

“Well-made worlds”

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Abstract

A re-examination of a textual quirk in the *Mahābhārata*.

Eight times in the *Mahābhārata*¹ reference is made to people going to, attaining, or bestowing on others the *sukṛtāṃl lokān*, apparently “well-made worlds”. The context leaves no doubt that what is meant is heaven, but the phrase seems oddly chosen. Investigation suggests that it is actually a cuckoo in the nest, and that the poets originally wrote something slightly different.

As well as these occurrences of *sukṛtāṃl lokān*, the epic refers five times² to *puṇyākṛtāṃl lokān*, “the meritoriously-made worlds”. The word *puṇyākṛta-* is not common in the text: it occurs elsewhere only once, at 13.62.2 – *śaṃsa me tan mahābāho phalaṃ puṇyākṛtaṃ mahat*. There are thirty-two other occurrences of words beginning *puṇyākṛt. . .*, but they are all unmistakably forms of the agent noun *puṇyākṛt-*, not the past participle *puṇyākṛta-*. What is more, five of these occurrences³ form part of the phrase *puṇyākṛtāṃl lokān*, “the worlds of the meritorious”, which differs from *sukṛtāṃl lokān* only in the sandhi of the two words, and which makes rather easier sense. It looks as if a single phrase has come to be spelt in two slightly different ways, causing it to have two different meanings. If this is indeed the case, which of the two was intended by the poets? It is surely very suggestive that, of the remaining occurrences of the word *puṇyākṛt-*, five are genitive plural forms governing, but not immediately preceding, forms of *loka-*:

- 3.247.5 lokān puṇyākṛtāṃl brahman sadbhir āsevitān nṛbhiḥ
5.42.17 yān imān āhuḥ svasya dharmasya lokān/dvijātīnāṃ puṇyākṛtāṃ
 sanātānān
13.62.51 ete lokāḥ puṇyākṛtāṃl annadānāṃ mahātmanāṃ
13.70.19 icchāmy ahaṃ puṇyākṛtāṃl samṛddhāṃl/lokān draṣṭuṃ yadi te
 ‘haṃ varārhaḥ
13.70.20 saṃdarśayāṃ āsa tadā sma lokān/sarvāṃs tadā puṇyākṛtāṃl
 dvijendra

The antonym of *puṇyākṛt-*, *pāpakṛt-*, occurs only once in the genitive plural preceding *loka-*:

- 12.255.14 sa sma pāpakṛtāṃl lokān gacched aśubhakarmanā

1 2.68.21, 3.200.38, 7.164.31, 9.52.6, 10.8.19, 13.79.6, 14.36.26, 15.23.16.
2 6.28.41, 7.118.30, 11.20.25, 12.226.10, 14.93.75.
3 3.164.33, 7.16.36, 7.50.64, 7.51.24, 7.54.15.

But again, there is another occurrence of it governing but not preceding the word (I cite the entire *śloka* because the syntax is not clear from the one line):

7.16.34 nāstikānāṃ ca ye lokā ye ‘gnihorāpitṛtyajām tān āpnuyāmahe lokān
ye ca pāpakṛtām api

The *Mahābhārata* contains forty-five further occurrences of words beginning *pāpakṛt...* (discounting forms of *pāpakṛtya-/pāpakṛtyā-*); all of them are forms of *pāpakṛt-*, none forms of *pāpakṛta-*.

The evidence thus strongly suggests that the sequences appearing as *pūṇyakṛtāṃl lokān* would be written more normally as *pūṇyakṛtām lokān*. The substitution of one sandhi for the other is not very surprising, given that in manuscript usage it is common for *n* to be replaced by *anusvāra* before *l*, as *m* is before any consonant; indeed, Whitney (§213) comments that “according to the Hindu grammarians”, *m* before *l* may be replaced by nasalized *l*, in the same way as happens to *n*. Of the ten occurrences of our phrase, half are spelt by the editors with *anusvāra*, half with nasalized *l*. This may partly reflect differing editorial policies, since there is only one overlap (book 7 has four *anusvāras* and one nasalized *l*). But if that phrase is “misspelt” on five occasions, it is at least plausible that the phrase *sukṛtāṃl lokān* could be a parallel case.

Unlike *pūṇyakṛta-* and *pāpakṛta-*, the participial form *sukṛta-* does of course occur commonly in the *Mahābhārata*: we see it functioning both as an adjective meaning “well-made” (e.g. 1.1.89) and as a noun meaning “good deed” (e.g. 1.33.27); and the phrase *sukṛtāṃl lokān* is uniformly spelt with nasalized *l*, indicating an accusative plural *sukṛtān*. It is worth pointing out, however, that the unambiguous phrase *sukṛtinām lokān* (“worlds of the doers-of-good”) occurs at 6.79.10, and there are further cases where *sukṛtinām* governs forms of *loka-* without immediately preceding them at 12.309.27 and 13.105.1, so the “given essential idea” does exist within the epic.

It is also striking that all cases of the problem phrase are in the accusative plural; we have no forms such as **sukṛtā lokāḥ*. The accusative plural is the only form permitting the ambiguous sandhi to produce two grammatically acceptable readings. Given this, and the parallelism with *pūṇyakṛtām lokān*, where there can be no serious doubt that the intended meaning was “worlds of the meritorious”, the likelihood seems very strong that there has been a shift from *sukṛtām lokān* to *sukṛtāṃl lokān*, from “worlds of the doers-of-good” to “well-made worlds”. Possibly the beguilingly simple grammar of the second phrase helped to compensate for the fact that it actually makes less sense than the first one; scribes and/or editors may also perhaps have been unconsciously influenced by the fairly common occurrence of forms of the past participle of *ji-* qualifying a following *loka-*⁴ in lines such as *dhruvaṃ śastrajitāṃl lokān prāptāsy amaravad vibho* (11.17.7).

4 There are nineteen such cases in the *Mahābhārata*; they are of course not restricted to the accusative plural.