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HOW THE GODS KILL: THE *NĀRĀYAṆA* ASTRA EPISODE, THE
DEATH OF RĀVAṆA, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF *TEJAS* IN THE
INDIAN EPICS

In a previous article, I demonstrated that *tejas*, or “fiery energy”, governs the functioning of the divine weapons (*divya astras*) as they appear in the two Indian epics.¹ The thrust of my argument (which I wish to continue here) is that divine weapons are constructed from and naturally embody the energy-substance *tejas*. More importantly, *tejas* often needs to be controlled and the fundamental principle underlying this process is that *tejas* is the active ingredient required to neutralize itself.² Neutralization is affected by concerns of quantity and quality, for example, *mahātejas* over *alpatejas*, and *brahmatejas* over *kṣatriyatejas*.³ To kill opponents of superior energy, one must best their relative *tejas*. Heroes thus acquire *tejas* to employ divine weapons successfully and also for personal efficacy in battle. When uncontrolled the energy can reach a critical mass and this can lead to devastating results. The loss of potential *tejas* at a cosmological level causes the divine weapons to be withdrawn from circulation.⁴ The application of these principles is evident throughout many divine weapon episodes, and the principles of *tejas* resonate throughout both epics in many other episodes.

In the following paper, I will examine two divine weapon episodes that are of utmost importance for the development and resolution of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the first episode, the anti-hero Aśvatthāman nearly destroys the heroic Pāṇḍava brothers and Kṛṣṇa when he releases at them the cataclysmic *Nārāyaṇa astra*. This episode represents one of the few times in the entire *Mahābhārata* when the Kauravas could have achieved a decisive and outright victory. In the second episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the human hero Rāma slays the demon lord Rāvaṇa, a task which the epic does not hesitate to call impossible. This paper is thus primarily concerned with the motif of theomachy, which occurs throughout the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, as gods, demons, and heroes are overcome, even when they have achieved a state of invulnerability (*avadhya*). Likewise, as the following paper will demonstrate, Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are at the forefront of employing and avoiding the very methods for destroying beings of divine calibre. I was previously unable to explore these episodes in any depth. I believe

that without a detailed examination of them, one cannot fully appreciate the narrative mechanics by which the epic poets create many of the martial episodes. One must equally appreciate the underlying principles governing *tejas*, for these principles play a crucial role in the outcome of the narratives under discussion. It is my intention then to draw a clearer picture of the narrative techniques and structures in the epics whereby a god or demon can be threatened with death or eventually slain. The best way to do this is through a detailed investigation of two major episodes in both epics, the near destruction of the Pāṇḍavas by the *Nārāyaṇa astra* and Rāvaṇa's death at the hands of Rāma.

THE NĀRĀYAṆA ASTRA EPISODE

The most graphic display of divine weapon combat occurs in a minor episode of the *Mahābhārata* entitled “*The Release of the Nārāyaṇa Astra*” (*nārāyaṇāstramokṣaparvan*: MBh.7.166–173). In contrast to other divine weapons, which appear repeatedly throughout the epics, the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is featured only once. In one of the epic's most treacherous turns of events, Pāṇḍava Yudhiṣṭhira falsely informs Droṇa, the brahman warrior and martial guru of both armies, of the death of his son, Aśvatthāman. Believing his son to be dead, Droṇa gives up fighting and is unlawfully slain by Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna. Aśvatthāman vows to avenge his father by employing the *Nārāyaṇa astra*. According to the Critical Edition, the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, called the “ultimate weapon” (*paramam astraṃ*: MBh.7.166.44), was passed down from the deity Nārāyaṇa to Droṇa and Aśvatthāman.⁵ The *Nārāyaṇa astra* gives the wielder the ability to produce showers of divine weapons (*divyāni śastravarṣāṇi*), and due to its very nature the wielder blazes with *tejas* in battle.⁶ An alternate account of the *Nārāyaṇa astra*'s history (which appears in several variant texts) reads:

The entire earth was deprived of the host of warriors by [Paraśu-] Rāma. With this terrible *astra*, the warrior class was destroyed in a previous age. This *astra* consisting of the *tejas* of Nārāyaṇa, which extinguishes the *tejas* of [other] *astras* was previously created by the mighty Viṣṇu. When that great Asura, that Daitya Hiraṇyākṣa was destroyed, then the *Nārāyaṇa astra* was indeed of old discharged by Viṣṇu, after destroying that great Daitya at the end of the Dvāpara, O best of kings. The *astra* was previously obtained by the great-souled Rāma resorting to *tapas*, propitiating the god of gods Viṣṇu, the master of the three worlds. From him [this *astra*], which cancels out all *astras*, reached Droṇa. And thus this great weapon cannot be checked by anyone; this is the method for checking the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, O kings.

rāmeṇa pṛthivī sarvā niḥkṣatriyagaṇā kṛtā anenāstreṇa bhīmena kṣatram utsāditam purā. yat tan nārāyaṇam tejaḥ astratejaḥpramardanam. tad astraṃ nirmitam

pūrvam viṣṇunā prabhaviṣṇunā. yadā nipātito daityo hiranyākṣo mahāsuraḥ. tadā nārāyaṇāstraṃ hi pūrvasṛṣṭam hi viṣṇunā. taṃ nipātya mahādaityaṃ dvāparānte nṛpottama. rāmeṇa tapa āsthāya labdham pūrvam mahātmanā. devadevaṃ samārādhyā viṣṇuṃ tribhuvaneśvaram. tasmād droṇam anuprāptam sarvāstraprativāraṇam. tathaitad dhi mahāśastraṃ kena cin na nivāryate. nārāyaṇāstrasya nṛpā eṣa yogo nivāraṇe (MBh.7.170.40, 1401* 1–12).

Although the versions differ as to who gave Droṇa the divine weapon, an affinity is suggested between Nārāyaṇa and Paraśu-Rāma as both are closely associated with Viṣṇu.⁷ The claim that the divine weapon cannot be “checked” (*ni-√vr-*) is epic hyperbole, as will be shown in the main episode. As I have pointed out elsewhere, this passage confirms several important themes relating to divine weapon combat.⁸ Of most importance for the following argument is that when Nārāyaṇa gave his divine weapon he concurrently gave his *tejas*, which suggests that a *divya astra* contains the *tejas* of the specific deity who presides over it.

Before gifting his *divya astra*, Nārāyaṇa adds a warning that the *Nārāyaṇa astra* never returns without killing an enemy, and that it could even slay a person who was invulnerable (*avadhya*). He stipulates that the divine weapon should not be used against warriors who are mortally wounded, fleeing, throwing down weapons, imploring their enemies, and seeking refuge, because it will seriously injure the wielder who oppresses those who ought not to be slain (*avadhyān*) in battle.⁹ After his father’s death Aśvatthāman becomes the sole possessor of the great weapon, and vowing to slay all the Pāṇḍavas, he touches water and the *Nārāyaṇa astra* appears. The apocalyptic weapon invokes fierce winds, thunder, and earthquakes, and the ocean and mountains tremble. The sun darkens and carrion-eating demons descend from the sky. All the assembled celestials and kings become terrified.¹⁰ Aśvatthāman directs the *divya astra* at the Pāṇḍava army, and although the divine weapon’s presence severely affects nature, only in battle is its potential horror fully realized. The divine weapon produces thousands of blazing arrows, razor-edged discs and other fiery weapons that completely envelop all the troops. And most horrifically, the more the Pāṇḍavas’ army fight against that *astra*, the more it increases in size.¹¹ The situation becomes so devastating that Yudhiṣṭhira admits defeat and orders his troops to flee. However, Kṛṣṇa immediately prohibits this action and commands the army to quickly cast aside their weapons and dismount from their elephants, horses, and war-chariots to the ground. He states that this is the prescribed method (*yogo . . . vihitah*: MBh.7.170.38) for counteracting the *astra*, because it cannot kill an unarmed opponent on the ground. He further confirms that the more the warriors battle the

power of the *astra*, the more the Kauravas become powerful, and that it will destroy anyone who would resist it, even mentally.¹²

Bhīmasena, the most belligerent Pāṇḍava, refuses to follow Kṛṣṇa's command. He chastises his army and, according to a variant reading, berates his brother Arjuna for his cowardice. Arjuna informs Bhīma that he has taken a vow by which he cannot use his own prized divine weapon, the *Gāṇḍīva* bow, against the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, cattle, and brahmans.¹³ Ignoring both Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Bhīma proceeds to attack Aśvatthāman. Flaming arrows then cover Bhīma, and when he resists the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, it increases in size. Deathly afraid, the entire army throws their weapons to the ground, and all descend from their chariots, elephants, and horses. As soon as they do this, the intense force of the *astra* (*astravīryam vipulaṃ*) then assails Bhīma's head,¹⁴ and; "All creatures, especially the Pāṇḍavas, cried in pain and anger as they saw Bhīmasena overwhelmed by the *tejas* [of the *astra*]."¹⁵ The episode continues at length:

After seeing Bhīmasena completely covered by the *astra*, Dhanamjaya [Arjuna] enveloped him with the *Vāruṇa* [*astra* or "Water-weapon"] in order to counteract the *tejas*. Nobody saw him covered by the *Vāruṇa astra* because of the dexterity of Arjuna, and because he was covered with *tejas*. Encompassed by the *astra* of Droṇa's son, Bhīma, garlanded in flames, with his horses, driver, and chariot, became very difficult to observe, like fire cast in fire. Just as the stars fly towards the western mountain at the end of the night, O king, in that same way arrows flew towards the chariot of Bhīmasena. Indeed, Bhīma, his chariot, horses, and driver enveloped by Droṇa's son, disappeared into the midst of the fire, O sire. Just as fire, after burning the entire universe with everything in it at the appointed time, would return to the mouth of the Eternal One, in that same way the *astra* enveloped Bhīma. And the *tejas* that entered him could not be discerned in any way, just as a fire entered the sun or as the sun entered a fire.¹⁶ After seeing the *astra* thrown all around the chariot of Bhīma; and Drauṇi [Aśvatthāman] unopposed and enhanced in battle; [and also after seeing] all the troops of the Pāṇḍus with weapons cast aside; and those great charioteers led by Yudhiṣṭhira with faces turned away out of despair; then, Arjuna and Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa] both possessing great splendour quickly jumped down from their chariot, and the two heroes ran towards Bhīma. After penetrating the *tejas*, which originates from the power of the *astra* of Droṇa's son, then by magic those two very powerful ones entered into it. Thus, the fire born of the *astra* did not burn the two with weapons cast aside, due to employing the *Vāruṇa astra*, and due to the virility of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Thereupon, Nara [Arjuna] and Nārāyaṇa [Kṛṣṇa] forcibly overpowered Bhīma and all his weapons in order to neutralize the *Nārāyaṇa astra*. The great charioteer Kaunteya [Bhīma] while being dragged away began to roar aloud, and that fierce *astra* of Drauṇi, which was very difficult to overcome, increased in size. Vāsudeva spoke to him, "How is it, O son of Pāṇḍu, that although forbidden you do not desist from battle, O Kaunteya? If these sons of Kaurava could be conquered by a fight, then, we would fight here and so too these bulls of men. But all of your men have, indeed, descended from their chariots, and because of this you must step away quickly from your chariot, O Kaunteya." Having said this, Kṛṣṇa caused him to descend to the ground from his chariot, and breathing heavily as an elephant, [Bhīma] possessed eyes that were red with fury. When he was brought

down from his chariot and made to lay aside his weapon on the ground, then, the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, which burns enemies, was neutralized. Thus, when that unbearable *tejas* was neutralized by this action, all the directions and regions became clear, favourable winds blew, and the wild beasts and birds were soothed. The warriors and their mounts rejoiced, O lord of men. Then, when that fierce *tejas* was driven away,¹⁷ O Bhārata, Bhīma being sensible shone like the sun that has risen at the end of the night.

bhūmasenaṃ samākīrṇaṃ dr̥ṣṭvāstreṇa dhanamjayah, tejasah pratighātārthaṃ vārunena samāvṛṇot. nālakṣayata taṃ kaś cid vārunāstreṇa samvṛtam, arjunasya laghutvāc ca samvṛtatvāc ca tejasah. sāsvasūtaratho bhīmo droṇaputrāstrasasamvṛtah, agnāv agnir iva nyasto jvālāmālī sudurdr̥śah. yathā rātrikṣaye rājañ jyotiṃsy astagirim prati, samāpetus tathā bānā bhūmasenarathaṃ prati. sa hi bhīmo rathas cāsya hayāḥ sūtas ca māriṣa. samvṛtā droṇaputrena pāvakāntargatābhavan. yathā dagdhvā jagat kṛtsnaṃ samaye sacarācaram, gacched agnir vibhor āsyam tathāstraṃ bhūmam āvṛṇot. sūryam agniḥ praviṣṭah syād yathā cāgniḥ divākaraḥ, tathā praviṣṭam tat tejo na prājñāyata kiṃ cana. vikīrṇam astram tad dr̥ṣṭvā tathā bhīmarathaṃ prati, udīryamānaṃ drauṇim ca niṣpratidvamdvam āhave. sarvasainyāni pāṇḍūnāṃ nyastaśastrāṇy acetasaḥ, yudhiṣṭhirapurogāms ca vimukhāms tān mahārathān. arjuno vāsudevaś ca tvaramānau mahādyuti, avaplutya rathād vīrau bhūmam ādravatām tataḥ. tatas tad droṇaputrasya tejo 'strabalasambhavam, vigāhya tau subalināu māyayāviśatām tadā. nyastaśastrau tatas tau tu nādahad astrajo 'nalāḥ, vārunāstraprayogāc ca vīryavattvāc ca kṛṣṇayoh. tatas cakṛṣatur bhīmaṃ tasya sarvāyudhāni ca, nārāyaṇāstraśāntyarthaṃ naranārāyanau balāt. apakṛṣyamāṇah kaunteyo nadaty eva mahārathah, vardhate caiva tad ghoram drauṇer astram sudurjayam. tam abravīd vāsudevaḥ kim idaṃ pāṇḍunandana, vāryamāno 'pi kaunteya yad yuddhān na nivartase. yadi yuddhena jeyāḥ syur ime kauravanandanāḥ, vayam apy atra yudhyema tathā ceme narar̥ṣabhāḥ. rathebhyaś tv avatīrṇās tu sarva eva sma tāvakāḥ, tasmāt tvam api kaunteya rathāt tūrṇam apākrama. evam uktvā tataḥ kṛṣṇo rathād bhūmim apātayat, niḥśvasantaṃ yathā nāgaṃ krodhasamraktalocanam. yadāpakṛṣṭah sa rathān nyāsitaś cāyudham bhuvi, tato nārāyaṇāstraṃ tat praśāntam śatrutāpanam. tasmīn praśānte vidhinā tadā tejasi duḥsahe, babhūvur vimalāḥ sarvā diśah pradīśa eva ca. pravavus ca śivā vātāḥ praśāntā mṛgapakṣiṇah, vāhanāni ca hr̥ṣṭāni yodhāś ca manujeśvara. vyapodhe ca tato ghore tasmīms tejasi bhārata, babhau bhīmo niśāpāye dhīman sūrya ivoditah (MBh.7.171.1–22).

Duryodhana, the king of the Kauravas and supreme antagonist of the *Mahābhārata*, voices his frustration to Aśvatthāman about the divine weapon's failure, and commands him to invoke it again. Aśvatthāman informs the king that the *Nārāyaṇa astra* cannot return, nor be invoked twice, because it will destroy the wielder.¹⁸ Undaunted, Duryodhana accepts the divine weapon's failure, and praises Aśvatthāman as the best of those who know *astras* (*astravid-*), and finally urges him to employ other divine weapons to defeat the Pāṇḍavas.¹⁹

A MORE DETAILED EXPOSITION OF THE NĀRĀYAṆA ASTRA AND THE CONCEPT OF TEJAS

It is obvious that the *leitmotif* of the whole *Nārāyaṇa astra* episode is the danger posed by the *Nārāyaṇa astra's tejas*. What I want to do now

is examine the episode by focusing on the role of *tejas*. The primary concern of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is to neutralize the *tejas* of the divine weapon. They have to actively deal with the *Nārāyaṇa astra's tejas*, before making Bhīma conform to the prescribed method. Firstly, Arjuna releases the *Vāruṇa astra* or “Water-weapon” for the specific purpose of neutralizing the *Nārāyaṇa astra's own tejas*.²⁰ The *Vāruṇa astra* is often employed as a counter weapon against fire (*agni*) itself, or the *Āgneya astra* (“Fire-weapon”). At a more refined level, because *tejas* is required to neutralize *tejas*, Arjuna employs the *Vāruṇa astra's own watery tejas* to quench the *tejas* of the *Nārāyaṇa astra*. That it was not entirely successful indicates that the *tejas* of the *Nārāyaṇa astra* was superior to the *tejas* of water. I will return to this point shortly.

The *Nārāyaṇa astra's* relationship with *tejas* does not end here. It is stated that the more the warriors fight against the divine weapon the more it increases in size (*vi-√vr̥dh-*: MBh.1.170.21). Furthermore, when Bhīma resists the *astra* it increases in size “like a fire fanned by the wind” (*yathāgnir aniloddhataḥ*: MBh.7.170.57): a subtle metaphorical reference to Bhīma as the son of the wind god Vāyu. Additionally, it increases in size when Bhīma roars in anger at being restrained by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.²¹ None of these examples explicitly relate to *tejas*,²² and there no other indications that the divine weapon could be swelling with the energy.

A corresponding line states that any warrior who fights against the power (*bala-*) of the *Nārāyaṇa astra* causes the Kuru army to become more powerful (*balavattara-*: MBh.7.170.40), that is, the soldiers increase in power (*bala*). This could merely be suggesting that as one army is destroyed, then the other army gains the advantage. However, *tejas* originates from the power of the *astra* (*tejo 'strabalasambhavam*: MBh.7.171.11). Thus, the above statements could actually mean that when the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is fought against, it increases in size and causes the wielder (and his troops) to increase with *tejas*.²³ When the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is first given it is stated that the wielder will “blaze with *tejas* in battle”.²⁴ The suggestion is not that the wielder will be injured by the divine weapon's fiery energy, but that his *tejas* will increase. Beyond the original gift of the *astra*, there is no indication from where the *tejas* originates that energizes the wielder.²⁵

By employing the principles of *tejas* the *Nārāyaṇa astra* episode can be further interpreted. I have argued elsewhere that the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is increasing in size due to absorbing the *tejas* of its victims.²⁶ This same principle is seen when Śiva swells (*vi-√vr̥dh-*) due to an intake of *tejas* from Arjuna's divine weapons.²⁷ Similarly, Nahuṣa is

given a very rare boon (*sudurlabham varam*) whereby he can steal (*ā-√dā-*) the *tejas* of any being simply by looking at them.²⁸ This ability has the most devastating effect, as Nahuṣa gains so much *tejas* that he oppresses the gods.²⁹ Nahuṣa loses all his energy when his foot touches the head of a brahman, and the former's *tejas* discharges into the latter.³⁰ Similarly, Bhīṣma takes (*ā-√dā-*) the *tejas* of his opponents in battle, as does Droṇa and Kṛṣṇa.³¹ The sun is said to take the *tejas* of creatures (*samupā-√dā-*) by means of its own *tejas*, and then restores it again (*vi-√srj-*).³² In the *Nārāyaṇa astra* episode, it seems that Aśvatthāman has a symbiotic relationship with the divine weapon, as it transports *tejas* back to him and causes his own energy to swell. However, in the same way that the priest acts as a figurative earth (read: ground) for Nahuṣa's energy, the literal earth poses a threat to the *Nārāyaṇa astra*. The measures taken to neutralize the *Nārāyaṇa astra* pertain to this process, and will be accounted for in the following analysis.

THE PRESCRIBED METHOD (*VIHITA YOGA*) FOR NEUTRALIZING THE
NĀRĀYAṆA ASTRA

The *Nārāyaṇa astra* episode can be analyzed by examining the prescribed method (*vihita yoga*) for countering the divine weapon. This will paint a clearer picture of the exact actions taken to neutralize the *Nārāyaṇa astra's tejas*. Normally a divine weapon of relatively equal energy is employed to neutralize another divine weapon. However, because the danger posed by the *tejas* is on such a cataclysmic scale it requires a unique method of countering.

The *Vāruṇa astra* is employed only as a temporary measure to aid Bhīma. Even though the “Water-weapon” does not counter the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, it seems to hold it in check for a short period, thus buying the two heroes time to subdue Bhīma. While the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is ultimately more powerful, the *Vāruṇa astra's* watery *tejas* impedes, rather than absorbs, the former divine weapon, and due to this the latter is in turn not absorbed.

My interpretation here can be confirmed by another episode in the *Mahābhārata* that employs a similar watery theme. To kill the demon Dhundhu, Viṣṇu's *tejas* enters and invigorates Kuvalāśva,³³ causing the warrior to swell (*ā-√pyai-*) with *Nārāyaṇa-tejas*.³⁴ This line highlights the identity between Viṣṇu and *Nārāyaṇa*, and the fact that they embody the same *tejas*. Because Dhundha slept beneath a desert, Kuvalāśva's twenty-one thousand sons had to dig him up. Finding Dhundhu blazing

with *tejas* like the sun, the king's sons attack him. Dhundhu vomits fire from his mouth and his *tejas* incinerates the king's sons.³⁵ The text continues:

When they had been burnt by the fire of his anger, O best of Bharatas, then Kuvalāśva, that protector of the earth, who possessed great *tejas*, approached the great spirited one who had been woken up and who was like another Kumbhakarna. Much water flowed from [Kuvalāśva's] body, O great king; thus that *tejas* [the fiery breath of Dhundhu] was absorbed by the king as watery [*tejas*], O king, and as a yogin does with his yoga, he [Kuvalāśva] neutralized the fire with water. Thereupon, for the security of all worlds, the king burnt the ferociously strong Daitya with the *Brahmā astra*, O best of Bharatas.

teṣu krodhāgnidagdheṣu tadā bharatasattama, tam prabuddhaṃ mahātmānam kumbhakarnaṃ ivāparam, āsasāda mahātejāḥ kuvalāśvo mahīpatiḥ. tasya vāri mahārāja susrāva bahu dehataḥ, tadāpīyata tat tejo [rājñā] vārimayaṃ nṛpa, yogī yogena vahnim ca śamayām āsa vāriṇā.³⁶ brahmāstreṇa tadā rājā daityaṃ krūraparākramam, dadāha bhārataśreṣṭha sarvalokābhayāya vai (MBh.3.195.26–28).

Clearly the principles of *tejas* are at work in this myth, as the king “absorbs” or “drinks” ($\sqrt{pā-}$) Dhundhu's *tejas* by the medium of his own watery (*vārimaya*) *tejas*. It will be recalled that the *tejas* of water is more powerful than the *tejas* of fire,³⁷ thus Kuvalāśva's perspiration neutralizes Dhundhu's fiery breath.³⁸

To return to the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, like the aforementioned episode, the *Vāruṇa astra* in a sense acts as a barrier rather than an immediate counter weapon. While Kuvalāśva completely quells the demon's inferior fiery *tejas*, the *Vāruṇa astra* is only able to hold the more powerful *Nārāyaṇa astra* in check for a short time. This is evident from the way Arjuna employs the *Vāruṇa astra*, as the text states that no one can see Bhīma because it covers him, and thus the warrior is enveloped in *tejas* from both divine weapons.³⁹ It seems Arjuna is trying to augment Bhīma's own *tejas* by coating him in watery *tejas*, which will temporarily resist the onslaught of the more powerful *astra*, but like a fire-jacket that only protects one from immediate heat, it will not counter the inferno.⁴⁰ During the temporary respite Bhīma is extracted from the *Nārāyaṇa astra's tejas* – but the problem still remains.

The prescribed method for counteracting the out of control divine weapon is first communicated by Nārāyaṇa and enforced by his counterpart Kṛṣṇa. It can be presented in summary while employing Bhīma as the example of what happens if the method is not obeyed. The prescribed method goes as follows; (1) the warriors must dismount from their elephants, horses, and chariots; (2) they place their weapons on the ground, because the divine weapon cannot kill an unarmed warrior; and (3) they must refrain from attacking the *astra* even with their minds as the divine weapon could still afflict them. It is only after

all warriors cast aside their weapons and dismount from their vehicles that the divine weapon's *tejas* focuses on Bhīma, and proceeds to penetrate into his head. Bhīma roars in anger at being forcibly removed from combat, which can obviously be interpreted as mental resistance, and thus causes the divine weapon to increase in size. This is the foremost concern of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, who, after seeing the *astra* increasing in size when fought against, drag Bhīma off his chariot to the ground and disarm him. It is only when Bhīma finally conforms to the prescribed method (i.e., unarmed, descended from his chariot, mentally calmed, and on the ground) that the *astra's tejas* is neutralized and driven away.

At first glance the prescribed method resembles many of the restrictions of honourable combat (*kṣatradharma*); for example, one should only fight with another similarly armed, one should not kill a soldier who is already in combat with another or who has fled from the combat or who is unarmed or unprepared, and one should not harm non-combatants.⁴¹ However, the first indication that the divine weapon is not following the laws of combat is contained in Nārāyaṇa's initial warning.⁴² Droṇa is informed that the divine weapon never returns without killing, and would even slay a person who is not considered a proper target (*avadhya*). Several categories of combatants are then listed to remind Droṇa that, although the divine weapon can destroy them, to kill them is a *dharmic* infringement upon the wielder as they are "protected" by *kṣatradharma*. It is thus the warrior's duty to follow the laws of combat and to restrict the divine weapon's target options. This is further illustrated when Kṛṣṇa prohibits Yudhiṣṭhira's order for all the troops to flee the battlefield, because the *astra* will still be effective and attack any fleeing combatant. Kṛṣṇa confirms that the divine weapon is not going to obey *kṣatradharma*. Since the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is not subject to *kṣatradharma*, then Kṛṣṇa must be dealing with the divine weapon in a different way.⁴³ It is only by following Kṛṣṇa's method that the *tejas* is neutralized, which suggests that instead of subjecting the *astra* to some kind of moral code, Kṛṣṇa is deliberately dealing with its energy source.

THE PRESCRIBED METHOD IN LIGHT OF THE PRINCIPLES OF *TEJAS*

An ulterior motive is revealed when the prescribed method is examined in light of the principles of *tejas*. When Kṛṣṇa tells the warriors to step down their chariots to the ground, disarm themselves, and calm their violent thoughts he is cutting off the *Nārāyaṇa astra's* access to any forms of *tejas* – its intrinsic fuel source. Without any *tejas*, which

is central for it to function in battle, the *astra* has to withdraw from combat and return to Aśvatthāman. This can be demonstrated by asking the question: where does the *tejas* come from the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is able to leach?

Firstly, chariots and the various paraphernalia associated with them are sources of *tejas*. In battle they are said to constantly blaze with the energy.⁴⁴ Due to their inherent *tejas*, chariots function as active neutralizers of divine weapons. For example, in one of Arjuna's battles with divine creatures, the hero states:

“Thereupon, sixty thousand chariots belonging to the wrathful ones who were eager to battle with me jointly circled me, O Bhārata, and I blew them apart with sharpened arrows that were trimmed with vulture feathers, and they fell back in battle like the ocean's waves. Thinking that they were unable to be defeated by a human in battle, I thereupon employed all my *astras* in succession. Then those thousands of chariots belonging to the excellent warriors gradually counteracted my *divya astras*”.

tato rathasahasrāṇi śaṣṭis teṣāṃ amarsīṇām, yuyutsūnām mayā sārḍhaṃ paryavartanta bhārata. tān ahaṃ niśīṭair bāṇair vyadhamāṃ gārdhravājitaiḥ, te yuddhe samnyavartanta samudrasya yathormayaḥ. neme śakyā mānuṣeṇa yuddheneti pracintya vai, tato 'ham ānupūrvyeṇa sarvāṇy astrāṇy ayojayam. tatas tāni sahasrāṇi rathānām cītrayodhinām, astrāṇi mama divyāni pratyaghnañ śanakair iva (MBh.3.170.30–33).

In a similar episode the potential danger involved in this process is averted by Arjuna's charioteer Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa makes Arjuna dismount from his chariot and promptly follows him, for as soon as Kṛṣṇa dismounts, the chariot is consumed by fire.⁴⁵ Arjuna asks for an explanation and the deity replies:

“This [chariot] was previously burnt by diverse kinds of *astras*, O Arjuna. It was not destroyed because I remained on it in battle, O scorcher of foes! But it is now consumed by fire and destroyed by the *tejas* of *Brahmā astras*; only when you obtained your goals was it abandoned by me, O Kaunteya.”

astrair bahuvīdhair dagdhaḥ pūrvam evāyam arjuna, madadhiṣṭhitatvāt samare na viśīrṇaḥ paraṃtapa. idānīm tu viśīrṇo 'yam dagdho brahmāstratejasā, mayā vimuktaḥ kaunteya tvayy adya kṛtakarmaṇi (MBh.9.61.18–19).

According to the principles of *tejas*, Kṛṣṇa has to exercise his own *tejas* to neutralize the divine weapons.⁴⁶ It is important to remember that gods are subject to the natural laws (*dharma*) of the universe, and thus there is no reason to believe that Kṛṣṇa is any different. It is fair to assume that Kṛṣṇa neutralizes the *Brahmā astras* by containing them within himself – the same method Śiva employs. Magnone concurs when he writes of 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.”⁴⁷ However, the chariot is still destroyed, and indicates that the process is not totally successful, as if the deity is barely able to contain the excess, and when he steps

to the ground the *tejas* is unleashed – like a dam swelling to the point of overflow and then opening its flood gates so as not to burst.⁴⁸ Thus, chariots play an active role in neutralizing divine weapons, yet due to their inherent energy also act as potential sources of *tejas* for the *Nārāyaṇa astra*'s superior *tejas* to leach.⁴⁹

Secondly, the *Nārāyaṇa astra* can acquire the *tejas* inherent in the warriors' normal weapons (*śastras*), armour and other battle paraphernalia. This point is evident throughout both the epics in numerous passages.⁵⁰

Thirdly, as is apparent from several of the myths already encountered, anger in its multiple expressions is one of the primary emotions associated with *tejas*.⁵¹ According to *Āyurveda*, a person who has an imbalance of the *pitta doṣa* or who is closely associated with it (kṣatriyas) is said to have a violent, aggressive, and angry demeanour.⁵² The *pitta doṣa* further plays a role in visual perception, physical beauty, emotional stability, and mental lucidity. The energy-substance of the *pitta doṣa* is none other than *tejas*.⁵³ Bhīma's expression of anger at being removed from the combat will have further manifested his *tejas*, causing the divine weapon to increase, and, furthermore, any violent thoughts from the warriors will produce the vital fuel needed for aggregation.⁵⁴ Hence, Kṛṣṇa's warning not to resist the *astra*, even mentally. The warriors thus remove external sources of *tejas* (chariots, weapons, and anger) that can provide the divine weapon with further energy. In a sense, the warriors are making themselves as unwarrior-like as possible, in an attempt to cut off the divine weapon's fuel source and to protect themselves from destruction. The double meaning of *avadhya* as "invulnerable", on one hand, and an "improper target", on the other, seems to be fully played on here.

Lastly, the ground plays a very central role in the neutralization of divine weapons, by channeling the energy like any modern electrical "earth", and acting as a kind of super capacitor of *tejas*. Earth is considered one of the primary sources of *tejas*. When all the gods are unable to neutralize Śiva's *tejas*, the earth controls and contains it.⁵⁵ In the inanimate world, minerals and metals are also sources of *tejas*, and exist in a structured hierarchy: from gold (*kāñcana*, *hiraṇya*), the most refined, through silver (*raupya*), copper (*tāmra*), black-iron (*kārṣṇāyasa*), tin (*tripu*), and lead (*sīsaka*), the least refined.⁵⁶ Due to its vast superiority kings are advised against standing on the ground barefoot or their *tejas* will discharge into it.⁵⁷ At Rām.6.14–15, Varuṇa refuses Rāma safe passage across his waters, so Rāma attacks the Ocean with arrows that blaze with *tejas*, and according to several variants he

finally invokes the *Brahmā astra*.⁵⁸ At this point, Varuṇa placates Rāma and promises him safe passage across his waters. After the quarrel, Rāma asks Varuṇa at what region can he release the divine weapon. The imperative is recognized, for the *astra* must be checked by a source capable of neutralizing its *tejas*. Thus, Rāma is told to discharge it into the ground. Interestingly, it seems that once a divine weapon is manifested it must be released.⁵⁹ Being a predominant source of *tejas*, the earth is quite capable of performing the task at hand. Varuṇa tells Rāma to release the divine weapon in an area where impure creatures drink his waters, and thus he kills two birds with one stone, so to speak. The *Brahmā astra* causes considerable damage and due to this Rāma, in a divine twist, grants the region a boon of prosperity and fecundity.⁶⁰

Although the disaster is avoided by a divine boon, an *astra* can still cause a lot of damage if released upon the earth, but will in turn be contained and neutralized by it. It is for this reason that the *Nārāyaṇa astra* cannot kill someone unarmed on the ground, for contact with the earth, acting as a “lightning-rod”, will neutralize the divine weapon’s energy.

To summarize, the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is countered, first by removing any potential fuel sources that allow it to increase in size and continue to threaten the Pāṇḍava army, and second, by being subjected to a greater energy source – namely the earth – which is capable of containing and neutralizing its rogue energy. It is only through Kṛṣṇa’s intimate knowledge of the way the divine weapon operates that the Pāṇḍavas are saved from near destruction: This seems especially true given the fact that the deity is referred to as Nārāyaṇa in the episode.

Kṛṣṇa’s ability to neutralize divine weapons (rather than instigate the methods to neutralize them) raises an interesting question: why does he not counter the *Nārāyaṇa astra* in the same way that he counters the *Brahmā astras* that threatened Arjuna’s chariot? In brief, the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is closely connected with Kṛṣṇa through his association with the deity Nārāyaṇa, and it may be that a god’s own divine weapon is the one thing that can destroy him. This is illustrated by Aśvatthāman’s request for Kṛṣṇa’s *Sudarśana* discus, whereby Aśvatthāman offers Kṛṣṇa his own *Brahmaśiras astra* in return. The deity obliges Aśvatthāman, but he is unable to even lift the divine weapon.⁶¹ After Aśvatthāman’s failed attempt Kṛṣṇa asks him why he required the *Sudarśana* discus. Aśvatthāman replies:

“After offering worship to your honour, I certainly intended to fight you, O Kṛṣṇa. For this reason your discus that is worshipped by Devas and Dānavas was solicited. I tell you the truth, O eternal one, I would have become invincible! Having failed to

gain my extraordinary desire from you, O Keśava, I will take leave. You must speak auspiciously to me, O Govinda! This well-centred discus is held by you, who are a bull of the Vṛṣṇis with this irresistible discus; there is none other on earth who can possess it!”

prayujya bhavate pūjām yotsye kṛṣṇa tvayety uta. tatas te prārthitaṃ cakram devadānavapūjitam, ajeyah syām iti vibho satyam etad bravīmi te. tvatto 'haṃ durlabhaṃ kāmam anavāpyaiva keśava, pratiyāsyāmi govinda śivenābhivadasva mām. etat sunābhaṃ vṛṣṇinām ṛsabheṇa tvayā dhṛtam, cakram apraticakreṇa bhuvi nānyo 'bhipadyate (MBh.10.12.35c–38).

Aśvatthāman tries unsuccessfully to gain the *Sudarśana* discus from the *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa. The impetuous brahman-warrior does this for one reason only: to slay the deity outright. Aśvatthāman’s attempt to murder Kṛṣṇa with the deity’s own divine weapon must be taken seriously; that is, Aśvatthāman’s actions display a real concern for killing the god and an understanding of now it may be accomplished. His behaviour does not appear to be a foolish act of ignorance. It is only by obtaining Kṛṣṇa’s own divine weapon that Aśvatthāman could have succeeded in this theomachy, even though the brahman is said to possess the *Brahmaśiras astra* – a divine weapon equated with both the *Brahmā astra* and the *Pāśupata astra*. The implication is clear: to kill a god one needs that very god’s divine weapon, or correspondingly, access to that god’s *tejas*.⁶² It could be for this reason that Kṛṣṇa did not directly deal with the dreaded *Nārāyaṇa astra*, for it was made from his divine counterpart’s *tejas*.⁶³

In contrast, in the *Vaiṣṇava astra* episode Kṛṣṇa actively counters one of his own divine weapons, but it is done in a unique way.⁶⁴ During a fight with Arjuna, King Bhagadatta releases the *Vaiṣṇava astra*:

Wounded, but still unperturbed, the fierce one raised up the *Vaiṣṇava astra*, and released his elephant-hook, after inspiring it with *mantras*, at the breast of the Pāṇḍava. That all-slaying *astra* released by Bhagadatta, however, Keśava [Kṛṣṇa] received on his breast after shielding Pārtha. Then, that *astra* turned into a triumphal garland on Keśava’s breast.

viddhas tathāpy avyathito vaiṣṇavāstram udīrayan, abhimantryāṅkuśaṃ kruddho vyasṛjat pāṇḍavorasi. visrṣtaṃ bhagadattena tad astraṃ sarvaghātakam, urasā pratijagrāha pārtham samchādya keśavaḥ. vaijayanty abhavan mālā tad astraṃ keśavorasi (MBh.7.28.16–18a).

Arjuna questions Kṛṣṇa’s actions as the deity promised never to interfere in combat. Kṛṣṇa explains that he gave the divine weapon to the demon Naraka, making him invulnerable (*avadhya*:- MBh.7.28.28), and it was passed from Naraka to Bhagadatta. No one in the universe is invulnerable to it, not even Indra or Rudra.⁶⁵ Ever pragmatic, Kṛṣṇa breaks his promise and neutralizes the divine weapon.

However, the way Kṛṣṇa counters the divine weapon is not with another *astra*, nor does he contain it within himself like Śiva. He

transforms the missile into a garland. Rather than let a functional instrument of battle strike him, the deity changes the divine weapon into the least deadly of objects – a flower. Kṛṣṇa neither neutralizes or contains the divine weapon in a strict sense (the two being virtually synonymous), but alters the divine weapon by taking away its sharpness; and *tejas* itself derives from the root $\sqrt{tij-}$, meaning “to be sharp”.

Whether Kṛṣṇa is remaining faithful to his promise of non-combatancy during the *Nārāyaṇa astra* episode, or is threatened by his own divine weapon, the episode itself has provided one of the most interesting displays of divine weapon combat. The principles of *tejas* are being adhered to both explicitly and implicitly throughout the whole episode, and their consistency further highlights the significance of the principles themselves. However, without an understanding of the relationship between the divine weapons and the concept of *tejas*, none of the actions taken to neutralize the divine weapon could have been depicted. Extreme measures are taken to counter the *Nārāyaṇa astra*, and although unrivalled in divine weapon combat, they nevertheless follow a reliable thematic pattern seen in other divine weapon episodes.⁶⁶ As we will see, many of the principles already encountered are clearly visible in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and relate directly to Rāma’s ability to slay Rāvaṇa. They have been alluded to in the cogent work of one scholar, yet need further elaboration for a complete understanding of the epic narratives.

THE *BRAHMĀ ASTRA*, RĀMA, AND THE DEATH OF THE DEMON LORD RĀVAṆA

It has been said that the first and last books of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are later interpolations, due to the fact that only in these two books is Rāma (the hero of the epic) said to be the divine incarnation of the great god Viṣṇu. During the middle five books Rāma is said to be a mere human (*mānuṣa*), never displaying his divine nature, as he blunders through much of the epic like a mere mortal would. On the contrary, in his article “The Divine King in the Indian Epic”, Sheldon Pollock has shown that the divinity of Rāma is an integral component of the whole story.⁶⁷ He has done this by examining the boon that Rāma’s arch-enemy, the demon lord Rāvaṇa, obtains from the god Brahmā. The boon protects the demon (*rākṣasa*) from being slain by any creature in the universe, except humans (*mānuṣa*), who are omitted from the list of creatures. It is suggested that Rāvaṇa did not include humans because he thought of them simply as food.⁶⁸ The boon itself, and references

to it, appears throughout the whole epic.⁶⁹ Here is one example of the boon:

It was he who long ago in the great forest had practiced asceticism for ten thousand years, and unflinched offered up his own heads to the Self-existent Brahmā. It was he who had no longer to fear death in combat with any beings – gods, dānavas, gandharvas, piśācas, birds or serpents – any beings but man (Rām.3.30.17–18).⁷⁰

Pollock argues that to by-pass the boon Rāma has to be some kind of god-man; “Not a god, since the gods have become, so to speak, contractually impotent; nor yet a man, men being constitutionally impotent . . .”⁷¹ To quote Pollock at length:

To my mind it implies that we cannot here be dealing with the simple story of a mortal hero, however powerful he may be, struggling with and overcoming a demonic creature . . . For had that been the conception of the composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there would have been no reason whatever to include, as a constituent component of the story, the motif of the boon. This has no other purpose that I can conceive of than to “problematize” the human dimension of the hero . . . the boon-motif necessarily raises questions about the nature of the hero that need never and would never have been raised unless his nature were itself meant to be offered as matter for speculation, interrogation, and wonder. Everywhere the poem indicates that Rāvaṇa’s assessment of man was the correct one. We are continually being reminded how impossible it is that a man should slay Rāvaṇa and the other *rākṣasas*, and thus, at the same time, we are being invited to conclude how improbable it is that Rāma is indeed a man.⁷²

Pollock goes on to suggest that Rāma is not a mere human, but some kind of intermediate being – a “divine human” or “mortal god” – who is able to transcend both realms of existence. Pollock equates Rāma’s nature with several other myths involving divine boons that protect demons from being killed. In general it is the deity Viṣṇu who is called upon to save the day. For example, to get around a boon that protects a demon even from humans, Viṣṇu incarnates himself as a therianthrope half-man half-lion (*narasiṃha*), thus being able to slay the demon. Likewise, the human king Kuvalāśva is required to slay the demon Dhundhu who obtained a boon of invulnerability from Brahmā – humans once again being unwisely excluded. Kuvalāśva can only slay the demon, as Pollock points out, by being infused with Viṣṇu’s own *tejas*.⁷³ Thus, Pollock suggests that like the Kuvalāśva myth Rāma is “transformed into the engine of destruction” by his association with the deity Viṣṇu.⁷⁴ Moreover, while equating Rāma’s divine ability to kill Rāvaṇa with this epic motif, Pollock concludes;

I hope that the primary thrust of these different versions of the same basic motif has now begun to make itself felt. The catalogue of the boon does not imply that the slayer can be merely a creature that has been inadvertently omitted from the list. If explicitly excluded, he must then be charged with some divine potency; if not (and this amounts to much the same thing), he must be an altogether new being . . .⁷⁵

Pollock’s primary argument that the divinity of Rāma is central to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole can be reinforced, and further advanced by employing the principles of *tejas*. Pollock suggests, in general, that when a creature is able to by-pass the internal logic of a boon he is infused with some kind of “divine potency”. He even suggests in one case that this potency is Viṣṇu’s *tejas*. However, Pollock is content that Rāma is simply some kind of thematic replica of the same cycle of myths that allow a creature to kill a near invulnerable demon by being aided by a superior figure, namely the god Viṣṇu. What Pollock casually overlooks is the central role that *tejas* plays. As we have seen, in the Kūvalāśva episode *tejas* is the cardinal factor by which the demon is slain, and the actual instrument of death is the *Brahmā astra* – the very same weapon that Rāma employs to kill the demon lord Rāvaṇa.

Before turning completely to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, I must digress once more to the *Mahābhārata*. The subversion of a boon and the role of *tejas* can be clearly seen working in Indra’s battle with the demon Vṛtra. This episode of theomachy provides a direct correlation with Rāma’s ability to slay Rāvaṇa. Vṛtra possesses a boon that protects him from being killed “by what is dry or wet; by stone or by wood; by a weapon [*śastra*-] or by the *Vajra*; in the day time or at night.”⁷⁶ Indra is however stubbornly determined to find a “fault” or “loophole” (*randhra*-: MBh.5.10.32) in the boon. Thus, at dusk (neither day nor night) Indra found Vṛtra by the seashore, and while thinking of Viṣṇu, Indra saw a pile of foam (*phena*), which is neither dry, nor wet, nor a weapon.⁷⁷ Indra immediately threw it at Vṛtra and “that foam blended with the *Vajra*, and Viṣṇu having entered the foam, destroyed Vṛtra.”⁷⁸ Once again the suggestion is that Viṣṇu’s *tejas* enters and energizes the *Vajra astra* (“Thunderbolt-weapon”), so the king of the gods can slay the demon.⁷⁹ Thus, an alternate version of this myth reads:

After seeing Śakra filled with despair, the eternal Viṣṇu placed his own *tejas* in Śakra, increasing his power. After seeing Śakra swollen by Viṣṇu, the hosts of Devas placed one by one their own *tejas* in him, and so did the immaculate brahman sages.

*taṃ śakraṃ kaśmalāviṣṭaṃ dr̥ṣṭvā viṣṇuḥ sanātanaḥ, svatejo vyadadhāc chakre
balaṃ asya vivardhayan. viṣṇunāpyāyitaṃ śakraṃ dr̥ṣṭvā devagaṇās tataḥ, svaṃ svaṃ
tejaḥ samādadhyaṣuḥ tathā brahmaṛṣayo ’malāḥ* (MBh.3.99.9–10).

It is only by employing an item – foam – that is inadvertently omitted from the categories depicted in the boon that the demon is able to be slain. However, it is not just the foam (*phena*) that is able to kill the demon; it has to be infused with the *Vajra*’s *tejas*, which is constituted by Indra, Viṣṇu, Ṛṣis, and gods.⁸⁰ This pattern, by which the internal logic of a boon is by-passed, is common to other episodes within the epics (one need only recall Dhundhu and Kūvalāśva), and will be

further seen in relation to Rāma's nature and the death of the demon lord Rāvaṇa.

Tejas and the divine weapons play a central role in Rāvaṇa's death. According to the principles of *tejas* there is no possibility that Rāma – as a human (*mānuṣa*) – can defeat Rāvaṇa without possessing supranormal quantities of *tejas*. Moreover, without supranormal quantities of *tejas* there is no possibility that Rāma can wield, let alone possess, the ultimate *Brahmā astra*.

As I have already stated, the *Brahmā astra* is employed by Rāma to slay Rāvaṇa. Hence, in one of the most profound and exquisite descriptions of a divine weapon, the text reads:

Thereupon, reminded by the command of Mātali, Rāma seized an arrow that blazed and hissed like a serpent. The divine Ṛṣi Agastya, who was powerful in battle, had previously bestowed it upon him, and that great and unfailing shaft had been given to him by Brahmā. It was originally constructed by Brahmā, who possessed unlimited *ojas*, for the use of Indra, and was in the past given to the lord of gods, who desired to conquer the three worlds. The wind was in its feathers, and the sun and fire in its point. The shaft was made from ether, and [it was the mountains] Meru and Mandara in weight. The feathers blazed with beauty, and it was adorned with gold. It was made from the *tejas* of all the elements, and was as brilliant as the sun. Blazing like the Fire of Time enveloped in smoke, like a poisonous snake, it tore apart hordes of chariots, elephants, and horses, and was quick to act. Capable of tearing asunder gateways, iron bars, and even mountains, its body was soaked in copious amounts of blood, and coated with fat: it was truly horrific. Like the *Vajra* in essence, and loud-sounding, capable of destroying various armies, being terrible it horrified all, and hissed like a serpent . . . The angered one [Rāma], after powerfully drawing the bow, displayed excessive exertion and released at Rāvaṇa that arrow, which ripped apart vitals. Dreadful like the *Vajra* hurled by the arm of the Thunder-bolt wielder, and inevitable as Death personified, it struck the breast of Rāvaṇa. Released with great velocity for the destruction of his body, the arrow pierced the heart of the evil-souled Rāvaṇa. Taking the life of Rāvaṇa, that arrow destroyed his body with force, and stained with blood it penetrated the earth's surface. After destroying Rāvaṇa, that arrow was covered in flesh and soaked in blood. Having achieved its purpose it once again entered the quiver [of Rāma] in complete humility.

tataḥ saṁsmārito rāmas tena vākyena mātaleḥ, jagrāha sa śaraṁ dīptam niśvasantam ivoragam. yam asmaḥ prathamam prādād agastyo bhagavān ṛṣiḥ, brahmadattam mahadbāṇam amogham yudhi vīryavān. brahmaṇā nirmītam pūrvam indrārtham amitaujasā, dattam surapateḥ pūrvam trilokajayakāṅkṣiṇaḥ yasya vājeṣu pavanaḥ phale pāvakahāskarau, śarīram ākāśamayaṁ gaurave merumandarau. jājvalyamānam vapuṣā supuṅkham hemabhūṣitam, tejasā sarvabhūtānām kṛtam bhāskaravaracasam. sadhūmam iva kālāgnim dīptam āśviṣam yathā, rathanāgāśvavṛndānām bhedanam kṣiprakāriṇam. dvārānām pariḥḥānām ca giriṇāmapi bhedanam, nānārudhiraṣiktāṅgam medodigdham sudārunam. vajrasāram mahānādam nānāsamitidārunam, sarvavitṛāsanam bhīmam śvasantāmiva pannagam . . . sa rāvaṇāya saṁkruddho bhṛṣamāyāmya karmukam, cikṣepa paramāyattastam śaraṁ marmaghātinam. sa vajra iva durdharṣo vajrabāhuvisarjitaḥ, kṛtānta iva cāvāryo nyapatadrāvaṇorasi. sa viṣṭo mahāvegaḥ śarīrāntakaraḥ śarah, bibheda hrdayam tasya rāvaṇasya durātmanaḥ. rudhirāktaḥ sa vegena jīvitāntakaraḥ śarah, rāvaṇasya haranprāṇānviveśa dharaṇūṭalam. sa śaro rāvaṇam hatvā rudhirādrakṛtacchaviḥ, kṛtakarmā nibhṛtavatsvatūṇim punarāviśat (Rām.6.97.3–10, 15–19).

Although the episode does not explicitly state that the arrow is a *Brahmā astra*, it does state that it was given by Brahmā. It is also made from the *tejas* of all the elements (*tejasā sarvabhūtānām kṛtaṃ*). Several variant texts also state that *tejas* incinerates Rāvaṇa.⁸¹ Furthermore, at the end of the epic Rāma gifts Śatrughna this very shaft so he can slay the demon Lavaṇa, and the arrow is made from the *tejas* of Viṣṇu (*viṣṇos tejomayam śaram*).⁸² These themes are brought to the foreground in the *Mahābhārata*'s retelling of the death of Rāvaṇa. In this version Rāma unites an arrow with the *Brahmā astra*. The text continues:

Thereupon, Rāma released that fierce arrow, which possessed unequalled *ojas*, like an upraised Brahmanical staff, and was meant for Rāvaṇa's destruction. Enveloped in a fiercely blazing fire, the best of Rākṣasas was burnt by it, together with his chariot, horses, and charioteer. Then, the thirty [gods], together with the Gandharvas, and Cāraṇas rejoiced after seeing Rāvaṇa slain by Rāma of unsullied acts. The five elements departed from the great lord Rāvaṇa, for he was cast down in all the worlds by the *tejas* of the *Brahmā astra*. The physical elements of his body, even his flesh and blood, were consumed by the fire of the *Brahmā astra* until they disappeared, not even the ashes could be seen.

tataḥ sasarja taṃ rāmaḥ śaram apratimaujasam, rāvaṇāntakaram ghoram brahmadaṇḍam ivodyatam. sa tena rākṣasaśreṣṭhaḥ sarathaḥ sāsvasārathih, prajajvāla mahājvālenaḥgninābhipariṣkṛtaḥ. tataḥ prahrṣṭās tridaśaḥ sagandharvāḥ sacāraṇāḥ, nihataṃ rāvaṇaṃ dṛṣṭvā rāmeṇākliṣṭakarmanā. tatyajus taṃ mahābhāgaṃ pañca bhūtāni rāvaṇam, bhramṣītaḥ sarvalokeṣu sa hi brahmāstratejasā. śarīradhātavo hy asya māṃsam rudhiram eva ca, neśur brahmāstranirdagdā na ca bhasmāpy adṛśyata (MBh.3.274.27–31).

In this episode Rāvaṇa's death is explicitly caused by the *tejas* of the *Brahmā astra*. In fact the divine weapon's *tejas* is so intensely hot (*prajajvāla mahājvālena agninā*: MBh.3.274.28) that not even ashes remained. It is clear then that *tejas* plays a central role in Rāvaṇa's death.

From the beginning, Rāma's use of the *Brahmā astra* should have raised questions about his true nature, for the texts imply that humans cannot possibly employ divine weapons due to their inherent lack of *tejas*. Hence, the *Mahābhārata* states with regard to divine weapon combat; "Humans would not believe this, for it does not occur among them."⁸³ This is especially true for the *Brahmā astra*, as the same text explicitly states that humans are unable to possess it.⁸⁴ To return to Rāma's own nature, he is consistently said to "possess very great *tejas*" and "unlimited *tejas*" (*sumahātejas-*, *amitatejas-*),⁸⁵ and during a fit of rage Rāma's *tejas* is said to be able to consume the universe.⁸⁶ In an encounter with the mythic warrior Paraśu-Rāma, who was the sole destroyer of all the warriors in a previous age, Rāma displays his *tejas*, defeats him, and further stuns all the celestial beings who were watching the proceedings.⁸⁷ Rāma then seizes Paraśu-Rāma's divine bow and

arrows and proves he can wield them. The *Narasimha Purāṇa* expands on this episode by stating that Rāma also gains all of Paraśu-Rāma's *tejas*. While referring to this, Magnone writes that Paraśu-Rāma "was shorn of his *vaiṣṇavatejas* by the younger Rāma come to relieve him from his duty of *avatāra*-hood."⁸⁸ However, the precedent does appear in the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, as the exchange of the bow and arrows indicates an exchange of *tejas*.⁸⁹

Rāvaṇa is also considered to possess vast quantities of *tejas*, which is of the *brahman* or highest quality.⁹⁰ Hanuman (*mahātejas*) is so impressed with Rāvaṇa's levels of *tejas* (*atitejas*) that he believes the demon could rule the heavens.⁹¹ Thus, Rāvaṇa has nothing to fear from mere humans, whom he considers to be like straw.⁹² However, Rāvaṇa's greatest mistake is clearly seen in the following episode. Here, Rāvaṇa speaks to Rāma's kidnapped wife, Sītā:

"I see in the worlds none who can match my virility, neither among the Devas, nor the Yakṣasas, Gandharvas, or Ṛṣis. What will you do with Rāma, who has fallen from sovereignty, a wretched ascetic, enervated, a human and possesses insufficient *tejas*."

na deveṣu na yakṣeṣu na gandharveṣu narṣiṣu, ahaṃ paśyāmi lokeṣu yo me vīryasamo bhavet. rājyabhr̥ṣṭena dīnena tāpasena gatāyusā, kim kariṣyasi rāmeṇa mānuṣeṇālpatejasā (Rām.3.53.20–21).

The compound *alpatejas* consistently appears in both epics as a technical term to describe the weak ontological nature of humans. Though Rāma is technically a human, it is clear that he does not possess "insufficient *tejas*". Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa even recognize the danger and negative repercussions of having the human quality of *alpatejas*.⁹³ Rāvaṇa clearly under estimates the power of his arch-enemy,⁹⁴ and for this mistake he pays with his life.

There is one last indication of Rāma's superiority, which relates to Rāvaṇa's death and the way the *Brahmā astra* returns to Rāma after killing the demon lord. After the divine weapon kills Rāvaṇa it enters the earth and returns to Rāma. The *tejas* of the arrow is so powerful that Rāvaṇa's own *tejas* does not contain it (his body is burnt so intensely not even ashes remained), and neither does the earth, but on returning to Rāma there is no effort whatsoever on his part to control it, in fact it enters his quiver "in complete humility" (*nibhṛtavat*); implying the near infinite superiority of Rāma's own *tejas*.

In summary, just as foam (*phena*) is able to kill Vṛtra, so the preternatural Rāma is able to slay Rāvaṇa. Thus,

the formulation of the boon itself . . . inherently entails the counteraction of the boon by some previously nonexistent creature or phenomenon, either one purely deceptive

or else – and this is more frequent – one entirely outside the catalogue of natural possibility.⁹⁵

Pollock’s theory of Rāma’s divine nature is consistent with the principles of *tejas*, and thus advances his theory that the divinity of Rāma is central to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole. Without vast levels of the “divine potency” *tejas* there is no way Rāma would have been successful in his quest. The irony lies in the extreme amounts of *tejas* with which the hero is endowed. Rāma is no mere human and most definitely is Pollock’s “superhuman”: a new order of being endowed with the destructive energy of the universe. Furthermore, while both foam and Rāma stand outside the categories listed in the boons, each one must, by necessity, be infused with excessive amounts of *tejas*. And this is due to the fact that once the formulaic structure of the boon is breached by the “unnatural” phenomena, then the opponent’s inherent energy must be overcome. It would be pointless for the heroes to possess access to the “Achilles’ Heel” and not have the firepower to exploit it. However, either is useless without the other: in Rāma’s case man is impotent without *tejas*, but *tejas* is impotent without a man to by-pass the boon.

CONCLUSION

Tejas is clearly a concept that resonates in many semantic fields. Its diverse appearance in realms that seem disparate to the modern reader tend to produce either inconsistent translations or statements about the unintelligible and inconsistent nature of the term, or worse the opinion that it lacks a stable core sense or neom, such as “fiery energy”, however cumbersome by preference be. I hope that my research has highlighted the consistent and overarching meaning of a concept that can at once refer to the sharpness and potency of weaponry, the heat of fire and the brightness of light, an impetus to act, bodily and sensory functions, and much sought after spiritual and martial power. Within the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* *tejas* features in these semantic realms, as well as others, yet behind the various renderings needed to make it intelligible in a given context, I believe we must always be aware of its central principles – transferability and functionality – as well as its martial overtones. *Tejas* is not only central to epic symbolism but also plays a part in governing the creation and intent of epic narratives. It is a term that was obviously highly important to the composers of the epics, from philosophical, narratological, and biological standpoints. However, I conclude negatively, as we have little or no understanding

of the significance of *tejas* and other power terms in the rest of the Vedic and non-Vedic religious, medical, and philosophical literature. What is worse is that we have virtually no methods to understand the way the power terminology was experienced in real social and political worlds – a problem that desperately needs attention.⁹⁶

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NOTES

¹ See Jarrod L. Whitaker, “Divine Weapons and *Tejas* in the Two Indian Epics”, *Indo-Iranian Journal* vol. 43, 2 (2000), pp. 87–113.

² See, for example, MBh.7.135.5c. *tejas tu teja āsādyā praśamaṃ yāti . . .* cf. MBh.12.249.9 and Rām.1.55.14–24.

³ See, for example, MBh.1.155.27–28, esp. MBh.1.155.27e, *brahmakṣatre ca vihite brahmatejo viśiṣyate*. cf. MBh.13.34.15, MBh.13.58.21, MBh.13.58.35, MBh.14.9.37, MBh.12.79.24. For *ṣatriyatejas/ṣatratejas*, see MBh.1.114.26, MBh.5.57.1, MBh.7.126.39 (where a brahman intends to steal or outshine, *√muṣ-*, *ṣatriyatejas*), and MBh.10.3.19–20, where Prajāpati assigns *tejas* to *ṣatriyas*, and without it a *ṣatriya* is lowly or vile (*adhama*). In this same passage, the god assigns the quality of patience or self-restraint (*dama*) to brahmans. However, we should reserve some caution about the distinct nature of these qualities, as patience is said to increase *tejas* (*damas tejo vardhayati*: MBh.12.154.9, cf. MBh.12.213.4–6). Also MBh.18.5.34. At this stage I wish to disagree with Daniel H.H. Ingalls’ claim that “*Tejas* or military splendence is the peculiar property of the nobility, just as *tapas* or creational heat is the peculiar property of the priesthood.” See Daniel H.H. Ingalls, “Authority and Law in Ancient India”, in *Authority and Law in the Ancient Orient: A Supplement to the Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 74, 3 (Baltimore: American Oriental Society, 1954), p. 41. Ingalls is here drawing upon MBh.1.165.28, which states that *tejas* is the power of warriors, in contrast to a brahman’s power being “patience” (*ṣamā*). cf. MBh.3.28.35, and MBh.5.132.2. However, such passages are not intended to make *tejas* the exclusive domain of *ṣatriyas*. Their intent is to suggest that brahmans, as followers of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), are concerned with higher matters, and thus are dissociated with any connections to such a martial energy-substance. Clearly, neither one is peculiar to a given class.

⁴ My argument that the change in *yugas* plays a role in the loss of the divine weapons must be taken as tentative and based on later epic and post-epic developments. Gonzalez-Reimann argues that the *yuga* theory is a later addition to the *Mahābhārata*, and by the time of the *Purānas* is taken for granted. Much of the epic simply blames time (*kāla*) for adverse change and suffering. This is especially true for the episode in which Arjuna’s divine weapons are lost (see MBh.16.8.46–64, MBh.16.9.32–35, and MBh.17.37–40). See Luis González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata*

and the *Yugas: India's Great Epic Poem and the Hindu System of World Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). I still believe that *tejas* plays a central role in the process. See esp. MBh.16.9.32–33. However, the ontological and physiological shift in potential power and energy due to a change in time and/or *yugas* requires further investigation, although time (*kāla*), it seems, also works by means of *tejas*: *sarvaṃ kālaḥ samādatte gambhīraḥ svena tejasā*, MBh.12.217.19.

⁵ In the epics, Nārāyaṇa is a mysterious character, both deity and sage, closely associated with Viṣṇu and his *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa. Nārāyaṇa generally appears with his partner Nara, who is himself closely associated with Arjuna (see MBh.3.41.1–2). By the time of the *Purāṇas*, Nārāyaṇa becomes one of Viṣṇu's minor *avatāras*. See Alain Danielou, *Hindu Poltheism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 165.

⁶ MBh.7.166.50.

⁷ In a corresponding version Droṇa obtains all his *astras* from Paraśu-Rāma, including the ultimate *Brahmā astra* (see MBh.1.154.1–13).

⁸ See Whitaker, pp. 93–94.

⁹ *na tv idaṃ sahasā brahman prayoktavyaṃ kathaṃ cana, na hy etad astram anyatra vadhāc chatror nivartate. na caitac chakyate jñātuṃ ko na vadhyed iti prabho, avadhyam api hanyād dhi tasmān naitat prayojayet. vadhah samkhye dravaś caiva śastrāṇāṃ ca visarjanam, prayācanam ca śatrūṇāṃ gamanaṃ śaraṇasya ca. ete praśamane yogā mahāstrasya paramitapa, sarvathā pīḍito hi syād avadhyān pīḍayan raṇe.* MBh.7.166.46–49. I have translated *avadhya-* in two ways: the first to express those types of beings considered “invulnerable” in the epics (cf. MBh.3.193.19, MBh.6.1.27–32, MBh.7.28.28, MBh.8.24.7, and MBh.8.66.62–63); the second to express those types of beings who, due to their weakened condition, should be considered “invulnerable”. In all the incidents cited above *avadhya* is used as a technical term for when a demon obtains a boon from some higher deity, and is thus unable to be slain by most creatures in the universe. I say “most” because invulnerability in the epics is conditional.

¹⁰ MBh.7.167.1–6.

¹¹ *prādūrāsams tato bānā dīptāgrāḥ khe sahasraśaḥ, pāṇḍavān bhakṣayiṣyanto dīptāsyā iva pannagāḥ. te diśaḥ khaṃ ca sainyaṃ ca samāvṛṇvan mahāhave, muhūrtād bhāskarasyeva rājanī lokam gabhastayaḥ. tathāpare dyotamānā jyotiṃśivāmbare 'male, prādūrāsan mahīpāla kārṣṇāyasamayā guḍāḥ. caturdiśaṃ vicitrāś ca śataghyo 'tha hutāśadāḥ, cakrāṇi ca kṣurāntāni maṇḍalānīva bhāsvataḥ. śastrākṛtibhir ākīrṇam atīva bhatararṣabha, drṣṭvāntarikṣam āvignāḥ pāṇḍupāncālasṛñjayāḥ. yathā yathā hy ayudhyanta pāṇḍavānāṃ mahārathāḥ, tathā tathā tad astram vai vyavardhata janādhipa. vadhyamānās tathāstreṇa tena nārāyaṇena vai, dahyamānānaleneva sarvato 'bhyarditā raṇe. yathā hi śīśīrāpāye dahet kakṣaṃ hutāśanaḥ, tathā tad astram pāṇḍūnāṃ dadāha dhvajinīm prabho.* MBh.7.170.16–23.

¹² *śīghraṃ nyasyata śastrāṇi vāhebhyas cāvarohata, eṣa pratighāto mahātmanā. dvipāśvasyandanebhyas ca kṣitiṃ sarve 'varohata, evam etan na vo hanyād astram bhūmau nirāyudhān. yathā yathā hi yudhyante yodhā hy astrabalaṃ prati, tathā tathā bhavanty ete kauravā balavattarāḥ. nikṣepsyanti ca śastrāṇi vāhanebhyo 'varuhyaye, tān naitad astram samgrāme nihaniṣyati mānavān. ye tv etat pratiyotsyanti manasāpiha ke cana, nihaniṣyati tān sarvān rasātālagatān api.* MBh.7.170.38–42.

¹³ See MBh.7.170.51, 1403*1–5.

¹⁴ *pannagair iva dīptāsyair vamadbhīr analaṃ raṇe, avakīrṇo 'bhavat pārthaḥ sphuliṅgair iva kāñcanaīḥ. tasya rūpam abhūd rājan bhīmasenasya saṃyuge, khadyotair āvṛtasyeva parvatasya dinakṣaye. tad astram dronaputrasya tasmīn pratisamasyati, avardhata mahārāja yathāgnir anilodhdhataḥ. vivardhamānam ālakṣya tad astram bhīmavikramam, pāṇḍusainyam rte bhūmaṃ sumahad bhayam āviśat. tataḥ śastrāṇi te sarve samutsṛjya mahūtale, avārohan rathebhyaś ca hastyaśvebhyaś ca sarvaśaḥ. tesu*

nikṣiptaśastreṣu vāhanebhyaś cyuteṣu ca, tad astravīryaṃ vipulaṃ bhīmamūrdhany athāpatat. MBh.7.170.55–60.

¹⁵ *hāhākr̥tāni bhūtāni pāṇḍavās ca viśeṣataḥ, bhīmasenam apaśyanta tejasā saṃvṛtaṃ tadā.* MBh.7.170.61.

¹⁶ A variant text supplies an interesting insight into the nature of the *Nārāyaṇa astra* when it strikes an opponent (MBh.7.171.7, 1408*1–2); “That *astra* repeatedly moves away because of the sound of Bhīma’s cries, but it always returns to him and because of the sound of his cries releases him once more”.

¹⁷ In the end the *tejas* of the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is not permanently destroyed or extinguished, but is rather “driven away” (*vyapoḍha*). However, *vyapoḍha* can also mean “destruction”, and throughout the episode assorted verbs that can mean “to destroy” are employed to convey how the divine weapon is defeated (e.g., $\sqrt{mrd-}$, $\sqrt{vr-}$, $\sqrt{sam-}$, $\sqrt{han-}$, etc.). For example, the verb $\sqrt{sam-}$ appears in several lines; “in order to neutralize” (*-śāntyarthaṃ*: MBh.7.171.13); and “that unbearable *tejas* was neutralized” (*praśānte*: MBh.7.171.20). The word *śānti* can mean “tranquility” or “relief from suffering”, but in the earliest Vedic literature is used for pacifying fire, anger, and fever, which are all connected with the concept of heat. See Chauncey Justus Blair, *Heat in the Ṛg Veda and Atharva Veda* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1961) and D.J. Hoens, *Śānti: A Contribution to Ancient Indian Religious Terminology* (S-Gravenhage: 1951). While many of these verbs carry a sense of termination, it is best to conceive of a divine weapon’s defeat as temporary rather than permanent. Throughout the epics other divine weapons appear with the same “destruction” verbs, yet are employed by the heroes again and again. To counter a divine weapon means neutralizing its destructive energy, which must be transferred and controlled, rather than its final extinction. The neutralization of the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is consistent with Aśvatthāman’s final statement that implies he still possesses the divine weapon, but cannot recall it because of a more immediate danger. Hence, my use of “driven away”, which implies its neutralization, rather than the more permanent “destroyed” for *vyapoḍha*.

¹⁸ *naitad āvartate rājann astram divir nopapadyate, āvartayan nihanty etat prayoktāram na samśayaḥ.* MBh.7.171.25–27. The *Rāmāyaṇa* offers an interesting reason behind why an *astra* cannot be used twice in succession (Rām.5.46.34ff.). Hanuman is bound by the *Brahmā astra*, then Rākṣasas unfamiliar with the nature of *astras* further bind the monkey god with ropes. At this the *Brahmā astra* releases its bonds, because it will not remain while other bonds are in place. The divine weapon’s wielder simply states for the record (Rām.5.46.48); “Once an *astra* is counteracted, another *astra* [of the same kind] cannot be set in motion, thus all [of us] should worry.”

¹⁹ MBh.7.171.30. At MBh.10.6–16, Aśvatthāman unsuccessfully fights Arjuna again in another major divine weapon battle. See esp. MBh.10.14.2–15, MBh.10.15.19–24, MBh.10.15.31, 65*1–2, and MBh.14.69.1–3. Also the related Bhīṣma/Paraśu-Rāma battle is pertinent, MBh.5.182.4–9, MBh.5.185.15–19, and MBh.5.186.7.

²⁰ MBh.7.171.1. The *Vāruṇa astra* is the divine weapon of the Indian water deity Vāruṇa, and one of the standard *divya astras* employed by many heroes throughout both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Arjuna received the *Vāruṇa astra* from Indra, the supreme ruler of the gods (see MBh.3.161.16, 832*1–8).

²¹ MBh.7.171.14.

²² Ganguli-Roy’s interpretation suggests that the *Nārāyaṇa astra* increases with *tejas*, for example; “That weapon . . . directed against Bhimasena increased in energy and might” (Roy, vol. 6, p. 473), or “that terrible and invincible weapon of Drona’s son began to increase (in might and energy)” (Roy, vol. 6, p. 474). This is not the only place where Ganguli-Roy suggests that divine weapons increase in size with *tejas*. See Roy, vol. 7, pp. 268–269 (MBh.8.66.1ff.), where the *Brahmā astra* is “swelling

with energy”. However, the Sanskrit does not yield his translation of “energy” or “might”.

²³ Cf. MBh.8.24.57–63 (including MBh.8.24.61,256*1–3), where the gods cannot contain ($\sqrt{bhr-}$) half of Śiva’s *tejas* for the destruction of enemies (whose *tejas* levels double their own). The gods thus give Śiva half of their *tejas* so the supreme deity can kill them. With this *tejas*, Śiva’s power (*bala*) becomes powerful (*balavattara*: MBh.8.24.62–63). Cf. MBh.3.99.9–10 below.

²⁴ *anenāstreṇa samgrāme tejasā ca jvaliṣyasi*. MBh.7.166.50.

²⁵ It seems that one translator of the *Mahābhārata* suspected that the *Nārāyaṇa astra* causes the wielder to increase with *tejas*. At MBh.7.171.8, the Ganguli-Roy translation reads “Droṇa’s son swelling with energy and might” (Roy, vol. 6, p. 474), whereas the Sanskrit simply says that Aśvatthāman is “enhanced” or similarly “aroused” (*udīryamāna*). The English word “energy” is often used for *tejas* in Ganguli-Roy’s translation of the *Nārāyaṇa astra* episode (not to mention the *Mahābhārata* as a whole), whilst I can only speculate what the word “might” represents, as there are several other energy-substances that appear in the episode and convey similar meanings, for example, *vīrya* (“virility”), *ojas* (“vital fluid”). Assuming that Ganguli-Roy is employing the English word “energy” for *tejas*, it seems he is suggesting a more profound process is involved with the divine weapons. Pratap Chandra Roy, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, 2nd ed., 12 vols. (Calcutta: Oriental Publishing, n.d. [1884–1896]). Roy was actually the publisher of the epic, while the translator, Kisan Mohan Ganguli, has only been recognized in recent editions. Of further note, the energy-substances *vīrya* and *ojas* function in similar ways to *tejas*. They both sporadically appear as the destructive energy of divine weapons. The relationship between the three needs further research. For a detailed examination of these and other “essential powers” (*daseinsmächte*) in the *Vedas* and *Brāhmaṇas*, see Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varṇa System and the Origins of Caste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁶ See Whitaker, pp. 101–104.

²⁷ See MBh.3.163.33–35.

²⁸ MBh.5.11.6.

²⁹ At MBh.5.16.24, Nahuṣa pre-empts the gods’ boon by telling them to give him *tapas* and *tejas*. Nahuṣa’s ability to steal *tejas* by looking at other beings is further reinforced at MBh.5.13.19, MBh.5.15.13, MBh.5.15.18, MBh.5.15.19,106*1–2, MBh.5.16.21, MBh.5.16.26, and MBh.12.329.30. In this last line Nahuṣa is said to have “ruled the three heavens with five hundred blazing suns on his forehead, which stole the *tejas* of everyone.” *nahuṣah pañcabhiḥ śatair jyotiṣām lalāte jvaladbhiḥ sarvatejoharais triviṣṭapam pālayām babhūva*. cf. MBh.2.71.10–11, and MBh.3.106.3. The relationship between *tejas* and *tapas* is clarified by MBh.1.68.22, which states that the female ascetic Śakuntalā “controlled her *tejas*, which was accumulated by [the practice of] *tapas*.” *tapasā sambhṛtam tejo dhārayamāsa vai tadā*. See Whitaker, p. 110 n. 64.

³⁰ MBh.5.17.11–12.

³¹ For Bhīṣma, see MBh.6.105.31, for Droṇa, see MBh.7.126.39, for Kṛṣṇa, see MBh.2.42.22–24.

³² MBh.3.160.31 and MBh.3.160.36. cf. MBh.12.287.12, where an amulet (*maṇi*) takes the *tejas* of the sun (see also MBh.5.84.11).

³³ MBh.3.195.12. See also MBh.3.193.24–27. For a detailed account of this theme, see Minoru Hara, “Invigoration”, in H. Falk, ed., *Hinduismus und Buddhismus: Festschrift für Ulrich Schneider* (Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1987), pp. 134–151. I would also like to rectify a mistake in which I incorrectly cited Hara (see Whitaker, p. 109 n. 40). The accurate citation is Minoru Hara, “Transfer of Merit”, *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, vol. 31–32 (Madras: 1967–1968), pp. 383–411. This article has also been

revised and expanded as “Transfer of Merit in Hindu Literature and Religion”, *The Memoirs of the Research Department of The Toyo Bunko*, vol. 52 (1994), 103–135. I would like to thank M. Hara for kindly sending me these articles.

³⁴ MBh.3.195.18. At MBh.12.331.5 *Nārāyaṇa tejas* is said to be difficult to encounter (*durdarsā*).

³⁵ MBh.3.195.20, and MBh.3.195.24.

³⁶ I read the variant *rājñā* for the Critical Edition’s *rājā*, which makes no sense with the passive verb. Furthermore, the adjective *vārimaya* is problematic. I would like to thank John D. Smith for his helpful remarks on this passage. The *yogī yogena* invokes images of the ascetic practice of the five fires ritual (*pañcāgnisādhana*), whereby four fires are lit around the ascetic in the summer, with the scorching sun being the fifth. The internal logic suggests that an ascetic is able to perform this exceptionally difficult task by overcoming the unbearable heat (*tejas*) of the fires by sweating, i.e., producing *tejas* which absorbs and neutralizes the incoming energy. I can only call to mind my own experience of long periods in a sauna, where the most uncomfortable period is before one “breaks a sweat.” For a reversal of this theme, in which *tejas* is employed to absorb water, see MBh.13.138.3 and MBh.13.139.22.

³⁷ See MBh.5.15.31–32. cf. MBh.12.79.20–33, where the former episode is clarified and quoted as part of a discourse on morality.

³⁸ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), argues that through the medium of water kings infuse themselves with *Vaiṣṇava tejas* during ritual bathes. Inden, p. 236, further notes, “The luminous, goal-directed energy (*tejas*) in everything connected with the human world was, claimed the Vaishnavas, highly entropic. Unless people interacted repeatedly and correctly with the overlord of the cosmos with the purpose of acquiring new infusions of his *tejas*, the human world would quickly disintegrate, for people would be unable to complete themselves and eventually obtain the goal of union with the absolute godhead.” At MBh.3.81.143, a *tīrtha* or sacred bathing site is qualified as *aujasam varuṇam*, and is said to blaze with its own *tejas*, and at MBh.3.82.64, one goes to heaven by means of the *tīrtha*’s *tejas*. At MBh.13.111.16–18, *tīrthas* are considered to be exceedingly pure (*atīva puṇya*) from contact with ascetics, and by means of the *tejas* of earth and the *tejas* of water (*salilasya ca tejasā*)! cf. Rām.4.39.43.

³⁹ MBh.7.171.2. An *astra* is also used in a similar way in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. At Rām.5.46.34ff., the *Brahmā astra* captures and binds (*bandha-*) Hanuman when it is unable to kill him.

⁴⁰ See MBh.6.45.50, where Arjuna’s *tejas* combines with another warrior’s *tejas* (*tejas tejasi samprkṛtam*) for the latter’s protection. cf. MBh.13.83.53.

⁴¹ See MBh.6.1.27–32. For detailed analysis of *kṣatradharma*, see E.W. Hopkins, *The Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste in Ancient India* (Varanasi: Bharat-Bharati, 1972 [1889]), P.C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India* (Dacca: The University of Dacca, 1941), and B.K. Majumdar, *The Military System in Ancient India* (Calcutta: The World Press, 1955). For a succinct summary of *kṣatradharma*, see W.S. Armour, “Customs of Warfare in Ancient India”, in *Transactions of the Grotius Society*, vol. 8 (New York: Oceana Publications, 1962 [1922]), pp. 71–88.

⁴² MBh.7.166.47–48.

⁴³ There are indications that other divine weapons follow *kṣatradharma*. At MBh.7.67.43–54, Śrutāyudha obtains a *divya astra* in the form of a mace (*gadā*). Varuṇa informs the king that it must not be hurled at a non-combatant, because it will return and kill him. Śrutāyudha hurls the divine mace at Kṛṣṇa, it hits the deity yet does not harm him, then returns to slay the king. See MBh.7.166.49, where the *Nārāyaṇa astra* is said to harm the wielder if he injures non-combatants (cf. MBh.3.294.33). Before ascribing the Śrutāyudha episode solely to the workings of *kṣatradharma*, it is interesting to note that the divine weapon still hits Kṛṣṇa. The text

does not mention any infringement of *kṣatradharma*, and even states that the fatal use of the mace (MBh.7.67.52) “was like an ill-managed act of sorcery that returns to the wielder.” I have reservations about the relationship between *kṣatradharma* and divine weapons, as divine weapons are by nature chaotic and violent. This is evident from the primary concern of the texts to make sure that they remain controlled at all times.

⁴⁴ See, for example, MBh.6.115.49 and Rām.6.83.27.

⁴⁵ MBh.9.61.13.

⁴⁶ Kṛṣṇa is said to possess unlimited *tejas* that blazes like fire (*amitadīptāgnitejāḥ*: MBh.13.143.25). At MBh.9.61.28–30, Yudhiṣṭhira even indicates that victory was only obtained through Kṛṣṇa’s grace (*prasāda*), his participation (*karma*) in the battle, and through the operation of his *tejas*. cf. BhG.7.9–10, BhG.10.36, BhG.10.41, BhG.11.17, BhG.11.19, BhG.11.30, BhG.11.47, BhG.15.12, which all describe Kṛṣṇa’s *tejas*.

⁴⁷ Paolo Magnone, “The Development of *Tejas* from the Vedas to the Purānas”, in *Proceedings of the VIIIth World Sanskrit Conference* (Vienna: 1990), p. 146.

⁴⁸ The brahman Vasiṣṭha’s nature is recalled when he absorbs the *tejas* of the *Brahmā astra*. He has to let off steam, so to speak, as fire and smoke billow from his body. See Rām.1.55.6–24.

⁴⁹ See MBh.1.215.16.

⁵⁰ See, for example, MBh.1.49.24, MBh.1.219.4, MBh.3.48.18, MBh.3.228.11, MBh.4.33.14, MBh.4.52.20, MBh.4.53.20–21, MBh.5.176.33, MBh.5.182.4–9, MBh.6.60.21, MBh.7.31.45, MBh.7.118.52, MBh.7.172.20, MBh.10.7.64–65. For armour and ornaments, see MBh.6.99.21, MBh.7.69.52–75. See also MBh.5.58.22, MBh.5.155.4–6 and MBh.5.155.30, where the *Śārṅga* and *Gāṇḍīva* bows are constructed from *tejas*. cf. MBh.7.6.19–20. At MBh.2.22.24, Arjuna’s *Garuḍa* banner (*dhvaja*) blazes with *tejas*. cf. MBh.7.6.17–18.

⁵¹ See MBh.3.195.26. cf. Mbh.10.15.18 variants. Rām.4.39.43, “*tejas* born from anger” (*kopajaṃ tejah*).

⁵² See Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), p. 242, and McKim Marriott, “Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology,” in M. Marriott, ed., *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 13.

⁵³ See Whitaker, p. 103. cf. Dominik Wujastyk, *The Roots of Āyurveda* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 148, where “heat of cholera” equals *pittatejas*. For a discussion on the *doṣas*, see Hartmut Scharfe, “The Doctrine of the Three Humors in Traditional Indian Medicine and the Alleged Antiquity of Tamil Siddha Medicine” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 119, 4 (1999), esp. p. 626.

⁵⁴ At MBh.3.28.1ff., Draupadī chides Yudhiṣṭhira for not directing his anger at the Kauravas, and she informs him that by *tejas* alone he could destroy them (MBh.3.28.36). What follows is a parable on when it is proper to employ *tejas* (here in an extended sense “martial acts” or “punishment”) or patience (*kṣamā*) (MBh.3.29.1ff.). Draupadī tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he must exercise his *tejas* (MBh.3.29.33), and she concludes (MBh.3.29.34); “Indeed, time has now run out for forgiving the Kurus: when the time for *tejas* has come, you must employ *tejas*.” *na hi kaścīt kṣamākālo vidyate ’dya kurūn prati, tejasas’ cāgate kāle teja utsraṣṭum arhasi*. See González-Reimann (2002), chap. 4.

⁵⁵ See Rām.1.35.10–17, incl. Rām.1.35.12, 813*1–14, and also see Rām.1.36.1ff. cf. MBh.3.218.30, MBh.13.83.36ff., MBh.13.84.1ff.

⁵⁶ See Rām.1.36.15–21, incl. Rām.1.36.17, 828*1–10. cf. MBh.5.15.31–32, where rock’s (*aśman*) *tejas* is more powerful than iron’s (*loha*), and for more on gold, etc., see MBh.13.83.36ff and MBh.13.84.1ff. See also D.M. Bose, ed., *The Concise History of Science in India* (New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 1971), pp. 459–460. At MBh.4.38.1ff., the Pāṇḍavas’ bows, swords, arrows, and quivers are depicted in detail, and are inlaid with gold and gems. Herodotus notes that swords

taken by Greeks from Indians were inlaid with gold. See Wilbrahim Egerton, *An Illustrated Handbook of Indian Arms . . .* (London: White Orchid Press, 1880), p. 10. This suggests that because metals, especially gold and iron, contain *tejas*, then any metal product (e.g., human weapons) should be treated as divine, or at least embodying a divine substance. This may be one reason why a warrior worships his weapons. See MBh.12.160.85; “The worship of weapons should always be performed by skilful warriors.” *aseśca pūjā kartavyā sadā yuddhaviśāradaih.* cf. MBh.8.27.57–58. For an enlightening account of ancient Indian metallurgical terminology, see James L. Fitzgerald, “Sanskrit *Pīta* and *Śaikya/Saikya*: Two Terms of Iron and Steel Technology in the *Mahābhārata*”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* vol. 120, 1 (2000). pp. 44–61.

⁵⁷ See Whitaker, p. 111 n.77. In a modern context, William S. Sax, “Fathers, Sons, and Rhinoceroses: Masculinity and Violence in *Pāṇḍav Lilā*”, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 117, 2 (1997) has observed in northern India that iron arrowheads forged by blacksmiths for ritual performances are considered to be dangerous because of their inherent *śakti* energy. Sax, p. 289, notes, “Not only is it disrespectful to drop them, but they are believed to be full of energy (*śakti*) which, like electricity, can be discharged into the earth if they come into contact with it”.

⁵⁸ Rām.6.14.16, Rām.6.15.1, App. 1 (no. 11), (235*) 9.

⁵⁹ At Rām.5.36.30–31, Rāma neutralizes his *Brahmā astra* by directing it into a crow’s eye (cf. Rām.5.65.1ff.). He does this because of the following; “Let it be said that this *Brahmā astra* is unable to rendered ineffectual.” This seems to imply that Rāma cannot recall it. However, Rāma does recall his *Brahmā astra* in other incidents (see Rām.6.97.19), but only after it has struck the enemy. In contrast, at MBh.6.112.136–137, Bhīṣma invokes a *divya astra*, but withdraws it immediately when he sees that his enemy is the “female” Sikhaṇḍin. cf. MBh.5.186.7.

⁶⁰ See Rām.6.15.7, 262*2–5, 263*1–11, 264*1–6, 265*1–6.

⁶¹ MBh.10.12.1ff.

⁶² Note that Kulaśśva absorbed Dhundhu’s own *tejas* before killing him (see MBh.3.195.1ff.).

⁶³ It is recalled that Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa and Nārāyaṇa share the same energy source (see MBh.3.195.18).

⁶⁴ MBh.7.28.1ff.

⁶⁵ MBh.7.28.33.

⁶⁶ J.L. Mehta, “The Discourse of Violence in the *Mahabharata*”, in J.L. Mehta, ed., *Philosophy and Religion: Essays in Interpretation* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1990), p. 270, equates the non-resistance method of countering the *Nārāyaṇa astra* with Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence.

⁶⁷ Sheldon Pollock, “The Divine King in the Indian Epic”, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 104, 3 (1984).

⁶⁸ Pollock, p. 509, see esp. n. 15.

⁶⁹ Pollock, p. 509ff.

⁷⁰ This is taken from Pollock’s own translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. see Sheldon Pollock, trans., *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*, vol. 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). It is part of R.P. Goldman, ed. and trans. et al., *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*, 5. vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984–1996).

⁷¹ Pollock, pp. 516–157.

⁷² Pollock, pp. 510–511. The pathetic nature of humans, and their martial prowess in battle, is stressed in many separate episodes throughout the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

⁷³ Pollock, p. 521. See MBh.3.193–195, esp. MBh.3.193.24–27.

⁷⁴ Pollock, p. 510. A view that is completely substantiated by all the books of the epic, see Pollock, p. 512.

⁷⁵ Pollock, p. 522.

⁷⁶ MBh.5.10.29.

⁷⁷ MBh.5.10.36.

⁷⁸ MBh.5.10.38. At MBh.1.158.47–50, the *Vajra* shatters into a thousand pieces on striking Vṛtra. Those fragments are known as anything that is expedient (*sādhana*) on earth.

⁷⁹ See MBh.5.16.16. which reads; “After approaching the water, the foam was filled with the *tejas* of Viṣṇu, and by you Vṛtra was slain in the past, O king of the gods, O lord of the world!”

⁸⁰ It is also constructed from the bones of a brahman, and thus *brahmatejas*. See MBh.12.329.27, and MBh.12.329.41. For a lengthy description of the extreme nature of the *Vajra's tejas* and an interesting retelling of the *Vṛtra* myth, see MBh.14.11.9–17. cf. MBh.7.69.50–59.

⁸¹ Rām.6.97.29, 3095 (B)*1–4.

⁸² See Rām.7.61.26–28.

⁸³ *nedaṃ manuṣyāḥ śraddadhur na hīdaṃ teṣu vidyate*. MBh.4.59.36.

⁸⁴ cf. MBh.3.41.13–16, and MBh.1.123.74–77.

⁸⁵ cf. Rām.3.3.2, Rām.3.20.18, and Rām.6.59.25.

⁸⁶ Rām.3.62.6.

⁸⁷ Rām.1.75.1ff.

⁸⁸ Magnone, p. 146. He is here drawing upon the *Narasimha Purāna* 47.149–150.

⁸⁹ There are further indications that Rāma gains *tejas* from other sources. At Rām.1.66.1ff., Rāma strings and breaks a divine bow. Jan Gonda, *Ancient-Indian ojas, Latin *augos and the Indo-European nouns in -es/-os* (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek, 1952), p. 35, notes that when a bow is broken the warrior steals its various energy-substances.

⁹⁰ Rām.7.21.15. Note here that Rāvaṇa's celestial mansion, Puṣpaka, is protected by *brahmatejas*.

⁹¹ Rām.5.47.1ff.

⁹² Rām.7.10.18.

⁹³ Rām.6.70.32 and Rām.6.103.6. cf. Rām.4.63.11.

⁹⁴ cf. Rām.5.18.33.

⁹⁵ Pollock, p. 517.

⁹⁶ I have begun such an endeavour for my Ph.D. research – Jarrod L. Whitaker, “Ritual Metaphysics vs. Ritual Performance: An Account of Magic in the *Atharvaveda*.” Paper read at the *212th American Oriental Society Conference* (Houston, Texas, March 22–25, 2002) and a revised version read at the *3rd International Vedic Workshop, The Vedas: Texts, Language and Ritual* (Leiden, Netherlands, May 30–June 2, 2002).

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