

Vidura Speaks: A Study of the *Viduranīti* and its Reception History

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**Abstract**

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This thesis offers a close reading of an important yet neglected didactic text from the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*, namely the *Viduranīti*, which is a nocturnal politico-moral counsel of Vidura to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Adopting the currently prevalent trend in *Mahābhārata* scholarship, the received epic is approached as a work of literature by treating its didactic segments as constitutive parts of the unfolding narrative, rather than simply viewing the received epic as an outcome of later didactic accretions on a supposed earlier core narrative. As such, the *Viduranīti* is juxtaposed thematically with the epic's story, particularly with the epic's portrayal of Vidura, and structurally with other didactic portions of the epic and the entire epic as a whole. The former analysis reveals that both Vidura and the *Viduranīti* are centered around the categories of *dharma* and *artha*, while the latter exposes similarities in the literary architectonics of the *Viduranīti* and other didactic tracts. Finally, a case study investigates why the *Viduranīti* was canonized in a modern Hindu community. Situating this textual reframing in the modern socio-historical context, I argue for the need to focus on reception histories of early South Asian texts.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iii
Abbreviations .....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1. Scope of the thesis .....	1
1.2. Scholarly context and framework .....	4
1.3. Thesis outline .....	8
1.4. Working principle: A note on the text and translation.....	9
Part I: The World of the <i>Viduranīti</i> .....	11
Chapter 2: Vidura and the <i>Viduranīti</i> .....	12
2.1. Introduction.....	12
2.2. Synopsis of the <i>Viduranīti</i> .....	14
2.3. Unpacking and understanding Vidura .....	20
2.3.1. Vidura, the <i>dharmātmā</i> .....	20
2.3.2. Vidura, the <i>arthatattvajñāḥ</i> .....	25
2.4. Juxtaposing Vidura and his <i>nīti</i> counsel: <i>dharmārtha</i> as the leitmotif of the VN.....	30
2.5. Concluding remarks.....	37
Chapter 3: On the literary texture of the <i>Viduranīti</i> .....	39
3.1. Introduction.....	39
3.2. Framing the <i>Viduranīti</i> .....	40
3.3. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s interlocutory role.....	46
3.4. Vidura’s rhetorical repertoire.....	54
3.4.1. Contextual buildup .....	54

3.4.2. Contrastive corroboration .....	56
3.4.3. Retrospective accusation .....	57
3.4.4. Metaphoric elucidation .....	59
3.4.5. Tag phrasing .....	60
3.4.6. Numerical listing .....	60
3.4.7. Further sub-tales .....	62
3.5. Concluding remarks .....	66
Part II. <i>Viduranīti</i> in the World.....	68
Chapter 4: <i>Viduranīti</i> 's canonization in the Swaminarayana <i>sampradāya</i> .....	69
4.1. Introduction.....	69
4.2. Sahajānanda Svāmī and the Swaminarayana <i>sampradāya</i> .....	70
4.3. Swaminarayana canons and the VN .....	72
4.4. Context of the VN's deployment .....	75
4.5. Vidura's role in caste recalibrations .....	80
4.6. Concluding remarks .....	83
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future directions.....	85
Bibliography .....	88

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Vidura's comments with regard to the Pāṇḍavas and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's questions.....	48
Table 2: Context setup by Vidura while advocating for the Pāṇḍavas .....	55

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## Abbreviations

ĀDhP	<i>Āpaddharmaparvan</i>
MBh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
PCE	Poona Critical Edition
ŚP	<i>Śikṣāpatrī</i>
SSJ	<i>Satsaṅgījīvanam</i>
VA	<i>Vacanāmṛt</i>
VN	<i>Viduranīti</i>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The largest inadequacy in *Mahābhārata* scholarship... is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature.

-- Hildebeitel (1999, 156)

In order to make up for a large lacuna in Mbh scholarship, the didactic corpora must be taken up for study, and arguments must be advanced posing the question of their relationship to the Mbh, the question of their internal integrity, and the question of their meanings and intentions.

-- Bowles (2007, 35)

### 1.1. Scope of the thesis

Engaging several key issues raised in the field of *Mahābhārata* studies over the past few decades, this thesis focuses on one didactic text from the epic *Mahābhārata* (MBh), namely the *Viduranīti* (VN), which appears in the epic's fifth *parvan* (book), the *Udyogaparvan*. The MBh needs no introduction for anyone familiar with South Asian literature, culture, religion, or philosophy, thanks especially to the *Bhagavad Gītā* contained in the MBh, which is generally perceived as the core statement of Hindu religious thought and culture.<sup>1</sup> Some of the eighteen *parvans* of the epic have heretofore received much – although perhaps still not adequate – scholarly attention. For instance, the twelfth *parvan* of the MBh, the *Śāntiparvan*, and its constituent *upaparvans* (sub-books), especially the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* and the *Āpaddharmaparvan*, are among the well explored segments of the epic given the works of scholars such as James L. Fitzgerald (1980, 2004) and Adam Bowles (2007). In contrast, the

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<sup>1</sup> A reader unfamiliar with the MBh may find useful the concise summary provided by Brodbeck and Black (2007, 1–5).

*Udyogaparvan* has as yet been hardly studied even in a rudimentary manner, and this thesis seeks to engage this understudied *parvan*.

While putting forth several insightful observations about the *Śāntiparvan*, Fitzgerald argues that the *Śāntiparvan* fits well within the MBh's unfolding narrative as it is primarily concerned with the cooling down of Yudhiṣṭhira who is “dangerously overheated” with anguish and grief in the wake of the apocalyptic fratricidal war (2004, 95ff.). Mirroring this phenomenon in a reverse fashion, the *Udyogaparvan*, occurring just before the first war book (the *Bhīṣmaparvan*), is central to the epic's plot due to its buildup to the war. That is, it is from the *Udyogaparvan* that the ‘heat’ that Fitzgerald speaks of starts accumulating. Thus, the Sanskritist Patricia Greer rightly remarks in her brief analysis of some of the ethical dialogues of this *parvan*: “In the rising and falling action of the *Mahābhārata*, this fifth book is all ascent” (2005, 211), and she further adds: “one theme dominates *Udyogaparvan*, and one tone: terrifying unease” (2005, 214). To advance our understanding of this important *parvan*, and to get a flavor of the “terrifying unease” thematized within this *parvan*, this thesis focuses on one interesting ethical dialogue in the *Udyogaparvan*, the *Viduranīti*, which perhaps is – as will be explored in this thesis – the best window affording a look into the *Udyogaparvan*'s aesthetics of unease.

Being a component of the understudied *Udyogaparvan*, the *Viduranīti* too, has not received adequate and sustained scholarly attention. Patricia Greer (2005) and very recently James Hegarty (2019) have explored this text in juxtaposition with two other dialogues from the *Udyogaparvan*: the *Sanatsujātīya* or teachings of Sanatsujāta and the teachings of Vidurā.<sup>2</sup> Both of these scholars have offered some insightful remarks on the VN, which I will invoke in this thesis from time to time. However, as individual chapters in edited volumes, these papers

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<sup>2</sup> Hegarty seems to be unaware of Greer's work focusing on the very same dialogues analyzed in his paper.

analyze the VN at a more telescopic, zoomed-out level and from a comparative perspective as they try to tease out the intra-textual relationship among the said three dialogues of the *Udyogaparvan*. This thesis, in contrast, will offer a more focused and close reading of the VN, analyzing both its semantic content and literary structure. Hegarty’s paper importantly alludes to the idea that the VN’s coda captures some of the core instructions of the larger epic itself, that the “very words [appearing in the culmination of the VN] are used in verses offered at the very close of the *Mahābhārata* (at 18.5.47-50), which are said to be as instructive as the *Mahābhārata* itself (at 18.5.46)” (2019, 220). This crucial observation already promises the rewards one could reap from a close study of the VN.

Not only does the VN throw light, as Hegarty remarks, on the motivations and teachings of the overall MBh itself, it also sheds important light on the epic character Vidura whose ethico-moral teachings it contains. Unlike several central characters featuring in the MBh, such as Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsa, Arjuna, Karṇa, and Yudhiṣṭhira, who have been well examined in MBh scholarship, Vidura stands among those characters yet to be explored. This is particularly paradoxical considering that Vidura is commonly interpreted by the MBh readership as the only character who remains righteous throughout the epic.<sup>3</sup> Although they are not studies strictly focused on Vidura, we do have a few works by scholars such as Lisa Crothers (2005, 2013), Emily Hudson (2013), and Hegarty (2019) which make some preliminary but important comments on Vidura, especially in his role as Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s advisor.<sup>4</sup> This thesis attempts to take

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<sup>3</sup> See Section 2.1 for a detailed discussion of this aspect.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Crothers also engages the reception of Vidura in the *Vidhura-pañḍita jātaka* story where “the Buddhist creators of the *jātaka* conceive of him in Buddhist terms” (2013, 318).

a further step in advancing our understanding of Vidura, a character who continues to hold the imagination and interest of the epic's general readership.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2. Scholarly context and framework

Although dedicated to the study of only one section of the MBh, i.e. the *Viduranīti*, this thesis makes arguments that have far-reaching implications for some key issues raised in recent MBh scholarship. First and foremost, a study of the *Viduranīti* is worthwhile simply because the VN belongs to the much-neglected didactic corpus of the epic. Since the time of its inception in the nineteenth century, the field of MBh studies has largely been dominated by text-historical analyses, with one of the salient scholarly debates centering on the relationship between the MBh's "narrative" and "didactic" strands. To explain this debate briefly, two primary approaches have been taken in the field by scholars when discussing the epic's textual history: the so-called 'analytic' and 'synthetic' approaches. Broadly speaking, while the 'analysts' proffer that the received epic is a result of didactic accretions (making up the so-called "pseudo-epic") on a core nucleus of heroic narrative (the putative "*Urepos*"), the 'synthetists' argue for an organic wholeness of the transmitted epic.<sup>6</sup> This text-historical focus has in turn problematized the study of the epic's didactic corpus; as Bowles recently noted, the tendency to concentrate on the heroic narrative "concomitantly relegate[d] the didactic corpora to an ancillary status at best, or to

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Crothers notes the "popular Brahmanical assumptions about the import of the counsel of Vidura" by citing the publication of a collation of Vidura's counsels (from the MBh's *Anuśāsana-* and *Sabhāparvans*) by "Brahmanical Indian scholars (Vidyaratnam P. N. Menon, editor) in the first decades of the twentieth century" (2013, 507). As a recent example of this "continuing interest and impulse" in Vidura and his teachings, Crothers cites Sampath (2002).

<sup>6</sup> The "didactic" corpus referred here includes all the instructional (philosophical, ethical, etc.) segments of the epic. For a quick overview of the 'analytic' and 'synthetic' attitudes, see Brodbeck (2011, 223–24), and for a more detailed presentation, Bowles (2007, 16–34).

completely exclude them at worst” (2007, 405).<sup>7</sup> The as yet understudied VN is a didactic text from the epic that is clearly emblematic of this issue.

To be sure, as Bowles too rightly notes (2007, 16), a clarification is warranted here: what is lacking is not a complete neglect of the didactic tracts. Some of these pieces have been utilized as sources for, say, reconstructing Indian intellectual history. But there is a dearth of scholarship that reads these didactic sections as constitutive parts of the epic and in juxtaposition with the epic’s narrative, thus leading to the skewed focus in epic studies that Bowles cautions against. Prompted by similar well-founded warnings extended by contemporary MBh experts, this thesis explores the VN while treating it as a constitutive feature of the MBh and as a part of the epic’s unfolding narrative, rather than as a later accretion resulting from authorial redactions. This framework has particular relevance for exploring the intra-textual relationship between the epic’s story and didactic materials. Scholars such as Greg Bailey (1983), Bimal Krishna Matilal (1989), Mukund Lath (1990), and recently Angelika Malinar (2017a, 2017b) have already shown that the epic’s narrative and didactic materials are inextricably intertwined, thereby arguing about the artificiality in such bifurcation of the epic fabric.<sup>8</sup> This thesis investigates – and corroborates – this argument by studying in tandem Vidura himself as depicted in the epic’s plot, and his ethical teachings as captured in the didactic VN.

Going hand in hand with these text historical perspectives about the epic’s narrative and didactic strands is the attitude that scholars bear while assessing the nature of the epic’s composition. Not only did several early players in the field of MBh studies bemoan and criticize

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<sup>7</sup> Also see Bowles’s comment cited in the chapter’s epigraph. As noted already, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Śāntiparvan* are important exceptions.

<sup>8</sup> Some citations from the quoted works are provided in Section 2.5 as they are important to bear in mind alongside the arguments made there.

the bewildering length of the epic,<sup>9</sup> intense efforts of intellectual autopsy were undertaken by them on the received epic to assert and uncover various chronological layers in the text. This “excavationist” approach, as Fitzgerald puts it (2003, 812), resulted in a concomitant lack of appreciation of the received text as a literary product.<sup>10</sup> The field has however taken a new direction at the turn of this century, largely thanks to Alf Hiltebeitel’s theories and arguments since the late 1990’s, especially to his oft-quoted remark that “the largest inadequacy in *Mahābhārata* scholarship... is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature” (1999, 156), and to his work, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata* (2001). In the wake of Hiltebeitel’s lead, as Emily Hudson notes, there has been a vigorous interest in viewing the epic as literature:

Several scholars have taken advantage of the new interpretive possibilities... Adam Bowles’s *Dharma, Disorder, and the Political in Ancient India*, for example, approaches the *Āpaddharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* as a unitary work of literature and explores the poetic techniques that make it a cohesive unit. In *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage*, Arti Dhand, interpreting the *Mahābhārata* as a “bounded literary work unified by considerable thematic coherence,” presents a critical study of sexuality in the epic. Finally, Simon Brodbeck’s *The Mahābhārata Patriline* approaches the epic as “an integral literary unit” in order to investigate the relationship between the text’s internal narrators and the members of the family whose story they tell.<sup>11</sup> (Hudson 2013, 5–6)

Hudson also discusses in her *Disorienting Dharma* how the MBh “functions as a work of literature to convey ethical meaning” (2013, 6). To be sure, it is important to note, as Aditya Adarkar reminds us, that while academic scholarship is only now approaching the MBh as a

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the famous (or notorious) remarks are only too well-known in the field now: Moriz Winternitz viewed the epic as a “literary monster” (1908, 326), and Hermann Oldenberg as a “monstrous chaos” (1922, 1).

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to notice this phenomenon – that is, an obsession of how a text came to be to the neglect of its literary study – even in other areas of Sanskrit studies. For instance, much of early scholarship on the so-called Trivandrum plays attributed to Bhāsa has focused on issues of authorship and dating, leading later scholars such as Heidrun Brückner to observe that “detailed literary analyses and appreciation of the dramas are still wanting” (1999, 503 n.4).

<sup>11</sup> References are to Bowles (2007), Dhand (2008, 18), and Brodbeck (2009). For several additional examples, see Hudson (2013, 6 n.10).

form of literature, the “Sanskrit tradition, as well as the Mahābhārata itself, has viewed the epic holistically... the popular view has been that it was written by an author, Vyāsa, and that it is sustained by a unified aesthetic vision” (2008, 305). This thesis inherits this traditional – and current academic – legacy of regarding the MBh as a work of literature. As such, the VN is explored with respect to not only its semantic content and thought but also its literary texture and architectonics.

In addition to an exploration of the VN from within the epic’s textual landscape, this thesis studies the reception of the VN in a contemporary lived religious setting. Reception histories of South Asian texts are only recently receiving the attention they deserve. As Deven Patel noted in his study of the commentarial reception of the classical Sanskrit *mahākāvya* (lit. great poem) *Naiṣadhīyacarita*, scholars have “rarely ventured to address how an indigenous literary tradition received and *experienced* one of its key texts” (2014, 1; emphasis in original). This “poverty in our historical comprehension” however extends beyond the reading and commentarial communities that Patel considers, as there is a similar dearth of scholarship exploring how early South Asian texts have been received, appropriated, and reframed throughout history in different religious, political, performative and other spaces. In other words, the reception histories of South Asian texts are still areas of research that are as yet hardly tapped by scholars. For instance, speaking of the *Ramāyaṇa*, Sheldon Pollock writes about the need to study the history of the epic’s reception:

If earlier criticism concentrated on the epic's "genetic history" and dismembered the work in the search for its primal components, we might now want to take its "receptive history" more centrally into consideration: approaching the epic as a whole, in conformity with the traditional mode of reception, and seeing how it works as a whole can reveal a dimension of the poem's meaning easily as significant as any derived from considering the elements of its genesis. For understanding the work includes, and maybe principally

so, understanding what it may have meant in Indian social, intellectual, and cultural history. (Pollock 1991, 5–6)

Likewise, new directions in the study of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are looking at “two overlapping themes, namely, ‘the world of the Bhāgavata’, which is to say the horizon of ideas and narratives found within the text, as well as ‘the Bhāgavata in the world’, that is, the ways in which the text has shaped and been shaped by the manifold contexts in which it has flourished” (Gupta and Valpey 2018, 2). Inspired by approaches such as these, while two-thirds of this thesis situates the VN in the world of the MBh, the remaining third explores the reception of the VN in a modern context.

### **1.3. Thesis outline**

Prompted by the new directions in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* studies noted in the foregoing paragraph, this thesis is organized into two parts: the first focuses on ‘the world of the *Viduranīti*’ and the second on ‘the *Viduranīti* in the world’. In Part I, consisting of chapters 2 and 3, the main methodology employed is to approach a didactic text such as the VN as a constituent part of the *Mahābhārata*. In chapter 2, after providing a synopsis of the VN, I analyze the epic’s characterization of the VN’s speaker, that is, Vidura. This understanding of Vidura’s portrayal in the MBh facilitates a juxtaposition of the epic’s narrative and didactic strands, and I argue that the narrative episodes centered on Vidura and the teachings of Vidura as captured in the VN are patterned along the same themes and motifs.

Chapter 3 continues to situate the VN within the MBh framework, but from a different lens. While I place the VN in conversation with the epic’s narrative in chapter 2, in chapter 3 I explore the VN in juxtaposition with other didactic texts of the epic and the epic as a whole. Additionally, while chapter 2 focuses on the semantic *content and themes* of the VN, chapter 3

engages the literary *structure and presentation* of the text. Here I throw light on how the VN adopts – but tweaks – the frame conventions of the larger epic and how the VN’s immediate audience, that is, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, plays a central role in steering the thematic arc of the text.

Part II brings us to the modern period as I investigate the VN’s reception in the Swaminarayana *sampradāya* (tradition), a religious community founded in present-day Gujarat at the turn of the nineteenth century. The singular instance of the VN’s canonization in this tradition is examined to reveal the text’s appeal for this modern religious group. This case study highlights the influence of socio-cultural and political contexts on the way an ancient text is reinterpreted by its later audience.

#### **1.4. Working principle: A note on the text and translation**

As noted already, the MBh’s synchronous artistic integrity is a working principle for this thesis. This working hypothesis, employed by much of MBh scholarship emerging in this century, has been greatly facilitated by the establishment of the epic’s critical edition, generally called the Poona Critical Edition (PCE), in the last century by the team of editors at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Poona. The text followed in this thesis is the reconstituted text of the PCE which was, broadly speaking, collated from what was common in the manuscripts studied by the Poona team. No arguments about ideas of historical layering of the reconstituted text are made in this thesis. Additionally, while I have frequently consulted the critical apparatus of the PCE, that is, the variant readings of the text, the variants did not seem to affect any arguments made in this thesis, so that the variant readings are only occasionally incorporated in the discussions here. Indeed, the *Udyogaparvan*’s editor from the Poona team, Sushil Kumar De, has already noted that the divergences between the *Udyogaparvan*’s two

manuscript recensions – i.e., the Northern and Southern recensions<sup>12</sup> – are not as prominent as in the case of some other *parvans*:

“*the two recensions do not recede very materially from each other*; and this is a feature which distinguishes the Udyoga from some other books of the epic... The divergences between the two recensions, therefore, are mostly confined to inevitable differences of reading, variations of words, phrases or half-stanzas, a certain number of transpositions or substitutions of *pādas* and stanzas, and some scattered minor confluences which are easily separable. Thus, the additions and deviations are happily not of such an exceptional, extensive or baffling character as to affect or alter the entire aspect of the text.” (De 1940, xxv; emphasis in original)

In short, for the purposes of this thesis, we need not worry about the variant readings.<sup>13</sup>

All the translations provided in this thesis are mine, but I am indebted to the translations of J.A.B. van Buitenen (1978) and Bibek Debroy (2011), which I have referred to from time to time.

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<sup>12</sup> The PCE’s general editor, V. S. Sukthankar, divided the manuscript material of the first *parvan* to be edited, the *Ādiparvan*, into these two recensions, see Sukthankar (1933, vii). This division was deemed relevant by the editors of almost all other *parvans* except the *Sabhāparvan*, where the editor, Franklin Edgerton, saw the need for grouping the manuscripts into three recensions: Western, Eastern, and Southern. For a concise presentation of the stemmata developed for different *parvans*, see Adluri and Bagchee (2018, 393–96).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth emphasizing again that the variant readings are less relevant – although I have always checked them – only considering the goals of this thesis. The variants are certainly significant if one wishes to focus on, say, the transmission of the text within manuscript traditions itself, as has been briefly attempted by Hegarty (2019, 214–16).

**Part I: The World of the *Viduran̄ti***

## Chapter 2: Vidura and the *Viduranīti*

It seems that instead of telling us how people *should* behave, *Mahābhārata* shows how different types of people *actually* act and tend to morally defend their own actions. Crooked people would obviously adopt questionable means of self-justification. But in the *Mahābhārata* we also find characters like Vidura, who, more than anyone else, seems to be the very embodiment of righteousness and moral wisdom. Among the numerous stories of deceit and betrayal, greed and passion, cruelty and vengeance, his words to Dhṛtarāṣṭra seem to serve as the beacon light of morality when he says that one should not give up *dharma* in the face of lust, fear, avarice or the desire for living; because *dharma* is eternal, while pleasure and pain are ephemeral (*Udyogaparvan* 40.11–12).

-- Sen (2014, 201; italics in original, underlined emphasis added)

### 2.1. Introduction

There has been a tendency in scholarship to simply dismiss a didactic text from the *Mahābhārata* as a hodgepodge of pedagogical ideas and instructions. The same phenomenon can be noticed in the case of the *Viduranīti*, which has often been viewed as a mishmash of politico-moral ideas.<sup>14</sup> While this view seems to be a natural result of the discursive nature of the text, there are few studies interested in distilling the essence of the text and then assessing its nature. This chapter makes an attempt in this direction, but at the same time, care is taken to avoid any simplistic essentialization of the text as that would undesirably flatten its semantic and thematic diversity.

In order to promote an understanding – and appreciation – of the *Viduranīti*, this chapter is primarily concerned with several key aspects of the text including its contents, prominent

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, van Buitenen sees the VN as “Vidura’s relentlessly incessant rainy-season pitter-patter of peanuts of wisdom that should have lulled to sleep the most insomniac of worriers. The theme is all too familiar to readers of didactic Sanskrit: the blessings of virtue, the perils of vice. For this literature not only does not shy away from repetitiousness and redundancy, it is blissfully aware of it” (1978, 180).

motifs and themes, and the aptness of classifying it as a *nīti* text. Additionally, any examination of a didactic text such as the VN should include a study of the interlocutory actors – that is, the speaker, audience, and any intermediaries there may be – involved in the didactic text, and particularly so of the speaker who delivers the didactic sermon. Thus, the epic’s characterization of Vidura is another important subject discussed in this chapter.<sup>15</sup>

The character Vidura and the text *Viduranīti* are clearly interlinked by the fact that it is Vidura who speaks this *nīti* sermon. However, Vidura and the VN rely on each other in more than just this obvious manner. In the passage quoted in the epigraph above, Prabal Kumar Sen makes an important observation that Vidura acts in the *Mahābhārata* as the “very embodiment of righteousness” and that Vidura’s teachings in the *Viduranīti* emphasize that one must practice righteousness (*dharma*) at all costs. This observation shows how the characterization of Vidura in the MBh and the teachings of Vidura in the VN convey a parallel message about the non-negotiability of following *dharma*. Sen’s remark further signals that the VN does not simply embed Vidura’s teachings but also encodes the principles guiding Vidura’s own personal conduct as seen throughout the epic. Exploring this consonance (or lack thereof) in Vidura’s actions in the epic and his pedagogy in the VN is also one of the primary concerns of this chapter. But first, I begin with presenting a bird’s-eye view of the contents of the VN since this lays the groundwork for further analysis of the text.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A study of the VN’s immediate audience Dhṛtarāṣṭra is undertaken in the next chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Owing to the discursive nature of the text, any attempt to summarize the VN can do so only in very broad strokes. In providing this synopsis, I am particularly indebted to van Buitenen’s summary of the text (1978, 254–55).

## 2.2. Synopsis of the *Viduranīti*

The *Viduranīti* is a more common name for the *Prajāgara-(upa)parvan* or the Book of the Vigil (MBh 5.33-41)<sup>17</sup> in the *Udyogaparvan* or the Book of Effort of the *Mahābhārata* (Book 5). The VN is preceded by the *Sañjayayāna-(upa)parvan* which describes the embassy of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer and bard Sañjaya to the Pāṇḍavas (MBh 5.22-32), and followed by the *Sanatsujāta-(upa)parvan* that describes the Brahmin sage Sanatsujāta's soteriological teachings to Dhṛtarāṣṭra (MBh 5.42-45).

In the *Sañjayayānaparvan*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends Sañjaya as a *dūta* (ambassador) to the Pāṇḍavas at the completion of their exile with “a double purpose of making a courtesy call – after all, his [Dhṛtarāṣṭra's] nephews the Pāṇḍavas have been gone for thirteen years – and finding out what Yudhiṣṭhira's demands really are” (van Buitenen 1978, 133). As an envoy, Sañjaya learns about the Pāṇḍavas' insistence on having their kingdom back. In the last *adhyāya* of this *upaparvan* (MBh 5.32), Sañjaya returns to Hāstinapura, meets Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and berates the king for his blind attachment to his sons. And at the end, explaining that he needs rest after his tiring journey back to the kingdom, he declares that he would relate the message of the eldest Pāṇḍava Yudhiṣṭhira in the royal assembly the next morning. The events of the *Prajāgaraparvan* (and the subsequent *Sanatsujātaparvan*) take place at this point in the epic, that is, during the sleepless night that Dhṛtarāṣṭra spends in anxiety worrying about Yudhiṣṭhira's message, whence the *parvan*'s title *prajāgara*, i.e., Vigil.

In the first *adhyāya* of the VN (MBh 5.33), Dhṛtarāṣṭra summons (via his doorkeeper) his half-brother and minister Vidura. And upon Vidura's arrival, Dhṛtarāṣṭra tells him that he is

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<sup>17</sup> I follow the standard convention in citing the text of the MBh which involves a specification of the *parvan* (book), followed by the *adhyāya* (chapter), and followed by the *śloka* (verse). Here, MBh 5.33-41 refers to complete *adhyāyas* 33 to 41 in the fifth *parvan* of the MBh.

panic-stricken at the report that Sañjaya is to deliver the next morning and that he is unable to sleep on this account. He asks for Vidura’s counsel on what is beneficial for a sleepless person, thereby eliciting the long *nīti* sermon from Vidura.<sup>18</sup> After a pointed and criticizing comment on what kind of people suffer from insomnia, Vidura explains at length the traits of a wise person (*pañḍita*) and a fool (*mūḍha*).<sup>19</sup> This is followed by a rather lengthy – and perhaps mnemonically constructed – discourse on numerically listed things that come in ones, twos, threes, and so on, through tens.<sup>20</sup> Peculiarly, these verses do not reveal any connecting logic in their contents or themes apart from grouping together lists containing the same number of entities. Vidura then delineates the qualities of a good ruler, followed by those of a virtuous person in general,<sup>21</sup> and finally concludes by entreating Dhṛtarāṣṭra to return the kingdom of the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>22</sup>

The next *adhyāya* (MBh 5.34) has Vidura explicating further, upon Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s plea for further teachings, on the qualities of a wise man and a judicious king – this time in terms of ideas dealing with the relationship (*anubandha*) between actions (*karma*) and their consequences (*vipāka*).<sup>23</sup> The doctrine is illustrated using a series of examples<sup>24</sup> followed by several practical instructions for successfully operating in the world.<sup>25</sup> Next, the importance of following *dharma* in the acquiring, protecting, and strengthening of a kingdom is emphasized.<sup>26</sup> A hodgepodge of disparate ideas are then proffered in a series of verses which seem to lack any connecting theme,

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<sup>18</sup> MBh 5.33.1-12

<sup>19</sup> MBh 5.33.13-40

<sup>20</sup> MBh 5.33.41-83. See Section 3.4.6 for a discussion of this set of verses.

<sup>21</sup> MBh 5.33.85-88 and MBh 5.33.89-102

<sup>22</sup> MBh 5.33.103-104

<sup>23</sup> MBh 5.34.1-12

<sup>24</sup> MBh 5.34.13-18

<sup>25</sup> MBh 5.34.19-24

<sup>26</sup> MBh 5.34.25-29

except that at some points they seem to be concerned about cultivating good habits like humility and discipline.<sup>27</sup> In a few ensuing verses the diet, appetite, and fears of the rich, the middling, and the poor classes are briefly mentioned.<sup>28</sup> For a good while then, Vidura underscores the salience of *indriyanigraha* (sense control) and *vāksaṃyama* (control over speech by speaking kind and non-abusive words).<sup>29</sup> In light of these teachings about the need to master the senses and control the speech, the *adhyāya* ends with a criticism of the Kauravas and a glorification of the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>30</sup>

Further encouraged by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura continues his discourse in the next *adhyāya* (MBh 5.35) with a sustained discussion on the virtue of *ārjava* (honesty). This teaching on *ārjava* also includes as a sub-tale an *itihāsaṃ purātanam* (ancient story) that drives home the point that honesty should be pursued even at the cost of the life of one's son.<sup>31</sup> The remainder of the *adhyāya* is again an extended series of verses lacking any coherent theme other than that they are all morally- and at times politically-charged and focus on various virtues like absence of envy (*anasūya*).<sup>32</sup> The *adhyāya* again closes with criticizing the Kauravas and praising the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>33</sup>

The next *adhyāya* (MBh 5.36) again offers another *itihāsaṃ purātanam* – a dialogue between Ātreya and the Sādhyas – that largely revisits and builds upon some instructions and themes from the previous *adhyāyas*, such as the virtue of *titikṣā* (endurance), absence of

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<sup>27</sup> MBh 5.34.30-46

<sup>28</sup> MBh 5.34.47-50

<sup>29</sup> MBh 5.34.51-68 and 5.34.69-77

<sup>30</sup> MBh 5.34.78-83

<sup>31</sup> MBh 5.35.1-32. This sub-tale is discussed further in the next chapter; see section 3.4.7.

<sup>32</sup> MBh 5.35.33-65

<sup>33</sup> MBh 5.35.66-67

*vākpāruṣya* (i.e., absence of harsh speech), *samasvabhāva* (equanimity), and so on.<sup>34</sup> On Dhṛtarāṣṭra's query, Vidura now elucidates what it is that makes a family a *mahākula* (great family), then, conversely, on how families lose status. He then follows it up with ideas on the art of making friends and on the futility of *saṃtāpah* (grief).<sup>35</sup> The discourse continues with teachings on how to find *śānti* (peace), and in this context Vidura denounces alienation of and discord among kinsmen.<sup>36</sup> This discussion naturally dovetails again into Vidura's plea for the Pāṇḍavas' cause, and with this, the *adhyāya* draws to a close.<sup>37</sup>

The next *adhyāya* (MBh 5.37) starts off with a listing of seventeen kinds of people who engage in futile actions, closing this list with a piece of advice on how people *should* act in the world.<sup>38</sup> Dhṛtarāṣṭra's question on why the human lifespan is not hundred years as the Vedas proclaim prompts Vidura to preach on diverse moral ideas ranging from ignoble qualities that must be shunned to virtues that must be inculcated.<sup>39</sup> A more politically oriented counsel focused on the attributes of a good minister is then offered, especially noting that a minister who has his king's welfare in mind must give the right counsel even if it is unpleasant for his master to hear. Vidura neatly capitalizes on this opportunity and includes a few words endorsing Pāṇḍavas' right to their kingdom.<sup>40</sup> Next, the focus is on how a king must treat his *bhṛtya* (servant) and select his *dūta* (envoy),<sup>41</sup> followed by some very generic moral advice on how an average person should

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<sup>34</sup> MBh 5.36.1-21

<sup>35</sup> MBh 5.36.22-46

<sup>36</sup> MBh 5.36.47-67

<sup>37</sup> MBh 5.36.68-72

<sup>38</sup> MBh 5.37.1-7

<sup>39</sup> MBh 5.37.8-13

<sup>40</sup> MBh 5.37.14-19

<sup>41</sup> MBh 5.37.20-27

operate in the world.<sup>42</sup> Vidura again reminds Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the evil in alienating the Pāṇḍavas and explains the importance of pursuing *dharma* and *artha* simultaneously.<sup>43</sup> *Prajñā* (wisdom) is extolled as the greatest among five kinds of strength.<sup>44</sup> Finally the *adhyāya* closes by advocating for the Pāṇḍavas' merits and rights.<sup>45</sup>

*Adhyāya* 5.38 engages diverse ideas spanning the themes of hospitality, equanimity, diet, the power of wisdom, treasures worthy of protection, and the qualities of noble men.<sup>46</sup> A shrewd king is explained as one whose counsel remains secret, who is wise in carrying out the affairs of his state, who is astute in the maintenance and expansion of his treasury, and so on.<sup>47</sup> After another stretch of verses loosely dealing with various virtues and vices, as well as with factors by which one's fortune increases or dwindles, the *adhyāya* ends with yet another appeal in Pāṇḍavas' favor.<sup>48</sup>

Dhṛtarāṣṭra insists once more in the next *adhyāya* (MBh 5.39) that Vidura continue while also admitting his incapacity to abandon his son; Vidura, however, reiterates that men devoid of virtues must be avoided.<sup>49</sup> Asserting also that kinsmen in adversity should be assisted, Vidura beseeches Dhṛtarāṣṭra to give at least some villages to the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>50</sup> A discussion on different virtues like patience and forgiveness, an exposition on good manners, a reiteration of the doctrine of *karma* and the concepts of *dharma* and *artha*, and several other miscellaneous ideas follow in

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<sup>42</sup> MBh 5.37.28-37

<sup>43</sup> MBh 5.37.38-47

<sup>44</sup> MBh 5.37.48-54

<sup>45</sup> MBh 5.37.55-60

<sup>46</sup> MBh 5.38.1-14

<sup>47</sup> MBh 5.38.15-26

<sup>48</sup> MBh 5.38.27-44

<sup>49</sup> MBh 5.39.1-14

<sup>50</sup> MBh 5.39.15-30

a series of verses that eventually ends by exhorting the king to treat the Pāṇḍavas as his own sons.<sup>51</sup>

The following *adhyāya* (MBh 5.40) similarly starts with a kaleidoscopic range of ideas like skillful but unattached action, incompatibility between wisdom- and pleasure-seeking, and auspicious things to be kept in one's house.<sup>52</sup> Now Vidura gives the *sarvaparam* (highest) advice on the non-negotiability of pursuing the eternal *dharma* in this fleeting life with its concomitant cycles of ephemeral pleasure and pain. He also glorifies contentment as the ultimate virtue and reminds Dhṛtarāṣṭra that upon death one is accompanied only by the merits and sins one has accrued.<sup>53</sup> After a small set of disconnected verses, there is a discussion of the duties of the *cāturvarṇa* (four classes, viz., brāhmins, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas, and śūdras), at which point Vidura implores Dhṛtarāṣṭra for Yudhiṣṭhira's re-coronation, but Dhṛtarāṣṭra still confesses his inability to do so.<sup>54</sup>

The last *adhyāya* of the VN (MBh 5.41) is the shortest with only eleven verses. This *adhyāya* mainly serves as a transition to the following *Sanatsujātaparvan*. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra demands teachings that still remain to be shared, Vidura pleads his ineligibility to instruct Dhṛtarāṣṭra on higher matters of *mokṣa* (liberation) due to his *śūdra* origins and recommends him to Sanatsujāta<sup>55</sup> for further counseling. Vidura now mentally summons the sage, offers

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<sup>51</sup> MBh 5.39.31-70

<sup>52</sup> MBh 5.40.1-10

<sup>53</sup> MBh 5.40.11-17

<sup>54</sup> MBh 5.40.18-30

<sup>55</sup> Sanatsujāta belongs to the group of four eternal youths conceived from Brahmā's mind; the other three are Sanaka, Sanātana, and Sanatkumāra. These sages feature most prominently in the various Purāṇas, while Sanatkumāra is also famously seen in the seventh *prapāṭhaka* (book) of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, where he teaches sage Nārada about *brahman* (Vedāntic term referring to the substratum or underlying principle of the entire universe).

hospitality upon the sage's arrival, requests that the sage speak to the king, and thus passes the mantle of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's instructor on to Sanatsujāta.

### 2.3. Unpacking and understanding Vidura

As noted in the introduction to this thesis,<sup>56</sup> there is still a dearth of scholarship studying several major characters from the epic, including Vidura. While exploring Vidura at length is beyond the scope of the present work, some key MBh episodes associated with Vidura and germane to the present work are discussed here. More specifically, I focus on two important narrative nodes of Vidura's characterization, namely the events surrounding his birth and the episodes throwing light on his relationship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as they illuminate some important aspects of Vidura's *nīti* counsel. Additionally, I explore some other instances from the epic narrative that feature Vidura and that have interesting conversations with and implications for the teachings embedded in the VN.

#### 2.3.1. Vidura, the *dharmātmā*

In contrast to immoral actions performed at some point by most characters of the epic, Vidura is commonly perceived by the epic's readership as the single character that remains righteous throughout. For instance, Crothers remarks that "Vidura was one of the few characters in the *Mahābhārata* whose dharmic character was not consistently challenged; the text was claiming for Vidura that he was always on the side of *dharmā*" (2013, 319).<sup>57</sup> This aspect of Vidura's persona is justified, or rather necessitated, by the epic narrative itself by a legend

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<sup>56</sup> See section 1.1

<sup>57</sup> Also see this chapter's epigraph for another scholar's remark along the same lines.

related to Vidura's birth, according to which he was the incarnation of Dharma. According to the legend, which occurs in an abridged form at MBh 1.57.77-81 and in a detailed manner in *adhyāya* 1.101, a sage by name Māṇḍavya, though innocent, was once impaled on a stake (*aṅī*) on suspicion of theft, whence he came to be known as Aṅīmāṇḍavya.<sup>58</sup> In course of time, the sage summons Dharma and enquires what bad act he had performed to receive such retribution. Learning from Dharma that as a boy he stuck reed stalks in the tails of insects, Aṅīmāṇḍavya becomes indignant about being punished for some boyhood mischief and curses Dharma to be born in the *yoni* (womb) of a *sūdra*.<sup>59</sup> However, this birth in a *sūdrayoni* does not deprive Dharma of his dharmic *svabhāva*; the narrative of the Aṅīmāṇḍavya legend immediately certifies that Dharma's incarnation Vidura is a *dhārmī*, i.e., a righteous person (MBh 1.57.81, 1.101.27-28):

*tena śāpena dharmo 'pi sūdrayonāv ajāyata |*  
*vidvān vidurarūpeṇa dhārmī tanur akilbiṣī ||*

By that curse even Dharma was born in the womb of a *sūdra*, as a wise, dharmic, and sinless body in the form of Vidura.

*etena tvaparādhena śāpāt tasya mahātmanah |*  
*dharmo vidurarūpeṇa sūdrayonāv ajāyata ||*  
*dharme cārthe ca kuśalo lobhakrodhavivarjitaḥ |*  
*dīrghadarśī śamaparaḥ kurūṅaṃ ca hite rataḥ ||*

But on account of this offence, due to the curse of that noble spirited [Aṅīmāṇḍavya], Dharma was born in the womb of a *sūdra* in the form of Vidura. He was expert in *dharmā* and *artha*, devoid of greed and anger, far-sighted, tranquil, and devoted to the welfare of the Kurus.

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<sup>58</sup> For various iterations of this legend in different *Purāṇas*, and interestingly in Kauṭilya's *Arthasāstra* and some Buddhist sources, see Kantawala (1995). The story has also been analyzed by Wezler (1997) and Hildebeitel (2001, 192–95).

<sup>59</sup> The sage also stipulates a limit (*maryādā*) on the fruition of *dharmā* (*dharmaphalodaya*) that henceforth no mistake committed before the age of fourteen should be counted as sin (MBh 1.101.26).

Clearly, then, in both the abridged and extended versions of the Aṅīmāṇḍavya tale, Vidura, as an incarnation of Dharma, is stated to be predisposed to following the path of *dharma*. Additionally, one reads in these verses that Vidura is also skilled in *artha* (polity, profit, etc). This is another crucial dimension of Vidura's persona to which I will return in the next section.

Besides the Aṅīmāṇḍavya tale that makes Vidura predisposed to *dharma*, the manner in which Dharma is actually born in the Kuru family as the human Vidura lends further explanation for Vidura's wisdom and dharmic acts. The story, told in MBh 1.97-100, is a familiar one dealing with the recurring and often intertwined epic motifs of lineage crisis and *niyoga* (levirate) practice. *Niyoga*, derived from *ni+√yuj* meaning 'appoint to, appoint someone as', is the practice where a (typically *brahmin*) male is appointed to procreate a son on another's widow or wife for the purpose of perpetuating the latter's family line.<sup>60</sup> This practice prescribed for times of exigency is invoked at several critical junctures in the epic story and results in the birth of many major characters of the epic. However, the *niyoga* episode that leads to Vidura's birth is peculiar and singular as in this case both the male and the female partners are appointed as surrogates, making Vidura sort of a grand paradox in genealogical terms. The story is briefly recapitulated below.

When the king Vicitravīrya, the only surviving son of Śantanu and Satyawatī, dies childless, Satyawatī is distressed over the dynastic crisis faced by the now kingless Kuru kingdom. She immediately asks Vicitravīrya's stepbrother Bhīṣma to assume the throne or to sleep with his brother's widows for the sake of progeny, invoking the practice of *niyoga*. But upon Bhīṣma's refusal to revoke his vows of relinquishment and celibacy, Satyawatī realizes that

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<sup>60</sup> For useful discussions of the *niyoga* practice in the MBh, and the eventual stigmatization of the practice in the *Dharmaśāstras*, see Kantawala (1989), Sutherland (1990), and Doniger (2000, 248ff.).

Vyāsa, her premarital son fathered by the sage Parāśara, is the suitable candidate for *niyoga*. Summoning Vyāsa, Satyavatī asks Vicitravīrya’s two young widows, Ambikā and Ambālikā, to lie with Vyāsa. Although there is now some hope of preserving the line, unfortunately, Vyāsa’s unkempt and smelly presence is too much for both the queens; during their respective nights with the sage, Ambikā closes her eyes in fright, while Ambālikā pales. Consequently, these *niyoga* encounters result in the birth of the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the pale Paṇḍu, who are otherwise mighty and illustrious. Satyavatī, not completely happy with the outcomes so far, again urges Ambikā to spend another night with Vyāsa. The queen, however, is terrified at the prospect of sleeping with Vyāsa again and instead dispatches a *dasī* (maid-servant) posing as the queen in Vyāsa’s attendance.<sup>61</sup> In contrast with the queens, the anonymous maid humbly honors and sleep with the sage, and he, pleased with her, blesses her at the end of the night as follows (MBh 1.100.26-27):

*uttiṣṭhann abravīd enām abhujīṣyā bhaviṣyasi |  
 ayaṃ ca te śubhe garbhaḥ śrīmān udaram āgataḥ |  
 dharmātmā bhavitā loke sarvabuddhimatām varaḥ ||  
 sa jajñe viduro nāma kṛṣṇadvaipāyanātmaḥ |  
 dhṛtarāṣṭrasya ca bhrātā pāṇḍoś cāmitabuddhimān ||*

[Vyāsa] said to her as he got up: “You will cease to be a slave, and this illustrious child has come to your belly, O charming one. He will be devoted to *dharma* and become the best of all intelligent men in the world.” That son of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana [Vyāsa], Vidura by name was born, whose brilliance had no limit, brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu.

The text thus makes it clear that, owing to the manner in which the *dāsī* performed the task that was assigned to her, she begets the child Vidura who is not just devoid of any defects but is blessed to be extremely wise (*amitabuddhimān*). In other words, as Arti Dhand’s (2004, 2018)

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<sup>61</sup> In her typical amusing style, Wendy Doniger refers to this episode as one of the epic’s “bedtricks” (2000, 251).

reading of this narrative convincingly demonstrates, whereas Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Paṇḍu would bear the defects of blindness and pallor due to their mothers' faults (*mātuḥ vaigunṃyāt*, MBh 1.100.10), the obedience, equanimity, and detachment with which the maid carries out the duty assigned to her makes her, as it were, a true *karmayogin*, and her virtues predispose her son Vidura to likewise be tranquil and virtuous.<sup>62</sup> This account of Vidura's birth by a *śūdra* maid is also what is responsible for the label often used to identify him: *kṣattrī*, a term signifying either the son born from a *kṣatriya-śūdra* union or the son of a female slave.<sup>63</sup>

To summarize, Vidura's birth appears to be situated at the intersection of both a curse (from Anīmāṇḍavya to Dharma) and a blessing (from Vyāsa to the *dāsī*). Where Vidura's previous incarnation connects, or rather identifies him with Dharma, his present incarnation associates him with the *śūdra* class. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, these two facets of Vidura have important implications on the *Viduranīti*: while Vidura's connection to Dharma validates and legitimizes his *nīti* counsel, his *śūdra* association delimits the counsel to praxeological matters of *dharma* and *artha* and excludes soteriological teachings of *mokṣa* (release from the cycle of rebirth).

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<sup>62</sup> This *dāsī* mother of Vidura has her own reception history: she is lionized in a modern Bangla play *Anāmnī Anḡanā* by Buddhadev Bose (1992), who, like several other modern authors, is interested in exploring the lives of marginal epic characters.

<sup>63</sup> Lisa Crothers remarks that the usage of the term *kṣattrī* signals more information about Vidura than just his mixed parentage: "Vidura is frequently referred to with the nomenclature of his mixed birth (*kṣattrī*, [sic]), as if to stress that his counsel is always a combination of those factors, warrior-birth and sage-birth, martial concerns combined and informed with prescient wisdom" (2013, 412). This is an interesting and reasonable observation. However, I am not really convinced of the causal relationship Crothers draws between Vidura's *śūdra* status and his wisdom: "In the Mahābhārata, Vidura's birth made him an outsider (born of a *śūdra* woman), which contributes in part to perceptions of his special wisdom in the *Mahābhārata*. Vidura is an outsider in similar ways that sages are; possessing special wisdom from their outsider ascetic practices" (2013, 319). In my reading, as I argue above, Vidura's extraordinary wisdom seems to largely stem from his connection with Dharma and his mother's virtues, the two aspects not analyzed in Crothers's study.

### 2.3.2. Vidura, the *arthatattvajñah*

As alluded to in the discussion of the Aṅīmāṇḍavya legend, besides his proclivity to *dharma*, Vidura is also extolled as skilled in *artha* (*dharme cārthe ca kuśalaḥ*, MBh 1.101.28; see translation above). The same idea is expressed in the *niyoga* story of the *dāsī* who gives birth to Vidura (MBh 1.100.28):

*dharmo vidurarūpeṇa śāpāt tasya mahātmanah |*  
*māṇḍavyasyārthatattvajñah kāmakrodhavivarjitah ||*

On account of the curse of the noble Māṇḍavya, Dharma [born] in the form of Vidura knew the essence of *artha* and was devoid of desire and anger.

Here Vidura is not only acknowledged as an *arthatattvajñah*, knower of the essence of *artha* (polity, profit, etc.), but also as devoid of *kāma* or desire. Indeed, throughout the epic Vidura himself frequently expresses his views about the insignificance of *kāma*. A good illustration for this point appears in the *Śantiparvan* (MBh 12.161), when Yudhiṣṭhira asks his brothers and Vidura the following question (MBh 12.161.2):

*dharme cārthe ca kāme ca lokavṛttiḥ samāhitā |*  
*teṣāṃ garīyān katamo madhyamaḥ ko laghuś ca kaḥ ||*

The course of the world depends on *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*.  
Which among them is the most important, which the second, and which the least?

In response, Vidura, referred here as *arthagatitattvajña* (knower of the essence of the course of *artha*; MBh 12.161.4), emphasizes the importance of *dharma*, and secondarily *artha*, while ranking *kāma* as the least significant (MBh 12.161.7-8):

*dharmeṇaivarṣayas tīrṇā dharme lokāḥ pratiṣṭhitāḥ |*  
*dharmeṇa devā divigā dharme cārthaḥ samāhitaḥ ||*  
*dharmo rājan guṇasreṣṭho madhyamo hy artha ucyate |*  
*kāmo yavīyān iti ca pravadanti manīṣiṇaḥ ||*

By *dharma* alone the sages have crossed [the cycle of rebirth], the worlds are established on *dharma*,

by *dharma* the gods went to the heaven, and *artha* depends on *dharma*.  
*Dharma*, O king, is foremost in point of merit, *artha* is said to be the middling,  
and the wise say that *kāma* is the least significant.<sup>64</sup>

In fact, Vidura has an even stronger criticism of *kāma* in the concluding section of the VN where he prescribes that one must safely cross the river which has the crocodiles of *kāma* and *krodha* (anger).<sup>65</sup>

To summarize, the introductory verses on Vidura (i.e., MBh 1.100.28, 1.101.28) reveal, in my reading, how he was conceived by the epic author(s). While I have already demonstrated Vidura's grounding in matters of *dharma* as Dharma incarnate and his exclusion from matters of *mokṣa* as *sūdra*-born,<sup>66</sup> his portrayal is also centered on the category of *artha* and excluded from the realm of *kāma*. In effect, among the *caturvidha puruṣārthas* (fourfold goals of life) of the Hindu worldview – *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa* – Vidura is essentially situated at the intersection of *dharma* and *artha*. This analysis is a crucial window to understand not just Vidura himself but also his *nīti* counsel. I will return to this point in the next section, but for now I briefly return to the moment where we left the narrative of Vidura's birth, as this will throw light on Vidura's relationship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

After the birth of the three Kuru boys, thanks to Vyāsa and the *niyoga* system, when the time came ripe, Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not inherit the throne due to his blindness (*acakṣuṣtvāt*), nor

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<sup>64</sup> It is interesting to note the varied views of the other Pāṇḍava brothers in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's question: Arjuna ranks *artha* at the top (MBh 12.161.11); Nakula and Sahadeva advocate for *dharma*, and also *artha* based on the principles of *dharma* (MBh 12.161.26); and Bhīma interestingly ranks *kāma* superior, noting that without *kāma* one would not even desire *dharma* and *artha* (MBh 12.161.28). For a nice analysis of this episode, see Woods (2001, 63–65) and Bowles (2007, 382–88).

<sup>65</sup> *kāmakrodhagrāhavatīm pañcendriyajalām nadīm | kṛtvā dhṛtimayīm nāvam janmadurgāṇi saṃtara ||* (MBh 5.40.20)

<sup>66</sup> Here my intention is not to say that Vidura as *sūdra*-born would be personally unfit for *mokṣa* or liberation according to the MBh worldview. I only wish to emphasize that he would be reluctant to engage, and even be prohibited from teaching such matters, as is clearly attested at the end of the VN (MBh 5.41.5; see the synopsis of the *adhyāya* presented in section 2.2 and the discussion of the framing of the VN in section 3.2).

does Vidura due to his mixed parentage (*karaṇatvāt*); the result is Pāṇḍu’s coronation (MBh 1.102.23). Bhīṣma, however, makes Vidura responsible for taking proactive measures for the flourishing of the kingdom and the family (MBh 1.103.4). Thus, Vidura, as an *arthatattvajñāḥ*, becomes the prime counselor to king Pāṇḍu and, upon Pāṇḍu’s relinquishing of the throne, to king Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Indeed, it seems that the rather marginal fraternal bond Vidura shares with Dhṛtarāṣṭra is cemented by the counseling relationship shared by them.

The advice-giving relationship between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura, however, has some interesting paradoxical elements. On the one hand, at all moments of crisis or dilemma, Dhṛtarāṣṭra immediately seeks Vidura’s counsel,<sup>67</sup> much to the dismay of his son Duryodhana, whose frustration with his father’s reliance on Vidura often prompts him to emotionally blackmail Dhṛtarāṣṭra. For instance, when the king wishes to wait for Vidura’s advice regarding Duryodhana’s proposal for the notorious dice game, Duryodhana is worried that Vidura will convincingly argue against the idea, and threatens the king with suicide (MBh 2.45.41-44):<sup>68</sup>

*dhṛtarāṣṭra uvāca*  
*kṣattā mantrī mahāprājñāḥ sthito yasyāsmi śāsane |*  
*tena saṅgamyā vetsyāmi kāryasyāsya viniścayam ||*  
*sa hi dharmam puraskṛtya dīrghadarśī param hitam |*  
*ubhayoḥ pakṣayor yuktaṁ vakṣyaty arthaviniścayam ||*

*duryodhana uvāca*  
*nivartayiṣyati tvā ’sau yadi kṣattā sameṣyati |*  
*nivṛtte tvayi rājendra mariṣye ’ham asaṁśayam ||*  
*sa mayi tvaṁ mṛte rājan vidureṇa sukhī bhava |*  
*bhokṣyase pṛthivīm kṛtsnām kiṁ mayā tvaṁ kariṣyasi ||*

Dhṛtarāṣṭra said:

I am at the bidding of the *kṣattā*, my very wise minister.

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<sup>67</sup> In Emily Hudson’s reading of the MBh’s “aesthetics of suffering,” she rightly frames Dhṛtarāṣṭra as the central epic character embodying the idea of “suffering” and notes Vidura as his primary “advisor against grief” (2013, 42).

<sup>68</sup> For a detailed treatment of this episode, see Crothers (2005).

Upon consulting him, I will find out the decision on this matter.  
For the farsighted one will place *dharma* and the ultimate welfare first,  
and then speak the decision on this affair as it fits both parties.

Duryodhana said:

That *kṣattā* will restrain you if he enters [into this matter].

And when you are restrained, O best of kings, I will certainly die.

When I am dead, O king, you be happy with Vidura.

You will enjoy the whole earth; what will you do with me [i.e., why bother about me]?

While Duryodhana is often annoyed, as in the episode noted above, by his father's dependence on Vidura, Vidura's suggestions, which quite often revolve around the ideas of self-abnegation and the primacy of familial good over personal attachments, are ironically too much for Dhṛtarāṣṭra to embrace, despite Dhṛtarāṣṭra's conviction about Vidura's wisdom and noble intentions. Thus, when being counseled, as during the VN, the king often vents his emotional dilemma – a painful conflict between Vidura's moral teachings and his own paternal attachment to Duryodhana.<sup>69</sup> In effect, as Patricia Greer observes in her study of the *Udyogaparvan*'s ethical discourse (2005), Vidura's teachings mostly fall on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's deaf ears and blind eyes. Greer also naturally wonders why Vidura puts up with his audience's "studied weakness" and argues:

"Dhṛtarāṣṭra has no reason to feel compelled by Vidura's advice, and Vidura knows this. Why then does he put up with the studied weakness and hidden ambitions [of Dhṛtarāṣṭra]? ... Because Vidura depends on his half-brother and accepts his hospitality. Vidura's ethical dilemma is as acute as Dhṛtarāṣṭra's" (Greer 2005, 216–17).

Vidura's physical and financial reliance on Dhṛtarāṣṭra could easily explain why he persists in spouting didactic instructions to Dhṛtarāṣṭra throughout the epic; but in my reading, this appears to be a simplistic analysis. One should not forget, especially considering our foregoing analysis of *karmayoga* in the case of Vidura's mother, that Vidura, assigned to work as a counselor by

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<sup>69</sup> For instance, see Dhṛtarāṣṭra's vocalization of his frustration in the VN (MBh 5.40.28-29), translated in the next chapter (see section 3.3).

Bhīṣma, would understandably stick to his duty regardless of the outcome of his counsels. And this understanding is, I think, corroborated by the manner in which Vidura is introduced and sketched in the epic's narrative. The perseverance on the part of Vidura in spouting out the counsels is, however, sustained only as long as Dhṛtarāṣṭra honors, seeks, and trusts Vidura's advice; when the king doubts and insults Vidura's intentions in the *Sabhāparvan* (MBh 3.5), suspecting that he is partial to the Pāṇḍavas and maleficent to him, Vidura is quick to leave the palace to join the Pāṇḍavas living in exile. Of course, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is immediately distressed about Vidura's departure; he soon realizes his folly, dispatches Sañjaya to fetch Vidura back from the forest, apologizes to Vidura upon his return, and kisses him on the forehead (MBh 3.7).

Taking stock of the discussion of Vidura's character presented thus far, we have analyzed the manner in which Vidura is introduced by the epic author(s). Vidura's proclivity toward *dharma* can clearly be linked to the fact that he is Dharma-incarnate. In the same manner, the way in which the *dāsī* conceives him has similar implications on his persona – that is, he is born as a duty-oriented *dharmātma*. Further, his expertise in *artha* undergirds his ministerial role at the Kuru court and cements his relationship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra. All of these aspects of Vidura's characterization have important repercussions on Vidura's *nīti* counsel: his devotion to *dharma* and *artha* prompts and legitimizes the VN, his advice-giving relationship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra sustains the VN, and his birth in the *śūdra* class delimits and terminates the VN by excluding *mokṣa*-related matters. I will continue to flesh out these claims in the remainder of this chapter and the following chapter.

## 2.4. Juxtaposing Vidura and his *nīti* counsel: *dharmārtha* as the leitmotif of the VN

As argued so far, the epic's discourse on Vidura primarily situates him at the nexus of the two *puruṣārthas*, *dharma* and *artha*, while marginalizing the remaining two *puruṣārthas*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. As we saw, in the verses that introduce Vidura, he is variously described as *dhārmī/dharmātma* (dharmic; MBh 1.57.81, 1.100.26), *dharma cārthe ca kuśalaḥ* (expert in *dharma* and *artha*; 1.101.28), *arthatattvajñaḥ* (knower of the essence of *artha*; 1.100.28), and so on. Similar descriptions of Vidura emphasizing his knowledge of *dharma* and *artha* are strewn throughout the epic, including several instances in the VN.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the *Viduranīti* is also, as I seek to demonstrate, mainly patterned on the two themes of *dharma* and *artha*.

The popularity of *nīti* literature is attested since early times, evidence dating back to at least the few centuries of the Common Era.<sup>71</sup> Derived from the Sanskrit root *nī* (to lead), *nīti* is meant “to lead” or guide its audience in their pursuit of this- and other-worldly goals. The encyclopedic lexicon *Śabdakalpadruma*, compiled in the nineteenth century by pandits commissioned by Raja Radhakanta Deva of Bengal, explains *nīti* as *nīyante saṃlabhyante upāyādaya aihikāmuṣmikārthā vāsyāmanayā vā*, that is, “in or by means of *nīti*, stratagems and the like or this- and other-worldly material benefits are attained” (Deva 1822, 606). *Nīti* doctrines are typically framed with a story of kings or rulers as their immediate audience. Therefore, *nīti* counsels largely deal not only with concepts like right conduct and moral behavior but also with policies of political wisdom and statecraft. In other words, *nīti* is primarily concerned with political and moral matters.

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<sup>70</sup> For example, Dhṛtarāṣṭra addresses Vidura as *dharmārthakuśalaḥ* at MBh 5.33.11, 5.34.1.

<sup>71</sup> The popularity of Sanskrit *nīti* texts is evident both within and beyond India (Sternbach 1970), as well as in Buddhist context (Strauch 2008). We similarly have in the Islamicate sphere the Persian *akhlāq* literary corpus dealing with ethical and moral teachings. That the popularity of *nīti* literature also seeped into the vernacular has been demonstrated in the case of medieval Andhra by Rao and Subrahmanyam (2008).

In scholarly treatments, the corpus of Sanskrit *nīti* literature (*Nītiśāstra*) is often combined with the *Arthaśāstra* tradition. However, to correlate the *nīti* genre with its correspondents from the *caturvidha puruṣārthas* of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa* is not a straightforward task and warrants a case-by-case analysis for different *nīti* texts. In their study of Telugu *nīti* works from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, Velceru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam argue for a distinction between *dharma*- and *nīti*-traditions since, they claim “*artha* and *kāma*, profit and pleasure, are the most significant in *nīti* texts” (2008, 407). They also read *nīti* as secular or “this-worldly” as it consciously veers away from matters of *dharma* and religion (2008, 403–4, 407–11). This may be the case for the medieval Telugu *nīti* literature that they were surveying. The “epic *nīti*,” however, seems different. Here, *dharma* and *artha* are almost always conceptually paired, and there is a concern for both the quotidian “this-worldly” and the higher “other-worldly” matters.<sup>72</sup> The VN serves as a good case in point. Here, just as Vidura’s wisdom and expertise on *dharma* and *artha* are constantly re-emphasized, his doctrines are certified as *dharmārthasahitaṃ vacaḥ* or “words enjoined with *dharma* and *artha*” (MBh 5.35.1). In fact, the VN is unambiguously clear about the inseparability of *dharma* and *artha* (MBh 5.37.44):<sup>73</sup>

*arthasiddhiṃ parām icchan dharmam evāditaś caret |*  
*na hi dharmād apaity arthaḥ svargalokād ivāmṛtam ||*

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<sup>72</sup> To be sure, Rao and Subrahmanyam (2008, 404) seem to acknowledge this idea as they quote the French Indologist Charles Malamoud’s (1997) observation (translated from French by the authors): “The originality of the *Arthaśāstra* is that the science of government, the doctrine of royal conduct, is set out there in a perspective where *artha* appears in a highly limited form and not, as in the Epics or the Laws of Manu, for example, where it is assimilated to the perspective of “duty” (*dharma*).”

Similar to the epic *nīti*, Ludwik Sternbach notes *dharma* and *artha* to be the focus in Bhartṛhari’s *Nītiśataka*, too: “The division of Bhartṛhari’s epigrams and some collections of stray verses based on these epigrams... are divided into three parts – *nīti* (*dharma* and *artha*), *vairāgya* (*dharma* and *mokṣa*), and *śṛṅgāra* (*kāma* and *artha*)” (Sternbach 1974, 4).

<sup>73</sup> For other instances where the VN exhibits a dual emphasis on *dharma* and *artha*, see MBh 5.34.60, 5.34.64, 5.34.82, etc.

A person who wishes the complete attainment of *artha* should practice *dharma* alone from the beginning;

For *artha* does not stray from *dharma*, just as the nectar does not stray from heaven.

In addition, the VN's concerns clearly extend beyond the domain of mundane existence and secular thought, as the text focuses quite a bit on the soteriological realm. For example, MBh 5.35.58 cautions that one must perform actions that not only ensure happiness in this world but also hereafter.<sup>74</sup>

*pūrve vayasi tat kuryād yena vṛddhaḥ sukhaṃ vaset |*  
*yāvajjīvena tat kuryād yena pretya sukhaṃ vaset ||*

When young one should do that by which he would live happily when old,  
All through life one should do that by which he would be happy after death.

Further, Rao and Subrahmanyam emphasize that *nīti* is primarily intended for a political audience, not for providing a normative moral idiom for popular consumption (2008, 420). This position could again be inappropriate for the VN.<sup>75</sup> Although the VN has in Dhṛtarāṣṭra a royal subject for its immediate audience, its contents are clearly diverse and have a wider reach, as the text's synopsis shared above clearly reveals. Thus, rather than lumping together and talking of all *nītiśāstra* and *arthaśāstra* materials – *lokanīti*, *rājanīti*, *dandānīti*, etc., – as a single homogenous category, it may be helpful to emphasize the internal nuances and subtleties of different *nīti* texts on a case-by-case basis.

I now build upon my argument that the VN is primarily centered on the categories of *dharma* and *artha*. Broadly speaking, while the *artha*-centered ideas of the VN revolve around principles of statecraft and polity, the *dharma*-centered ones are more concerned with ideas of

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<sup>74</sup> See also MBh 5.40.15-17 for Vidura's exposition on what happens after death.

<sup>75</sup> And perhaps for the epic *nīti* in general. While I take issue with Rao and Subrahmanyam for occasionally seeming to extrapolate arguments based on medieval Telugu *nīti* works to *nīti* literature as a whole, I join them in their "lament" for the unfortunate misreading and misapplication of *nīti* texts as singularly "moral" in character, a reading that suppresses *nīti*'s political dimension.

personal conduct and deportment. In other words, whereas the former could be understood as focusing more on secular/mundane and this-worldly ideas, the latter attends to matters that include religious and other-worldly issues. To quickly survey a sample of these two domains of thought, some teachings from the VN from both the moral and political sides are now briefly flagged.

Starting with some prominent themes related to morality, ethics, deportment, and the like, Vidura in the VN is acutely concerned with the virtues of sense control and equanimity. For instance, warning about the destructive sway of the five senses, Vidura affirms the need to tame them (MBh 5.34.68):<sup>76</sup>

*nijān utpatataḥ śatrūn pañca pañcaprayojanān |  
yo mohān na nigrhṇāti tam āpad grasate naram ||*

Disaster devours a man who out of delusion does not subdue the five innate enemies [i.e., the five senses] as they rise up with their five purposes.

In fact, the VN's recurrent emphasis on *indriyanigraha*<sup>77</sup> appears to be important in justifying our understanding of the text as belonging to the *nīti* genre. To elaborate, the lexicon *Śabdakalpadruma* quotes the *Nītimayūkha*<sup>78</sup> which explains *nīti* texts as undergirded by the idea of sense control, a preliminary step that must be achieved by a king before he seeks to take charge over his ministers and others (*Śabdakalpadrumaḥ* 1822, 606):

*nayasya vinayo mūlaṃ vinayaḥ śāstraniścayaḥ |  
vinayo hīndriyajayastadyuktaśāstramicchati ||  
ātmānaṃ prathamam rājā vinayenopapādayet |*

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<sup>76</sup> The most conspicuous set of verses dealing with the motif of *indriyanigraha* occur at MBh 5.34.52-68. For teachings on this theme and on equanimity, see also MBh 5.36.14, 5.36.45, 5.38.6, etc.

<sup>77</sup> In a very recent article, James Hegarty has also highlighted the VN's recurrent emphasis on sense control as "Vidura's *idée fixe*" (2019, 216–20).

<sup>78</sup> One of the twelve *mayūkkhas* (lit. ray of light) written by Bhaṭṭa Nīlakaṇṭha (seventeenth century CE). The twelve *mayūkkhas* deal with various topics connected with "ancient and medieval Hindu civil and religious law, ceremonial, politics and cognate matters." (Kane 1926, xvii)

*tato 'mātyān tato bhṛtyāṃstataḥ putrāṃstataḥ prajāḥ ||*

The foundation of conduct/polity is discipline; its confirmation is in the *śāstras*; discipline is the victory over the senses, the *śāstra* endowed with this... [is *nīti*].<sup>79</sup>  
A king should first win over himself by discipline,  
and then his ministers, then servants, sons, and then subjects.

It is further noteworthy that not only does the VN felicitously underscore the salience of sense control (as a *nīti* text, according to the *Nītimayūkha*, might be expected to), it also similarly notes that it is vain for a king to control his ministers or conquer his enemies until he subjugates his own senses (MBh 5.34.54-55):

*avijitya ya ātmānam amātyān vijigīṣate |  
amitrān vājitāmātyaḥ so 'vaśaḥ parihīyate ||  
ātmānam eva prathamam deśarūpeṇa yo jayet |  
tato 'mātyān amitrāṃś ca na moghaṃ vijigīṣate ||*

One who desires to conquer his ministers without conquering himself,  
or to conquer his foes without conquering his ministers, perishes inevitably.  
[But] one who would first conquer himself as he would a country,  
and then conquer his ministers and foes, his desire to conquer is not in vain.

And interestingly, the VN also juxtaposes its teachings on the importance of controlling the senses and of following *dharmārtha* (MBh 5.34.60):

*dharmārthau yaḥ parityajya syād indriyavaśānugah |  
śrīprāṇadhanadārebhya kṣipraṃ sa parihīyate ||*

Abandoning *dharma* and *artha*, one who goes under the sway of the senses quickly is bereft of fortune, life, wealth and wife.

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<sup>79</sup> It is not clear how the word *ichhati* (“he/she desires”) fits into the verse here: perhaps “one desires the *śāstra* endowed with this, i.e., with victory over the senses? Or, a locative absolute construction as “when one desires the *śāstra* endowed with this”? On the other hand, the *Vācaspatyam*, an encyclopedic lexicon compiled by the pandit Tārānātha Tarkavācaspati also in the Bengal region in the nineteenth century like the *Śabdakalpadrumaḥ*, gives the line in question as *vinayo hīndriyajayastairyuktaḥ pālayenmahīm*, “discipline is the victory over the senses, one endowed with these would/should rule the earth.” (See: <https://kosha.sanskrit.today/word/sa/nIti>)

Besides several such moral teachings,<sup>80</sup> the VN, as noted already has, of course, many clearly visible political themes. For instance, the text suggests how a king must forestall the breach of royal counsel (*mantrabheda*) and stresses the importance of appropriate exercise of *daṇḍa*, the scepter symbolic of state power or sovereignty.<sup>81</sup>

While I have separately laid out the moral and political ideas of the VN, there is undeniably much overlap in this distinction, as the preceding discussion may already have demonstrated. For instance, we saw the teachings on sense control being pushed into the political realm in recommendation that a king must first conquer his own senses before he does his enemies. James Hegarty therefore rightly observes that by placing “equanimity at the heart of royal piety,” the VN suggests “the sage-like qualities of the king,” in contrast to the *Upaniṣads* that lay out the “king-like qualities of the sage” (2019, 225). He further notes:

“Vidura also offers us a politics that is distinctly philosophical; his teachings present a model of royal piety, in which there is an attempt to fuse political and emancipatory ideologies. In this regard, he is part of a range of attempts both within and beyond the *Mahābhārata* to harmonise religious and political values, institutions and goals” (Hegarty 2019, 211).

While Hegarty’s interpretation of the VN as a blending of the political and philosophical can hardly be challenged,<sup>82</sup> the text need not be seen as a “predominantly political one” (2019, 225).

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<sup>80</sup> Other conspicuous moral and ethical teachings in the VN are in the context of *vākpāruṣyam* or verbal abuse (MBh 5.33.74, 5.34.71-77, 5.36.6-9 and *passim*), insatiability of desires (MBh 5.33.69 and *passim*), etc. For a useful discussion of the ethics of *vāk* in the MBh and the VN, see Chakrabarti (2014).

<sup>81</sup> For teachings related to the forestalling of and the dangers associated with *mantrabheda*, see MBh 5.33.18, 5.33.44, 5.34.41, 5.33.58, 5.38.15-19, etc.

For VN’s discourse on *daṇḍa*, see MBh 5.33.74, 5.33.86, 7.34.72, etc. There is much insightful scholarship exploring the concept of *daṇḍa* as seen in the *Dharmaśāstras* and the *Arthaśāstra*, and the way it is framed in the MBh. For a sample, see Krishan (1989), Sinha (1991), and Bhattacharya (2004), who concur in several key observations, especially in noting that the MBh’s conception of *daṇḍa* lies midway between that of the *Dharmaśāstra* and the *Arthaśāstra* traditions. This observation holds for the way in which *daṇḍa* is formulated in the VN too.

<sup>82</sup> To be sure, a similar idea about the intertwining of the philosophical and the political has been proffered by scholars for some novel concepts seen in the MBh as a whole. For instance, Lath (1990) has famously argued that

In my reading, the text, as it stands in the Pune Critical Edition, has perhaps a somewhat more ethical or philosophical flavor than it does political. And this reading would significantly augment the applicability and relevance of the VN for a wider audience. To support my claim, I close with two verses that perhaps are what Vidura offers to us as takeaway points from his long nocturnal counsel (MBh 5.40.11, 5.39.57; the first verse is referred to in this chapter epigraph):

*idaṃ ca tvāṃ sarvaparam bravīmi puṇyaṃ padaṃ tāta mahāviśiṣṭam |  
na jātu kāmān na bhayān na lobhād dharmam tyajej jīvitasyāpi hetoḥ ||*

And I am telling you, dear, this meritorious and very special word, elevated above all: One should never abandon *dharma* out of desire, fear, greed, or even to save one's life.

*na tat parasya saṃdadhyāt pratikūlam yad ātmanaḥ |  
saṃgrahenaīṣa dharmāḥ syāt kāmād anyāḥ pravartate ||*

One should not do to another that which is unfavorable to oneself;  
This is *dharma* in summary, everything else operates according to [one's] desire.

These verses strategically occur in the final phase of the VN, justifying my idea of them as Vidura's conclusive teachings. This observation is particularly relevant for the first verse, which occurs in the last main *adhyāya* of the VN. (As noted already, the succeeding, and theoretically the last, *adhyāya* of the VN is mainly a transition *adhyāya* for the following *upaparvan*.) Also importantly, we must note for this verse the sudden prosodic change in meter from the typical *śloka* to the less frequent *triṣṭubh*.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the verbiage used in the two verses – *sarpaparam* (elevated above all) and *saṃgrahena* (in summary) – attests to the primacy of the embedded teachings. Where the first verse proclaims the non-negotiability of practicing *dharma*, the second verse spells out what *dharma* means in Vidura's dictionary (a definition very much in

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the MBh's neologism of *ānṛśamsya* or non-cruelty is the philosophical *ahiṃsā* or non-violence adapted to the political realm where complete non-violence, especially on the part of kings, is not viable.

<sup>83</sup> That is, the preceding verse in the text is in *śloka* meter. This observation about the prosodic change for the quoted verse MBh 5.40.11 would benefit from a more focused study of the VN's prosody, which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this thesis.

the ranks of the so-called “Golden Rule” observed in the teachings of most religious traditions<sup>84</sup>). If these verses can indeed be acknowledged as our take-home points from the VN, it is noteworthy that the teachings here are conspicuous in their lack of any political flavor, thereby affording these concluding verses, and the whole VN, a more universal appeal than just the political.

## 2.5. Concluding remarks

It is easy and perhaps understandable to simply view the *Viduranīti* as a pell-mell of politico-moral ideas, as has been the pattern in much contemporary MBh scholarship. But what happens when we distill this voluminous text to extract its essence and then assess the nature of the text? And what do we find when the text and its speaker are placed in conversation and studied in tandem? These were some questions grappled in this chapter. The overarching deduction from this inquiry is the important claim that the epic’s discourse on Vidura primarily situates him at the nexus of the two *puruṣārthas*, *dharma* and *artha*, while marginalizing the remaining two *puruṣārthas*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*; and that Vidura’s counsel, the *Viduranīti*, is likewise patterned after the two themes of *dharma* and *artha*.

Superficially, this analysis may not seem highly significant. However, the methodological apparatus employed here, and the deductions drawn from it challenge a still prevalent attitude in *Mahābhārata* scholarship that tends to fragment the epic fabric into disparate narrative and didactic strands. Methodologically, juxtaposing Vidura’s portrayal in the epic’s narrative and Vidura’s teachings in the epic’s didactic offered a unique avenue to tease out

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<sup>84</sup> Echoes of the “Golden Rule” are also seen at other places in the MBh. For instance, see MBh 12.251.19 and 12.251.21.

the intra-textual relationship between the epic's story and didactic materials. Using the particular case of Vidura and the *Viduranīti*, we were able to map some integrative forces uniting the epic's plot and didactic. This mapping demonstrates how the two supposedly disparate literary strands of the epic illuminate, reflect, and actually rely on each other. To be sure, this crucial statement about the design and structure of the MBh was already put forth by a few scholars, and I here cite Bimal Krishna Matilal's words that put forth this argument wonderfully:

Indologists have often distinguished between the narrative material and the didactic material in the epic. The implicit idea was that the didactic material was added to the narrative material and sometimes the narrative to the didactic, so that modern scholarship could separate one from the other. This seems to me a very artificial distinction as far as the text of the *Mahābhārata* is concerned. The so-called narrative and didactic material are found inextricably fused together in the text, such that they cannot be often differentiated. Sometimes the narrative itself imparts the moral lesson without any deliberate efforts on the part of the narrator. In other words, the medium itself is the message here. (Matilal 1989, 5)

But while some scholars have argued along the same lines as Matilal, they only constitute a minority in the field of MBh studies.<sup>85</sup> As a result, there are few studies juxtaposing the epic's narrative and didactic corpus.<sup>86</sup> The foregoing analysis was, I hope, able to demonstrate how the methodology leveraged here enables us to challenge, correct, and advance our understanding of the epic's grand design.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> To quote a few other scholars, Greg Bailey writes that "what is implicit in the narrative material is made explicit in the didactic material" (1983, 109–10). And Mukund Lath suggests that the epic "seeks to unravel the meaning of moral concepts through a living story, through the action itself in which the concepts are embedded... What gives depth to this *saṃhitā* [i.e., the MBh] is the poignant manner in which the reflection on *dharma* is woven into the very texture of the story of the epic" (1990, 115–16). Likewise, Angelika Malinar (2017b) argues that one must pay attention to the interplay between the epic's narrative and didactic passages.

<sup>86</sup> A few recent examples to successfully do so are Bowles's study (2007) of the *Āpaddharmaparvan* and Malinar's study (2017a) of a philosophical passage from the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*.

<sup>87</sup> Of course, this is based on my working principle that the PCE adequately represents the epic's archetype. As Lath rightly notes, critics could still argue that the interlacing of the epic's story and didactic was "historically an afterthought" (1990, 116).

### Chapter 3: On the literary texture of the *Viduranīti*

“Listening to you, I am not contented; you are speaking wondrous things about this.”

-- MBh 5.35.1cd<sup>88</sup>

“Tell that to me as I am intent on listening, for you are speaking wondrous things.”

-- MBh 5.41.1cd<sup>89</sup>

#### 3.1. Introduction

As the two excerpted hemistiches quoted in the epigraph above indicate, the text of the *Viduranīti* – or rather, the audience within the text, Dhṛtarāṣṭra – explicitly remarks on the wonderment in (and plurality of)<sup>90</sup> Vidura’s ideas as captured in the VN. Indeed, even a casual reader of the VN would agree that the VN appears to be a motley of rather loosely connected politically-, morally-, and ethically charged didactic ideas. While the previous chapter of this thesis outlined and assessed the VN’s content and its nature, as well as the appropriateness of labeling it as a *nīti* text, this chapter analyzes the VN by rising beyond its textual content, or rather, by digging below the VN’s ideological surface to expose its *architectonics* or the *style of presentation* of its ideas. I use the term ‘literary texture’ when referring to this structural analysis of the VN.<sup>91</sup> This broad term, I propose, has the potential to subsume diverse aspects related to a

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<sup>88</sup> *śṛṇvato nāsti me tṛptir vicitrāṇīha bhāṣase*

<sup>89</sup> *tan me śusrūṣave brūhi vicitrāṇi hi bhāṣase*

<sup>90</sup> In both these lines, the word *vicitra* could at once signify both the variegated and wondrous nature of Vidura’s teachings.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Narrative texture’ is perhaps the more common terminology used in textual studies when focusing on the structure of a text. However, as noted in the introduction to the thesis, text-historical arguments since the dawn of MBh studies have led to a polarization of the epic’s textual material into disparate “narrative” and “didactic” strands. Therefore, employing the term “narrative texture” for MBh studies could be slightly misleading, especially when the text in question is a didactic one like the VN.

text's structure and layout, such as its rhetorical apparatus, integrative motifs, narrative pace and arc, aestheticized emotional essence or *rasa*, linguistic peculiarities and style, and so on.

Additionally, while the previous chapter juxtaposed the VN and the epic's narrative, this chapter will juxtapose the VN and other didactic texts from the epic. More specifically, in this section focused on the VN's literary texture, I pay particular attention to what in my reading of the VN stood out as particularly intriguing and/or peculiar to this text, and also to those stylistic aspects that reveal interesting convergences and divergences among the VN, other didactic texts of the MBh, and the MBh as a whole.<sup>92</sup>

### 3.2. Framing the *Vidurañti*

To quickly recap the narrative framework of the VN, the VN is a nocturnal dialogue between Vidura and a sleepless Dhṛtarāṣṭra, initiated at the latter's behest before the impending fratricidal war. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, panic-stricken at the news from Yudhiṣṭhira that Sañjaya was to report the next morning, is unable to sleep and summons Vidura to counsel him on what is beneficial to a sleepless person. At this point, the epic's overall narrative briefly pauses, and the MBh provides a context for the unfolding of the didactic VN comprising 541 verses spread across nine chapters.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> In this context, Hudson makes an interesting, and I think valid, remark highlighting the importance of studying a text's stylistic aspects, which she refers to as 'narrative strategies': "Generally speaking, a narrative strategy is a set of instructions that a text deploys to guide its audiences" (2013, 28).

In the same context, Bowles reminds us about arguments made by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1973) regarding the importance of bearing in mind the 'communicative context' in order to understand any act of communication: "there are messages immanent within the communicative act which tell us how to understand this communication, and these stand over and above the simple 'denotative level' of the linguistic or other items (such as gestures, and so on) which make up the message. He [i.e., Bateson] calls these 'metacommunications', communications about communications." (Bowles 2007, 161)

<sup>93</sup> See Table 1 in section 3.3 for an overview of the chapter-wise distribution of VN's verses.

An important narrative technique that the VN and many other intra-MBh texts share with the epic as a whole is the structure of embedding, whereby some narratives are framed within other narratives. The MBh peculiarly places itself within a two-tiered framing structure: the epic itself mentions that it was first narrated to Janamejaya, a descendant (great-grandson) of the Pāṇḍavas, by Vaiśampāyana, a student of the epic’s putative author, Vyāsa at a *sarpasattra* (snake sacrifice) organized by Janamejaya; next, Śaunaka and other sages participating in a twelve year *sattra* at the Naimiṣa forest hear the MBh from Ugraśravas, a wandering bard who had heard the first telling of the epic as part of the audience at Janamejaya’s *sarpasattra*.<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, despite being a later telling, the Ugraśravas-Śaunaka frame is hierarchically outer/above the Vaiśampāyana-Janamejaya frame since the former encloses the latter. Thus, a reader of the text first encounters, at the very outset of the epic, the second telling of the MBh at the Naimiṣa *sattra*, and only later the first telling at Janamejaya’s *sarpasattra*.<sup>95</sup>

Over the past few decades, this double embedding of the entire MBh,<sup>96</sup> as well as the second-order embedding of the MBh’s constituent texts by the MBh itself have received some long overdue scholarly attention.<sup>97</sup> One particularly influential study is by Christopher

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<sup>94</sup> To complicate things further, the Naimiṣa setting itself offers two duplicated beginnings for the epic: in MBh 1.1, Ugraśravas begins his narration in response to the request of the Naimiṣeya sages; in MBh 1.4, the bard again restarts his narration, as though nothing had gone before, in response to Śaunaka’s request. For an analysis of this “split” in the Naimiṣa frame, see Adluri (2011, 148ff.) and Bowles (2011, 231ff.)

<sup>95</sup> For descriptions of these particular moments in the MBh’s narration, see MBh 1.1.57-58 for Janamejaya’s *sattra*, and MBh 1.1.1-19 for the *sattra* at the Naimiṣa forest.

<sup>96</sup> Alf Hiltebeitel has argued about a third “indispensable” frame in the text: “the ‘outermost’ authorial frame in which Vyāsa recites the MBh to his five disciples, including his own son Śuka” (2001, 92ff., 2006, 229). For references to this episode from MBh, see MBh 1.1.63, and also the references in Brodbeck (2011, 244, n.38). This implicit frame, Hiltebeitel remarks, would then clarify that it is Vyāsa’s disciple Vaiśampāyana who is narrating the MBh at Janamejaya’s *sarpasattra*, whereby the *sūta* Ugraśravas also imbibes it. Scholars have, however, rightly highlighted the error in this idea. For instance, Hudson notes that a “frame” is usually referred to “a story about the telling of another story, a story which, by definition, opens and closes the story which it frames. On the other hand, Hiltebeitel seems to use the term to refer to different levels of the narrative” (Hudson 2013, 24, n.48).

<sup>97</sup> For example, see Minkowski (1989, 1991, 2001), Hiltebeitel (2001, chap. 3, 2005), Adluri (2011), Bowles (2007, chap. 5).

Minkowski (1989) who studied the epic's placement of itself within the two-tiered *sattra* framework. With regard to the epic's sustained use of embedding throughout its narrative, he remarks: "embedding is not simply a phenomenon found at the borders of the *Mahābhārata*. It is a narrative technique employed throughout. Indeed, if the *Mahābhārata* has any unitary identity, it may be provided by its framing, embedding, episodic style" (1989, 406).<sup>98</sup>

Minkowski further categorizes the recurring patterns of MBh's embedding into two subtypes: that of hierarchy and sequence; while the former corresponds to the syntactic style of hypotaxis, the latter corresponds to parataxis (1989, 406–7). The hierarchical/hypotactic style, he notes, is marked by successive embedding of stories; that is, an outer or hierarchically higher frame completely encloses an inner story/frame. Consequently, one notable feature of this style of embedding is a change in the speaker and audience in the two frames. We have already noted above a classical illustration of this pattern in the MBh: the epic's two-tiered framing. In contrast to the hierarchical/hypotactic style, Minkowski notes that the sequential/paratactic pattern of narration occurs within a fixed speaker-audience frame; the same speaker narrates multiple stories in succession to the same audience. For instance, Minkowski refers to the narration of war-events in sequence by Sañjaya to Dhṛtarāṣṭra: first, with Bhīṣma as the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava forces (*Bhīṣmaparvan*), then Droṇa as the commander-in-chief after Bhīṣma's fall (*Droṇaparvan*), then the *Karṇaparvan*, and finally the *Śalyaparvan*.

An interesting aspect of the narrative context of the VN, however, is that it defies classification under this hypotaxis/parataxis binary, as Minkowski also observes (1989, 407). As alluded to above in the discussion of the VN's narrative framework, just before the VN or

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<sup>98</sup> Importantly, here Minkowski (1989, 412–13) also proposes, building on Grintser's work (1963) in Russian, that "the *Mahābhārata*'s use of a frame story is probably the oldest," from where, according to Grintser, the *Bṛhatkathā*, the *Pañcatantra*, and much of the world's story literature could have in turn adopted the technique of embedding.

*Prajāgara-(upa)parvan* where Vidura and Dhṛtarāṣṭra engage in a nocturnal discussion, the *Udyogaparvan* has the *Sañjayayāna-(upa)parvan* with a Sañjaya-Dhṛtarāṣṭra dialogue; and after the VN, the *Sanatsujāta-(upa)parvan* features a conversation between Sanatsujāta and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Thus, in these successive sub-*parvans*, while the audience Dhṛtarāṣṭra remains the same, the speaker addressing Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the nature of their conversation completely changes. Therefore, Minkowski comments: “Formally, this arrangement is not comparable with the paratactic narrative..., but is rather a kind of embedding that mimics parataxis” (1989, 407). Thus, the VN’s narrative moment in the epic offers an interesting intersection of the different modes of embedding seen elsewhere in the epic.

Returning to the Vidura-Dhṛtarāṣṭra frame that encloses the didactic ideas of the VN, one again observes some close parallels and some deviances with other frames encountered in the MBh. For this, too, Minkowski’s careful presentation of the motifs used in the creation of the MBh’s two outermost frame stories, i.e., the ones seen at the Naimiṣa- and the *sarpa-sattra*, is useful (1989, 407 ff.). For instance, Minkowski notes that (i) new episodes or frames are generally marked by the arrival of the narrator at a place where the soon-to-become audience is engaged in a lengthy, sedentary activity; that (ii) the audience then leverages both the intervals during their activity and the fortuitous coming of the speaker to hear some mythical lore from him; and that (iii) the audience achieves this by offering hospitality to the guest-speaker and then soliciting from him stories during their sacrificial ritual breaks.

This general pattern noted by Minkowski, although noteworthy for the MBh’s meta-frames, is more or less always tweaked according to the specific context in the component frames of the epic. Adam Bowles’s important recent work on the *Āpaddharmaparvan* (ĀDhP) anthology of texts provides a useful illustration (2007). The ĀDhP is a sub-*parvan* of the

*Śāntiparvan* featuring a very lengthy discussion between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma, with the latter lying on his arrow-bed after the apocalyptic Bhārata war. In the ĀDhP’s frame, Bowles notes that “there is an inversion of this standard structure [referring to the motif of a wandering bard arriving at a seated audience]: it is Yudhiṣṭhira, along with his allies, the *audience* for Bhīṣma’s discourse, who arrives before Bhīṣma [who is the stationary speaker]” (2007, 174; emphasis in original, my comments interspersed). An obvious reason for this inversion, as Bowles quickly adds, is Bhīṣma’s inability to move from the bed of arrows. But notwithstanding this inversion from the “standard structure,” Bowles draws striking parallels between the ĀDhP frame and the MBh’s meta-frames by arguing that “the setting in which the [ĀDhP’s] narration takes place is highly reminiscent of the ritual settings found in the Mbh’s inner and outer frames” (2007, 174). Bowles’s comments presented as a coda for his juxtaposition of the ĀDhP’s and the MBh’s frames is particularly relevant for my analysis of the VN:

“This coalescence of similarities and differences suggests that, within the constraints imposed by a particular narrative context, the epic poets played with frame conventions in a conscious manner, manipulating their configurations with full awareness of other frame ‘options’. Contrasts and similarities between the various frames point, therefore, to differences between the narratives that they enframe.” (Bowles 2007, 176)

Returning to the frame of the VN, there are indeed some similarities with the standard tropes highlighted by Minkowski, but mostly at the surface level. In the VN, the audience, namely Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is stationary and the speaker, Vidura, arrives where Dhṛtarāṣṭra is seated. However, Vidura, a minister and royal counselor of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, does not walk in fortuitously or as an uninvited guest; Dhṛtarāṣṭra had asked his doorkeeper to fetch Vidura, who thus comes at the king’s bidding.<sup>99</sup> Thus, at least superficially, Vidura’s *nīti* sermon appears to occur in the epic by design, and not by happenstance. Further, while the audience at the Naimiṣa forest was

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<sup>99</sup> MBh 5.33.1-6

perhaps motivated to listen to the MBh primarily to fill the intervals during their daily ritual actions in the twelve-year *sattrā*,<sup>100</sup> Dhṛtarāṣṭra's motivations for seeking Vidura's ethico-moral teachings are slightly ambiguous. On the one hand, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, anxious about Sañjaya's relaying of Yudhiṣṭhira's message the next morning, was perhaps just hoping to pass the sleepless night in Vidura's company.<sup>101</sup> On the other hand, however, he may have been genuinely keen on hearing some beneficial words related to *dharma* and *artha*;<sup>102</sup> I will return to this aspect in the next section.

In addition to such manipulations of some of the frame conventions, the motif of the audience according hospitality to the speaker is done away with in the VN, which, as Minkowski too briefly remarks (1989, 408), was due to the fact that, being a *śūdra* and the king's attendant, Vidura did not merit Dhṛtarāṣṭra's hospitality. One could also argue that the trope of hospitality is missing in the VN since Vidura was not a guest who appeared fortuitously, like Ugraśravas at the Naimiṣa forest, but had been summoned. However, at the end of the VN, in the transition chapter to the following *Sanatsujātaparvan*, Sanatsujāta, too, is (mentally) summoned by Vidura to appear at Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court, and then accorded appropriate (*vidhidṛṣṭena*) hospitality.<sup>103</sup> This seems to indicate that because of Vidura's *varṇa*, and because there is no *vidhi* ordained for receiving a *śūdra*, it would not be possible to sustain the hospitality motif in the VN. Indeed, the VN's frame seems to clearly remind this fact to the reader/listener by means of its usage twice of the word *kṣattṛ* – a label for either the son born from a *kṣatriya-śūdra* union or the son of a

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<sup>100</sup> Of course, the situation at the *sarpasattrā* would be different, as Janamejaya's primary motivation to hear the MBh was perhaps his curiosity to learn about his ancestors.

<sup>101</sup> See MBh 5.33.9-10, 5.33.12 where Dhṛtarāṣṭra expresses his anxiety over Sañjaya's message.

<sup>102</sup> See MBh 5.33.11, 5.33.15, 5.34.1, etc., where he repeatedly requests Vidura for his teachings on *dharma*- and *artha*-related matters.

<sup>103</sup> MBh 5.41.9

female slave – for Vidura.<sup>104</sup> We may note, however, that the lack of hospitality for Vidura does not invalidate his superiority in terms of his wisdom, which is a prerequisite for the validity of the VN itself; that is, if Vidura’s wisdom was not certified as superior, his didactic preaching would have suffered a loss of authority.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, throughout the VN, Dhṛtarāṣṭra repeatedly addresses Vidura as the singular or most wise of the Kuru clan.<sup>106</sup> This point is further driven home by Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s surprise in the last chapter of the VN (MBh 5.41.4):

*kiṃ tvam na veda tad bhūyo yan me brūyāt sanātanaḥ |  
tvam eva vidura brūhi prajñāśeṣo ’sti cet tava ||*

Do you then not know that which the eternal one [Sanatsujāta] would tell me?  
You yourself tell me, Vidura, if you have any wisdom remaining [to be shared].

When Vidura suggests that Sanatsujāta will instruct Dhṛtarāṣṭra on matters related to *mokṣa*, the king wonders why Vidura would not teach that himself.

### 3.3. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s interlocutory role

When engaging with the VN, a question that naturally arises in the minds of readers (or listeners) is: how relevant are Vidura’s ethical teachings to Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s immediate predicament? Although a valid question, the answer does not seem to be a simple, unidimensional one. At several moments in the text, Vidura’s words do address his royal audience’s pressing emotional crisis. For instance, Vidura’s very first response to Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s

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<sup>104</sup> MBh 5.33.2, 6

<sup>105</sup> Indeed, Vidura too validates, as it were, his own teachings despite his *śūdra* origins. According to him, the lowliest person (*antya*) is not marked by his/her origin but by a lack of virtues such as self-knowledge and endurance (MBh 5.34.70). See also MBh 5.34.39, where Vidura notes that it is not one’s family but one’s character that matters.

<sup>106</sup> For instance, *tad brūhi tvam hi naś tāta dharmārthakuśalo hy asi* (MBh 5.33.11cd), *asmin rājarṣivamśe hi tvam ekaḥ prajñāsaṃmataḥ* (MBh 5.33.15cd). This kind of flattery is also an important technique employed by the audience in a frame story to fuel the speaker’s enthusiasm to narrate.

solicitation is in connection to the king's sleepless state as Vidura tries to diagnose the reason for it (MBh 5.33.13-14):

*abhiyuktaṃ balavatā durbalaṃ hīnasādhanam |*  
*hṛtasvaṃ kāmīnaṃ coram āviśanti prajāgarāḥ ||*  
*kaccid etair mahādoṣair na spr̥ṣṭo 'si narādhipa |*  
*kaccin na paravitteṣu gr̥dhyān viparitapyase ||*

One who is overpowered by a stronger enemy, one who is weak, one who is wanting in means,  
one whose everything is lost, a lover, and a thief – sleeplessness troubles them.  
I hope that you are not touched by these great faults, O king!  
I hope you are not agonizing while coveting other's wealth.

Additionally, at several points, Vidura repeatedly urges, reprimands, cautions, and criticizes Dhṛtarāṣṭra over the injustice previously and currently being done to the Pāṇḍavas under his rulership and reminds the king that he still has an option to redress the situation and free himself from his debilitating anxiety. While such verses suggest a clear relevance of the VN for its narrative context, these verses mostly occur only at the ends of various *adhyāyas*. Or, as van Buitenen notes: “every lecture [i.e., chapter of the VN] ends with a peroration on the justice of the Pāṇḍavas' cause” (1978, 181).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> This comment, however, needs a minor correction since not every lecture ends thus; see my Table 1 and its related discussion. Also, an important point to consider in this context would be the status of the *adhyāya* breaks: when and how were the chapter breaks imposed in the epic? Unfortunately, I am as yet unable to find in current MBh scholarship any remarks on this aspect, although some leading MBh experts have casually alluded to the question of the chapter breaks' status. For instance, Hildebeitel (2005, 459) notes that the chapter endings are “often adroit *adhyāya* breaks.” However, one point to bear in mind is Sukthankar's comment that the “*adhyāya* division in our extant manuscripts [i.e., the manuscripts used in preparing the PCE] is extremely arbitrary” (1933, xcix). As such, different print editions of the epic have different number of *adhyāyas*,

Table 1: Vidura's comments with regard to the Pāṇḍavas and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's questions

MBh <i>adhyāya</i>	No. of Verses in the <i>adhyāya</i>	Vidura advocates for the Pāṇḍavas	Dhṛtarāṣṭra's questions/comments
5.33	104	103-104	5, 9-12, 15
5.34	83	80-83	1-3
5.35	67	65-67	1
5.36	72	68-72	22, 47-48
5.37	60	18-19, 38-42, 58-60	8
5.38	44	43-44	-
5.39	70	16-30, 70	1, 7
5.40	30	27	28-30
5.41	11	-	1, 4, 7

In the table provided above, I have noted the total number of verses (column 2) in each chapter of the VN (column 1). In column 3, I have listed the specific moments in the nine chapters of the VN when Vidura explicitly speaks about Pāṇḍavas and/or Kauravas; and in the last column, I have tabulated the verses when Dhṛtarāṣṭra speaks to Vidura to either ask a question or make a comment.

As can be seen from the third column, except for *adhyāya* 5.37, where the Pāṇḍavas are also mentioned at intermediate points, and *adhyāya* 5.41, which is primarily a transition text to the following *Sanatsujātaparvan*, all other chapters of the VN are concluded by verses pertinent to the larger epic narrative. These verses thus directly address the immediate crisis faced by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, which he had conveyed to Vidura at the start of the VN, a crisis that indeed inaugurated the VN (MBh 5.33.9-12):

*sañjāyo vidura prāpto garhayitvā ca māṃ gataḥ |  
ajātaśatroḥ śvo vākyaṃ sabhāmadhye sa vakṣyati ||  
tasyādyā kuruvīrasya na vijñātaṃ vaco mayā |  
tan me dahati gātrāṇi tad akārṣīt prajāgaram ||  
jāgrato dahyamānasya śreyo yad iha paśyasi |  
tad brūhi tvam hi nas tāta dharmārthakuśalo hy asi ||*

*yataḥ prāptaḥ sañjayah pāṇḍavebhyo na me yathāvan manasaḥ praśāntiḥ |  
sarvendriyāny aprakṛtiṃ gatāni kiṃ vakṣyatīty eva hi me 'dya cintā ||*

O Vidura, Sañjaya has returned, and he left after admonishing me.  
He will relay Ajātaśatru's [Yudhiṣṭhira's] message in the assembly hall tomorrow.  
I am as yet not aware of the Kuru prince's message;  
and so, my limbs are burning, and that is what is keeping me awake.  
Whatever you see as beneficial to one who is awake and agonizing,  
tell me that, for you are skilled among us Kurus in matters related to *dharma* and *artha*.  
Since Sañjaya returned from the Pāṇḍavas, my mind does not have its peace as it should.  
All my faculties have become abnormal, and now I am only brooding on what he  
[Sañjaya] will say [tomorrow].

Apart from the verses discussed above, however, much of the remaining content of the VN would at first seem to speak to its audience's crisis only obliquely. To come to terms with this aspect of the text, I suggest that we look beyond Dhṛtarāṣṭra's panic-stricken words in the opening frame of the VN to also consider his interlocutory questions and comments strewn within the body of the VN.<sup>108</sup> (The fourth column in Table 1 above lists all the moments in the VN when Dhṛtarāṣṭra speaks.) While the king's opening verses in the VN's frame inaugurate and contextualize the VN, his interlocutory verses are the ones responsible for the "flow" and the "pace" of the VN, and perhaps also for the seemingly digressive nature of the text at several points. In other words, Dhṛtarāṣṭra plays a crucial role not only in initiating the VN but also in propelling it forward, ensuring that Vidura stays on task and that the flow of his *nīti* counsel does not pause. Additionally, we may also note the significance of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's frequent plea for more words of wisdom in terms of a didactic instruction that Vidura himself gives in the VN as a response to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's request (MBh 5.39.1-2):

*dhṛtarāṣṭra uvāca  
anīśvaro 'yaṃ puruṣo bhavābhava sūtraprotā dārumayīva yoṣā |*

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<sup>108</sup> Bowles's comment in his study of the ĀDhP's structure is relevant: "In the Mbh and other Indian texts, such as the *purāṇas*, 'interlocution' and 'framing' are complementary and interrelated processes" (2007, 163)

*dhātṛā tu diṣṭasya vaśe kilāyaṃ tasmād vada tvaṃ śravaṇe dhṛto 'ham ||*

*vidura uvāca*

*aprāptakālaṃ vacanaṃ bṛhaspatir api bruvan |*

*labhate buddhyavajñānam avamānaṃ ca bhārata ||*

Dhṛtarāṣṭra said:

Man is without power in the matter of existence and non-existence, like a wooden puppet strung on a string.

By the creator he is subject to his fate, so it is said. So, you speak; I am intent upon listening.

Vidura said:

Speaking words inopportunistically even Bṛhaspati

receives disregard for his intelligence and disrespect, O descendent of Bharata!

That is, in view of Vidura's own remark that a wise person should not speak uninvited, he would need occasional nudging from his audience to continue his teaching throughout the night. This phenomenon thus appears to be an interesting case wherein we see an embedded didactic idea being enacted in the embedding story.<sup>109</sup>

Continuing with the analysis of the audience's interlocutory role, Minkowski's study of the MBh's two outer *sattra* frames highlights the standard motif of having an "active, participatory audience" in a frame story who "will often prompt the direction of the [embedded] story" (1989, 403). Further, Minkowski (1989, 408ff.) summarizes different types of formulaic diction used in the audience's interlocation: "imperative form of a verb that means to tell or speak" (for examples in the VN: *brūhi* in MBh 5.33.11, *vada* in 5.36.48); "interrogatives" (e.g., 5.36.22, 5.37.8); "formulaic construction... made up of *śrotum* + a first person form of *iṣ*" (e.g., 5.33.15); and "requests for more/an extended version" (e.g., 5.34.1-2, 5.35.1, 5.41.1). Drawing from Minkowski's arguments, Bowles uses in his study of the ĀDhP the term *praśna* for

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<sup>109</sup> See section 2.4-5 where I already explored the idea that the epic's story and didactic strands interweave and inform each other.

“questions or interrogations from one interlocutor to the other,” (2007, 181) and notes that “it is usually the *praśna* that provides the means of progression from one unit to the next... Without the *praśna* the limitations of a simple monologue would be apparent” (2007, 186–87).

In the VN, too, the significance of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s interlocution becomes apparent in the very first chapter. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra conveys his predicament to Vidura (MBh 5.33.9-12; translation on p. 49 above), and Vidura attempts to diagnose his condition (5.33.13-14; translation on p. 47 above), Dhṛtarāṣṭra immediately expands the range of topics that he would like to hear from Vidura (MBh 5.33.15):

*śrotum icchāmi te dharmyaṃ paraṃ naiḥśreyasaṃ vacaḥ |  
asmin rājarsivamśe hi tvam ekaḥ prājñasaṃmataḥ ||*

I wish to hear your words related to dharma and leading to ultimate good,  
for you alone are deemed wise in this lineage of royal sages.

And Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s plea is quite successful as Vidura immediately broadens the scope of his didactic discourse and starts giving generic *nīti* instructions, beginning with the traits of *pañḍitas* and *mūḍhas*.<sup>110</sup> And yet, while Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s curiosity and enthusiasm for Vidura’s preaching punctuate and steer the VN throughout, it may be misleading to think that Dhṛtarāṣṭra was genuinely intent on correcting his own or his son Duryodhana’s conduct. This point becomes clear toward the end of the lengthy nocturnal discourse when Dhṛtarāṣṭra simply confesses his helplessness to Vidura in a fatalistic tone (MBh 5.40.28-30):<sup>111</sup>

*evam etad yathā māṃ tvam anuśāsasi nityadā |  
mamāpi ca matiḥ saumya bhavaty evaṃ yathāttha māṃ ||*

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<sup>110</sup> MBh 5.33.16ff.

<sup>111</sup> In MBh 5.39.1 too, Dhṛtarāṣṭra displays a fatalistic attitude; see that verse and translation on pp. 49-50 above. Even beyond the VN, one can find this attitude of Dhṛtarāṣṭra throughout the MBh, for example at MBh 2.45.57. This attitude of Dhṛtarāṣṭra corroborates an interesting point made by A. K. Ramanujan in his macroscopic study of the various characters and themes of the MBh: “Characters usually know what they are doing and still do it,” and “the dramaturgic notions of action issuing from character, character transformed by action in some direct way, do not fit here [in the epic]. Characters do not change here” (1991, 437–38).

*sā tu buddhiḥ kṛtāpy evaṃ pāṇḍavān prati me sadā |  
duryodhanaṃ samāsādya punar viparivartate ||  
na diṣṭam abhyatikrāntuṃ śakyam martyena kena cit |  
diṣṭam eva kṛtaṃ manye pauruṣaṃ tu nirarthakam ||*

This is just as you always instruct me,  
and, O good one, even my mind is just as you have always told me.  
But, although my intellect is always made in this way towards the Pāṇḍavas,  
it again changes after meeting Duryodhana.  
By no man can fate be transgressed.  
I think that only fate acts and human effort is futile.

At the end of a long nocturnal sermon by Vidura, which primarily teaches how a person should wisely and righteously navigate the world, and which stresses the role of individual human initiative and free will, one finds Dhṛtarāṣṭra's fatalistic response comical, to say the least. If it were not for his occasional questions punctuating the course of the VN, his response would have easily made one wonder whether he remained awake throughout the *nīti* counsel, a counsel that, as van Buitenen puts it, "should have lulled to sleep the most insomniac of worriers" (1978, 180). Hegarty nicely analyzes this moment along the same lines:

"Dhṛtarāṣṭra responds with an almost comic level of incomprehension. He commends Vidura's attention to his immediate plight having just been told precisely what to do! It is tempting to read a degree of irony or even pathos in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's response. The recalcitrant interlocutor is a powerful textual tool in dialogue of this type. It can turn instruction into satire without necessarily blunting the force of the teaching itself."  
(Hegarty 2019, 217)

In any case, as Minkowski and Bowles have observed about the audience's role in other frames of the MBh, it is clear that Dhṛtarāṣṭra plays a central role in eliciting the *nīti* discourse from Vidura and then in providing necessary impetus from time to time to carry the discourse forward. However, at least in the VN, the audience's centrality does not end here: Dhṛtarāṣṭra is also primarily responsible for the conclusion of the *nīti* discourse. Upon pleading to Vidura again for anything that is still left unsaid (5.41.1; see the chapter epigraph above), Vidura knows that

what remains is the doctrine related to *mokṣa*, that is, the human pursuit (*puruṣārtha*) dealing with the idea of transcending death.<sup>112</sup> Vidura, however, stops giving any further teaching because of his ineligibility as a *śūdra*-born to instruct on matters related to *mokṣa* (*śūdrayonāv ahaṃ jāto nāto 'nyad vaktum utsahe*, 5.41.5ab), and recommends Sanatsujāta for explaining the doctrine about the non-existence of death.<sup>113</sup> At this point, the VN (*prajāgaraparvan*) concludes, and the epic narrative paves the way for the *Sanatsujātaparvan*. Therefore, it is at this juncture that the Vidura-Dhṛtarāṣṭra frame also collapses and we revert, for a brief moment, to the hierarchically outer Vaiśampāyana-Janamejaya frame.<sup>114</sup> In other words, after the verses 5.33.1-3, 7-8 in the first *adhyāya* of the VN where we encounter Vaiśampāyana's words prefacing the *nīti* dialogue, it is only at 5.41.8-11 in the last chapter of the VN that we again “dip” to the outer frame.<sup>115</sup> Thus, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's appetite for more teachings ultimately lends a progressive arc to this particular didactic moment in the *Udyogaparvan*: from the VN which contains a more this-worldly praxeological doctrine dealing with ideas where *dharma* and *artha* are important and conceptually intertwined, we proceed to the *Sanatsujātaparvan* that contains a much subtler eschatological doctrine primarily centered on *mokṣa*, the highest *puruṣārtha* according to Hindu worldview.

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<sup>112</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, the VN is mainly centered at the nexus of *dharma* and *artha*.

<sup>113</sup> MBh 5.41.2-6

<sup>114</sup> MBh 5.41.8-11

<sup>115</sup> Here I borrow Hildebeitel's (2006) terminology as used in his study of the “dips” in the *Nārāyaṇīya* subtext in the MBh's *Śāntiparvan*. Note that we, however, never dip in the VN to the outermost Ugrāśravas-Śaunaka frame set at the Naimiṣa forest.

### 3.4. Vidura's rhetorical repertoire

As the study of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sporadic interlocution amply testifies (see the epigraph of this chapter), Vidura's 'wonderful' (*vicitra*) discourse is marked by diverse rhetorical tools and flourishes. I now survey and present several noteworthy rhetorical strategies employed by Vidura in the VN. As I will comment, this summary is useful not only in throwing light on the literary and poetic structure of Vidura's didactics, but also in bringing to fore the complex – and diplomatic – personality of Vidura.

#### 3.4.1. Contextual buildup

As noted already, scholars such as van Buitenen have bemoaned the 'relentlessly incessant' flow of Vidura's counsel.<sup>116</sup> According to Hudson, however, this verbosity, whereby Vidura "discusses what seems to be every topic under the sun," is precisely what characterizes Vidura's pedagogical method. Hudson argues that the point of Vidura's "strategies of excess" would be to open Dhṛtarāṣṭra up and make him receptive, through sheer volume, to what Vidura has to say, for "Vidura every now and then interrupts his rambling discourse to give Dhṛtarāṣṭra very specific advice – namely, to consider the consequences of his actions and to return the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom to them" (2013, 119–22). Hudson, I believe, offers an insightful observation that helps explore the way Vidura brings in the topic of the Pāṇḍavas throughout his counsel. I have already listed in table 1 the specific moments (i.e., verses) in the VN when Vidura speaks about the Pāṇḍavas. But to explore the immediate contexts in which these moments occur, I now summarize the content of a few verses surrounding some of these instances when Vidura explicitly refers to the Pāṇḍavas.

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<sup>116</sup> See n.14 above.

Table 2: Context setup by Vidura while advocating for the Pāṇḍavas

<b>Context setup by Vidura</b>	<b>Vidura's words referring to the Pāṇḍavas</b>
When one's intellect is muddled and destruction looms, he sees wrong as right and holds onto it (MBh 5.34.79)	The Kauravas intellect is seized by their enmity for the Pāṇḍavas, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not realize it (MBh 5.34.80)
Virtues of people who become and remain prosperous, which includes honesty towards one's kin (5.35.63-64)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra cannot prosper by allying with Duryodhana, Śakuni, etc.; Pāṇḍavas are endowed with all virtues (5.35.66-67)
A lone tree can be felled by a violent wind but not trees crowded together; lone man is vulnerable to enemies, so kinsmen must support each other; the sick are always miserable and the wise shun sickness (5.36.60-67)	Vidura reminds Dhṛtarāṣṭra of his warnings during the match of dice and the disrobing of Drapaudī, further noting that the wise shun crookedness; the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas must protect each other and have the same friends and enemies (5.36.68-70)
Difficulty in finding a person who gives apt advice even if unpleasant to hear; one should abandon a man for the sake of a family (5.37.15-17)	Vidura reminds Dhṛtarāṣṭra that his warnings during the match of dice displeased the king; the king has abandoned lions (Pāṇḍavas) and is herding jackals (Kauravas) (5.37.18-19)
Interdependence of a forest and its tigers for sustenance (5.37.42)	Kauravas are forest and Pāṇḍavas are tigers (5.37.41)
Fire hidden in wood is safe only as long as it is not kindled, but when kindled it burns the entire forest (5.37.56-57)	Men of noble birth have the power of fire; Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his sons are the forest (5.37.58-60)
One who does not share his property must be shunned; one who angers innocent people close to him does not sleep peacefully; one should appease those people who when offended pose a threat to one's prosperity (5.38.36-38)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra abandoned Pāṇḍavas and handed the dominion to Duryodhana (5.38.43)
The evils of discord among kinsmen (5.39.15-25)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra should at least give some villages to the Pāṇḍavas (5.39.19)
One shouldn't do anything that will make him suffer later (5.39.27)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra will suffer later learning about the death of his sons (5.39.26)
The insatiability of desire (5.39.66-69)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra should treat the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas equally (5.39.70)
The duties of the four <i>varṇas</i> (5.40.23-27ab)	Dhṛtarāṣṭra must reinstate Yudhiṣṭhira in his <i>kṣatriya</i> duties (5.40.27cd)

As one notes from the table above, Vidura’s pedagogy frequently involves setting up a context based on what seems to be a piece of general political and ethical advice. However, sometimes he capitalizes on this context and immediately dovetails into giving pointed, explicit advice in reference to the Pāṇḍavas. For instance, in the first case (from *adhyāya* 5.34), Vidura notes that one’s intellect is muddled when destruction looms over him, thereby alluding to the destruction of the ill-witted Kauravas themselves.<sup>117</sup>

To summarize, an important rhetorical flourish Vidura occasionally deploys in the VN is the strategic piling up, verse after verse, of more abstract politico-moral advice in order to, as Hudson notes, “open up” Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and in the course of which he cleverly sneaks in the topic of the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>118</sup> Further, Vidura strategically employs this rhetoric in a way that lets him advocate for the Pāṇḍavas from various angles; that is, once he speaks about the dangers of discord among kinsmen, once about the insatiability of desire, once using a metaphor of a forest and tigers, once using a sub-tale,<sup>119</sup> and so on. Vidura thus repeatedly – yet differently – urges Dhṛtarāṣṭra to mend his ways before it is too late.

### 3.4.2. Contrastive corroboration

Vidura’s didacticism frequently involves juxtaposing antithetical categories, a juxtaposition that especially serves to reinforce teachings related to the diametrically opposed aspects being contrasted. To illustrate, at the very outset of the VN, Vidura explains the virtues

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<sup>117</sup> While this pattern of connecting the general to the specific is evident at the instants listed in the table, there are a few moments where Vidura raises the topic of the Pāṇḍavas abruptly, that is, without any obvious connect to the didactic context, as at the end of the first chapter of the VN (MBh 5.33).

<sup>118</sup> I propose this argument only for the verses immediately surrounding those related to the Pāṇḍavas. I do not, of course, argue that the entire *adhyāya* is a strategic unfolding to the topic of the Pāṇḍavas.

<sup>119</sup> See section 3.4.7

of a *paṇḍita* (a wise one) in a series of verses (MBh 5.33.16-29), and immediately follows it up with a set of verses (5.33.30-38) on the traits of a *mūḍha* (an ignorant or a fool). Likewise, at a later point, after explaining what makes a lineage/family a *mahākula* (a great family; 5.36.23-24), he also makes note of how families degenerate (5.36.25-28). In both these cases, a quick verse wraps up the juxtaposing enterprise: in the first case, a verse at the end closes the theme by reiterating who a *paṇḍita* really is (5.33.39); while in the second case, a summarizing verse clarifies what really makes a family great (5.36.29). This style of double explanation works well in driving the point home as it includes teaching not only things that one ought to do but also things that one must refrain from doing. There are also cases elsewhere in the VN where the juxtaposition is a less systematic lumping of verses dealing with the opposite categories, such as a series of verses dealing in an intertwined manner with one who is under the control of his senses (*indriyas*) and one who has mastered his senses (5.34.52-62). Here, too, the argument still holds that such complex juxtaposition is largely used as an oratorical device for delivering comprehensive teachings.

### 3.4.3. Retrospective accusation

As discussed already, a large portion of the VN's content engages with generic *nīti* ideas related to *dharma* and *artha*, and thus appears to be only tangentially related to the specific narrative moment in the MBh's story. However, when Vidura does engage with the MBh's larger story, he frequently does so by recalling some prior incidents from the epic's story. Note, for instance, the following verses (MBh 5.36.68, 5.37.18):

*purā hy ukto nākaros tvaṃ vaco me dyūte jītāṃ draupadīm prekṣya rājan |  
duryodhanaṃ vārayety akṣavatyāṃ kitavatvaṃ paṇḍitā varjayanti ||*

Earlier when I saw Draupadī won in the dice game I said “Stop Duryodhana in the game of dice,” [but] you did not do it, O king. Wise ones shun deceit.

*uktaṃ mayā dyūtakāle 'pi rājan naivaṃ yuktaṃ vacanaṃ prātipīya |  
tadauśadhaṃ pathyam ivāturasya na rocate tava vaicitravīrya ||*

Even at the time of the dice game, O king, I had told you that it was not proper, O descendent of Pratiṭpa. But it did not please you, O son of Vicitravīrya, as a beneficial medicine does not please a sick person.

Overtly, such recalling is done with an intention of swaying Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s mind at least at this critical moment in the *Udyogaparvan*, a *parvan* that narrates various peace-making efforts undertaken by several characters and parties to thwart the impending apocalyptic war.<sup>120</sup> For instance, in the VN verse below, Vidura urges that Dhṛtarāṣṭra now redress the situation (MBh 5.39.29):

*duryodhanena yady etat pāpaṃ teṣu purā kṛtam |  
tvayā tat kulavṛddhena pratyāneyaṃ nareśvara ||*

If Duryodhana had previously committed this evil towards them [the Pāṇḍavas], that should be remedied by you as an elder of the lineage, O lord of men.

In addition to this pedagogical purpose, however, these verses also serve another important purpose: they integrate the VN with the broader MBh narrative. This phenomenon of echoing prior epic episodes in order to integrate a didactic text within its narrative context is also well noted by Bowles in his study of the *Āpaddharmaparvan*:

“Such intertextual ‘epic allusions’, which demonstratively evoke the characters and deeds of the Mbh, are found throughout śāstric literature (indeed in most Sanskrit literatures), yet they acquire particular resonance when referred to in the course of the ‘text’ (broadly conceived) to which they belong. The ĀDhP’s physical and thematic framing by the Mbh thereby takes on added significance, since it is a framing explicitly foregrounded by

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<sup>120</sup> For a useful analysis of the nature of some of these peace-making efforts, see Dev (1989) and Greer (2005).

certain texts of the ĀDhP itself, demanding that they be read against its background.”  
(Bowles 2007, 155)

#### 3.4.4. Metaphoric elucidation

The use of metaphorical language in early Indian literature, especially in didactic and pedagogical texts, is a well-known – although not a thoroughly studied – phenomenon. Vidura, too, deploys in the VN some famous metaphors known in early Indian thought, such as the chariot image (MBh 5.34.57-58, cf. *Kāṭhakopaniṣad* 3.2.3-6) and the figurative comparison between hurtful words and arrows/thorns for their painful effect on the receiver (*vāksāyaka*; see MBh 5.34.76-77, 5.36.8-9). While the first metaphor is widely seen in early Indian literature in the context of explaining the need for *indriya-nigraha* (sense control), the comparison between speech and arrows has proliferated more in texts on philosophy of language, until at least the first millennium CE.<sup>121</sup> Although beyond the scope of the present study, it could be very rewarding to trace such well-known metaphors across diverse texts as a way to place these texts in conversation with each other, and to track any continuities and ruptures in their associated doctrines.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The *vāksāyaka* metaphor can also be found in some other didactic portions of the epic such as in the *Śāntiparvan* (see MBh 12.299.9). Arindam Chakrabarti (2014, 249) offers an insightful analysis for this metaphor: “Speech and war were both taken ritually as acts of sacrifice. Speech is fire, it burns and cooks. Trenchant words have been compared to sharp arrows, making archery a standard metaphor for public debate in the Vedic–Purāṇic literature.” See also Malcolm Keating (2018) for a fascinating discussion of the figurative comparison between words and arrows in texts such as Jayanta Bhaṭṭa’s *Nyāyamañjari* (9<sup>th</sup> century CE), Vācaspati Miśra’s *Nyāyavārttikatātparyāṭikā* (9<sup>th</sup> century CE), and Abhinavagupta’s *Locana* (ca. 1000 CE).

<sup>122</sup> For instance, in his study of two Gāndhāri *sūtras*, Joseph Marino (2017) demonstrates how the similes found in his Gāndhāri material “allude[s] to wide-reaching networks of imagery found throughout early Buddhist literature that enhance our interpretation of the Gāndhāri sūtras.” He further comments on the merits of this methodological approach: “By tracing similes and metaphors instead of doctrine, we can see how the [metaphorical] images... connect apparently unrelated Buddhist texts, and how in different cases they drive the pedagogical strategy of the those [*sic*] texts. Moreover, we can uncover the way the same images were incorporated into non-Buddhist Sanskrit texts like the *Manusmṛti* and *Arthaśāstra*, something that would be impossible if we only searched for doctrinal parallels.” (2017, 4)

### 3.4.5. Tag phrasing

A very frequent stylistic structure noticed in the VN is what could be referred to as ‘tag phrasing.’ Below are a couple of illustrations that demonstrate and help explain this construction (MBh 5.39.43, 5.39.59):

*maṅgalāmbhanam yogaḥ śrutam utthānam ārjavam |  
bhūtim etāni kurvanti satām cābhīkṣṇadarśanam ||*

Recourse to what is auspicious, yoga, learning, resilience, uprightness – these confer prosperity; and so does repeated audience with virtuous beings.

*strīdhūrtake ’lase bhīrau caṅḍe puruṣamānini |  
caure kṛtaghne viśvāso na kāryo na ca nāstike ||*

In a woman, a cheat, an indolent one, a coward, a violent one, a self-conceited one, a thief, an ingrate, trust should not be placed; nor in an atheist.

As we note from these examples, a single verse attempts to group a list of things or qualities or people, etc., and one entity of the list is reserved for simply tagging at the end of the verse after what is even otherwise a complete thought. Thus, the list encased in such verses would not appear incomplete even if the last tagged item were to be removed. We will now see another pattern of listing in the VN where the literary style employed “locks” the list in the verse.

### 3.4.6. Numerical listing

This is another very common way of listing items in the VN, wherein the quantity/number of entities being mentioned in the list is also specified within the verse; for example (MBh 5.35.45):

*aṣṭau guṇāḥ puruṣam dīpayanti prajñā ca kaulyam ca damaḥ śrutam ca |  
parākramaś cābahubhāṣitā ca dānam yathāśakti kṛtajñatā ca ||*

Eight virtues glorify a man: wisdom, noble birth, self-control, learning,  
valor, restraint in speech, generosity according to capacity, and gratitude.

As noted, this pattern of numerical listing “locks” the list, as it were, by also specifying the number of items being listed. Indeed, as will be discussed at length in the next chapter of this thesis, later MBh commentators, such as Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara (ca. 17<sup>th</sup> century), use this criterion to pick a more preferable version of a verse when faced with multiple variants of it in different manuscript traditions.

There is one case of numerical listing in the VN that deserves special attention: the extended series of verses in the first *adhyāya*, MBh vv. 5.33.44-83, which compiles things that come in ones (5.33.44-48), twos (5.33.49-54), threes (5.33.55-57), and so on till groups of tens (5.33.82-83). Interestingly, besides grouping together lists containing the same number of entities, this set of verses does not reveal any other connecting logic, say, in themes, motifs, etc. As a result, to the extent that the Pune Critical Edition represents the MBh archetype, there are a significant number of interpolations in this section (that is, the so-called “star passages” in the PCE’s critical apparatus). In other words, the lack of any other connecting logic makes this section a sort of a grab bag: theoretically, one could add into this section any verse containing a list with the quantity of list members specified. For instance, note star passage 183 in the PCE (De 1940, 135) containing several verses listing things coming in six. Another way of looking at this sequence of verses lies in the potential such arrangement of verses has in serving as a mnemonic aid for oral narration. A final point to note here is the puzzling numerical verse (MBh 5.33.43) that prefaces this series of verses:

*ekayā dve viniścitya trīṃś caturbhir vaśe kuru |  
pañca jītvā viditvā ṣaṭ sapta hitvā sukhī bhava ||*

After deciding upon the two with the one, subdue the three with the four.  
After conquering the five, knowing the six, and letting go of the seven, be happy.

Although tempting to expect, this mysterious verse does not display any easy connections with the ensuing array of numerically connected verses. That is, there is no clarification in the subsequent verses compiling things coming in ones, twos, threes, etc., about what the one, two, three, and so on in this prefatory verse allude to. However, only in one instance, for clarifying a specific number *sapta* (seven) in the riddle verse above, most commentators<sup>123</sup> leverage the subsequent verses listing things coming in seven (MBh 5.33.73-74, see verses below). Helping to make such a connection is the fact that there is only one list for things coming in seven, and that in both the prefatory verse and the subsequent verse the suggestion is the same – about avoiding the seven.

*sapta doṣāḥ sadā rājñā hātavyā vyasanodayāḥ |*  
*prāyaśo yair vinaśyanti kṛtamūlās ca pārthivāḥ ||*  
*striyo 'kṣā mṛgayā pānaṃ vākpāruṣyaṃ ca pañcamam |*  
*mahac ca daṇḍapāruṣyam arthadūṣaṇam eva ca ||*

A king should always avoid seven evils resulting in addiction, and by which kings, [although] well established, mostly perish: women, dice, hunting, drinking, harsh words as the fifth, great severity in punishment, as well as the waste of wealth.

### 3.4.7. Further sub-tales

A last, but important, rhetorical component to be discussed, and one which brings this chapter to a full circle, is the further embedding of sub-stories in the VN. As analyzed earlier,<sup>124</sup> the VN is embedded in the Vidura-Dhṛtarāṣṭra frame, which itself is hierarchically/hypotactically

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<sup>123</sup> This connection is made by Arjunamiśra, Devabodha, Nīlakaṇṭha, Sarvajñanārāyaṇa, and Vimalabodha (see Bākre 1920, 85-86). Vādirāja, however, glosses *sapta* as the seven *dhātus*: *tvak-carma-rudhira-māṃsa-medo-majjā-asthi*, referring to seven bodily elements, namely, skin (mentioned twice!), blood, flesh, fat, marrow, bone. (This appears different from the traditional description of the seven *dhātus* which refers to the seven bodily fluids or secretions: chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen.)

<sup>124</sup> See section 3.2.

encased in the all-encompassing Vaiśampāyana-Janamejaya and the Ugraśravas-Śaunaka frames. Within the VN, the embedding drops further to another level, as Vidura narrates two other stories: the Sudhanvā-Virocana-Prahrāda story and the Ātreya-Sādhyādevas dialogue. However, these two embedded episodes, occurring at MBh 5.35.5-31 and 5.36.1-21, are paratactically structured and do not interact with each other, barring the similar formulaic diction that prefaces both of them (MBh 5.35.5, 5.36.1):

*atrāpy udāharantīmam itihāsaṃ purātanam |  
virocanasya saṃvādaṃ keśinyarthe sudhanvanā ||*

On this matter, they cite this ancient story,  
the dialogue of Virocana with Sudhanvā for the sake of Keśinī.

*atraivodāharantīmam itihāsaṃ purātanam |  
ātreyasya ca saṃvādaṃ sādhyānām ceti naḥ śrutam ||*

On this very matter, people cite this ancient story  
that we have heard – the conversation of Ātreya and the Sādhyas.

This formulaic line, *atrāpy udāharantīmam itihāsaṃ purātanam* (and its variants) has been noticed throughout the epic and has also been well discussed by several scholars.<sup>125</sup> In the words of van Buitenen, “it is the standard opening of many didactic inserts,” and it is interesting because it introduces text portions “not as part and parcel of the *Mahābhārata*, but as a quotation from elsewhere, an *itihāsaṃ purātanam* which ‘they cite’ (*udāharanti*) on a topic that emerges from the [MBh] text” (1978, 179). Additionally, more often than not, the episodes embedded after this phrase are not found in other texts outside the MBh, and therefore, this phenomenon of prefacing an *upākhyāna* with the formulaic rhetoric is perhaps an evidence of the compilation of

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<sup>125</sup> See van Buitenen (1978, 179), Minkowski (1989, 410), Hiltebeitel (2005, 474), and Bowles (2007, 183 n.83). In the text of the VN as compiled in the PCE, the formulaic line also occurs, without any logic, at MBh 5.33.84: *atraivodāharantīmam itihāsaṃ purātanam | putrārtham asurendreṇa gītaṃ caiva sudhanvanā ||*. There is no ensuing anecdote and the verse in any case seems to be referring to the Sudhanvā-Virocana-Prahrāda story occurring in MBh 5.35, which will be discussed shortly.

floating oral didactic texts. And as Sen notes, the formulaic introduction preceding the narration of some anecdote serves to note that “the practice in question has been sanctioned or recommended by some well-known person” (2014, 194). I now present some brief remarks on the nature of the two paratactic episodes embedded within the VN, starting with the one that closely resembles the VN.

The dialogue between Ātreya and Sādhyādevas (MBh 5.36.1-21):

As noted, this episode largely clones its framing text, the VN, both stylistically and pedagogically. Just as Vidura delivers his didactic preaching at Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s behest, Ātreya, implored by the Sādhyas (MBh 5.36.3), instructs them in a series of verses (5.36.4-21). Even the content of Ātreya’s teaching echoes Vidura’s, both being basically concerned with *nīti* ideas, i.e., with the science of personal conduct. For instance, the figurative comparison of harsh speech with arrows discussed earlier features both in Vidura’s (5.34.76-77) and Ātreya’s teachings (5.36.8-9). As such, the purpose of embedding similar didactic teachings in a new hypotactic frame is unclear in this case.<sup>126</sup>

In his analysis of this sub-tale, Hegarty interestingly reminds us of the relationship between the two speakers:

“One should note at the outset Vidura’s special relationship to Atri, as his descendant, at least in the view of the list of partial incarnations of the *Ādi Parvan* (given in *adhyāya* 61). Vidura is thus to be closely identified with the sage in the embedded tale. The teaching of Ātreya focuses on the characteristics of virtue... The emphasis on equanimity and neutrality is recurrent.” (Hegarty 2019, 218)

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<sup>126</sup> This instance therefore does not confirm with what Bowles reminds us in his book (2007, 162), drawing from the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, that the frames “perform a ‘metacommunicative’ function in respect to the units they embed.” (See n.92 above for an introduction to the term “metacommunication” as developed by Bateson.)

Thus, Hegarty too notes the commonalities between Vidura's and Ātreya's teachings. It is, however, not evident from the epic whether the similarities can be attributed to the fact that the two speakers share a special relationship.

Sudhanvā-Virocana-Prahrāda story (MBh 5.35.5-31):<sup>127</sup>

First, to outline the story briefly: upon Keśinī's inquiry on who is superior, brahmins or daityas, Virocana, being a daitya, asserts that the latter are superior. Keśinī suggests that the matter be resolved the next morning after the brahmin Sudhanvā's arrival. The next morning, Sudhanvā and Virocana wager their lives while asserting their own superiority, and go to Virocana's father, Prahrāda, asking him to serve as their arbiter. Even after learning that his son's life was in danger, Prahrāda declares Sudhanvā as superior. Pleased by Prahrāda's rectitude, Sudhanvā exempts Virocana from his bet.

This sub-text, unlike the Ātreya-Sādhyas conversation, diverges from the VN in several respects. Stylistically, this text is a story involving four characters (Keśinī, Prahrāda, Sudhanvā, and Virocana), and is not a didactic sermon from one character to the other. Therefore, while the VN and the Ātreya-Sādhyas conversation are monologic in texture (barring the occasional requests by their respective audience that the speaker continue speaking further), this is a dialogic act/drama involving several characters, each speaking to a notable extent.<sup>128</sup>

Pedagogically, too, this parable has a specific purpose: to teach Dhṛtarāṣṭra by illustration, or rather by reminding him the practices of learned people from the past, that he must follow what

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<sup>127</sup> Vidura already told this story in a slightly different version during the episode of the dicing match in the *Sabhāparvan* (MBh 2.61.58-80). There his narration was for everyone assembled in the court, urging them to speak up and restrain the unfolding events of the match.

<sup>128</sup> As noted by Bowles (2007, 169), Greg Bailey (1995, 38ff.) has done a very useful study on the different degrees of interactivity among various characters in *purāṇic* episodes that is also illuminating when applied to the MBh.

is right even at the cost of his son's life. And so, Vidura concludes thus at the end of this story (MBh 5.35.32):

*tasmād rājendra bhūmyarthe nāṅṛtaṃ vaktum arhasi |  
mā gamaḥ sasutāmātyo 'tyayaṃ putrān anubhraman ||*

Therefore, O Indra among kings, you ought not speak a lie for the sake of the [whole] earth.

Straying after your sons, do not go towards evil with your sons and ministers.

Finally, we may note that just as the VN briefly pauses the MBh's linear story narrative due to its didactic theme, this episode briefly pauses the VN's didactic narrative by introducing a story.

### 3.5. Concluding remarks

In exploring the literary texture of the VN, the central objective of this chapter has been to uncover the stylistic and rhetorical peculiarities of the VN, and to throw light on those literary aspects revealing interesting parallels and divergences among the VN, other didactic texts of the MBh, and the MBh as a whole. In regard to its placement in the MBh, we have seen that the VN offers an interesting overlap between the paratactic/sequential and hypotactic/hierarchical modes of embedding seen throughout the epic. Additionally, we have noted how the VN's frame tweaks some of the tropes found in most other MBh frames. As such, the VN serves to illustrate how the epic's standard frame conventions are generally inflected and manipulated by the epic composer(s) in accordance to the specific narrative moments and contexts.

As for the significance of the audience, just as in other MBh frames, Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the VN plays a crucial role in both initiating and steering the text forward. However, I sought to demonstrate how his centrality extends even further in the VN. Not only is this character primarily responsible even for the conclusion of the VN, his interlocution ultimately lends a progressive arc to *Udyogaparvan*'s didactics – we thus observe the didactic theme progressing

from *dharma*- and *artha*-centered praxeological ideas in the VN to *mokṣa*-centered eschatological thought in the *Sanatsujātaparvan*. Finally, I have surveyed some prominent rhetorical devices of the VN with a view to understanding its literary style, whereby some further parallels between the VN and other MBh texts were exposed, such as the use of the formulaic diction *atrāpy udāharantīmam itihāsaṃ purātanam* (“on this matter, they cite this ancient story”).

## **Part II. *Viduran̄ti* in the World**

## Chapter 4: *Viduranīti*'s canonization in the Swaminarayana *sampradāya*

*“The characteristics of the wise and the fools in detail, as well as what should and should not be done, Vidura explained Dhṛtarāṣṭra long ago. It is called the Viduranīti, beneficial for householders and ascetics. After studying it, one can know from it what should and should not be done.”*

-- *Satsaṅgījīvanam* 3.40.12-13<sup>129</sup>

### 4.1. Introduction

This thesis has so far explored the *Viduranīti* horizontally, so to speak, within the world of the *Mahābhārata*. In contrast, this chapter explores the VN vertically, that is, in a historical framework, whereby the text is situated in a modern socio-religious context.<sup>130</sup> In addition to studying the text from a different context, this chapter engages with an important academic field that analyzes the nature of negotiations between text and practice in South Asian religions.

The relationship between scriptural texts and religious praxis has been a fascinating yet complicated issue in the study of Indian religions. While some scholars have cautioned the huge gap between textual and quotidian religiosities, others have demonstrated the formation of new canonical texts with extensive borrowings from religion on the ground.<sup>131</sup> The VN and its contemporary reframing as a canonical text by a modern religious community, namely, the

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<sup>129</sup> *paṇḍitānām ca mūrkhāṇām lakṣaṇāni savistaram | kāryākārye ca viduro dhṛtarāṣṭram purāvadat || proktā viduranītiḥ sā gr̥hīnām tyāginām hitā | tām abhyasya tato jñeyah kāryākāryavinirṇayah ||*

<sup>130</sup> My use of the labels “ancient,” “classical,” and “modern” is only in a chronological sense: “ancient” and “classical” stretching until the sixth century and “modern” referring to the period starting with the nineteenth century.

<sup>131</sup> For an amusing presentation of the former, see Narayanan (2000), and for the latter, see the suggested research articles in Nemeč (2009, 763).

Swaminarayana *sampradāya*, offers a nice vantage point to analyze these negotiations between doctrine and lived religion.

More precisely, there is a central question animating this case study: Why was an ancient text dealing with the art of statecraft and the science of personal conduct reframed within the canon of a modern religious production? This question becomes more intriguing when a few additional factors are considered. Firstly, this is, as far as I am aware, a singular case where the VN has been canonized and recommended in a religious setting. Secondly, and more importantly, the text's role within the canon is strikingly paradoxical. As we will see, while the other scriptures that made their way into the canonical fold of the *sampradāya* have well-defined roles to play in the legitimization and identity formation of the nascent religious sect, the VN *overtly* appears loose in its relevance in this respect. This *apparent* ambiguity of the text's role, I posit, throws light not only on a modern-day interpretation of the VN, but also on the historical factors shaping the formation of the Swaminarayana tradition.

#### **4.2. Sahajānanda Svāmī and the Swaminarayana *sampradāya***

The Swaminarayana *sampradāya* emerged at the dawn of modernity in present-day Gujarat in western India, which includes the former regions of North and South Gujarat, Kathiawar or Saurashtra, and Kutch. It was founded by Sahajānanda Svāmī (1781-1830)<sup>132</sup> around 1802, saw a remarkable growth even within the three decades of the leader's supervision, and has since grown into a major transnational form of Hinduism marking its presence in many

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<sup>132</sup> Sahajānanda Svāmī is himself referred to as Śrī Svāminārāyaṇ in the community. Following the convention used in the field of Swaminarayan studies, I use Sahajānanda or Sahajānanda Svāmī to refer to the historical person and Swaminarayan/Swaminarayana as an adjective, as in Swaminarayana community, Swaminarayana studies, etc.

places sheltering Gujarati communities and diasporas.<sup>133</sup> Modern historical narratives emphasize the shifting political scene and changing power dynamics in eighteenth century Gujarat that effectively created a “power vacuum” by the early nineteenth century (S. Patel 2017a, 1–4).<sup>134</sup> This was the moment when the Swaminarayan sect emerged, roughly in parallel to the consolidation of British supremacy in Gujarat.

Sahajānanda aligned his religious formation to the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* culture already influential in Gujarat (Mallison 2016, 50–51). He traced his *sampradāya* via his guru Rāmānanda Svāmī (not to be confused with the fourteenth century Rāmānanda, ascribed founder of the Rāmānandi order) back to Rāmānuja (the eleventh century proponent of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta). For the sustenance of his religious creation, Sahajānanda laid great emphasis on the scholarship of his *sādhus* (monks) and asked that they contribute to the fellowship’s literary production (Brahmbhatt 2018, 4–5). During a sermon in 1824, he also explained that “a *sampradāya* flourishes through texts narrating the life-events of the *īṣṭadev* (*sic*), or chosen deity, of the *sampradāya*” (Brahmbhatt 2018, 32). Based on these pronouncements of Sahajānanda, the scholar Arun Brahmbhatt argues that the “Swaminarayan *sampradāy* can be meaningfully characterized as a “textual community”” (2018, 5). Here Brahmbhatt draws upon the work of the religious historian Anne Blackburn (who in turn builds her theory upon the work of the European medievalist Brian Stock) that defines ‘textual community’ as a “collective [of individuals] who understand the world and their appropriate place within it in terms significantly influenced by their encounter with a shared set of written texts...and who grant special social status to literate

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<sup>133</sup> The religious studies scholar Raymond Williams of Wabash College has written the foundational text (2001) on Swaminarayan Hinduism. For a detailed account of the sect’s origins, see Williams (2001, 5–32).

<sup>134</sup> See section 4.4 for a more detailed discussion of the historical context.

interpreters of authoritative written texts.”<sup>135</sup> The Sanskritist and Swaminarayan expert Peter Schreiner comments in a similar vein as Brahmhatt: “It may be an exaggeration to call the Swaminarayan Movement a ‘religion of the book,’ but it is certainly a movement in which texts contribute essentially to the definition of identity” (2001, 161). These scholars’ claim that for Sahajānanda texts played a crucial role in articulating religious identity is especially corroborated by the fact that he (and his order of *sādhus*) frequently evaluate other religious traditions on the basis of their authoritative scriptures. For instance, in the scholastic debates documented in the *sampradāya*’s literature, the founder often criticizes Śāktas for reading “wrong” texts such as the *Kaulāgama* (Schreiner 2001, 169, n.16).<sup>136</sup>

#### 4.3. Swaminarayana canons and the VN

Having underscored the value of texts in the flourishing of his *sampradāya*, what texts did Sahajānanda deem as fit to carve his *sampradāya*’s identity? Additionally, what made these texts authoritative from the founder’s perspective? And, how is this information transmitted within the tradition? Starting with the last question, often leader(s) of religious formations take conscious efforts to articulate and transmit knowledge pertaining to their community’s identity in an unassailable manner. Three important texts were composed for this purpose during the formative stages of the Swaminarayana tradition: the *Śikṣāpatrī* (ŚP), the *Satsaṅgījīvanam* (SSJ), and the *Vacanāmṛt* (VA). The *Śikṣāpatrī*, a composition of 212 Sanskrit verses said to have been

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<sup>135</sup> Blackburn (2001, 12) cited in Brahmhatt (2018, 5)

<sup>136</sup> The Śākta-Swaminarayan animosity had several dimensions. (Note that these were Śāktas of the *vāmamārga*, “left-handed” path). Sahajānanda criticized their animal sacrifices and other heterodox practices. In return, Śāktas, who had the Rajput princes under their influence, are known to have often persecuted Swaminarayan and his followers; see Mallison (2016, 53) and Williams (2001, 27–28). For a detailed account of the scholarly debates between the Śāktas and Swaminarayanis, as transmitted in the Swaminarayan literature, see Brahmhatt (2018, 33–48).

authored by Sahajānanda himself in 1826, is a rulebook of personal conduct to be followed by Swaminarayan followers.<sup>137</sup> The *Satsaṅgījīvanam* is a long Sanskrit text of over 16,000 verses documenting the life of Sahajānanda, composed by Svāmī Śātānanda during the founder’s lifetime, supposedly with the latter’s approval. The *Vacanāmṛt* is an edited collection of 273 public sermons in Gujarati given by Sahajānanda between 1819 to 1829 and compiled by early Swaminarayana monks. These three works contain information about the eight older scriptures from the broader Hindu tradition that Sahajānanda deemed as *satsāstras*. Further, the newly composed texts are themselves rendered canonical by ordaining that the followers should read them daily.<sup>138</sup> The adherents are also warned about excommunication if they do not follow the injunctions enjoined in these texts, and are alerted that the texts captured the essence of all authorized *śāstras* that could be referred for further details.<sup>139</sup> The three works thus represent what could be referred to as the Swaminarayan formation’s “modern canon” vis-à-vis the “traditional canon” of eight *satsāstras*.<sup>140</sup>

To define what constituted a *satsāstra*, we have already seen Sahajānanda proposing the significance of texts that recount the life and exploits of the *iṣṭadeva* of a *sampradāya*. Additionally, the enumeration of *satsāstras* in the modern canon is prefaced by defining them as scriptures that are attuned to the Vedas, narrate the avatar of Kṛṣṇa, and expound the word *sat* in its threefold nature (*sat* is said to stand for the highest *brahman*, noble people who have

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<sup>137</sup> Recently, the Swaminarayan scholars Jaydev Jani and Peter Schreiner (2016) have advanced an interesting argument questioning the authorship of the received version of the ŚP.

<sup>138</sup> See Schreiner (2001, 162) for a similar view. As Schreiner remarks elsewhere (1999, 265), for lack of a Sanskrit equivalent of the word “canon” (perhaps, *āgama?*), I follow his legacy in using the term canon.

<sup>139</sup> ŚP 203-209, SSJ. 4.44.204-209, VA Gaḍhaḍā II.28 (Gaḍhaḍā refers to the present-day city in Gujarat; the chapters in the VA are grouped under the name of the place where Sahajānanda delivered the sermons).

<sup>140</sup> For an excellent theoretical analysis of the role played by a canon and its re-inscription in the success of a religion, see von Stietencron (2001, 14–32).

surrendered to *brahman*, and their religion).<sup>141</sup> Accordingly, Sahajānanda authorized eight scriptures as *satsāstras*: (1) the *Vedas*, (2) the *Brahma Sūtras*, (3) the *Bhagavad Gītā*, (4) the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, (5) the *Vāsudeva Māhātmya* from the *Skanda Purāṇa*, (6) the *Viṣṇusahasranāma*, (7) the *Viduranīti*, and (8) the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*.<sup>142</sup> Clearly, the first three texts situate the *sampradāya* within the Vedānta school of *darśana* (philosophy).<sup>143</sup> The subsequent three indicate an affiliation with the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* tradition, an idea explicitly expressed in ŚP 98-102. Also, ŚP 97 specifies that the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* and an accompanying commentary, the *Mitākṣarā*, should be used for guidance in the ritual and secular realms. There is, however, no specification in the ŚP about the purpose of the *Viduranīti*. Similarly, sermons recorded in the VA lack references to the VN, while there are ample citations to the other *satsāstras*, as well as to other non-canonical sections from the MBh.<sup>144</sup> As for the SSJ, there is a cursory mention of Sahajānanda listening to the VN<sup>145</sup> and another brief but interesting episode where the VN is deployed; I will discuss the latter in the next section. Overall, in comparison to its canonical peers the VN's significance remains more or less ambiguous.

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<sup>141</sup> *sthāpīte yeṣu kṛṣṇasya sākāratvaviśudhate | satcchāstrāṇi tu tānyeva vedārthānusṛtāni hi ||* (SSJ 2.2.30) *sacchabdena paraṃbrahma sādḥavaśca tadāśritāḥ | proktāstadīyo dharmāśca śāstraṃ caitatirikāśrayam ||* (SSJ 3.22.4). *satechabdavācyametacca tritayaṃ yatra varṇitam | syāttatsachāstramudītaṃ saṅkṣiptaṃ vāpi vistṛtam ||* (SSJ 3.22.41).

See SSJ 3.22.3-40 for a more detailed explanation of these ideas.

<sup>142</sup> *vedāḥ śrīmadbhāgavataṃ nītiśca viduroditā | viṣṇornāmasahasraṃ ca gītā bhāgavatī tathā ||* *śārīrakākhyasūtrāṇi yājñavalkyasṃṛtistathā | śrītvāsudevamāhātmyamiti tajjñeyamaṣṭakam ||* *ye 'nusṛtā baveyuśca sadgranthā etadaṣṭakam | te 'pi sacchāstramityutkā mumukṣūṇāṃ hitāvahāḥ ||* (SSJ 3.22.42-44).

A listing of these eight *satsāstras* also occurs at ŚP 93-95; SSJ 2.2.32-33, 4.44.93-95; VA Vartāl 18

<sup>143</sup> The *Vedas* by extension include the *Upaniṣads* which along with the other two texts form the foundational canon – the *Prasthānatrayī* – of Vedānta *darśana*.

<sup>144</sup> For instance, the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* in VA Gaḍhaḍā I.72 and the *Sanatsujātīya* (the very next *upaparvan* following the VN) in VA Sāraṅpur 14.

<sup>145</sup> SSJ 4.9.38-40

During my inquiries about the VN with a few Swaminarayan scholars, it was consistently highlighted that the VN was useful as an ethical code. The social makeup of the early Swaminarayan community was largely comprised of lower caste-groups that were labelled as “criminal castes” in colonial writings, and texts such as the VN, it is suggested, could have aided the reformist leader in disciplining his followers. That may have been an appeal of the VN, but, as I will demonstrate, likely not the *only* one. Naturally, the formation of a textual community is highly dependent on its context. So, to better understand the polyvalent appeal of the VN, I now turn to the very milieu of the sect’s emergence. In the process, I will in particular contest the limiting and simplistic trope of reading the early *sampradāya* through the concepts of religious reform and social discipline by considering two important yet neglected facets: religious anxiety and social mobility.

#### **4.4. Context of the VN’s deployment**

Most historiographical accounts of the Swaminarayan movement depict the moment of the sect’s emergence as one characterized by a power vacuum with a frenzied state of affairs. In the wake of diminishing Mughal dominance and retreating Maratha presence in western India of the eighteenth century, early nineteenth century Gujarat lacked an imperial authority. Gujarat then was a congeries of over 300 princely states that came under the control of the East India Company, mostly by indirect rule, by 1820. Alongside, there is a persistent portrayal of the rapacity of several fringe caste groups such as the Kolis and Kathis, and of the prevalence of disagreeable socio-religious practices like female infanticide and *sati* (widow immolation) among Rajput clans. Against this background of political unrest and disturbed social landscape, the standard narrative emerging from both colonial and Swaminarayan accounts depicts the new

religious formation through the lens of reform.<sup>146</sup> While colonial writers and administrators, hesitant of directly intervening in the local practices, commended Sahajānanda for his reproach of *sati* and female infanticide, as well as his taming of the marginal social groups, Swaminarayan followers enthusiastically portrayed their leader as an avatar-figure who arrived in Gujarat at a time of great social upheaval.<sup>147</sup> This received account is more or less perpetuated in contemporary Swaminarayan scholarship and only recently have some scholars endeavored to look beyond the “lens of reform;”<sup>148</sup> even fewer studies have situated the movement in context of the social mobilities that marked premodern Gujarat.<sup>149</sup> This paper makes an additional effort in this direction to remedy the ideologically slanted narratives confined to the lenses of reform and social discipline.

Sahajānanda, originally a Sarvaria brahmin from the Oudh region,<sup>150</sup> arrived in South Gujarat in 1800 at the end of a period when Gujarat’s landscape was marked by intense social mobility. While the lower rungs of the society that included tribal and pastoral groups such as the Kolis and Kanbis had settled down as peasant communities, the Kathis who were holders of miniscule chiefdoms were often conquered by their stronger neighbors (Tambs-Lyche 1997, 113, 121ff.). Lower-class groups such as these were prominent among the adherents of the new religious community founded by Sahajānanda. In contrast, the upper ruling, bureaucratic, and mercantile classes such as the landed Rajput elites, Nagar Brahmans, and Banias were mostly

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<sup>146</sup> For an excellent survey of the historiography of Swaminarayan tradition as a reform movement, see Hatcher (2016).

<sup>147</sup> For a quick overview of these accounts, see Purohit (2012, 90–94).

<sup>148</sup> For instance, Patel (2017b) and Mallison (2016, 50–55)

<sup>149</sup> For instance, Parikh (2016)

<sup>150</sup> According to the biographical and hagiographical accounts, upon his parents’ death when he was eleven years old, Sahajānanda embarked on a peripatetic life as a renunciate travelling throughout India for seven years at the end of which he arrived at Loj in Kathiawar; see Williams (2001, 13–16).

members of other long-established traditions in Gujarat such as Śāktism, Vallabha *sampradāya* (also known as Puṣṭimārg tradition), and Jainism (Hardiman 1988, 1907–8; Parikh 2016, 105).

As mentioned, Sahajānanda was particularly lauded for pacifying the Kathis and Kolis who were labelled as “criminal castes” by the British<sup>151</sup> – a narrative that has taken a prominent place in the community’s historiography. Accordingly, standard accounts underscore the founder’s uncompromising emphasis on ethical and moral values, signifying a context where texts such as the *Viduranīti* could have been meaningful. Such narratives, however, neglect to factor in the possibility of the founder’s anxiety for strengthening his *sampradāya* in what was a highly competitive religious milieu. (It is particularly relevant to also recall that Sahajānanda was a recent arrival in Gujarat.)<sup>152</sup> The narratives further deprive agency from the grass roots by ignoring their social aspirations. As the historian Harald Tambs-Lyche observes, Kathi and Koli groups “were claiming equality with Rajputs for the exercise of power” (1997, 135). That is, they were in the process of “Kṣatriyization” trying to reinvent themselves and were perhaps actively seeking out avenues to legitimize this self-reinvention (just like the contemporary Rajput elites). They may also have been aware of the long-established symbiotic relationship between emerging ruling classes and the brahmanical order.<sup>153</sup> In this context, the Swaminarayan scholar Vibhuti Parikh’s study provides an important corroboration. Parikh notes that oral traditions of groups like the Kolis documented during the colonial era reveal references to legends about the

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<sup>151</sup> For Kathis, see Tambs-Lyche (1997, 113, 279, 291); and for Kolis, Tambs-Lyche (1997, 134–38), Parikh (2016, 104).

<sup>152</sup> Patel (2017b) endeavors a departure in this respect by demonstrating how the founder may have been anxious about the Vallabha tradition that was already well-established in Gujarat. Additionally, Brahmhatt brings to light several episodes of scholarly debates between early Swaminarayan members and other contemporary religious sects’ adherents and argues that these encounters “believe a certain anxiety that persisted from the earliest period of the *sampradāy*” (2018, 93).

<sup>153</sup> In early India, as the non-Kṣatriya kings were ascribed Kṣatriya caste status by Brahmanical intervention, the latter “were reciprocally patronized with generous land grants that in turn served to further empower them in politico-economic terms” (Parikh 2016, 101).

interdependence between non-Kṣatriya rulers and the brahmins. This being the case, was Sahajānanda catering to the power aspirations of recently settled peasant communities rather than merely disciplining erstwhile tribal, pastoral groups? To grapple with this question, I suggest that we correct the restrictive focus on Sahajānanda's social disciplining and be open about investigating the role he may have played in the social aspirations of his early clientele. However, studying this aspect from the available sources is an opaque enterprise since the *sampradāya*'s literature has its own agenda of glorifying the founder and there are few scholarly treatments in the still-budding field of Swaminarayan studies that engage with the idea of social mobility. But we perhaps get a glimpse of Sahajānanda's strategy to accommodate his followers' aspirations from an episode described in the SSJ that is centered around the VN.

As noted earlier, despite being authorized by Sahajānanda, references to the VN are strikingly few in the modern canon of the *sampradāya*. However, the singular instance of VN's deployment as reported in the SSJ seems interesting. The episode, occurring at SSJ 3.40.1-18, takes place in Durgapura (present-day Gaḍhaḍā) at the time of the Prabodhinī festival<sup>154</sup> when Sahajānanda prompts his audience to ask any question they may have. The "kings" (*rājānaḥ*) Puñjajit, Vāstu, Sūra, etc., request Sahajānanda to guide them on what they should and shouldn't do as followers of the *pravṛtti-dharma* (path of action). At this point, the leader remembers his devotee (*svabhakta*) Vidura and recommends that his interlocutors follow the teachings given by Vidura to Dhṛtarāṣṭra long ago, that is, the *Viduranīti*, since it is the essence of all *nītiśāstra*, propounds the characteristics of the learned and the fool, and delineates what one should do and

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<sup>154</sup> Name of the *ekādaśī* (eleventh lunar day) of the bright fortnight of the Hindu lunar month *Kārtika* (around November to December). This day carries special significance not only for the broader Hindu tradition as it is mythologically attested as and traditionally believed to be the day when the god Viṣṇu wakes up after a four-month period, but also for the Swaminarayan community as Sahajānanda was initiated by his guru on this day in the year 1800. Note that the SSJ, given its self-styling as a *Purāṇa*, does not mention the year for this day in the Durgapura episode noted above. (Schreiner 1999)

avoid in worldly activities (see the epigraph to this chapter). The questioners, delighted with the instructions received, leave.

Among the “royal” questioners featuring in this incident, the SSJ reports Puñjajit as the chief of *dhaureya* (present-day Dholera) who later requests Sahajānanda to fulfill his desire of constructing a Kṛṣṇa temple in Dholera.<sup>155</sup> Sahajānanda is pleased with Puñjajit’s wish and dispatches a *sādhu* Adbhutānanda for the temple construction which is eventually inaugurated in 1826 by Sahajānanda himself.<sup>156</sup> The remaining two chiefs, Vāstu and Sūra, when mentioned elsewhere in the SSJ are classed as Khachars in the SSJ’s (Sanskrit to English) translation done by the *sampradāya*.<sup>157</sup> These Khachar or Kathi Darbars<sup>158</sup> are known to have played a significant role in the solidification of the nascent sect by providing a space for many of Sahajānanda’s public speeches as recorded in the VA. In fact, I have been informed by a Swaminarayan scholar affiliated with the *sampradāya* that the two Khachar chiefs of SSJ are the same as the ones frequently reported in VA for hosting Sahajānanda in the towns Kariyani and Loya.<sup>159</sup> Additionally, several prominent Kathi Darbars such as Dada Khachar and Zinabhai offered land and other services for the cause of the incipient community. Although the SSJ styled as a hagiographical *purāna* mixes up fact with fiction and the events reported in it cannot all be taken

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<sup>155</sup> SSJ 4.39.3-25.

<sup>156</sup> SSJ 4.45.21-33. However, according to a later text of the *sampradāya*, the *Vicaranlīlāmṛt*, Sahajānand expressed his desire to have a temple built in Dholera. When the followers unsuccessfully offered to donate land, he told them to ask ‘*saheb*’ (the local government official); see Patel (2017a, 91, n.3).

<sup>157</sup> Translation from the Swaminarayan Bhuj temple. See SSJ 4.40.7, p. 286 in <https://www.swaminarayan.faith/media/3713/s-jivan-e-4.pdf>

<sup>158</sup> Khachars are a subset of Kathis (Tambs-Lyche 1997, 114). ‘Darbar’ has a wide semantic range referring to a chief, the government of a princely state, or a member of a landowning or other dominant caste. Darbar culture in Kathiawar mainly included the Rajputs and Kathis. Tambs-Lyche explains the Darbar (etymologically, ‘power-holder’) as a social position (Tambs-Lyche 1997, 113–18). As evident from the Swaminarayana case, the Darbars also became a “node of cultural and social life” (Tambs-Lyche 1997, 102).

<sup>159</sup> Personal communication in December 2018 with a Swaminarayan scholar based in the UK.

at face value,<sup>160</sup> the consciousness of the symbiotic dependence between the landholding chiefs and the *sampradāya* is striking.

To take a brief stock of the discussion presented thus far, the effort has been to unravel the relationship between Sahajānanda's institutionalization of his religious production and the power aspirations of his early recruits. It appears from the foregoing analysis that just as the contemporaneous and more influential Nagar brahmins were serving as ministers and bureaucrats in the more elite and established courts of greater Gujarat,<sup>161</sup> Sahajānanda was perhaps attending to his clientele's aspirations as their brahminical adviser.<sup>162</sup> His role as such is perhaps signaled by acts such as providing the landholding, power-aspiring chiefs a *nīti* text dealing with matters of personal conduct and political affairs.<sup>163</sup>

#### 4.5. Vidura's role in caste recalibrations

The single SSJ episode focusing on the *Viduranīti* is particularly informative about what makes the VN canonical: its speaker Vidura. As we saw in the previous section, before recommending the VN, Sahajānanda remembers his “*svabhakta*” Vidura and remarks that his interlocutors should follow the prescriptions uttered by the learned (*paṇḍita*), referring to Vidura.

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<sup>160</sup> Notwithstanding this interweaving of fact and myth, the SSJ has been assessed as “one of the oldest and most authentic sources on the life and person of Swami Sahajānanda” by Schreiner (1999, 261), a leading authority on the SSJ. For a useful discussion of Swaminarayan *līla* (hagiographical and biographical) texts as historical sources, see Patel (2017a, 188–99).

<sup>161</sup> Patel (2017a, 81). Patel (2017a, 126) particularly notes the adversarial relation between Sahajānanda and a Nagar brahmin Jagjivan Mehta who was an adviser to the regent of Kutch.

<sup>162</sup> Additionally, his using the Kathi Darbar spaces to give most of his sermons may have played a redemptive role in the weakening Darbar status of the Kathi chiefs who were being conquered by their more powerful encroaching neighbors.

<sup>163</sup> In their study of medieval Telugu *nīti* corpus, Rao and Subrahmanyam have likewise remarked about the changing historical interpretation and relevance of *nīti*: “*nīti* was no longer regarded as a matter for kings and courtiers alone, but instead for everyone, and in particular for anyone who desired status and social recognition” (2008, 418).

Additionally, the singular lack of citations to the VN in the modern writings of the *sampradāya* stands in striking contrast to the ample references to the person of Vidura. In the sect’s literature, Vidura is acknowledged as an expert in *kāryākārya* (actions that should and should not be performed) and, more importantly, glorified as a model devotee.<sup>164</sup> Overall, it is safe to say that the VN was authorized by the founder more for the person it signified rather than the content it embedded. Additionally, the character of Vidura may have had further appeal for Sahajānada as he was establishing a new caste-status for his *śūdra* followers, namely the identity as a *sat-śūdra* (virtuous *śūdra*), as opposed to an “*asat-śūdra*” (ordinary one).<sup>165</sup>

Genealogically, as discussed already, Vidura in the MBh is a grand paradox.<sup>166</sup> While he was fathered by a substitute Vyāsa under *niyoga* practice for continuing the Kuru lineage, his mother was a maid substitute for the Kuru queen Ambikā who was supposed to attend on Vyāsa. Vidura’s liminal caste-status between the *kṣatriya* and *śūdra varṇas* is a motif that surrounds the character in the MBh, and one that also features in the opening verses of the VN where he is called a *kṣattṛ*, a word that refers to either the son born from a *kṣatriya-śūdra* union or the son of a female slave.<sup>167</sup> His ambiguous social status notwithstanding, the MBh vividly portrays Vidura’s devotional zeal for Kṛṣṇa, a characteristic that is much greatly emphasized in the later *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>168</sup> As such, for his devotion and caste status, Vidura may be read as a model

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<sup>164</sup> See, for instance, SSJ 1.54.16, 2.21.2, 2.24.31; VA Gaḍhaḍā I 63

<sup>165</sup> As we know, the *sampradāya*’s early community was comprised of them to a large extent (Hardiman 1988, 1907–8).

<sup>166</sup> See section 2.3

<sup>167</sup> MBh 5.33.2; see section 2.3.1

<sup>168</sup> Vidura becomes an important *bhāgavata* (devotee) in this *purāṇa* (Book 3) which holds paramount importance for the Swaminarayan *sampradāya*. An episode of Vidura from this *purāṇa* is also recalled at SSJ 4.72.33.

*satsūdra* in Swaminarayana terms, and the character may have been useful to legitimize the founder's enterprise of recalibrating his *śūdra* devotees' identity as *satsūdras*.<sup>169</sup>

What the term *satsūdra* entails is elaborated in the *sampradāya*'s literature: a *satsūdra* is one who is born in a pious family, does not consume meat and liquor, honors the brahmins, and earns honestly.<sup>170</sup> Further, the prescriptions ordained for a *satsūdra* are carefully set apart from those for an ordinary *śūdra*; while the former should follow some of the rituals prescribed for upper-caste followers (*dvijas* or twice-born people), the latter have a distinct ritual code.<sup>171</sup> The message seems clear: *śūdras* aspiring for a new recognition in the changing socio-cultural landscape could join the Swaminarayan fold and cleanse the notions of impurity attached to their caste.<sup>172</sup> It however must also be mentioned that changing the rules of the caste game was a delicate and strategic move; the founder realized the import of attending to his *śūdra* followers'

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<sup>169</sup> It is worth noting in this context that the Hindu tradition has always been puzzled about how to analyze and reconcile with the character Vidura given his spiritual aptitude despite his *śūdra* origins. As Ingalls noted sometime back, "as the Indian caste system rigidified, the example of Vidura, it seems to me, becomes ever more salutary. The brahmins insisted that no Śūdra was qualified to study the highest truth, no Śūdra was an *adhikāri* for *brahma jijñāsa*. If he listened to Vedic recitations, hot lead was to be poured in his ears. But the great Śaṅkarācārya, while he remains strict in this respect, concluded the *Upaśūdrādhikaraṇa* (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.3.38) by worrying about Vidura. 'One cannot deny,' he says, "to persons like Vidura that they may reach the fruit of knowledge by force of the *samskāras* left over from their previous births." This says in effect that although a Śūdra may not study the ultimate truth, he may actually have realized it without special study in his present" (1995, 5).

In effect, it appears that while Vidura's *śūdra* origins caused unease during premodern times when caste ideas solidified, he was especially found relevant for the modern colonial times when religion was sought to authenticate the caste re-inscriptions of groups that were economically rich but ranked lower in the caste hierarchy.

<sup>170</sup> *viśuddhānvayasāñjāto nivṛtto madyamāmsataḥ | dvijabhakto vañigvṛttiḥ sacchūdraḥ sa prakīryate ||* (SSJ 5.13.46). I am aware that this definition of *satsūdra* aligns with the idea that Sahajānanda was disciplining his lower-class laity. However, I would like to stress the lacuna in scholarly treatments that does not address the *śūdra* devotees' aspirations and vision for the new self-dignity they would acquire from joining the sect. Also, I hope to explore in a future work how Sahajānanda's ethical guidelines for a *satsūdra* parallel or complicate the theory of Sanskritization famously proposed by the social anthropologist M. N. Srinivas (1952).

<sup>171</sup> These guidelines are presented at ŚP 44-45.

<sup>172</sup> This was particularly true in the case of the *śūdra* Kaṅbī followers who eventually became the *vaiśya* Pāṇḍārs; see Hardiman (1988, 1907–8) and Mangalnidhidas (2016, 117).

aspirations to climb up the social ladder but was careful not to completely overthrow the traditional *varṇāśrama* system and jeopardize the development of his still-nascent sect.<sup>173</sup>

#### 4.6. Concluding remarks

Why did the founder of one particular Hindu *sampradāya* incorporate the *Viduranīti* in his sect's canon? What potentialities did the VN's politico-moral code embody that rendered it attractive to one specific textual community? While reflecting over the modern-day reception of the *Viduranīti*, these were the questions that drew me to the field of Swaminarayan studies. Although the text has been canonized in the *sampradāya*, this study has revealed the immediate ambiguity surrounding the VN's role and relevance for the community. The VN was perhaps needed as an ethical code, as the standard narratives on Swaminarayan religiosity that emphasize the ideas of reform and moral discipline would have us believe. However, I proposed a variant reading of the VN's reception considering the shifting power dynamics and changing caste identities in premodern Gujarat's socio-political landscape. As a result, the received reductionist notions of reform and social discipline were counterbalanced – using the VN as a vantage point – with the largely ignored realities of anxiety and social mobility. That is, this case study has simultaneously thrown light on both the modern reception of the VN and the formation of a modern religious community. And herein lies the appeal of studies focusing on reception histories of texts: such studies, like the proverbial crow's eye,<sup>174</sup> have the potential to not only

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<sup>173</sup> That care was taken to not completely overthrow the traditional system is evident at many places in the modern Swaminarayana canonical literature, as, for instance, at ŚP 39ab, 91, 96.

<sup>174</sup> I allude to the *kākāḥsigolakanyāya* (maxim of the crow's eye) here, a traditional Indian maxim based on the supposition that the crow has only one eye that it can move from the socket on one side to the other. This *nyāya* is generally invoked to emphasize the applicability of one thing to two purposes.

help us understand the historical (re)interpretations of early texts but also to illuminate some hidden aspects of the historical and socio-cultural contexts underlying the milieu of reception.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future directions

Following the trend witnessed in *Mahābhārata* scholarship of the twenty-first century, which mainly took shape to redress an important gap in the field that persisted since the field emerged in the nineteenth century, this thesis embraced the idea of the epic's status as a work of literature and sought to explore the artistic design and synchronous unity of the received text. This hypothesis especially came to rescue the didactic strands of the epic. Whereas much of earlier scholarship primarily focused on the MBh's textual history and simply viewed the received baffling size of the epic as an effect of snowballing for some centuries during which the didactic texts supposedly got attached to a putative core narrative, the currently prevalent attitude offers a necessary counterpoint by setting aside the text-historical methodology and by appreciating the didactic portions as integral to the received epic's unfolding narrative. This thesis has similarly treated one didactic segment of the epic, the *Viduranīti*.

In the first main chapter, we unearthed the categories of *dharma* and *artha* underpinning the epic's portrayal of Vidura. Along the same lines, the VN displayed these two *puruṣārthas* as its predominant concern. This demonstration undermines the previously held notions of incongruity between the epic's narrative and didactic materials. Likewise, a study of the literary architectonics of the VN in juxtaposition with that of other didactic tracts of the epic and with the overall epic itself revealed several aspects of convergence, especially in the way the framing story and the audience operate in these texts. Additionally, any points of divergence were noticed to be an effect of and informed by the difference in the specific narrative moments and contexts. Taken together, these two chapters situated the VN in the unfolding narrative of the MBh and demonstrated the new literary possibilities and appreciation that open up by welcoming such an

attitude towards the epic's didactic texts. More specifically, the chapters revealed the implications of the epic's characterization of Vidura on the *Viduranīti*: we have noted that Vidura's devotion to *dharma* and *artha* prompted and legitimized the VN, that his advice-giving relationship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra sustained the VN, and that his birth in the *śūdra* class delimited and terminated the VN by way of excluding *mokṣa*-related soteriological ideas.

The last main chapter focused on the VN's reception in the modern Swaminarayana *sampradāya*. The text's canonization in this religious community was posited as being informed by the intense social mobilities that marked pre-modern western India. This case study served, I hope, as a demonstration of how early Indian texts are implicated in the subcontinent's vibrant and fluid social, cultural, religious, and political landscapes, and why focused scholarship on reception histories of ancient texts is the need of the hour in the field of epic – and Sanskrit – studies. I have thus argued about the appeal of studies focusing on reception histories of texts as such studies have the potential not only to help us understand the historical (re)interpretations of early texts but also to illuminate some hidden aspects of the historical and socio-cultural contexts underlying the milieu of reception.

Although several arguments have been made in the foregoing chapters on diverse aspects of the VN and its reception, the restrictive framework of a master's thesis project and resources, especially time, unfortunately delimited the extent to which I could explore the chosen text. Indeed, this thesis is only an initial foray paving the way for many more approaches that could – and should – be undertaken to gain a holistic understanding of the text. Most importantly, a more robust historical reconstruction of the text's reception demands a series of additional case studies centered on both Vidura and his *nīti* sermon. For instance, Vidura's reception as a Vaiṣṇava *bhāgavata* (devotee) in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and as an idealized minister in the Buddhist

*jātaka* stories<sup>175</sup> warrant focused research to illuminate the socio-cultural and religious norms influencing the later reinterpretations and reframing of Vidura. Similarly, the VN's reception in the scholastic-commentarial sphere would be a worthwhile avenue to explore. This study is especially facilitated by the fact that all six extant commentaries of the *Viduranīti* – Devabodha's *Jñānadīpikā*, Vimalabodha's *Durghatārthaprakāśinī*, Sarvajña Nārāyaṇa's *Bhāratārthaprakāśa*, Arjunamiśra's *Dīpikā*, Vādīrajatīrtha's *Lakṣābharaṇa*, and the famous *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* by Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara – are available in print.<sup>176</sup> A focused exploration of these premodern commentaries dating from about the eleventh to seventeenth centuries would reveal the textual orientations, ideological priorities, and any sectarian attitudes of these commentators as they apprehend the text.<sup>177</sup>

Ultimately, the ocean of the *Mahābhārata* is vast and there should be no restriction on the manner in which one takes a dip in it. Adopting any and all approaches – be it literary, aesthetic, performative, interpretive, historical, or other – can only advance our understanding and appreciation of a text that has been loved by its popular readership and admired, or occasionally loathed, by its scholarly readership.

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<sup>175</sup> As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Crothers's study (2013) offers a good starting point for tracing Vidura's reception in the *jātaka* stories.

<sup>176</sup> See De (1944) for Devabodha's commentary and Bākre (1920) for the remaining.

<sup>177</sup> During this thesis project, I was able to read all the commentaries and make some preliminary observations about the commentators' textual approaches and hermeneutical maneuvers while interpreting the text. I plan to synthesize these observations in a future work.

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