

OF META-NARRATIVES AND 'MASTER' PARADIGMS: SEXUALITY AND THE REIFICATION OF WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA

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Preliminaries: The Problem with 'Master' Paradigms

Transitional moments in history have typically been associated with 'events', understood initially as political: new dynasties, wars, and such moments shaping 'history' in the rise-and-fall mode of marking the passage of time. In India, this periodisation of history led to outlining the rise and the *decline* of the Magadhan Empire, or the *decline* of the Mughal Empire, as if there is, or can be, an inherent stability to political power. As historians, we know that power and control over resources are inherently unstable, always challenged and rearticulated. This mode of writing history has been particularly disastrous for women in the writing of Indian history since the nineteenth century, as the rise-and-fall thesis came to rest on the fall of the 'Hindu' woman's status from her earlier glorious position in the 'ancient' and imagined past, to one of degradation in the 'barbaric' medieval times under Muslim rule, to regeneration of the Indian people under the impetus of the social reform movement, led of course by male social reformers. Nationalist history was largely enmeshed in either explaining the decline of dynasties, or the decline of culture with serious implications for gender.

Later, especially since the mid twentieth century, even as the rise-and-fall thesis was displaced, what came to dominate the historical imagination was the modes-of-production thesis of history, marking the inevitable progress of history as the history of social formations. Within this admittedly broader framework as well, the messiness of history—the unasked questions, the complexities of history, were contained within the sweep of social and economic

processes: transitions were understood as moving from something definitive to something else that was equally definitive: social relations were those associated with, and generated by, control over productive resources.

Thus, despite the raging debates on whether there was feudalism in India, no 'his'torian participating in this debate ever considered how (or whether) the new social formation transformed social relations for women. Transitions remained oblivious of gender. Indeed, we may argue that the idea of transitions cannot be gendered in any meaningful way as the very paradigm of 'transition' with its focus on historical concerns such as a 'prime mover' theses, or single factors as precipitators of change, erases the possibility of any centrality to gender as a critical component of new social relations: that is a transformation wherein gender relations *move* the direction of history.

It appears to me that even following the large amount of work produced by feminist historians across the globe, and the shifting concerns of history under new social science approaches 'Transitions', with a capital 'T' are premised on historical changes that preclude a concern with gender. The exception perhaps is an early moment in history when women's sexuality, and their capacity to procreate, came to be regarded as a resource to be controlled by the community, led by some men, and caused a series of changes which feminist scholars, both basing themselves on Engels¹ and differing from him, have tried to analyse and outline for us. Even so, because these changes also led to a binary distinction between the world of production and the world of reproduction, the focus of history came to dwell on the former. The paradigms of history, indeed of all social sciences, have made it difficult if not well nigh impossible to gender them in any meaningful way: the very idea of 'T'ransition', in particular, refuses gender as a factor precipitating change to a new set of social relations.

But if we were to engender notions of transitions to its pre-binary moment in thinking about 'Change', a number of issues can be explored: for example if historical transitions were to be inclusive of the history of social reproduction what would social institutions and social dominance look like? How might periodisation change if we were to introduce gender as a marker of periodisation²; further, if transitions are not merely about state power and who controls that, or the histories of production and resource mobilisation and governance, but about how people, especially women, experience—or do not experience—transitions in their own lives, how might the notion of transition be defined? This essay will attempt to raise some of these questions as a

possible beginning of a more comprehensive exploration of gendered transitions in Indian history. I will particularly examine the question of whether the notion of history can be gendered or whether, or how, transitions may have shaped gender relations at different moments of time, as well as look at the spatial dimensions of such transformations. I will focus in particular on the *Mahabharata*, which, more than any other ancient Indian text, reflects all the ambiguities and contradictions of a transitional moment in history capturing as it does a range of social formations in India, broadly during an 800-year period from 400 BCE to 400 CE.

I

I have suggested that the framework that has found the most favour with historians since the mid-seventies or so in India has been the idea that history is the history of social formations to which cultural patterns are linked. The use of this framework has produced some fine work that has lifted ancient India out of the realm of mythology, political and dynastic histories and the cultural manifestations that such political transformations inspired. The focus on analysing and detailing material milieus of various time periods and the more general class framework introduced new questions on production relations including the social relations entered into for production; questions of technology and its relationship to change—the prime mover thesis—were also fundamental to the framework. Thus the role of iron, in particular the axe and the iron tipped ploughshare, in clearing land for cultivation and the consequent spread of agriculture, the importance of the horse and bridle, the introduction of the 'Persian wheel' in irrigation were all elements by which historians sought to deduce critical transitional moments in history.

This framework was not uncontested: implicitly and explicitly a critique of this position sought to reverse the relationship between technology and change by outlining the importance of new ideas in precipitating change; either way, however, these debates were ungendered. The material milieu itself did not include vital aspects relating to gender; further, sexuality and reproduction were not regarded as aspects of social relations—either of production or of social reproduction. However, since the framework of social formations did seek to link class and state in its more sensitive renderings as a set of broad and complex processes—rather than restricting analysis to unilinear renderings of the inevitable march of history—feminist and gender-sensitive 'his'torians

have tried to work gender into the broad parameters of this framework; they have thus gendered history if not gendered the notion of transitions in history. In varying degrees, such work in India has examined marriage forms, women's right to inheritance and control over property, *stridhana* and matrimonial rights, gifts to religious institutions, women's contribution to ideas and their participation/ exclusion from religious practices and institutions, the existence and transformation of goddess cults, and the creation of culture more generally³. In the last two decades, a solid body of work has emerged on gender relations within the social formations framework which have contributed notably to our understanding of early Indian history. Some of these writings have been strikingly conceptual, others informative and useful.⁴

Among the more conceptual works, there has been an important attempt to link production, state formation and gender hierarchies. A breakthrough of sorts was achieved in Kumkum Roy's recent work that managed to lift women's history from its 'add women and stir formula' to one in which gender was a critical component in the emergence of the new social and political formations in the period 800-400 B.C.⁵Roy showed how the emergence of the state and the household were deeply gendered; she also argued that the rituals which have been so significant in terms of earlier Indological studies were, in a fundamental sense, an attempt to legitimate the right of the king to control the productive and reproductive resources of the entire realm and the head of the household, the *yajamana*, to do the same with the productive and reproductive resources of the household. Control over reproduction, and of women's sexuality, was, therefore, a central feature of the emergence of stratification in early India.

Another piece of research work has extended the analysis of Kumkum Roy to examine the manner in which ritualised notions of procreation transformed biological activity into a sacralised function that was central to the *griha*, the household, and its reproduction. At the same time the stability of the social structure was premised upon the *griha* as an essential unit of the society, achieved through the intensive propagation and social implementation of rituals, conducted by sacred specialists, the *brahmanas* for the individual householders. The rituals performed by the householder and his wife provided status and recognition to them and linked them to the community, legitimised his control over the household, and the household itself was the locus of the two major activities: production and reproduction both equally significant for the survival of the household and the community.⁶

Another series of explorations have attempted to draw attention to the history of control over women's [and men's] sexualities through the strictly operative endogamous marriage system and the critical relationship between caste and gender in the maintenance and reproduction of the caste system. Fears of miscegenation, and the breakdown of the social order, in the form of the ultimate dystopia—in the notion of *kaliyuga*— are a recognition of the difficulties, or the inability, to sustain extant forms of production, through labour exploitation of the shudras and lower orders if they do not conform. This is closely linked to the difficulties in sustaining legitimate forms of marriage and sexual norms, contingent upon women's compliance to state and community practices of sexual governance,⁷ and their consent to patriarchal and caste ideologies. There has also been an attempt to analyse the diversity of patriarchal practices, through distinctive marriage and sexual norms for different castes and relate these with the intricate relationships between production, reproduction, labour and caste hierarchies.⁸

Despite the advances that have admittedly been made in understanding the complexities of how social formations are actually gendered by works that have related production with reproduction, I am not sure that there has been any shift in understanding the notion of transition, which remains located in shifts in the mode of production—hunting, gathering, pastoral societies, pre-class tribal societies, lineage societies, and distinctive types of class societies—slave, feudal, and capitalist. Once it has been determined that the mode of production has shifted, some feminists, and the occasional male historian, or anthropologist, have tried to bring production and reproduction together through an analysis of marriage and kinship patterns in distinctive types of societies. They have helped to gender social and economic processes but the idea of transition, as Transition, is still determined by changes in agricultural developments, technological developments, and the production of food, goods and services.

In a history such as this, would there be place for looking at transition as precipitated by new gender relations, of putting into place certain mechanisms of sexual governance, thereby making possible new production relations or new power relations? How might we flip the relationship between production and reproduction and thus of the dominant ways of thinking about what constitutes social formations? Would it be outrageous to say that the emergence of the endogamous marriage system, and a caste based hierarchy of social

groups (and of the particular types of households that were linked to these developments) were contingent upon an elaborate code of sexual governance, one that made possible the emergence of a 'claste' society,⁹— i.e. a caste-cum-class society? In turn claste society made possible a stable and enduring relationship between landowning/land-controlling groups on the one hand, and labouring groups on the other, kept apart as part of the *long duree* structures through the reproduction of caste groups, and of the production system, made possible through caste-based labour exploitation. If caste is recognised as part of the infrastructure, rather than as consigned to the superstructure, as Godelier¹⁰ argued, then sexual governance too would have to be recognised as part of the very infrastructure in the context of south Asia. Caste would then determine the way change and transitions might occur as well as impinge upon how new production relations were shaped, how stable or internally fraught such relations were, how much place there was for 'claste' struggle, and the nature of economic, social and political governance at different moments in our history in the context of these social relations. The meanings attached to the obsessive anxieties about the dystopic nightmare of *kaliyuga* then may acquire new lines of enquiry.

Theorizing Reproduction

Following the arguments of Engels in the *Family, Private Property and the State*¹¹ and independent of them, a number of feminists have explored the relationship between different institutions in societies and their bearing on gender at a theoretical level. Other scholars have tried to link production and reproduction together and explored a number of societies to examine marriage, kinship, and property relations in various stages of development—within a historical context. For example, Jack Goody makes a number of useful connections between modes of production, kinship structures and inheritance patterns focusing on gender. His discussion of concubines and co-wives is particularly insightful as he examines the hierarchy of rights among women and the children they produce.¹² Claude Meillassoux also is mindful of the links between production and reproduction as societies make transitions from one set of social relations to another. He points out that since the cycle of production is short and does not gear itself to previous or following generations, direct control over progeny would itself act as an investment towards a duration exceeding the dominant economic notion of time or the periodicity of the

economic cycle related to everyday enterprises. If the economic cycle extends over a long period and if the survival of the oldest is related to their control over the younger ones, then woman and young ones are at stake.¹³ In such a conjuncture as this, pubescent women are not expendable though men are; women of the group must, therefore, be protected against their capture by rival groups, while captured wives must be guarded. Sooner or later women become objects of war. The warrior's role is then enhanced to the detriment of females. Peace would only ensue if there is an orderly circulation of pubescent women arranged through chieftains and authorities capable of negotiating betrothal and marriages: in other words the *management* of reproduction at a political level. Women, then, are no longer objects of war, but subjects, as pledges in alliances or of allegiance, kept available through incest prohibition to build up political networks. In sum, where progeny is not directly coveted, women are comparatively freer; although men do not create human beings, they manage social reproduction and become dominant.¹⁴

Feminist anthropologists have introduced a powerful gender dimension to kinship and marriage studies, best illustrated in the work of Gayle Rubin. She introduces her best known essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,' with a analytical leap from a statement of Marx in the context of social relations that create subordination and domination:

What is Negro slave? A-man-of-the-black-race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations....

Taking off from this Rubin says:

What is a domesticated woman? A-female-of-the-species. The one explanation is as good as the other. She only becomes a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold itself is money...¹⁵

To unravel these relations, Rubin turns to Levi Strauss and kinship from whom she draws as well as turns away¹⁶ because he, like Freud, recognises the place of sexuality in society, as also the profound differences between the experiences of men and women.¹⁷Engels had already distinguished between relations of sexuality and relations of production, nuancing the way to think about sexuality

in materialist terms. Production is, therefore, twofold: of the means of existence, and of human beings. But to understand the empirical reality of what Rubin classifies as the sex-gender system, one must turn to kinship and to Levi-Strauss; as Rubin puts it, his book *Elementary Structures of Kinship* 'explicitly conceives of kinship as the imposition of culture upon the facts of biological procreation'.¹⁸ Levi-Strauss does not assume an abstract, genderless human subject, but speaks of males and females, allowing us to trace the divergent social destinies of the two sexes. Because Levi -Strauss sees the essence of the kinship system in the exchange of women by men, he constructs an implicit theory of sex oppression.¹⁹ Rubin categorises this exchange as the 'traffic in women':

The 'exchange of women is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology. Moreover it suggests that we look for ultimate locus of women's oppression within the traffic in women, rather than the traffic in merchandise....Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favours, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold. Far from being confined in the 'primitive' world, these practices seem to become only more pronounced and commercialized in more 'civilised' societies. Men are also trafficked as slaves, serfs, and athletic stars or as some other catastrophic social status, rather than as men. Women are transacted as slaves, serfs, and prostitutes, but also simply as women.²⁰

Rubin tracks the processes of the kinship system as not merely exchanging women but exchanging sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and people—men, women and children— in concrete systems of social relationships;²¹ the implications of such an exchange of women for compulsory heterosexuality, and the consequent threat of homosexuality between women:

As long as men have rights in women which women do not have in themselves, it would be sensible to expect that homosexuality in women would be subject to more suppression than in men.²²

She argues that if a single refusal by a woman to be given to the man she was promised is regarded as disruptive, if she were to ask for a woman instead, it would be regarded as insurrectionary as it would be a double refusal of the kinship system.²³

Rubin points not only to the need to acknowledge that kinship and marriage are always parts of the total social systems and always tied into economic and political arrangements, but to go beyond Levi-Strauss who, in her view, does not carry his own principles far enough to outline a political economy of sex²⁴, a task she initiates for us to extend further.

Another feminist anthropologist, Christine Ward Gailey,²⁵ actually focuses on a transitional moment in history to make a number of connections in the context of reproduction: based on an analysis of Tongan society, she looks at the centrality of gender in the transition from a kinship-based society to a class-based society. She argues that while Marxists often acknowledge the subordination of women, they regard it as a kind of tangential fallout of state formation. She takes the view instead that state and class formation cannot be understood as processes without analysing gender.²⁶ Drawing from Leacock, Rapp, Lamphere and Rubin,²⁷ Gailey proceeds to show how 'woman-ness', including primarily the capacity to procreate and therefore reproduce people makes women, more than men, 'recapitulate kin identity' for all people.

Further, although marriage has not necessarily drawn major social attention in all kinship societies, as a rite it may represent the 'indivisibility of production and reproduction' in such societies.²⁸ In Tongan society, Gailey argues, there was no effective split between productive and reproductive labour. But marked changes occur in emerging state societies based on class specially because the reproduction of class relations depend upon non-kin institutions such as military or religious structures: social reproduction required then a subordination of kinship considerations to those of class.²⁹ The nature of marriage too changes specially among the non-producing elite classes. In Gailey's words:

Here the regulation of succession, alliances with other elite classes, and claims to the surpluses and labour extracted dominate. Marriage in the non-producing classes becomes more strictly political alliance or the demonstration of political power through the exchange of women (by women and men), Marriage tends to become defined by procreation, since

inheritance of title, position and wealth becomes a paramount concern within non-producing elite.³⁰

Thus, though women were already being exchanged even in kin based societies, the meanings of such transfers are different post-transition.

Moreover, in early states, the task of providing for non-producing elites places unprecedented stress on the acquisition and control of labour. Women can not only work but also 'produce new producers'. Thus they become, according to Leacock, a special focus for control.³¹ New producers can also be obtained through conquest: the identity of women, captives and slaves in relation to 'state-classes' is not as kin but as producers of goods, as servicers supporting the lifestyle of the elites, or as producers of goods and people as concubines, slave women and secondary wives. The incorporation of such new groups into tribute production or labour services becomes the basis for an ideology of biologically distinctive, inferior humanity—the ethnic group or race.

As racism and sexism emerge concomitantly, women of the producing classes—often from conquered communities, experience the greatest reduction of identity, typecast in sexual or reproductive terms.³² With tensions over how communities are reproduced, control over biological reproduction 'necessarily becomes an issue'. Gailey posits that the injection of *political power into community continuity* [emphasis added] i.e. the crisis of social reproduction in state formation creates the emphasis on women's role in social reproduction, which otherwise would only be a facet of their social identity.³³

The most sustained analysis of the formation of patriarchy in an archaic society, linking gender with class and state, has of course been the work of Gerda Lerner.³⁴ Because this analysis is based on another kind of transitional moment, the emergence of a strong agrarian-based urban civilisation in Mesopotamia, a riverine region with a complex social formation, it is particularly useful for feminist historians of the subcontinent. Amongst the most significant aspects of Lerner's work is her ability to make links between gender, class and state and because she combines a materialist understanding with a feminist examination of institutions, she is creative as well as theoretically rigorous without being hidebound. Thus while the arguments of Engels have been found useful to her analytical framework, the sequence of changes occurring in society as it moved from one stage to another, has been flipped around by Lerner who has both built upon, sharpened and qualified the Engelian position. She has

also expanded on the work of structural anthropologists writing on marriage and the exchange of women in early societies,³⁵ and its consequences upon the subordination of women.

In *The Creation of Patriarchy* Lerner tends to follow Levi Strauss and Claude Meillassoux in regarding that the exchange of women and the establishment of control over their sexuality *preceded* the emergence of private property³⁶ and that this stage of transition resulted in women being reified; women's reproductive capacity was recognised as a resource and became the property of particular kin groups. Lerner, however, argues that it is not women who are reified but their reproductive capacity³⁷. She also argues that these developments enable the transition from horticultural to agricultural societies as control over women's reproductive capacity has an advantage with regard to the appropriation of surpluses over systems based on the complementarity between the sexes. In a situation where land was not yet a scarce resource, control over biological reproduction would expand the pool of people available for production.

Control over women's reproductive capacity and the use of force, if necessary in capturing women as reproducers could and did lead to the denial of sexual autonomy to women whose sexual labour was appropriated and who thus became the first form of property. Lerner proceeds to develop her arguments based on historical evidence from Mesopotamia demonstrating links between women's subordination, class and the legal regulation of sexuality in archaic states.³⁸

From the point of view of the restrictions on the sexual autonomy of women, Lerner draws our attention to the process of the codification of the laws in Mesopotamia which reflect a major concern with sexual governance: thus of the 282 laws in the Code of Hammurabi, 73 pertain to marriage and sexual matters; out of the 112 surviving Middle Assyrian laws 59 pertain to marriage and sexual matters.³⁹ Other matters of regulation were debt bondage and control of slaves—issues of gender, class and economic power dominate the concerns of the codifiers. The dis-aggregation of women within marriage or a sexual relationship to create a hierarchy among them according to rights for themselves and their children, which Goody had initiated, is carried forward by Lerner. She provides a powerful analysis of the divisions between women based on class and specific kinds of sexual relations with men. These are illustrated by the strict codes of veiling: far from being ubiquitous, they were compulsory

for some categories of women and severely banned for women slaves and prostitutes, making for a hierarchy of women, and a hierarchy of sexual governance regulations, based on the sexual practices allotted to each category of women.⁴⁰

If the emergence of an early form of sexual governance in the form of the mutually agreed upon exchange of women between kin groups or the forcible capture of women has led to a series of other changes for women, and for men too, then this may be regarded as the real moment of 'Transition' for women in history. The denial of sexual autonomy also became the basis for the loss of other kinds of autonomy in the economic, political and social spheres as a way of consolidating and maintaining the control over women's sexuality which formed the base upon which a range of complex economic formations were contingent.

While history as a transition/ transformation of different modes of production proceeded to unfold, and would certainly have transformed the lives of women in a variety of ways, there was a certain basis upon which later developments were, in a manner of speaking, *pre-scripted*. Women might be more or less in the production sphere, provide labour in different ways, participate in different degrees in various spheres of activity, contribute to the creation of culture, seek to negotiate the circumstances of their lives but their greater subjection to norms of sexual governance has remained a fairly constant feature through various kinds of transitions in history—a kind of patriarchal despotism or a patriarchal equilibrium⁴¹ which provided a stable base upon which other scripts were to be enacted.

Broadly within the framework of issues and questions outlined above I will examine the Buddhist texts,⁴² and undertake a close reading of the *Mahabharata* as it is said to be located at a moment when society was moving from a kin-clan based structures to a monarchical kingdom, and a stratified society and is rich for that reason in reflecting a range of social practices, including a diversity of reproductive practices.

Section - II

The Regulation and Ritualisation of Desire: Cohabitation, Marriage and Reproduction

The *Agganna Sutta* is a parable of origins that reflects a Buddhist ascetic hierarchical model of society⁴³ where the normal hierarchies of the Brahmanical texts are both countered and rearticulated. It is located at a point where the brahmanas are repeatedly claiming birth-based inherent rights to superiority over others as conceptualised by them into four categories, arranged hierarchically, with the brahmanas heading the list. It is part of an ongoing discourse between the Buddha and two brahmana young men who have, over numerous discussions, become the Buddha's disciples⁴⁴.

Like earlier occasions, in this sutta too, the Buddha combats the Brahmanic claims to birth-based superiority on two grounds: the similarity of biological processes through which *all* human reproduction takes place and to which the brahmanas too are subject—they are not born from Brahma's mouth as they claim: brahmani women menstruate, get pregnant, give birth through the same passage as every other woman, and nurse their children too like every other woman. The claims to superior status and the right to draw service from others lower down the hierarchy are also rejected on the ground that moral behaviour, wealth and the selling (or buying) of the labour of one's own or of others reside individually in persons and are not intrinsic to them as a group.⁴⁵

The parable on the origin of the world and of beings who inhabit it is thus part of a Brahmana-Buddhist debate which attempts to both debunk the brahmana position, satirise⁴⁶ it and outline instead the Buddhist view of social relations: a distinctive view of the origins and evolution of the world, of kingship and social differentiation.⁴⁷ The myth therefore positions both social hierarchy between high and low among men, and links it with gender differentiation, sexual desire and, by implication, with reproduction and individual holdings over land.

The main structure of the myth narrates a series of evolutionary sequences that follow a pattern of identifying stages, and delineating events that lead to a 'fall', whereby the material world is preceded by a subtle and formless state

which becomes more gross and formed as the stages proceed. Initially, there was no materiality/corporeality in this world: the beings that inhabit the earliest stage are made of mind, provide their own light and feed on rapture, and move about in the air; there was no sun, no moon, no stars, no men and no women; just beings who were unformed and ungendered. Then, there was a slow development of materiality, a kind of skin appeared which is called earth essence—a substance that had a pleasant smell, taste and colour. A food craving then emerged in a being who tasted the essence; others too did so and that led to a further reduction of their luminosity and a further development of their corporeality; the sun and moon appeared, as did night and day and thus did the world evolve. As the beings ate, they became grosser and grosser, formed and distinctive from each other. Moving gradually from immaterial to the material, a stage came when there was rice —the text is clearly set in an agrarian society looking back at its own past— which was sweet-smelling, and which 'beings' gathered together to feed themselves; then there was further corporealisation and the beings who had been ungendered now developed the male and female parts. Now we reach a dramatic moment in the text as the gendering of the body into male and female gives rise to desire— a desire that is clearly heterosexual: from my point of view this is a critical moment in the narrative and in the 'evolution' of practices. I will quote from the text:

The female parts appeared in a woman and the male parts appeared in a man. The woman looked at the man with intense, excessive longing, as did the man at the woman. As they were looking at each other with intense longing, passion arose in them and burning came upon their bodies; because of this burning they had sex.

When others saw the first couple acting thus they said, 'away with your impurity...'⁴⁸

Shamed thus, the mating couples were externed from the communal settlements and they built huts to hide themselves in when 'intoxication' came upon them.⁴⁹

Another critical moment is now reached as the accumulative instinct follows immediately thereafter in the narrative; this is followed by the drawing of boundaries around the growing rice by individuals and then other individuals violate the rights of proprietorship by eating rice from someone else's plot; this goes on till people decide that they need to set up a *mahasammata*—a *khettanam pat*⁵⁰— over them who will maintain order, and to him they turned

a portion of their rice. This heralds the emergence of the khattiya class and finally various other social classes, based on their moral values and their distinctive work, emerge: the brahmana, the vessa and the sudda.

A notable aspect of the description of the vessas is that they alone are marked out for association with practicing sexual intercourse⁵¹, and they are then associated with a range of occupations 'of high repute'; similarly the sudda, described as a left-over category, is referred to as pursuing 'mean lives' and that was the birth of the sudda group.

Finally, from all the different groups, individuals who were disapproving of their own tasks (*sakkam dhammam*) chose to become ascetics, practice dhamma and attain nibbana in 'this very life.' This created a fifth category of people drawn from all the others but distinct from them as they pursued the higher goals of life renouncing both production and reproduction.

'The monk is therefore the highest among men', but for those who rely on clan as a status marker, 'the khattiya is the best' says the Buddha, concluding his discourse with the young brahmanas.⁵²

How do we read this text for purposes of the history of sexual and reproductive practices? First, the text breathes the spirit of bhikkhudom especially in its frank disapproval of sexual relations and its privileging of the ascetic existence as the best type of existence, deserving of the highest respect. This is to be expected from a celibacy driven social morality. But, putting that aside, what else is the account doing in terms of conceptualising social relations? The critical segment on the emergence of males and females, as physically distinctive beings, places the feeling of longing as experienced by the woman for a man first, immediately followed by the same feeling experienced by a man for the woman. Their passion for each other is consummated and then, because this is regarded as shameful and because it is public, it leads to the building of huts to provide a private space to make for sexual cohabitation⁵³. Cohabitation, more specifically coupledness, is followed by the accumulation of surplus and the privatising of food supplies, and then to theft or the violation of private individual rights—perhaps by those who have no access to it, or wish to have more than others. So, the king comes into being: to 'chastise those who require to be chastised,' as the text puts it. But what is notable, from my point of view, is that even as the narrative moves into a classification of social divisions, there is no description of the evolution of structured practices for the exchange of women, or for marriage. Reproductive norms do not seem to be in place nor

is there evidence for the institutionalisation of the family; interestingly, given the later association of the king, in Buddhist texts, with vigorous action against theft and adultery—the only two functions associated with governance⁵⁴, the absence of sexual norms or the notion of adultery in the narrative is striking. Further, sexual relations are based on mutual desire and consummated by mutual consent. Even though other developments take place, there is no overt indication of a gender hierarchy between men and women, certainly no sexual division of labour. In this delineation of the earliest, most archaic, moment described in the origin parable, sexual governance- or regulation of sexual practices— seems to be unknown. Coupling is consensual, between individual women and men in pairs at this point in the early, archaic state of social existence delineated in the parable of 'origins'.

There is no such richly layered text of origins in the Brahmanical tradition that matches the evolutionary process delineated in the *Aggana Sutta* and it is, therefore, difficult to discern a historically evolutionary pattern of the emergence of social institutions such as marriage, although there are numerous texts dealing with rituals and myths that have a bearing on marriage and reproduction in the Brahmanical textual tradition. A parallel moment marking pre-incestuous sexual relationships can be seen in certain references to a primeval man, and to a free expression of desire which is refused as unacceptable⁵⁵; further there are a number of suggestions as well as explicit references in the later Vedic texts that indicate two parallel processes, both of which move away from the archaic moment of free expression of desire and its consummation: the first is the ritualisation of cohabitation and, more importantly, of reproduction: the ritualisation is regarded as necessary in order to control and/or manipulate what is 'natural' such as birth, as well as to institutionalise life processes such as sexual relations within marriage regarded as sacred⁵⁶; the second is regulation of desire and of sexual practices, especially for women, when cohabitation is linked to reproduction and the birth of children, particularly sons, to ensure patrilineal reproduction.

Brahmanic marriage rituals in their earliest conceptualisations were concerned with different components of the cosmic whole and not merely with the two individuals concerned. The exemplar of such a formulation is the primeval marriage between the moon (Soma) and Suryaa, the daughter of the sun god. In this context, marriage is seen as an aspect of the cosmic order.⁵⁷ But the human counterparts for whom parts of the text are chanted elaborate

a number of interests: the hierarchy between the dominant male and controlled female is reflected in the *panigrahana* ceremony⁵⁸; but, going further, the Vedic bride, by reason of being female, is clearly represented as a precious commodity as well as a dangerous object. She holds, in Menski's view, the potential for either a glorious future or imminent destruction. Women are thus seen as highly potent but in an ambivalent way⁵⁹. The marriage verses centre on both these aspects. This ambivalence can also be seen in the *Grhya Sutras* (which have been the focus of a recent study from a feminist standpoint) where a negative imagery is associated with the incoming bride who holds a 'malevolent power'; marriage is thus a social catalyst that can change the circumstances of a groom's family.⁶⁰ Essentially, marriage is viewed as the transfer of the bride's reproductive potential to the husband's family; however, at the same time, there is an anxiety about preventing the designated husband from an early death, a danger that the bride holds within her as she can carry unseen diseases that could harm the groom and his family.⁶¹ The presence of the priest in the ritual appears to be critical in terms of supervising the important magical aspects of the transfer of female procreative potential to the husband's family.

Over time, the ritual reveals an increasing involvement of priestly agents, especially in countering the defiling power and danger in the spilling of virginal blood as part of the consummation of the marriage.⁶² Progeny is the dominant expectation from marriage and a new term for the wife appears in some later texts where she is *jani* the 'future mother' and one who will have sons, *putrini*.⁶³ In the *Atharva Veda*, the bride is first transferred to the priest who purifies the participants and absorbs her dangers: the wife becomes worthy of married life only through the involvement of a priest.⁶⁴ To this extent, the brahmanas managed to subject women to ritual processes that dramatise women's ritual disabilities by making their own intervention central in tackling the magical dangers emanating from the wife-to-be, before transferring her to the groom.

In a study of Srauta ritual, Smith shows how two mythic causes worked to restrict the role of women in the sacred Vedic ritual: Varuna's noose and Indra's curse.⁶⁵ According to him rites can be viewed within three fundamental contexts: the most obvious is the performative: what the actors do in the performance of the rituals; the second is the mythic context, where myths are used to explain ritual actions; and the third is the socio-economic context, where historical explanations are provided for ritual action and theory. He examines the srauta ritual in terms of all three. From his study we can discern that apart

from the wife's explicit association with reproduction and the mothering of sons in the marriage rituals, she is also a necessary component of the ritual efficacy of the yajamana's commissioning of sacrifices, as the sponsor of rituals such as the srauta rites. The sacrifice is required to be performed by the yajamana, his patni and an all male cast of officiants.⁶⁶

Yet the ambivalence that we saw in relation to the marriage rituals earlier is perceptible here also in making for the effective performance of sacrifices. This ambivalence results in trying to restrict the wife's activities in the sacred Vedic ritual and is justified by mythic causes: women are bearers of the god Indra's curse and must also be restrained by Varuna's noose to make them capable of participating in the ritual on terms acceptable to the tradition. These two gods dominate over the Vedic ritual: Indra is a warrior god who kills when required as he did the serpent Vrtra and Varuna is a celestial god associated with truth and cosmic order. He is the guardian of truth as expressed in speech, a function that he exercises with the threat of binding his victim with a noose. He brandishes the noose not just to ensure truthful speech but also to ensure that the propagation of the world occurs within a properly conceived cosmic order.⁶⁷ The cord, representing Varuna's noose, used to tie her to her husband and the rite through appropriate mantras, propagates cattle and children for the sacrificer. For example, in the performance of the fortnightly rituals at the time of the new and full moon, the first act is to bind the waist of the wife with a rope as she enters the sacrificial arena; this is not just a symbolic binding but is explicitly identified as Varuna's noose; in the classical soma sacrifice one can perceive how the wife occupies a dual location in the texts: on the one hand her sexuality and reproductive capacity are constantly exalted but, on the other, her role in the sacrifice, even though the avowed purpose is the generation of offspring, and the perpetuation of the cosmos and the elevation of the sacrificer's wife to heaven, is systematically reduced. Ultimately a point is reached when substitutions were possible for the wife.

The problem of needing to contain the wife perhaps originates in the mythic explanation of the inherent impurities of women as evident in the monthly menstruation: according to the *Taittiriya Samhita*, when Indra killed Visvarupa, he transferred one third of the stain of murdering a brahmana upon women which took the form of menstrual blood which is regarded as impure and dangerous because of Indra's curse. The bearers of this discharge must, therefore, be excluded from the sacrificial arena; the rope that the wife wears

when she is in the sacrificial area both embodies and exemplifies these restrictions.⁶⁸ First, she is led into the ritual space by a brahmana which marks her initiation; then she is bound with a girdle of special grass called munja after being made to sit because in this position she becomes virile.⁶⁹ She is girdled at the waist because it is below the navel that she is regarded as impure. According to the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, the rope represents Varuna's noose. In effect, the garment she wears represents plant life and associates her with the fertile earth⁷⁰. Varuna's noose promotes proper, controlled human procreation.

Most significantly, since Varuna is also the guarantor of truth as expressed by speech, the sacrificer's wife is more liable to scrutiny; for example in a section of the caturmasya rite, the wife is required to publicly declare her extra-marital affairs, or their non existence, in a kind of 'truth act'. She is asked to declare her lovers in response to the question to whom do you go (*kati te jarah*)⁷¹; if she truthfully identifies anyone, the person is seized by Varuna and this acts as an expiation of sorts. By voicing what is 'tantamount to a commitment to monogamy' the wife transforms, with the aid of Varuna, the sacrifice from untruth to truth.⁷² The noose of Varuna is necessary within the sacrificial realm to promote proper fertility; this is a symbol of both her loss of independent responsibility and of her limited participation.⁷³ The transference of the guilt of Indra's brahmana murder was, in Smith's view, the vital moment for women in India since it was the mythic catalyst that led her into Varuna's noose.⁷⁴ In completing a circuit of relationships, marriage and fertility are ritualised but the ritual itself is also linked to the containment of the dangerous potential of women based on appropriate sexual and reproductive practices.

Ensuring successful reproduction is of critical concern to early Brahmanical society beginning with later Vedic texts, and going into later Brahmanical texts such as the *Dharmasutras* and the *Dharmasastras*; in a general sense, there are grave dangers posited to family continuity and lineage-building through the failure to reproduce, or when the process has actually begun to steer the embryo successfully through to live birth. Thus, there are marriage hymns as we saw earlier, fertilising strategies for successful impregnation including the invocation to the goddess Sinivali⁷⁵, preferably for a male child,⁷⁶ rituals that will enhance impregnation such as the eating of fertilising *payasa* or the performance of *putra kameshti* rites. Finally, there are a series of strategies to protect the embryo from harm. Brahmana women whose children are alive are

expected to play an auspicious role in some of these ceremonies.⁷⁷ Gonda examines the meaning and purpose of the *simantonoyana* ritual, cited as an important life cycle ritual or samskara in the early Sanskrit texts.⁷⁸ He argues that the social context of the ritual is one where it is believed that 'life is a stream in which it is always an affair of surmounting the perilous obstacles during the pregnancy of a woman who was to undergo a succession of rites for the sake of the safety of the embryo'; the *simantonoyana* was to mark the entry into a new stage of life; it was a ritual act to enhance the generative power of the couple, a kind of magico-religious rite to ensure the birth of a male offspring. In Gonda's view, it was a kind of 'deception magic' that would fool the demons at a time when the woman was exposed to much danger by driving away the female goblins who thirst for a destruction of the embryo. The *simantonoyana* was to follow after the *garbhadhana*, a rite that was designed to achieve successful impregnation of the wife and begin conception: the two rites of *garbhadhana* and *garbharaksana* to prevent miscarriage are linked together to manage the early stages of reproduction. Vishnu and Raka in particular are enjoined to protect the wife's womb.⁷⁹

Although the rite of *simantonoyana* is now performed during the pregnancy of the wife, it was originally part of the marriage ceremony, according to Gonda. Marriage was centrally about reproduction and fecundity as represented in the marriage hymn of Suryaa where the bride is identified with Aditi, the mother of the gods and identical with the earth, the manifestation of fecundity par excellence⁸⁰. Marriage and the *simantonoyana* were thus linked to mark the two important events in a woman's life and were part of the same ritual. Rituals such as the *pumsavana* were also performed during the first trimester, before the child moves and can ensure that the foetus is transformed into a boy.⁸¹In sum, as Brian Smith argues, the fundamental assumption in the Vedic tradition was that the natural was defective, and must be rectified through appropriate rituals.⁸²

Dangers to the embryo remain a subject of concern despite samskaras such as the *garbhadhana*, *garbharaksana* and the *simantonoyana*. In an illuminating essay, Laurie Patton examines mantras, formulaic statements or utterances that are chanted to prevent miscarriages of pregnancy.⁸³ She examines the imaginative and ritual world which are the context for the rituals to be performed to ward off difficult childbirths, to ensure safety for the woman and the brahmana who is to be born: there are mantras to ward off miscarriage

which are part of a set of mantras against various types of dangers. Specifically, a mantra is chanted to drive away a flesh-eating demon who devours embryos. Anxiety about the loss of a potential child, presumed to be a future learned brahmana, is accompanied by increasing evidence of the deployment of a language of control whereby the term for embryo comes to be separated from the mother to mean a male brahmana. Similarly, Jamison examines a number of myths about the sun where an injured embryo is reborn after the performance of prescribed rituals to revive it.

Where do dangers to the embryos emanate from? From outsiders such as demons, specially a female demon called Amiva who could attack at two moments; when the sperm 'flies' into the womb in the Vedic embryology before the fertilisation of the egg; the second when the foetus begins to move about, leading finally to the birth of the child.⁸⁴ This can cause the death of the embryo in some form. But danger also lurks from humans who seek improper sexual relations after a woman is pregnant: the husband, lovers, or brothers who come to sleep with the woman at night, all of whom are the demon Amiva in disguise, and threaten the embryo. A close examination of the mantras shows two important things: a natural progression towards brahmanical control over the foetus and an increase in the mobilisation of mantras to ward off the demonic forces that could threaten it. Patton argues that this is parallel to a clear movement towards understanding the foetus not as 'a possession of the mother but that of the brahmana, whose potential mantric legacy it holds'.⁸⁵ There are mantras to make sure that it is a male child that is brought forth with the appropriate intellectual capacities⁸⁶ and who in turn will be endowed with the means to perpetuate the brahmanic lineage.⁸⁷ The birth of any male brahmana child could be the birth of a great brahmana sage; further, if a miscarriage is threatened or imminent, a second safe womb substitute may be found to start the birth again so that the learned brahmana in the making can actually be safely delivered.⁸⁸ Significantly, the term *garbha*, meaning womb, becomes *vedagarbha* in many of the Sanskrit texts; the womb of the Vedas, to mean precisely a knowledgeable brahmana. As Patton points out, 'what was once a body part of a woman has come to mean, if not its opposite, at least its converse: the sacred traditional knowledge of a man'.⁸⁹

Along with rituals to prevent a miscarriage or salvage a threatened miscarriage are stern injunctions against aborticide: it is among the worst sins and deserves the greatest punishment. The term for it is 'brunahan' which

means either the killer of an embryo or the killer of a learned brahmana. According to Wezler, who examines the meaning of the term, many early Indian thinkers believe that if one kills an embryo before its sex is known it may well be a male: that male could grow up and be learned in the Vedas and perform sacrifices and benefit both worlds.⁹⁰ (Unfortunately, no such deterrent seems to be available to save the female foetus!) Elsewhere even an inappropriate marriage can cause a kind of 'social slaying of an embryo'; a hymn suggests that such marriages as the younger brother marrying before the elder brother will cause his seed to be inappropriate and is an abdication of responsibility towards appropriate reproduction.⁹¹ The *Shatapatha Brahmana* dictates that killing an *atreyi*, according to one interpretation a woman fit to conceive, is equivalent to a *brunahatya* or aborticide. Jamison suggests that the term *atreyi* originally applied to a woman fit for conception and child-bearing whose fertility was violently interrupted as the sage Atri's mother's was. Later the term became associated with a legal provision which condemned violence against such a person.⁹² Killing such a woman was tantamount to the killing an embryo as well.

Patton concludes her analysis of mantras and rituals vis a vis miscarriages in early Sanskrit texts by arguing that the late Vedic texts show an increased anxiety over the potential loss of lineage, and in doing so 'wrest the embryo further and further away from the body of the mother'. Anxiety over the loss of an embryo is also anxiety over the loss of a learned brahmana, who has, as she points out, become the sole signification of the *garbha*.⁹³ She critiques the work of some 'feminist historians of religion' who celebrate the metaphorical transfer of a female body part into a larger, public, predominantly male, activity, and yet call it "inclusion." She instead terms the process a symbolic exclusion, whereby the person from whom the image is taken becomes less and less visible in the production of a new meaning for the image. The symbol is manipulated effectively to turn what was female into exclusively male and thus the meaning of the female is reduced to what the female is expected to produce.⁹⁴

This is a clear indication that women were 'reified', though Patton does not use the term in her essay. In her words, first they are reduced to 'their body parts and then into what they could provide as reproducers through the embryos that they bore in their wombs, even as they themselves were distanced from the product of their wombs'. Patton concludes: Through a series of metaphorical

linkages, the womb was no longer viewed as a part of a woman's body, and therefore as a kind of detached item, it was able to be controlled by the technology available at that time—that of the Vedic mantra.⁹⁵ In sum, textual authority in early India was mobilised effectively through mantras and appropriate rituals, in the service of greater control over the female body. As Gerda Lerner has pointed out, it is women's sexuality that is the basis for the reification of women, not the totality of their being; it is those body parts that reduce them to have a specific kind of value as reproducers that leads to their reification⁹⁶.

Appropriate rituals to reify women are complemented by prescriptions to regulate sexual desire and procreation according to changing social contexts; this is amply reflected in Brahmanical texts of the Vedic, late Vedic and Shastric traditions. The mythology on the subject is rich and complex, indicative of the multiplicity of possibilities and challenges in a transitional moment. Marriage and the begetting of children in the context of notions of the transfer of inherent qualities, changes in kin-clan organization and the bounding of social groups into specific social categories such as Brahmana and Kshatriya dictate greater regulation of the sexuality of both men and women but particularly women, more specifically the wife, making for different meanings of the way adultery is understood and defined in different cultures and at different times. Doniger draws attention to the fact that adultery is always assumed in India to be the husband, wife and her lover trio, not the husband and his lover, and is construed as a crime, an *adharmā* that causes pollution in a woman.⁹⁷

This notion developed over time because in the early Vedic texts we see that the lover can be both male and female. But as the scope and performance of rituals expanded the success of the ritual came to hinge upon the fidelity of the married woman who participated in the sacrifice with her husband, as we have already seen. Going beyond ritual efficacy, there are references to more human compulsions in the *Atharva Veda* which provides chants to render the lover of the wife impotent, presumably so that he does not impregnate her.⁹⁸ The danger of death represented by the young wife to her husband or her brother-in-law is, strategically, sought to be deflected upon her lover instead. Thus she is transformed from being a *patighni* or a *devaraghni* to a *jaraghni*, through appropriate mantras.⁹⁹

The learned Brahmana, in particular, is in danger, as an injunction tells us: one should not get familiar with the wife of a learned brahmana as it is likened

to someone else making a libation in one's sacrificial fire. To protect the son of a brahmana from such a danger particular verses may be chanted by him when he senses that his mother is going astray from the path of virtue so as to ensure that his mother's lover's seed does not impregnate her. The son, rather than the husband, seems to be at the centre of the danger posed by the mother's unregulated sexual conduct as he must make sure that he actually inherits the biological substance of his learned father.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps, concerns such as this were the context for the introduction of the rule of Svetaketu's law in the *Mahabharata* to be discussed below. Again, the harking back to earlier times within a narrative like the *Agganna Sutta* is notable. In concluding this segment, I find it useful to draw from the *Mahabharata*, and its evocation of certain sexual practices in the 'past' that have lapsed, and thus forgotten, but provide a rationale for changing sexual practices complicating the very idea of a stable notion of adultery, unlike the relative stability of later Brahmanical texts. For a historian, this is important, particularly in understanding transitions. The context for the statement that certain sexual practices that were regarded as 'lawful' in the 'ancient' past by Pandu, though they may seem reprehensible then, is the curse of death upon him if he consummates his sexual desire. This denies him sons for whom he yearns. Since Pandu wants sons but cannot actually procreate, he evokes past practices as he makes a rather unusual suggestion to his senior wife Kunti that she cohabit with some other male, appointed by him in his place, in order to beget children. The rationale for this unusual suggestion is summed up thus:

In the olden days, so we hear, said Pandu, women went uncloistered...they were their own mistresses who took their pleasure where it pleased them. [There was thus a time in the past when there were no fixed patterns of marriage and sexual partners were freely chosen]. 'Women,' said Pandu to Kunti in his recounting of the episode, 'were free to cohabit with anyone without a trace of sin; this was the ancient dharma—where women were not 'faithful' to their husbands] but were not 'lawless' for such was the law in olden days.¹⁰¹ Even today,' said Pandu, 'the animal creatures still follow this hoary law, without passion or hatred. This anciently witnessed law was honoured by the great seers and still prevails among the northern Kurus...for this is the eternal law that favours women [emphasis added]. But in the present world the present law

was laid down soon after...it was Svetaketu who laid down this rule among humankind.¹⁰²

According to Pandu, one day the brahmana boy Svetaketu, the son of Uddalaka, was witness to an occasion where the mother was led away for a sexual encounter by a brahmana man, not his father, in the very presence of his father. He led her away by the hand saying, 'Let us go'. The outraged Svetaketu saw this as an act of force, whereupon his father told him to hold his anger as this was very much the way sexual relationships were enacted; just as cows mated with heifers so did women and men. He said to Svetaketu:

Do not be angry, son. This is the eternal law. The women of all classes are uncloistered¹⁰³ on earth. Just as the cows do, so do the creatures each in its class. But Svetaketu, the seer's son, did not condone the law and laid down the present rule for men and women on earth, for humans but not for other creatures... and ever since the rule has stood...¹⁰⁴

So it was the enraged Svetaketu, whom Olivelle has characterized as the quintessential 'spoilt little brat' of Indian literature¹⁰⁵ (based on his other interventions, recounted in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chandogya Upanishad*) who according to Pandu, proceeded to lay down, for the first time, the rule of monogamy for women:

From this day onward [he ruled] a woman's faithlessness to her husband shall be equal to aborticide, an evil that shall bring on misery. Seducing a chaste and constant wife shall also be a sin on earth; and a wife who is enjoined by her husband to conceive a child and refuses shall incur the same evil. Thus [Pandu recounts] did Uddalaka's son Svetaketu *forcibly* [emphasis added] lay down this rule of the law in the olden days...[*Mahabharata*1.7.113.20]

The last injunction seems to have been added for good measure as it goes beyond the rule of monogamy for women and has implications for their sexual autonomy; not only did women lose their autonomy in the choice of partners but also in the arena of reproduction; it is a moment when the 'law' puts in place a structure of regulation that completes the takeover of women's bodies, turning them into reified beings. The rules are brought into society not by the

'aggrieved' husband, but by the son who is the future face of patriarchal norms and sexual regulation. Svetaketu's injunctions first put in monogamy for women and made the husband the owner of her sexuality, then contained other men from violating his monopoly over her, and finally made the husband the owner of her progeny. Ideologically, control over the entire process of reproduction was complete.

This summarised account of the shift in the law on sexual relationships provides us with pointers to changes in sexual practices from a 'natural' and ungoverned state of cohabitation to one where monogamy is laid down for women, as is the punishment for her refusal to bear a child, which is the purpose of sexual relations in the Shastric literature. The linking of the importance of childbearing—as the injunction against aborticide indicates, with the ruling of chastity for women, is also a stage in the development of social institutions as the paternity of the progeny could be ensured more definitively than under promiscuity—the stage suggested by the earlier sexual practices that Svetaketu specifically outlawed for the future.

Sexual autonomy and freely chosen sexual partnerships were ruled out, indicating an important shift in the regulating of sexual relationships. According to the new law laid down by Svetaketu, women must have only one sexual partner and remain faithful and obedient to him; this clearly marks an important 'moment' when women's reproductive potential is being bounded within a particular circle of men, closing off access to other men; on the face of it, this is a law to regulate men's access to women by privileging one set of men over others. But, at the same time, it is also denying women the possibility of sexual agency in a consensual relationship; it is also the first stage in institutionally creating a double standard of sexual morality in which women, as wives, bore the burden of the new sexual mores.¹⁰⁶

Before I conclude this segment of the essay, it might be pertinent to look at the way adultery—as defined by Doniger with the woman and the lover at the centre of the sexual tension—is central to the construction of the good woman trope as a counter to the sexually desiring woman, and the violence that is inherent in regulating women's sexual desires for men other than their husband. Even the slightest hint that wives have been unchaste brings a violent end to their lives. Two women, both significantly as wives of brahmanas, are protagonists who must be punished for displaying, or suggesting, sexual agency

which threatens the purity of their wombs: Ahalya and Renuka . Ahalya's story is the better known of the two as she was restored to life by the touch of Rama during the travels in his exile years. According to the legend, the extraordinarily beautiful Ahalya was fashioned by the Creator and Indra, the king of Gods immediately desired her for himself, as he was the most preeminent God and therefore considered himself entitled to her. The Creator however decided that the Rishi Gautama should have her because of his stability and great ascetic qualities. The sage took his sexual pleasure with her; but Indra, consumed with jealousy, raped her while Gautama was away from his hermitage. When Gautama returned and saw what had happened, he cursed Indra, but he also punished Ahalya who was to be no longer uniquely beautiful because it was that beauty and youth that had led her astray,¹⁰⁷ Another version in the *Ramayana* tells a different variant of the punishment of Ahalya: Indra appears before Ahalya in the guise of Gautama and propositions her for an immediate sexual encounter saying, ' men who want pleasure do not wait for a woman's fertile period'¹⁰⁸ [that is do not do it only for procreation] but take it when the urge comes on. And Ahalya, who knew this man in front of her was not her husband, still consented because she was sexually curious about the king of the Gods. They took their pleasure but the sage Gautama caught them out and cursed both of them. For Ahalya, the curse was that she become invisible to all creatures for a thousand years, living only on the wind till Rama came along and purified her: he would free her from greed and delusion and then she would be restored to the sage. The sage says:

You shall dwell in this ashram with nothing to eat, air your only food, suffering, lying on the ashes, and invisible to all creatures.¹⁰⁹

And to Indra he says:

Fool! For taking on my form and doing this thing that ought not to be done, you shall lose your testicles.¹¹⁰

Indra's testicles then fall to the ground. Later, however, the gods make it possible for Indra's potency to be restored through the grafting of a ram's testicles upon him and he continues to enjoy his sexual pleasures: Ahalya however remains 'dead' till Rama comes along and redeems her from her sins.

The narratives put together complement each other: Ahalya is stunningly beautiful and everyone desires her; the brahmana rishi Gautama gets her, the

King of Gods, Indra the warrior desires her and takes his sexual pleasure with her and both are cursed¹¹¹ though the violence done to Ahalya is greater and lasts longer and she must be purified before she can return to Gautama's possession of her. Adultery by the wife with her lover, whether or not with her consent, is punishable with at least a symbolic death as it threatens the social order of the Brahmanical tradition.

That the death could be more than symbolic death is the theme of a variant of the Ahalya, Gautama, Indra story in the *Mahabharata*¹¹²; this account is centred on the son of Ahalya and Gautama named Cirakarin, literally 'slow acting'. He is named thus because when Gautama discovers Indra's adulterous encounter with Ahalya, he is infuriated. In this version Indra is a guest, disguised as a brahmana, at Gautama's house and the story begins when the offending event has just occurred. When Gautama realizes that the guest/stranger has had sex with his wife, he explodes in rage and determines to kill her. He orders his son Cirakarin, a character who is introduced into this version and is not known from other versions, to perform this matricidal deed. Confused and unhappy at this command which presents him with a moral dilemma, Cirakarin simply disappears for a while. Finally, the father cools off and comes to the conclusion that Ahalya did not really commit any offence as Indra, disguised as a brahmana was a guest at her husband's house and the hospitality to the guest is a comprehensive rite with no qualifications. Unquestioning compliance is the norm for entertaining a brahmana guest and so Ahalya's lapse is not a lapse at all.

In this version of the Ahalya story in the *Mahabharata*, she is given no voice in the account¹¹³. She says nothing and is merely the 'subject' of a misdemeanour, the object of the command to the son to kill her for her wrong, and the source of a moral dilemma for the son whose 'rebellion' takes the form of stalling so that better sense might prevail. It is significant that in the final resolution where Gautama changes his mind and recasts the misdemeanour as a proper guest rite, the original dilemma faced by Cirakarin at being commanded to commit matricide is erased: it is not a dilemma for the *Mahabharata* as a text, as will be clear from the example discussed below. The story of Renuka in the *Mahabharata* is even more explicit: Renuka is a kshatriya princess, the daughter of a king given in marriage to the brahmana sage Jamadagni. She has five sons and is a chaste wife who brings water in wet mud everyday for her husband's ablutions, a power related to her chastity.

One day she sights a king and his queen making love in the water and is overcome by desire; immediately the special power she has is destroyed and the sage knows that she has fallen from virtue. Enraged he asks his sons to behead her; one by one, the four elder sons refuse and then it is the turn of the youngest son Parshurama to be asked. In a towering rage, the father says to his son:

'Slay this sinful mother, son. Have no fear,'¹¹⁴

The son obeys his father's command, striking off Renuka's head with an axe. Pleased by this loyal act of matricide, Jamadagni's anger vanishes and he offers Parshurama a boon. He asks for the revival of his mother, but more pertinently, that no one including the mother should remember her murder, and that no one would be touched by the evil. Whether the evil lies in the matricide or the lapse from fidelity is not quite clear, according to Doniger though Goldman regards the evil as the sin of matricide¹¹⁵. The evil in question is made more explicit in a South Indian re-telling as one where she can become someone who did not in fact lose her chastity at all, that is she did not display the erotic gaze¹¹⁶. Doniger analyses the implications of this myth:

[While] there is a male gaze in this these myths, there is also a powerful female gaze: it is by gazing, not being gazed at that Renuka discovers, and revels in her eroticism...she is a subject, not a mere object or victim of a male subject...[but] precisely because the male author of the text deems the female gaze unacceptable, Renuka must be beheaded, her gaze silenced as it were.¹¹⁷

The account of Renuka's beheading has many versions particularly in folk traditions of South India that have implications for understanding caste, but here I want to examine the myth from the point of view of matricide, otherwise regarded as a reprehensible and cardinal sin. Here, matricide becomes acceptable as punishment for a wife/mother's expression of desire for a man other than her husband. The main motifs in this account of matricide according to Goldman are: the mother Renuka is a sexually aggressive woman; the son Parashurama unhesitatingly kills his sinful mother under the father's command; all the other sons resist and are punished for their refusal; Parashurama is rewarded by his father for his act in the form of invincible skills in battle¹¹⁸which makes him eliminate the kshatriyas from the world many times over—ultimately

he is renowned for his extermination of whole lineages of kshatriyas down to the unborn embryos. And, we may note, the whole cycle began with the matricidal killing of the mother for the sin she had committed in harbouring, for a moment, an 'adulterous' desire.¹¹⁹

III

Textual-Sexual Transitions: The Reification of Women in the Mahabharata

As a text, the *Mahabharata* has been described as the strongest link between the 'old and the new' and as a work of imagination that reflects transitions most fruitfully and faithfully.¹²⁰ The bards who first created this work and then recited it wove together a remarkably coherent fabric consisting of symbols and themes to convey their fundamental concerns. Despite its development and elaboration over many centuries¹²¹, it succeeds in making its narrative and didactic portions hang together. The central theme of the epic, according to Jani, dwells on twin concerns: the human state as governed by desires, and its corollary, man's subservience to rule and principle.¹²²

All the conflicts in the text emanate from these two principles which themselves are in conflict with each other; the basic conflict that drives the narrative forward is set in a moment of political change as society is moving from kin-clan units to kingdoms; of changes in the social formation; changes in the basis of production with land increasingly becoming a critical resource over which a fraternal conflict between two segments of a lineage leads to war and the near extinction of the whole lineage.¹²³ The kshatriyas and the kshatriya ethic therefore dominate the text and retain their narrative centrality despite massive brahmanisation, evident in its elaboration.¹²⁴

From my viewpoint, this process of elaboration, while retaining its central core narrative, is useful as the layering of the text also reflects a range of social practices, including sexual and reproductive practices that are critical to the narrative as I shall show in the rest of this essay, and in a larger study that is underway.¹²⁵ The text shows a decided tendency of placing didactic concerns over the narrative and yet, for an ethics aspiring text it nevertheless documents huge variations in sexual practices without being condemnatory. At the same

time the range of practices come to be overlaid by the narrowing frames wherein the ethical and didactic ultimately come to be defined *ideologically* to exclude issues of reproduction: that is, what may appear to be contradictions between reproductive practices that ensure the survival of the lineage, and the setting into place of a more structured set of rules for sexual governance do not lead to the raising of fundamental ethical questions in the way the killing of kin, or lying, or killing in violation of kshatriya codes, acquires in the text.

Diversity of sexual practices are explained or resolved at an instrumental level by taking recourse to the theory of *apaddharma* (or the law of distress), rather than being resolved in the domain of ethics. Let me elaborate: there are four important questions raised in the text by four protagonists; Svetaketu questions the origin of marriage as part of intellectual inquiry; Yudhishtra questions the rationale for the state, Arjuna questions the Kshatriya duty to fight and Janaka questions worldly life.¹²⁶ As the text unravels, the first question gets subsumed, indeed it disappears, and the later three questions are explored in some depth at different levels and at different points in the text.

My question is: why should this be so when it is very evident that issues of reproduction, sexual desire and sexual conflict are at the heart of the narrative, and actually move the narrative forward in fundamental ways? Is it that questions of reproduction cannot generate great philosophical or political or moral issues in the minds of the composers (as paradigms for transition cannot be gendered meaningfully in today's ideological concerns, in the meta-narrative frameworks of history)? How do we explain the text's own narrative ambivalence in mentioning such a range of marriage and reproductive practices and then dropping them off from further attention—indeed obscuring some of the issues that leave their mark on the text by creating moments of dramatic intensity but then disappearing as the great questions—of politics, the state, dharma and moksa get taken up in whole segments of discourse emanating from the issues raised by the great male protagonists of the text? Why does Bhishma expound on the state—even as he lies dying— but not on the abduction of the Kasi princesses, or of the wrong he did to Amba despite the fact that the narrative does dwell on Amba's penance and rebirth to seek revenge for the wrong done to her? The text creates its own hierarchy of issues and mutes the possibility of engaging with others,¹²⁷ and yet that is what we now need to do—engage with the text to uncover the 'story' of the histories of marriage, sexuality and reproduction. I will, in this segment of the essay, look specifically

at the practice of the abduction of women as brides, a practice specially permitted, even celebrated as desirable, to/for the kshatriyas.

The text of the *Mahabharata* is already familiar with the famous classification of eight types of marriages of the *Dharmasutras* and the *Dharmashastras* [1. 7.96]. This indicates that there is a normative structure of rules that govern marriage and reproduction along with the injunctions against miscegeny and for endogamous marriages. The archaic layering of the text, which depicts a kind of promiscuity and multiple ways of reproducing both at the mythical and real level, is accompanied by more socially regulated pattern of marriages. The eight types of marriages arranged hierarchically might, therefore, suggest that an orderly system of the exchange of women is in place and that it has evolved as a consensual arrangement between men, or at least some groups of men, and that they are committed to upholding its premises. Whether women were a part of this development is not very clear and is an issue that requires further examination. If we look at the definition provided by Levi-Strauss it does not appear to be important or relevant to the actual system in place:

The total relationship of exchange, which constitutes marriage, is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men and the woman figures only as one of the objects of exchange, not as one of the partners. This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into consideration, as [maybe] the case. In acquiescing to the proposed union she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place, she cannot alter its nature¹²⁸.

While the above definition and its implications are important and useful in thinking about marriage and reproductive practices, in the *Mahabharata* one of the eight forms outlined as proper for the kshatriya caste, the raksasa form, presents us with some significant aspects of unsettled or unresolved questions on the 'orderly' transfer of women between two sets of men. I will now turn to the narratives of abduction of brides in the *Mahabharata*, with a particular focus on Bhishma's abduction of the three Kasi princesses, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, but also the abductions of Subhadra, and Rukmini, abducted by Arjuna and Krsna respectively.

The *Adi parvan* of the *Mahabharata*, its first book, serves as a summarised narration of the events leading up to the great war elaborated in the remainder

of the text, and it also dwells on the history of the lineage caught up in a fratricidal war among cousins. It plots the ancestry of the main lineage, as well as of many of its other protagonists, and provides us with a mine of information on sexual practices as the main lineage of the Bharatas itself goes through many moments of near death before desperate measures are taken to keep the reproduction of the lineage, and thus of political power itself, going. This threatened extinction frames the analysis that I offer in this paper.¹²⁹

The description of kings and their heroic exploits, the rivalries among Gods, demons and men proceed narratively in a manner that does not in any way lead up to the Mahabharata war or the tensions that fuelled it, until we get to the celibate Bhishma's acts of match-making for his younger brother, upon whom the entire onus of reproduction falls, as he is the sole surviving son who can reproduce the Kurus. The anxiety on Bhishma's part may be doubled as he has earlier chosen to subject himself to a self-denying vow, thereby excluding him from kingship, and also reproduction so that his stepmother Satyawati's son's line can, with assuredness, inherit the throne. This is a pre-condition set by Satyawati's father for Bhishma's father's consummation of his desire for her.

With one of her two sons already dead, all hopes are pinned on Vichitravirya, the second son, so when he reaches manhood—the text makes explicit that he has reached manhood—Bhishma decides to act decisively, with his step mother's approval, to bring in brides (in the plural to make sure that there will be sons). He decides to attend the *svayamvara*¹³⁰ of the Kasi princesses and he pre-empted the *svayamvara*—the possible expression of choice by the maidens- and abducts all three princesses. We may note that even though Vichitravirya has reached manhood, it is not he who attends the *svayamvara* but the elder step-brother, the archetypal brave and invincible kshatriya hero of the Mahabharata who executes the abduction of the princesses. The 'celibate' Bhishma places all three princesses in his chariot and drives off.¹³¹

As Fitzgerald points out this is one of the *defining* acts of his life and career in the *Mahabharata* as it has enormous implications for Bhishma and the unfolding of the heroic epic.¹³² The passage in the text is thick with description of the event:

Bhishma then came to hear that the king of the Kasis had three daughters, beautiful as *apsaras*, who all three were to *choose* their own husbands. So with his mother's consent, the great

chariot warrior, clad in his armor, set out with a single chariot for the city of Benares. There [he] saw prosperous princes assemble from all directions and he saw the maidens themselves. As the bards proclaimed the names of the princes by the thousands, the lordly Bhisma himself put in his claim for the maidens.

With a thunderous voice Bhisma, great swordsman, said to the kshatriyas as he lifted the girls on to his chariot, " the wise declare that girls may be given to men of virtue who have been invited, or they will be decked with ornaments; or a dowry is proffered according to wealth. Others may marry off their daughters with a pair of cows. Others again give them for a negotiated price, *while others till force their leave by force.* Others lie with a girl that is taken off guard. And others find for themselves. Now know that this present marriage is the eighth that the sages recall—the bridegroom choice, which the kshatriyas praise. But the students of the law hold that that *bride is the best who is carried off by force.*¹³³ So princes, I am ready to carry these maidens off by force! Now strive with all your might to defeat me or be defeated: here I stand princes, resolved on battle!"¹³⁴

After thus challenging the kshatriyas *and the king of Kasis*, the mighty Kuru lifted all three girls on his chariot and drove swiftly off, abducting the girls.¹³⁵

Before we move on to the rest of the description in this first telling of the abduction¹³⁶ of the princesses of Kasi it is important to deduce what is happening in this description. Bhisma acts on behalf of his brother but there is nothing in his declaration to the assembly of kshatriyas that indicates that he is not acting on his own behalf—indeed the narrative suggests that he is claiming them for himself; further he cites eight modes of marriage, slightly different from Manu's enumeration but he proclaims the legality of the act of abduction by claiming that the best bride is the one who is carried off by force. He does not say the best kshatriya bride is one who is carried off by force, nor that abduction is the best for kshatriyas—indeed he has stated earlier that the kshatriyas praise the *svayamvara*—the bridegroom choice, and observe that law. And yet the bride abducted by force is the best: that would be counter to 'choice' and yet the wise and law knowing Bhisma seems to see no contradiction in what he states. Is the *svayamvara* a mere ritual enactment, a way of staging a tournament to

act as a prop for ritualized heroic action that actually has nothing to do with choice, or is the *svayamvara* a later development that seeks to take precedence over abduction, or is it meant to regulate forceful capture by providing a formal occasion for its enactment? In this context we may point out that there are other examples of abduction at the time of the *svayamvara*, to be discussed below, as also other cases of abduction enacted by all the great heroes in the *Mahabharata*. Is this part of the consensual culture of the kshatriyas, or is this a disruption of emerging norms of the exchange of women spearheaded by the kshatriyas as part of the imperatives of their lives in which death is imminent and reproduction an urgent necessity for the survival of the lineage. It is significant that Bhisma's challenge is proclaimed to include the father of the girls the King of Kasi himself. What seems to be more than clear here is that the princesses are not 'choosing' their grooms (even if some of the princesses think they are like Amba did as we shall see below), individually or collectively; they are being turned into prizes offered in a 'ritual' of heroic action, reduced to mere 'things' who cannot determine the course of their lives; in Levi Strauss's formulation 'they cannot alter the nature of the transaction' even if all the men are agreed on the acceptability of abduction, and of the fight –or the ritualized battle— that ensues between the various competitors.

Two scholars have turned their attention to abductions of brides as a mode of acquiring wives among the kshatriyas: Minoru Hara¹³⁷ and Cynthia Talbot¹³⁸. I do not have access to the argument in the original in the case of Cynthia Talbot, only Madhav Deshpande's summarizing of it, but it appears to me that while both scholars have opened up an important issue on the kshatriya practice of acquiring brides by capture, they stick too closely to the representation of the kshatriya ethic which abhors taking anything as a gift (including women) as they are the givers of gifts never its takers. Let us take the argument of the former: Hara begins by making a distinction between the *raksasa* (abduction) from the *asura*—which entails 'bribery' as he puts it, and *paisaca*, which involves trickery, suggesting that the latter two are abhorrent to the kshatriya ethic. *Raksasa* instead is approved exclusively for the kshatriya caste. He then cites the definition of *raksasa* from Manu:

The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home while she cries and weeps, after having slain and wounded her kinsmen, and broken their houses is called *raksasa*.¹³⁹

As he points out, evident in the definition is the forcible abduction of the girl, the use of violence entailing even the murder of her guardians. He goes on to cite other scholars like L. Sternbach¹⁴⁰ who explain the practice as a 'remnant of a past when invaders forcibly captured a woman, or plundered princesses of their enemy's country as part of their booty', an explanation that Hara rejects. Instead he goes on to examine aspects of kshatriya culture and ethic wherein kshatriyas are defined as those who 'possess the power of arms', their dharma as lying beyond the ordinary sense of morality—*nirmalyada*—and to whom the word *dehi*—'give' is unknown.¹⁴¹ The implied notion of giving in *Brahma*, *Daiva*, *Arsha*, and *Prajapatya* where the father gives the girl to her husband is not therefore kosher. That is, the idea of transfer of guardianship and control, gifted by the father to the husband, implied in *dana* is not compatible with the kshatriya dharma, and is 'disgraceful' to their pride¹⁴². But then Hara poses the question (and answers it): how then do they get what they want? By resorting to their kshatriya dharma and *taking* what they want by using physical force. The Kshatriya dharma commends that warrior kings should resort to violence for the possession of the desired object whether it be land or women, defeat and kill the possessor of the property or its guardian. He also reminds us that the earth that king's wish to possess is portrayed as a woman which stands under the guardianship of the previous possessor, the rival king; the idea of a negotiated transfer of guardianship is contradictory to this code; therefore a kshatriya must, ideally, *forcibly* take the desired woman, not have her given to him.¹⁴³ Talbot repeats these arguments, but also adds that in the later layers of the *Mahabharata* there is an attempt to over-write the kshatriya ethic, and its practice of capturing brides, by aligning it with more normative forms of marriage. This is achieved by Brahmanising the abduction, i.e. by making the abduction, along with its show of prowess, end in a marriage ritual where the bride is given away through a 'proper' *kanyadana* by her male guardian.¹⁴⁴ Both arguments are interesting and useful to my analysis of the central theme of this essay. I think, however, that they are only a partial explanation of the relationship of abduction of brides to Kshatriya marriage practices. My position will become clearer as I proceed with the account of the *forcible* capturing of the princesses of Kasi *from the public hall where the svayamvara is to be held*, a point that neither Hara nor Talbot seem to address. We need to bear in mind Bhishma's own distinction between *svayamvara*, which he describes as a kshatriya practice, and the capture by force which is a distinct but lawful way

of acquiring women for marriage for kshatriyas, not to be collapsed within the *svayamvara*.

Let us return to the continuing description of the abduction in the text when the princes respond to Bhisma's challenge:

Indignantly, all the princes rose in a body, feeling their muscles and grinding their teeth...the champions wrathfully and indignantly...dashed to their chariots and leapt on them...brandishing their arms, they went in pursuit of the Kuru... and a battle began between him and them [the description makes sure that this is a real battle, not a mere ritual]...and when he had defeated them in battle the Bharata drove with the girls towards the Bharatas. Then the warlike King Salva...set upon Bhisma from behind in the battle, like a bull elephant that, king of his herd, attacks with his tusks a rival in his rear, when he is mounting an elephant cow in heat. "Stay, lecher, stay," ¹⁴⁵the King shouted at Bhisma...driven by his fury... enraged by these words, blazing with anger ...Bhisma followed the law of kshatriyas, and fought back; others became spectators now at the encounter of Salva and Bhisma. Like two roaring powerful bulls before a cow in heat they turned on each other with all their strength and might...¹⁴⁶

This is a striking passage that goes beyond a mere rhetorical description of kshatriya valour; it is soaked with sexual tension between the two warring protagonists Bhisma and Salva seeking to gain control of the object of their desire as the charge of lechery makes clear. What is notable is the casual manner in which Salva, is introduced; there is nothing in this account to link Salva to the princesses, Amba in particular. To defuse the metaphorical description of sexual tension between Bhisma and Salva, likened to bull elephants seeking to gain sole control over a cow elephant 'in heat', we get a sanitised account thereafter of the 'proper behaviour' of Bhisma as he conducts the daughters of the King of Kasi to Hastinapura, treating them like 'daughters-law, or younger sisters, or daughters'! Yet, it is only when all the three abducted princesses have reached Hastinapura and are being handed over in marriage to Vichitravirya,¹⁴⁷ and wedding preparations are on, that Amba, the eldest of the three princesses, reveals her own feelings in the matter. She says: 'in my

heart I had chosen, Salva, the King of Saubha to be my husband and he had chosen me; and it was also my father's wish. I was to have elected him at the bridegroom choice.' These words are spoken at an assembly of brahmanas, making it a public declaration. The passage then tells us that Bhishma therefore decided to give her 'leave to depart'. We hear nothing more of Amba or what happened to her in this account as the text suddenly glides on to the marriage of the two younger princesses, and the pleasures they experience with Vichitravirya for many years (without success at reproducing the lineage though) till he dies, when the narrative moves on to a second crisis for the Kuru lineage: the actual and much feared end of the Kuru lineage.

What is striking in the summarised account—which is focused on the history of marriage and reproduction of the Kurus is that—Amba and Salva are cardboard figures whose anger and humiliation at the disruption of their plans to marry, to be made public at the *svayamvara*, awaits narration till the recounting of that experience in Book Five. There we get a description of what actually happened to Amba and how she swore to revenge herself against Bhishma for the wrong he did to her. Chronologically the abduction of Amba by Bhishma provides the first moment of conflict in Kuru marriages, and *precedes* the rivalry between the Dharatarashtras, the children of Dhritarashtra, and the Pandavas, which leads to the war. It is an act that will lead ultimately to Bhishma's death, to Amba's penance, rebirth and change of sex to be the instrument of his death. So why is the first account so brief, and why does it gloss over later happenings? Further, what are the elements that we do find included in the narrative that point to the significance of the abduction of the three princesses, Amba in particular?

It is clear that the *svayamvara* is meant to be the occasion when Amba will choose Salva, which is to be a mutually consensual expression of desire and its fulfillment: fortunately it also has the approval of the father of the bride. But Bhishma has other plans; He forcefully captures all three girls and, even if he does not know about her love for Salva, in effect, he has shown contempt for the notion of choice in the *svayamvara*. In particular, he has thwarted the possible assertion of sexual agency, formally embedded in the idea of marriage by choice. He has simply asserted brute power in the capture of the princesses from the hall where the choice of the princesses is to be made public and taken the girls away from under the nose of the father and other contenders for their hands; he has captured by force and 'manly virility' the reproductive

potential of the blue-blooded Kasi princesses. This is an open challenge to the possible assertion of choice in which Vichitravirya would not be anywhere—he is not even around—so that the dissolute Kuru King could have many wombs to produce sons from. The aggression of the moment is fully captured even in this short version of the abduction and is clearly evident in the attack of and the defense of the abduction by Bhisma. We know from the account later on in the passage why Salva should be infuriated as he is a contender for Amba, and why the moment is so sexually charged with references to two bull elephants fighting over a cow elephant in heat. There is more than kshatriya ethic and their abhorrence for getting something as a gift, even a woman in marriage, as 'dana', working itself out in this passage.

The importance of the *raksasa* form of marriage, and the abduction of princesses as brides is further borne out in the case of Arjuna's abduction of Subhadra, who becomes his junior wife; unlike Arjuna's other marriages where the brides stay on in their natal homes, she moves into the Pandava household. The abduction is set in the surroundings of Dvaraka where Krishna and Arjuna are spending time together. They attend a festival where Arjuna chances upon Subhadra, and is immediately smitten; Krishna, whose sister she is, notices his friend's condition and suggests that Arjuna should simply abduct her without any attempts at seeking anybody's prior approval. This is what he says:

The [appropriate form of] Kshatriya marriage is the *svayamvara* [bridegroom choice]. But that is dubious Partha, since one's own sentiments have no influence on the outcome. Forcible abduction is also approved as a ground of marriage for kshatriyas who are champions, the law-wise know. Abduct my beautiful sister by force, *for who would know her designs at a bridegroom choice* [Emphasis added, *Mahabharata* 1 .17.211].

The rationale for the abduction is striking: what Krishna, the brother of the bride is saying—and mind you he is the all-knowing Lord—is that if it is left to the woman to choose, the outcome cannot be predicted; its too risky as the choice could fall on anyone and so he tells Arjuna that its not only expedient, but is necessary, to preempt choice and leave nothing to a woman's wishes.¹⁴⁸ Advised thus by Krishna, Arjuna abducts Subhadra—rushing at her forcefully as she is out in the open worshipping the Mount Raivartaka. Her armed guards [women have to be under armed escort at all times if they re in public spaces?]

raise an alarm and sound the war drum as everyone else in the clan rush to take up their arms, leaving their eating and drinking aside. Balarama, the elder brother, is furious at this betrayal of guest ethics saying, 'what man would break the dish that he had eaten off. Can I forgive that he has trodden on my head?' Ultimately Krishna calms Balarama and defends Arjuna's action; he says:

He [Arjuna] judged that he could not win at a bridegroom choice...I believe Arjuna saw these difficulties and hence abducted Subhadra [*Mahabharata* 1.17.212, Butanein Vol I, p. 408].

Using other arguments like the utility of the alliance between the Vrishnis and the Pandavas, Krishna settles the matter through diplomacy; finally Arjuna returns with Subhadra to be formally married with appropriate rites and is given a great deal of wealth when he and Subhadra return to Indraprastha. When Abhimanyu is born there are joyous celebrations and much gift-giving by Yudhishtra. None of the five sons born to Draupadi by the five brothers merits a similar description. There is not a word in the account on Subhadra's opinion on the abduction although the text does tell us that she won over Draupadi (who is hardly pleased with this marriage of Arjuna's) turning herself into a cowherd girl when she enters the joint household and serving her senior co-wife with diligence and humility. But there is a suggestion in the narrative that Subhadra would not have chosen him, perhaps because he was already married and therefore abduction was the most effective means of consummating Arjuna's desire for her.

It has been argued that although not as important to the central heroic tale as the winning of Draupadi at the *svayamvara* and the Pandava brothers' joint marriage to her, the marriage to Subhadra is extremely significant: it provides some insight into the composition of the epic as a whole since it is a connecting link between Arjuna and Janamejaya at whose *sattr*a the Mahabharata is being recited.¹⁴⁹ It is Arjuna and Subhadra's son Abhimanyu who fathers Parikshit who in turn fathers Janamejaya. The very name of Subhadra means 'glorious' 'auspicious' and according to Katz suggests that she too is a fertility figure, much like Sri (Draupadi) in character.¹⁵⁰ Thus Arjuna's marriage to Subhadra, a *raksasa* marriage by abduction which is a typical heroic feat in Indo European literature, is the marriage through which the Kuru

lineage survives as all of Draupadi's sons by the Pandava brothers are killed in the night raid at the end of the Mahabharata war. Apart from securing the lineage and successfully reproducing a contender for claiming and gaining political power, the marriage by abduction re-cements the alliance between the Pandavas and the Vrishnis since they are already related through Kunti, who is the paternal aunt of Krishna, making for a more congenial variant of cousinly relations. (Arjuna/Pandavas are cousins of Krishna, and therefore of Subhadra herself.) The Pandava's thus acquire their staunchest supporter for the future war as a member of their kin circle, furthering their relationship by birth to one by marriage too. No wonder then that the text speaks of the birth of Abhimanyu, who also becomes the favourite nephew of Krishna, metaphorically thus:

As fire begotten at a sacrifice upon the womb of a Sami tree
block that is dulled the superior warrior begotten on the Satvata
woman by Dhananjaya...
[*Mahabharata*.1. 213. 22].

Marriage by capture has yielded the very survival of the lineage of the Pandavas, even as death and destruction loom darkly on the horizon.¹⁵¹

Not all abductions end happily, are properly sanctified by rituals, and produce heroic sons as the marriage of Arjuna and Subhadra did. The facilitation and the use of strategic diplomacy by the Lord himself has meant a smooth passage for Arjuna from being abductor to becoming progenitor of the lineage that survives the great war. But what happens when the Lord himself is the abductor? The 'wronged' man could end up being killed as does Sisupala to whom Rukmini is being given in marriage by her guardians—her brother and her father—when Krishna abducts her, from the marriage hall. A brilliant analysis by Georges Dumézil¹⁵² of Sisupala is enabling in seeing underlying patterns in the heroic exploits of warriors in Indo-European myths and epics. As he points out Sisupala is an incidental character in the *Mahabharata* who appears only to contest Krishna's special honouring after Bhishma declares him to be most worthy guest present in the assembly of kings before Yudhishtra performs the *rajasuya*, his royal consecration. Significantly Sisupala taunts Bhishma with the claims of a counter hero—Salya who he regards as more worthy of genuine honour. Further, Sisupala actually charges Bhishma with impotence on the one hand and the abduction of Amba on the other. He says:

If you think yourself wise, knowing the law, why did you abduct Amba who loved another? Your brother Vichitravirya followed the conduct of the good: the king did not seek the girl you abducted, Bhishma, he on whose wives another had to beget offspring for you, and not according to the ways of the strict, while you winked thinking yourself wise. For you have no law Bhishma! Your celibacy is a lie¹⁵³ that you maintain either from stupidity or from impotence, no doubt of that! [*Mahabharata* 2.26.38: 20-25].¹⁵⁴

But before the slanging match descends any further rather dramatically, and without too much reason, Krsna uses his discus to finish Sisupala off. As antecedents we are told that the two are close kin—they too are cousins, so where does the tension lie? The text casts Sisupala as mounting the first set of offences against Krsna and his family: he strikes at their kingdom and burns down Dvaraka when Krsna is away; he attacks the clan members, and disrupts the horse sacrifice and, worst of all, he abducts womenfolk of Krsna's household twice over as they are traveling to join their betrothed's/husbands in the conjugal household; in the second abduction, like Indra, he uses trickery to commit a sexual sin on a woman promised to a kshatriya prince: in effect he has acted in an unwarrior-like fashion by not striking openly; he has mounted an attack upon the religious observances of Krsna's family, and the two sexual-sin attacks are made upon women of the king's family or those placed under his protection. These charges are enumerated by Krsna to the hall full of kings before he kills Sisupala as part of the litany of 100 offences committed by Sisupala that Krsna has promised his aunt, Sisupala's mother, the total number of offences he will forgive. But, is Sisupala the first offender in this ongoing war between the two? From the standpoint of the plot the innate opposition between the two as incarnations of a God and a demon is reinforced and even overshadowed by an enmity whose cause is 'fortuitous and earthly, a masculine rivalry over a pretty girl.'¹⁵⁵ Before Krsna hurls the discus on him he hurls the following abuse: 'This fool, who must want to die, once proposed himself for Rukmini, but the fool no more obtained her than a sudra a hearing of the Veda.'

At this Sisupala laughs back defiantly:

Have you no shame at all Krsna, that you broadcast in assemblies before these kings, that your Rukmini was another man's first? For what self-respecting man but you would

broadcast to the strict that his wife had belonged to another,
Madhusudana? [*Mahabharata* 2.26.42:19-20].

As Dumézil states¹⁵⁶ this rivalry of the two men is known to the readers/listeners from elsewhere: The king of the Vidharbhas had a son Rukmin and a very beautiful daughter Rukmini. Krsna and Rukmini loved each other but Rukmin, the brother, had a grudge against Krsna and did not want her to be given to him. Urged by Jarasandha, the father and son gave Rukmini to Sisupala. As if nothing had happened Krsna came to attend his rival's wedding, abducted the girl from the middle of the ceremony, and married her. Such then was the conflict of passions that drove the inimical relationship between the two; each of them considered himself provoked by the other. Dumézil finds justifications for both to feel aggrieved; Krsna because the girl's male kin gave her away to a rival and Sisupala because she was spirited away from him after she was legally and 'correctly' received by him from her guardians.¹⁵⁷ Rukmini's abduction, we can see, was central to the tension between these two cousins which ends only with the killing of one by the other; in between the retaliatory action by the aggrieved Sisupala had sought to hit back at Krsna and his family by abducting women belonging to the Vrsni clan. Here too, while we are informed by the narrative that Rukmini loved Krsna, we can also see that the bride is a prize in the hands of two warring sets of men; there is no consensual and 'orderly' transfer of the woman in question from one set of people to another. We can also see why Krsna almost incites Arjuna to abduct Subhadra since that is the surest way of obtaining what you desire.

Dumézil concludes his discussion of the Sisupala-Krsna confrontation with the following observation:

Usually the 'second causes' which the authors of the *Mahabharata* have superimposed on the deep causes arising from the translation of a mythology into an epic, betray themselves as ad hoc inventions, often mediocre and incommensurate with what is presented as their consequences [as for example Kunti's injunction to her sons whereby the virtuous Draupadi finds herself committed to a polyandrous marriage]. One might think that also for the conflict of Krsna and Sisupala over Rukmini...¹⁵⁸

Unfortunately, the explanation for the conflict where the abduction is critical to the animosity is treated merely as an overt enactment of a more deep rooted contradiction between two brothers, binary opposites who are born and reborn as Hiranyakashipu and Narasimha, Ravana and Rama, and finally as Sisupala and Krsna; this in turn takes us to the ongoing tension between the gods Rudra and Visnu emptying the abduction of its elemental, ethical and social meanings. The text overwrites its own conflicts by recasting them as longstanding tensions and its resolutions in the domain of religion and philosophy, as do our finest scholars when they read the text *only* along the grain of its stated design, however elevated that might be. Perhaps we may never uncover the 'deep causes' in the realm of social meanings that I might be looking for. Be that as it may, before closing this paper we need to return to the Amba story to explore how the text does provide one chain of consequences that followed from the approved raksasa /bride by capture form of marriage, considered lawful for kshatriyas—as lawful as the svayamvara or marriage by concourse—went horribly wrong.

In Book Five of the *Mahabharata* the narrative of Amba suddenly reappears. The occasion is Bhisma's explanation of why he will not fight Sikhandin, who is actually a woman, Amba reborn to venge herself on Bhisma, and it goes against his manly warrior ethic to fight a woman— they are obviously meant for abduction not for combat, merely a prize for capture by virile kshatriya heroes. He proceeds to recount the main happenings preceding and following the abduction and this is his gloss on the event: before he goes off to the svayamvara he has been blessed by the mother whose lineage he is so eager to ensure, and when he returns with the three princesses he says to her 'I have won these daughters of the king of Kasi for Vicitravirya, at the price of bravery by defeating the kings.' The prize and battle dimension is well bought out in the description. He recounts his exploits colourfully saying that as he battled and fended off the kings who had gathered there (which does not include Salva in this description) he laughed loudly, clearly enjoying the contest. But when Amba declares that it would be improper to force her to dwell in the house of the Kurus since she loved Salva, and that he would be waiting for her, Bhisma decides to send her back. Unfortunately King Salva refuses to accept her as his wife, regarding her as belonging by right to the abductor, [he tells Amba, addressing her as a fair hipped woman, that she is now Bhisma's chattel].¹⁵⁹ He obviously fears the wrath of Bhisma, which he has personally experienced

according to the earlier telling in Book One, escaping narrowly with his life after his charioteer is felled in the battle. But Amba continues to plead with Salva, saying:

I was not happily abducted by Bhisma...he abducted me by force, in tears after putting the kings to flight. Love me who loves you, an innocent girl...I have heard that Bhisma's undertaking was intended for his brother... to whom he has given my sisters, Ambika and Ambalika. I swear that I speak the truth. Love me, a girl come to you on her own, not as another man's woman, hoping for your grace [*Mahabharata* 5. 60.172].

As Bhisma's recounting proceeds he seems happy to show passing sympathy for Amba's hapless situation, and even happier to condemn Salva's 'cruel' rejection of the Kasi King's daughter, whom he says Salva cast off like a snake does its skin. The narrative goes on to build a picture of her pitiable condition, angry, humiliated, and tearful. Amba cannot go back to her father and her own people; her father, she bemoans, has dangled her like a harlot for some bride price and we are not sure what this means unless the capture of the bride is regarded as a form of bride price. She proceeds to curse her father, herself, King Salva, Bhisma and the Vidhata, the placer, all of whom carry the blame for her plight, but she resolves to seek revenge from Bhisma who was the 'beginning' of her misfortunes. So she proceeds to prepare herself through austerities for battle. She goes to hermitages, meets many ascetics, is chanced upon by her maternal grandfather who shares her outraged grief. But none of these wise men can come up with a resolution of what is to happen to her as a woman who is cast out from the social world of the life of a princess. Finally the grandfather tells her to appeal to that great avenger against the wrongs of the kshatriyas, Rama Jamadagnya who has wiped out the kshatriyas twenty two times from the face of the earth.

Now here we come upon a point in the text where the narrative could have melded the anger of the brahmanas against the violence used by the kshatriyas to force their will on everyone including the brahmanas when it suits them, and the anger of a woman, a wronged Kshatriya princess, carried away like a 'piece of chattel'—these are Salva's words—to pursue a great ethical battle between right and wrong,¹⁶⁰ between the righteous and the demoniac, between

Amba and her abductor Bhisma for destroying her life and turning her into a thing. But the text does not do this: Jamadagnya hints at why this cannot happen within the framework of the choices he lives by and the text upholds. When Amba requests him to kill Bhisma, initially he responds by saying, 'woman of the Kasis, I do not willingly take up weapons other than in the cause of scholars of the Brahman'.¹⁶¹ Then he proceeds to offer to mediate on her behalf repeating his dictum 'I will not take up arms in any way except at the behest of the brahmanas. That is my covenant.'¹⁶² Rejecting a mere apology Amba persists with her desire for a more effective redressal of her grievance until another brahmana seeks to appeal to Jamadagnya on her behalf. Finally a posse of brahmanas accompanies Rama Jamadagnya and Amba to meet Bhisma but Bhisma is unrelenting and makes the humiliation of Amba worse as he abdicates responsibility for any harm done to Amba. Rama asks Bhisma what prompted him to wrong her doubly first by abducting her, even as she is the daughter of the king of Kasi, against her will, and then in letting her go thus causing her to fall in merit: for who could approach her once he had touched her [the physicality of the act of abduction is evident]. The rejection by Salva follows this 'impurity' and hangs her in a limbo as neither wife nor daughter, so he orders that Bhisma take her back. But Bhisma continues to refuse saying that he has relinquished her because,

What man who knows the perilous flaws of women will ever
allow a woman in love with another man to lodge in his house
like a snake? [*Mahabharata* 5.60.178.20].

It is clear that Bhisma is unwilling to take her back, even for Vicitravirya for whom he abducted her in the first place. 'There is no way I can give her to now to my brother' Bhisma tells Rama, since she has shown herself to be an unwilling partner for marriage to him; she cannot be trusted to serve the goals of reproducing heirs for the Kuru lineage; her claim to sexual autonomy and choice have made her unfit to be incorporated into the house of her very abductors.¹⁶³ This case of abduction, otherwise regarded as a perfectly proper act for the kshatriyas, goes horribly wrong. It goes wrong because Amba thinks that the *svayamvara* is actually an occasion where a bride can express choice,¹⁶⁴ not be a sham tournament to display kshatriya power. Further, there is a sub text here to the main text describing the abduction and its consequences: abductions are not acceptable to some women and perhaps also to some men, who may be rooting for a more orderly exchange of women, of which we see

many examples among kshatriya families cementing political alliances and building networks of various kinds which come in handy when battles have to be fought and empires built. Thus, instead of a kshatriya-brahmana alliance that could have been cemented to redress Amba's grievances by the patriarchs of her day the entire episode, as recounted by Bhishma, turns the occasion into a moment when Bhishma's invincibility is proved against Jamadagnya who does finally engage in battle but merely to provide a heroic prop for Bhishma's great valour. At the end of the great battle, described at great length, Jamadagnya declares his failure to be able to help Amba: He says,

Radiant woman, in full view of these people I have exhibited great manly prowess to the outmost of my power. But I am not able to surpass in battle that foremost of armsmen, Bhishma, this is the limit of my power...Go now woman wherever you wish...throw yourself at Bhishma's mercy, there is no other course for you to take...[Vol. 5, p.518]

Tossed back to seek the charity of Bhishma, the very man who wronged her by that great avenger of ksatriyas and the great upholder of dharma, Amba responds,

On no condition whatever shall I go back to Bhishma again. Rather I shall where I can myself bring Bhishma down in battle...Thus the maiden spoke, her eyes rolling in anger...brooding upon my death [*Mahabharata* Vol, p.518]

Bhishma goes off to be congratulated by the mother and the rest of the patriarchs, who have heard Amba's story, and even pinpointed Bhishma as the cause of her plight, melt away leaving Amba to work out her own destiny, to make other choices that are still open to her. But that is another story.

The Amba-Bhishma encounter, as I have already stated, has a central place in the narrative structure of the *Mahabharata* and yet it remains a moral crisis that is not a moral crisis within the gendered and ideologically slanted framing of what can be *allowed* to surface as a moral/social crisis in the great text.¹⁶⁵ The figure of the abducted princess, Amba, represents the problem of male violence over women. It is an assault on what has emerged as a patriarchal social consensus, even among the kshatriyas, about how women are to be given away/acquired for reproduction, as can be seen in the parallel form of marriage considered particularly suitable for the kshatriyas, the *svayamvara*.

The notional self-choice is violently disrupted when brides are abducted from the *svayamvara* hall itself where princes have assembled to present themselves as suitors; it is violently disrupted when Bhishma acts on behalf of his dissolute and weak brother, and presses his claim to acquire women to reproduce the lineage, which he believes is dying.

Bhishma's abduction is a violent disruption of Amba's actual moment of choice being forcibly thwarted, a moment when she was expected to choose her husband but could not. The later austerities that she performs are an attempt to return autonomy to a woman; it is about her right to choose a partner, to feel desire and have it consummated, a right to negotiate her sexuality. The austerities are about her anger, and her humiliation, about her being cast away as a piece of discarded goods by the patriarchal social consensus in which one man abducts her, another man is too weak and dissolute to deal with the mess his brother creates, and a third will not take her because he fears reprisal from the abductor, who she 'legally' belongs to, after the abduction.

Thus one man is legally entitled to dispose of her sexuality— to pass it on to his nominee— another is the recipient of her sexuality and reproductive power but will not use it, even though he himself is debauched, once she has declared her love for another, and a third is the object of her love but will not accept it because he is fearful of its social consequences. All thus discard her as unsuitable in some way *because* she has the temerity to believe that she can choose.¹⁶⁶

The austerities and ambivalent shifting sexuality leading to her transgendered history is a product of her attempt to reclaim some degree of autonomy in the battle over her reified body. The celibate/impotent Bhishma then is finally felled through the agency still left to her; Amba's burning sense of revenge fixed upon Bhishma continues to seek a suitable redressal of her grievance through a bodily experienced and psychologically destabilising end for him. In the end, he is believed by many witnesses to the battle to have been felled by a transvestite, even though it is actually Arjuna who shoots him. He must lie on a bed of arrows and feel pain till he dies, mirroring the bodily pain and psychological destabilisation that she was forced to go through before she could bring about her abductor's end. This we can read from the sub-texts.

In sum, the Amba episode as it develops through her own burning anger and the subsequent austerities that she performs to seek a suitable retaliation against Bhisma, represents her critique—and ours—of the forcible takeover of her subjectivity. Her retaliatory actions return agency to her, but this cannot give her back her agency to *choose* the circumstances of her life, specially her sexual autonomy. The narrative of the *Mahabharata* works to discipline female choice¹⁶⁷; all three princesses abducted by Bhisma are reproductive potential that is being violently obtained through the abduction *before* choice can be asserted.¹⁶⁸ Reified as wombs, all three have a tragic history, a history of thwarted sexual autonomy as the concurrent account of Ambika and Ambalika tell us¹⁶⁹; virtually raped as part of impregnation, both produce faulty sons, neither of them fit to rule, and through these marred figures, who at different times rule Hastinapura, generate the great war. Thus the episode of the abduction of the three Kasi princesses moves the narrative centrally to create the crisis of power, the difficulties of putting in place settled norms for the orderly transfer of power to the eldest son, to regency and conflict over entitlement to the kingdom. It is not only conflict over control of land, the gambling match, and the disrobing of Draupadi that lead to the tragic end in the war; the distortions of an enforced sexual control over women are a fundamental factor in the *Mahabharata* narrative of war.

I began this essay with the *Agganna Sutta* account of 'unregulated' consummation of sexual desire of early human society and moved on to a more regulated cohabitational structure, as outlined by Svetaketu, and then to the transitional society delineated in the *Mahabharata*. Two points may be reiterated: there is considerable tension in the forging of kshatriya marriages even as both *svayamvara* and *raksasa* abduction are providing brides for various lineages and are described as lawful—as also *gandharva*, specifically for kshatriyas, along with other modes of acquiring women that I have not dwelt upon here in the interests of space. Yet, there is enormous conflict generated by *raksasa* marriages as the two families, that of the abductor and that of the princess being abducted, as well as other kings join the battle over the girl. It is evident that the woman is regarded as a prize, because of her political status and royal blood, but also because she represents the means to keep the lineage going through her reproductive potential.

It is significant in this context that even the *svayamvara*, where the bride is won through a test of skill, such as Draupadi's, leads to violent resistance

because the assembled kshatriyas believe that a brahmana—Arjuna in disguise—is taking her away from what they see themselves as a property of ‘their’ class. Neither *svayamvara* nor abduction as forms of marriage are uncontested, nor do they make for a smooth transition of women from their natal to their conjugal households, or for an orderly exchange of women between two groups of men so desirable in patriarchal caste-based society.

Early on in the essay, I drew attention to Gerda Lerner’s analysis of rules regulating marriage and sexual practices in various legal codes in early Mesopotamia and the evolution of these rules over time making for an understanding of the intensification and expansion of the rules of sexual governance. Scholars of early India do not have the rich inscriptional evidence available to students of Mesopotamian history that has made it possible to explore a transitional moment and gender it convincingly, and that too with considerable finesse. However, in the ambivalences of the text of the *Mahabharata*, of what it says and what it suppresses under the imperatives of kshatriya heroism on the one hand and brahmanical ethics on the other, we may find ways of thinking about transitions—albeit in the lower case, and try to shift ways of doing history. It has been said that the Mahabharata is a story that has continued to be told and retold:¹⁷⁰ this is my ‘retelling’, to explore a transitional moment in the history of my part of the world.

(Endnotes)

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¹ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, [1884] Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1948.

² Natalie Zemon Davis points out that a gendered analysis of history would help us to rethink some of the central issues faced by historians including periodization (‘Women’s History in

Transition: The European Case,' in Joan Wallach Scott ed. *Feminism in History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 79-104, p.89).

³ For a sample of this work see Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Society*, Delhi, Manohar, 1999.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kumkum Roy, *Emergence of Monarchy in Early India, Eighth to Fourth Centuries B.C.*, Delhi Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁶ Jaya Tyagi, *Engendering the Early Household: Brahmanical Precepts in the Early Grhyasutras, Middle of the First Millenium B.C.*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 2008, pp. 346-348.

⁷ I owe this term to Pratiksha Baxi; many conversations with her on numerous dimensions of sexual control, and the violence and coercion associated with the enforcement of such control led to recognising the importance of this term. I am grateful to her for this and many other inputs in thinking about sexual governance more generally.

⁸ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Kolkata, Stree, 2002.

⁹ I owe this term 'claste' to a young student from Bihar, which marvellously captures the complex relationship between caste and class, both as distinct and intertwined, to form a combination of the two analytically distinct categories of caste and class but inextricably linked to each other to create a mode of organizing production and of social reproduction.

¹⁰ Maurice Godelier, 'Infrastructures, Societies, Histories,' *Current Anthropology*, 19 (4) 1978, pp. 763-71.

¹¹ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, [1884] op.cit.

¹² Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976. See especially Chapter 5.

¹³ Claude Meillassoux, 'The Progeny of the Male,' paper presented at the Tenth International Congress of Anthropological Ethnological Sciences, New Delhi, 12. 12. 1978.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,' in Joan Wallach Scott, ed. *Feminism in History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp.105-151, p. 106.

¹⁶ She is particularly critical of the way Levi-Strauss takes heterosexual relations for granted and drops his analytical rigour to romanticise the relationship between men and women rather than see what kinship systems do to women; heterosexual romance itself is premised upon one of the greatest rip-offs of all time (Ibid., p.138).

- ¹⁷ Ibid. p. 107.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.115.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid., pp. 118-119.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 120.
- ²² Ibid., p.124.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p 143.
- ²⁵ Christine Ward Gailey, *Kingship to Kinship: Gender Hierarchy and State Formation in the Tongan Islands*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1987.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 3.
- ²⁷ Eleanor Leacock 'The Origins of Gender Inequality: Conceptual and Historical Problems' *Dialectical Anthropology*, 7:4 1983, pp.263-284; Louise Lamphere, 'Strategies, Cooperation and Conflict Among Women in Domestic Groups,' in Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere eds. *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Stanford , Stanford University Press, 1974, pp.97-112; Rayna Rapp, 'Gender and Class:An Archaeology of Knowledge Concerning the Origin of the State,' in *Dialectical Anthropology* 2:4 1978, pp. 309-316; Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women,' in Rayna Rapp Reiter ed. *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 157-210.
- ²⁸ Gailey, op.cit. p.11.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p.18.
- ³⁰ Ibid. p.19.
- ³¹ Eleanor Leacock , cited in Ibid. p.20.
- ³² Ibid., p.20.
- ³³ Ibid. p. 22.
- ³⁴ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986.
- ³⁵ As for example the works cited above.
- ³⁶ Gerda Lerner, op.cit, pp.8; 50-52.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 50.
- ³⁸ Ibid., Chapters 2,3 and 4.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁰ Ibid., chapters 5 and 6.

⁴¹ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, pp. 72-81.

⁴² The focus is specially on the *Agganna Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* (see reference below) as it represents the Buddhist parable of the origin of the world and social institutions, almost Engelian in its formulation and therefore particularly suggestive; a number of secondary analyses of rituals in the later Vedic period that pertain to marriage and safe birth and of myths that help us to understand the ritualization and regulation of sexuality

⁴³ Richard Burghart argues that kings, brahmanas , and ascetics each produced ideologies of the social world which hierarchised it, and naturally placed themselves at the top of whatever the value-scale the model embodied (cited in Steven Collins, *Agganna Sutta: The Discourse on What is Primary (An Annotated Translation)* Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2001, p.9.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, Chapter four.

⁴⁶ Wendy O'Flaherty (The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. 33) takes the position that most Buddhist cosmogonic myths are intended to satirize Hindu myths, cited in Collins, op. cit. p.11 and in this case work to also to show as Gombrich held that the caste system is nothing but a human invention (Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Benaras to Colombo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988, p. 85) cited in Collins, pp.12-13.

⁴⁷ Collins, citing S.J.Tambiah (*World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976) op.cit. p.12.

⁴⁸ Collins, op.cit. p. 44.

⁴⁹ The commentator on the *Mahabharata*, Nilkantha, refers to an offensive practice of sexual intercourse which is animal-like since it is conducted in public and is therefore reprehensible; other practices such as niyojana, co-habiting with a brother in law are also regarded as acting like animals—i.e. being unregulated like the conduct of animals, a constant metaphor for unacceptable sexual conduct in the Sanskrit te. (See Robert Goldman, 'Fathers, Sons and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Texts,' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1978, 6, pp. 325-92, p, 383, n.157.)

⁵⁰ I will use the pali spellings for the pali texts and Sanskrit spellings for the Sanskrit, even if this appears to be inconsistent to maintain the distinct languages of the original.

⁵¹ This is an interesting association that has further implications which I cannot develop at the moment; suffice it to say that the vessa, like the gahapati of the buddhist texts, is the archetypal producer, and therefore also the archetypal reproducer; as a category they are naturally fecund and as I have argued earlier reproduction of labouring hands is a requirement of those associated with the task of producing goods, especially food derived from field based agriculture (Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, chapter 2 and Brian Smith, 'Classifying the Universe: Ancient Indian Cosmogonies and the Varna System,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 23.2 1989, pp.247-249.

⁵² Collins, op.cit, p.49.

⁵³ See n. 20 above.

⁵⁴ Chakravarti, op.cit

⁵⁵ There is a significant account in the RigVeda (10.10) in the form of a dialogue between the twins Yami and Yama where Yami solicits Yama, the first son of the solar god and king of the dead, suggesting sexual relationship wherein she invokes the gods of procreation, and argues that the human race must be preserved. Yama counters her by invoking moral gods and their laws. Laurie Patton argues that many of the dialogue hymns between women and men are particularly associated with hymns that relate to fertility and are explicitly sexual in nature ('The Fate of the Female Rsi: Portraits of Lopamudra', in Julia Leslie ed. *Myth and Mythmaking*, London, Curzon Press, 1996, pp.21-38,p.25); see also Kumkum Roy, paper presented at the conference in Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi, March 2008.

⁵⁶ Kumkum Roy also points to the ritualization of procreation in rites of passage such as marriage where prayers are offered for the birth of sons and at pregnancy for a safe childbirth (Kumkum Roy, op.cit. p. 256).

⁵⁷ Warner F. Menski, 'Marital Expectations as Dramatized in Hindu Marriage Rituals' in Julia Leslie ed., *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, London, Pinter Press 1991, pp. 47-67, p. 53

⁵⁸ Kumkum Roy, 'Marriage as Communication: An Exploration of Norms and Narratives in Early India', *Studies in History* 10: 2. 1994, pp.184-95.

⁵⁹ Menski, op.cit, p. 56.

⁶⁰ Jaya Tyagi, *Engendering the Early Household: Brahmanical Precepts in the Early Grhyasutras, Middle of the First Millenium BCE. Dehi*, Orient Longman, 2008, p. 151

⁶¹ Menski, op.cit, p.57.

⁶² Ibid., p. 59.

⁶³ Ibid., p.60.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

⁶⁵ See below, p.20.

⁶⁶ Frederick M. Smith, Indra's 'Curse, Varuna's Noose, and the Suppression of women in the Vedic Sruta Ritual,' in Julia Leslie ed. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, op.cit. pp. 17-45; p.19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.20.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.23.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.26.

⁷¹ *Apastambha Sruta Sutra*, 8.6.20 cited in Ibid., p.26.

⁷² Ibid, p. 26.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁵ Jaya Tyagi, p. 154.

⁷⁶ The desire to conceive a child, a son, requires the first oblation with the statement, Mitra and Varuna both are men; the Asvins both are men, Indra and Surya are men. May a man be born in me (*Paraskara Grhyasutra*, 1.9.5 cited in Jaya Tyagi, op.cit, p. 148).

⁷⁷ Jaya Tyagi cites a passage from the *Ashvalayana Grhyasutra* (1.14.8), op cit. p.167.

⁷⁸ Jan Gonda,, 'The Simantonoyona as Described in the *Grhyasutras*,' *East and West* 1956: 7: pp.12-31

⁷⁹ *Shankhayana Grhyasutra* 1.22.13 cited in Jaya Tyagi, p 167

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp.14-16.

⁸¹ Jaya Tyagi, op. cit, p.158.

⁸² Brian Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 50

⁸³ Laurie L. Patton, 'Mantras and Miscarriage: Controlling Birth in the Late Vedic Period,' in Laurie L. Patton, *Jewels of Authority: Women in the Textual Tradition in Hindu India*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.51-66.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.56.

⁸⁷ Patton cites the case of the rsi Saptavadhri; the king Asvamedha had seven attempts at having a child; finally he employed Saptavadhri presumably to beget a son upon his queen but he too failed, was thrown into an abyss for it but was revived by the Asvins. A Rigveda hymn and the story of Saptavadhri explicitly address the anxiety provoked by the continuation of the male line, combined with ways in which the birth can be secured to proceed smoothly, *ibid.* p. 57.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.59.

⁹⁰ Albert Wezler, 'A note on Sanskrit Bhruna and Bruhnahatya, cited in Patton, *Ibid.*, p. 59, n. 28.

⁹¹ Patton, *op.cit.* p.59.

⁹² Stephanie Jamison, *Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991. pp. 216-223, cited in *Ibid.* p.60. n.30.

⁹³ Patton, *op.cit.* p.61.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p.63.

⁹⁶ Lerner, *op.cit.* p. 50.

⁹⁷ Wendy Doniger, 'Begetting on the Margins: Adultery and Surrogate Pseudo Marriage in Hinduism,' in Lindsey Harlan and Paul Courtright eds. *On Hindu Marriage and its Margins*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 160-182, p. 160.

⁹⁸ *Atharva Veda* 6.138.7.9, cited in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980. P.30

⁹⁹ *Shankhayana Grhyasutra* 1.16.1-12, cited in Jaya Tyagi, p. 149.

¹⁰⁰ In an interesting account in the *Mahabharata*, a young pregnant wife is in danger of being raped by her brother in law, Brhaspanti, who desires her and wants to have her; she argues that she is already pregnant with the brother's child and so the brother in law's seed will go waste; he does not care and takes her against her will but then the embryo calls out from the womb that

since he was already there first, and the womb would not accommodate two embryos Brhaspati's seed would go waste; halted midway Brhaspati then curses the embryo who is born blind! For an analysis of this myth see Robert Goldman, 'Fathers, Sons and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics,' *Journal Of Indian Philosophy*, 1978, 6, pp. 325-92, p. 359. It is significant that the wife has little autonomy in the matter and she merely tries to stall on the ground that no reproduction will follow the intercourse and the man's seed will go waste. The son on the other hand claims his rights as being already there and so thwarts the uncle's forcible impregnation of the mother.

¹⁰¹ There is an interesting notion of a different 'time' as social memory, or as imagined past; while we may never know what this passage reflects in terms of historical validity, the process described does evoke a process of codification as we get to the post-Rigvedic period that also acknowledges the shifts in practices and historicises the Law as an evolving feature of society that is non judgmental about earlier practices.

¹⁰² *Mahabharata* 1.7.113. 1-9.

¹⁰³ The word is *anavrita*, which Meyer glosses as unhindered, not forbidden, accessible to all, not restrained, unbridled, free, J.J. Meyer, *Sexual Life in Ancient India*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1953, p.118, n2.

¹⁰⁴ *Mahabharata* 1.7.113.14-15. All references to the *Mahabharata* are to the University of Chicago Press translation, directed by J.A.B. van Buitanein, and after his demise by a collective including James Fitzgerald. The University of Chicago translation (published by the Chicago University Press) is based on the critical edition of the Mahabharata prepared by the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Pune.

¹⁰⁵ Patrick Olivelle, 'Young Svetaketu: A Literary Study of an Upanisadic Story,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119: 1, 46-70, 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Even after the transition from a more flexible state of sexual practices to a more bounded set of sexual rules came into being latitude had to be given for 'abberations' in actual relationships; thus we have the dictum three things do not become impure: women, gems and water (K.Krishna Moorthy, 'Socio- cultural Milieu of the Mahabharata, in R.N Dandekar ed. *The Mahabharata Revisited*, Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1990, pp. 139-150, p. 147. The monthly courses of women were regarded as washing off her impurities since any previous sexual encounter would not leave any residue to sustain her impurity; this is also one reason why the best time for reproducing in the Brahmanical texts is regarded as immediately after a woman has bathed following the end of the monthly period.

¹⁰⁷ *Ramayana*, 7.30. 17-36, summarized from Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 89-90.

¹⁰⁸ *Ramayana*, 1. 47. 18; translated and by Robert Goldman as *The Ramayana: of Valmiki*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 2007.

¹⁰⁹ *Ramayana* 1.47.29.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.47.26

¹¹¹ There are numerous versions of the Ahalya-Indra sexual encounter: in some Ahalya is a consenting partner, in some she is fooled by the garb Indra has assumed. Indra's punishments vary from losing his testicles and regaining them through the intervention of the Gods, to sprouting vaginas on his body and having to hide; but whether consenting or raped Ahalya undergoes a violent end. For a summary of these multiple versions see Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, op. cit. pp. 88-112.

¹¹² *Mahabharata*, 12.258. 2-75.

¹¹³ Barbara Gombach, *Ancillary Stories in the Sanskrit Mahabharata*, Ph.D thesis, Columbia University, 2000, p, 312.

¹¹⁴ *Mahabharata* 3. 116. 14.

¹¹⁵ Robert Goldman, 'Fathers, Sons and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics,' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1978: 6. Pp. 325-92, p. 333.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 208.

¹¹⁷ Doniger. *Splitting*, p. 209.

¹¹⁸ Robert Goldman, 'Matricide, Renunciation and Compensation in the Legend of Two Warrior Heroes of the Sanskrit Epics,' *Proceedings of the Stockholm Conference on Indological Studies, Indologica Taurenensia* 1982, 10, pp.117-31.

¹¹⁹ It is significant that the two distinctive accounts of the matricide and the killing of the ksatriyas by Parshurama for the killing of Jamdagni by the kshatriya king Kartavirya in the *Mahabharata*, are linked together in other tellings where the latter is an adulterous desirer of Renuka (Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, pp.211-212.).

¹²⁰ Yaroslov Vassilkov argues that the Mahabharata went through the stages of a classic heroic epic partly transformed into a religious didactic epos, retaining some features of an epic folklore at the archaic stage; The text is unique for combining features of the main historical stages: archaic, classical and late forming layer upon layer, becoming somehow connected and united in a kind of symbiotic system ('Typological Definition of the Mahabharata' *Indo Iranian Journal* 38. pp. 249-56, 1995, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* pp.249-50). Also see, R.K. Dwivedi, 'A Critical Study of the Changing Social Order at Yuganta: Or the End of the Kali Age (with special reference to the Mahabharata) in Lallanji Gopal ed. *D.D. Kosambi Commemoration Volume*, Varanasi, Banaras Hindu University, 1977, pp. 276-296.

¹²¹ Oldenberg, cited in A.N. Jani, 'The Mahabharata as an Organic Growth of the Oral and Literary Tradition in Ancient India', in R.N. Dandekar ed. *The Mahabharata Revisited*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1990, pp.71-85, p. 71.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Romila Thapar, 'The Historian and the Epic, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 1979 60-61, pp.199-, p.201.

¹²⁴ James L. Fitzgerald, 'India's Fifth Veda: The Mahbharata presentation of Itself', in Arvind Sharma ed. *Essays on the Mahabharata*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1991, p. 154.

¹²⁵ It is significant in this context that the main *Mahabharata* has been regarded as the Pandava part of the narrative including the difficulties of the Bharata lineage in extending itself: Bhisma's vow of celibacy, Vicitravirya's failure to engender sons, and then Pandu's forced infertility (James Fitzgerald, Negotiating the Shape of "Scripture" in Patrick Olivelle, *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400CE*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 271; thus the problem of reproduction is a central element in the main Mahabharata

¹²⁶ G.C. Pande, 'The socio-cultural Milieu of the Mahabharata; An Age of Change,' in R.N. Dandekar ed. *The Mahabharata Revisited*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1990, pp.121-136, p.131.

¹²⁷ For a discussion of 'muting' in social science paradigms which could explain textual practices see Edwin Ardener, 'Belief and the Problem of Women,' and 'The Problem Revisited' in Malcolm Chapell ed. *The Voice of Prophecy*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp.72-85 & 127-133.

¹²⁸ Claude Levi Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston, The Beacon Press, 1969. P. 115.

¹²⁹ My current engagement with a larger work dwells on analysing the *Mahabharata* from a different standpoint than the lines of enquiry established in the huge explosion of *Mahabharata* studies, some of which is very rich, nuanced, and pioneering in many ways. There is also a considerable body of work that has effectively introduced gender concerns into the reading of the text. I hold the view that a crisis of reproduction is at the heart of the political crisis, and the work reflects the tensions of matching normative and orderly reproduction of the lineage with the demands of stable modes of the transfer of power and material resources: questions of reproduction of material and political resources and of the lineage are at the heart of the text. I will explore these issues in depth in a forthcoming work tentatively titled: *The Dying Lineage: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Crisis of Political Power in the Mahabharata*.

¹³⁰ Svayamvara is often translated as 'bridegroom choice' but as this paper suggests in the discussion below the choice element is surrounded by many elements that negate actual choice residing in the princess whose svayamavara is being held.

¹³¹ Summarised from the *Mahabharata* 1.7.96-98, translated by J.A.B. van Butanein, *The Mahabharata*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 1, 1973, pp. 228-230.

¹³² James Fitzgerald, 'Bhisma Beyond Freud: Bhisma in the Mahabharata', in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* eds. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, Oxford, Routledge, 2007, pp.189-207, p. 204.n.7.

¹³³ J.J. Meyer, interprets this to mean not that it is the best form of marriage but that marriage by capture is the oldest form of marriage in *Sexual Life in Ancient India: A Study of the Comparative History of Indian Culture*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1953, p. 70, n. 3.

¹³⁴ Van Butanein, J.A.B, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 1, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1973, p. 228.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ The narrative of the abduction is much elaborated in later books of the text, and will be discussed below.

¹³⁷ Hara Minoru, 'A Note on the Raksasa Form of Marriage,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94:3,pp.296-306, 1974.

¹³⁸ Talbot Cynthia, M.A. thesis, University of Michigan, 1980, cited in Madhav Deshpande, 'The Kshatriya Core of the Bhagavad-Gita,' in S.P. Narang ed. *Modern Evaluations of the Mahabharata: Professor R.K Sharma Felicitation Volume*, Delhi, Nag Publishers, 1995, pp.182-193, p.182.

¹³⁹ Cited in Hara, *op.cit.*, p. 296.

¹⁴⁰ L. Sternbach, *Judicial Studies in Ancient Indian Law*, Part I, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 1965, pp. 348ff.

¹⁴¹ Meyer presents the first stage of this argument of kshatriya ethic: The warrior found his pride in another direction than that of the brahmana; "take" was his shibboleth..."take for thyself by main force .Thou art the strong one and to the strong belongs the earth", *op.cit.* p.68.

¹⁴² Haru, *op.cit.*, p.302.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp303-04.

¹⁴⁴ Talbot in Deshpande, *op.cit.*, pp. 182-3.

¹⁴⁵ Meyer glosses this as 'yearning for the woman, the prince shouted "top! Stop@ to Bhisma, goaded by rage', *op.cit.*, p.71.

¹⁴⁶ Van Butanein, J.A.B, *The Mahabharata*, vol 1, p. 229.

¹⁴⁷ An important question from the standpoint of this essay is: why could Bhisma not arrange marriages, even three of them to ensure reproduction, with princesses of different kingdoms—as

he did for Pandu, which would have also consolidated political networks for the Kurus; this is an acknowledged mode of arranging alliances and would have brought no slur upon the celibate status of Bhishma. His taking recourse to abduction where he surrogates for Vicitravirya suggests that either the Kurus are not yet high on the political horizon, or that the dynasty carries some stigma—perhaps the fisherwoman status of the mother of the king; or was Vicitravirya rumoured to be impotent?

¹⁴⁸ Meyer's recounting of Krsna's advice to Arjuna translates the passage thus: 'The svayamvara is ... bound with doubt and danger because of the wilfulness of women's nature...Do thou Arjuna take my sister by force. For who knows what she will do at the svayamvara?', op cit pp.73-4.

¹⁴⁹ Ruth Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna is There is Victory*, Columbia, University of Carolina Press, 1989, p.62.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 63.

¹⁵¹ At the end of the war only seven heroes survive on the side of the Pandavas, and three of the Kurus; all but 10 of the two phratries are dead. The anxiety about reproduction among Kshatriya lineages would be critical in such a desperate contest over the throne.

¹⁵² Georges Dumezil, *The Stakes of the Warrior*, Tr. By David Weeks, Berkeley, the University of California Press, 1983. Pp.55 ff.

¹⁵³ There is a clear suggestion here of an act of transgression committed by Bhishma in abducting the Kasi princesses as he is taken on the vow of celibacy; it is therefore wrong for him to have acted as a surrogate for someone else.

¹⁵⁴ This is a significant passage as it presents an opinion that is at variance with the recounting that Bhishma provides in Book Five; the *Mahabharata* is giving us two perceptions of the discarding of Amba after her abduction by Vicitravirya. It also charges Bhishma with not begetting sons on the Kasi princesses after Vicitravirya's death before producing heirs for the Kurus and using instead the seed of another, a recourse that is regarded as less than dharmic.

¹⁵⁵ Dumezil, op.cit. p.115.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.116.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ *The Mahabharata*, van Butanein, vol 5, p. 499.

¹⁶⁰ James Fitzgerald summarizes a litany of Brahmana accusations against the abuse of the ksatra-constriction of the dharmas, that is people doing Lawful Meritorious deeds, and the oppression of the Earth, assault, theft, failure to acknowledge Brahmana pre-eminence-as part

of the written constitution of the Mahabharata as we have it. These abuses are due to men of arms being *aniyata*, unrestrained, drunk with the arrogance of power ('Negotiating the Shape of Scripture,' in Patrick Olivelle ed. *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.273). Yet what is striking is the absence of the acknowledgement of wilful abduction of women from her 'legal' guardians and the subversion of the svayamvara, and of course of brahmanical norms of the legal transfer of a girl's sexuality to her husband with appropriate rituals. The great warrior who chastises the ksatriyas and runs a prolonged vendetta against them cops out over Amba's search for justice which would have served him well in the 'war' of the varnas.

¹⁶¹ Van Butanein, *The Mahabharata*, op.cit. vol 5, p.504.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ See n. 42 above for a supportive account of the discussion on the rejection of Amba as an unfit reproducer for the Kuru lineage.

¹⁶⁴ James Fitzgerald translates the word/term svayamvara as 'choosing for herself' of a husband from among suitors gathered for inspection [*Mahabharata as Religious Rhetoric*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1983, 51: 4 pp. 611-630, p.623 n.6] only from among ksatriyas, certainly not from among the lower orders as is clear from Draupadi's assertion of negative choice when she refuses to have Karna try his hand at the bow at her svayamvara.

¹⁶⁵ In this context it might be interesting to draw from Robert Goldman's essay titled, 'Transexualism, Gender and anxiety in Traditional India.' According to him, in essence it is Bhishma, the archetypal renouncer of his own male sexuality, in deference to that of his father, who prevents Amba from fulfilling her culturally determined roles as wife and mother. When we recall the moral approbrium that an unmarried girl draws in the text as does a woman whose menses are wasted because she does not yet have a husband, or her husband is not fulfilling his conjugal duties by her then it is ironical indeed that the great brahmanas of Amba's time do not treat her abduction and her rejection as a great moral crisis, a crisis that deserves their serious and successful intervention (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113.3, 1993, pp.374-401, p. 392).

¹⁶⁶ I would take Goldman's analysis further. He is right in pointing out that having become the used property of another man through the abduction Amba's suitability for marriage is destroyed and therefore Salva too, in the patriarchal honour rejects her since from his standpoint she is now sexually used by the fact of her abduction. Thus all discard her (Goldman, op.cit. p.392). But in my view all of these actors reject her because she has expressed her own choice in the matter of her own desires, her preferred sexual partner. Perhaps this is why even Rama Jamadagnya does not really punish Bhishma for his abduction of Amba and fights a half-hearted battle with Bhishma, whereas he destroys kshatriyas repeatedly for the killing of his father by one of them.

¹⁶⁷ In this context it is significant that in a later account Salva, the King Amba desired and was going to choose at her svayamvara is killed by Krsna for being a cohort/brother of Shisupala whom he had already killed as we saw in an earlier segment of this paper; now Salva too is cast as a demon [Van Butanein, *Mahabharata*, 3 (31) 15-23] suggesting that Amba's desire is in some way tainted, that women's desires lack the power to discriminate between good and bad and are innately demoniac. Krsna's suggestion that women cannot be left to decide as 'who knows whom they might choose,' has some relevance here. Choice then, in the context of women, is clearly negated ideologically by the text.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer treats the abduction of Amba as her rape by Bhishma, op.cit. p. 73.

¹⁶⁹ *The Mahabharata* 1.7.96-101

¹⁷⁰ For example Alf Hiltebeitel writes: The Mahabharata is a story that India has never ceased to rethink and retell (*The Ritual of Battle*, Ithaca, Cornell University, 1976, p.14 cited in Bruce M. Sullivan, *Krsna Dvaipayana Vyasa and the Mahabharata*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1990, p.25).