

How to become a Brahman: The construction of *varṇa* as social place in the *Mahābhārata*'s legends of Viśvāmitra

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This article investigates varṇa as an embodied and spatialized social practice in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata, with a focus on the epic subnarratives of Viśvāmitra, the legendary king who became a Brahman. Adopting a post-Dumontian position that the articulation of social status is always a political act, the Mahābhārata's treatment of Viśvāmitra is analyzed as a literary attempt to secure the social place of Brahmanhood in post-Mauryan India. Two specific narratives are taken up for comparative study: first the kāmadhenu legend—the squabble with Vasiṣṭha that led to Viśvāmitra's Brahmanhood—and then an altogether different story in which a mixup by Viśvāmitra's sister Satyavatī meant that he had always been a Brahman by birth. Two distinct interpretive voices are heard in the same epic—one extolling Viśvāmitra's extraordinary ascetic power, and another, louder one minimizing his realworld impact by insisting that his varṇa change never actually happened. Developing the concept of 'textual performance' to explain how fluid legendary material was embedded into the fixed epic corpus, this article argues that the Mahābhārata utilized counter-normative figures like Viśvāmitra to articulate alternative voices and possibilities, but within a carefully regulated epic storyworld that naturalized varṇa as an everyday social practice.

Though little is certain about how it took place, the composition of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was clearly of monumental significance in the social history of early India.¹ Its grand vision has been linked closely to the consolidation of imperial polity (see Thapar 1984; Sutton 1997; Brockington 1998, 162–7), the emergence of *bhakti* religiosity (see Hildebeitel 2004; Biardeau 1982; Laine 1989; Fitzgerald 1983; Sutton 2000), and the development of a newly cosmopolitan Sanskrit literary culture around

¹ All references to the two Sanskrit epics in this essay are to their respective Critical Editions, henceforth abbreviated as *Mbh* and *Rām*. Their use has been greatly facilitated by the electronic texts of the Sanskrit epics produced by Muneo Tokunaga, as revised and corrected by John Smith, and are accessible electronically on Smith's Home Page [online] (accessed March 24, 2007). Available from: <<http://bombay.indology.info/index.html>>.