

The Mahabharata has had a perennial and undying appeal for the European mind and imagination, an interest that easily dates back to the late 18th century when Indologists had just about begun to roll their agenda off the conveyor belt. This period witnessed a sudden upsurge, even proliferation, of commentaries and treatises on *The Mahabharata*, a process that aimed at giving an entirely new direction to the philosophical speculation or inquiry on this significant cultural text.

Ironically enough, this renewal of interest had also coincided with the process of colonisation in India and the crisis of nationalism in Europe in general and England in particular. No wonder, the Indologists felt compelled to make repeated attempts to 'purify' or 'sanitise' *The Mahabharata* in an effort to 'civilise' it as well as make it more manageable for their own critical or political purposes. If Soren Sorenson talked in terms of deconstructing an Ur-Text of *The Mahabharata* out of what Oldenberg had once described as a "monstrous chaos," Adolf Holtzmann refused to recognise it as a *dharmashastra*. Regardless of how they chose to respond to it, the underlying assumption was simply to vulgarise or inferiorise *The Mahabharata* and by so doing, inferiorise the very people or the race to which the text essentially belonged.

To put it another way, a brand of Orientalism could be said to have marred the very process of the early reception of *The Mahabharata*. But what is indeed mystifying, even somewhat problematic, is that the debate on *The Mahabharata* continues to be centred around much the same questions upon which it had initially been grounded by the Indologists. Despite the fact that we now pride ourselves on having reached a crucial phase in post-coloniality, one of the most significant of our cultural texts continues to be hamstrung by a colonial mind-set and its mouldy straightjacket. What is perhaps worse is that with Indology having become an industry in the West, most of the critiques on *The Mahabharata* consistently refuse to relocate the critical questions on this stupendous literary work. Though Nicholas Sutton claims to have ploughed a fresh ground in his voluminous and well-researched book *Religious Doctrines in the Mahabharata*, he, too, ends up traversing the familiar terrain.

Having rejected the "historical criticism" of Hopkins as an inexact science, Sutton declares his decided preference for the text-critical method rather early on in the book. Positing *The Mahabharata* as a unitary work with a definitive ethical message, he sets out to excavate diverse religious

Book review

Textual Analysis of the Mahabharata

RELIGIOUS DOCTRINES IN THE MAHABHARATA

by Nicholas Sutton

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doctrines of Hindu thought embedded in it. For this purpose, he segments the entire text under different heads such as Epic Soteriology, Epic Theism, Epic Eschatology, or Epic's teachings on Ethics, Destiny, Humanity, Origin of the World, Gender and the like. Sutton is categorical about having distanced himself from the structuralists such as Biardeau, Dumezil and others, who insist upon exploring the doctrinal tensions and dissonance within the text, wherever these are found. And in this respect, he claims to have followed the cue of the Indian scholars, who read it as a *dharmashastra*, thus avoiding the familiar trap of viewing *The Mahabharata* as a "dismally intractable text" with "a forbidding size" that Western scholarship often gets into. Following the best traditions of text-critical methodology, Sutton sets about disentangling complex, often confusing strands of religious doctrines running through the multicoloured tapestry of Hindu thought.

Proceeding on the premise that *The Mahabharata* "reflects the contradictions of an age of transition," as elegantly put forward by Prof G.C. Pande, Sutton goes on to establish how the epic thought is nothing but a synthesis of Vedic orthodoxy and non-Aryan belief systems. By arguing that the epic is about the post-Vedic society in which the "tribal practices of Aryans such as 'yajna' had become substantively reduced" he seeks to historicise ancient India in linear, sequential terms. Undeterred by the fact that such a notion of history has now become problematic, Sutton further hypothesises, this time after Greg Bailey, that the synthesis is to be located in three value systems centred on *pravrtti*, *nivrtti* and *bhakti*. Interestingly enough, he first sets up *pravrtti* (Vedic) and *nivrtti* (post-Vedic) as two divergent world-views and then attempts to resolve this opposition in *bhakti*. While his understanding of ancient Indian history betrays a sense of continuity, his interpretation of Hindu thought appears to stress discontinuity or rupture. Despite his claims to the contrary, his dialectical under-

standing of Hindu thought inevitably pushes him into the trap of binarism that a structuralist often finds hard to escape.

Elaborating upon the intrinsic differences in two value-systems, Sutton says, "The fundamental difference between the two tendencies is that *pravrtti* embodies an essentially social view of religious life in which the individual is allotted a specific position in the created order with a clearly defined relationship to all other beings. The values associated with *nivrtti* define human beings in an entirely different way, not purely in relation to the social and created order but as an individual who exists only in relation to himself" (p 12). Apparently, this highly differentiated view of the two tendencies fails to take into account their complementary status and/or relationship that Hindu thought often stresses. It needs to be pointed out here that Vedas treat 'yajna' as not just another set of practices but also a harmonious state of mind; not only an action but also a thought; not only an external manifestation but also an internal belief. On closer scrutiny, Sutton's binarism is found to be nothing more than an oversimplified reductionism that mirrors dualism in Sutton's mind as much as it mirrors it in the Western thought. Perhaps, it's pertinent to point out here that if there's anything that the Western mind finds rather puzzling, even disconcerting, about Hindu thought, it's the notion of multiplicity or plurality inherent in it. And as far as this goes, Nicholas Sutton's thesis is no exception either.

Faced with the task of reconciling a bewildering variety of Indian philosophical systems, all that Sutton manages to do is to give a highly selective, subjective, somewhat cursory overview of each. He is of the view that, among other things, the authors of *The Mahabharata* had an access to a variety of systems inscribed in such diverse works as *The Vedas*, *The Upanisads*, *The Vedanta Sutras*, *Pancaratra Literature*, *Dharma Sastras*, *Samkhya* and *Yoga Sutras*, and *Puranas*. Undoubtedly, he does support this claim rather ably by

citing the relevant textual material, which, he says, is available mostly in the *Santi Parvan* and *Amusasna Parvan*. But what makes his position somewhat dubious, if not untenable, is his own admission that, at least, some of these sources date back to a period later than that of *The Mahabharata*. It appears as though history is no more than a convenient ploy or an expedient tool for Sutton, a mere handmaiden of his thesis and so can easily be bent, twisted, telescoped or discarded at will.

While this might be dismissed as failure of a certain form of historicism he's implicated in, there's no doubting Sutton's skills as an archaeologist. Throughout the book, he handles his digging tools rather well, excavating the textual evidence rather assiduously. So much so that not a single contention of his goes unsupported by whatever little shreds of evidence there are in *The Mahabharata*. This kind of close attention to the text in question is, undoubtedly, Sutton's strong point, yet sometimes his own text fails to pass a very close scrutiny. Especially when he ends up repeating not just his own arguments but also the very same words in which these arguments are often couched. For instance, the twin concepts of *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* are sought to be defined no less than five times over (see pp. 10-11, 76-77, 135-36, 363-64 and 381-82), and what is worse, each time the language is much the same. A fit case of overkill, the book definitely does over explain itself. An average Indian scholar with a slight knowledge of Hindu philosophical thought might find such explanations irritating, if not entirely superfluous. One gets the feeling as though Sutton is constantly engaged in a self-conscious, self-reflexive act of translating the complexities of Hindu thought unto himself as well as others. Now that brings us to another important question: for whom did Sutton write this book, or who constituted its target audience?

That this is not entirely a speculative question is evident from the fact that the Christian world-view is repeatedly invoked in course of the discussion as a definitive frame of reference.

The whole idea of 'religious doctrine' or 'religious organisation,' as applied to Hindu thought in Chapter 3, appears to be no more than a throwback to that historic debate between Protestants and Catholics, which had virtually split the entire Europe at the dawn of Renaissance. To put it differently, the questions of crucial importance to Sutton's thesis are not raised from 'within' the structures of Hindu thought but rather from 'without.' This becomes glaringly

more conspicuous as the discussion slowly progresses. And nowhere does it communicate itself so strongly as in Chapter 11, where *The Mahabharata's* teachings on gender are made the focus of attention. Conscious of the fact that gender equality is a by-product of Western liberal ideology, Sutton says, "Despite persistent discrimination against women in society, the debate in favour of gender equality has been won in the West and also among a substantial section of the westernised intelligentsia in India." What is indeed shocking is that sometimes a rhetorical statement, unsupported by any evidence, empirical or otherwise, is made into the very basis of critical enquiry. In such cases, where the methodology is questionable and the hypothesis fragile, even the most laudable conclusions are likely to strike a jarring falsetto.

More in the nature of a compilation than an exegetical work, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahabharata* is really an attempt at organising, classifying and synthesising a range of ideas that is simply staggering. Of course, the effort is quite a bold one, though it isn't as confident as it might appear at first sight. What makes it somewhat shaky is its schematic, segmented character, its hurriedly drawn conclusions, its endless repetitions and its occasional slippage into a self-cancelling procedure. However, what disappoints about this book the most is its failure to cut through the sheath of traditional scholarship. While cutting a fairly wide swathe, it remains hopelessly circumscribed in its methodological procedures and/or practices.

The present thesis of Nicholas Sutton stands on the same principle upon which the Indological excursions had invariably rested, namely, the Kantian notion of organic unity. Operating scrupulously within this all-too-familiar territory, he refuses to engage with the indeterminate, unstable nature of either 'text' or 'textuality.' And as such, he chooses to ignore all those questions, which are invariably connected with the processes of cultural production of *The Mahabharata*. It needs to be pointed out here that the long history of how this epic was constituted as a text does call attention towards its own processes of production as much as it does towards a sense of history embedded in it. So long as the critical endeavour is not directed towards this end, there's very little possibility of saying something startlingly new about *The Mahabharata*.

Rana Nayar
Reader in English
Panjab University, Chandigarh

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