In several Purāṇas there is a myth which accounts for the origin of the varṇas and āśramas on the grounds that they provided a means of countering the steady decline in the standard of human behaviour that had begun from the commencement of the tretāyuga.¹ One striking feature of this myth is the depiction of the Earth withdrawing her fertility, thus causing the soil to become barren. Her action causes distress amongst humans, who rush up to Brahmā, begging for refuge. He milks the Earth of her fertility, teaches the people how to grow plants and then establishes the varṇas and āśramas. A study of this myth and in particular of the Earth-milking act reveals much about Hindu cosmology and about Hindu views concerning the relationship between the Earth and the people who inhabit her. In this article I propose to investigate Brahmā’s act of Earth-milking and to compare it with the same act performed by Prthu as narrated in many of the myths which describe his accession to kingship. This should not only cast light on several aspects of kingship in ancient India, but perhaps more important, it should bring out the strong connections between the figure of Brahmā and the king.

I

The myth where Brahmā is depicted as the Earth-milker occurs in several versions. The version cited here is taken from the MkP:

Once, during the time of creation, Brahmā created from his mouth a thousand pairs of humans who were characterized by goodness (sattva). From his breasts came another thousand. They were influenced by passion (rajas) and were impetuous and impatient. Another thousand came
from his thighs and their status was discontentment. Being inclined towards exertion they were influenced by passion and ignorance (tamas). Finally, he created a thousand pairs from his feet, but they were ugly and unintelligent, abounding in ignorance.

At the beginning of the kalpa pairs of beings engaged in sexual intercourse prompted by love, but because women did not menstruate there were no births. However, when they died another pair was instantly born from them.

This was called “Prajāpati’s first human creation”. Born from his lineage, these people honoured the world and lived near rivers, streams, oceans and mountains. In the kṛtayuga there was very little heat or cold. The people were happy and there were no disputes amongst them. There were no demons, wicked beings, birds, animals or anything that was unrighteous to hinder them. Nor were there flowers, seasons or years. Continually they were happy.

With the passing of time these people attained perfection (siddhi). The water they drank was exquisite and all their desires were fulfilled. They enjoyed perpetual youth, suffered no afflictions and lived for four thousand years. Everywhere the Earth was with good fortune (bhāgyena).

Eventually, however, these humans died and their prosperity disappeared with them. This happened at the beginning of the tretāyuga. Simultaneously, kalpa trees appeared and from them fruits, clothes and ornaments were produced, and on them the people lived. Passion (rūga) arose amongst the people and copulation occurred, followed by conception. Then the people became avaricious and egotistical. The trees died, the people fought and experienced cold, heat and hunger. To defend themselves they began to build towns and forts.

When the kalpa trees disappeared the people became confused and despondent. Then it rained and the Earth became fertile, as a result of which domestic and wild plants and fruit grew. But yet again the people were assailed by avarice and passion and tried to seize the land, trees and herbs for their own profit. Because of this the plants died before their eyes and the Earth simultaneously swallowed up the herbs.

Due to the disappearance of the plants the people became completely bewildered, so, afflicted with hunger, they went to see Brahmā. He knew what the Earth had done, and accordingly, milked her, using Sumeru as the calf. After the cow was milked, corn reappeared along with seventeen types of seeds and fourteen types of plants for use in the sacrifice. These plants had to be cultivated, so Brahmā taught the people the art of cultivation as a means of livelihood. Then he established bounds of propriety (maryādā) according to a plan (vathānâyāya?) and the characteristics of the people. After that, in order, he established the varnas, āśramas, laws to protect people and the respective heavens applicable to the varnas and certain classes of sages.

With one important variation which shall be discussed later, the other versions of this myth correspond closely to this one.

The temporal setting in this narrative is the kṛtayuga and the beginning of the tretāyuga. The kṛtayuga is portrayed as an “idyllic golden age”. Though the humans created by Brahmā appear to be grouped in an order analogous to that of the varnas, there is no apparent hierarchy suggested in the description of their activities. Nor do the people act in accordance with any external set of “regulations” such as svadharma. In fact, there is no mention of dharma being present in the kṛtayuga and so it can be assumed that this was a vision of a period when the people spontaneously acted in a way which guaranteed the mutual benefit of all. Such a vision of the kṛtayuga as a kind of “golden age” does not fit with other descriptions of it found in Indian literature. In these it is described in glowing terms as an ideal