The Problem of Indifference to Suffering in the *Mahābhārata* Tradition

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Abstract In the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa is regularly accused of ignoring harm that befalls its various characters. In fact, the Sanskrit verb *upekṣ* (“to overlook, disregard, or ignore”) is applied more consistently to Kṛṣṇa than any other figure in the epic. Through its use, both the *Mahābhārata* and the tradition raise a question: how can Kṛṣṇa be indifferent to two genocides (the massacre of the Kurus and the Yādavas) and the mistreatment of Draupadī? Although previous studies on theodicies in the epic have focused on the issue of Kṛṣṇa’s omnipotence (or lack thereof) in the *Mahābhārata*, this article argues that the question of omnipotence is irrelevant because Kṛṣṇa does not want to prevent the suffering of a large-scale war—his neglect is *intentional*. From this question of (intentional) neglect, the theological problem of indifference to suffering arises for these early readers of the *Mahābhārata*: under what circumstances is it justified for Kṛṣṇa to neglect the suffering of others, despite being able to prevent it? In presenting this problem, this article also draws attention to the importance of commentaries on the epics and Purāṇas as a source of study for vexed ethical and theological questions such as this one.

Keywords *Mahābhārata* · theodicy · Draupadī · Kṛṣṇa · *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* · *upekṣā* · epic commentaries

In classical Sanskrit Buddhist, Jaina, and Hindu narratives, moral exemplars face a similar dilemma: should they ignore harm or intervene and assist someone in need? In Āryaśūra’s *Jātakamālā*, a series of short stories about the Buddha in his previous births, we are told that the Buddha, born as a monkey, offers himself as a meal to a

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hungry tigress in order to prevent her from eating her own cub. The Buddha's reasoning is that he must intervene and not ignore the potential suffering (*duḥkham upeksyate*) of the innocent cub. Hemacandra's *Triṣaṣṭiśālākāpuruṣacaritra*, a collection of narratives about famous Jaina heroes, includes a story about the Tīrthaṃkara Neminātha and a similar conundrum. When Kṛṣṇa abandons his Yādavas in battle with Jarāsaṃdha, his cousin Nemi is faced with a dilemma: should he compromise his commitment to nonviolence and lead the Yādavas in battle, or should he remain true to his values and stay out? In a scene that curiously mirrors the opening of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Nemi's charioteer convinces him to join the battle by arguing that a failure to lead the Yādava contingent would be tantamount to him letting his clan perish in battle, and one should not ignore (*nopekṣyam*) that.¹

In each of these instances, the moral exemplars—Buddha and Nemi—face the dilemma of ignoring harm, and they each respond differently. These examples also hold something else in common—they use the verb *upekṣ* (“to overlook, disregard, or ignore”) to indicate that someone has ignored or might ignore harm. The previous examples conceive of indifference ethically as more than just overlooking harm, they probe whether the bystander is ever morally justified in not acting and if the bystander is even capable of preventing the harm at all.

We are told in the *Mahābhārata* that Kṛṣṇa disregards two genocides—the massacre of the Kurus and the Yādavas—and also turns a blind eye to Draupadī when she is being forcefully disrobed by the Kauravas. The verb *upekṣ* is used ten times to signal Kṛṣṇa's indifference. In fact, *upekṣ* is used more consistently with regard to the god than any other character in the *Mahābhārata*. At face value, these charges evoke an image of a detached Kṛṣṇa looking on as millions massacre each other.

Are we to understand that Kṛṣṇa stood by dispassionately as a genocidal war and the massacre of his own clan took place? This becomes a problem in the vein of the Buddhist and Jaina examples if these are events Kṛṣṇa could have prevented. These two issues—Kṛṣṇa's indifference and his ability to prevent harm—are inextricably tied to the question of his divinity in the epic and the nature of divinity itself.² In his essay “Defence of a Devious Divinity,” Bimal Krishna Matilal (1991: 405) argues that Kṛṣṇa must resort to trickery to win the Bhārata War because he is not omnipotent, and omnipotence is not an important concept in Indian philosophy. If Kṛṣṇa were omnipotent, Matilal says, the god could have ended the Bhārata War in a single day, instead of using various crooked strategies to steer the Pāṇḍavas to victory over eighteen days. While this explanation may satisfy the modern reader's ethical concerns about Kṛṣṇa's trickery, both the *Mahābhārata* and the tradition

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² The divinity of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* is tied to the vexed question of the history of the *Mahābhārata*'s composition. For the purpose of this article, I am working with the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute's critical edition and treat it as a text. I will not be addressing text-critical questions or speculations on the prehistory of the BORI edition.

(here represented by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, its commentaries, and commentaries on the *Mahābhārata*) question Kṛṣṇa's neglect. The *Mahābhārata* tradition raises a question: how can Kṛṣṇa permit two genocides and the disrobing, or *cīraharana*, of Draupadī? Emily T. Hudson (2013) has argued along similar lines that the *Mahābhārata* does not always present Kṛṣṇa as omnipotent, and therefore the epic hedges on whether Kṛṣṇa can alleviate the suffering of the characters. As I show in this article, the question of omnipotence is irrelevant because Kṛṣṇa does not want to prevent the suffering of a large-scale war—his neglect is *intentional*. From this question of (intentional) neglect, the theological problem of indifference to suffering arises for these early readers of the *Mahābhārata*: under what circumstances is it justified for Kṛṣṇa to neglect the suffering of others, despite being capable of preventing it? An important component of this problem is the forceful disrobing of Draupadī. This tests the limits of Kṛṣṇa's indifference, and in fact, the tradition's reworking of this story suggests that it would be cruel for Kṛṣṇa to *not* ultimately intervene and help her if he is capable. In presenting this problem, I also draw attention to the importance of commentaries on the epics and Purāṇas as a source of study for ethical and theological questions.

I begin by looking at all instances where the term *upekṣ* is used with regard to Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*. In particular, I look at the three principal instances where Kṛṣṇa is accused of turning a blind eye to suffering—the genocides of the Kurus and the Yādavas and the disrobing of Draupadī. Although there is a discussion about whether he is capable of preventing harm, I argue that the *Mahābhārata* is not questioning his omnipotence. Instead, there is a moral expectation that he would do the right thing. In the second section, I look at the defense that the *Mahābhārata* tradition mounts in response to the problem of indifference. Kṛṣṇa's neglect, I maintain, is intentional. I conclude by looking at the Draupadī episode.

Upekṣ in the *Mahābhārata*

The term that will anchor this study—*upekṣ*—has a wide semantic range and is not always used in other genres to mean indifference.³ More than other Sanskrit texts, it is the *Mahābhārata* that fleshes out a nuanced understanding of indifference and its ethics. In the Sanskrit epic, the verb *upekṣ* is used seventy-eight times, and mostly in this context. Although there are a host of candidates who could be accused of ignoring harm in the *Mahābhārata*, a tale riddled with violence and genocide, the epic applies *upekṣ* most consistently to Kṛṣṇa. While this term had wide currency at

³ *Upekṣā*, or in Pali *upekkhā*—when understood as “equanimity”—is fourth of the four divine dwellings (*brahmavihāras*) in Buddhism (along with *mettā*, friendliness; *karuṇā*, compassion; and *muditā*, joy). Equanimity denotes worldly indifference, or at least viewing the opposites in the world equally, but it does not require one to overlook preventable harm. This is because the second *brahmavihāras* is *karuṇā*, which would require someone to be compassionate enough to prevent the suffering of others that they are capable of preventing, as the Buddhist example above shows.

the time of the *Mahābhārata*'s composition and it was certainly being used in a clearly ethical sphere, the *upekṣā* that Kṛṣṇa is accused of is not "equanimity."⁴

Within the *Mahābhārata* itself, *upekṣ* sometimes means "to overlook, disregard, or ignore" something or someone.⁵ For example, when Karna was suddenly bitten by a worm, he ignored it (*tam upaikaṣata*) because his teacher was resting in his lap.⁶ In the war books, Duryodhana and others frequently accuse their key warriors of partiality, particularly when it seems that they are intentionally trying not to kill certain enemy combatants. For example, Duryodhana accuses Droṇa of "ignoring" his favorite student Arjuna in battle (*bhavān upekṣām kurute*) instead of killing him.⁷ *Upekṣā* is briefly mentioned as a stratagem in war in the *Śāntiparvan*.⁸ It is used in a legal context as well to describe overlooking (or excusing) a crime or unpaid dues. Of the seventy-eight instances of *upekṣ*, the verb is used sixty times to signal that someone has overlooked harm or suffering. Various epic figures—from Dhṛtarāṣṭra to Yudhiṣṭhira—are accused of overlooking suffering or misconduct.

There are other Sanskrit verbs that the *Mahābhārata* occasionally uses to indicate that someone "looked on" as something terrible happened, but these verbs are not used as consistently as *upekṣ* to be considered systematic. The verb *prekṣ* is occasionally used in this context, particularly *upaprekṣ*, which comes from the same root (*īkṣ*) as *upekṣ*. The construction referred to as the "*anādare ṣaṣṭhi*" in grammatical literature, where the genitive case conveys disregard, is also used with regard to Kṛṣṇa. For example, in the *Strīparvan* (11.13.17), Gāndhārī complains about Bhīma's treachery in the mace battle but notes that this all happened "as Vāsudeva looked on" (*vāsudevasya paśyataḥ*). These verbs, however, do not recur frequently enough in an epic (or larger Sanskrit) context to be a systematic marker of indifference like *upekṣ*. Aside from being used in the *Mahābhārata*, *upekṣ* is also used in this way in other classical Sanskrit narratives, including the *Jātakamālā* and the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. As I show, commentators also engage in a systematic discussion of indifference using *upekṣ* specifically over any other verb. For these reasons, I focus on the recurrence of this specific verb as it relates to Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*.

There are two other notable examples of wanton massacre that deserve mention, namely, the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest and its inhabitants in the *Ādiparvan* and the slaying of the Pāṇḍavas' five young sons by Draupadī (the Pāṇḍaveyas) in their sleep in the *Sauptikaparvan*. I do not focus on the *Sauptikaparvan*'s massacre because Kṛṣṇa is not involved and *upekṣ* is not used to question his indifference to the slaughter of the innocent boys. The burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest does not involve indifference on the part of Kṛṣṇa. In this episode he, along with Arjuna, is

⁴ Though indifference in the face of harm is presented as a problem in the *Mahābhārata*, at times Kṛṣṇa embraces the related ethic of equanimity. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he frames his own involvement in the world as being that of a detached nonactor.

⁵ *yo balād anuśāstīha so 'mitraṁ tena vindati | mitratām anuvṛttaṁ tu samupekṣeta paṇḍitaḥ* || (2.57.10)

⁶ *saṁdaśyamāno 'pi tathā kṛmīṇā tena bhārata | guruprabodhaśaṅkī ca tam upaikaṣata sūtajah* || (12.3.8)

⁷ *svayam hi mṛtyur vihitah satyasamdhena samyuge | bhavān upekṣām kurute suśiṣyatvād dhanamjaye* || (7.125.27)

⁸ *sāma copapradānam ca bhedo daṇḍaś ca pāṇḍava | upekṣā pañcamī cātra kārtsnyena samudāhṛtā* || (12.59.35)

an active party to the massacre of animals and inhabitants of the forest. While *upekṣ* or any notion of indifference to suffering is not raised in this context, there are structural similarities between Kṛṣṇa's massacre of creatures in the Khāṇḍava Forest and the massacre of his clan, which will be discussed later.

I will explain three major examples—the disrobing of Draupadī, the Bhārata War, and the massacre of the Yādavas—two of which are genocides. In the very beginning of the *Mahābhārata*—the first *adhyāya* of the *Ādiparvan*, to be exact—the bard Ugrasravas provides the seers of the Naimiṣa Forest with a brief synopsis of the epic's narrative. It is here that the theme of indifference is first addressed. When the narrator summarizes the dicing match, he touches on Kṛṣṇa's reaction upon hearing about what happened:

*nātiprītamanās cāsīd vivādāṁś cānvamodata |
dyūtādīn anayān ghorān pravṛddhāṁś cāpy upaīkṣata || (1.1.93)*

Though he [Kṛṣṇa] was not very pleased, he permitted the disputes, and also overlooked (*upaīkṣata*) the other terrible misconduct that increased, beginning with the gambling match.

Here we have, at the highest narrative level, a summary of the issue that the *Mahābhārata* frequently wrestles with. The narrator draws a distinction between permitting something and overlooking it but finds Kṛṣṇa culpable in both cases. The terrible conduct that the bard describes from there on—the dicing match, the disrobing of Draupadī, and so on—are all framed as acts that Kṛṣṇa allows to take place.

Two Genocides and a Disrobing

In this section, I look at the instances in the *Mahābhārata* where Kṛṣṇa appears to be indifferent to suffering and is explicitly accused of being so. In each of these cases, the epic uses the verb *upekṣ* to flag his indifference. There are four episodes where Kṛṣṇa is accused of indifference in the *Mahābhārata*: in the disrobing of Draupadī, the Bhārata War, the mace battle of Bhīma and Duryodhana, and the Yādava massacre. Of these four, three are recurring and serious concerns: the disrobing of Draupadī, the massacre of the Kurus, and the genocide of the Yādavas. In each of these passages, using the verb *upekṣ*, Kṛṣṇa is accused of neglecting harm. I begin first with a relatively minor example. In the *Sauptikaparvan*, Aśvatthāman sees Duryodhana slain and laments the foul means of his defeat. Not only does Bhīma break the rules of war by breaking Duryodhana's thighs, he also crushes his head. Aśvatthāman then berates Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna for allowing this kind of impropriety:

*dhig astu kṛṣṇaṁ vārṣṇeyam arjunaṁ cāpi durmatim |
dharmajñamāninau yau tvāṁ vadhyamānam upekṣatām || (10.9.30)*

Damn the evil-minded Kṛṣṇa of the Vṛṣṇis and Arjuna. They fancy themselves to be knowers of Dharma, [yet] they ignored you (*upekṣatām*) as you were being killed.

Kṛṣṇa allows Bhīma to break Duryodhana's thighs, and even advises him to do so. But he does not tell Bhīma to crush his head and signals his opposition to such a move after it is done. Though Kṛṣṇa had not condoned the crushing of Duryodhana's head, Aśvatthāman faults him and Arjuna for not intervening in the mace battle that broke the rules of war.

The second example of neglect is the disrobing of Draupadī. We have already seen in verse 1.1.93, how the *Mahābhārata* uses the verb *upekṣ* with Kṛṣṇa to signal his culpability for ignoring misconduct beginning with the dicing match (*dyūtādīn anayān ghorān*). Kṛṣṇa is not present for the gambling match because he returns to his capital, Dvārakā, before the match begins. In the critical edition, Kṛṣṇa does not intervene in Draupadī's plight and we are told that extra clothes magically appear to prevent her from being stripped naked. Though Draupadī is spared the humiliation of being fully disrobed in public, Kṛṣṇa appears to be absent in her moment of crisis. The famous version of this story, where she prays to Kṛṣṇa and he appears and prevents it, is a later interpolation. As we will see, this interpolation is important for the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara and others. In the critical edition, the Kauravas attempt to disrobe Draupadī but their efforts are thwarted by the sudden appearance of endless clothing to cover her. After the dicing match and her disrobing, Draupadī upbraids her husbands and Kṛṣṇa for ignoring her pleas for help. She tells Kṛṣṇa:

naiva me patayaḥ santi na putrā madhusūdana |
na bhrātaro na ca pitā naiva tvaṁ na ca bāndhavāḥ ||
ye mām viprakṛtām kṣudhair upekṣadhvaṁ viśokavat |
na hi me śamyate duḥkhaṁ karṇo yat prāhasat tadā || (3.13.112–113)

I have no husbands or sons, no brothers or father, no kinsmen, and definitely not you, Madhusūdana. You ignored (*upekṣadhvaṁ*) me as though you were without pity [when I was] abused by those vile people, for my misery does not abate, since Karṇa mocked me then.⁹

Though Kṛṣṇa was not present in the *sabhā* (court) when she was abused, Draupadī still holds him responsible for ignoring her mistreatment, perhaps hinting at his omniscience. Kṛṣṇa justifies his absence from the dicing match by explaining that he had to protect his kingdom from a foreign invader. In the Telugu and Grantha manuscripts, Draupadī appeals directly to Kṛṣṇa before being disrobed and makes the problem of indifference explicit:

hā kṛṣṇa dvārakāvāsin kvāsi yādavanandana |
*imām avasthām saṁprāptām anāthām kim upekṣase || (2*550.1–2)*

Look here Kṛṣṇa, resident of Dvārakā, where are you, beloved of the Yādavas? Why do you ignore me (*upekṣase*) who is without a protector when I am in such a state?

In some ways, the interpolated passages resolve the issue of culpability by having Kṛṣṇa appear and protect her from being completely disrobed, instead of having him

⁹ *Upekṣadhvaṁ* is an example of the augmentless imperfect, found occasionally in the *Mahābhārata*.

remain absent. Her complaint to Kṛṣṇa after the disrobing, however, still remains in the critical edition. Kṛṣṇa's involvement in and prevention of Draupadī's disrobing is a sign that redactors were not comfortable with him looking on indifferently as she was mistreated.

The allegation that Kṛṣṇa sat idly by and looked on during the genocidal Bhārata War is the epic's most serious and recurring accusation about the god. In this third instance, the verb *upekṣ* is used four times by two different characters. With few exceptions, the Dhārtarāṣṭras and those fighting for them are massacred in the Bhārata War. After the war, it is Kṛṣṇa who is held responsible for not only ignoring the human cost of the war, but also for not preventing it despite being able to. In contrast, Kṛṣṇa's brother, Balarāma, excuses himself from battle, saying that he cannot overlook the destruction of the Kurus.¹⁰ After the war, the grieving mother of the slain Kauravas, Gāndhārī, asks Kṛṣṇa why he ignored the mutual destruction of the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas and curses him for doing so. *Upekṣ* is used three times here:

Kṛṣṇa, the sons of Pāṇḍu and the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra hated each other. Why did you ignore (*upekṣitā*) them as they perished, Janārdana? You who were able to do something, who had many retainers, who stood in the midst of an extensive army, who had equal interest in both sides, who had heard all that was said? And since you neglected (*upekṣitās*) the destruction of the Kurus, O Slayer of Madhu, because you wanted it.... Take the result of that. Since I have come to have some ascetic power because of my obedience to my husband, I will curse you with that.... Since you ignored (*upaikṣanta*) your kinsmen, the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas, as they were killing each other,... you shall slay your own kinsmen. Even you,... when the thirty-sixth year is at hand, shall wander in the woods having slain your own kinsmen, having slain your own family, having slain your sons. You shall arrive at your end by an ignominious means (11.25.36–41; Fitzgerald 2004: 70–71).¹¹

Kṛṣṇa will recall Gāndhārī's words at the time of his death. Indeed, he dies ignominiously thirty-six years after the war. The queen of the Kurus is not the only person to confront Kṛṣṇa in this way; the sage Uttānka also voices his concern that Kṛṣṇa overlooked the violence of the war.

In the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, Kṛṣṇa meets a sage named Uttānka while traveling back to Dvārakā after the war. The sage asks Kṛṣṇa if the attempts at bringing about peace and preventing war were successful, and Kṛṣṇa fills him in on the proceedings. Kṛṣṇa explains that he tried unsuccessfully to broker peace, and as a

¹⁰ *tasmād yāsyāmi tīrthāni sarasvatyā niṣevitum | na hi śakṣyāmi kauravyān naśyamānān upekṣitum ||* (5.154.33)

¹¹ *pāṇḍavā dhārtarāṣṭrās ca drugdhāḥ kṛṣṇa parasparam | upekṣitā vinaśyantas tvayā kasmāj janārdana || śaktena bahubhṛtyena vipule tiṣṭhatā bale | ubhayatra samarthena śrutavākyaena caiva ha || icchatopekṣito nāśaḥ kurūṇām madhusūdana | yasmāt tvayā mahābāho phalaṁ tasmād avāpnuhi || patišūśrūṣayā yan me tapaḥ kiṁ cid upārjitam | tena tvām duravāpātmañ śapsye cakragadādhara || yasmāt parasparam ghnanto jñātayaḥ kurupāṇḍavāḥ | upekṣitās te govinda tasmāj jñātīn vadhiṣyasi || tvam apy upasthite varṣe śattriṁśe madhusūdana | hatajñātīr hatāmātyo hataputro vanecaraḥ || kutsitenābh्यupāyena nidhanam samavāpsyasi ||* (11.25.36–41)

result the two cousins went to war. Uttānka does not accept Kṛṣṇa's narration of events and does not immediately absolve him from his role in the carnage:

*tvayā hi śaktena satā mithyācāreṇa mādghava |
upacīrṇāḥ kuruśreṣṭhā yas tv etān samupekṣathāḥ || (14.52.22)*

The best of Kurus were assisted by you who was capable, but acting deceitfully you were the one who completely overlooked (*samupekṣathāḥ*) them, Mādghava.

As a result, the sage angrily blames Kṛṣṇa for deceitfully overlooking (*samupekṣathāḥ*) the carnage and vows to punish him with a curse.¹² Kṛṣṇa urges Uttānka not to curse him, because an insincere curse would destroy the merit accrued by the sage's austerities. He then gives a *Gītā*-esque sermon about his divinity and shows Uttānka his universal form, which satisfies the sage. In his sermon, Kṛṣṇa explains that he incarnates to establish and protect *dharma*. When he is born as a human, he must act like one (14.53.13, 14.53.19). Even though Uttānka does not follow through with cursing Kṛṣṇa, this is the second instance where Kṛṣṇa is criticized for allowing the Bhārata War to happen. One feature common to both episodes is that both Gāndhārī and Uttānka agree that Kṛṣṇa had been capable of preventing the war. Gāndhārī says that he had the power—with a great army (*śaktena bahubhṛtyena*) and many other means at his disposal—to prevent the calamitous war. Uttānka merely says that he had the power to stop it (*śaktena*). Indifference becomes unethical when someone is capable of preventing harm but neglects it without reason.

The final atrocity that Kṛṣṇa overlooks is that of his own clan in the *Mausalaparvan*. Following Gāndhārī's curse (and another curse by the sages towards Sāmba that he will give birth to an iron rod that will destroy the Yādava clan [16.2.4–11]), the Yādavas slaughter each other in a drunken brawl. Kṛṣṇa, as predicted by Gāndhārī, watches as this happens and even participates in the destruction. In this case, Kṛṣṇa's father holds him responsible for the carnage. After listing all the people that his son defeated, Vasudeva says:

*prācyāms ca dākṣiṇātyāms ca pārvatīyāms tathā nrpān |
so 'bhyupekṣitavān etam anayam madhusūdanaḥ || (16.7.11)*

[Having conquered] kings in the east, south, and the mountain regions, Madhusūdana overlooked (*abhyupekṣitavān*) this calamity!

Following Gāndhārī's curse, we have a curious case of mirroring: Kṛṣṇa is cursed not only to die, but to ignore the genocide of his Yādava clan because he ignored the genocide of the Kurus. As Gāndhārī predicts, he ignores the carnage in the sense that he looks on as it happens without doing anything to prevent it.

¹² *Mahābhārata* 14.52.20.

Intentional Neglect? Questioning Kṛṣṇa's Omnipotence

The verb *upekṣ* is used for the last time in the *Mahābhārata* by the epic's author himself while in a discussion with Arjuna about Kṛṣṇa. In the *Mausalaparvan*, Arjuna rushes to Vyāsa's hermitage to complain about the preceding events—the destruction of the Yādava clan, Kṛṣṇa's death, and the suffering of the Yādava women—and expresses his helplessness. In his response, the epic's author addresses the vexing question of overlooking the destruction. Vyāsa says:

*bhavitavyam tathā tad dhi diṣṭam etan mahātmanām |
upekṣitam ca kṛṣṇena śaktenāpi vyapohitum ||
trailokyam api kṛṣṇo hi kṛtsnam sthāvarajaṅgamam |
prasahed anyathā kartum kim u śāpam manīṣiṇām ||
rathasya purato yāti yaḥ sa cakragadādharah |
tava snehāt purāṇarṣir vāsudevaś caturbhujah ||
kṛtvā bhārāvataṛaṇam pṛthivyāḥ pṛthulocanaḥ |
mokṣayitvā jagat sarvaṁ gataḥ svasthānam uttamam || (16.9.26–29)*

Everything was ordained to be for those great men, yet it was overlooked (*upekṣitam*) by Kṛṣṇa, even though he could have stopped it. Because Kṛṣṇa can destroy the entire three worlds with everything movable and immovable, how much more easily the curse of sages. He who went in front of your chariot because of friendship, was none other than the mace holder, the primeval *rṣi*—that four-armed Vāsudeva! The large-eyed god who descended to lift the earth's burden freed the entire world and went to his own supreme abode.

The epic's author himself makes the same point that Ugrasravas does in the earlier verse: Kṛṣṇa overlooked the destruction (in this case, of the Vṛṣṇis), but in this case he provides a justification for why it was permissible. According to Vyāsa, Kṛṣṇa disregarded the slaughter of the Vṛṣṇis (*upekṣitam kṛṣṇena*), but Vyāsa also refers to a divine plan, saying that Kṛṣṇa departed after lessening earth's burden.¹³ Nonetheless the point is clear: Kṛṣṇa had been capable of preventing the genocide of the Yādavas but opted not to. This is a key detail that the tradition reflects upon, and often echoes. For example, Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara, the seventeenth-century commentator on the *Mahābhārata*, points out in his *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* that although Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma were capable of preventing the massacre of their family, they opted not to overstep the rules of time (*kāla*), which sealed the

¹³ Yet, as Alf Hiltebeitel notes, Vyāsa leaves a loophole in the speech: "He says Kṛṣṇa could have prevented the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis, but unlike Gāndhārī and Uttara, he does not say whether or not Kṛṣṇa could have prevented the destruction of the Kurus" (2001: 89).

massacre as inevitable.¹⁴ Vyāsa is suggesting that not only does Kṛṣṇa sit idly by as his family perishes, he *intended* that death to happen.¹⁵

This argument of Vyāsa raises the question of why a capable god would intentionally neglect a genocide of his own clan? Implicit in this question is the assumption that Kṛṣṇa is capable of preventing the genocide. It is often in this context that omnipotence enters the scholarly discussion. A passage from the Uttara episode specifically has been used to prove that Kṛṣṇa is claiming that he is not omnipotent, and was thus powerless to stop the massacre of the Bhārata War. I quote the passage in question:

*kṛto yatno mayā brahman saubhrātre kauravān prati |
na cāśakyanta saṁdhatuṁ te 'dharmarucayo mayā || (14.52.15)*

Brahmā, I made an effort towards the Kauravas for good brotherhood, but I could not reconcile those who prefer *adharma*.

Matilal and Hudson interpret this verse as proof that Kṛṣṇa is not always capable of preventing the Bhārata War, and thus is not omnipotent.¹⁶ While Kṛṣṇa claims that he attempted without success to bring about peace, even that is questionable. On two occasions, the god admits during the peace talks that his entreaties about peace are only a formality and that war is inevitable.¹⁷ There is little evidence in the narrative to support what Kṛṣṇa is saying, and we have reason to doubt the sincerity of his argument to Uttara that he was unable to prevent the war. Kṛṣṇa does not defend himself to Gāndhārī, but he does claim to Uttara that he tried to bring about peace. If we take the narrator Ugrasravas's warning in the beginning of the text seriously, we should question the veracity of his claim.

Kṛṣṇa is held responsible for overlooking or ignoring harm consistently in the *Mahābhārata*, all instances of which have been examined above. The charges range

¹⁴ Nīlakaṇṭha, *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* on *Mahābhārata* 1.2.356 (vulgate edition): *rāmakṛṣṇau mahatparam brahmāpi santau kalam nāticakramatuḥ | samarthāṁ api maryādām nollaṅghitavāntāṁ ity arthaḥ |*

¹⁵ The editor of the critical edition of the *Mausalaparvan*, S. K. Belvalkar, pays attention to Vyāsa's defence of Kṛṣṇa and is unsatisfied with it. He suspects that this defense was important because the devotee of Kṛṣṇa expects that he prevents their suffering. Belvalkar further notes, in his introduction to the *Mausalaparvan*, that this explanation of Kṛṣṇa's conduct "would not probably fully satisfy the layman, who expects the divine Avatāra to always do the right thing and save the sufferers" (*Mahabharata* 1927–1966, 19 [1959]: xxxiv).

¹⁶ Hudson: "The Uttara episode explicitly raises the question of Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence and responds negatively. According to this passage, Kṛṣṇa did not stop the war because he lacked the power to do so" (2013: 201). Based on the above verse (14.52.15), Matilal says that "Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* did not always claim to be omnipotent...He admitted before the hermit Uttara how powerless he was to stop the devastating war, and restore friendship between the two warring families. For as he said, the war was inevitable, and he had the power to stop the inevitable" (1991: 410).

¹⁷ See, for example, 5.29 where Kṛṣṇa specifically advocates war with the Kauravas, and this is before his "peace mission" has begun. In 5.91 Kṛṣṇa confides to Vidura that he knows that the peace talks are futile, and adds in 5.91.16: *na mām brūyur adharmajñā mūḍhā asuhyādas tathā | śakto nāvārayat kṛṣṇaḥ saṁrabdhān kurupāṇḍavān ||* ("Kṛṣṇa, though capable, did not restrain the enraged Kurus and Pāṇḍavas." Those fools, enemies who know *adharma*, should not speak in this way about me.) I thank Simon Brodbeck for this reference. Compare Hildebeitel 2001: "We know that Kṛṣṇa does not undertake the final negotiations before the war to bring about peace or practice *ahimsā*, as Yudhiṣṭhira thinks and wishes" (214).

from the mundane (overlooking Bhīma cheating in the *gadāyuddha*) to the serious (ignoring Draupadī's plight, the Bhārata War, and the Yādava genocide). In the case of the latter charges, for Draupadī, Gāndhārī, Uttanka, and Vasudeva, the issue is that Kṛṣṇa did not prevent the harm despite being capable of doing so. In asking why Kṛṣṇa did not prevent these events or outright ignored them, are these characters posing an explicitly theological question about his omnipotence? When viewed through the lens of "*upekṣ*" we see that Kṛṣṇa is not the only one who is accused of overlooking the war or the disrobing of Draupadī. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is also frequently accused of ignoring the brewing conflict between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas that leads to the war.¹⁸ There is also the story of Aurva in the *Ādiparvan* (1.169–171), where the Bhṛguś take collective responsibility for willfully ignoring their own genocide. Still, Kṛṣṇa's neglect remains a recurring question, and the one requiring the most justification. Gāndhārī and Uttanka in particular note that Kṛṣṇa is "capable" (*śakta*), and there are very few counterarguments to suggest that he was not capable of preventing the violence. I suggest we read capability here not as questioning his omnipotence. Rather, when viewed within the larger context of this debate, all of these figures—from the Bhṛguś, to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, to Kṛṣṇa—were capable of preventing harm as bystanders. Gāndhārī says, for example, that Kṛṣṇa was capable with "a large retinue" at his disposal (*bahubhṛtyena*). She is arguing for Kṛṣṇa's own political capability to bring about peace, not necessarily for the use of supernatural powers. Indifference thus becomes an ethical problem when someone is capable of preventing harm but instead opts to merely look on. The other moral exemplars (Buddha and Nemi) have each faced dilemmas of indifference and responded differently. There is a moral expectation that Kṛṣṇa would see harm and act accordingly to prevent it.

The editors of the *Strīparvan* and the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* include the Gāndhārī and Uttanka episodes in the critical edition of the text based on the manuscript evidence, but they still view them with suspicion from the perspective of "higher criticism." The editor of the *Strīparvan*, Vasudev Gopal Paranjpe, finds that the block of text that includes Gāndhārī's reproach of Kṛṣṇa seems to interrupt a speech of Kṛṣṇa, which would indicate that it might be a later addition to the text. He notes, however, that the manuscript evidence supports its inclusion in the text and any question of its authenticity "belongs to the pre-history of the Mbh" (*Mahābhārata* 1927–1966, 12.2 [1956]: 120). Gāndhārī's curse, he posits, is yet another reason for the Yādava genocide and Kṛṣṇa's death. The editor of the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, Ragunath Damodar Karmakar, finds the whole Uttanka episode—his accusations against Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa's resulting defense and sermon—to be "irrelevant and absurd."¹⁹ He presents his own theory for why it might have been added into the epic. Though both editors present interesting justifications for the inclusion of these episodes that they think are interpolations, they note that there is no textual basis to

¹⁸ In fact, *upekṣ* is used almost as much with Dhṛtarāṣṭra for this reason. See, for example, 2.65.12, 5.53.6, 3.48.11.

¹⁹ "This whole episode appears to be irrelevant and absurd....The only plausible explanation appears to be that as the Anuḡītā did not refer to the Viśvarūpa (which forms an important episode in the Bhagavadgītā), some one thought that the lacuna ought to be filled in some way" (*Mahābhārata* 1927–1966, 18 [1958–60]: 468).

exclude them from the critical edition. They are well attested in the manuscript traditions, and thus part of the earliest recoverable *Mahābhārata* available to us.

Commentarial and Purāṇic Defenses of Kṛṣṇa's Indifference

The previous section raised several points. The *Mahābhārata*, through *upekṣ*, flags episodes where characters disregard or ignore harm. The verb is used most consistently with regard to Kṛṣṇa, who overlooks the misconduct and suffering of various figures and ignores two large-scale genocides that he could have prevented. Although scholarship has used this to question Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence, his neglect of these episodes is intentional. The commentarial tradition and post-*Mahābhārata* texts examine whether this type of neglect on the part of a god is justified, and if so, what type of defense would justify Kṛṣṇa's indifference. Read with a spirit of receptivity, I look at the solution to the problem of neglect that the *Mahābhārata* and its commentaries present. Kṛṣṇa's indifference in the *Mahābhārata*, like Rāma's humanity in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is not a barrier to his divinity, but a requirement of it.

Vyāsa also hints in his speech at a larger divine plan of which Kṛṣṇa was a part, which would require Kṛṣṇa to intentionally neglect the suffering of others. In his conversation with Kṛṣṇa examined earlier, he uses the term *bhārāvataṛaṇa*, "removal of the burden." It is a phrase that recurs throughout the epic and refers to a story that "remain[s] firmly in the background of the epic" (Brodbeck 2009: 52) but is nonetheless important to understanding the text.²⁰ The defense of Kṛṣṇa's indifference, as we will see, hinges on this story. The terms of Kṛṣṇa's descent into the world are dictated in this section of the *Mahābhārata*, literally called the descent of the portions (*aṁśāvataṛaṇa*). In brief, the *aṁśāvataṛaṇa* is first narrated in full in chapter fifty-eight of the *Adiparvan*. After Rāma Jamadagni massacres the Kṣatriya men, the Kṣatriya women are forced to father children with Brāhmaṇas in order to continue the lineage. With the help of these Brāhmaṇa progenitors, a new Kṣatriya race is birthed. This, we are told, is a better class of kings—they are righteous, and as a result *dharma* prospers. The peace is disturbed by demons who overrun the kingship by being born as Kṣatriyas. The earth, as a result, becomes overburdened with corrupt rulers and desperately seeks the help of the creator god, Brahmā, to unburden her of these demons. It is here that the burden of the earth is explained:

tām uvāca mahārāja bhūmim bhūmipatir vibhuḥ |
prabhavaḥ sarvabhūtānām īśaḥ śambhuḥ prajāpatiḥ ||
yadartham asi samprāptā matsakāśam vasumdhare |
tadartham samniyokṣyāmi sarvān eva divaukasaḥ ||

²⁰ Pollock, writing about Rāvaṇa's boon in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, argues that "authentic meaning, however, is not found only *au pied de la lettre*, in what is explicitly, directly signified in any given (and unstable) verse. It is often discovered to be inscribed in higher-level (and stable) narrative features, in the larger and significant motifs and themes, for instance which make necessary and meaningful implications both intrinsically and as a result of their literary-historical associations" (1984: 508). The *bhārāvataṛaṇa*, like Rāvaṇa's boon, is one of those higher-level narrative features in the *Mahābhārata*.

ity uktvā sa mahīm devo brahmā rājan visṛjya ca |
ādideśa tadā sarvān vibudhān bhūtakṛt svayam ||
asyā bhūmer nirasitum bhāraṁ bhāgaiḥ pṛthak pṛthak |
asyām eva prasūyadhvaṁ virodhāyeti cābravūt ||
tathaiva ca samānīya gandharvāpsarasām gaṇān |
uvāca bhagavān sarvān idaṁ vacanam uttamam ||
svair aṁśaiḥ saṁprasūyadhvaṁ yatheṣṭaṁ mānuṣeṣv iti || (1.58.43–47)

Great king, the supreme lord of the earth, the origin of all beings, the master, giver of happiness, Prajāpati, said to the earth: “For that purpose for which you have come to me, earth, I will assign all the gods.” Having said that to the earth and dismissed her, the god Brahmā, himself the creator of all beings, ordered all the gods: “in order to relieve the burden of the earth, manifest as portions one by one there [on the earth] to stop them” he said. In this way, having brought together the groups, the *gandharvas*, and the *apsarās*, *bhagavān* [Brahmā] said these words to all of them: “be born among men according as you desire.”

The divine plan is to have the celestial beings descend to earth to rid her of corrupt political rulers, in order to stop them (*virodhāya*). The strife will take the form of the Bhārata War. It is at this point that the gods summon Nārāyaṇa for help:

atha nārāyaṇenendraś cakāra saha saṁvidam |
avatartum mahīm svargād aṁśataḥ sahitaḥ suraiḥ ||
te 'marārivināśāya sarvalokahitāya ca |
avateruḥ krameṇemām mahīm svargād divaukasaḥ || (1.59.1, 3)

Then Nārāyaṇa and Indra made a pact to descend on the earth from heaven as a portion along with the gods.... They descended in order, from the heaven of the gods to the earth, for the benefit of the whole world, in order to destroy those enemies of the immortals.

The *Mahābhārata* occasionally gives this as the justification for the war. The other celestial beings descend as various important epic figures who play a role in either instigating or fighting in the war. Nārāyaṇa descends as Kṛṣṇa and Indra descends as Arjuna. The Bhārata War that precipitates the massacre of the Kurus is elevated to a higher, mythical level: it is a necessary evil to rid the world of corrupt rulers. By using the term *bhārāvataṛaṇa* in his speech, Vyāsa implicates the slaughter of the Yādavas in this larger divine plan. The idea is that the Yādavas had become part of the corrupt class of Kṣatriyas who were wearing the earth down, hence their destruction was imperative.²¹ Although it is not explicitly stated, it is strongly implied that the Yādavas have become part of the “earth’s burden.” Kṛṣṇa says to Gāndhārī in the *Strīparvan* that only he will decide the end of his clan. Still, there are hints in the *Mahābhārata* and elsewhere that the Yādavas have become part of the corrupt Kṣatriyas that the gods descend to the earth to remove. In the lead-up to their eventual massacre, the Yādava princes try to trick a group of sages into

²¹ This is a point that the Purāṇas explicitly make about the genocide of the Yādavas (see, for instance, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.1.1–3).

thinking one of them is a pregnant woman. This act of disrespect, followed by their drunken brawl, is an example of the behavior of the Kṣatriya class that burdens the earth. In fact, Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (1.6.9), which was composed around the same time as the *Mahābhārata*, supports the idea that the Yādavas are good Kṣatriyas turned bad. The story of the disrespectful Yādavas is used as a cautionary example of Kṣatriyas who have not mastered their senses, and thus brought about their ruin. Kṛṣṇa's intentional neglect, as the incarnation of Nārāyaṇa, is a necessary step to achieving that noble end.

Some find a parallel here with the other massacre that Kṛṣṇa participates in—the destruction of the Khāṇḍava Forest along with its inhabitants. Christopher G. Framarin (2013), following Madeline Biarreau, argues that Kṛṣṇa's (and Arjuna's) wanton massacre of the creatures in the Khāṇḍava Forest represents the *pralaya*, the cosmic dissolution of the world. They find structural similarities between the episode and the explanation of the *pralaya*. Framarin argues that in that episode, Kṛṣṇa is acting as *kāla*, or time, destroying the world to start anew. There is a curious parallel here with the justification of Kṛṣṇa's intentional neglect. We are told by Vyāsa and others that the massacre and other events that Kṛṣṇa overlooks are done to destroy corrupt Kṣatriyas who have burdened the earth. The image of *pralaya* is frequently evoked whether Kṛṣṇa is intentionally overlooking or actively (and happily) participating in a massacre. Despite the differences in the two episodes raised earlier, the logic behind the justification is the same: to make a better world, Kṛṣṇa oversees the destruction of a previous order.

To fully appreciate how the burden of the earth helps us understand Kṛṣṇa's indifference, we can take cues from how the tradition uses the metamyth to answer some of the epic's most vexing moral questions. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a central devotional text to Kṛṣṇa, is aware of Kṛṣṇa's indifference in this context and responds directly to the questions that the *Mahābhārata* raises when *upekṣ* occurs, particularly the question of whether he was able to prevent war. In the third *skandha* of the *Bhāgavata*, we are told that Duryodhana exiles Vidura from the Kuru court, and as a result he embarks on a pilgrimage. Eventually, Vidura meets Uddhava, a friend of Kṛṣṇa's, after the war. Vidura inquires about Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas and reflects on the war. While Vidura is questioning Uddhava, he notes Kṛṣṇa's indifference to the war:

*nūnam nṛpāṇām trimadotpathānām mahīm muhuś cālayatām camūbhiḥ |
vadhāt prapannārtijihīrṣayeśo 'py upaikṣatāgham bhagavān kurūṇām ||*
(*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3.1.43)

Certainly, even though he wished to remove the pain of those who came to him for refuge, the illustrious god overlooked the offences (*upaikṣatāgham*) of the Kurus due to the killing of those kings who were misguided by their threefold arrogance in repeatedly shaking the earth with their armies.

Using *upekṣ*, Vidura is added to a long list of epic figures (Draupadī, Gāndhārī, Aśvatthāman, Uttanka, and Vasudeva) who accuse Kṛṣṇa of ignoring suffering or wrongdoing. Vidura agrees that Kṛṣṇa ignored the offences of the Kauravas, which were sources of suffering for the Pāṇḍavas.

Far from being unconcerned about some of the ethical questions that indifference raises, some commentators on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—including the well-known Śrīdhara—weigh in and address them. Śrīdhara writes:

nanu hareḥ kim evaṁ līlayā yena svabhaktānām vanavāsādikleśā bhavanti svasya ca dautye bandhanodhyamādiparābhavas tadvarāṁ teṣāṁ aparādhānamīkaram eva hananāṁ nāparādhopekṣety ata āha | ...prapannānām ārtijihīṛṣayeśodhasamaya eva hantum samartho 'pi kurūṇām agham upaikṣata | tadānīmeva teṣāṁ vadhe sarvaduṣṭarājavadho na syād ity āśayenety arthaḥ | (*Bhāvārthabodhini* on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3.1.43).

Now someone might object that “surely, what is the point of Hari’s play, whereby his own devotees underwent hardships such as exile in the forest and he was insulted during his [peace] embassy by attempts to imprison him and so on? Far better to slay them as soon as they transgressed than to ignore their trespasses (*aparādhopekṣā*).” In anticipation of this question, the verse says, “with a desire to relieve the suffering of those who surrendered [unto him].” God, although he was able to kill [the Kauravas] right at the time of transgression, overlooked (*upaikṣata*) the faults of the Kurus. If he had killed them at that time, the destruction of all the terrible kings would not have been [possible]. This is what the verse means to convey.

In opening his commentary with that issue, Śrīdhara anticipates the question that Matilal asks centuries later about Kṛṣṇa’s omnipotence—that is, “why wouldn’t Kṛṣṇa, if he is omnipotent, just kill all the kings in one day and end the war?” The destruction of the terrible kings is key to the *aṁśāvataṛaṇa*, the partial descent of the gods. The argument that Śrīdhara is making is that Kṛṣṇa’s neglect is a precondition for fulfilling the larger aim of unburdening the earth. What does this line of reasoning mean for Kṛṣṇa’s omnipotence? Nārāyaṇa has incarnated with the sole mission of relieving the earth’s burden. The way to do this is through sowing strife (*virodha*) like the war. Much of the grief that Kṛṣṇa neglects is in service of the Bhārata War (or in the final case, the Yādava massacre), which Śrīdhara points out involves *all* the kings that needed to be killed. The *bhārāvataṛaṇa* forces us to consider another option that is particularly salient when thinking about Kṛṣṇa’s exchange with Uttan̄ka in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*. Kṛṣṇa’s claim that he tried unsuccessfully to bring about peace can be brought into question, not because he lacks omnipotence, but because he did *not* want to prevent the war in the first place. This intentional neglect, brought about by the divine plan, sidesteps the question that Gāndhārī and Uttan̄ka raise—“why did he ignore harm despite being able to prevent it?”—in favor of an argument that Kṛṣṇa did not want to prevent the war and the Yādava massacre to begin with. In fact, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* explicitly ties the Yādava massacre to the destruction of corrupt Kṣatriyas. We are told that the Yādavas, who in the lead-up to their destruction are not only drunk but disrespect Brāhmaṇas, have become part of the corrupt class of Kṣatriyas. Kṛṣṇa decides that after freeing the earth of her many burdens in the forms of demons and corrupt kings, he must now destroy his own clan—the last remaining burden. Both the

Bhāgavata verse and Śrīdhara's commentary on it rely on the metamyth implicitly to justify Kṛṣṇa's indifference and its connection to the genocide of Yādavas.

There is support for this argument that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and Śrīdhara make in the *Mahābhārata* and its commentarial tradition. The earliest known commentary on the *Mahābhārata* dates back to the twelfth century written by Devabodha. From then on, there has been a series of commentaries, including those of Arjunamiśra (fourteenth century) and Nīlakaṇṭha (seventeenth century). The earliest commentaries on the *Mahābhārata* were straightforward *ṭīkas* written to explain difficult verses of the epic, and 1.1.93 appears to be one such verse in the tradition. As we have seen, in this verse Ugraśravas warns the reader from the outset that although Kṛṣṇa was not pleased, he allowed various quarrels and overlooked the dicing match and other misconduct. Devabodha says that the arguments (*vivāda*) that Kṛṣṇa overlooks are the seed for the destruction of the villains. In his own commentary, Arjunamiśra builds on Devabodha's interpretation of the verse by explicitly connecting an event that Kṛṣṇa ignored, the dicing match, with the god's objective of destroying the evil Kṣatriyas. He writes in his commentary that this dicing match, a contrived disagreement which resulted in the disrobing of Draupadī, was in fact "the seed for the war whose motivation was the destruction of the spoilt Kṣatriyas" (*duṣṭakṣayanimittayuddhabhijātvād*).²² Commenting on that verse, Nīlakaṇṭha argues that Kṛṣṇa allowed the quarrels and overlooked suffering in order to destroy the *Kṣatriya* class. The commentator also brackets this issue within the *avatāra* doctrine to bolster his point. He adds that killing wicked people is the purpose of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation as an *avatāra*.²³ These *Mahābhārata* commentators deploy a consequentialist argument that recognizes Kṛṣṇa's indifference but argue that it is in the service of a greater good. This greater good is a deadly war that "drains the swamp" of corrupt rulers.

In the case of the Yādava genocide, the seventeenth-century Mādhva commentator Vādirāja accepts Kṛṣṇa's indifference. In the *Mausalaparvan*, Arjuna returns to Dvārakā after hearing of Kṛṣṇa's death and the slaughter of the Vṛṣṇi clan in a drunken brawl. This is the verse, followed by the commentary of Vādirāja:

tato 'rjunas tām āmantrya keśavasya priyaḥ sakhā |
prayayau mātulaṁ draṣṭuṁ nedam astīti cābravīt || (16.6.3)

Then, Arjuna, that beloved friend of Keśava, saluted them and went to see his maternal uncle [Vasudeva]. "This is not so," Arjuna said.

naitad astīti cābravīt ity atra kṛṣṇasyopekṣaṇāt etat rājyam eva nāstīty abravīt |
(*Lakṣālaṁkāra* on *Mahābhārata* 16.6.3)

²² Arjunamiśra borrows some of his glossing from Devabodha. Devabodha glosses the verb *upaikṣata* as "having the status of standing in the midst of what is enjoined and restricted" (*vidhiniṣedhamadhyasthatā*). Devabodha's commentary on *Mahābhārata* 1.1.93: *nātiprīṭamanāḥ kṛtrimavivādasya duṣṭakṣayanimittayuddhabhijātvād anumodanam* | *upekṣā vidhiniṣedhamadhyasthatā* | Arjunamiśra's commentary on *Mahābhārata* 1.1.93: *nātiprīṭamanāḥ kṛtrimavivādasya duṣṭakṣatriyanimittayuddhabhijātvāt anumodanam upaikṣata upekṣatā-vidhiniṣedhamadhyasthatām* |

²³ Nīlakaṇṭha, *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* on *Mahābhārata* 1.1.139 (vulgate edition): *nāstīti yat vivādān anvamodata yac cānyān upaikṣata* | *tatra hetuḥ dahan kṣatram paraspam ity uttareṇa sambandhaḥ* | *hetau śatpratyayaḥ* | *kṣatrasya dāhāyety arthaḥ* | *duṣṭasamhārārthatvāt tadavatārasya* |

“This is not so” here means that due to the neglect of Kṛṣṇa, “this” as in this [Vṛṣṇi] kingdom, does not exist.

Vasudeva will later confirm what Vādirāja claims Arjuna implies here: that the destruction of his clan was due to Kṛṣṇa’s own neglect. These commentators on the *Mahābhārata* (from Devabodha, to Arjunamiśra, to Nīlakaṇṭha), along with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and one of its commentators, Śrīdhara, are willing to justify Kṛṣṇa’s intentional neglect of the Bhārata War and the Yādava genocide because it “drains the swamp” of corrupt rulers.

The Draupadī Question: Nīlakaṇṭha on the *Cīraharāṇa*

We have looked thus far at how the tradition justifies Kṛṣṇa’s indifference to the genocide of the Yādavas and the mass slaughter of the Bhārata War. The burden of the earth metamyth, as Arjunamiśra and other commentators explain, is one of the reasons why Kṛṣṇa had to allow the dicing match as well. But is there a limit to this type of moral reasoning, even for the commentators? As we have seen, Nīlakaṇṭha justifies Kṛṣṇa’s perceived indifference at key junctures of the *Mahābhārata* when required to do so. One episode that Nīlakaṇṭha wrestles with, however, is the disrobing of Draupadī in the *Sabhāparvan*. This is one episode of indifference that the commentarial tradition does not univocally justify in the same way as the others.

In order to understand Nīlakaṇṭha’s reading of the disrobing episode, it is important to examine the interpolated version of the story that he comments on. Here is what happens when Duḥśāsana attempts to disrobe her in the vulgate edition of the *Mahābhārata*, upon which Nīlakaṇṭha bases his commentary:

ākṛṣyamāṇe vasane draupadyā cintito hariḥ |
govinda dvārakāvāsīn kṛṣṇa gopījanapriya ||
kauravaiḥ paribhūtām mām kim na jānāsi keśava |
he nātha he ramānātha vrajanāthārtināśana |
kauravārṇavamagnām mām uddharasva janārdana ||
kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa mahāyogin viśvātman viśvabhāvana |
prapannām pāhi govinda kurumadhye ’vasīdatīm²⁴ ||
yājñasenyā vacaḥ śrutvā kṛṣṇo gahvarito ’bhavat |
*tyaktvā śayyāsanaṁ padbhyām kṛpāluḥ kṛpayābhyagāt || (2*543.1–7, 10–11)*

When her clothes were being dragged off, Draupadī thought about Hari. “O Govinda! Resident of Dvārakā! O Kṛṣṇa, beloved of the cowherdesses.” Don’t you know that I have been abused by the Kauravas, Keśava? O Master! Master of Ramā! Lord of Vraja! One who removes suffering! Rescue me as I am sunk in the ocean of the Kauravas, Janārdana! Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa! Great Yogī! Self of the world! Creator of the world! Protect [me] who has taken refuge [in you], Govinda, suffering in the midst of the Kurus....Having heard Yājñaseni’s

²⁴ This interpolated passage is found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.49.11) and is likely borrowed from there.

words, Kṛṣṇa became absorbed. He left his throne [and] with compassion, the merciful one arrived on foot.

In the version of the *Mahābhārata* upon which Nīlakaṇṭha comments, Kṛṣṇa appears and saves Draupadī from being disrobed after she desperately pleads for his intervention. This saves the commentator from having to explain why Kṛṣṇa neglected Draupadī's plight. The disrobing and Kṛṣṇa's intervention allow Nīlakaṇṭha to instead raise the question of why Kṛṣṇa *should* intervene to help Draupadī.

Embedded in this commentary is the theological problem of whether Kṛṣṇa is capable of preventing the disrobing. Nīlakaṇṭha uses Draupadī's prayers to delve into this debate, making the case that not only is Kṛṣṇa capable of preventing her suffering, but that he ought to do so. For example, in 2*543.2, Draupadī refers to Kṛṣṇa as the "resident of Dvārakā" (*dvārakāvāsin*) in her plea for help. Nīlakaṇṭha sees in this an admission, or even expectation, that Kṛṣṇa must be able to intervene in her distress. The commentator notes that if Kṛṣṇa can shift all the Vṛṣṇis from Mathurā to Dvārakā in one night, then how can he not be able to help her?²⁵ The second epithet of Kṛṣṇa that Draupadī uses in the verse is "the beloved of the cowherd people" (*gopījanapriya*). Nīlakaṇṭha, again, says that if Kṛṣṇa is nearby (*saṃnihita*) and capable (*śakta*), he should protect against defilement. If Kṛṣṇa can favor people of such low social status as the cowherdresses,²⁶ he can certainly favor Draupadī. The implication of this verse, rooted in the epithets that Draupadī uses to call out to Kṛṣṇa, is that he is capable of preventing her misery. It is through these interpolated (but famous) verses that Nīlakaṇṭha makes an argument for Kṛṣṇa preventing Draupadī's miseries.

In the next verse of Draupadī's plea, Nīlakaṇṭha makes Kṛṣṇa's choice clear. In his reading of the situation, Draupadī sees only two ways to resolve her plight: either Kṛṣṇa remains indifferent like an enemy, or he intervenes and helps her by producing more clothing to cover her.²⁷ Kṛṣṇa's explicit intervention at this crucial moment proves that he is capable of protecting Draupadī, and also that he does not overlook the misery of one of his devotees. In his commentary, Nīlakaṇṭha quotes a verse also found in the *Mahābhārata* *tātparyaprakāśa*, which says that the dicing episode shows that a devotee of Hari should not be ignored.

nāsty akāryaṃ kadaryaṇāṃ nāsty akṣāmyaṃ mahātmanāṃ |
nāsty upekṣyo harer bhakta iti dyūte pradarśitam || (Bhāratabhāvadīpa on
Mahābhārata 2.60.50 [vulgate edition])

What is forbidden among the low is not [to be ignored], what is unforgivable among the greats is not [to be ignored], and a devotee of Kṛṣṇa is not to be overlooked—this is all shown in the dicing match.

²⁵ Nīlakaṇṭha, *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* on *Mahābhārata* 2.60.41 (vulgate edition): *ekarātrenaiva svīyān āpadaḥ sakāśād uddhartuṃ samudramadhye purinirmāṇaṃ tām purīm prati sarvanagarasya yugapat prāpaṇaṃ ca kurvatas tava mama trāṇam īsatkaram ity arthaḥ |*

²⁶ Women have inherent faults, he argues, per *Cāṇakyanūti*, and Kṛṣṇa cannot change that. The objection may be that Kṛṣṇa cannot extract nectar from poison, as that would be akin to protecting or favoring the defiled. Gopījanapriya, then, invites the reaction to that argument.

²⁷ Nīlakaṇṭha, *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* on *Mahābhārata* 1.60.43 (vulgate edition): *viśvātman viśvāntaryāminn ity arthaḥ | viśvabhāvana viśvakartaḥ | antaryāmitvena satruṃ vā śminn arthe udāsīnaṃ kuru athavā viśvakartṛtvena vastrāṇi bahūni samarpayeti bhāvaḥ ||*

The disrobing of Draupadī—and Kṛṣṇa’s intervention—are important for Nīlakaṇṭha because it solves problems not only of the god’s indifference, but his ability to prevent such a thing from happening. The two questions, as we have seen, are closely interlinked. For although Kṛṣṇa is capable of stopping the misery of his devotee, he does not overlook harm to her. Like Vasiṣṭha in the *Ādiparvan* story, however, Nīlakaṇṭha argues through these interpolated verses that Kṛṣṇa *is* capable and is not indifferent. The primary question of Kṛṣṇa’s indifference to harm is raised here for Nīlakaṇṭha and he reasons through it. One must wonder what the exegete would make of the critical edition version of the epic, where Kṛṣṇa is absent from the proceedings. It is important for the tradition to interpolate verses that include Kṛṣṇa’s intervention into Draupadī’s misery because it presents the biggest challenge to the problem of indifference. While the other examples of indifference are easier to justify, this is more difficult. Nīlakaṇṭha’s close attention to the importance of Kṛṣṇa’s intervention gives us a hint as to why that is.

Conclusion

Through a study of the verb *upekṣ*, we see that overlooking violence and suffering is a common concern in the *Mahābhārata* and the word is used more consistently with regard to Kṛṣṇa than any other character. This is not coincidental, or some type of sloppy accident brought about by interpolations. Scholars have and continue to dispute Kṛṣṇa’s divinity in the *Mahābhārata*. Working from the critical edition, I see no inconsistency in his characterization and the mention of his neglect. In fact, by questioning his neglect, Kṛṣṇa joins a group of other exemplars such as Buddha and Nemi, who are held to a high moral standard. I have also shown that the problem raised here is not one of omnipotence, but one of neglect. There is an expectation that Kṛṣṇa, like other figures in the *Mahābhārata*, would prevent suffering if he was capable of doing so. From a close reading of the verb *upekṣ* in the *Mahābhārata*, I suggest that the problem is not one of omnipotence, but indifference to suffering.

While I agree that omnipotence in the sense of “maximal power” is not a requirement of divinity in the *Mahābhārata*, the question raised here is not related to omnipotence. We see both in the *Mahābhārata* and in its reception a robust and recurring discussion of Kṛṣṇa’s capability, but very rarely is there any serious argument that he was incapable of preventing the calamities he is accused of neglecting. Through a study of the *Mahābhārata*’s reception, we see that the issue for the commentators is a pronounced theological problem of neglect.

The question of capability implies that Kṛṣṇa wants to prevent these events in the first place. The argument deployed in the tradition, with the help of the *Mahābhārata*, is that Kṛṣṇa must rid the world of its corrupt rulers, and this requires him to selectively neglect suffering. The question of omnipotence is sidestepped by the argument that Kṛṣṇa’s neglect is intentional.

The tradition does not ask why an omnipotent god could not prevent the suffering of others, it instead asks why a capable Kṛṣṇa would intentionally neglect the suffering of his devotees and what are the limits of that argument? Nīlakaṇṭha

Caturdhara's commentary on the *cīraharāṇa* reveals where this intentional neglect becomes a problem. In justifying Kṛṣṇa's intervention in the disrobing of Draupadī, Nīlakaṇṭha implicitly argues for a Kṛṣṇa who does not always neglect his devotees. In fact, according to him, the moral of that story is that a follower of Kṛṣṇa like Draupadī should not be overlooked. This explains the logic behind the popular interpolation, which places Kṛṣṇa at the scene of Draupadī's disrobing to explicitly prevent it. It also encourages us to look at a committed Advaitin like Nīlakaṇṭha—who is no doubt aware of arguments in the *Brahmasūtras* that god cannot be accused of being partial or cruel because of *karma*—as an exegete who is thinking through the meaty theological problem of indifference to suffering not in a commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, but in his commentary on the *Mahābhārata*.

A secondary aim of this article is to draw attention to the value of commentaries on the epics and Purāṇas and what they have to offer on these ethical and theological questions. In scholarship, Itihāsa commentaries have been neglected in comparison to the authoritative commentaries of various śāstric disciplines, like the commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Upaniṣads, and *Brahmasūtra* in the Vedānta traditions.²⁸ This is primarily because these *smṛti* commentaries “do not generally form part of the education of the western Indologist and, in fact, are often dismissed by scholars trained in the traditions of European philology as derivative, late, sectarian, biased and, in brief, unworthy of the scholar's attention” (Goldman 2006: 7). A symptom of this problem (or some may argue a reason for it) in the case of the *Mahābhārata* is that there exists no fully published and widely circulated commentary on the text other than that of Nīlakaṇṭha.²⁹ The *Mahābhārata* has a rich commentarial tradition, dating back to the twelfth century with Devabodha's *Jñānadīpikā*, which merits consideration.

What can these series of commentaries on the *Mahābhārata*, along with commentaries on the Purāṇas, offer? The question of Kṛṣṇa looking on as others suffer in the *Mahābhārata* is an important question for these commentators, all of whom view Kṛṣṇa as the divine with some capability to prevent suffering. It is an opportunity for them to address a concrete theological problem in a way that few other genres are able to do. On the philosophical and theological question of god's role in the suffering of others, they offer answers and solutions that are sometimes vastly different from the *Brahmasūtras*, for instance. Engaging with the *Mahābhārata*, even at its most basic level, cannot be removed from engaging with the ethical and theological issues it presents.

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²⁸ This trend is slowly changing, particularly when it comes to the study of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* commentaries. See, for example, Okita (2018).

²⁹ The commentary of Devabodha has been partially published, and the commentary of Vādirāja was published in 2005. The editions of the *Virāṭaparvan* and *Udyogaparvan* of Bakre include multiple commentaries.

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