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# On the Narrative Structure of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* (*Mahābhārata* 12.203–210)

Kenji TAKAHASHI

Keywords: *Mahābhārata* / *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* / Narrative structure / Adhyātma

## 1. Introduction<sup>1)</sup>

The *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma*, “the Adhyātma [teaching] concerning Vārṣṇeya (Kṛṣṇa),” which comprises chapters 203–210 of the 12th Book of the epic *Mahābhārata* (hereafter MBh), contains an intriguing physiological and psychological teaching, which witnesses an early period of the philosophical development in South Asia before the formation and establishment of the classical schools; but its unique tenets have not been explored fully due to its textual difficulties. To form the basis for future studies of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma*, the present paper addresses the issues of the narrative framework of the text by reexamining the manuscript evidence given in the Poona Critical edition (hereafter PCE, Sukthankar et al. 1933–1966) and a Nepalese manuscript Ñ<sub>8</sub>, the oldest extant manuscript for the *Śāntiparvan*, not used in the Poona Critical Edition. The detailed information of Ñ<sub>8</sub> can be found in Takahashi (2019: 446–448).

## 2. The Narrative Structure of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma*

At the beginning of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma*, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma to instruct him on the supreme Yoga leading to liberation (MBh 12.203.1). Then, Bhīṣma

introduces a dialog between an anonymous teacher (*guru*) and his disciple (*śiṣya*) (MBh 12.203.2). He says that the disciple greets his teacher (MBh 12.203.3) and asks him to solve his doubts (MBh 12.203.4–6). After verse 6, the text reads *gurur uvāca* “The teacher said,” and the teacher’s words are narrated in the subsequent verses (MBh 12.203.7–43). In Chapter 203, the speakers are the teacher and his disciple.

However, at the beginning of Chapter 204, the manuscript evidence is divided according to whom the subsequent verses are ascribed to (The manuscript  $\tilde{N}_8$  is not available for this part of the text):

*bhīṣma uvāca*:  $K_{6,7} V_1 B_{0,6-9} Da_{3,4} Dn_{1,4} Ds D_{2-6,8,9} G_2 M_{1,6,7}$

*gurur uvāca*:  $\acute{S}_1 K_{1,2,4} D_7 T_{1,2} G_{1,3,6} M_5$

In Chapters 205–210, the manuscripts  $\acute{S}_1 K_{1,2,4}$  that regard Chapter 204 as belonging to the dialog between the teacher and his disciple change its dialog framework:

*bhīṣma uvāca* / *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca*:  $\acute{S}_1 K_{1,2,4,6,7} V_1 B_{0,6-9} Da_{3,4} Dn_{1,4} Ds D_{2-6,8,9} M_{1,6,7} \tilde{N}_8$

*gurur uvāca* / *śiṣya uvāca*:  $D_7 T_{1,2} G_{1-3,6} M_5$

In this way, while the manuscripts  $\acute{S}_1 K_{1,2,4,6,7} V_1 B_{0,6-9} Da_{3,4} Dn_{1,4} Ds D_{2-6,8,9} M_{1,6,7} \tilde{N}_8$  understand the dialog in Chapters 205–210 as taking place between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira, the manuscripts  $D_7 T_{1,2} G_{1-3,6} M_5$  regard the same textual part as a dialog between the teacher and his disciple.  $B_7$  lacks a reference to the speakers at the beginning of Chapter 205, but in Chapters 204, 206–210 the speakers are given as Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira. The manuscript  $D_7$  is classified as one of the Devanāgarī Composition Version in PCE as it is written in the

Devanāgarī script, but its readings largely concord with those of the Southern manuscripts ( $T_{1,2}$ ,  $G_{1-3,6}$   $M_{1,5-7}$ ; cf. PCE Vol. XVI, cv). Therefore, we may well regard those manuscripts that read *gurur uvāca* / *śiṣya uvāca* as representing a branch of the Southern transmission.

It is to be noted that there are fluctuations in attribution of speakers in manuscripts  $G_2$   $M_{1,6}$ .  $G_2$  regards Chapters 204, 207–208 as the Bhīṣma-Yudhiṣṭhira dialog, and Chapters 205, 209–210 as the teacher-disciple dialog. It lacks a reference to the speakers in Chapter 206. The manuscripts  $M_{1,6}$  largely regard Chapters 204–210 as the Bhīṣma-Yudhiṣṭhira dialog, except for Chapter 210 in the case of  $M_1$  and Chapters 207–210 in the case of  $M_6$ .

Although  $\acute{S}_1$   $K_{1,2,4}$  read *gurur uvāca* at the beginning of Chapter 204, they consistently read *bhīṣma uvāca* / *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca* instead of *gurur uvāca* / *śiṣya uvāca* in Chapters 205–210. This seems to suggest that the manuscripts  $\acute{S}_1$   $K_{1,2,4}$  read *gurur uvāca* before MBh 12.204.1 by the influence of *gurur uvāca* before MBh 12.203.11, but the tradition these manuscripts are based on consistently read *bhīṣma uvāca* / *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca* from MBh 12.204.

PCE consistently chooses *gurur uvāca* / *śiṣya uvāca* for Chapters 203–210 following the Southern tradition (cf. PCE Vol. XVI, 2167–2168). This reading concords with the narrative framework of the dialog between the teacher and his disciple as introduced at the beginning of Chapter 203. However, since the manuscripts that ascribe Chapters 204–210 to the teacher and his disciple are found only in some of the Southern transmission, it may be worth considering the possibility that the text originally read *bhīṣma uvāca* / *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca* for Chapters 204–210. This might be explained as the confusion in the common source that the extant manuscripts are based on or as a result of the editorial patchwork at the time when this part of the text was incorporated into the MBh.

In the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (MBh 12.168–353), it is often the case that Yudhiṣṭhira poses questions to Bhīṣma, who introduces an old *itihāsa*<sup>2)</sup> that

takes the form of a story narrated by Bhīṣma or a dialog between some divine or legendary figures. For example, at the beginning of Chapter 169, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma what is to be understood as bliss (*śreyas*) while time lapses away, bringing destruction to all the beings (MBh 12.169.1). Bhīṣma then introduces a dialog between an anonymous father and his son (MBh 12.169.2ff., the *Pitāputrasaṃvāda*). In some cases, however, Bhīṣma answers Yudhiṣṭhira's question directly without quoting any *itihāsas*. In the *Bhūtotpatti* (MBh 12.200), Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma about Viṣṇu (MBh 12.200.1–2), who then narrates how Viṣṇu created this world (MBh 12.200.3–43). Therefore, it is not impossible that the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* is represented as a dialog taking place between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira.

It is worth noting that the Southern transmission of the MBh tends to standardize and normalize the text in various ways (so-called *editio ornatior* “an ornate text”)<sup>3)</sup> In the *Bhṛguharadvājasaṃvāda* “the dialog between Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja” (MBh 12.175–185), we find that the Southern transmission adds the indication of speakers in order to make the text understandable. Bhṛgu, the proponent in this dialog, teaches that the Individual Self exists as Fire or Wind. Bharadvāja, the questioner, then asks Bhṛgu what the Individual Self is like if a body consists of the five elements (MBh 12.180.11–12). Bharadvāja argues that when one's corporeal body is being destroyed, the Individual Self is not observed (MBh 12.180.13). Then, Bharadvāja continues, “If a body is devoid of an Individual Self and is endowed with [only] the five elements, then who experiences the pain of the physical [and] mental suffering?” (MBh 12.180.14 *yady ajīvaṃ śarīraṃ tu pañcabhūtasamanvitam / śārīre mānase duḥkhe kaś tāṃ vedayate rujaṃ* //) Then Bharadvāja says, “The Individual Self hears what is told. [The Individual Self] does not hear it (what is told) with two ears, O great seer, when the *manas* is distracted. Therefore, the Individual Self is unnecessary.” (MBh 12.180.15 *śṛṇoti kathitaṃ jīvaḥ kaṇābhyāṃ na śṛṇoti tat / maharṣe*

*manasi vyagre tasmāj jīvo nirarthakaḥ* //). At first sight, MBh 12.180.14 is difficult to attribute this verse to Bharadvāja because MBh 12.180.14 takes the form of a question, and Bharadvāja answers to it in MBh 12.180.15. In line with Fitzgerald’s (1980: 374) rendering,<sup>4)</sup> I interpret that Bharadvāja gives a rhetorical question against himself from Bhrgu’s side to stress the importance of the *manas* in the following verse (MBh 12.180.15). The Southern manuscripts D<sub>7</sub> T<sub>1,2</sub> G<sub>1,3,6</sub> M<sub>1,5,7</sub> in contrast, insert *bhrgur uvāca* “Bhrgu said” before verse 14 and insert *bharadvāja uvāca* “Bharadvāja said” (*bhāradvāja uvāca* in T<sub>2</sub>) after verse 14, thus ascribing verse 14 to Bhrgu’s speech. These insertions make the flow of the text easier to understand.<sup>5)</sup> This change of attribution of speakers is not absolutely necessary because we can also understand verse 14 as Bharadvāja providing a question to his own statement. PCE rightly excludes these indications of speakers from its constituted text. This example indicates that the tradition on which these manuscripts were based was subjected to systematic rewriting and rearrangement of the arguments by learned scholars.

### 3. Reconsidering the Editorial Choices of PCE

The issue of the narrative framework involves the choice of vocatives in the constituted text. PCE consistently neglects the readings that suggest the speakers in Chapters 204–210 are Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira regardless of their textual value, but these cases should be critically reconsidered. The examination of each case will help us to investigate how the attribution of speakers changed during the course of transmission.

In MBh 12.207.5, Ś<sub>1</sub> K<sub>1,2,7</sub> D<sub>4,9</sub> Ñ<sub>8</sub> read *pārtha* “the son of Prthā (Kuntī)” which refers to Yudhiṣṭhira, whereas PCE reads *artha*- following the bulk of the manuscripts.

MBh 12.207.5

*tāmstān upāsate dharmān dharmakāmā yathāgamaṃ /*

*na tv eṣāṃ pārtha sāmānyam antareṇa guṇān imān // 5 //*

*pārtha*] Ś<sub>1</sub> K<sub>1, 2, 7</sub> D<sub>4, 9</sub> Ñ<sub>8</sub>; *artha*- K<sub>4, 6</sub> V<sub>1</sub> B<sub>0, 6-9</sub> Dn<sub>1, 4</sub> Ds D<sub>2, 3, 5, 6, 8</sub> T<sub>2</sub> G<sub>3, 6</sub> M<sub>1, 5-7</sub>;  
*atha* Da<sub>3, 4</sub> *tatra* D<sub>7</sub> T<sub>1</sub> G<sub>1, 2</sub>.

Those who delight in *dharma* worship these and those *dharma*s according to tradition. However, there is nothing in common among these (*dharma*s), O Son of Prthā (Yudhiṣṭhira), except for these virtues.

The next verse (MBh 12.207.6) says that those who know the *dharma* teach these virtues as the purity of speech, body, and mind (*vāgdehamanasāṃ śauca*), endurance (*kṣamā*), truthfulness (*satya*), firmness (*dhṛti*), and remembrance (*smṛti*). Then, the text exalts *brahmacarya* (chastity) as the highest virtue (MBh 12.207.7). We can interpret that these virtues are common features of differing *dharma*s (*tāmstān ... dharmān*).

If we follow PCE's editorial choice *artha-sāmānyam* in pāda c, pādas cd can be translated as "But, these *dharma*s have no common aims (*artha*), except for these virtues."<sup>6)</sup> However, it appears unnatural that these virtues constitute the aim of *dharma*s because the aim of the *dharma* is often described as worldly or unworldly wellbeing, not the virtues themselves. For example, in the opening statement of the *Vasiṣṭhadharma-sūtra*, it is said that a righteous man who knows the *dharma* and acts accordingly becomes most praiseworthy in this world and wins the heavenly world after death (1.1–3: *athāto puruṣaṇiḥśreyasārtham dharmajijñāsā // 1 // jñātvā cānutiṣṭhan dhārmikaḥ // 2 // praśasyatamo bhavati loke pretya ca svargalokaṃ samaśnute // 3 //*).

In the case of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* also, MBh 12.207.7, which follows the passage quoted above, says that they attain the highest destination (*parā-gati*) by chastity and such a reward of good conduct can be called the aim of *dharma*. It

is possible that these virtues are intended as the aim of *dharma*s, but this reading does not seem to reflect the original intention of the text.

It may not be difficult to explain how the reading *arthasāmānyam* sneaked into the text. The mention of *dharma-kāmā(h)* “those who delight in *dharma*” in pāda b could have triggered the insertion of the remaining member of the *trivarga* (*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*), although *kāma* is not used in the meaning of one of the *trivarga*. We can imagine that the author intentionally used the phrasing *dharma-kāmāḥ*: by putting *dharma* as an object of *kāma*, the *dharma* orientation of the text is stressed in contrast to the worldly value system in which *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma* are equally pursued.

MBh 12.206.1 also poses the problem of the choice of vocatives. PCE reads this verse as follows:

MBh 12.206.1

*rajasā sādhyate mohas tamasā ca naraṛṣabha /*

*krodhalobhau bhayaṁ darpa eteṣāṁ sādhanāc chuciḥ // 1 //*

*tamasā ca naraṛṣabha*] K<sub>6,7</sub> Dn<sub>1,4</sub> Ds<sub>2</sub> D<sub>4,8,9</sub> T<sub>2</sub> M<sub>5</sub>; *tamaś ca bharatarṣabha* Ś<sub>1</sub> K<sub>1,2,4</sub> B<sub>0,8</sub> Ds<sub>1</sub> D<sub>3,5-7</sub> T<sub>1</sub> G<sub>1-3,6</sub> M<sub>1,6,7</sub> Ñ<sub>8</sub>; *tamasā bharatarṣabha* V<sub>1</sub> B<sub>6PC</sub> (marg.) Dn<sub>1,4</sub> D<sub>2,8</sub>; *tarṣasā bharatarṣabha* B<sub>6AC</sub> Da<sub>3</sub>; *tarṣaś ca bharatarṣabha* B<sub>9</sub>; *harṣaś ca bharatarṣabha* Da<sub>4</sub>. B<sub>7</sub> damaged.

Perplexity is produced by *rajas* and *tamas*, O bull of men. So are anger, avarice, fear and arrogance [produced by *rajas* and *tamas*] — through the mastery of them, there is purification.

For pāda b (*tamasā ca naraṛṣabha*), a considerable number of manuscripts (Ś<sub>1</sub> K<sub>1,2,4</sub> B<sub>0,8</sub> Ds<sub>1</sub> D<sub>3,5-7</sub> T<sub>1</sub> G<sub>1-3,6</sub> M<sub>1,6,7</sub> Ñ<sub>8</sub>) read *tamaś ca bharatarṣabha*. If we adopt this variant reading, then the entire verse can be translated as “Perplexity is produced by *rajas*, and so is *tamas*, O bull of Bharatas (Yudhiṣṭhira), anger,

avarice, fear and arrogance [produced by *rajas*] — through the mastery of them, there is purification.” Whereas *naraṣabha* “bull of men” can refer to the disciple or Yudhiṣṭhira, the epithet *bharataṣabha* can be used only for Yudhiṣṭhira. It is noteworthy that the manuscripts T<sub>1</sub> G<sub>1-3, 6</sub> that regard this portion of the text as the dialog between the teacher and his disciple also read *bharataṣabha*, which refers to Yudhiṣṭhira. The Southern tradition is not entirely free from the confusion of speakers.

Even though the reading *tamaś ca bharataṣabha* has better manuscript support (not only the bulk of the Devanāgarī manuscripts, but also Kashmiri, Nēwari, and some of the Southern transmission), PCE’s editorial choice (*tamaś ca naraṣabha*) appears fair.

In the same Chapter 206, it is said, “*rajas* is cast in *tamas*. *sattva* is placed in *tamas*” (MBh 12.206.12ab: *rajas tamasi paryastaṁ sattvaṁ tamasi saṁsthitam*), indicating that *tamas* is regarded as a substratum for *rajas* and *tamas*. If we adopt the reading *tamaś ca bharataṣabha* ( “Perplexity is produced by *rajas* and so is *tamas* [produced by *rajas*] ” ), *tamas* is to be understood as something produced by *rajas*, which contradicts with the statement found in MBh 12.206.12ab. Therefore, the reading *tamaś naraṣabha* appears to fit to the context.

Van Buitenen (1957: 99), on the other hand, suggests to read *tamaś sādhyate moho rajasā ca naraṣabha* for pādas ab, transposing *tamaś* and *rajasā*, and translates the whole verse as “*moha* results from *tamas*, and wrath and greed, fear and conceit from *rajas*; by subduing them one becomes pure.” He does not specify the reason for his correction of the text, but we can infer that he suggested it because the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* holds that *tamas* is the cause of perplexity (MBh 12.205.21ab: *saṁmohakaṁ tamo vidyāt kṛṣṇam ajñānasambhavam*). However, we do not find any manuscripts that support van Buitenen’s suggestion. Moreover, he understands that *rajas* produces *krodha*

“anger” and *lobha* “avarice” mentioned in MBh 12.206.1cd, but MBh 12.205.32ab says that a person is engaged in the actions related to avarice and those arising from anger by *tamas* (*tamasā lobhayuktāni krodhajāni ca sevate*). Therefore, van Buitenen’s correction does not seem to be particularly compelling.

Still, the problem of the *guṇas* that van Buitenen raises is worth considering. In what follows, it is said that people, with their limbs burned by Viṣṇu’s *māyā*, resort to love (*kāma*) out of perplexity (*moha*) (MBh 12.206.2–3). Then, from love, they reach anger (*krodha*), avarice (*lobha*), and perplexity (*moha*) (MBh 12.206.4ab). It is to be noted that MBh 12.206.1 also has these three (*krodha*, *lobha*, and *moha*). It is said that from pride (*māna*) and arrogance (*darpa*), people attain egoism (*ahaṃkāra*), and from egoism, they attain actions (*kriyā*) (MBh 12.206.4cd). Through actions, there will be a bondage of affection (*snehasaṃbandha*), which leads to sorrow (*śoka*) (MBh 12.206.5ab). Then by undertaking comfort and suffering, there will be moments created by rebirths (MBh 12.206.5cd). After describing the dirtiness of an embryo (MBh 12.206.6–7b), the text emphasizes that women should be neglected (MBh 12.206.7c–8b). It appears that the sequence starting from *rajas*, *tamas*, and *moha* is intended to explain how a living being comes into existence. The text continues:

MBh 12.206.9–10b

*krtyā hy etā ghorarūpā mohayanty avicakṣaṇān /*  
*rajasy antarhitā mūrtir indriyāṇām sanātaniḥ || 9 ||*  
*tasmāt tarṣātmakād rāgād bijāj jāyanti<sup>7)</sup> jantavaḥ / 10ab*

These actions, whose nature is formidable, perplex the ignorant people. The everlasting form of the sense faculties is hidden in *rajas*. (9) Therefore, living beings are born from the desire (*rāga*) as the seed whose nature is thirst.

In the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma*, *rajas* is closely associated with desire (*rāga*) (cf. Takahashi 2019: 431–432). When describing the production of individual sense faculties, MBh 12.206.16ab says that the faculty of hearing is produced from the desire for sound (*śabdarāgāc chrotram asya jāyate bhāvitātmanah*).

We can interpret that MBh 12.206.9c–10b explains how *rajas* as desire results in the birth of a living being. Considering the fact that *moha* mentioned in MBh 12.206.1a finally leads to the birth of a living being and that *tamas* is regarded as the basis for *rajas* in MBh 12.206.12ab, we can justify the understanding that *moha* “perplexity” is produced from *rajas* and *tamas*, as suggested by the reading *rajasā sādhyate mohas tamasā ca nararṣabha*.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

PCE regards the entire discourse of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* (MBh 12.203–210) as a dialog between a teacher and his disciple following a branch of the Southern transmission of the text. However the above analysis indicates that whereas Chapter 203 is the dialog between a teacher and his disciple, Chapters 204–210 are the dialog between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira. This inconsistency in the attribution of speakers appears to be present at least in the text that is traceable from the extant manuscript evidence. As the narrative framework determines the use of vocatives in the dialog, I reexamined the editorial choices of PCE for two problematic verses and found that in the case of MBh 12.207.5, it is preferable to adopt the reading *pārtha*, which points to the Bhīṣma-Yudhiṣṭhira dialog. In the case of MBh 12.206.1, although the reading *bharatarṣabha* that refers to Yudhiṣṭhira has better manuscript support, the examination of the teaching of *rajas* and *tamas* in the *Vārṣṇeyādhyātma* indicates that PCE’s reading is justifiable. At present, it is difficult to decide whether the discrepancy in the narrative structure indicates that Chapter 203 and 204–210 are of different

origins or not. This question requires further scrutiny of the teachings of each chapter.

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### Abbreviations

PCE Sukthankar et al. 1933–1966.

MBh *Mahābhārata*

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- 1 All the translations of the Sanskrit texts are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 See Tokunaga (2009) for the term *itihāsa*.
- 3 Hiltebeitel (2006) and Mahadevan (2008, 2013) draw our attention to the Vaiṣṇava orientation of the Southern transmission of the MBh.
- 4 Fitzgerald (1980: 374): (But you may say,) “ But if the body is complete in those five elements and has no soul what is it that feels the pain when there is physical or mental discomfort.”
- 5 See Section 4 of my forthcoming paper (Takahashi forthcoming) for a detailed analysis of this part of the text.
- 6 cf. Deussen & Strauss (1906: 258): Die Freunde der Satzungen verehren der heiligen Überlieferung gemäß diese oder jene Satzungen; ihr Ziel ist nicht das gleiche [wie das der Wissenden], außer daß sie folgende Tugenden erlangen.
- 7 The active ending (-*anti*) instead of the middle ending (-*ante*) is due to the metrical constraint.

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## SUMMARY

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(*Mahābhārata* 12.203–210)

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The *Vārṣṇeyādhyaṭma* (*Mahābhārata* 12.203–210) contains early teachings that foresee the later philosophical development of important doctrines such as the *guṇa* theory and others. However, it has been poorly studied due to its textual difficulties. To form the basis for future studies on this text, the present paper tackles the issue of the narrative structure of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyaṭma*. The Poona Critical Edition (Sukthankar et al. ed., *The Mahābhārata For the First Time Critically Edited*. Vol. I–XIX. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute. 1933–1966) regards the entire discourse of the *Vārṣṇeyādhyaṭma* as a dialog between an anonymous teacher and his disciple. This study, however, by reconsidering the manuscript evidence, demonstrates that whereas Chapter 203 is presented as a dialog between a teacher and his disciple, the remaining part of the text, Chapters 204–210, is the dialog between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira. As the narrative structure is also related to the use of vocatives in the dialog, the present paper reexamines the Poona Critical Edition's editorial choices of two puzzling verses (12.207.5 and 12.206.1) in which the traces of Bhīṣma-Yudhiṣṭhira dialog are eliminated from the constituted text.