

## The First English Translation of *Mahabharata*: Authorship, Authority, Translation and Utility Matters

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“As Professor Max Mueller noted ‘printing is now the only means of saving your Sanskrit literature from inevitable destruction’.”

P.C. Roy: “Preface” *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa*: p. 30

This essay explores the issues associated with the fraught entry of *The Mahabharata* into the domain of print modernity in India. It focuses on the twin issues of authority-authorization and utility-realism as they inform and colour such entries. I describe *The Mahabharata* in India, before the 18th century, as a vast, complex and intermedially worked-out ‘event’ rather than a ‘text’ in the modern sense of the term. The critical distinction made between a ‘work’ as self-contained and ‘text’ as porous, enabling reader-response, must take into account that both (‘work’ and ‘text’) operate within, and are produced by the overarching operations of print modernity. An ‘event’, on the other hand, is surely something far more amorphous and preceding the cultures of modernity.

*The Mahabharata* ‘event’, even when operating within cultures of orality<sup>1</sup>, was a complex collaborative, intermedial processes of narrativizing. Such a process implicated *The Mahabharata*’s ‘orality-performativity’ within its ‘orality/performativity-in-écriture’ dimensions.

The renderings of Neelkantha Chatudhara’s 17th century Sanskrit *Mahabharata* or Kashiram Das’s Bengali *Mahabharata* or numerous renderings of the *Bhagwad Gita* as the essence of *Mahabharata* did not claim distinction as autonomous ‘texts’ but sought privilege as *Mahabharata*’s *tikabhasya*, being part of its exegetical process. These were offerings to the ‘event’ called *The Mahabharata* that were culled on the anvil of *bhakti*<sup>2</sup>.

The *Mahabharata*’s difficult entry within the ambit of print modernity meant crucial shifts of emphasis from it being an ‘event’ in continuum to the rupture

from its immediate past and being congealed into a standard text/edition. This also meant *The Mahabharata* being textualized with auteurs that were now claiming ‘authority’ of their ‘translation’ into modern Sanskrit; or/ and into the modern Indic and European vernaculars. Such translations now also clearly state the original authorship of *The Mahabharata* (following the inexorable logic of print modernity) as belonging to a person called ‘Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa.’

These vast transnational processes of *The Mahabharata* entering within print modernity cultures also meant ‘fixing’ the ‘event’ genealogically, that is, within non-permeable generic categories. While one set of individuals (Indologists such as Albrecht Weber and Friedrich Max Mueller) described *The Mahabharata* as *mahakavya* and *mahakavya* as signifying ‘epic poetry,’ another set (Sanskritists, such as Pundit Shashadhar Tarkachudamani and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay) described it as *itihasa* in the sense of ‘history’ that is a record of empirically verifiable facts. Yet, the ancient Sanskrit aesthetic categories of *mahakavya* and *itihasa* had semantic charges very distinct from their English language ‘equivalent’ significations<sup>3</sup>.

I will narrate (following *The Mahabharata*’s digressive, eclectic, contra teleological style) the story of its entry into print cultures, in the form of its first complete English translation and its standardization as a reliable ‘text.’ This effort paid obeisance to the principal god of print-modernity, the nation-state. This nation-state deity, however, was paradoxically implicated and operating within transnational and Empire-informed ideologies!

J. van Buietenen’s “Introduction” to his English translation, *The Mahabharata: Book of Beginning* (Book I, *Adi Parva*) is in respectful acknowledgement of the ‘authority’ of the Pune-based Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute’s (henceforth called BORI) standardized Sanskrit *Critical Edition*. The task of editing this ‘definitive text’ began in 1918 at the behest of Professor Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar and was finally

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published in 1966. Van Buitenen's English translation of *The Mahabharata* is anchored in BORI's scholarship and its critical methodologies crystallizing several recensions, and versions into an ultimate, standard text.

van Buitenen, however, does not consider the first complete English translation of *The Mahabharata* by 'P.C. Roy' in 11 volumes and published from *Datavya Karyalaya Press* in Chitpur, Kolkata, between 1883-1889, as worthy of critical respect. In addition, van Buitenen describes the 'P.C Roy edition' as having been rejected by readers of its own times, as well as by those in ours. J. van Buitenen's grudging admission that the first English translation possesses a degree of scholarly rigour does not, however, ameliorate the fact that it is lacking in both the qualities of 'authority' and 'ethics.' I quote van Buitenen's response to this first English translation of *The Mahabharata*, as these are the very charges I wish to refute:

Thus, one complete translation was published from Calcutta (eleven volumes, 1883-1896) under the name P.C. Roy, but was in fact executed by Kesari [sic] Mohun Ganguli. This translation was not well received, either in India or in the West. Indeed the English is grating and refractory in the extreme and does not allow comfortable reading even to one used to Victorian English applied by the Indian provinces to the rendering of Sanskrit classics. [xxxvi] The apparatus is minimal to the point of non-existence, and the reader who tries to wind his way through *The Mahabharata* finds not even a table of contents to guide him. Still in spite of the strictures one might level at it, the translation [...] was by no means a careless job (Buitenen, "Introduction" Book 1, *The Mahabharata: Book of Beginning*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1973, xxxviii)

By the time van Buitenen had come to introduce his second volume of *Mahabharata* translation ("Preface" *The Mahabharata, Book 2, The Book of Assembly Hall*), he wanted to "amplify" that the first translation of *The Mahabharata*, coming from colonial Bengal, "appeared as if done by P.C. Roy but was in fact executed by K.S. Ganguli"! A somewhat contrite van Buitenen admits that this fact/truth is stated by Ganguli himself in the "Translator's Postscript"! This is an admission, notes Buitenen, that comes at the end of the 'Roy's' eleven-volume edition ("Preface: A Correction." *Mahabharata: The Book of Assembly Hall*. Chicago UP, 1979, x). J. van Buitenen also revises his earlier dismissive stance towards the quality of the Ganguli's translation and admits that the edition does have a critical apparatus; a table of contents-instruments that 'authorize' a scholarly translation-and that Buitenen "often consult[s]" the 'Roy' translation, "and mean[s] no slight to [his] predecessors" ("Preface" *Book of Assembly Hall*, x).

I might also add that the Roy translation, that which is actually the Kishorimohan Ganguli edition (henceforth to be called by its name *The Mahabharata of*

*Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa* or *TMOKDV*), remains till date the only complete scholarly English translation of *The Mahabharata* and all Western efforts at translating the text (and that includes the prestigious Chicago edition, whose translational endeavour J. van Buitenen had led, till his death) have remained, till date, incomplete enterprises.

### Authority and Authorship

This first English translation of *The Mahabharata*, authored by Kishorimohan Ganguli, in the second last decades of 19th century colonial Bengal in eleven volumes (1883-1896), and published by a person called Protap Chandra Roy,<sup>4</sup> the owner of the *Datavya Karyalaya Press* in Chitpur, north Kolkata, is the focal point of my study.

My essay studies not merely the act of this translation but its production underpinnings, or what I describe as the 'enterprise of production of the first English *Mahabharata*'. Such an 'enterprise' comprised garnering intellectual and governmental support; raising funds and ensuring financial support from the public at large; comparing often conflicting versions of an event called *The Mahabharata*; translating/crystallising into English a text so culturally dense that it is practically untranslatable; publishing, disseminating gratuitously (and I want to emphasise the act of free distribution of *TMOKDV* copies by the *Datavya Karyalaya Press*) advertising, and its reprinting. This massive enterprise that Roy and Ganguly headed and in which an entire 'jati-people' were implicated, embodies those complexities that an 'event' entering within print modernity cultures had had to engage with.

However, every excellence of the text entitled *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa/Translated into English Prose*; but printed without the name of an 'author-translator' and with the name of its publisher—P.C. Roy—was overlooked once the fraught questions regarding *TMOKDV*'s 'authorship' came to light. Charges of fraudulence and imposture emerged to besmirch the text's every value. Its quality of nuanced English (a phenomenal achievement, given the Indians' relatively recent acquaintance with English language in India); the sheer enormity of the enterprise and the virtual untranslatability of a conceptually-dense *Mahabharata*; and the utmost rigour of scholarship that marked this translation were undermined repeatedly by *Mahabharata* critics, post 1960s.

Charges of fraudulence and unethical authorship-assumption on the part of the publisher P.C. Roy (and the consequent denying the actual author, Kishorimohan Ganguly, of his rightful due) were bandied about, primarily at the behest of the Kolkata-based professor of English and yet another trans-creator of *The Mahabharata*—Purushottam Lal.

P. Lal cannot be entirely blamed for his assuming that P.C. Roy was a fraud as many (and that includes contemporaries of P.C. Roy, such as Rudyard Kipling) had described the Bardhaman-based publisher, Protap Chandra Roy, the owner of the Dityavya Bharat Karyalaya Press as the first translator of the complete English version of *The Mahabharata*; the author of the 11-volume *TMOKDV*. Such 'recognition' of 'authority' of P.C. Roy seems obvious, given that Roy's name appears on the inner title page of the first volume of *TMOKDV*, and everywhere else, including in its Prefatory matter (though as publisher) of the first volume of the *Adi Parvan* whereas Ganguli's name is completely absent! "The supreme irony" notes Prof. Purushottam Lal is that:

[T]he K.M. Ganguli translation, now reissued from Calcutta's Oriental Press in eleven volumes (11 D Arpuli Lane, Calcutta, 1961) nowhere mentions his name, but openly credits P.C. Roy as 'translator and publisher' on the title page of each volume (*An Annotated Mahabharata Bibliography*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1967).

These charges were amplified by J. van Buitenen in his "Introduction" in *The Mahabharata: Book I, Book of Beginning* and seemed to acquire a normative status. Buitenen's "Correction" that came as part of the "Introduction" to the second volume of his *The Mahabharata* translation (*Book Two, Book of Forest*) did very little to sanitize an already besmirched reputation. The imputations of *TMOKDV*'s plebian, non-scholarly essence and its lack of critical methodology seemed to follow from the original charge of its fraudulent imposture. Buitenen quotes an essay from the 1884 edition of *The Hindu* (a prestigious Indian newspaper published from Madras) as evidence of readers' rejection of the Ganguli translation, during Ganguli's own lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of authority-authorship issues (that I claim to be central to the print modernity cultures) is reduced, and its complex implications lost if one deploys the analytical frame of binaries, comprising of 'villainous perversity' on Roy's part and 'innocent victimhood' as Ganguli's portion, with regard to the authorship of a text called *TMOKDV*.

A more enabling and responsive frame would be to 'read' the authorship-issue as the outcome of relative *naivete* on the part of the *TMOKVD* stakeholders in matters pertaining to 'authorship' and intellectual property rights, at the inception of print-modernity cultures.

The 'victim' Kishorimohan Ganguli's explication is significant. My highlighting certain lines of the passage that the 'duped' Ganguli wrote as his "Translator's Postscript" and that comes at the end of Volume XI (1896) of the English *TMOKDV*, is revealing. Ganguli notes that even "before, however, the first fasciculus could

be issued, the question as to whether the authorship of the translation be publicly owned arose." While "Babu Pratapa Chandra Roy was against anonymity" Ganguli "was for it". Ganguli ascribed his unwillingness to publicize his name as the "translator" of *TMOKDV* right away as he was doubtful about "[...] possibility of one person " being able to "translat[e] the whole of the gigantic work." Ganguli was also conscious that "other circumstances than death might arise in consequence of which" his "connection with the work might cease." Kishorimohan Ganguli felt that it would look decidedly odd and "to issue successive fascicules with names of succession of translators appearing on title pages" (*emphasis mine*).

The last sentence of Ganguli's explication exposes the relative *naivete* of the publisher-translator duo regarding contemporary methods of couching, entitling, naming, entitling such collaborative projects. Given that the Chicago University's *The Mahabharata* translation project (from 1973 onwards) has had, as of yet, three translators (owing to the death of J. van Buitenen who had completed translating the first five *parvans*) and given that the translation task was now reposed in the able hands of Prof. Wendy Doniger, and Prof. James Fitzgerald (the latter having completed translating the sixth and seventh *parvans*) and yet continues to be known by the name of the Chicago *Mahabharata*, because its principal funding agent was the Ford Foundation under Chicago University's South Asia Programme, exposes how the 'naming' and 'framing' methods of such collaborative projects have evolved in the contemporary world.

The *Clay Sanskrit Library* of ancient Sanskrit texts is so called because the principal funding 'authors' are John and Jennifer Clay. The Clay Library's translated texts, having named the principal funding agent, then named their publisher, New York University Press. The names of the editor-in-chief, Richard Gombrich and editors-translators of particular volumes—Isabella Oriana and Somdeva Vasudeva (for example), come even later. Other names might be added along as co-translators as the work reaches completion, having had begun in 2006. This is exemplary of recent developments in editorial team formation, and 'naming methods' that acknowledge an 'editor-in-chief' or 'translator-in-chief', along with a team of author-translator at the beginning of a project, while being utterly comfortable in the translation being known by the names of their principal funding agents— J.J. Clay, and University of New York Press, in this instance.

Such printed acknowledgement of a 'team of authors/translators' is also predicated on firm commitments on the part of team-members, and even more firm commitment regarding the project funding.

The translator-in-chief of the Chicago project J. van Buitenen notes that his *The Mahabharata* translation would not be possible, and he “could not have gone ahead with the publication had it not been for the substantial subvention it received from a private donor and from a foundation-supported University committee.” That donor was “George V. Bobrinsky, Emeritus Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Chicago” whom Buitenen describes as a “warm. ever-helpful. most generous colleague and friend.” Also, “the Committee on Southern Asian Studies which largely with the aid of the Ford Foundation” has been responsible “for the development of Indian studies at this University” (“Preface”, *Book I, The Book of Beginning- The Mahabharata*. Chicago University Press, 1973).

The van Buitenen translation and all subsequent English translation editions, such as those by Purushottam Lal’s *Writers’ Workshop Edition*, Bibek Debroy’s *Penguin Edition*, had the additional advantage of being anchored within the Standard Critical Edition of *The Mahabharata* of BORI, Pune. This project was completed largely by Professor Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar (but a host of other ‘authors’ such as Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar who pioneered the manuscript collection and Indological methodologies in British India, and Professor S.K. Belvakar and Professor R.N. Dandekar were appointed as joint general editors in 1957 after V.S. Sukthankar. The project was also made possible by huge financial support from the Raja of Aundh, (in the Satara district in modern Maharashtra) as well as public donations and (what is most vital) the deploying of (by then, firmly established) German philological principles, more popularly known as the Lachmann method<sup>6</sup> to steady and guide the translational ship.

Neither such intellectual network-where-withal, nor committed funding for such a huge project that ensures fixity of ‘names’ of translators was available to Protap Chandra Roy. Roy came from a desperately poor family from the Sanko area of *muffusil* Bardhaman, in colonial Bengal. Having lost his parents and raised by a widow, his adult life was spent mostly in selling books from door to door and setting up a small bookshop in Kolkata. Ganguli himself doubted Roy of possessing the necessary intellectual credentials/network and resources, so necessary to implement a project of such huge dimensions. It is the presence of the influential Durgacharan Banerjee (father of the nationalist leader Surendranath Banerjee) vouchsafing Roy’s intentions, and an assurance of an English nobleman—Marquis of Hartington—in a letter written to the German Indologist, Dr Reinhold Rost, that made Ganguli even consider Roy’s *The Mahabharata* project as feasible!

More than twelve years ago, when Babu Pratapa Chandra Roy, with Babu Durga Charan Banerjee, went to my retreat at Seebpore, for engaging me to translate the *Mahabharata* into English, I was amazed at the grandeur of the scheme. *My first question to him was—whence the money to come—supposing my competence for the task (emphasis mine).*

It is then that P.C. Roy, the arranger of an incredible amount of funding; enthusiastic visualizer of the “utility” and outreach of such translation project among British administrators, educationists and American scholar, benefactors, “showed” Ganguli, “Dr Rost’s letter”. The letter “suggested some assistance and British administrative support for the translation plan.”

This power vector of British administrative support was that one more step towards the authorizing of the project. The letter of Dr Reinhold Rost, a great German Oriental professor of the Jena school, and references to the French Orientalist, Auguste Barth (1834-1916), whose book, *Les Religions de Inde* of 1879, had created a major impact in India especially in its English translation, also acted metonymically to ‘authorize’ the project. European Indology-informed scholarship, and British administrative support-intent induced Ganguli to come on board of an unknown-publisher P.C. Roy’s translation project.

We now know that it is only after the completion of such a mammoth project that its “utility” was recognized and Lord Dufferin (Viceroy and Governor General of India 1884-1888) sanctioned a grant of 11,000 rupees (a princely sum for those times). Lord Ripon, the next Governor General, also contributed handsomely to the project. Sir Rivers Thompson (Lt. Governor of Bengal from 1882 to 1887) sanctioned 500 rupees for the project; Sir Auckland Colvin (1838-1908) Lieutenant Governor of the North West Provinces, founder of Colvin Talukdar College in Lucknow, and financial advisor to the Council, gave 2,000 rupees, and Sir Alfred Croft (Director of Public Instruction of Bengal from 1877-1897) granted 5,000 rupees. The official list of funding agencies extended to American scholars and benefactors, such as Professor Charles Rockwell Lanman (American scholar of Sanskrit in Johns Hopkins and Harvard University, 1850-1941), Professor Maurice Bloomfield of Johns Hopkins University (1855-1928, Sanskrit scholar from Yale University) among ‘others’.

The phrase ‘others’ stands as an innovative method of crowd-funding that Roy had devised and explained in his “Preface” to the English *Mahabharata* text. One of the ‘innovations’ was to distribute as many number of copies of the translation possible free of cost (*datyavyabitaran*) to maximum number of people in India and the West, and to charge a handsome amount, from those who could pay

(50-65 rupees) as part subscription, and part price. It is this piece of innovative marketing and one that was tied up with the translation-publishing of *The Mahabharata* (the Indian text) into English, (an important European language-culture) as expressive of national pride, that made this effort so special! In his publisher's "Preface", Roy notes with considerable pride:

Roughly estimated, the *Bharat Karyalaya* has distributed up to date nine thousand copies of the *Mahabharata* and *Hariivansa* taken together [...] Leaving aside the arithmetical results of the *Karyalaya's* operations, it might be fairly presumed that the genuine demand for 18000 copies of sacred books of India represent a degree of interest of the people in the history of their past that is certainly not discouraging to patriotic hearts.

Protap Chandra Roy's efforts in organizing funds, building up a patronage network among British officials, printing, publishing the text and disseminating them mostly free of cost (as the name *Dataavya Bharat Karyalaya* indicates) as an act of overt nationalist identity assertion cannot be underestimated and makes Roy as much a 'author' in the project as Ganguli.

Ganguli ratifies that it is in the context of a real anxiety regarding the hugeness of the project and money promised, but not yet forthcoming that led to the joint decision "to withhold the name of the translator." However, when "an influential Indian journal came down upon poor Protap Chandra Roy and accused him openly of being party to a great literary imposture", Roy revealed the name of the translator as printed in the later fasciculus and forced them to apologize!

There are other textual layers of this translational story. Ganguli clears critical space by condemning the ill-informed and non-scholarly vernacular translations of *The Mahabharata*, available in the market, and refers to the authority of the Neelkantha Chatudhara's Sanskrit edition of the *Mahabharata* in 17th century India. There are numerous co-translators of Ganguli that are mentioned in the "Translator's Preface" and some of them are Krishna Kamal Mukhopadhyay, Shyamacharan Kaviratna, Charucharan Mukherjee, and Aghorenath Bannerjee, but they are not formally 'acknowledged' as joint translators of the text in print in the title page!

Finally, of course there is the looming shadow of Friedrich Max Mueller over this project! Roy had left with Ganguli, a copy of translation "received from Professor Max Mueller"! What extent of *The Mahabharata* had Max Mueller actually translated into English? Ganguli notes that the Max Mueller version was actually "executed thirty years ago by a young German friend of this great Pundit!" Who was that young friend of Max Mueller? He remains unknown and unacknowledged!

Ganguli claims that the Max Mueller version was literal and "had no flow" and so it had to be compared line by

line with an original Sanskrit (Neelkantha Chatudhara's *The Mahabharata*) and redone by Ganguli. Even someone like van Buitenen who must clear critical space to make way for his new English translation (that incidentally is not yet complete despite the enormous might of Anglo-American funding!) acknowledges that for all its flaws, the Ganguli translation is scholarly and is the result of painstaking academic rigour.

I describe this process of the first translation of *The Mahabharata* into English and the translational decisions taken in such detail, to expose the complexity of authorizing events like *The Mahabharata* and the difficulty of congealing them within a single-author textual frame. While Prof. Richard Gombrich does not mind his *The Mahabharata* to be referred to as the *Clay Text* because it encodes the name of the funding supporter, I don't see the validity of Prof. P. Lal and many subsequent critics' contempt for Roy's incredible efforts to bring such a work to its desired completion.

### Translational Methods

I would also like to at this point, dispute J. van Buitenen's claims that Ganguli's English is "grating to the ear", "Victorianized" (in the pejorative sense of 'antiquated' and note that it was exactly that kind of 'normalized English' that was being used by both Anglo-Indians (British in India) and their compradors, the English educated *bhadralok* of Bengal. This class had adapted to this Victorianized English better than any other South Asian group because of their physical and intellectual proximity to the ruling group and being extensions as it were, as clerks and writers, of their British rulers in language use. Rabindranath Tagore's self-translation of his Bengali *Gitanjali* into English and for which he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature is far more 'Victorianized' than Ganguli's translation of *The Mahabharata*, and as van Buitenen also agrees, translating a complex and huge text such as *Mahabharata* into a European vernacular, and making it meaningful to a modern culturally-uninformed, and racially prejudiced (Kipling for example) European audience was a fraught task.<sup>7</sup>

While I recognize Buitenen's space-clearing efforts to make room for his new translation, I cannot agree that his translations are more mellifluous or 'correct' *vi a vis* that of Ganguli's! To put it simply: Buitenen 'naturalizes/anglicizes' the Sanskrit text to suit his European readers. That often has disastrous consequences given that he is not a cultural insider. He admits that:

I am very much aware of the danger that such literalism might result in quasi translation. [...] terms for social ranks, *Brahman*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *sudra* have been rendered by the Anglicized "brahmin" and "baron," "commoner" and "serf"

respectively. [...] Other words [such as *tejas*] I had to give up on [...] ("Introduction", *Book I, Book of Beginning, The Mahabharata*, xii).

I appreciate Buitenen's bewilderment with words such as *dharma* as they seem to imply different things in different contexts and is possibly the most complex, layered word in the known world, I militate against his deploying of the most absurd equivalents for culture-specific concepts such as '*khastriya*' as 'baron,' the lower part of Draupadi's sari as 'skirt', and proper names such as 'Vrikodara' as 'wolf-belly.' Every *maharathi*-heroic figure in *Mahabharata* is imbued with multiple names and Krishna has eight hundred. Each of those 'names' is proper noun as well as attributes of the hero. Arjuna is known as 'Phalguni' because he was born in the month of *phalgun* but it is also a proper noun. Parthasarathi is an equivalent of Krishna (because he is the *sarathi*-charioteer of Partha or Arjuna) but also a proper noun and a name and therefore untranslatable.

Ganguli being a cultural insider retains most of these culture-specific terms in his English language translation; insists on 'foreign-ising' the text and letting its Sanskrit and culture-specific muscles, bones and blood be seen through its translucent English-language skin<sup>8</sup>.

A comparative study of the translational logic of Sanskrit *Mahabharata(s)* into English in British India and the translational logic that informed translational-efforts of Greek Homeric epics in English in England is worthwhile<sup>9</sup>. The translational-textual reclamation of the Greco-Roman epics in the English language as discursively coeval of 'high Englishness' was a process that had begun with John Dryden but reached its self-reflexive peak with that priest of high culture and the English nationalism, Mathew Arnold.

The bringing of the Homeric epics into the domain of proper English translation was to lay claims to Greco-Roman classics as distinctive and coeval of English 'high culture'. This translation-act that was one of cultural reclamation was to distinguish English culture from the penumbra of Victorian philistinism on the one hand, and the 'darkness' of the colonized margins, on the other. Mathew Arnold's translation act also purports to purge Homer of his 'barbaric dimensions' and recast Homeric epics seamlessly, so as to function as the origins of a cultural tradition, within which the 'individual talents' of modern English litterateurs may reside.

### The Nation: Its Epics and its 'Outer Barbarians'

Arnold and Ganguli were both grappling with issues related to translation of epics into modern vernaculars (in this case, English) in times of print modernity. Both were acutely aware of the importance of such

translational projects in constructing heroic national-identity positions. While Arnold was aware of the high stakes involved in appropriating epics in English and rendering the European vernacular language cultured/prestigious thereby; Ganguli was conscious of 'using' English (prestigious as the language of the rulers of India) to keep alive his beleaguered classical traditions; and fob off imputations of them being 'monstrous' and 'barbaric' merely because India had been territorially conquered by the British<sup>10</sup>.

Mathew Arnold's rejection of Francis William Newman's, (brother of Cardinal Newman) 'quaint' 'Victorianized' Homeric translations, in favour of a difficult, more literal, against-the-grain translation (*On Translating Homer, Three Lectures*, London: George Routledge, 1861) is comparable to the stated translation goals of Kishorimhan Ganguli and Protap C. Roy. Arnold forges English nationalist aspirations on the anvils of a Homer that is reclaimed as 'simple', 'noble' and 'difficult.' His outlining of translational methods that 'foreign-ise' Homer in English translation and clear the epic poet of any 'primitive barbaric' dimensions (as imputed by some 'civilized' Victorians such as Francis Newman) creates that bulwark against that maudlin, sentimentalized, philistine English language/culture, that Arnold was wary of. Appreciation of the Arnoldian construction of English 'high culture' as a superior kind of Englishness, and one that resists Victorian philistinism, is often restricted to a reading of his *Culture and Anarchy*. However, it is in his outlining of methods of translating Homer that Arnold imagines a trans-nationally-valent high Englishness that is noble but not barbaric; simple but not simplistic; and intellectually tough to be sufficiently out of reach so far as contemporary European philistine 'barbarians' are concerned. The 'barbarian' that perpetually threatens the high national culture is also necessary as its distinctive Other. It is a similar conceptual construction that informs Ganguli-Roy's prefatory matter as well.

On the one hand, Ganguli insists on 'foreign-ising' the Sanskrit text in English, so that the spirit of the original *The Mahabharata* is retained:-

In this regard to translations from the Sanskrit, nothing is easier than to dish up Hindu ideas so as to make them agreeable to English taste. But the endeavour of the present translator has been to give in the following pages as literal a rendering as possible, of the great work of Vyasa [...] ("Translator's Preface" Book 11 *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa*, 1-2).

On the other hand, the Roy-Ganguli combine entreats Queen-Victoria to not "look [...] upon the conquered people as outer barbarians" but to "understand their aspirations" [...] "by a study of their national literature". The rising prestige of epic poetry in 19th century Victorian England and Europe; the recognition of such poetry as

marker of national-cultural identity formation; and the need to textually reclaim it as a distinctively nationalist act is repeatedly emphasized in the "Preface".

In his publisher's "Preface", Roy notes, "this thirst for the ancient literature of our Fatherland [...] could not but inspire feelings of pride in every patriotic bosom [...]." Such publications might succeed in persuading Indians "to contemplate, [...] *the immutable truths of Aryan philosophy, the chivalry of Aryan princes and warriors, the masculine morality that guides the conduct of men in most trying situations*" and convince both Queen Victoria and his countrymen to "look upon Vyasa and Valmiki with feelings of proper pride" (Roy "Preface" "Adi Parava", *Mahabharata*. Calcutta: Datavya Bharat Karayalaya, 9-10, *all emphasis mine*).

The most important contribution of Roy as a publisher, fund raiser and visionary, was to discover in the English *Mahabharata*, post Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 and post-Mutiny, a foundational stone, in the project of 'Indian subject position constitution'. Such a position was informed by demands for equal rights of Indians as subject-people of the same Empire, as the Caucasian-British.

Roy notes that:

In her gracious Proclamation, constituting the Charter of our liberties, the Queen Empress of India enunciates the noblest principles of government, [...] Instead of looking upon the conquered people as outer barbarians, those in authority over them always manifests a sincere desire to enter into their feelings and understand their aspirations by personal converse and, what is certainly more efficacious in this line, by a study of their national literature.

Roy notes that such understanding of the conquered races is best done through translation "with regard to the *Mahabharata* in particular". The Oriental scholars affirm that this is the text on which "Orient[al] poets and prose writers of succeeding ages have drawn as on a national bank of unlimited resources." Hence Roy is "fully persuaded [of] the usefulness of such a translation [...]"

Roy's skillful steering between the Scylla of nationalist aspirations; demands for equal subject rights and cultural equivalence on the one hand; and the Charybdis of sedition, is worthy of admiration. Roy displays acuity in emphasizing the *Mahabharata*'s 'utility' within an imperial system that seeks to know its subjects while venerating the 'timeless appeal' of their sacred texts.

Roy emphasizes, *pace* Professor Monier Monier-Williams, the un-ruptured relation between classical Sanskrit and Indic vernacular cultures as against the more marked rupture between classical Greco-Roman cultures and modern European vernaculars. This also makes the reading of an English *Mahabharata* useful to European civil servants wishing to govern India.

## Utility and Realism Matters

I will end my somewhat eclectic essay on the first English translation of *The Mahabharata* with the one reader-response that was contemporary to the translation's publication. On the one hand, this response corroborates Ganguli-Roy's claim that the translation was very well received and rubbishes van Buietenen's declaration of the edition being rejected in its own times and ours.

In 1886, Rudyard Kipling wrote an article for the *Civil and Military Gazette* on *The Mahabharata* that was then being translated into English. Kipling notes that:

The twenty-fifth portion of Babu Protap Chundra Roy's translation of *Mahabharata* -excellently printed on fair paper-is now before the public. [...] it is impossible not to admire the unflagging zeal and industry of the author[...].

Kipling also notes that most Englishmen, including prestigious journals such as the *Indian Antiquary: A Journal of Oriental Research* (published from 1872 and founded by the renowned archeologist James Burgess to enable transnational Indological knowledge sharing), commend the work and opine that "it is almost impossible to say too much in support of an undertaking."

What he does hotly contend, however, is that "the epic will be regarded as a thing of interest to be studied" as "this is an article of faith and therefore unverified by research". He militates against Indological constructions, noting that "Monier-Williams and Max Mueller have told the world what to believe, and the world is content to take their assertions on trust; agreeing unhesitatingly in what they say." The author of *Kim* begs to disagree, noting that the reading of the English *Mahabharata* has left him bewildered! He is unable to discover any "utility" of such a text for contemporary times, though this 'complaint' has everything to do with the epic's essence and little to do with its translation!

Meanwhile the ever-pragmatic Roy insists that this translation could help British civil servants to understand India better as the epics are Indian culture in their essence and imperialist governance is produced by cultural knowledge:

Viewed also in the light of a means to an end, the end, viz, of understanding the wishes and aspirations of the Indian races for purposes of better government, and given the practical difficulty of British civil servants acquiring enough Sanskrit to read and understand a huge and complex text such as *Mahabharata* this translation's supreme 'utility' resides in that all that "is contained in the great Sanskritic works of antiquity becomes obtainable by Englishmen through the medium of translation [...]."

Now such an explanation regarding the *Mahabharata*'s 'utility' and necessity of its English translations might

appear slavishly craven, and repulsive to the modern Indian ears, given that it is seventy years that they have been rendered 'people' with "rights to rights," with distinct subject positions and 22 scheduled languages (English being one of them) asserted as distinctly Indic.

The last lines of Roy's "Preface" might assuage the bruised ego of modern Indians because it is also a position espoused by cosmopolitan thinkers such as Tagore and Goethe. The translation of Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is useful because:

The production of genius [is] the common inheritance of the world. Homer lived as much for Greeks, ancient or modern, as for Englishmen or Frenchmen, Germans or Italians. Valmiki and Vyasa lived as much for Hindus as for every race of men capable of understanding them.

## Notes

1. *The Mahabharata* is considered a *smriti* text, one that is remembered and retold by numerous tellers who recollected it, and therefore of later origin than the *shruti* texts such as the *Vedas* which were heard.
2. I am indebted to Sujit Mukherjee's *Translation as Discovery* for first introducing me to this idea.
3. Refer to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Krishnacharita* for more on this debate.
4. I use the Bengali transliterative practice of naming. So it is not the Anglicized Kishori Mohun, but Kishorimohan as it refers to a male (in this case, god Krishna) who infatuates

young girls, whereas 'Kishori' delinked from its *sandikaran* (*liaison*) with 'mohan' simply means a young girl! Protap Chandra Roy should be Pratapchandra Roy but this is the spelling that Roy insists on and so I retain it, albeit in protest.

5. This essay (as referred to by van Buitenen in the "Introduction" to his *The Mahabharata: Book I, Book of Beginning*) in the newspaper *The Hindu* is one that I was unable to access and I am, therefore, compelled to cite, at second hand.
6. The German scholar, Karl Konrad Wilhelm Lachmann (1793-1851), was a significant figure in the development of European philology and his research methods played a significant role in enriching the discipline of Comparative Philology. The 'Lachmann method' refers to reconstructing the text on the basis of genealogical kinship between languages.
7. Refer to Mahasweta Sengupta's essay "Translation, Colonialism and Poetics: Rabindranath Tagore in Two Worlds" on Tagore's English translation of his Bengali *Gitanjali* in Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere edited *Translation, History and Culture: A Sourcebook*. London: Cassel, 1995.
8. I am indebted to Harish Trivedi for this idea in *Postcolonial Translation Theory: Theory and Practice* (edited by Bassnett and Trivedi, London: Routledge, 1999).
9. This is something that van Buitenen acknowledges in his "Introduction" to the, *Book of Beginning*.
10. Many scholars, including van der Deer and van Buitenen, refer to these connections between examination and translation of Homeric texts and *The Mahabharata*.