

Article

Politics without Fear: King Janaka and Sovereignty in the *Mahābhārata*

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Abstract: This paper will analyse a series of dialogues that features kings named Janaka, which appear in the *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*. Although there is some variation among these episodes, kings named Janaka tend to be characterised as exemplary rulers who engage in dialogue with learned philosophers and who are strongly associated with the ideals of self-cultivation, renunciation, and liberation. I will argue that the name Janaka functions as a conceptual repertoire for ideas and practices associated with a particular understanding of royal authority. As I will show, the dialogues featuring kings named Janaka characterise sovereignty as both dynamic and fragile because the king is always in the process of displaying his knowledge and self-control. In this way, the different dialogical episodes featuring different Janakas conceptualise political authority differently, thus contributing to an ongoing, inter-textual and inter-religious discussion about sovereignty in ancient India.

Keywords: sovereignty; *Mahābhārata*; Janaka; Yudhiṣṭhira; Aśoka; yoga; ātman



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1. Introduction

When reflecting on the importance of Mohandas Gandhi to the Independence movement, Jawaharlal Nehru argued that the essence of the Mahatma's teaching 'was fearlessness and truth'—the same lessons, he noted, that can be learned from some of India's oldest philosophical sources, the Upaniṣads:

The greatest gift for an individual or a nation, so we had been told in our ancient books, was *abhay* (fearlessness), not merely bodily courage, but the absence of fear from the mind. Janaka and Yajñavalkya had said, at the dawn of our history, that it was the function of the leaders of a people to make them fearless. (Nehru [1946] 2010, p. 393)

Nehru's invocation of this dialogue from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* in the context of India's struggle for independence brings up a particular understanding of sovereignty that locates political authority in a ruler's ability to exert self-control. This understanding, which has been re-explored in different ways by Nehru, Gandhi, and others leading up to and since India's independence in 1947, was closely associated with a number of kings named Janaka in ancient times.

A king named Janaka first appears in the *Bṛhmaṇas* and Upaniṣads (see Black 2007, pp. 105–12), but kings with the same name and/or characteristics also feature, on several occasions, in Buddhist and Jain sources (see Appleton 2017, pp. 135–69). In narratives across the three religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, these kings are characterised as exemplary rulers who are often depicted in dialogue with learned philosophers and who are strongly associated with the ideals of self-cultivation, renunciation, and liberation. In the *Mahābhārata*, the name Janaka continues to be linked with these ideals, showing possible influences from Brahmanical, as well as Buddhist and Jain sources. Not all the Janakas in the *Mahābhārata* refer to the same person, but characters named Janaka are repeatedly associated with an understanding of political authority rooted

in a king's claim to achieve self-mastery, both through his understanding of philosophical teachings and his performance of self-cultivation practices, such as *yoga*. I will refer to discussions about this ideal of kingship as the philosopher-king discourse on sovereignty. As we will see, the dialogues featuring kings named Janaka characterise sovereignty as both dynamic and fragile because the king is always in the process of displaying his knowledge and self-control. Accordingly, the philosopher king does not have an inalienable claim to political power, but must continually demonstrate his authority to rule.

2. What Is Sovereignty?

Sovereignty has been a hot topic in scholarly discussions across disciplines over the past two decades or so. In these discussions, sovereignty is usually understood as an idea about the basis of political authority. According to some scholars, sovereignty is a specifically Western concept, with the word itself deriving from Latin and its emergence as a political idea taking place in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe in the aftermath of the Treaty of Westphalia, particularly in the works of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes. Two thinkers that have dominated debates in the 20th and 21st centuries are Carl Schmidt and Giorgio Agamben, both of whom conceptualise political sovereignty in terms of the power to exert total control, beyond laws and conventions.

More recently, some scholars have extended discussions on sovereignty beyond these understandings of absolute power and beyond modern Western political philosophy. In their edited collection *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept*, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr have argued that sovereignty is a 'global concept' (Benite et al. 2017, p. 8). One of the reasons they approach sovereignty in this way is because ideas and conceptualisations of political authority have been produced across the world throughout recorded history. Treating sovereignty as a global concept for comparison is to analyse 'political, aesthetic, theologico-political, genealogical, legal' aspects of sovereignty 'between and across particular cultures' (Benite et al. 2017, p. 7). I would agree that there is much to be gained by making theoretical reflections on sovereignty more inclusive and expansive, not only by identifying a wider range of articulations of political power, but also through comparative analysis across regions and time-periods. As Benite, Geroulanos, and Jerr suggest, there is value in approaching sovereignty as part of 'global intellectual history' (Benite et al. 2017, p. 17).

A crucial question to be asked when declaring sovereignty a global concept is: Why do such global analyses need to cluster around the term 'sovereignty'? By doing so, do such studies reify 'Westphalia's ordering of sovereignty' (Benite et al. 2017, p. 8)? Although this risk is never avoided completely, I think it is possible, nevertheless, that the Western orientation of such concepts can be provincialised precisely through the process of putting them into a critical discussion with voices and sources from non-Western contexts that address related concerns. In other words, speaking directly to conversations based around hegemonic Western terms can be an exercise in extending, challenging, and subverting such discourses.

Moreover, as we engage with non-Western sources, we see that the very methods of theorising about political philosophy can be quite different. In this paper, we will pay particular attention to a number of narrative episodes in the form of dialogues. Through these episodes, we will see that narrative sources do not necessarily theorise by defining terms and constructing universalising concepts, but rather by juxtaposing different views and provoking reflection on their relationships with each other. In the Janaka dialogues, as I will demonstrate, ideas about sovereignty are explored through the contrasting literary portrayals of characters with the same name.¹ As we will see, the different Janakas are not depicted in ways that are meant to be entirely consistent with each other (or based on a possible historical person), but rather the name Janaka functions as a conceptual repertoire for ideas and practices associated with a range of understandings of royal authority that couples political power with philosophical teachings and self-cultivation practices. Rather than constructing a model of sovereignty that is ordered, with fixed ideas of legitimate

rule, these dialogues characterise political authority as contested, fragile, and continually emergent.

3. Janaka and Sovereignty in the Late Brāhmaṇas and Early Upaniṣads

Ancient Indian sources discuss sovereignty in a number of different ways.² Geoffrey Samuel has identified two understandings in particular. One, which he calls the ‘warrior king’, ‘was based on the concept of the king as an exponent of military prowess who had the military force to ensure compliance from the surrounding chiefs or kings’ (Samuel 2008, p. 73). The other, which he calls the ‘wisdom king’, depicts rulers ‘as having tendencies towards the *śramaṇa* or renunciate lifestyles, or as actually becoming *śramaṇas* or renunciates’ (Samuel 2008, p. 73). Samuel notes that the name ‘Janaka’ is closely associated with ‘the idea of the ruler who is a figure of wisdom and/or renunciation’ (Samuel 2008, p. 69).

Throughout the *Mahābhārata*, and in the *Śānti Parvan* in particular, versions of these two distinct, yet not mutually exclusive, understandings of sovereignty are widely represented. In the context of the *Mahābhārata*, the king who relies on coercion is not necessarily a warrior, but rather one who bases his authority on his monopoly over the use of violence and his ability to suspend *dharma*. The king’s monopoly over the use of violence is symbolised in the *daṇḍa*, the ‘rod of punishment’,³ while his ability to suspend *dharma* is explored extensively through discussions about *āpaddharma*, the *dharma* of extenuating circumstances.⁴ This understanding of royal authority is emphasised in the *Rājadharmā* section of the *Śānti Parvan*.

This paper is concerned with the second understanding of sovereignty, which I will refer to as the ‘philosopher king’. Although Samuel describes this ideal as the ‘wisdom king’, I prefer ‘philosopher king’ because it implies more rigorous practices of attaining knowledge and of cultivating virtuous tendencies, while also speaking more directly to similar understandings of royal authority in other ancient contexts.⁵ According to this understanding, a king’s claim to political power relies on his ability to assert control over himself. A king who gains mastery over his thoughts, words, and actions is said to have mastery over his entire kingdom. In the *Mahābhārata*, this understanding of royal authority is emphasised in the *Mokṣadharmā* section of the *Śānti Parvan*.

The philosopher-king ideal was first articulated in late Vedic sources, early Buddhist and Jaina literature, and the inscriptions of Aśoka, and continued to be developed in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as elsewhere. In the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads, Janaka of Videha is the king most prominently characterised as a philosopher king. His name, which means, ‘father’, reminds us that he is more mythical than historical, but in late Vedic literature Janaka refers to a single figure, who is king of the aspiring kingdom of Videha. Naomi Appleton has shown that across Buddhist and Jain literature there are a number of different kings named Janaka and that they have overlapping characteristics with kings named Nimi/Nami. Reading their episodes alongside each other, Appleton demonstrates that these kings are particularly associated with the theme of renunciation: ‘Stories about Janaka and Nimi/Nami thus offer a rich tapestry of ideas concerning the crucial tension between worldly responsibilities and other-worldly pursuits’ (Appleton 2017, p. 151).

One of the places where this tension is first explored is in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, where Janaka and court priest, Yājñavalkya, engage in a long conversation. As I have discussed elsewhere, the relationship between Janaka and Yājñavalkya is generally depicted as complementary and inter-dependent (Black 2007, pp. 105–14), which is reflected by their friendly banter throughout their encounter. As their dialogue unfolds, the relative hierarchy between them shifts, with Yājñavalkya initially approaching the king, but with Janaka getting down from his throne to approach Yājñavalkya after the brahmin’s teaching. At the end of the dialogue, Janaka offers Yājñavalkya his kingdom and himself as a slave. Yājñavalkya concludes his long teaching with the identification of *ātman* and *brahman*, equating this knowledge with fearlessness. ‘This is the great unborn self, unageing, undying, immortal, fearless, *brahman*. *Brahman* is fearless: the one who knows this becomes

fearless *brahman*' (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.25, tr. Roebuck 2003). Indeed, this is the same passage referenced by Nehru, who claimed that the responsibility of political leaders was to make the people fearless.

Yājñavalkya includes in his teachings to Janaka an overt association between self-mastery and political power. He describes the self (*ātman*) as 'controller of all, ruler of all, overlord of all' (4.4.22, tr. Roebuck 2003, slightly modified). Through this knowledge of the self, one becomes 'calm, self-controlled, quiet, patient and concentrated, he sees the self in himself, sees the self as all . . . This is the world of Brahmā, your majesty: you have attained it' (4.4.23, tr. Roebuck 2003). Here we see an explicit articulation of the philosopher king, where the ruler's political power is directly associated with realising a certain understanding of self, the consequence of which is control over his body and mind. But in addition to characterising his knowledge of Upaniṣadic teachings as the basis of the king's sovereignty, this dialogue also indicates the tensions within this understanding of kingship, as, at the very moment Janaka achieves the self-control and fearlessness to make him a sovereign ruler, he, at least symbolically, renounces the throne. As we will see, this tension, which simultaneously depicts the king as politically engaged and renouncing the world, is one that is explored further in the Janaka dialogues of the *Mahābhārata*.

4. Janaka and Sovereignty in the *Mahābhārata*

The *Śānti Parvan*—the section of the *Mahābhārata* where kings named Janaka feature most—begins soon after the devastating war is over. Yudhiṣṭhira is overwhelmed with grief because of the scale of the death and destruction, the personal tragedies of losing his grandfather, teacher, and long-lost brother, and his own complicity in the violence, not to mention his guilt for the deceitful means through which his enemy's generals were killed. Overcome with despondency, Yudhiṣṭhira announces that he will give up the throne and follow the path of renunciators.

In response, Bhīṣma offers his long tuition to Yudhiṣṭhira that takes up the bulk of the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana Parvans* (12.56–13.152). Ultimately, Bhīṣma will convince Yudhiṣṭhira not to renounce, after which the eldest Pāṇḍava brother will rule for thirty-six years, before installing an heir and setting off with his brothers for a final pilgrimage and ascent to the Himalayas. Adam Bowles explains how Yudhiṣṭhira's initial dilemma sets the scene for the entire *parvan*: 'Yudhiṣṭhira's grief (*śoka*) and his resolve to renounce provide the narrative context in which the great teachings of the subsequent didactic corpora take place' (Bowles 2007, p. 134).

Yudhiṣṭhira's dilemma about renunciation is also part of wider debates going on throughout the *Śānti Parvan*, particularly about *dharma* and how it relates to the king. James Fitzgerald has described the conflict between what he refers to as old *dharma* and new *dharma*. While old *dharma* refers to Vedic institutions such as large-scale ritual and *varṇa-dharma*, new *dharma* 'was the result of the new religious perspectives and values of yoga', and incorporated ideals such as renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and liberation (*mokṣa*) (Fitzgerald 2004, pp. 109–14).⁶ Here, we notice an overlap between Samuel's two models of kingship and Fitzgerald's description of two *dharms*, with the warrior king adhering closely to old *dharma* and the wisdom/philosopher king representing the ideals of new *dharma*.

The king that Fitzgerald most closely associates with new *dharma* is Aśoka, whose inscriptions depict the ideal ruler as one who both engages with religious teachers and attempts to embody their teachings. In her excellent analysis of Aśoka's inscriptions, Upinder Singh has described his political philosophy as 'a bold attempt to assert and emphasize the moral foundations of royal authority and empire, the nature of the good, and the close connection between the governance of the state and the self' (Singh 2012, p. 143). As she explains, Aśoka understood political power as 'moral sovereignty', in which there is 'a close connection between being good and doing good; between the cultivation of inner virtues and the elimination of negative emotions and propensities; between the individual and society' (Singh 2012, pp. 135–37).

Returning to the *Mahābhārata*, it is worth noting Nicholas Sutton's suggestion that Yudhiṣṭhira is in some sense modelled on Aśoka:

It is my view that the characterisation of Yudhiṣṭhira in the epic and the extended debates that surround his notion of dharma, (*sic*) reflect controversy that arose in the reigns of Aśoka and other rulers of similar disposition over how Buddhist and ascetic ideals could be reconciled with the practicalities of ruling a kingdom. (Sutton 1997, p. 338)

I find Sutton's suggestion compelling, particularly as it brings attention to the shared narrative theme 'of a man of violence transformed into a man of peace' (Sutton 1997, p. 334). Fitzgerald has taken this suggestion further, however, arguing that Yudhiṣṭhira was a literary creation 'designed as a refutation, or at least a rebuttal, of the emperor Aśoka' (Fitzgerald 2004, pp. 136–37). Although there are sections of the *Mahābhārata*, particularly in the *Rājadharmā* section of the *Śāntiparvan*, that seem to demonstrate this position, I do not think that the ideals associated with Aśoka are refuted as completely as Fitzgerald characterises it. According to Fitzgerald, the character of Yudhiṣṭhira is deliberately scripted 'to represent what the authors of the *MBh* saw to be wrong with Aśoka' (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 137). One problem with this interpretation is the assumption that the composers of the *Mahābhārata* are speaking with one voice. Here, I think Sutton has a better description of how the *Mahābhārata* responds to Aśoka, explaining that the text's perspective 'remains equivocal and offers no clear answer to the dilemmas it explores' (Sutton 1997, p. 339). Rather than seeing the composers of the *Mahābhārata* as committed to one understanding of dharma—or, perhaps, one understanding of sovereignty—, Sutton sees the debates about different styles of kingship as ongoing and unresolved: 'The *Mahābhārata* thus highlights and explores the tensions between these two notions of dharma rather than promoting one side of the debate over the other' (Sutton 1997, p. 340).

Returning now to the Janaka dialogues, we see that these discussions with the king are a crucial part of exploring the relationship between two types of dharma and two models of sovereignty. Indeed, many of the values that both Sutton and Fitzgerald associate with Aśoka are exactly those that are discussed in several of the dialogues featuring kings named Janaka. I would suggest that if Yudhiṣṭhira is a response to Aśoka, then that response is mediated through the figure of Janaka. If this is the case, then it becomes clear that the *Mahābhārata* does not refute the Aśokan model, but rather explores different iterations of it. Some of the Janaka dialogues, to be sure, reject the ideal of the philosopher king; others, however, clearly embrace it, while still others seem to accept modified understandings of it. Rather than a rebuttal, then, I see kings named Janaka as offering a variety of ways to incorporate the philosopher-king understanding of sovereignty into an emerging new ideal of kingship as embodied by Yudhiṣṭhira—an ideal of kingship that blends the old dharma and new dharma.

Drawing a connection between the various kings named Janaka and Aśoka is also important because it shows how widely this ideal of the philosopher king was shared, while demonstrating that this discourse on sovereignty was not merely explored in narrative literature, but also put into practice. Aśoka has received a lot of attention both by scholars and Indian nationalists because of his verifiable historicity, but it is noteworthy that kings named Janaka are the rulers most often associated with the philosopher-king discourse on kingship in ancient Indian literature. Indeed, considering that the first stories of a Janaka in the late Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads likely predate the Mauryan Empire, we might speculate that kings named Janaka served as a model for Aśoka. In any case, kings named Janaka continued to be occasions for thinking through ideas of self-cultivation and political power across Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions for over a thousand years.

5. Janaka and Sovereignty in the *Mahābhārata*

Kings named Janaka feature throughout the *Mahābhārata*, but their highest concentration of appearances is in the *Mokṣadharmā Parvan*, which is the longest and final section of the *Śānti Parvan*. In the *Mokṣadharmā Parvan*, Janakas appear in a total of eight dia-

logues, seven of them clustered closely together, the last six of which appear consecutively. Although these Janakas are not all the very same person, they resonate with each other through their shared name, as well as shared literary features. Most of the Janakas we will discuss are depicted in dialogue with a knowledgeable interlocutor, usually a brahmin sage. On many occasions, the king begins the encounter with an affliction, but is then transformed by the teachings of his interlocutor. Importantly, different Janakas learn different teachings, some of which are in tension with each other. Many of the Janakas, however, learn philosophical doctrines about the self and discuss techniques of self-cultivation, particularly *yoga*, which are associated with renunciation and liberation. Through these overlapping characteristics, the Janaka dialogues seem to be in dialogue with each other, as they explore the enactment of the ideal king in different ways. As the characters known as Janaka are presented differently in terms of what they learn and how they are transformed by their knowledge, the basis for sovereignty is likewise presented differently.

One of the main tensions that is explored throughout the Janaka dialogues is between whether a king can be liberated without giving up his political responsibilities or if the only way to achieve liberation is to transcend kingship. In most cases, Janaka is depicted as a wise king who learns how to be a better ruler through teachings from brahmins. While one dialogue portrays Janaka as renouncing the throne to seek liberation, on most occasions the king is not liberated, nor does he necessarily have aspirations to become a renouncer. Indeed, many dialogues are more aligned with understandings of *karma-yoga*, with teachers urging the king to cultivate self-control while remaining engaged in the world. In this section I will briefly summarise all ten of the Janaka dialogues in the *Śānti Parvan*—eight of which appear in the *Mokṣadharmā* section—, identifying the themes of the self, *yoga*, renunciation, and liberation, all of which will be developed further in the subsequent sections.

5.1. Janaka and the Burning City of Mithilā (12.17.17)

References to Janaka appear very early on in the *Śānti Parvan*, soon after Yudhiṣṭhira threatens to renounce the throne. The first time a king named Janaka is mentioned is by Yudhiṣṭhira himself. On this occasion, Yudhiṣṭhira defends his own decision to renounce by invoking a famous quotation attributed to a king named Janaka about the city of Mithilā burning:

Now they say this verse was sung by King Janaka, who was beyond the pairs of opposites (*nirdvandva*), who had gained liberation (*vimukta*), and who had *mokṣa* in full view: ‘Yea! My possessions are endless though nothing at all is mine. Were Mithilā ablaze in flames, nothing of mine would be burning’. (12.17.17–18, tr. Fitzgerald 2004, slightly modified)

In this verse, Janaka demonstrates his liberated status through his non-attachment. Variations of this verse, which are quoted on two other occasions in the *Śānti Parvan*,⁷ also appear in Buddhist sources. In the *Janaka-jātaka*, as Appleton points out, Janaka responds with a similar verse after his wife ‘orders that people should make fires’ as ‘a ruse to persuade him to return’ from his renunciation (Appleton 2017, p. 148). In the Buddhist context, it is clear that Janaka has already renounced and his willingness to watch his former capital city burn ‘hammers home the strength of Janaka’s determination’ (Appleton 2017, p. 149). Here, Yudhiṣṭhira invokes the image of Janaka as a liberated king to support his own decision to renounce.

5.2. Janaka and His Wife (12.18)

In direct response to Yudhiṣṭhira’s invocation of Janaka’s famous verse, his brother Arjuna recounts a different episode featuring a king named Janaka (12.18). Here, as he tries to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira to retain the throne, Arjuna describes a Janaka who has already renounced his kingdom and has taken on a life of asceticism. When his wife sees him, with a shaved head, no possessions, and begging for food, she lambasts him for leaving her, their son, his kingdom, and all his royal responsibilities behind. As she explains,

even though Janaka thinks of renunciation in terms of selflessness, it is actually a very selfish thing to do, because it impacts negatively on others. In her impassioned diatribe, Janaka's wife reinterprets the duties of a king in terms of selfless detachment, in contrast to what she sees as the inherent selfishness of renouncers who rely on others to survive. In response to the famous verse that depicts Janaka as a king who has achieved liberation, this dialogue portrays Janaka's pursuit of liberation negatively. Importantly, it is not clear in Yudhiṣṭhira's invocation if the Janaka who watches his city burn has formally renounced, or if he continues to rule as a liberated king. In contrast, in the dialogue recounted by Arjuna, Janaka's wife explicitly rejects both the lifestyle of renunciation and the ideal of liberation as unsuitable for kings. It is also worth noting that, like in the *Janaka-jātaka*, it is Janaka's wife who tries to persuade him not to renounce. Appleton suggests that this scene, following shortly after Yudhiṣṭhira's invocation of the verse about the burning city of Mithilā, 'demonstrates awareness of Janaka's wife's attempts to dissuade him, as found in the *Janaka-jātaka*' (Appleton 2017, p. 149). The possible influence of Buddhist sources indicates that the Janaka dialogues in the *Mahābhārata* were part of broader debates about liberation, kingship, and sovereignty that were also taking place in Buddhist, as well as Jaina, traditions.

5.3. Janaka and Aśman (12.28)

Shortly after Arjuna recounts the exchange between Janaka and his wife, Vyāsa enters the discussion and recites a dialogue between a king named Janaka and the brahmin Aśman (12.28). In this episode, Janaka, mirroring Yudhiṣṭhira, is described as 'overwhelmed with grief and misery' (12.28.3). Aśman offers a teaching that emphasises fate and destiny, while encouraging Janaka to adopt a stoic outlook that accepts the inevitability of old age and death. The brahmin warns the king that the same fate awaits everyone, even kings (12.28.15) and renouncers (12.28.47). At the end of this encounter, Janaka follows the advice of Aśman, stops grieving, and returns to his duties as king. Vyāsa then tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he, too, should let go of his grief. In this teaching, Aśman does not encourage Janaka to give up the throne or pursue renouncer ideals such as *mokṣa*, but rather to perform Vedic rituals, and to follow the three aims of life: *kāma*, *artha*, and *dharma*.

In these first three examples from the *Rājadharmā* section of the *Śānti Parvan*, kings named Janaka are associated with different teachings and have different stances towards renunciation and liberation. The range of teachings associated with these kings and the different ways they navigate the tension between the responsibilities of kings and the ideals of renouncers are further extended in eight dialogues in the *Mokṣadharmā* section. In contrast to these first three examples, where kings named Janaka are invoked by three different interlocutors—Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Vyāsa—, all the dialogues featuring a king named Janaka in the *Mokṣadharmā* are recited by Bhīṣma as part of his instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira.

5.4. Janaka Janadeva and Pañcaśikha (12.211–212)

This dialogue, which appears early on in the *Mokṣadharmā Parvan*, is one of two conversations between a king named Janaka and Pañcaśikha (12.211–212), the well-known teacher associated with the Sāṃkhya school of philosophy. Bhīṣma explicitly refers to Pañcaśikha as the son of Kapila, the legendary founder of Sāṃkhya, and much of his teaching incorporates teachings characteristic of the Sāṃkhya tradition. Bhīṣma recounts this conversation as a response to Yudhiṣṭhira's specific request to hear how Janaka 'had attained *mokṣa*' (12.211.1). Bhīṣma says that one hundred teachers lived in Janaka's palace teaching different doctrines and discussing different views. Similar to how Yājñavalkya is depicted in his interactions with Janaka in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, when Pañcaśikha arrives at Janaka's court, he impresses the king by demonstrating his superior knowledge in relation to the king's other teachers, and the king becomes his student.⁸ When Janaka questions whether everything ends in annihilation, Pañcaśikha responds with a teaching about the self as eternal. At the end of Pañcaśikha's instruction, Bhīṣma describes the

king as ‘extremely happy’ (*paramasukhī*) and freed from sorrow (12.212.51), indicating that the king has achieved liberation.⁹ In the Vulgate, Pañcaśikha quotes the famous verse attributed to Janaka that if his capital city were to be on fire, nothing of his would burn.¹⁰

5.5. Janaka and Parāśara (12.279–287)

In a long and detailed exchange (12.279–287), the brahmin Parāśara, who is Vyāsa’s father, offers instruction on a number of topics, including karma, *varṇāśrāmadharma*, and asceticism. Parāśara repeatedly emphasises ascetic values, such as self-restraint (*dama*) (12.279.19; 12.283.23) and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) (12.279.19; 12.283.29), while also invoking the Upaniṣadic teaching of the universal self (12.283.23; 12.283.29). He makes it clear that such ascetic values are specifically catered for a royal audience, as he instructs the king to be the type of *ksatriya* who does not act with violent intent or malice and who seeks to know the self (12.283.23–5). He also praises *mokṣa* (12.284.33), but later explains that freedom from attachment can be pursued while living among material goods and pleasures (12.287.6–11). Bhīṣma recounts that at the end of the teaching Janaka obtained great happiness (12.287.45).

5.6. Janaka Karāla and Vasiṣṭha (12.291–296)

In one of the more interactive exchanges, Janaka Karāla is in dialogue with the Vedic seer, Vasiṣṭha. At one point, the Videhan king questions the brahmin whether *mokṣa* is possible (12.293.19–21). In response, Vasiṣṭha offers a detailed teaching on *yoga*, in which he advocates cultivating qualities such as controlling the senses and concentrating the mind. During his teaching, Vasiṣṭha accuses Janaka of not knowing the meaning of the scriptures (12.293.24), but at the end of the dialogue he encourages the king to share his teaching with others, while outlining who would be suitable students, including those in control of their senses (12.296.33–36). At the end of their encounter, Vasiṣṭha assures the king that he will now be without fear and without grief (12.296.37). Again, there is no explicit statement that Janaka Karāla renounces or that he attains *mokṣa*, but Vasiṣṭha seems to imply that the king is now liberated when he tells him that he has transcended both fear and sorrow.

5.7. Janaka Vasuman and the Bhārgava (12.297)

In the dialogue between Janaka Vasuman and the Bhārgava (12.297), the seer teaches the king to be faithful to his wife and follow *varṇa-dharma*. Similar to many of the Kuru kings of the *Mahābhārata*, this Janaka is on a deer hunt when he encounters the Bhārgava seer, from whom he listens to a short discourse on *dharma*. In this comparatively brief episode, the Bhārgava instructs the king to restrain his senses and abstain from what is disagreeable to all living beings (12.297.5). He also indicates that he advocates *karma-yoga*, when he explains that one can act as a forest dweller while living as a villager (12.297.10). There is no explicit indication that the king has achieved *mokṣa*, but the brahmin’s teaching emphasises ascetic virtues and self-control, while also making it clear that the highest good (*śreyas*) is attainable. At the end, Bhīṣma recounts that the king renounced desire (*kāma*) and pursued *dharma* (12.297.25).

5.8. Janaka Daivarāti and Yājñavalkya (12.298–306)

Bhīṣma recounts this dialogue in response to Yudhiṣṭhira’s question about what is eternally fearless (*abhaya*) (12.298.2).¹¹ Yājñavalkya’s discourse contains a detailed account of *yoga* and *sāmkhya*, as he advises Janaka Daivarāti to control his senses and rejoice in the self (12.304.12–13). At the beginning of their exchange, Yājñavalkya tells the king that nothing is unknown to him (12.298.9), implying that the king already knows everything that he will teach him. However, it is only after receiving the teaching when he is said to have achieved *mokṣa* (12.306.92). In contrast to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, where it is not clear if Janaka more than symbolically renounces the throne, here we get a more explicit statement of the king’s renunciation, as he becomes a *yati* (ascetic), abdicating the throne to his son (12.306.94). The king, therefore, is depicted as fully embracing the renouncer lifestyle, yet also making a clear distinction between being a renouncer and being a king.

5.9. Janaka and Pañcaśikha (12.307)

Bhīṣma recites this second exchange between a king named Janaka and Pañcaśikha in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's question about how to avoid death. In this brief episode, Janaka echoes Yudhiṣṭhira's question, asking the renouncer Pañcaśikha how to avoid death. Similar to Aśman (12.28.14), Pañcaśikha describes old age and death as unavoidable, comparing them to two wolves (12.307.11). At the end of his teaching, he instructs the king to study, give gifts, and perform sacrifices (12.307.11–14). Unlike the earlier dialogue with Pañcaśikha, in which the king is described as attaining *mokṣa* and becoming immensely happy, on this occasion there is no mention of Janaka's spiritual progress.

5.10. Janaka and Sulabhā (12.308)

In this dialogue, Janaka is depicted negatively, with Bhīṣma describing him as *dharma-dhvaja*, which can mean 'hypocrite' or 'impostor' (12.308.4). When the female renouncer Sulabhā hears that the king has achieved enlightenment, but without renouncing his responsibilities as king, she goes to his court to challenge his claim to liberated status. In their ensuing debate, Janaka vehemently defends his own claims to have attained *mokṣa*. He argues that *mokṣa* is not achieved by renouncing possessions, but rather through knowledge that releases one's bonds with the world. Sulabhā, however, rejects *karma-yoga*, making the case that one must live the life of a renouncer in order to achieve liberation. Although Sulabhā's argument is against *karma-yoga* generally, she brings up a number of points that are specifically about why a king cannot be free, such as the many ways he is necessarily immersed in social relations as part of the day-to-day business of ruling his kingdom. Sulabhā, then, contrasts the king's presumption to control others through his royal commands, with the mundane reality of a king's life in which 'others are always telling him what to do' (12.308.142). She silences the king at the end of their exchange, indicating that Janaka is not the liberated king he claims to be.

5.11. Janaka and Śuka (12.309–320)

In this episode, Janaka is depicted as a king who has already attained liberation without renouncing the throne. His dialogue with Śuka appears as part of an extended narrative about the young brahmin's life story, ending with his eventual attainment of *mokṣa*. At the beginning of the story, when he comes of age, Śuka asks his father to teach him about liberation. But rather than teaching his son himself, Vyāsa instructs him to seek out Janaka, whom he describes as one who can teach him about *mokṣa* (12.312.6–7). At the end of their exchange, Janaka pronounces Śuka as already liberated. Then, reminiscent of Yājñavalkya's teachings to Janaka in both the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Mokṣadharmā*, Janaka reassures Śuka that he 'has no fear in things that inspire fear' (12.313.49). It is worth noting that this is the only dialogue in the *Mahābhārata* where Janaka is cast as a teacher.

6. Janaka and the Philosophy of a Philosopher King

As we can see, kings named Janaka are repeatedly portrayed as learning philosophical discourses, yet they learn a wide range of sometimes contrasting doctrines from one dialogue to the next. Aśman discusses fate, time, and destiny, which are recurring views in the *Mahābhārata*, but rarely associated with a king named Janaka. Parāśara and the Bhārgava emphasise *karma-yoga* ideals, such as *varṇāśrāmadharma*, while Vasiṣṭha and Yājñavalkya offer long discourses about *yoga* and *sāṃkhya*.

Despite the range of doctrines, a recurring situation is that kings named Janaka learn teachings that relieve their condition of suffering or disquiet. In many instances, the king faces an emotional or situational quandary; he is distressed, he has a perplexing question, or he is dissatisfied with the teachings of his court teachers. Even Aśman, who neither espouses renouncer values nor promises the reward of liberation, offers a teaching on how Janaka can overcome debilitating emotions to resume his responsibilities as king. Similarly, on other occasions the king is overcome by concerns about his own mortality. As Malinar points out, in the exchange between Janaka Janadeva and Pañcaśikha, 'the very center

of Janaka's concerns' is 'his fate after death' (Malinar 2017, p. 631). In these cases, the teachings delivered to the king are depicted as therapeutic, because they address particular situations in which the king's ability to rule is tested in one way or another. In this way, many of the Janaka dialogues mirror Yudhiṣṭhira's situation that begins the *Śānti Parvan*. Just as Janaka's teachers offer discourses that help the king overcome the obstacles he faces, the teachings that Yudhiṣṭhira hears in the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana Parvans*—which include the Janaka dialogues themselves—will help Yudhiṣṭhira overcome his debilitating emotions to become an effective ruler.

Another frequent trope of the Janaka dialogues—one that goes all the way back to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*—is the promise of ruling without fear. In the *Śānti Parvan*, four of the dialogues mention fearlessness (*abhaya*). Pañcaśikha tells Janaka Janadeva that a person can become tranquil and have no fear of old age and death (12.212.45). Similarly, Vasiṣṭha instructs Janaka Karāla not to fear anything (12.296.38). Indeed, after he narrates this exchange, Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that having heard this teaching he can overcome fear (12.296.46). Meanwhile, Bhīṣma recounts the dialogue between Janaka Daivarāti and Yājñavalkya in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's request to hear about what is 'eternally auspicious and fearless' (12.298.2). And at the end of the dialogue with Śuka, Janaka tells Vyāsa's son that now that he no longer has attachments, he will have no fear (12.313.49).

Interestingly, many of the same dialogues that offer the promise of ruling without fear are the ones that include a teaching on *ātman*, characterised both as an inner essence and as a universal consciousness. We have already seen that *ātman* is a central topic of Yājñavalkya's teaching to Janaka in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU 4.4.23). In the *Śānti Parvan*, kings named Janaka are closely associated with teachings of the self and learn variations of related doctrines from a number of different teachers. In his encounter with Pañcaśikha, for example, Janaka Janadeva is not satisfied with his other teachers' views on 'the true nature of the self' (12.211.5). Later, when the king wonders whether everything ends in annihilation (12.212.2–4), Pañcaśikha responds by talking about the *adhyātman* that is neither annihilated nor eternal, but is assimilated into the absolute (12.212.44). Parāśara also speaks about *ātman*, advising the king to see all creatures as he sees himself (12.280.23). Interestingly, Parāśara also says that knowledge of the self (*ātmañāna*) is available to all *varṇas* (12.285.20–24). Meanwhile, Vasiṣṭha specifically equates knowledge of the self with *yoga* (12.294.11–13), explaining that 'the self is seen within the self' (*drśyate 'tmā tathātmani*) (12.294.20). Unsurprisingly, given his association with teachings of *ātman* in the *Upaniṣads*, in the *Śānti Parvan* Yājñavalkya talks about rejoicing in the self (12.304.12).

For Sulabhā, one of her main criticisms of Janaka the *dharma-dhvaṇa* is that he does not fully understand the implications of *ātman*, arguing that if he were liberated enough to see his own true nature, then he should be able to see the true nature of others as well (12.308.126).¹² In the final Janaka dialogue of the *Śānti Parvan*, when the king takes on the role of a teacher, much of his instruction to Śuka is about the universal self, at one point telling the young brahmin: one should know self by means of the self (*ātmānam ātmanā*) and one should see the self in all creatures and all creatures in the self (*sarvabhūteṣu cātmanāni sarvabhūtāni cātmani*) (12.313.28–29).

The overlapping instances of teachings of the self and the promise of fearlessness indicate that fear is endemic to a certain, incorrect view of the self that entails finitude and is invoked by sorrow, old age and death. A recurring assumption is that a king cannot rule properly if afflicted by fear and that only knowledge of the self can transform a king to live and rule without fear. In these cases, only a king who knows the self is qualified to lead others, thus reinforcing the widespread association between self-mastery and political power.

Nevertheless, the wide range of teachings that are included among the Janaka dialogues indicate that the philosopher king is not necessarily associated with any philosophy in particular, but rather that different types of teachings can be transformative to different degrees. As we have seen, even Aśman, who neither promises fearlessness nor liberation, still offers a teaching that leads a king named Janaka to be a more effective ruler. Although

the doctrines might change from one dialogue to the next, the Janaka dialogues mainly agree that kings enhance their ability to rule through what they learn from learned teachers.

7. Janaka and the Practices of a Philosopher King

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, we saw that knowledge of the self is associated with a number of dispositions, although the methods for attaining them remain unclear. Some of the Janaka dialogues in the *Mahābhārata* are similarly vague, advocating self-control but not offering details about how to cultivate such habitual tendencies. Parāśara, for example, emphasises ascetic values, such as self-restraint (*dama*) (12.279.19; 12.283.23) and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) (12.279.19; 12.283.29). The Bhārgava instructs Janaka Vasuman to restrain his senses and abstain from what is disagreeable to all living beings (12.297.5), as well as to renounce desire (*kāma*) (12.297.25). But neither Parāśara nor the Bhārgava outline a specific set of practices for how to attain these goals.

Two of the Janaka dialogues, however, include specific discussions about how to achieve self-control through *yoga*. In Janaka Karāla's encounter with Vasiṣṭha, the two main techniques associated with *yoga* are control of the breath (*prāṇāyāma*) and meditative concentration on a single object (*ekāgratā*) (12.294.8). Vasiṣṭha elaborates, saying that one should practise all the time, except when defecating, urinating, and eating (12.294.9). Vasiṣṭha also explicitly links the practice of *yoga* to knowledge of the self (12.294.11–13; 20) and the goal of liberation (12.293.30).

Similarly, Yājñavalkya describes *yoga*'s two components as breath control and concentration of the mind (12.304.8–9).¹³ But Yājñavalkya goes into more detail about each of these techniques, describing *prāṇāyāma* in terms of twelve types of breath control for the evening and twelve breath-control practices for the early morning (12.304.10–11). Yājñavalkya also describes concentration (*dhāraṇa*) in terms of withdrawing the senses back into the mind. Both techniques are presented as means towards the ultimate goal of liberation, which Yājñavalkya emphasises at the end of his teaching.

In contrast with Vasiṣṭha and Yājñavalkya, who associate *yoga* with meditative practices, Sulabhā highlights *yoga*'s association with magical powers. At the very beginning of the episode, Bhīṣma describes Sulabhā as a renouncer who practises *yoga*, has wandered the earth on her own, and has attained *mokṣa*. When she hears the questionable claims that Janaka has achieved *mokṣa* (12.308.9), Sulabhā uses her yogic powers to put on an immaculately beautiful body and travel to the court in the wink of an eye. Then, after arriving at Janaka's court, she uses her knowledge of *yoga* to enter into the king's being (*sattva*) with her being (12.308.16). As indicated by the *Yoga Sūtra*, the abilities to transport oneself instantly across long distances and to inhabit another's body were widely accepted as powers attained through the practice of *yoga*.¹⁴ We can see, then, that an important part of this debate is that Sulabhā demonstrates her yogic powers, while Janaka does not. Although in some contexts such magical powers are contrasted unfavourably with *yoga*'s ultimate goal of achieving *mokṣa*, here Sulabhā's extraordinary powers are a demonstration of her liberated status.¹⁵

If we see *yoga* as contributing to a wider discourse of royal sovereignty, then we can observe some interesting political implications of Sulabhā using her yogic abilities to enter the king's body. Janaka tries to argue that what Sulabhā does is inappropriate, but this appears to be an attempt to deflect the more fundamental question of how, if he were really liberated, he could have allowed her to enter his body in the first place. In other words, her ability to enter his body illustrates that he did not have the power to prevent her from doing so—that she has mastered the powers of *yoga*, while he has not. If the basis of his sovereignty is self-mastery, then Sulabhā's attack on Janaka's claim to have attained *mokṣa* is simultaneously a questioning of his ability to rule. By demonstrating that the king does not have control over himself, Sulabhā challenges Janaka's political authority.

Śuka's exchange with a king named Janaka does not feature a teaching on *yoga*, nor does it include any examples of *yoga* being practised. It does, however, offer an interesting contrast to the Sulabhā dialogue. One of the parallels between these two encounters is

that both Sulabhā and Śuka are renouncers who travel to Janaka's court after hearing reports about him. But while Sulabhā hears reports that she seeks to challenge, Śuka, when learning that Janaka has achieved *mokṣa*, is advised to seek him out as a teacher. As we have seen, Sulabhā uses two of her yogic abilities in preparation for her encounter with Janaka, transforming her appearance and transporting herself instantly. With this in mind, it is revealing that when Vyāsa initially tells his son to seek out Janaka, he advises him not to use his supernatural powers (*prabhāva*) to travel through the sky (12.312.8). When we think of Sulabhā's use of her yogic abilities as a way of testing Janaka, we can see Vyāsa's advice here as suggesting that to arrive in a manner that displays his yogic accomplishments could be considered a challenge. If mastering *yoga* can be a basis of political sovereignty, then it is not surprising that the demonstrative displays of the powers of *yoga* can also be seen as a political threat, in this case to be avoided.

Although *yoga* does not appear across all the dialogues featuring kings named Janaka, when it is discussed it enhances an already established political discourse about the relationship between practices of self-mastery and royal power. What these discussions on *yoga* add to this discourse are more details and more precision about techniques of self-cultivation. The two most prominent examples of this are the description of breath control and single-pointed concentration. An important and recurring message, then, in the Janaka dialogues and other sections in the *Śānti Parvan*, is that the king should practise *yoga* to achieve mastery over himself. In other words, *yoga* is characterised as an effective practice for a king to demonstrate his sovereignty, over both himself and his kingdom.

Although some of the core terms and practices associated with *yoga* are likely to have emerged initially among ascetics and renouncers, as the later Upaniṣads indicate,¹⁶ the appearance of these discussions in the Janaka dialogues indicate that, in the *Mahābhārata*, *yoga* is strongly associated with political discourses about the philosopher king. In other words, as *yoga* became a principal method for achieving self-cultivation within discourses about achieving some kind of liberated state, it also was incorporated into political discussions that associated liberation with political sovereignty. As we have seen, it is not only the recurrence of King Janaka as the receiver of these discourses that situates them in a political context, but also the narrative framing of the *Śānti Parvan* as a whole, which characterises Bhīṣma's instructions as a guide to Yudhiṣṭhira for how to rule.

8. Janaka and the Soteriologies of a Philosopher King

Despite a number of overlapping characteristics, the dialogues between kings named Janaka and their learned interlocutors offer a variety of views on whether it is possible, or even desirable, for a king to be liberated. In some cases, such as the first dialogue with Pañcaśikha, Janaka Janadeva is introduced by Yudhiṣṭhira as having already achieved liberation. At the end of Pañcaśikha's teaching, the king achieves supreme bliss and is free from sorrow. Similarly, when Vyāsa tells his son to go and learn from Janaka, he depicts the king as already liberated. These examples strongly suggest that the king is liberated while retaining his position of king.

In contrast, other examples indicate that a king becomes liberated only after renouncing the throne. Although the recurring quotation about Mithilā burning is not explicit about whether Janaka has renounced or continues to be king, he is portrayed as 'beyond the pairs of opposites' (*nirdvandva*) and as having achieved *mokṣa* (12.17.17). Appleton, however, points out that in Buddhist sources Janaka sings this verse after he has renounced (Appleton 2017, pp. 146–51). It thus remains unclear whether the Janaka invoked by Yudhiṣṭhira has renounced or remains active as a ruler. The dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Janaka Daivarāti portrays the king as achieving *mokṣa* after he installs his son as king. But while this possibility is presented positively in this encounter, it is this scenario that Janaka's wife criticises so severely in the episode narrated by Arjuna. On one level, Janaka's wife's discourse is a general argument against renunciation, especially when she talks about how she no longer has a husband, how his mother no longer has a son, and how their son no longer has a father. However, much of her argument specifically warns against a king

adopting the ideals of a renouncer. She repeatedly refers to him as doing nothing and as someone who selfishly takes from others, in contrast to a king who always supports others. At the end of her speech, Janaka's wife describes renunciation as 'a livelihood for those bald ones who merely display the flag of *dharma* (*dharma-dhvaja*)' (12.18.33).

Whereas Janaka's wife criticises the king for leaving his kingdom behind, Sulabhā argues that he cannot achieve liberation without renouncing the throne. Despite stating that Janaka has obtained *mokṣa*, Bhīṣma portrays the king negatively. When he describes Janaka as one who flies the flag of *dharma* (*dharma-dhvaja*), he echoes Janaka's wife's description of renouncers. The difference is that when Janaka's wife says this, she is thinking of the hypocrisy of the renouncer who preaches freedom while sponging off others, while Sulabhā says this to bring attention to a different type of hypocrisy—of claiming to be liberated when not committing to the lifestyle required to reach such an advanced spiritual state.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that, throughout these dialogues, Janaka's two biggest critics are not brahmins, but *kṣatriya* women. Even though they have diametrically opposing views—Janaka's wife a proponent of *karma-yoga* and Sulabhā completely rejecting it—, both bring important gendered perspectives to the debate about the philosopher-king ideal of sovereignty. Janaka's wife highlights the collateral damage of those left behind by royal renouncers, indicating that an important aspect of a king's duty is to protect women and families. Sulabhā, meanwhile, brings attention to the king's misogynistic behaviour towards her, while arguing that by not seeing women and men as ontologically equivalent he reveals that he is not liberated. As I have argued elsewhere, Sulabhā takes the innovative position that one's views on gender can serve as a litmus test for whether or not one has achieved *mokṣa* (Black). In the case of Janaka's wife, her non-brahmin status coalesces with her general criticism of renunciation. For Sulabhā, her criticism indicates that the ability to achieve *mokṣa* is not based on birth, but on knowledge and practice.

The Janaka dialogues do not have a consistent view on sovereignty, but rather they put different explorations of a particular understanding of kingship in dialogue with each other. In the process, the tensions these dialogues have with each other highlight the fragility of the philosopher king. When the king is said to have achieved liberation, he depends on both the teachings and legitimation of brahmins. In Janaka Daivarāti's encounter with Yājñavalkya, for example, it is his brahmin interlocutor who gives him the knowledge based on which he claims to have achieved *mokṣa*. In contrast, Janaka's confrontation with Sulabhā indicates that even when he has claimed to have reached this status, he can still be challenged. Here, Sulabhā's arguments expose a particular vulnerability of the philosopher king: that he is not the ultimate authority on the teachings of self-mastery. The Janaka dialogues indicate that renouncer teachers can give kings political legitimacy, while the encounter with Sulabhā warns that they can also take it away.

By offering a range of perspectives, the Janaka dialogues portray the philosopher-king ideal of sovereignty as both dynamic and fragile. Some promise the possibility for a king to achieve political sovereignty through his own self-mastery, but taken together they indicate that the king is always in the process of displaying his knowledge and self-control. The different kings named Janaka are sometimes understood as a lineage, but their authority to rule derives from each king's ability to demonstrate his sovereign status for himself, not through inheritance or other transfers of power. A king, such as Janaka Daivarāti, might abdicate the throne to his son, but implicitly his son will have to prove himself through his own understanding of doctrines and ability to control himself. In this way, the philosopher king does not have an inalienable claim to political power, but rather continually demonstrates his royal authority through a series of discourses and practices.

9. Concluding Reflections

This paper has examined how a group of dialogues featuring kings named Janaka offer a rich exploration of the philosopher-king ideal of sovereignty in the *Mahābhārata*. Although Aśoka is often seen as the paradigmatic example of the philosopher king in ancient India and some scholars have suggested that Yudhiṣṭhira is modelled on Aśoka, kings named

Janaka are more explicitly represented as the paradigm through which Yudhiṣṭhira learns about how to be a philosopher king, or at least how to incorporate some aspects of this ideal into his own approach to rule. The Janaka dialogues, which make up a crucial aspect of Yudhiṣṭhira's preparation for assuming the throne, indicate that the philosopher-king discourse on sovereignty is not so much refuted as incorporated into a new model of political authority, embodied by Yudhiṣṭhira, which combines the ideals of the *Rājadharmā* and *Mokṣadharmā*.

While focusing on how the Janaka dialogues explore understandings of sovereignty, I have not only brought attention to a particular discourse that examines political authority, but I have also tried to showcase how narrative can be an important source for ancient Indian political theory. While some scholars still claim that pre-modern India had no tradition of political theory, we have seen political theorising taking place through a series of dialogues and their complex inter-textual relationships with each other. Each episode featuring Janaka contributes to a much broader and highly developed discourse about the legitimisation of political power. The Janaka dialogues do not make explicit arguments about what makes a king sovereign, but rather they explore a range of ways in which learned discourses and ascetic practices can authorise and enhance a king's ability to rule. In this way, the Janaka dialogues demonstrate that there is not one single basis for political authority, but rather a variety of ways of conceptualising what gives a ruler power. Some dialogues suggest that brahmin teachers or specific teachings provide the grounding for rulership, while others indicate that the king can claim authority for himself by perfecting a set of ascetic practices or attaining a certain level of knowledge. On some occasions, sovereignty is equated with *mokṣa*, with the king portrayed as demonstrating his political power through his attainment of liberation. On other occasions, however, it seems enough that the king exhibits a knowledgeable and cultivated state, but without claims of liberation. In other words, some dialogues depict the ideal king as having aspirations towards liberation, while revealing a discomfort with the idea of a fully liberated king who continues to rule. Other dialogues—particularly those with Janaka's wife and Sulabhā—reject the aspiration of a fully liberated king altogether.

Each Janaka dialogue, then, offers a unique articulation of which doctrines a king should know, what practices a king should perform, and to what extent these teachings and practices authorise his rule. While some views on sovereignty are represented more than others, an important aspect of the Janaka dialogues is that they represent an ongoing, inter-religious conversation where a number of perspectives are represented. By looking at these dialogues alongside each other, we have seen that kings named Janaka are conduits through which the philosopher-king ideal is theorised. Rather than identify one particular version of this ideal as more original or more important, I think we can better understand how the ideal of the philosopher king was theorised when we pay attention to its diverse articulations. Keeping in mind that the kings featured in these dialogues are not all the same Janaka, I think we can see them as examples of how the *Mahābhārata* tends to resist the urge to universalise. Instead, it explores shared ideals through the particularities of a number of different individuals in exchanges with different interlocutors in different situations. In this way, the Janaka dialogues contribute to the text's more general tendency to depict the goal of philosophising as deepening one's own understanding by considering a topic from a number of points of view, rather than arriving at a consistent and repeatable conclusion that can be universalised. As Nehru looked to indigenous models of political authority when thinking about the future of an independent India, it is not surprising that he found inspiration in one of the earliest episodes to feature a king named Janaka. Perhaps we can continue to learn from these Janakas today.

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Notes

- ¹ Appleton sees kings named Janaka (as well as kings named Nami/Nimi) as part of the same lineage. In the context of the *Mahābhārata*, however, it seems to me that the relationship between the different Janakas is more conceptual than genealogical. Of the Janaka dialogues we will examine, in one case a genealogical relationship is emphasised through the use of the term *janakātmaja* (12.297.1), but on the whole it is not clear if all the kings named Janaka are related to each other and, if so, what their relationship is.
- ² For an excellent analysis of sovereignty in early Vedic sources, for example, see [Proferes \(2007\)](#).
- ³ McClish defines the *daṇḍa* as ‘a symbol of the capacity to inflict harm. It was associated in particular with the king, as defined by his use of violence in the practice of governance . . . the king’s *daṇḍa* represents his raw ability to dominate others by force and is the fundamental source of his political power’ ([McClish 2018](#), p. 273).
- ⁴ According to Bowles, *āpad-dharma* ‘fundamentally means “right conduct in times of distress”, and refers to the relaxing of normative rules of behaviour when extraordinary social, environmental or other difficulties, have made these normative rules difficult to follow. In short, *āpaddharma* refers to exceptional rules for exceptional circumstances’ ([Bowles 2007](#), p. 2).
- ⁵ Here I have in mind Pierre Hadot’s understanding of ancient philosophy as a ‘way of life’, in which philosophical doctrines are learned in conjunction with self-cultivation practices or, what Hadot calls, ‘spiritual exercises’. As Hadot explains such exercises as ‘practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation’ ([Hadot 2002](#), p. 6). Although the word philosophy itself was only used in an ancient Mediterranean context, comparable traditions that combine learning and self-cultivation practices were also developed in other ancient contexts, such as India and China (see, for example, [Angle and Slote 2013](#); [Fiordalis 2018](#); [Lai et al. 2019](#)).
- ⁶ For a similar distinction, see [Bowles \(2007, pp. 134–45\)](#).
- ⁷ The two other occasions in the *Śānti Parva* are 12.171.56 and 12.268.4. As we will see, it also appears in the Vulgate version of the Janaka/Pañcaśikha dialogue. As Appleton points out, this verse is also ascribed to Janaka (and kings named Nimi) in Buddhist and Jaina sources ([Appleton 2017](#), pp. 146–51).
- ⁸ According to Malinar, Garbe has made a similar suggestion, which is supported by both Bedekar and Frauwallner. See [Malinar \(2017, p. 611, n. 6\)](#).
- ⁹ Malinar resists this reading, arguing that Bhīṣma interprets *mokṣa* ‘as a state of “great happiness”’ ([Malinar 2017](#), p. 613).
- ¹⁰ See the Critical Edition, Volume 16, appendix 1, no. 19, verse 35, p. 2036. See also, the Clay Sanskrit library translation of this verse, where it appears at 12.219.50.
- ¹¹ As we have seen, Yājñavalkya teaches Janaka to be fearless in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.25).
- ¹² For further discussion on the implications of Sulabh’ās argument here, see [Black \(Black, 2021, pp. 138–43\)](#); [Vanita \(2003, p. 88\)](#); [Fitzgerald \(2002, p. 674\)](#); and [Ram-Prasad \(2018, p. 85\)](#).
- ¹³ Parāśara also discusses *yoga*, but he goes into far less detail than either Vasiṣṭha or Yājñavalkya.
- ¹⁴ Ability to travel through the air appears at 3.42; ability to enter into another person’s body appears at 3.38.
- ¹⁵ As Sutton points out: ‘Within the didactic passages, however, Yoga is recognised primarily as a soteriological technique and the magical powers gained are warned against as a distraction’ ([Sutton 2000](#), p. 99).
- ¹⁶ Discussions about *yoga* are first found in the later Upaniṣads, particularly in the *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara*. Although there are few narrative details, the social contexts indicated in these texts are more likely the domain of renunciators than kings. Another late Upaniṣad where teachings on *yoga* are prominent is the *Maitrī Upaniṣad*. This text features the renouncer-king Bṛhadratha, but not as an acting king who achieves self-mastery for the sake of ruling, but as having already installed his eldest son as king and retreating to the forest to learn from the brahmin Śākāyanya.

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