DIVINE WEAPONS AND *TEJAS* IN THE TWO INDIAN EPICS

The divine weapons (*divya astra*) of the two Indian epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramāyaṇa*, play a central and ubiquitous role in the narratives. Nevertheless, the subject has been woefully neglected. With numerous gods and heroes, most of whom wield at least one divine weapon, the epics have produced the most vivid and rich examples of divine weapon combat, quests, and histories. The heroes’ victories are achieved only with divine weapons. The battle scenes are replete with divine weapons and the carnage they produce. Arjuna travels to the remote Himalayas to obtain divine weapons from Śiva, the four world guardians, and various other gods. Rāma obtains most of his divine arsenal from the divine sage Vāsishtha. Throughout both epics, histories of individual divine weapons are enumerated. It is within the epics that the divine weapons reach their most developed stage, while bringing to the foreground many beliefs and practices ancient Indians, especially the warriors, had about the world they lived in. In fact, in no other mythological corpus is the concept of divine weapons more developed and more complex than in the two Indian epics. Thus, without a proper understanding of the divine weapons the Indian epics cannot be fully appreciated.

However, the divine weapons cannot be properly understood without a comprehensive examination of the concept of *tejas* or “fiery energy.” Embedded within the mythology is a recurring set of principles that pertain to the nature of *tejas*. This set of principles relates directly to the nature and function of the divine weapons. Therefore, because *tejas* governs the way the divine weapons operate in the mythology, the primary aim of the following paper is to outline its “intrinsic laws” and to codify them systematically in a working model. To stress the point, this paper is primarily a study of the nature and function of divine weapons in the two Indian epics, yet, as the episodes will show, the concept of *tejas* is intrinsic and thus totally indispensable. The significance of *tejas* has been overlooked, and a coherent depiction of it is crucial for an understanding of the divine weapons of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramāyaṇa*.1

Unfortunately, scholars have not seriously expounded divine weapons in any detail. When confronted with a divine weapon such as the Agneya astra ("Fire-weapon"), historians have generally explained it away as an ancient musket, or similar gun-powder weapon (which disappeared before any western contact with India). While accepting this explanation, only Hopkins sympathetically acknowledges the traditional interpretation of divine weapons as originating from the supramundane realm, and that they can be united with ordinary weapons, endowing them with the divine weapons’ own power. He even seems to recognize the centrality of tejas, from √tiḥ- “to be sharp”, when he writes “Fire is used not of fire, but of the swift sharp biting power of a weapon.”

The problem of trying to find historical explanations for the divine weapons is twofold. Firstly, the divine weapons are much more destructive than an ancient musket or cannon could ever have been. Arrows, as one manifestation of a divine weapon, are fired from bows in a manner resembling modern day weaponry, and many of the divine weapons have the destructive capability of small tactical war-heads, killing thousands in one strike. If such a historical approach were in vogue today, scholars would not be satisfied until they found ancient AK-47s, or a nuclear capability. Secondly, as Hopkins seems to have understood, the fire of the divine weapons is not the element itself, but the more subtle energy-substance tejas or “fiery energy”. These are not weapons of fire per se, but weapons of energy.

Only in the realms of religious inquiry are the divine weapons given any serious treatment. Mehta aptly writes that the divine weapons are best understood as “God-given inner potencies and spiritual forces available to man, rather than physical instruments of destruction.” Begley’s insightful study of Viṣṇu’s Sudarśana cakra briefly surveys textual developments of the divine discus throughout the Vedic literature, before the bulk of his research turns to iconographical evidence of the personified discus in the post-epic and medieval sources. Like the historians before him, he is satisfied that the fiery nature of the discus refers to the use of incendiary weapons. For Katz, the divine weapons are symbols of ancient warrior initiation rituals, and of certain gods; thus when wielding divine weapons the heroes symbolically represent the respective deities. Similarly, for Hiltebeitel, Arjuna’s use of Indra’s and Śiva’s divine weapons reinforces the hero’s identity with those gods, and the divine weapon battle between Arjuna and Aśvathāman connects the two heroes with the gods Nārāyaṇa and Rudra respectively. This kind of symbolic interpretation cannot be faulted, as far as it goes, yet it treats the divine weapons as representations of other realities. However,
I prefer to treat the divine weapons as signs – direct indicators of an ontology that the epic authors wished to express about their universe.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING OF TEJAS

Before turning to the divine weapons themselves, it is necessary to examine the development and meaning of tejas. The Sanskrit word derives from the root ṭīj-, meaning “to be sharp”. It appears in older examples of Vedic literature, e.g., the Rg Veda and Atharva Veda. At this point, tejas refers to the sharp edges of weapons, etc., and is vaguely connected with the concepts of heat, fire, and light.11 The metaphor of the sharpness of fire extends to the ferocity of humans, thus, even at this early stage, tejas features as a psychosomatic characteristic of individual beings. This set the stage for a metaphorical transition from “sharpness” to a kind of “energy”. By the time of the Upanisads, tejas surpasses other energy-substances while incorporating their diverse roles. It becomes the central creative principle of the supreme god, and furthermore, the energy of all movement and activity (rajoguna) in the universe.12 It is further ascribed to be the subtle essence of the Hindu atman or “soul”, and thus “is the ever-changing energy which is passed on along the downward current of evolution and taken back in involution.”13 Hence, by the time of the epics, Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation (avatāra) of Viṣṇu, can conclude in the Bhagavad-Gītā; “Whatever being possesses power, wisdom, prosperity, or is endowed with strength, know that it originates from but a fragment of my tejas.”14 Magnone expounds this point:

As an energy, tejas is eminently transferable, and the effects of its transfer are different according to whether the broader or the narrower notion of tejas is applied. In the former event, the grant of tejas is coextensive with creation, and its confiscation with dissolution. This is the case with most avatāras, when Viṣṇu becomes incarnate with a portion (amsa) of his tejas and then takes it back dissolving his form after completion of the task . . . When tejas is intended in the narrower sense, i.e., as the cause of mere excellence, and not generally of existence, then its acquisition and loss do not entail an absolute inception or cessation, but simply a promotion or demotion to or from a higher level of existence.15

By the epic period, tejas is well established as an energy-substance with distinctive fiery connotations. Furthermore, tejas can be classified into four kinds: (1) earthly (bhauma), such as fire; (2) divine (divya), such as lightning, or the constellations; (3) physiological (audarya), which occurs in gastro-intestinal secretions; and (4) mineral (akaraja), such as metals, jewels, etc.16 On the gross level, tejas preserves its ancient connections with fire and heat, and when possessed by persons or objects suggests the English words “glory”, “majesty”, “ardour”, and
“splendour”. On the subtle level, as an energy, tejas is responsible for knowledge, and when in excess is highly destructive. For example, seers (rṣis) are referred to as tejasvins, and can threaten the universe with their energy. Correspondingly, warriors are constantly referred to as hot, even burning, and there is an almost endless supply of metaphorical comparisons between warriors and fire imagery. All of this culminates in the notion of tejas as found in the epics. Magnone concludes that by the epic period “tejas appears as a self-standing universal energy independent of the Lord, and obeying its own intrinsic laws, with which the Lord has himself to cope.”

Tejas is thus best understood as tangible and functional.

THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE WEAPONS

The concept of divine weapons is fluid – they are weapons of energy. There is virtually no limit to the way they manifest themselves. They can be subtle forces of explosive power, like a massive fireball, or tangible instruments of death that are physically held, or both, depending on the situation. Through incantations (mantras) a divya astra is generally united with a normal weapon (śastra) – typically arrows – which obviously makes the latter more effective. Among the more tangible divya astras are Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa’s Sudarśana discus, Arjuna’s Gāṇḍīva bow, and Karna’s divine lance (śakti). While these divine weapons are material objects, tangible instruments of war, they are not always bound by such mundane conceptions, as the Sudarśana discus at times materializes on command. Other divine weapons create thousands of arrows, or even appear as large “stormclouds” discharging from themselves various kinds of divine and non-divine weapons. What is central is the mental relationship divine weapons have with their wielder as they reside in the mind. Furthermore, divine weapons are closely connected with such emotions as rage and anger. When unleashed they invoke all the raw power of a warrior’s fury, infused with the tejas of the gods, and thus are capable of laying waste hundreds of opponents in one concentrated act of violence.

Most divine weapons are named after the deities who preside over them, and, in general, they manifest the natural phenomena associated with the particular powers they reflect. For example, the Agneya astra (“Fire-weapon”) belonging to Agni, the god of fire, creates fire, and the Varuṇa astra (“Water-weapon”) belonging to Varuṇa, the water deity, creates water. Thus, a large array of divine weapons exists, which produce storms, lightning, fire, wind, typhoons, mountains, rain,
etc. Likewise, on a more physiological level, there is the Prasvāpa astra (“Sleep-weapon”) which is countered by the Sambodhana astra (“Awakening-weapon”). There are also the three ultimate divine weapons; the Brahmā (ā-sīra) astra of Brahmā, the Nārāyaṇa astra relating to Viṣṇu, and finally the Pāśupata astra of Śiva.

The divine weapons are also sentient beings, who often appear anthropomorphically.23 They can even assume various theriomorphic and therianthropic forms, which in a bestial fury tear their victims apart.24 The personification of divine weapons develops to the point in the Purānic literature where the Sudarśana discus, as one example, is not only “capable of following Viṣṇu’s instructions and acting independently of him, but it is also capable of feeling emotions like wrath and dissatisfaction.”25

Ultimately, all divya astras are weapons of a single divine energy – tejas. This energy is channelled into the physical world by their wielders, who, with the correct mantras and, more importantly, their own reserves of tejas, control the energy by uniting it with a more tangible weapon, most commonly an arrow, or the energy can be simply released on its own. Divine weapons are far more destructive and efficacious than ordinary weapons (śastras) and their use enhances a warrior’s natural prowess in combat. However, this weaponry represents immense and often volatile power, and is reserved for the greatest of heroes, putting them in direct communion with the gods, as any warrior possessing a divine weapon can unleash the energy of the gods in the human realm.

A MODEL OF THE DIVINE WEAPONS

I present here a tentative model of the divine weapons based on the principles of tejas, and each principle will be then systematically examined.

The Genesis of the Divine Weapons

Divine weapons are forged from the tejas of various gods.

The Neutralization Process

When unleashed or uncontrolled, tejas must be neutralized, and tejas is the active ingredient required to do this. The process of neutralization is affected by concerns of quantity (e.g., maha-tejas over alpatejas), and tejas is itself ranked in a qualitative hierarchy, which further affects
the neutralization process (e.g., brahmatejas over kṣatriyatejas, watery tejas over fiery tejas, etc.). The neutralization process takes two forms; either greater tejas bestows the relative rigidity and hardness of an object, and thus resists and repels weaker tejas; or greater tejas absorbs and contains weaker tejas.

**The Control of the Divine Weapons**

Throughout the epics, heroes are concerned with acquiring maximal tejas in its most potent forms. Furthermore, any warrior who acquires divine weapons must also possess a sufficient quantity and quality of tejas to control and employ them.

**The Danger in the Divine Weapons**

Because tejas absorbs tejas, there is an inherent danger in the divine weapons, which can lead to catastrophic results.

**The Loss of Divine Weapons**

The loss of tejas due to a change in the yugas or world ages causes the divine weapons to be withdrawn from the epic heroes.

Divine weapons are created from, embody, and function due to the principles governing tejas. The divine weapons are one of Hinduism’s richest examples of the workings of these principles. The consistent application of the principles is evident throughout all the divine weapon episodes. The completed model can be used to examine any given divine weapon episode.

**The Genesis of the Divine Weapons**

The mythology encompassing the creation of the divine weapons is most developed in the *Purānic* literature. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* provides a clear account of their genesis.

Thereupon, Viṣvakarman neutralized [the Sun’s] tejas. Having placed the Sun on a lathe [Viṣvakarman] ground down his tejas, [and] he worked an imperishable eighth portion and cut the piece away. The Viṣṇava tejas, which Viṣvakarman cut away from him, fell blazing violently down on the earth... With this tejas the blacksmith constructed the discus of Viṣṇu, the Trident of Śarva [Śiva], the palanquin [or weapon] of the Wealth-Giver [Kubera], the lance of Guha [Kārttikeya], and the weapons of the other gods: all these Viṣvakarman fashioned with the tejas.

**tejasas śāmanam cāsya viśvakarmā cakāra ha. bhramam āropya sūryam tu tasay tejo nisātanam, krtaśāṁ astamanṁ bhāgaṁ sa vyāśṭāyava avyāyam. yat tasmād vaiśnavam tejasā sātītaṁ viśvakarmam aṁ, jāvyāyamānāṁ apaat taddhāmaṁ...**

...tvaṣṭāvab tejasā tena viṣṇo cakram akalpayat, triśālāṁ caiva śaraṇya śiśkīṁ dhanadasya ca. sākim
TWO INDIAN EPICS

Like the Viṣṇu Purāṇa,29 the Mārkandeya Purāṇa30 states that Viśvakarman creates the weapons of the other gods, and those splendid items were made with the tejas of the sun for the pacification of enemies.

The Padma Purāṇa32 contains an independent creation myth for Viṣṇu’s Sudarśana discus. Here, all the gods, including Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu, emit their own tejas, which forms into an unbearable mass that only Śiva can fashion into the fabled divya astra.33

An earlier version of this myth appears in the Mahābhārata, and although the Sudarśana discus is not explicitly created from tejas, the energy-substance is present.34 Both myths suggest the discus possesses such intense tejas that it is difficult, or even impossible, to look at.35 Thus, it seems that in order to remedy this the name Sudarśana, meaning “beautiful” or “good-looking”, is bestowed upon it so others can look at it.36 The Nārāyaṇa astra, called the “ultimate weapon” (parama astra: MBh.7.166.44), gives the wielder the ability to produce diverse showers of divine weapons (divyani śastravarsāni), and due to its very nature the wielder blazes with tejas.37 In the Mahābhārata, an alternate creation myth for the Nārāyaṇa astra states that Viṣṇu constructs it from the tejas of Nārāyaṇa, and his tejas is the substance that “extinguishes the tejas of other astras” (yat tan nārāyaṇam tejah astratejavahpramardanam: MBh.7.170.40, 1401*38). The Nārāyaṇa astra and the other divine weapon myths of origin reveal a consistent principle: all divya astras are made from and embody tejas.

The Neutralization Process

The Nārāyaṇa astra is constructed from the tejas of Nārāyaṇa and his tejas “extinguishes the tejas of other astras.” Several important themes
can be extracted from this line. Firstly, *tejas* functions as the constitutive element of the divine weapon. Secondly, *tejas* functions as the divine weapon’s destructive power. Thirdly, *tejas* neutralizes the *tejas* of other divine weapons. The influence of *tejas* over itself suggests that it is governed by a set of principles. The presence of *tejas* in other *divya astras* illustrates that it is a property shared among all divine weapons. Lastly, when Nārāyanā gave his divine weapon he also gave his *tejas*, which suggests that a *divya astra* contains the *tejas* of the specific deity who presides over it. These themes show that divine weapons are metonyms of *tejas*. Moreover, the leitmotif of the whole Nārāyanā astra episode is the danger posed by the Nārāyanā astra’s *tejas*. By exploring these themes the principles governing divine weapons can be clearly elucidated.

To begin, it is important to explore the motif in which *tejas* is bestowed upon a hero. This is illustrated in the *Mahābhārata*; before the warrior Kuvalāśa slays the demon Dhundhu, he is told:

Visṣu will cause your own *tejas* to increase with his *tejas* . . . Whichever king slays this fierce and great Asura, then, the Vaiṣṇava *tejas*, which is dangerous to approach, will enter him. You must take upon yourself that *tejas* which is unbearable on earth . . . For Dhundhu who possesses great *tejas* is unable to be burnt up by insufficient [alpa-] *tejas*, indeed, even in hundreds of years . . . . *tejasā tava tejaś ca visṇur āpyāyāyati yasya tāṁ mahāśuram raudrāṃ vadhisyati mahīpaṭih, tejas tasmā vaśpavan īti praveksya durāsādam, tat tejas tvam samādhāya bhūvi duḥśaham . . . na hi dhundhur mahātejas tejasālpena śākyate, nirdāqdhūm . . . sa hi varṇāśatair api.* (MBh.3.193.24–27)

One principle conveyed by this myth is that *tejas* “can be given and taken, that is, it is transferable. When one is given *tejas* by others, his own *tejas* naturally increases. In the mythological sphere a god being given *tejas* by a more powerful god becomes stronger.”  The central principle is that *tejas* is affected by concerns of quantity. Clearly, one who is of *alpatejas* or “insufficient/limited *tejas*” needs greater quantities of *tejas* to defeat an opponent of *mahātejas* or “great *tejas*.” This principle features in other divine weapon episodes. For example, Viṣṇu’s *tejas* enters and energizes Indra’s *Vajra astra* (“Thunderbolt-weapon”), so the king of the gods can slay the demon Vṛtra. In an alternate version of this myth not only does Viṣṇu give Indra his *tejas*, but also all the gods and brahmans.

Several closely related principles that concern the destructive and hierarchical nature of *tejas* can be extracted from one central *Rāmāyaṇa* episode (Rām.1.53–55). To defeat the brahman Vasiṣṭha, king Viśvāmitra practises asceticism (tapas) to gain divine weapons from Śiva. He attacks the brahman with over three dozen different *divya astras*, which begin
to burn the ascetic’s hermitage with their tejas. They are all literally swallowed (√/gras-) by the brahman’s staff (danda: Rám.1.55.6–13).

The text continues:

When these [divya astras] were neutralized, [Viśvāmitra] released the Brahmaprema astra … All the three worlds became horrified when the Brahmaprema astra was set in motion. By brahmanical tejas Vasiṣṭha entirely consumed even that extremely fierce Brahmaprema astra with his Brahmadanda … While the great-spirited Vasiṣṭha was devouring the Brahmaprema astra he assumed a fierce and terrible appearance, which stunnied the three worlds. From all the pores of skin of the great-spirited Vasiṣṭha flames accompanied by smoke shot forth like rays of light from fire, and the Brahmadanda raised by Vasiṣṭha’s hand blazed forth like the smokeless Fire of Time or like another staff of Yama. Thereupon, hosts of sages praised Vasiṣṭha, that foremost of incantation reciters, “Your power is unfailing, O brahman! But you must contain the tejas with [your own] tejas! Viśvāmitra, who possessed great tapas, has been checked by you, O brahman, be gracious [foremost] of incantation reciters, O auspicious one! But the worlds must be freed from pain!” Being addressed in this way he [Vasiṣṭha] who possessed great tejas and great tapas neutralized himself. While breathing hard the injured Viṣvāmitra said the following, “So much for the power that is the power of a ksatriya! The power of brahmatejas is [true] power!43 By a single Brahmadanda all my astras have been nullified. I have contemplated all this, therefore, with mind and body purified I will undertake great asceticism so as to attain brahmanhood.”

This myth reveals several important principles governing the way divine weapons operate. Firstly, tejas is harnessed, absorbed, neutralized, and contained by other entities that possess tejas themselves. Tejas is the active substance required to deal with tejas. Secondly, various qualities of tejas affect the outcome of the neutralization process. Here, a priest’s tejas is superior to a warrior’s tejas. Furthermore, these qualities define the hierarchy of tejas. Thus, not only does one need greater quantities of tejas, but to defeat an opponent of superior tejas one needs more potent energy, which is illustrated by Viṣvāmitra’s concern to attain brahmanhood in order to gain access to brahmatejas.

This principle features in other divine weapon episodes as well. For example, to slay the brahman demon Viṣvarūpa, who possesses “unlimited tejas” (amitatejas: MBh.5.9.7), Indra has his Vajra astra constructed from the bones of a brahman, and thus from brahmatejas.44
When that supreme being departed, Dhātṛ collected his bones and created the Vajra. With this invincible and indestructible Vajra, which was constructed from the bones of a brahman, and permeated by Viṣṇu, Indra destroyed Viṣvarūpa, and severed his heads.

tasya paramām any avasṛte tāṇy asthīni dhātṛ sanghyā vajram akrat, tena vajrānabhedyenapradhyeyena brahmānsthiaṁbhūtena viṣnupraviṣṭenendro viṣvarūpaṁ jaṅhāna, sīrasāṁ cāsya chedanam akrat. (MBh.12.329.27)

It is naturally Viṣṇu’s tejas that permeates (pra-√viṣ-) the Vajra, but also, as the text itself concludes, Indra is only able to kill Viṣvarūpa by being “increased with the power of brahmatejas.” Once again a brahman’s tejas is more effective than a kṣatriya’s tejas. Thus, as Hiltebeitel has noted, Indra can defeat a brahman only by having access to another brahman’s energy.

The qualitative hierarchy of the neutralization process can be seen working at other levels in the use of the Varuṇa astra or “Water-weapon”, which is generally employed to neutralize the Agneya astra or “Fire-weapon”. While it seems that water is naturally being used to counter fire, a more refined process emerges when the mythology surrounding fire and water is examined. Agni, the god of fire, offers the following explanation when he refuses to enter water:

nāpah pravestum sakṣyāmi kṣaya me ‘tra bhavisyatī ... adbhayo ‘gnir brahmataḥ kṣatram aśamlohaṁ utthitam teṣāṁ sarvatraśaṁ teṣaḥ śvāsa yoniṣu śāmyati. (MBh.5.15.31–32)

The central theme conveyed in this myth is that the subtle energy of both fire (agni) and water (apas) is tejas, and also that the tejas of fire will be neutralized if it enters the tejas of water. Or more generally, tejas operates on tejas in such a way that one is neutralized by the other (the same sentiments expressed in MBh.7.170.40, 1401*3, and Ram.1.55.14–24). The process is hierarchical: though it resides in various phenomena, the tejas of water is superior to and thus neutralizes the tejas of fire; the tejas of brahmans is superior to the tejas of kṣatriyas; the tejas of rock is superior to the tejas of iron, and so on. To quote O’Flaherty:

The image of fire in water is used throughout Indian mythology to express the control of indestructible excess energy. Although in Western thought water brought to fire usually results in the extinction of fire, in India the fire almost always emerges intact from the combination, merely controlled or transformed .

In relation to the neutralizing power of tejas, it is no surprise that Vasiṣṭha’s divine weapon, the Daṇḍa, is described as “exceedingly fierce
and possessing tejas equal to the Fire of Time”, which is tantamount to calling it the apocalyptic weapon par excellence. The Kāladanda or “the staff of Death” stood incarnate next to Yama, the god of the dead, and “blazed with tejas.” The danda is also the staff employed by kings, with which they punish criminals and administer the law (dharma). In the Manavadharmāśāstra 7.28, danda – “punishment” – is called a very great tejas. Thus, Vasiṣṭha’s Brahmadanda clearly possesses superior quantities of tejas and the most potent quality, making it quite capable of neutralizing any divyā astra.

The major process of neutralization outlined above involves containing the tejas within an object that possesses greater tejas. However, there is another way to counter divine weapons. The centrality of tejas extends to the relative rigidity of an object. Rigidity here means an object’s ability to resist damage, its impenetrability, strength, hardness, etc. Firstly, Duryodhana’s body is made from “masses of diamonds” (vajrasamcaya-), and for this reason it cannot be penetrated by astras and śastras. The Vajra astra is considered adamantine, thus lending its name to diamonds. Central to the Vajra’s rigidity is the fact that it is constructed from brahmatejas. Anything equated with the Vajra is believed to embody the highest quality of tejas, and furthermore, due to this energy it can resist attacks. Moreover, the physical strength of the body (śarīrabala) is due to the correct functioning of the physical element of flesh (māṃsadhātu). Bala determines one’s ability to perform any physical exertion, the nature of one’s muscular structure, and it also endows sturdiness, firmness (sthairya), and hardness (drdhata) to the body. The ability of śarīrabala and the māṃsadhātu to work is contingent on the correct functioning of tejas. Thus, Duryodhana’s body is only adamantine because he possesses vast quantities and the most potent quality of tejas. No wonder the epic authors can have the heroes who possess great tejas (mahātejas) struck by hundreds of arrows and still live.

This illustration can be extended to the correct functioning of armour. At Rām.6.59.1ff. Lākṣmana battles the demon Atikāya (mahātejas-). The battle between them involves various divine weapons. When the demon’s defenses are thwarted, thousands of arrows hit him, but their points shatter on his divine armour, which he previously obtained from Brahmā. The armour is adorned with diamonds or the Vajra itself (vajrabhūṣite: Rām.6.59.93), and is considered invulnerable (avadhyakavacah: Rām.6.59.95). Vāyu tells the hero that Atikāya’s armour is impenetrable, and of all divyā astras only the Brahmā astra will work. Lākṣmana releases the Brahmā astra, which is further said
to “resemble the Vajra” (vajrakalpam: Rām.6.59.100). The Brahmā astra penetrates the armour and kills the demon. Thus, to by-pass the armour, which embodies brahmatejas, Laksmana has to employ the Brahmā astra, itself constructed from brahmatejas (the same sentiments expressed in Viśvamitra’s battle with Vasistha, and Indra’s battle with Viśvarūpa). Therefore, the capacity of a given object, e.g., divine weapons, armour, and flesh, to resist being penetrated or destroyed depends on both the quantity and quality of its tejas. Thus, not only can superior energy absorb and neutralize an inferior source, but a superior source can also repel the energy altogether. Only the context of the given episode will indicate which form of neutralization is occurring, i.e., repulsion or containment. The former is probably the primary way divine weapons counter each other in the standard combat portrayed in the epics, much like any parrying blow or shield would work. However, it is the latter method of neutralization that causes the greatest problems in the texts.

The Control of the Divine Weapons

When Vasistha absorbs and contains the Brahmā astra, its tejas is so intense that the brahman is transformed, making him more violent and a threat to the universe. The incoming fiery energy is so excessive that flames shoot forth from his skin. In a verse that encompasses the neutralization process, the text even implies that the brahman could lose control of himself. Vasīṣṭha is told: “You must contain the tejas with your own tejas!” In addition, only by performing a balancing act between his own tejas, the Danda’s tejas, and the Brahmā astra’s tejas, is the brahman able to neutralize himself, as an intake of excessive energy can cause uncontrollable rage or self-annihilation.

Clearly, one must possess adequate tejas to handle an intake of new energy. It is no surprise, then, that before a warrior receives any divya astras his own tejas levels are evaluated. This is evident in the following episodes: before Arjuna receives the dreaded Pāṣupata astra he practises tapas, and is said to possess fierce tejas (ugratejas:- MBh.3.39.20). Disguised as a mountain man (kirāta) Śiva engages Arjuna in a duel, by which the hero’s tejas levels are tested. Arjuna attacks Śiva with various divine weapons, but the god swallows (pras-) them all. The deity neutralizes the divine weapons by containing them within himself, a feat worthy of the Doomsday god, who is said to be the receptacle (nidhi) of all tejas and tapas. Arjuna continues to attack the deity with the Brahmā astra:
When all of those [divya astras] were neutralized, I brought forth the Brahmā astra. Thereupon, he was completely covered with blazing arrows, and as he was covered by my great astra he increased in size. Then, the world was scorched by the tejas that was produced from me, and for a moment all the heavens were completely ablaze. Then the one who possessed great tejas [Śiva] instantly overpowered even that astra.

tesu sarvesu śāntesu brahmāstram aham adiśam. tatah prajvalitair bānaih sarvatah sopacyyata, upacyāmānaś ca mayā mahāstrena vyavardhata. tatah samātāpi loko mañprasttītena tejasā, kṣanena hi dīśah kham ca sarvato 'bhividpītam. tadh apy astraṃ mahātejah kṣaṇenaiva vyāsātayat. (MBh.3.163.33–35a)

Dismayed at Śiva’s power, Arjuna grapples with him, but the deity overpowers the hero with his tejas.68 After the battle, Śiva tells Arjuna; “My and your tejas and virility have been matched today, O faultless one.” 69 Only after this test does Śiva present Arjuna with his own Pāśūpata astra.

Similarly, before Arjuna receives divine weapons from Indra he is tested (pariksārtham: MBh.3.164.28) regarding their correct use. Indra only gives Arjuna his divine weapons when the latter promises never to use them against humans (mānuṣaṃ: MBh.3.164.26), a process that directly relates to the principles of tejas. In similar fashion, in exchange for Indra’s divine lance (śakti), Karna cuts his preternatural armour and earrings from his body. However, Karna only agrees to this gruesome bargain when Indra promises to restore his tejas to its original level. The reason for this is that Karna loses tejas when his innate armour and earrings are removed.70 This illustrates that warriors draw upon the energy of objects, and any loss of tejas in the forms of armour, earrings, weapons, etc., depletes the warriors’ energy pool. Finally, when Āsvatthāman prays to Śiva for divine weapons, various creatures appear before him, literally intent on ascertaining the extent of his tejas (jijñāsānāmānas tattejah: MBh.10.7.48). Only after their evaluation does Śiva appear in person, and gifts a divine weapon in the form of “supreme and stainless sword” (vimalam khaḍgam uttamam: MBh.10.7.64), but not before Śiva’s own tejas enters Āsvatthāman.71 This clearly demonstrates that a warrior’s energy must be adequate before he can receive divine weapons. The reason for this is that a warrior must be successfully able to contain and employ the divine weapon’s tejas with his own tejas.72

This point can be further illustrated by the fact that warriors are preoccupied with maintaining their energy levels. They acquire as much tejas as possible in many different forms, such as divine and non-divine weapons, armour, adornments, jewellery, chariots, and banners – all of which contain tejas. As one example from the epics, amulets and other forms of jewellery are said to blaze with tejas. Various kinds of amulets
(mani) appear throughout the Vedic literature, which bestow upon the wearer many different energy-substances, including tejas, when bound to a part of the body. In the Atharva Veda an amulet is addressed thus; “‘tejas art thou, confer tejas (hold tejas fast) on me’ (tejo ‘si tejo mayi dhārayādhi).” This is also the case with other items and materials, such as a gold plate, which bestows upon the wearer its innate tejas. Thus, the innate energy of these items is drawn upon to augment one’s own energy pool.

During battle a warrior’s tejas can be depleted, and if it is lost he will die. According to Indian medicine (āyurveda), energy-substances are lost through lacerations, broken bones, internal injuries, and the like. In one episode, Rama’s troops are severely wounded, but are given herbs that are said to blaze and burn. In a separate myth, herbs (osadhi) are created from the tejas of the sun and moon. Warriors speak to other warriors to increase their tejas, and before battle the tejas of a hero is enhanced by musicians playing drums and singing praises. Arjuna’s tejas combines (tejas tejasi samprktam: MBh.6.45.50) with the energy of another warrior, so the latter can survive a deadly attack. In the Rāmāyana, Rama and his brother Laksmana receive a series of power words (mantragrāma) known as Balā and Atibala (which are also associated with divine herbs) that protect the brothers from hunger, fatigue, and a demoness, and all this is because the mantras are full of tejas (tejāhāsamanvita:- Ram.1.21.16). Thus, the maintenance of tejas is a vital theme for warriors in the epics – without sustained energy they are dead.

A warrior can further acquire tejas from an opponent in battle. In a heated argument with Śiśupāla, Kṛṣṇa calls forth the Sudarśana discus and proceeds to cut off the king’s head:

Thereupon, the [assembled] kings watched an excellent tejas rise up from the body of the king of Cedi ... like the sun rising from the sky. Then, that tejas worshipped the lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa, who is honoured in the world, and it entered into him ... Having seen that, all the rulers of the earth thought it was wonderful that the tejas entered into the mighty-armed one, who is supreme among men.

The text even states that Kṛṣṇa contrives the execution of the king for the sole purpose of reintegrating the energy, because Śiśupāla is said to be a fragment (amsa) of the deity’s own tejas. While referring to this episode Hara appropriately states: “In single combat it was believed that the tejas of the killed warrior entered into the one who kills.”
There are episodes where the tejas of a slain warrior goes elsewhere. When Karna is slain his tejas returns to the sun, and when Drona is killed he ascends to heaven like a blazing meteor (ulkāṃ prajvalitāṃ īva: MBh.7.165.57). Fire acts as a standard mode of transport between various realms. For example, Śiva descends to earth in a great blaze of fire (mahāraçismat: MBh.3.40.3). Similarly, when mortally wounded, Valin’s tejas, śṛt, parākrama, and prāṇa enter a necklace. While wearing the necklace he remains alive and only dies when the necklace is given to his brother Sugrīva. This further implies that Sugrīva acquires all of his brother’s energy.

Tejas is thus the functional martial energy par excellence. It is employed both offensively and defensively. A divya astra is the means to release tejas into battle. In combat tejas must be controlled and takes many different forms. The acquisition and maintenance of tejas is vital for the survival of a warrior, and his skill and mastery in divine weapons. The epic warriors do not exclusively possess tejas, but because they are expected to monopolize violence, it is by function central to their needs in battle. Obviously, it is not better for a warrior to burn out, for he will fade away.

The Danger in the Divine Weapons

While many divine weapons have the destructive power to kill thousands in one strike, there is a further danger in the divine weapons that is related in the following episode. Arjuna acquires divine weapons from the gods and begins to demonstrate them. The world is afflicted with terrible omens and the sage Narada says:

Arjuna, O Arjuna, you must not employ the divya astras! They are never at anytime to be released at an improper receptacle . . . Nor at anytime should one release them at a proper receptacle, when not pressed: for in the use of these astras lies a very great evil . . . When these powerful [divya astras] are protected according to tradition . . . they will bring happiness without a doubt. But when not protected, they lead to the destruction of the three worlds, O Pāṇḍava: never do this again!

The cataclysmic evil (sumahān dosaḥ) of the divine weapons is so devastating that it can destroy the universe. This is a striking statement considering the importance of the divine weapons. At its strongest dosa translates as “evil”, but means at least a “fault”, “deficiency” or “detrimental effect.” Therefore, what is the “detrimental effect” that can bring about the end of the universe?
One clue is offered about the danger in (mis-)using the divine weapons: Arjuna is told never to use the divine weapons on an “improper receptacle” (niradhis.t.hana). The following episode reveals the exact nature of an “improper receptacle”. When Arjuna receives the Paśupata astra (equated with the Brahmaśiras astra and Brahmā astra) Śiva tells him:

I shall give to you the great Paśupata astra, which is my favourite! O Pāṇḍava, [you are] capable of containing, releasing, and recontaining [this divya astra]. Even great Indra does not know it, nor Yama, nor the king of the Yakṣas, neither Varuṇa, nor Vāyu; how could the humans know it? However, O Pārtha, without deliberation it is not at anytime to be released at a human: for if hurled at one of insufficient tejas, it might burn down the entire world. There is no one in the three worlds, moving and motionless, who is invulnerable to it. It can be directed by the mind, the eye, a word, or a bow.

Evidently an “improper receptacle” (niradhiṣṭāna) is a human (purus.a, mānusa, etc.) who possesses “insufficient tejas” (alpatejas), and because of this lack of tejas, the divine weapons cannot be provided with a place to rest – a clear reference to the neutralization process. The category alpatejas is a statement of quantity. According to epic ontology, humans reside near the bottom of the creation and therefore possess limited amounts of tejas. This may very well be the reason why humans cannot wield divine weapons. The imperative prohibiting the divya astras striking a being of insufficient tejas indicates that the neutralization process will fail.

The question remains: what would happen if a divine weapon struck an entity of “insufficient tejas”? By drawing upon the themes already encountered with the principles of the divine weapons the answer can be simply stated: if a divine weapon struck a being of insufficient tejas (alpatejas), its inherent tejas will not be neutralized; moreover, the divine weapon will take the tejas of its victim(s), causing it to increase in size, and after many such incidents it will possess enough energy to threaten the universe. This is the cataclysmic danger in the divine weapons! This occurs in one of the longest divine weapon episodes. The Nārāyaṇa astra is directed at the human footsoldiers and begins to swell to such proportions that the universe is nearly destroyed. It is only by Kṛṣṇa’s invention and his direct concern with cutting off the divine weapon’s access to any potential fuel sources that the Nārāyaṇa astra is finally countered.
The preceding analysis assumes that a divine weapon will appropriate the \textit{tejas} of an inadequate target. This can be verified as the text reveals more about the nature of the divine weapons in the warning that identifies their misuse as a \textit{do\-sa} or “evil”. The word \textit{do\-sa} in addition means “bodily humour” and “disease”, and thus refers to the ancient Indian theory of three bodily humours (\textit{trido\-sa}). According to Ayurveda, diseases occur from an imbalance in one or more of the three bodily humours (\textit{trido\-sa}); “wind” (\textit{v\-a\-ta}), “phlegm” (\textit{kapha}), and “bile” (\textit{pitta}). The energy of the \textit{pitta do\-sa} or “bilious humour” is \textit{tejas}, the very same energy found in divine weapons.\textsuperscript{93} The three humours are the foundation and controllers of the psychosomatic condition of all beings. They act as basic constituents for the body in states of psychological and physiological health, but when unbalanced contribute to the contraction of diseases. For example, the \textit{pitta do\-sa} governs the metabolic and digestive systems, while \textit{agni} (“fire”) is the active principle of the entire system, and correspondingly \textit{tejas} is the subtle energy of \textit{agni}.\textsuperscript{94} The \textit{pitta do\-sa} is homologously and metonymically related to \textit{agni} “fire” and \textit{tejas} “fiery energy.”\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Pitta} and \textit{agni} \textit{tejas} are virtually identical – the major difference is that \textit{pitta} is the container and \textit{agni} \textit{tejas} is the contained. The \textit{pitta do\-sa} is further responsible for visual perception and its impairment, the colour and beauty of the body, and such emotions as courage or fear, anger or cheerfulness, and the lucidity or confusion of the mind.\textsuperscript{96} As the bilious internal heat of the body, the main function of \textit{agni} is to stimulate digestion, and thus is central in the assimilation of nutrition. \textit{Tejas} is responsible for the nourishment, transformation, and physiological functioning of the body’s “physical elements” (\textit{dh\-atus}). Consequently, every \textit{dh\-atu} inherently contains \textit{tejas} (\textit{dh\-atvagni} or \textit{tejodh\-atu}).\textsuperscript{97}

A disease is originally produced when an imbalance occurs in the humours. The \textit{do\-sas} should ideally be in a state of equilibrium, but this balance is easily disturbed. When a disorder occurs in the balance of the three humours (\textit{trido\-sa}), the physical elements (\textit{dh\-atus}) are directly affected. Disease occurs when a \textit{do\-sa} becomes agitated and overflows its boundaries, thus causing an increase and an imbalance in a specific \textit{dh\-atu}.\textsuperscript{98} The cause of increase of all things is due to the general or those qualities shared in common (e.g., \textit{tejas}), while the cause of their decrease is the particular or unshared qualities.\textsuperscript{99} The nature of an individual container (the particular) is to separate the contained (the general), and when the container is compromised the contained gains the new but defective pathways that allow it to unite with its like substance.
Hence, *tejas* tends to attract and absorb *tejas*. This is not only true for the internal world, but for the external one as well.

*The Loss of the Divine Weapons*

The last principle pertaining to the divine weapons is Arjuna’s loss of them after the Kurukṣetra war. There are two central factors that relate to the loss of the divine weapons: (1) the change in the *yugas* or “cosmic ages”, and (2) the subsequent loss of *tejas*.

By the epic period, a complex system of cosmological time had developed based on four ages of the cosmos (*yugas*) that make up one complete cyclic age of existence (*mahāyuga*). The four successive *yugas* are characterized by progressively decreasing lifespans, virtues, and quality of human life. The *Rāmāyāṇa* takes place in the *Tretā yuga*, while the *Mahābhārata* is set at the end of *Dvāpara yuga*. At the end of the great Kurukṣetra war *Kali yuga* begins. The present age of the universe, *Kali yuga*, is characterized by the final decline of *dharma* and a general sense of suffering and impurity. The world and human beings are at their worst in all matters. It is this general sense of deterioration in *Kali yuga* that can be specifically correlated with the loss of the divine weapons due to an intrinsic decline in the potential *tejas* available to all mortals, including warriors.

To turn to the loss of the divine weapons: the Kurukṣetra war is resolved, and *Kali yuga* commences. Only the Pāṇḍavas, their common wife Draupāda, and a handful of others remain alive. The *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa is mortally wounded by a hunter named Jaras or “Old age”, and returns to the divine realms. While escorting women and children from Kṛṣṇa’s city Dvārakā, Arjuna is engaged in battle by a thousand bandits (*dasyu*). Arjuna begins to fight these bandits but has trouble stringing his *Gāndiva* bow, and when he summons his divine weapons they do not appear (*MBh*.16.8.52–53). Due to this, Arjuna cannot protect the women from being captured. Arjuna begins to lament his defeat, and blames his inability to employ his divine weapons on the nature of fate (*daiva*: *MBh*.16.8.62–64). The divine sage Vyāsa drives the point home when he informs Arjuna:

> He who was once powerful loses that power, and he who was once a lord is ruled by others. Your *astra*, which have accomplished their mission, have gone and they will return in the future to your hand when the [appropriate] time arrives.

Arjuna’s loss of the divine weapons is thus due to the workings of fate (*daiva*) and time (*kāla*), and one manifestation of time is the *yugas*.
The loss of the divine weapons can also be correlated with a loss of tejas. Firstly, before the bandits attack Arjuna’s caravan they state that they can only do it because the warriors, including Arjuna, are “shorn of ojas” (hataujasah: MBh.16.8.46), while a variant text reads “shorn of tejas” (hatatejasah). Furthermore, while the critical edition has Arjuna lamenting the “deterioration in the virility of his arms” (vaikṛtyam . . . bhujavīrye: MBh.16.8.54), a variant text supplies “deterioration in the virility of his tejas” (vaikṛtyam . . . tejovīrye). If Arjuna has lost his tejas it would explain the reason behind the mysterious disappearance of his divine weapons. Without the correct quantity of tejas Arjuna will be unable to control or employ the divine weapons successfully. Correspondingly, a loss of tejas correlates with a loss in physical strength (śārīrabala), which is seen in Arjuna’s inability to string his divine bow. The sage Vyāsa informs Arjuna that his weakness in battle is for the following reason:

Power, intuition, tejas, and foresight exist in times of prosperity, and they perish in the opposite conditions . . . All this has its root in time, which is the principal cause of the universe . . . Time thus unexpectedly takes it all away again.

Vyāsa’s statement is further clarified in the following:

[The wise man] knows in yuga after yuga that the natural law [dharma] is crippled in one foot, and that the life expectancy and energy of mortals follow the rules of the yuga.101

Thus, power (bala), intuition (buddhi), tejas, and foresight (pratipatti) all decline due to a change in time (kāla, yuga), and this consequently causes a loss in the potential life expectancy (āyus) of humans. The Sanskrit word sakti or “energy” is employed in the second passage as a general word for all energy-substances.102

The epic authors are suggesting that in the world in which they live, Kali yuga, no one can own or employ divine weapons of the calibre portrayed in Dvāpara yuga. This is because of a decline in the potential amount of tejas any given individual can acquire. If the divine weapons are left in Arjuna’s possession, his de-energized state would put the universe (not to mention himself) in jeopardy, since the divine weapons will not be able to be controlled. Thus, the divine weapons are withdrawn from circulation, so to speak, and returned to their divine owners. This is illustrated by Arjuna’s inability to employ his divya astras and occurred when the Brahmaśīras astra returned
to Brahmā after its tejas was removed from the slain Parikṣiṭ (see MBh.14.69.1–3). Furthermore, after the incident with the bandits, Arjuna and his brothers encounter the god of fire, while travelling near an ocean. Arjuna still carries his Gāṇḍiva bow and two inexhaustible quivers. Agni proceeds to tell the Pāṇḍavas the following:

“Your brother Phalguna [Arjuna] should only go to the forest after giving up this supreme weapon, the Gāṇḍiva. He has no need of it anymore. That jewel of a discus, which stood next to the great-spirited Kṛṣṇa, has gone. When the time comes, it will return to his hand. For Pārītha’s use it [the Gāṇḍiva] was procured from Varuṇa by me. Thus, that best of bows, the Gāṇḍiva, must be given back to Varuṇa.” Thereupon, all those brothers urged Dhanamājayā, and thus he threw it into the ocean, and those two inexhaustible great quivers.

Therefore, the divine weapons of the calibre portrayed in the epics can only be safely issued in the framework of a more powerful age. Moreover, because of a natural decline in the potential amounts of tejas anyone can acquire, those very divine weapons can no longer be owned or successfully employed, and must be returned to their owners to protect the universe from the cataclysmic danger inherent in their nature.

CONCLUSION

Divine weapons are created from, embody, and function due to the principles governing tejas or “fiery energy.” Firstly, all divine weapons contain tejas. Secondly, when violently active, tejas must be neutralized, and tejas is the active ingredient required to do this. The process of neutralization is affected by concerns of quantity (e.g., mahātejas over alpatejas), and tejas is itself ranked in a qualitative hierarchy, which further affects the neutralization process (e.g., brahmatejas over ksatriyatejas, watery tejas over fiery tejas, etc.). Thirdly, throughout the epics, heroes are concerned with acquiring maximal tejas and in the most potent forms. Any warrior who acquires divine weapons must also possess the adequate quantity and quality of tejas to control and employ them. Fourthly, when contained the energy naturally expands, and can burst its container and move into other sources. When this occurs on a cataclysmic scale, such as the Nārāyana astra episode, then the only option is to remove any potential sources of energy which
it can assimilate. The Nārāyaṇa astra leaches the tejas of its victims and swells to cataclysmic proportions, and only by the intervention of the deus ex machina – Krṣṇa – is the imminent destruction of the Pāṇḍava army avoided, and the universe saved. Lastly, it is the loss of tejas due to a change in the yugas that causes the divine weapons to be withdrawn from Arjuna. The application of the principles is evident throughout all the divine weapon episodes.

Without an appreciation of the principles of tejas, the divine weapon episodes cannot be adequately understood. This appreciation highlights the lucidity and skill of the epic poets and the implicit knowledge they drew on to create the divine weapons. The consistent appearance of tejas in the divine weapon episodes and the coherent application of its principles indicate a long and nurtured development in ancient Indian thought. When the divine weapons are considered in the context of an ancient Indian ontology they appear as rational creations based on a clear internal logic. The divine weapons are explicit and amplified examples of an ancient Indian physics – the principles of tejas – which are believed to permeate all forms of life, encompassing both the animate and inanimate worlds, linking the two together by a common property, which charges them, giving value, functionality, and power – and is based on empirical, intuitive, and inherited forms of knowledge. The divine weapon episodes and the principles of tejas are straightforward. The simplicity of the episodes and their underlying principles does not indicate a deficiency on the part of the authors, in fact, it indicates the exact opposite, highlighting the attention to detail and forethought given to the epics. Scholars have long noted the importance of fire in numerous ancient warrior cultures. I have demonstrated one aspect of this phenomenon in the ancient Indian context. By appreciating these principles, one begins to understand the metaphors, symbols, and relationships between warriors and divine weapons, normal weapons, fire, heat, light, anger, courage, physical strength, rigidity, and spiritual power – which all culminate in the notion of tejas in the epic period.

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NOTES


6. Many modern Hindus explain the divine weapons as proof of the ancient Indians’ knowledge and employment of nuclear arsenals.


14. It is important to note that sakti simply translates as a spear, lance, etc., and in the context of the divine weapons has nothing to do with the feminine principle or energy of later Hinduism. In fact, the very energy of the Sakti is none other than tejas (see Rām.6.88.22–45). However, I would like to suggest that the energies tejas and sakti share common properties, and research into their relationship is needed.


17. Magnone, p. 146.

18. See MBh.1.17.20–23.

21 It is wrong to think that divine weapons are the sole property of the epic warrior (ksatriya). In fact, it is the epic priest (brahman/brähmana) who possesses and wields divine weapons the best. Any ksatriya wanting to obtain them must study with a brahman, or go directly to the deity concerned. In contrast, see MBh.1.158.1ff., where Arjuna exchanges his Ägneya astra for an alliance with a defeated opponent.

22 See MBh.1.125.19 and MBh.1.122.47 (Appendix 76*1–15), where the Vārūṇa astra is used to create water. At MBh.6.116.21–24 Arjuna fires the Purāṇya astra (“Rain-weapon”) into the earth, which causes a spring of water to gush forth. At MBh.1.125.19–20 not only does the Vārūṇa astra create water, but the Ägneya astra creates fire, the Vāyuyya astra creates wind, the Purāṇya astra creates rain, the Bhaumana astra allows the wielder to enter the earth, and the Pārvata astra creates mountains. The Antardhāna astra or “Disappearance-weapon” removes all the above phenomena. On his quest for all the divine weapons of the gods, Arjuna (re-)acquires all the diyva astras of the four Lokapālas (see MBh.3.42.16–42), one of which is Kubera’s Antardhāna astra, which is itself said to steal ojas, tejas, and dyuti (MBh.3.42.33, cf. Rām.1.26.25, 700*31).

23 See MBh.3.41.19–22, MBh.3.163.51, MBh.4.40.24, 764*1–7, MBh.18.4.3, Rām.1.26.22–25, Rām.1.27.10–13, Rām.5.46.34ff., and Rām.7.99.7.

24 See MBh.3.170.38–48, and MBh.12.31.1ff.

25 Begley, p. 21.

26 A warrior learns three mantras to control divine weapons (although lists appear of five or more, see MBh.3.165.6, MBh.4.56.14, 986*7–8). The three mantras are dhāraṇa, mokṣa, and saṃbhāra. The warrior must (1) “suppress” or “contain” (dhāraṇa) the divine weapon. After a divine weapon is (2) “released” (mokṣa), the warrior must once again (3) “withdraw” and “recontain” (saṃbhāra) the diyva astra.

27 My use of the Purāṇas is somewhat minimal. I only turned to the Purāṇas to verify arguments regarding the epics. An exhaustive study of the divine weapons in the post-epic Purāṇas must be left for another time.

28 The Viṣṇumahāpūrṇānam (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1985).

29 VP.3.2.8–12. The myth also appears in the Matysa, Padma, Bhaṣgovata, and Harivamśa Purāṇas.


31 See MP.108.1–5.


33 See PP. 6.9.15–33.


35 Dash, p. 13, notes that “heat and light represent the obverse and reverse of the same coin viz., tejas.”

36 The discus is equated with the beauty of the primeval lotus (ādipadma), and is as bright as the sun, with Kṛṣṇa’s arm for its stalk. However, the beauty is portrayed as fatal, as the lotus leaves are razor sharp, and armed with it Kṛṣṇa is said to resemble the Doomsday fire (see MBh.6.55.89–92). In a separate passage, Kṛṣṇa receives the Siṣṭarāṇa discus from Agni. The discus is said to embody the Vajra astra or “Thunder-bolt” (vajrāṇībha), and also to be an Agneya astra (MBh.1.216.21).

37 MBh.7.166.50.

38 A variant of line three reads sarvatejāhpramanardonam or “extinguishes all tejas.”

39 See MBh.7.166–173.


41 See MBh.5.10.12–38, and MBh.5.16.16.
See MBh.3.99.9–10.

For the main episode see MBh.5.9.1ff. cf. MBh.3.98–99.

cf. MBh.5.16.16.

brahmatejāyaprabhāvopabrūhitah. MBh.12.329.41.


Tejas is ascribed to be one of several energy-substances inherent in fire and water, see Gonda (1957), p. 43, and p. 58. For further analysis on fire and water, see D.M. Knipe, In the Image of Fire (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), pp. 112–115.


MBh.1.49.24.


There are several episodes where the tejas of a superior being cannot be contained and neutralized by creatures of inferior tejas. The energy is contained only by a source capable of handling it. See, for example, MBh.8.24.57–61, and Rām.1.36–37.

See MBh.3.240.6–7.

See MBh.12.329.25–41.

Dash, pp. 120–121.

Dash, p. XI and p. 120.

See MBh.1.181.19–21, where Arjuna is said to possess brahmatejas. Katz, p. 50, n. 46, states, “In fact, throughout the Mahabharata various kings, including Arjuna, tend to be praised as brahmānaya, which means either ‘brahmanic’ or ‘friendly to brahmins.’”

See Rām.6.59.83–91.

Rām.6.59.31.

Rām.6.59.97.

I wish to tentatively suggest here that this is one of the leitmotifs of the Rāmayana, as Rāma must possess immense amounts of the most potent tejas to destroy the demon king Rāvana. Thus, Rāma is not a typical human of alpatejas that Rāvana believes him to be. For Rāvana’s assessment of Rāma’s tejas, see Rām.3.53.20–21, and Rām.3.5.16. For examples of Rāma’s actual tejas levels, see Rām.1.75.1ff., Rām.3.3.2, Rām.3.20.18, Rām.3.62.6, and Rām.6.59.25. Due to constraints of space I cannot explore this suggestion, but intend to in a later paper. For a related argument see Sheldon Pollock, “The Divine King in the Indian Epic”, in Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 104, no. 3 (1984).

It is not clear whether practising tapas increases tejas, but obviously one needs both to acquire and employ divine weapons successfully. The relationship between tapas and tejas is unclear, although neither one is given precedence, as one ancient author surmises; “Tapas is appeased by tejas, and tejas by tapas.” From the Garuda Purāṇa, quoted in Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen, eds. & trans., Classical Hindu Mythology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), p. 70. A Wezler of Universität Hamburg has kindly informed me that research exists in German on the
relationship between tejas and tapas by such scholars as Hacker, Rüping, and Shee. Regrettably, I have not looked at these sources.

65 See MBh.3.40.1ff., and MBh.3.163.1ff.
66 MBh.3.163.29–32.
67 MBh.13.14.51. cf. MBh.7.69.57, where the gods see Śiva as “a mass of tejas as brilliant as millions of suns,” apiṣṭaṃ tejasam rāṣṭiṃ sāryakotisamaprabham. cf. MBh.8.24.40, and MBh.8.24.51.
68 MBh.3.40.48–49.
69 saman tejas ca vṛtyam ca mamādy a tavā caṇaṅga. MBh.3.40.53.
70 MBh.3.294.29–32. Throughout the Mahābhārata the Pāṇḍavas diminish Karna’s tejas, so that he will pose no threat to Arjuna, and can in the end be slain. Yudhiṣṭhira conspires with Karna’s charioteer, Salya, and the latter agrees to help reduce Karna’s tejas (tejovadha:- MBh.5.8.27, and MBh.8.4.95). Salya states that Karna will be easily slain with diminished tejas (ḥrtejas:- MBh.5.8.31). Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that without his armour, earrings, and lance, Karna has become like a man (mānasātaṃ: MBh.7.155.27, 1247*1–2), indicating that Karna’s tejas is impaired, as men (mānasā) possess alpatejas. With diminished tejas from the loss of his armour, earrings, lance, and from Salya’s actions, Karna is killed (MBh.8.67.1ff.). When he dies, his remaining tejas returns to the sun (MBh.8.67.27).
71 MBh.10.7.65.
72 For a major divine weapon episode where Āśvathāman loses control of the Brahmās āstra due to a lack of tejas, see MBh.10.6–16, esp. MBh.10.7.5 variant, MBh.10.7.48, MBh.10.7.65, and MBh.10.15.15–16.
73 Gonda (1957), p. 59, notes that “the amulet and its property are distinct, and the ‘power-substance’ tejas obviously constitutes a supra-normal and supra-phenomenal element by means or agency of which the amulet can be the useful instrument applied in rites for obtaining a great variety of desires.”
75 Gonda (1957), p. 60. See also Gonda (1952), p. 20.
76 Gonda (1957), p. 59, notes that in the Atharva Veda a man prays for his tejas to be saved (AV.9.1.16f.); “‘as the bees and flies smear honey upon honey, so, O Āśvins, let my varcas (‘splendour’), tejas, physical strength and ojas be maintained’”
77 Kings are advised against standing on the ground barefoot or their tejas will discharge into it (this also calls to mind the fact that gods’ feet never touch the ground). Similarly, to prevent the sun stealing the king’s tejas an umbrella should always be employed. See Jan Gonda, Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969). To highlight the superiority of Arjuna’s tejas, at MBh.2.69.17 it is learnt that the hero gains tejas from the sun. Moreno and Marriott (1990), p. 157, note, “Footwear is recommended in Hindu medical books to maintain sexual potency and sharpen eyesight, evidently by helping to conserve the vital fluids [read tejas] that empower these functions. The books teach that semen and other vital bodily fluids are stored mainly in the head and chest, but may drain away by a sensory-motor channel that links the eyes directly to the feet . . . from the feet fluids may leak out unless restrained by shoes.” See Manuel Moreno and McKim Marriott, “Humoral transactions in two Tamil cults: Murukan and Mariyamman”, in Marriott, M., ed., India through Hindu Categories (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990). For the relationship between tejas and semen (retas), see Mary Carroll Smith, “Epic Parthenogenesis”, in A. Sharma, ed., Essays in the Mahābhārata (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). For tejas and eyesight, see MBh.2.71.10–11, MBh.3.106.1ff., MBh.5.11.1ff., MBh.5.13.19, MBh.5.15.13–19, 106*1–2, MBh.5.16.21–26, and MBh.12.329.30.
78 See Rām.6.61.1ff.
Hara, p. 386. Hara is here referring to MBh.7.87.60–63.

81 MBh.2.41.3.

82 MBh.2.41.3.

83 Hara, p. 386. Gonda (1952), p. 25, notes that among other substances ojas and tejas “enter a man at the moment of the death of his adversary.”

84 MBh.8.67.27.

85 cf.MBh.7.165.40.

86 Rám.4.17.4–5.

87 Rám.4.22.16–24.

88 cf.MBh.1.123.74–77.

89 cf.MBh.3.163.49, 840*1.

90 See MBh.4.59.36.

91 See MBh.7.166–173.

92 Once again due to space constraints I cannot delve any deeper into the Nārāyan astra episode (MBh.7.166–173). However, in the future I intend to elucidate the release of the Nārāyan astra and the principles of tejas in a separate paper.


95 See McKim Marriott, “Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology,” in Marriott (1990), p. 16.

96 Dash, p. 33.


99 See Caraka Samhitā 1.1.44–45.

100 MBh.16.8.44ff.

101 I would like to thank Luis Gonzalez-Reimann of Berkeley University for informing me of this passage.

102 In the epic literature śakti rarely conveys its later connotations of a primarily feminine energy-substance, which is closely associated with the Goddess. In fact, in the Mārtkandeya Purāṇa tejas is the raison d’être of the Goddess. She is created from the tejas of various gods, e.g., Śiva’s tejas becomes her face, Yama’s tejas forms her hair, Viṣṇu’s tejas forms her arms, and so on (MP.82.8–17). She is given replicas of the deities’ divine weapons (MP.82.18–31), and her sole function is to battle a demon (see MP.83.1ff.). Although Kṛṣṇa removes the divine weapon from the dead child, what is implicit is that it is first contained by the infant. What is interesting, then, is that the unborn child of the royal lineage is employed to contain the tejas of the divya astra (see MBh.10.15.32). By turning to the mythology surrounding royal babies it becomes apparent why such an action is undertaken. At MBh.1.6.1ff. an unborn prince destroys a demon with his tejas. Royal children are born “endowed with excessive tejas” (ativa tejasā: MBh.1.43.12 variants), and possess “great tejas” (mahātejāḥ: MBh.1.44.16). According to the Mānavadharmaśāstra “the earthly ruler is formed or constituted of the supranormal principle of fiery energy (tejas) of all the gods (Manu 7,11); ‘He in whose favour resides Pāmā, the goddess of fortune, in whose valorous dwelling victory, in whose anger abides death, is formed of the tejas of all gods.’” Gonda (1957).
The reason the child is chosen as the target for the divine weapon is so that his immense tejas will contain the divya astra’s tejas.

At MBh.5.96.18–20 the Sudarśana discus and the Gāṇḍiva bow are said to reside in a lake of fire.

There are suggestions that the relative power of a divya astra is contingent on a specific yuga. At MBh.13.14.131 Kṛṣṇa has a divine vision of the Pāśupata astra, which is said to be the most powerful divine weapon. Yet next to the Pāśupata astra stood the divine Šūla or spear employed by Lavaṇa in the Rāmāyaṇa, and is said to be equal to or even more powerful than the former divine weapon. Kṛṣṇa’s vision takes place in Dvārapa yuga, while the Rāmāyaṇa is set in Tretā yuga.

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