

The Mahabharata Patriline: Gender, Culture, And The Royal Hereditary

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The Mahābhārata Patriline

Samjaya's Yādava *vaṁśa* (7.119) coincides with Vaiśampāyana's *vaṁśa* only in the stretch Purūravas → Ayus → Nahuṣa → Yayāti. In Vaiśampāyana's *vaṁśa* these four seem to stand and/or fall together, and in similar fashion, as if they had not always been in this *vaṁśa*.⁴ I will show this retrospectively, by exploring the figure of Yayāti.⁵

In the *śloka vaṁśa*, Yayāti is not Nahuṣa's eldest son. This is not mentioned further,⁶ but the elder brother's name (Yati) would suggest he renounced, like Dakṣa's sons. He might be any *yati* – perhaps the *yati* of 14.28, whose attitude to violence seems antithetical to kingship. Reich writes on this scene:

Seeing the sacrificial victim in front of him, a *yati* (wandering ascetic) addresses the *adhvaryu* (the priest whose role is among other things, to immolate the animal) and proclaims: "This (sacrifice) is violence." ... Verbally abusing (root *kuts*) the *adhvaryu*, the *yati* ridicules his claim that he is causing no harm ... (Reich 2005:283–4)

The eighteen-chapter hiatus within the *śloka vaṁśa* is initiated by Janamejaya's request for more details about Yayāti (1.71:1–2). Vaiśampāyana introduces Yayāti's in-laws and tells of Yayāti's marriage and his being cursed by his father-in-law Śukra, causing a patrilineal crisis that is resolved in 1.79–80. Vaiśampāyana then mentions that after Yayāti went to heaven he was temporarily ejected by Indra; and Janamejaya asks for details, which continue until the *vaṁśa* resumes in 1.89 at Janamejaya's request (see Figure 3.3, p. 28).

Devayāni's father Śukra Bhārgava is the priest for Śarmiṣṭhā's father Vṛṣaparvan, king of the *asuras*.⁷ But the girls quarrel – they both think 'my dad's better than yours' – and Śarmiṣṭhā throws Devayāni down a well. Yayāti, out hunting, appears, thirsty, his animals exhausted (*śrāntayugyaḥ śrāntahayo*, 1.73:14).

Looking into the well, Nahuṣa's son saw that it was dry; and he saw the young lady down there, blazing like a tongue of fire.

(1.73:15)⁸

⁴ At 1.app108:50–51, in connection with the Pāṇḍavas' move to Khāṇḍavaprastha, these four kings are all said to have ruled from Khāṇḍava.

⁵ Yayāti is mentioned in the *Rgveda* at 1.31:17 and (as Nahuṣa's son) 10.63:1.

⁶ But a common interpolation here (1.*692; Ganguli 1993:165) says that Yati the *muni* resorted to *yoga* and became *brahman*. Oldham suggests that Yati became a Jaina (1891:385). (The asterisk indicates a 'star passage' in the *Mahābhārata* critical edition – a passage that is found in only some *Mahābhārata* manuscripts, but is short enough to be included as a footnote rather than an appendix.)

⁷ Śukra (also called Uśanas and Kāvya) can raise the dead; see Dumézil 1971: 133–238; Goldman 1977; Jamison 2007:124–37. 'Śukra' means 'sperm', and/or (the planet) 'Venus'; see 12.278 for how he got the name.

⁸ *sa nahuṣaḥ prekṣamāna udapānam gatodakam | dadarśa kanyām tām tatra dīptām agnīśikhām iva ||* We cannot tell whether this is before or after Yati renounces.

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