

INDRA IN THE EPICS

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The contributions that Asko Parpola has made to the study of the earliest phases of South Asian culture are varied but invariably stimulating. As a small tribute to his scholarly energy and to his leadership in our discipline, I offer this survey of that most outstanding of the Vedic gods, Indra, as he appears in the Sanskrit epics.

The actual deities mentioned in the epics, as well as their relative frequency, are closer on the whole to the Vedic pantheon than to classical Hinduism, most obviously in the prominence of Indra, but also for example in the continued presence of Parjanya. This is not to assert that there are no differences, but rather to suggest that to a significant extent the changes took place within the period during which the epics grew to their present form.¹ The epic evidence suggests in fact what other evidence also points to: that Indra maintained a degree of supremacy in more popular belief longer than most Vedic deities. In the early to middle layers of both epics he is prominent and frequently mentioned, both as the ruler of the gods and as the performer of various heroic deeds; his exploits in defeating Vṛtra, Bali, Namuci and various other Asuras are regularly the standard for assessing the strength and bravery of human heroes (his use of deceit to defeat them is accepted as all part of the attitude of the end justifying the means which is not uncommon in the *Mahābhārata*). However, Indra subsequently declines in prestige and, instead of his

¹ To analyse these changes I shall utilise for the *Rāmāyaṇa* the stages of growth that I have previously identified (Brockington 1984). There is nothing equivalent for the *Mahābhārata* (for a survey of the present state of research see Brockington 1998: 135–155) but as a provisional classification I take the *Sabhāparvan* and the *Udyoga* to *Strī parvans* as being mainly early, the *Ādi*, *Āraṇyaka*, *Virāta* and *Āśvamedhika* to *Svargārohaṇa parvans* as intermediate, and the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans* as being the latest; this is obviously only a rough and ready attempt but it enables a start to be made on putting the data into a meaningful sequence. In presenting some figures for occurrences, I shall compare the *Droṇa*, *Karṇa* and *Salya parvans* (15276 verses in total) with the *Ādi* and *Āraṇyaka parvans* (17337 verses plus 84 prose passages) as examples of the early and intermediate stages that are roughly comparable in size.

martial exploits being stressed, his killing of Vṛtra is seen as brāhman-murder and the story of his adultery with Ahalyā is alluded to or told in later parts of both epics.

Studies of Indra in the epics were undertaken long ago by Adolf Holtzmann (1878) for the *Mahābhārata* alone and by Washburn Hopkins (1915) for both; between them they collected probably all the significant references to Indra therein but, while both were alive to the issues of the development of the epic, they were of course working long before the publication of the Critical Edition and so their work is in need of updating. The present contribution will not primarily seek to duplicate their collecting of material but rather will concentrate on the distribution of references across the different parts of both epics and on analysis of the implications of the different types of reference, aiming in this way to advance our understanding of the epic material.

The prominence of Indra in the epic narratives has led some scholars to connect their heroes more directly with him, which does serve to highlight this point, even though I have reservations about the relationships suggested. Jacobi long ago viewed the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a transposition of Vedic mythology about Indra, seeing Rāma's battle with Rāvaṇa as another form of Indra's battle with Vṛtra and arguing that, since in later Vedic literature Sītā is the wife of Indra or Parjanya, Rāma must be a form of these gods (Jacobi 1893: 130–139). Pavel Grintser (1974) has argued that the main narrative of the *Mahābhārata* is based on the myth of Indra's slaughter of Vṛtra, as well as individual incidents (for example, Duryodhana hiding in the lake may be compared to Indra hiding and being rescued by his wife, itself mentioned at 5.10.43 and 12.329.17–40); one of his supporting points, that the majority of *Mahābhārata* similes are related to Indra mythology is absolutely valid. Vassilkov (1995) more specifically suggests that the story of the Pāṇḍavas' struggle with Jarāsaṃdha is modelled on the Indo-European myth, as he claims it to be, of the battle between the thunder-god and his demonic adversary.

Indra is referred to by a wide range of names and epithets in both epics and in general these show an increase in frequency from the early to the middle phases of their composition; not infrequently two or more are used together and it is not really practicable to make a distinction between name and epithet, so no attempt will be made to do so in subsequent figures. Throughout both epics Śakra is in fact a commoner name for him than the simple Indra, although counting of Mahendra with Indra broadly eliminates the difference. In the *Mahābhārata* his main designations in order of frequency in the books surveyed (figures in brackets for books 7–9 and 1–3 separately) are as follows: Śakra (146+220), Indra (117+169), Vāsava (58+49), devarāja (12+76), Vajrin, Vajradhara, etc. (34+39), Mahendra (35+35), Puramdara (19+37), Śatakratu (15+38), Maghavān (15+26), Sahasrākṣa (11+24), Pākaśāsana (6+12), sureśvara (3+12), Śacīpati (3+9) and Vṛtrahan (1+11). In the *Rāmāyaṇa* his main designations (figures for the first, second and

third stages separately) are as follows: Śakra (50+63+69), Indra (46+54+64), Mahendra (22+46+27), Vāsava (22+29+23), Sahasrākṣa (8+14+32), Puraṃdara (12+11+8), Śatakratu (13+8+7), Vajrin, etc. (6+16+3), devarāja (3+9+4), Pākaśāsana (2+3+6), sureśvara (3+2+5), Śacīpati (1+5+2) and Maghavān (3+2+1). The most notable points are the decline in frequency of Vāsava over time in the *Mahābhārata* (and a smaller increase in the *Rāmāyaṇa* than for other terms), the substantial later increases in both epics for Sahasrākṣa and Pākaśāsana (both of which are typical of the Purāṇic portrayal of Indra), the occurrence of the less common Puraṃdara, Maghavān and Śatakratu mainly in the first stage of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the relative rarity in both epics of the typically Vedic epithet Vṛtrahan, despite the fact that his battles with Vṛtra and other Asuras are commonly alluded to in similes.

Indra is indeed the commonest single *upamāna* in both epics, symbolising not only valour and prominence but also protection, whereas his *vajra* is a symbol of terror and deadliness. Gonda has cautioned in relation to the Purāṇas that

More or less conventional references, for instance in a simile, to Indra's power and prowess may not, in my opinion, weigh heavily when it comes to considering the question as to how far the god was really, in these aspects, an object of the worship of the masses (Gonda 1967: 231).

Nevertheless, simile material, being incidental, may reveal more in some respects about authors' attitudes than the narrative itself. The figures noted next exclude occurrences of terms such as *narendra*, *rājendra* and *mṛgendra* (which are examples of fossilised figures) but even these indicate the former supremacy of Indra. Indra in fact appears in similes 247 times in the three books of the *Mahābhārata* surveyed by R. K. Sharma (1964), the *Ādi*, *Āraṇyaka* and *Bhīṣma parvans*, and 142 times in the *Ayodhyā* to *Yuddha kāṇḍas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, including those relating to his weapons, banner and abode. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* Indra and his weapons are particularly common in the *Araṇya* and *Yuddha kāṇḍas*, while similes involving his battle with Vṛtra are a feature of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, and several similes refer to his position as king of the gods.

Similes for combats between warriors frequently refer not only to his battle with Vṛtra but also with other Asuras, with Namuci, Prahlāda, Śambara, Vala/Bala, Bali, Virocana and Maya. In the *Mahābhārata* battle books *śambarāmarājayoḥ* (7.24.58d, 71.30d, 144.18d, 8.63.19d and 9.14.30f) makes use of one of Indra's less common designations; the fight between Indra and Śambara is also mentioned quite often besides (e.g. 8.60.30d and 63.63d, Rām. 5.14.8d, 6.57.7a and 63.42d). Another stereotyped *pāda*-length simile (*indrprahlādayor iva* 3.270.12d, *śakra-prahlādayor iva* 3.273.18, *śakraprahrādayor iva* 7.119.12d, 131.90d, 141.28d, 148.62d and 715*3 post.) refers to Indra's fight with Prahlāda, while he only became the ruler of the gods after defeating a list of Asuras which ends with Prahrāda

(12.99.48–49, cf. 3.165.18); the frequency of this simile contrasts interestingly with the Purāṇic association of Prahrāda with Viṣṇu. In other instances the process of transfer of exploits from Indra to Viṣṇu or another god is visible within the epics. In the battle books of the *Mahābhārata* Indra alone usually kills the Asura Jambha in similes (7.71.20d, 77.17cd, 142.21d, 8.9.27ef, 64.11d, 9.11.63d, 19.11c and 25.21d) but occasionally Indra and Viṣṇu kill him (7.57.81ef and 8.45.72cd) or Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is his killer (7.10.5; cf. 5.48.15), while in a later passage (3.100.22) he is slain by Viṣṇu. Again, in similes Tāraka is defeated by Indra alone at 6.91.17 and 8.37.23, by Indra together with Skanda at 7.148.56 and by Skanda alone at 9.45.64; however, in the lengthy later account of Tāraka's defeat at 13.84–86 Skanda is born in order to achieve this feat and Indra has no real role, although at the end Skanda reinstates Indra in the kingship of the gods (13.86.29; cf. 3.218).

The frequency of similes featuring Indra's banner indicate a significant role for it at least early on; it is noteworthy that such similes are lacking in the third stage of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and rare in the later parts of the *Mahābhārata* (cf. Brockington 1995). In addition, there is the episode (Mbh. 1.57.1–31) where king Uparicara Vasu is persuaded by Indra and the other gods to abandon austerities and to be a good *kṣatriya* and in return he receives various gifts from Indra, including a bamboo staff, which was erected for worship as a repetition of Indra's cosmogonic act of "propping up" the world pillar at the end of the year (cf. Meyer 1937: 3–6; Sukthankar 1939); incidentally, Vasu was also the first recipient of the chariot on which Indra and Viṣṇu rode in the battle for Tārakā and which later passed to Bṛhadratha and Jarāsaṃdha before being commandeered by Kṛṣṇa (2.22.16 and 27). Some similes refer to the *indradvaja* being taken down at the end of the festival, while the importance of its uprightness is reflected in the stereotyped use of *utthita indradhvaja*. Warriors' bows are also compared occasionally to Indra's bow in a way that suggests that it was still regarded as a real bow rather than as the rainbow, its standard meaning in classical Sanskrit.

Indra's linking with the Maruts, typical of the *Ṛgveda*, is not uncommon, especially in similes (e.g. Mbh. 3.34.81f, 184.25b, 238.23b, 4.63.42ab, 65.5e, 5.48.2, 60.18b, 89.41, 108.8, 7.5.25d, 53.34c, 68.49b, 83.39d, 150.76d and 154.63b). Indra with the Maruts and others attend on Brahmā at 5.48.2, while the Maruts emerge from Diti's foetus destroyed by Indra at 5.108.8; the story of Indra destroying Diti's foetus is told at length at Rām. 1.45, which Kirfel (1947) with good reason compares with Purāṇa parallels. Indra is also occasionally linked with the Vasus, e.g. Mbh. 6.92.15d. Both epics narrate Garuḍa's exploit of stealing the *amṛta* from Indra's palace (Mbh. 1.29 and Rām. 3.33.28–34) but, despite its Vedic resonances, in more developed passages. However, Indra's linking with Varuṇa in the long compound *mahendravaruṇopama* is characteristic of the *Rāmāyaṇa* alone with seven occurrences against only one in the text of the *Mahābhārata*.

Viṣṇu's junior partnership with Indra persists from the Vedas into the epics, especially in the battle books of the *Mahābhārata*, where *dvandvas* of the two names are not uncommon: *indropendrau* 6.79.55d and 9.33.14d, *śakraviṣṇū* 8.45.72d (also 1.78.9d and 2.22.16a), *indrāviṣṇū* 7.57.81e, 9.44.4a, *vāsavācyutau* 8.68.62d (cf. also *indrāvaraja* at 8.13.17b and 9.16.37d, and *indrānuja* at Rām. 1.61.25c and 6.79.4d), as well as more explicit wording like "as Viṣṇu offers the world to Śacīpati", 9.32.23cd. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* there are similes comparing Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to Indra and Viṣṇu respectively (for example 6.24.29d, 79.4d and 87.9d). More generally Indra and Viṣṇu are listed together at Mbh. 6.55.77d, 7.131.46b and 150.46b, 8.22.16d, 26.43a, 49b, 68.54d, also Rām. 7.26.17b. In addition, the Vedic linkage of Indra and Agni is found, for example in *indrāgnī* (3.134.8a, 7.24.20d, 76.24d, 8.26.13c) and *śakrāgnī* (8.43.7d).

Indra is also quite closely linked in the Vedas with Parjanya, the rain god. The distribution of Parjanya's occurrences in the epics is therefore significant to our understanding of Indra; in the *Mahābhārata* the largest number occurs in the *Droṇaparvan*, appreciably ahead of the much larger and later *Śāntiparvan*, while in the *Rāmāyaṇa* Parjanya is most frequent in the Ayodhyākāṇḍa and, though slightly commoner in the second stage than the first, occurs only once in the third stage.² Thus, Parjanya occurs mainly in the earlier stages of both epics, whereas the references to Indra causing rain, so typical of the Purāṇas, belong predominantly to the later stages; the starting point for the shift is quite possibly to be seen in the image of showers of arrows occurring in battle contexts.³ On the whole Indra is still the thunderer who wields the *vajra* with warlike intent (e.g. Mbh. 5.12.21) and reference to his causing rain is as likely to be in the context of his general creative powers. For example, even in the relatively late episode where Kadrū explicitly

² The actual figures for the *Mahābhārata* are *Ādiparvan* 5, *Sabhā* 3, *Āraṇyaka* 9, *Virāṭa* 4, *Udyoga* 5, *Bhīṣma* 5, *Droṇa* 16, *Karṇa* 4, *Śalya* 3, *Sauptika* 2, *Śānti* 12, *Anuśāsana* 4 and *Āśvamedhika* 2, and for the *Rāmāyaṇa* 6 out of the total of 13 in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* and 7 in the second stage against 5 in the first. They include *parjanya iva vṛṣṭimān* 4.53.67d, 6.59.22d, 7.64.32b, 99.1d, 137.6b, 150.50d, 155.27d, 9.11.59b, 16.2b and 12.67.31b (there are no * passage or App.I occurrences), Rām. 2.1.31d and 6.67.20d (cf. *parjanya iva vṛṣṭibhiḥ* 3.27.7d), *parjanyaninadopama* at 5.92.29d, 6.43.6d, 96.20d, 107.48b, 7.104.29d, 166.59b, 9.23.5b and 13.145.9b (again no */App.I occurrences) and *kālavarṣī ca parjanyaḥ* at 1.62.10a, 3.188.88a, 12.92.1a (cf. 12.29.48a, but again no */App.I occurrences, and contrast *akālavarṣī parjanyaḥ* 3.188.69a, cf. 76a, and *nikāmavarṣī parjanyaḥ* 2.30.2c and 5.60.17a, cf. 10.2.5a) and Rām. 6.116.88c (significantly just this one occurrence, but cf. *kāle varṣati parjanyaḥ* 7.89.9a).

³ Passages where Indra causes rain are Mbh. 1.16.24, 21.6–17, 22 (all), 58.14, 163.15c, 215.9, 18, 217.19c, 218.1–2, 16, 3.10.19, 110 (Rśyaśṛṅga episode), 186.44, 4.42.24, 63.42ab, 65.5e, 5.29.11, 97.6–7, 145.24ab, 7.9.14b, 29.35, 68.49b, 8.66.49cd, 9.15.32cd, 57.48c, 12.141.18, 320.7a, 14.76.27d, 14.95 (Agastya coerces Indra) and Rām. 4.14.14d, 38.2a, 6.78.4d, 7.35.49d, 40.16ab and 62.10b (but contrast *dhakṣyate pāmsuvarṣeṇa mahatā pākāśānaḥ* at 7.72.8cd).

begs Śakra for rain to help the snakes (Mbh. 1.21.6–17), she praises him extravagantly as both the *vajra* and the roaring monsoon cloud and also as the invincible creator and destroyer of the worlds (*sraṣṭā tvam eva lokānāṃ saṃhartā cāparājitaḥ*, 11ab).

Lomaśa, telling the story of Cyavana, refers to Indra as claiming to have ordained anyway that the Aśvins should drink the Soma and later points out the sacred stream of Indra, “where Dhātā and Vidhātā and Varuṇa ascended” (3.125.5 and 20cd, see further below). Elsewhere too Indra is linked with or even identical to Dhātā and Vidhātā (5.55.7 and 3.183.13). He is the bringer of wellbeing to the world of the living (1.55.4ab) and Yudhiṣṭhira addresses him as lord of past and future (17.3.7a). Often his supremacy is explicitly linked with his martial ability: for example, Pākaśāsana conquered the three worlds by his prowess (1.194.17cd), when the Daityas were overcome and Śakra was lord of the three worlds everyone rejoiced (13.82.7), and Vāsava, after conquering all the Asuras and gaining *indratva*, chose Bṛhaspati as his *purohita* (14.5.7). Perhaps the most striking statement, apart from its context, is the declaration that Indra assigns beings their strength and so forth, allots their shares and lays down their tasks (3.218.9–12); however, the context is Skanda’s birth and Indra’s offer of submission to him, which interestingly Skanda declines with the declaration “you are ruler of the three worlds and of me” (3.218.19ab).⁴ Thus, even as he is being superseded in the later stages of the epics, Indra is still being praised for his lordship and creative power – a powerful tribute to his former status.

Besides the mentions in similes and in the brief allusions noted so far, the *Mahābhārata* includes several narratives of Indra’s major exploits. The *Udyogaparvan* gives an extended version of the Vṛtra myth, where Indra first slays Viśvarūpa and then Vṛtra, both of whom have been created by Tvaṣṭṛ (5.9–10), before – weakened by the burdens of brahmanicide and treachery – he flees into the waters, concealing himself in a lotus filament, while Nahuṣa takes his place in heaven (5.11–17) and seeks to claim Śacī; within it, Śalya tells Yudhiṣṭhira that Indra suffers greatly when he is forced to flee by his guilt for Vṛtra’s killing, while Viṣṇu also plays a significant role (e.g. 5.10.41).⁵ Indra is freed from the sin of brahmanicide by performing an *aśvamedha* (5.13.12–18); at 9.42.28–37 Indra is similarly guilty of brahmanicide and the killing of a friend in the slaying of Namuci but frees himself from guilt by performing a sacrifice. The share of his brahmanicide that is

⁴ I thank Yaroslav Vassilkov for drawing many of these passages to my attention (personal communication, 6th September 1999).

⁵ For an analysis of this account of Indra’s brahmanicide see Ruben 1957 (who considers this to be probably older than the *Rāmāyaṇa* accounts) and Shulman 1985: 220–228, and for an interpretation of the symbolic connections between the Nahuṣa and Yayāti stories see Hildebeitel 1977. Another version lacks the deception element of this and other versions and has Indra hide in a lake simply because he does not believe that Vṛtra is dead (3.98–99).

distributed to women (5.13.17) is commonly linked to their menstrual impurity. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* too, but only in the third stage, menstrual impurity is once derived from a quarter of the guilt of Indra's brahmanicide (7.77.14, cf. 4 App.I.14.45–8[l.v.]). Indra's slaying of Vṛtra is narrated again in the *Śāntiparvan* (12.272–273, cf. 9.42, 12.270.13 and 14.11.6–20), despite its generally late character, revealed by its Vaiṣṇava orientation (whereas at 7.69.49–67 there is a Śaiva orientation).

The *Āraṇyakaparvan* includes one of the most emphatic declarations of Indra's supremacy, since "one king of the gods, hero and killer (*hantā*)" at 3.134.7 is clearly meant to designate him, as well as the tale of Dadhīca, whose bones form the *vajra* with which Vṛtra is slain in another version of that myth (3.98–99, cf. 12.329, which alludes to several of Indra's exploits, including his slaying of Triśiras and his seduction of Ahalyā), and his responding to Surabhi's plea (3.10.4–19). However, it also contains the story of Cyavana, which tells of the Aśvins' inclusion among the recipients of Soma, Indra's opposition to this, his being attacked by Mada, drunkenness, and having to give way (3.124–125, cf. 12.329.14³, 13.14.15–301 and 14.9.31–37), which reveals a distinctly later attitude towards Indra.

In Nārada's description of the celestial *sabhās* Indra's is the first and is called Puṣkaramālinī (Mbh. 2.7; the others are those of Yama, Varuṇa, Kubera and Brahmā); other references to Indra's *sabhā* are found at 5.46.9 and 11.8.20. Besides the extensive description of the world of Indra in the context of Arjuna's journey there, a brief episode of the seers Parvata and Nārada arriving there occurs in the *Nalopākhyāna* (3.51.11–17), which explicitly indicates that it is the proper destination of *kṣatriyas* dying in battle, also more briefly alluded to elsewhere (e.g. 2.11.62–64, 20.15–17, 3.43.32, 51.17, 7.26.8, 11.2.10, also 12.99.43–45, cf. Hopkins 1915: 140–141; Sutton 2000: 261–263), so much so that "the ancient road that leads to Indra" is a euphemism for death in battle (5.50.48, cf. 6.17.8–9, 7.18.36d, etc.). Elsewhere in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, however, the envoy of the gods, come to take Mudgala to the heavens to which the righteous and ascetics go and where the gods reside, declares that far above them are the worlds of Indra, and far above them are the worlds of Brahmā (3.247).

Indra is naturally the warrior deity and the deity of the *kṣatriyas*. His favoured weapon is the *vajra*, made from Dadhīca's bones (3.90.6, cf. 1.29.19b) either by Tvaṣṭṛ (3.98.22–23) or by Dhātṛ (12.329.25–26), which is six-cornered (3.98.10d and 7.109.10d), returns to his hand (3.294.24cd) and becomes a tiger to kill Suvarṇaṣṭhīvin (12.31.27); the importance of his weapons in general is shown by the common formulaic compounds *indrāśanisamasparśa* and *indrāśanisamasvana*. Vāsudeva, besides declaring that Indra reached his position by acting rightly and by his self-control (5.29.10–13), affirms that he created warfare, weapons and armour to kill the *dasyus* – these are *kṣatriya* weapons (5.29.27); at 6.103.94–96 Kṛṣṇa

states the principle that Bṛhaspati of old declared to Śakra that the permanent duty of *kṣatriyas* is to kill those prepared to kill. Indra, although he has won sovereignty, still sacrifices (1.115.11cd) and has offered a hundred sacrifices (9.48.2b), thus fulfilling his role as a ruler. Indra attends king Vyuṣitāśva's sacrifice and so by implication the king is successful (1.112.8–9), and so similarly with king Nrga (3.86.6), while Rāma Jāmadagnya satisfied Indra with a great sacrifice (3.117.11).

As befits a ruler, Indra wears a diadem (*kirīṭin*, e.g. 1.30.6b and 2.7.5b) and is shielded by a white parasol (*pāṇḍureṇātapatreṇa dhriyamāṇena mūrdhani*, 3.42.14ab and 44.17a – a stock formula elsewhere applied to kings and warriors). Literal reference is made to his *dhvaja*, as when his chariot pennant, Vaijayanta, is described as being dark blue (Mbh. 3.43.8). His chariot also is named, as Jaitra (3.274.13 and 5.102.3) or Sudarśana (4.51.3). However, he rides a white elephant at 1.218.28 (a very late Vaiṣṇava insertion, according to Holtzmann 1878: 298) and generally references to Airāvata are late (Hopkins 1915: 126; Brockington 1984: 137). His parentage and family are scarcely mentioned; he is one of the Ādityas or the son of Aditi (e.g. 1.59.15, 60.35 and 114.55–56) and more specifically his mother is Dākṣāyanī (1.70.9 and 3.213.20) and, while his wife is occasionally named as Śacī or Paulomī, offspring are very rarely mentioned: once it is stated that Paulomī gave birth to Jayanta (Mbh. 1.213.58c), there is a *tīrtha* of Indra's daughters (3.80.97ab), and once an anonymous son of Indra fights alongside his father (5.98.8), while in the *Rāmāyaṇa* the crow that attacks Sītā is called a son of Śakra (5.36.24 – so not surprisingly identified as Jayanta by the commentators) and once Akṣa's splendour is like that of Indra's son (*vajrisutopamaprabha*, 5.45.39a[1.v.]).

More significant than the narrations of Indra's own mythology are the occasions of his active intervention in the narrative, whether central or more peripheral. Among the more peripheral are his testing of Śibi Uśīnara (3.131), his help in the form of a jackal to Kāśyapa (12.173), his setting the sons of Bhaṅgāśvana against each other (13.12.27–28 and 35–49, cf. Hopkins 1915: 136), his offering any boon to Upamanyu (13.14 – but here he is subordinate to Śiva) and his help to Utaṅka (14.57.31–32, cf. Hopkins 1915: 137); these are all in fact relatively late. An indication of his continuing, if reduced, prestige even in the latest stage of the *Mahābhārata* is the substantial number of dialogues in the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans* where he is one of the protagonists, sometimes in disguise.⁶ Rather more directly

⁶ These dialogues are with ascetics (12.11, in the form of a hawk), Bṛhaspati (12.21, 85 and 104 and 13.61.48–90), Ambarīṣa (12.99), Prahrāda (12.124.47–60 and 12.215), Kāśyapa (12.173), Bali (12.216–218 and 220 – two versions of an encounter after his fall, where Bali acts as a teacher, which are part of a series of such chastenings of Indra), Namuci (12.219), Śrī (12.221, cf. 218), a parrot (13.5), Śambara (13.36), Brahmā (13.71.5–73.10 and 82.6–41), various sages (13.97) and Gautama (13.105). Bṛhaspati regularly advises Indra on policy (2.46.9, 66.7, 6.46.40ab, 5.33.60 and 12.29.17) and Indra chose him as his *purohita* (14.5.7).

related to the central narrative, as well as earlier, is the fact that Nakula's horse is a gift from Indra (5.55.15).

Most notably, in the symbolic scheme of the five Pāṇḍava brothers as the sons of various gods he fathers Arjuna, although he only accedes to Kuntī's call after a year-long vow and severe asceticism on her part (1.114).⁷ Indra is usually described, therefore, as lending his support to Arjuna but, when Agni in the form of a brāhman asks Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa to help in the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest on the grounds that Indra always protects the forest by extinguishing the fire that Agni starts, they grant him their help (1.214.29–215.19). This episode thus uniquely sets Arjuna against his own divine father according to the traditional scheme. However, it comes at the start of Indra's bestowal of weapons on Arjuna (1.214–225) and at the end of the whole episode Indra expresses delight in his son and promises to give him *āgneya*, *vāyavya* and other weapons in the future (1.225.7–12); thus it could be seen as Arjuna proving himself to his symbolic father, rather than simply his confronting the archetypal warrior Indra in battle, although the similarities to his confrontation with Śiva disguised as the Kirāṭa tell against this. The superiority of Indra is scarcely in doubt, however, and is reinforced by Kṛṣṇa choosing eternal friendship with Arjuna as a boon from Indra (1.225.13).

Following his encounter with the mountain man (and so in accordance with Indra's promise to give weapons to his son only after this, 3.38.42), Arjuna journeys to Indra's heaven in order to obtain weapons and remains there for five years; following his return and Indra's visit (3.161–162), Arjuna narrates the event to his brothers (3.164–165). Notably, in this episode Indra gives Arjuna further instruction in modes of *tapas* (3.164.22), despite his usual depiction as being hostile to asceticism.⁸ Indra gives his own weapons only after Arjuna's arrival (Arjuna receives the *vajra* and *aśanis* at 3.45.4) and instructs him in their use, whereas other gods have bestowed their weapons more promptly (3.41–42); in obtaining them Arjuna is by implication gaining the powers of the various deities as befits a king. Mātali, Indra's charioteer, comes to take Arjuna to Indra's heaven and then drives the chariot for him in his battles with the Nivātakavacas and the inhabitants of Hiraṇyapura (3.161–71); his defeat of the Nivātakavacas is his teacher's fee to Indra, fulfilling Brahmā's prediction to Indra that he himself will destroy them but in another body (3.169.31) and thereby underlining the virtual identity of Arjuna and Indra. Throughout the episode, Arjuna's identity as Indra's son is emphasised:

⁷ On Arjuna as a name of Indra in the Brāhmaṇas, see for example Katz 1989: 281–283. Arjuna at 1.189.32d[1.v.] is an *aṃśa* of Śakra, rather than his son.

⁸ Indra is indeed by no means always opposed to asceticism; another counter-example is that Yavakṛta undertakes severe *tapas* in order to win from Indra the boon of mastering the Vedas without study at 3.135–139 (see Hara 1979). The appearance here (3.164.13–14) of the *lokapāla* concept of the deities linked with the compass points is worth noting.

he sits on his father's throne "like another Indra" (3.44.22) and, when Lomaśa arrives, he finds Arjuna occupying half of Indra's throne (3.45.10), while Mātali declares that Arjuna rides Indra's chariot even better than Indra (3.164.37–39).

Yudhiṣṭhira's bodily ascent to heaven in the *Mahāprasthānikaparvan* is reminiscent of Arjuna's ascent to Indra's heaven in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*; indeed, Ruth Katz (1989: 206) suggests that "certain elements of Yudhiṣṭhira's ascent imply that Arjuna should really be the central figure here, or originally was". Certainly, Yudhiṣṭhira ascends in a chariot brought by Indra, just as Arjuna did. Also, the *māyā* by means of which Yudhiṣṭhira perceives this belongs to Indra (18.3.34). Elsewhere, too, Indra is a master of illusion; for example, at 12.272–273 he overcomes Vṛtra's power of illusion by entering Vṛtra as a fever through his yogic power and killing him with the *vajra*.

Karṇa tells Sūrya that he will win fame as a hero by giving the earrings and armour which confer immortality on him to Indra (3.282.20–35); he is bound by his generosity of nature, to grant any request made by a brāhman, the guise which Indra adopts (3.284–294, cf. 1.104.17). In fact Karṇa exchanges his armour for Indra's spear, intending to use it against Arjuna (3.294.24–34, 5.54.52–53 and 12.5.8–10), and Indra was willing to give anything except his *vajra* (3.294.19). Also, Ghaṭotkaca was created by Maghavān in order to nullify Karṇa's power, according to 1.143.38. Indra's hostility towards Karṇa is well illustrated by another story set when Karṇa, himself now disguised as a brāhman, is studying with Rāma Jāmadagnya: one day, when Rāma Jāmadagnya is asleep, cradled by Karṇa, Indra disguises himself as a worm and bores through Karṇa's thigh, which Karṇa puts up with unflinchingly, thus revealing his *kṣatriya* origin to Rāma Jāmadagnya when he wakes (8.29.4–6; however, in the later telling at 12.3.1–23 the worm is not Indra but an Asura). Nonetheless, Karṇa is compared to Indra on occasion (e.g. 8.6.42d and even more strikingly at 8.65.7).

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, many major figures are compared with Indra, including Rāvaṇa (ten times) and other *rākṣasas*, and several formulaic compounds are used to express this idea (Brockington 2000: 133); Rāma is compared to Indra most often in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, for obvious reasons, and very rarely in the third stage. Essentially Indra is the standard of comparison for any warrior or king, though also of *kṣatriya* as against brāhman values (for example, Rāma replies to Sutīkṣṇa "as Indra to Brahmā", 3.6.12d). Another indication of the older pattern are the similes already mentioned which compare Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to Indra and Viṣṇu respectively; the two brothers are also once compared to Indra's two arms (5.19.28c). Indra's visit to Śarabhaṅga's hermitage (Rām. 3.4, which in style appears typical of the second stage) seems to be intended to enhance Rāma's significance, since Indra in his conversation with the sage predicts and so in effect commissions Rāma's

future exploits (3.4.19).⁹ Kabandha refers to Indra's promise that Rāma will release him from his hideous form (3.67.15–16), thus linking Rāma indirectly with Indra, as does the story of Rāma's lifting of Gautama's curse on Ahalyā for her adultery with Indra (1.47–48). Rāma is assisted by Indra's chariot and charioteer, Mātali, in his final duel with Rāvaṇa (6.90–100).¹⁰ Mandodarī, in her lament over the dead Rāvaṇa, declares that Rāma cannot after all be human (as she first states) and must be Indra in the form of Rāma (6.99.5–11); not surprisingly, a Southern insertion feels the need to make her revise her opinion yet again and say that, since Indra cannot face Rāvaṇa, Rāma must therefore be Viṣṇu (6.3114*). It is Indra who restores the dead *vānaras* to life at Rāma's request (6.108), although interestingly in the *Rāmopākhyāna* it is Brahmā who does this (Mbh. 3.275.40).

In the intermediate and later stages of the *Mahābhārata* on the whole, a pattern develops of Indra's power having limits. At Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, for example, Indra protects Takṣaka until Janamejaya, learning this, orders the priests to force Indra into the fire as well (1.51.4–11) and Indra then abandons Takṣaka. Some other instances are his fears that Viśvāmitra's *tapas* will topple him from his throne and his sending of Menakā (1.65.20–66.9) and similarly his sending Jālapadī to halt Śaradvat's austerities (1.120.5–9), his failure to stop Cyavana offering Soma to the Aśvins (3.124–125), the birth of Māndhātṛ, equal to Śakra and capable by his austerities of sending him to Yama's realm (3.126.20–29), Janaka's reply to Aṣṭāvakra that even Indra bows to brāhmins (3.133.2), and his fear that Triśiras will supplant him and consequent sending of *apsarases* (5.9.7–18). In the *Śānti-parvan* Kuśika undertakes fierce *tapas* in order to get a son equal to Indra, so Indra decides to become his son, Gādhi Kauśika (12.49.1–6), although there is no mention of this in the *Rāmāyaṇa* account of Gādhi's birth as the son of Kuśanābha (1.33.1–6); however, Sītā's homily to Rāma includes the story of the ascetic led astray by the sword left with him by Indra (Rām. 3.8.13–19). Earlier statements that Indra gained his status or conquered the three worlds by his prowess or his self-control give way to statements such as that Śakra gained *mahendratva* by honouring brāhmins (13.36.19). Indra's theft of the lotus-stalks (13.94–96) has been compared with its parallel versions in the *Bisajātaka*, *Jātakamālā*, *Padma Purāṇa* and *Skanda Purāṇa* by Rosa Klein-Terrada (1980), who traces their development from a single, original *Asketen-dichtung*.

⁹ It is interesting to note that Indra at 3.4.24a is referred to as *varada*, the term later so regularly used of Viṣṇu, and that he is shown as eager to lead Śarabhaṅga to the world of Brahmā and not, as in Purāṇic accounts, attempting to prevent ascetics reaching their goal. Similarly, Indra is termed *varāṇām īśvaro dātā sarvabhūtahite rataḥ* at Mbh. 13.30.3cd.

¹⁰ Incidentally, a Southern addition to the *Śānti-parvan* on the principle of fair combat cites Rāma using Indra's chariot in the final contest with Rāvaṇa (12.228* 6–9).

In the third stage of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Indra still retains considerable significance, although his portrayal is now closer to that typical of the Purāṇas. The story is told of his becoming a peacock and then giving it his thousand eyes on its feathers as a reward (7.18.5+21–23). Indra leads the gods in battle against Rāvaṇa (7.27–28), though first appealing to Viṣṇu as the supreme deity, but he is captured by Rāvaṇa's son (hence named Indrajit), released through Brahmā's intervention and lectured about his adultery with Ahalyā (7.29–30). The narrative of his performing an *aśvamedha* to free himself from the guilt of *brahmahatyā* after killing Vṛtra (7.75–77) also has Purāṇic aspects, including its being offered to Viṣṇu (Brockington 1998: 458), but Indra's continuing importance is demonstrated when, as Rāma recalls to his brothers Sīta's restoration after the fire-ordeal, he states that she was handed back by Mahendra (7.44.8), in a surprising variation from the account at the end of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, where it is appropriately Agni who returns Sītā (6.106.1–9). Again, it is Śacīpati who takes Lakṣmaṇa to heaven (7.96.17).

Another sign of Indra's declining status is seen in his relationships with women. The story of his adultery with Ahalyā is alluded to several times in the *Mahābhārata* (5.12.6, 12.329.14^{1–2} and 13.138.6) and narrated more fully in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.47–48 and 7.30.15–41);¹¹ it is exacerbated by his disregard of the proper times for intercourse (Rām. 1.47.18), and Gautama castrates him by a curse (1.47.26–27; cf. Mbh. 5.12.6 and 12.329.14²). Elsewhere Indra's thousand eyes appear in order to ogle Tilottamā (Mbh. 1.203.25). Despite Renate Söhnen-Thieme's assertion that Ahalyā is the only instance (Söhnen-Thieme 1996: 39), a certain number of other incidents do feature in later parts of the *Mahābhārata*. Marginal perhaps is his taking the form of a breeze to mix up the clothes of Devayānī and Śarmiṣṭhā, thus starting their quarrel (1.73.4). Indra is presented in a better light in the episode where Srucāvati undertakes penance in order to win Indra as husband and eventually is taken up to heaven by him at 9.47 (this is however within the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* in that book, so it may not be as early as the rest). However, he seduces the wife of Medhātithi, who orders their son Cirakārin to kill her in a parallel to or even a parody of the Rāma Jāmadagnya story (12.258). In a presumably later story, Indra attempts to seduce Ruci, the wife of the ṛṣi Devaśarman, but is frustrated by the pupil Vipula who enters her body by his yoga in order to prevent her responding (13.40–41); in the course of this he assumes many forms (40.26–38, for other examples see Gonda 1967: 247). Later still, in the *Harivaṃśa*, he is thoroughly humiliated when he takes the form of the sacrificial horse at Janamejaya's *aśvamedha* in order to have intercourse with his wife Vapuṣṭamā (Hv. 118.12–38).

¹¹ Renate Söhnen-Thieme (1996) notes that this first explicit narrative of Indra and Ahalyā found in the *Bālakāṇḍa* is relatively late, tracing it back to Brāhmaṇa references and forward to a full account in the *Brahma Purāṇa*.

It is worth emphasising that, even when Indra is being supplanted by Viṣṇu and Śiva in the latest parts of both epics, their prominence is regularly judged against his – he still remains the yardstick against which others are measured. In the second version of the story of how Śiva ordains that Draupadī shall have five husbands, Śrī witnesses the five Indras of the past being humbled by Śiva and is herself then born as their wife when they take birth as the five Pāṇḍavas (1.189.1–39), although they are still fathered by the usual gods (1.189.27); this is obviously intended to show how Śiva as the supreme deity supplants the old ruler of the gods.¹²

Nārāyaṇa declares that he is Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Indra, Śiva and various other gods at 3.187.5–6; Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* declares that he is Vāsava among the gods (BhG 10.22b); the *Viṣṇusahasranāma* (13.135) includes Viṣṇu being *indrakarmā* (97c). Correspondingly in the *Śivastava* Śiva is identified with Indra and is Śakra among the Maruts (13.14.150cd and 160a, cf. 13.17.101 and 146.37), while the 108 names of Sūrya at 3.3.17–29 contains Indra (20a); at 13.146.38–41 Rudra is Devendra, Vāyu and the other gods. Śakra on Airāvata attends Śiva at 3.221.6+19; the gods headed by Indra go to Śiva for help at 8.24.36; Śiva is more powerful than Indra at 10.17.7; Śiva makes Indra the lord of the gods at 12.122.27ab; Upamanyu spurns Śiva disguised as Indra in favour of Śiva himself at 13.14.88–105; in order to praise Śiva Indra sings the *Śatarudrīya* at 13.14.147; Brahmā, Indra and others do not know Śiva at 13.16.16; Śiva paralyses Indra at 13.145.31 (cf. 1.189.16).

Although Viṣṇu's junior partnership with Indra persists into the epics, as noted above, he develops during their growth from an assistant into the superior, until Indra even appeals to Viṣṇu to help him. At Mbh. 1.58.35–51, in response to Earth's request for relief from the oppression of the Asuras, Indra and Nārāyaṇa agree to descend to earth; the obvious implication is that they become Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa but Nārāyaṇa is the senior. Viṣṇu gives Indra his status at 3.13.18, 5.10.7, 6.64.4, 7.124.9 and elsewhere; Indra and others praise Viṣṇu at 3.192.14; Indra and the other gods go to Viṣṇu for protection at 5.10; Vṛtra, killed by Indra, goes to Viṣṇu's highest state at 12.274.56–58.

There is in fact in the latest stages more nearly a quartet of deities than either a trio or a pair. Indra's continuing prominence can no doubt be related to his ongoing

¹² Śrī was originally a symbol of sovereignty and as such possessed by many rulers and above all by Indra (e.g. Mbh. 12.124, 218 and 221, and Rām. 6.40.25). Gösta Johnsen compares the contention over Draupadī with the story of Śrī deserting Bali for Indra at Mbh. 12.218 (Johnsen 1966). However, at 1.566* Draupadī is identified with Śacī, not Śrī. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, since Rāma is often compared to Indra, Sītā is occasionally compared to Indra's consort Śacī but no real identification is ever made. The association of the five Pāṇḍavas with Indra does not always bear these negative connotations; for example, the *riṇa* of Indra in the sense of his handsomeness is applied positively to Yudhiṣṭhira at 4.67.33b (as is the description of Uttarā as being attended as though she were a daughter of Indra, 4.67.31c).

role as the *kṣatriya*'s deity, just as Brahmā's is linked to brāhmins and ascetics. This close association with particular *varṇas* may well be a major factor in the ultimate decline of both Indra and Brahma. About Indra himself it is stated "Indra indeed, though son of Brahmā, became a *kṣatriya* by his actions", killing nine times ninety evil kin and gained *indratva* (Mbh. 12.22.11–12), while a king, when chosen, is Indra (12.67.4), and the duty of *kṣatriyas* is that of Indra just as of brāhmins it is Agni's (*aindro dharmah kṣatriyāṇām brāhmaṇānām athāgnikah* 12.139.60ab). Indra surpasses other kings in sacrificing (12.20.11) and he won his kingdom by sacrificing (14.94.4) – but this last passage goes on to deprecate use of animals in sacrifice, with *ṛṣis* trying to dissuade Indra from killing a living animal (14.94.7–19).

The subordination of Viṣṇu to Indra even persists to some degree into the third stage of the *Rāmāyaṇa* where, for example, Viṣṇu is called *indrānuja* at 1.61.24c and *devarājānuja* and *vāsavānuja* at 7.8.6b and 15b. In the version of the Vāmana myth narrated by Viśvāmitra (1.28.2–11), after winning back control of the three worlds from Bali Vairocana, Viṣṇu presents them to the still prominent Indra. Other examples of Indra's greater prominence precisely where Vaiṣṇava emphasis is later apparent include Agastya presenting Rāma with divine weapons, commonly regarded as Viṣṇu's weapons, since in the second stage Brahmā and Indra are as prominent as Viṣṇu (3.11.29–33, cf. 6.97.4–5) and in the first *Bālakāṇḍa* summary, added at the end of the third stage, Indra alone is mentioned (1.1.34ab), while the second summary ignores the incident completely (1.3). However, with Viṣṇu's growth in status, he eventually reaches a position of superiority over Indra and, being *indrakarman*, of operating through him (6.105.16); once Indra even begs in vain for Viṣṇu's help (7.27.13–19).

In a similar way, in the *Mahābhārata*, Arjuna's relationship with Indra gives way to his relationship with Kṛṣṇa, ultimately interpreted as one with Viṣṇu. In the light of this, episodes such as the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest are given a new interpretation, with Arjuna's power being seen to come from Kṛṣṇa rather than from Indra; for Ruth Katz (1989: 216) this is implied in the brief reference to the event at 13.143.23. At 3.13.8 Kṛṣṇa entrusts the universal sovereignty to Śacīpati and at 9.32.23 Viṣṇu confers the sovereignty of the three worlds on Śacīpati. On occasion, even hostility is indicated: Kṛṣṇa stole the *pārijāta* tree, defeating Śacīpati (5.128.45cd); mounting Vainateya and terrifying Amarāvati, the hero brought back the *pārijāta* from Mahendra's abode (7.10.22).

By the later stages of the *Mahābhārata* there are definite indications of the Purāṇic attitude towards Indra, with for example the narration of the story of the five Indras (1.189, also 1.2.87c) and Bali declaring to the present Indra that there have been many thousands of Indra and that everything is subject to time (12.217.53–55; cf. 13.1.58–59, where Indra and everything else are emitted by

kāla). Similarly, the basically Purāṇic pattern of the four *lokapālas* occurs in later parts of the epics (Hopkins 1915: 149–52; Brockington 2000: 228). We find instances of the term *lokapāla* without the individual deities being named (e.g. Mbh. 3.158.8, Rām. 2.1.28 and 20.16) and of the four gods being named without use of the term (e.g. Mbh. 1.69.4 in the Śakuntalā episode and 3.89.12ab in the *Tīrthayātrāparvan*, Rām. 6.105.1 in Brahmā's *stava* of Rāma, but the term *lokapāla* at 9a), as well as Indra being specifically termed a *lokapāla* (3.52.5 in the Nala episode); there are even instances of the named gods being assigned to compass points (3.164.13–14, already noted, in the anomalous incident of Indra instructing Arjuna in *tapas*, cf. Śakra being consecrated in the east, 5.106.7b in the Gālava episode). The location of these instances is instructive.

Indeed this last point illustrates rather well my initial contention that to a significant extent the changes in the role and status of Indra took place not so much between the Vedas and the epics as within the period during which the epics grew to their present form. In the core of both epics Indra is the ruler of the gods, the warrior deity whose favoured weapon is the *vajra*, the ultimate comparator for epic heroes; with him are linked the Maruts, Agni and Parjanya and subordinate to him is Viṣṇu; his battles with Vṛtra and other Asuras are the ultimate in heroic action and his world is the proper goal of warriors slain in battle. By their latest stages Indra seeks expiation for brahmanicide in his slaying of Vṛtra, his power is shown as being limited by employment of *tapas* or by *kāla*, Viṣṇu and Śiva are being presented as superior to him (which is nonetheless a testimony to his former greatness), his relationships with women are dubious and – the ultimate humiliation – the current Indra is just one of an endless series. For all that, he still retains significance, as the sheer volume of the references to him and to his activities demonstrates. This may in part be due to the *kṣatriya* orientation of the composers of the epics but there is undoubtedly considerably more to it than that. At the popular level, attested not only in the Purāṇas but also in folk literature, Indra never fades out to the extent that he appears to do in the more classical and brāhmanical literature.

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