

INTRODUCTION

by

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The *Mahabharata* is an Indian epic, in its original Sanskrit probably the largest ever composed. Combined with a second great epic, the *Ramayana*, it embodies the essence of the Indian cultural heritage. William Buck, a young American whose untimely death at the age of thirty-seven occurred only months after he delivered manuscripts for both epics to the University of California Press in Berkeley, has retold these classics, as many poets have before, in a language and at a length that make them available to the contemporary reader.

The *Mahabharata* is the story of a dynastic struggle, culminating in an awesome battle between two branches of a single Indian ruling family. The account of the fight between the Kurus and the Pandavas for the fertile and wealthy land at the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers near Delhi is enhanced by peripheral stories that provide a social, moral, and cosmological background to the climactic battle.

We do not know exactly when the battle took place. The *Mahabharata* (pronounced with the stress on the third syllable: mahabhárata) was composed over a period of some four hundred years, between the second century B.C. and the second century A.D., and already at that time the battle was a legendary event, preserved in the folk tales and martial records of the ruling tribes. The Indian calendar places its date at 3102 B.C., the beginning of the Age of Misfortune, the Kaliyuga, but more objective evidence, though scanty and inferential, points to a date closer to 1400 B.C.

At that time Aryan tribes had just begun to settle in India after their invasion from the Iranian highlands. The land from western Pakistan east to Bihar and south not farther than the Dekkhan was occupied by Aryan tribes whose names are often mentioned in records much older than the *Mahabharata*. The tribal communities varied in size and were each governed by the “prominent families” (*mahakulas*) from among which one nobleman was consecrated king. The kings quarreled and engaged in intertribal warfare as a matter of course, their conflicts were sometimes prolonged affairs, sometimes little more than cattle raids.

It is in this context that the Bharata war took place. The Kurus were an ancient tribe who had long been rulers of the area in the upper reaches of the Yamuna River. The Pandus, or Pandavas, were a newly emergent clan living in Indraprastha, some sixty miles southwest of the Kuru capital, Hastinapura. According to the *Mahabharata*, the new aristocrats were invited to the court of the ancient noble house of Kuru to engage in a gambling contest. There they were tricked first out of their kingdom and then into a promise not to retaliate for twelve years. In the thirteenth year they took refuge at the court of the Matsyas, where they allied themselves with the Kurus’ eastern and southern neighbors, the Pancalas. Together in a vast host they marched up to Hastinapura, where they were met on Kuruksetra, the plain of the Kurus. Here the Kurus and their allies were defeated.

In bare outline that is the story of which the bard sings. But the composer of the *Mahabharata* has portrayed the actions of the warriors in both a heroic and a moral context, and it should be understood as a re-enactment of a cosmic moral confrontation, not simply as an account of a battle. Unlike our Western historical philosophy, which looks for external causes—such as famine, population pressure, drought—to explain the phenomena of war and conquest, the epic bard views the events of the war as prompted by observances and violations of the laws of morality. The basic principle of cosmic or individual existence is dharma. It is the doctrine of the religious and ethical rights and duties of each individual, and refers generally to duty ordained by religion, but may also mean simply virtue, or right conduct. Every human being is expected to live according to his dharma. Violation of dharma results in disaster.

Hindu society was classed into four castes, each with its own dharma. The power of the state rested with the *ksatriyas*: kings, princes, free war-

riors and their wives and daughters. Their dharma was to protect their dependents, rule justly, speak the truth, and fight wars. The priest caste was not socially organized in churches or temples, but consisted of individual *Brahmans* in control of religion. Among their other duties, they officiated at great sacrifices to maintain the order of the world and accomplish desired goals. They were also in control of education, could read and write, and taught history according to their outlook on life. The *Mahabharata* in its final form was largely the work of a Brahman composer, so we find in the peripheral stories an emphasis on the power and glory of the Brahman caste, although in the main story of the epic there is not one powerful Brahmin. The *Vaisyas*, of whom we hear little in the *Mahabharata*, were merchants, townspeople, and farmers, and constituted the mass of the people.

The three upper castes were twice-born: once from their mothers and once from their investitures with the sacred thread. The lowest caste, the *Sudras*, did menial work and served other castes. They were Aryans, however, and their women were accessible to higher-caste men: Vyasa was the offspring of a ksatriya and a sudra, and so was Vidura. Outside the caste system were the “scheduled castes,” the tribal people of the mountains, such as the Kiratas, as well as the Persians and the Bactrian Greeks.

Besides their caste dharma, people had a personal dharma to observe, which varied with one’s age and occupation. So we find a teacher-student dharma, a husband-wife dharma, the dharma of an ascetic, and so on. One’s relation to the gods was also determined by dharma. The lawbooks specify the various kinds of dharma in detail, and these classifications and laws still govern Indian society.

The Hindu system of eschatology is often expounded in the *Mahabharata*. In brief, it is the doctrine of the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*), the doctrine of the moral law (dharma), which is more powerful than even the gods. The moral law sustains and favors those creatures that abide by it, while thwarting those that trespass. Its instrument is *karma*, the inexorable law that spans this life and the afterdeath, working from one lifetime to another, rewarding the just and making the evil suffer. In this Hindu universe those in harmony with dharma ultimately reach a state in which rebirth is not necessary any more. If, however, the forces of evil are too strong, the moral law reasserts itself and often uses forceful means to restore harmony where it has been lost. To accomplish that,

often a being of a higher order, a god, who in his usual manifestation has no physical body, takes birth among the people and becomes an *avatara*, a “descent” of his own power on earth. Often the physical manifestation is not aware of his divine antecedents, but discovers them in the course of his life on earth. Therefore an avatara has many human qualities, including some that by our own standards would be less than divine: hostility, vengefulness, and an overweening sense of self-importance. These qualities are necessary for him to confront confidently the forces of evil, the *asuras*, who have taken flesh also and appear as bitter enemies committed to a battle to the end.

The emphasis on morality in the *Mahabharata* brings with it considerations of the nature of the divine. There are many gods; the Indian pantheon is overwhelming in its diversity and vagueness. At the highest level of creation are the gods (*devas*), who are in continual conflict with the demonic forces, the asuras. Among the gods, Visnu, Siva, and Indra are especially important. Visnu is mainly manifest through his incarnation as Krisna. He is a supreme god worthy of love and devotion. Siva is also a supreme god, but represents the ascetic side of Indian religion. He dwells on a mountain, dresses in a tiger skin, and wears a characteristic emblem, the trident, still carried by Indian mendicants. The third eye in the middle of Siva’s forehead scorches his enemies. Indra is in name the king of the gods, but in fact his importance had declined by the time of the *Mahabharata*, although he remained a principle god. In the *Mahabharata* he is the god of rain and father of Arjuna, a Pandava.

Less powerful are the elemental gods of fire (Agni), wind (Vayu), water (Varuna), sun (Surya), and moon (Soma). Karna is the god of love. Unlike the gods in Western mythologies, the prominent Indian gods are difficult to characterize. Although they are assigned obvious functions as powers, their spheres of power and their characteristics overlap because they are ultimately all manifestations of the universal principle, Brahman, the universal soul or being to which individual souls will be reunited after the illusion of time and space has been conquered.

At a lower level, still divine but progressively less lofty, are the hosts of the Gandharvas, Apsarases, Siddhas, Yaksas, and Raksasas. The first three classes are usually benevolent to mankind. Gandharvas play heavenly music to which the nymphs, the Apsarases, dance. Indra also uses the Apsarases to seduce ambitious ascetics who, by their severe

self-castigation, have accumulated so much spiritual power that it becomes a threat to Indra's supremacy; as a result of seduction the anchorite loses his power. Yaksas are sprites, dryads, and naiads. Rak-sasas are malevolent demons who prowl around the sacrificial altars or in other ways disturb human beings.

Humans look at the gods as powers to be appeased or controlled, with the exception of Visnu, who is simply adored. Gods often interact with humans, marry them, give them weapons, invoke their assistance or aid them. At times gods interact with men through the intermediary of wise old men, sages whose advice was obeyed by prudent warriors who would not violate the will of the gods in order to avoid incurring the sage's curse. Upon his death, the ancient hero expects to go to Indra's heaven, where there is feasting and rejoicing.

Rivers and other landscape features are personified and function as both divine or semi-divine beings and as natural phenomena. In the *Mahabharata* gods communicate with men, animals talk and are sometimes real animals, sometimes human beings or gods. The story often moves into an idealized land where heroic feats, deeds of valour and physical strength are regarded with awe and fear. These incidents foster a sense of marvel in the reader: we are transported into an idyllic world where illusion and reality cannot be separated.

The *Mahabharata* should be understood as a moral and philosophical tale as well as an historical one. Only in this way can we appreciate the significance of the *Bhagavadgita*, the Song of the Lord, which is part of the *Mahabharata*, but which is usually excerpted and read as an independent religious work. In India, the *Mahabharata* as a whole has been regarded for centuries as a religious work, to the extent that a medieval poetic theoretician characterizes its main sentiment (*rasa*) not as heroism but as tranquillity (*santi*).

Between the time of the events described in the epic and the time the *Mahabharata* was composed, social conditions had changed considerably. India was no longer a set of tribal communities; it had become subdivided into large regions (*janapadas*) ruled by kings who had become absolute monarchs. The conquests of King Asoka and Candragupta Maurya, which united large areas of India under one ruler, had paved the way for the emergence of a national consciousness. "Dear to all men is Bharata-land, as it was to the god Indra, Father Manu and the mighty warriors of old," says the poet. And

although the Indian world was by now interacting with the world around it, the most important part of the world was still Bharata, the land of the Aryans, which was now concentrated south of the Himalayas and north of the Vindhya Mountains, between the desert in the west and the swamps of Bengal in the east.

The *Mahabharata* did not remain an exclusively Sanskrit work. Within a few centuries of its composition it was translated and paraphrased into other Indian languages: the Dravidian languages of South India, and the Indo-Aryan languages that succeeded Sanskrit historically in the north. Stories were adapted for dramatization, folk-singers composed ballads in their own tongues, preachers and politicians made use of its philosophy. Thus the Great Epic gradually spread by word of mouth from village to village, from kingdom to kingdom, from region to region. It was recited in courts during great festivals and sacrifices honoring a king (indeed, even as the *Mahabharata* is told as a story heard by the bard at a great sacrifice.) Jains and Buddhists found a place for it in their non-canonical literature, and as the Indian empire expanded from the first years of the Christian era onward, the *Mahabharata* and its sister epic, the *Ramayana*, accompanied the itinerant merchants. On the trade routes to Europe, to Burma, to Thailand and Vietnam, to the spice islands of the western Pacific the bards followed the traders, and later, when colonial kingdoms were established in these tropical countries, they found a place at the kings' courts. The profound moral message of the *Mahabharata* became identified with the power of the ruling dynasties, and the epics were often translated into the languages of the colonized countries. Gradually the *Mahabharata* became part of the literature of the receiving country: the epic was reworked, rewritten, condensed and phrased in contemporary terminology and in terms of the adopting culture.

It is in this tradition that we find the present English rendition of the *Mahabharata*. It is not a translation. The author, William Buck first became acquainted with the *Mahabharata* through a chance reading of the Bhagavad-gita during a vacation in Nevada. Inspired by the poetry of this work he subsequently read the whole *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. He then set out to make his own renderings. It is a retelling based on a translation of the Sanskrit original published by Pratap Chandra Roy, published in the beginning of this century. The slow and forceful pace of the Sanskrit original, its honest, wise, and

totally convincing outlook on the state of the world, its descriptions of awesome battles and gruesome deaths as tragic yet natural events in human experience, these are just a few of the features that have found response in the hearts of millions of Asian people. Most Western renditions have obscured the brilliance of the Sanskrit poetic constructions, but we have all of this in William Buck's work. It is remarkable that a Westerner has been able to uncover the nuggets of this Indian epic with such sensitivity. Like the original, it deserves reading, rereading, and even reciting aloud, for it will affect the reader at various levels of his awareness.

William Buck has, of course, condensed the story. The old translation from which he worked covers 5800 pages of print, while his own book is less than a tenth that length. But by and large, Buck's rendition reflects the sequence of events in the Sanskrit epic, and he uses the traditional techniques, for instance, of stories within stories, flashbacks, moral lessons layed in the mouths of principal characters. In detail, however, there are differences between the two, which makes it unwise to use this book as an exact reference work. William Buck has excerpted passages without trying to be complete, so many passages have been left out or altered to fit the shortened version. One of the parts omitted is the Bhagavad-gita.

One feature that will strike the reader of this work is its abundance of names, sometimes long difficult words, sometimes names that look alike except for a single letter. But to learn the characters' names is an inevitable hurdle that has to be overcome before the *Mahabharata* can be appreciated, and William Buck has smoothed the way by regularizing many of the names, making them sound more like English and omitting the tedious diacritical marks. Also at times he has altered the names of rivers and mountains, as the Javanese have done.

There are other English versions of the *Mahabharata*, some shorter, some longer. But apart from William Buck's rendition, none have been able to capture the blend of religion and martial spirit that pervades the original epic. It succeeds eminently in illustrating how seemingly grand and magnificent human endeavors turn out to be astoundingly insignificant in the perspective of eternity.