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"What's Written on the Forehead Will Never Fail"

Karma, Fate, and Headwriting in Indian Folktales

A widespread belief in India is that at birth a deity comes to write the destiny of the newborn child on its forehead. Like the well-known concept of karma, the motif of headwriting expresses that one must bear one's fate since no amount of effort can alter it. And yet folktales that use this motif often show that one's destiny may be fulfilled in surprising ways. This article examines five instances of the outwitting fate tale type that use the motif of headwriting to argue that these tales contest the deterministic world view supported by karma ideology by rejecting ascribed identities and advocating the use of wit, courage, and, significantly, trade to transform a miserable fate into a good one. I further argue that these values can be identified with upwardly mobile low-caste trading communities who may have been the "authors" or primary bearers of these folktales.

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A BELIEF widely attested to in the folklore and literature of India is that at the moment of birth, or on the night of the sixth day after birth, a god or goddess comes to write the destiny of the newborn child on its forehead. The destiny so inscribed often takes the form of a set of verses indicating the most important features of a person's life: the kind of birth (that is, what caste and family they are born into), length of life, work occupation, level of poverty or affluence, and so forth. Several Indian languages have expressions for this writing on the forehead: *talaiyeḻuttu* ("headwriting") and *talaiviti* ("head-fate") in Tamil; *haṇeli barediddu* ("what's written on the forehead") and *haṇebareha* ("the writing on the forehead") in Kannada; and *phālalikhita* ("what's written on the forehead") in Sanskrit (RAMANUJAN 1991b, 40). Sometimes the image of writing on the forehead is condensed: either the writing is not mentioned, as in the references to *kŏpāl* (from the Sanskrit *kapāla*, "forehead") in Bengali, and *kapālāṅti* ("what's on your forehead") in Marathi (BROWN 1978, 254); or the location of the writing on the forehead is not mentioned, as in *brahmalipi* ("Brahma's script") in Sanskrit and in the Hindi phrase *hamārī kismat men garībī likhī hai* ("Poverty is written in my destiny") (WADLEY 1994, 118).

When an audience first encounters it in a proverb or folk narrative, the motif of headwriting seems to suggest that fate is inexorable, as in the Tamil phrase *talaiyeḻuttu iruntāl atai yār māṟṟa muṭiyum*? ("If it is in the headwriting who can change it?"). Similar in some ways to the well-known Indian concept of karma, the motif of headwriting expresses in a highly condensed fashion that one must bear one's fate, whatever it is, since no amount of effort can alter it. And yet folktales that use this motif often show that fate can be outwitted, or that destiny may be fulfilled in surprising, ironic ways. Such a twist in meaning suggests that tales of the "outwitting fate" type may be read as dissenting opinions which contest the deterministic world view encoded in the karma ideology (BROWN 1978, 154–60).

The twentieth-century American Indologist, W. Norman Brown, was the first to argue that tales of the outwitting fate variety could be read as challenges to the karma doctrine. Brown's article, "Escaping One's Fate," originally published in 1920, deftly interprets a number of different tales that use the motif of headwriting. But he concludes that the skepticism they express about the immutability of fate is not widespread. He writes,

> The various illustrations of escaping fate which I have presented in this paper do not represent a frequent mental attitude of the Hindus. Rather, they are in the nature of exceptions that prove the rule, "Fate is inevitable." But they do, I believe, show that there exists in India an indigenous spirit of rebellion against the doctrine of human helplessness, a spirit that undoubtedly finds expression in the actualities of daily life as well as the fancies of fiction. (BROWN 1978, 160)

Though Brown concedes that the rebellious spirit communicated through the tales probably found occasional expression in the "actualities of daily life," he treats the tales that employ the outwitting fate motif as quaint expressions of a minority viewpoint that is of interest primarily as a novelty. Through the application of contemporary methods of folkloristics, I would like to show in this article that the tales have a much broader social relevance than Brown perceives. To that end I retell and analyze five versions of the outwitting fate tale type that use the motif of headwriting to show how these tales probe the possibilities of the many different ways of understanding the predetermination of one's future. When we examine these tales closely, I argue, it is clear that it is not merely "wit" that allows one to overturn the destiny ascribed to oneself, but a rejection of ascribed identities and a willingness to take on great personal risk in pursuit of a larger vision of what is possible. While many scholars have by now confirmed Brown's hunch that the karma doctrine does not go unchallenged in India, I seek here to build on this work to show that such rejection may have been particularly attractive to particular social groups. Specifically, I demonstrate through comparative analysis of the shared structure of the tales that they affirm the risk-taking ethos characteristic of upwardly mobile trading groups who not only contest the karma doctrine at the level of ideology, but defy its socially conservative implications in their lives.

One key insight of a recent collection of essays on the concept of destiny in the world's major religious traditions is that questions of destiny are inextricably linked to questions of identity (BOWKER and BOWKER 1994). On both an individual and a collective level, the question "What does the future hold?" is bound up with *who* one thinks one is. Character is indeed destiny. At a broad, theological level, expectations of the unfolding events that lead to the ultimate telos or "end" of life are shaped by concepts of human nature. On the individual level, this pattern translates into the belief that a person's expectations for the future depend in large measure on where he or she fits into the larger social order. As Kim Knott has argued, people's exploration of life's central existential questions—"Who am I?" and "What is my purpose and destiny in life?"—are shaped by their particular social location and the expectations that others place on them. Hindu women's subjective understanding of karma and the way it shapes their own personal destiny, for example, evolves within the context of social ideals for women—their *stridharma*—which entails specific ideas about what constitutes a well-lived life for a woman (that is, marriage, children, and predeceasing one's husband) (KNOTT 1996, 16). In this way, ideas linking destiny and identity serve a socially conservative purpose, encouraging

people to accept and embrace the life pattern that has been assigned to them by virtue of being born into a particular body and a particular family.

The reverse is also frequently true. Not only does one's destiny flow from one's identity (for example, gender and social location), but people frequently believe that one's identity *is what it is* so that one can live out a particular destiny. Gana nath Obeyesekere's massive comparative study of beliefs surrounding rebirth in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek religious thought suggests that cultures all over the world affirm that being born into a particular body and family is not accidental. However, he argues that whereas in small-scale societies one gets reborn into a family as "an ancestor returned," in more complex societies rebirth eschatologies are "ethicized" so that the type of birth an individual receives on being reborn is the result of her good or bad deeds in a previous life. One of the crucial differences between rebirth eschatologies that depend on the idea that newborns are the incarnations of deceased ancestors, and those that attribute rebirth to the good and bad deeds done in a previous life, is that in ethicized rebirth eschatologies *lineage no longer determines rebirth, rebirth determines lineage*. This shift in ideology allows rebirth beliefs to function as a theodicy, justifying the uneven distribution of goods in society by declaring that one *deserves* one's place in the social order since it is a fitting reward or punishment for behavior in a previous life (Obeyesekere 2002, 72–75).

It would be interesting to discover whether there are counter-beliefs in the Amerindian and Greek context comparable to the challenges to the karma doctrine found ubiquitously in the Indic context. For against the idea that one's destiny is intimately bound up with one's ascribed identity, one finds in Indian folktales two challenges to the socially stabilizing ideology of the karma doctrine: first, that events can radically alter the expected outcome of being born into a particular family, and second, that if one is willing to take on enormous personal risk, one can alter destiny with effort and creativity.

Karma and its competitors

In his famous study of religion in India, Max Weber argued that the doctrine of karma was an axiomatic belief among the people of India. Weber distinguished Hindus from the adherents of Jainism and Buddhism by their belief in the existence of an immortal soul and the rational consistency with which karma was linked to the social ranking of castes. If one abided by one's caste duty (*svadharma*), one earned good karma and was ensured a better rebirth in the next life. But the neglect of duty unfailingly led to the direst of consequences, either in this life or the next. This combination of features made Brahmanical Hinduism, according to Weber, the "most consistent theodicy ever produced by history" (Weber 1958, 121). The promise of upward mobility across lifetimes was so appealing, and so plausible within the logic of karma, that it effectively "tamed" the lower castes of India into passive acceptance of the status quo.

> Rebirth can drag a man down into the life of a "worm in the intestine of a dog," but, according to his conduct, it might raise and place him in the womb of a queen and a Brahman's daughter. (WEBER 1958, 122)

By promising upward social mobility in the next life as a reward for adherence to social norms, the karma doctrine thus discouraged actual social mobility. This elegant analysis of the karma doctrine by Weber and other nineteenth-century social scientists led to a view of Indian society bound to reproduce itself without interruption, as a society uniquely shaped by a "dread of the magical evil of innovation." Indeed, it is one of the most enduring stereotypes produced by colonialist knowledge about India.

Since Weber's day, historians of religion, Indologists, and anthropologists have sought to undermine this stereotype in two ways. Textual scholars and philosophers have clearly demonstrated that the karma doctrine does not necessarily lead to an ethos of fatalistic resignation and have revealed the rich possibilities within it for affirming moral responsibility and free will (KRISHNAN 1997; REICHENBACH 1989 and 1990). In addition, anthropologists and historians of religion have been very cautious in their speculations about the extent to which people in India "believe" in karma. Although it is often represented as something essential to Indic thought, ethnography since the 1950s demonstrates that belief in karma is not uniformly diffused throughout Indian culture. Indians employ many other ways of interpreting misfortune instead of or in combination with karma (NUCKOLLS 1992; KOLENDA 1964). For example, Kathleen Gough reports the mixture of surprise, skepticism, and derision with which a group of untouchable men in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in the 1960s responded to her inquiries about such ideas.

> One day, sitting in the Adi-Dravida ["original Dravidians," a South Indian term for untouchables] street, I tackled a group of older Pallars on the subjects of death, duty, destiny and rebirth of the soul. In my inadequate Tamil, I asked them where they thought the soul went after death.... The group collapsed in merriment—perhaps as much at my speech as at the question. Wiping his eyes, the old man replied, "Mother, we don't know! Do you know? Have you been there?" I said, "No, but Brahmans say that if people do their duty well in this life, their souls will be born next time in a higher caste." "Brahmans say!" scoffed another elder. "Brahmans say anything. Their heads go round and round."
>
> (GOUGH 1973, 234)

Similarly, Bernard Cohn's Chamar (untouchable) informants in Senapur in the 1950s claimed to know nothing about the fate of the soul after death or other ideas related to karma (COHN 1992, 285). Robert DELIÈGE (1993) and Michael MOFFATT (1979) have uncovered oral narratives among untouchable Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu through which Paraiyars provide themselves with alternative explanations for their lowly position in the regional caste structure. Rather than the orthodox view that individuals are punished for past bad karma by being born into this lowly caste, these myths explain that in the beginning the ancestor of the caste committed

some foolish, rather innocent mistake that resulted in the wholesale demotion of the community.

One of the most important findings of ethnography that deals with these questions is that the karma ideology faces a great deal of competition from a range of alternative explanations for misfortune. When confronted by calamities that resist the explanations provided by ordinary practical reasoning, people in India draw on a wide variety of discourses besides karma to provide a meaningful framework within which the event can be confronted and contained, for example, astrology, ancestor worship, witchcraft, village goddess worship, and headwriting (Hiebert 1983). These theodicies may be broken down into several categories based on the primary cause of fortune or misfortune: a) an impersonal, mysterious force like fate (*daiva* [divine fate]; *vidhi* [an injunction that must be followed]; *bhāgya* [one's portion in life]); b) the will of god or the gods (*deva*; *Iśvara*; *kuladeyvam*); c) the coming to fruition of past karma (*karmavipāka)*; and, d) human effort (*puruṣakarma*; *puruṣakāra*). In the five folktales that use the motif of headwriting that I examine below, one sees the karma theory combined and juxtaposed with these alternative theodicies in a complex dialogical manner characteristic of Indian religious literature. As A. K. Ramanujan writes, a key feature of Indian creativity is the "dialogic response of one tradition to another, the copresence of several of them in one space, parodying, inverting, facing, and defacing each other, sharing and taking over characters, themes, motifs, and other signifiers but making them signify new and even opposite things" (Ramanujan 1991b, 54). For example, karma is often viewed as a strictly rationalistic system based on a clear cause and effect relationship, and one's actions (lit. *karma*, from the Sanskrit verbal root √kṛ) in this life have consequences either in this life or in another. But it possesses many mysterious qualities. The most significant of these is conveyed by the idea that karma "ripens" (*karmavipāka*) over time. Like plants that emerge from seeds planted in the ground, the results of one's actions gradually become visible over time, only fully revealing their final form beyond the boundary of death. Although one knows that the actions of the past will inevitably bear consequences, one does not know how or when; thus, the ripening of karma is said to be *adriṣṭa*, "unseen, invisible" (Krishnan 1997, 171–204). In this way it comes to have some of the force of fate as *daiva*, the mysterious efficacy of the devas, the gods of the Vedic sacrifice. Indeed, whole industries of prognostication have arisen in India, astrology chief among them, to undo the ordinarily *adriṣṭa* nature of karma so that it *can* be seen, enabling the individual to anticipate it and respond more effectively. Some theist philosophers, perhaps uncomfortable with the idea that such a crucial aspect of karma's workings would be left to chance, have reintroduced here the notion of a personal deity (*Iśvara*) who determines how the good or bad deeds of the past will shape the present (Krishnan 1997, 151). For example, Śrīvaiṣṇava theologians view God as the "judge of karma," meting out rewards and punishments depending on whether he is pleased or displeased with the *jīva*'s (individual soul's) action (*karma*), although they disagree among themselves as to whether God's compassion exceeds and neutralizes the force of one's karma (Mumme 1987). But in other

settings, particularly the folktales I will examine below, the mysterious aspect of karma and the invisible and unpredictable nature of its fruition causes karma to be assimilated to the more ancient notion of *daiva*, which refers to the implacable force of the gods.

Written on the body: headwriting and tales of outwitting fate

The motif of headwriting occurs in combination with all of these types of theodicies. It can be seen as shaped by gods, fate, or karma, and sometimes by more than one force at a time. This is because headwriting, in essence, functions as nothing more than the medium through which the contents of one's future existence is expressed. It is the nature of the medium itself that is of crucial significance. By suggesting that one's destiny is literally written on the body, that it takes the form of words embedded in the body, the image of headwriting appears to affirm the most deterministic readings of how these causal forces impact future events. And yet, folktales of outwitting fate that use the motif upend the view that one's fate is fixed by emphasizing the ambiguities of the language in which that fate is conveyed.

The oldest instance of the outwitting fate tale type that I have found is in Sōmadēva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* [The Ocean of Story] (Tawney and Penzer 1926, 185–86), which was probably composed in the eleventh century CE in northwest India. This is one of the four oldest versions of the famous Indic collection of fables known as the *Pañcatantra*, the *Tantrakhyāyika*, or the *Hitopadeśa*. All of these collections, though redacted in different times and places, share so many stories that they probably have a common ancestor.[1] It is no longer fashionable in folklore studies to search for the "original" archetypal tale, a quest that obsessed nineteenth-century collectors of folktales. But it remains a striking feature of human creativity that what most hearers would recognize as the "same tale" can appear in so many different guises, clothed variously in the garments of the cultures it comes to call home. And yet in all these variations one still discerns a shared structure that is modified by the addition or subtraction of motifs. What I regard as the core structure of the outwitting fate tale type is present in the following narrative, told and retold in India for the last one thousand years. In this retelling, as in all five narratives that I present here, I have drawn on existing published versions of the tale, but have paraphrased them in my own words to make the language less archaic and to highlight relevant themes. I hope in doing so that I am not distorting the meaning of the tale, but rather being explicit about my role as a new link in a chain of retellings.

Outwitting Fate I: Kathāsaritsāgara 2. 119. 157

A poor householder made a living for himself and his family with a single ox. He was so poor that he frequently had to go without food. During one of these

> involuntary fasts, he went to the shrine of the goddess Durgā in the Vindhya hills and threw himself down on the *darbha* grass to practice austerities until Durgā granted the boon of wealth. In a dream, the goddess came to him and said, "Get up! Your wealth shall always consist of one ox, and by selling it you shall live in perpetual comfort." The next morning, after rising and eating, he still could not bring himself to sell the ox for he was afraid that if he sold it he would have nothing left. When he told his dream to a clever friend the friend encouraged him to sell the ox: "The goddess told you that you should always have one ox, and that you should live by selling it. Why aren't you following her commands, foolish man? Go ahead and sell this ox, and use the proceeds to support your family. When you have sold this one, you will get another, and then another." The poor householder followed these instructions and finding that he received ox after ox, he lived happily ever after in constant comfort.

Here the Goddess reveals the double entendre that is a recurring joke in all of these tales: the householder's fate is to live on "one ox." But by changing the emphasis, the meaning of the phrase is transformed from having to live on one ox alone, into being able to live on—at all times—*at least* one ox. In a sense the man's destiny never changes—he and his family always subsist on one ox. But the goddess hints to him that he can alter the meaning of this by changing his orientation towards the future from fear to confidence. Further, the tale suggests that it is faith, specifically faith in a deity, which helps the householder relinquish his grip on a small measure of security, and in the process gain much greater wealth. As to the cause of the man's initial poverty the tale remains circumspect. It makes no mention of karma. While the poor man seems to have won Durgā's intervention through his asceticism, Durgā's role seems not to be to change the householder's fate, but simply to reveal it to him, and then show him how he might circumvent it. He does so, essentially, by becoming a trader in oxen.

The second oldest version is from the *Dharmakalpadruma* [The Wishing-Tree of Dharma] 2.4.109, a large collection of Jain stories written in Sanskrit. The twentieth-century Indologist Maurice Winternitz reports that the *Dharmakalpadruma* was written by Udayadharma in 1450, but others attribute it to Dharmadeva of Pūrṇimāgaccha in 1610 (Winternitz 1927, 545; Raghavan and Raja 1977, 239). Jain story literature displays an intense fascination with karma. This retelling is based on a German version by Johannes Hertel, the prolific German Sanskritist and collector of folktales in Indian literature (Hertel 1913).

Outwitting Fate II: Dharmakalpadruma 2.4.109–139

> In the kingdom of Kṣitipratiṣṭhita there lived a king named Naravāhana. His minister, Jñānagarbha, was said to be as wise as Bṛhaspati [the legendary guru to the Gods]. On the sixth day after the birth of the king's first son, Jñānagarbha hid in the shadow of a lamp until midnight and waited for the goddess Ṣaṣṭhi [lit. "the sixth," the divine personification of fate, which is written on the head of a newborn after six days] to come and write the child's destiny on his forehead.

> He overheard the deity say as she wrote, "Only by hunting shall he support his life. A single creature shall be his portion daily, never another." When he heard this, the minister cried out in his heart, "How could such a cruel fate come to a king's son?" Later, the queen gave birth to a second son, and, as before, Jñānagarbha hid in the shadows to hear what his future would bring: "This son will become a grass seller with a single beast of burden. Never will he receive another ox." Some years later the minister overheard Ṣaṣṭhi reveal the fate of the king's third child, a girl: "She will certainly become a prostitute. Through fate she will obtain in the end only one man a day." The minister became worried about the terrible karma of these three. After a time, some unscrupulous relatives of the king usurped his kingdom and the king's children had to flee for their lives. While each one sought to make their way in the world, the minister wandered. One day in a particular kingdom he happened to meet the son who had become a hunter. The young man said, "I am only able to make a pitiful living as a hunter, catching just a single beast each day." Hearing that, Jñānagarbha had a thought. "Listen to my advice," he said, "Do not kill any animal, except the Bhadra Elephant, which has behind its frontal lobes great pearls which you can retrieve and sell. Fate must give you an animal every day, as it is written on your forehead." So saying, Jñānagarbha set off in search of the second son. He found the second son at a crossroads, selling his day's load of grass. After he heard the young man's story, he said to him, "Sell your ox every day, my child. When you have sold it, fate must provide another for you, since it is written on your forehead." In the same way the minister went looking for the third child. When he saw her, his eyes filled with tears and he said, "Oh poor girl! How did you come to such a state!" She replied, "It is the fore-ordination of karma. And as if that isn't bad enough, only one man a day comes to me, and from that I can only earn a little." Jñānagarbha advised her as he had her brothers: "Ask for a hundred *dinara*s from every man who wants to come in your house, and through the force of fate that will happen." Having given these instructions to the three children, the minister retired to his house. While he slept one night, Ṣaṣṭhi came to him. "You have bewildered me with all these problems. So the *tura* [a musical instrument] is played with sticks! Release me from this situation, friend. How long can I go on giving an elephant, an ox, and a man willing to spend one hundred dinars every single day?" The minister spoke, "People say, 'a crooked wood drills a crooked hole.' The same applies to you." "What can I do," said Ṣaṣṭhi, "to get out of this quandary?" "Return the kingdom to the king's sons and then go, do as you like," said the minister. The grateful brothers gave their sister to the minister in marriage, and thus the oldest son of the minister became king.[2]

As in the variant from the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, through the clever advice of an intelligent friend, three children manage here to compel supernatural forces of causation to fulfill their destiny to the letter, thereby transforming an unhappy future into a good one. Karma and fate are mentioned separately as causes, although the tale seems to point to karma as the primary cause. What is clear is that the tale emphasizes the inscrutable (*adriṣṭa*) nature of the ripening of karma. The minister

expresses several times his astonishment that *these* children could have received a bad lot in life: "How could such a cruel fate come to a king's son?" As argued previously, it is the imperceptible process by which karma ripens that allows karma to be used interchangeably with fate (*daiva*), as if referring to a mysterious divine force. The sense of the overwhelming power of karma relative to other forces of causality is reinforced here by the fact that Ṣaṣṭhi, a goddess, is not the determiner of fate, but simply its scribe. That she arranges things in the end so as to restore the good fortune of the king's children is less a sign of her power than evidence that she, as a personification of fate, was outwitted by human ingenuity and courage.

We should note that several elements add new inflections to the central story. The motif of headwriting, which did not appear at all in the older version, here takes center stage. It also helps to concretize a second element of the story, namely, that the story begins with the demotion of an infant or youth of high status due to no apparent fault of his or her own. As we will see, a common motif in all but the first of the outwitting fate tales is that a child who seems initially destined for a comfortable, even luxurious life by virtue of being born into a wealthy or high-status family turns out to have an evil fate. This causes him or her to lose all status and wealth and to become impoverished to the point that he or she must make a living in some humiliating, ignoble way. Such a tragic chain of events is clearly contrary to the ideal pattern of life envisioned by orthodox scriptures in which those born into a particular family do so as a result of having the right karma, and thus the right qualities (*guṇam*s) to develop the dispositions and skills necessary for success in the way of life to which their birth entitles them. And yet, these tales may reflect the vicissitudes of real life more accurately than does this ideal scenario, even in a society as theoretically stable as Hindu society. Contrary to the Orientalist image of the social order in India as rigid and unchanging, many avenues of social mobility (both upwards and downwards) that can raise or lower a person's social standing exist, and have always existed, even in a single generation. These include religious conversion, migration, marriage, education, and service to kings and other local rulers. Moreover, in India, as elsewhere, forces beyond people's control regularly compel people to do all manner of things they would not ordinarily do. Famine, drought, accidents, poor health, and the breakup of families—all these can and do radically alter the expected outcome of birth into a particular family.

Arguably, the karma ideology, in providing a ready explanation for unexpected shifts of fortune, mitigates against social change. By explaining away all apparent anomalies it affirms the basic plausibility structure of orthodox visions of the social order, and does so while shifting responsibility for misfortune squarely onto the sufferer: one always gets the fate one deserves. And yet, one of the remarkable things about the outwitting fate tale type is its message that through audacity, daring, and wit a person can alter the mechanistic and unforgiving force of karma or fate. One can take a mean and poor fate and through faith in a vision of a better, bigger life, and the courage to stick by that vision, one can transform one's life entirely. Such a transformation requires that one's self-concept change along with one's vision of the future. The figures in these narratives accomplish this by

exploiting the ambiguity in the linguistic expression of headwriting. These tales suggest that while headwriting is unalterable, and what fate has written must be fulfilled, there are a variety of ways in which this could happen.

The idea that one's identity and destiny are intertwined is taken quite literally by proponents of karma doctrines, particularly those who see karma (understood literally as "action") not as an abstract, insubstantial quality—as in most Western metaphysics—but as substantial matter (Daniel 1983, 28). Scholars often attribute Jains with the most materialistic view of karma, but the metaphors used to describe the properties of karma in Hindu scriptures as well as ethnographic evidence suggest that this view is more broadly held. This is seen quite clearly in technical accounts in the *Mahābhārata* that explain the operation of karma. In answer to questions about how karma can attach itself to the embodied soul and move with it from life to life, sages respond with images of branding, stamping, and marking. For example, in the third book, the *Forest Book*, Markaṇḍeya tells Yudhisthira that those caught in the cycle of transmigration reap sorrow as a result of their evil actions, "marked as they gradually were by their unholy deeds" (MBH 3.181.19, van Buitenen 1975, 575).[3] The word translated by van Buitenen as "marked" is *paricihnitāḥ*, which may be variously defined as "marked, stamped, distinguished."

Another instance of the use of the concept of "marking" or "stamping" in the *Mahābhārata* to describe how karma influences the body occurs in book fourteen, the *Book of the Horse Sacrifice*. In a dialogue between two Brahmins about the nature of action, one Brahmin says that at the moment of death, "The *jīva* withdraws from the body and exists enveloped [*samāvṛtaḥ*] by his own acts [*karmabhiḥ*] and branded [or bent, *aṅkitaḥ*] by its own auspicious and meritorious acts and sins" (Sa jīvaḥ pracyutaḥ kāyāt karmabhiḥ svaiḥ samāvṛtaḥ/aṅkitaḥ śubhaiḥ puṇyaiḥ pāpaiḥ va api upapadyate) (MBH 14.17.28). While the term *samāvṛtaḥ*, "enveloped by, covered with," perhaps conveys the sense that the acts do not necessarily touch the *jīva*, *aṅkitaḥ*, "branded, bent" definitely suggests that the relationship between karma and the body is one of very close contact. In these passages, karma is represented as acting upon the subtle body through a violent transformation of its exterior. The branding imagery suggests that the change is permanent. This heightens the pathos of the predicament of the soul trapped in the cycle of rebirth and thus helps the speaker to persuade his listeners to act in the proper fashion. It is this specific idea—that the effects of action are permanently lodged in one's flesh and bone—that the motif of headwriting also draws upon for its force. One can no more remove the effects of karma than (in the days before cosmetic surgery) one could remove a bodily disfigurement.

There is one important difference between the mechanism for fixing the outcome of a person's life described in the *Mahābhārata*'s understanding of karma and the mechanism suggested by the figure of headwriting. The information processing and transmission system described by the sages in the *Mahābhārata* is essentially digital: one's deeds are either good or bad, either sins (*pāpaiḥ*) or good and meritorious deeds (*śubhaiḥ puṇyaiḥ*) (MBH 14. 17.28). The proportion of

karmic substances produced by good and bad deeds is what ultimately dictates the destiny assigned to the body inhabited by the *jīva* in its next rebirth. Ethnographic evidence suggests that this kind of digital system for reckoning the outcome of a person's accumulated karma can work in a couple of different ways. When asked about the workings of karma, some people theorize that one can balance out bad deeds by good deeds to result in an overall surplus of good deeds and thus a happy future. Others theorize that good deeds cannot cancel out bad deeds; each good deed results in some pleasant outcome, while each bad deed results in an unpleasant outcome. At most, these people argue, good deeds of an extraordinary nature can only postpone the fruition of bad karma to some later incarnation or minimize the impact of that karma (Daniel 1983, 39).

Such a system is much more reliable and accurate, it seems, than when one's karma is processed and stored in the form of language. Every deed is measured and weighed and recorded in some fashion, and no deed, whether good or evil, is overlooked. Such is not the case in tales where the headwriting motif is used to show how fate may be outwitted. In these tales, it is precisely this weak link in the system that allows someone to seize their destiny by radically reinterpreting the language in which it is articulated.

The next version comes from a collection of Tamil folktales assembled by Pandit Sangēndi Mahālinga Naṭēśa Śāstri (1859–1906), a nineteenth-century Tamil scholar and contributor to the *Indian Antiquary*. One of the most prominent Indian folklorists of his time, Naṭēśa Śāstri was born into a Saiva Brahmin family in Tiruchirapalli district in Tamil Nadu. He worked for the Government Archeological Survey under Robert Sewell, who praised his work as a translator of Tamil inscriptions. Many Indian folklorists worked in the shadow of their British or American collaborators, but Śāstri gained considerable recognition for his work on his own. He was a member of the prestigious British Folklore Society from 1893, and published numerous books, including a four-volume series called *Folklore in Southern India* produced by the Bombay Education Society (Prasad 2003, 436–37). One of Śāstri's best known (because it is the most widely distributed) books, *Tales of the Sun, or, Folklore of Southern India*, was coedited with Mrs. Georgiana H. Kingscote, the wife of a British officer. The prejudicial characteristic of much colonial scholarship is apparent in the fact that Mrs. Kingscote gave little credit to her coauthor, even though research indicates that he contributed at least twenty-five of the twenty-six tales in the collection (Prasad 2003, 437).[4] Śāstri's own version of the outwitting fate story, which had been published previously in the *Indian Antiquary*, is almost word-for-word identical with the version published in *Tales of the Sun*, with a couple of slight bowdlerizations typical of colonial folklore collections. Ramanujan retells this story in his *Folktales of India* collection, citing the two variants produced by Śāstri (Ramanujan 1991a, 81–87; Śāstri 1888, 259–64; Śāstri and Kingscote 1984, 230–47). My own retelling relies mostly on Ramanujan's version.

Outwitting Fate III: Naṭēśa Śāstri

A young Brahmin leaves home in search of knowledge. In a peaceful forest far from civilization he finds a guru living with his wife. The young man serves the guru and learns from him for many years. Then, one day, the guru decides to make a pilgrimage to a distant shrine. Since the guru's wife is eight months pregnant, the guru leaves his wife in the care of his student and a neighbor-woman. On the night his guru's wife goes into labor, the student stands watch at the door of the natal chamber. At the stroke of midnight he sees a figure attempting to sneak into the chamber and with a shout he halts the stranger's progress: "You old Brahmin, what do you think you're doing, entering my master's cottage without so much as a by your leave?" When he discovers that it is Brahmā himself going to write the baby's fate he asks what the deity intends to write. Brahmā replies, "Even I do not know what my stylus will write on the forehead of the newborn. As the child comes into the world, I place the stylus on its head and it writes the fate of the child according to its good or bad deeds in its previous life." The young disciple extracts the promise that Brahmā will tell him what has been written, but the god warns him that if he tells anyone, his head will split into a thousand pieces. When Brahmā exits the chamber, the student learns that the baby is a boy and that he is fated to a very hard lot: a buffalo and a sack of rice will be his only share in life. When the student objects to the injustice of this child's lot, especially considering the high status of its father, Brahmā replies, "What do I have to do with it? Such are the fruits of a former life. What's sown in the past must be reaped in the present."

Three years pass. The guru again gets an impulse to go on a pilgrimage when his wife is pregnant and the same sequence of events occur, except this time the baby is a girl and the student learns from Brahmā that his stylus has written that she has to earn her living as a prostitute. She must sell her body every night. The student lives with the family for three years more, until the boy and girl are six and three, respectively. But he grows more heartsick everyday as he contemplates the sad fate awaiting the children. Eventually he requests permission to leave the ashram in order to make a pilgrimage of his own, which his teacher grants.

After many years of travelling, learning, and pondering the mysterious ways of providence, he returns to his guru's village. He discovers that the old sage and his wife have died and that the guru's son is supporting himself and his family on one buffalo and a single sack of rice, as Brahmā's verses had prophesized. The student introduces himself to the miserable young man and, promising a better life, tells him to sell both the buffalo and the sack of rice that day and use the money to provide a feast for his family, the poor, and the best Brahmans in town. "Leave not even a mouthful for the next day. Reserve nothing," says the student. The young man is astonished to hear such advice. "If I do that, how will I feed the four mouths in my own house? You Brahmans are always advising poor people like me to give it all to Brahmans. It's all very well for you. You are on the receiving end." And yet in the end, the young man reluctantly agrees. For the first time in his life he is able to provide a good meal for his family and

> neighbors; but that night he is filled with anxiety. He tosses and turns wondering and worrying about how he will provide food for his family now. At dawn, he goes out in a daze to feed the buffalo, as was his habit, and discovers to his amazement that another buffalo is standing in the stall alongside a sack of rice. His heart leaps with joy and he runs to tell his father's student of this miraculous occurrence. Impassively, the student instructs him in how to ensure his good fortune: he must sell the buffalo and the sack of rice each day and use the money only to feed his family and others, stinting nothing in his generosity.
>
> After staying with the son for a short while, the student goes to see his guru's daughter, who ekes out a living in the next village as the neighborhood prostitute. Promising her a chance at a better life, he tells her to grant her services that night only to someone who pays her a large measure of pearls of the first water. She follows his advice in spite of her doubts and turns away all her regular clients, who assume she's gone mad. In the wee hours of the morning she obtains Brahmā himself as her lover, disguised as a beautiful young man, he being the only person who could pay such an exorbitant price. The student tells her that as long as she sells the pearls each day and uses the money to buy gifts and food for the poor she will have this lover each night. He will be her husband. Before he leaves, he counsels her in this way: "Don't reserve a paisa for the next day. Hoard nothing. The day you fail to do this you'll lose your husband and fall back into your old wretched ways."
>
> At dawn, on the morning that the student resumes his wandering, he encounters on the road a beautiful person leading along a buffalo, with a sack of rice on his head and a bundle of pearls hung around his shoulder. It is Brahmā, his head nearly bald from carrying out himself the fate which his iron pen had written. Brahmā pleads with the student to relieve him of this burden, and the student agrees on the condition that Brahmā allow them an ordinary happy life. The god grants his request and thus relieves himself of all his troubles.

Here the narrative makes explicit the idea that has only been suggested in previous instances of this tale type—that the fate expressed in headwriting is the sum of one's good or bad deeds in a previous life or lives. In addition, the core elements of the story type are all present here: an infant who seems destined to lead a happy life by virtue of being born into a good family turns out to be burdened with an evil fate, and yet is able to outwit it by forcing a new meaning from the written expression of his destiny. Beyond being a story about outwitting fate, though, this version is also a story about the risks and rewards of generosity, and about the courage necessary to boldly give away all that one owns with the confidence that one will gain it back again, a point to which I will return. The children transform their ill-fortune by becoming successful traders in oxen and pearls who use their wealth to provide for learned Brahmans and the poor. When it is too much for Brahmā to sustain this, they receive an ordinary happy life.

There is some controversy over whether or not this is in fact an oral tale or a direct translation from the Jain *Dharmakalpadruma*. W. Norman Brown accused Naṭēśa Śāstri of deceiving his readers by representing this tale as an oral folktale

when in fact it had several textual predecessors. Śāstri was not the only one engaging in this "deception," however. According to Brown's estimates, as many as half of the three thousand supposedly oral tales that had been gathered and committed to writing in the modern era had definite precursors in a written literary context (BROWN 1978, 123 and 127). And yet, the disapproving tone with which Brown chides Śāstri, not just once but on three separate occasions (BROWN 1978, 123, 150, and 157), for translating written narratives as oral ones seems now unjustified in light of Brown's own insight: since time immemorial there has been a near constant exchange across the imaginary borders within Indian society and its cultural landscape, between written texts and oral texts, folk texts and elite texts, men's tales and women's tales. The rise of print media in the nineteenth-century certainly accelerated the process by which written tales were introduced into streams of oral transmission, and vice versa. But even before the modern era numerous vectors caused narratives to cross and re-cross the porous boundary between oral and written literature (POLLOCK 2003). Professional bards, both itinerant and those settled in a particular village, drew from a large repertoire; travelling dramatic troupes performed localized forms of trans-Indian epics; and literate Brahmans themselves shared their knowledge of the textual tradition orally in both formal and informal settings. This is the sociological context for the dialogic nature of Indian literature in which vastly different traditions of creative expression coexist, "parodying, inverting, facing and defacing each other, sharing and taking over characters, themes, motifs, and other signifiers but making them signify new and even opposite things" (RAMANUJAN 1991b, 54).

Following Ramanujan's dialogical model of Indian literature, these outwitting fate tales can be read as parodies of the karma ideology. Through a kind of hyperbolic exaggeration of the notion that karma is inexorable, that one must pay for the actions of the past, these tales mimic in a broad fashion the outlines of the karma ideology in a way that criticizes the latter. The humor in outwitting fate tales that employ the motif of headwriting depends on the over-literalization of the prophetic sentences written on each of the children's heads. For example, the most obvious meaning of the poor farmer's headwriting—to subsist on a single ox and a single bag of grain—is that it is an expression of poverty. And yet the clever student manages to force this apparently straightforward turn of phrase towards its denotative meaning by a strong literal reading: the man will always have *at least* one ox and one bag of grain, no matter what he does. Similarly, the girl's headwriting, a euphemistic way of indicating her occupation as a prostitute—she will have to sell her body every night—is twisted so that it opens the possibility of her becoming rich without losing her chastity.

When the headwriting motif is used in conjunction with the ideology of karma, as it is in these stories, the effects of one's actions in a previous life are represented as taking up residence in the body in the form of words in a terse, descriptive phrase. Outwitting fate tales that use the headwriting motif show that once the possibilities opened by virtue of the inherent ambiguity of language have been recognized and seized, karma or fate (understood here as an inexorable force) can

be made to turn against itself. An evil fate can be transformed into a blessing. This thwarting of fate can be seen as a critique of the ideology of karma in that by testing to breaking point the ability of language to generate a one-to-one correspondence between words and things, the narrative seems to question the adequacy of the karma ideology's similar pretensions to supply a one-to-one correspondence between past deeds and present events. While Brahmā's assertion that "What's sown in the past must be reaped in the present" implies that the child must have done something dreadful in a former life to receive this destiny, that its evil destiny is a reflection of an evil character, the disciple's strong rereading of the texts inscribed on the children's foreheads recovers the children's original innocence.

Traders in goods, traders in stories

The figures in these folktales move beyond mere survival by cleverly deploying the meager resources that fate has allotted them. How they do so may tell us something about the social strata these tales represent, something about which the folklore collections from which these tales were drawn are completely silent. These narratives took shape in print thanks to the efforts of colonial-era folklorists, both Indian and non-Indian. Beginning with Miss Frere's pioneering collection, *Old Deccan Days*, published in 1868, missionaries, colonial administrators, military officers and their wives, along with hundreds of Indian collectors, gathered folktales from all the regions of India, translated them into English, and included them in books whose primary purpose was to introduce English readers to something of India's local character. However, while the nineteenth-century folklore collections remain important as crucial repositories of oral narratives, they are of little use in discerning the power plays at work when tales are actually narrated or performed. Folklore collectors like Śāstri rarely gave clues as to the kind of people they heard the stories from, or who their usual audiences were. Were the narrators men or women? Were they Brahmins, dominant landed castes, or agricultural laborers? With the increasing sophistication of the field of folkloristics, these questions have become central to the analysis of oral narrative, as scholars come to see how the meaning of a narrative is shaped significantly by the context in which it is told, varying according to audience, teller, setting, and so forth (Appadurai 1991, 4).

Even in the absence of such direct statements, however, one can make reasonable conjectures about the people to whom the story would have held the most appeal as an expression of deeply held sentiments. One can hazard guesses about the probable originators of the tale and cautiously identify those whose interests and world view the tale best articulates. To do so, one has to ask, what kind of world does the story envision? Whose dreams and hopes does it give voice to? Whose interests are represented by the narrative in the most favorable light? I would argue that tales of the outwitting fate type seem to articulate best the world view and ambitions of members of upwardly mobile low castes. Like the Paraiyar origin myths that Robert Deliège (1993) and Michael Moffatt (1979) have

recorded, through which the Paraiyars represent themselves as kings who have been wrongly demoted, these narratives describe the downfall of a once powerful (or potentially powerful) person through no specific fault of their own. But unlike the figures in the origin myths, each protagonist in outwitting fate tales, whether a hunter, a poor farmer, a grass seller, or a prostitute, parlays his or her meager means into something bigger and better through entering into the world of exchange. I would argue that such a narrative reflects the ambitions of upwardly mobile artisan and agricultural castes who use trade as a means of social and economic advancement.

The last two variants of the story that I will consider support this hypothesis by recounting the rise in fortunes of another archetypal figure from Indic folklore—the hunter. Here the figure of the hunter from the *Dharmakalpadruma* variant reappears in two slightly different guises. Brown located these variants of the tale in modern collections of regional Indian folklore. The first was collected by an Indian scholar named Mukharji whose collection, *Indian Folklore,* I have not been able to locate. According to Brown, the gist of this tale (*Outwitting Fate IV*: *Mukharji*) is that a prince is doomed by fate to earn his living from his fifteenth year by hunting stags. His minister suggests to him that he cease to go to the forest to hunt, knowing that to fulfill his fate Bidhātā (another divine personification of fate) must drive the stags to him. At first, he waits on the outskirts of the city, then in his own neighborhood of huts, and finally in the hut itself for Bidhātā to come driving along the stag. Bidhātā eventually gives up and grants the boy his father's kingdom again (Brown 1978, 157, footnote 20). The next, and last, variant is in a contribution to *The Indian Antiquary* by Putlibai D. H. Wadia (1886), an Indian folklore collector from western India, which he entitles "Vēmāi and the Thieves."

Outwitting Fate V: *Putlibai D. H. Wadia*

> One night a party of thieves lying in wait for passing travelers chanced to see the goddess Vēmāi [another female personification of fate] passing by quickly with a golden tray of auspicious items on her head, including rice, red powder, and a pair of dice set with diamonds and pearls. She told the thieves that she was in a great hurry to write the destiny of the king's newborn son. When the thieves refused to let her pass, she promised to tell them what it was on her return. Returning with a downcast look, she said to the thieves, "Although born a king's son, this boy will lose his parents at the age of twelve, and then be deprived of his kingship by a usurper who will condemn him to spend his life as a prisoner within the castle." "But," she said, brightening, "he will somehow manage to escape and after that he will pass the rest of his life in the jungle, eking out an existence by hunting small game." The thieves were, in spite of their profession, loyal subjects of the king, whom they loved, so they kept an eye on the prince throughout his youth. Indeed, just as the goddess had predicted, the Raja and Rani both died when the boy was twelve, and then his uncle usurped the throne and sent him to the dungeon. Luckily, the thieves came to his aid and broke him out of his prison. In the jungle, they provided him with a bow and arrow, but

> advised him never by any means to kill small game, but only to shoot his arrows at elephants, rhinoceros, and other large beasts. As if acting as instruments to fulfill the prince's headwriting, the rabbits and deer of the jungle would throw themselves in his path. But, mindful of his mentor's advice, the prince reserved his arrows only for the large beasts. With the sale of the hides and tusks of these large beasts, killed at a rate of one a day, he managed over the course of time to amass a large fortune. (Wadia 1886, 171–72)

These stories about hunters who rise above a subsistence level of survival through trade in skins, ivory, or jewels epitomize the kind of upward mobility through trade that has shaped the fortunes of many groups in Indian society, particularly those who live on the borders between the forest or jungle and the population centers of the plains (Guha, 1999). Many have argued that the incorporation of such so-called "tribal" groups into Indian society takes place from the very bottom, where they are integrated as outcasts and untouchables into the bottom rungs of the caste system of Indian society. To the extent that such low status communities internalize the building blocks of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism—*varna*, *dharma*, *karma*—there they stay, at least within the boundaries of this life. Classical narratives, narratives that articulate the point of view of established Hindu elites, provide a ray of hope in an invisible, imagined realm beyond death: they may be rewarded for a lifetime's faithful adherence to their inherited dharma by a step-by-step advancement up the ladder of castes. The tales I have been analyzing here, on the other hand, reveal a shortcut to upward mobility that does not require multiple lifetimes, whereby hunters or herdsman with courage, skill, and luck can amass fortunes by exchanging hides, tusks, and so forth for money. To the extent that the tales celebrate this route for bypassing the expectations of docility and resignation normally placed on low castes, it seems fair to say that the outwitting fate tales embody the values of the upwardly mobile members of such groups who have taken up trade. In the world of trade it helps to have a high tolerance for risk, and a willingness to wager a lot—perhaps everything—in pursuit of profit.

One could argue that the tales' valuation of risk, combined with the fact that one of the oldest versions of the tale is found in a Jain collection (the *Dharmakalpadruma*), suggests that the traders who produced the text were likely Jains. This is certainly plausible. In fact, Wadia's version comes from "western India" (which may refer to Gujarat), a region with a strong and influential Jain presence for many centuries. But each variant of the tale involves the sale of animals, in one way or another, even animal products such as skins, tusks, and "pearls" gathered from the heads of elephant carcasses, and Jains famously avoid occupations such as hunting and trade in animal products because of their adherence to the principle of *ahimsa* (or nonviolence) (Cort 2004, 80). For this reason, I would argue the trading communities that "authored," or more cautiously, transmitted these tales with the most relish would be non-Brahman and non-Jain (see table 1).

While the affirmation of risk-taking—that is, ignoring small game in favor of the chance to bag bigger, more lucrative game—may be clearly seen as characteristic

TABLE 1: Analysis of upward mobility in outwitting fate tales that use headwriting motifs

Source of narrative	Father	Divine personification of fate	Clever advisor	First child	Second child	Third child
Kāthasaritsagara 2. 119	Householder	Durgā	Clever Friend	Poor farmer with but one ox becomes a trader in oxen		
Dharmakalpadruma 2.4.109 (retold by Brown and Hertel)	Raja	Ṣaṣṭi (Hertel) or Fate (Brown)	Minister, Jñānagarbha	Prince turned hunter becomes a trader in pearls	Prince turned grass seller with one ox becomes trader in oxen	Princess turned poor prostitute becomes jewel merchant and highly-paid courtesan with God as a customer
Naṭēśa Śāstri (retold by Kingscote and Ramanujan)	Brahman Guru	Brahmā	Guru's clever disciple		Brahman's son turned poor farmer becomes prosper-ous trader in oxen	Brahman's daughter turned village prostitute becomes well-provided-for consort of a God
Mukharji, Indian Folklore (retold by Brown)	Raja	Bidhātā	Minister	Prince turned hunter of stags turned herder of stags, has kingdom returned to him		
P. D. H. Wadia	Raja	Vēmāi	Thieves	Prince turned hunter of small game becomes prosperous big game hunter and trader in skins and ivory		

of trading groups, the ethic of generosity and reciprocity advocated by these outwitting fate tales may not be so widely recognized as a virtue of traders and merchants, who, in India, are often stereotyped as stingy and deceiving. And yet these tales, especially the variant supplied by Śāstri, clearly advocate generosity over hoarding. Besides being stories about escaping one's fate, they are also stories about how a spirit of largesse can allow one to overcome adversity. The fearful, hoarding spirit of the guru's son is implicitly condemned; recommended instead is a spirit of openhanded, unstinting generosity that counts on the world to reciprocate. As the son's hesitation makes clear, this kind of advice can be dangerous to follow. If the story has a universal appeal, it is in the way that it captures succinctly a deep-rooted feature of human psychology: anxiety about the future often leads to a self-fulfilling experience of deprivation. Like American jokes about the differences between the eternal pessimist and the eternal optimist, these tales dramatize the outcomes of believing the glass is always either half-empty or half-full. Yet, the outwitting fate tales take on a distinctive meaning when viewed in the context of traditional Indian economic patterns. As has been well documented, dominant communities in India maintain their social and economic position in part by situating themselves as generous patrons and givers in networks of exchange (cf. Raheja 1988). By becoming a patron who gives food to Brahmans or employment to artists, even a person born with low status can rise in social rank. This kind of earned status is certainly an important social good in and of itself, but it is also crucial to establishing one's reputation as a responsible leader in a community. By virtue of that reputation, one gains credit and credibility on numerous levels: on the strictly financial level in terms of being able to get loans of money, and on a political level in terms of being able to influence the life of a community. In this light, the Brahman's son turned poor farmer turned wealthy donor in Śāstri's version, who expends everything he has for the community, gains it back along with "interest" in the form of prestige for his generosity.

Conclusion

I have argued here, following W. Norman Brown, that these tales should be read as critiques of the karma doctrine lodged by people who rejected the socially conservative implications of karma at the level of ideology. In concluding, it would be useful to describe more carefully what kind of critique these tales offer. Are they parodies of the karma ideology? Or are they satirical, hyperbolic exaggerations that amuse because they illustrate a widely accepted theory taken to extremes? Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman have offered a useful distinction between satire and parody. They argue that satire depends on a single notion of reality—"a single dominant code and… clearly articulated boundaries of identity, reality and ethical judgment," while parody "deliberately mingles domains and superimposes or interweaves contrasting visions, including competing notions of the real, while always allowing for the presence of at least two operative codes" (Rao and Shulman 1991, 435). If the outwitting fate tales are critiques of the karma ideology,

which I argue they are, they do so more through parody than satire because they do not *explicitly* or directly condemn the karma ideology or the conservative ethic that flows from it. Rather, for the sake of the surprise rereading of the headwriting verse at the end, the story must maintain two alternative readings of the headwriting verse alive at once, keeping in tension two alternate descriptions of reality. The pleasure of "outwitting" a cruel fate supposedly earned by one's deeds in a previous life comes precisely because it thwarts the deterministic view of karma; but without the latter, such stories would fall flat. Not unlike what scholars have observed about many upwardly mobile groups within India, these narratives work within the dominant ideology without overturning it altogether (MOFFATT 1979). If this is a counter-system, it is not one that seeks to bring down the dominant order with a trumpet call so as to usher into being a completely different order of being; it is one that alters, modifies, parodies, and slyly imitates.

I have also sought here to go beyond Brown to hypothesize as to the kind of people who may have "authored" these tales (if such a thing may be said of a genre of literature that is by definition authorless), or at least derived a lot of satisfaction from them. My intention here is to point to further research that could flesh out the concrete ways in which communities and individuals incorporated a critique of karma in their lives. This discussion is relevant more broadly in folklore studies and the history of religions in that it addresses a question much debated in studies of the role of religious ideologies in conflicts between and among interest groups. The question has to do with whether and how dominant ideologies, ideologies that advocate the interests of a ruling elite, are internalized, appropriated and/or transformed by socially and politically subordinated groups. Did American slaves internalize the Pauline endorsements of slavery preached to them by their masters (MARTIN 1998)? Do Muslim women internalize demeaning representations of their supposedly dangerous and uncontrollable sexuality by conservative Muslim clerics? Do Hindu dalits and members of low castes believe that their social marginalization is deserved as a result of karma earned through the sins of a previous life? Under what conditions do subordinate groups contest the identities ascribed to them and reject the destinies that are assigned to them as a result? Definitive answers to such questions can only be answered through historical or ethnographic case studies of particular communities at particular moments in time. Perhaps suggestions for more such case studies may be gained from the conclusions arrived at here.

When the karma ideology is used to reinforce social norms and structures it suggests that who you are is defined fundamentally by birth, and furthermore that the natural course of your life will flow from that birth-ascribed identity. This is the meaning of the figure who comes at birth, or six days after it (not coincidentally, just days before a baby's naming ceremony, according to Hindu custom) to inscribe the individual's fate on their forehead. The outwitting fate tale upends both of these assumptions. First, the identity of the newborns described in these tales turns out to be quite different from what one would expect given their birth—the king's son becomes a hunter, the guru's daughter a prostitute. Second, their lives do not follow the trajectory expected by either their birth or their downfall. Indeed, the

characters' rapid movements up and down the social ladder described in these tales utterly confounds the assumption that one's birth, as determined by karma, in turn determines one's destiny. The tales implicitly advocate the rejection of identities ascribed to individuals on the basis of birth, instead applauding human effort as a means of social mobility. In that sense the tales do not subscribe to a cosmology in which social stratification is natural and static, embedded in the very substance of creation. Moreover, eschewing both belief in a rational, predictable universe governed by karma and belief in random chaos governed by fate, these tales affirm the ability of humans to take bad fortune and turn it into good by embracing risk, following the advice of smart people, and giving generously with the certain knowledge that one will receive back more in return.

Notes

1. Indeed, the Indic *Ocean of Story* has flowed into numerous other cultural regions beyond India, giving rise to Arabic fairy tales and *Aesop's Fables* of ancient Greece.

2. W. Norman Brown tells a shortened version of this tale in his article, "Outwitting Fate" (Brown 1978, 156–57), relying on Johannes Hertel's German version (Hertel 1913, 444–45).

3. The original reads "Kleśabhāginaḥ/aśubhaiḥ karmabhiś ca api prayaśaḥ paricihnitāḥ" (mbh 3.181.19, vol. 3, 618–19).

4. For a poignant account of a more typical case of an Indian folklorist falling into obscurity, see Naithani (2002).

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Abbreviation

mbh *The Mahābhārata: Text as Constituted in its Critical Edition*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1942.

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