

Book Reviews

Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (eds.), *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2014, pp. xxvii + 292, Rs. 895/-, ISBN: 9780415710558.

The *Mahabharata*, with its myriad manifestations and its many layers, continues to exert an irresistible fascination on laypersons and professionals alike. In some instances, there are shared preoccupations: the figures of Draupadi and Karna for example, almost invariably attract and trouble both ordinary listeners/ viewers/ readers and the more erudite. Other figures, such as that of Sulabha, or the Dharmavyadha, who finds space in several interventions in this volume, are less well known and therefore more intriguing. The outcome of a Spring School organized at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in 2010, with contributions from scholars located across disciplines such as Cultural Studies, English, History, Philosophy, and Sanskrit, the anthology offers challenges to both the specialist and the non-specialist. It also demonstrates the wealth of resources that this complex text offers to those interested in delving into it for exploring a wide range of predicaments.

Organized around three focal points, the volume includes diverse fare. Saroja Bhate provides an account of the construction of the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*. This is useful, as many of the authors depend on this edition for their analyses, even while drawing on variants and translations. Likewise, Sibesh Bhattacharya draws attention to the narrative strategies adopted in what he identifies as the early *parvans* or sections of the text. He argues that these are not only "early" in the sense of being the first parts, but that they are central as they help us understand the subsequent conflict that dominates the narrative. In this context, birth narratives acquire a special significance, as do issues of *dharma*, a theme that inevitably runs through several of the essays. Additionally, Bhattacharya draws attention to the sophisticated style of the narrative, where we are transported back and forth in time and space with enviable ease.

In the section on aesthetics, Radhavallabh Tripathi reminds us about the rich range of terms used within

the Sanskrit literary tradition to designate and classify the epic, each of which provides a distinct frame within which it can be located. Nrsinha Prasad Bhaduri, on the other hand, adopts a different strategy, setting up a comparison between Karna of the *Mahabharata* and Karna in Tagore's poetic reconstruction. While the differences and similarities that he highlights are interesting, one wishes that we were told something about the cultural contexts within which these narratives circulate, which would have helped in locating these variations. Also, Karna/ Karan, perhaps alone amongst the supporters of Duryodhana, continues to be popular as a name given to young boys in north India. This in itself is an index of the way in which the epic is embedded in contemporary imagination, exploring which could provide insights of a different order.

Expectedly, the section on ethics is both the longest, and in many ways, the richest. Most of the authors in this section choose to focus on specific episodes/ incidents from the text, and these yield some of the most insightful and provocative essays. For instance, Vrinda Dalmiya's attempt to locate bases for care ethics and epistemic justice leads her to investigate, amongst other things, the narrative about Kausika and Dharmavyadha (referenced in some of the other essays as well). This allows her to explore the rich potential of the text and its complex readings, as well as alert us to its limitations. In another intervention, Uma Chakravarti compels us to revisit the episode of Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court. What we often miss out, she underscores, is that Draupadi's arguments in self-defense are all from the perspective of the *ksatriya* woman. What Draupadi objects to is not the status of the *dasi* per se, but the fact that she is being reduced to it. The implications of the text for debates around issues of social justice animate both these essays and make them particularly relevant.

Anirban Das provides an unsettling reading of one of the most troubling episodes of the *Mahabharata*, the slaughter of the sleeping members of the Pandava camp, including children and the unborn, by Asvatthaman, inviting us to reflect on this representation as we attempt to come to grips with terrorism and its implications. In

terms of contemporizing the epic, this essay has a certain immediacy that is only too apparent in our troubled times.

The context-specificity or situational ethics/justice in the *Mahabharata* is explored at length by Prabal Kumar Sen. He highlights several dilemmas within the text, and draws attention to the category of *apaddharma* as well as to the strategy of *tarka* or argument. Many of these issues are exemplified through the figure of Krsna. Sen draws on the commentarial tradition in his analysis, allowing us to move beyond a presentist preoccupation with these narratives.

Inevitably, we have contributions that focus centrally on Yudhisthira, the sometimes shadowy central figure of the epic. Enakshi Mitra attempts to understand Yudhisthira through a Wittgensteinian framework. One felt that the framework often overwhelmed the discussion, but this may be a matter of perspective. Gangeya Mukherji's more accessible intervention raises issues of violence. These are exemplified by violence in the sacrificial context, in terms of violent livelihoods, capital punishment, and expectedly, the consequences of warfare. He charts the dialogues in which Yudhisthira participates, and argues that this figure of the reluctant king allows us the space to engage with these complex issues, even as (and perhaps because) it denies us any neat closure.

The contributions by the editors, which frame the volume, both provide points of entry and an open ending to the rich discussions. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay uses the game of dice (and Yudhisthira) to take the reader through a whole range of registers of human existence, from the cosmic to the everyday, engaging with issues of determinism, chaos and order. This is achieved through reading the episode in terms of a rich discussion on dicing, kingship and the world at large.

Arindam Chakrabarti, on the other hand, chooses a far less spectacular, almost incidental episode that is part of the epic tradition, the dialogue between king Janaka and Sulabha. He argues that Sulabha, a proto-Buddhist renunciate woman, is the figure who lays down norms for conversations that can be enriching, and mutually beneficial, as opposed to Janaka, who represents both masculine and kingly pride. Sulabha successfully challenges his pretensions, and exposes the hollowness of his claims. Chakrabarti suggests that this dialogue can provide us with insights into ways and means of engaging in "just" conversations. While this felicitous reading is certainly persuasive, Sulabha, like Draupadi, rests her claims, at least partially, on her status as a *ksatriya* woman, and thus, in a sense, Janaka's equal. Is there then, a dimension of caste that is particularly resilient and resistant to contemporizing?

At another level, given that most of the authors engage with the Critical Edition, it may have been useful to have some sense of the extent to which this text is known beyond the scholarly universe. If its circulation is restricted to the academia, and if departments of philosophy and ancient history have a relatively limited space even within the academic world, what is the impact of the text? Also, given that the Critical Edition took shape within the worlds of colonialism/nationalism, how do we understand it in the rapidly changing post-colonial world that we inhabit?

Also, and returning once more to the lay audience/reader, it would have been worth investigating how the televised version of the epic has been received and used as a resource. There are, besides, new and not so new tellings in circulation, ranging, for instance from Divakaruni Banerji's *Palace of Illusions* to the printed versions of the *Bharath* of the Bhils, each of which appeals to distinct audiences. How do we engage with these to set up contemporary conversations?

In the Foreword to the volume, Peter Ronald deSouza expresses the hope that the endeavour will serve to contemporize and democratize the epic, and make it available as a resource to think through our present worlds. As is evident, many of the essays redeem this expectation, and one will look forward to the sequels.

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Shakti Kak and Biswamoy Pati eds., *Enslaved Innocence: Child Labour in South Asia*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2012, pp. vii+340, Rs. 995/-, ISBN: 978-93-80607-30-6.

This edited volume on the issue of child labor—a stark, consistent and increasingly visible social reality throughout the country—brings together a set of fifteen essays. Laboring children, as the editors point out in the preface, are a matter of shared concern especially since the gross measurable wealth of nation-states in the South Asian region is otherwise increasing. India has indeed moved on/through the trajectory of being an ex-colony to a welfare nation-state, and is now part of an increasingly globalized economic network. The problem, as they argue, is one of political economy. Following the Marxist framework, laboring child-community shores up a particularly sensitive example of surplus labor—hence the title. The linking of slavery and children though, we might remind ourselves, is as old as Aristotle where the economy of the polis was oriented towards a different