



## Approaching the Past the South Asian way:

Family and History  
in Sanskrit Literature



## Edrych ar y Gorffennol yn Null De Asia:

Teulu a Hanes mewn  
Llenyddiaeth Sansgrit

# ORDER OF CEREMONIES

Glamorgan Council Chamber, from 7.00 pm

## **Welcome and Introduction**

Professor Max Deeg  
(Head of the School of Religious and Theological Studies  
and Director of the Centre for the History of Religion in Asia)

## **The ‘Genealogy and History’ project**

Dr James Hegarty and Dr Simon Brodbeck

(for the project blog, see  
<http://blogs.cf.ac.uk/historyofgenealogy/>)

Glamorgan Committee Room 1, from 8.00 pm

## **‘Colours of Life’, part one**

(India Dance Wales)

**Interval: Buffet**

## **‘Colours of Life’, part two**



Cardiff  
University  
Centre  
for the  
History of  
Religion  
in Asia





**The History of  
Genealogy, the  
Genealogy of History:**

**Family and the Narrative  
Construction of the  
Significant Past in Early  
South Asia**

**James Hegarty and  
Simon Brodbeck**

A three-year project  
funded by the



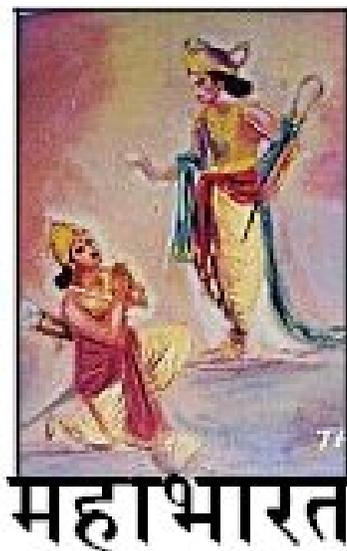
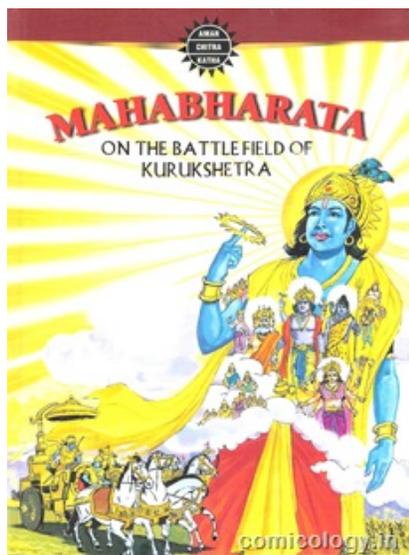
Arts & Humanities  
Research Council





**Dr James Hegarty (JH): introduction**

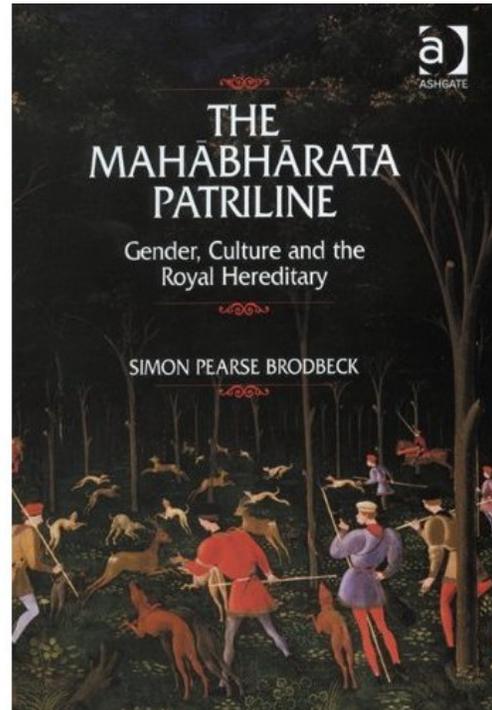
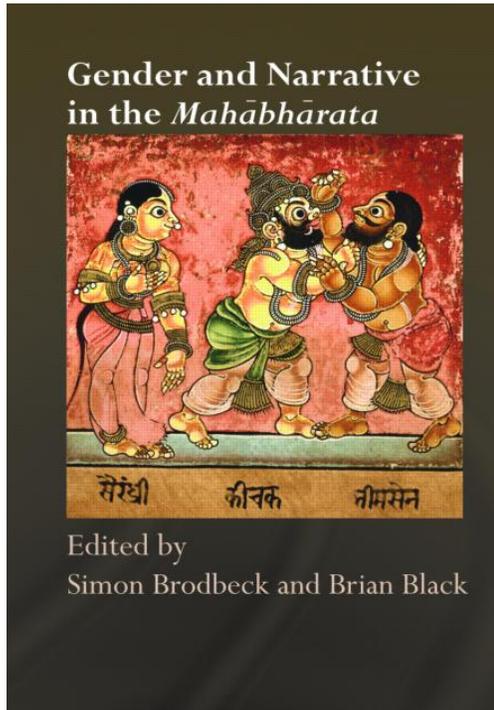
I am James Hegarty. I am fascinated by stories. In particular, I am fascinated with the reasons why all human groups everywhere tell stories to one another. I am particularly interested in the role of religious stories in South Asia. This is a region that has brought us epic tales of Rama and Sita as well as the life of the Buddha and much else besides. I am, by training, a Religious Studies specialist and a Sanskritist. Sanskrit is the language of the very earliest literature that we find in the Indian sub-continent. My doctoral studies were undertaken at Manchester University. During this time, I also studied at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, where I fell deeply and madly in love with the Mahabharata, an epic tale of family and of love, hatred, and the consequences of war.



Since arriving in the School of Religious and Theological Studies in late 2003, I have been sharing my enthusiasm for Sanskrit literature and language with anyone, and everyone, who will listen. As well as teaching Sanskrit, I have introduced new undergraduate modules in the roles of religion and performance in South Asia (which move from ancient text to televisual adaptations of Sanskrit materials) and in the making of Hindu and Sikh traditions in the modern world. At master's level I offer courses in the role of narrative in the transmission and adaptation of religious knowledge in South Asia. I am in the final stages of completing a study of the Sanskrit Mahabharata for the Routledge Hindu Studies Series.

### **Dr Simon Brodbeck(SB): introduction**

Good evening. My name is Simon Brodbeck. I've been employed by Cardiff University on a three-year contract as a research assistant on the 'Genealogy and History' project, and I'm very happy to have come here to work with James. I studied in Cambridge and in London, where I did my PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies, on the philosophy of the Bhagavadgita. I then worked for eighteen months as a lecturer in the Sanskrit Department at the University of Edinburgh. Before I came to Cardiff I worked in London on a three-year research project on gender and narrative in the Mahabharata.



During that project I did quite a lot of research into the genealogy of the Mahabharata kings, and I became increasingly interested in how genealogies work, and what they are for.

## Introducing the Project (JH)



### **The History of Genealogy, the Genealogy of History:**

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The project came about when Simon and myself found ourselves sitting in his flat in London discussing what we were most interested in at that time. We will present our conversation as a dialogue.



**JH:** I can't get enough of the way in which the past is put together in early South Asia. It is fascinating the way in which stories are layered, patterned, and parcelled up in so many ways.

**SB:** Well James, I myself am utterly obsessed with family trees and the ways in which early South Asians told and re-told their family histories.

**JH:** Mmm... Surely we can bring these together in some way?

**SB:** By Jove, there must be something we can do...

It is a tribute to our brilliant minds that what we decided to do was simply combine the two.

The history of genealogy: quite literally, the ways in which family histories have been told and re-told.

The genealogy of history: the broader consideration of how all this fits together in terms of the ways in which the past was understood in early South Asia.



### **The Project Summary in slightly more formal terms**

As is often said in shampoo adverts: brace yourself, the science is coming!

Pre-modern South Asia has often been presented as a land without ‘history’. The Genealogy and History project questions this idea and explores how, in South Asia, ‘family history’ or ‘genealogical narrative’ has been an enduring resource for the formation and transformation of understandings of the past and of religion and politics. Our key research question is: what is the role of family history in early South Asia?

Family history allows people to experiment with all sorts of ideas of how one might, could, or should live (and much else besides). This has mainly been achieved by



showing the consequences of a given course of action for a given family (by and large, of kings or brahmins – a significant religious elite in South Asia).

Understanding how and in what ways people use stories to build religious and social identities is one of the most important ways in which arts and humanities research can contribute to a global society.

In short, we ask:

How do ideas of the past take shape?

What influences choices with regard to what is remembered collectively and what is not?

Our project takes up these issues and explores family histories in Sanskrit story traditions and in



inscriptional sources (those things that have been written in stone, on clay, or on some other durable material and which survive much better than palm leaf manuscripts in the Indian sub-continent).



By doing so, we will not only shed light on the cultural history of early South Asia, but will also explore the ways in which human social groups develop, maintain, and transform their understandings of the past more generally.



The sources in which the family history looms largest and earliest are the Sanskrit epics the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the Puranas (all of which are foundational Hindu texts). These texts try to do nothing less than present the totality of knowledge significant for human beings. They do this by taking up and intertwining, in compelling detail, the family histories of a range of royal and priestly, or brahmin, lineages. There is also a vast range of material in Sanskrit inscriptions left by successive ruling dynasties in South Asia. This is rather more local in its focus but is full of references to characters that appear in the epics and Puranas.

Very little comparative work has made use of both literary and inscriptional sources, and none of it has focused on the way in which the past was constructed and used in first-millennium South Asia.



In the first stage of our research, which is still underway, we will survey this broad range of materials and compare different approaches to the telling of family histories.

In the second stage, we will explore the ways in which these stories are structured and presented and the sorts of things we can, on this basis, say about the people who told them.

In the final stage of research we will consider the relationship between family history and a range of sometimes conflicting social, religious, and political ideologies in early South Asia.

In this way, we will come to an in-depth understanding of the role of family history in the social and cultural life of first-millennium South Asians.

We will also make a contribution to the broader understanding of the differing ways in which the past is put together and understood in human society.



### **The outputs (SB)**

Thanks to the generous funding of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, we will be hosting an international workshop next May, here in Cardiff, at St Michael's College.

Eighteen scholars will congregate here, from as far afield as India, Canada, and Australia, and will listen to each other's papers on the subject of South Asian genealogies. The papers will be improved in light of the workshop discussions, then they will be edited by James and myself and published as a book.





James and I are also writing a second book together, which will be a history of the usage of genealogy in Sanskrit literature. Up until now we have been busy reading, taking notes, and discussing what we've read. Hopefully, the two books that proceed from the project will stand as landmarks in the field and will serve to encourage and focus future research.

We have set up a blog for our project, on which we occasionally post details of our latest discoveries and share interim materials that may be of interest to others. The web address is on the programme of tonight's events.



<http://blogs.cf.ac.uk/historyofgenealogy/>

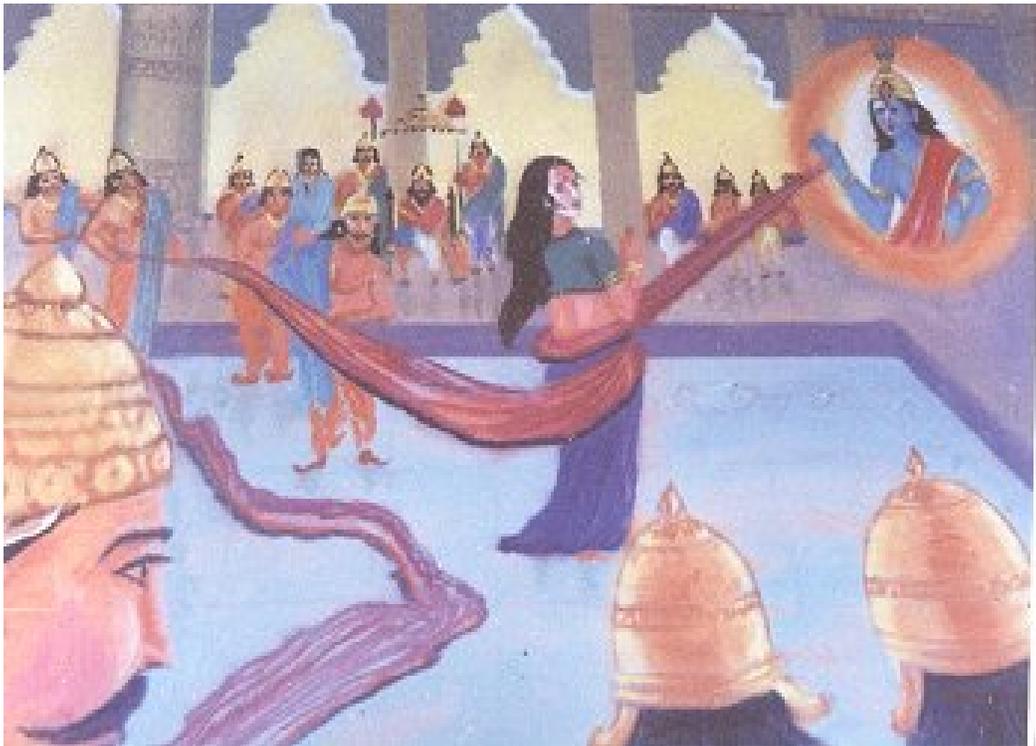
This event is the first of three public lectures that we will be giving as part of our research project. In the second and third of these, in 2010 and 2011, we will report on the workshop and our ongoing progress, and share further research results with you.

Introducing the Mahabharata (JH)





Today we will focus our attention on a text called the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is a vast poem that tells of the conflict between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.





Their conflict over who will become king culminates in a horrific war that results in the slaughter of almost the entire *kshatriya*, or warrior, class. As well as providing a rich and varied account of royal family conflict, the text is also full of diverse tales, asides, and political, philosophical, and theological speculations, the most famous of which is the Bhagavad Gita.



The Mahabharata is very large, the oft-quoted statistic being that it is four times the length of the Old and New Testaments taken together. It is probably about two thousand years old, perhaps more, perhaps less. The Mahabharata has been consistently drawn upon by generations of South Asians in Sanskrit and in many other Indian languages.



It achieved its best-known Sanskrit form in the edition and commentary of Nilakantha in the second half of the seventeenth century, but the Mahabharata is told and re-told in innumerable forms, from grandmother's lap to television and comic book versions, to this very day.





The Mahabharata is a story about the past, written and re-written by peoples from the past. This seems to be a somewhat obvious point but it is one that is worth making, as it has often been underplayed by academics. This is because research has tended to be carried out by individuals who want to tell other stories: of the development of Hinduism, of Sanskrit Literature, or of Indian Society.

These enquiries have produced valuable results. Very few scholars, however, have addressed the Mahabharata in terms of its simplest and most obvious purpose: to tell its readers and hearers about the past and the world in which that past unfolds. Modern India is, after all, 'Bharat' in many modern Indian languages.

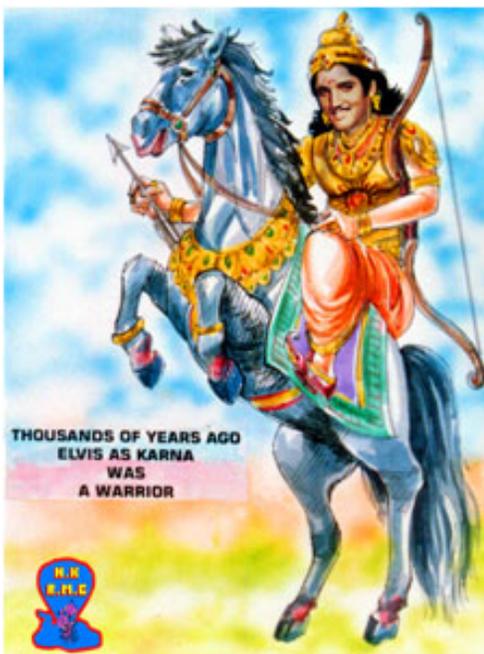




Yet the Sanskrit Mahabharata has a rather interesting and complicated way of approaching the past. The Mahabharata is a story that is based on exploration: a crisis unfolds and the reasons for that crisis are explored and re-explored (often on several occasions and often with very different answers in each case). The most common form of crisis in the Mahabharata is one that involves family relationships or family histories. I will take as an example the case of the tragic history of one of the great anti-heroes of the Mahabharata: Karna.

### **Karna and the past in the Mahabharata**

Family lies at the heart of this story. For Karna is the unacknowledged older brother of the heroes of the Mahabharata, the Pandavas. We hear of the birth of Karna early on in the Mahabharata as part of the story of how the god Indra begged the earrings and armour of Karna from him. This was in order to help neutralise his threat to the



great Pandava warrior Arjuna. Neither Karna nor the Pandavas realise that they are related. Karna is the son of the sun (Surya). His mother Kunti had obtained a boon such that she could conjure up any god. Her first 'youthful experiment' with this new-found power ended in the birth of the glorious Karna, just as her later use of the power resulted in the births of three boys (Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna) to herself, and twins to her co-wife Madri (Nakula and Sahadeva) – these being the five Pandava brothers ('sons' of Pandu). As a maiden, Kunti felt unable to keep the baby Karna and instead decided to abandon him, floating him in a basket down the river Ashva.



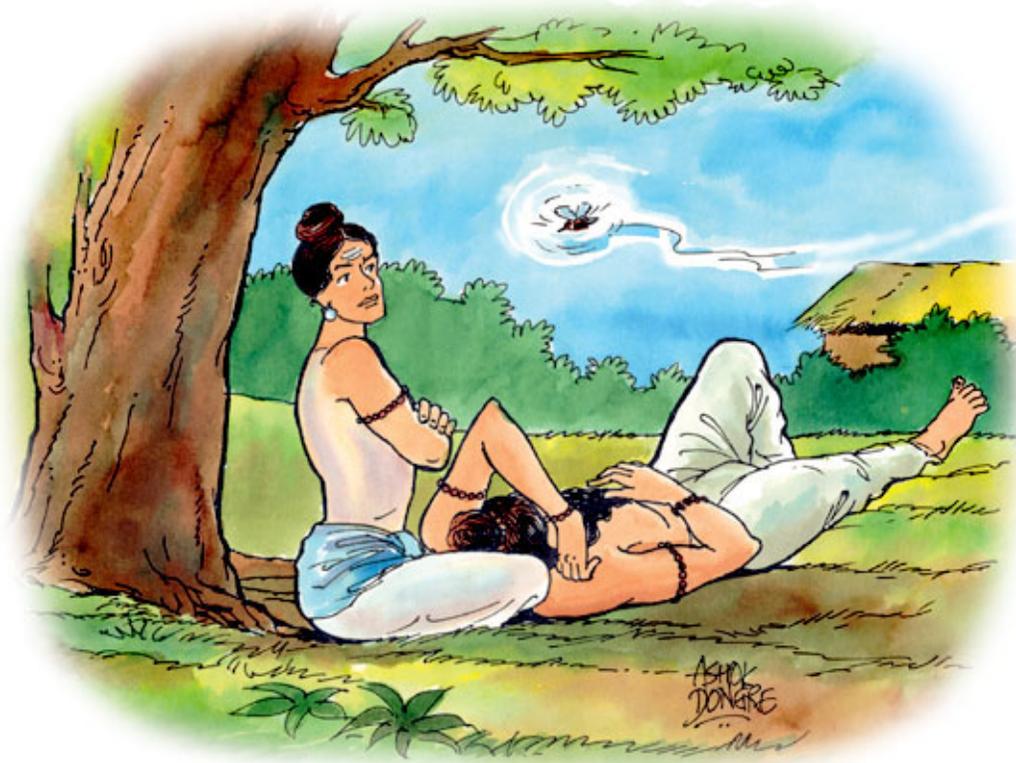
He was found by a stable-hand, Adhiratha, who adopted him and brought him up ignorant of his semi-divine warrior origins. Karna leads a somewhat complicated life: much of it is taken up with the gathering of weapons with which to defeat the Pandavas. This is because he is the close friend and ally of the Kaurava prince Duryodhana, who is the sworn enemy of the five sons of Pandu.

Having been told of Karna's birth early on in the Mahabharata, we hear an account of his past from his own mouth later on in the text. At this point in the main plot of the Mahabharata, Karna is general of the Kaurava forces and locked in horrific combat with the Pandavas on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. We hear,



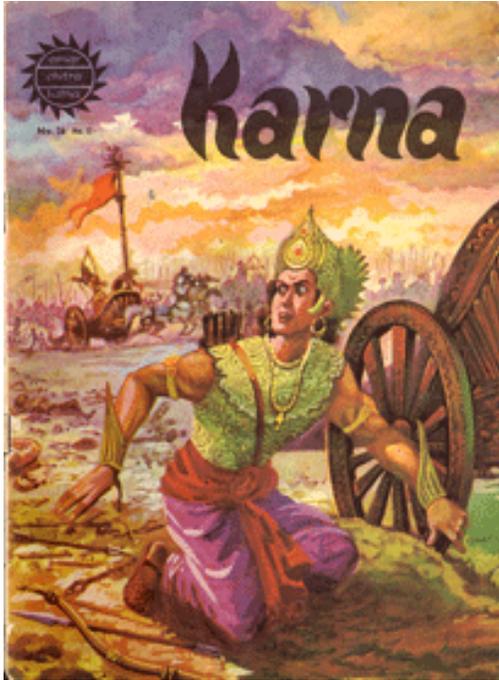
among other things, of his being cursed by the brahmin-warrior Rama (not the Rama of the Ramayana).

Karna had entered the great warrior's service under false pretences in order to obtain knowledge of terrible missile weapons (*astras*). While his teacher was sleeping on his lap, Karna's thigh was bitten by some sort of insect. Karna endured the terrible pain and did not disturb Rama. However, when Rama awoke and saw what had happened, he immediately recognised that such a capacity to endure physical pain was the mark of the *kshatriya* and not of the brahmin. He cursed Karna to forget the use of the missile weapon he had taught him when he needs it most.



Indeed, Karna is then killed by Arjuna in battle.

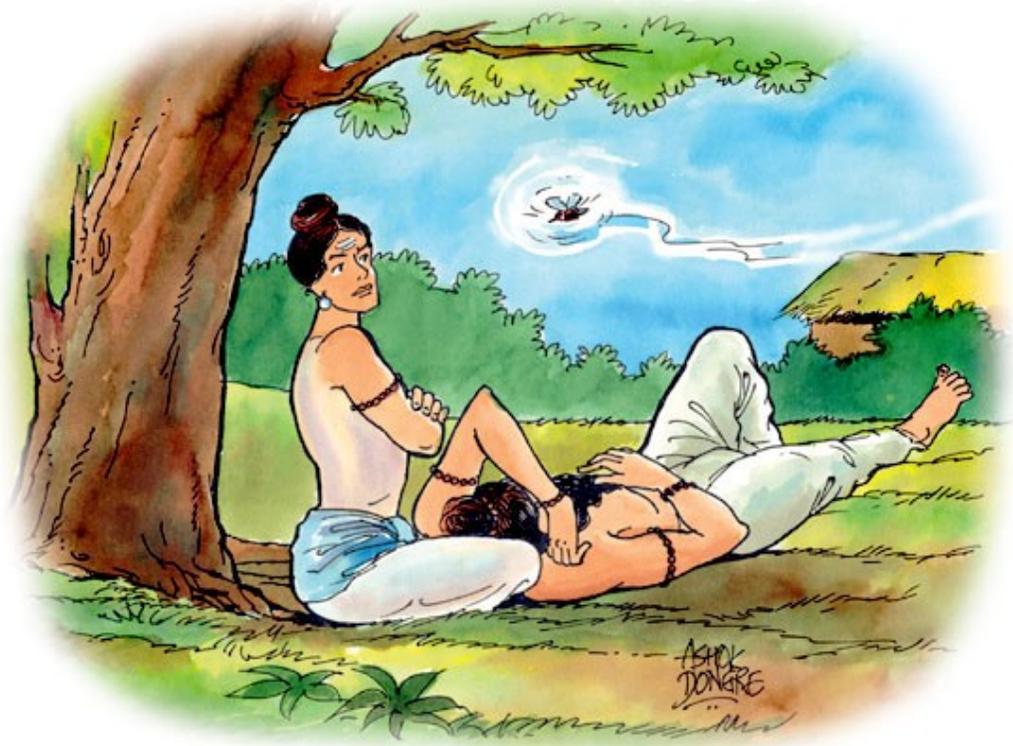




The details of Karna's past are thus always addressed situationally, in relation to a given crisis or event in the story of the Mahabharata. His birth is narrated in the context of Indra's plot to steal from him the earrings and armour given to him by his father, the sun. In our second example, Karna narrates his personal history in order to gain the confidence of his rather unfriendly charioteer Shalya before his death at the hands of Arjuna.

Later in the Mahabharata, we find a complete account of Karna's life. This occurs as the Pandava brothers are reeling at the revelation of Karna's identity as their senior brother. Furthermore, the sage Narada, who tells the tale, elaborates and extends it.

Narada retells the story of Rama and Karna.



However, when he tells it, it is full of new details, most especially in relation to the insect that bit Karna, which we now learn is a spider-like creature:

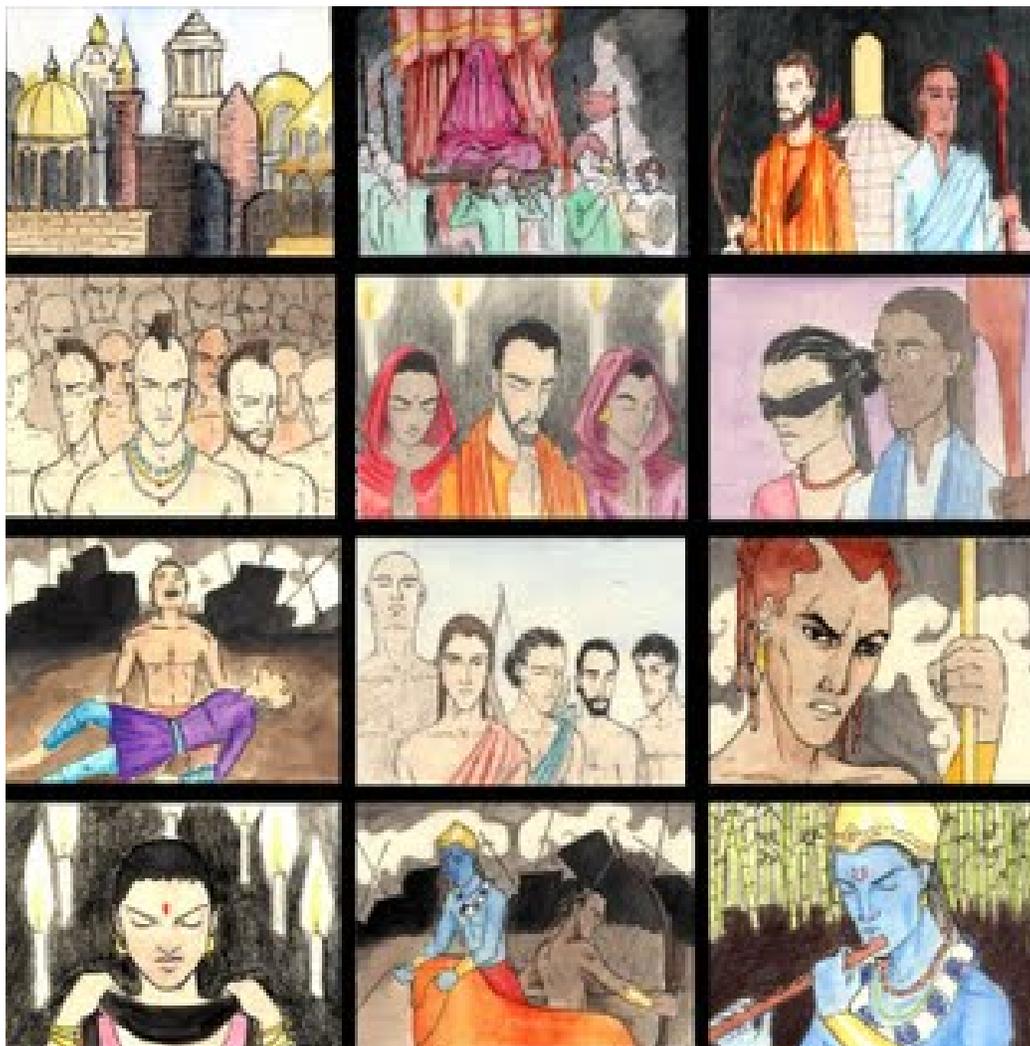


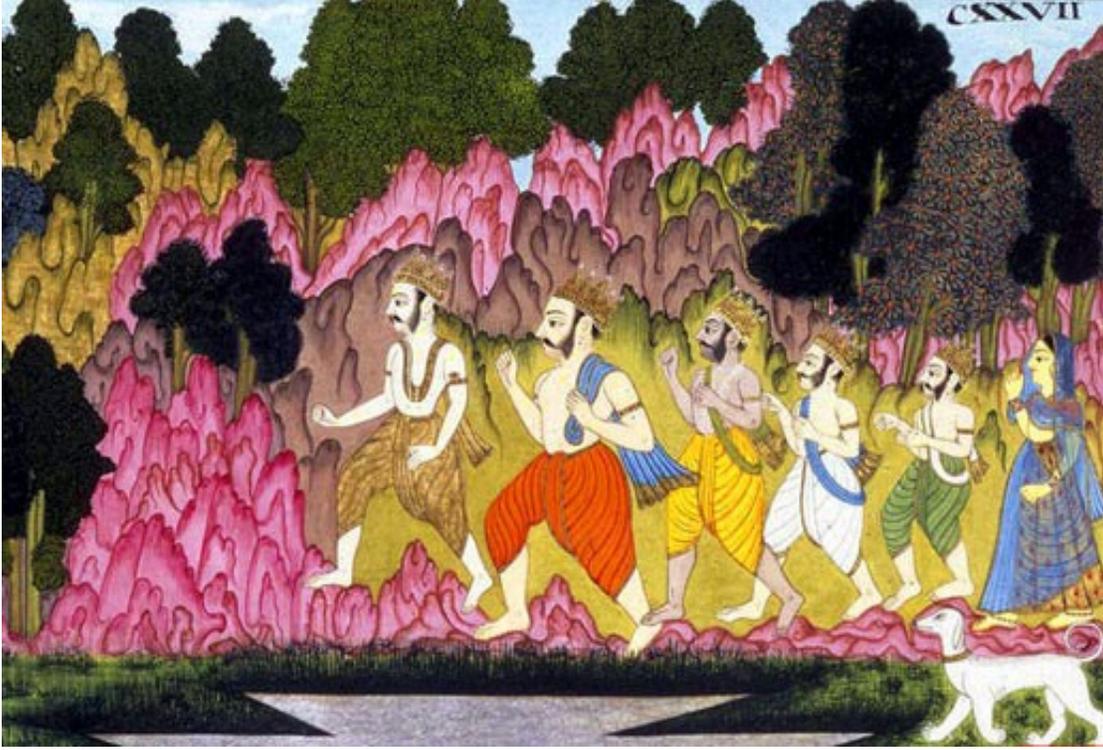
atha kṛmiḥ śleṣmamayo  
māṃsaṣṇitabhjanaḥ  
...  
aṣṭapādaṃ tīkṣṇadamṣṭraṃ  
sūcībhir iva saṃvṛtam  
romabhiḥ saṃniruddhāṅgam  
alarkaṃ nāma nāmataḥ

an insect made of mucus, that fed on flesh and blood ... with eight feet, with sharp teeth, it was covered in spikes, its body was covered with hairs; it was an 'alarka'.

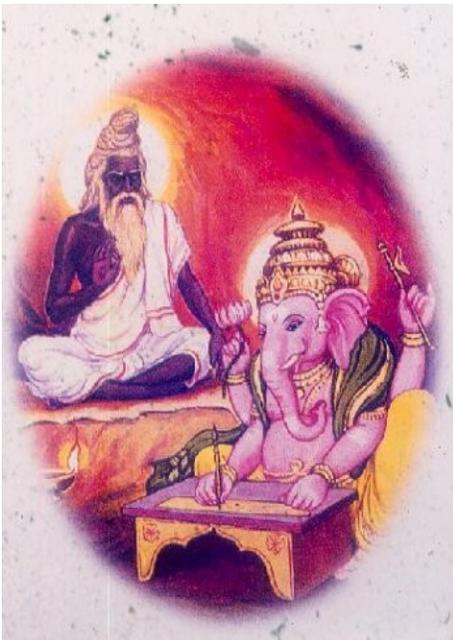
We are granted a comprehensive vision of this foul creature, as if to focus the attention of the audience for the subsequent expansion of his role: the story continues with a history of the alarka. The creature explains that he had formerly been a great demon and that he had been cursed for ravishing the wife of the great sage Bhrigu. The term of the curse was to last until the destruction of his monstrous form at the hands of Rama, the aforementioned warrior-brahmin and descendant of Bhrigu.

If we move from the birth of Karna to the details of his life and to the details of the life of the spider that bit him, a certain structure begins to reveal itself. This form of narrative construction of the significant past is one of *ongoing elaboration*. A character is introduced; details of his life are described; and the details of the details are described. The past is thus opened to potentially endless exploration.





We thus have three examples of stories that explore and extend the past from a given situation in the unfolding plot of the Mahabharata. The past is constructed as that which affects the present and that which is to be selectively explored from that present. This stands as something of a prompt to encourage further such story-telling activities; and the Mahabharata is told and re-told to this day. This means that there is some truth in one of the Mahabharata's favourite descriptions of itself:



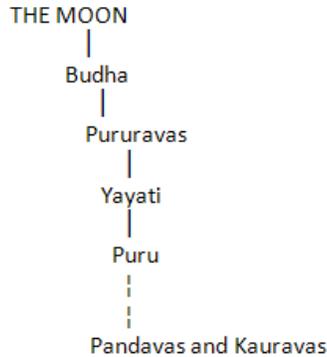
यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र  
यन्नेहास्ति न तत्क्वचित् ॥

*yad ihāsti tad anyatra  
yan nehāsti na tat kvacit*

What is here is elsewhere, but  
what is not here is nowhere

## Solar and Lunar Dynasties in the Mahabharata(SB)

In the story of the Pandavas and Kauravas, when the characters in the royal family talk amongst themselves, they speak of their family as being descended from the moon. It is a lunar line of kings.



This diagram shows the top of the family tree, tracing descent from the moon through Budha. Please note: this is Budha with one 'd', not to be confused with Buddha with two 'd's, who was the founder of Buddhism.

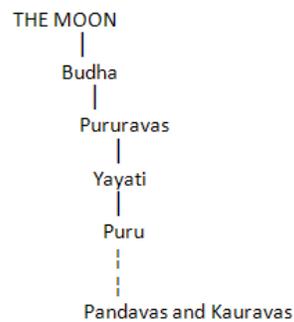


Now then. The Mahabharata presents the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas as told several generations later, to King Janamejaya, who is the great-grandson of the Pandavas. And at the beginning of the Mahabharata, before Janamejaya starts listening to the story of the Pandavas, his ancestry is told in detail. One might think that

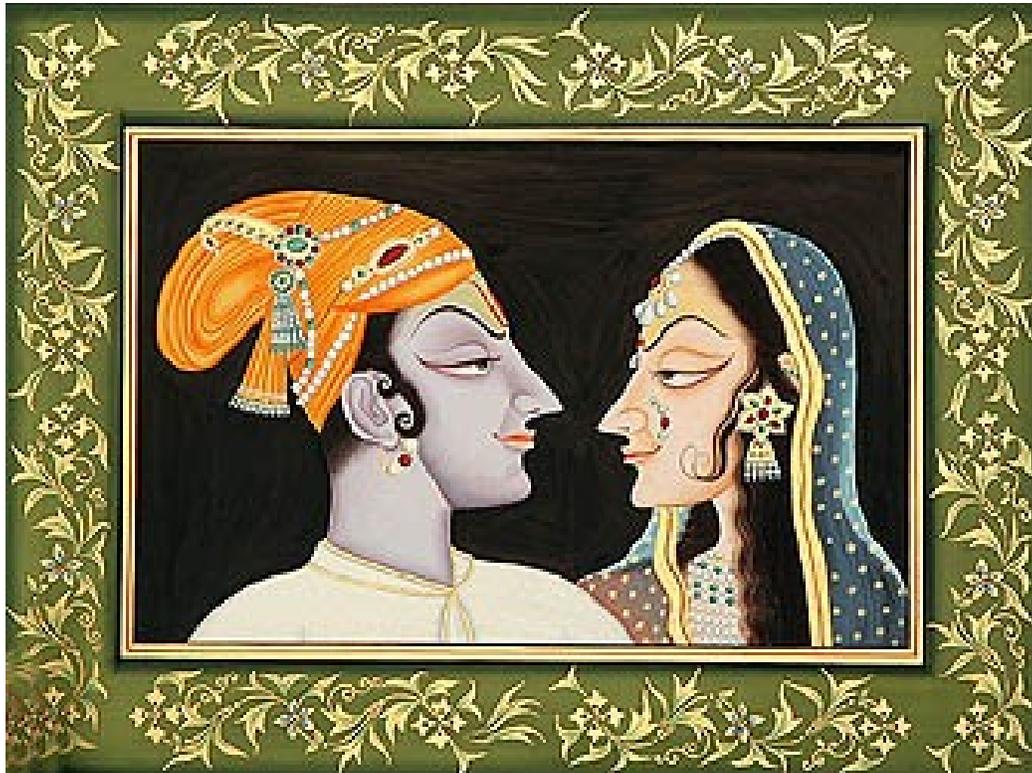
Janamejaya's ancestry would be the same as the lunar ancestry of the Pandavas, but just a bit longer, with the more recent generations added on the end. But it is not. When Janamejaya's ancestry is told, the family is presented as being descended from the sun. It is a solar line of kings.



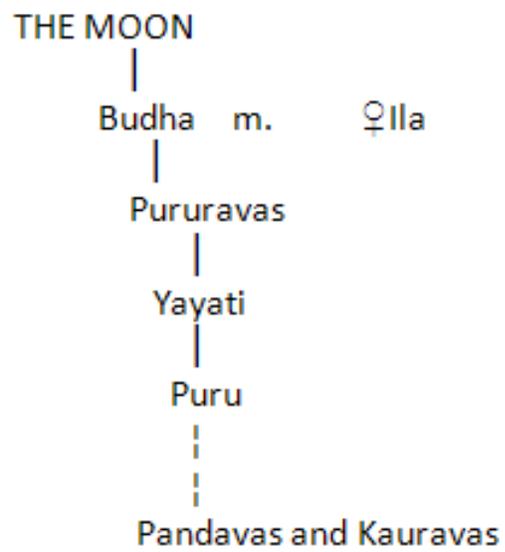
So it seems that in the several generations between the time of the Pandavas and the time of their descendant Janamejaya, the beginning of the ancestry has been adjusted. What used to be spoken of as a lunar line is now spoken of as a solar line. Let us see how this change is achieved.



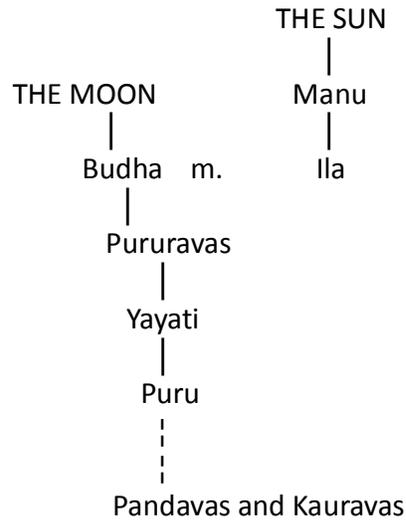
The ancestry as presented here is a list of men. But men can't have babies, so each of us has two parents – a mother as well as a father.



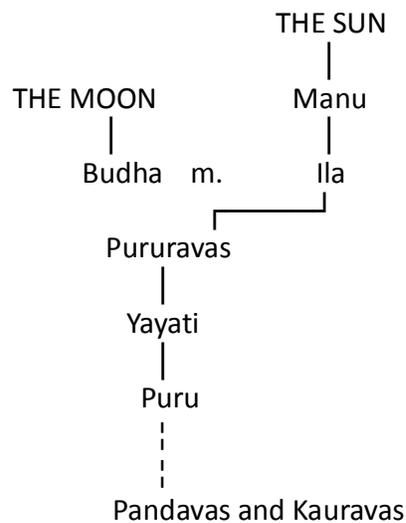
Pururavas's mother, Budha's wife, is called Ila. Here she is:



And here is *her* ancestry:

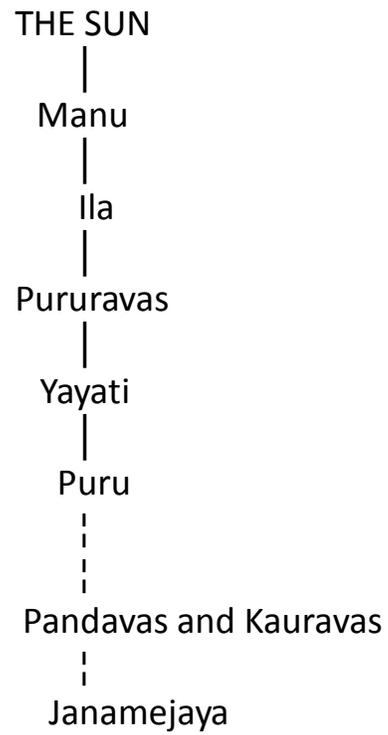


She is the daughter of Manu, who happens to be the son of the sun. So in order for the ancestry to become solar, all that has to happen is for us to start talking about Pururavas as the son of Ila rather than as the son of Budha.



Once we do that, we might even forget about Ila's husband and his ancestry, and talk about Ila as if she were a single mother.

And then the line features the sun in a central position. And that is how it comes down to Janamejaya.

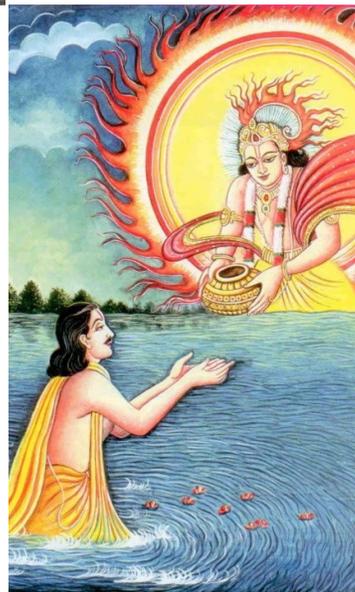


And when this line is narrated to Janamejaya, it is said that Ila was Pururavas's mother and that she was also his father.





My point here is that the narrated ancestral past is not fixed. It can change, depending on the needs and interests of the times. In this example, the switch from lunar to solar ancestry seems to indicate the growing power and status of this royal family in recent generations. The sun is bigger, brighter, hotter, and more constant than the moon. Its colour is gold rather than silver.



As a symbol of imperial majesty, it works very well indeed. Its chariot has never been known to break down.



It is interesting that the change in the upper reaches of the Mahabharata genealogy is associated with the inclusion of a woman as a link in the ancestral line, because usually these lines contain only men. In one particular generation, there has been a switch from tracing the father's ancestry to tracing the mother's ancestry. But this kind of ancestral switch could be made to occur in any generation, and this means that the genealogy that is told could be adjusted in any number of ways, incorporating any number of different sets of ancestors depending on the situation in which it is told.



## **Acknowledgements (JH)**

We would like to thank:

- The Arts and Humanities Research Council;
- India Dance Wales;
- The Centre for the History of Religion in Asia at Cardiff University, and its director (and the head of the School of Religious and Theological Studies) Max Deeg;
- Eluned Parrott and the Community Engagement Team at Cardiff University;
- Mr Hari Patel for his proactive response to our invitation to this event and his efforts in publicising it – we hope that this will be the beginning of a very productive relationship;
- The staff and porters of the Glamorgan Building who have been immensely helpful;
- Rachel and Rhima, our two student helpers and two of my finest Sanskrit students, who kindly gave of their time tonight;
- The New Vegetarian Studio for providing the food this evening;
- The various websites from which we borrowed our illustrations; and
- The Mahabharata for being so endlessly fascinating.

Please help yourself to the food during the interval in the dance performance.

## **Key to illustrations**

Page 1: Black-and-white Draupadi (twice)

Page 3: CHRA logo, designed by Sita Deeg and Ian Dennis

Krishna and his mother

Members of CHRA, left to right: Patrick Olivelle (international mentor), Max Deeg (director), Padma Anagol, Wu Juan, Simon Brodbeck, James Hegarty (development officer), Naomi Appleton, Radhika Mohanran, Will Johnson.

Page 4: Gaja-Lakshmi x 3

Max Deeg, Simon Brodbeck, and James Hegarty  
Shiva and Parvati with baby Ganesha

Page 5: Painting of the churning of the ocean

Amar Chitra Katha Mahabharata comic cover: Krishna's universal form  
Arjuna and Krishna

Page 6: Book covers x 2

Page 7: Shiva and Parvati with baby Ganesha (again)

'History today' (from The Mary Whitehouse Experience)

Page 8: Sculpted war scene next to doorway arch

Page 9: Durga with Gandhi

Chariot scene with red background

Page 10: 'Indraprastha Girls' School' postage stamp

Rama and Sita (from Doordarshan Ramayana)

Mehrauli iron pillar

Page 11: Bhagavata Purana scroll (from John Rylands Library, Manchester)

- Page 12: Arjuna competing at Draupadi's svayamvara (bridal festival)  
St Michael's College with red flowers
- Page 13: Scholars at work (in Dubrovnik, 2005)  
Black-and-white Draupadi (again)
- Page 14: Mahabharata comic cover: warrior in battle gear
- Page 15: Vyasa narrating the Mahabharata to Ganesha  
Krishna saving Draupadi at the disrobing
- Page 16: Arjuna and Krishna (Bhagavad Gita) chariot scene x 5
- Page 17: Arjuna and Krishna (Bhagavad Gita) chariot scene  
The two armies clash
- Page 18: Mahabharata sculptural frieze, Ellora  
Sculpture of the disrobing of Draupadi
- Page 19: Rabindranath Tagore postage stamp  
Elvis as Karna  
Cartoon Karna
- Page 20: Karna discovered and adopted  
Duryodhana on his chariot (from Doordarshan Mahabharata)
- Page 21: The more famous Rama, with Lakshmana, Hanuman, and Sita  
Karna and Rama
- Page 22: Karna trying to free his wheel x 2
- Page 23: Karna trying to free his wheel x 2 more  
Warrior beheaded by Arjuna (in fact this is not Karna but Jayadratha, but we couldn't find any pictures of the beheading of Karna)
- Page 24: Karna and Rama (again)  
A large spider
- Page 25: Multi-scene Mahabharata drawings
- Page 26: The Pandavas on their final journey, with Draupadi and a dog  
Vyasa narrating the Mahabharata to Ganesha
- Page 27: The moon  
The Buddha x 2
- Page 28: Meditating figure with chakras  
The sun and the pot of plenty
- Page 29: Man and woman (these are Krishna and Radha, but in context here they stand for Budha and Ila)
- Page 31: Chariot-battle relief sculpture
- Page 32: Mahabharata palm-leaf manuscript with chariot-battle scene  
Sculpted sun with open mouth  
Old Indian gold coins x 2  
The sun and the pot of plenty (again)
- Page 33: The sun on his chariot  
Aum

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