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Temporal Transitions and the Character of the Earth in the *Mahābhārata*

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ABSTRACT

In light of the present-day discourse of environmental crisis, this paper explores the characterisation of the Earth in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, and discusses some implications of the text's theory of cyclical time. In the *Mahābhārata*'s *yuga* theory, four ages (or aeons, or eras – four *yuga*s) pass in turn, with human lifespan and morality declining in each successive age before being restored for the beginning of the next cycle, one thousand cycles making up a complete iteration of the universe. The paper focuses on specific transitions: the three transitions from one age to another within the descending phase, which are prompted by the female Earth's complaint about the weight upon her; the transition from the end of one cycle to the beginning of the next; and the end of the thousandth cycle, when the biosphere disintegrates. Particular attention is paid to the Earth's role and motives in prompting the descending transitions, and to the implications of the descending and ascending transitions from her perspective, and from ours as human beings. The human perspective is interesting from a religious point of view, because soteriological potential is said to be highest during the fourth and last age of the cycle, when morality is at its lowest.

KEYWORDS

Earth; Time; Yuga cycle; Mahābhārata

Introduction: the *Mahābhārata* and the Earth

The *Mahābhārata* is a long Sanskrit text dating from the middle of the first millennium CE.[1] It contains the story of a great war between two sets of royal cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. It also contains descriptions of a repeating temporal cycle of four ages, called *yuga*s. This paper is about that *yuga* cycle, and its implications for the character Earth, and for human beings. For historical and literary reasons, the paper focuses only on the earliest accessible *Mahābhārata*, the written one in so-called 'Epic Sanskrit', and approaches it as an integrated text whose prehistory is unknown.

First, an introduction to the character of the Earth. In the text's royal mythology, the king is the Earth's husband: she is the territory over which he rules. Using his phallic rod of force, he prompts and channels her bounty for the common good.[2] The first king, Pṛthu, 'seeking livelihoods for his subjects, milked this cow [the Earth] for grains' (Hv 2.24).[3] The king is the householder par excellence; like the Earth he is the most provident host. The Earth herself is said to have taught Kṛṣṇa the duties of a householder. The Earth bestows her bounty upon all, nourishing each type of being in its own way.[4]

In his book *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, Jan Gonda notes that

> Terrestrial divinities of female sex are again and again the partners of the god's [i.e. Viṣṇu's] avatāras: Sītā, Satyabhāmā, Kṛṣṇa's wife who was considered a partial embodiment (*aṃśa*-) of the goddess Earth. Viṣṇu's relations with the earth are, indeed, a very important element in the avatāra conception which in its classical form may be regarded as a more exalted development of the god's helpful and loving interest in our planet and its occupants.
>
> (Gonda 1954, 125–26)

This paper will expand on Gonda's statement by distinguishing the planet's interests from those of its human occupants. Near the start of the *Mahābhārata*, the Earth complains to god Brahmā that she is being crushed by the weight of creatures, and the *Mahābhārata* war happens as a result. This paper hazards that to understand the Earth's relationship to the war, we must first appreciate the theory of the *yuga*s.

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[1] Thank you to the audience and respondents at Clare College at the 2023 Annual Conference of the British Association for the Study of Religions, and also to Kirsty Harding for assistance with the figures. The research presented in this paper is reported in detail in Brodbeck 2022. *Mahābhārata* (Mbh) references are to the critically reconstituted edition, which includes the *Harivaṃśa* (Hv).

[2] On the king and violence, see Mbh 12.67–71, 93–107, 121–22 (translations in Fitzgerald 2004); Clooney 2003, 114–21. On the phallic masculinity of the king, see Glucklich 1988; Sahgal 2015, 9–15; Brodbeck 2016, 128–32.

[3] *teneyaṃ gaur mahārāja dugdhā sasyāni bhārata* | *prajānāṃ vṛttikāmena*. *Harivaṃśa* translations are adapted from Brodbeck 2019.

[4] For the story of Pṛthu, see Mbh 12.59.93–141; for Pṛthu and the Earth and the cosmogonic milking of the Earth, see Hv 2.19–26 and 4.19–6.49; for the Earth narrating her own history to Viṣṇu, see Hv 42; for the Earth's teachings to Kṛṣṇa, see Mbh 13.100; for the Earth and Death, see below. On Pṛthu, see Fitzgerald 2004, 130–35; on the milking of the Earth, see Bailey 1981; on the Earth and the king, see Derrett 1959; Hara 1973; on the householder, see Bowles 2019.

The *Yuga* Theory

The theory of the four *yuga*s is mentioned in the text by various sages. The theory is broadly consistent, and is presented also in the *Laws of Manu*.[5] Within the cycle, each *yuga* is shorter than the previous one, and in each *yuga*, human morality and lifespan are lower than in the previous one. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of two cycles.

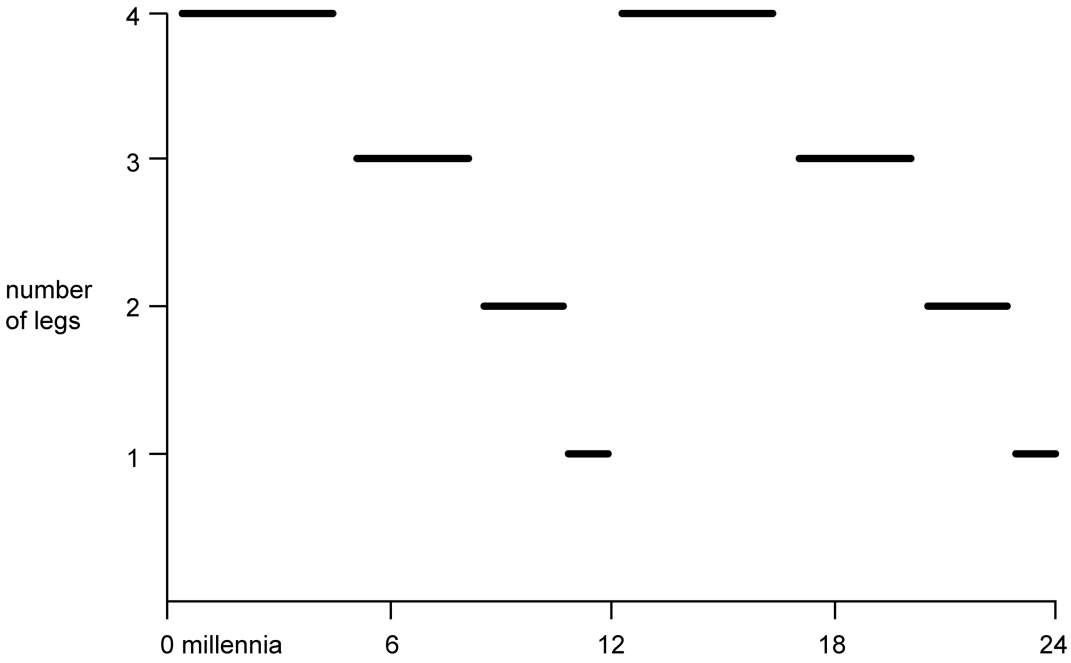

Figure 1: The *yuga* scheme (two cycles).

The cycle is illustrated by the image of a bull – the bull of morality, or *dharma* (Mbh 3.188.10; Couture 2006). This imaginary bull stands on all four legs in the first *yuga*, on three legs in the second, on two in the third, on just one leg in the last *yuga* of the cycle, and then on all fours again at the beginning of the next cycle. In the figure, the bull is on the vertical axis, and time is on the horizontal axis.

Each cycle lasts twelve thousand years. The *yuga*s are the four horizontal lines. In the first *yuga*, people are four times as good as in the fourth *yuga*, and live for four times as long. There is a strict correlation between human lifespan and human goodness. Both parameters track the number of the bull's legs. We must be in the fourth *yuga*, because at present a full human lifespan is about a hundred years. In the first *yuga*, it is four hundred years. Each universe lasts for a thousand cycles.

So that is an overview of the *yuga* theory. The textual accounts give it only in broad outline. We turn now to the mythology in an attempt to understand particular moments within the cycle.

[5] For the principal accounts of the *yuga* theory, see Mbh 1.57.72–73; 3.148; 3.186–89; 6.11; 12.200; 12.224; 12.230; 12.327; Hv 116–17; *Laws of Manu* 1.68–86.

The Descending Transitions

These are the transitions between *yuga*s within one cycle, where the number of legs shifts from four to three, from three to two, and then from two to one.

The mythological prompt for these transitions comes from the Earth. When people live for a long time, there are a lot of them alive at once, and the Earth suffers from their excessive weight. Presumably towards the end of each *yuga*, she complains like a damsel in distress, saying that she cannot bear the weight and is in danger of collapsing. She is rescued by the transition to the next *yuga*, where because people do not live as long, there are fewer of them alive at once, and the weight is reduced.[6] In some accounts of the descending transitions, bodily size also decreases from *yuga* to *yuga* (Mbh 3.148.7, 9; 3.186.32; Hv 85.55–62). In that case, not only would people be fewer after the transition, but they would also be smaller, so the reduction of weight would be even more dramatic.

The descending transitions are sometimes mythologically illustrated by a great cull or massacre which dramatically reduces the weight of humans. This illustration exists at some parallel remove from the idea of a reduction in human lifespan, but the effect is the same, and is exemplified by the story of Earth and Death (Mbh 12.248–50). Death was created because at first the Earth filled up and was going to collapse, but Earth's collapse was averted through the creation of Death. By implication, the creation of Death occured at the end of the first *yuga*. By implication, within the *yuga* cycle the Earth's collapse is then averted twice more: it threatens to occur but never does, because of a change or, symbolically, a decisive intervention or cull.

The *Mahābhārata* war is one such cull, located at the transition between the third and fourth *yuga*s.[7] This war occured because the Earth complained, and so the gods descended onto her and arranged it, and more than a billion men died in battle, and the Earth was thus rescued from her predicament.[8] The Earth was the recipient of that 'sacrifice of war', and the narrative often describes her looking lovely, covered with the casualties and débris of battle (Feller 2004, 268–77). Afterwards she was like a hunchback who had had her hump removed. As André Couture has shown, the king's hunchbacked maidservant whom Kṛṣṇa miraculously alters into bodily perfection represents the Earth restored by the *Mahābhārata* war (Hv 71.22–35; Couture 2015).

My point here is that what is good for the Earth is not good for us. It is obviously not in our interests for the Earth to collapse, but her collapse has never actually happened. And if possible, we want to live for a long time, and be good; and so whenever the

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[6] Perhaps it is implied that shorter-lived people would have fewer children, but this is unnecessary. Even with constant birth-rate, changes in life expectancy would affect population levels. The *yuga* variables seem principally to affect human beings, despite the statement at 3.148.7.

[7] For the temporal location of the war, see Mbh 1.2.9–10; 3.148.37; 6.11.14; 6.62.39; 9.59.21; 12.326.82; 12.337.42–43; Hv 13.39–40; 43.53–61; González-Reimann 2002, 86–117.

[8] For Earth's complaint towards the end of the third *yuga*, see Mbh 1.58; 1.189; 11.8; Hv 40–45. In the *Harivaṃśa* account, as well as the weight of population, 'the Earth has no space left' (*bhūmir nirvivarīkṛtā*, Hv 41.22) because of the towns (Hv 43.55). For the war's death toll, see Mbh 11.26.9. On the connections between the Earth and the character of Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas' wife whose mistreatment by the Kauravas is a proximate cause of the war, see Bowles 2008: xxv–xl.

Earth is rescued by the transition to the next *yuga*, and humans become shorter-lived and nastier, that is bad for us. People are happiest in the first *yuga*, but the Earth should be happiest in the last one, when the weight on her is lowest.

Religious Life in the Fourth *Yuga*

Life in the fourth *yuga* is nasty, brutish, and short, and the customary religious rites are largely neglected. But from a human point of view, this dire situation has a soteriological upside:

> Religion will totter in those days: it will be rooted in charity and lax about the four estates, but though subtle it will be maximally consequential. In those days people will attain salvation through meagre efforts; so the people who practise religion in the final *yuga* are lucky.
>
> (Hv 115.44–45)[9]

It is as if any religious or moral activity within the fourth *yuga* is particularly efficacious for the person performing it, because that person is operating against a maximally dismal trend. Especially important is love for Viṣṇu, who incarnated as Kṛṣṇa.

The Ascending Transition

When the last *yuga* in the cycle is followed by the first *yuga* of the next, this transition involves a fourfold increase in human lifespan and human morality. But this is bad for the Earth, because it means there will be more people alive at once, and so the problem that she repeatedly had in the previous cycle will recur. Accordingly, the ascending transition is not prompted by the Earth's complaint.

There are two contrasting accounts of the ascending transition (González-Reimann 2002, 131). One is messianic, the other is not. In the messianic account, the great god Viṣṇu will take birth on Earth as the brahmin Kalkin (Hv 31.148), who will become king, and 'will bring this turbulent world to tranquility' (Mbh 3.188.91),[10] by curbing the unruly and re-establishing high standards of morality, destroying 'wretched gangs of foreigners', 'thieves', and 'bandits'.[11] In this guise of Kalkin, Viṣṇu incarnates as per *Bhagavadgītā* 4.8: 'In some *yuga*s I come into being to protect the virtuous, destroy the wicked, and re-establish righteousness'.[12] As will by now be appreciated, it is hard

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[9] *tadā sūkṣmo mahodarko dustaro dānamūlavān* ।
cāturāśramyaśithilo dharmaḥ pravicaliṣyati ॥
tadā hy alpena tapasā siddhiṃ yāsyanti mānavāḥ ।
dhanyā dharmaṃ cariṣyanti yugānte janamejaya ॥
The translation takes *yugānte* to refer to the whole of the fourth *yuga* (Brodbeck 2022, 142). See also Hv 116.2 and, for the emphasis on charity, Mbh 12.224.26–27. The 'four estates' are the four prescribed modes of life for males: studentship, householdership, forest dwelling, and mendicancy (Olivelle 1993).

[10] *sa cemaṃ saṃkulaṃ lokaṃ prasādam upaneṣyati*. Trans. van Buitenen 1975, 597.

[11] *kṣudrān ... mlecchagaṇān*, 3.188.93; *cora*-, 3.189.1, 3; *dasyu*-, *dasyūn*, 3.189.5–6. My translations. On *dasyu*s, see Bowles 2018.

[12] *paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām* ।
dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya saṃbhavāmi yuge yuge ॥

to square this programme with what happens at the transition between the third and fourth *yuga*s.

In the non-messianic account of the ascending transition, the miseries that people endure within the fourth *yuga* eventually lead them to reassess their priorities and become fully virtuous, like an addict who finally kicks the habit after reaching rock bottom (Mbh 12.336.58; Hv 117). Since morality and lifespan are always correlated, when morality is replenished by whatever means, so is lifespan.

The messianic account, which features an external intervention from Viṣṇu, indicates that it is not just a question of what is good for human beings, but also of what is good for the gods. In the fourth *yuga*, with religious rites largely neglected, the gods do not receive all the offerings to which they were formerly accustomed. But there is no theoretical need for a cull at this point, so if the messianic account has malefactors killed en masse, that might be inappropriate. The non-messianic account is bloodless: the malefactors reform or die out. As with the descending transitions, there is a tension between two types of explanation for the transition: one where the transition is effected by an external intervention, and one where it is effected as it were automatically, from within the system.

The End of the Thousandth Cycle

Although the Earth repeatedly suffers from excess weight of population, during the *yuga* cycles there is no serious climate change or environmental degradation. The biosphere remains intact and hospitable across the transitions between *yuga*s and between cycles. In this cosmic model, the only reported environmental collapse occurs at the end of the thousandth cycle – that is, at the dissolution, the *pralaya* at the end of the universe. The *Mahābhārata* war occurred in the twenty-eighth cycle (Hv 13.39–40), so that end is still millions of years away. The kind of imminent environmental ending that we might envisage in light of the present-day climate crisis has no counterpart here.

When the end comes, severe drought will kill almost all creatures; then seven suns will parch the land, killing the rest; then fire, with the aid of strong winds, will burn everything up; then special clouds will rain for twelve years, until the world is nothing but ocean (Mbh 3.186.56–78). It will remain thus for as long as the universe persisted for, and then there will be another universe, with another thousand cycles.

Trans. Cherniak 2008, 203, adapted. *Bhagavadgītā* 4.8 = Mbh 6.26.8. Some scholars have suggested that in the *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa is not a form of Viṣṇu (van Buitenen 1981, 28; Malinar 2007, 99; Austin 2023, 909–10), but this view requires the *Bhagavadgītā* to be separated from its *Mahābhārata* context, and also prohibits the natural interpretation of Arjuna's vocatives at *Bhagavadgītā* 11.24 and 30, where he calls Kṛṣṇa 'Viṣṇu'.

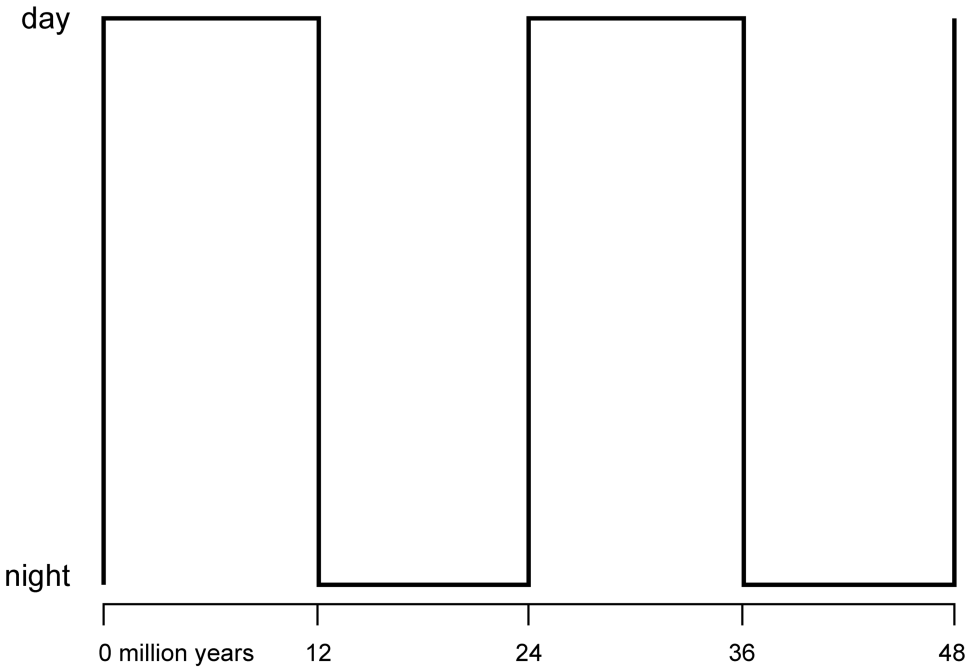

Figure 2: The days and nights of Brahmā.

Figure 2 illustrates this pulse of successive universes or days of Brahmā. The figure shows two days and two nights. The Brahmā whose days and nights these are was born within the flower of a lotus that grew out of the silt that settled in Viṣṇu's navel as he slept on his back in the primeval ocean. The souls left at the end of one universe are exhaled by Viṣṇu back into the next (Hv 40.11–14).

Concluding Discussion

To its early audiences, the *Mahābhārata* was a millenarian text, because the first *yuga* of the next cycle would have been anticipated as imminent. But the *Mahābhārata*'s *yuga* theory is now disproved, because the fourth *yuga* allegedly began with the *Mahābhārata* war. If that war happened, it must have happened more than twelve hundred years ago, since the text itself is older than that; but you and I cannot yet be in the first *yuga* of the next cycle, because we cannot live for four hundred years, and we are deeply morally compromised. So the theory is wrong.[13] Perhaps accordingly, when the *yuga* theory was taken up in later texts (and also in later commentaries both traditional and scholarly), the years denoting the durations of the various *yuga*s were reinterpreted as years of the gods, which are three hundred and sixty times longer than human years: a year for us is a day-and-night for the gods.

I hope to have shown that in order to understand the Earth's relationship to the *Mahābhārata* war, we must first appreciate the theory of the *yuga*s. However, when the text describes what happens at this particular transition between the third and fourth *yuga*s, the imagery that is used combines the dynamic of the descending transitions with the theoretically opposing dynamic of the ascending transition. The

[13] Additionally, there is friction between the *yuga* theory and the modern scientific worldview. Present-day human beings got here via evolutionary development, not through a three-stage degeneration from some lofty perfection of which we are the broken remnant just before the system reboots.

Earth is overpopulated and there is need for a cull as per the descending transitions, of which this is one; but also the war is presented as a victory of the good Pāṇḍavas over the bad Kauravas – a victory of the gods over their enemies – and thus as a restoration of *dharma* as per the ascending transition (Brodbeck 2021, 77–79). The latter dynamic does not fit here in terms of the *yuga* theory, since it would be twelve hundred years too early; but it is superimposed nonetheless.[14] Also superimposed is the imagery of the *pralaya* at the end of the universe, which would be millions of years too early. These paradoxical superimpositions define the *Mahābhārata*, and lend considerable complexity to the Earth's character. Her complaint, and the lifting of her burden through the *Mahābhārata* war, can only be presented as something beneficial to human beings because of the incidental soteriological advantage of living in the fourth *yuga*.

The listener within the text is King Janamejaya, a descendant of the victorious Pāṇḍavas two generations after the war. He hears the story of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, within which the accounts of the *yuga* theory are embedded. Although personally he has only the worst bit of the cycle to look forward to, he knows that as long as he loves Kṛṣṇa, who is the whole world and the whole of time and more, he will be all right. He also knows that, according to an alternative *yuga*-theory that is paradoxically co-present in the text, the *yuga* is determined by the quality of the king, and so wherever he might be in time, human morality and lifespan depend on how well he does his royal duty (Thomas 2007). As for us and the Earth, we must remember that the *Mahābhārata*'s Earth is a fantasy Earth in a text, not the real one, and that Janamejaya's Kṛṣṇa is a fantasy Kṛṣṇa in a text, not the real one (if there is a real one).

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[14] See especially Mbh 1.58, where the Earth's overpopulation is apparently a result of demonic (i.e. immoral) infestation; see also *Bhagavadgītā* 4.8, quoted above. In contrast with the Mbh 1.58 account, the *Harivaṃśa* account of the Earth's complaint explains the overpopulation as a result of high levels of *dharma*, not low ones, and the pro-dharmic aspect of Kṛṣṇa's intervention is limited to his incidental dispatching of various demons (Viethsen 2009). Austin's treatment (2023, 908, 920, 923) overlooks the discrepancies between these two accounts.

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