

A BRIEF TRAJECTORY OF THE MAHABHARATA FROM 'JAYA' TO THE GUPTA REDACTION

For a protean and immense work like *The Mahabharata*, tracing a definite origin is a cumbersome, and at times futile task. However, there are certain dates, references and stylistic clues that can help us in arriving at a rough framework of its textual evolution.

Scholars mostly agree that the core of the epic owes its origin to the 'gatha' tradition of oral-bardic poetry that dealt with heroic tales and legends. At this stage, the poem definitely had thematic ties to the Western heroic epics like *The Iliad* and *Beowulf*. These oral tales are believed to have formed the earliest core text of the Mahabharata composed by Vyasa. Fittingly, perhaps, this 'ur-text' is usually referred to as *Jaya* (or the tale of victory) as it is primarily about the war. From the present day titanic form of the epic, it is almost impossible to extract this 'original' or 'core' version. However, scholars like F. Edgerton and C. Smith have carried out extensive stylistic analysis and have come to the conclusion that around 8000 (or 8800) verses constituted the original *Jaya*. These verses are in the 'tristubh' meter as opposed to the brahminical 'shloka'. Since, some of the characters of the epic are even mentioned in early Vedic literature, the *Jaya* must have been in circulation as early as 9th century BC.

By the 5th century BC, a larger form of the poem began to emerge that included more detailed genealogical material and tried to place the war in the larger context of dynasty politics. This text, with Vaisampayana as the narrator, is often referred to as *Bharata* (after the first modern king India, in whom the bloodlines of the two great clans, the Chandravamsis and the Suryavamsis, mingled). Scholars are of the opinion that the *Bharata* constituted around 24000 verses. References to *Bharata* in the works of Panini, the grammarian who lived around 5th century BC testifies to its existence.

Over the next 800 years however, several didactic passages were added on to the core narrative of the poem, including the largely moral and philosophical 'Anushasana Parvan' and 'Shanti Parvan' alongside a plethora of 'akhyanas' and 'upakhyanas', which tend to examine from multiple perspectives the myriad possible implications of a single philosophical idea/question. The text thus snowballed into a gigantic and complex shape before arriving at its first extant written form during the Gupta period. This version contains more than one lakh lines of verse and is often called the 'Satasahasree Samhita'. When the Greek sophist Dion Chrysostom was talking of the Indians possessing an "Iliad of 1,00,000 verses" he was probably referring to the 'Gupta redaction'. This version remains the base for all later editions and translations of the *Mahabharata*.