

The Mahābhārata's Sociocultural Impact in India

Michel Danino

A short paper presented at an international seminar organized by Draupadi Trust on “The Mahabharata: Its Historicity, Antiquity, Evolution and Impact on Civilization”, 26-27 April 2012, New Delhi. Published in Neera Misra & Vinay Kumar Gupta, (eds), *The Mahābhārata: Its Antiquity, Historicity and Impact on Society*, Research India Press, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 156–162.

The Mahābhārata is not only a monumental piece of literature, a thrilling epic, a tragedy as large as life itself, an unrivalled teacher of Dharma, but also (and much more so than its elder brother, the Rāmāyaṇa) a confluence of kingdoms, dynasties, peoples, regions and languages. In fact, at the start of the Epic, Vyāsa informs Brahmā that he has composed in his mind a work that is to include all branches of knowledge, and, of interest to us here, to contain in particular “a description of ... the different kinds of nations and languages: the nature of the manners of the people....”¹

People or *Janas*

In other words, the Mahābhārata proposes to be, among other things, a mine of anthropological information on India in its time—a promise it has indeed held. As the late anthropologist K.S. Singh showed, the Epic names Indian peoples covering the entire subcontinent, although with a greater concentration in the Northwest and West.² It does so not randomly but by design, the same design that makes it list dynasties, kings and the regions where they rule. The Epic, therefore, is keen to place in front of its readers the faithful image of a highly diverse society, and clearly sets great store by that diversity: “He who desires to obtain a knowledge of the customs of different countries, and also the languages of different nations, and of the usages of different orders of men, knows at once all that is high and low.”³ “Different countries,” here, refers not to countries beyond India, but to regions of the subcontinent. While the Mahābhārata refers to India as “Bhāratavarṣa” or “Jambudvīpa,” the latter term being also the one used by Ashoka in his Edicts and by many Buddhist texts, those regions are *janapadas*, *varṣas* or *rāṣṭras*, depending on whether the emphasis is on political or geographical divisions.

I will however leave out the political units here to focus on the people—or rather peoples—that inhabit them. The Epic, K.S. Singh informs us,⁴ lists 363 *janas* or *jātis* on different occasions, a large number by any reckoning. The two terms, *jana* and *jāti* (from the root *ja*, born or descended from), are broadly interchangeable, but the former refers more to a people forming a state, while the latter rather connotes a community of people or a segment of a *jana* (for instance, Kirātas, a *jana*, have several *jātis*).

Lists of *janas* are not one but several, and appear on diverse occasions. As Robert Shafer pointed out in a 1954 essay on *Ethnography in Ancient India*,⁵ 231 *janas* appear in geographical lists; 212 in the *digvijaya* list (the military campaigns by Yudhiṣṭhira's four brothers campaigns in the four cardinal directions); 296 as the *janas* paying tribute to the Pāṇḍavas; 158 as part of army formations, and 108 from additional data. Of course, many *janas* are common to those lists; in the end, according to K.S. Singh, their total number is 363, leading him to observe that “the Mahabharata is the most comprehensive ethnography of ancient India in terms of the identification and listing of communities or *janas* and their territories or *janapada*.”

The *janas* are often defined in political or territorial terms (*janapadas*, *varṣas* or *rāṣṭras*, as mentioned earlier), often overlapping with a geographical definition. For instance:

The north-west (Central Asia, Persia, and Afghanistan) was dominated by ‘foreigners’, namely the Pahlavas, Sakas, Hunas, Yavanas, Kambojas, and Bhhikas. The west, roughly comprising Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, had communities such as the Daradas (Darda of today), Pisachas, Vahilkas, Yadavas of various segments, Surashtras, and many others. The northern Himalayan region had the Trigartas, Khasas, and others, who were also spread across the plains. The east had the Angas, Vangas, Kiratas, Chinas, and Pundras. The south had the Cholas, Pandyas, Keralas, Andhras, Dravidas, Karnatas, and Mushakas.

Another criterion to define the *janas* is their physical environment:

The mountain dwellers included the Arbuadas (Mount Abu), Haimvatas, Vindhyamulakas; from the deserts, the Marudha; from rivers and waterfronts, the Kausijakas (Kosi), Saindhavras (Sindhu), and Sindhu-Sauviras; from the pastures,

the Pasupas and Govindas; from the frontier, the Aparants. However, a large number of people belonged to the forests, *jangalas*, *dandakas*, and so on, because these were abundant in those days. They should be seen together with the forest dwelling communities such as the Adirashtras, Vanarasyas (there is a community called the Vana-manush too), and Nishadas. Some contemporary tribes can be identified as well, like the Mundas, Savaras, Kokuratas or Korkus, Karushas or Kurukhs, Kollagirs or Kolis, and Nishadas or Bhils.

Distinction between mainstream and “tribal” society

Some of the above *janas*, especially those living in forests or mountains, correspond to what colonial anthropology came to call “tribes,” with heavy connotations of racial inferiority and primitiveness. It is rarely realized, yet most significant, that there is no word for “tribe” in any Indian language, barring modern coinages such as *adivasi*; all terms found in the ancient literatures of India that get rendered into English as “tribal” invariably mean “forest-dweller”, “mountain-dweller”, or “nomad”. The “tribes” are just people—*janas*—and are not viewed as essentially different from the mainstream society; they are certainly not perceived to be racially or culturally inferior to it. Socially, moreover, historians are aware of how Kshatriya clans often rose from warring “tribes” once their territory had sufficiently grown.

This perspective is fully reflected in the Mahābhārata. In Singh’s words again,

A careful analysis of the long list of *janas* in the epics, and the Buddhist, Puranic, and secular literature of early and medieval times and the context in which they are mentioned, makes it very clear that hardly any distinction was made, until very late in history, between what we know today as ‘tribes’ and such communities of people who were known as the Gandharas and Kambojas, Kasis and Kosalas, Angas and Magadhas, Kurus and Panchalas, for instance. At any rate, in the whole body of historical data at our disposal, there is hardly anything to suggest that these communities of people belonged to two different social and ethnic categories. In fact, in the literary sources I have referred to, between the communities of people whom today we refer to as ‘tribe’, and those that we know from history as belonging to more advanced stages of socio-economic and cultural growth, there is hardly any evidence to show that in the collective consciousness of India there is any difference between the two sets of *janas*.

Cultural Integration

While the Epic thus takes special care to include as many regions and ethnic groups as it can, the latter more than reciprocated the compliment: the manner in which the Mahābhārata was adopted, adapted, translated, retold, re-created in every region of India, including “tribal” areas, testifies to the success of the cultural integration worked by the Epic: it gave every *jana* the right to “own” the great story.

For an example, let us look at the South, far removed from the Epic's epicentre: Cōlas, Pāṇḍyas, Dravidas are mentioned in the text; Sarangadhvajā, king of the Pāṇḍyas, fights in the war on the side of the Pāṇḍavas; in inscriptions, Cōlas and Cera kings proudly claim descent from the lunar or the solar dynasties. An inscription records how a Pāṇḍya king led the elephant force in the Great War on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas; another states that early Pāṇḍyas translated the Mahābhārata into Tamil (the translation is unfortunately lost). And the first named Cera king, Udiyanjeral, is said to have sumptuously fed the armies on both sides during the Bhārata war.

Let us not imagine that this “ownership” of the Epic is limited to upper castes: we find in a remote Shola forest of the Nilgiris, a hero stone narrating the life of the Pāṇḍavas; it is kept in a small shrine maintained by Kurumba tribals.⁶ Further south, near Kodaikanal, a few caves bear the name of “Pañca Pāṇḍavar Pārai” or “the rock where the five Pāṇḍavas [stayed].” Draupadī, too, is worshipped in many temples of Tamil Nadu. Similar traditions can be reported from the Northeast, Kashmir, central Himalayas, etc. Indeed, there are few regions of India where some trace of the passage of the Pāṇḍavas (at least one of them) or Rāma cannot be found!

Together, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata in effect wove a cultural web throughout the subcontinent—and, later, beyond to Southeast and Central Asia. More than the Vedas or the Upanishads, the two Epics spread key concepts of Indian civilization—such as *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth—across this whole cultural sphere, creating a sacred geography in the process.

For it is not just the Great War that brings those peoples together or the Pāṇḍavas' campaigns (all the way to Afghanistan), it is not just alliances across diverse ethnic groups, but also the institution of pilgrimage, which embedded the sacred geography of India in the land: whether we look at the *Chār Dhām* holy sites

conveniently placed at the “four corners” of India (Badrinath, Rameswaram, Dwarka, Puri), the twelve Jyotirlingas, the Kumbhamelā network (originally at twelve locations), the fifty-one or fifty-two Shakti *mahāpīṭhas*, the intention is transparent: get people to move across the length and breadth of the land on the trail of the gods or the heroes, get them to mix and interact and know other *janas*. The resulting tapestry has been rich as well as vibrant, and speaks of a cultural unity underlying the ethnographic and linguistic diversity. This is what Nehru once acknowledged, at a time when stressing this underlying unity was not yet regarded as a crime of “jingoism” or “communalism”:

Everywhere I found a cultural background which had exerted a powerful influence on their lives. This background was a mixture of popular philosophy, tradition, history, myth, and legend, and it was not possible to draw a line between any of these. Even the entirely uneducated and illiterate shared this background. The old epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and other books, in popular translations and paraphrases, were widely known among the masses, and every incident and story and moral in them was engraved on the popular mind and gave a richness and content to it. Illiterate villagers would know hundreds of verses by heart and their conversation would be full of references to them or to some story with a moral, enshrined in some old classic.⁷

While far too many scholars and non-scholars have spent years trying to prove or disprove the “historicity” of the two Epics,⁸ they have often, in the process, overlooked this far more important role of integration of India’s sociocultural diversity. In this sense, whether or not these two texts contain history, they were makers of history.

Dating of the Mahābhārata

This leads us to an important consideration: it has become fashionable in the last decade or two to come up with some “proof” (generally on debatable archaeoastronomical grounds) that the Mahābhārata’s main event—the War—took place in 3102 BCE, the start of the Kali Era, or thereabouts. (Of course, many other dates have been proposed, but these are the most frequent.) This is not the place to go into archaeoastronomical arguments and counterarguments (I will not also discuss here the still more absurd dates bandied about for the Rāmāyaṇa, many of which fall into the sixth millennium BCE), but

I wish to point out that in the current state of archaeological knowledge, the late fourth millennium BCE is part, in the Northwest, of the Early Harappan phase, when technologies and trade network are developing but cities are yet to emerge; elsewhere in India, cultures are still at various stages of Neolithic or chalcolithic developments. There are no states remotely resembling those describes in the Epic, no cities, and probably no communication between north India and remote parts such as the Northeast or the South. To imagine that the Epic's events could be framed at such an early stage is to do the text a considerable disservice, since it would have had not just to embellish those events as epics can legitimately do, but to accumulate over them a colossal mass of much later material—including the keen awareness of India's geography and ethnography highlighted above, an awareness that would be wholly impossible in the fourth millennium.

Indeed, if we reverse the problem and ask the simple question, “What is the earliest period when the subcontinent displays an ethnolinguistic landscape comparable to the one painted by the Mahābhārata?”, the answer would have to be, “Not before 500 BCE.” This is broadly in tune with conventional scholarship, according to which the text was composed over a few centuries BCE and CE. Even if we grant that some of its events may have been historical or semi-historical (although which ones remains an extremely thorny problem), it seems most unreasonable to imagine a gap of at least two and a half millennia between the said events and the writing of the Epic.

The period proposed by Professor B.B. Lal on archaeological grounds—the ninth century BCE or so—is more manageable from this perspective, although it would still imply a substantial accretion taking place before the text takes shape, since it precedes the urbanization of the Indo-Gangetic plains, on which the Epic so heavily depends. I will leave this question in suspense, as discussing it further cannot be fruitfully done without delving into the merits and demerits of all possible perspectives, from those that deny any historicity to the Epics to those that would regard them as actual history. I will only add that it is too often overlooked how other viewpoints are possible between these two extremes, some of them quite nuanced and complex, and which, in my opinion, have not received the attention they deserve.

Let me instead end by returning to the far more important question of the Mahābhārata's sociocultural impact, that of shaping India. As K.S. Singh put it beautifully,

The Mahabharata notion of *jana* or people of a territory still endures. ... People continue to identify themselves with the epic traditions, associate places with the visits of the epic heroes and to recall people's own role in the growing and developing epic traditions. This may be bad history but it is good myth and therefore good anthropology. ... Indians are reported to have relatively large eyes. This may be because our eyes are popping all the time; there is so much beauty, so much diversity to behold!

¹ *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, tr. Kisari Mohan Ganguli, first edn in the 1890s; republ. Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2000, Vol. I, Adi Parva, Section I.

² K.S. Singh, "Ethnography of the Mahabharata", Chapter 2 in *Diversity, Identity and Linkages: Explorations in Historical Ethnography*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011.

³ *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, op. cit., Udyoga Parva, Section XXXIII.

⁴ Unless otherwise mentioned, what follows, and quotations from K.S. Singh, are drawn from his "Ethnography of the Mahabharata", op. cit.

⁵ Robert Shafer, *Ethnography in Ancient India*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1954.

⁶ Benagudi Shola, near Aravenu in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. See Amirthalingam, M., *Sacred Groves of Tamil Nadu: A Survey*, CPR Environmental Education Centre, 1998, pp. 108–09.

⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961-73, p. 67.

⁸ Important studies of and perspectives on the Epics' historicity by a variety of archaeologists, historians and other scholars can be found in Gupta, S.P., & K.S. Ramachandran, (eds), *Mahabharata, Myth and Reality: Differing Views*, Agam Prakashan, Delhi, 1976; Shastri, Ajay Mitra, (ed.), *Mahābhārata: The End of an Era (Yugānta)*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, and Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2004.