

# The paradigm of kingship

The book is a dense but fascinating read providing considerable food for thought.... A review

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There was a raja named Uparicara, a dharma-following monarch, fond of hunting," is how Vaishampayana begins, striking what McGrath regards as the keynote of the epic ~ kingship. At the end Vaishampayana says that this "itihasa" named Jaya is to be heard by one who desires to rule the earth. The focus, therefore, is on kingship. Buddhadeb Basu was the first to argue that Yudhishtira, not Krishna or Arjuna, was the protagonist of the Mahabharata in *Mahabharater Katha* (1974, translated into English by Sujit Mukherjee as *The Story of Yudhishtira* 1986). McGrath's sixth book on the MB studies Yudhishtira as a model of dualistic monarchy (shared with Krishna and his brothers) in a "pre-Hindu," pre-monetary, pre-literate Bronze Age society of the first millennium BC. This monarchy, based upon agreement with the family, the clan and the people, is juxtaposed with the Shanti Parva's paradigm of autarchy ("more classical, early Hinduism"). There are two excellent appendices on epic time and epic pre-literacy which cannot be surveyed because of space constraints.

McGrath explores how pre-literacy is portrayed, again dually: externally, the drama of recitation before an audience; internally, the narrative of Yudhishtira's kinship group which is the foundation for preliterate poetry. The great variations in style show different poetic traditions being amalga-

mated: Vedic, pre-Hindu, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist. Believing that MB became a written text in the time of Samudragupta, McGrath features a coin of his on the splendid cover. But why could one person not have composed the MB? Look at Isaac Asimov's the encyclopaedic output and Shakespeare's with wide stylistic variations. McGrath compares Vyasa's exhorting Yudhishtira to be king-like by drawing upon traditions of ancient monarchy with the Gupta dynasty reviving the ashvamedha to legitimise power, using the MB recital for this purpose. Why should this not be equally valid for the revival five centuries earlier by Pushyamitra Shunga, the Brahmin general who assassinated his king? The wrongs a raja commits are removed by performing such yagyas and distributing donations.

In a time long long ago north of the Vindhyas lived communities who for protection chose from among Kshatriya families a ruler. To quote from the P. Lal transcription of the Shanti Parva chapters 57, 59, 67: "That mahatma ensured/the sway of dharma/in the world./ Because he ranjita-delighted/all his people,/ he was called a raja/... There is only one Sanatana Dharma/ for a raja/ who wishes to rule a kingdom:/ the welfare of his subjects./ Such welfare/preserves the world." The raja drew his authority from the people who, in return for his protection, gave him one fiftieth of their animals and gold, a tenth of their grain and the loveliest of their daughters. Money did not exist and writing was

unknown. Wealth acquired by the raja consisting of precious metals, gems, cattle, but not land, was distributed by him during yagyas and other ceremonies. Succession to the throne was not by primogeniture alone and needed ratification by the people.

McGrath makes out a strong case for the MB being about the establishment of Yadava hegemony (pointed out in my "Leadership and Managing Power: Insights from the Mahabharata," 2002). The displacement of Yayati's eldest son Yadu in favour of Puru, his youngest, comes full circle. However, it is not "a son of Krishna" who rules at Indraprastha, but his great grandson Vajra, while his sister's grandson rules at Hastinapura. McGrath envisages a conflict in which a matriline defeats a patriline. Actually, it is Satyawati's line that is displaced by her daughter-in-law Kunti's. McGrath seems to support the idea that the matriline represents "indigenous" Dravidian traditions that defeat "intrusive" Indo-Aryans. Thankfully he refrains from stepping further into this quicksand.

McGrath provides a new insight: royal authority is portrayed as dualistic, being shared by Yudhishtira with Krishna in both the major rituals of rajasuya and ashvamedha. Before that, authority is shared between Satyawati and Bhishma (and Vyasa). Royal power depends upon support of the community who are represented in the group of ministers to be chosen from all four classes. Yudhishtira's is also a fraternal kingship shared with his brothers and even with Dhritarashtra. McGrath pertinently points out that "kingdom" has its origins in the Old English "cyn" i.e. "kin" meaning "the situation or location of kinship" which does not connote rule by one person, the model Bhishma presents.

Is the need for the people's acquiescence to legitimise the kingship more implicit than explicit? While Yayati has to explain to them why he is choosing his youngest son, Shantanu does not; nor do the people protest. Yudhishtira's installation as crown-prince requires no consent from them. They only object when the Pandavas are exiled, but Duryodhana is not bothered. He appears to rep-

resent the autocrat type, though not tyrannical since the people tell Dhritarashtra they were happy under his reign. Krishna in his peace-embassy appealing to the kings in the assembly to speak is not evidence that Dhritarashtra has to heed the "sangha". Krishna is following the Yadava mode of governance. No one in the court responds to his appeal because Hastinapura does not envisage such consultative rule. Duryodhana is not bothered about Krishna's exhortation to behave so that the great warriors install him as crown-prince. He successfully asserts his right singly.

Krishna is called "sanghamukhyo", leader of the association. In Panini's time, says McGrath, the Bharatas' profession was "ayudhajivin" (weaponry) and they lived as a "sangha". The MB seems to be showing political systems changing from an oligarchic "sangha" and a kinship type of rule to absolute monarchy. Neither Parikshit nor Janamejaya shares power with anyone.

There is a curious incident, usually overlooked, which McGrath notes as an indication of oligarchic kingship. After the Pandavas have been exiled, Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni offer the kingdom to Drona considering him as protector, ignoring Dhritarashtra and Bhishma. This recurs when Duryodhana, rescued from the Gandharvas, offers the kingship to Duhshasana. Where is the consent of the public? McGrath proposes that this is because the rajasuya having gone wrong, royal authority has become fluid. In the Udyoga Parva subjects discuss Duryodhana's destructive thoughtlessness (like citizens in Shakespeare's plays), a feature absent from the type of kingdom Bhishma describes in the Shanti Parva. The mobile nature of kingship is seen when Karna tells Krishna that Yudhishtira would not accept the kingdom were he to know about Karna's birth. Gandhari, however, is quite categorical that the Kuru kingdom passes by succession. The MB seems to be presenting different claims to kingship without projecting a single model.

McGrath argues that three forms of time coalesce in the MB: the recalled pre-monetary, pre-literate time of "sanghas"; the time poetry creates representing an ideal; and the time of actual performance conveying both. Thus there is "a compounding of the historical, the mythical and the performative which coalesce into a single instance or event that has been simply transmitted and then recorded in our present text of the poem." An impressive thesis indeed.

McGrath makes a very interesting proposition: Parashurama's genocide of Kshatriyas might represent destruction of Buddhist kingdoms east of the Ganga-Yamuna doab. Where is the supporting evidence? J. Bronkhorst proposed that the MB's earliest written text is from the time when Brahmanism was imposing itself on eastern regions viz. Magadha. The Bhargava Brahmins, who feature prominently in the MB, would have been linked to this expansion.

It is not clear why the MB should be recalling "an imagined former era" of war-chariots, when Persian armies used them against Alexander. Nor is there a shift away from the Rigvedic sacrifice. It remains central to the MB with other ways of achieving liberation mentioned such as Sankhya and Yoga. Ritual sacrifice is even shown as worthless com-

pared to the life of "unchavritti" (gleaning). These could certainly be a response to Buddhism and Jainism, as McGrath claims. There are references to "caityas" (funeral monuments) and "edukas" (ossuaries) in the kingdom of Gaya. Bhurishrava meditates on "mahopanishadam" in yoga. The earliest Upanishads are around mid-first millennium BC. McGrath points out that Arjuna's sword is "akashanibham" (blue like the sky). This is the wootz steel produced in North India c. 3rd century BC. Uluka refers to the rite of weapon-worship ("lohabhahara"). "Loha" means "coppery, red" which McGrath interprets as bronze weaponry, thus bolstering his thesis about this being a bronze-age heroic culture.

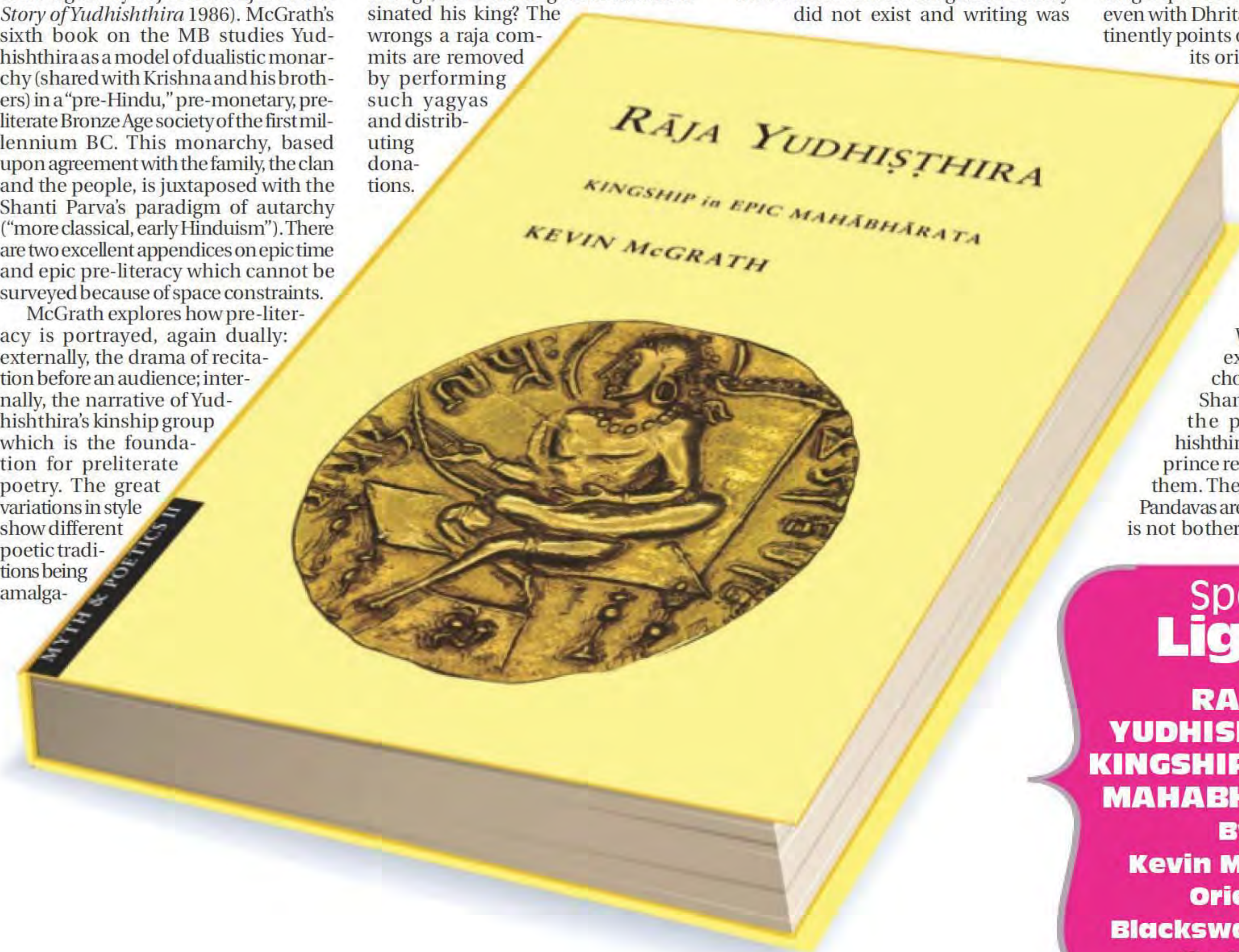
The king's primary duty is as a sacrificer, which McGrath analyses at length. The primary model is Indra, shatakratu (performer of a hundred sacrifices) the rain-bringer, promoting fertility. Satyawati urges Vyasa to provide a successor to the throne since a kingless kingdom gets no rain. As an offshoot of this, in old age the king becomes a forest renunciant, which is not part of the later "classical" model of monarchy where he rules till death.

McGrath is mistaken in stating that during Pandu's rule Dhritarashtra declares Yudhishtira's right of succession. By the time Duryodhana is born—which is the context of Dhritarashtra's comment—Pandu has long given up the throne to his elder brother, retreated to the Himalayas, been cursed by the deer-sage, and has persuaded Kunti to get a son from the god Dharma. It is interesting that Yudhishtira is referred to as "ajatashatru" (whose foes are not born), since this name is shared by Bimbisara's son (491 BC) who founded Pataliputra. It is not the name of Ashoka's father which was Bindusara. Both expanded the Magadha kingdom considerably. Without conquering Magadha, Yudhishtira cannot become "samraj" (emperor).

McGrath argues that the shift from oligarchic monarchy of the earlier books to autarchy in the Shanti Parva is matched by development of a pre-monetary barter economy into an urban one where currency was exchanged for goods. Jain and Buddhist merchant classes dominated; autarchic rule replaced fraternal kingship. While McGrath very rightly points out the puzzling omission of the Sindhu-Sarasvati civilization's urban heritage, elsewhere he asserts it is "obviously recalled" without citing evidence. The lack of mention of coinage in the Shanti Parva is dismissed because it is describing a mythical time, "blurring historic and poetic reality."

McGrath makes the very interesting point that the MB is recited at Takshashila, the capital of Gandhara (Kandahar), the land of Gandhari and Shakuni. Kautilya composed his Arthashastra here; Ashoka was viceroy here. The oldest manuscripts of the MB are from adjoining Kashmir. In his conclusion McGrath makes the very important suggestion for studying how the commentator Nilakantha prepared his edition of the text. This is what editors of the revised Critical Edition should do. The book is a dense but fascinating read providing considerable food for thought.

The reviewer, a former additional chief secretary, West Bengal, specialises in mythology



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