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EPIC HEROES HAVE NO CHILDHOOD
A survey of Childhood Descriptions
in the Sanskrit Epics, the *Mahābhārata*
and the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Summary: The two sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa contain few descriptions of their heroes' childhood. Semantically, childhood implies stupidity, ignorance, and thoughtlessness, at times bordering on cruelty. Usually, the time of childhood is dealt with rather quickly, and seen essentially as a period of formation and learning. In the few instances when specific incidents of a character's childhood are mentioned, they are mostly cast in a negative light and meant to explain why certain untoward events happen subsequently. The young kṣatriyas' exuberant childhood deeds are often frowned upon by the brahmin authors or brahmin protagonists of the story, while the young brahmins are often shown as born with full language skills and knowledge of the Vedas, in order to skip over their time of childhood altogether.

This paper was first meant as an investigation into the “realia” of ancient India. I felt curious to know how the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, describe their heroes'¹ childhood, or, to put it differently, what an “ideal”

¹ Let me make it clear that by “hero” I do not necessarily mean a hero in the Greek sense of the term, i.e., a demi-god, even though this type may occur: for instance, the Pāṇḍavas or Bhīṣma are of semi-divine descent. Here I shall simply use “hero” in the sense of “the hero of a particular narrative”, i.e. the main character of a story. In fact, we can state from the start that the heroes in question are either *kṣatriya* or brahmin boys. *Vaiśyas* and *śūdras* do not figure prominently in the epics and the girls' childhood, with a few

childhood was supposed to be like in epic times – childhood being understood here in a very broad sense as the time between birth and puberty.² But as it turned out, it was very hard to find positive evidence concerning the childhood of epic characters. Hence the somewhat provocative and exaggerated title of my paper: “Epic heroes have no childhood”. Provocative, in the sense that it goes against expectations: in other mythologies and heroic legends, the hero’s childhood-exploits are often emphasised and valued positively, as indicators of his future greatness;³ and exaggerated, in the sense that most of these heroes obviously do have a childhood,⁴ but it is simply not described in any detail.

A case in point is that of Rāma and his brothers: while the first book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is entitled *Bālakāṇḍa* (lit. the “boy section”), it is remarkable that the actual boyhood of Rāma and his brothers is skipped over in eleven verses (*Rāmāyaṇa* 1.17.11-21), where we learn that Vasiṣṭha, the family’s *purohita*, performs the four brothers’ rites of passage or sacraments (*karman*, 1.17.11-12), and that from childhood onwards (*bālyāt prabhṛti*, 1.17.15) Lakṣmaṇa was specially devoted to Rāma, and Śatrughna to Bharata (1.17.15-19) – a piece of information which is indeed of some importance for the plot of the story. The end-result of their education is that: “All

exceptions, was even less a topic of interest for epic authors. As Kakar (1978: 57) remarks: “Myths, too, are sparing of their bounty towards daughters, for in a patriarchal culture myths are inevitably man-made and man-oriented.”

² Legal texts distinguished between various periods of childhood. Acc. to Monier-Williams’ *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (*vide sub bāla*): “minors are classified as *kumāra* or boys under 5 years of age, *śiṣu* under 8, *pogaṇḍa* from the 5th to the end of the 9th or till the 16th year, and *kiśora* from the 10th to the 16th year”. As we see, these categories overlap and are not very precise. In any case, such formal distinction does not seem to be made in the epics, which most frequently, and rather indiscriminately, use the terms *kumāra*, *bāla* and *śiṣu*.

³ I wish to thank here Prof. Yaroslav Vassilkov for drawing my attention to this point. For instance, in Greek mythology, Heracles, as a mere baby, strangles the two serpents sent by Hera to kill him in his crib (Graves 1992: 453); seven-years old Theseus unhesitatingly attacks Heracles’ lion-skin with an axe, mistaking it for a real lion, whereas all the other children flee (Graves 1992: 325); Achilles kills his first boar at the age of six, and then spends his childhood-years killing lions, boars, and other wild animals (Graves 1992: 642).

⁴ Even though it can happen that a character literally has no childhood, in the sense that he grows up as soon as he is grown.

were learned in the Vedas and heroic. All were devoted to the good of the world; all were furnished with knowledge ; all were possessed of high qualities.”⁵ (Rm 1.17.14 ; cf. also 1.17.21).⁶ Apart from this rather meager information, none of which really pertains to a childhood-deed, practically the next thing we learn after their birth-story is that their father Daśaratha is starting to think about their marriage (Rm 1.17.22).⁷ At that moment, although they are still very young, they are obviously no longer children, since they proceed to kill some very dangerous demons at the sage Viśvāmitra’s request, and then get married immediately afterwards.

Usually, the time of childhood is dealt with in a few stock phrases, summing up the “bare essentials”, which are, in the case of *kṣatriyas*: “He had his rites of passage performed. He learned the Vedas and the art of weapons”. A rather more exhaustive and detailed enumeration is found in the passage that describes the youth of the three brothers Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu and Vidura:

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and the sagacious Vidura were from birth protected by Bhīṣma like sons of his own. They were sanctified by sacraments, they observed vows and studies, and became skilled in track and field, until they reached manhood. Then they were trained in archery, in horseback riding, in club combat, in sword and shield, in elephant lore and the science of policy. They toiled on the epics and the books of the Lore and the various

⁵ *sarve vedavidah śūrāḥ sarve lokahite ratāḥ / sarve jñānopasampannāḥ sarve samuditā guṇaiḥ // Rm 1.17.14 //*

⁶ Unless stated otherwise, all the translations of the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* are those found in Goldman (1984–2009) and the Sanskrit text is taken from the critical edition (ed. Bhatt *et al.* 1960-1975).

⁷ Later *Rāmāyaṇas* are a little more prolix concerning Rāma’s childhood deeds. Tulsīdās, for instance, in his *Rāmacaritmānasa* 1.3.1 (The Birth of the Lord) first dwells at length on the four brothers’ (esp. Rāma’s) loveliness of form, and relates one “childhood-miracle” performed by baby-Rāma, stressing his divine nature: Kausalyā sees him simultaneously sleeping in his crib and eating the fruit she has just offered during her *pūjā* at Viṣṇu’s shrine.

instructions, O lord, and they knew the verities of the Veda and its branches. (*Mahābhārata* 1.102.15-19).⁸

*dhṛtarāṣṭraś ca pāṇḍuś ca viduraś ca mahāmatih /
janmaprabhṛti bhīṣmeṇa putravat paripālītāḥ // 15 //
saṃskāraiḥ saṃskṛtās te tu vratādhyayanasaṃyutāḥ /
śramavyāyāmakūśalāḥ samapadyanta yauvanam // 16 //
dhanurvede 'śvapṛṣṭhe ca gadāyuddhe 'sicarmaṇi /
tathaiva gajaśikṣāyāṃ nītiśāstre ca pāragāḥ // 17 //
itihāsapurāṇesu nānāśikṣāsu cābhibho /
vedavedāṅgatattvajñāḥ sarvatra kṛtaniśramāḥ // 18 //*

As we can see from the above quotation, childhood and early youth are essentially seen as a period of formation: ritual formation, by means of the *saṃskāras* ; intellectual formation, consisting in a number of sciences and texts to be learnt ; and physical formation, by means of sports and fighting techniques. But mostly, the texts provide no details relating to specific and personal incidents of a character's childhood.

Naturally, the following question arises: why are the childhood years of epic characters not deemed worthy of description ? One may surmise with a certain degree of probability that the epic-makers were much more interested in the adult exploits of their heroes than in their childhood. Also, perhaps, that they did not know much about young children, whose care principally fell to the female members of the family.⁹ But complete ignorance of children's ways can safely be ruled out, while conciseness and the wish to "get to the point" are highly uncharacteristic of the epic style. Both epics know many narrators and many different listeners, but to my knowledge, the audience is hardly ever – if at all – moved by curiosity to ask the story-teller further questions about a

⁸ Unless otherwise mentioned, all the translations of the *Mahābhārata* are by van Buitenen (1973-1978) and the Sanskrit text is taken from the critical edition (ed. Sukthankar *et al.* 1933-1959).

⁹ This is seen for instance in the case of Bhīṣma: his mother, the river Ganges, whisks him away to heaven as soon as he is born. She only restores him to his father, king Śaṃtanu, after he has learned the Vedas, the art of weapons and the art of magic from exalted teachers (MBh 1.94.31-36).

character's childhood. This situation is even more surprising in view of the great importance given, on the other hand, to conception and birth stories. These are numerous in both epics, but especially so in the *Mahābhārata*'s *Ādiparvan*, "The Book of the Beginning", which probably contains the greatest number of births on record among all Sanskrit texts.¹⁰

My general contention to explain this silence concerning childhood is that the epic authors viewed their heroes' childhood with a certain degree of embarrassment. For childhood seems to imply lack of wisdom and even stupidity, as revealed by the term *bāla* (child) which also means "puerile, ignorant, simple, foolish".¹¹ In proverbial expressions, childhood is systematically opposed to old age, usually with the implication that old age equals wisdom and childhood equals the lack of it, even though this may be belied by exceptional individual circumstances, where an old man behaves like a child and a child is as knowledgeable as an old man.¹²

Even worse, childhood was frequently associated with lack of restraint, if not downright cruelty. The story of sage Māṇḍavya, subsequently known as Āṇīmāṇḍavya, found in MBh 1.101, is quite revealing in this respect. It is a typical "explanatory curse story", and purports to explain why the god Dharma, Law deified, was cursed to be born as Vidura in the womb of a servant woman. The story is as follows: a sage named Māṇḍavya was by mistake caught by the king's police with a band of robbers who had hidden in his hermitage, and impaled along with them; but unlike the robbers, he did not die on the stake. Realising his mistake too late, the king wanted to remove the sage from the stake, but the stake stuck to him and had to be cut off at the base. Everafter, Māṇḍavya had to walk about with the stake stuck in him – hence his name, Āṇīmāṇḍavya or "Māṇḍavya with the pike". Then he demanded to know why he was thus being tortured and what sinful deed he had committed for which this was the retribution. God Dharma

¹⁰ This explains why most examples adduced below are precisely taken from the *Ādiparvan*.

¹¹ Cf. Monier-Williams dictionary, under *bāla*.

¹² See for instance MBh 1.51.1 ; 3.133.10-11 ; 3.183.15.

explained to him that this was his punishment because when he was a child he had planted thorns in the tails of little grasshoppers (or flies: *patāṅgaka*). Hearing this explanation, Māṇḍavya became enraged: the punishment was in no way proportionate to the deed. For this, Dharma would be reborn in a servant woman's womb. And hence, children would be held responsible for their deeds only after the age of fourteen. Before that, their actions would not "count" in the karmic scheme of things.¹³

As we see, the text seems to assume that thoughtlessness is naturally ingrained in children, and prompts them at times to behave cruelly. This, however, should not be held against them, at least not until they have reached the age of "reason", here fixed at fourteen.

The same streak of cruelty in young ones is illustrated by another story, that of the Śārṅgaka birds (cf. MBh 1.223), even though the topic is not clearly articulated or thematised here. The Śārṅgaka birds, who are in reality the sons of a sage, are mere chicks without feathers and therefore unable to escape from the Fire when he burns down the Khāṇḍava forest. Yet they are amongst the very few creatures who are spared by Agni: pleased with their recitation of the Veda, he offers them a boon instead of burning them. Without the slightest hesitation, the young birds utter their wish: "These cats, O Light, aggravate us constantly. Now put them between your teeth, Fire, with all their kin!" (MBh 1.223.24).¹⁴ In this terrible situation where their life has just been spared miraculously – a circumstance which should normally mollify even the most hard-hearted – the first thing that comes to the little birds' mind is to seek revenge on their enemies the cats, and doom them to the most cruel death.

¹³ The same story is alluded to in MBh 1.57.77-80, in the "descent of the first generation", likewise in connection with the curse given to Dharma. There, the seer Āṇimāṇḍavya is said to have impaled one single little bird (*śakuntikā*), out of childishness (*bālyād*) (MBh 1.57.78).

¹⁴ *ime mārjārakāḥ śukra nityam udvejayanti naḥ /
etān kuruṣva daṁṣṭrāsu havyavāha sabāndhavān // MBh 1.223.24 //*

Of the five Pāṇḍava-brothers, Bhīma is the only one whose childhood-deeds are elaborated in the *Mahābhārata*. And like Māṇḍavya, he appears to be chiefly bent on making others suffer:

The Pāṇḍavas received the sacraments that the *Veda* prescribes and grew up in their father's house, enjoying the pleasures of life. When they played in their father's house with the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the Pāṇḍavas excelled in all the games that children play. In racing, in hitting the target, in stuffing himself, in raising dust, Bhīmasena beat all the boys of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Boisterously, he grabbed them by the hair above their ears as they were playing, held them by their heads, and set them to fight one another. The Wolf-Belly bullied them all, the one hundred and one powerful boys, alone and with little trouble. The strong Bhīma would grab hold of their feet, topple them mightily in the dust, or pull the yelping children over the ground until their knees and heads and eyeballs were chafed. When he was playing in the water, he would catch ten of the kids in his arms and sit down under the water, letting go of them when they came close to drowning. And when they climbed the trees to pick fruit, Bhīma would kick the tree to make it shake, and all shaken up they would tumble down with the fruit from the tree that shuddered from the kick, and fall down limply. Neither in fights nor speed nor drills did the princes ever get the upper hand when they were competing with Bhīma. So Bhīma became the bane of the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra when he competed, not out of malice, but because he was a child. (MBh 1.119.13-23).

*avāpnuvanta vedoktān saṃskārān pāṇḍavās tadā /
 avardhanta ca bhogāṃs te bhūñjānāḥ pitṛveśmani // 13 //
 dhārtarāṣṭraīś ca sahitāḥ krīḍantaḥ pitṛveśmani /
 bālakrīḍāsu sarvāsu viśiṣṭāḥ paṇḍavābhavan // 14 //
 jave lakṣyābhiharāṇe bhojye pāṃsuvikarṣaṇe /
 dhārtarāṣṭrān bhīmasenaḥ sarvān sa parimardati // 15 //
 harṣād etān krīḍamānān gṛhya kākanilīyane /*

*śiraḥsu ca nigr̥hainān yodhayāmāsa pāṇḍavaḥ*¹⁵ // 16 //
śatam ekottaraṃ teṣāṃ kumārāṇāṃ mahaujasāṃ /
eka eva vimṛdnāti nātikṛcchrād vṛkodaraḥ // 17 //
pādeṣu ca nigr̥hainān vinihatya balād balī /
cakarṣa krośato bhūmau ghr̥ṣtajānuśirokṣikān // 18 //
daśa bālāñ jale kr̥ḍan bhujābhyāṃ parigr̥hya saḥ /
āste sma salile magnaḥ pramṛtāṃś ca vimuñcati // 19 //
phalāni vṛkṣam āruhya pracinvanti ca te yadā /
tadā pādaprahāreṇa bhīmaḥ kampayate drumam // 20 //
prahāravegābhihatād drumād vyāghūrṇitās tataḥ /
saphalāḥ prapatanti sma drutaṃ srastāḥ kumārakāḥ // 21 //
na te niyuddhe na jave na yogyāsu kadācana /
kumārā uttaraṃ cakruḥ spardhamānā vṛkodaram // 22 //
evaṃ sa dhārtarāṣṭrāṇāṃ spardhamāno vṛkodaraḥ /
apriye 'tiṣṭhad atyantam bālyān na drohacetasā // 23 //

Even though the author finds an excuse for Bhīma's actions, which are attributed to his young age and not to any inherently cruel nature (*bālyān na drohacetasā*), the consequences of his childhood pranks are nevertheless devastating: he plants lasting seeds of hatred in his cousins' hearts, especially in Duryodhana's, who first makes several attempts to murder Bhīma alone (MBh 1.119.30-43), then all the Pāṇḍavas together, in the lacquer house (MBh 1.132 ff.),¹⁶ and finally provokes the great Mahābhārata war, in the course of which practically all the *kṣatriyas* are slaughtered. Thus, on the level of the characters' psychology, at least one causal explanation for the war can be found in Bhīma's childhood pranks.¹⁷ Obviously, the story of how Bhīma tortured his hapless cousins is important for the plot to unfold, since it explains the Kauravas' hatred towards him and his brothers. We may note that Bhīma is exclusively singled out in being the only one who treats his cousins wrongly. His brothers, it seems, did not join in the fun!

¹⁵ Here the critical edition reads *pāṇḍavāḥ* (in the plural), but this is evidently a printing-mistake.

¹⁶ MBh 1.129.2 states that Karṇa and Śakuni also try to do away with them, unsuccessfully.

¹⁷ On the mythical-ritual level, there are of course other explanations for the war. See Feller (2004: chapter 6).

The reason for this seems quite obvious: we could not even in our dreams imagine the serious Arjuna, let alone the perfect Yudhiṣṭhira, not to mention the rather pale twins, misbehaving in this fashion! On the other hand, Bhīma's adult behaviour does not significantly differ from his behaviour as a child: he remains boisterous, impulsive, thoughtless and violent throughout his life. Therefore, describing his childish misdemeanour does not particularly cast a blemish on his character. Yet on the whole, we notice that this passage does not present Bhīma in a good light: he attacks his cousins for the sheer fun of it, without the slightest provocation on their part, it seems, and just stops short of killing them. This is perhaps the only place in the whole *Mahābhārata* where we actually feel sorry for the Kauravas. In the present passage, the narrative shows a negative slant towards Bhīma, whereas he might easily have been cast in a more positive or heroic light – especially since he is fighting alone against one hundred and one boys.

Another story depicting a hero's childhood-deed, which does not entirely end well for the hero in question, pertains to Bhīma's half brother, the monkey Hanumat¹⁸ (see *Rāmāyaṇa* 4.65 and especially 7.35-36).¹⁹ In Hanumat's case, *bālyā* (childishness) is compounded with *kapitva* (monkey nature), which makes for an expositive combination! The *Rāmāyaṇa* narrates the following about Hanumat's childhood-exploits: when Hanumat was a mere baby, his mother once had to leave him alone for a while, and he started to feel terribly hungry. Seeing the rising sun, and mistaking it for a fruit, he jumped up to the sky in order to eat it. The very same day, the demon Rāhu had by coincidence also decided to eat the sun, his allotted share (cf. MBh 1.17). Seeing Rāhu, Hanumat wanted to eat him too. Rāhu called Indra to the rescue. The latter rushed to the scene. Seeing Indra's elephant Airāvata, Hanumat again tried to eat the elephant! Finally, Indra hurled his thunder-bolt at the young monkey, precipitating him to the ground, unconscious. Furious and unhappy, Hanumat's father, the wind-god, stopped

¹⁸ Bhīma and Hanumat have the same father, the wind-god Vāyu.

¹⁹ For an analysis of these passages and their mythical antecedents, see Feller (2009).

functioning, causing all the creatures great discomfort. The other gods went to pacify him, and restored Hanumat to life. They gave the young monkey a number of boons, especially gifting him with supernatural powers and magic weapons. As a result of this, he became exceedingly overbearing and troublesome, and disturbed the *ṛṣis* in their hermitages, disrupting their sacrificial performances with his childish pranks. One day, terribly annoyed, the sages cursed him not to know his own strength (Rm 7.36.33). After the curse, Hanumat became a meek and modest fellow, and peace was restored in the hermitages.

Even though Hanumat's childhood-exploit of jumping up to the sun is extraordinary and heroic, we may note that the passage from the *Uttarakāṇḍa* mainly stresses the child's greed, impatience, lack of foresight and overbearing nature, which finally result in a curse. It is interesting to note that this curse is delivered by brahmins – the *ṛṣis* are the ones who object to the young monkey's behaviour, and who punish him accordingly.

One more narrative, which reveals the brahmins' disapproval of a young *kṣatriya*-boy's overbearing nature, may be discussed here. The *Mahābhārata* tells us the following story about young Bharata, the son of king Duṣṣanta and of Śakuntalā, the founder of the whole Bhārata lineage:

He was a large child, with shining and pointed teeth, solid like a lion, wearing on his palm the sign of the wheel, and illustrious, large-headed, and strong. The boy, who appeared like the child of a God, grew up rapidly there. When he was six years old, the child in Kaṇva's hermitage would fetter lions and tigers, boars, buffaloes, and elephants to the trees around the hermitage and run about playing and riding and taming them. Hence the hermits who dwelled in Kaṇva's hermitage gave him a nickname: "He shall be Sarvadamana, for he tames everything!"²⁰ So the boy became known as Sarvadamana, and he was endowed

²⁰ Likewise, in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Sarvadamana appears on stage in act 7 dragging a lion-cub.

with prowess, might, and strength. Watching the boy and his superhuman exploits, the seer told Śakuntalā, “It is time for him to become Young King.” Since he knew how strong he had grown, Kaṇva said to his students, “Today you must quickly take Śakuntalā here with her son from our hermitage to her husband – she is blessed with all the marks that bespeak a good wife. For it is not good for woman to live too long with their kinsmen; it imperils their reputation, good conduct and virtue. Therefore take her without delay!” (MBh 1.68.5-11).

*ṣaḍvarṣa eva bālaḥ sa kaṇvāśramapadaṃ prati /
vyāghrān siṃhān varāhāṃś ca gaḅjāṃś ca mahiṣāṃś
tathā // 5 //*
*baddhvā vṛkṣeṣu balavān āśramasya samantataḥ /
ārohan damayaṃś caiva krīḁaṃś ca paridhāvati // 6 //*
*tato ‘sya nāma cakrus te kaṇvāśramanivāsinaḥ /
astv ayam sarvadamanaḥ sarvaṃ hi damayaty ayam // 7 //*
*sa sarvadamano nāma kumāraḥ samapadyata /
vikramenaṃaujasā caiva balena ca samanvitaḥ // 8 //*
*taṃ kumāram ṛṣir dṛṣṭvā karma cāsyātimanuṣam /
samayo yauvarāḅjyāyety abravīc ca śakuntalām // 9 //*
*tasya tad balam āḅñāya kaṇvaḥ śiṣyān uvāca ha /
śakuntalām imāḅ śīghraṃ sahaputrām ito ‘śramāt /
bhartre prapayatāḁyaiva sarvalakṣaṇapūḅjitām // 10 //*
*nārīṇām ciravāso hi bāndhaveṣu na rocate /
kīrticāritradharmaghnas tasmān nayata māciram // 11 //*

This passage describing Bharata (or Sarvadamana as he is nicknamed here) is revealing on two counts: first, we see that the physical description of the boy and the depiction of his deeds are meant to underscore his *kṣatriya* nature. He is big and strong, and his pointed teeth hint at carnivorousness. He is also naturally brave and intrepid, and captures and tames the wild animals of the forest.²¹ Furthermore, we see that this propensity

²¹ It is noteworthy that he refrains from actually killing them. This is certainly a concession to brahmanical values. In Greek mythology, the young Achilles, who is similarly brought up in sylvan surroundings, starts to *kill* the wild animals of the forest at about the same age.

is so to say genetically inborn, since it spontaneously manifests itself despite the peaceful and studious environment of the forest-hermitage in which the boy grows up, and where of course none of the brahmin residents have taught him such behaviour. At the same time, we see that this very behaviour – however admirable – makes him at an early age unfit for life in Kaṇva's hermitage, where all the creatures live together in peace.²² Observing the boy, Kaṇva decides that it is time to return him to his father.²³ Obviously, the implication is that the boy's temperament is getting out of control and potentially threatening in the brahmanical environment of the hermitage,²⁴ whereas his energy will be properly channelled and controlled in the environment of the court, with the help of his *kṣatriya* father.

We see in the two stories pertaining to Hanumat and to Sarvadamana that the brahmins find exception to the young boys' exuberant behaviour, and find ways to either curb them or remove them in order to preserve their peaceful mode of life. The brahmanical damper is less obviously seen in Bhīma's case, yet it may nevertheless be there, exercised by the brahmanical – or brahmanically inclined – authors of the *Mahābhārata*, who, as we noticed above, cast Bhīma's childhood-deeds in a quite negative light.

If, as we have just seen, some exceptional *kṣatriyas* come to the world endowed with inborn strength and prowess, certain eminent brahmin-sages, on the other hand, are born with innate

²² Cf. MBh 1.64, which describes at length the peaceful setting of Kaṇva's hermitage.

²³ Officially, Kaṇva invokes the need for Śakuntalā to go to her husband, but we see that the boy's behaviour is what really prompts him to take the decision. After all, nine years have elapsed since Duṣanta's visit to the hermitage (Bharata is now six, and Śakuntalā gave birth to him after 3 years of pregnancy (cf. MBh 1.68.1)), so Kaṇva should have worried much earlier about Śakuntalā's being away from her husband!

²⁴ This is poetically thematised by Kālidāsa in act 7, verse 18 of his *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, where king Duṣyanta, unaware as yet that Sarvadamana is his own son and mistaking him for the son of a *ṛṣi*, remarks, observing the boy's behaviour:

*evam āśramaviruddhavr̥ttinā saṃyamah kim iti janmatas tvayā /
sattvasaṃśraya sukho 'pi dūṣyate kṛṣṇasarpaśiṣuneva candanaḥ //*

Why is it that by you acting in a way contrary to hermitage (life), is violated (the practice) of forbearance, proper for your birth, although delightful by its being a refuge of animals, as a sandal-tree is by the young of a black serpent [i.e., a cobra]? (Transl. Kāle).

knowledge of language skills and especially of the Vedas. Indeed, some of them can already speak, and sometimes chant the Vedas in their mother's womb. In cases such as these, the process of learning, which is usually one of the principal activities of children, does not even have to take place, since knowledge of the Veda is inherited from the brahmanical forefathers in quasi-genetic fashion. As we shall see below, it is not always the case that the foetus hears others around him chanting the Vedas and learns it in this fashion. For indeed, certain foetuses are carried by their mothers in circumstances where there are no other brahmins around.

Dīrghatamas, son of Utathya, is said to have learned the Veda with its six branches while still in his mother Mamatā's uterus (MBh 1.98.9). He speaks out when his uncle Bṛhaspati violates his mother: "*Bhoḥ* little uncle, there is no room here for two! You have wasted your seed, and I was here first!" (MBh 1.98.13),²⁵ whereupon his uncle curses him to be blind. Hence his name Dhīrghatamas, "long darkness". Likewise, Aṣṭāvakra speaks out to his father from his mother's womb (blaming him for being slow-witted !), for which his father also curses him to be born crooked in eight ways, hence his name Aṣṭāvakra (MBh. 3.132.8-10). These stories – both of which contain curses meant to explain the origin of the names and handicaps of the two seers – seem to imply that knowledge beyond one's years, especially if it entails lack of respect towards one's elders, is not without dangers.

It is interesting to note that quite a few stories pertaining to precocious young seers, who know the Vedas before they are even born, occur in a context of conflict or distress, where the brahmins have to hide from the *kṣatriyas*. Thus Parāśara, Vasiṣṭha's grandson, recites the Veda and its branches in his mother's womb, where he stayed for 12 years (MBh 1.167.13-14). His father Śakti, and his father's ninety-nine brothers, had been devoured by king Kalmāṣapāda, who had been cursed to

²⁵ *bhos tāta kanyasa vade dvayor nāsty atra sambhavaḥ / amoghaśukraś ca bhavān pūrvaṃ cāham ihāgataḥ // MBh 1.98.13 //*

become a *rākṣasa*.²⁶ Likewise, the Bhārgava sage Aurva was carried in his mother's thigh for a hundred years, to hide him from the *kṣatriyas* who wanted to slaughter all the Bhṛgus. As his mother declares: "The entire Veda and its six branches came to the child when I bore him, to be once more of benefit to the dynasty of the Bhṛgus." (MBh 1.170.4).²⁷

In the above cases, the foetuses of the young seers are kept in their mother's womb – or thigh in the case of Aurva – for an inordinately long time. This long pregnancy may be seen as necessary in order to form very exceptional and perfected beings and explains the precocity and early learning of these young seers.²⁸ It is also a means to keep the brahmin babies safe from the *kṣatriyas*' wrath, and, incidentally, a means to preserve the Vedas in the face of the destruction of the brahmanical lineage. At the same time, the long time spent in their mother's womb can also be seen as a narrative technique to dispense with their childhood altogether, since that childhood is not spent "outside", but "inside" the mother.²⁹ When they finally see the light of day, they are adults – if not, perhaps, in size, at least in learning and wisdom.

²⁶ Parāśara's grandfather, Vasiṣṭha, is of course still very much alive. But Parāśara certainly does not learn the Vedas from him, because, crazed by grief at his sons' death, Vasiṣṭha spends those twelve years trying to commit suicide – unsuccessfully, since all the elements repeatedly reject him. (MBh 1.166-167).

²⁷ *śaḍaṅgaś cākhilo veda imaṃ garbhastham eva hi /
viveśa bhṛguvaṃśasya bhūyaḥ priyacikīrṣayā // MBh 1.170.4 //*

Here the "Veda with its six limbs" appears as a quasi-personified supernatural agency, which acts with a will of its own, moved by an instinct of self-preservation, and so to say "possesses" the foetus.

²⁸ This is clearly seen for instance in the case of Dṛḍhasyu, the son of Agastya and Lopāmudrā. Given a choice between a thousand sons and a single, exceptionally gifted son, Lopāmudrā chooses the latter: "Let me have one son who equals a thousand, ascetic; for one wise and virtuous son is better than many of no virtue!" (MBh 3.97.20). Dṛḍhasyu was born after a 7 years' pregnancy, "reciting the Vedas with their branches and the Upaniṣads" (MBh 3.97.23). Likewise, as we have seen above, Sarvadamana, the precocious young *kṣatriya*, was carried in Śakuntalā's womb for three years. Another son of Vasiṣṭha, Aśmaka, born by king Kalmāṣapāda's Queen, was also born after twelve years (MBh 1.168.25).

²⁹ This trait could be of some psychoanalytical interest. Kakar (1978: 126-127) remarks that in India, young boys are usually cosseted by their mothers and extremely protected till the age of about five, after which they are brutally banned from close proximity to the mother, and sent out into the harsh, male world.

An equally extreme, though opposite, case is that of Vyāsa, the composer of the *Mahābhārata* himself: displaying rare expediency, he is not only conceived and born within a day, but apparently grows up as soon as he is born:

... the happy Satyavatī ... gave birth the same day she lay with Parāśara. The mighty Pārāśarya [*scil.* Vyāsa] was born on an island in the river Yamunā. He stood before his mother and set his mind on asceticism. “When you think of me, I shall appear to you if any task needs to be done”, he said. (MBh 1.57.69-70).

*iti satyavatī hr̥ṣṭā [...]
parāśareṇa saṃyuktā sadyo garbhaṃ suṣāva sā /
jajñe ca yamunādvīpe pārāśaryaḥ sa vīryavān // 69 //
sa mātaram upasthāya tapasy eva mano dadhe /
smṛto 'haṃ darśayiṣyāmi kṛtyeṣv iti ca so 'bravīt // 70 //*

The text does not specify that Vyāsa was born with innate knowledge of the Veda, but this can safely be assumed, since immediately afterwards it is said that he divided the one Veda, and then taught the resulting four Vedas, with the *Mahābhārata* as the fifth, to his five disciples.

Rather astonishingly, Vyāsa’s conception, birth and growth are strikingly similar to Ghaṭotkaca’s, Bhīma’s *rākṣasa* son by the *rākṣasī* Hiḍimbā – even though it would seem that a brahmanical seer and a half-*rākṣasa* should stand on opposite ends of the scale of humanity. This is how the *Mahābhārata* describes the birth of Ghaṭotkaca:

Although a babe, he would have seemed a fully grown youth among humans, O lord of the people ; and on all weapons the powerful champion attained a sovereign mastery. Rākṣasa women give birth the day they conceive ; and Rākṣasas assume any shape they want and appear in many forms. The shiny child bowed and touched his father’s feet and his mother’s, that future bowman, and his parents gave him a name. [...] Then

Hiḍimbā said to Bhīma that the time of their life together had run out ; and she made a compact and went her own way. Ghaṭotkaca promised his father that he would come to them whenever he was needed ; thereupon that best of Rākṣasas departed for the north. (MBh 1.143.31-37).

*bālo 'pi yauvanam prāpto mānuṣeṣu viśāṃ pate /
sarvāstreṣu param vīraḥ prakarṣam agamad balī // 31 //
sadyo hi garbham rākṣasyo labhante prasavanti ca /
kāmarūpadharāś caiva bhavanti bahurūpiṇaḥ // 32 //
praṇamya vikacaḥ pādāv agrhṇāt sa pitus tadā /
mātuś ca parameṣvāsas tau ca nāmāsya cakratuḥ // 33 //*
...
*saṃvāsasamayo jīrṇa ity abhāṣata taṃ tataḥ /
hiḍimbā samayaṃ kṛtvā svām gatim pratyapadyata // 36 //
kṛtyakāla upasthāsye pitṛn iti ghaṭotkacaḥ /
āmantrya rākṣasaśreṣṭhaḥ pratasthe cottarāṃ diśam // 37 //*

As we see, both Vyāsa and Ghaṭotkaca are conceived, born, and grow up quasi-instantaneously. Both also similarly promise their parents that they will appear whenever they are needed.³⁰ While the immediate conception and birth of *rākṣasas* remains unexplained, *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.4.23, ff. contains a story which explains why young *rākṣasas* grow big instantaneously: one day, while travelling through the air, Śiva and Pārvatī flew over a wailing baby *rākṣasa*, who had been abandoned by his forgetful mother as soon as he was born. Moved with pity, Pārvatī gave a boon to the *rākṣasīs*: she declared that henceforth baby *rākṣasas* would grow as old as their mother as soon as they were born. Thus, as the *Rāmāyaṇa* explains, the reason why *rākṣasas* grow up at once is because *rākṣasīs* do not take

³⁰ And both will of course be held to their pledge and required to perform uncommon tasks: Vyāsa will be requested by Satyavatī to sire her grandsons in the place of his deceased half-brother Vicitravīrya (MBh 1.99-100), and Ghaṭotkaca will fight on his father's side in the great war, and will have to give up his life to save Arjuna's, at Kṛṣṇa's instigation (MBh 7.148-154).

care well of their offspring.³¹ In fact, this characteristic of the *rākṣasīs* is shared to some extent by Vyāsa's mother, Satyavatī: as an unmarried woman, she could not possibly have cared for her son and would perhaps have abandoned him, somewhat like Kuntī would later leave her first-born son Karna, who was also conceived out of wedlock. Yet at the same time, the quasi-immediate conception, birth and growth hint at an extraordinary, supra-human nature, which Vyāsa shares with the *rākṣasas* and with other types of divine or supernatural beings.³² Just as we cannot imagine fright-inspiring creatures like *rākṣasas* as cuddly babes, similarly we cannot – and probably should not! – imagine a venerable sage like Vyāsa as an ignorant young child.

To conclude, the following observations can be drawn from our findings: as we have seen, childhood-descriptions do not form a very conspicuous theme of Sanskrit epic poetry. The few examples we have tend to represent childhood as an age of ignorance and waywardness, at times even bordering on cruelty. Usually, not much is said about individual feats. Rather, in ordinary cases, children are seen as pre-formatted rough material, who require to be perfected by certain types of rituals and filled with certain types of knowledge in order to turn into socially acceptable beings. At the same time – and this is seen prominently in exceptionally gifted individuals – the child is born with innate qualities or predispositions, since his basic nature, be it *kṣatriya* or brahmanical, shines through despite the environment in which he is brought up: Sarvadamana displays clear *kṣatriya* dispositions even though he is raised in the

³¹ This characteristic is shared by the *apsarases*, the heavenly nymphs, who also tend to abandon their infant children, without, however, any provision being made for the children's safety. The story of Śakuntalā, in MBh 1.66, is typical in this respect.

³² King Drupada's two children, Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna and Draupadī, who are born by magic out of the sacrificial fire and out of the altar respectively, are born fully grown (see MBh 1.155.37 ff.). Garuḍa, the king of birds, similarly grows to a huge size and effulgence as soon as he hatches from his egg (cf. MBh 1.20). Garuḍa's mother, Vinatā, could probably also be termed a "bad" mother: before Garuḍa's birth, out of envy towards her co-wife Kadrū, whose snake-children had already hatched, she prematurely broke her first egg, which contained Garuḍa's brother, Aruṇa, who was consequently born crippled. For this story, see Feller (2004: chapter 4).

environment of the hermitage ; the brahmin-sages Aurva and Parāśara chant the Vedas while still inside their mother, in circumstances where all the grown, male brahmins – from whom they could have heard and learnt the Vedas – have been massacred. Certainly, the Sanskrit epics do not seem to know the genre of the “Bildungsroman”, where a character is formed through the tribulations of young age and finally emerges as an idiosyncratic, grown individual.

The rare cases where a precise event pertaining to a character’s childhood is described in detail are usually projected in a negative light. Mostly, these incidents serve to explain why something untoward happens subsequently: in Bhīma’s case, his childhood pranks explain the Mahābhārata war ; Hanumat’s exploit of jumping at the sun leads to his being cursed by the *ṛṣis*, which in turn explains why he does not know how strong he is; due to his cruelty to animals during his childhood, Āṇimāṇḍavya is kept on the stake, which brings him to curse Dharma to be born of a *sūdrā* mother. In this respect, it can be remarked that, on a narrative level, childhood incidents function not unlike stories pertaining to previous lives, which are often told to explain why a character has to undergo such and such an ordeal in his/her present life.³³

In the case of young *kṣatriyas*, we have seen that either the brahmin authors, or the brahmanical world-view prominent in the epics, often keep a damper on their otherwise exceptional exploits, showing them in a negative light, or emphasising the disastrous outcome of their actions. In the case of exceptional young brahmanical sages, the tendency is to do away with their childhood altogether – either by having them grow up instantaneously or by showing them as learned even before their birth – which is one way to avoid depicting them in less than dignified circumstances. We notice that precocity is rather frowned upon in young *kṣatriyas*, whose behaviour tends to be represented as obnoxious, but admired in the case of brahmin-

³³ With the same implication of temporal and causal distance: the character is obviously responsible for what happens to him (her), but only to a certain extent, since the – usually bad or unfortunate – deed was after all performed long ago, in childhood or in a previous life, when he (she) was not quite the same person.

boys, who appear to be wise beyond their age. More generally, we could even say that typical *kṣatriya* qualities (like physical prowess, ardour, the desire to fight) were viewed as undesirable and childish, whereas typical brahmanical qualities (powers of language, concentration, learning) were viewed as praiseworthy and “adult”.

Such being the general situation in the epics, we note that a sea-change takes place in later narratives, from the *Harivaṃśa* onwards and especially in certain *Purāṇas*,³⁴ which positively revel in depictions of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood deeds.³⁵ Kṛṣṇa is, obviously, an undisciplined boy, rather in the line of a Hanumat.³⁶ Yet his most dubious childhood pranks are presented in a positive light, and none of the brahmanical “frowning upon” is observable in his case. In fact, the naughtier Kṛṣṇa is, the more loveable he appears – to those who care for him, as well as to his devotees. The subject of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood is obviously a topic of its own.³⁷ In *bhakti* movements, his great success as a child certainly resides in the fact that god is best represented in the image of a child, since he enacts his *līlā* with such child-like whimsicality. Suffice it to say here, in view of the above observations, that this insistence on Kṛṣṇa’s childhood exploits and especially the positive valuation thereof, are new developments which quite certainly did not arise out of the Sanskrit epics.³⁸

³⁴ See *Harivaṃśa* 30-78 ; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 5 ; and esp. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.

³⁵ In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, king Parikṣit even specifically interrogates the narrator Śuka about Kṛṣṇa’s childhood deeds, he wants to hear more about them (BhPur 10.7.3). To my knowledge, the epics’ immediate audience never utter a similar wish.

³⁶ See esp. BhPur 10.8-9 for enumerations of his misdeeds.

³⁷ See Couture 1991.

³⁸ In the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa’s childhood deeds are only mentioned once, by his enemy Śiśupāla, who describes them contemptuously and ridicules them (MBh 2.38.5 ff.).

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