

THE FOREST THRESHOLD IN THE HINDU EPICS

THE FOREST THRESHOLD:
PRINCES, SAGES AND DEMONS
IN THE HINDU EPICS

By

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ABSTRACT

More than simply a backdrop, the forest in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa is one of three central environments in the Hindu epics, and of the three is easily the setting which most frequently shapes the epic action. By studying the forest, the people who pass through it and their activities there, a new perspective on Hindu epic narrative is gained.

The central thesis of this study is that the tripartite process of transformation, first observed in rites of passage, operates in the forest-related sections of the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, the middle or threshold phase of that process centering in the forest. The forest, then, acts as a threshold across which the epic heroes and heroines pass as they move from one life-stage to another, or as is more often the case, from one state of existence to another.

For example, in the early adventures of both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and the Pāṇḍava brothers, the heroes move from the brahmacarya life-stage to the gṛhastha life-stage. Similarly both Nala and Damayantī reflect this transformative process: Nala as he moves from being a ritually impure, possessed, insane king to a purified, liberated,

sane king; Damayantī as she moves from being the wife of a madman to the wife of a just, powerful ruler. Damayantī's transition is more dramatic than first appears for in epic India a woman had very few life options, thus a disastrous marriage meant that she was as good as dead. Both Draupadī and Sītā cross forest thresholds similar to Damayantī's. The Pāṇḍava brothers and Rāma also cross similar forest thresholds. Their movement from a state of peace to a state of war occurs primarily during the forest exiles common to both epics. Finally, while they dwell in the forest threshold, the epic religious heroes and heroines par excellence, the tapas-doing ascetics, move from a state of existence in which they are subject to death to a state of immortality. This last process, the movement from mundane, profane sphere to sacred sphere, provides a pattern useful for further understanding the forest activities of Rāma and the Pāṇḍavas.

In studying these various movements between states of existence, characteristics of the threshold phase of these processes emerge. In the case of the Pāṇḍavas, when the dynamic movement of the threshold is stressed, celibacy, communitas, pilgrimage and the intersection of mythic and heroic planes are the central characteristics. In the case of Rāma, when the more static ideal nature of the threshold is stressed, the dual modality of Nowhere and Source is the central characteristic. These characteristics themselves become tools with which to understand some of the

intricacies of epic narrative.

More importantly by focusing on the forest, an essential difference between the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa can be explored. And this is certainly one of the most important contributions of this study. Very few investigations have endeavoured to treat both of the Hindu epics. The reasons for this are complex, but I suspect that to confront the whole of both epics is impossible because of their vastness, while to choose a perspective from which to see both epics simultaneously without trivializing is difficult. The forest in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa provides a substantial perspective and thus a study of it is helpful in understanding the meanings of the Hindu epics.

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An acknowledgement page has become such a standard part of dissertations that instructions for its composition are included in the guidebook next to descriptions of margin widths and paper quality requirements, and stories circulate of dissertations being initially rejected because of a missing acknowledgement page. For the concerned Ph.D. candidate, then, the problem is not clarity, as it has been during the months of writing which precede the writing of this page; rather the problem is sincerity. How do I convince the reader of my sincerity when the acknowledgement formulae are all but given beforehand? 1) Thank everyone for their help, 2) thank one's spouse for patience and typing, and 3) take the blame for all the errors.

I am mystified by this problem. After years of graduate study I find that I too want to thank a number of people for their help, thank my wife at least for her patience and typing, and take the blame for the errors contained in this dissertation. About all I can do is profess my sincerity in all this--in what follows I mean what I say.

For their assistance in guiding the dissertation from its origin to its completion I thank Dr. John Colarusso, Dr. Phyllis Granoff, and Dr. Paul Younger. Dr. Alan Mason

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: FINDING ONE'S WAY IN THE WOODS

If, for a moment, we imagine that the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata are dramatic productions rather than Hindu epics, we are struck that, despite their great lengths, we have to construct only three stage settings: a city, especially its royal court, a battlefield, and a forest. Of these three, no one setting is dominant in the epics, but the forest sticks out as anomalous. The central heroes of the epics are, after all, warrior princes; one would expect to find them holding court and fighting on the battlefield. But why the forest? What is its role in the Hindu epics? These questions form the central task of this study--the attempt to understand what the forest means in the Hindu epics.

Even a brief survey of the epics indicates that the forest bears more meaning than 'a cluster of trees and creepers.' For example, from epic time right up to India today 'going to the forest' is a phrase of singular importance. 'Going to the forest' means renouncing the world. So the centrality of the forest as an epic setting and the initial indication that the nature of this setting is more complex than it first appears suggest that a study

of the forest is in order. In this dissertation we shall investigate the epic forest, the people who stay there, and their activities in an attempt to get at the meaning of the forest.

At the outset we should be clear what sort of thing the epics refer to when they use the word vana, usually translated as "forest". It is first important to purge our modern North American notion of forest as the limited tracts of trees one finds scattered among farmlands beyond cities and towns. What was considered forest in India was likely all that land which was not village or town or under cultivation, and in epic India that meant that most of the subcontinent was forest.¹

The only confusion which might arise in the use of the word vana comes when it refers to a pleasure garden. Sītā, the heroine of the Rāmāyana is kept prisoner in such a vana, and the monkeys who find Sītā celebrate by destroying a pleasure garden called Madhuvana.² These pleasure gardens were cultivated, tended, often walled and sometimes guarded.³ They were more like parks than forests and they lacked the dangerous quality as well as the vastness of the Indian forest of epic times. When we use the word forest in this study we are referring not to the vana as pleasure garden, but to that untamed vegetative growth that spread over virtually the whole subcontinent.

Just because the forest in epic times covers a vast area, however, does not justify an in-depth study of it.

But the forest in the Hindu epics is not only vast, it is also one of the most important settings in both epics. For example, both epics were first told in the forest and Vālmīki composed the Rāmāyaṇa there. Both sets of heroes spent some time in the forest in their youth and both sets met and fought demons there, beginning an antagonism that was to continue into their adult lives. The twelve-year forest exile of the Mahābhārata heroes corresponds to the fourteen-year forest exile of the Rāmāyaṇa heroes. Both these exiles are crucial to the narrative flow of the respective epics. In both epics the holiest people make their home in the forest as do many of the most demonic. In the Mahābhārata a long pilgrimage takes place in the forest. Sītā spends most of her later life in the forest and her sons are born there. A number of characters in the Mahābhārata retire to the forest in their later years. It is out of the forest that Aśvatthāman and his cohorts strike to destroy the Pāṇḍava army. And finally the heroes come out of the forest to achieve the sovereignty of the world.⁴ In short the forest is vitally important to both epics; therefore an attempt to understand the forest is justified.

It would be unfitting to launch into our proposed task without first at least attempting to describe the epics which are the textual object of our study. Obviously the nature of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata will become clearer to the reader as the study progresses, yet some introduction is in order.

Describing the epics to someone unfamiliar with them is a difficult challenge. Often one will see the epics, especially the Mahābhārata, described as 'encyclopedic', meaning that the epics include a whole range of subject items.⁵ It is this encyclopedic quality of the Mahābhārata which prompted J.A.B. van Buitenen to write:

If an analogy were to be made to western culture, one would have to imagine something like the following: an Iliad, rather less tightly structured than it now is, incorporating an abbreviated version of The Odyssey, quite a bit of Hesiod, some adapted sequences from Herodotus, assimilated and distorted pre-Socratic fragments. Socrates by way of Plato by way of Plotinus, a fair proportion of the Gospels by way of moralizing stories, with the whole complex of 200,000 lines worked over, edited, polished, and versified in hexameters by successive waves of anonymous church fathers. In the Western tradition this seems incredible. In the Indian civilization The Mahābhārata is a fact.⁶

The Rāmāyaṇa differs from the Mahābhārata in that it is more cohesive. The story line is kept to more rigorously and there is not the philosophical instruction which is apt to erupt in the Mahābhārata whenever one of many wandering sages arrives to visit the heroes. Nonetheless the Rāmāyaṇa does abound in long descriptions having a botanical quality, weaving like jungle creepers with elaborate twists and turns into a dense organic mass. Thus while reading either epic, the reader who is unfamiliar with the easy pace of the story is apt to be impatient and

want 'to get on with it'.

Though the designation 'encyclopedic' is useful in describing the epics (perhaps applying less aptly to the Rāmāyaṇa), it is misleading especially on one particular point. Entries in an encyclopedia have an obvious system of ordering. There is no such obvious system in the epics. However, because there is no obvious system of ordering does not mean that there is no sense at all to the order of the entries. One argument that this study will make is that the arrangement of stories, didactic material and main narrative is not purely by chance nor is it merely contrived, but rather that this arrangement was seen in a way analogous to the way religious visions are seen. In other words, the compilers of the epics arranged their material in accordance with a deeply felt set of correspondences--correspondences which they perceived as given and received much as religious visions are perceived as given by divine beings and received by human beings. We shall return to this point throughout the dissertation.⁷

Before beginning any scholarly inquiry, a few words about methodological problems are in order. In the case of this inquiry the chief problem encountered was that the modern perspective, or lens, shades our understanding of forests differently than does the epic lens. Without an initial awareness of this difference, confusion can occur. The essence of this difference centres around the awareness on the part of people of the epic period that the forest

wilderness was, among other things, a threat--a place which sheltered wild beasts, wild people, and even demons. This awareness is missing in the modern understanding of forests. To contemporary North Americans, for example, the forest wilderness is a forest preserve, a place where one can go to marvel at orderly natural processes as yet unmarred by human hands.⁸ Within the purview of this study, then, we must attempt to appropriate an epic lens when looking at the forest. In this way, although separated by time and culture, we may, by a further act of imagination, catch a glimpse of the vision which informed the set of correspondences underlying the ordering of the epic material.

A first step in carrying out our inquiry into the nature of the forest is to survey the scholarly work which has already been done in this field. It is a short survey. Of the studies which have anything to do with the forest in the Hindu epics two types may be discerned. First, studies which have to do with trees in Hinduism; there are two of these. And second, studies which focus on the forest rather than trees; here again there are two which are noteworthy.

In 1910 E.W. Hopkins published an article entitled "Mythological Aspects of Trees and Mountains in the Great Epics."⁹ Here Hopkins catalogues and systematizes references to trees, paying special attention to what kind of species tend to appear in various specific situations. More recently Odette Viennot has done a full length study of the various religious contexts of the tree in ancient India.¹⁰ In

Le Culte De L'arbre dans L'Inde Ancienne Viennot discusses Buddhist as well as Hindu materials and takes into account mythic description, philosophic analogy, public and domestic ritual prescriptions, evidence from popular sources as well as depictions of trees in the plastic arts. This work is impressive, but is only tangentially helpful to our study.

Having a more direct bearing is Walter Ruben's monograph called Waldabenteuer des Indischen Epischen Helden.¹¹ Ruben's work is helpful to this study because it details the centrality of the forest in the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata as well as in other Indian literature, most notably the Jātaka stories and the Kṛṣṇa corpus. Beyond this basic level Ruben is of less assistance than might be imagined. The reason for this is fairly straightforward. It is true that Ruben's work and this study share very similar foci: the occurrence in Hindu, or in Ruben's case Indian, epic literature of the forest, the people who frequent it, and the happenings there. Despite this similarity, the approaches which the two studies use to investigate the forest are different.

Ruben's methodological approach, the lens through which he sees the forest, is ground and polished by Marxism, thus the political dimension of the forest and of forest activities is central in Ruben's study. He sees, often almost hidden in the epics, a yearning on the part of the Indian people for political freedom from the tyrannical despots who rule over them.¹² Evidence for this yearning is

garnered from the folktales or remnants of folktales which make up large parts of the epics. Thus when Ruben spends his time and energy showing that Rāma and the Rāmāyaṇa are more folkloric than the Pāṇḍavas and the Mahābhārata, he does so to stress his central thesis. The folkloric influence in the Rāmāyaṇa may be seen, Ruben says, in Rama's protective attitude towards the brahmins, in the passion and romance in the relationship of Rāma and Sītā, in the helpful monkeys and other animals, in Rāma's monogamy, in his truthfulness and, perhaps most importantly for Ruben, in Rāma's perfect, just exercising of political power. Ruben argues further that the epics were altered by advocates of orthodoxy who were intent on protecting their priestly power. Thus Rāma is made to behead a śūdra ascetic, offer sacrifice upon sacrifice, and before his exile give away all his wealth to brahmins.¹³ It will soon become obvious that the methodological approach of this study is very different. This means that Ruben's work has been helpful in providing a general overview of the centrality of the forest in Indian literature, but in little else.

I received far more direction from an article by Nancy Falk entitled, "Wilderness and Kingship in Ancient South Asia."¹⁴ Falk spends most of the article establishing an intriguing relationship between the forest and the king. In her conclusion she draws some tentative conclusions about the nature of this relationship. The forest, Falk says, represents chaos, and the king, not unlike the Indian

ascetic, must enter into chaos and master it in order to gain his authority and power. This study, too, comes to posit a relationship between the forest, kingship, and ascetics, but it understands the nature of this relationship very differently. While the scope and length of Falk's study is limited, it was helpful to this investigation by offering a foil at the point of considering this important relationship.

Scholars like Ruben and Falk are not the only people to have offered an interpretation of the meaning of the forest in the Hindu epics. The epics themselves, or at least one of them, offer an understanding of the forest. Thus in this discussion of the various approaches to the epic forest, it is doubtless appropriate to consider what the texts indicate the meaning of the forest to be. The Rāmāyaṇa is silent on the subject, but a section of the Mahābhārata is crystal clear: the forest represents samsāra, the whirligig of existence. In the Strīparvan, vidura, uncle of the heroes, tells a parable.¹⁵ Once upon a time, says Vidura, there was a certain brahmin who found himself in a dreadful forest. He became terrified and ran pursued by wild beasts. As he raced blindly through the undergrowth, he chanced to cross the top of an open pit which was covered by a lush growth of creepers. The brahmin fell into the pit, but as luck would have it, his ankle became ensnared in a creeper as he plummeted down. The next thing he knew he was hanging upside down midway down

the pit. A huge elephant stomped impatiently above him, a cobra hissed below. In his headlong charge the brahmin had collided with a beehive so, while bees buzzed angrily about him, honey from the broken hive drizzled down on him and, even though upside down, he drank the golden streams with gusto. Shortly, a group of mice, some white and some black, began to gnaw at the vine which held the brahmin. Although he saw his predicament clearly, still the brahmin greedily hungered for more honey.¹⁶ Here Vidura ends the story, but in response to his brother's questioning he allegorizes nearly every part of the story. The beasts of prey are diseases which humankind is subject to, the creepers are the desire for life, the snake is time, the mice are days and nights and so on. The forest, that which contains all these horrible things, is life itself, the round of existence, samsāra.¹⁷

Why not, it might be asked, apply this metaphor of samsāra to the forest of the epics and be done with it? The answer is that by and large the metaphor is not viable in the rest of the epics. In epic narrative action, understanding the forest as samsāra does not make sense. Instead it mystifies the actions of the epic heroes, as well as those of the epic ascetics. If the forest may be likened to samsāra, what does the hero's exile there mean, and what does 'going to the forest' mean? Viennot argues that this metaphor for the forest grows naturally out of cosmic tree symbolism, but that it is a later interpretation.¹⁸

The argument that the metaphor of samsāra is a late addition to the Mahābhārata is consistent with its occurrence in a section of the Strīparvan which is generally accepted to be a late part of the Mahābhārata. If it is a late arrival to the Mahābhārata, it is understandable that the allegorization might not fit with the meaning of the forest which had already arisen in the earlier parts of the epic.

We have noted in passing that the approach of this study is different from those of studies of the epic forest already done. It is time to explicate our approach further, to attempt to reflect on the shape and contour of our own lens.

What we have done in this study is to use Victor Turner's work on the tripartite ritual process¹⁹ as an interpretive tool to approach Hindu epic narrative. This tripartite process was first identified in rites of passage, those rituals in which the participants are changed from one state of existence to another as, for example, from single person to married person or from girlhood to womanhood. Turner's work builds on the work of Arnold van Gennep²⁰ who, like Turner, primarily focused on religious ritual. From this focus van Gennep constructed a model of change involving three phases. In the first phase the ritual participant is separated from the fixed state of existence in which he or she has lived; in the next, the liminal or threshold phase, he or she is between one state

of existence and another--she is no longer a girl, but not yet a woman, for example; and lastly the participant is incorporated into the world, now a new person who perceives the world as a different place.

Turner, whose work has concentrated on the middle or threshold phase, has suggested that this tripartite process has applications beyond ritual.²¹ Acting on his own suggestion, Turner has applied his understanding of the liminal phase to a variety of phenomenon, including millenarian movements, the Franciscans of medieval Europe, the Sahajīyās of fifteenth and sixteenth-century India, Bob Dylan and Thomas Becket.²² There has been, however, no work which has attempted to understand religious epic in light of this tripartite process. Indeed the attempt to understand epic narrative grounded in myth from a perspective built on a ritual process might strike some as inappropriate. But the fruitfulness of this study should speak directly to that reaction and remind students of religiousness that the symbiotic relationship of myth and ritual warns against studying the one in complete isolation from the other.

It is the notion of liminality, the state of being in the liminal phase, which underscores this symbiotic relationship, and it is a central characteristic of liminality which triggered my application of the pattern of ritual process to epic narrative. Turner notes that "the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous."²³ From the beginning

of my work on the epic forests, it has been clear that forests were perceived as ambiguous. It is this perception--one which sees the forest as both 'open' and 'closed'--which led me to conclude that the epic forest is an appropriate liminal environment.

It is worthwhile to elaborate on this perception of the epic forest as ambiguous. Within this perception the forest is experienced as a lush paradise and, sometimes almost simultaneously, as the most horrible of hells; it protects and provides nourishment, it traps and destroys the unwary; it seems exhilarating, it seems forboding; in short the forest is experienced ambivalently. Yi-Fu Tuan, a cultural geographer, remarks on this general ambivalence towards forests. "Wilderness", he writes, "signified chaos, the haunt of demons--and purity".²⁴ If demons are the element necessary to signify chaos, then the forests of the Hindu epics certainly so signify. Demons abound there primarily in the form of rākṣasas, and much of their behaviour is appropriately chaotic.

It may well be the signification of "purity", that is the paradisiac quality of the wilderness, which prompted men and women throughout human history to establish monasteries in its midst. Whatever the case, once established, the monastery lent a sacred atmosphere to the surrounding wilderness. The epics are filled with stories of āśramas or forest hermitages which are good examples of the general phenomenon Tuan has noted.

The monastic community in the wilderness was a model of paradise set in an unredeemed world. Wilderness was often perceived as the haunt of demons, but in the neighborhood of the monastery it could acquire some of the harmony of redeemed nature, and the animals in it, like their human suzerains in the monastery, lived in peace.²⁵

Descriptions of the tamed wild beasts and the lush vegetation surrounding the āśrama occur throughout the epics and we shall return to this point in chapter six. What is of import here is that this fundamental perception of the forest as both chaotic and paradisiac meant that the forest was a natural site for a sacred dwelling, and for religious events to occur. Given the dominance of this perception of the forest as ambivalent and given its centrality to the material under study, we shall dwell on the two sides of this ambivalence.

The forest experienced as dense, closed space is dominated by the sense of sight. As anyone who has ever hidden in the woods while another has passed within a few feet can testify, the forest can close in around and form a comfortable nest from which to view the world. This sense of closed space is not always experienced as comforting however. As anyone who has looked for another in the lurking shadows of a dark forboding woods can testify, the forest can close in around and seem to strangle with its branches and trip with its roots. We shall return to this dual aspect of the dense spatial dimension of forestness,

but first it is necessary to detail the content of this dimension more closely.

To experience the forest in a closed spacial dimension is to experience its all enveloping nature. All perspective in this experience is curtailed; there are no distant views. Two stories from the epics illustrate this closed spacial dimension.

The first story is from the Rāmāyaṇa and involves Daśaratha, Rama's father. One day Daśaratha was in the forest hunting 'by sound alone'. He heard what he thought was an elephant drinking and shot an arrow guided only by the sound. He shot accurately as it turned out; however he killed not an elephant, but the only son of two blind forest ascetics. The thirsty elephant was in fact the young man filling his water pitcher. For this murder Daśaratha was duly cursed to lose his son (Rāma) prematurely, just as the forest ascetics had lost theirs.²⁶

It is my contention that this phenomenon of hunting 'by sound alone' was a skill developed to hunt in very dark forests,²⁷ and that this is a response to the curtailed perspective of the closed spacial dimension of the forest. In the second story, this one from the Mahābhārata, this contention is borne out. The story revolves around Ekalavya the son of the chieftain of the Niṣādas, a name the epics give to indigenous tribal peoples. Ekalavya wanted to learn archery from Droṇa, the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. He is forbidden presumably because of

caste restrictions. Undaunted, Ekalavya goes to the forest, takes on the appearance of an ascetic, makes an image of Droṇa and alternately practices his archery and propitiates the statue of his guru. He becomes a very accomplished archer.

One day the Pāṇḍavas are hunting in the forest near Ekalavya when a dog which has been tagging along with the hunters smells "that black Niṣāda" and begins yapping at him. When the mutt has continued his barking for some time, Ekalavya engages in some "fast, blind shooting"²⁸ filling the dog's mouth with seven arrows so rapidly that the dog does not have time to close his mouth from the time of the first arrow to the time of the last. At this point the dog returns to the Pāṇḍavas, who are fittingly amazed at the archer's feat. Here the story takes a bizarre turn. Droṇa, accompanied by Arjuna, goes to Ekalavya, where he requests and receives his guru fee, in this case Ekalavya's thumb. Having cut off his thumb, Ekalavya is no longer as fast as Arjuna in archery. The episode of the guru gift, then, transpires to ensure Arjuna's supremacy in the realm of archery.²⁹ Unfortunately we cannot here consider any of the social or psychological ramifications of this story. Our intent is to show that the epic forests were perceived as a closed spacial environment, and that the hunting 'by sound alone' or 'blind shooting' is evidence of this perception. In the story of Ekalavya we find a forest so dark that the outcast archer has been able to perfect a technique

of 'blind shooting' in the environment.³⁰ Clearly the perception of the forest as closed, dark space is known to the epics, since in the stories about hunting by sound alone the forest is characterized by a thick, almost smothering quality. This quality stands in marked contrast to the other way in which the forest appears as a phenomenon.

The forest experienced as immense open space is dominated by the 'sense' of imagination. Gaston Bachelard in his The Poetics of Space has in a lyrical, sometimes abstruse, way described this perception of the forest. He notes that a primary attribute of the forest is that it seems a "limitless world." He labels this attribute "immensity" and states it is more a perception of the imagination than the senses:

...we might make a detailed examination of what is meant by the immensity of the forest. For this "immensity" originates in a body of impressions which, in reality, have little connection with geographical information.³¹

Indeed we have seen that our senses tell us that the forest is closed, dark and dense. Bachelard, who seems to regard the imagination as another kind of sense, has seen that we also perceive the forest to be vast, to be immense.

The Hindu epics acknowledge this open spacial dimension just as they acknowledge the closed spacial dimension. The problem with identifying this perception is that it is 'imaged' more often than actually stated. In

spite of this, an impression can be drawn from some descriptive adjectives, in this case from the tale of Nala and Damayantī. "Empty", meaning without people, "dreadful", "unpeopled", "desolate", "grand" and "vast" recur most often,³² and from them we may infer an immensity which relativizes the human scale.

Still there is something lacking in the mere cataloging of descriptive adjectives, and Bachelard gets at it when he says:

One feels there is something else to be expressed [about the forest] besides what is offered for objective expression. What should be expressed is hidden grandeur, depth. And so far from indulging in prolixity of expression, or losing oneself in the detail of light and shade, one feels that one is in the presence of an "essential" impression seeking expression....³³

This "essential" impression is, of course, what Bachelard calls immensity.

This dimension of forestness corresponds to our own perception of the forest when it is linked to the experience of walking deeper and deeper into a forest with a feeling of uneasiness which grows with every sort-of-familiar-looking tall tree passed, with each time the swaying treetops creak and rattle amongst themselves, with the growing sense that perhaps we are lost. Bachelard says:

We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of "going deeper and deeper"

into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going we no longer no where we are.³⁴

By definition one does not 'wander in the forest' and know where one is going and where one is, and so it is that the young princess, Damayantī, panics when confronted by the immensity of the forest. Having been deserted by her husband, she weeps and cries out, "I am afraid in the empty forest!"³⁵ We are not to understand from this that Damayantī is fainthearted; she shows herself elsewhere to be of heroic character. Rather we are to understand, I think, that the immensity of the forest can oppress the most stouthearted. Even the valiant Pāṇḍava brothers could be moved by their perception of the forest as vast and deep. Although usually competent hunters and woodsmen, once when they were chasing a deer, the five brothers became lost for a short time deep in the woods. 'Tired and discouraged' they sat down under a large banyan tree and began to complain about their situation. This behaviour was uncharacteristic of the brothers as a group, but made sense under the stressful and embarrassing situation they found themselves in. In short even the Pāṇḍavas who are great hunters and have lived in the forest for twelve years can be affected by the immensity of the forest. It is easy to empathize both with Damayantī's fear and the Pāṇḍavas' discomfort. The vastness, the immensity, of the forest, whether it exhilarates or tyrannizes, overpowers in its open spacial

dimension.

I am suggesting by all this discussion of perceptions and dimensions that there is something about the natural phenomenon of the forest which lends itself to become the bearer of oppositional meanings. That is, the two dimensions of a forest, closed and open, which are humanly perceivable are naturally opposite and thus bear opposite meanings.

It is interesting that the meanings borne, at least in the epics, do not always arise from the same dimension. The closed, dense spacial dimension, for example, can have a positive or negative valence, and the same holds true for the vast, open dimension. The close dense forest hides ugly, fierce demons and the vengeful Aśvatthāman; it also shelters Rāma during his exile as well as the ascetics in their renunciation of the world. The vast, open forest is frightening to nearly every main character at some time or other, but it also provides the forest ascetics with the inspiration to transcend their human smallness. The point, then, is not to identify these dimensions with positive or negative valences, rather it is to stress that the natural environment of the forest has at its essence a strong potential for ambiguity, and that the forest will thus tend to bear meanings which are harmonious with this ambiguity. Furthermore it is precisely this potential for ambiguity that makes the forest a suitable liminal environment.

Our investigation of the epic forest as a liminal

environment within a three-part process of transformation will proceed as follows. In the next chapter we consider sections of epic narrative in which ritual might normally play a significant role. Then, in the succeeding chapter, we consider a particular epic tale, that of Nala and Damayantī, in which ritual does not have a central place. The fruitfulness of the application of the tripartite process in both these instances, especially vis-à-vis the forest, justifies proceeding to a closer examination of the relation of the forest to three groupings of heroes and heroines in the epics: the Pāṇḍava brothers and Draupadī, Rāma and Sītā, and the religious ascetics of the forest. This is accomplished in the next three chapters; a conclusion follows. In short, in the course of this study we propose to explore the significance of the forest of the Hindu epics from a vantage offered by the study of ritual done by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.

By way of introduction there remains only one further issue to discuss: the oral nature of the epics. Early on in the preparation of this study it became clear that some decision had to be reached as to which manuscripts of the epics would be used. Many different recensions of both the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata exist, and to choose one over another would be arbitrary. There was little choice but to use the critical edition of each epic.³⁶ This choice was made in full awareness that some scholars are calling into question the whole idea of a critical text of a work

that is essentially oral in nature.³⁷

The major thrust of such scholars is that the techniques which do good yeoman's duty in establishing a critical edition from many literary recensions of a text, are not necessarily relevant when working with recensions which have a long oral tradition. For example, the editors of the critical editions of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata concur that those passages which all recensions agree on are probably oldest and therefore should be retained. This is good text-critical methodology. Even leaving aside the pre-supposition that that which is oldest necessarily represents that which is truer or more real, the relevancy of this methodological tool is open to challenge. It is the nature of material which has been transmitted orally to be changed, elaborated and embellished over and over again. This is part of the beauty and charm of oral narrative; it is central to the story-teller's art. He or she must be always sensitive to the particular audience in attendance, and to the context in time and place of the storytelling itself. Given this tendency of oral narrative to change, these sections of epic which are virtually identical, may well be the newest not the oldest.³⁸

While I am in basic agreement with the objections these scholars have raised, a viable alternative to the critical editions has not arisen.³⁹ In this study I have tried to follow the path marked out by Alf Hiltebeitel. The general direction of this path is indicated by his

references to the Mahābhārata as a "narrative continuum" and a "work in progress."⁴⁰ These references suggest that the 'final form' of the epics was never reached. Oral tradition continued to embellish and elaborate, and thus scholars may make use of the appendices to the critical edition, when it seems appropriate. I have used the critical edition as a base as much for scholarly convenience as for any other reason, but I have occasionally augmented my study with other examples when it seemed both helpful and prudent.

In addition, I have attempted to understand the connections between the main narrative of the epics involving the central heroes and heroines and the so-called episodes which seem, at first encounter, especially in the Mahābhārata, to distract one's attention from the flow of the main narrative. Again following Hildebeitel in this matter, I have attempted to develop a sense for the connective tissue which links these episodes to the main narrative. It is Hildebeitel's thesis that the compilers of at least the Mahābhārata saw connections and correspondences between Brahmanic ritual and the epic action and also between the epic action and the events of the mythic or divine realm.⁴¹ This 'connective tissue' derives its binding strength from an inner logic by which a particular location of a certain episode is more reasonable than another. The placement of a particular episode in a particular context, then, is assumed not to be accidental, but intentional.

A pivotal example of this sort of 'connective

tissue' forms the central thesis of this study. It is that the forest in the Hindu epics is often understood as a threshold whose inner logic is formed by a three-part process, which works in epic narrative continuum just as it works in rites of passage, where it was originally observed.

¹ Walter Fairservis, in The Roots of Ancient India (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Pr., 1975), p. 16 notes that authorities generally agree that India was forest covered. The type of forest varied with rainfall and soil, but that most probably there were tropical forests in Assam and the Western Ghats.

² The monkey's destruction of the pleasure garden is fueled by the madhu or honey which they drink. It has the effect of intoxicating them, and this seemed strange to me until I learned that honey which is not properly cured in the comb can ferment. If Madhuvana were in an area that was excessively hot and humid, the bees would be hard put to cure the honey properly.

³ Jeannine Auboyer, Daily Life in Ancient India; From Approximately 200 BC to 700 AD (New York: MacMillan, 1965), pp. 266-67.

⁴ Walter Ruben, Waldabenteuer des Indischen Epischen Helden (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), pp. 18 and 31.

⁵ For example, Moritz Winternitz in A History of Indian Literature, S. Ketkar, tr. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1972), describes the many different types of writing he finds in the Mahābhārata and calls the epic a "compendium of narratives of all descriptions" (Vol. 1, pp. 317-21). Elsewhere he calls the Mahābhārata a "literary monster" (vol. 1, p. 326).

⁶ Edward C. Dimock, Jr. et al., The Literatures of India, An Introduction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1974), p. 53.

⁷ Cf. Alf Hiltebeitel, The Ritual of Battle (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1976), p. 359.

⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, Topophilia; A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), p. 105. Tuan states:

People rarely perceive the irony inherent in the idea of preserving the wilderness. "Wilderness" cannot be defined objectively: it is as much a state of the mind as a description of nature. By the time we can speak of preserving and protecting

wilderness, it has already lost much of its meaning... "Wilderness" is now a symbol of the orderly processes of nature. As a state of mind, true wilderness exists only in the great sprawling cities.

⁹ E.W. Hopkins, "Mythological Aspects of Trees and Mountains in the Great Epics", The Journal of the American Oriental Society, v. 30, 1910, 347-374.

¹⁰ Odette Viennot, Le Culte De L'arbre dans L'Inde Ancienne, Annales du Musée Guimet Bibliothèque D'Études, v. 59, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954.

¹¹ Ruben, op. cit.

¹² Ibid., p. 35.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 33-35.

¹⁴ Nancy E. Falk, "Wilderness and Kingship in Ancient South Asia," History of Religions, v. 13, no. 1, August 1973, 1-15.

¹⁵ Mahābhārata, for the first time critically edited..., ed. V.S. Sukthankar et al., 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-66) (hereafter MPh), 11, 5, 3.

¹⁶ The essence of Vidura's tale appears as a 'zen story' in Paul Reps, Zen Flesh, Zen Bones (Garden City, N. J.: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, no date), pp. 22-23.

¹⁷ A similar treatment of the forest may be found in the following verse which the devotional poet Tulsī Dās addresses to Rāma:

"The forest of this world is very terrible, O
Murāri, deep and dense, and trees in the
form of karma are thick around,
Desires are the creepers and worries the many
sharp thorns, -
this is the hard and heavy forest with its
close-set trees...."

The translator, F.R. Allchin, notes that this passage "continues with a further elaborate metaphor likening the world [samsāra] to a forest through which the soul must pass." Tulsī Dās, The Petition to Rām; Hindi Devotional

Hymns of the Seventeenth Century, tr., F.R. Allchin (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), pp. 126 and 270.

18 Viennot, op. cit., p. 88.

19 Victor W. Turner, The Forest of Symbols (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1967). Also by the same author, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1974), and The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1969).

20 Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, tr. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

21 Turner, Dramas, pp. 13-17 and passim.

22 Turner, Ritual, and Dramas.

23 Turner, Ritual, p. 95.

24 Ibid., p. 248.

25 Ibid., p. 148.

26 Rāmāyaṇa, critical edition, ed. J.M. Mehta et al. (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960) (hereafter Rām.), 2. 57 and 58.

27 It may be the case that some of the epic forests were rain forests. The translator J.A.B. van Buitenen indicates this when he translates vana as "jungle" as, for example, at 3.59.25 when he has in the "empty jungle" for sunye vane. The Mahābhārata, J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and tr. (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, vol. 1, 1973, vol. 2, 1975, vol. 3, 1978), vol. 2, p. 334. These very dark forests might also have been climax forests.

28 MBh., 1.123.18 and 21; van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 271.

29 MBh., 1.123.1-40.

30 Cf. van Buitenen's note to MBh., 1.123.1 and 15, v. 1, p. 459.

31 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Maria Jolas, trans. (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1964), p. 185.

32 MBh., 3.58.75, 59.25, 60.4, 58.27, 60.1, 61.1, 61.24, 61.30.

33 Bachelard, op. cit., p. 186.

34 Ibid., p. 185.

35 MBh., 3.60.4; van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 334.

36 MBh., op. cit., and Rām., op. cit.

37 Madeleine Biardeau, "Some More Considerations About Textual Criticism", Purāṇa, Vol. X, no. 2, July 1968, 115-123. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Review of J.A.B. van Buitenen (ed. & trans.), The Mahābhārata, vol. 1, Book 1: The Book of the Beginning; vol. 2, Book 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall; vol. 3, Book 3: The Book of the Forest," in Religious Studies Review, vol. 4, no. 1, January 1978, pp. 19-28. J.W. DeJong, "Recent Russian Publications on the Indian Epic", The Adyar Library Bulletin, vol. 39 (1975), 1-42 in which he reviews the work of Pavel A. Grintser and Ja. V. Vasil'kov. See also Nabanita Dev Sen, "Comparative Studies in Oral Epic Poetry and the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa: A Report on Bālakāṇḍa," Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 86 (Oct.-Dec., 1966), 397-409.

38 DeJong, op. cit., p. 41.

39 Mlle. Biardeau has suggested another technique in the article noted above, and has applied the technique in "The Story of Arjuna Kārtavīrya Without Reconstruction", Purāṇa, vol. 12, no. 2 (July 1970), 286-303. It is not clear that this technique is always helpful, nor have there been plaudits from other scholars for this technique.

40 Hiltebeitel, op. cit., p. 15.

41 Ibid., pp. 359-60.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EARLY ADVENTURES OF THE EPIC HEROES: A PASSAGE BETWEEN LIFE-STAGES

Early in the heroic adventures contained in both the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata the forest has a prominent place. Both Rāma and the Pāṇḍava brothers leave home and enter the forest at the juncture between childhood and adulthood, and their forest experiences serve to mature them. This chapter will explore this maturation process in order to show that the tripartite process derived from ritual can be applied to epic narrative, at least narrative with a ritual content, and to show that the forest in the epics plays an important role as a liminal environment, a threshold. The chapter will proceed by first looking at Rāma's maturation process, then will move on to consider the Pāṇḍavas' maturation process.

Rāma

Rāma's story begins with his divine birth. He and his brothers are conceived by the god, Viṣṇu, in the wives of the king of Ayodhyā, Daśaratha. The childhood of the four brothers is not noted by the Rāmāyaṇa apart from the mention that they studied the Vedas and learned the art of

archery.¹ When Rāma is fifteen and his marriage is being deliberated by Daśaratha, the famous sage, Viśvāmitra, arrives in Ayodhyā and disrupts all the planning.

Viśvāmitra has come to Ayodhyā to enlist Rāma's aid in protecting his sacrifice from the raids of two powerful demons, Mārīca and Subāhu. He is insistent that only Rāma can help him, and calls upon Daśaratha to honour his boon to Viśvāmitra by letting the boy go. Rama's father refuses on the grounds that Rāma is too young and inexperienced, and the demons, called rākṣasas, are too dangerous. Instead Daśaratha offers to go in Rāma's place. Viśvāmitra counters that these demons have been sent by the king of rākṣasas, Rāvaṇa, and only Rāma will be able to perform the task. Daśaratha again refuses and begs Viśvāmitra to leave the boy behind:

"My son is dearer to me than life, you must not take him away; I fall at your feet and beg you, a wretched man madly fond of his son."²

Daśaratha's pleading is of no avail.

Viśvāmitra becomes exceedingly angry causing the worlds to tremble in fear of the sage's power. Daśaratha had made an unconditional promise to the sage and he is now violating his word. Daśaratha's purohita, or house priest, enters the scene to warn his patron of the danger in breaking his word, and to reassure Daśaratha that his son would be safe in the sage's care. After all, Viśvāmitra,

who was once a warrior himself and is the caretaker of gods' weapons, has promised to instruct Rāma.³ On his purohita's advice Daśaratha agrees to honour his promise.

Once outside the city Viśvāmitra loses little time before he begins to instruct Rāma. The boy purifies himself in a river and then receives two sacred formulae from Viśvāmitra which protect him from hunger, thirst, fatigue and fever as well as enemy ambush.⁴ In a short time this protective sacred knowledge would serve as battle armor.

Besides instructing the boy in protective sacred knowledge, Viśvāmitra also related much sacred lore to the curious Rāma and his brother, Lakṣmaṇa, who accompanied him. The first example of this sacred lore is the story of how Kāma became the 'Bodiless (anaṅga) God' as a result of being consumed by the gaze of Śiva's third eye. The story arises in the context of passing the hermitage named for Kāma.⁵

At this point in his early adventures Rāma confronts the first of the two major tests he encounters in his forest sojourn. The context of the test, a battle with a ferocious rākṣaṣa, will become familiar. The trio comes upon an ominous looking forest which emits loud howls and cries from its depths. In response to Rāma's question, Viśvāmitra tells the brothers that the forest was once two cities. These cities received the favour of Indra because they had received the polluted runoff from the purification rites which cleansed Indra of his sin of brahmin⁶ murder. In spite of the god's favour a horrible

rākṣasī named Tāṭakā had terrorized the inhabitants of the cities until the cities had reverted back to forest. At Viśvāmitra's insistence and with his aid, Rāma challenges the female demon to battle and kills her.⁷ The forest is no longer threatening with Tāṭakā dead, and the trio is able to spend the night there.

The gods were pleased at Rāma's triumph, and authorized Viśvāmitra to bestow their weapons on the hero. He did so. Included among these weapons were Śiva's trident, Indra's thunderbolt, Viṣṇu's discus and Yama's Daṇḍa stick. These special weapons take on various physical forms, including personified ones, and come when called to mind. Viśvāmitra taught Rāma the sacred formulae which discharge these weapons thus completing his preparation for the second test.⁸

Enroute to Viśvāmitra's hermitage in Tapovana (the forest of asceticism) the sage tells the heroes the story of his hermitage. The hermitage, or āśrama, once belonged to the avatāra of Viṣṇu, Vāmana. The story of Bali and Vāmana is occasioned by their arrival at the hermitage and it contributes to the collection of sacred lore Rāma receives.⁹ This lore is of a particular type, however, insofar as it deals with his ancestors. Since Rāma has divine as well as mortal ancestors, sacred lore concerning the avatāras of Viṣṇu and the line of the Ikṣvāku Kings are both significant for him.

Once at Viśvāmitra's hermitage, the great sage

begins a six-day sacrifice during which he must remain silent. This last point increases the seriousness of this test, because it means that the sage will not be able to help the two heroes either by advising them or by cursing the demons. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are, in this test, alone. On the final day of the sacrifice Mārīca and Subāhu arrive with a raiding party of airborne rākṣasas. They course across the sky 'like clouds in the rainy season' and when they are above the altar, they pour blood down on the sacrifice thereby polluting it. Rāma immediately springs to action and, using his newly won weapons, defeats the rākṣasas. Subāhu and the raiding party are killed, while Mārīca is wounded by the Mānava weapon which knocks him one hundred miles into the sea.¹⁰

With the peace of his forest hermitage assured, Viśvāmitra sets out with his charges to the city of Mithilā where King Janaka is sponsoring a large sacrifice. As the three travel, Viśvāmitra regales the two heroes both with general lore and with stories of their ancestors. Included in his recitation of tales are the story of King Janaka's bow, the story of the churning of the ocean of milk,¹¹ the story of the descent of the celestial river Ganges to earth (the main human characters are placed in the Ikṣvaku line to which Rāma belongs),¹² and the story of Indra's seduction of the sage's wife, Ahalyā, and the subsequent curses which are precipitated by their sexual indiscretion.¹³

This last story is told in response to Rāma's question as to why the hermitage they were visiting was seemingly uninhabited. Ahalyā was cursed to remain invisible and without food, and has inhabited the 'uninhabited' hermitage invisible to gods and humans alike. Upon seeing Rāma, however, her curse is lifted and she appears before the trio in dazzling splendour.¹⁴ This is the first of many instances when the mere sight of Rāma frees people from curses, and as such, it is one of the first indications that Rāma is something more than an excellent warrior.

With the telling of the long story of Viśvāmitra's career,¹⁵ the scene of action moves from forest to city. The two heroes are introduced to the king, and request to see Śiva's bow which Janaka has in his possession. The king accedes to their request but first tells the story of his daughter, Sītā. Sītā was born from the earth of sacrificial ground after Janaka had ejaculated on the soil upon seeing Menakā, a beautiful apsaras, or celestial nymph. As Janaka was ploughing the sacrificial ground, his daughter turned up in a furrow, and was thus named Sītā, which means 'furrow'.¹⁶ Whoever can string Śiva's bow will win Sītā's hand in marriage, but so far no prince has managed even to lift the bow. The huge bow then arrives in a gigantic iron box mounted on eight wheels and dragged by five thousand men.¹⁷ Rāma seizes the bow, bends it and breaks it. Janaka joyfully arranges the marriage with Daśaratha, and after various rituals are performed, Rāma and his three

brothers all marry women of Janaka's line.¹⁸

Robert Antoine, in his Rāma and the Bards, has argued cogently that these early adventures of Rāma form an initiation from adolescence into adulthood.¹⁹ Antoine presents a list of criteria which are necessary for puberty initiation, and shows how the early adventures satisfy these criteria. Central among these criteria are the movement of the child into a dangerous situation over the objections of the parents; the gift of divine weapons and sacred formulae; the test of valour including battle with monsters; the instruction in sacred lore; and marriage.²⁰ Antoine notes that Viśāmitra functions as the initiation master in this initiation process.²¹

Rāma is recognized as having undergone this transition from adolescence to adulthood when the wedding party meets Rāma-with-the-Axe on the way back to Ayodhyā. This Paraśurāma is renowned for his repeated destruction of the warrior varṇa, or caste. The meeting is thus potentially volatile especially since Paraśurāma claims to possess the twin of Śiva's bow and wants Rāma to try to bend it. Paraśurāma announces that he will fight Rāma if the latter is able to bend this bow. Rāma not only bends the bow and fits an arrow, but also destroys all the worlds in heaven which Paraśurāma has gained by his asceticism. This turn of events humbles Paraśurāma who pays obeisance to Rāma and trundles off.²²

While this episode of the meeting of the two Rāmas

seems contrived, one point is relevant to our discussion. Paraśurāma is willing to challenge Rāma man to man and thus is recognizing him as an equal. The episode underscores the change that Rāma has undergone. He is no longer the boy his father wept over a month before. He has become a man through combat, sacred lore and marriage. He now is ready to assume the responsibilities of adult life which, in Rāma's position as eldest son of a king, should include kingship.

The maturation process

For the purposes of this study it is important to note that the forest is central in this movement from adolescence to adulthood, and important to attempt to understand that centrality. Our attempt at this understanding is aided by Bruno Bettelheim's intriguing study of fairy tales²³ which takes up the role of the forest in the maturation process. "The forest," Bettelheim notes, "...symbolizes the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be."²⁴ Bettelheim's focus is the psychological maturation of children, but his insights, save the one involving "inner darkness", are applicable to the social maturation process we have seen in Rāma's early forest adventures.

For Rāma in his early adventures the forest is the

place where he becomes clear about who he is. His battles with the rākṣasas establish him as an exemplary demon fighter and begin his long feud with Rāvaṇa, the rākṣasa king. This feud will serve as a focus for much of Rāma's life, and, of course, has repercussions on a divine plane. Since Rāvaṇa has raised havoc the world over, and since he can only be defeated by a man, Viṣṇu has agreed to incarnate himself in Daśaratha's sons of whom Rāma is the eldest. In the early battles with Rāvaṇa's representatives, Rāma's divine identity emerges in his bravery and skill in battle.

Rāma's divine identity is clarified in two other episodes in the early adventures. The first is the sacred lore concerning Vāmana. The story of the dwarf avatāra of Viṣṇu who overcomes the demon king with his three giant steps, while not consciously recognized by Rāma as a tale paralleling his own situation, is told by Viśvāmitra in a context which is very suggestive. They are entering Viśvāmitra's āśrama which once belonged to Vāmana. It is, Viśvāmitra complains, overrun by demons, but Rāma should be able, he says, to right the situation. He concludes by noting that the hermitage belongs to Rāma as well as himself.²⁵ All this serves to draw a parallel between Rāma and Viṣṇu.

The second episode is a more direct clarification of Rāma's divine identity. It is the aforementioned meeting of Rāma and Ahalyā. Here Ahalyā is released from her curse of invisibility upon seeing Rāma. The Rāmāyaṇa

again does not tell us what Rāma's reaction to this unusual event was; it is not the epic's custom to dwell on the inner reflections of the heroes. We can surmise, however, that these two events served to clarify his divine identity.

Rāma's human identity, which also becomes clarified in the forest, is of equal importance. We have already noted that he becomes a warrior in fact by his battles with the rākṣasas. He also becomes a part of a line of kṣatriyas, or warriors, which includes among its numbers such notables as Sagara and Bhagīratha, the human protagonists in the story of the descent of the Ganges River to earth. By learning through Viśvāmitra's stories of the exploits of these heroes of the Ikṣvaku line, Rāma is able to enter fully the stream of humanity flowing out of the past, and thereby to carry out the task of ruling Ayodhyā and the surrounding kingdom; the right and duty of the Ikṣvakus since the time of illud tempus²⁶ when the Ganges flowed to earth. By becoming certain that he is a king in a long line of kings and a warrior in a long line of warriors Rāma becomes sure of his identity; he becomes clear about who he is.

To learn more of the place of the forest in the maturation process of the epic heroes, and to learn more of this maturation process itself, we shall turn to the early adventures of the Pāṇḍava brothers, heroes of the Mahābhārata. There are a number of structural similarities between the early adventures of the Pāṇḍavas and the story of Rāma discussed above. Like Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa the

Pāṇḍava brothers leave home, battle rākṣasas in the forest, win their bride by a test involving a bow which is difficult to bend, and like Rāma they return home to the promise of kingship.²⁷ Town locations and forest locations are interwoven in this series of events, but with the exception of the marriage, all the significant episodes take place in the forest.²⁸

In addition to these structural similarities, the maturation process gives parallels between Rāma's adventures and the Pāṇḍavas' adventures. Rāma becomes clear about who he is in the forest and this is a sign of his maturing into adulthood. The Pāṇḍava brothers engage in a number of activities which help define and clarify their identities. Like Rāma they learn about some of their ancestors. One of their ancestors is revealed to be Tapatī a daughter of the sun god famous for her asceticism.²⁹ On another occasion the story of Vasiṣṭha is told because that great sage was once the purohita of the Kuru line, the line of the Pāṇḍavas.³⁰ The Pāṇḍavas engage in some more rigorous learning as well. While disguised as brahmins and living in the forest, the five brothers learned "the Vedas and all their branches and the science of policy".³¹ This latter science is called nītiśāstra and teaches the practical, sometimes severe, methods of governing a kingdom. As was the case with Rāma, kingship was an essential element of the Pāṇḍavas' identity.

This kingship element is brought further into focus

with the forest battles one or more of the five brothers fight in their early adventures. Two of these fights entail conflicts between Bhīma and two different rākṣasas, and one involves Arjuna and a celestial being called a gandharva, but all three are disputes which have a territorial dimension. The first battle pits Bhīma, protecting his mother and brothers who are asleep beneath a banyan tree, against a rākṣasa named Hiḍimba, who, like many of his kind, relished the taste of human flesh.³² Hiḍimba is as large and nearly as strong as the mighty Bhīma thus their hand-to-hand combat reduces the forest to rubble and raises "dust until it resembled the billowing smoke of a forest fire."³³ In the end Bhīma strangles Hiḍimba to death "like a sacrificial animal" and breaks the demon's spine over his knee for good measure.³⁴ Before the battle, Hiḍimba had acknowledged a territorial claim on the forest by saying, when he sent his sister to bring him the Pāṇḍavas for his meal, "you are in no danger of them since they are sleeping in our domain."³⁵ This territorial dimension is even more prominent in the next battle.

A rākṣasa named Baka is the cause of a great amount of grief in and around the town of Ekacakrā. The king in the area is weak³⁶ and the powerful demon has established what amounts to a protection racket. In exchange for protecting the kingdom against enemies of any ilk, Baka demands a regular payment of a cartload of rice, two buffaloes and a human being.³⁷ Here the rākṣasa has usurped

the protective duties of the king and, as was the custom of the king, has levied his own kind of tax. The human part of the 'tax' is provided by each family of Ekacakrā in turn, and when the brahmin family which is hosting the disguised Pāṇḍavas must provide the meal, Bhīma insists on being sent. The inevitable confrontation occurs in the forest where Baka dwells. As in the previous encounter the struggle is very violent and as a result the forest is again destroyed. Bhīma is again victorious, again snapping the back of the demon across his knee.³⁸

The third battle is of a different tenor than the first two. The gandharva, Citraratha, challenges the Pāṇḍavas, and Arjuna responds with the agneya missile which burns up the challenger's chariot.³⁹ The Pāṇḍavas grant Citraratha his life and a deep friendship develops. Citraratha's original challenge was caused by what he had regarded as trespassing on his territory. As the Pāṇḍava brothers approached, he had called out, "This is my own wood, ... Neither corpses nor horned beasts nor Gods nor humans set foot here--then how do you dare to approach?"⁴⁰ So in spite of the different flavour of this battle, the territorial dimension is still central.

Returning to the notion that maturation involves the re-formation or clarification of identity, it is obvious that in their first real combat the Pāṇḍava brothers become clear about their role as warriors. The territorial dimension of these battles suggests that, in addition, the

Pāṇḍavas are realizing something of their identity as rulers-to-be. We have seen that the rākṣasa, Baka, had taken advantage of a weak king to usurp the duties and privileges of kingship. Moreover, the forests in ancient India were normally crown property. The forests themselves were under state control and the products of the forests belonged to the king. The foresters who engaged in the harvesting of timber, tree planting and charcoal manufacture were in the employ of the king.⁴¹ Given this fact, anyone making a claim of territorial rights on forest land was directly challenging the authority of the king. This is exactly what the Pāṇḍavas' combatants were doing. By doing battle with these challengers of kingly authority the five brothers were implicitly acting out the role of the king who would regain his territory. Thus the territorial dimension of these three forest battles serves to crystalize the element of kingship in the Pāṇḍavas' identity. The overall effect of these battles is to help the five brothers become clear about their social identities as warriors and rulers.

It would seem that the presence of similar maturation processes in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa shows that a similar initiation process from childhood to adulthood occurs in both epics. This is not so. Too many of Antoine's criteria for puberty initiation are not fulfilled by the events of the early adventures of the Pāṇḍava brothers. While danger is involved in the Pāṇḍava brothers'

journey to the forest, their mother, their only surviving parent, shows no hesitation in agreeing to their trip which begins the maturation process. There are no divine weapons and no sacred formulae, which parallel Rāma's acquisitions, in this forest narrative. The single aspect which speaks most conclusively against understanding the Pāṇḍava's early adventures as a puberty initiation is that their mother accompanies them. One of the outstanding elements of the classic initiation of boys into manhood is the absence of women.⁴² In order for the boy to become a man he must be separated from his childhood world, the central figure of which is his mother.⁴³ Since the Pāṇḍava youths bring their mother to the forest, we may assume that the process they undergo there is not initiation from boyhood to manhood.

Further proof for this assumption comes from Hindu tradition itself. On the occasion of the upanāyana saṁskāra the young boy is understood to be initiated into the community at large.⁴⁴ During this saṁskāra he is separated from his family and goes to a teacher. By virtue of this ritual the young boy was considered a twice-born one, or dvija. While the age of the child at the time of the upanāyana ceremony may not allow us to speak of a puberty initiation into manhood, nonetheless this ceremony marked the symbolic point at which the child could begin becoming an adult. For the Hindu tradition the upanāyana is the significant initiation of its youth.⁴⁵

Between life-stages

Still, the heroes do mature through their experiences and they do undergo a number of changes. Initiation itself belongs to a larger rubric called rites of passage.⁴⁶ This rubric includes not just ritual behaviour centered on life crises such as puberty, but also includes ritual behaviour acknowledging any movement from one stage of life to another.⁴⁷ With this understanding we can see that Antoine's puberty initiation hypothesis is too limiting for the heroes of the Mahābhārata. We shall show that the early adventures of the heroes of both epics are better understood as comprising a rite of passage between the brahmacarya, or student, stage of life and the gr̥hastha, or householder, stage of life. These two life-stages are the first of the four part ideal system called varṇāśramadharmā.

The law books which the rituals deemed essential in Hinduism set out a specific saṁskāra or rite to be done at the juncture between the brahmacarya and gr̥hastha life-stages. This saṁskāra is called samāvartana and it marks the end of studentship.⁴⁸ Before this rite could begin, the student had to first present his guru, or teacher, with a gift. After he had fulfilled this last duty, the student performed the samāvartana saṁskāra, which was essentially a ritual bath taking place in the forest.⁴⁹ Afterwards, his guru anointed him and presented him with some of the luxurious accoutrements of the householder's life which had

not been part of his austere studentship. These accoutrements included ornaments, collyrium, earrings, umbrella, shoes and mirror.⁵⁰ This saṁskāra was always a prerequisite to marriage⁵¹ and apparently has become today only the equivalent of a marriage license.⁵²

The epics are silent on the samāvartana saṁskāra in the context of the early adventures. Rāma and his family are said to perform all the necessary ceremonies ("śrāddhas") before the wedding, but these are not described, and in any case since they do not take place in the forest, they can not be the required saṁskāra.⁵³ It may well be that this absence of samāvartana saṁskāra in the epics is due to the fact that a literal understanding of the samāvartana rite has sometimes resulted in the saṁskāra not being required of a boy who learns under his own father.⁵⁴ It is possible that, as the authors of these stories understood it, the actual samāvartana saṁskāra was not required of their heroes. Yet a change in life-stage does exist, and the forest activities the heroes engage in do resemble a traditional rite of passage. To determine the extent of this resemblance we shall return to the story of the Pāṇḍavas before they entered the forest, then trace their progress to the gṛhastha life-stage.

The Pāṇḍavas

Much more is said about the Pāṇḍavas' studentship

than is said about Rāma's. The Pāṇḍavas' study consisted of learning the various skills necessary for warfare. Their main teacher was a brahmin named Droṇa who had received his knowledge of weaponry and his special weapons from Paraśurāma when the latter was retiring to the woods.⁵⁵ Droṇa's prowess was extensive in part because he knew all the "secrets and vows"⁵⁶ which were necessary for the accurate use of the weapons. The Pāṇḍavas' study, then, entailed more than acquiring technical fighting skill; it also entailed learning the various formulae which discharged the various weapons.

Arjuna emerged as Droṇa's favourite student. The results of Droṇa's special attention to Arjuna are evident when all the students are tested near the end of their studies. Only Arjuna has enough concentration to hit a very small target from a long distance. None of the other students has enough concentration even to shoot.⁵⁷

After this test, Droṇa decides that the young princes had finished their studies.⁵⁸ To mark the event a weapons show is arranged where all of Droṇa's students may demonstrate their abilities to the assembled crowd. The weapons show turned out to be an extravaganza with amazing displays amid cheering throngs.⁵⁹

Immediately following the weapons show, Droṇa assembled his students and asked for his guru gift. His request is an unusual one as he asks that his students capture the king of the Pāñcāla, Drupada, and bring the

defeated monarch before him. This request is grounded in a feud which Drona has with Drupada. In any case, his students are well trained and are successful in crushing Drupada's city. The kingdom of Pāñcāla is divided with Drona controlling the northern half and magnaminously turning the southern half over to Drupada.

Meanwhile Duryodhana, the eldest cousin of the Pāñḍava brothers, was consumed by jealousy for his talented cousins. He convinces his father, who is acting king until the Pāñḍavas reach the proper age, to send his cousins to a provincial town, Vāraṇāvata. Duryodhana then conspires to destroy the Pāñḍavas by ensconcing them in a fine house built of very flammable materials, then burning up the house and its inhabitants. His plan would have succeeded except that the Pāñḍavas are forewarned of the danger, and they escape the conflagration. They are thought to be dead, however, as the bodies of five young men and a woman are found in the ruins.⁶⁰ Accompanied by their mother, the Pāñḍava brothers flee to the forest where they encounter rākṣasas, study the Vedas and live as brahmins as was described earlier.

Until they are sent to the provincial town, the Pāñḍavas follow the ideal pattern described in the law books. They study under a guru in the brahmacarya stage, although apparently not in the forest. At the completion of their studies they provide a gift to their teacher as was their responsibility. But instead of a samāvartana

samskāra, or a hint of a ritual involving bathing, the Pāṇḍavas are subtly exiled. The pattern is interrupted. Eventually they find themselves in the forest where, as we have seen, they become clear about who they are, especially as regards their identity as warriors and kings. It is worth noting that these roles form the predominant social identity of the brothers when they finally enter the grhastha stage of life. The maturation process discussed earlier is a necessary condition of their movement to a new stage of life.

Another event which prepares the Pāṇḍavas for their assumption to the householder stage of life occurs during their discussions with the gandharva, Citraratha. It will be remembered that after Arjuna reduced the gandharva's chariot to ashes, Citraratha became a friend of the Pāṇḍavas. In the course of establishing a rapport with Citraratha, Arjuna asked why the gandharva was able to attack them so easily. Citraratha responded, "'You have no fires, you have no oblations, you have no priest before you: therefore you were set upon by me'".⁶¹ After hearing the story of Vasiṣṭha, one of the famous priests of their ancestors, the five brothers, on the advice of Citraratha, asks Dhaumya to be their purohita. It is significant that the household fire for anyone and the house priest for a king are essential elements of the grhastha lifestage.⁶²

Having chosen a purohita, the Pāṇḍavas go directly to King Drupada's kingdom where a svayamvara, or bridegroom

choice⁶³ is being held for Drupada's daughter, Draupadī. When none of the assembled princes succeed in pulling the bow, let alone in hitting the target, Arjuna enters the tournament. All the Pāṇḍavas are inognito and dressed as brahmins thus Arjuna's entry causes some disturbance, as a brahmin apparently ought not enter the competition. Arjuna succeeds in winning Draupadī, but he and Bhīma must fight their way out of the arena because of the angry warrior suitors.

Upon returning home Arjuna says to his mother, "'Look what we found'". Kuntī, the Pāṇḍavas' mother, thought her sons had been begging food and responded without looking. "'Now you share that together!'"⁶⁴ Her words precipitate the unusual marriage of Draupadī and all five brothers. Drupada is understandably reluctant to agree to this uncommon union, but the five brothers do not want to make their mother guilty of an untruth. Drupada is eventually convinced of the rightness of the marriage by the Pāṇḍavas' grandfather, Vyāsa, who tells The Story of the Five Indras. We shall return to the polyandrous marriage later.

After the wedding, the Pāṇḍavas are given one half the kingdom of their father by the 'acting' king of their homeland, Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Even this concession of an uncultivated forest tract was made over the strident objections of Duryodhana. The Pāṇḍavas clear this land with the help of their new ally Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and establish a city there. This establishment of a city completes their transition into

the gṛhastha life-stage. They now have a house priest, a wife, a home, and household fires. The process of forest adventure by which they have become householders is unusual and incomprehensible by the light of the rituals (saṁskāras) set forth in the lawbooks. However, as indicated earlier, a broader ritual pattern, the rites of passage, is helpful in our attempt to understand the early forest adventures of the Pāṇḍavas.

Rites of passage

The movement from life stage to life stage in traditional societies involves passage rituals. These rites of passage, first identified by Arnold van Gennep,⁶⁵ have become part of the language social scientists use in explaining ritual behaviour. As noted in the previous chapter, Van Gennep discovered three phases of a rite of passage and labelled them separation, limin or threshold, and incorporation,⁶⁶ while more recently Victor Turner has focused on the middle or threshold phase of passage ritual.⁶⁷

In the separation phase, Turner notes, the person involved in the passage ritual, the passenger, is wrenched away from the state he has known. By 'state' Turner means "any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized."⁶⁸ This detachment from a known fixed point in a social structure is often represented in the symbolic language of myth and ritual as a death.⁶⁹ In a very real

way the passenger does die to one stage of existence to be reborn later in a different state. These states of existence are seen to be mutually exclusive in the sense that it is not possible to belong to both states at once. This point is self evident: one cannot be simultaneously at peace and at war; a child and an adult; a polluted profane individual performing a sacred rite. The rebirth or incorporation phase brings the passage to completion. The passenger is once more in a stable condition with new rules and regulations, new codes of behaviour and new rights and privileges.⁷⁰

Between death and rebirth is the threshold or liminal phase. The status of the 'liminal personae' is by definition ambiguous because they are slipping between known classifications of states.⁷¹ According to Turner, "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."⁷² A rich variety of symbols describes the passengers' nowhere position. They may be "represented as possessing nothing" because "as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, [or] position in a kinship system."⁷³ There is nothing about them which sets them apart from their fellow passengers.

From this point of view of attempting to clarify one's identity the liminal phase would be confusing and enlightening at the same time. Says Turner, "the neophytes

are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories."⁷⁴ This confusion of categories understandably precipitates a questioning of old social roles and thus breeds an uncertainty about who one is. Simultaneously the liminal personae are in a "realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."⁷⁵ Out of this realm emerge the pieces of the new identity which will enable the passengers to re-enter in a new state of existence the world they left.

Related to the ambiguity and paradox inherent in the liminal phase is the tendency of passengers to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism while on the threshold between states of existence. Stripped of their status, and confused about their identity, it is little wonder that the fellow passengers often experience what Turner calls "communitas".⁷⁶ "It is as though," notes Turner, "they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life."⁷⁷ In their uniform condition the liminal personae have no distinctions among themselves. There is a blending of high and low, and in this homogeneity is born comradeship. According to Turner the passenger enters a realm in which the basic human social bond is not yet fragmented into the structuralized ties of caste and hierarchical ranking.⁷⁸

Communitas is the experience of this human bond which links the liminal personae together.

The traditional ritual

While this brief and general description of a rite of passage hardly exhausts the phenomenon, it should provide enough information to study the transition from brahmacarya to gr̥hastha life-stage. The lack of reference in the epics to traditional saṁskāras relevant to this transition period has been noted. Nonetheless it is important to demonstrate that this traditional samāvartana saṁskāra makes sense as a rite of passage. Studying the ritual from this perspective will later enable us to show that the early forest experiences of the Pāṇḍavas function in a similar way.

In his book Hindu Saṁskāras R.B. Pandey gives a short account of the samāvartana saṁskāra culled from the Bhāradvāja and Pāraskara Gr̥hyasūtras.⁷⁹ Even this short account of the ritual provides some interesting parallels with the rite of passage. First the student must spend the first half of the day shut up by himself in a room. This procedure would serve to separate the student from his usual studentship duties of study and fire-tending. This separation is underscored when, in the procedure that follows, the student recited the auspicious mantras. Usually his guru would recite these mantras; now the student can recite them himself.⁸⁰

At midday the student ended his seclusion, embraced the feet of his guru and placed one last stick of wood on the sacrificial fire. Then sitting amidst eight vessels of water arrayed toward the eight major directions, the student began the bath which was the essence of the ritual. Reciting the appropriate verses the student bathed himself with water from each of the vessels. The gist of the verses was that his consuming attention to fire was being left behind and he was washing in order to insure prosperity, glory, holiness and splendour.⁸¹ His bath having been completed the student finished crossing the threshold by throwing his ascetic garb into the water, cutting off his beard, lock of hair and nails, and then cleaning his teeth while saying the words, "'Array yourself for food'"⁸² This latter act begins the ex-student's incorporation into the householder life-stage. He now receives a new set of clothes made of unwashed, undyed material along with flowers and garlands and a wealth of luxurious accoutrements of the householder's life formerly denied him. One of these accoutrements is a mirror which he may 'see himself as he really is' in his new role as householder. The incorporation phase of the rite was consummated when the newly attired exstudent, now called a snātaka, was introduced to the nearest centre of learned men by his teacher.⁸³

Since the student apparently underwent this samskāra alone, obviously the element of *communitas* never develops. In spite of this it is clear that the traditional

ritual which ushered a person from brahmacarya to grhastha life-stage may be included under the general rubric of rites of passage.

Neither epic mentions this samskāra, yet the epic heroes all move from brahmacarya to grhastha life-stage; therefore they need a substitute for this rite of passage. Since the normal transition ritual is a rite of passage, we may reasonably expect that anything which takes its place would have many of the attributes of the ritual it replaces. The early forest adventures of the Pāṇḍava brothers and those of Rāma and his brother, occur at a time when the samāvartana samskāra normally would occur. Because ritual expresses certain human realities in action, it is not surprising to find the actions of the Pāṇḍavas and Rāma expressing the reality of their life-stage transition at a time appropriate to that transition, i.e., their early adventures. Further if the early adventures substitute for the traditional rites of passage, then the fact that they occur in the forest becomes significant for our investigation.

The ritual pattern in the narratives

Until the time of their quasi-exile to Vāranāvata, the Pāṇḍava brothers live a life of royal luxury. Even after they are sent to the distant provincial town, they remain very affluent. The significance of their dismissal

is that they have been separated from the centre of royal power, the capital of the kingdom. With this quasi-exile, then, the Pāṇḍavas begin the separation phase of their rite of passage between student and householder life-stages.

The separation phase culminates, as it often does in traditional passage rituals, with their 'death'. In fact they escaped from the burning house, but to the rest of the world they were dead. Dhṛtarāṣṭra ordered the funeral rites performed and all their friends mourned their untimely death.⁸⁴ Because the Pāṇḍava brothers along with their mother assumed disguises and told no one of their escape, they remained dead to the world at large.

At the end of their forest adventures the five brothers are incorporated back by degrees into the world they left. First Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva recognizes the heroes at Draupadī's svayaṃvara. Then the next day Yudhiṣṭhira reveals their identity to Drupada at the bridegrooms' party.⁸⁵ Drupada had already suspected their true identities from the information garnered from spies. The wedding ceremonies (there are five) provide the ritual culmination of the incorporation phase of their rite of passage.⁸⁶ After the weddings runners were sent to all the kings of the earth with the news of the Pāṇḍavas' wedding to Draupadī and of the true identities of the 'brahmins' at the svayaṃvara.

When they heard that the sons of King Pāṇḍu and Kuntī had been disguised as

brahmins, the kings of men were greatly surprised, for before they had heard that Kuntī and her sons had been burned alive. "They have been reborn!" Thus all the kings thought of them, ... 87

Just as the world thought them dead, so now the world considers them reborn. We have seen that death and rebirth are the symbolic starting and finishing points of a rite of passage. In the separation phase the passengers die, here in a blazing house, and in the incorporation phase, they are reborn, here in the public announcement of their marriage.

It remains to consider the middle or liminal phase of the Pāṇḍavas' rite of passage between life-stages. Traditionally this phase is marked by ambiguity, especially about who one is, and by the social interrelationship called *communitas*. The ambiguity common to the liminal personae may be seen in the Pāṇḍavas in a number of ways. In the forest they are without the comforts which have been obvious signs of their royal birthright. Even their brother Bhīma, normally insensitive to all but his most visceral needs, notices the difference:

"...What more grievous sight can I ever see than the sight of these tigers among men now bedding on the ground? The law-wise king who deserves to sway the three worlds [Yudhiṣṭhira], why must he lie tired on the ground like a commoner! ..."88

He repeats this litany for each of his brothers. Without their finery, Bhīma is saying, his brothers appear to be

without refinement, which from his position among the royal elite is the way ordinary people look. In short the Pāṇḍavas in the forest possess nothing; they have no status and no property. This in itself is a mark of the liminal personae.

The Pāṇḍavas compound their liminal uncertainty concerning their identities when they decide to disguise themselves as brahmin ascetics to avoid further persecution at the hands of Duryodhana. Their disguise involved braiding their hair and wearing ascetic garb consisting of bark skirts and deerskins. We can assume their disguise was adequate because many people were deceived by it. During this period of disguise it will be remembered that the five brothers engaged in learning the Vedas and the science of governmental policy.

Normally one's birth determines one's caste in India.⁸⁹ One belongs to the caste that one's father belonged to. To deviate from this norm, at least in epic times, was cause for some consternation.⁹⁰ Nevertheless in their early forest adventures the Pāṇḍavas appear as members of any but their own caste. His brothers seem to Bhīma like commoners, and the disguise they assume is of the higher brahmin caste. This mixup of castes has some peculiar ramifications for the Pāṇḍavas. At the conclusion of the svayaṃvara Bhīma and Arjuna are forced to fight members of their own warrior varṇa in order to protect Drupada, a warrior, who is being attacked because he gave

his wife to the 'brahmin', Arjuna. This 'brahmin' is, of course, really a warrior, thus there is no real need to fight in the first place. This confusion of castes mirrors the Pāṇḍava's own ambiguous status.

The liminal phase is paradoxically also the 'realm of pure possibility'. For the Pāṇḍavas we have seen this means that their maturation process includes becoming clear about who they are as warriors, kings and householders. This paradoxical quality associated with the threshold phase of the rite of passage will reoccur again.

In addition to ambiguity of status and identity, the liminal personae are marked by *communitas*, the sense of a fundamental human bond between them. This sense manifests itself in the egalitarian treatment the passengers give one another. *Communitas* is the blending of high and low in comradeship; the neophytes treat one another alike because they are alike in their passage between states. A perspective on the Pāṇḍavas' experiences of *communitas* is provided by a brief look at Bhīma in these early adventures. Bhīma of all the brothers is most prominent in these adventures. In the escape from the burning house Bhīma carries not just his mother, but all his brothers as well. Then in order not to wake his sleeping family who he has been selflessly guarding, he drags the demon, Hidimba, off into the forest where the noise will not disturb them. Bhīma, at his mother's suggestion, agreeably substitutes himself for one of his brahmin host's family, although he

knows it will mean a confrontation with the rākṣasa, Baka. This kind of selfless activity was not an obvious attribute of the child Bhīma.

As a child Bhīma was a bully. The epic makes it clear that Bhīma's childhood bullying was playful in intent, but bullies everywhere are notoriously short on concern for another's welfare, and Bhīma is no exception. His prime targets were his cousins who he repeatedly bested because of his great strength. He would pick his 'playmates' up off the ground by the hair and then "set them to fight one another."⁹¹ The description of Bhīma's 'play' continues:

When he was playing in the water, he would catch ten of the kids in his arms and sit down under the water, letting go of them when they came close to drowning. And when they climbed the trees to pick fruit, Bhīma would kick the tree to make it shake, and all shaken up they would tumble down with the fruit from the tree that shuddered from the kick, and fall down limply.⁹²

Even if we agree with the epic that Bhīma's activity constitutes play, it is still obvious that he cared little for the welfare of his cousins. In fact his behaviour is self-serving and self-centered.

It is this childhood behaviour which makes Bhīma's attitude during the threshold experience so noteworthy. During the threshold adventures Bhīma is willing to risk life and limb for those with him. Certainly the epic means to demonstrate Bhīma's protective stance towards his family.

This stance provides the basis of a theme which carries throughout the Mahābhārata. Nonetheless this does not explain the change that comes over Bhīma which is first noticeable as the family races from the burning house. None of the other characters change so dramatically in the early adventures. Bhīma's self-centeredness seems to be consumed in the flaming house and, when thrust into the desolate forest, he does more than his share to help his relations. The liminal attitude of *communitas* nicely describes Bhīma's new concern for others. Bhīma changes because he becomes aware that, strong as he is, he is really just like the rest of his brothers. He too is a commoner in the forest, in the forest he is like everybody else.

The most radical statement of the *communitas* the Pāṇḍavas generate in their early forest adventures is their polyandrous marriage to Draupadī. Much ink has been spilled over this episode, much of it by the later tradition to justify what it regarded as an anathema.⁹³ Recently Alf Hiltebeitel has shown the thematic correlation between mythic and epic material on just this point.⁹⁴ I would like to suggest that the marriage of Draupadī and the five brothers makes internal sense as well.

In attempting to explain to Drupada why his daughter must have five husbands, Yudhiṣṭhira says:

"...She was won by the Pārtha [Arjuna],
your daughter--and she is a treasure.

We have a covenant that we share together every treasure, king! We do not want to give up our covenant now, good king.⁹⁵

On the face of it this seems a rather lame reason for an outrageously adharmic or unlawful marriage. If we consider that the five brothers are still in the liminal phase of a passage between life-stages however, Yudhiṣṭhira's words take on some significance. If, as Turner suggests, the liminal personae tap a fundamental human bond in the threshold experience and if one expression of this *communitas* is the sharing of all things for the common good, then the sharing of Draupadī as a common wife makes perfect sense. The problem Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers face is that the society they are acting in cannot appreciate or even perceive their *communitas*. It is after all because they are out of place and out of time that they experience the *communitas* central to the liminal phase. Thus it is that the Pāṇḍavas' grandfather, Vyāsa, has to mediate and convince Drupada of the rightness of the union by explaining its mythic dimension.⁹⁶ Drupada is convinced, the Pāṇḍavas marry Draupadī and emerge from their threshold experience ready to establish their kingdom as royal gṛhasthas.

From this detailed accounting of the phases of the tripartite process in the Pāṇḍavas' early adventures, and from the earlier discussion of Rāma's adventures as a puberty initiation, it follows that Rāma, too, passes through a rite of passage. He is separated from his

father, involved in the liminal phase during his travels with Viśvāmitra, and incorporated at Janaka's court. Of course any puberty initiation is a rite of passage, and thus will carry the tripartite imprint. But Rāma's passage to manhood corresponds with his passage from the brahmacarya life-stage to the grhastha life-stage. It is at this point that Rāma's early adventures parallel those of the Pāṇḍavas, and it is at this point that the role of the forest in both epics is identical.

The role of the forest in the early adventures of the epic heroes is a pivotal one. In the case of both epics it is in the forest that the central liminal events take place. By passing through the forest the heroes, to paraphrase Bettelheim, resolve the uncertainty about who they are, and begin to understand who they want to be. This process occurs because they are betwixt and between the usual states of existence. Old categories and norms no longer apply, new categories and norms do not yet apply. The heroes are on the threshold where nothing is fixed but the flux. Out of the threshold's flux new roles are formed; the heroes emerge from the forest capable of acting in new ways as royal grhasthas. In the early adventures of the epic heroes the forest is their threshold.

Notes

- 1 Rām., 1.17.nt. 513, lines 3-4.
- 2 Rām., 1.19, nt. 575, lines 5-6. Translation by Robert Antoine in Rāma and the Bards: Epic Memory in the Rāmāyaṇa (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1975), p. 23.
- 3 Rām., 1.18.10.
- 4 Rām., 1.21.10-16.
- 5 Rām., 1.22.7-10.
- 6 I have opted to use the spelling "brahmin" to refer to members of the priestly caste because it has come into general use in this form, and causes less confusion than the more correct brahman.
- 7 Rām., 1.25.1-22.
- 8 Rām., 1.27.1-22.
- 9 Rām., 1.28.7-13 and Appendix 1, no. 6, lines 1-16.
- 10 Rām., 1.29-8-23.
- 11 Rām., 1.44.1-27.
- 12 Rām., 1.34-43. King Sagara is identified as part of the Ikṣvāka line at 1.38.2.
- 13 Rām., 1.47.15 - 1.48.10.
- 14 Rām., 1.48.11-16.
- 15 Rām., 1.50-65.
- 16 Rām., 1.65, note 1208, lines 1-5.
- 17 Antoine, op. cit., p. 41.
- 18 Antoine (ibid., p. 42) sees this marriage as the union of Earth and Sky, but he does not develop this theme except to note that Sītā returned to the earth at the end of her life while Rāma returned to heaven.

- 19 Ibid., pp. 31-45.
- 20 Ibid., p. 31.
- 21 Ibid., p. 43.
- 22 Rām., 1.73-75; Antoine, op. cit., p. 43f.
- 23 Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1976).
- 24 Ibid., p. 93.
- 25 Rām., 1.28.14.
- 26 Illud tempus is a phrase which Mircea Eliade uses to mean once-upon-a-time. The notion is significant for the history of religions and is discussed in Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, tr. William R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959), pp. 80-113.
- 27 MBh., 1.124-199.
- 28 Most of these episodes will be noted below. They occur in MBh., 1.124-199.
- 29 MBh., 1.160-163.
- 30 MBh., 1.164-172. It is interesting that Vasīṣṭha is claimed as purohita by the heroic lines in both epics.
- 31 MBh., 1.144.5, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 301.
- 32 MBh., 1.139-143.
- 33 MBh., 1.142.15, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 299.
- 34 MBh., 1.142.25-30, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 299.
- 35 MBh., 1.139.9-10, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 295.
- 36 MBh., 1.148.10.
- 37 MBh., 1.148.5-10.
- 38 MBh., 1.151.1-20.
- 39 MBh., 1.158.10-30.
- 40 MBh., 1.158.10-15, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 321.

41 Auboyer, op. cit., p. 109, and Romila Thaper, A History of India, vol. 1 (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 55.

42 Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation, tr. William R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 7-10, 4, 5, 16, 33.

43 Ibid., p. 8.

44 Raj Bali Pandey, Hindu Samskāras (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), p. 112. In addition, Veena Das, "The uses of liminality: society and cosmos in Hinduism," Contributions to Indian Sociology, vol. 10, no. 2 (1976), p. 257, states that the incorporation of a boy normally place at the upanāyana.

45 Ibid., pp. 111-123.

46 Van Gennep, op. cit., pp. 65-116.

47 Ibid., p. 187.

48 The Laws of Manu, tr. Georg Bühler (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), pp. 1-33.

49 Ibid., p. 149.

50 Ibid., p. 151.

51 Manu, op. cit., III, 4.

52 Pandey, op. cit., p. 148 and p. 152.

53 Rām., 1.71.18-20. Ramashraya Sharma, A Socio-Political Study of the Vālmiki Rāmāyana (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971) notes on pp. 27-28 that there is no specific reference to the samāvartana-samskāra in the Rāmāyana.

54 Kane, op. cit., v. 2, p. 1, p. 405. J.C. Heesterman in "The Return of the Veda Scholar (samāvartana)", Pratidānam (=Festschrift Kuiper), (The Netherlands: The Hague, 1969), pp. 436-447 argues that the samāvartana originally was not a rite of passage, but was an agonistic ritual in which a verbal contest was central. If Heesterman's theory is correct, it would explain why the ritual does not 'work' well as a rite of passage and thus why the epics substitute wanderings in the forest which they deem more substantial.

55 MBh., 1.122.20 ff.

- 56 MBh., 1.122.24, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 268.
- 57 MBh., 1.123.50-65.
- 58 MBh., 1.124.5.
- 59 MBh., 1.124.127.
- 60 MBh., 1.134-137.
- 61 MBh., 1.159.1-5, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 323.
- 62 Manu, III, 67-84 (fire) and VII, 78 (purohita)
- 63 'Bridegroom choice' is van Buitenen's rendering of svayamvara.
- 64 MBh., 1.182.1-5, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 357.
- 65 Van Gennep, op. cit., passim.
- 66 Ibid., pp. 11 and 21.
- 67 Turner, Forest, pp. 93-111, Dramas, pp. 231-299, and Ritual, pp. 94-203.
- 68 Turner, Ritual, p. 94.
- 69 For example see van Gennep, op. cit., p. 75; Eliade, Initiation, p. xii; Turner, Forest, p. 96 and Ritual, p. 95.
- 70 Turner, Forest, p. 94.
- 71 _____, Ritual, p. 94.
- 72 Ibid., p. 95.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 _____, Forest, p. 97.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 _____, Ritual, pp. 96f. Turner notes that he chooses the Latin communitas to differentiate this idea of social relationship from the idea of an area of common living called to mind by the word community.
- 77 Ibid., p. 95.
- 78 Ibid., p. 96.

79 Pandey, op. cit., pp. 150 f., see also Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 1, pp. 408-411.

80 Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 1, p. 409, especially nt. 479.

81 Pandey, op. cit., p. 150.

82 Ibid., p. 151.

83 Ibid., Kane (v. 2, pt. 1, p. 408) notes that the snātaka remains between life-stages until he marries.

84 MBh., 1.137.10-14.

85 MBh., 1.181.30 f.

86 MBh., 1.186-191. Ruben, op. cit., p. 31, has noted that the forest wanderings in both epics lead to marriage.

87 MBh., 1.192.5-6, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 379. The emphasis is van Buitenen's, "punarjātāniti smaitān manyante sarvapārthivāḥ".

88 MBh., 1.138.20-21, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 293. The word Van Buitenen renders as 'commoner' is "prākṛta".

89 Irwati Karve, Hindu Society (Poona: Deccan College, 1961), p. 129.

90 Bhagavadgītā, 1.40-44.

91 MBh., 1.119.16, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 264.

92 MBh., 1.119.19-22, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 264.

93 For a Western response with a different intention, but the same presupposition see van Buitenen, v. 1, p. xxi.

94 Hiltebeitel, op. cit., pp. 69-99.

95 MBh., 1.187.23-24, van Buitenen, v. 1, pp. 367 f. The word van Buitenen renders as 'covenant' is "samaya".

96 MBh., 1.189.

CHAPTER THREE

A STORY OF LOVE AND CHANGE: THE TRIPARTITE PARADIGM IN NALA AND DAMAYANTĪ

We have seen in the narrative stories which depict the early adventures of the epic heroes the imprint of the ritual pattern called rite of passage. In this chapter we shall apply the process of change inherent in the rite of passage to a narrative in which there is no life-crisis to mark nor a change in life-stage to celebrate. Traditionally such marking or celebrating is done in a rite of passage, so on the face of it our application of the tripartite process to such a narrative seems ill-advised. However the appropriateness of our endeavour is suggested by van Gennep, who noted that rites of passage may mark the transition from one state of existence to another.¹ Victor Turner elaborates on this idea:

Van Gennep made a striking discovery when he demonstrated, in his comparative work on rites of passage, that human culture had become cognizant of a tripartite movement in space-time. His focus was restricted to ritual but his paradigm covers many extraritual processes.²

The extraritual process we shall investigate is found in the well known tale of Nala and Damayantī from the

third or 'forest' book of the Mahābhārata. By means of this investigation we shall demonstrate that the tripartite process is recorded in epic narrative generally, not only in epic narrative concerned with life-crises and life-stage changes, and furthermore that the forest is a central symbol in that tripartite process.

The tale

Nala and Damayanti has long been recognized as a significant story by both Eastern and Western scholars.³ However, while it has often been acclaimed, the critical study which has heretofore been done on the tale has been concerned primarily with dating either the story itself,⁴ or the setting of the story, called the Vanaparvan, meaning 'the book of the forest'.⁵ There is nothing inherently wrong with this concern with the historical origin of the text, but so far studies have proceeded without much concern for the significance of the tale.⁶ This lack of focus on the tale's significance is particularly disappointing for this study because the forest plays a dominant role in Nala and Damayanti; thus a coherent understanding of the story would include valuable ideas about the role of the forest. Since helpful critical investigations are not available, we shall attempt an understanding of both the tale and the place of the forest within it. A recounting of the story is a fitting place to begin.

Nala and Damayanti tells the story of the

trials and tribulations of a royal couple who lose their kingdom and regain it again.⁷ The story begins with a description of the extraordinary characteristics of the young king and princess who at that time lived in different kingdoms. They first heard of one another through the praises of awestruck persons who had witnessed their splendour. Their love for one another arose sight unseen and was fanned and fueled by a wild goose who flew as a go-between from Nala's city of Niṣadha to Damayantī's city of Vidarbha. Soon Damayantī experienced the madness typical of a love-struck girl as described in Indian literature. Her father, Bhīma, was informed of her condition and subsequently announced that she would have a bridegroom choice, a svayaṃvara. Princes began arriving at Vidarbha from all over the world hoping to win Damayantī's hand in marriage. Damayanti's svayaṃvara also came to the attention of the gods in heaven. Damayantī's unparalleled beauty was renowned as far away as Indra's heaven, and so it was that four gods set out to Vidarbha to win Damayantī's hand. When these gods, Indra, Agni, Varuṇa, and Yama, had travelled some distance, they met Nala on his way to the court of Bhīma. Nala's handsome features and dignified bearing stopped the gods in midflight. Amazed though they were they still had the wherewithal to ask Nala to do them a favour. Nala, who, besides possessing a love of dice and skill with horses, is characterized as being true to his word, agreed to their

non-specific request. [In an ironic turn Nala became the specific request.] In an ironic turn Nala became the unwilling messenger of the gods whose task it was to plead with Damayantī that she would choose one of the gods as her husband.

When he arrived at Bhīma's palace, he gained access to Damayantī's apartments by becoming invisible through the power of the gods. Appearing before Damayantī, Nala spoke to her for the first time. He felt his love for her rise up in him, but suppressed it and nobly pleaded the gods' case. Damayantī, already deeply in love with Nala, would have none of it, and devised a plan whereby she would choose her beloved at the svayaṃvara. Being truthful, Nala reported all this back to the gods, and they countered Damayantī's plan by all appearing at the svayaṃvara looking exactly like Nala.

As the moment approached to choose her husband, Damayantī became quite distressed because there appeared to be five Nalas. She prayed to the gods that if she had chosen Nala at the words of the wild goose, if she had been truthful in speech, and if Nala had been ordained her husband by the gods themselves, they they would take their true forms. The gods responded to this Act of Truth⁸ by assuming their divine forms thereby leaving Nala waiting to be chosen. He was, and their marriage was celebrated. Before departing, the gods bestowed various boons on Nala including the ability to cook, to have water and fire at

his fingertips and to be unharmed by fire. In addition, the gods gave Nala the boon of never having to stoop for doorways and gave the royal couple the gift of a daughter and a son.

On their way back to Indra's heaven the four gods met two of their comrades who were exceedingly displeased at having been set aside for a mere mortal. Despite the counsel of the four, these two gods went off with evil intentions wrought by jealousy. Some twelve years later one of these gods, Kali, entered the body of Nala at a moment when the king was ritually impure. Meanwhile the other god entered the dice. Since Nala was possessed, he was consumed by a desire to gamble; and since Kali controlled the dice, Nala was soon stripped of his kingdom, his wealth and even his clothes. As a result he and his wife were turned out of their own city by Puṣkara, Nala's brother, who had been Kali's pawn in the dice match.

Nala's former subjects were forbidden by the new ruler to aid him, thus after spending three nights on the edge of the city, the two exiles began to wander in the forest. Eventually they came to a shelter and there Damayantī, exhausted by her trials, slept, while the possessed Nala debated leaving his wife as he felt she would be better off without him. At length, after much brooding, he cut his wife's one remaining garment in two, took half to cover himself and abandoned her. But even though Nala was possessed, the separation was torturous for him.

Nala went and went, but came back to the lodge everytime, drawn forth by Kali, drawn back by his love. The suffering man's heart was cut in two; like a swing it kept going back and forth to the lodge.⁹

Finally, overpowered by Kali, Nala ran off leaving Damayantī alone "in the empty forest".¹⁰

When she awoke, Damayantī at first would not believe that Nala had left her alone. Perhaps Nala was playing hide n' seek. Soon terror, rage and grief overcame her and she exhibited mad behaviour--she ran about screaming, fell to the ground in a faint, but was soon up and lamenting again. She cursed the creature who was causing Nala's suffering then set out to search for her husband in the "predator-infested wilderness".¹¹ Before long she was ensnared in a boa constrictor's coils and, as her life was being squeezed from her, she cried out to her husband to protect her. Fortunately a hunter was in the vicinity and he dashed on the scene, killed the giant snake, and freed Damayantī. Unfortunately her rescuer turned oppressor, as it soon became clear that he intended to rape her. As he began his advance on her, Damayantī again made an Act of Truth. "If I have never thought of any man by Nala even in my heart," she said, "then let this hunter fall dead". At her very words the hunter fell dead "like a tree caught in a fire".¹²

Damayantī's forest trials were only beginning. She searched the forest asking everything she encountered

if it had seen her husband. First she fearlessly asked a tiger, then she asked a "sacred rocky mountain"¹³ and then she encountered a hermitage of forest ascetics. On each of these occasions she first introduced herself, briefly told her story, then asked if Nala had been seen. The only response she received was from the ascetics who told her that some day she would be reunited with her husband. Then these ascetics disappeared along with their huts. Their disappearance understandably disturbed Damayantī and she continued her lament and her search as before.

Her wandering eventually brought Damayantī to a road where she met a caravan. The caravan's members' reaction to her was at best tentative because of her dirty dishevelled appearance, but after an interrogation and some discussion they agreed to allow her to travel with them to Cedi, their destination. Although later in the Vanaparvan Yudhiṣṭhira says that a "caravan is a friend of the traveller,"¹⁴ Damayantī's position with the caravan was only marginally more secure than her solitary vulnerability to the dangers of the forest. Caravans attracted all manner of robbers and misfits, and were risky, if profitable, ventures for the merchants who invested in them.¹⁵ Shortly after Damayantī joined this caravan to Cedi, disaster struck. A herd of thirsty elephants inadvertently trampled most of the people in the caravan as they slept in an inauspicious spot next to a lotus pond. Damayantī survived the catastrophe and, still hoping to find Nala, made

her way to Cedi with some brahmins.

As she entered that city, her lack of escort and her scruffy, half-clad, madwoman appearance drew the attention of a crowd of street urchins, and this procession in turn drew the attention of the king's mother who pitied Damayantī and questioned her. In response to her questions Damayantī said she was a handmaiden deserted by her crazed husband in the forest. The king's mother then took Damayantī in and put her in the service of her daughter. Damayantī lived in the protection and service of this princess for some time.

The narrative returns to Nala who, after he had deserted Damayantī, saw a great forest fire. From the depths of the inferno came calls for help directed to him by name. He responded to the cries, and because of his god-granted ability to remain unharmed by fire, easily rescued the imperiled victim. The calls had come from a king of the snakes who had been cursed by an ascetic to remain in one spot. This snake, named Karkoṭaka, repaid Nala by biting him. The poison from the bite attacked Kali, Nala's possessor, and changed Nala's appearance from that of a handsome prince to that of a deformed short-armed charioteer. With this change of appearance came a magic garment with which he might resume his handsome form, along with some helpful advice. Karkoṭaka told Nala to go to the city of Ayodhyā and ask King Ṛtuparṇa for employment as a charioteer saying his name was Bāhuka. This Nala did,

and he was taken into the court of that king. According to the snake king, Ṛtuparṇa knew the secret of dice which Bāhuka needed in order to rid himself of Kali, and regain his kingdom, his wife, and his dignity. Thus he served in Ṛtuparṇa's court as cook and charioteer for some time.

Meanwhile Damayantī's father had sent many brahmins to scout the countryside in search of his daughter. Before long she was found and returned to Vidarbha. There she immediately reinitiated her search for Nala. She dispatched another group of brahmins to read a gently chiding, poignantly pleading verse in all the courts of the world and to report back any response. Bāhuka heard the verse in Ṛtuparṇa's court and responded with an oblique verse of his own which, when coupled with his non-Nala-like appearance, was slight inducement for action. Nevertheless Damayantī secured her mother's support, and, without her father's knowledge, sent out a notice of another svayaṃvara. This ruse of a false bridegroom choice was intended to flush out the real Nala, for only a horseman of Nala's caliber could cover the distance from Ayodhyā to Vidarbha in time for the svayaṃvara.

When Ṛtuparṇa received word of the second svayaṃvara, he commanded Bāhuka to harness the fastest horses for the journey. Since he suspected Damayantī of being unfaithful by remarrying, Bāhuka/Nala was crushed but he complied with his master's orders, and proceeded to drive him to Vidarbha post-haste. Enroute, the king and

the charioteer agreed to trade their knowledge of horses and dice. As soon as Bāhuka learned the secret of dice, Kali, writhing from Karkoṭaka's poison, left his body. Thus it was that Bāhuka arrived in Vidarbha purged of his possessor, ready to regain wife and kingdom, but discouraged from doing so by Damayantī's seeming unfaithfulness.

A round of testing on both sides followed and after each had passed the other's tests, Bāhuka transformed himself into Nala by means of the magic garment and was reunited with Damayantī and their children. He stayed in Vidarbha long enough to raise a gambling stake and an army, then went to Niṣadha and challenged his brother to further gambling. Nala won back his kingdom with ease, and treated his brother with compassion, sending him home unharmed. Damayantī then joined her husband in Niṣadha and joyful celebration ensued. Nala and Damayantī passed the rest of their lives living like gods in Nandana park; they lived happily ever after.

Separation

Before demonstrating how this story may be illuminated by the paradigm provided by the rite of passage, further explication of that paradigm is in order. In addition to identifying three phases of the rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation, van Gennep also identified rituals common to each phase. He noticed that these three phases of ritual did not always share one-third

of the overall importance given to the larger passage rite. For example funeral rituals tended to stress separation; marriage rites, incorporation; and pregnancy or initiation rites, transition.¹⁶ Van Gennep concluded:

Thus, although a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated.¹⁷

This variation in emphasis which van Gennep found in ritual occurs in epic narrative as well. For example we shall see that in Nala and Damayanti a good deal of emphasis is placed on the activities of the incorporation phase, and that activities which are applicable to the transition phase are inserted at a critical, but appropriate, juncture in the activities of the incorporation phase.

The recounting of the tale should have made one interpretive complication clear. The tale of Nala and Damayanti is presented as two interrelated interwoven stories. Nala's and Damayanti's journeys are like two streams which run parallel to one another, sometimes merging and running together for a while, but for the most part remaining separate until they finally flow together at the story's end. Nala journeys from a kingship polluted by a ritual error and thus ravaged by possession, through a period of servitude to a renewed kingship freed of

pollution and possession. Damayantī journeys through a period of servitude as well (the streams run parallel), but Nala's kingship, whether tarnished or purified, is significant in her journey only insofar as it affects her role as Nala's wife. Damayantī's trials, which provide the tale with much of its pathos and much of its charm, revolve not around Damayantī's struggle to regain her queenly status, but around her struggle to understand the behaviour of the insane Nala and to regain a sane husband. Since the tale is presented in two streams, our interpretation will proceed in similar fashion.

Nala's separation from his normal state of existence as a royal gṛhastha is gradual and by degrees. Using the metaphor of death common to the separation phase, Nala may be said to experience a slow death. Each successive throw of the dice removed a bit more of the trappings and essence of his kingship. This process began when the normally exemplary king performed the twilight rites without purifying himself.¹⁸ This situation in which the purity of the ritual was violated left Nala vulnerable and in danger.¹⁹ Kali, the god who had been waiting twelve years to give vent to his jealousy of Nala, took advantage of this situation and entered Nala's body. Once under the sway of Kali's possession Nala became like a madman in his addiction to gambling, and in fact he is described as insane.²⁰ He steadily gambled away everything he had.

The wealth that marked a successful king was the

first thing to go. His stakes of raw and refined gold, wagons and teams, and clothes were all lost. Next his compulsion to gamble distanced him from the needs of his people and so, in spite of Damayantī's attempts to interest him in his duties as chief counselor and leader, he lost the confidence of his ministers and subjects. They turned away from the palace gates thinking him lost.²¹

After some months of gambling Damayantī recognized that Nala had little left to gamble and that the end was near. Consequently she entrusted their two children to Nala's charioteer and sent them to her father's palace in distant Vidarbha. This act separated Nala from his world by several degrees. By this double blow he was no longer a father to his children, and no longer a warrior ready to engage in chariot warfare.

Soon Puṣkara, Nala's brother, had won the kingdom and all Nala possessed.²² Nala stopped short of wagering Damayantī and instead

threw down all the jewelry on his body.
And in a single robe, unclad, feeding
the grief of his friends, the king strode
out, relinquishing his ample fortune.²³

Followed by Damayantī he went to the edge of the forest and camped there three nights. He is further separated from his former subjects by an edict preventing them from aiding the exiles. Poised on the edge of the forest, Nala is completely separated from the lush, richly appointed world he had known. Now he and his wife must sleep on the ground

and take water as their only food.

If Nala's separation from his world is by degrees, Damayantī's separation from her world is quick--a sudden death. Damayantī's state of existence before the separation process began was essentially that of a royal wife. With Nala's exile she was a displaced royal person but still a wife, which for her was more important. That Damayantī had made her wifely status her foremost priority is evidenced by her behaviour: she followed Nala to the forest rather than live in royal splendour with his brother or her father. Damayantī herself stressed the importance of her existence as Nala's wife when, after she had been deserted, she explained her situation to the group of brahmin ascetics:

"It is because of him, brahmins, that I have gone to this terrifying, dangerous, and ghastly forest that is infested with tigers and game. If I do not find King Nala in a few days and nights, I shall yoke myself to a better world by abandoning my body. What does it profit me to live without the bull-like man?"²⁴

This quotation indicates that should her existence as Nala's wife end, her worldly existence too might just as well end.

The death-like quality of Damayantī's separation from Nala is again stressed in the words of the heroine. Shortly after Nala deserted her, Damayantī awoke and in terror recognized her situation--to have been abandoned by

her husband was virtually to have left the world of the living. The tale is clear and straightforward on this point:

...refreshed from her fatigue
[Damayantī] woke up trembling in
the unpeopled forest. She did not
see her husband and, panic-stricken,
she cried out aloud in fear for the
Niṣadhan: "Mahārāja! Ah my protector,
oh Mahārāja! Ah master, why did you
desert me? Ah I am lost and dead;..."²⁵

This theme of metaphoric death expressing the reality of the separation from one state of existence has been encountered before. If added evidence for the use of the death metaphor is necessary here, it is provided by a brahmin who reports to Damayantī that on her account her relatives have themselves been lying around as if dead.²⁶ The implication here is that they have been mourning the death of the young woman.

Damayantī's self-expressed 'loss and death' makes sense on a social as well as on a symbolic level. It is not difficult to understand Damayantī's perception of her plight if we look at the social convention surrounding husbands and wives in epic times. In marriage the women gave up all ties to her own family and became part of her husband's family. In a very real sense she belonged to him. Remarriage after the husband's death was impossible because in the first place the widow was not a virgin,²⁷ and in the second place she belonged to her husband's

family.²⁸ Becoming a widow, like Damayantī's desertion, was hardly comfortable for a woman.

The disappearance of her husband placed her in an inferior position, legally as well as socially...Her fate was simply to live a chaste and austere life, sleeping on the ground, taking only a single meal each day... dividing her time between prayer and religious rites, and possessing only one hope: to be married to her husband again in a future life...²⁹

In addition, the widow was barred from sacred ceremonies, social reunions, and celebrations, and was forbidden to use makeup, wash her body with fragrant oils, or to comb her hair.³⁰ Van Buitenen notes that Sāvitrī "commits herself to widowhood which for a woman is nothing less than living death".³¹

This living death suggests that 'dying to the world while living' common to world renouncing ascetics in the Hindu tradition.³² In fact much of the behaviour expected of a widow parallels the general behaviour patterns of the ascetics. Manu specifies that the widow ought to deprive her body by eating flowers, fruits and roots.³³ Fruits and roots make up the 'forest fare' of the ascetics living in the forest and sleeping on the ground is common to both. The widow's lack of attention to her hair suggests the ascetic's matted locks, while there is a general disregard for the body and ornamentation common to both widows and ascetics.

This parallel is even more striking when Damayantī's unusual behaviour is taken into account. Damayantī seems to lose all interest in her body after her forest separation. Her disregard for her body is apparent even when she is in the employ of the royal family of Cedi. She is repeatedly described as dirty,³⁴ and is recognized by the brahmin from her father's court in spite of the layers of dirt on her body.³⁵ She wears no ornaments,³⁶ eats only fruit and roots,³⁷ has matted hair, is emaciated,³⁸ and wears the ochre robe of a monk.³⁹ Damayantī combines the living death of the world renouncing ascetic and the living death of the widow in her appearances and behaviour.

Damayantī's widowlike behaviour serves to unite the social and symbolic levels of the narrative action. Since she is alone in the world,⁴⁰ she behaves, in accordance with social dictates, like a widow. On the symbolic level we have already seen that in his separation from kingship Nala undergoes a symbolic death. Thus in mourning her husband's death, social and symbolic aspects come together to reinforce each other in Damayantī's behaviour.

Incorporation

We have seen how the separation of Nala from kingship is catalyzed by ritual impurity and possession, and his death is a slow one marked out by the dice throws of his crazed gambling. The parallel separation of Damayantī from her insane husband is far more sudden; she is left

alone in the desolate forest while she sleeps. This separation precipitates a bizarre kind of behaviour which echoes that of a true widow. The incorporation phase of Nala's and Damayantī's journey is similarly bifurcated. First Damayantī enters a new state of existence as she is reunited with her now sane husband. Then Nala's incorporation culminates in his winning back his kingdom, which is possible due to his purified state, and reunion with his wife.

The incorporation phase of Damayantī's journey, like Nala's, takes a good deal of story-telling time. Damayantī's incorporation begins when she is still incognito, living in Cedi. She enters her new state of existence in two stages. In the first stage she is rescued from humiliating servitude by a brahmin, Sudeva, who recognizes the ex-queen by her beautiful body and auspicious birthmark despite the layers of dust and grime which hide both. Damayantī is then transported to her father's palace where she remains unhappy and uninterested in looking after herself. Her only concern is to find Nala. To this end she initiates a variety of schemes which culminate in the second stage of her incorporation, her confrontation with Bāhuka/Nala. The latter believes Damayantī to be guilty of faithlessness (she, a 'widow', tried to remarry), and thus Damayantī must perform another Act of Truth during which the gods profess her wisdom and chastity.⁴¹ Convinced of her faithfulness Bāhuka transforms himself into Nala and the couple embrace in a tearful reunion.

For Damayantī to become a wife again, Nala had first to become a fit husband. As Bāhuka, he is still possessed by Kali, and is thus still not yet ready to become Nala. Nonetheless it is while he is Bāhuka, while he is in servitude, that Nala begins his entry into a new, purified state of existence. Like his death, Nala's rebirth is by degrees. First, on the advice of the snake king, he enters Ṛtuparṇa's service. Next he responds to Damayantī's verse and his true identity is suspected for the first time.⁴² The suspicion of Nala's true identity leads to the false svayaṃvara ruse which in turn precipitates the super-fast chariot ride from Ayodhyā to Vidarbha.

It is on this ride that Bāhuka is exorcized of Kali by means of learning the secret of dice. This episode is pivotal and will receive further attention later. For now it is enough to note that Bāhuka/Nala entered Vidarbha freed from his possession for the first time since he had become ritually polluted as the king of Niṣadha.

In the context of his gradual incorporation the chariot ride marks off another increment. Vārṣneya, formerly Nala's charioteer and now in Ṛtuparṇa's employ, suspects Bāhuka of being Nala on account of the short-armed man's superb horsemanship. As they enter the city of Vidarbha, the fast moving chariot makes a thunderous noise which had heretofore been unique to Nala's chariot. Thus Damayantī and Nala's horses⁴³ are alerted to Nala's presence. Damayantī is disappointed to find only Ṛtuparṇa,

Vārṣṇeya and the ugly Bāhuka in the chariot. Nonetheless she begins a series of tests which gradually assure her that Bāhuka is Nala and thus the tests gradually incorporate Nala into his body and into the world.

In the first of this series of tests Keśinī, a handmaiden of Damayantī, is sent to question Bāhuka and spy on him. During the questioning Bāhuka is betrayed by his tears of grief and afterwards he is betrayed by his supra-normal abilities granted him by the gods after the svayaṃvara. Next Keśinī brings Nala's children and Bāhuka again breaks down and only barely covers his tears. Finally Bāhuka and Damayantī come together, and, while Damayantī is tested for faithlessness, she in turn chastises her husband for deserting her in the lonely wood. Bāhuka explains that he, or rather Nala, was possessed by Kali at the time and consequently was not responsible for his actions.⁴⁴ When the couple was thus reconciled to one another, Bāhuka "put on that dustless robe, called to his mind the king of snakes--and resumed his own body."⁴⁵

The next day all is explained to Damayantī's family and Ṛtuparṇa. The latter learns the secret of horses from Nala, acquires a new charioteer, and departs. Vārṣṇeya returns to Nala's service and his return marks off another increment in the king's gradual, but nearly completed, rebirth, just as three years before his departure marked an important juncture in Nala's death or separation from the world. Lastly Nala wins back his kingdom with his

newly acquired knowledge of dice thereby completing his incorporation into an unpossessed, sane, unpolluted state of existence.

Threshold

We have yet to explore the threshold or transition phase of Nala's and Damayanti's adventures. This is the central phase of the tripartite process and is most important in the context of this study of forests; thus it demands close attention. In the tale of Nala and Damayanti the threshold phase is marked by a series of events not encountered in the early adventures of the heroes. The gods play an important role in this story, and their activities have ramifications which affect the action of the tale at nearly every point. It is in the forest during the threshold phase of their separate wanderings that Nala and Damayanti begin to recognize the colossal effect that the actions of the gods have on their lives. This recognition will be shown to be an important part of the threshold experience, therefore it is relevant at this point to make a brief foray into the relationship between gods and heroes in the epics.

Alf Hiltebeitel in his book, The Ritual of Battle, investigates this interrelationship of gods and heroes using cross cultural epic materials. His helpful investigation begins by describing the different elements of the two kinds of stories which tell of gods and heroes, namely

myths and legends. Hildebeitel writes:

Myths are stories which take place in the fullest expanses of time and space (they articulate a cosmology); they deal with the origin, nature, and destiny of the cosmos, and their prominent characters are gods.⁴⁶

Allowing for the possibility of refining each item further and of the probability of the overlapping of descriptions, Hildebeitel says,

Legends are stories which take place at a specific time and on a specific terrain; they deal with the origin, nature, and destiny of man, and their most prominent characters are heroes.⁴⁷

It is when the cosmic order spun out by the gods intersects with the human sphere, that the heroes feel the impact of fate. Two of the words for fate in the Mahābhārata, vidhi, "what is ordained" and daiva, "what pertains to the gods," underscore this intersection of cosmic order and human destiny.⁴⁸

This abstract intersection of mythic and human planes occurs in some very concrete ways in the epics. Hildebeitel refers to these concrete ways as divine links and identifies incarnations, divine favoritism, paternity as well as possession as examples.⁴⁹ He further states that more important than the kind of link which the hero has with the gods is his response to that link. The hero's response, says Hildebeitel, has a lasting effect on the

culture which looks to the heroes for exemplary patterns of behaviour. As he puts it:

What is significant is that epics present a context in which the heroes, coming to terms with the origin, nature, and destiny of the universe as it impinges upon them, inevitably make some type of response--submission, defiance, courage, faith, self-discovery...-- which takes on determinitive symbolic value in terms of an understanding of the origin, nature, and destiny of man.⁵⁰

It is very difficult to assess the 'determinitive symbolic value' which Nala and Damayanti carries for the Hindu tradition. It is much easier to locate the mythic plane impinging on the heroes in the activities of the gods in the tale. Before the svayamvara these are playful, and then later, with Kali's possession of Nala, much more sinister. In the transition or threshold phase of this tale the main characters recognize and come to terms with this divine impingement and, by their subsequent actions, formulate a response to it.

Within the threshold phase of the tripartite process first identified by van Gennep the sojourner is betwixt and between states of existence. In the discussion of this phase in the last chapter several aspects were discussed including the depiction of the liminal personae as possessing nothing, the reduction of these people to a common ground in a process which jumbled their sense of identity, and the paradoxical ambiance of the threshold wherein one

experienced nothingness and all possibilities simultaneously.⁵¹ Nala and Damayanti have been shown to be on separate but often parallel journeys, thus it is no surprise that their threshold experiences are separate. Towards the end of his separation from kingship Nala was poised on the edge of the forest no longer a powerless polluted king, but not yet a powerful purified king; he was betwixt and between very different states of kingship. Similarly Damayanti, when she was separated from her husband and her world in the forest, was no longer the wife of an insane king, but not yet the wife of a sane king; she was betwixt and between very different states of wifeness. In the course of their threshold experiences both Nala and Damayanti are reduced to servitude,⁵² and both come to realize the divine cause of their odyssey.

Shortly after Nala enters the forest he loses his last article of clothing. This is significant because nakedness is often the symbolic expression of the liminal persona's negative status vis-à-vis the structured world he has left.⁵³ Nala's one article of clothing is stolen by some birds he tries to catch for food. As they fly off with his cloak, the birds taunt Nala "standing naked on the ground, wretched, with his face bent down, [saying] 'we are the dice, fool, and we came to take your robe too; for it did not please us to see that you still went clothed.'"⁵⁴ Nala has nothing because Nala is nothing in the threshold phase of his adventures. Turner notes that it is sometimes

necessary to go below the social ladder in order to move up the social ladder.⁵⁵

Before he moves up the social ladder to powerful kingship, however, Nala must first get on the social ladder. Nala begins his crossing to social prominence not as Nala but as Bāhuka. This change of personhood, while making internal sense, nevertheless serves to dissolve Nala's sense of identity. This dissolution of one's sense of identity is common to the paradigm of the liminal persona. Having deserted Damayantī, Nala wandered the forest and eventually came upon Karkoṭaka, king of the nāgas or snakes. He rescued Karkoṭaka from the flames of a forest fire and was bitten by the thankful snake.⁵⁶ The venom from the bite attacked Kali and radically altered Nala's appearance in the following ways. Whereas before he was handsome and of dignified bearing, now he was ugly, short and deformed, and whereas before he had long arms which were the mark of an exceptional warrior, now he had short arms.⁵⁷ Nala's actions to this point have shown him to be inwardly changed by Kali's possession. His new, deformed body seems an outward manifestation of his inner 'deformity'. That he does not immediately put on the magic garment which will change his appearance back to its original handsome form, bespeaks Nala's tacit admission that his new appearance 'fits' him.⁵⁸

However fitting his appearance, it takes little imagination to consider the shock to Nala's sense of identity which this transformation must have had. Less than a week

before Nala had been a king, albeit a bad one, and now he was an ugly sūta, a charioteer. Socially the sūta is an interesting figure, liminal in his own right. According to the lawbooks he is the offspring of a kṣatriya man and a brahmin woman,⁵⁹ and as such is in a sense betwixt and between caste categories. His special status is acknowledged by the tradition since it assigns the sūta the task of recording and reciting kṣatriya lore. Regardless of this special status, the sūta was, for Nala the king, a servant. Generally this servant tended to the horses and helped with cooking.⁶⁰ Bāhuka followed this general pattern in Ṛtuparṇa's court. This is significant in that an important aspect of liminality involves portraying "the supreme political authority" as a slave.⁶¹

So far the negative aspects of Nala's threshold experience have been discussed. The liminal or transition phase is also paradoxically a time when new knowledge is gained, when new possibilities are discovered. Nala's experience is no exception. For example, while his transformation into the servant Bāhuka meant great trauma for Nala, it also meant he was incognito. This gave him a certain freedom from social stigma and shame. Just after he has bitten Nala, the snake, Karkoṭaka, says, "'I have changed you, so that people will not know you'".⁶² Karkoṭaka is an instrumental figure in Nala's threshold experience for he effects nearly all the changes, and thus puts Nala in touch with all the possibilities inherent in

the transition.

Further positive results of Nala's encounter with the snake include a magic transformative garment, the knowledge that skill at dice is a prerequisite for regaining kingly status, advice on where and how to proceed, immunity from predators, enemies, and sorcerers, and most importantly the knowledge that some being had "out of anger and rancor"⁶³ possessed Nala and that he was now immune from that possession.⁶⁴ While his possessor had not been identified nor exorcized, Nala as the sūta Bāhuka now had the possibility of responding to the impingement of divine or mythic activity in his life since now he had come to terms with its existence. The forest threshold provides that possibility for Nala.

As has been shown, Bāhuka enters Ṛtuparṇa's service and simultaneously Nala begins incorporation to a new state of purified kingly existence. During the speedy chariot ride to Vidarbha, however, Nala reenters the threshold phase to complete the purgation of his possessor. The three travellers are betwixt and between Ayodhyā and Vidarbha in the forest when they came upon a vibhītaka tree in full bloom.¹⁵ Here Ṛtuparṇa displays his amazing skill in counting, essential to winning in dice. Bāhuka has just been astounding his master with his skill with horses, so an otherwise unlikely trade is agreed upon. Bāhuka will trade his knowledge of horses for Ṛtuparṇa's knowledge of dice. After the agreement is reached,

Rtuparna imparted his knowledge to Nala. Promptly Kali issued forth from his body when Nala had learned the secret of the dice, incessantly vomiting from his mouth the bitter venom of Karkotaka. The fire of Kali's curse came out of the king who had been suffering from it; he had been worn thin from it and had for a long time lost control of himself. Kali was not freed from the poison, and he took on his own body.⁶⁶

The hero's response to the intersection of the mythic plane and the plane of his existence is now complete. Nala was reduced to nothing by divine intervention and was relegated to servitude in order to begin his patient return to the world. He twice entered the forest and there was transformed and received knowledge whereby he was able to engage in a conscious struggle against his possessor.

Damayantī, too, realizes the workings of the gods while in the threshold phase of her journey, but her response is quite different. Furthermore, while Nala's test for receiving his liberating knowledge and transformation is quick (he saves the snake king from fire), Damayantī undergoes a series of harrowing and cathartic experiences during which she is changed into a madwoman.

These experiences form a series of trials which one by one wear down Damayantī's queenly demeanor and her resolve to find Nala. Like Nala she undergoes these trials virtually naked, 'with half a garment'. The last act of her insane husband was to deprive her of half her clothes. Again this lack of possessions extending even to clothes

indicates that the threshold crosser has nothing because she is nothing, she has no status.

Nala's sense of identity was shocked by his instant change. Damayanti's forest trials, on the other hand, wore down her sense of who she was. These trials are enumerated in the recounting of the tale. What is of interest here is that in moving from the rescuer-turned-rapist, to the vision of the ascetics, to the caravan members to the king's mother there is an increasing inability to recognize Damayanti for who she is. The hunter has little trouble seeing that she is someone else's beautiful wife, "'whose are you doe-eyed woman'?",⁶² he asked. But as the search tires her and the forest tears at her hair and muddies her body, her identity becomes more of a mystery to those she meets. The ascetics wonder if she is the goddess of the mountain or river, while the caravan members add the possibility of a yakṣī and rākṣasī to these guesses. Finally the king's mother admits "wonderingly" that she does not know what manner of woman stands before her. Damayanti entered the town "pale, wan, dejected, disheveled, unwashed, walking like a crazed woman"⁶⁸ and trailed by a band of curious street urchins. The king's mother is confused by her scruffy appearance, her lack of ornaments and lack of male accompaniment, which contrasted with her beautiful body which 'shone like lightning in the clouds.'

As her appearance becomes more and more a mystery to those she encounters, Damayanti's response to their

perplexed queries as to her identity becomes less and less elaborate. The text relates that to the hunter she told "all...in the way it had befallen".⁶⁹ To the ascetics Damayantī told of her lineage, of Nala's great virtues and accomplishments and of his downfall. Then she identified herself as Nala's wife and asked if they had seen him, affixing many descriptive epithets to him in the process.⁷⁰ By the time Damayantī stumbled onto the caravan looking "like a mad woman, full of hurts, covered with half a skirt, thin, pale, dirty, her hair overlain with dust",⁷¹ she seemed weary of telling about herself and weary of her search. Their frightened questions as to her identity elicited a relatively terse reply:

"Know that I am mortal, the daughter
of a sovereign king, daughter-in-law
to a ruler, the wife of a king, who is
yearning to find her husband! The king
of Vidarbha is my father, my husband is
the king of Niṣadha, lordly Nala by name
and it is that undefeated king I am
seeking..."⁷²

To this speech she adds a short plea for information regarding Nala and then she falls silent.

Damayantī's search for Nala has, since his desertion, given her her only link to her former state of existence as a wife. As her search proves more and more futile, she begins to look more and more like one who has died to the world while living. While before, when caring for Nala, Damayantī was described as "not mad" (anunmattā,

3.57.1), now she is described as "having the appearance of a madwoman" (unmattarupā, 3.61.110) and walking like a madwoman" (unmattāmiva gacchantīm, 3.62.19). Damayantī's sense of identity is worn away by her trials during her futile search. And of course this corresponds to the now familiar mark of the threshold phase.

As was the case with Nala, change is central to Damayantī's forest sojourn. As we have seen, during her transition Damayantī ceases to be a wife, and she becomes mad. The wearing away of her sense of identity prepares Damayantī for one more change, a change of occupation. Like Nala, Damayantī goes into servitude before entering the next state of existence. Damayantī emerges from the forest calling herself a handmaiden, and she enters the employ of the king's mother.

While her change is not as radical as Nala's transformation into Bāhuka, Damayantī's change of occupation implies a change of caste. She describes herself as a sāirandhrī (3.62.26). This is a specific term which refers to a particular mixed caste whose task it was to serve in attending and adorning others.⁷³ Manu adds that the members of this caste live like slaves although they are not in fact slaves (X.32). In the case of Bāhuka's sūta status the liminal quality of a mixed caste offspring was mentioned. This liminal quality is compounded in both cases of the sūta and the sāirandhrī as both castes are described as pratiloma.⁷⁴ This means that they involve a

relationship between a woman and man in which the woman is of a higher varṇa, and this according to the Dharmaśāstras, is against the natural order of things.⁷⁵ Thus these castes are in a sense slipping between 'normal' categories. Damayantī's assumed identity as a sāirandhrī further increases her distance from normal categories because the mother of the sāirandhrī is herself of mixed caste,⁷⁶ while the father is a dasyu who is outside the caste system altogether.⁷⁷

When in the early adventures of the Pāṇḍavas the five brothers changed caste, we noted that the epic considered such activity dangerous, a threat to dharmic order. The same holds true for Damayantī's change of caste.⁷⁸ The point of this discussion of caste is to stress that for Damayantī, as well as for Nala, the transformation which takes place in the forest is a significant one both as regards the social context of the times and as regards the symbolic context.

The liminal or threshold phase often holds special knowledge for the people crossing it. This knowledge, as in the case of the secret of dice for Nala, has important implications for the sojourners when they reach the next state of existence. Damayantī is a recipient of a threshold insight, and as with Nala, it concerns the influence of the gods' activities on her world.

Shortly after Damayantī joined the caravan in the forest, it was overrun by a herd of elephants. The members

of the caravan were nearly all killed by the stomping pachyderms. This horrible catastrophe, coming as it does after a succession of wearying trials, leads Damayantī to consider what manner of creature could be plaguing her. Her thinking culminates in the realization that jealous gods are probably the cause of her problems. Damayantī grieved for her slaughtered fellow travellers and reflected:

"I think it is because I rejected the divine World Guardians who had assembled for the Bridgegroom Choice in favor of Nala. Surely it is through their powers that I am now separated from him."⁷⁹

Here Damayantī comes to understand the reasons for the divine impingement on her world which has caused her separation from Nala.

Nala's response to his threshold realization is patient struggle. Damayanti's response is at first total resignation to her fate. She gives up the active search that has so long sustained her. Then, after she returns to her father's palace, she begins a quiet but clever manipulation designed to snare Nala, in spite of divine intervention. As it happens, Nala's struggle and Damayantī's scheming reach fruition in the dénouement of the story and bring the tale to its fitting close.

Both Nala and Damayantī emerge from their forest threshold changed and ready to change further. They are armed with the knowledge that their journeys are divinely

conspired, and they have the possibility of dealing with their divine antagonist.

The forest

When it is understood from the perspective provided by the tripartite process, the role of the forest in the adventures of Nala and Damayanti is especially significant in the threshold phase of their adventures. As in the case of the Pāṇḍavas' early adventures, all of the transitional elements of the passage process in Nala and Damayanti occur in the forest. This is even the case when a liminal experience which is preparatory for incorporation, i.e. the exorcism of Kali by secret knowledge, is included in a series of events which depict Nala's gradual return to his world, his incorporation. The exorcism of Kali, involving as it does mythic characters and quick changes, does not fit in the incorporation phase. From the perspective of the dynamic tripartite process the exorcism belongs in the threshold stage. However, epic narratives do not move with the same patterned regularity as do rituals, so to signal a disruption of the flow of incorporation events, the story changes scene from Ayodhyā to Vidarbha. It is not accidental that the 'out of place' segment occurs in the familiar liminal setting of the forest.

In our story the forest is the place where

interruptions of the normal flow of life in the ordinary world are commonplace. Not only are the normal occupational delineations of caste scrubbed out, but the normal restrictions on a person which limit him or her to one caste per human existence are, in the forest, turned topsy turvy as well. These interruptions point to the prominence of change in the forest. The forest is approached with dread in part at least because there nothing is ordered once and for all. The forest is a place of shifting forms and sliding categories. There, it would seem, anything can happen. A handsome king can be changed to an ugly charioteer by a snake bite, while a strong queen of sound mind can be worn away to a frazzled dishevelled servant girl.

The forest is always a temporary way station on a larger journey. By trials, transformation, as well as boons and special knowledge Nala and Damayantī prepare for their re-integration into the world of ordinary men and women. The preparation afforded by the special knowledge is especially important because it precipitates much of the incorporation which later takes place. This knowledge seems to derive its effectiveness or power from the fact that it is specifically knowledge about the gods, or knowledge which directly affects the interactions of gods and heroes. Both Nala and Damayantī receive this kind of powerful knowledge while in the forest.

The question as to why powerful knowledge which

catalyzes change and the changes themselves should be predominant in the forest will occupy much of the investigation of the next chapters. For now it is enough to consider what light the threshold phase of the tale of Nala and Damayanti¹ can throw onto the forest. The tale demonstrates that in the epic cultural topography the forest-as-threshold is understood as both Nowhere and as Source. Nala in the forest is a no one who is nowhere yet has the potential to be anyone anywhere, including a charioteer capable of obtaining necessary secret knowledge. It should be impossible to be nowhere and anywhere at the same time, but the threshold harbors such paradoxical coincidences of opposites as a matter of course.⁸⁰ Upon entering this, as well as other such coincidences of opposites, the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon blows out the boundaries of experience. An obvious correlative of this explosion of normal experiential perimeters is change. The forest is a natural expression of the threshold across which those who desire change and those who need change continually pass.

In this study of the tale of Nala and Damayanti¹ we have attempted to demonstrate that the tripartite paradigm of passage is a prevalent process not only in narratives where a ritual process is central, but also in a narrative which has no obvious ritual focus. Within this passage paradigm the forest has been repeatedly located in the middle phase as a threshold betwixt and between states

of existence. Next the forest exile of the Pāṇḍava brothers will be studied as we use the tripartite passage paradigm as an interpretive tool to understand something of the flow of events in the Mahābhārata as a whole.

Notes

- 1 van Gennepe, op. cit., p. 187.
- 2 Turner, Dramas, p. 13.
- 3 Winternitz, op. cit., v. 2 pp. 336 f.; and for a catalogue of kāvyas, nāṭakas, and campus inspired by Nala and Damayanti see Bijan Ray Chatterjee, "The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata in South-East Asia," part 1, chapter 8 of The Cultural Heritage of India, v. II: Itihāsas, Purāṇas, Dharma and Other Śāstras (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission, 1962), p. 107.
- 4 Winternitz, op. cit., p. 337.
- 5 E. Washburn Hopkins, The Great Epic of India; Its Character and Origin (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1969), p. 72 n. V.S. Sukthankar uses Nala and Damayanti to date the Rāmāyaṇa: Sukthankar Memorial Edition, v. 1, ed. P.K. Gode (Poona: 1944), pp. 415 ff.
- 6 J.A.B. van Buitenen is a partial exception to this generalization. He is concerned with the historical origins of the tale, but contributes a significant insight into the feminine focus of the tale, v. 2, pp. 182-185.
- 7 MBh., 3. 50-78.
- 8 For a study of the Act of Truth see W. Norman Brown, "Duty as Truth in Ancient India, in The American Philosophical Society Proceedings, vol. CXVI, 1972, pp. 252-268.
- 9 MBh., 3.59.22-24, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 334.
- 10 MBh., 3.59.26.
- 11 MBh., 3.60.18, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 335.
- 12 MBh., 3.60.37, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 336.
- 13 MBh., 3.61.35, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 337.
- 14 MBh., 3.297.45, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 802. For a further discussion of caravans see Auboyer, op. cit., p. 72.
- 15 Auboyer, loc. cit.

- 16 van Gennep, op. cit., p. 11.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 MBh., 3.56.4.
- 19 See Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (Middlesex, England, Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 17-40 for an excellent discussion of the aspect of danger in ritual pollution.
- 20 MBh., 3.57.1. The word used is unmatta.
- 21 MBh., 3.56.10-19.
- 22 MBh., 3.58.1-2.
- 23 MBh., 3.58.6-7, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 332.
- 24 MBh., 3,61,84-86, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 340.
- 25 MBh., 3.60.1-4, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 334.
- 26 MBh., 3.65.28, bandhuvargāśca gattasattvā ivāsate.
- 27 Draupadī's virginity was restored to her four times for her five marriages to the Pāṇḍava brothers, MBh., 1.190.14.
- 28 P.V. Kane, op. cit., vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 608-612, and Auboyer, op. cit., pp. 176, 212. The prohibition against remarriage has persisted. Writing in 1973 Clark Blaise wrote of modern Bengal's marriage customs: "...if divorce is a disgrace, remarriage is an obscenity." Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee, Days and Nights in Calcutta (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 142.
- 29 Auboyer, op. cit., p. 211.
- 30 Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 1, pp. 583 ff.
- 31 Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 214.
- 32 Examples of this abound in David Kinsley, "'The Death that Conquers Death': Dying to the World in Medieval Hinduism," in Frank E. Reynolds and Earle H. Waugh, ed. Religious Encounters with Death (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Pr., 1977, pp. 97, 105 f.
- 33 Manu, V. 157.
- 34 MBh., 3.75.21, 3.65.8, 3.66.8, 3.74.8.
- 35 MBh., 3.65.9-12.

36 MBh., 3.65.16.

37 MBh., 3.62.26.

38 MBh., 3.65.8.

39 MBh., 3.74.8. Ernst Arbman in Rudra (Uppsala, 1922) notes that a person condemned to death wears a garment and powder of this red or ochre colour. This observation (made also by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty in Hindu Myths [Great Britain: Penguin, 1975] p. 121 n., who adds Buddhists and other heretics to the list) underscores the correspondence between the ochre robe and being 'dead' in life. Veena Das in Structure and Cognition (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 126-26, explains the similar behaviour of the mourner and the ascetic by noting that both are impure and that this impurity symbolizes liminality.

40 In MBh., 3.62.26 Damayantī describes herself as bhujīṣyā meaning she is a woman dependent on working for others for her subsistence. A married kṣatriya woman would normally not be a bhujīṣyā.

41 MBh., 3.75.1-15.

42 MBh., 3.68.15-16.

43 Nala's horses had been brought to Vidarbha over three years before when his children had been evacuated from Niṣadha by Vārṣneya.

44 MBh., 3.74.17.

45 MBh., 3.75.16.

46 Hildebeitel, op. cit., p. 32.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., p. 34.

49 Ibid., p. 35.

50 Ibid., p. 34.

51 Turner, Forest, pp. 95-97, and Ritual, pp. 95-96.

52 MBh., 3.65.1, the word translated as servitude is preṣyatā.

53 Turner, Ritual, p. 95.

54 MBh., 3.58.14-15, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 332.

55 Turner, Ritual, p. 170.

56 It is footnoteworthy that both Nala and Damayantī encounter snakes in their forest wanderings during which they are both changed considerably. The snake is held as a symbol of transformation in many cultures apparently due to its ability to slough its skin.

57 I suspect that long arms were a ksatriya virtue because they enabled the warrior to pull the bowstring back further thereby increasing the velocity and distance of the arrow.

58 Alf Hiltebeitel notes in The Ritual of Battle (pp. 45-46), that within epic cycles deformities and "monstrosities" are common to heroes. He also states that "physical and moral defects may complement each other."

59 Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 1, p. 98.

60 Ibid., p. 99.

61 Turner, Ritual, p. 102.

62 MBh., 3.63.14, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 344.

63 MBh., 3.63.17, van Buitenen, loc. cit.

64 MBh., 3.63.12-24.

65 MBh., 3.70.6.

66 MBh., 3.70.26-29, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 354.

67 MBh., 3.60-30, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 335.

68 MBh., 3.62.20 & 23, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 343.

69 MBh., 3.60.30, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 335.

70 MBh., 3.61.70-85.

71 MBh., 3.61.110-111.

72 MBh., 3.61.116-120, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 341.

73 Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 1, p. 73.

74 Ibid., pp. 73, 98.

75 Ibid., p. 52.

76 Ibid., p. 73.

77 Manu, X, 45.

78 Nala's change of caste might be seen as within the circle of dharma. His change is a complete transformation from one person to another. In this context his caste change 'makes sense'.

79 MBh., 3.62.17-18, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 342.

80 Turner, Forest, p. 99.

CHAPTER FOUR
FROM PEACE TO WAR: THE TRANSFORMATIVE
PROCESS IN THE PĀṆḌAVA'S EXILE

This chapter will attempt to understand the long exile of the Pāṇḍavas. Again the tripartite process extrapolated from traditional rites of passage will prove crucial for our understanding and will give a structure to the events of the exile. Again central to that process in this epic narrative is the role of the forest as a threshold-- here betwixt and between a state of peace and a state of war.

The Pāṇḍavas live in their palace at Indraprastha for some time before being challenged by a jealous Duryodhana to a dice match. Yudhiṣṭhira accepts, and loses everything to Duryodhana. After some emotional moments which center around Duḥśāsana's act of dragging Draupadī into the assembly hall by the hair when she was bloody from her menstrual period, the Pāṇḍavas are reinstated. Immediately, however, they are challenged to gamble again for a different stake and Yudhiṣṭhira loses again. This time the stake had been exile to the forest for twelve years followed by a thirteenth year during which the losers must live incognito in the world of men. If the losers are discovered in this thirteenth year, they must return to the forest for another twelve years. If they should successfully

complete the terms of exile, they may lay claim to their territory.

The pivotal action in the events leading up to the exile, Yudhiṣṭhira's repeated gambling away of his kingdom, has attracted the attention of several scholars. The most intriguing study of the dice match is by van Buitenen who, following initial insights of G.J. Held,² contends that the dice match was the concluding ritual of the rājasūya sacrifice that the Pāṇḍavas had been celebrating.³ The text itself refers to the requirements of dharma, to an unspecified vow which Yudhiṣṭhira had made, and to his desire to obey the command of his step-father.⁴ Whatever the case it is clear that the Pāṇḍavas are not ready for kingship, and that the murky problems arising from the struggle for property within a joint family⁵ have not been solved. The effect of exile in this situation is on the one hand to underscore the Pāṇḍavas' inability to govern by removing all the signs and prerogatives of sovereignty, from wealth and power to free movement, and on the other to alleviate temporarily the struggle for property by disjoining the family.⁶ The exile suspends the royal birth-right of the Pāṇḍavas and, as in their earlier quasi-exile to Vāraṇāvata, they enter the forest threshold and there undergo a change-- this time from a peaceful state of existence to a state of existence in which they are ready for warfare.

The story of the Pāṇḍavas' exile is a long one distributed over three parvans of the Mahābhārata: parts of

the Sabhāparvan, and the whole of both the Virāṭaparvan and the very substantial Vanaparvan. Much of the bulk of the exile section is taken up by 'episodes', stories in which the main characters of the epic are not directly involved. While these stories give a fitting sense of duration to the story of the twelve-year exile,⁷ they are actually considered by scholars to be accretions which often detract, or at least distract, from the business at hand.⁸ Recently Alf Hiltebeitel⁹ has shown that these 'extraneous narratives' are often intentionally placed, and, further, can provide a key for untangling the jumbled skein which the epic sometimes offers to a modern audience different in culture and unskilled in receiving information which was, and is, part of oral tradition.

We have the makings of such a helpful key in the tale of Nala and Damayantī, told in the Vanaparvan. While the content of this tale has been adequately discussed in the previous chapter, the context of the story remains to be set forth. Yudhiṣṭhira sends Arjuna on a dangerous mission to obtain the weapons of the gods. Arjuna has been away only a short time before Yudhiṣṭhira begins to miss his brother. He has misgivings about sending Arjuna at all and, when Bhīma berates him for obeying the terms of the exile, he has a mild attack of self-pity. Onto the scene comes one of the many ṛṣis who visit the Pāṇḍavas during their forest stay. His name is Bṛhadaśva and he is soon hearing all of Yudhiṣṭhira's complaints. Yudhiṣṭhira ends

his catalogue of misfortunes by saying, "'There is no man, I think, unhappier than I am'".¹⁰

By way of responding Bṛhadaśva tells the tale of Nala and Damayantī. He concludes his narration by counseling Yudhiṣṭhira to remember all the good things he has as compared to Nala:

Nala, who was all alone, found very great and gruesome grief, O King of the earth, and then again his fortunes were restored. You on the other hand are accompanied by your brothers and by Kṛṣṇā [Draupadī], O Pāṇḍava, and enjoy yourself in the great forest while observing the Law. You are daily attended on by lordly brahmins, steeped in the Vedas and their branches, King--what have you to complain about?¹¹

In addition, Bṛhadaśva teaches Yudhiṣṭhira the secret knowledge of dice which Nala had learned from Ṛtuparṇa in the forest.

The learning of secret dice playing knowledge is not the only parallel between Nala and Damayantī and the exile section of the Maṇābhārata. The main characters in both narratives are separated from their accustomed royal lifestyle by a rigged dice game and are banished to the woods. Both sets of main characters experience identity crises and the intersection of the divine plane of existence with their own plane. In both narratives the central figures emerge from the forest in disguises which help them re-enter the royal world they left without setbacks.

Of course these two narratives are not parallel on

every point. Significant differences will emerge in the ensuing discussion, nonetheless it is clear that the placement of this tale in the Vanaparvan is not accidental. Even on the level of story qua story the placing of the tale makes sense. Implicit in Br̥hadaśva's counsel is the assurance that if Nala, who lost his kingdom in the same manner as Yudhiṣṭhira and who was in an even worse situation, could have his fortunes restored, then it should be far easier for Yudhiṣṭhira to reclaim his kingdom.

This brief indication of parallels between Nala and Damayantī and the story of the Pāṇḍavas' exile provides the direction our exploration will take. In the study of Nala and Damayantī we have seen that the tripartite process is an appropriate tool for understanding epic narrative, and we have seen that Nala and Damayantī has rough parallels with the story of the exile of the Pāṇḍavas, therefore this same process should illuminate the exile narrative of the Pāṇḍavas. Since the forest played a large role in Nala and Damayantī, it will not be surprising to find the forest central to the exile passage from peace to war in the odyssey of the Pāṇḍavas.

The separation

Yudhiṣṭhira lost his kingdom in much the same way as Nala--dice throw by dice throw. Yudhiṣṭhira's loss occurred much more quickly than Nala's, but it was just as total. In fact in the first round Yudhiṣṭhira even gambled

away himself, his brothers and his wife. After Draupadī rescued them and their kingdom was restored, Yudhiṣṭhira was challenged to a second round. This match lasted one throw at the end of which the Pāṇḍavas with their wife found themselves banished to the forest.¹²

The Sabhāparvan details the events surrounding the first stage of the tripartite process, the separation. First the Pāṇḍavas doffed their warrior garments and exchanged them for the traditional garb of the forest ascetic, a crude outfit of deerskin. This change of clothes will be explored in depth in the next chapter. For the present discussion it is enough to note that the change of clothes from royal silk to crude animal skin served to point up the separation of the heroes from their royal environment.

This point was not lost on Duḥśāsana, one of Duryodhana's brothers. While the change was going on, he triumphantly trooped about belittling the Pāṇḍavas. He repeatedly likened their state to that of barren seeds,¹³ and he gloated aloud:

"The Pārthas [Pāṇḍavas] have been thrown into hell, for a long time, an endless time, fallen from happiness, bereft of their kingdom, for years without end. They, the Pāṇḍavas who, power-mad, have been laughing at the Dhārtarāṣṭras, now must go into the forest, defeated and robbed of their wealth!"¹⁴

Duḥśāsana pays for his adharmic behaviour on the battlefield where he suffers cruel treatment at the hands of Bhīma, but

his depiction of the Pāṇḍavas' plight is here accurate. They have been separated from happiness, wealth and kingdom and must enter the hell-like forest.

In the two previous investigations into the separation phase of the processional movement from one state of existence to another, the metaphor of death has been used to describe the separation. Here, too, death is an appropriate metaphor. The death-like aspect of the Pāṇḍavas' exile is perhaps best seen as they actually leave the capital city for the forest. Vidura later related the Pāṇḍavas' departure to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in these words:

Kuntī's son Yudhiṣṭhira has covered his face with his shawl, and Bhīma Pāṇḍava has spread his arms wide as he goes. The left-handed archer follows the king, scattering sand, and Madri's son Sahadeva goes with his face all streaked. Nakula is much distressed in his thoughts and is walking with his whole body limned with dust, behind his king, he the handsomest man of earth. Kṛṣṇā of the long eyes, hiding her face in her hair, beautiful and crying much, follows the king. Dhaumya is chanting the gruesome Chants of Death, ...as he walks the tracks he holds up kuśa grass in his hand.¹⁵

Dhṛtarāṣṭra then asked Vidura to explain the meaning of these actions. This is what Vidura told his king: Yudhiṣṭhira covered his face so that he would not burn people with his angry gaze. Bhīma displayed his mighty arms to demonstrate his willingness to crush his foes. Arjuna was forecasting the number of enemies he will

slay--one enemy for each grain of sand. The twins have disguised themselves, the one so that he won't be recognized and the other so he will not cause women along the way to fall in love with him. Draupadī predicted that all the Kaurava women would, in thirteen years, look just as she now looked. And finally Daumya, the purohita, said that the gurus of the Kurus would be chanting the same death chants after the war. Vidura concluded, "'With these guises and signs the spirited Kaunteyas¹⁶ have given notice of the resolve that lodges in their hearts as they go to the forest.'"¹⁷ With all due respect to Vidura, his explanation is not very satisfying.

It is not my habit to search for the 'original' meaning of a passage in order to uncover the 'real', 'essential', or 'true' meaning of the passage. Original meanings and essential meanings are not necessarily equivalent. This case, however, begs for some investigation past the allegorical interpretation offered in the text by Vidura. Firstly, any allegorical interpretation of symbol, or in this case symbolic action, does violence to the multifaceted nature of symbol by limiting its elements to a one-to-one correspondence.

Secondly this particular allegorical interpretation lacks internal consistency. Vidura's conclusion that the pāṇḍavas were demonstrating their resolve is not borne out by the actions of the twins, and is only carried by the words of Draupadī and Dhaumya not mentioned in the first

description of their actions. Even the explanation of the actions of the three oldest brothers seems farfetched: surely the impetuous Bhīma could have demonstrated his resolve to destroy his foes in a more convincing fashion. Thus while I recognize the appropriateness of so-called accretions which arise in the oral narrative of a living tradition, in this specific case I feel justified in setting aside this particular allegorical interpretation, not as incorrect or inappropriate, but as unhelpful in understanding the symbolic actions of the Pāṇḍavas.

When the Pāṇḍavas depart for the forest their actions are all related to actions performed by those coping with death; that is to say, they all manifest some form of mourning behaviour. This interpretation stems naturally from the described actions of Dhaumya and Draupadī. When anyone died in epic India it was customary for the wife to follow the funeral procession weeping and for the priest, normally in the lead, to chant the Vedic hymns prescribed by the ritual texts.¹⁸

Yudhiṣṭhira's action of covering his face with a shawl is also a characteristic sign of grieving,¹⁹ but Arjuna's action is more unusual. He is described as scattering sand on the ground. This seems to be perplexing behaviour until one discovers that according to one ritual text, just before a sacrificer dies sand must be scattered about in the sacrificial shed where the dying man is then laid out.²⁰ In a similar way Bhīma's outstretched arms call

to mind the outstretched arms of the grief stricken Maddī in the "Vessantara-Jātaka",²¹ and the upraised arms of the mourning women of the Strīparvan.²² Both Nakula and Sahadeva have dusted different parts of their bodies. In the udakakarma ceremony the mourners offer water to the dead with dishevelled hair and dust covering their bodies.²³ Similarly Kane reports that mourners of a child's death should throw dust in their hair.²⁴ This leaves only the kuśa grass which Dhaumya holds for which I could find no exact parallel. However a kuśa grass-topped staff is carried in one variant of the funeral ritual,²⁵ and kuśa grass is used throughout the various funeral rites.

The objection might be raised that since I can discover the ritual prescriptions which apparently parallel the described symbolic actions of the Pāṇḍavas, then surely these prescriptions would have been known to the epic storytellers thus obviating the allegorical interpretation. This is not necessarily the case. Given that the epic was transmitted and preserved orally, regional variations could, and clearly did, grow up. The Dharmaśāstras, too, tended to variation depending on the influence of different schools.²⁶ Thus it might well be that the allegorical interpretation spoken by Vidura gained credence in a region dominated by a school to which the actions of the Pāṇḍavas on their departure for the forest were indeed mysterious.²⁷

To understand these mysterious actions as mourning behaviour performed in response to their own symbolic deaths

on exile to the forest does not, of course, exhaust the symbolic content of those actions. It may well be that another interpretation of their actions will make perfectly good sense. The point here is not to attempt a dogmatic understanding of the Pāṇḍavas' actions, but to try to understand the seemingly bizarre actions of the exiled heroes as forming a part of a coherent process the first stage of which entails the separation of the heroes from their comfortable world of royal splendor and privilege.

The threshold

The threshold experience of the exiled Pāṇḍavas is temporally extended beyond any conceivable ritual transitional phase. In a ritual context twelve years is a long time. Even in the narrative context the time seems to drag as a result of the volume of different activities which do not seem to move the plot along to any appreciable degree. In fact the forest activities of the Pāṇḍavas are, for the most part, very significant and, as we shall see, even contribute to the overall flow of the epic. On the whole, however, the plot, which developed at breakneck speed throughout the Sabhāparvan, is allowed to cool its heels in the leisurely pace of the Vanaparvan.

One thing is abundantly clear from the very first. The Pāṇḍavas are in the forest by accident, they do not belong there; in the forest they are out of place.²⁸ This fact was immediately brought home to the exiles when, as

they were about to enter the Kāmyaka Forest, they were challenged by the rākṣasa, Kirmīra, who lived in the wood. The rākṣasa barred their way into the forest. He was carrying a lighted torch and his appearance was hideous:

There, behold! the demon, gnashing his eight fangs, eyes copper-red, the hair standing up on his head and aflame, like a monsoon cloud with its circle of sunbeams and lightning and its fellow-travelling cranes, setting loose his demoniac wizardry and giving forth loud screams, sending forth the thunderous roar of a cloud, carrying rain-behold, the demon!²⁹

After Dhaumya had dispelled the demon's wizardry with spells of his own, Bhīma, the seasoned rākṣasa fighter, strode forth to do battle.

Kirmīra was delighted to discover that his opponent was Bhīmasena Pāṇḍava, for as it turned out, Kirmīra was the brother of Baka and the friend of Hiḍimba, both of whom had been slain by Bhima in his early adventures. Fighting to revenge his brother and friend, the rākṣasa fought valiantly with the, by now customary, trees and rocks. Finally Bhīma won the upper hand and "strangled him like a beast of sacrifice."³⁰ By destroying the rākṣasa the exiles were able to pass over the edge of the threshold which would more or less contain them for the next twelve years. Or as the epic puts it: "Having rendered that forest thornless,...[Yudhiṣṭhira] went on with Draupadī and made it his dwelling."³¹

Several themes which have been encountered in previous epic threshold stages are also found in the exile narrative. Dominant among these themes are the notion of *communitas*, which formed an important part of the early adventures, and the experience involving the intersection of divine and human planes, which was essential to the forest adventures of Nala and Damayantī. The latter experience was especially important in uprooting and re-forming the main characters' sense of identity.

In addition, two elements new to our exploration of epic thresholds are encountered in the story of the Pāṇḍavas' exile. Through these themes the heroes' sense of identity is destroyed and re-formed. These are celibacy and pilgrimage. We will discuss these four themes in an order prompted by the flow of the forest exile narrative. The first will be celibacy.

Celibacy

While celibacy is not an issue in Nala and Damayantī, we know that the Pāṇḍavas are expected to live a celibate life in the forest from a number of places in the Mahābhārata. For example we have Bhīma chastising Yudhiṣṭhira for his passive compliance to dharma by taunting that 'despair had prompted him to a life of a eunuch.'³² And Droṇa remarked that the Pāṇḍavas were living in the forest as brahmacārins, and would return from their exile possessed by anger.³³ Part of the vow of the

brahmacārin was to abstain from sexual relations.

This was not the first time in the Mahābhārata that the sexual abstinence of the brahmacārin vow was an issue during a forest exile. Early in their marriage to Draupadī, the five brothers, at the suggestion of the sage, Nārada, had made a covenant which insured the privacy of one husband and wife. If, the covenant said, one of the brothers saw another brother sitting alone with Draupadī, the intruder would have to live in the forest for twelve months as a brahmacārin.³⁴ An unavoidable chain of events led Arjuna to interrupt Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī, and consequently he went to the forest for a year. There he was seen by a beautiful nāga princess named Ulūpī. Ulūpī fell in love with Arjuna on first sight, and forthrightly propositioned him. Arjuna responded ruefully that, while he would like to accommodate her, he could not as he vowed to live a hermit's life (brahmacaryam).³⁵ Ulūpī was determined, however, and convinced Arjuna that his vow applied only to Draupadī. Thus, following her exegesis of this very subtle dharma, they made love.

Further evidence that the Pāṇḍavas were expected to remain celibate in the forest as a condition of their exile comes from Duḥśāsana. As was noted earlier, he mercilessly taunted the brothers after they had lost the dice game. It should be recalled that Duḥśāsana repeatedly referred to the Pāṇḍavas as barren seeds. This metaphor was an apt one for if the Pāṇḍavas had to remain celibate

while in the forest, they could not conceive children; they would be barren.

Duḥśāsana cruelly pushed his attack past this allusion and called upon Draupadī to abandon her now useless husbands. He taunted:

"The sagacious Somaka Yajñasena
[Drupada],
Gave Pāñcalī [Draupadī], his child,
to the Pāṇḍavas:
That was ill done, for the Pārthas
are enunchs
And no longer men to Yajñaseni
[Draupadī]! 36

"Having seen the fine-clad reduced to
deerskins,
And penniless, homeless, in the woods,
What joy shall you find, you Yajñaseni?
Now choose a husband who pleases you!" 37

Bhīma was the brother to respond to this insult, and his response was telling. Rather than brand Duḥśāsana a liar, Bhīma admitted that the "insolent churl" had done grave hurt by striking the Pāṇḍavas' weak spot with his words. Then Bhīma extrapolated a threat from his admission: just as Duḥśāsana had hurt with his words, so Bhīma would hurt him in a more concrete fashion on the battlefield. Bhīma did not deny the truth of Duḥśāsana's insult. He could not; the Pāṇḍava brothers were to remain celibate while in the forest.

Victor Turner links celibacy to the threshold stage in the following way:

Another liminal theme exemplified in the Ndembu installation rites is sexual continence...Indeed, the resumption of sexual relations is usually a ceremonial mark of the return to society as a structure of statuses. While this is a feature of certain types of religious behavior in almost all societies, in preindustrial society, with its strong stress on kinship as the basis of many types of group affiliation, sexual continence has additional religious force. For kinship, or relations shaped by the idiom of kinship, is one of the main factors in structural differentiation. The undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by the discontinuance of sexual relations and the absence of marked sexual polarity.³⁸

In other words celibacy reinforces the neither-here-nor-there, betwixt and between quality of the liminal persona or thresholder. Because the thresholder abstains from sexual activity he or she loses a primary expression of his or her sexual identity. In addition, according to Turner, societal structure based on kinship relationships is negated when one of the primary binding forces of kinship is negated. With sexual differentiation gone and societal differentiation weakened, the celibate liminal persona is twice as liable to the vagaries of the threshold.

It is worth noting that in the passage cited earlier Duṣṣāsana lumps the Pāṇḍavas' celibacy in with their reduction in status, their poverty and their homelessness. All of these aspects of the Pāṇḍava brothers' exiled condition call to mind the common liminal quality of possessing nothing as an outward sign of being no one, of being betwixt and between categories of the social grid. In this

case the Pāṇḍavas' celibacy reinforces the conditions which they experienced in their early forest adventures by setting them between genders, by making them neither male nor female, in short making them eunuchs.

The threshold is at its core paradoxical. We have discussed only the negative aspects of celibacy because those aspects were the ones which most clearly impinged on the Pāṇḍavas. Droṇa implies the paradoxical twin aspect of celibacy, however, when he notes that they were living as brahmacārins and would return, possessed by anger, to do great destruction. Just as celibacy locates the thresholders as Nowhere in cultural topography, it also places them at the Source. In a later chapter when the forest ascetics are studied, we shall see that celibacy, very much part of the hermits' life, is a way of doing asceticism and thereby is a way of obtaining powers. Celibacy, then, is a classic liminal quality which simultaneously negates forms from the world recently left, and allows the possibility of new forms unknown to that structured world. The Pāṇḍavas' celibacy appears negative only in light of the world they are leaving (whose crass spokesman is Duḥśāsana). Once in the forest their celibacy will gain the paradoxical duality common to threshold phenomena.

The meeting of god and hero

In our study of Nala and Damayantī we found that an important aspect of the thresholders' forest experience

was a realization of the influence which the gods had in their lives. This realization was seen as a part of a larger pattern of interaction between divine and human realms. Central to this pattern was the disruption and re-formation of the main characters' sense of identity. This pattern was first investigated by Angelo Brelich.³⁹ Recently Alf Hiltebeitel simplified Brelich's heroic morphology into an epic morphology appropriate to the current state of research in the Hindu epics. Hiltebeitel demonstrates the importance of considering the intersection of mythic and heroic planes for understanding the dynamics of the Hindu epics.⁴⁰ Nowhere is Hiltebeitel's insight more helpful than in the forest threshold.

There are significant differences between the intersection of mythic and heroic dimensions that one finds in Nala and Damayantī and in the forest exile of the Mahābhārata. For one thing the influence of the gods on the lives of Nala and Damayantī is either capricious, as at the svayaṃvara, or destructive, as in Kali's possession of Nala. The Pāṇḍavas', or more properly the Kaunteyas', experience of the gods' influence is at first one of challenge, but the resolution is always in their favour. The gods, in the end, aid the Kaunteyas at every turn during their forest exile, although the heroes still experience identity crises. Another difference is that the response of Nala and Damayantī to the gods' actions in their world is relatively passive when compared with the response of the

Kaunteyas. The following discussion will illuminate these and other differences between the threshold experiences of Nala and Damayantī and that of the Pāṇḍava brothers.

When discussing the intersection of mythic and heroic spheres during the forest exile it is helpful to distinguish between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kaunteyas. The former are the five brothers, the sons of Pāṇḍu. The latter are the three oldest brothers who share the same mother, Kuntī. The twins, the youngest brothers, have Pāṇḍu's second wife, Mādri, as their mother. It is Kuntī alone who knows the mantra (formula, spell), whereby the gods can be summoned to father children of human women. She performs the mantra by which Mādri is impregnated by the Aśvins. The Kaunteya brothers are far and away the main characters of the epic proper. Little of note can be said about the characters of the twins except that Sahadeva is exceedingly eloquent and Nakula is exceedingly beautiful, while both are equally devoted to their older brothers. On the other hand the characters of Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna are well developed throughout the Mahābhārata. It is not surprising, then, that the meeting of gods and heroes centres on the Kaunteyas.

A large section of the forest narrative deals with the individual threshold adventures of the Kaunteya brothers. The ramifications of these individual experiences, which involve the intersection of mythic and heroic realms, are important in the preparation of all the Pāṇḍavas for the

subsequent trials and war. In exploring the divine dimension of their existence, each of the Kaunteya brothers in turn comes to realize more of who he is, learns traditional teachings, and gains divine favours which will aid him when he re-enters the world from which he has been exiled.

Arjuna

The first of the Kaunteyas to embark on his individual threshold adventure is Arjuna, the youngest. Arjuna's sojourn in Indra's heaven takes five years and is instrumental in the final defeat of the Kaurava army. In fact it was anxiety about the strength of that army coupled with desire for sovereignty that moved Yudhiṣṭhira to send Arjuna on a mission to win the weapons of the gods.⁴¹

Vyāsa, the superseer grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas catalysed the mission by providing Yudhiṣṭhira with magic knowledge which, when passed on to Arjuna, would insure his success.

Vyāsa promised the eldest Pāṇḍava that Arjuna would accomplish great exploits with the celestial weapons of Indra, Śiva, and the rest of the World Guardians (lokapālas).⁴²

In addition, Vyāsa gave Yudhiṣṭhira some sound ecological advice. He counseled him to move from the Dvaita Forest where they were staying back to the Kāmyaka Forest in order to prevent the destruction of all the deer in the forest. Then Vyāsa disappeared.

After a time Yudhiṣṭhira took Arjuna aside and told

him of their grandfather's visit and counsel. Yudhiṣṭhira passed on the magic knowledge to Arjuna, and instructed him to go to Indra's heaven and there to obtain the weapons of the gods.

After he was ritually consecrated, Arjuna bid everyone a respectful goodbye. The epic records Draupadī's supportive and touching farewell. She says in part, "On you now rest the happiness and misery of all of us, our life and death, kingdom and sovereignty."⁴³ Her words hit upon an oft-repeated theme of Arjuna's solitary journey: Arjuna is the finest of the Pāṇḍava warriors. Yudhiṣṭhira is taking a risk by sending him off to improve his 'strike capabilities'. Should Arjuna die, the Pāṇḍavas' chances to regain their kingdom are nil.⁴⁴

Because of the knowledge bestowed by his grandfather Arjuna was able to travel very far very quickly. In just one day he had passed over the Himālayas and Mount Gandhamādana, and had reached Indrakīla and his first test. There on the top of the world an ascetic of golden lustre commanded him to stop, put down his weapons, and rest, since he had reached the end of his journey. Because he was determined to win the weapons, Arjuna resisted the ascetic. The ascetic laughed, revealed himself to be Indra, and offered to grant Arjuna a boon. The great archer asked for the celestial weapons. Indra tried to tempt him with other things, but finally replied that after Arjuna had met Śiva he would have the weapons.⁴⁵ Then Indra disappeared.

Continuing his mission Arjuna entered a "ghastly, thorny forest"⁴⁶ which was devoid of human beings. There he found a beautiful spot and began doing intense asceticism, or tapas. Arjuna began a fast which he increased in severity month by month until in the third month he ate only twice, and then his meal consisted of one dead leaf that had fallen to the ground. In the fourth month he "lived on wind alone, with arms raised, without support, balanced on the tips of his toes."⁴⁷

His tapas was so intense and of such quality that the seers of the area were threatened. To ease their worry they complained to Śiva who reassured the ascetics. After the seers had gone away, Śiva went in the guise of a mountain man to the forest where Arjuna was staying. The mountain man and Arjuna became embroiled in an argument after both had simultaneously shot a boar. In fact the boar was a rākṣasa who was intent on killing Arjuna, thus the argument was not over who owned the carcass, since the boar had resumed its rākṣasa form on death. Instead the dispute seemed to concern a breach of hunting etiquette. In any case the fight that ensued was of tremendous proportions. Arjuna used up all his arrows, broke his sword on the mountain man's head, threw trees and rocks and finally engaged the ruffian in hand to hand combat. This last struggle was so fierce that the friction produced from the grinding of limbs during a clinch started a small fire.⁴⁸

In the end Arjuna was defeated, but Śiva was very

pleased with his performance. Because he was so pleased, Śiva gave Arjuna a vision of himself in his divine form. Arjuna then worshipped Śiva and asked forgiveness for his assault on the god. Forgiveness was granted, and Śiva offered a boon. Arjuna, with a remarkable singleness of purpose, asked for the extremely powerful Pāśupata weapon which Śiva gave him, instructing him in the secrets of its use. It could be launched with a thought, a glance, a word, or a bow. By way of farewell Śiva touched Arjuna which healed his wounds, and sent him off to Indra's heaven.⁴⁹

Following Śiva's departure the lokapālas, guardians of the four quarters of the world whom we already encountered at Damayantī's svayaṃvara, arrived and granted Arjuna the vision to see them. Then three of them presented Arjuna with their favourite weapons: Yama his club, Varuṇa his noose, and Kubera the weapon of disappearance. Indra told him:

"For a very great task is yours to accomplish for the Gods, enemy tamer! You must ascend to heaven; be prepared, radiant man. My chariot driven by Mātali shall come to earth for you, and in heaven I shall give you the weapons of the Gods..."⁵⁰

With this speech the lokapālas left Arjuna alone in the forest, but soon Indra's words came true.

After Mātali had arrived and driven Arjuna to heaven in one of the many celestial chariots which could

go anywhere, Indra received Arjuna by hugging him and inviting him to share his throne.⁵¹ Throughout this section of the narrative much is made of Arjuna's being Indra's son. The privilege of sharing the throne is one example of this.⁵²

Arjuna settled into life in his father's house. There he learned about the "great weapons and the means to withdraw them."⁵³ Included among these weapons were Indra's lightning bolt and thunderclaps. Despite the tugs from a sense of responsibility to his family, Arjuna was persuaded by his god-father to stay five years. During much of this interlude he learned how to perform celestial music and how to dance from the gandharva, Citrasena.

A visiting seer was sent to Yudhiṣṭhira with the message not to fret about Arjuna. He would not be returning for a while the message said, because he had a task to perform for the gods.⁵⁴ In this manner we learn of the trial which tested Arjuna's newly gained knowledge and weapons.

The problem which Arjuna is to solve for the gods is very much like the central problem of the Rāmāyaṇa. In this case a group of demons called Nivātakavacas cannot be destroyed by the gods on account of a boon the demons won. They must be conquered by a man, and Arjuna is the only one capable. Thus it is that Indra, after teaching Arjuna the intricacies of loosing and retrieving the weapons of the gods, asked his pupil to destroy the Nivātakavacas as his traditional guru's fee.⁵⁵ Indra equipped Arjuna for the

battle by loaning him his charioteer, Mātali, and his chariot along with the one thousand bay horses which pulled it, as well as an impenetrable coat of mail and an everlasting bowstring. In addition, the remaining gods presented Arjuna with Devadatta, a conch whose battle sound struck terror into the hearts of enemies.

As it turned out Arjuna needed all of the assistance he could muster to overcome these demons. The Nivātakavacas were very numerous and particularly skilled and vicious. While they were excellent fighters, the Nivātakavacas real forte was wizardry. Arjuna later described the demons' first magical assault in this way:

On all sides there appeared a shower of rocks, which sorely pressed me with terrifying stones as big as mountains, but with my swift lightning-like arrows shot from Indra's weapon I shattered each into a hundred pieces. When the rocks had been pulverized, a fire broke out, and the powdered rocks fell into it like sparks. With the rock shower abated, a powerful rain of water descended upon me with jets as wide as cart axles.⁵⁶

When Arjuna had countered this onslaught with the various missiles, the demons retaliated by covering the battlefield with darkness. At this point even the seasoned Mātali lost heart, but Arjuna remained calm. When Arjuna had dispelled the darkness with his magical weaponry, the demons became invisible. Still Arjuna kept up the fight shooting arrows which, by the charms he placed on them, found their invisible marks. In an instant the Nivātakavacas

became visible again, and Arjuna saw them piled on the battlefield amidst the broken chariots and mangled horses. The carnage was so great that there was no place for Arjuna's war horses to put their four thousand feet.

Despite the reduction of their ranks, the Nivātakavacas did not give up the fight. As Arjuna described it the demons flew up and

covered the whole sky and, invisible, attacked, hurling massive rocks. Others of them, who had gone underground, halted the feet of the horses and the wheels of the chariot....Having halted the bay horses and the chariot, while I kept fighting, they piled mountains on me and the chariot, surrounding me on all sides, and with the mountains piling up and more falling down, the place where we were became like a cave.⁵⁷

In this seemingly impossible situation Mātali suggested that Arjuna use Indra's favourite weapon, the vajra or lightning bolt. He took Mātali's advice and unleashed the powerful weapon. The results were devastating. The missile not only destroyed the air-borne demons, but it also sought out the ones who had entered the earth and were clutching the chariot wheels. In spite of the power of the Nivātakavacas and the power of the released weapon Arjuna, by his own account, remained unscathed:

The place was covered with scattered corpses of mountainous Nivātakavacas as with scattered mountain ranges. Neither the horses, nor the chariot, nor Mātali, nor I had suffered any hurt--it was like a miracle.⁵⁸

On the way back to Indra's heaven, Arjuna saw another boon-protected city occupied by demons. In an adventure which paralleled the one above Arjuna freed Hiranyapura, the City-of-Gold, from the clutches of two prominent demons and their army hordes. This time Arjuna used the Raudra weapon favoured by Śiva. The weapon appeared in personified form as "a three-headed, nine-eyed man with three faces, six arms, blazing flames for hair, and his head surrounded with tongue-flashing serpents."⁵⁹ Arjuna strung the weapon, shot, and, not surprisingly, with it destroyed the enemy.

Arjuna then reported back to Indra who praised him and promised that he would be victorious in battle and that Yudhiṣṭhira would become sovereign of the world. Says Indra:

"Slaying my enemies, you have brought me a great guru's gift, Pārtha! You shall always remain as steadfast in conflict, Dhanamjaya [Arjuna], and unconfused, achieve an understanding of weapons. Neither Gods nor Dānavas nor Rākṣasas shall withstand you in battle, nor Yakṣas, Asuras, or Gandharvas, birds or snakes. And Kuntī's law-spirited son Yudhiṣṭhira shall reign over the earth that you have won with the power of your arms."⁶⁰

Not only do these battles win Indra's highest praise and promises for Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira, but in them Arjuna also demonstrates the importance of the celestial weapons. Without them Arjuna would have been

lost. The value of the weapons is underscored later in the exile when a rākṣasa named Jaṭāsura ('the demon with an ascetic's braid') stole the weapons and captured Draupadī and three of the Pāṇḍavas as well. Bhīma defeated the rākṣasa after a long battle with trees and rocks by severing Jaṭāsura's head by means of a powerful blow with his fist. The priceless weapons were thereby saved.⁶¹

At the end of his long sojourn, when Arjuna was reunited with his brothers on Mount Gandhamādāna, he reported all of his adventures to Yudhiṣṭhira. The eldest Pāṇḍava mulled over the impressive list of accomplishments which Arjuna amassed on his visit to Indra's heaven--divine weapons and knowledge of their employ, experience in battle, and visions as well as the favour of the gods--and concluded, "now I think we have won all of Goddess Earth with her garland of cities and subjugated Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons."⁶² Clearly the anxiousness which prompted him to send Arjuna off has been dispelled, and he is more confident of success in the war which is almost sure to come.

Bhīma

Bhīma's solitary threshold adventure parallels Arjuna's insofar as he, like Arjuna, meets a suprahuman relative who tests him and then helps him. Unlike Arjuna whose adventure was prompted by Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma's was prompted by Draupadī.

While the Pāṇḍavas, less Arjuna, were on a pilgrimage to sacred places, Draupadī spied a beautiful wind-borne lotus and, desiring more flowers, sent Bhīma up a mountain to fetch them. At his wife's request Bhīma began to climb the mountain.

Both his eye and his will fastened upon the Gandhamādana peaks,...he continued, boundless of might. Unbridled, the splendid man climbed, sniffing his way like a rutting elephant, following the trail of the bridleless fragrance that rose from the flowers of all seasons. His father, the chill wind that blows from the Gandhamādana, took away his fatigue and stood his hair on end.⁶³

With the help of his god-father, Vāyu the wind god, Bhīma had soon entered a region usually frequented only by gods, assorted celestial beings, and seers. Here Bhīma was out of place as he demonstrated in short order by impetuously tearing up the forest as he climbed. Vines and creepers trailed from his limbs as he plowed through the woods trampling the trees in his path.

Further in keeping with his impetuous nature he began blowing on his conch shell and slapping his arms in challenge. Bhīma's noisy bravado awoke Hanumān, the great monkey hero of the Rāmāyaṇa, who heard the noise and yawned as he came out of his sleep.

...as he yawned he slapped his tail against the ground with the thunder of Indra's bolt. Like a bellowing cow the mountain echoed on all sides the slapping of the tail from its caverns.

The sound of his tail, out-thundering
the trumpeting of drunk elephants,
ranged over the colorful mountain
peaks.⁶⁴

Bhīma took this noise for a challenge, and going to investigate, found Hanumān, whom he did not recognize. The monkey stopped the Pāṇḍava and told him that he could go no further as the mountain was accessible only to the siddhas, celestial sages of magical capabilities.

Bhīma understood the monkey's friendly words of advice only as an impediment to his flower-fetching mission. Consequently he responded with threatening words. Unruffled, Hanumān, still unrecognized, claimed to be too feeble to move. Bhīma then attempted to move Hanumān's tail from the path in order that he might pass, but, to his astonishment, he was unable to lift the monkey's tail.

Then he pulled at the thing, which stretched high like Indra's rainbow, with both his arms; and even with both arms powerful Bhīma was unable to lift it. His eyebrows were cocked, his eyes widened, his brow knit, his limbs sweated, but Bhīma could not budge it. However he tried, there Bhīma stood at the great monkey's side, exhausted from pulling up the tail, and he hung his head in shame.⁶⁵

Following this humiliation Bhīma asked for the monkey's forgiveness and mercy, as well as for the creature's true identity. Thereupon the monkey revealed himself to be Hanumān, son of Vāyu, and Bhīma joyfully paid proper respect to his elder half brother.

Then Bhīma requested from the great monkey a vision of his giant form used long ago when he had leapt across the sea to Lañkā. At first Hanumān refused, but after teaching his younger brother the fourfold nature of each cycle of time, he finally conceded and demonstrated his fierce form. The monkey grew out of the plantain grove in which they had been conversing until he was as big as a mountain flashing in the sun's rays. Bhīma's response to this vision was one of fear and joy:

Shuddering, but merry of heart, Bhīma folded his hands and spoke to Hanumān still in that form: "I have seen the huge measure of your body, mighty hero; now contract yourself! I can no more face you than the rising sun.... 66

In admitting that he had 'had enough' of the awesome vision, Bhīma previews Arjuna's reaction to Kṛṣṇa's overwhelming vision in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavadgītā.⁶⁷ Bhīma's encounter with Hanumān parallels the Gītā in another way as Hanumān went on to lecture Bhīma on dharma.⁶⁸ Then Hanumān blessed his younger brother and advised him to be prudent in his actions. The monkey also pointed out the path to the Saugandhika Forest wherein grew the saugandhika flower which was the object of Bhīma's quest. There, said Hanumān, the god Kubera had a pleasure garden.

As in the case of Arjuna, Bhīma's suprahuman relative displayed his affection by embracing him with his

paws, thereby dissolving Bhīma's fatigue. In addition Hanumān granted his sibling a boon. Bhīma chose Hanumān's protection, whereupon the monkey agreed, promising specifically to reinforce Bhīma's battle cry with his fearsome roar and to perch on Arjuna's war banner uttering terrible roars which would in themselves destroy the enemy.⁶⁹ Having given his advice, teachings and assistance, Hanumān disappeared.

Bhīma, his energy renewed, returned to his flower-fetching mission and with gusto charged up Mount Gandhamādana. After tramping through the wood for some time, Bhīma arrived at the lotus pond where the saugandhika flowers originated. The pond, however, belonged to Kubera, and was protected against interlopers like Bhīma by thousands of rākṣasas called Krodhavaśas.

Some of these Krodhavaśas and Bhīma began arguing about the warrior's right to pick flowers from Kubera's private pond. Bhīma quickly tired of arguing and tried to plunge into the pool to pick the flowers only to be physically restrained by the guards. A horrible fight ensued with Bhīma slaughtering over a hundred demons and routing the rest. When Kubera heard of the battle, he laughed indulgently and gave Bhīma leave to take the flowers. Meanwhile Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī and the twins (Arjuna was still in Indra's heaven) arrived with the help of Ghaṭotkaca, Bhīma's son by the rākṣasī, Hidimbā. Yudhiṣṭhira briefly chided Bhīma for his violent behaviour, and then the family

settled down for a short vacation in the pleasure garden of the god.⁷⁰

Bhīma's skirmish with the Krodhavaśas parallels Arjuna's battle with the Nivātakavacas, and just as Arjuna fought a second battle much like the first, so does Bhīma. After staying for a time in Kubera's garden, the Pāṇḍavas returned to the hermitage of Nārāyaṇa only to be again disturbed by a beautiful flower which precipitated another horticultural foray on the part of Bhīma. Van Buitenen thinks that this second adventure 'corrects' the 'mistaken' presence of rākṣasas in Kubera's employ. These beings should, he argues, be yakṣas, or forest spirits.⁷¹ On the other hand, as van Buitenen mentions in a note, Kubera is given sovereignty over Laṅkā and its rākṣasa inhabitants.⁷²

Whatever the case, the overall thrust of the second adventure is identical to the first. Draupadī saw a beautiful flower while the family wandered north from the furthest hermitage. She desired more and sent Bhīma. This time there was no meeting with Hanūmān, and this time the rākṣasa guards are joined by yakṣa guards. The flow of the battle which erupted reversed direction twice, but Bhīma ultimately conquered his enemies again. Kubera, however, was less understanding of this second human imposition on his domain, and came in person to express his displeasure. Luckily Bhīma's attack had ended a curse on Kubera, so that despite his admonition to Yudhiṣṭhira to control his violent brother, Kubera's arrival on the scene was treated as an

auspicious occasion by the heroes, and they, in turn, were well received. Said Kubera to the eldest Pāṇḍava:

Your Wolf-Belly [Bhīma], who has been indulging in foolhardy acts on this mountain, you should keep thoroughly in check, king...From here on the forest creatures shall look after you, wait on you, and always protect you anywhere, Indra of the Kings.⁷³

At the personal invitation of Kubera the Pāṇḍavas and their pilgrimage entourage stayed in Kubera's garden where they lived like gods attended by the yakṣas. It was after they had stayed on Mount Gandhamādana for one month that Arjuna rejoined them fresh from his visit to Indra's heaven.⁷⁴

Like Arjuna, Bhīma had passed an initial test imposed by a relative of a divine kinship, Hanumān, gained a valuable experience in warfare and had earned a vision, and boons which, in a fashion less conspicuous than those earned by Arjuna would help the Pāṇḍavas in the war which seemed inevitable. And just as Arjuna was successful in bringing the celestial weapons down to the human realm for Yudhiṣṭhira, so was Bhīma successful in bringing the celestial saugandhika flowers down to the human realm for Draupadī.

Yudhiṣṭhira

Yudhiṣṭhira's experience of the mythic plane intersecting his own is different from the experiences of the

two younger Kaunteyas. On first glance, however, the difference seems greater than it is. Like his brothers Yudhiṣṭhira also underwent a test at the hands of a supernatural relative and received assistance and boons when he passed the test. The adventure began after the pilgrimage was complete and the Pāṇḍavas had moved back to the Dvaita Forest, this time to Mārkaṇḍeya's āśrama. One day when the family was relaxing in the peaceful hermitage, a distraught brahmin ran up and told them that his drilling woods, or fire sticks, used for starting sacrificial fires had been stolen. It seems that a deer had gotten the drilling woods tangled in his antlers and had bounded off. The brahmin pleaded desperately with the Pāṇḍavas to help. They agreed and took up the hunt for the animal.

Mysteriously the usually proficient hunters could not catch the deer, and finally, after losing sight of the animal, they rested beneath a large banyan tree. After some grumbling stemming from their frustration, Yudhiṣṭhira asked Nakula to climb a tree in order to look for water to quench their thirst. Nakula complied and shortly reported water-loving birds and trees a short distance away. Yudhiṣṭhira then asked his brother to fetch some water for the brothers to drink. Nakula agreed and hurried off. He soon came upon a beautiful lake and as he did, he heard a disembodied voice which said:

"Commit no violence, friend. This is my old property. Answer my question, Mādreya, then you may drink and fetch."⁷⁵

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"Commit no violence, friend. This is my old property. Answer my question, Mādreya, then you may drink and fetch."⁷⁵

Nakula, however, was very thirsty and rushed to the water to drink. No sooner had he drunk the water, than he collapsed motionless on the ground.

As time went on Yudhiṣṭhira became mildly concerned and sent the next youngest brother, Sahadeva, to find the brother and some water. Sahadeva went to the lake, but suffered the same fate as Nakula. The next youngest brother, Arjuna, was sent, and upon seeing his dead brothers, he searched the forest for their attackers. The voice came to him as well and the great archer released a volley of arrows directed at the sound. Although he neatly demonstrated his ability to shoot by sound alone, the voice spoke again, again demanding answers to questions before water could be had, but Arjuna was so thirsty from shooting the arrows that he drank and collapsed dead like his younger brothers. Yudhiṣṭhira next sent Bhīma who, in keeping with his impetuous nature, disregarded the warning proffered by the voice and by the bodies of his brothers, drank, and fell dead.

Yudhiṣṭhira then approached the water alone and saw his brothers all lying dead by the side of the lake. Yudhiṣṭhira broke down on witnessing the horrible scene, and cried grievously all the while trying to puzzle out who had killed them. Of course he suspected the Kauravas, but could not think clearly on account of his grief. To quiet his mind he walked to the water whereupon he heard the warning from the voice. Yudhiṣṭhira asked aloud to whom

the voice belonged. A crane replied that he was really a yakṣa who was protecting his old property. The yakṣa then assumed his "odd-eyed, big-bodied" form.⁷⁶ Yudhiṣṭhira, with tremendous presence of mind, assured the forest spirit that his old property was safe from the Pāṇḍavas and agreed to answer the yakṣa's questions.

A barrage of riddle-like questions on cosmology, sociology, biology as well as a few on dharma followed,⁷⁷ but Yudhiṣṭhira was able to answer every one in turn. The yakṣa then granted Yudhiṣṭhira the boon of the life of one of his brothers, and to the creature's astonishment Yudhiṣṭhira chose Nakula. When asked why he had chosen Nakula when Arjuna and Bhīma were his full brothers and were so important to his quest for kingship, Yudhiṣṭhira responded that Mādri, his father's second wife, should have a living son. Since Yudhiṣṭhira, by choosing Nakula, had chosen dharma over profit or pleasure, he was rewarded with the lives of all his brothers.⁷⁸ As his brothers stood up, all hunger and thirst left them.

Yudhiṣṭhira persisted in his investigation of the creature's real identity. No yakṣa, he reasoned, could have such power over life and death; especially the lives and deaths of the heroic Pāṇḍavas. The 'yakṣa' then addressed Yudhiṣṭhira as 'son' and revealed himself to be Yudhiṣṭhira's god-father, Dharma.⁷⁹ Like the other supra-human relatives the Kaunteya brothers encountered, Dharma granted the eldest Kaunteya a series of boons. Yudhiṣṭhira

chose the boons that the distressed brahmin's sacrifice not be interrupted by the loss of his drilling woods, and that the Pāṇḍavas' thirteenth year, during which they had to enter the public realm but remain undiscovered, be successful. To these requests Dharma replied:

"By my grace you, scions of Kuru, shall live this thirteenth year hidden and unrecognized in the city of Virāṭa. Whatever appearance any of you fancies, that appearance you shall have according to your wish. Return these drilling woods to the brahmin, for I stole them in the guise of a deer in order to try you."⁸⁰

In addition, the god Dharma granted Yudhiṣṭhira a further request that he always remain virtuous. By demonstrating his skill at riddles in word-combat with the yakṣa, Yudhiṣṭhira had won life for his brothers as well as success for the difficult thirteenth year.

This was not the first time Yudhiṣṭhira's skill at answering riddles had saved a life. When Bhīma had been caught in the coils of a goat-eating boa constrictor, Yudhiṣṭhira had freed the snake from a curse, and thus Bhīma from sure death, by answering the boa's questions on the relationship of conduct, birth, and caste.⁸¹

The seriousness of this 'riddle-game' may escape a modern audience because the tradition of combat by riddle is not familiar to us. That tradition was familiar to the Mahābhārata. The verbal warfare which Bandin and Aṣṭāvakra engage in earlier in the Vanaparvan is a dual to the death

which has already claimed the lives of many brahmins including the life of Astāvakra's father.⁸² The one who first failed to answer in this riddle battle was drowned. Happily Aṣṭāvakra won. Bandin was revealed to be the son of Varuṇa who was sending the brahmins to a sacrifice his father was holding. The drowned brahmins reemerged from the sea, Varuṇa's realm, and the story ends happily.⁸³

Yudhiṣṭhira's riddle combat ends happily as well. The boons he has won will stand the Pāṇḍavas in good stead in their upcoming struggle for the kingdom of their father. In this, Yudhiṣṭhira's confrontation with his suprahuman relative parallels the experiences of his brothers. In all three instances the results of the meetings of Arjuna with Indra, Bhīma with Hanumān, and Yudhiṣṭhira with Dharma are preparation for the events to come.

In addition to the obvious preparatory parallels among the three Kaunteyas' encounters with their relatives from the mythic world--those of test, vision, and boons--there occurs in all three of these encounters an event which in previous chapters has been linked to the transitional or threshold experience. This event involves the alteration of the thresholder's sense of identity. Initially the liminal persona experiences a shaken sense of identity--he is no longer the person he once was. For Arjuna and Bhīma this shaken sense of identity would come from their defeats at the hands of their testers. Śiva

defeats Arjuna, while Hanumān humiliates Bhīma. This was the first time either warrior had been bested and we may assume that Bhīma's shame noted earlier was shared by both. Of course this shame would have been short-lived given that their testers soon revealed their suprahuman natures. To be bested by a god or a god-like monkey⁸⁴ would not be as ego shattering as to be defeated by an ordinary creature; nonetheless defeat was defeat, and as such it was a blow to one's professed prowess as a great warrior.

Yudhiṣṭhira's shaken sense of identity came in a different form. For the eldest brother on whom the double responsibility of family and kingship squarely fell, the sight of his four younger brothers, his kin and guarantors of his sovereignty dead on the ground would have reduced him to nothing. Further his role as protector of his younger brothers was reversed for, in sending them for water, he had sent them to their death. Rather than their protector he seemed, at that moment, their destroyer. Grief, not shame, was the acid which erased whatever comfortable assurance he had of himself as the leader of the Pāṇḍava clan.

Fortunately the same three encounters also provided a means by which the Kaunteyas could begin to re-form a new sense of identity. This means is provided in several ways. Firstly all three Kaunteyas reaffirm their semidivine origins: Arjuna with his father, Indra, Bhīma with his half-brother by Vāyu, Hanumān, and Yudhiṣṭhira with his

father, Dharma. Secondly an important facet of each heroes' individual identity is underscored by the encounters.

Arjuna proves himself a skilled warrior. Bhīma shows himself to be as powerful in his passion as Arjuna is in his technical knowledge. And finally, Yudhiṣṭhira shows himself to have the wisdom befitting a king.⁸⁵

This last trait of Yudhiṣṭhira's is stressed in all three herces as the third aspect of the re-formation of their identities. All three Kaunteyas are shown to be cut of regal cloth. Arjuna, for example, shares the throne of the king of the gods. Bhīma does not ask permission to pick the saugandhika flowers because, he says, "'kings do not beg, that is the eternal Law'".⁸⁶ And Yudhiṣṭhira's conflict with the yakṣa who is bent on protecting his territory from trespassers is reminiscent of the rākṣasa and gandharva conflicts of the early adventures where the kingly duty of protecting the forest has been usurped by other creatures.⁸⁷

This last theme occurs on one other occasion in the Vanaparvan and is worthy of noting here, as the occasion marks a significant episode in the Pāṇḍavas' forest stay.⁸⁸ Duryodhana and his cohorts planned a trip to the region where the Pāṇḍavas were staying, ostensibly to oversee the Kaurava cattle operation, but in fact to humiliate the Pāṇḍava brothers. Their plot was spoiled when they trespassed on the territory of the gandharva Citrasena. A fight broke out and the Kauravas, including

Karna, were routed, while Duryodhana and some of his band were captured. Some of the defeated Kauravas approached the Pāṇḍava brothers for help in rescuing their comrades. Yudhiṣṭhira commanded his brothers into the fray, they went to the disputed property, and saved the day by their heroic fighting. When it was discovered that Arjuna and Citrasena were friends from the days of Arjuna's visit to Indra's heaven, the release of Duryodhana was expedited. The latter was so ashamed that he contemplated suicide for some days after.

The point of this story becomes clear when the territorial responsibilities of the good sovereign form the backdrop. Duryodhana and the Kauravas are too prideful to obey the strictures of boundaries, and not powerful enough to defend their tendency to violate the territory of others. Yudhiṣṭhira, on the other hand, can not only rely on his brothers' battle prowess to protect and defend territorial claims, but he also is so virtuous that he rescues his bitterest rival because of the bond of kinship. In this test, as in all the others in the Vanaparvan, the Pāṇḍavas demonstrate that they are the faction most ready to take on kingship.

In the three parallel experiences of the Kaunteya brothers we have seen many of the elements of liminality common to the threshold which we encountered in Nala and Damayanti. In becoming aware of the power which these beings of the mythic realm had over them, the heroes' sense

of identity was shaken up, and its re-formation was begun. The Kaunteyas have a far more active response during their interaction with the gods than either Nala or Damayantī. This may well be because the Kaunteya heroes are themselves part-god and therefore are capable of a response impossible for more ordinary humans such as Nala and Damayantī. In any case, it is clear that the intersection of mythic and heroic spheres is an important theme in the exile narrative, and that it plays an important role in the threshold experience of the main heroes.

Pilgrimage

One of the major events undertaken during the Pāṇḍavas' exile was the pilgrimage to the surrounding tīrthas or sacred places.⁸⁹ The impetus to set out on this undertaking came from Indra when Arjuna was staying with him. Indra was aware that the family missed their illustrious brother and he suggested they undertake a pilgrimage, in part as a distraction. Indra directed his suggestion to Yudhiṣṭhira through the medium of the seer, Lomaśa:

"...Do not miss Phalguna [Arjuna] too much; he will return as soon as he has finished with the weapons. Without the purified prowess of his arms and complete mastery of weapons, Bhīṣma, Drona, and the others cannot be countered in battle...You yourself, lord of men, enemy-tamer, should visit remote places of pilgrimage together with all your other brothers. After bathing at sacred fords [tīrthas] you will become guiltless

and feverless; and freed from evil,
O lord of kings, you will enjoy the
kingdom."⁹⁰

Indra's instructions have far-reaching implications. We shall return to them again.

Lomaśa took some time travelling from Indra's heaven to the forest where the Pāṇḍavas were staying. In the interim Yudhiṣṭhira had heard the story of Nala, learned the secret knowledge of dice from Bṛhadaśva, and learned of the various sacred places from Nārada and his own purohita, Dhaumya. Thus when Lomaśa arrived, Yudhiṣṭhira had already decided to embark on a tour of the tīrthas. Lomaśa offered to guide him, noting that he had made two such pilgrimages already. A seasoned pilgrim, Lomaśa instructed Yudhiṣṭhira to 'travel light' to facilitate what would be an arduous journey. At this instruction Yudhiṣṭhira dismissed those 'brahmins, ascetics, and citizens' who had heretofore loyally followed the brothers through their forest exile. These loyal folk left for the Kaurava capital carrying "heavy burdens".⁹¹ After Yudhiṣṭhira had promised protection to a group of brahmins who were intent on making the dangerous pilgrimage, but who could not do so without help, the four brothers set out along with Draupadī and Dhaumya, with Lomaśa in the lead.

In the course of their pilgrimage, which proceeded in a 'sunwise' direction, the travellers visited places such as rivers, lakes, mountains and forests which were

sacred on account of their natural power, as well as places which were sacred because of a singular event which took place there. Often, of course, the river or forest was doubly sacred precisely because a hierophany occurred there as well. Lomaśa was apparently a very talented guide for he knew all the details of these events marking the bursting of sacredness into the profane world, and he regaled his charges with stories of these events. Van Buitenen points out that many of these stories which Lomaśa told are classics.⁹² We shall have occasion to return to many of Lomaśa's tales in a later chapter; for now it is enough to say that these stories added to a growing body of sacred lore that the Pāṇḍavas were exposed to during their exile. As their pilgrimage drew to a close, Arjuna joined his brothers, and a short time later the Pāṇḍavas returned to the Kāmyaka Forest, their pilgrimage complete.

Victor Turner has devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to a study of pilgrimage.⁹³ He has shown that pilgrimage is a liminal phenomenon which shares some important characteristics with similar liminal processes such as initiation. As is the case with these other rites of passage, pilgrimage separates the pilgrim from his usual state of existence, places him or her in a processional limbo between destinations, and leads the liminal persona or thresholder into the rituals surrounding the shrine. According to Turner, pilgrimage removes the pilgrim

from one type of time to another. He is no longer involved in that combination of historical and social structural time which constitutes the social process in his rural or urban home community, but kinetically re-enacts the temporal sequences made sacred and permanent by the succession of events in the lives of incarnate gods, saints, gurus, prophets, and martyrs.⁹⁴

Pilgrimage centres, Turner shows, are often located on the periphery of the centres of civilization. This serves to reinforce the separation of the pilgrim from his ordinary life-world insofar as it sets the pilgrimage centre apart from "the centrality of state and provincial capitals and other politico-economic units"⁹⁵ as well as from centres of ecclesiastical control. As examples of this periphery phenomenon Turner cites Mount Kailāsa and Lake Mānasa which are located on the further side of the Himalayas.⁹⁶ Both these pilgrimage sites are visited in the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage or tīrthayātrā.⁹⁷ Turner allows that "even in good weather they are difficult of access. Marginal though they are, they are at the source of the five great rivers of India". The pilgrim, then, begins in a familiar place, goes to a distant place and returns to the familiar place, theoretically changed.

Turner adds:

A pilgrimage center, from the standpoint of the believing actor, also represents a threshold, a place and moment "in and out of time," and such an actor--as the evidence of many pilgrims of many religions attest--hopes to have there

direct experience of the sacred, invisible, or supranatural order, either in the material aspect of miraculous healing or in the immaterial aspect of inward transformation of spirit or personality.⁹⁹

In another study Turner has found a correlation between pilgrimage and death. In liminality generally, says Turner, "the dead are conceived of as transformative agencies" who can mediate between normally distinct dyads such as past and present, life and death and so on. In pilgrimage specifically the pilgrim rehearses his own death. "The metaphoric or symbolic death undergone by initiands or pilgrims puts them in the in-between state of life-in-death."¹⁰⁰ We have met this state of life-in-death in the last chapter when we studied Damayantī's behaviour. At that time we found that both widows and ascetics exemplified this state. This life-in-death state is demonstrated by our pilgrims even before they embark on their pilgrimage. We have seen that on their departure for the forest they mark their death to the ordinary work-a-day world by performing a series of death oriented actions.

One of the most frequently recommended religious activities performed at the tīrthas was making an offering to the ancestors. These offerings seem to be a method of honouring one's dead relatives. In addition one pilgrimage centre is described as being visited by the ancestors.¹⁰¹ Although the ancestors do not seem to mediate on behalf of the pilgrims, at least in the Mahābhārata, there are other

'dead' people inextricably linked with pilgrimage sites, who do mediate between opposites in the world. These 'dead' people are the ascetics who are, as we have seen, 'alive-in-death'. A more detailed exploration of the mediating activities of the ascetic will be undertaken in a later chapter; the point here is that the pilgrims in the Mahābhārata are not unlike pilgrims elsewhere as regards their close relationship with death and the dead.

There are further, more striking parallels between the tīrthayātrā of Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers and the general process of pilgrimage described by Turner. One such parallel begins with the word tīrtha itself which is the word generally used for 'pilgrimage site' in the Vanaparvan. The literal meaning of tīrtha, is 'crossing', especially a crossing over water, a ford. The development of tīrtha from a word meaning ford, to a word with sacred dimensions meaning place of pilgrimage need not concern us here.¹⁰² What is important is the convergence of the two meanings. Tīrtha comes to be used to designate places which have little to do with water (e.g., a mountain, an aśrama or a forest), but which are places where safe religious crossings may be made. The pilgrimage site is a sacred spot where a distance which is usually impossibly vast such as one between the sides of a yawning chasm (or between life and death, heaven and earth, or purity and impurity) may be crossed as if it were a threshold between the rooms of a house.

Another correspondence between the tīrthayātrā of the Vanaparvan and pilgrimage as Turner understands it centres on the peripheral aspect of pilgrimage sites. We have already mentioned Mount Kailāsa and Lake Mānasa as examples of this. By way of supplementing these two examples which focus on distance, it is important to note that in the tīrthayātrā the tīrthas are described as dangerous to visit. Often rākṣasas along with distance are listed as the two most effective deterrents to making a pilgrimage. An example of this danger occurs when the group of brahmins petition Yudhiṣṭhira to take them with him on the pilgrimage; they say:

"The straits and perilous places are infested with beasts of prey, and the fords cannot be reached by small companies of travellers...The fords are infested with Rākṣasas who always obstruct austerities, pray save us from them!"¹⁰³

The peripherality of the tīrthas is also emphasized by Nārada's comment that some pilgrimage sites are difficult to find.¹⁰⁴

This peripheral nature of the tīrthas serves to underscore their distance from civilized centres (thus the uncivilized demons), and therefore acts to separate the pilgrims from their former civilized way of life. But, it might be argued, the Pāṇḍavas are already in the forest, they are already cut off from royal comforts and privileges. Be that as it may, the beginning of the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage

does represent a still further stripping away of their former comfortable existences. As related earlier, Lomaśa advised Yudhiṣṭhira to travel lightly, and he acted on that advice by sending a large following of dependents back to the city of the Kauravas. The text notes that these people were laden down with heavy burdens.¹⁰⁵ From this we can assume that the Pāṇḍavas had carried a few remnants of civilized life with them into the forest. These they gave up as they set out on their pilgrimage. Thus the Pāṇḍavas, like all embarking pilgrims, experienced a further separation from their known world.

There can be little doubt that the pilgrimage of the Mahābhārata was considered religiously efficacious. When Yudhiṣṭhira complained that his enemies prospered in spite of their adharmic behaviour, while he, who was controlled in his actions, suffered the debilitating setback of exile, Lomaśa called upon sacred history to explain the matter. The gods, he reminded Yudhiṣṭhira, once found themselves in a similar situation. To extricate themselves from their predicament they visited sacred sanctuaries. According to Lomaśa,

...fully observing gifts and rituals,
the Gods went to the sacred fords and
thereby attained to the highest pros-
perity. Likewise you too, great king,
shall bathe with your brothers at the
fords and find again your fortune.¹⁰⁶

By following the path once trod by the gods, Yudhiṣṭhira

will prosper.

This promise echoes Indra's when he suggested the Pāṇḍavas undertake a pilgrimage. At that time Indra commented that by doing a pilgrimage evil was destroyed and prosperity resulted.¹⁰⁷ Here the immaterial and material aspects noted by Turner¹⁰⁸ and cited earlier coincide in one pilgrimage experience. The immaterial aspect of the pilgrimage centers on the purification which comes of the destruction of evil. The material aspect is the prosperity which in the Pāṇḍavas' case often takes the form of supra-human gifts. And generally the pilgrimage is described time and again as a purifying event which will result in good things in this world for all who undertake it.¹⁰⁹

Yudhiṣṭhira himself is the recipient of two such 'good things' while on the tīrthayātrā. He bathed in the Vaitaranī River and, by his own admission, 'transcended the human domain' and received the power of divine hearing. He suddenly heard the sound of monks praying three hundred thousand leagues away.¹¹⁰ On another occasion Yudhiṣṭhira received divine eyesight like that of "eminent seers" after bathing in the Yamunā River which he described as a "gate to the ridge of heaven."¹¹¹ Later in the Strīparvan Yudhiṣṭhira used this eyesight to determine the extent of the casualties after the battle, and the different heavens to which the multitude of warriors ascended at their death. This information was requested by Dhṛtarāṣṭra who took consolation in the heavenly end of his warriors, as he looked

upon their bodies mangled by battle and by scavenging birds and animals.¹¹² Thus true to Indra's word, the pilgrims received material prosperity and were purified of their evil.

The significance of this stress on purification occurring as a result of the pilgrimage process is that transformation is again central to this threshold experience. The pilgrim, by undergoing the rigors of pilgrimage, is cleansed of evil. Granted, this transformation is not of the same weight as those witnessed in traditional rites of passage (e.g., from boyhood to manhood),¹¹³ nonetheless the transformation process, with the threshold at its centre, is at the core of the tīrthayātrā.

Further evidence that pilgrimage was considered religiously efficacious as well as transformative is that often the reward for visiting a particular pilgrimage site is expressed in terms of sacrifice. For example, Nārada tells the Pāṇḍavas that a pilgrim who goes to the tīrtha at Gokarṇa and fasts for three nights will achieve the same merit as a person who performs ten aśvamedhas, or horse sacrifices.¹¹⁴ This indicates that the ancient Vedic rite, by the time of the tīrthayātrā, was used as a means of measuring the worth of other religious rituals.¹¹⁵ I have discussed the reasons for the semantic shift surrounding the phenomenon of Vedic sacrifice elsewhere.¹¹⁶ For the purposes of this discussion, it should be noted that the transformative underpinnings of the rituals of sacrifice and

pilgrimage make easy an assessment of the religious efficacy of one in terms of the other.

Finally a comment on the appropriateness of the location of the tīrthayātrā section in the Vanaparvan is in order. Once pilgrimages and forests are understood as thresholds between states of existence, the place of the tour of pilgrimage sites in a forest context, and thus in the Vanaparvan makes good sense. The Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage parallels, and in a sense amplifies, their exile experience. This amplification is epitomized in a dizzying fashion when the tīrtha the pilgrims are visiting is itself a forest. On a mathematical model this instance represents the threshold experience multiplied three times by itself, or raised to the third power: during the Pāṇḍavas' exile to the forest (threshold)¹ they undertake a pilgrimage (threshold)² to many tīrthas including a number which are themselves forests (threshold)³. The tīrthayātrā moves the Pāṇḍavas further out on the margin of civilization, further away from the royal life they had known before. The result of this distancing ultimately will be to prepare them for re-entry into the world of men and the battle with their foes. The purification of evil which they reap from the tīrthayātrā assists that preparation and helps insure their success.

Communitas

The fourth theme which signals the threshold quality

of the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile is the theme of *communitas*. This theme was explored briefly in an earlier chapter in which Bhīma's change of character and the polyandrous marriage of the Pāṇḍavas were interpreted in light of *communitas*. *Communitas* according to Turner, often arises out of liminality.¹¹⁷ As has been noted before, the liminal personae are 'betwixt and between', they have fallen "into the interstices in the social structure".¹¹⁸ The link between liminality and *communitas* is that the thresholders find themselves sharing the same lot. Thus the betwixt and between nature of the threshold experience gives rise to *communitas*, the experience of one's shared humanity with other persons which Martin Buber described as the movement from I to Thou.¹¹⁹ Within a group in which each person is without status, social classification, or property there is exerted a tremendous force towards cohesion. Without the normal everyday signposts of position and rank the 'high'- 'low' differentiations customarily assigned to people are difficult to assess. The basic humanity of the thresholder is much easier to see.

One religious ritual in which this basic humanity comes to the fore is pilgrimage,¹²⁰ and the basic outlines of *communitas* are visible in the Pāṇḍavas' tīrthayātrā. As a sign of their *communitas* they submit to 'the general authority of a ritual elder',¹²¹ who is for the Pāṇḍavas Lomaśa, their pilgrimage guide. And although their pilgrimage is paradigmatic for subsequent pilgrimages,¹²² and

thus special, the great princes appear as ordinary pilgrims wearing ordinary pilgrim garb and doing ordinary pilgrim things.

The occurrence of *communitas* in the pilgrimage section of the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile is not an exceptional event, but rather signals what is the case throughout the forest exile; namely that cast into a situation outside the boundaries of ordinary Hindu life, the family knits itself more tightly together. Despite (Turner would say because of), their horrible plight, the family bands together and, in spite of internal dissension and the individual sorties of Bhīma and Arjuna, stays together.¹²³ While this cohesiveness is no doubt meant to demonstrate the ideal family situation, it, like the five-fold marriage to Draupadī, defies conventional understanding. At the point of this defiance the notion of *communitas* is helpful.

Without this notion of *communitas* the exile behaviour of Bhīma and Draupadī is especially difficult to understand. The former has, as we have seen, an impetuous character, and to compound matters Bhīma does not forgive injustices done to himself and his family. The treatment which Draupadī received, the insults they all endured, and the rigged nature of the dice match¹²⁴ all eat away at Bhīma while he waits for the exile to end. Draupadī for her part has a fiery spirit which also brooks no slight. She frequently heaps abuse on Yudhiṣṭhira for not revenging the injury done to her and to her family.¹²⁵ Van Buitenen

points out that it is surprising that Draupadī does not leave the forest for her relative's abode,¹²⁶ especially given the way she feels about Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to honour the terms of the dice match.¹²⁷ Arjuna's second wife goes to stay with her relatives, and, more importantly, Draupadī's sons are taken to stay with her relatives in Pāñcāla.¹²⁸ In light of all this one might expect her to leave the hardships of the forest also. However, as van Buitenen points out:

The question is never raised, though to others their solidarity is astonishing. The Pāñḍavas act as one organism whose limbs it is impossible to amputate. However much of a strain the enforced idleness is for Bhīma, and however much it rankles with Draupadī that her honor remains unavenged, they do not threaten to leave.¹²⁹

The image of the exiles as an organism is apt as it describes the close interrelationship, the *communitas*, of the family members. All of them are reduced in social position, they all are dressed in the deerskin clothes of the ascetic, all are celibate, all must share the food the forest provides, all must suffer the separation from their children, and all must share the deprivations of the forest life. Their exile brings out a *we-are-all-in-this-together* attitude which pervades all their actions and keeps them together against overwhelming odds.

The significance of this *communitas* for the epic generally pivots on the change of social rank or position

that occurs in the levelling out of these princes of high rank to the non-position of exiles. And since it is Yudhiṣṭhira who of the Pāṇḍava brothers holds the highest position, it is he for whom the levelling process of *communitas* is most important.

In discussing the relationship between *communitas* and social structure, Turner declares that *communitas* is essential to the continued functioning of the social structure.¹³⁰ This is especially true when the thresholder, as in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, moves on to hold a high position in the social structure. Often this high position will have many sacred aspects. In that case

this "sacred" component is acquired by the incumbents of positions during the rites de passage, through which they changed positions. Something of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office.¹³¹

The point here is that the sacrality of a high social position such as kingship depends in part on the levelling quality of *communitas* to prevent the incumbent of that position from getting above him or her self. Without the experience of *communitas* an "essential and generic human bond" would go unrecognized in positions of power and consequently, says Turner, there would be no society.¹³²

In order to explore how the levelling quality of *communitas* functions in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, it is

helpful to compare and contrast his experiences with those revealed by Turner's research of a parallel situation, the installation rites of a chief of the African tribe, the Ndembu.¹³³ First Turner establishes the sacrality of the chief's position. This is how he describes the chief:

He is, symbolically, ...the tribal territory itself and all its resources. Its fertility and freedom from drought, famine, disease, and insect plagues are bound up with his office, and with his physical and moral condition.¹³⁴

The sacrality of the Ndembu chief is similar to that of the king in the Mahābhārata. This sacrality has been noted in secondary sources¹³⁵ and elements of sacred power, such as insuring the fertility of the earth and freedom from drought, can be found in the stories of the epics.¹³⁶ And we have already discussed the close relationship of the king to his territory.

Commensurate with this sacrality comes power and authority, and these things can be abused. Turner claims that one of the main aims of the Ndembu installation rite is to try to insure that power and authority are not abused. Turner notes that the temptation of an incumbent of high status to overstep his authority in his private interest is great, and that he ought to view his authority as a gift from the community.¹³⁷ Such a democratic ideal is not at the heart of the epic monarchy, nevertheless Yudhiṣṭhira

showed he was capable of overstepping his authority in the dice match. Apparently he was in the bounds of his authority to gamble away all his kingdom with its palace and wealth, and he was even within bounds to gamble himself and his brothers into slavery, but he overstepped his authority when he gambled away Draupadī. When he staked Draupadī in the dice match, the elders all made woeful noises and the hall itself shook.¹³⁸ Further, when Draupadī was dragged into the assembly hall Bhīma vented his rage at the king:

There are a lot of whores in the country of gamblers, Yudhiṣṭhira, but...[the gamblers] never throw for them, for they have pity even for women of that stripe. The tribute...and all our vast wealth, the gems..., the mounts and prizes, the armor and weaponry, the kingdom, yourself and we have all been staked and lost to others. This I didn't mind much, for you are the master of all we possess. But you went too far, I think, when you staked Draupadī....It is because of her that I hurl my fury at you! I shall burn off your arms! Sahadeva! Bring the fire!¹³⁹

Bhīma is made to calm down, and Draupadī managed to precipitate their freedom from the first round of gambling by playing on a technicality attached to this issue of Yudhiṣṭhira's authority. In any case, it is clear that Yudhiṣṭhira, for whatever reason, was incapable of judiciously handling his own authority at the dice game.

Within the installation rite of the Ndembu the attempt to control the tendency to abuse authority comes

during a period where the tribespeople revile and harangue the chief-to-be. During this time the chief-to-be must sit passively and patiently submit to the authority of the community. Later he may not punish anyone on account of the things they said during the ritual.

Yudhiṣṭhira must withstand much verbal abuse, not only from Duhśāsana at the beginning of the exile, but also from Bhīma and Draupadī throughout their forest stay. Like the Ndembu chief he patiently receives their venom and never acts negatively in response to their assaults. As we have seen he even rescues Duryodhana, the perpetrator of his demise, from the clutches of the angry gandharvas. Yudhiṣṭhira retains his equanimity throughout the trials of his forest exile.¹⁴⁰ In fact, the threshold of the forest exile provides a surfeit of tests which eventually curb any tendency to overstep authority by reinforcing Yudhiṣṭhira's relationship with dharma. By means of his exile experiences, Yudhiṣṭhira, by the time of his confrontation with his father, Dharma, has exorcised the remains of a failed rule marked by the abuses of his previous status, and has prepared for the new responsibilities of war and kingship which loom. Says Turner:

The ordeals and humiliations...to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges.¹⁴

The heart of the threshold experience which catalyzes the 'destruction of the previous status' and prompts the 'tempering of Yudhiṣṭhira's essence' is *communitas*. In typically paradoxical fashion the *communitas* between Yudhiṣṭhira and his family acts simultaneously to allow for whole-hearted support and scathing critiques, for ego-boosting inspiration and the constant reminder of his ordinary humanity. *Communitas* teaches that "the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low."¹⁴² Twelve years of forest exile with the comradeship of his family and purohita provided an extraordinary trial whereby Yudhiṣṭhira learned and demonstrated the substance of that lesson.

In the threshold stage of the Pāṇḍavas' exile we have identified four themes: celibacy, the intersection of mythic and heroic planes, pilgrimage and *communitas*. Within the story of the Pāṇḍavas' exile these four themes work to emphasize the liminal quality of their lives. They are neither male nor female, man nor god, here nor there, rulers nor ordinary men. In the forest more clearly than anywhere else, the Pāṇḍavas are betwixt and between characters in transition. We have argued that all these themes also serve to prepare the heroes for their fate, especially for the war to come. It is in this sense, then, that the forest of the Vanaparvan is a threshold between the state of peace and the state of war.

Incorporation

The Vanaparvan ends with the Pāṇḍavas concluding their twelve-year forest stay, but not their exile. According to the conditions of their exile they must spend a thirteenth year living incognito in the world of people. If they are discovered during this year, the heroes must return to the forest for another twelve-year period. The fourth book of the Mahābhārata, the Virāṭaparvan, tells the story of this crucial thirteenth year and should give the details, if our thesis is correct, of the last phase of the three-part process which underlies the Pāṇḍavas' exile.

The significance of the incorporation phase of the Pāṇḍavas' exile is perhaps most fully appreciated by considering Draupadī and her adventures, especially as they parallel Damayantī and her adventures. Draupadī has not yet been discussed at length because in the forest threshold she is not as central as the male heroes. As the epic moves from the Vanaparvan to the Virāṭaparvan, however, the flow of the story sweeps her up, and she returns again to a prominent position in the narrative.

Although she is not central to the forest narrative, the four threshold themes which were outlined for the Pāṇḍavas are present in Draupadī's forest stay as well. She remained garbed in the ascetic deerskin and celibate throughout, and, as discussed earlier, she remained an integral part of the Pāṇḍava family in the forest and contributed to the environment of *communitas*. She accompanied

the four of her five husbands who went on the pilgrimage and suffered the hardships of travel more than any of the other pilgrims.¹⁴³ Draupadī's contact with the divine realm rounds out her threshold experience.

This fourth theme, the contact with the divine realm, occurs when Draupadī confronts Kṛṣṇa in the forest and complains of the injustices that have befallen her. Alf Hiltebeitel has demonstrated that Draupadī's forest meeting with Kṛṣṇa is special. For Hiltebeitel, Draupadī's exchange with Kṛṣṇa "points beyond the surface events to the mythological identities of the figures involved."¹⁴⁴ The mythological identity which is clearest from Draupadī's words is the one between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu,¹⁴⁵ and Draupadī takes advantage of her meeting with the god to bemoan her fate and plead for help. In so doing she reveals that her sense of identity is as shaken as was Damayantī's.

In the course of her lament Draupadī claims to hate the Pāṇḍavas¹⁴⁶ and argues that she is unprotected in the world. If, she hisses, a wretch like Karṇa could laugh at her distress, then she has no husbands, no sons and no friends.¹⁴⁷ That Draupadī is without sons is unarguable; they have been taken to Pāñcāla for the duration of the exile.¹⁴⁸ And while she may be guilty of hyperbole in the presence of Kṛṣṇa for the sake of effect, the forest exile and the events leading up to it portray her husbands as unable to protect her. In her forest exile she shares with Damayantī a widow-like state. In this context Dr.

Irawati Karve comments, "Two words keep recurring in reference to Draupadī--nāthavaty anāthavat 'having husbands, but like a widow.'"¹⁴⁹ Here Dr. Karve is bringing to our attention Draupadī's frequent complaint that she was repeatedly dishonoured while her husbands stood watching in silence. And in fact only two times--once by divine miracle in the assembly hall, and once in secret by Bhīma at the Virāṭa's court--is she saved.

The upshot of Draupadi's threshold experience is similar to Damayantī's: an undermining of her sense of wifely identity. Draupadī's threshold is betwixt and between a marriage to men powerless to protect her and defend her behaviour (which in the Hindu context is no marriage at all), and a marriage to men ready and able to avenge the injustices done her and protect her from further harm.

If parallels between the threshold experiences of Draupadī and Damayantī exist, it comes as no surprise that parallels exist between the incorporation phases of each. The most obvious of these parallels and the one which is most enlightening vis-à-vis the incorporation phase of the Pāṇḍavas generally is the one concerning the disguise that each woman assumes after leaving the forest. It will be remembered that Damayantī became a sairandhrī, a serving maid or ladies maid specializing in hair styling and in the preparation of fragrant oils. As is so often the case in traditional Indian society an occupation is not solely

a means of livelihood, but involves a place in the hierarchical caste structure. In short to become a sairandhrī was to change classes; it was to become another person.

When one of her husbands asks Draupadī in what disguise she will spend the thirteenth year of exile, she replies:

...there are in this world maidservants
who serve as chambermaids and live under
no one's protection. No other women
go about like this... I'll call myself
Sairandhrī, a chambermaid with a skill
in hairdressing.¹⁵⁰

Thus it was that Draupadī assumed the same disguise as Damayantī, introduced herself to Virāṭa's queen as a woman of that same mixed caste, and was taken into the employ of the queen.

The identical disguises of Damayantī and Draupadī call attention to parallel disguises in parallel situations. Nala left the forest 'disguised' as the deformed Bahuka, and in their early adventures the Pāṇḍavas disguised themselves as brahmins until they reentered the world at the court of Drupada. In the Virāṭaparvan, too, the heroes emerge from the forest in disguise, this time in order to fulfill the terms of their exile, but also no doubt to signify the transformative character of the forest threshold.

The Pāṇḍavas decide to spend their last year of exile in the court of Virāṭa in the country of the Matsya. First they unstring their bows and then hide their weapons

in a tall tree in a cremation ground.¹⁵¹ Their excursion in Matsya is to be the first time since their adolescence that they will be unarmed. Like Nala going to the court of Ṛtuparṇa as the deformed Bahuka the Pāṇḍavas enter Virāṭa's court transformed. Yudhiṣṭhira has become a brahmin who, thanks to Bṛhadaśva's preparation, knows the secret of playing dice. He becomes a part of the court scene. Bhīma has become a cook and wrestler named Ballava. Nakula has become a horse trainer and Sahadeva, a cowherd. All three enter the employ of Virāṭa as servants. Arjuna has undergone the most dramatic change. From a manly hero versed in both asceticism and warfare, Arjuna has become a eunuch with feminine flowing hair and gown. Thanks to the instruction of the gandharva, Citrasena, Arjuna is skilled in music and dance, thus he is employed to teach these skills to the king's daughter. These disguises mark the beginning of the Pāṇḍavas' incorporation into the civilized world of human beings.

This incorporation phase is not altogether straightforward. It is laced through and through with the liminal imagery of the threshold. The presence of both liminal and post-liminal imagery reflects an essential tension which is inherent in the Pāṇḍavas' situation.¹⁵² The Pāṇḍavas are ready to end their exile, they are ready to rejoin the world. They have weapons, knowledge and divine favour; they have passed trials and cleansed themselves of evil by means of a pilgrimage, they are ready, but the time is not

up. They are, to use a phrase that is repeated in the Virāṭaparvan, 'tied by the noose of dharma'.¹⁵³ In a sense they are stuck between liminal and incorporation stages.

The threshold quality of the heroes' stay at Virāṭa's court is implicit in the words of Arjuna when he describes their year of hiding as living undiscovered "like infants in the womb."¹⁵⁴ We have seen that womb imagery is characteristic of the threshold.¹⁵⁵ The Pāṇḍavas' disguises, as noted above, also reflect a liminal state. This is amplified by the nature of the disguises for in all cases a paradox in which the heroes become what they are not occurs. For the twins this paradox takes the form of the inversion of high social position and low social position which Yudhiṣṭhira experienced so intensely during the forest exile. Both these princes become lowly vaiśyas.

The paradoxical nature of the disguises of the four more major characters is more significant, and by twisted threshold logic, more sensible. Draupadī's disguise as the chambermaid Sairamhrī has already been noted. One of the general characteristics of this mixed caste female was held to be independence--she was not supported by anyone. Ironically this is the chief complaint Draupadī lodges against her husbands, that they do not support her especially in times of distress. Thus in becoming a chambermaid Draupadī must confront, in a first-hand literal manner, that which she abhors: being without support, without help,

and independent.

One of Bhīma's claims to fame was his appetite. When the Pāṇḍavas must beg food in the early adventures, one half must go to feed Bhīma while the remainder feeds the four remaining brothers and their mother.¹⁵⁶ As corroborating evidence one of Bhīma's epithets literally means 'wolf-belly'. For one whose primary concern at least as regards food had been how to get enough of it into his stomach, the disguise of a cook, a person whose primary concern regarding food was the feeding of others, would be a way of acting out an understanding of the place of the Feeder in relation to the Fed. There is a whimsical irony here to be sure, but there is in the play of the paradox a serious (but hardly solemn) note as well.

In the Mahābhārata Arjuna is the epitome of many things, but all of them coalesce into his heroic nature. He is the hero's hero whose renown is sung in a litany of 'manly deeds'. For this quintessentially masculine warrior to become a sexless transvestite involved a paradox of the most fundamental kind. In taking on the disguise of the princess' dancing instructor Arjuna experienced if not all, at least a good measure of that which he ordinarily was not.

The paradox in Yudhiṣṭhira's case was of a more existential nature. The Pāṇḍava king's otherwise spotless character had been blemished by an overwhelming addiction to gambling. It has been noted that Yudhiṣṭhira becoming the gambling master was analogous to a reformed alcoholic

becoming a bartender.¹⁵⁷ As Virāṭa's gambling master Yudhiṣṭhira must confront that opposite part of himself and literally live with it for a while. Towards the end of the year Yudhiṣṭhira as the gambling master finds himself warning Virāṭa about the dangers of rash gambling by using himself as the example of a monarch who lacked discretion.¹⁵⁸

All of these paradoxes underscore the liminal logic characteristic of the Pāṇḍavas' year in hiding. As that year began, however, an event took place which points to the tension inherent in their situation. At the same time the Pāṇḍavas settle on the disguises they will assume in the upcoming year, they take names by which they will be known in public. It is at this time that Draupadī, for example, takes the name Sairamdhri. As they are about to enter the city, their first brush with civilization of this kind in twelve years, Yudhiṣṭhira gives the men secret names which all are related to jaya, "victory".¹⁵⁹ Van Buitenen has suggested that this dual naming event may be paradigmatic for the present custom of giving two names to the newborn child, one a public name for 'everyday' and one a secret name which controls his inner essence.¹⁶⁰ Without entering into a discussion of the merits of van Buitenen's hypothesis, it is possible to see in this dual naming event the tension which will pervade the whole year to come. The public names are names made necessary by 'the noose of dharma', the conditions of their exile. These names still carry the liminal charge so predominant in the

forest threshold. The secret names point to the essential concern of the Pāṇḍavas, victory on the battlefield, which is struggling to surface as the period of exile ends. The secret names point to the centre of the incorporation phase.

The tension between public disguise and secret identity, between liminal leftovers and incorporation activities threatened to bubble over in Virāṭa's court. Virāṭa's charioteer, a power behind the throne named Kīcaka, attempted to seduce/rape Draupadī.¹⁶¹ Suspecting the worst, Draupadī had protected herself by a truth vow,¹⁶² but she was outraged by the assault and convinced Bhīma to avenge her. Bhīma reduced Kīcaka into a lump of flesh¹⁶³ and in the ensuing mêlée killed over one hundred of Kīcaka's kinsmen. All this brouhaha easily could have alerted a clever spy to the Pāṇḍavas' whereabouts. If the Pāṇḍavas were discovered, it meant another twelve years in forest exile. A premature reentry into the world would have been a fate equal to death, for after another twelve years away from both battlefield and throne, the Pāṇḍavas would be too old to win back their kingdom, and life for a kṣatriya was inextricably bound up with battle and with sovereignty.

Apparently by the force of Dharma's boon this tension between public disguise and secret identity never bubbled over and instead the process we have been charting moved wholeheartedly into the incorporation phase. The

bulk of the Virāṭaparvan depicts the Pāṇḍavas' rebirth into the world they had left.

Fittingly they burst upon the world fighting in battle. When Virāṭa's rivals, the Trigartas and the Kauravas heard that Kīcaka, the linchpin of the Matsya war machine, was dead, they initiated a two-pronged cattle rustling expedition into Virāṭa's kingdom. Virāṭa mustered all his forces to repulse the raid and the Pāṇḍavas were instrumental not only in beating back the cattle raid, but also in saving Virāṭa's life and the life of his son.¹⁶⁴ Thus the counter-raid marks the beginning of the disintegration of the disguise,¹⁶⁵ for not only would the Matsyas find it peculiar that the cook and gambling master could fight so ably, but the Kauravas recognized Arjuna as he single-handedly drove them off. By this time the required time had passed so that the battle exploits of the Pāṇḍavas did not jeopardize their reentry into the world.

The next development in their incorporation occurred when they publicly revealed their true identities to the astonished Virāṭa and his court. The revelation had a sense of ritual about it¹⁶⁶ and paralleled a similar scene in Draupada's court in which the disguised Pāṇḍavas claimed Draupadī after the svayaṃvara. The skirmish against the cattle rustlers had thrown over the tension between liminal public disguises and private identities seeking reestablishment in the world. This public revelation of their true identities formalized the Pāṇḍavas' incorporation

phase which was then capped, as it was in the early adventures, by a wedding.

The marriage which is celebrated at the close of the Virāṭaparvan unites Arjuna's son Abhimanyu with Virāṭa's daughter Uttarā.¹⁶⁷ A marriage is a fitting culmination to the Pāṇḍavas' incorporation into the world for marriage is itself a rite of passage which stresses incorporation at every turn.¹⁶⁸ Not only is Uttarā 'incorporated' into the Pāṇḍava tribe, but the Matsyas and Pāṇḍavas are politically linked. In addition the wedding is an occasion for demonstrating socio-political loyalties to the world at large. So four great armies are present at the ceremonies along with a host of illustrious guests including Drupada and Kṛṣṇa (uncle of the groom) who have come to show respect, to have fun and to welcome the Pāṇḍavas back into a world they had left thirteen years before.

Conclusion

By carefully charting the three phases of the Pāṇḍavas' exile we have again demonstrated a transformative process which underlies the epic narrative. Further, by identifying the ritual-like behaviour which the Pāṇḍavas exhibited when they left the city for the forest as a separation or metaphoric death, and the long forest sojourn as a threshold or betwixt and between phase, and the adventures at Virāṭa's court as leading finally to incorporation, we

have again been able to isolate and focus on the forest as a significant locus of events in order to learn more about its role as a threshold.

In the narrative of the Pāṇḍavas' exile we found the forest threshold characterized by four themes: celibacy, the meeting of god and hero, pilgrimage and communitas. These themes, besides amplifying the liminal quality of the forest exile, served to prepare the Pāṇḍavas by providing them with special boons, ritual purification, celestial weapons, and character development for the war which seems almost certain to come. The scene of the marriage festival which ends the epic narrative of the exile is one of great joy and gladness from one vantage point. From another, however, the celebrants are most clearly poised on the edge of a huge battle. They are not on that edge by accident either, they have been 'processed' or prepared for battle almost from the moment of their exile. The tripartite process revealed in the Pāṇḍavas' exile, shows them moving inexorably towards war. The role of the forest in this process is again to act as an appropriate threshold across which the heroes pass enroute to war and sovereignty.

Notes

¹ Victor Turner (Forest, pp. 94-95) states that rites of passage accompany the change which occurs when a tribe goes to war.

² G.J. Held, The Mahābhārata: an Ethnological Study (London and Amsterdam, 1935). Held's contention was that the dice game was a ritualized potlach ceremony.

³ Van Buitenen, v. 2, pp. 19-30. Alf Hiltebeitel (op. cit., pp. 94 f.) has done complementary work connecting Śiva to the dice play.

⁴ dharma: MBh., 2.61.9, 2.67.15; vow: 2.52.16, 2.53.13; and obedience: 2.67.4, 2.52.15.

⁵ Irawati Karve, Yuganta: The End of an Epoch (Poona: 1969), p. 18. Dr. Karve feels that this is the central issue of the Mahābhārata.

⁶ Steven O'Brien ("Indo-European Eschatology: A Model", The Journal of Indo-European Studies, v. 4, no. 4, winter 1976) sees the significance of exile as related to eschatology and backs this up by his cross-cultural epic studies. Unfortunately he does not seem aware of the work of Madeleine Biardeau on the pralaya symbolism in the Mahābhārata, e.g., "Etudes de mythologie hindoue", 3, Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extreme-Orient, LVIII (1971), pp. 17-89.

⁷ Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 177.

⁸ Winternitz, op. cit., v. 1, pt. 2., p. 281 and van Buitenen, v. 2, pp. 174-75, 182-85.

⁹ Hiltebeitel, op. cit., e.g., pp. 79-85 (the tale of the five Indras and the marriage of Draupadī), and pp. 312 ff. (the Sauptikaparvan and the story of Dakṣa's sacrifice).

¹⁰ MBh., 3.49.34, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 318.

¹¹ MBh., 3.78.8-10, van Buitenen, v. 2., p. 364.

¹² MBh., 2.53-67.

¹³ MBh., 2.68.8, 13, and 14.

14 MBh., 2.69.5-6, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 159.

15 MBh., 2.71.3-7, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 165.

16 'Kaunteyas' means literally sons of Kuntī, but I take this term to refer here to all the main characters Vidura has been talking about.

17 MBh., 2.71.24, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 166.

18 While it is nearly impossible to locate precisely the "chants of death" (yāmyāni sāmāni) noted here, it is probable that the substance of these chants came from the Yama sūkta (Rg. X. 14) which is one of the five hymns (Rg. X. 11-15) Kane says have been used by most sūtras and which are used in cremation rituals today. Rg. Veda X. 14 is the hymn devoted almost exclusively to Yama (Kane, op. cit., v. 4, pp. 191-94).

19 Van Gennepe, op. cit., p. 168. Van Gennepe sees the veil worn in mourning as separating the mourner from the world.

20 Kane, op. cit., v. 4, p. 182. In addition the dead ascetic's grave should be filled with sand (p. 230).

21 E.B. Cowell, ed., The Jātakas, 3 vols. (London, 1969), v. 3, #547, p. 291.

22 MBh., 11.11.6.

23 Pandey, op. cit., p. 255.

24 Kane, op. cit., v. 4, p. 211.

25 Ibid., p. 205 n.

26 Manu, op. cit., p. xviii ff.

27 It is also possible that the epic compilers intended this symbolic action to have the double meaning of both funeral rite and threat to the enemy. Although the tendency to multi-meaning in Sanskrit literature is well known, this possibility seems less likely to me because the allegorical interpretation is presented in the text as the exclusive understanding of the Pāṇḍavas' actions. Nonetheless this possibility cannot be ruled out.

28 Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 176.

29 MBh., 3.12.7-9, van Buitenen, v. 2., pp. 240-41.

- 30 MBh., 3.12.63, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 243.
- 31 MBh., 3.12.71, Ibid.
- 32 MBh., 3.34.14.
- 33 MBh., 3.71.37-38. In the "Vessantara Jātaka" (Cowell, op. cit., p. 270) Maddī agrees not to approach Vessantara "unseasonably" because "woman is the canker of chastity."
- 34 MBh., 1.204.28.
- 35 MBh., 1.206.22, and van Buitenen, note to 1.206.22, v. 1, p. 466.
- 36 Van Buitenen concurs that this is a reference to forest celibacy in a note to 3.68.10, v. 2, p. 818.
- 37 MBh., 3.68.10-11, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 160.
- 38 Turner, Ritual, p. 104.
- 39 Brelich, Gli Eroi Greci: Un problema storico-religioso (Rome: Edizioni dell' Ateneo, 1958), cited in Hiltebeitel, op. cit., p. 33.
- 40 Hiltebeitel, op. cit., pp. 29-43, For a review of Hiltebeitel's work see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Review", pp. 19-28.
- 41 MBh., 3.37.1-19.
- 42 MBh., 3.37.30.
- 43 MBh., 3.38.24, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 297.
- 44 For confirmation see Bhīma's speech 3.49.5-10.
- 45 MBh., 3.38.30-45.
- 46 MBh., 3.39.14, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 298.
- 47 MBh., 3.39.23, Ibid., p. 299.
- 48 MBh., 3.40.20-52.
- 49 MBh., 3.41.23-24.
- 50 MBh., 3.42.37-38, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 305.
- 51 MBh., 3.44.20.

52 For other references see MBh., 3.42.18, 43.11, 44.16, and 45.3.

53 MBh., 3.45.4, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 310.

54 MBh., 3.45.30-34.

55 MBh., 3.165.8.

56 MBh., 3.168.1-5, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 546.

57 MBh., 3.169.8-11, Ibid., pp. 547-48.

58 MBh., 3.169.18-19, Ibid., p. 548.

59 MBh., 3.170.39, Ibid., p. 551.

60 MBh., 3.170.67-69, Ibid., p. 552.

61 MBh., 3.154.

62 MBh., 3.171.14, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 553.

63 MBh., 3.146.19-23, Ibid., p. 499.

64 MBh., 3.146.60-63, Ibid., p. 501.

65 MBh., 3.147.17-20, Ibid., p. 503.

66 MBh., 3.149.11-12, Ibid., p. 506.

67 Bhagavadgītā, 11.23-24, 45.46.

68 MBh., 3.149.24-52.

69 Hanumān keeps this promise in the Karṇaparvan when in the course of the battle, the ape banner of Arjuna is pierced by an arrow. Hanumān roars in response, and the enemy army is momentarily petrified by fright; MBh., 8.37.7-10.

70 MBh., 3.153.

71 Van Buitenen, v. 2, pp. 201-02.

72 MBh., 3.258.15, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 202n. This is also mentioned in MBh., 12.278.8.

73 MBh., 3.159.13-14, Ibid., p. 531.

74 MBh., 3.161.17.

75 MBh., 3.296.12, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 797.

76 MBh., 3.297.20, Ibid., p. 800.

77 The so-called yakṣapraśna, 3.297.26-62.

78 The "Devadhamma Jātaka" has a similar riddle episode in the midst of a forest exile. The Jātaka is much more cynical about the reasons for the eldest son's asking the yakṣa for the life of the youngest. The Buddha-to-be says that if he came back without the youngest brother, saying the boy had been eaten, no one would believe him; Cowell, op. cit., v. 1, p. 26.

79 MBh., 3.298.6

80 MBh., 3.298.18-19, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 805.

81 MBh., 3.173-178.

82 MBh., 3.132-134.

83 For further discussion of the riddle in an Indian context cf. Durga Bhagwat, The Riddle in Indian Life, Lore, and Literature (Bombay, 1965).

84 Bhīma's respectful homage to Hanumān is reminiscent more of worship to the monkey god Hanumān of the Purāna's and contemporary India than the special servant treatment Hanumān receives in the Vālmīki Rāmāyana.

85 The encounter between Indra and Karna which seems at first ill-placed in the Vanaparvan (3.284-94), may well serve to show a parallel re-formation of the divine identity of Karna. This hypothesis is strengthened by the important role Sūrya, the sun god, plays in this story. Sūrya is the father of this fourth and oldest Kaunteya. In addition, Karna, after cutting his armor and earrings from his skin, receives a new name, a sure sign of a new identity.

86 MBh., 3.152.9, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 511.

87 Supra., pp. 39-41.

88 MBh., 3.224-43.

89 MBh., 3.80-133.

90 MBh., 3.45.30-34, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 311.

- 91 MBh., 3.90.17-22, Ibid., p. 405.
- 92 Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 187.
- 93 Turner, Dramas, pp. 166-230, "Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process" in Reynolds, ed., op. cit., pp. 24-39, and "Pilgrimage and Communitas", Studia Missionalia, vol. 23, 1974, pp. 305-27.
- 94 _____, Dramas, p. 207.
- 95 Ibid., p. 197.
- 96 Ibid., p. 194.
- 97 Lake Mānasa: 3.130.12, Mount Kailāsa: 3.140.10 ff.
- 98 Turner, Dramas, pp. 194-95.
- 99 Ibid., p. 197.
- 100 Turner, "Death", pp. 38-39.
- 101 For examples, cf. MBh., 3.80.14, 63, 86; 81.56; 83.29, 56.
- 102 For one theory see van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 186.
- 103 MBh., 3.91.4 and 13, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 406.
- 104 MBh., 3.81.61 and 82.8.
- 105 MBh., 3.90.22: bhuyiṣṭhśaḥ paurā gurubhārasamāhitaḥ.
- 106 MBh., 3.92, 15-16, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 408.
- 107 MBh., 3.45, 30-34.
- 108 Turner, Dramas, p. 197.
- 109 This idea is reiterated by the brahmins: 3.91.9, the sages, Vyāsa, Nārada and Parvata: 91.19-22, Lomaśa: 92, 14, Nārada alone: 82.91, and Mārkaṇḍeya: 180.35.
- 110 MBh., 3.114.15-16.
- 111 MBh., 3.129.14 and 20.
- 112 MBh., 11.26.19-20.
- 113 Victor Turner cites many instances where pilgrimage and rites of passage do not identically correspond. Perhaps

the most intriguing difference (which Turner ascribes to the difference between complex and tribal societies) is that of their special characteristics: "the limen of pilgrimage is, characteristically, motion, the movement of travel, while that of initiation is stasis, the seclusion of novices in a fixed, sacred space. The former liminalizes time, the latter space; time is here connected with voluntariness, space with obligation." ("Death", p. 31).

114 MBh., 3.83.23-26.

115 Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 186.

116 Thomas Parkhill, "A Perception of Bubblings in the Indian Worldview", M.A. Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, McMaster University, 1974, unpublished, pp. 44-64.

117 Communitas also arises from marginality and inferiority, Turner, Ritual, p. 128.

118 Ibid., p. 125.

119 Martin Buber, Between man and man, trans. R.G. Smith (London and Glasgow: Fontana Library, 1961), p. 51, cited in Turner, Ritual, p. 127.

120 Turner, Ritual, p. 96.

121 Turner, Dramas, pp. 166 ff.

122 Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, Hindu Places of Pilgrimage (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1973), p. 15.

123 These examples may seem formal or stylized, and this is because pilgrimage is typified by "normative" communitas. The spontaneous, immediate "confrontation of human identities" described above constitutes what Turner calls "existential" communitas. This kind of experience, while exhilarating, life-giving and necessary for sustaining a balanced human order, is impossible for most people to maintain for very long periods outside of the blueprints for utopias which are fueled by what Turner labels "ideological" communitas. Instead, the everyday concerns of living temper existential communitas and it becomes normative communitas. Turner describes the creation of normation communitas as the process

where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources to keep the members of a group alive and thriving, and the necessity for social

control among those members in pursuance of these and other collective goals, the original existential *communitas* is organized into a perduring social system....

(Turner, Dramas, p. 169)

Because of its origins, a social bond between pilgrims defined by normative *communitas* may erupt into the experience of existential *communitas* between participants. Nonetheless the ongoing experience of existential *communitas* is generally the privy of the artists, religious heroes, and mad people who live always 'on the edge', in the margins, or in the classification gaps of the social structure.

124 from MBh., 3.1.18 on.

125 e.g., MBh., 3.31.1-5.

126 Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 177.

127 e.g., MBh., 3.28.1-35. Van Buitenen states that Yudhiṣṭhira pledged only his life to forest exile but 2.67.11 contradicts this. There, in the gambling stakes set out before the throw, Draupadī is cited and the 'you' of 'you shall go to the forest' is plural. See also Nancy Falk, "Draupadī and the Dharma", in Beyond Androcentrism (Missoula, Montana: Scholar's Press, 1977), pp. 91, 98-102.

128 MBh., 3.23.44 f.

129 Van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 178.

130 Turner, Ritual, p. 97.

131 Ibid. This theme of tempering pride also occurs in the "Vessantara Jātaka" where the hero says of his exile in the forest: "...just as a charioteer breaks in a horse; adversity...has tamed us here." (Cowell, op. cit., v. 30, p. 300).

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., pp. 97-107.

134 Ibid., p. 98.

135 A.M. Hocart, Kingship (London: Watts, 1941), pp. 3-4; E.W. Hopkins, "The Divinity of Kings", Journal of the American Oriental Society, v. 31, 1931, p. 313; J. Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship From a Religious Point of View (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), p. 24.

136 King Samavarana was absent from his city for twelve years during which time no rain fell (MBh., 1.163.10-20). Sītā's father discovered her in a furrow while he was fulfilling his kingly duty involving plowing the earth of the sacrificial ground. (Rām, 1.65, note 1208, lines 1-5). The intimate connection between the king and the fertility of the earth is an indication of the sacred status of the king. This connection holds on the mythic level as well. On one occasion when Indra, the king of the gods, disappeared, the "forests withered away...there was no rain," (O'Flaherty, Myths, p. 85. The story is repeated twice in the Mahābhārata, c.f. O'Flaherty, Myths, p. 320.).

137 Turner, Ritual, p. 104.

138 MBh., 2.58.39.

139 MBh., 2.61.1-6, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 144.

140 Van Buitenen (v. 2, p. 177) concludes that the events of the Vanaparvan serve primarily to build Yudhiṣṭhira's character in this manner. For another investigation of this relationship between kingship and the forest see Falk, "Wilderness".

141 Turner, Ritual, p. 103.

142 Ibid., p. 97.

143 MBh., 3.144.1-15.

144 Hildebeitel, op. cit., pp. 88 ff.

145 MBh., 3.13.44.

146 MBh., 3.13.58.

147 MBh., 3.13.114.

148 MBh., 3.23.46.

149 Karve, Yuganta, p. 118; for example see MBh., 4.17.296 and for related statements see 4.15.21, 15.35 and 17.1.

150 MBh., 4.3.16-17, van Buitenen, v. 3, p. 30.

151 MBh., 4.5.15-26.

152 J.A.B. van Buitenen argues that the Virāṭaparvan has a carnival quality because it depicts a liminal hinge-time between the end of one period (the twelve-year exile)

and the beginning of another (the time of war); v. 3, pp. 4-5, 13, 20-21. I suspect that the first part of the Virāṭaparvan has a kind of giddy character because of the potentially explosive tension which is the life-situation of the Pāṇḍavas at Virāṭa's court.

153 MBh., 4.15.20, 4.55.5.

154 MBh., 4.66.10, van Buitenen, v. 3, p. 127.

155 Vessantara, the exiled king of the Jātaka bearing his name, stays in the forest nine and one-half months before resuming the throne. Nine and one-half months is, of course, the gestation period of a human fetus (Cowell, op. cit., v. 3, p. 302).

156 MBh., 1, 145, 5-6.

157 Van Buitenen, v. 3, p. 7.

158 MBh., 4.63.34-35.

159 MBh., 4.5.30 ff.

160 Van Buitenen, v. 3, p. 10.

161 Van Buitenen suspects (v. 3, p. 13) that Kīcaka feels free to assault Draupadī sexually because it was a holiday devoted to variations of this type of activity. I am inclined to suspect that the 'independent' sairandhī suffered the fate of free-willed women in most patriarchal cultures and was considered to be of loose moral character because she was not supported (read: not controlled) by any male. If this suspicion is the case, it renders the violence of Kīcaka's advances at least more comprehensible.

162 MBh., 4.14.18.

163 MBh., 4.21.47-67.

164 MBh., 4.30-32; 4.36.1-45.

165 Van Buitenen, v. 3, p. 15.

166 Ibid., p. 17.

167 MBh., 4.67.

168 Van Gennep, op. cit., pp. 117, 141.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOWHERE AND SOURCE: THE FOREST AS IDEAL THRESHOLD IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA

When the focus of study is the exile to the forest, the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa parallels the Mahābhārata at many points. A brief overview will demonstrate the similarities. Rāma, the main hero of the Rāmāyaṇa, is exiled with members of his family to the forest as a result of a dispute involving kingship. In the forest Rāma is tested repeatedly, visits holy men, and is betwixt and between peace and war. He emerges from the forest prepared by the rigors and hardship of forest life ready to do battle with the enemy.

These parallels notwithstanding, the Rāmāyaṇa is a very different epic than the Mahābhārata and this difference has a bearing on our study. The Hindu tradition recognizes this difference by assigning the two epics of two different genres of literature. The Mahābhārata is generally considered by the tradition to be itihāsa, or 'history', while the Rāmāyaṇa is understood to be kāvya, or poetry.¹ The central figures of the epics, then, differ within this typology: the Pāṇḍavas are 'historical' characters in the sense that they are obviously and believably human with occasional suprahuman traits, while Rāma is an ideal type who is clearly divine with occasional human traits.²

The generic difference between the epics affects not only the characters, but is mirrored in the flow of events which occupies the characters as well. This is even the case when the events are very similar, as in the case of the forest exiles. The poet's concern for ideal types works against the development of an inner dynamic within the Rāmāyaṇa. Rāma is an ideal King and Husband, Sītā is an ideal Wife, Lakṣmaṇa an ideal Brother and Rāvana an ideal evil Demonic King. By the end of the epic none of them has become anything but what he or she already was at the outset of the epic. Their characters are bound by ideal types. The tension which sustains the kaṅvya comes from the juxtaposition of these ideals which often results in conflict. For example the juxtaposition of good and evil Kings provides the central conflict of the epic, while the juxtaposition of the responsibilities of the good King to his subjects on one hand and to his Wife on the other provides the moral dilemma central to the tragic dimension of the epic. Thus although the types clash, the characters of the Rāmāyaṇa are, for the most part, static, and the flow of events reflects that stasis.

In contrast the flow of events in the Mahābhārata reflects the 'historical' or human quality of that epic's characters. Yudhiṣṭhira is a good, but flawed king who gambles away his kingdom and whose resolve fails when he finally wins the Kuru throne. Similarly Arjuna is an excellent, but flawed warrior whose resolve fails just

before the critical battle. Even Duryodhana and Karṇa are excellent but flawed villains. In spite of their dastardly evil activities, they are heroic warriors who attain heaven by virtue of their warfare. The multivalenced quality of the Mahābhārata's characters results in an internal dynamic which, while unlike the character development of the modern novel, is nonetheless very clearly marked by the tripartite process having at its centre change.

Because change is so central to the tripartite process it is not surprising to find little emphasis on that process in the Rāmāyana. The Rāmāyana, after all, is peopled with ideal heroes and heroines for whom a significant change such as that charted in the tripartite process is in one sense foreign. For these heroes and heroines there is no reason to change; they are ideal.

This ideal quality found in the Rāmāyana is significant for this study in two ways. First, as we have noted, there is little emphasis on the tripartite process in this epic. Second, the concern of the Rāmāyana poets for ideal types extends from the characters to encompass the landscape, including the forest, as well. We shall take our cue from these differences in proceeding in our study. The first part will identify the same tripartite structure found in the Mahābhārata in which the heroes are processed from a state of peace into a state of war and which in the Rāmāyana has varying emphases. The second

part will explore the forest of the Rāmāyana and discover it to be an ideal Threshold.

Victor Turner has noted that a mark of the thresholders is that they have nothing because they are nobodies. Says Turner:

Their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty. Rights over property, goods, and services inhere in positions in the politico-jural structure. Since they do not occupy such positions, neophytes exercise no such rights. In the words of King Lear they represent "naked unaccommodated man."³

The other forest dwellers we have studied have reflected this condition, but in the Rāmāyana much is made of the exiles achieving this condition. In this way our attention is focused on the process by which the exiles become separated from their usual life and enter the threshold. In fact, of the three stages of the process which finds its most explicit depiction in the traditional rites of passage, the separation stage in the Rāmāyana is the clearest.

Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā begin the separation stage by ridding themselves of all the property and goods which have been an intrinsic part of the royal pomp which has surrounded them. Rāma tells Sītā,

"Give your jewels to the Brahmins and food to the beggars who call for it; do not tarry, hurry!"
When she knew her company pleased her husband, the queen was overjoyed and rushed to give her goods away.⁴

In some textual traditions Rāma adds:

"Do thou distribute my precious ornaments, my rich clothing, all that appertains to entertainment and pleasure, my couches, chariots and the rest, among my servants and also the brahmins."⁵

Rāma helps Sītā in this task which serves to cut them off from an important aspect of kingship, namely material wealth.⁶

The next step in their separation stage involves a change of clothes. In this way they are in Turner's language not so much 'prototypes' as copies of sacred poverty, because they don the bark garments of the religious sages who populate the forests. The change from royal silk to ascetic bark symbolizes the transformation of princes and princess to religious wanderers. This kind of transformation through the medium of clothes is not an uncommon one even in the secular modern West. Work uniforms, play or "leisure" clothes and 'Sunday best' describe us into roles quite different from each other. Similarly, but more profoundly, Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa become like the religious wanderers whose clothes they wear in part through the act of putting on the clothes.

The profundity of this change of clothes is pointed up by Sītā's reaction to the bark robes. As the time for departure to the forest drew near, Kaikeyī, who had brought about the exile so that her son might be king,

produced three outfits normally common to forest ascetic which the three exiles would wear. The silk-clad Sītā was startled at the sight of those humble clothes "like unto a doe at the sight of a fowler's snare" and she began to cry. So unaccustomed was she to these clothes that she was unable to figure out how to put them on. Finally Rāma had to fasten up her garments, as the women of the harem wept at the piteous sight.⁷ For Sītā the distance, born of unfamiliarity, which existed between the accustomed royal life and the unaccustomed forest life heightened her sense of separation.

Rāma, on the other hand, was very clear about the nature of his exile and its implications vis-à-vis becoming separated from the society of men. When Daśaratha, Rāma's sorrowful father, tried to send an escort of beautiful women, soldiers, food and wealth to the forest with his son, Rāma declined saying,

"I have renounced all comforts in order to live in the forest on the natural products to be found there; O Sovereign, what need have I for an escort, I who have given up the society of men?...O Lord of the Earth, what use have I for an army? I have stripped myself of everything; let them supply me with a robe of bark only; let two things be brought for me, a spade and a basket, to serve me during the fourteen years that I shall pass in the forest."⁸

The spade and the basket were for collecting the traditional forest food which involved digging roots from the ground and

picking fruit.

The exiles appropriate the appearance of the customary forest dwellers in one other way and this appropriation further accentuates their separation from the royal world. The exiles stand at the edge of the forest on the border of the civilized world of Ayodhyā and the threatening wood. It is here on the border of city and forest that Rāma calls for the milky sap of the Nyagrodha Tree and uses it to bind his and Lakṣmaṇa's hair into the traditional matted locks (jaṭā) of the ascetic.⁹ This action serves to mark the exiles off from the world of comfort they have enjoyed. Long flowing hair was a prized mark of a warrior,¹⁰ and to bind that hair semi-permanently with gooey sap was to reduce a fashionable coiffure to an ugly matted lump. This act most probably represents the transposition of warrior power into ascetic power, from physical might to spiritual might.¹¹

Central to the narrative of the Rāmāyaṇa is the issue of kingship. Rāma is on the verge of assuming the kingship from his father when his stepmother, Kaikeyī, removes him from direct succession in favour of her son, Bharata, and exiles Rāma to the forest for fourteen years. Rāma's abrupt exile separates him from kingship as well as from the more material aspects of his life in Ayodhyā. The abruptness of this separation is underscored by his words to Lakṣmaṇa explaining that the water of coronation will become the water of ascetic purification. Rāma says:

"Those jars of holy waters, that were destined for the ceremony [of enthronement], will serve for the purification when I take the vows of an ascetic..."¹²

The fundamental shift from coronation water to purification water is an easy one not only because sacred water is required in both instances, but also because both events reflect a similar separation stage in a rite of passage. The one is a passage from ordinary man to king, the other a passage from ordinary man to purified ascetic.

The issue of kingship is also prominent in the final event of the separation of the exiles from their accustomed world. When Bharata learned of his mother's scheme, he would have nothing to do with it, and went to the Citrakūṭa Forest to attempt to return Rāma to the throne. Rāma refused Bharata's request on the grounds that it would violate a vow his father had made to Kaikeyī long ago. Unable to persuade Rāma, Bharata asked for Rāma's sandals which he then placed on a throne in a nearby village. Bharata vowed to attend Rāma's sandals while clad in the same ascetic garb and eating the same forest fare as the exiles.

On the face of it the meaning of this episode is clear. In an effort to disassociate himself from the wrong actions of his mother, Bharata attempts to reinstate Rāma and, failing that, he takes Rāma's sandals "for the purpose of sovereignty" [rājyāya].¹³ In short, he places

the sandals on the throne so that he will not act in an adharmic manner by assuming the kingship himself when it is rightfully Rāma's. That Rāma's sandals are used is not surprising. The pāduka were from very early times considered one of the five "ensigns of royalty" or rājak-akudāni.¹⁴ In one of the Jātaka stories a chariot with the five ensigns including the sandals is sent in search of a new king.¹⁵ In the Rāmāyaṇa Bharata is emphasizing Rāma's rightful place on the throne by placing a symbol of the latter's authority, his sandals, on the throne.

Another level of meaning is suggested by a Jain story concerning the same pāduka or sandals. When a certain king named Siddharāja died, no one suitable could be found to replace him. In consequence Siddharāja's sandals were placed on the throne until someone could be found to succeed him.¹⁶ The content of this Jain story in which sandals placed on the throne represent a dead king bears upon Rāma's fate during his exile. We have seen that the Pāṇḍavas manifested mourning behaviour on their departure for the forest and we suggested that this indicated a metaphoric death in separation. A similar phenomenon is indicated here. Bharata places Rāma's sandals on the throne on Rāma's exile to show that Rāma has died to the world of men on entering the forest. This death is also hinted at by the mourning behaviour of the people of Ayodhyā. As the chariot bearing the three exiles pulled away from Ayodhyā, the tears from the people's grief-stricken crying quickly

damped down the dust raised by the chariot wheels. All were "exhausted with weeping and sobbing, the whole multitude, horror-stricken at Rāma's departure, in an extremity of grief, cried out, 'Alas! Alas!', whilst the tears of the women fell in torrents, as water falls from the lotuses when fishes leap."¹⁷ This mourning behaviour indicates that for all intents and purposes the exiles 'die' upon entering the forest. This is the last mark of a well-marked separation process which has included a change in material wealth, a change of clothes, and a change of hair style.

The threshold guardians

As the three exiles moved from the separation stage of their exile into the transition or threshold stage, they encountered a rākṣasa named Virādha. Virādha claimed the Daṇḍaka Forest as his territory and as if to demonstrate his claim, three lions, four tigers, two leopards, four deer, and the head of an elephant hung from his spear¹⁸ indicating that this forest was his hunting ground. This impressive kill highlighted his appearance which was typically that of a rākṣasa;

Of formidable aspect, hideous, deformed, his eyes sunk deep in his forehead, with a vast mouth and protruding belly, clad in a tiger skin, covered with blood and loathsome to look upon, he struck terror into the hearts of all beings; it appeared as if death itself were approaching with open jaws.¹⁹

Virādha proved to be an especially challenging foe for the heroes because, on account of a boon, he could not be killed by any weapon. After an initial challenge Virādha won the upper hand by seizing Sītā and running off. It was only after the brothers engaged Virādha in hand-to-hand combat that they finally weakened him enough to bury him in a giant pit.

This encounter with Virādha parallels similar meetings of the Pāṇḍavas, first with Hiḍimba and later Kirmīra, as well as the meeting of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with Tātakā. All of these encounters take place just as the heroes enter the forest, just as they are on the edge of the threshold. This consequently suggests that these demons correspond to what Joseph Campbell has called threshold guardians. Campbell states that, "the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the 'threshold guardians' at the entrance to the zone of magnified power...Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger...."²⁰ In folktales these guardians generally live outside the normal flow of village life where they are 'watchers of established bounds.'. When the hero attempts to move out of bounds, he is challenged and tested by the threshold guardian. Campbell refers to one example of such a guardian as an "adroit shapeshifter" and in many examples that he cites the threshold guardians aid the hero once he has proven his worthiness by passing the test.²¹

Not surprisingly rākṣasas are notorious for their

ability to change their form: Rāvāṇa and Jaṭāsura appearing as ascetics and Marīca appearing as a deer are only three examples. In addition sometimes the epic heroes receive assistance as a result of passing the test administered by the threshold guardian. The Pāṇḍavas' confrontation with Hiḍimba resulted in Bhīma's union with his sister Hiḍimbā and shortly afterwards the birth of Ghaṭotkaca. Ghaṭotkaca helped the heroes during their pilgrimage when he organized rākṣasa bearers to carry them over impassable terrain,²² and during the battle when he threatened Karṇa enough to cause the latter to use Indra's dart, thereby allowing Arjuna unimpeded access to Karṇa in a later battle.²³

Virādha provides another such example of the threshold guardians' assistance to those who pass the test. As he died, Virādha revealed himself to be a cursed gandharva who, because Rāma had defeated him, had been freed from the curse and could now go to heaven. Before he left his body Virādha directed the exiles, who had heretofore been aimlessly wandering, to Śarabhaṅga's āśrama where they would receive counsel.²⁴ Virādha's direction reminded Rāma how out of place the exiles were in the forest. He said to Lakṣmaṇa:

"This impenetrable forest is dangerous
and we are not its natural inhabitants;
let us therefore seek out the Sage
Sharabhangā without delay."²⁵

At Śarabhaṅga's hermitage Rāma learned of the path which would take them to Sutīkṣṇa's āśrama where the exiles would receive food and rest. Thus Virādha's advice ends the exiles' wandering in the pathless wood and puts them in touch with the sages of the forest who are their greatest comfort in this part of their forest stay.

Speaking about threshold guardians, Campbell concludes:

The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades.²⁶

In the Hindu epics the rākṣasas at the edge of the forest represent the watchful powers on the edge of the unknown against whom the heroes repeatedly demonstrate their competence and courage.

The threshold

Thus far the tripartite process has been well-marked and clear in the Rāmāyana. The epic lays a good deal of stress on the separation stage of the process. The transition or threshold stage and the incorporation stage are not nearly so well marked. When we considered the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile, we discovered four striking themes: celibacy, the intersection of mythic and heroic planes, pilgrimage and communitas. These four themes

emphasized the liminal quality of the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile. During the forest exile of the Mahābhārata there is a betwixt and between quality to the exiles' lives which is heightened through the four themes and which itself underscores the larger transformation from a state of peace to a state of war.

If we take the forest exile of the Pāṇḍavas as a full expression of the threshold stage, the forest exile in the Rāmāyaṇa is disappointing. Only one of the four themes, that of the intersection of mythic and heroic planes, is expressed clearly and without ambiguity. The remaining three themes are present to greater or lesser degrees, but they receive no emphasis and are not without ambiguity. We shall deal with these three themes first.

The theme of celibacy is not central in the Rāmāyaṇa. The question of whether the three exiles remain celibate or not does not come up. This is, of course, in contrast to the Mahābhārata where Duḥśāsana makes an issue of the Pāṇḍavas' celibacy. In the Rāmāyaṇa the question simply does not arise, at least not in the text of the critical edition. The case of the romantic interlude in the Citrakūṭa Forest might argue against the celibacy of the heroes, but one would still have to infer sexual activity from idyllic surroundings and innocent acts of tenderness.²⁷ And to counter that argument one could cite either Hanumān's description of Rāma as "standing firm in a vow of celibacy",²⁸ (although this may well refer to

Rāma after Sītā's abduction) or part of Sītā's promise to Rāma, "'In the fragrant forests I will love you more: obedient, forever modest, as virgin as a student.'"²⁹

A subepisode and a description found in the notes and appendices of the critical edition are more explicit but only add to the ambiguity. Sītā relates an episode to Hanumān which occurred at Citrakūṭa Forest. The substance of this episode is that a crow repeatedly attacked Sītā until Rāma protected her by hurling the Brahmā weapon at the bird. The subepisode tells of how Sītā's tilaka, or forehead mark, is transferred to Rāma's chest during what is apparently love play.³⁰ In marked contrast a description in an appendix to the Yuddhakāṇḍa places Rāma's vow of celibacy before the abduction of Sītā.³¹ Given this contradiction it is fair to say that the layers of oral tradition are not consistent on this point. Nothing would be gained for our discussion by determining which layer is historically primary because to exorcise either sexuality or asceticism from Rāma would not do justice to the ideal King of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. It is enough for our study to note the ambiguity of this liminal theme in the Rāmāyaṇa and to suggest that the ambiguity is a function of the poet's concern for ideal types.

The theme of pilgrimage is less ambiguous in the forest exile, but it receives little or no emphasis. In fact the three exiles spend most of their time in the Daṇḍaka Forest on a pilgrimage wandering from one āśrama

to another. Rāma states that this is his intent when they take leave of ascetic Sutīkṣṇa. "'It is our wish'", says Rāma, "'to visit all the retreats inhabited by holy men of devout practices in the Dandaka Forest.'"³² With virtually no activity in the interim the text announces abruptly:

Received with delight and honoured
by those great rishis, Rama roamed
through the silent woods, that great
warrior sojourning with the ascetics,
sometimes for ten months, sometimes
for a year...sometimes three months
and sometimes eight. In this way
engaged in innocent pastimes, ten years
passed away.³³

A visit with Agastya follows this announcement, but the bulk of the kāṇḍa, or book, is taken up with the events at Pañcavaṭī leading up to Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa. Towards the end of the kāṇḍa Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa begin their search for the abducted Sītā. In short order they have dispatched two rākṣasas and visited the woman ascetic Śabarī. Finally some sixty-one sargas or chapters, later, in the last sarga of the kāṇḍa, Rāma says to his brother:

"...Laksmana, we have performed our
ablutions in the sacred waters of
these seven seas and have offered
oblations to our ancestors. Our
evil karma has thereby been destroyed
and prosperity made manifest; my
heart is filled with peace...."³⁴

Rāma's description of his inner contentment seems incongruous given that his wife had recently been stolen, after which event he had manifested all the signs of a nervous

breakdown.

In the context of the pilgrimage, however, Rāma's remark makes good sense. We saw how in the tīrthayātrā of the Pāṇḍavas the heroes were purified and thus further prepared for war. Here, too, the theme of purification is central in Rāma's remarks and explains his otherwise incongruous inner peace. Nonetheless the pilgrimage which the exiles undertake in the Rāmāyaṇa is barely observable and has little of the high profile of the tīrthayātrā in the Mahābhārata.

The theme of *communitas* is likewise never clearly delineated. Certainly it is obvious that the three exiles do stay together through thick and thin. However, this is more a function of the ideal kinship relationships than a result of an experience of fundamental humanness brought on by the loss of status and position.³⁵ Again recalling the example of the Mahābhārata, we noted there that the exiles stayed together despite very human reasons to go on their own ways, as witnessed by the complaints of Draupadī and Bhīma. In the Rāmāyaṇa, by contrast, a discouraging word never passes the lips of any of the exiles who instead carry on with superhuman deportment. The ideal Brother and ideal Wife would be expected to act only in supportive ways in his or her role, thus it is not surprising to find Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, as representatives of these types, being very supportive. Whereas in the case of the Mahābhārata exiles one is prompted to wonder why they stay together, in

the case of the Rāmāyana exiles one would wonder if they did not.

As our discussion of celibacy, pilgrimage and *comunitas* indicates, these three liminal themes are at best undercurrents in an exile narrative in which the central dramatic action, Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā, sweeps all else aside. The fourth theme, the intersection of mythic and heroic planes, is prominent because it involves this central action. It is through this fourth theme that the threshold experience of the forest exiles of the Rāmāyana is realized.

The intersection of mythic and heroic planes

The essential difference between the intersection of mythic and heroic planes in Rāma's threshold experience and the Pāṇḍavas' threshold experience is grounded in the nature of Rāma's being. To get at this difference it is helpful to consider the nature of Rāma's exile. When Rāma is exiled no enmity between Rāma and Rāvaṇa is established by that act. Unlike the situation in the Mahābhārata in which the struggle over common property within the joint family resulted in exile and established the basic antagonistic tension within the epic, the struggle for kingship in the Rāmāyana results in exile, but is only tangentially related to the basic antagonism between Rāvaṇa (and his rākṣasas) and the rest of creation with Rāma as its champion. It is as if the exile to the forest in the

Rāmāyaṇa 'sets up' a confrontation situation which pits the forces of Evil against the hero.

This conclusion prompts a consideration of the special heroic nature which enables Rāma to stand against the demonic forces of Rāvaṇa. The Bālakāṇḍa tells us that Rāma is an avatāra of Viṣṇu.³⁶ This fact alters the nature of the intersection of mythic and heroic dimensions in the Rāmāyaṇa. In a sense, since Rāma and his brothers are portions of Viṣṇu sent to earth to combat Rāvaṇa, the mythic realm impinges on the heroic world in the very persons of Rāma and his three brothers. There would seem to be, strictly speaking, no intersection of the two planes, but rather a blending of two realms like the confluence of two rivers. In the Rāmāyaṇa, it would seem, the mythic and heroic realms are completely melded in the avatāra sons of Daśartha.

Yet this is not the case. Rāma and his brothers are not aware of the cosmic significance of their heroic actions. Their perspective is that of the unenlightened human rather than that of the all-knowing god; theirs is an heroic rather than a mythic perspective. From a mythic perspective the great epic events such as the abduction of Sītā or the war against Rāvaṇa are mere embroidery on a cosmic plan which unfolds throughout the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa. Only from time to time is the epic audience able to glimpse this mythic dimension as for example when Brahmā and the Daṇḍaka sages cheer and are filled with joy at the

abduction of Sītā because they know that by this act the evil Rāvaṇa has unlocked the chain of events which will cause his downfall.³⁷ Despite their divine origins, the heroes are virtually ignorant of this mythic perspective and are always caught up in the embroidery. For them the embroidery of the cosmic plan forms significant events, and these significant events serve to question the hero's sense of identity just as in the epic intersections of mythic and heroic realms we have seen in the tale of Nala and Damayantī and in the forest exile of the Pāṇḍavas.

It was in the forest that Nala and Damayantī became aware of the divine impingement on their existence. It was during the forest exile that the older Pāṇḍava brothers encountered the mythic realm in the form of their suprahuman relatives. And it was during both of these threshold experiences that the heroes came to question who they really were, and began to re-form their identities especially vis-à-vis their social role as kings.

In spite of the differences between the two epics, Rāma and Sītā experience a similar fate in the forest. There they experience first hand the fearful aspect of divine impingement on their world. There, following a series of lesser events, Rāvaṇa comes to the exiles' hermitage, causes the two brothers to be distracted, and carries off Sītā. This pivotal act not only precipitates the remainder of the epic action, but also serves to shake the main characters' sense of who they are.

Like Nala, Rāma on entering the forest has lost the sovereignty of a kingdom, but unlike Nala, Rāma is not possessed and is still a superb warrior capable of destroying a whole rākṣasa army, and certainly capable of protecting his wife even in the inhospitable forest. This latter certainty is shattered by Sītā's abduction. On discovering Sītā missing, Rāma displayed a variety of emotions ranging from overwhelming fear to overpowering anger. This display, regardless of the particular emotion expressed, signalled a dramatic change in Rāma's character. He had lost his self-control. At first he threatened suicide, fainted, spoke as if Sītā were still there and was overcome by shame.³⁸ Then, when the spirits of the forest and river refused to direct him to Sītā out of fear of Rāvaṇa, Rāma threatened to destroy the universe. In a fit of crazed rage he shouted:

"With mine arrows I shall shatter the defences of the Three Worlds, if the Gods do not restore Vaidehi to me as she was before she was borne away. If they do not bring back my beloved unharmed, I shall lay waste the entire universe and all contained therein... I shall loose every weapon of destruction."³⁹

Clearly Rāma had become unhinged by the abduction of his wife, clearly he was 'no longer himself'.

It was his brother who calmed him down by reminding him firstly of the moderate just qualities of a good king, and secondly that a king did not despair like a common man.⁴⁰

Lakṣmaṇa's words stress Rāma's kingly identity which again figures in the hero's re-formation of his identity. He must not fear like an ordinary human nor anger like a tyrant. In keeping with the ideal mold in which he has been cast, Rāma soon buoys himself up and begins the long rescue of Sītā.

Sītā's plight during the exile shares some features with that of Damayantī. Both are married yet must live apart from their husbands. For both this is a very painful situation, thus both exhibit some of the same widow-like behaviour in their separation. When Hanumān first saw Sītā, she was given to frequent sighing and crying, while her appearance was much like Damayantī's when she had been separated from Nala. For example, Sītā's hair was dishevelled, her single garment was dirty, she was without fine ornaments, except for her arm bands which were dusty from neglect. With her tangled hair in disarray she looked like "the earth with its dark blue forests in the rainy season."⁴¹ In short she exhibited many characteristics of widowhood, itself used as "the standard of comparison (upamāna) for everything that had lost its charm" by the epic poet.⁴²

In the discussion of Damayantī's threshold experience, it was noted that she behaved in some ways like a widow, and in some ways like an ascetic. Sītā, too, is described as doing tapas,⁴³ or ascetic practices, and at one point Hanumān attributed his success in Laṅkā to Sītā's

ascetic power.⁴⁴ To round out these parallels Sītā, like Damayantī, is recognized despite her unkempt appearance. Hanumān, here in a role which parallels that of Sudeva, the brahmin messenger in Nala and Damayantī, recognized Sītā's beauty and grace in spite of her filthy garment and tear-reddened face. Like Sudeva, Hanumān eventually returned to his sender (Rāma) with the news of the lost woman's [Sītā's] existence and whereabouts.

Damayantī's sense of identity was shattered when her husband abandoned her. Similarly Sītā's sense of identity suffers strain as time passes and she has not been rescued by Rāma. She asks the messenger, Hanumān, to ask Rāma why, if he was willing in the Citrakūṭa forest, to use the Brahmā weapon against a piddling crow who had bitten her, he did not rescue her from this demon who had stolen her away.⁴⁵ Perhaps, she worried tearfully, she had committed some sin which had caused Rāma to lose his love for her.

By their behaviour both Rāma and Sītā betray a shaken sense of who they are. This comes as a direct result of Rāvaṇa's crime. The hero and heroine experience Rāvaṇa's abduction as a terrifying event of catastrophic proportions. Only a king from the mythic realm could deceive the great hero and steal his wife. None of the heroic characters is aware of his or her own heritage in the mythic realm, and therefore all experience the impingement of the mythic population on their own world in a manner

similar to the heroes and heroines heretofore discussed.

We indicated earlier that the events of the forest exile precipitated war as well as prepared the heroes for battle. Having discussed the central event involving the intersection of mythic and heroic planes which precipitated war, we shall now consider the central event of Rāma's forest exile which prepared the heroes for the battle to come. This event, the alliance with the monkeys, represents an intersection of mythic and heroic planes in two ways.

The first way resembles the intersection of planes represented by Rāma's incarnation. While unaware of their status, the monkeys are part of a cosmic plan. The monkeys with whom Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa become allied early in the Kiskindhākāṇḍa are not ordinary monkeys; they are children of the gods. At Brahmā's instruction the gods had sired offspring among the monkeys in order to help the avatāras of Viṣṇu battle Rāvaṇa.⁴⁶ His alliance with these super-monkeys enables Rāma to go to war against Rāvaṇa.

Besides proving excellent warriors, the monkeys assist Rāma in other ways. For example, the monkey, Nala is able to engineer the building of the bridge to Lāṅkā as he is the son of Viśvakarman, the gods' architect.⁴⁷ In addition the monkeys are forest dwellers par excellence (as their name vānara, probably from vana, forest implies). The monkeys' natural affinity for the forest means that they are able to traverse the dense forest between Kiskindhā

and Lañkā with ease.

This is not the case with a human army. When Bharata went to the Citrakūṭa Forest to try to persuade Rāma to return to Ayodhyā as its king, he took with him an entourage and an army. In order that the chariots and wagons might proceed into the uncharted forest Bharata took a whole crew of workers to build a road.⁴⁸ An army which needed to have civil engineers in order to move through the pathless forest would be little help in rescuing Sītā. In delightful contrast the monkey army's advance through the forest is more a frolic than a logistical maneuver. As Rāma marches them from Kiskindhā to the shores of the ocean, the monkeys are described as breaking down trees and rousting up stones and juggling them for fun as they go along.⁴⁹ Their progress is awesome:

Like a mass of cloud enveloping the sky, that monkey army advanced in solid formation encompassing the southern region. As they pressed on mile on mile, crossing the rivers and streams against the current, they traversed many leagues in one stretch.⁵⁰

It is easy to see how the benefits of an alliance with such eager warriors would assist the preparations for war. The semi-divine character of the monkeys gives their alliance which Rāma something of the quality of an intersection of mythic and heroic planes.

The second way that the alliance with the monkeys represents an intersection of mythic and heroic planes is

through the character of Hanumān. This second instance of intersection is stronger and clearer than the first because the adventures of Hanumān in the Rāmāyaṇa can be shown to parallel the threshold experiences of Arjuna during the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile. Hanumān, as we learned in the last chapter, was fathered by Vāya the wind god. Vāyu and the other gods gave great speed and other powers to the monkey child, but by the time of the alliance with Rāma, Hanumān had been cursed to forget his prowess.⁵¹ During the monkeys' search for Sītā, Hanumān remembered his powers.

Hanumān belonged to the search party which was to explore the southern part of the world in an attempt to find Rāma's wife. At first they were unsuccessful and in fact were near exhaustion when they discovered the cave called Rkṣabila. At Hanumān's suggestion they entered the cave and found a paradisiac forest of golden trees along with mansions of indescribable splendour. A woman ascetic, Svayamprabhā, told him the story of the cave, then by means of her ascetic power she assisted them out of the cave which was for living beings normally very difficult to leave.⁵² The monkeys found themselves on the shore of the great southern ocean and soon learned from the vulture, Saṃpāti, that Rāvaṇa had carried Sītā across the ocean. Their joy on learning this news quickly turned to dejection when they realized that they would not be able to cross the ocean.

Their plight prompted Jambuvān, the oldest monkey present, to tell Hanumān the story of the latter's childhood.

His story included an explanation of how Hanumān received his name and how he had received the powerful boons of the gods.⁵³ Inspired by his own personal history Hanumān grew to a great size then leapt from the top of a high mountain out across the ocean. He leapt with such velocity that many "trees followed in his wake, like relatives accompanying their dear one setting out on a journey to a far country."⁵⁴ Hanumān passed the tests of two threshold guardians before reaching Laṅkā, the home of Rāvaṇa.⁵⁵ Once there he explored the city, found Sītā, destroyed the grove she was in and was captured.⁵⁶ Having faced Rāvaṇa and having advised him to release Sītā, Hanumān was led through the streets of Laṅkā. He used this opportunity to reconnoiter the city. He then escaped and set the city on fire.⁵⁷ After again seeing to Sītā's welfare, he jumped back to the search party to report his findings.⁵⁸

The tale of Hanumān has been related in some detail in order to show some of its basic similarities with the individual adventures of Arjuna during his forest exile.⁵⁹ Both heroes are serving an exiled king in the forest when they are sent on a mission. Both are successful. More significantly both confront figures from the mythic realm (Arjuna: Indra and Śiva, Hanumān: Rāvaṇa), and both come to learn something of their real selves while on their mission--Arjuna, that he is the son of Indra; Hanumān, that he is the son of Vāyu.

The movement from peace to war is central to the

threshold experience of the heroes of both epics. In the Mahābhārata Arjuna played a central role in this movement providing the Pāṇḍavas with celestial weapons, the favour of the gods, and his own battle experience. Similarly Hanumān has a central role in the movement from the state of peace to the state of war in the Rāmāyaṇa. Hanumān brings Rāma news of Sītā's existence and her location in Laṅkā as well as his scouting reports from his time inside the city walls. He has also demoralized the enemy by setting their city afire and defying their power to hold him captive. In addition to his battle experience garnered in fighting the rākṣasas on Laṅkā, Hanumān returned with the re-found knowledge of his own powers. These prove vital in the war to come as, for example, when he leaps to the Himālyas to obtain the medicinal herb necessary to revive Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and virtually the whole monkey army.⁶⁰ Hanumān's individual experience of the intersection of mythic and heroic planes, like Arjuna's, dovetails nicely with the like experiences of the other heroes and reinforces the movement from peace to war in the Rāmāyaṇa.⁶¹

In discussing the response of the heroes to the intersection of mythic and heroic planes in the Mahābhārata we noted that the Pāṇḍavas were far more active than Nala and Damayantī in responding to the impingement of the mythic dimension upon their world. A comparison of Rāma to the Pāṇḍavas shows that the former's response to the impingement of the mythic realm is even more intense. The

mythic-heroic interchange in the Rāmāyaṇa comes to dominate the epic action. Rāma's heroic actions take on more and more significance on the cosmic level until at the height of the battle when Indra sends his chariot and driver to earth for Rāma to do battle there is virtually no distinction between mythic and heroic planes, between the gods and rākṣasas and Rāma.⁶²

We suggested that the Pāṇḍavas' response to the mythic impingement was more dynamic than that of Nala and Damayantī because they were partly divine and therefore capable of feats having influence in the mythic realm. More ordinary humans such as Nala and Damayantī had no such capabilities because they lacked a mythic pedigree. If we extend this hypothesis to Rāma's response, it holds up. Rāma's response to the impingement of the mythic realm in his own world (Rāvaṇa) was more intense than that of the Pāṇḍavas because Rāma's roots were more deeply set in the mythic realm. Rāma's response was appropriate to his avatāra nature.

The intersection of mythic and heroic realms in the Rāmāyaṇa lends the forest exile its liminal or threshold quality in a far more straightforward manner than the other three themes. Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā causes both hero and heroine to plummet into a despair which tries their sense of identity. The alliance with the monkeys assists the re-formation of Rāma's identity by beginning the process of rescue in earnest, but does not bewitch him

into his former sense of surety. As he tells the chief of monkeys, Sugrīva, "...I, Laksmana and the fair-complexioned Sita are wholly dependent on thee; in the forest, thou art our refuge."⁶³ In addition the alliance with the monkeys, especially through the individual journey of Hanumān, serves to quicken the transformation from peace to war. The forest exile, then, becomes a threshold for the main characters of the Rāmāyaṇa primarily through the intersection of mythic and heroic realms.

Incorporation

The incorporation stage of the process which moves Rāma from peace to war begins after Nala, the monkey architect, finishes the bridge to Laṅkā. At this point Rāma is ready to do battle. His enemy has been identified and the enemy strength has been assessed. His wife has been located and has urged him to rescue her. Rāma has formed a war alliance with the monkey chief, Sugrīva, by killing Sugrīva's rival brother who held the throne. And he has purified himself by visiting holy men and women in the forest. Rāma emerges from the forest ready to engage the demonic forces in battle.

It remains for Rāma to remove the outward signs of his threshold existence, for the dress of the thresholder has no place in the day-to-day affairs of humankind. Especially if those affairs consist primarily of warfare,

the ascetic's bark tunic and matted locks are out of place. Thus it is that having crossed the miraculous bridge to Lāṅkā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa strip off their bark clothes, let down their hair (cīrāṇi jaṭā nirasya ca) and put on their impenetrable coats of mail and take up their weapons (kavacāyudhāni).⁶⁴ By this act they remove the last traces of their threshold existence and enter the battle ready to destroy Rāvaṇa and thereby free the world from his demonic tyranny.

As the epic narrative becomes more and more concerned with the cosmic dimension of Rāma's activities, less and less attention is paid to the tripartite process. We have seen that the separation stage received a detailed treatment, while the incorporation stage which takes a whole year and a whole parvan in the Mahābhārata is rendered in the two lines cited above, belonging to an appendix to the critical edition of the Rāmāyaṇa. Again it is the juxtaposition of ideal types rather than internal dynamics which sustains the dramatic tension in the Rāmāyaṇa. Since this concern for ideal types pervades the Rāmāyaṇa, it behooves us to change our focus from the dynamic process which characterizes the threshold to the type of place which characterizes the threshold. This change of focus from the nature of the threshold experience to the nature of the threshold itself will allow us to explore the Rāmāyaṇa forest as a threshold and discover it to be, not surprisingly, an ideal Threshold.

The forest as threshold; the dual modality

We have noted earlier that Turner regards thresholdness as both the negation and the source of the structural forms of human culture. In a discussion which stems from Jacob Boehme's notion that "In Yea and Nay all things consist." Turner states that

Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but in some sense as the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.⁶⁵

One would expect the threshold to reflect this dual characteristic of liminality or thresholdness. This is indeed the case.

One mode of this dual characteristic, the negation of structural forms, is easily observable in the thresholds we have encountered. This mode involves the negation of status, rank, social role and sexual categories. Examples of this mode abound in the epics. Turner points to this mode when he points out that thresholders "are neither one thing nor another; or may be both: or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any cultural topography)...."⁶⁶ The first mode, the negation of structural forms, is often experienced as being Nowhere.

The second mode, the source of structural forms, is more intangible. From this mode it would seem that the

threshold is at the centre of the flow of life energy into the world. The thresholder flirts with the chaos of muddled forms and returns to the world with a sense of the possibility of new configurations and combinations from the dissolved bits of the old forms. Just the knowledge of this possibility works against the tendency towards stagnation among structural forms in a society.⁶⁷ The thresholder often experiences this second mode as being at the Source of all things. According to Turner, then, a threshold generally has a dual modality. To explore the forest of the Rāmāyaṇa with this generalization in mind, we shall separate the modes discussing them one at a time.

Negation: being Nowhere

At a very basic level the forest of the Rāmāyaṇa is the negation of the categories of the ordinary world. This basic level is obvious: the forest is uncivilized, untamed, and unrefined. In the forest there are wild animals, there is no cultivated food and no elaborate dwelling. As Rāma is preparing to set out on his fourteen-year exile, the city folk are continually pointing out this disagreeable uncivilized side of the forest. Even Kauśalyā, in blessing her son's journey, alludes to the host of problems which the forest naturally holds. She says to Rāma:

"May there be no monkeys, scorpions,
mosquitoes, gnats, reptiles or insects in thy

sylvan retreat. May the great elephants, lions, tigers, bears, boars, horned buffalo and other ferocious beasts never harm thee, O Dear Child. May all those formidable creatures that live on flesh or those who are dangerous not harm thee..."⁶⁸

Rāma too, was well aware of the uncivilized quality of the forest. When he tried to dissuade Sītā from accompanying him to the forest, he portrayed the forest as a source of great danger. To this end he listed a host of perils: man-hunting wild beasts, marshes impassable even to elephants in rut, thorny paths, a dearth of water and food and therefore constant hunger, the bare ground for a bed and withered leaves as a mattress, great storms which blotted out the day, great numbers of reptiles by land and water serpents in the rivers, insect tormenters and, of course, sickness all contributed to the uncivilized quality of forest life.⁶⁹ At times this natural negative mode of the forest seemed to overwhelm the heroes as when they began their search for Sītā.

...[They] followed a hitherto untrodden path, overgrown with bushes, trees and creepers of various kinds, which was difficult of access, with dense thickets on either side and of sinister appearance; nevertheless the two mighty warriors pressed on through that vast and dangerous wood.⁷⁰

Without a doubt the dark negative aspect of the forest is most graphically embodied by the rāksasa. Here I am not thinking so much of the relatively civilized

cultured rākṣasas like Rāvaṇa, Khara and the fourteen-thousand inhabitants of the colony in the Daṇḍaka Forest, as I am of the raw violent rākṣasa who we have met as the threshold guardians Hidimba, Kirmīra, and Virādha. These creatures of distorted form, vile temper, and a love of human flesh terrorize the few souls who dare brave the other more mundane negative aspects of the forest.

This kind of rākṣasa appears with enough frequency in the Rāmāyaṇa forest to amplify the forest's negative or Nowhere mode to the point of making the environment very unpredictable. Rāma, normally confident and self-assured, reflects this amplified sense of negativeness when, having been assaulted by Virādha, he notes in lines cited earlier, "'This impenetrable forest is dangerous and we are not its natural inhabitants; let us therefore seek out the Sage Sharabhanga without delay'".⁷¹ A prime example of the accentuated unpredictability which the rākṣasas contribute to the forest occurs late in the exile. It is after the huge rākṣasa army has been destroyed and the forest has ostensibly been made safe that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, struggling through the last of the Daṇḍaka Forest in search of Sītā, are confronted by two more rākṣasas. The first of these is Ayomukhī. Ayomukhī is a huge female rākṣasī who has fangs, a harsh voice, an immense stomach, and dishevelled hair. She propositions Lakṣmaṇa and grabs him lustfully, whereupon he draws his sword and mutilates her, cutting off her nose, ears and breasts.⁷²

Having thus dispensed with Ayomukhī, the brothers walk headlong into the four-mile-long arms of the most curious rākṣasa of the Rāmāyaṇa. Kabandha has no head and his legs are all but nonexistent. When his one eye in the middle of his chest blinks, it reveals yellowed lids. Just below his eye a huge mouth salivates in the middle of his stomach. Kabandha uses his four-mile-long arms to catch herds of deer and other forest animals and stuff them into his waiting maw. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa find themselves in the clutches of this beast, they suffer a temporary failure of nerve, but recover in time to cut off the creature's arms before he is able to devour them. Without his extraordinary arms Kabandha is powerless.⁷³ Ayomukhī and Kabandha are two further examples of the negative, Nowhere quality of the forest.

If this negative mode is most graphically embodied in the Rāmāyaṇa by the rākṣasa, it is best expressed in terms of contrast to the ideal city, Ayodhyā. This is not surprising since uncivilized means literally "uncitized." Further since the negative mode is experienced as being Nowhere, then by contrast the centre of civilization, the city, is perceived as Someplace.

Essentially, Nowhere and Someplace are understood as opposites within the cultural topography. Obviously Nowhere is some place, however this is not the same as Someplace. The latter is as much an idea or metaphor as a physical place. By way of analogy a person who is a

non-entity, while undeniably a person, is not a Somebody but is just the opposite. So a place which is beyond the pale of civilization, which is out of bounds is not a Someplace, but is just the opposite, it is Nowhere.

It is easy to understand how Ayodhyā can be perceived as a Someplace. The capital is described early in the Bālakāṇḍa as the ideal city. The city is filled with beautiful mansions and majestic palaces and the gentle Sarayū River flows within its walls. It has strong fortifications and a deep moat and on the outskirts are found tall trees giving the city the appearance of "a lovely girl wearing a girdle of greenery."⁷⁴ So lush is Ayodhyā that sugar cane juice is universally used in place of water. The king, Daśaratha, is an ideal king--he has full authority over the people, is righteous, sacrifices frequently and has never broken his word.⁷⁵ His counsellors are wise and trustworthy and his court generally was supportive and morally sound.

Encircled by skilled ministers adept in the law and what was proper, who were devoted, intelligent and capable, that monarch acquired a glory equal to the sun's surrounded by its rays.⁷⁶

The inhabitants of Ayodhyā are equally ideal. They are uniformly happy, virtuous, wealthy, without greed, and discomfort. None is "mean-spirited, proud, rash, worthless or an atheist".⁷⁷ The castes are ordered properly in Ayodhyā and all are content with their lot, all the citizens

are beautiful and live long lives. Ayodhyā is protected by valiant warriors and its name, meaning literally 'not to be overcome; unconquerable', indicates that order is well established in this paradise; chaos is banished.

Ruled by the illustrious and mighty King Dasaratha, the Vanquisher of his foes, resembling the moon amidst the stars, that well-named city, the fortunate Ayodhya, with its gates and solid locks, adorned by edifices of every kind and peopled by thousands of men, had for its sovereign one who was equal to Indra.⁷⁸

The Ayodhyā of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa is presented as a Somewhere place which has shut chaos out with 'solid locks' and which is ruled over by a monarch like unto Indra, king of the gods.

It is little wonder that the inhabitants of such a beautiful place reacted with bewilderment and dismay as they watched their prince and princess ride off to the woods. It is little wonder that they responded as if Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa were dead. The contrast between the life of the city and the life of the forest is indeed great and the Ayodhyāns' dismay points up the contrast.

Like the citizens of Ayodhyā Daśaratha wondered at the changes his son would have to undergo in experiencing the Nowhere dimension of the forest. He mused:

"My dearly beloved Rama, accustomed to being treated as a prince and to ride on elephants and horses, will now have to walk on foot in the great

forest. My son, who at the time of his repast, was besieged by cooks and attendants trying to outdo each other in the preparation of food and drink for him, how will he be able to subsist on wild fruit and roots that are acrid and bitter? Rama, who has ever been used to costly apparel and every luxury, how will he be able to resign himself to the orange robes of a mendicant?...."⁷⁹

This contrast between the accustomed life of luxury of Ayodhyā and the uncivilized hard life of the forest is reiterated by Kauśalyā, "A stranger till today to hardship, how will...[Rāma] be able to subsist on a handful of corn? He whose servants live on hulled rice, how can Rāma live on fruits and roots in the forest?"⁸⁰

Later on Daśaratha makes the same point about Sītā. How can she possibly live this very different, difficult life after having been raised in the lap of luxury?⁸¹ And Rāma, himself, rejects a plush seat offered by his mother saying,

"What further purpose has such a seat for me? The time has come when it behoves me to use a woven mat."⁸²

Thus the city of Ayodhyā with her silky lap of luxury is contrasted repeatedly with the boney ribs of the forest right up to the moment of departure.⁸³ We shall return to the relationship of the king of the Someplace which is the city shortly.

The citizens of Ayodhyā are dismayed because their

prince and princess belong in the walled Someplace of their city. They have failed to realize that Rāma has changed. He has given up his wealth, his possessions, his status and his royal prerogative. As he entered the forest threshold, he became as we have seen, metaphorically no one, a nobody. In some sense, then, it is fitting that he be exiled to a place which was Nowhere in terms of the cultural topography.

In conclusion, the negative or Nowhere mode of the Rāmāyaṇa forest is best expressed through contrast with the ideal city of Ayodhyā. The structure of the latter is dictated by the protective walls, ordered streets and buildings with locks, while the structure of the forest is 'free-form' dictated by the more random ordering of growing trees.

The Forest as Source

When it is experienced in its second mode as the source of structural forms, the forest is no less random in its ordering, no less uncivilized. Nonetheless the perception of the forest dominated by this second mode is diametrically opposed to the perception of the forest held by the citizens of Ayodhyā. When seen as Source the same uncivilized, unrefined quality of the forest is understood as an abundant cornucopia rather than as a deficient horror. At a basic level the forest provides its inhabitants with their needs.⁸⁴

We have already seen that the three exiles are clothed in garments made of bark. In addition they eat 'forest fare', the wild honey, roots and fruits garnered from their forest home.⁸⁵ And the last basic need, that of shelter, is provided by the leaves and wood of the forest trees from which Lakṣmaṇa constructed their hut at Pañcavaṭī.⁸⁶

Beyond these basic needs, the forest provided Rāma with another essential during his exile: war allies. The monkeys are, of course, truly forest creatures, but the alliance is a curious one for more than the obvious reason. For example from Kauśalyā's motherly speech to Rāma quoted earlier it is clear that monkeys were considered, along with gnats and tigers, part of the negative dimension of forest life.⁸⁷ From this it follows that Rāma's alliance with the monkeys in the Kiskindhākāṇḍa is doubly improbable. First and more obviously the monkeys are animals normally incapable of communicating at length with humans let alone of forming political alliances. And second, as an animal, the monkey in the Rāmāyaṇa is unreliable, impetuous, and generally regarded as a pest. While the monkey alliance might be passed off as 'just a flight of epic fantasy,' it makes sense when it occurs within the "realm of pure possibility,"⁸⁸ the forest threshold.

The Source mode of the forest receives its most creative expression in the Rāmāyaṇa in the descriptions of the paradisiac forests there encountered. When the monkeys

penetrate into R̥kṣabila Cave, they enter just such a forest.

From this description the forest is a paradise:

...they penetrated deep into the cave and beheld a luminous enchanting and marvelous region filled with different kinds of trees of varying fragrance... Happily they approached that spot and saw trees glistening like gold possessing the brilliance of fire, and they beheld Salas, Talas, Tamalas,...[and other varieties of trees] in full flower with clusters of golden blossom, crimson buds, twigs and creepers adorning them, dazzling as the dawn, their trunks being of emerald and their bark luminous.⁸⁹

Beautiful lotus ponds and huge golden trees round out this description.

Another paradisiac forest of the Rāmāyaṇa which we have already noted is the forest at Citrakūṭa. There the three exiles live an idyllic existence which is for a time free from both the cares of human society and the negative mode of the forest. The Mandākinī River flows through the woods and inspires Rāma to wax eloquent in Sītā's presence:

"...Bathing three times a day in the river, living on honey, roots and fruits, in thy company, I do not regret Ayodhya or the kingdom! There is none in the world who would not find delight and rest on the banks of this enchanting river, frequented by herds of elephants, who, with lions and monkeys, come here to drink, and which is marvellously adorned with innumerable flowers!"⁹⁰

At first it seems curious that Rāma would list elephants as one of the delights of this paradisiac setting. It will be

remembered that in the tale of Nala and Damayanti a herd of elephants on their way to their favourite drinking site decimated an entire caravan leaving only a few survivors. It is necessary to reiterate that the very same uncivilized element which is central to the experience of being Nowhere when in the forest, is central to the experience of being at the Source. Whereas earlier in the epic Nowhere was contrasted unfavourably to Someplace, here the Source element of the forest is contrasted favourably to Someplace ("Ayodhyā or the kingdom"). The walled structure of Someplace cannot compare to the idyllic unstructured paradise illustrative of the Source mode of the forest.

Another example of this mode is provided by Bharata and his army who spend the night in an enchanting forest with paradisiac qualities on their way to Citrakūṭa. The sage Bharadvāja was pleased by Bharata's honorable intention to coronate Rāma, and used his ascetic power to summon the 'divine forest of the Kurus' to serve as Bharata's army bivouac. Quite suddenly the surrounding countryside changed form.

A great level area of approximately twenty miles was covered with a carpet of grass, dark as emerald, and it was planted with Bilva, Kapittha, Panasa, Citron, Amalaki and Mango Trees laden with fruit, and the divine forest of the Kurus appeared there, affording all the delights of Paradise...⁹¹

Experimenting with 'all the delights of Paradise' kept

Bharata's army engaged most of the night. The forest provided everything that the army could want. An inexhaustible supply of wine along with entertainment by gandharvas and apsaras added to the Source dimension of this magic forest.

Before Rāvaṇa and his demonic cohorts shatter the peace of the exiles' most permanent forest home, Pañcavaṭī is as paradisiac as the preceding examples. Again Rāma describes the surroundings:

"...re-echoing to the cry of peacocks,
lovely hills covered with blossoming
trees containing many a cave, resembled
great elephants with huge howdahs
embroidered in gold, silver and copper,
that are studded here and there with tiny
mirrors.⁹²

After Lakṣmaṇa had constructed a leaf hut for the three of them, they lived there "for some time like the Gods in heaven."⁹³

Before they settled down at Pañcavaṭī, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā spent ten years in the different āśramas or hermitages in the Daṇḍaka Forest. These āśramas also also have a paradisiac quality which points to the Source mode of the forest. The negative Nowhere mode of the forest has no place in the āśrama. As there is no need for even protective violence, Rāma unstrings his bow on entering⁹⁴ and finds an ideal paradise where deer, tigers and all manner of birds wander at will in perfect accord.⁹⁵ The deer even sleep curled up around the sacred altar.⁹⁶ All the negative elements of the forest, with the notable

exception of the rākṣasa, exist in a paradisiac state in the āśrama.

The fullest description of an āśrama is given when the three wanderers have entered the Daṇḍaka Forest, but have not yet met Virādha. They enter the forest and see a circle of huts forming the āśrama.

This retreat, a haven to all beings, the ground of which was carefully tended, was frequented by many deer and multitudes of birds and rendered gay by the dancing of troops of apsaras.

The description goes on to catalogue the sacred beauty of the āśrama:

Beautiful with its spacious huts, where the sacred fire burnt, surrounded by ladles and other articles of worship such as skins, kusha grass, fuel, jars of water, fruit and roots; encircled by great and sacred forest trees, bowed with the weight of ripe delectable fruits, the whole hermitage was hallowed by sacrificial offerings and libations and re-echoed to the recitation of Vedic hymns.⁹⁷

Completing the description are lotus covered pools and a carpet of flowers.

It is important to stress that the āśrama contains many of the same aspects of the wilderness which the citizens of Ayodhyā found frightening. Wild animals, coarse food, primitive dwellings and an overabundance of trees are all present in the āśrama. Instead of creating an atmosphere

of forboding and dread, however, they contribute to the sense of paradise which pervades the forest retreats of the ascetics. In fact, besides providing the ascetics with the basic necessities of life, the forest also provides an abundant supply of wood for the sacrificial fires which burned continuously.

It would be well here to stress that there are not two kinds of forest in the Rāmāyaṇa. There is a single type of forest with a dual modality. A single forest, the Daṇḍaka for example, appears as both Nowhere and Source. In the second of these two modes the forest appears as the source and is experienced as paradise. Even in this mode, however, the forest is uncivilized and unrefined, it is not Someplace, it is far better. While the ambiance of the forest as Source is still, calm, and peaceful. The fact that opposing modes coincide in the nature of the epic forest augments its status as threshold. According to Turner "this coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this or that, and yet is both."⁹⁸ This coincidence of the Nowhere mode and the Source mode in the forest of the Rāmāyaṇa helps make it the ideal threshold for the main epic characters.

The dual modality and the 'problem' of Rāvaṇa

The essential tension of the Rāmāyaṇa is the

struggle between good and evil, between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Thus far in our discussion of the forest we have mentioned Rāvaṇa only in passing and have apparently excluded him from any contribution to the Nowhere mode of the forest threshold because he did not live there. Does this mean that Rāvaṇa has no place in our study? Not at all. In fact an appreciation of Rāvaṇa in light of the recently discussed dual nature of the forest, benefits our understanding of both the demon and the threshold.

First it is necessary to return to the narrative. Rāma's direct confrontation with Rāvaṇa began with an inauspicious meeting with the demon king's sister, Śūrpaṅakhā. This meeting took place one day when Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā were resting at their hermitage at Pañcavaṭī. The rākṣasī, Śūrpaṅakhā arrived and began to make sexual advances towards Rāma. The two brothers teased the hideous looking creature in a manner which encouraged her until Śūrpaṅakhā, in a fit of jealousy, attacked Sītā whom she regarded as her only rival for Rāma's affection. Lakṣmaṇa protected his sister-in-law by hacking off Śūrpaṅakhā's nose and ears.

Śūrpaṅakhā was understandably distraught and repaired to her brother, Khara, who was the leader of a colony of rākṣasas in the area. Khara was sympathetic to Śūrpaṅakhā's plight and her desire for revenge, so he sent fourteen able-bodied rākṣasas to destroy the three residents of Pañcavaṭī. He did not make provision for the prowess of

Rāma, however, who quickly dispatched the band to Yama's realm.

Rāmā's lack of respect for rākṣasa might, coupled with Śūrpaṅkhā's contempt for her brother's failure, infuriated Khara who mustered an army of some fourteen-thousand rākṣasa warriors and personally led them against Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Telling Lakṣmaṇa that there was no need for both of them to tire themselves out, Rāma entered the fray alone. In a relatively short time Rāma slaughtered the huge army, the celebrated general, Tṛśira, and finally Khara himself.⁹⁹

When Rāvaṇa heard of Rāma's victory he was enraged and, in part due to Śūrpaṅkhā's prodding, he devised a scheme to steal Sītā. With the reluctant help of the demon Marīca, Rāvaṇa carried out his plan. This act precipitated many of the events already discussed and, of course, culminated in Rāvaṇa's defeat in a titanic battle.

Returning to the discussion of Rāvaṇa and the forest, we have seen that the bizarre deformed rākṣasas like Virādha and Kabandha are part and parcel of the forest. They represent the Nowhere or negative mode of the forest. A fourteen-thousand rākṣasa colony is another matter. It is witness to the central problem of the Rāmāyaṇa: on account of a boon Rāvaṇa is unconquerable by the usual protectors of cosmic order. The fourteen-thousand rākṣasas in the Daṇḍaka Forest represent Rāvaṇa's design of world conquest. They are a concrete example of the complaint recorded early

in the epic which the gods make to Brahmā about Rāvaṇa's tyrannical behaviour.¹⁰⁰ The substance of their complaint is that the demonic forces of evil are running out of control. The complaint is referred to Viṣṇu who sends Rāma, his avatāra, to set the situation aright.

While Rāvaṇa's unchecked activities are primarily significant on this larger level, they have ramifications in the forest as well. The presence of the huge rākṣasa contingent in the Daṇḍaka Forest indicates that the balance between the modes of Nowhere and Source has been severely tipped in the favour of the former mode. There is in the Daṇḍaka Forest an over-negation of structural forms, a preponderance of evil. The complaints of the ascetics that the rākṣasas have increased their disturbances bear witness to this imbalance.¹⁰¹ Rāvaṇa's quest for world dominance has resulted in the ecology of the symbolic landscape becoming unbalanced.

In the first part of this chapter we discussed Rāma's unawareness of his part in the cosmic design to overcome Rāvaṇa, and how, as he was processed from a state of peace to a state of war, he came more and more to act out his mythic potential as avatāra. When he crossed the bridge to Laṅkā, Rāma was finally fulfilling his divine mission. Enroute to that fulfillment Rāma went through a long series of preparatory events beginning with his early rites of passage under the leadership of Viśvāmitra. His slaying of Khara and the fourteen-thousand rākṣasas formed

another of these preparatory events. Although Rāma claimed in a battle taunt that Khara's death would make the forest safe for the ascetics and would rid the forest of all rākṣasas,¹⁰² this was not the case. In the first place the dark uncivilized character of the forest caused by wild elephants, creeping vines and similar flora and fauna could provide enough of the unsafe Nowhere quality for the inhabitants of the forest even without the rākṣasas. This was certainly the case with the Pāṇḍavas who were free from large scale rākṣasa attacks in the forest, yet often found their environment an oppressive Nowhere. In the second place Rāma did not exterminate all the forest demons by killing Khara and his army. Ayomukhī and Kabandha were proof of that.

Rather than obliterating the Nowhere mode of the forest, Rāma rights the balance. While it may seem that Rāma 'tames' the forest, he in fact only restores the tension provided by the coinciding opposites of Nowhere and Source. The forest cannot be walled as if it were a city and still retain the dual nature essential to its threshold character. Instead the dual nature, at one time in peril due to Rāvaṇa's exploits, is reestablished by Rāma on his way to Laṅkā to rescue Sītā and defeat Rāvaṇa.

The forest and the city; ideal types

The 'problem' of Rāvaṇa obscures the fundamental

geographical juxtaposition in the Rāmāyaṇa between forest and city. This obscurity comes from the fact that the city dweller Rāvaṇa seems to represent the Nowhere mode of the forest. We have seen that, in fact, Rāvaṇa does not establish the Nowhere-Source tension, but rather disrupts the tension by actions typical of cosmic tyranny. Meanwhile the juxtaposition of city and forest makes for one of the most fertile areas for insight into the nature of forest as threshold.

Earlier in the chapter the ideal city of Ayodhyā was contrasted first with the Nowhere mode of the forest, and then briefly with the Source mode. The full weight of this juxtaposition is felt when the structured ideal type, the city, is seen to revert to 'free-form' ideal type, the forest. While one other incident of this kind occurs in the Bālakāṇḍa,¹⁰³ we shall concentrate on the examples which involve Ayodhyā.

When Rāma leaves for the forest, we have seen that the citizens of Ayodhyā manifest mourning behaviour. Part of their mourning takes the form of a lament in which they decide they will follow Rāma into exile. They say in part:

"Let the forest where Raghava is going
be our city, and the city we are
abandoning become a forest! May the
reptiles leave their holes, the wild
beasts and birds forsake the rocks,
the elephants and lions flee in terror
before us as we enter the forest and,
deserting it, come and live in the
unfrequented capital!"¹⁰⁴

Here the description of the fall of the unpeopled city is far more complete than their idea of what life with Rāma in the forest might entail. For example, they go on:

"Let Kaikeyi with her son and relatives take possession of this country [Ayodhyā] full of grass, venison and fruit, which has become the resort of serpents, wild beasts and birds!"¹⁰⁵

The Ayodhyāns' lament takes on a prophetic cast when Daśaratha dies of grief over Rāma's exile and the whole city goes into mourning. It is to this mourning city without the bustle of everyday life that Bharata, ignorant of his father's death, is summoned. He is in sight of, but still some distance from, the capital when he remarks that the city resembles a lonely forest.¹⁰⁶

In this last case Ayodhyā without the bustle of everyday life is devoid of the human characteristics which are essential to its claim to being a civilized place. Even worse the city has lost its king, its real claim to being a Someplace. In the case of Rāma, too, the peoples' lament, besides indicating Rāma's popularity, is in response to a situation in which the city, Someplace, is being deprived of its rightful kingly heir. Vasiṣṭha reiterates this notion when he says, "'The forest will be the real kingdom for it is there Rama will dwell.'"¹⁰⁷

The point is clear: under normal circumstances the city is Someplace because within it the wheel of everyday human activity spins and further the king is the hub of the wheel.

When these normal circumstances no longer hold, such as at the death or exile of the king, the city may revert to its uncivilized forest state. This reversion is looked upon with dismay and fear by the city dwellers. There is good reason for their reaction. The most powerful description of Ayodhyā's reversal into a wild state occurs not in the Vālmiki Rāmāyana but in Kālidāsa's Raghuvamśa. There the city herself is describing her plight after the site of the capital was moved from within her walls. She is describing what has become of some of the refined charms of city life and mentions the red lac foot cosmetic of the well-bred women:

"and on those flights of steps of mine where beautiful ladies [at one time] placed their feet dyed with lac do tigers, who have killed deer, now place their paws besmeared with blood."¹⁰⁸

Yet we know this to be a one sided understanding of the forest. We have seen the same tigers coexisting contentedly with deer in a paradisiac āśrama which reflected the Source mode of the forest threshold.

Turner suggests that for those concerned with the maintenance of structure, any manifestation of thresholdness would appear as dangerous and anarchical.¹⁰⁹ There is, in other words, a formal disparity between the forest threshold and the city world which goes beyond the notions of uncivilized and civilized. According to Turner the

liminality of the threshold acts as a counterweight to the tendency of the structured world to a stagnation of forms and categories. The disparity between the forest and the city, then, arises naturally out of the juxtaposition of Ayodhyā, the ideal structured world and the forest, the ideal threshold.

This juxtaposition of ideal types is essential to a kāvya like the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. Ordinary folk rarely if ever frequent a Nowhere, Source, or Someplace. Most of us live our lives in less awesome loci in the cultural tography. In the Rāmāyaṇa, however, where the ideal type dominates the epic action, only Nowheres, Sources and Someplaces are large enough to accommodate the grandeur of its heroes and villains.

Notes

- 1 Dimock, op. cit., pp. 48 and 54 f.; Winternitz, op. cit., v. 1, pt. 2., pp. 417-418, and Karve, Yuganta, p. 108.
- 2 For an intense traditional response to this difference see Karve, Yuganta, pp. 113-118.
- 3 Turner, Forest, p. 99.
- 4 Rām., 2.27.31-32; translation by Edwin Gerow in Dimock, op. cit., p. 63.
- 5 Rām., 2.27.31, note 714; translation by Shastri, v. 1, p. 240.
- 6 Rām., 2.29.
- 7 Rām., 2.33.9-12; translation of 2.33.9 by Shastri, v. 1, p. 257.
- 8 Rām., 2.33.2, 4-5; Shastri, v. 1, p. 256.
- 9 Rām., 2.46.55-57.
- 10 Moti Chandra, Costume, Textiles, Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient and Mediaeval India (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1973), p. 225.
- 11 For a discussion of the power of hair in the context of rites of passage, as well as some thoughts on the ascetic's jaṭā cf. Edmund R. Leach, "Magical Hair", in Myth and Cosmos; Readings in Mythology and Symbolism, John Middleton, editor (New York: 1967), pp. 77-108.
- 12 Rām., 2.19.21, note 488, lines 1 and 2; Shastri, v. 1, p. 221.
- 13 Rām., 2.105.23.
- 14 Franklin Edgerton, "Pañcadivyaḍhivāsa or Choosing a King by Divine Will," Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. xxiii, 1913, p. 160, nt. 1.
- 15 "Mahājanaka Jātaka", no. 539 in Cowell, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 25.

16 Kumārapālacaritrasaṃgraha, ed. Vinavijaya, Singhi Jain Series, 41 (Bombay: 1956), Caturaśītiprabandhāntargata "Kumārapāladevaprabandha", pp. 112-113, paragraph 10. My thanks to Dr. Granoff for this reference.

17 Rām., 2.35.26, note 940, lines 6-10.

18 Rām., 3.2.7-8.

19 Rām., 3.2.5-6; Shastri, v. 2., p. 5.

20 Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1949), p. 77.

21 Ibid., pp. 80-81.

22 MBh., 3.153.13-25.

23 MBh., 7.148.31-154.63.

24 Rām., 3.3.22-23.

25 Rām., 3.4.2; Shastri, v. 2., p. 11.

26 Campbell, op. cit., p. 82.

27 For example, Rām., 5.36.14-15.

28 brahmacaryavrate sthitaḥ: Rām., 5.33.12.

29 niyatā brahmacārinī: Rām. 2.24.10; Gerow in Dimock, op. cit., p. 61.

30 Rām., 5.36.14, notes 834 and 835.

31 Rām., 6. Appendix 1, number 30, lines 47-49.

32 Rām., 3.7.6; Shastri, v. 2, p. 17.

33 Rām., 3.10.22-25; Shastri, v. 2, p. 23.

34 Rām., 3.71.3-5; Shastri, v. 2, p. 158.

35 Sītā's plea to Rāma to take her into exile is an example of this. While she argues passionately, she makes it clear (2.24.3) that the touchstone of her case is the ideal relationship of husband to wife.

36 Rām., 1.15.

37 Rām., 3.50.10-11. Much of this section and a later section on Rāvaṇa seems to fly naively in the face of scholarly work which stresses the relative lateness of the Bālakāṇḍa and Uttarakāṇḍa and the emphasis in those two books on Rāma's avatāra nature and Rāvaṇa's status as lord of the demons; see for example R. Goldman and J. Masson, "Who Knows Rāvaṇa?--A Narrative Difficulty in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa," 50 (1969), pp. 95-100. However the approach taken here differs in intention from the work cited in that it attempts to consider the seven books of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa as a coherent whole. The precedent for this attempt is, of course, the Hindu religious tradition itself. Only by attempting to comprehend the continuity of the Rāmāyaṇa as sacred text can we hope to understand any internal symbol-logic that is there. This perspective does not deny the findings or importance of textual dating research, rather it says: granted the first and seventh books are later additions, what is it that allowed the tradition to revere the text as a coherent whole? From this perspective the central narrative difficulty in the article cited, namely that no one had heard of Rāvaṇa and his city, might be explained by reference to the information gap between the heroic and mythic realms. Certainly Rāma is well educated in the sacred history of the mythic realm, but Rāvaṇa's exploits are not 'history', they are 'news' to the heroes.

38 Rām., 3.59 and 3, Appendix 1, no. 13, lines 1-42.

39 Rām., 3.60.50, note 1191, lines 1-4; Shastri, v. 2, pp. 136 f.

40 Rām., 3.61.10-11 and 3.62.13.

41 Rām., 5.13.24; Shastri, v. 2, pp. 373 f.

42 Sharma, op. cit., pp. 97-98; for examples see Rām., 3.15.8, 5.24.27-28.

43 Rām., 5.13.29.

44 tapobalāt: Rām., 5.56.139, note 1254.

45 Rām., 5.36.30-37.

46 Rām., 1.16.1-6.

47 Rām., 6.15.8.

48 Rām., 2.74.

49 Rām., 6.4.52, note 75, lines 19-20.

50 Rām., 6.4.52, note 75, lines 1-3; Shastri, v. 3,
p. 11.

51 Rām., 7.36.32-34.

52 Rām., 4.49-51.

53 Rām., 5.65.

54 Rām., 5.1.43; Shastri, v. 2, p. 329.

55 Rām., 5.1.130-190.

56 Rām., 5.3-9; 13-37; 39-41; 46.

57 Rām., 5.51-52.

58 Rām., 5.53-55.

59 Walter Ruben (op. cit., p. 31) believes that the travels of Hanumān have a structural similarity with another of Arjuna's sojourns, that involving his year long exile during the Pāṇḍavas' reign at Indraprastha. The basis of Ruben's hypothesis is that both episodes are inserted into their respective narratives. While this hypothesis may be valid, it does not seem helpful in understanding either story; Ruben draws no conclusions from this observation.

60 Rām., 6.61.

61 For a detailed study of the exploits of Hanumān see John Duggan, M.A. Project, McMaster University, 1978.

62 It should be remembered that when Arjuna received the same favour of chariot and charioteer from Indra, he was in heaven, the mythic realm, and was involved in a battle tangential to the central warring of the epic.

63 Rām., 4.12.32, note 279, lines 6-7; Shastri, v. 2,
p. 197.

64 Rām., 6, Appendix 1, no. 15, lines 18-19.

65 Turner, Forest, p. 97.

66 Ibid.

67 _____, Ritual, p. 129.

68 Rām., 2.22.6-7; Shastri, v. 1, p. 228.

69 Rām., 2.25.

- 70 Rām., 3.65.2-4; Shastri, v. 2, p. 144.
- 71 Rām., 3.4.2; Shastri, v. 2, p. 11.
- 72 Rām., 3, Appendix 1, no. 17, lines 1-22. In the northern manuscripts the heroes confront only the second, male demon. Ayomukhī's mutilation was a punishment normally administered to unchaste women; Dimock, op. cit., p. 65.
- 73 Rām., 3.65.8-69.
- 74 Rām., 1.5.12; Shastri, v. 1, p. 18.
- 75 Rām., 1.6.1-5.
- 76 Rām., 1.7.17; Shastri, v. 1, p. 22.
- 77 Rām., 1.6.8; Shastri, v. 1, p. 20.
- 78 Rām., 1.6.23, note 245, and 6.24; Shastri, v. 1, p. 21.
- 79 Rām., 2, Appendix 1, no. 9, lines 182-188. This description is carried by both northern and southern manuscripts.
- 80 Rām., 2.21.2; Shastri, v. 1, p. 225.
- 81 Rām., 2.33.14, note 873, line 1.
- 82 Rām., 2.17.14, note 422; Shastri, v. 1, p. 214.
- 83 This contrast is found in the Mahābhārata and the "Vessantara Jātaka" as well; e.g., MBh., 1.138.15-24 and Cowell, op. cit., v. 3, pp. 259 ff.
- 84 In this mode the epic forest is not unlike the wishing trees found in the Kathāsaritsāgara and Purāṇas. These wishing trees provide humans with all their needs during the earlier yugas in a cycle of time; for a description see Odette Viennot, op. cit., pp. 81-84, as well as Skanda Parāṇa, 1.20.40.173-185 and Vāyu Parāṇa, 1.8.77-88.
- 85 Rām., 2.89.17. As noted earlier Rāma asked for a basket and spade when he departed for the forest in order to gather his food. Rām., 3.33.5.
- 86 Rām., 3.14.21.
- 87 Rām., 2.22.6
- 88 Turner, Forest, loc. cit.

89 Rām., 4.49.17, 18-20 and note 1072; Shastri, v. 2, pp. 294-95.

90 Rām., 2.89.17-18; Shastri, v. 1, p. 385. The idea of the forest obliterating the desire for sovereignty is also found in the "Vessantara-Jātaka" where Maddī gives a paradisiac description of the forest adding in the refrain, that in the forest the hero will forget that he was ever king; Cowell, op. cit., v. 3, p. 256.

91 Rām., 2.85.26-28ab; Shastri, v. 1, p. 375.

92 Rām., 3.14.14-15; Shastri, v. 2, p. 35.

93 Rām., 3.14.29; Shastri, v. 2, p. 35.

94 Rām., 3.1.9.

95 Rām., 3.71.3.

96 Rām., 2.111.8.

97 Rām., 3.1.2, note 2; 3-5; Shastri, v. 2, p. 3.

98 Turner, Forest, p. 99.

99 Rām., 3.16.29.

100 Rām., 1.14.5-10.

101 Rām., 2.108.13-21.

102 Rām., 3.29.8-9.

103 Rām., 1.23.15-30.

104 Rām., 2.30.19-20; Shastri, v. 1, p. 247.

105 Rām., 2.30.20, note 800; Shastri, v. 1, p. 247.

106 Rām., 2.65.19.

107 Rām., 2, Appendix 1, no. 15, line 30, Shastri, v. 1, p. 258.

108 Kālidāsa, Kalidasa's Raghuwansha: A Mahakavya in 19 Cantos with the commentary of Mallinatha Suri, tr. Krishnarao Mahadeva Joglekar (Bombay: Tukaram Javaji, 1916), p. 245; canto XVI, vs. 15.

109 Turner, Ritual, p. 109.

CHAPTER SIX

THE EPIC SAGES: ON THE THRESHOLD OF IMMORTALITY

The main heroic characters of the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa are not in the forest by choice nor is their presence there commonplace. However, there are other characters--human beings--who do choose to inhabit the forests and whose presence there is more pervasive than that of the exiled heroes and heroines. These are the religious sages who populate the forest āśramas of the Hindu epics.

The sages are important to understanding the significance of the forest in the epics, partly because the sages have the highest religious profile of any of the human characters of the epics, but mainly because their activity is played out exclusively in the forest.

Forest-dwelling sages appear in both the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. In the former, the vānaprastha, or forest-dwelling stage, is so prevalent that some students of the Rāmāyaṇa have suggested an identification between the Rāmāyaṇa ascetics and the vānaprastha stage.¹ The identification seems reasonable since in the Rāmāyaṇa only the vānaprastha stage is mentioned, the ascetics live in communities, sometimes with their wives, and tapas is the pre-eminent activity.²

In the Mahābhārata both the vānaprastha stage and the sannyāsin, or lone, wandering mendicant, stage are present. Indeed, the Mahābhārata expresses the traditional view that the vānaprastha stage leads naturally into the sannyāsin stage as an ascetic comes more and more to renounce the world.³ While both life-stages are known to the Mahābhārata, the narrative sections typically depict the forest sage as a vānaprastha, living in communities, performing sacrifices and doing tapas, while the sānnyasin is a rare species, discussed but hardly ever encountered.⁴

In both epics, then, the ascetics are closer to the vānaprastha stage in which the forest is the critical domain.

Tapas

The primary religious concern of the sage is doing tapas. It is true that they also perform sacrifices, and relate tales, laden with traditional wisdom, to the exiled princes, but doing tapas is central to the forest ascetic. And while P.V. Kane notes that the vānaprastha does tapas in order to accustom himself to "privations, severe austerities and self-mortification",⁵ there is much more to doing tapas than becoming acclimated to a difficult lifestyle. Tapas is undertaken for a variety of aims, many involving the acquisition of suprahuman powers. Of all these aims, however, the highest is winning svarga or mokṣa.

The word tapas in the epics is most often translated

as 'ascetic practices', 'austerities' or 'self mortification'. However, the word connotes more than physical activity or inactivity. The word derives from the root tap, "to heat, grow hot", and from this origin comes an underlying meaning, presupposed by the epics, of 'heat power'. Thus when the sage Agastya (in the story told below), asks his wife not to squander his tapas, he is speaking directly about his power, and only indirectly about his ascetic practices. And tapasvin, a word used to refer to a doer of tapas, literally means 'one who possesses tapas'. The primary literal sense of tapasvin is 'one who possesses heat power'--heat power which, it is understood, he or she obtained by doing ascetic practices.

The tapas of the epics is a power found in nature, a part of the structure of reality⁶ that can be harnessed by means of ascetic practice. Exactly how this works is not clear, but a good metaphor for it is the harnessing of water power. Just as, in our world, water can be dammed up to generate water power, so in the epics heat can be 'dammed up' to generate heat power. Both the power generated and the means of generation are referred to as tapas. Further just as the water power can be stored, so, in the epics, can tapas be stored. Agastya was renowned for the tapas or heat power which he harnessed and stored. And his response to his wife, noted above, indicates he carefully guarded that store of power.

This power comes to the ascetic as a result of

self-denial and physical hardship. The severe tapas which Arjuna did during his forest exile, to gain access to Indra's heaven, has already been described.⁷ His fasting and extreme body postures are not unusual forms of asceticism. Some ascetics are so emaciated that they are 'held together by their veins.'⁸ There is also evidence that pilgrimage was understood to be tapas.⁹ This is understandable for, as we have seen, a pilgrimage involved great hardship. Another extreme form of tapas involved standing in one place for a long period of time. The ṛṣi Cyavana once stood as rigid as a post for so long that an ant hill covered with creeping vines and ants grew up over him. He continued his tapas surrounded by the ant hill until eventually his eyes alone could be seen peering out with a piercing glow, due to his accumulated power.¹⁰

Furthermore the power which the ascetic acquires by tapas can take a variety of forms, most of which may be grouped under the rubric of 'suprahuman powers'. Examples of such powers abound in the epics. Agastya, for example, possessed divine eyesight with which he could foresee events, and a remarkable digestive system.¹¹ In another instance we learn that knowledge of the Vedas without study can be had. Another story relates that an ascetic comes back to life after having been shot dead.¹³ Yudhiṣṭhira provides food for all the brahmins who follow him to the forest by doing tapas directed at the sun.¹⁴ In the Rāmāyaṇa the sage Bharadvāja, by means of his tapas, brought

the divine forest of the Kurus to serve as quarters for Bharata's army,¹⁵ and the woman ascetic, Anasūyā, obtained yams and fruit, changed the course of the Ganges, and compressed ten nights into one,¹⁶ while another woman did tapas to win a husband.¹⁷

The Goal of Tapas

Like any raw power, tapas has no intrinsic moral dimension. It just is. It may be channeled for good or evil purpose. The problem, however, is that the use of tapas for mundane purposes comes at the expense of the use of tapas for the purpose of achieving immortality.

There are many examples of demons performing asceticism and using the accumulated power for their characteristic purposes. For example, Rāvaṇa received the boon that he would be unconquerable by gods, demons and celestial beings. This boon was extracted by the power of his tapas, a tapas which involved cutting off each of his ten heads one by one.¹⁸ Rāvaṇa's son, Indrajit, perhaps the most able demon warrior Rāma faces, is protected in battle by his tapas.¹⁹

Even the forest sage who is seeking immortality sometimes explodes in anger with a curse drawing upon his accumulated tapas. When the sage curses in anger, overwhelmed by passion, his stored tapas is released with a minimum of control usually to produce an inversion of one or more natural processes. In the epics the curse of the

angry sage is universally feared, with even great kings bowing before its power, or even the threat of its power.²⁰ The following story about Cyavana illustrates the immense power of a curse fueled by tapas.

Cyavana once remained in one place for so long that he became covered over with an ant hill. As it happened, one day King Śaryatī and his daughter, Sukanyā, along with an army escort, chanced to stop near the ascetic. As the beautiful Sukanyā wandered about, she noticed two luminous specks in an ant hill. They were Cyavana's eyes glowing from the power of his tapas. The ascetic tried to speak to the princess but no sound came from his dried up throat. Next (in the act befitting a bored youth with time on her hands) Sukanyā poked at the luminous specs with a thorny stick. This so enraged Cyavana that he cursed the whole army to be constipated. This unhappy situation was only relieved when Śaryatī gave Sukanyā to Cyavana in marriage.²¹

While it occasionally bubbles forth in a retributive curse, the power of tapas is more often directed to the purification of the sage himself. The result is seen very clearly in the tale of Viśvāmitra, told in both epics.²² Viśvāmitra burns away his sins and faults, especially passion and anger, with his tapas.²³ As a result of his severe asceticism Viśvāmitra manages to change his caste from kṣatriya to brahmin,²⁴ an extremely rare feat indeed. The sense of the relationship of tapas and purification is that the heat generated by the doing of the tapas burns up

(the root dah is used) accumulated evil.

The tale of Mañkaṇaka, told, as are many related in this chapter, in the context of the Pāṇḍavas' tīrthayātrā, illustrates in a delightful way the purificatory nature of tapas. The story goes that one day the ascetic, Mañkaṇaka, accidentally cut his hand with a blade of kuśa grass. When vegetable juice flowed from the wound, Mañkaṇaka "was overjoyed and, with eyes wide open with wonder, ...began to dance. When he was dancing, the animate and inanimate creatures, stunned by his splendour, began to dance too".²⁵ This disruption of the orderly course of events made the gods uneasy and they went to Śiva for help. Śiva, renowned for his tapas, approached Mañkaṇaka and asked him the reason for his joy. When Mañkaṇaka displayed his vegetable juice 'blood', Śiva laughed and pricked his own thumb whereupon snow-white ashes fell from the wound. Śiva's display of dazzling purity so humbled the ascetic that he stopped dancing. Order in the universe was thus restored, while Mañkaṇaka begged Śiva that his tapas, here referring primarily to his power, might not diminish on account of his frivolous display.²⁶

The story reveals a progression toward increasing purity from the relatively coarse, mundane red blood of an ordinary person to the vegetable juice of the ascetic to the white ashes of the god. The hierarchical arrangement of bodily 'fluids' set out in this story can be extended as a metaphor to the whole range of results of doing tapas.

While a great number of impressive suprahuman powers are effected by tapas, the greatest of these powers, as far as the epics are concerned, is that of spiritual purification, here symbolized by vegetable 'blood'.²⁷ And beyond that achievement, which in itself is splendid enough to cause the whole universe to dance, is the attainment of freedom from death, immortality, here symbolized by Śiva's snow-white ashes, "the seed of life transfixed in death".²⁸

This metaphoric allusion to immortality is firmly grounded in the epics where freedom from death--the crowning achievement of tapas--is detailed in a number of stories. These stories indicate that freedom from death may be accomplished in two ways: by reaching svarga, or heaven, or by achieving mokṣa, release.²⁹ In both visions of immortality a person is no longer subject to death. In both cases the forest sage enters a stage of "existence" by means of tapas.

Svarga is the pre-eminent goal of the epic ascetic in both the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, where the visions of immortality differ only slightly. There are examples in both epics of forest sages attaining svarga. Thus, Mandapāla "went to the farthest shore of asceticism" and when he died, "attained to the world of the ancestors" or pitṛloka, one of the heavens.³⁰ Similarly Lomaśa, the pilgrimage guide, described one tīrtha as a place where mortals did their tapas and went to heaven,³¹ while the ascetics in the tale of Nala and Damayantī are described as

desiring to see the road to heaven.³² In the Rāmāyaṇa the sage Śarabhaṅga on his death went to Brahmāloka, the world of Brahmā, a region he had won by means of his tapas.³³ Pāṇḍu, the father of the Pāṇḍavas, was successful in winning the road to heaven by his severe tapas,³⁴ and Hanumān taught Bhīma that heaven was the proper goal for all the twice-born castes.³⁵ We have seen that Yudhiṣṭhira used his divine eyesight to count the dead heroes who had attained heaven because of their bravery,³⁶ and in the story of Balāka that hunter went to heaven because he did his own dharma flawlessly.³⁷ Perhaps the most famous epic example is Yayāti who fell from heaven on account of pride, but ascended again by means of the merit and tapas of his four grandsons, his daughter, Mādhavī and the ascetic Gālava.³⁸

When svarga appears as the religious goal of the ascetic, that goal is understood to be the highest possible one. Speaking on the vision of heaven in the Rāmāyaṇa, Ananda Guruge comments:

Svarga or the abode of the God was considered to be the goal of one's religious pursuits. And liberation was not conceived as something different from this. The philosophical concept that Svarga was only a relatively happy state and not the ultimate bliss is alien to the religion of the Rāmāyaṇa.³⁹

Indeed here svarga is far more than a 'relatively happy state'.

In the Rāmāyaṇa svarga is the ultimate religious

goal. Here svarga is made up of the various lokas of the gods with Brahmā's loka being the highest.⁴⁰ Before entering heaven, first one's sins are shaken off, sometimes by tapas,⁴¹ then one abandons his or her human body⁴² to assume a divine form.⁴³ In one oral tradition the new arrival in heaven joins the ancestors who have been enjoying themselves in the company of the gods.⁴⁴ As we noted earlier heaven is most often won by tapas, as in the cases of Śarabhaṅga, Śabarī, and Dilīpa.⁴⁵ The theme of becoming like the gods or 'divinization', which is central to the Vedic vision of immortality,⁴² is apparent here in the idea of assuming a divine form upon entering heaven.

Divinization is central to the epic understanding of svarga. Ironically this theme is best illustrated in the story of Mudgala--ironically because Mudgala ultimately decided to strive for mokṣa rather than heaven. The story occurs in the Vanaparvan. In it a messenger of the gods comes to reward a particularly virtuous sage named Mudgala by taking him to heaven in a celestial chariot. Mudgala is not easily impressed, and, so that he might be convinced that going to heaven is a worthwhile journey, he asks the messenger to describe the place. From the description it is clear that life in heaven is much like life on earth but without the typically human problems. For example, the messenger says:

"There is no hunger or thirst, no fatigue,
no concern about cold or heat, no atrocity

no unholiness, no diseases rage there. All smells are attractive, no touch is repugnant...There is no sorrow, no old age, no effort or complaint...."⁴⁷

The messenger goes on to describe the inhabitants of heaven in terms that are usually reserved for the gods. Again from the messenger's description:

"There is no sweat or foul smell, neither feces nor urine, and not a speck of dust spoils their garments, hermit. Their garlands, of heavenly fragrance and beautiful, never fade, and the blessed inhabitants are driven about in celestial chariots."⁴⁸

From Nala and Damayanti we know that the celestial chariots, lack of dust and sweat and unfading garlands are all marks of divinity.⁴⁹ According to the messenger there are thirty-three worlds including the worlds of Indra and the worlds of Brahmā, the latter being the higher.⁵⁰ The significance of tapas in this vision of immortality is underlined when, as part of his description, the messenger notes that everyone who inhabits heaven has tapas.⁵¹

There is one other aspect of the vision of immortality of the Mahābhārata which is worth noting since it is connected with the exercise of tapas. This aspect occurs in a story which tells of the time Pāṇḍu decided to renounce the world and go to the forest.⁵² Once he became a vāna-prastha, Pāṇḍu applied all his energies to winning heaven. Because of his rigorous tapas he won the road to heaven, but because he had no male progeny, he was denied access.

The same thing happened to Mandapāla whose example was cited above. On being denied final access, both ascetics are reminded that every man on earth is born with a number of debts and among them is the debt to the ancestors, the pitrs.⁵³ This debt may only be paid by sons and śrāddha ceremonies. Only after this debt is paid can the ascetic attain svarga.⁵⁴ There is a clear indication that progeny is a prerequisite for heaven.

This prerequisite is an old one dating from the Vedas.⁵⁵ The logic behind the prerequisite is straightforward--Pāṇḍu says that if he is without sons when he dies, his ancestors will die.⁵⁶ The implication is that without the food offerings of the śrāddha ceremonies his ancestors will starve to 'death' even though they are already in heaven. Thus freedom from death in heaven is guaranteed by male progeny who will perform the proper ceremonies. Significantly those svarga seekers without sons can remedy their situation by tapas.

A part of the narrative cycle of the famous sage Agastya illustrates a number of points touched on thus far, including the importance of the prerequisite of male progeny, the place of suprahuman powers in the scheme of tapas, and the centrality of the vision of immortality in the epics. As such it provides a well-rounded narrative with which to conclude this section on the goal of tapas. One day while he was living the ascetic's life in the forest, Agastya came upon his forefathers hanging by their

feet in a dark cave. Agastya immediately recognized that his ancestors were doing tapas and asked what it was they wanted. They replied in unison, "'Offspring!'".

Agastya had apparently moved directly into the vānaprastha stage from the brahmacarya stage as was allowed by at least some ancient authorities,⁵⁷ and thus he had fathered no children. This situation distressed his ancestors for as they explained:

"We are your own ancestors and have ended in this cave, hanging down because we are wanting in progeny. If you, Agastya, were to beget a sublime child, we would be released from this hell and you, son, would attain to the goal [gatim]."58

In response to his ancestors' tapas-charged request Agastya resolved to beget a 'sublime child' to free his ancestors and win his and their immortality.

Once he had decided to fulfill the request of his ancestors, Agastya needed a wife, but he found no suitable woman. Thus he fashioned a girl-child from the most dazzling limbs of other creatures. He then gave her to a neighbouring king to raise and when the girl had come of age Agastya married her. Lopāmudrā, for that was her name, dressed in deerskin and bark tatters and faithfully served the sage while he practised his tapas. After some time Agastya decided it was time to end his vow of chastity and called his wife to have intercourse with him. She was reluctant to make love, however, without the luxurious bed and finery

which she had grown up with and which was more fitting a gṛhastha life style.⁵⁹ Agastya requested that she not have him squander his hard-earned merit on procuring material goods, but Lopāmundrā insisted. Since she had pleased him by serving him so faithfully and since he desired a son, Agastya went off to raise some capital.

It was customary for kings to give gifts to prominent brahmins in those days, so Agastya visited the nearest kingdoms to obtain wealth. Unfortunately the first three kings he approached were barely making financial ends meet, so the sage decided that to take from these kings would be unfair to their subjects. Thus it was that Agastya arrived at the palace of Ilvala, an asura, or demon, king.

Now Ilvala carried a grudge against brahmins and had killed many visiting brahmins in a rather ingenious way. Ilvala had the power to call creatures back from the realm of Yama, the kingdom of the dead. Thus he had his brother, Vatāpi, turn into a goat, had him slaughtered, and fed him in roasted goat form to the visiting brahmin. Then he would call his brother back to life thereby splitting asunder the unsuspecting brahmin.

Agastya was hardly unsuspecting of Ilvala's hospitality. The sage had divine eyesight, and thus, when the haughty Ilvala presented him with a roast goat, Agastya calmly ate the whole thing. When the sage had finished eating, the demon called forth his brother but the only response was a fart from Agastya.⁶⁰ At this Ilvala

was crushed as he realized his brother had been digested.

Having destroyed the demon's secret weapon, Agastya managed to get a substantial amount of wealth from Ilvala, and his mission accomplished, he returned to his wife. When he determined the time to be right, Agastya made love to Lopāmudrā and gave her the choice of having either a thousand sons, or a hundred sons each the match of ten, or ten sons who each equalled one hundred sons, or one son worth a thousand sons. Lopāmudrā chose the last of these and after a pregnancy of seven years, "a glorious great sage issued forth, fairly blazing with power, reciting the Vedas and their branches and the Upaniṣads."⁶¹ The birth of this 'sublime child' freed Agastya's ancestors and they attained the worlds [lokān] they desired.⁶²

It is instructive to consider the role of tapas in this story. It was the tapas of the ancestors that precipitated their eventual attainment of heaven by moving Agastya to use his tapas to finally obtain a son. Using his tapas Agastya first created his wife, then he obtained the wealth his wife required, and finally he arranged the thousandfold glory of his son. As a result of all this tapas an exceptional child was born⁶³ and the heavenly worlds were won for Agastya's ancestors. At every turn in this complex narrative the power which comes from practising tapas was instrumental in attaining the goal of heaven.

The forest-dwelling ascetic of the epics is an

important figure. Indeed, in many respects the ascetic is the religious hero of the epics. The central activity of the ascetic is doing tapas, for which he acquires a power that may be directed toward achieving immortality. Perhaps the most striking feature of the ascetics and their activity is that their domain is in the forest and that their tapas is derived from it. I wish now to focus attention more specifically on the significance of that forest.

The forest ascetic, betwixt and between

By now the tripartite process whereby the epic heroes move from one state of existence to another is familiar to this study. It should come as no surprise, then, to find this process central to the experience of the forest ascetics. By considering, on one hand, the threshold experience of the ascetics and, on the other hand, the forest as a threshold, I shall attempt to shed light on the significance of the forest.

Establishing the separation phase of the forest ascetic is an easy matter. We have seen that when the epic heroes go to the forest, they must change their appearance, give away their possessions, and witness the grief of their friends and relatives. The epic ascetic is, as we noted when discussing the heroes' departures, the paradigm for this event. The bark and deerskin clothes, and matted hair of the changed appearance 'belong' to the ascetic, they are

his identifying mark. The old king, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, provides a good epic example of this separation phase when, after the great battle and the establishment of Pāṇḍava rule in the Kuru land, he leaves for the forest with wife and brother amid the grief-stricken wailing of his former subjects.⁶⁴

When this wailing was encountered before, we likened it to traditional mourning behaviour. This behaviour marked the exile's departure to the forest as a kind of death. In the case of the forest ascetic this metaphoric death is very clear. By entering the forest, the ascetic-to-be has separated himself from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day human existence. He has 'died to the world in life.' This 'death' is further emphasized by tapas. In practising tapas the ascetic denies the centrality of the very things that are the focus of the swirl of activity in the ordinary world--the desires and needs of his or her body. Fasting, celibacy, and long periods of motionlessness are all examples of 'reversing the ordinary flow of life,'⁶⁵ of dying to the world in life.

Having identified the separation phase of the tripartite process we shall skip the threshold phase for the moment to consider the incorporation phase. At first the incorporation phase seems notable on account of its absence. Unlike the other epic heroes discussed in previous chapters, the classical, or ideal, forest ascetic does not return to the human world. Victor Turner speaks about this

phenomenon in discussing the religious life of the main 'world religions':

What appears to have happened is that with the increasing speculation of society and culture, with progressive complexity in the social division of labor, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities "betwixt and between" defined states of culture and society has become an institutionalized state...Transition has here become a permanent condition. Nowhere has this institutionalization of liminality been more clearly marked and defined than in the monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions.⁶⁶

Given Turner's observation we would not expect an incorporation phase in the ascetic's journey because there the threshold has become the last stop, the permanent condition. The epic ascetic remains in the forest.

To end with Turner's observation, however, would be misleading in two ways. First there are, as we have seen, ascetics who do tapas simply to acquire various powers. Often after they receive their powers, they return to the world to make use of the boon they have wrested from the gods. This is especially so in the case of demon ascetics. In these cases I propose that the visit by the god who grants the boon marks a kind of incorporation into a state of powerfulness from a state without power.

While the existence in the epics of power hungry ascetics is undisputed, we have seen that the ascetics who crave power alone are not held to be the epitome of

asceticism. This brings us to the second way in which Turner's observation might be misleading when applied to the epic ascetics. It is true that the threshold is the forest ascetic's 'permanent' condition so long as he or she is alive. On death, however, the successful ascetic realizes the fruit of his or her tapas and gains immortality of one form or another. Either she ascends to heaven like Śabarī, or he gains heaven and freedom from death through progeny like Mandapāla, or he succeeds in winning mokṣa like Mudgala.⁶⁷ In any case the ascetics move across the threshold when they experience a physical death to this world. The ascetics' 'incorporation' is not in corpus but is in spiritus, and it occurs when they leave the forest for the heavenly realms or beyond. It is noteworthy that, just as in the case of the rites of passage identified by van Gennep, the 'world' into which the ascetic is incorporated is a changed one, and further that the ascetic has moved to a new state of 'existence'.

The geographical locus of the epic ascetics' religious activities is the forest. Once more the four themes of the liminal or threshold experience which we have identified in the epic forest, celibacy, pilgrimage, *comunitas* and the intersection of mythic and heroic realms, will be surveyed. The first two of these themes need only to be mentioned insofar as they have been established heretofore. As for celibacy, it is clear that for the ascetics of the epics the brahmacarya vow, abstention from

sexual intercourse, is a form of tapas that is universally practised and a form which, due either to the need for offspring or the temptations of apsaras sent by insecure gods, is often broken.⁶⁸ Regardless of these lapses, the forest ascetic is expected to be celibate and is thought to amass power, including sexual power, because of this form of tapas.

From the tīrthāyatrā of the Pāṇḍavas we know that pilgrimage is a religious activity that is very much a part of forest ascetic life in the epics. The people who guide the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage are forest ascetics, and Lomaśa, the foremost guide, has visited the tīrthas twice before, and is therefore able to relate the sacred history of each place. It is interesting to note that throughout the tīrthāyatrā section of the Vanaparvan the forest ascetics of old are mentioned as religious heroes who had profitably done sacrifices long ago. By the time of the tīrthāyatrā sacrifice itself had been replaced by pilgrimage as the most efficacious religious act. Because a particular place tends to persist in its sacredness, many of the tīrthas the Pāṇḍavas visited were formerly sites of memorable sacrifices.⁷⁰

The shared humanity or *communitas* of the epic ascetics is signified by the āśrama, the collection of huts where the sages lived, did sacrifices and practised tapas together. The āśrama represented the banding together of religious heroes in part for reasons of survival, but largely for reasons of similar religious activity. The

āśrama offered both the ascetic and the wandering pilgrim hospitality and human companionship.⁷¹ But the goals and aspirations of this alternate community were vastly different from those of the social community the forest ascetic had renounced.⁷²

The importance of the āśrama, and thus the importance of *communitas*, is underscored by the references which liken the āśrama to a pathway to heaven or image of heaven itself.⁷³ No doubt this likeness was partly inspired by the beauty of the epic āśrama. For example the hermitage of Nara and Nārāyaṇa, made beautiful by the power of the tapas of the great ascetics who lived there, is described as "full of trees that always stood in flower and fruit" with a central Jujube Tree

casting unbroken shade, overspread by
a superb luster, shining with a smooth
and thick foliage of soft leaves, wide,
with heavy branches, boundlessly radiant,
piled up with plentiful sweet berries that
dripped honey...a place without gnats and
mosquitoes, and where water, roots and
fruit were abundant, ...visited by Gods and
Gandharvas, ...a lovely spot without thorns
and gently touched by snow.⁷⁴

In addition to this paradisiac dimension though, the fact that a group of ascetics was all doing tapas to 'storm heaven' from one place also inspired the epic storyteller to refer to the āśrama as a pathway to heaven.⁷⁵ Thus the āśrama and its importance in the epics bespeak the centrality of *communitas* to the forest experience of the epic

ascetic.

The final threshold theme to be surveyed with regard to the forest ascetic is the intersection of mythic and heroic realms. In considering this theme we shall focus, as we have throughout this section, on the ideal forest ascetic, the religious hero who does tapas ultimately to gain immortality in some form.

It is precisely because they have devoted themselves completely to religious pursuits that the forest ascetics defy the neat categorization of epic material into 'mythic' and 'heroic'. While on the forest threshold, by means of their tapas, the ascetics appropriate many of the powers normally the prerogative of only the gods of the mythic realm. The jealousy and insecurity which the gods often manifest when confronted by a powerful 'hero' doing tapas show that this appropriation was understood to occur with some frequency. Thus the successful ascetic effects an intersection of mythic and heroic realms in his very person. The epic ascetics do not so much experience the gods' actions as fate, as much as they create fate themselves by means of their curses. The ascetic's curse has power over even the gods.⁷⁶ And occasionally the forest ascetic grants boons much as a god would.⁷⁷

In previous discussions of the intersection of mythic and heroic realms, we have found that the forest threshold is the scene of the hero's quest for self-knowledge, and that it is during the intersection when he often decides who he

is and where he is going. There are examples of this theme in the narratives of the forest ascetics of the epics as well. The raw power of tapas tests the mettle of the ascetic, catalyzes change, then fixes the most mercurial characters into a recognizable identity. The power which comes with tapas either sullies or purifies the soul of the ascetic. Again the examples of Rāvaṇa and Viśvāmitra come to mind. The former is transformed into an arrogant tyrant by his forest tapas, while the latter is mellowed and becomes a wise teacher. In addition the mokṣa-seeking forest ascetic is worth noting here. He, too, realizes his true identity in the intersection of mythic and heroic realms. In the realization of the identity of his ātman with brahman this type of ascetic experiences a kind of 'intersection' of his heroic human nature and a super-abstracted mythic realm. From this 'intersection' this forest ascetic comes to understand his true sacred identity. While there are obvious differences between this kind of 'intersection' of mythic and heroic realms and a hero's encounter with a god, the essential pattern is the same, and the threshold dimension of each is clear.

That the mythic and heroic realms intersect in the person of the ascetic does not mean that these categories are useless. To some extent, of course, all such categorization is artificial, but these categories are very useful for describing the happenings of the forest threshold. There are fewer places more appropriate for seizing powers

normally the prerogative of the gods than a place in which human beings and gods are wont to confront one another. The betwixt and between quality of the threshold means that the forest ascetics are no longer a part of the ordinary mundane sphere of human activity, and are therefore able to transcend more easily the gross human sphere and thereby confront the gods on their own ground. This confrontation is potentially very risky. Thus, while in the forest, the ascetic both makes the gods' powers accessible to himself and himself vulnerable to the challenge of the gods.

The presence in the epics of sages commanding supra-human powers and winning immortality by awesome feats of asceticism may be understood from a different perspective. It is Robert Goldman's hypothesis that much of the narrative content of the Mahābhārata which celebrates the superiority of brahmin ascetics over kṣatriyas and gods was the work of brahmin redactors.⁷⁸ Goldman argues that point convincingly, and there is without doubt much of value in this argument. Nonetheless to focus exclusively on the editorial slant of brahmin redactors is to miss some of the connections which the epic ṛṣis have seen. It is my contention that one of these connections links the religious quest of the ascetic with the forest by virtue of the liminal experience which is appropriate to the threshold.

The forest as Threshold: the epic ascetic

We have briefly surveyed the dynamic process which

transforms the ascetic while in the forest. Now, in order to complete our attempt to understand the essential role the forest plays in the lives of the epic ascetics, we shall turn, as we did in the last chapter, to a consideration of the forest as a place. In so doing, we shall again investigate the dual modality of the forest as threshold to see what light it sheds on the ascetic and his or her tapas.

In the last chapter we found that the forest as threshold was perceived in two modes: the negation of structural forms, experienced as being Nowhere, and the source of structural forms, experienced as being at the Source of all things. The first of these modes derives from the thresholder's lack of a secure place in the world--he or she has left the usual rankings, categories, and roles of the known ordering system, and can not yet relate to the 'new' ordering system of the state of existence into which he or she will be incorporated. The second mode derives from the same situation, but sees possibility where for the first mode there was only chaos. In the second mode anything seems possible, because without structural forms anything is possible at least until the new structure is made manifest. The second mode mines the 'realm of pure possibility'.

Many of the same aspects of the negation of categories which we witnessed in the Rāmāyaṇa forest are part of the ascetic's forest world. The uncivilized, untamed, unrefined nature of the forest means that the epic ascetic

does tapas just by carrying out the activities necessary for survival. The only activity which might be simplified is that of providing wood for the sacrificial fires. That simplification is more than offset by the difficulties encountered in maintaining sufficient food and safe quarters not to mention acquiring the offerings which must be made into the sacrificial fire. In fact the practice of tapas itself is a negation of structural forms insofar as it intends to deny the human body, the needs and desires of which are the *raison d'être* of the ordinary human world. This human world finds its fullest epic expression in the luxurious lush Someplaces of Ayodhyā, Hāstinapura, and Indraprastha.

In the last chapter we found that the rākṣasa most graphically embodied the Nowhere mode of the Rāmāyaṇa forest. The rākṣasa is even more a plague to the epic ascetic and thus serves as an amplified embodiment of the negative mode for the ascetic. The rākṣasa seems drawn to destroy the ascetics as part of the timeless dance of good and evil forces. In the Rāmāyaṇa the early adventures of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are precipitated by the exploits of two rākṣasas who have repeatedly profaned the sacrifice of Viśvāmitra. As that sage put it:

When, after long effort, the sacrifice approaches consummation, those Rakshasas, Maricha and Subahu, who are powerful and crafty, prevent its completion and defile the altar with blood and flesh. My efforts are thus rendered vain, and, weary and discouraged, I have left that place.⁷⁹

These demons can be far more destructive. In the Mahābhārata the story is told of a group of demons who hid in the ocean by day and stalked the forests by night invading āśramas and killing many ascetics. Because these demons hid so well, people were perplexed.

In the morning they would find the hermits, who were lean from their fasts, lying on the ground in lifeless bodies. The land was filled with unfleshed, bloodless, marrowless, disemboweled, and disjointed corpses like piles of conch shells. The earth was covered with shattered sacrificial jars, broken offering ladles, and scattered agnihotras.⁸⁰

It was on this occasion that the great ascetic Agastya drank up the ocean so that the gods could kill the demons.⁸¹

Agastya's action raises an interesting question.

If the ascetics were so powerful why did they not simply curse the rākṣasas or burn them up with their tapas-fueled gaze. The answer is provided by Rāma when he quotes the ascetics as saying:

By the power of our asceticism it were easy for us to destroy these Rangers of the Night [rākṣasas], but we are loath to lose the fruits of austerity, earned over a long period.⁸²

In other words to destroy the rākṣasas would expend their heat power which they are storing in their quest for immortality.

There is another notion presupposed in this

quotation. It is that any action done in the heat of passion, as it were, wastes the fruits of tapas. The sense of this seems to be that the expenditure of raw power can not be regulated when done in passion. This notion is nicely illustrated by the story of Viśvāmitra's attempt to become a brahmin. This sage suffered a number of setbacks on his arduous journey, the most significant of which was a ten-year hiatus in his tapas when he succumbed to passion and lived with the apsaras, Menakā. When he realized his folly, he went back to his tapas with renewed resolve and when he was tempted again, this time by a different celestial nymph, he became angry and changed her to stone. As it turned out this lapse into anger had the same effect as his sexual passion, it nullified his tapas.⁸³ To act against the rākṣasas with any passion as the motivating force negated the power of the tapas so carefully won.

The rākṣasas' harassment put the ascetics in a doublebind situation. In order to do tapas the ascetic must be left in peace. Only then can he or she amass the power which will fulfill his or her goal. But the rākṣasas disturb this tapas, and thus must be destroyed. However, if the ascetics were to destroy the rākṣasas themselves, they would lose the fruits of their tapas. Consequently they must turn to the exiled heroes for help. The rākṣasa embodied a threat of destruction of the ascetics' tapas, meaning either the ascetic practices, or the power derived from them, or both. This threat coupled with the basic

hardships which life in the forest entailed, form the heart of the negative mode of the forest for the forest ascetic.

The other mode, the mode in which the forest is experienced as a source, is immediately and obviously apparent in that the forest provides the ascetics with their clothing, food and shelter. In the source mode the forest is also the realm of pure possibility. Because it is the realm of pure possibility, the forest threshold is the natural site of the ascetic's acquisition of extraordinary and bizarre powers as well as their realization of that normally most unusual of possibilities, the freedom from death. It is understandable that under the broad umbrella of a threshold such divergent effects of tapas as supra-normal powers and two variant visions of immortality would converge as examples of pure possibility.

As in the case of the Rāmāyana heroes, when the ascetics experienced it in its second mode, the forest as threshold was a no less refined place. Certainly the āśrama was regarded as a kind of paradise or as an image of heaven, but this was not because it contained all the comforts of the ordinary world of human beings. Rather it was considered as paradisiac and heavenly because it was a symbolic source of life. In the āśrama the ascetics counselled travellers on matters of dharma, on matters that concerned, among other things, structural forms, categories, and rankings. One of the benefits which came to the epic heroes during their forest stay was learning some of the

intricacies of subtle dharmā from the sages. Thus Rāma consulted the ascetics of the forest on matters of dharmā as he journeyed from āśrama to āśrama, while Yudhiṣṭhira entertained a stream of ascetics during his exile with the same result.⁸⁴ In the Hindu tradition dharmā is essential to the flow of life, without it life would cease. It is with this in mind that we have called the forest āśrama a symbolic source of life. The āśrama represents a life source because it is a source of dharmā.

It makes sense that the forest ascetics are experts on dharmā for they are thresholders without a bias or desire for personal gain in the everyday world. Therefore they can see clearly into the intricacies of the world. Liminality, as we have seen, allows for seeing new possibilities. This, then, is the essence of the second mode, the source mode of the forest threshold. And it may well be that this source mode is the heart of the connection the epic ṛṣi saw which prompted him to place many of the epic's teachings on dharmā in a forest context in both the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata.

In conclusion, then, we can best understand the forest ascetics of the Hindu epics as in the midst of a ritual process by which they are being transformed. The site of their transformation is the forest in which they dwell as thresholders in transition from one state of existence to another. These thresholders are no longer

members of ordinary society which, from the forest, appears worldly and profane. Instead those ascetics whom the epics themselves revere have set themselves apart and are sacralizing themselves by the purifying heat of tapas in order to win heaven, or break the bonds of samsāra at their death. And only their physical death will mark the end of their forest threshold stay. Thus these forest ascetics are betwixt and between the profane world and the sacred realm, no longer a member of the one and not yet a part of the other; no longer an ordinary human bound by his or her mortality, not yet suprahuman enough to leave death behind.

Notes

¹ For a description of these life-stages see Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 2, pp. 928-929. Scholars making the identification between Rāmāyaṇa ascetics and vānaprasthas include Ananda Guruge, The Society of the Rāmāyaṇa (Ceylon: Saman Press, 1960), p. 144, and Ramashraya Sharma, A Socio-Political Study of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), p. 127.

² Guruge, op. cit., p. 143, and Rām. 2.58.20, 3.5.14, 3.11.25, and 5.11.40. Examples of wives living in forest communities are Atrī and Anasūyā, Rām., 2.109-111.

³ For example see MBh., 1.110.1-36.

⁴ When Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī and Vidura enter the forest late in the epic, Vidura behaves more or less like a sannyāsin (MBh., 15.33). Dhṛtarāṣṭra is clearly a vānaprastha, however.

⁵ Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 2, p. 928.

⁶ Thomas J. Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1971), p. 26.

⁷ (Supra, p. 132). Indra tells Arjuna (MBh., 3.164.21) that since he has visited the tīrthas often and has done tapas, he can go to heaven.

⁸ MBh., 3.155.90. Photographs of some of the extreme body postures may be found in W.M. Zumbro, "Religious Penances and Punishments Self-inflicted by the Holy Men of India," National Geographic, XXIV, Dec. 1913, pp. 1257-1314.

⁹ Yudhiṣṭhira received divine eyesight by bathing at a particular pilgrimage site just as Lomaśa promised (MBh., 3.129.17). But when he tells his guide of his ability to see the other worlds, Yudhiṣṭhira says his eyesight was a result of his tapas (3.129.19). The implication is that bathing at a tīrtha is a form of tapas. For further examples of the syncretism of tapas and pilgrimage see W.M. Zumbro, op. cit., pp. 1257 and 1280.

10 MBh., 3.122.1-4. Interestingly enough the word for ant hill is the neuter vālmika which, according to some is the source of Vālmiki's name. Apparently the adikavi performed the same tapas as Cyavana. For a list of the various types of tapas in the Rāmāyana see Guruge, op. cit., pp. 287-288.

11 His digestive powers are also apparent in the story in which Agastya drinks up the entire ocean. When it is requested, however, he can not replace the ocean waters as he has digested them. (MBh., 3.102.1-5, 15-17); compare the variant of the sage Jahnu who drank up the Ganges and then let it flow from his ears: Rām. 1.42. note 934. Agastya also makes use of his divine eyesight in the Rāmāyana (3.12.15).

12 MBh., 1.120.40 and 3.135.10-42.

13 MBh., 3.182.1-20.

14 MBh., 3.3.10-14.

15 Rām., 2.82.26-27.

16 Rām., 2.109.9, 10, 18.

17 MBh., 1.157.5-15. The epics do not make the mechanics of the acquisition of these suprahuman powers explicit, but it is clear that the very nature of tapas involves the 'damming up' of heat power. This heat power is a kind of raw power which may be channeled or directed in any number of ways. Again the analogy of water is apt. Water behind a dam is raw power which has yet to be channeled through the turbines to produce electricity. The raw power of tapas may be channeled into a quest for immortality, or as these examples demonstrate, into a variety of different attempts to alter the normal flow of natural processes.

18 Rām., 7.10.

19 Rām., 5.46.5.

20 Lopāmudrā's father worried about Agastya's ability to curse him: MBh., 3.95.5.

21 MBh., 3.122.1-24.

22 Rām., 1.62-64, and MBh., 1.65-66.

23 MBh., 1.66.2. See also Ārṣṭiṣena, MBh., 3.156.1, and Bhagīratha, MBh., 3.107.4.

24 Rām., 1.17.35.

25 MBh., 3.81.99-100, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 283.

26 The story is also told in the MBh., 9.37 and the Vāmana Purāna, 5.17.2-23. For translations see Roy/Ganguli, 9.38 and O'Flaherty, Myths, pp. 173-174.

27 The second-rate nature of obtaining ego-centred power as over against striving for more ego-less goals is nicely depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa by the contrast between Rāvaṇa and Viśvāmitra. Robert Antoine (op. cit., pp. 53-70) has shown that the careers of these two characters are parallel. Both seek for power and circumambulate the universe in the course of their search. Their parallel journeys serve to highlight the contrasts between them. Rāvaṇa does tapas to become invincible and thereafter becomes more and more arrogant until finally he tyrannizes the whole world. Viśvāmitra begins in a way similar to Rāvaṇa. He begins his tapas to become a brahmin in order to be able to humble his rival, Vasistha. But enroute he succeeds in purifying himself of all greed, passion and anger and, in the end, wins the brahmin rank and establishes a friendship with his former rival. Ultimately the foolishness of Rāvaṇa's path is demonstrated by his crushing defeat and death at the hands of Rāma, while on the other hand Viśvāmitra's spiritual purification serves him in good stead as Rāma's spiritual guide in the early adventures.

28 O'Flaherty, Śiva, p. 173.

29 The vision of immortality which sees mokṣa as its goal has a kind of fledgling status in the epics. In fact the notion of mokṣa (in the sense of the ātman's release from samsāra) is absent from the Rāmāyaṇa (Guruge, op. cit., p. 273, and Sharma, op. cit., p. 233), while in the Mahabharata it is present but localized, for the most part, in two relatively late parvans.

Svarga is another matter. Just how doing tapas came to be seen as a path to svarga where before sacrifice alone was the accepted path is not central to our study. Nevertheless it involves some exciting speculation which is worth noting here. Chauncey J. Blair has done an exhaustive study of every occurrence of tap related words in the early Vedic material (Heat in the Rīg Veda and Atharva Veda [New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1961]). His explanation of the evolution of the notion of tapas is as follows:

The unusual physical heating which the priests felt (when doing a sacrifice),

they attributed to their ritual activities, and naturally came to believe the resulting heat was a measure of their zealously at the ritual. It was also a measure of their devotion to the god addressed. The next step was the belief that this devotional heat had in itself the power of achieving the purpose of the ritual.
(p. 108)

Interestingly enough, the sweat produced in performing the sacrifice was considered as proof of the devotional fervor.

Blair cites an alternate view of J.W. Hauser (Die Anfänge der Yoga Praxis im Alten Indien [Stuttgart, 1922]), which I think is complementary to the one quoted above. Briefly, this view notes that both Agni and Soma are called 'ṛṣi-maker' (ṛṣikṛt) and that Agni is said to make an ordinary priest into an ṛṣi by giving him "head-heat". Hauser felt that Soma must be an ṛṣi-maker because of its intoxicating properties, and that the intense heat of the fire must act in the same way on the ordinary priest. If, instead of being an intoxicated person, the ṛṣi had an altered state of consciousness which permitted the reception of visions, then anything which brought on that state of openness to visions might be lumped together as ṛṣi-making. In the early Vedic material this would provide a link between drinking soma and doing sacrifice. Later, doing tapas was added to these two as another way of getting "head-heat". Obviously one's ability to have visions could be considered directly proportional to the amount of one's devotion, thus making the two views complementary rather than alternate.

The notion of tapas in the epics has changed from these hypothetical beginnings. Some continuity can be seen, however. For example in the Rāmāyana sacrifice is described as a kind of tapas (Rām., 3.70.19-20) and the forest ascetics are said to resemble fire (Rām., 3.1.15). One last aside: the notion that the connection between sacrifice and tapas is due to the fact that the forest-dweller has internalized his fires does not hold up because in the epics the forest ascetics perform sacrifices as well as tapas.

³⁰ MBh., 1.220.7, van Buitenen, v. 1, p. 423.

³¹ MBh., 3.130.1.

³² MBh., 3.61.60.

³³ Rām., 3.4.24.

- 34 MBh., 1.111.1-5.
- 35 MBh., 3.149.50-52.
- 36 MBh., 11.26.19-20.
- 37 MBh., 8.49.34-40.
- 38 MBh., 5.119.15-5.121.6. For general statements that by tapas one attains heaven cf. MBh., 12.284.14 and 13.123.4.
- 39 Guruge, loc. cit.
- 40 Rām., 3.4.24, 7.69.10.
- 41 Rām., 2.98.31 and 1.22.nt. 640: taponirdhūtakalmasāh.
- 42 Rām., 2.98.34 gives the example of Daśaratha. A corresponding example may be found at MBh., 1.119.10-12.
- 43 The cases of the young ascetic, Rām., 2.58.40 and Śabarī, Rām., 3.70. nt. 1350, vs. 26, nt. 1353, vs. 27.
- 44 Rām., 1.40. nt. 892, also Jan Gonda, Loka; World and Heaven in the Veda (Amsterdam, 1966), p. 86, nt. 64, hereafter referred to as Loka.
- 45 Rām., 3.4.24; 3.70.27; 1.41.4 and MBh., 3.106.40. See also the strange case of Śambuka; Rām., 7.67.3, and Viśvāmitra, Rām., 1.56.5. In addition there are groups of anonymous ascetics seen by Rāvaṇa (Rām., 3.33.20) and reported by Bharadvāja (Rām., 2.48.28) who had won the worlds [lokān] or heaven [divam] by tapas.
- 46 Jan Gonda, Loka, p. 85. Specific examples of this theme are provided by the aśvamedha in which the sacrificer becomes divinized (Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, 7.3.1.12; Loka, p. 89), and by the vājapeya sacrifice in which the sacrificer climbs the sacrificial pole and on reaching the top proclaims, "we are immortal", meaning that he has won the world of the gods by becoming like them (Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, 5.2.14; Loka, p. 93). This theme is reinforced and linked to the notion of tapas by the line from the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa which states that the devas or gods attained godhood by means of tapas (Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa, 3.12.3; cited in David Knipe, In the Image of Fire [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975], p. 115).
- 47 MBh., 3.247.9-11, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 703.
- 48 MBh., 3.247.15-16, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 704.

49 MBh., 3.51.27 and 54.21-24.

50 MBh., 3.247.18-19.

51 MBh., 3.247.4.

52 MBh., 1.110.1-36.

53 This notion may have its roots in the tripartition of the universe into three lokas each with a corresponding obligation; cf. Gonda, Loka, pp. 62-63.

54 MBh., 1.111.7-17, and 1.220.6-14. See also Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 2, p. 425. It is interesting that Māṇḍapāla decides to mate with a bird in order to produce offspring in short order. This seems a rather superficial payment of his debt.

55 O'Flaherty, Śiva, p. 76.

56 MBh., 1.111.16.

57 Kane, op. cit., v. 2, pt. 1, p. 424.

58 MBh., 3.94.11-15, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 412.

59 The begetting and raising of children make up one of the chief aims of the gṛhastha life-stage.

60 MBh., 3.97.7.

61 MBh., 3.97.23, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 416. The complete story is told in MBh., 3.94-98; compare: Rām., 3.10.52-65.

62 There is a similar teaching in the tale of Śakuntalā, MBh., 1.68.37-38.

63 Doing tapas to gain offspring is familiar to the Rāmāyaṇa as well, for example: Rām. 1.24.5, 1.37.6, and 1.45.3-6. Rāma is said to have been born as a result of great tapas on the part of his parents: 2.45.10 and 3.62.3.

64 MBh., 15.12 and 15.16. It would be neat and orderly to be able to say that the departure of the ascetic-to-be parallels the movement from one life-stage to another encountered in the early adventures. The diversity of the experiences of the ascetics in the epics prevents this parallel.

65 Mircea Eliade, Yoga: Immortality and Freedom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 96 ff, 270 ff, and 362f. Veena Das, "The Uses..." p. 257, notes that the renouncer transcends the categories of the social and cosmic worlds.

66 Turner, Ritual, p. 107.

67 Mudgala: MBh., 3.247.43, given the context of the story it is very likely that siddim parām nirvāna lakṣanām refers to the freedom from the cycle of rebirths, mokṣa.

68 For more on the relationship of sexual power and the chaste ascetic see O'Flaherty, Siva, pp. 55-57.

69 MBh., 3.90.9.

70 E.g. MBh., 3.93.10-23 and 3.114.4-10. There is some evidence that sacrifice was considered a form of tapas in the epics, e.g., Rām., 3.70.19-20. The demons who attack the ascetics at MBh., 3.99.20 certainly interchange the two. They decide to focus their attack on the ascetics because, they say, tapas holds up the worlds. The maintenance of the world is, in Vedic texts, primarily a function of sacrifice, not tapas. A few lines later the destruction of the ascetics is described in almost exclusively in terms of sacrificial implements in disarray (3.100.5-10). If this is to indicate that the demons have destroyed the ascetics' tapas, then sacrifice can be understood to be a kind of tapas.

71 Karve, Yuganta, p. 117.

72 Louis Dumont has noted ("For a Sociology of India," Contributions to Indian Sociology, v. 1 [April, 1957], pp. 15-17) that the renouncer steps out of caste. Given that the experience of communitas is supposed to involve a leveling of hierarchy, it would be nice to be able to note this phenomenon in the epic. One cannot. While caste hierarchy rarely is significant to the plot of a narrative, it occurs enough to indicate that caste was a fact for the forest ascetic. Viśvāmitra's quest for the brahmin rank (Rām., 1.64 and MBh., 9.38.22 and 39.29) and the case of the śūdra, Śambuka, who was engaged in tapas when the dharma of the age did not allow it (thus prompting Rāma to behead the man for the sake of the orderly functioning of the world, Rām., 7.66.67) are two examples of this. Only the relatively frequent mention of women ascetics indicates that the sexual hierarchy may have broken down for the ascetics in the epics.

73 Rām., 2.87.18 and MBh., 1.64.19 and 30. The āśrama shares this characteristic of being a path to heaven with the tīrtha (MBh., 3.129.13) and the sacrificial altar (MBh., 5.119.11). All three accesses to heaven, tapas, sacrificial altar and pilgrimage site, are expressions of what Eliade calls the axis mundi or the centre of the world. This may be the root of the phenomenon noted earlier of pilgrimage and sacrifice being treated as forms of tapas.

74 MBh., 3.149.16-19, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 497.

75 This latter inspiration is explicit in Rām., 2.87.18 where the āśrama is called tapasānām nivāso and is equated with svargapatho.

76 For example MBh., 13.41.18-23 where Indra is frightened away from the guru's wife by the student, Vipula, who reminds him that Gautama had once cursed him to be covered with a thousand vaginas.

77 E.g. Bhṛgu: Rām., 1.37.6, Kapila: MBh., 3.106.24-25, and Dhāṁḁa: MBh., 9.50.21. Goldman, op. cit., chronicles many instances of ascetic might over the gods, see especially pp. 21, 82-88, and 117-118.

78 Goldman, op. cit., pp. 139-140.

79 Rām., 1.18.5-6, Shastri, v. 1, p. 48.

80 MBh., 3.100.8-10, van Buitenen, v. 2, p. 420.

81 MBh., 3.103.4-5.

82 Rām., 3.9.13.

83 Menakā: Rām., 1.62.1-10, and Rambhā: Rām., 1.63.1-15. See also Rām., 7. App. 1, no. 8, lines 4-5.

84 As just a sample of many possible examples there is Sītā's talk with Anasūyā (Rām., 2.109.15-110.21). The teachings of Mārkaṁḁeya and Baka Dālbhya (MBh., 3.26 and 27) occur in this context as well.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters the threshold nature of the forest in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata has been amply documented. The forest has been shown to be a threshold between states of existence not only in the early adventures when the movement from childhood to adulthood naturally called to mind the liminal threshold phase of a rite of passage, but also in the illustrative but tangential narratives of the main characters, and the religious journeys of the epic ascetics. It remains to discuss what significance this identity of the forest and the threshold might have for our overall understanding of the two epics.

To begin to get at this significance it is helpful, I think, to turn to the role of the forest exile in both epics. In the case of both the Pāṇḍavas and Rāma the forest exile interrupts the normal unfolding of events surrounding the heroes' relationship to sovereignty. Just when both sets of heroes are becoming established in their roles as royal grhasthas, they are cast out of their kingdoms, separated from a sovereignty which was considered sacred, and made to enter the forest as 'dead' men and women. This theme of the interruption of the normal flow of the life of the

sovereign by forest exile is echoed in the tale of Nala and Damayanti.

In these instances of course the forest manifests some of its liminal quality, but it is the juxtaposition of sovereignty and exile, civilization and forest, or structured world and liminal world that is of interest. This juxtaposition has been noted by Victor Turner, and forms the springboard for one of his central theses. The basic human tendency to an ordered, hierarchical, structured existence is balanced, says Turner, by an equally basic tendency to a topsy-turvey, leveled, 'anti-structured' existence. Thresholds along with *communitas* are the prime examples of anti-structure, while social organization gives bounteous examples of structure. According to Turner:

Society is a process which embraces the visions and reflections, the words and work, of religious and political mendicants, exiles, and isolated prophets, as much as the activities of crowds and masses, the ceremonies of the forum and marketplace, and the deeds of legislators, judges and priests.¹

In short, a healthy society is one in which the natural tendencies of humankind to grow through anti-structure and to conserve through structure are both indulged.

Admittedly there can be excesses in any society, and the societies depicted in the epics offer clear examples of such excesses. At its best the threshold fosters creativeness and invention. The heroes' access to divine

power and teachings about subtle matters of dharma are examples of this. Pushed to its extreme the tendency to anti-structure results in a destructive chaos. The rākṣasas are, as we have seen, an apt representative of this extreme.

Excess can plague structure, the other human tendency, as well. Structure without liminality or *com-munitas* is dangerous because it results in the stagnation of empty form. In this situation the dominance of order and repression of even playful law-lessness leads to tyranny in government. Again the epics provide examples in the tyrants Rāvaṇa and Duryodhana, while the rule of the many virtuous epic kings, not the least of whom are Yudhiṣṭhira and Rāma, provides examples of the ideal of balanced societies.

Neither Rāma nor Yudhiṣṭhira comes by a balanced rule easily. In both cases an earlier 'excess' has resulted in an unbalanced situation. In Rāma's case the unbalanced situation is most clearly seen in the mythic realm where Rāvaṇa's tyranny has reduced the gods to being servants of the rākṣasa king. In Yudhiṣṭhira's case the unbalanced situation, the tyrannous Kaurava rule, results from a combination of his own weakness for gambling and Duryodhana's consuming desire to rule.

In both cases the heroes go off to the forest and there experience first hand the liminal or threshold dimension of existence. Their forest experiences are mixed, as is fitting a threshold, but overall it may be said that through their forest exiles the heroes come to an awareness

of the essentialness of the liminal (and therefore anti-structural) dimension of human existence by experiencing it first hand themselves.²

The societies depicted by the epics are traditional societies, and, as in many traditional societies, it is difficult to differentiate in the epic societies between sacred processes and other processes normally deemed 'secular' in the pluralistic societies of the contemporary Western world. For example the process described above in which the heroes learn of the importance of liminality might seem simply a political concern: the heroes are being prepared for their central political roles. While this assessment is accurate, it is not exhaustive.

Because dharma was the king's constant touchstone when he carried out his state duties, the king's political doings had a significant religious aspect. This religious aspect of dharma goes hand in hand with the sacred quality which adhered to kingship in the period when the epics were compiled. With this religious aspect of kingship in mind, a further consideration of the significance of the forest threshold for the epic heroes is in order.

We have seen that by their movement through the forest the heroes cross the threshold between peaceful and warring states of existence. Further, during this crossing the heroes gain an awareness of the positive, creative, inventive possibilities of non-structured reality. To garner a deeper understanding of the religious significance

of the forest threshold for the epic heroes it is helpful to return to the example of the forest ascetics. The ascetics, it will be remembered, move from the ordinary world of society where death ultimately reigns, across the forest threshold, to a state of existence (or in the case of mokṣa, transexistence) which is free from death. And most importantly the ascetics move from a profane realm to a sacred realm.

Just as during his forest exile the epic hero mimics the clothing and much of the behaviour of the ascetic, so his sojourn in the forest threshold mimics the ascetic's movement from profane to sacred realms. It is true that the two epics express the movement of their heroes from profane to sacred realms in different ways, and these differences will be discussed below; nevertheless a brief consideration of the similarities between the two epics is helpful here.

Both Rāma and Pāṇḍavas emerge from their forest exiles ready to assume the sacred kingship which was rightfully theirs. In both cases the first public signal of their readiness to assume kingship is the war which the heroes wage against those who, in their absence, usurped their sovereignty. In both epics it is not just the sovereignty of the home kingdom, but the sovereignty of the world which is at stake.³ The cataclysmic battles, which in the last analysis the heroes fight to win sacred sovereignty, are instruments to procure kingship. Following the parallel with the ascetics, the battles are analogous to the tapas

that the ascetics 'wield' to assault heaven or achieve mokṣa. It is by crossing the forest threshold that the epic heroes gain their war-waging powers. For both epic hero and ascetic the movement across the forest threshold takes them from ordinary of-the-worldness to the brink of sacredness. Exactly how this movement unfolds remains to be demonstrated.

The Rāmāyaṇa

We have seen that the stress of ideal types in the Rāmāyaṇa allows the demarcation lines between protagonists to be drawn with bold clear lines. For example Rāvaṇa is as Evil as evil can be, while Rāma is consummately Good.⁴ The battle between these opponents has implications throughout the three worlds because Rāvaṇa had been wont to tyrannize even the four lokapālas, the divine guardians of the world, and of course because the forces of Evil are finally being challenged by the forces of Good. The forest, the place of Rāma's exile, the scene of Sītā's abduction, and the home of the monkey allies, forms the threshold across which Rāma must pass into battle, and thence into the sacred sovereignty of the world.

Rāma's universal sovereignty can be demonstrated by a number of points. When he returned to his home after the battle, Rāma was apparently king only of Ayodhyā. On another level, however, since he had defeated Rāvaṇa and thereby protected the world from that tyrant's destructive

whims, Rāma had carried out the royal dharma which even Indra, king of the gods, could not do. Thus when Bharata conferred the kingdom of Ayodhyā on Rāma, he used words which indicate that the whole of the world is involved:

"Let the universe today witness
thine enthronement, O Raghava...
Do thou rule the world as long as
the sun revolves and the earth
endures."⁵

While it is part of stock descriptions of Hindu coronations, the detail that the waters for Rāma's investiture come from the four seas located at the four ends of the earth, as well as from all five hundred of the world's rivers, nonetheless underscores the universal nature of Rāma's sovereignty.⁶

Further, not just Ayodhyā, but the whole world became fruitful in honour of the coronation of Rāma.⁷ And finally the jubilant Ayodhyans are joined by celestial celebrants--gandharvas sang, apsaras danced while the lokapālas and remaining gods anointed the king with sacred herbs⁸--denoting once more the worldwide significance of Rāma's rule.

It is significant for this study that the Rāmāyaṇa, at least as taken in its seven book entirety, considers that Rāma's ability to wrest the rule of the world from Rāvaṇa is rooted in his avatāra nature. The epic poets seem to have seen the reinforcing connection between the epic king and the mythic avatāra, between sacred kingship and Rāma's sacred inner nature. The significance of this

connection is evident when we remember where Rāma comes into his own nature.

It is not until after the great battle that Brahmā tells Rāma of his identity with Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu,⁹ and from that point we can be sure that Rāma is fully conscious of his divine nature. But as we have shown, Rāma begins (unconsciously) to assume his avatāra role as the one who is to save the world from the forces of adharmā when on the forest threshold. The occurrences of his forest stay prepare Rāma for this role, bring him into contact with his real enemy, and trigger, under the guise of a struggle to rescue his wife, what is in fact a cosmic battle.

From this assessment we can distill the religious significance of the forest in the Rāmāyaṇa: by simultaneously harbouring and undermining Rāma in characteristically liminal fashion, the forest 'processes' him from heroic 'raw material' into a warrior of mythic stature already beginning to realize his dharma as the sacralized king of the whole world. The forest forms Rāma's threshold into his sacred role.

The Mahābhārata

In the Mahābhārata the religious significance of the forest shares with the Rāmāyaṇa a central emphasis on the movement from profane to sacred realms. The uniqueness of the two epics would in itself prevent a discussion of

the religious significance of the forest in the larger epic from simply retracing the points outlined above; but in addition the Mahābhārata's forests, like so much else about the great epic, take us to a more and more tentative position as we try to grasp their whole meaning. It seems to me that this tentativeness is warranted in a conclusion as it suggests engaging directions for further study.

In his persuasive study The Ritual of Battle, Alf Hiltebeitel challenges the commonly held image of the compilers of the Mahābhārata as palm leaf shufflers with an acute editorial (that is sectarian) bias. Hiltebeitel postulates that the compilation of the epic was a long process accomplished by people he calls 'epic ṛṣis'. He chooses this label intentionally:

By calling attention to this term for visionaries and poets, I refer in particular to the ṛṣis' faculty of "seeing connections;" "equivalences," "homologies," and "correspondences"...

Hiltebeitel goes on:

This faculty of "seeing connections" would have involved the epic poets not only with correlations between myth and epic, but also between epic and ritual...¹⁰

The correlation between epic and ritual which Hiltebeitel explores is the one between the great battle and Brāhmaṇic sacrifice. This correlation provides the pivot

around which Hildebeitel, using the insights of Madeleine Biardeau derived from the Purāṇas, and the Indo-European focus of Georges Dumezil, spins his central thesis:

Within the same background that produced these [Brāhmaṇic] sacrificial texts, the main contours of the epic's "narrative continuum" would seem to have been shaped as a "ritual of battle". Over a "sacrifice of weapons" (śastrayajña), says Karṇa, Krishna will preside as a witness (vettr) and as the main officiating priest, the adhvaryā.¹¹

During this battle/sacrifice the four senāpatis or marshals, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Śalya, and indeed all of the Kauravas, are sacrificial victims 'offered' in order that the Pāṇḍavas might win the sovereignty of the three worlds. According to Hildebeitel this pattern closely follows the Brāhmaṇas in which animal sacrifice accomplished the same end. In the great epic, he says, "the acquisition, or recovery of the three worlds is achieved by triumphing over human victims, 'shares', in a great 'sacrifice of battle.'"

Hildebeitel perceives this underlying correspondence in the Mahābhārata as occurring after the great battle as well. Yudhiṣṭhira, it seems, performed the ritual of battle badly because he committed moral sins in killing the four senāpatis. Thus he had to atone for his sins by performing an aśvamedha, which in the Mahābhārata is an expiatory sacrifice. The Brāhmaṇas recognized that steps should be taken to neutralize any impurity or danger inherent in ritual slaughter.¹²

While Hildebeitel traces the correspondence of the epic ṛsis in the epic narrative after the great battle, he says nothing about the narrative before the battle. This is the period of time, discussed in chapter four, during which the Pāṇḍavas live in exile in the forest and then, relatively briefly, in disguise in the court of Virāṭa. If we are to 'see connections' between this part of the epic narrative and Brāhmanic ritual, we need to consider what normally preceded a sacrificial ritual. We need to consider dīkṣā.

Dīkṣā is the ceremonial consecration which in Brāhmanic reckoning preceded certain sacrifices, especially the soma sacrifice. In order to perform these sacrifices a layman was required to undergo extensive ritual preparation. This preparation accomplished two main ends: a ritually enacted rebirth and an increase of ritual potency.¹⁴ These were both signs that the sacrificers had "passed beyond the human condition," that they had "emerged from the 'profane'".¹⁵ It is precisely at the point of these two essential results of dīkṣā, rebirth and increased potency, that the correspondences with the epic material begin to crystalize. We shall discuss them one at a time.

That dīkṣā ritually effects a rebirth of the sacrificer-to-be is undeniable. The meaning of the symbolic action is plain: the sacrificer is bathed, has his hair cut, is anointed with butter and is made to keep his hands closed into fists. If it is not immediately clear

that the sacrificer-to-be becomes a fetus by means of these metaphoric actions, the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa spells it out: "Him to whom they cause to undertake the dīkṣā, the sacrificial priests make into an embryo again."¹⁶ The sacrificer-to-be was ensconced in a closed hut which the same Brāhmaṇa describes as a womb, and he is covered with a garment which was understood to be the 'amniotic sack' of the consecrated.¹⁷ Dīkṣā, then, provided a symbolic gestation period at the end of which the sacrificer-to-be was reborn.

The language of 'gestation period followed by rebirth' would neatly describe the threshold and incorporation phases of the tripartite process we charted through the Pāṇḍava's forest adventures in chapter four. In fact we have typified the incorporation phase as a rebirth. The parallels between dīkṣā and the Pāṇḍavas' exile on this point are so obvious that further discussion here would be redundant.

In dīkṣā the increase of ritual potency of the sacrificer-to-be is intimately bound up with tapas. Tapas, it will be remembered, refers in the epics not only to ascetic practices, but also to heat power with creative potential. Eliade points out that "Prajāpati creates the world by 'heating' himself to an extreme degree through asceticism," and goes on to draw parallels between tapas, such as that done in dīkṣā, and the shamanic practice of demonstrating the acquisition of inner heat by mastery over fire.¹⁸ Similar principles do seem to be at work. The

sacrificer-to-be performs the asceticism of sitting covered by a garment in a closed hut (not unlike a sweat lodge) and thereby increases his inner heat. This increase is demonstrable by his sweat. By performing this asceticism the sacrificer-to-be increases his creative powers in imitation of the paradigmatic sacrificer, Prajāpati, who sacrificed himself to create the world.

This understanding of the relationship of tapas, dīkṣā and the sacrifice helps to explain the otherwise confusing references to dīkṣā as 'the womb of tapas'.¹⁹ It is within the 'womb' of dīkṣā that the heat-power of tapas grows to maturity. And it is from the womb of dīkṣā that the sacrificer emerges, tapas 'grown' and 'on tap,' as it were, ready to deal with the fire of sacrifice. In this manner is the ritual potency of the sacrificer-to-be increased in the consecration ceremony of dīkṣā.

Another obvious correspondence between this aspect of dīkṣā and the epic material occurs with the ascetic who in 'the womb of the forest', increases his or her tapas to gain immortality of one kind or another. This correspondence is strengthened by Gonda's assertion that dīkṣā need not be applied exclusively to ceremonies in preparation of the soma sacrifice.²⁰ He goes on to compare a renouncer figure, the vrātya, with the dīkṣita, the sacrificer-to-be, on grounds that appear to have all the betwixt-and-between characteristics of the threshold:

It is instructive to see that the term dīkṣā can also apply to the ritual habits of the vrātyas who are neither brahman nor vaiśyas..., neither brahman nor kṣatriya..., practising neither Veda study nor worldly occupations they wander about in quest of heaven, like the dīksita who has left this world but not yet reached heaven....²¹

Much of this description of vrātyas and dīkṣitas, especially the last phrase, might easily be applied to the forest ascetics of the epics.

We noted above that the religious quest of the ascetics provided clues for understanding the religious significance of royal epic heroes. So it is in the Mahābhārata that these heroes in more subtle symbolic trappings, trod the same path as the forthright ascetics. It is clear that the ascetics increase their ritual potency (tapas) in the forest. If we follow Hildebeitel's lead, we can see clearly this correspondence in the case of the Pāṇḍavas as well.

If the epic ṛṣis perceived the central ritual of the Mahābhārata as the sacrifice of battle, then they might well have 'seen' that the Pāṇḍavas' increased ritual potency would take the form of battle oriented boons from the gods, celestial weapons and weapon mastery, battle practice, purification by pilgrimage, the establishment of allies and so on. Of course all these 'increases' occurred during the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile and are chronicled in an

earlier chapter. With their increased ritual (battle) potency the Pāṇḍavas emerged from their forest exile like dīksitas leaving their hut to go forth to slaughter their sacrificial victims in order to win the sovereignty of three worlds.

Whether or not we attribute this correspondence between the rebirth and increased ritual potency of dīkṣa and the forest in the Mahābhārata to epic ṛṣis, the insight the correspondence or analogy provides is helpful in understanding the significance, especially the religious significance, of the forest in both epics. There is little evidence that the great battle in the Rāmāyaṇa has a sacrificial quality, thus it makes no sense to argue that Rāma's ritual potency is increased in the forest. Nonetheless it is possible to argue, as we have done, that Rāma's sacred potency, his avatāra nature, is quickened in the forest; thus a basic pattern may be discerned in both epics. At the essence of this pattern is the forest. In the Rāmāyaṇa and in the Mahābhārata the forest acts as a threshold by crossing which the heroes and heroines become consecrated; that is they become more sacred, they increase their power, and attain a sacred state of existence preparatory to engaging in their most sacred quest.

Notes

¹ Turner, Dramas, p. 293.

² Veena Das in "The uses ...", pp. 245-263 argues that the king, like the officiating priest and ascetic, must be a liminal figure in order to enable him to judge impartially when carrying out state duties. His liminality allows the king a perspective outside any ordinary social classifications from which he may accurately assess matters brought before him (pp. 259-260). Following Das' argument we could speculate that Yudhiṣṭhira and Rāma acquire this liminality in the forest.

³ Alf Hiltebeitel has shown that the Mahābhārata understands that it is the sovereignty of the three worlds which is at stake (The Ritual of Battle, pp. 87, 198, 286); the Rāmāyaṇa will be discussed below.

⁴ Rāma's boundless goodness seems to irritate some Western sensibilities as witnessed by Aubrey Menen's treatment of the hero in Rama Retold (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954).

⁵ Rām., 6.116.9, 11; Shastri, v. 3, pp. 365-66.

⁶ Rām., 6.116.45-52.

⁷ Rām., 6.116.63.

⁸ Rām., 6.116.58, 62.

⁹ Rām., 6.105-106.

¹⁰ Hiltebeitel, op. cit., pp. 359-360.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹² Ibid., p. 287.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 293-296.

¹⁴ Thomas J. Hopkins, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

¹⁵ Eliade, Yoga, p. 108.

16 Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, 1,3,1; translated and cited by Jan Gonda, Change and Continuity in Indian Religion (The Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1965), p. 337.

17 Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, 1, 3; cited in Thomas Hopkins, op. cit., p. 31.

18 Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (New York: The Bollingen Foundation, 1964), p. 412.

19 Āpastamba Śrautasūtra, 10, 6, 5, and Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 3, 7, 7, 1 and 2; cited in Gonda, Change, pp. 344, 356. Gonda's explications are here uncharacteristically unsatisfying.

20 Gonda, Change, p. 325.

21 Ibid., p. 326.

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