

The Truth about the Gita

Late V R Narla



V.R. Narla

Prologue

A more apt title would have been "The Myth of the Gita". For all that is traditionally said about it is open to serious doubt. Was a great war really fought on the plains now hallowed as Kurukshetra? In case it was fought, did every principality in the India of the day, and some even beyond India, join one side or the other? What was the date of the war? Was there a Krishna, Vasudeva who elected to be charioteer of Arjuna? Did Arjuna, said to be the single-handed victor of many battles, lose his nerve when he saw the mighty army of Duryodhana arrayed against the smaller one of his own? Granting that he was, in fact, shaken by the thought of having to kill his kith and kin to gain a kingdom, could a pep talk by Krishna prepare his mind for the terrible carnage which followed? And did the two vast armies, poised for battle, stand still while the question and answer session between Arjuna and Krishna went on for the better part of a day?

Another important question that faces us is this: In case the Bhagavad Gita, the Song, Celestial, was actually sung by Krishna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, how did it come down to us? The full text of the Gita, says the *Mahabharata* was reported at the end of the day by Sanjaya to the old and blind Dhritarashtra sitting miles away in his palace at Hastinapura. Not only did Sanjaya report every word that dropped from the blessed lips of Krishna, but he also described the setting of the divine discourse without missing the slightest gesture by the head or hand or the very lifting of an eyebrow. Unseen by anyone, unhurt by any weapon, he moved freely from one side of the battle front to the other. Day or night made no difference to him. He knew no fatigue and worked round the clock. He read the innermost thoughts of everyone as though he had an open book before him.

Inventions of the present scientific and technological age, such as the radio, television and video, are put to shame? The traditionalists will, of course, retort that even to pose such a question is silly. They will tell you that the sages of that bygone age were only a notch below the gods and they had the power to grant any boon, and Vyasa was a supreme lord of boons. And so, when Dhritarashtra, the congenitally blind Kuru king keenly wanting to follow the fortunes of the war, prayed that Sanjaya, his crony, be given the boon of seeing and hearing and knowing everything, Vyasa gave it readily. Obviously, these miraculous powers were given only for the duration of the war for we do not know of Sanjaya having used them ever afterwards. Furthermore, there was a point when those powers let him down.

On the last day of the war, Satyaki spotted him and might have put him to the sword but for the timely intervention of Vyasa.

Brushing aside the traditionalists who put a pious gloss over ugly facts, it should be bluntly stated here that Dhritarashtra, thus favoured by Vyasa, was Vyasa's illegitimate son. Can a holy man like Vyasa be guilty of lechery? Yes, he was. And he was himself the natural son of Satyawati, the offspring of her pre-marital sex with Parasaram, a great sage. And in his turn, the greater sage, Vyasa, was the father of four illegitimate sons in all.

Frankly, the age of the *Mahabharata* was the Permissive Age *par excellence*. In that age drinking and dancing were customary. Cattle-lifting and the abduction of prospective brides were widely prevalent. Fratricide and genocide were not uncommon. To ensure royal succession and to avoid sure passage to hell, the birth of a son even outside wedlock was actively promoted. Indeed, it was at the instance of Satyawati, the queen-mother, that Vyasa impregnated her two royal daughters-in-law, Ambika and Ambalika. For their dissolute husband died prematurely without leaving a son to continue the Bharata dynasty. As we will presently see, this was no solitary example of progeny by proxy in that particular dynasty, nor for that matter, in that particular age.

Despite the fact that Vyasa, according to traditionalists, was almost a demi god, he was not much of a success as progenitor. Dhritarashtra, the son whom he begot by Ambika was blind; Pandu, the son whom he next begot by Ambalika, was pale and sickly. Only in his third go, he was able to produce a normal, healthy and intelligent boy, called Vidura. And yet, Vidura's right of succession to the throne was never so much as thought of. For his mother was the Sudra maid (which in effect meant a slave) of Ambika. Disliking the very sight of Vyasa, Ambika (though urged by her mother-in-law) refused to sleep with him for a second time, and sent in her maid. Obviously Vyasa had a happy time with her for the outcome of his encounter with her in bed was happy. Besides these three sons, he had a fourth one by name Suka. One day, it is said, Vyasa was rubbing two dry sticks against each other to produce the sacred fire. While on the job, he chanced to see a buxom wench from the large harem of Indra, the Lord of Heaven. It made him so libidinous that he spilled his seed all over the holy sticks in his hand. Lo and behold! That very moment Suka was born to excel, in some respects, both his father and grandfather in greatness.

If we now turn to the next generation and its principal heroes, we find that all the five Pandavas were illegitimate children. The mother of the first three was Kunti, and each of them had a different father; the mother of the next two, who were twins, was Madri, and they had a set of two fathers. Like Satyawati, Kunti also had premarital sex and the son born out of that affair was Karna. Unlike Satyawati, however, Kunti did not own up her first-born but abandoned him as soon as he was born. Putting the gloss of supernaturalism over such licentiousness and making gods parties to such lechery, as we find it done in the *Mahabharata*, is to degrade gods to the level of lechers!

So widespread was the permissiveness of the age that sexual looseness, bordering on depravity, was not at all confined to the Bharata dynasty. It was, as hinted earlier, very much present in other dynasties as well. Kansa was the son of King Ugrasena of Mathura and the maternal uncle of Krishna; he owed his birth to the rape of the queen by a danava, that is, by a non-Aryan. The birth story of Drupada, the Panchala king, is odious. Still more odious is the story of the birth of

his two children Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna. His intense desire for progeny led him to solicit the help of two sages who were brothers. Both of them were natural sons like Vyasa. Perhaps due to that very reason they almost matched Vyasa in their miraculous powers. The younger of the two refused to help Drupada at any price, but the elder agreed to take up the assignment on condition that he be given a hundred thousand cows as his fee. Towards the end of the sacrifice initiated to produce a son, the officiating sage, that is, the elder one, invited the queen to sleep with him. As she was having her period, she had to ask him to wait for a few days. But as the auspicious hour would not wait, the sage produced there and then Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna. The two of them emerged from the sacrificial fires not as babies but as a fully grown maiden and a robust young man; the maiden bedecked like a princess, and the young man fitted with a coronet and armour like a prince. While the maiden was black, the young man looked ugly, almost hideous. The former was so black that her given name was "Krishna" (the Black one). Despite her dark colour, she was stunningly beautiful, and her hand was much sought after. Ultimately she became the polyandrous wife of the five Pandava brothers.

To traditionalists, all this may be another proof of the miraculous power of sacrifices, but to a modern man with a liberated mind this can only be the skullduggery that was being widely practised by the so-called sages. It is quite likely that the illegitimate children of an illegitimate sage were palmed off on a willing Drupada as gifts from heaven.

Indeed, it looks as though it was the Age of Illegitimacy. For we find, apart from many royal princes, the two leading teachers of archery of the age (both of them from the priest caste) were also illegitimate; the reference here is to Drona and Kripa. Of course, their questionable origins are hidden, as usual, behind the smokescreen of sanctimony. Can anyone who cares for naked truth deny that fornication in its grossest form was a part of the more important of the Vedic sacrifices?

However that may be, the point is that between the original teaching of the Gita by Krishna and its recital by Souti at least a century must have elapsed. For after the Kurukshetra War, Yudhishthira ruled for thirty-six years; Parikshit, his successor, ruled for sixty years. It is not known when exactly Janamejaya launched his genocide of the Nagas as a measure of revenge for their assassination of his father, Parikshit. Nor is it known definitely how many years later Sounaka initiated his sacrifice in the Naimisa Forest. But of one thing there can be no doubt. The time lag between Krishna's teaching of the Gita and its recital by Souti cannot be taken as less than a century. Not one but several centuries must have elapsed from the time of Souti to the time of the final redaction of the Gita to writing. If we have to give credence to traditionalists, that gap is to be reckoned not in centuries but in millennia. Over such a wide gap in time did the text of the Gita as taught by Krishna retain its original size or shape or the scope of its message?

It can, of course, be argued by the traditionalists that the Vedas were reduced to writing after a much longer gap than the Gita and yet even the nuances of its pronunciation retain their original purity. But the Gita is no Veda and even now its scriptural authority is not universally accepted. In fact, none seems to have taken the Gita very seriously before Adi Sankaracharya who lived in the A.D. eighth century, and wrote a commentary on it as a part of his campaign to destroy Buddhism. Not to speak of others, neither the Arya Samajists nor the Brahmo Samajists attach much value to the Gita. And so, any analogy sought to be drawn between the purity of the text of the Vedas and of the Gita can hardly be relevant.

The improbable setting in which the Gita is said to have been taught and the dubious way in which it is supposed to have been handed down to us are good enough reasons to convince a rational mind that it is a myth. What Alexander Pope said of rumours is amply true of the Gita:

"The flying rumours gathered as they roll'd, Scarce any tale as sooner heard than told; And all who told it added something new, And all who heard it made enlargements too."

Having first read the Gita when I was a fresher at college, and that was more than half-a-century ago, and having given very many years to the study of innumerable commentaries on it, I am convinced that all that is said about the Gita, including its authorship, its time and place of composition, its transmission from generation to generation, its importance as compendium of a unified and profound system of philosophy with relevance for all people and all times, in a word, everything that is sedulously propagated about it is a myth. In that case, why did I not entitle it as "The Myth of the Gita"? My only reason is the hope that with a comparatively mild title I may not turn the devotees of the Gita against me even without reading me. To be sure, I have no illusions that I can convert them to my view, but even if a few out of their mighty ranks come to realise the hollowness of the tall claims made on behalf of the Gita, mine will not, I believe, be a wasted effort.

Late V R Narla was editor of two Telugu dailies, Rajya Sabha member, humanist

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Chapter I

The Truth about The Gita

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A Doubtful War

"The word Mahabharatha", wrote Edward Washburn Hopkins, "Is used by Panini, but only as an adjective which might be applied to anything great, connected with the Bharathas, a hero or town, as well as a war or poem". There can be no doubt that the Mahabharatha is a great poem regarding the Bharathas. As we have it today, it is "about eight times the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together"². But can it also be taken to mean a great war that was fought on the plain of Kurukshetra between the Bharathas, that is, between the Kurus and Pandus ? There are very many reasons to hold that no such war was fought and they can be said down serially:

(1) While the Kurus are well known to the Vedic literature, the Pandus are not. As was pointed out by Hopkins, who made a special study of the *Mahabharatha* they do not find a place even in the Brahmanas and Sudras'. This was specially emphasised by Max Muller. He said:

The names of the Kurus and Bharathas are common in Vedic literature but the names of the Pandavas have never been met with. It has been observed that even in Panini's grammar the name Pandu or Pandava does not occur, while the Kurus and Bharata-s are frequently mentioned particularly in rules treating of the formation of patronymics and similar words°.

This means that even during the lifetime of Panini, that is, during the middle of the fifth century, B.C., the Pandavas were unknown.

(2) When the *Rig veda* takes notice of a local and tribal war fought between Sudas, the king of the Bharatas, and a confederacy of ten kings on the banks of Parushani (the modern Ravi)⁶, surely a war on a national scale, indeed, on an international scale as the *Mahabharata* would have us believe, could not have been left unrecorded in the whole corpus of the Vedic literature. To quote Max Muller again:

The war between the Kurus and Pandavas, which forms the principal subject of the Mahabharata, is unknown to the Veda'.

(3) Kurukshetra is frequently mentioned in the Vedic literature as a holy place but never as a battlefield'.

(4) Vyasa and Vaisampayana figure in the 'Taittiriya' 'Aranyaka' but not as the first two authors of the *Mahabharata*'.

(5) In the *Kathaka Samhita* there is a specific reference to a Kuru king named Dhritarashtra, but that reference is not in the context of the Kurukshetra War; it pertains to a ritual dispute between Dhritarashtra and his priest.¹⁰

(6) Parikshit is praised in the Atharva Veda as the ruler of a prosperous kingdom; Janamejaya is lauded in the *Sathapatha Brahman* as a performer of sacrifices and a lavish giver of gifts to priests. But neither is specifically mentioned as a descendent of Arjuna".

(7) In the *Mahabharata* Arjuna is the natural son of Indra but in the 'Satapatha Brahmana', he is Indra himself 2.

(8) An *akshauhini* (an army corps) consists of 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants, 65,610 horses and 1,09,350 foot-soldiers". It is said that as many as eighteen *akshauhinis* were assembled on the plain of Kurukshetra, eleven by the Kurus and seven by the Pandus. The assembly of such a mammoth force is not easy even today, and impossible in the ancient times. Moreover, no single battlefield can hold such a gigantic force"

(9) The total number of horses in the Kurukshetra War works out to be 11,80,980. And yet, strangely we do not hear of any major cavalry engagement. Now, the number of foot-soldiers is of the order of almost two millions. In spite of it, the role of infantry in the war is nebulous. But references to single combats are plenty. It is, therefore, quite reasonable to presume that the war, if it was fought, comprised mostly single combats, as it was the general practice among all primitive peoples.

(10) On a very liberal estimate the total number of participants in the war could not have been more than four millions. (In arriving at this figure two men for each chariot and two for each elephant are allowed.) And yet, the total number of the dead exceeded 1660 millions¹⁶. So we have to presume that each combatant died more than four hundred times !

(11) In the age in which the Kurukshetra War is said to have been fought, the weaponry was crude, and no great war can be fought with crude weaponry. In this context, it should be

noted that even the Harappans with a higher civilization used as their weaponry only stones and slings, clumsy axes and arrowheads made of copper, bronze and stone.

(12) Iron weapons, which are essential for a major war, could not have played any significant part in the Kurukshetra War. Iron came into general use in India only after the sixth century B.C., and it was definitely unknown before the eleventh century B.C. "

(13) Magadha was held to be non-Aryan and hence an impure region till a fairly late date. So, too, was all land that lies to the south of the Vindhya. Because of this, neither Magadha nor any of the South Indian kingdoms could have, as it is claimed, taken part in the Kurukshetra War.

(14) When communications were primitive, transport of large armies from distant places in India and abroad would have posed insurmountable obstacles.

(15) It is simply absurd to say, as it is done in the Mahabharata, that Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha (Assam) played an important role in the Kurukshetra war.^{1e} He does not figure in the Vedic literature, either the earlier one or the later. Even Panini of the fifth century B.C., shows no knowledge of him.

(16) A more absurd thing is to say that the Yavanas the Sakas and the Pahlavas fought on the side of the Kurus. None of these peoples had any active role in Indian history before, say, the fifth century B.C.

Many more points can be adduced to doubt the historicity of the Kurukshetra War. But I will make just one more. The army assembled for the war, it is stated consisted of eighteen akshauhini; the duration of the war was eighteen days; of the active combatants, the survivors after the war on the side of the Pandavas were six, that is, one-third of eighteen, and three on the side of the Kurus, that is one-sixth of eighteen; Yudhishtara ruled for thirty-six years, that is twice eighteen; Krishna died thirty-six years after the Kurukshetra War, that is, again, twice eighteen; the epic which records the war has eighteen cantos and even the chapters of the Gita are eighteen. This cannot be something fortuitous. Some superstitious fellow, who was a believer in numerology and had a hand in the redaction of the *Mahabharata*, must have contrived this silly nonsense.

In view of these and other considerations, not a few men of eminence questioned the historicity of the Kurukshetra War.

I will refer only to some of them. R.G. Bhandarkar, one of the earliest historians of modern India, much respected for his sound scholarship and sober judgment, had no doubt in his mind that not only the *Mahabharata* but also the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* (mythologies) were not historical works.¹⁹ Time and again he bemoaned why modern education was not instilling into us the modern spirit, the spirit that questions everything and puts everything to the test of reason before accepting it as truth.

Another historian and a junior contemporary of Bhandarkar, R.C. Dutt, went a step further; he stated that "the incidents of the war in the *Mahabharata* were undoubtedly mythical." He also thought that "the five Pandava brothers and their common wife were myths."²⁰ Dutt may not have been a specialist in history as Bhandarkar was. But he had the distinction of translating the Rig Veda into Bengali, defying the hue and cry raised against him by the orthodox folk as to how a Sudra dare go anywhere near the Vedas. And his abridged translations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* into English are still rated high. So, Dutt should have spoken with knowledge and conviction when he dismissed the Kurukshetra War and the Pandavas and their joint wife as fictitious.

Much earlier than either Dutt or Bhandarkar, Rammohan Roy had drawn pointed attention to one of the opening verses of the *Mahabharata*. In that verse Vyasa calls his epic "a work of imagination." After having acquainted himself thoroughly with the scriptures of all the major religions of the world, and having initiated a new branch of study which has since come to be known as "Comparative Religion", Roy placed no value on the Gita. In his voluminous writings on religion he ignored it almost totally.

Unlike Roy, Gandhi valued the Gita greatly. "Gita", he said "has been a Mother to me ever since I became first acquainted with it in 1889.⁷² Even so, he had serious doubts about the historicity of the *Mahabharata*. He thought that the battle which formed, so to say, the backdrop to the Gita was none other than the battle that goes on all the time in every individual between the forces of good and evil.

Years earlier to Gandhi, Vivekananda took exactly the same stand. He said:

There is enough ground of doubt as regards the historicity of Arjuna and others, and it is this: *Shatapatha Brahmana* is a very ancient book. In it are mentioned somewhere or other all the names of those who were the performers of the Ashva-medha Yajna but in those places there is not only no mention, but no hint even, of the names of Arjuna and others, though it speaks of Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit, who was grandson of Arjuna.

Yet in the *Mahabharata* and other books it is stated that Yudhisthira, Arjuna and others celebrated the Ashvamedha sacrifice."²³

Despite all this, Vivekananda thought, like Gandhi, that the mythical nature of the *Mahabharata*, does not take away the value of the epic as a whole, or its most important section, the Gita. It is a stand that cannot be accepted without demur. Surely, if Arjuna was mythical, his alter ego, Krishna, cannot be historical personage. And if both were mythical, how could one discourse to the other? And if some nameless author or authors fabricated the Gita and interpolated with into the *Mahabharata*, how can it be called the "Song Celestial or the Divine Lay"?

Traditionalists - they are always with us in their serried ranks, and their ranks consist not only of the illiterate but also of the highly learned-, including many scientists and philosophers - well, our traditionalists may dismiss Dutt and Bhandarkar as historians of yester year; they may maintain that while Roy and Vivekananda and Gandhi might have made history, each in his own way, they were no historians. But can they deny the standing or stature of that multi-faceted genius, D.D. Kosambi, as a historian? A mathematician of international repute, he applied scientific methods to the study of Indian coins. He brought to bear the Marxist approach on Indian history. Though our professional historians did their best, first to ignore him, and then to ridicule him, towards the closing stages of his life, and more so, after his death at the age of 58, he came to be recognized as a trend-setter. Apart from his keen perceptions, his capacity to combine many disciplines, and his power to understand the workings of historical

forces in shaping the life and thought of a people, he was a man of intellectual integrity. He stated his convictions clearly, sincerely, boldly. Before I finish, I will have occasion to quote from his writings quite often. For the time being, let us hear what he said about our epics:

From our material it is still impossible to say where the great theme-battles of the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were fought, let alone when — if indeed they represent any historical events at all.

Returning to the subject some years later he had no more lingering doubts and referred to the Kurukshetra War as "this fictitious great war."⁵

Now we may turn our attention to a couple of living historians, D.C. Sirkar and H.D. Sankalia. To be sure, the former is primarily a specialist in epigraphy and the latter in archaeology. But neither subject can be mastered without a firm grounding in history. Both of them are fully convinced that in case the Kurukshetra War really took place, it was no more than a family or tribal feud. Some of the points which I made in the opening part of this chapter are based on their writings; those who are interested can refer to their contributions to the co-operative study entitled *Mahabharata : Myth and Reality*, edited by S.P. Gupta and K.S. Ramachandran.'

Personally, this study has left me a sad man. For it is clearly indicative of the crushing weight of tradition - *silly tradition, dead tradition* —on the Hindu mind. Out of its forty-one contributors, not even half a dozen show any capacity to think boldly, rationally, originally. And one or two of them have such a fuddled mind as to argue in all seriousness that what millions and millions of people believed for thousands of years as true cannot be fictitious. By the same token, we have to accept the widely prevalent belief over the ages that the eclipses of the sun and the moon are caused by those two impish demons; Rahu and Ketu.

Are our minds so conditioned by our puerile puranas that we can be fooled by any fantastic nonsense ? Is there something basically wrong with our national psyche ? I am pretty sure that most of the contributors to *Mahabharata: Myth and Reality* fast during an eclipse and take a bath at its end, feeling joyous that by their piety they saved the sun or the moon from mortal danger. It is significant that the sub-title of their co-operative study is not "Myth or Reality" but "Myth and Reality". It is a clear proof that they were born as believers, grew up as believers and one day will die as believers. They are incapable of doubting, of questioning and of putting anything to the acid test of reason. In their view, to doubt any old belief is to be an infidel, to question it is to be guilty of sacrilege, to seek to put it to the test of reason is to condemn oneself to a long term in hell. It is mostly these folk that are in charge of our universities, our national laboratories, our technological institutions, and to our shame, even of our government at every level. I know that these are strong words, perhaps harsh words, but they are, I submit, not uncalled for in view of the credulity, bordering on imbecility, which is so much in evidence in every sphere of our national life today.

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Chapter II

The Truth about The Gita

Late V R Narla



V.R. Narla

False Signposts

There is only one firm date in the history of ancient India and that is the year of Alexander's invasion (327 - 326 B.C.). The reason for it is quite simple. The Indian time is cyclical.

Prabhava, Vibhava, etc., come round once every sixty years. No year in that cycle of sixty can, therefore, be pinpointed on the scale of linear time.

To be sure, there is a Vikrama Era. There is also a Salivahana or Saka Era. But none can be too sure about the starting point of either. The Vikrama Era, for instance, is said to have begun in 58-57 B.C. Who is this Vikrama after whom the Era is named ?

What is the great deed, the historic event, which it commemorates? There is no clear answer to these questions. He cannot be the Vikramaditya who won a mighty victory over the Hunas in A.D., the fifth century. For the era starts almost six hundred years prior to that victory. He cannot be Pushyamitra, who assassinated the last Mauryan Emperor and founded the Sunga dynasty. For the date of that assassination falls in the last quarter of the second century B.C. He cannot be Kanishka, the most famous emperor of the Kushana dynasty, the reason for it being that he flourished, not during the middle of the first century B.C., but about a century later. Nor can he be Goutamiputra Satakarni of the Satavahana dynasty. He did, no doubt, crush the Sakas in a heroic battle, but that battle took place in or around A.D. 124 - 125. Furthermore, the inscriptions, brimful of his panegyrics, do not mention "Vikramaditya" as one of his titles. So, when each of these to whom the credit of starting the Vikrama Era is given by one historian or the other is ruled out, there remains Azes the Parthian who established a large and prosperous kingdom in the Punjab and Sind by about 60 B.C. And he did initiate an era. But he name it after himself, the most sensible thing to do. In Prakrit his era is called the Aya or Aja Era; in no language, be it Prakrit or Sanskrit or Palhavi, is it called the Vikrama Era.

In their desperate bid to solve the unsolvable riddle of the Vikrama Era some of our historians maintain that originally it was known as the Krita Era or the Malva Era in honour of some Malva king or general who defeated the Sakas somewhere, sometime, somehow. At this point I may record the reaction of D.D. Kosambi to this futile debate. Referring to the *Vikrama Volume*, 'published from Ujjain to commemorate the completion of the first two millennia of the Vikram Era. he wrote:

The 2000th anniversary of Vikram was celebrated with due pomp in 1943, though neither the press agents nor the luminaries publicized were able to shed any light on the problem. The memorial Volumes [in English and Hindi] issued on the occasion prove only the futility of such research. None of the mutually contradictory essays in such volumes proves anything beyond the will to be-lieve.²

Regarding the other, that is, the Salivahana or Saka Era which, it is said, starts in A.D. 78, there is an equally unresolved controversy. When the chronology of ancient India is so uncertain, so hazy, even when we come down to historical times, is it not useless to try to fix a period for the persons and events mentioned in our two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the thirty-six Puranas, major and minor ? Though called epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are, in fact, Puranas only. It is not only useless but, if I may be pardoned a strong expression, utterly idiotic. And yet, that very thing is done in all **seriousness**.

Whoever started the farce — yes, it is nothing else — it was given a fillip by F.E. Pargiter. He was a British I.C.S. Officer who rose to be a judge of the Calcutta High Court. Having mastered Sanskrit, he first translated the *Markandeya Purana* into English. Next he collected the more important of the dynastic lists carried by the Puranas, rendered them into English and published them in book form with a long introduction. The title of his book is also rather long and it reads: *The Purana Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*. 'A little later he set down the results of his study of these lists in a book entitled *Ancient Indian*

Historical Tradition. ` All the history, dependable history as different from conjectural history, which he could extract from the Puranas is just about a thimbleful. Small wonder, despite their claim to be *Itihasas* (current histories) the Puranas are myths and mythologies. They begin with the creation of the cosmos, its dissolution and its renewal; next they talk of Manu, the Hindu Adam, and his wives and his progeny. Then they give the lists of the kings of different dynasties, past, present and future. In between these things they emphasize the virtues of the principle of inequality between man and man, the principle institutionalized in the caste system. They expatiate on the risk of the world going to pieces unless the primacy and the privileges of the priest class are fully protected by the king. And they end up by laying down stringent rules which should govern a man's life from birth to death, and even beyond death, for they tell him how to find his way to heaven, and once there, how to make a beeline for the gorgeous bedroom of a gorgeous Rambha or a Menaka or a Tilottama or a Varudhini or—well, he has a wide choice.

From out of this piffle how much history can be gathered ? Nothing or practically nothing. What is worse, it has a highly deleterious effect on our moral fibre. If this is taken to be a reckless, almost a rabid indictment, my submission is that it is late by 2500 years. What Valmiki and Vyasa are to us, Homer and Hesiod are to the Greeks. Both of them came under heavy attack by Plato, or more correctly, Plato speaking through Socrates. When your gods and heroes are gamblers and drunkards, when they lie and boast, when they are lustful and indulge in fornication, when they are mean, cowardly and vengeful, in short, when they are given to every weakness and vice, will they not, asked Plato, encourage everybody to find excuses for his own weaknesses and vices? Unless one is familiar with the writings of Homer and Hesiod, what all Plato said in condemnation of Greek myths and mythologies cannot be properly appreciated; hence direct quotations from him are cannot be properly appreciated; hence direct quotations from him are being avoided. Those who are interested can turn to the third book of Plato's Republic. The best translation I know of is by Jewett. 5

Now, in some respects, Xenophanes was more caustic than Plato in his condemnation of Homer and Hesiod. An out and out rationalist and materialist, he poured vitriol on mythological gods and condemned anthropomorphism without any reservation.' Euripides, the play-wright, also attacked the myths and mythologies in his own original, subtle and effective way. And yet, here in India we have poets, playwrights and philosophers who go into ecstasies over the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the thirty-six Puranas and the stuff and nonsense they purvey. However, it is not always an act of foolishness. For hidden behind it, there is a well-planned motive, a long-range plan. It is to arrest the growing forces of freedom, democracy and equality and to continue in a camouflaged form the old order of society based on "The gradations and degradations" of the caste system. It is significant that C. Rajagopalachari, K.M. Munshi and other highly astute politicians turned into active protagonists of the Hindu epics and Puranas in post-Independence India

Though all myths and mythologies, to whichever nation they may belong, are intrinsically nasty, ours are easily the worst from amoral point of view. Furthermore, they are most undependable as sources of history. On this last point, I may quote the eminent Indologist and historian, A.L. Basham. He wrote:

The names of many of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* may genuinely be those of contemporary chieftains, but we must regretfully record that the story is of less use to the historian than the (*laid*, or most of the Norse and Irish saga literature It is futile to try to reconstruct the political and social history of

India in the 10th century B.C. from the *Mahabharata* as it would be to write the history of Britain immediately after the evacuation of the Romans from Malory's Morte d' Arthur.'

Our Pargiters and Pradhans cannot dismiss out of hand the point made by Basham. And so, we see that, Sita Nath Pradhan himself had to admit the very many difficulties posed by the Puranas as sources of history. He bemoaned:

The Puranas profess to give us the ancient history of Aryan India ... In this ... business, the Puranas sometimes naturally conflict; sometimes the same Purana makes, though rarely, different statements in different places; very often they corrupt the names of persons; sometimes one dynasty is merged or inter-woven into or tacked on to another owing to the corrupt reading that have (sic) crept in, the result being a preposterously long line of kings; sometimes collateral successions are described as lineal; sometimes the orders of succession reversed; sometimes the dynasties are lengthened owing to various kinds of corrupt readings; even a synchro-nism has been found misplaced owing to a similarity of names; divergent synchronisms have been recorded.'

This did not, however, deter Pradhan from using the Puranas to frame a chronology for the history of ancient India. He was a brave man indeed !

Pargiter himself was no less aware how exasperating could be the problems posed by the Puranas to a historian. Without boring you or

_ myself by giving a lengthy quotation, like the one I gave from Pradhan, I will point out that Pargiter had to tackle eighty Janamejayas, a hundred Nagas, Haihayas, Dhritarashtras and Brahmadata, two hundred Bhimas and Bhishmas and one thousand Sasabindus! And this is only a partial list. 9

This mad confusion would surely make every Pargiter to swear under his breath. After wrestling with the Puranas and their dynastic lists for a lifetime, out of sheer irritation, if not desperation, Pargiter himself once exploded violently and said that the Brahmins who wrote the Puranas could see "No valid distinction between history and mythology and naturally there was a tendency to confuse the two, to mythologize history and to give mythology an historical garb. We can thus see why there was a total lack of historical sense among the brahmins who composed the brahmanical literature". 10

Well, I have, I hope, said enough to convince any open-minded man that the Puranas are false signposts for ancient Indian history. Yet, those very Puranas are followed to decide when the Kurukshetra War took place. How the thing is done will be sketched briefly in my next chapter.

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CHAPTER III DUEL WITH DATES

The concept of a Kali Age is at once crude and primitive. It goes against anthropology, against archaeology, against common sense itself. In man's history, there are only three ages thus far; they are the Age of Savagery, the Age of Barbarism and the Age of Civilization. Like the earlier two ages, the last one also has its different phases. Neither the age nor its different phases end abruptly, giving place to the new, they merge imperceptibly into each other. Often they exist side by side. Though a fascinating subject, it is not pertinent to the present context. I will therefore confine myself to saying that the belief in the recurring cycle of four ages, the Krita, Treta Dwapara and Kali, with progressive decline in righteousness (*dharma*), peace and

prosperity is either *crenkish* or *knavish* or both. Yet, attempts to fix the chronology of the prehistory of India begin almost always with a discussion as to when exactly the Kali Age has stepped in.

If that is decided, says the orthodox school, the date of Kurukshetra War will be decided automatically. On this point, C.V. Vaidya was most unambiguous. 'The orthodox opinion', he observed, "is that the war took place in 3101 B.C.,* calculating on the basis of the generally accepted belief in India that in 1899 A.D., five thousand years had elapsed since the beginning of the Kali - age". And he announced regally. "We agree with this orthodox opinion", ' The orthodox, here as elsewhere, now as always, believe that the higher they raise their voice, the louder they bang the table, the truer will be the beliefs they profess. And they do get away with it, and that is the tragedy of India. Our nation seems to provide the most fertile soil for the growth of credulity, irrationality and superstition.

* *Others push it back by one year 3102 B.C.*

A part of this state of mind is to maintain that the Krita-Kali cycle of time is specially designed by God in His greatness for His chosen land, Hindustan, and for His chosen people, the Hindus. It does not apply, the Old Guard shouts in unison, to the rest of the world.² This, in effect, means that we have nothing to do, absolutely nothing, with the rest of the world and its people and its life. Need we, then, wonder why for a thousand years or more, Hinduism put its foot down firmly on foreign travel ? Need we be pained why we have come to live like a snail in its own shell ?

Now to return to Vaidya and the orthodox school, pastoral nomads who rode in horse-drawn chariots, and adopted the axe with a shaft hole as their principal weapon of war, the nomads known to history as Aryans, were at the start of the Kali Age still either in their original home or just began to disperse in different directions. They were to take almost another 1500 years to make their first entry into the Sind Valley. For reaching the Ganga-Yamuna basin, they must have taken a further period of 500 years. How, then, could a war between well-settled Aryan tribes have taken place in the neighbourhood of what is now Delhi in 3102 or 3101 B.C. ? To the orthodox folk, it is an absurd question. To silence you, they have a hundred and one cogent and powerful arguments. The highest of them in cogency and power is the one advanced by that worthy, Abinash Chandra Das, and it asserts that the "original cradle" of the Aryans was India itself, or more specially, the Sapta Sindhu region. Crawling out of that "cradle", they reached the four corners of the world to shed the light of their glorious culture. To elaborate his discoveries, to expatiate on his theories, Das wrote two fat volumes, fat like the Vedic bulls. They are 'Rigvedic India' and 'Rigvedic Culture'. His discoveries and theories are so jejune that they do not deserve even a derisive smile. Yet, they were gobbled up by many, including a so-called historian of Vijayawada writer. I wonder whether this is chauvinism at its highest point or cussedness at its lowest level.

Leaving Das and his admirers in their "Aryan cradle", let us take up just one argument that is advanced in support of the traditional date for the start of Kali Age. In addition to literary evidence, there is, we are told, irrefutable inscriptional evidence, to prove that the Kali Age did begin in 3102 B.C. Yes, there is inscriptional evidence, but it has one little snag in it. The earliest of such inscriptions is the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II of the Western Chalukya dynasty. ` It is dated A.D. 634. How on earth can any inscription that comes 3736 years after an event be taken as evidence of that event. It is a thing which only an orthodox mind can comprehend.

Another piece of no less irrefutable evidence is flaunted in our face. It is a calculation made by Aryabhata, according to which the Kali Age started in 3102 B.C.⁵ But Aryabhata lived

in A.D., the fifth century, that is, about 3600 years after the event to which he testified on the basis of his astronomical calculations of dubious value. The validity of this evidence is, again, a thing which only an orthodox mind can appreciate.

The other calculations based on the puranic lists of kings and their reigns are so widely divergent as to leave us bewildered. To fix the date of the beginning of the Kali Age, the dynastic lists, originally given by the *Bhavishya Purna* and later copied by the *Matsya*, *Vayu*, *Brahmanda* and some other Puranas are relied upon.⁶ The *Bhavishya* rests on a big lie, a colossal pretense. It claims to peer into the future and to record the kingdoms that would rise and fall, the dynasties that would rule and fadeout and the history that would unroll in ages to come. On the mistrustful basis of the dynastic lists of that fraudulent Purana and the rest of the lying lot, efforts are made to work out the average length of the reign of each king, and using it as a unit, to travel backwards in time to the starts of the Kali Age.

As the dynastic lists in the Puranas vary as regards the number of kings, and as the total period of the reign of each dynasty also varies from Purana to Purana, the average, as is to be expected, necessarily varies. And it varies from 14 to 25 years. To give a few instances at random,

according to Pargiter that average for reign at a "fair" and "liberal" estimate is 18 years; according to Vaidya, it is 20 years;⁸ according to Basham, 19 years; according to P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, as 20 years for a reign is "a very low figure ... if the length be raised to 25", it will "not at all be an extravagant figure";¹⁰ according to Vincent Smith, it is just a wee bit above 25, that is, 25.2 years; according to A.D. Pusalkar, it is rightly 19 years, but as it is good to err on the side of caution, it can be reduced to 18 years;¹² according to P.L. Bhargava, the average is two years more, that is, 20 years; "according to two of the early Indologists, A.F.R. Hoernie and J.F. Fleet, as the lists of the Puranic dynasties are too long, it is advisable to fix the average at no more than 15 years; " according to A.S. Altekar, on the basis of the very learned and the very laborious calculation he made in 1939, the average is 16.5 years, and on the basis of an equally learned and laborious calculation he made in 1959, it is only 14.5 years;¹⁵ according to B.B. Lal, it is 14 years; 16 according to S.N. Pradhan — well, if you are tired of this rigmarole, I am. And so, I stop here.

There are three points that are specially to be noted regarding these calculations and conclusion. First, except very rarely no two historians or Indologists or other specialists agree about the average length of a reign, for the material they rely on is mostly faulty, if not fraudulent. Secondly, when we are dealing with dynastic lists that are very long, a difference of even five in the average length of a reign, can make a difference of many centuries in the final figure we arrive at. Thirdly, we cannot be too sure as to which dynasty followed which, and how many kings actually figured in a dynasty.

To make myself clear I will summarize as best as I can an exercise in fixing chronology taken from Pargiter. It is fairly certain that Chandragupta Maurya started his reign in or about 332 B.C. And that happens to mark the end of the Nanda dynasty. In trying to go back from that dynasty, especially from the time of Mahapadma Nanda, to the time of the Kurukshetra War, we have to take into account 24 Ikshvakus, 27 Panchalas, 24 Kasis, 28 Haihayas, 32 Kalingas, 25 Asmakas, 26 Kurus (Pauravas), 28 Maithilis, 23 Surasenas and 20 Veetahotra.

After making allowance for the discrepancies in these dynastic lists as given in different Puranas, we are left with a total of 257 contemporary kings in ten kingdoms, giving an average of 26 kings for each dynasty. Now, if 18 years is taken as the average for the reign of each king, 18 x 26 will take us back by 468 years. As it is said that the Nanda dynasty ended in 382 B.C.,

this would land us in (468 plus 382) 850 B.C., as the rough starting point of each of the ten dynasties which we are taking into account. But that is not the end of our journey backwards. Between the Kurukshetra War and the starting point of each of these ten dynasties, there were a few more kings and dynasties. (I am avoiding their names and numbers not to make our jungle path more thorny than what it is.) And so, we have to add 100 years more to 850 B.C., and conclude with a lusty shout that 950 B.C., was the starting point of the Kali Age. "But suppose the average is 14 years per reign, we land in 846 B.C.; and if it is 25, we alight in 1132 B.C.!

Are there not too many assumptions, surmises, conjectures, suppositions, guesses, speculation, etc., in the whole process? As I have already pointed out, there is absolutely no agreement as to the average period of the reign of a king. Furthermore, according to the Puranas. The total duration of the Nanda dynasty, that is, of Mahapadma and his eight descendents, was 100 years. But the Jain accounts extend it to 155 years while the chronicles of Ceylon reduce it to a mere 22 years. That is not the end of the matter, either. How long did Mahapadma rule to extinguish completely the Kshatriya kings and the Kshatriya kingdoms? Some say that he ruled for 88 years, and some others bring down his reign to just a dozen years.

As if this confusion is not enough, some scholars do not accept the synchronism of the Kurukshetra War and the beginning of the Kali Age. On the authority of Vriddha Garga, Varahamihira of A.D., the sixth century (both of them were famous astronomers of their times) maintained that the Kurukshetra War took place 653 years after the advent of the Kali Age, that is, in 2449-48 B.C. Kalhana, the Kashmiri historian of A.D., the eighth century, gave his full support to this view.¹⁹ K.P. Jayaswal, a historian of the present century, held, on the other hand, that the Kali Age, in fact, made its bow in 1388 B.C., and that the Kurukshetra War took place 36 years earlier, that is, in 1424 B.C. 20

Is it not presumptuous, I almost said madness, to hope that on the basis of such material a definite date for the Kurukshetra War and the singing of the Song Celestial can be assigned? And yet, for about fifteen hundred years, an attempt has been seriously made to decide when exactly that war was fought. As I do not wish to overburden this chapter with too many references, I will set down here the widely different dates assigned to the Kurukshetra War by the more prominent of the disputants during the past fifteen centuries or more. First I will give the date which they opt for and then give within brackets their names. So here we go: 3102 B.C. (Aryabhatta and Bhaskaracharya); 3101 B.C. (C.V. Vaidya); 2449-48 B.C. (Vriddha Garga, Varahamihira, Kalhana and D.C. Sen); 1922 B.C. (J.S. Karandikar); 15th Century B.C. (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Dharendra Nath Paul); 1468 B.C. (M. Ran-gacharya); 1450 B.C. (P.T. Srinivas Iyengar); 14th Century B.C. (H.T Colebrooke, Lord Elphinstone, H.H.Wilson, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Seetanath Tattavabhushan, R.C.Majumdar, H.C. Raychaudhuri, A.Basham and Paul Renou); between 1200 and 1042 B.C. (A.D. Pusalker); 1198 B.C. (K.G. Sankar); 1197 B.C. (K.L. Daftary); 1151 B.C. (S.N. Pradhan); about 1000 B.C. (E.J. Rapson and Vincent Smith); 950 B.C. (F.E. Pargiter); and finally 850 B.C. (H.C. Ray-chaudhuri who opted earlier for the fourteenth century B.C.

More debate on the point will only add more dates to make us more confused, irritated and bewildered. And yet the Bhimas and the Jarasandhas, Indian and foreign, will wrestle on. Let them fight it out. It will be good for their health. Meanwhile, we cannot overlook one important fact. Of those who took part in this debate, the more sober have formed one firm conviction, and it is that the Kali Age was a fabrication. Who did it ? J.F. Fleet pointed his accusing finger at Aryabhatta. K.P. Jayaswal was less specific; all he said was that someone did it before the close of the Andhra period A.D. 498. Indologist Winternitz was inclined to agree broadly with Fleet

and Jayaswal. The start of the Kali Age, he thought, was based "on the artificial calculation of Indian astronomers, and the association of this date with the conflict of Kauravas and Pandavas is, of course, quite arbitrary." I fully subscribe to this view. The very concept of the Kali Age is based not on reason but on faith. Faith and fabrication always go together, just as reason and truth march together.

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CHAPTER IV FEAR OF DISILLUSIONMENT

Archaeology is mute. And yet, it can reveal truth. Literature is articulate, but it has a natural tendency to embroider truth. And when it is that special branch of literature called myth and mythology, truth gets hopelessly enmeshed in its gaudy embroidery. Literary evidence should therefore be treated with extreme caution when one is writing the history of far off ages. Indeed, it should not be trusted unless it is corroborated by other sources, especially by archaeology.

This is a precaution that is taken by the historians of ancient Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Phoenicia, Crete, Media, Phrygia, Lydia, Carthage, Greece, Rome, Persia, China, in short, of every ancient nation. But it is hardly the case with the historians of ancient India. Why ? Is it because of fear of disillusionment ? Yes, indeed ! For two thousand years or more, we as a nation have been living on a diet of myth and mythology. No, I am wrong there. It is more a drug than food. We swallow it in large doses and it makes us euphoric. Ignoring our present, we gloat over our past. We boast about the glory of Ayodhya and the glitter of Hastinapura. We brag about that ancient Disneyland, the Mayasabha of Indraprastha.

If we take up the spade and start to dig, it may, we fear, reveal to us the truth about our Aryan past in all its stark nakedness. It may scatter to the winds our illusions about our supposed golden age presided over by Rama and Krishna. In fact that happened whenever we excavated the sites associated with the Ramayana and Mahabharata. It blew up sky-high the myth that the Aryans brought with them a superior civilization when they descended on India as conquerors. As it happened in several other parts of the world, and as it happened in several other periods of history, invariably the invaders were barbarians while the invaded were the civilized people. The onslaught of the Aryans meant a violent blow to the higher civilization of the Harappans and resulted in its gradual decline and death.

And for almost a millennium, say, till the rise of the Magadhan Empire (and it was the very first empire in Indian history). India had no more cities like Harappa and Mohenjodaro, no more towns like Kalibangan and Rangpur, no more ports like Lothal. The Aryans lived in mud houses, cooked in mud pots, ate out of mud bowls and drank out of mud cups. Their material culture was poor; they were total aliens to urban life and its amenities.

Together with their cows, they lived in village settlements, often sharing the same compound with their cows. This last statement is not meant to be a sneer; it is a statement of fact. Cow was their unit of exchange; it was their currency; it was their wealth, their status symbol. The highest luxury for them was to press the soma juice, a kind of strong liquor, thrice a day, and quaff pot fuls of it. The material culture of the Aryans was thus of the lowest order. Writing in 1962, Stuart Piggott said: "Like the Amurru in Mesopotamia, the Aryans were people who had never known a city." A greater archaeologist than Piggott, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, writing in 1966, was far more emphatic, and he stated:

Let us admit uncompromisingly that no Aryan cul-ture has yet been isolated anywhere in India as a material and recognizable phenomenon... .I

The verdict of these two foreigners should have been taken up as a challenge by the devotees of Rama and Krishna. They should have stunted neither time nor money nor effort to prove them wrong. Every site that had anything to do with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* should have been excavated long ago, not perfunctorily, but with utmost diligence to demonstrate how incorrect are the Piggotts and Wheelers. Instead of doing that, they vie with each other in drawing unwarranted conclusions from the shreds of the Painted Grey Ware found over a wide area, a few glass beads and iron arrow-heads discovered here and there, and a solitary twelve-room mud house located at the level of the last phase of the Harappan culture. Except to people given to wishful thinking, these prove nothing but the fact of the low level of the material culture of the Aryans during the thousand years from the time they forced their way into India to the rise of the Magadhan Empire with its base in what was predominantly a non-Aryan region.

Of course, it is said that a statement made in the Puranas, namely, that after it was badly eroded by the flood waters of the Ganges in the eighth century B.C., the capital of the Kurus was shifted to Kosambi has been proved correct by drillings into the bed of the river at Hastinapura. Just because that one statement is corroborated by archaeology, does it follow that the many silly things said about that city in the Puranas should *ipso facto* be correct? One such silly thing is this: Hastinapura, the Puranas tell us, was founded by Hastin; they also tell us, that Dushyanta, and his more famous son, Bharata, had Hastinapura as their capital. In the Puranic genealogical lists, Hastin is the fifth in succession to Dushyanta. How could the city founded by Hastin be the capital of his forefathers? ³ But nothing is too silly or absurd or crazy where Puranas are concerned.

Potsherds, glass beads, arrowheads and a twelve-room mud house —these cannot bear witness to a high material culture; that can be done only by massive monuments. As no such monuments have been found at Hastinapura, A. Ghosh rightly sounded a warning. He said:

... a word of caution is necessary, lest the impression is left on the unwary reader that the Hastinapura excavation has yielded archaeological evidence about the truth of the story of the *Mahabharata* and that here at last is the recognition by 'Official archaeology' of the truth embodied in Indian traditional literature. Such a conclusion would be unwarranted. Beyond the fact that Hastinapura, the reputed capital of the Kauravas, was found to be occupied by a people whose distinctive ceramics were the Painted Grey Ware in a period which might roughly have synchronized with the date of the origin of the nucleus of the *Mahabharata* story, that this occupation came to an end with a heavy flood and that this Ware is found at many early sites, some of which are connected, either in literature or by tradition, with the epic heroes, the excavation has no bearing on the authenticity or otherwise of the epic tale. It is indeed tempting to utilize archaeological evidence for substantiating tradition, but the pitfalls in the way should be guarded against, and caution is necessary that fancy does not fly ahead of facts.

But we do allow our fancy to fly ahead of facts where our old myths and mythologies are concerned. We fail to realize that the bulkier the old books are the greater the interpretations into them and the value of their anthropology, their geography, their history and the skeleton of that history, I mean, their chronology. The orthodox crowd, and to our deep regret it includes even many of our archaeologists, anthropologists and historians, are blind to this.

A typical representative of this blind crowd is C.V. Vaidya. "The Mahabharata War or rather battle", he wrote with a grand flourish, "is the first authentic event in the ancient history of India"

^s As if it was not enough, he affirmed that "nobody has doubted the truth of the event". A brasher statement can hardly be imagined. Not only the event, but also the date of the event was questioned very much by very many people, as we have already seen. And people would continue to question these things despite all the shouting, all the wailing and all the gnashing of teeth by the traditionalists.

In the spirit of a true historian, Vincent Smith said:

From darkness to light. The advent of the Maurya dynasty marks the passage from darkness to light for the historian. Chronology suddenly becomes definite, almost precise; a huge empire springs into existence

That is too much for the sanatanists to swallow. "Much earlier", they will tell you at the top of their shrill voice, there were six great emperors who ruled the whole world from their imperial throne in India. And all of them were pure-blooded Aryans and Kshatriyas who descended directly either from Surya (the Sun God), or Chandra (the Moon god). To hail the Maurya Chandragupta, the upstart, as the first emperor, they will declare, is a part of the dirty plot of Europeans like Vincent Smith to deny the honour of hoary antiquity to Indian history. In their bid to counter this plot, they maintain that the Chandragupta who was a contemporary of Alexander the Great was not of the Maurya Dynasty, but of the much later one, the Gupta dynasty. This would place the Gupta dynasty in the fourth century B.C. If you dare to protest, they will knock you down by hurling at you all their *panchangas* and all their Puranas. What counts, they pontificate, is that great divide between the Dwapara and Kali Ages, the Mahabharata War, fought in 3102 B.C. If that takes Asoka back at least by a thousand years, as it was pointed out by A.A. Macdonell,' and if it does not synchronize with world chronology, let Asoka and the world chronology be consigned to the blazing pits of hell. Being a Rai Bahadur and a little more sophisticated, Vaidya did not say it openly, but the Vijayawada historians and Vijayawada author to whom I referred to earlier, did !

Now, we have that new technique called "Carbon -14 dating". It was a discovery for which Willard F. Libby got the 1960 Nobel Prize for Chemistry, Libby's dating technique enables us to explore the past as never before. With its aid we can establish chronologies for prehistory as well as for the recent geologic and climatic changes. Of course, it has some limitations. It can, as Libby himself explained, take us back in time for a period of forty thousand years only "with an error of measurement of about one century in the period zero to twenty thousand years and somewhat larger for older dates' .⁸ True, since the time of Libby's statement which I quoted, it has been found that a slightly wider margin for error has to be allowed. But that has not taken away the importance of Libby's carbon-dating technique.

And yet, to accept its efficiency is to admit that your *panchangas* and Puranas are of no use in fixing a chronology for Indian history. And so, the margin of error, in radiocarbon dating, is exaggerated, indeed, the whole technique is belittled. And we are left wondering whether our Vaidyas are not really mythologists in the garb of historians !

The best thing to do with our Vaidyas is to ignore them; to argue with them is to give needless importance to their chatter, or, their gibberish, if you prefer the stronger expression. Carbon-14 dating has, on the whole, confirmed the correctness of the chronology of Indian history sketched roughly for the first time by Sir William Jones. It was he who identified the "Sandrocottus" of the Greek writers as Chandragupta Maurya, and established the synchronism of Chandragupta and Alexander. It was James Prinsep who deciphered the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts and enabled us to read the Asokan inscriptions. It was Alexander Cunningham, the Father of Indian Archaeology, who pieced together the geography of ancient India. Before these pioneering

savants made us realize the place of Chandragupta and Ashoka in Indian history, they were either forgotten or derided, denigrated and denounced. How many of us know that, according to our dictionaries, the word "Vrishala" means a Sudra, a sinful man and *also Chandragupta* ? How many of us, again, know that "Devanampriya", the title which Asoka had taken for himself in his inscriptions, has only one meaning, and that is *an imbecile* while praising, nay, worshipping the mythical folk heroes of the epics and the Puranas we heaped contempt on the heads of some of our greatest historical personages.

Insofar as this chapter is concerned, what remains to be said is this: The Kurukshetra War was in all probability a myth. In case it was not a myth, it took place about 1000 B.C. Even so, it can hardly be called a war, much less, a great war; it was a local skirmish between some Aryan tribes. Indeed, it was such a trivial thing that it was ignored totally by the entire range of the Vedic literature. Furthermore, the skirmish was perhaps not between the Kurus and Pandavas, These are by no means original ideas that are being advanced by me for the first time; more thorough students of the *Mahabharata* than myself postulated them decades ago.

Apart from the authorities whom I cited in my second chapter, there are many others whose verdict is that the Kurukshetra War was a myth. To quote only a few from among them, Vincent Smith was fully convinced that "the entire framework of the story of the Mahabharata is essentially incredible and unhistorical." ¹⁰ Albrecht Weber was completely persuaded that it was no more than a war "between the Aryan tribes..." Romila Thapar thought that it was "a local feud." ¹² Basham did, no doubt, give it the status of "a battle", but he held that it was a "battle magnified to huge proportions." ¹³ Christian Lassen was perhaps the first to take the stand that "the original struggle at Kurukshetra war between the Kurus and the Panchalas and the career of Pandava brothers and their connection with the Panchalas was included to promote the Brahmanical interests." The Pandya Sastri of Pithapuram may not have even heard name of Lassen, but on the basis of his independent study of the Mahabharata, he also came to the same conclusion as Lassen.

What does all this show? It shows that the historicity of the Kurukshetra War is doubtful; its date is doubtful; the long list of its participant kingdoms is doubtful; its extent and ferocity are doubtful; indeed, everything about it is doubtful including the singing of the Song Celestial by Krishna. And yet there are owls in the orthodox crowd who titus blithely the exact date when that war started. Before Galileo erred his telescope to the sky in the first decade of A.D., the seventeenth century, astronomy was not much of a developed science in any part of the world. In its former crude stages it was more an ally of wily priests and astrologers in fleecing the credulous people, and not an aid to seekers of knowledge to peer a little further into the depths of the vast cosmos.

And yet, on the basis of the pre-Galilean astrology, some members of our orthodox crowd venture to fix a chronology for ancient Indian history! None can accuse A.D. Pusalkar of being a heretic, much less *a pashanda*. And yet here is his criticism of our dependence of moth-eaten almanacs to *fix* a date for the Kurukshetra War:

Astronomical references in the Mahabharata itself about the position of the Nakshatras and planets have been utilized for determining the date of the war. But, the same data have yielded various divergent results. As a matter of fact, the statements in the Epic are conflicting and self-contradictory, so that in order to arrive at some conclusion it is necessary to reject certain statements or their implications as later interpolations or mere exaggerations. No satisfactory and acceptable result can be arrived at from these data. 15

The kind of foolish ventures criticized by Pusalkar are, by no means, confined to India. Over a hundred years ago Bishop Ussher announced to the world on the basis of his study of the Bible that God created Adam on March 23, 4004 B.C. ¹⁶ Perhaps inspired by this foolish Bishop, some decades ago Velandi Gopal Aiyar came out with the grand announcement that the Kurukshetra War broke out on October, 14, 1194 B.C. " Correcting Aiyar, another luminary has recently stated that the Kali Age began on February " 3102 B.C., and that the Kurukshetra War was fought thirty-six years later in 3138 B.C. He gave a generous life span of 125 years to Krishna and assigned 3227 B.C., for the Bhagavan's birth and 3102 for his death. In other words, the Kali Age started on the day of the Bhagavan's death. All very neat, very brave, and very stupid ! Another such luminary is S.B. Roy. After retirement from his position as a high-ranking Income-tax Officer, he is utilizing his genius for figures, tables, schedules and balance-sheets to decide for good the whole range of chronology, not only for India but for the entire world. Indeed, there is no riddle in human history to which this worthy has not a ready answer. As Director of the Institute of Chronology, New Delhi, he is throwing a flood of light on every dark corner of history. To enlighten laymen, he has written a small book, and for the study of scholars a large tome. "

"Vyasa" says Roy, "represents the grand personality of the intellectual world of the Epic-Upanishadic age." And Roy represents the grander personality of the "Age of Chartered Chauvinism" in which India, that is Bharat, is now living. Hats off to our modern Vyasas !

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CHAPTER V

"A FRAUD OF MONSTROUS SIZE"

It was Kipling who in a mood of levity used the phrase, "a fraud of monstrous size" to describe Cheops' pyramid which, five thousand years after its creation, still stands proudly just outside Cairo at the edge of the Sahara. Without the least levity, Kipling's phrase can be applied to the *Mahabharata*. As that tomb is called "the great pyramid", this tome is called "the great epic." That tops the list of the Seven Wonders of the World on the score of its sheer bulk. On the same score, this should head the list of the seven fantasies of the world if one were to prepare that list. While that is 451 feet in height and has 3,057,000 cubic yards of masonry, this is eighteen cantos in length and runs to 100,000 verses. Whatever sanctity the pyramid enjoyed at one time, it lost a long time ago; it is now only a tourist attraction. The epic, on the other hand, still enjoys its sanctity and that is one of the worst calamities of India. The sheer bulk and weight of the *Mahabharata*, and its sheer nonsense, crushes out all commonsense, even all common decency, from Indian life and thought-

How over the centuries the *Mahabharata* had grown into its present monstrous size is a tale that is told much too often. So, I need not tell it over again. It is enough to state that the epic itself provides internal evidence that it was the handiwork of three scribes, Vyasa, Vaisampayana and Souti. Vyasa, it is said, dictated the core-theme in 8800 verses and called it "Jaya". Vaisampayana enlarged it to 24,000 verses, and renamed it 'Bharata'. Then Souti came along to expand it to a grand total of 1,00,000 verses and called it the "Mahabharata". But the truth is that, apart from these three, there were many more nameless scribes and scribblers, fabricators and forgers, who put their finger into the prodigious pie.

To temper with the work of some other author, interpolate whole passages of your own into it, to twist it out of shape, to alter its very basis and its central message — what a heinous crime it is !

And yet in this spiritual country of ours, it has been done since antiquity. There is no religious text, no law-code, no treatise on polity, no manual of economics, no epic, no Purana that is not tampered with. And it is done with a clear conscience ! Indeed, it is thought that to "improve" the work of others by what you believe to be correct, proper or true, or what you think will subserve public interest (in effect this means the interest of your own caste) is a thing which would earn you the right of permanent residence in *Swarga* (heaven). And so, the process of "improving" goes on all the time. Even the coming of the printing press has not put a stop to it.

The *Mahabharata* is the worst victim in this respect. Its original form was in all likelihood that of a ballad. When there was no cinema, no radio, no television, perhaps not even the theatre, one of the most popular forms of entertainment was undoubtedly the singing of ballads. They were woven round folk-heroes or tribal gods. Their authors belonged to a special caste, a mixed one, called "Suta". The Sutas attached themselves to royal courts. They were most in demand during sacrifices. Some of the sacrifices went on and on for a dozen years or more and to overcome the boredom of the prolonged rituals the Sutas were engaged to recite their ballads. To please their royal patrons, they trimmed the text of the ballads here, expanded it there, and took full liberties with it everywhere. That is how the ballads increased in length from one recital to another and with each fresh recital their tone and tenor also changed. This was true not only of the *Mahabharata*, but of the *Ramayana* and Puranas as well.

That, however, is not the end of the story. The original text in Prakrit was changed (as Pargiter suggests) in later time to Sanskrit.' At this stage the Brahmins replaced the Sutas. And they went full steam ahead not only to alter the text of the old ballads but also their character, their meaning and message. The main thrust of their revision was to make themselves the undisputed gods on earth. Indeed, some of them went much further. The Bhrigus, who were the principal revisers, placed themselves above the gods. One of them, it was claimed, gave a hard kick — perhaps harder than a kick by a judo expert - right on the chest of Vishnu for not showing him proper respect. Prior to this, he was equally incensed with Brahma and Shiva, and laid them under dire courses.'

I am no Sanskrit scholar. Nor have I spent a lifetime doing research in Indology. But there are others, Indians and foreigners, who mastered Sanskrit and earned great name as Indologists. They can speak with greater authority than myself. One such was Hermann Oldenberg of Germany. The author of a critical biography of the Buddha, he was known as a prodigy of industry. According to the well-considered verdict of this savant: "The *Mahabharata* began its existence as a simple epic narrative. It became, in course of centuries, the most monstrous chaos." So, I am not the first, nor will I be the last to apply the adjective "monstrous" to the *Mahabharata*.

Hopkins was a closer student of the *Mahabharata* than Oldenberg. In his book *The Great Epic of India*, wholly devoted to a systematic analysis of the *Mahabharata*, and published for the first time at the beginning of the present century, this American Indologist described graphically how the epic has come down to us, and I quote:

In what shape has epic poetry come down to us ? A text that is no text, enlarged and altered in every recession, chapter after chapter recognized even by native commentaries as *Praksipta* in a land without historical Sens or care for the preservation of popular monuments, where no check was put

on any reciter or copyist who might add what beauties or polish what parts he would, where it was a merit to add a glory to the pet god, where every popular poem was handled freely and is so to this day.'

we think nothing of tampering with the old texts, be they religious or secular. And in the process of tampering, we throw in everything, relevant or irrelevant, decent or vulgar, true or false. According to Vincent Smith, out of the 100,000 verses of the existing text of the *Mahabharata* only 20,000 have a bearing on the core-theme of the epic, that is, the conflict between the Kurus and Pandus; all the rest is padding, more padding and yet more padding. Even in the medieval Hindi epic, the *Chand-Raisa*, there is padding in a big way. Its initial 5000 verses are now lost in a muddy ocean of 125,000 verses.'

What I have said thus far is meant to lead to some pertinent question. When was the core-theme of the *Mahabharata* composed ? When and how did its expansion begin ? When did it stop? What were the motives for tampering with the text ?

On every one of these questions, there is wide divergence of opinion among scholars. But it can be definitely said that the *Mahabharata* did not exist as an epic in Sanskrit, as distinct from a heroic laud in Prakrit, at the time of Panini. In his grammar the word "Mahabharata" is used, (as already pointed out) not as a noun, but as an adjective. He, however, mentioned Vasudeva, Arjuna and Yudhisthira, but the first two as Gods."⁹ From this we can deduce two things; first, at the time of Panini, *Mahabharata* did not exist as an epic in Sanskrit; second, the Krishna cult was then in its formative stages, and along with Krishna, Arjuna was also being worshipped as a god.

That Panini was unaware of the *Mahabharata* as an epic is suggested by yet another significant point. His grammar refers to Kunti and Madri. But they are brought in not as the wives of Pandu but as "geographical appellatives; Kunti signifying a woman from the country of the Kuntas, and Madri, Madra woman."⁹

When, then, did the *Mahabharata* assume the form of an epic ?

The earliest reference both to "Bharata and Mahabharata" occurs in

Asvalayana Grihyasutra. But Albrecht Weber thought that it was either an interpolation or that the *sutra* was of a very late date.¹⁰ However that may be, as the date of the *sutra* itself is very uncertain, it leaves us hanging. And so, we are back in the realm of assumptions, conjectures, speculations, guesses, etc. But of one thing there can be no doubt. Whatever be the date when the *Mahabharata* assumed its present form of an epic in Sanskrit, it cannot be anterior to Panini. Of course, that grammarians' lifetime cannot be fixed exactly ;, but the consensus is now in favour of the fifth century B .C. Rapson,²Barnett,"Hopkins," Macdonell:⁵Wintemitz,¹⁶ and some others think that the *Mahabharata*'s initial emergence as an epic should be placed some years after Panini, that is, between the fourth and third century B.C. Weber brings the date down to the third century B.C.'" and so does Vaidya.¹⁸ Radha Kumud Mookerji brings it down further by a century to the second century B.C."

Whatever might have been the upper limit for the emergence of the ' *Mahabharata* as a Sanskrit epic, the lower limit for its present avatar is A.D. the fourth or the fifth century. And minor additions and alterations and emendations did not stop till as late as A.D. the fourth century. Vaidya, on the other hand, placed the lower limit only a century below his upper limit, that is, 200 B.C. Nothing 'else can be expected from a self-proclaimed spokesman of the

orthodox crowd which has a holy horror for anything and everything that comes after Christ. In fact, the start of the Kali Age itself, it affirms, the fall of man has begun. But to go back to the lower limit for the shaping of the Mahabharata, V.S. Suthankar, despite his worshipful attitude towards the epic, was honest enough, candid enough, to admit that it might contain "some furtive additions which had been made as late as 1000 A.D. or even later." And he went on to add:

The critical edition of the Mahabharata which is being published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, shows that large blocks of the text of the vulgate must on incontrovertible evidence be excised as comparatively late interpolations.... the Southern Recension offers us illustrations of regular long poems being bodily incorporated in the epic, like the detailed description of the avataras of Vishnu put in the mouth of Bhishma in the Sabha, and the full enunciation of the Vaisnavadharma in the Asvamedhikaparvan, two passages comprising together about 2500 stanzas. When we know that these additions have been made comparatively recent times, even so late as the period to which our written tradition reaches back, can we legitimately assume that our text was free from such intrusions during that prolonged period in the history of our text which extends beyond the periphery of our manuscript tradition
?²⁰

Such is the mulish obstinacy of the orthodox crowd that it clutches at any straw to defend its blind beliefs. One such straw is an inscription of A.D. the fifth century which states that at that time Vyasa's *Mahabharata* had a total of 1000,000 verses. The same is the number now; and so it follows, argues the orthodox crowd, that from a time prior to that date there should have been no changes in the text of the epic. But they overlook one point. How easy it is to cut out some old verses here and there so as to make room for new ones and still to maintain the total at 100,000 ? And this is exactly what had happened.

Now, what remains is the question of motives. The first and foremost motive was to build up the concept of a personal god. Though Goutama the Buddha refused to affirm or deny the existence of god, his disciples set him up, soon after his death, as a god. And fantastic were the stories which they wove around him about his miraculous birth, his colourful life until he grew up to be a youth, the renunciation of his young wife and new-born son and his kingdom in his zeal to rid the world of all sorrow and suffering, his all-embracing love and compassion and his limitless powers to offer succor to his faithful devotees. All this helped to make Buddhism develop rapidly as a major threat to Vedism, or Brahminism, as some would prefer to call it. To counter-attack, it was necessary to create a rival. After trial and error, -the folk-hero of a tribe of cowherds in and around Madhura proved handy. But about the third or fourth century B.C., he was built up into a god. We see him breaking into the story of *Mahabharata* rather abruptly at the time of Draupadi's self-choice of a groom (swayamvara). She ended up by marrying; not one, but five princes, but that is a different story. From that time onwards, Krishna grows and grows and he dwarfs every other character in the *Mahabharata* and emerges as God.

The next motive, not so obvious, was to change what was a pro-Kuru laud into a pro-Pandu laud. On this point, apart from some Western Indologists, Pendyala, the Sastri of Pithapuram, wrote at length. This sea change, he thought, took place at the sacrifice of Janamejaya. He was a

descendent of the Pandus; he was lavish with gifts. Is it not then wise to please him by giving a pro-Pandu slant to the whole theme ? So the slant was given and yet truth shows through the cracks that could not be papered over completely.

A third and deeper motive, already mentioned in passing, was to place the priest class right at the top of the social ladder. A reliable historian of ancient India, Rapson was very definite in thinking that the *Mahabharata* "has become through the accretions of ages — the work, no doubt, of Brahmin editors — a vast encyclopaedia of Bahamanical lore' .2'

Yet another writer on Ancient India, particularly of the Buddhist period, is T.W. Rhys-Devids, and he says that the *Mahabharata* "has certainly undergone one, if not two or even three, alteration at the hand of later priestly editors." And he adds:

They must have recast the poem with two main objects in view — in the first place to insist on the supremacy of the brahmins, which had been so much endangered by the great popularity of the anti-priestly view of the Buddhists and others; and in the second place to show that the brahmins were in sympathy with, and had formally adopted, certain popular cults and beliefs highly esteemed by the people. In any case, there, in the poem, these cults and beliefs, absent from the Vedic literature, are found in full life and power. And though this line of evidence, if it stood alone, would be too weak to bear much weight, the most likely explanation seems to be that here also we have evidence, to some extent at least, of beliefs not included in the Vedic literature, and yet current among, and powerfully affecting, both the Aryan and the semi-Aryan peoples of India.'2

Well, whatever are the motives and whichever the agency, it was always sinister, always evil and inhuman. Is this too sweeping a condemnation? No, not in the least! "The Mahabharata, completely rewritten just before the Guptas", stated Kosambi, "shows revision in favour of the barbarous sari practice."²³ And if sati is again coming into vogue after more than 150 years of its abolition by law, thanks to the British, it is due to the pernicious influence of its epics and Puranas at the top of which stands the *Mahabharata*. Is this a biased charge ? No, definitely riot! "Perhaps few books", as Sir Percival Griffiths said, "have influenced the pattern of Indian life and thought more than the *Mahabharata*. In a well-known part of this epic occurs the description of a dispute between the wives of King Pandu as to which of them is entitled to die on his funeral pyre."

Well, such is the influence of the *Mahabharata*, persistent, pervasive, and pernicious. And with every revision, that influence has become more reactionary, more deadly. A part of that revision, let me add, is the Bhagavad Gita, the Song Celestial, with its exhortation to kill, to kill in cold-blood, to kill as a matter of caste duty.

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CHAPTER VI

OUTER CITADEL AND INNER FORT

Unless you breach the outer citadel you cannot storm the inner fort. That is the reason why I have been concentrating my attack on the *Mahabharata*. Once I show how it is a big lie, an outrageous forgery, a pious fraud, I can tackle the Gita easily. The validity of this strategy will

be readily conceded when it is remembered that without its dramatic setting the Gita loses much of its appeal.

Right from its start, despite its many groupings and regroupings, its reconnaissances, its ambushes, its sallies, sorties and skirmishes, its diversionary attacks, its rearguard actions, the Mahabharata marches - slowly, tortuously, and yet inexorably— towards the Kurukshetra. It is said to be not merely a battlefield but "a holy field", "a field of righteousness." On that field two vast armies are arrayed. The horses, numbering hundreds of thousands, are stamping their feet to rush forward, but on ebbing held back, neighing in their impatience. The elephants, somewhat less in number, are trumpeting. From the tops of the thickly massed chariots colourful flags are fluttering in the morning breeze. A drone is rising from the ocean of infantry, spoiling for fight. And suddenly, drowning everything else, there is the blowing of conches by the legendary warriors of both sides. It is followed by the blare of the kettledrums and tabors, drums and horns. The tumult is ear-splitting. It is resounding through earth and sky. At that dramatic moment, Arjuna asks Krishna to draw up his chariot into no man's land so that he could survey the men and their commanders whom he has to encounter. And once he sees standing before him his "fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles and brothers, sons and grandsons, as also companions", his limbs quail, his mouth goes dry, his body shakes, his hair stands on end and his bow slips from his limp hands. In a mood of deep despondency, of utter gloom, he says: "I have no desire for victory. Please turn back my chariot." With an indulgent smile, Krishna refuses to oblige, and for exhorting Arjuna to fight the battle of righteousness, he begins to sing his Song Celestial. A hush falls on the Kurukshetra; millions of men thirsting for war stand spell-bound; earth and heaven strain their ears not to miss even a single note of that divine song.

Take away this dramatic setting, this thrilling scene, what remains of the Gita ? Only the hotchpotch of faulty cosmology, hackneyed theology, turbid philosophy, primitive sociology, obnoxious ethics, and to create a mood of awe, the oft-repeated claims "I am the God", "I am the Truth", "I am the Life" and "I am the Way". And yet, to a mind that is already captive, it sounds like something great, something profound. Whoever first interpolated the Gita into the already much interpolated *Mahabharata* at this particular point with scenic tricks and sound effects was a master psychologist. "It is difficult to excel", as P.D.Mehta says, "the Hindu sense of dramatic in religion ... The poet author of the Gita could hardly have chosen a more arresting opening scene for his philosophical song." But to deal with the Gita at this stage would be to anticipate, and so, I return to the *Mahabharata* to fire at it a few final salvos.

A Rajagopalachari, a Munshi or a Sukthankar may appreciate the *Mahabharata* as a great work of literature, but I cannot. They may think that it has a solid kernel of historicity; I do not. They may extol it for its moral grandeur, its eternal verities; I disagree with them. Among the epics of the world, it is the most amorphous, the most tortuous and chaotic. It has neither the unity of theme nor style nor vision that is expected in an epic. To borrow the words of Hopkins, it is "pitched together and patched together". by many hands, including the most detestable of human beings, the priests. If it has one merit, it owes it to its original composers, the Sutas. They were born poets; they were of the earth, earthy; they had the power to sway the hearts of the common people. They could etch character in black and white with practically no intermediate tones, making it typological, and on that score, memorable. For priggishness, tinged with self-pity, there can only be one Yudhisthira; for the he-man who eats like a wolf and drinks like a whale, gruff in his speech and rough in his manners, there can only be one Bhima; for

obstinacy for incapacity either to learn or to unlearn, for standing on dignity unmindful of all consequences, there can only be one Duryodhana; and for — well, even the minor characters in the *Mahabharata* such as Sanjaya and Sakuni are typological. The interpolators and redactors could do little or no damage to those characters originally conceived and created by the Sutas. Draupadi is by far the most superb of their creations. And it is these characters who lend to the *Mahabharata* its basic appeal, its unabating interest. But simply on the basis of this is one merit, it cannot be rated as a great work of Indian literature, let alone the greatest work of world literature as Sukthankar would have us believe.⁴

Now as for the *Mahabharata* being a work of moral grandeur, it is (to put it mildly) a preposterous claim. To us who are ordinary mortals without any esoteric powers, the morals of the *Mahabharata* are muddy, crude, revolting. But to esoteric geniuses like Sukthankar the 'Mahabharata' is "the Golden Treasury of the Ideals of the Indians at their best" .⁵ But Indians of what age ? Of which political set up ? Of which economic and social order ? At one point of his paean of the *Mahabharata*, Sukthankar says with a thrill in his voice that the epic was "used as a book of education in Banas' time."⁶ Bana lived in A.D. the seventh century, and we are living in the twentieth. Bana lived in a monarchy, and we are living in a republic. Bana lived in a feudal social and economic order while we are professing to build a society based on socialism, egalitarianism and secularism. Our world is different from his; our world-view is divergent from his. And yet, Sukthankar thinks that the *Mahabharata* should continue to be our textbook; Rajagopalachari publishes a popular translation of the epic at a cheap price so that it could gain the widest circulation; and Munshi spends the terminal years of his life trying to complete his last major literary effort, 'Krishnavatara'.⁸ And we have in our midst millions of Sukthankaras, Rajagopalacharis and Munshis ! They have a feudal mentality. They have a vested interest in the old order of society. And so, they want the *Mahabharata* to be our textbook, the Gita to be our scripture. They refuse to read the history of the world, much less, to learn any lessons from it. This is not the place to recapitulate the story of the fading out of the Feudal Age in Europe, giving place to the Modern Era. But I would like to mention one bare fact. Paracelsus, the German alchemist and physician of A.D. the fifteenth century, "burned the books of Hippocrates and Galen before beginning his lectures on medicine at Prague." "It is that defiant spirit, that daring gesture, which led to the birth of modern medicine. If a modern India were to be born, we should cultivate that defiant spirit of Paracelsus and turn our back on a past that shackles on a world that is dead and gone. Undoubtedly, myth has a place in human civilization. As Bronislaw Malinowski wrote:

Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.¹⁰

But let it be noted that Malinowski, a great anthropologist, was writing of primitive culture, of primitive society. Is ours still a primitive society ? Even Rajagopalachari, Munshis and Sukthankars would reject that idea. Why, then, are they zealous in propagating the primitive myths? A reply to this query can be found in Malinowski's essay on "Myth in Primitive Society". In the course of it, he stated that "myth, taken as a whole, cannot be sober, dispassionate history, since it is always made ad hoc to fulfill a certain sociological function, to

glorify a certain group or to justify an anomalous status." I have added emphasis to what should be taken special note of. Our Rajagopalacharis, Munshis and Sukthankars are out to glorify *a certain group* (their own) and to justify *an anomalous position* (again, their own).

A little lower down in the same essay, Malinowski remarked:

It is clear that myth functions especially where there is a sociological strain, such as in matters of great difference in rank and power, matters of precedence⁴² and subordination, and unquestionably where profound historical changes have taken place.

All these conditions mentioned by Malinowski are present in the India of today. There is "sociological strain"; there is "great difference in rank and power"; there is social and economic "precedence and subordination". Our Rajagopalacharis, Munshis and Sukthankars are not for wiping out these factors; they are for preserving them; indeed, they would like to strengthen them; therefore, they opt for myth as a buttress to the old order of society. There can be no new society, no new life, unless that buttress is bombarded and blown up.

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CHAPTER XV ETHICS OF THE GITA

"The study of ethics", as Bertrand Russell said, "traditionally, consists of two parts, one concerned with moral rules, the other with what is good on its own account. Rules of conduct, many of which have a ritual origin, play a great part in the lives of savages and primitive peoples. It is forbidden to eat out of the chief's dish, or to seethe the kid in its mother's milk; it is commanded to offer sacrifices to the gods, which, at a certain stage of development, are thought most acceptable if they are human beings. Other moral rules, such as the prohibition of murder and theft, have a more obvious social utility, and survive the decay of the primitive theological systems with which they were originally associated. But as men grow more reflective there is a tendency to lay less stress on rules and more on states of mind ... What they value is a state of mind, out of which, as they hold, right conduct must ensue; rules seem to them external, and insufficiently adaptable to circumstances."

In other words, ethics is something wider, deeper and more universal than morals. In ancient India ethics never developed, as it did in Greece, into a special branch of study. True, Gautama the Buddha gave an ethical base to his religion. But the rise of Mahayana and other sects, differing from the Mahayana only in minor doctrinal details, undermined that ethical base. As further reference to the subject will be out of place here, all that need be said is this: As Russell put it truly and pithily: "Ethics is mainly social" .2

An ethical system with a social bearing can develop only in a society that has some social coherence. Because of our castes and sub-castes we lack it. Along with social coherence, we also lack social conscience. If ever we had it, our karma and *Punarjanma* (rebirth) theories weakened it, our Vedanta crippled it, and finally, our supreme goal of *Mukti*,

Moksha or *Nirvana* killed it. How can an individual goal foster a social conscience, a collective spirit? If you want release from the cycle of birth and death, you should, Krishna tells you, even cultivate "absence of affection for son, wife, home and the like." In the commentary on the verse, Sankaracharya leaves no scope for any doubt. He says:

Affection is an intense form of attachment and consists incomplete identification with another, as in the case of a man who feels happy or miserable when another is happy or miserable and who feels himself alive or dead when another is alive or dead. The like: others who are very dear, other dependants. Unat-tachment and absence of affection are termed knowledge because they lead to knowledge.`

If you are really serious about "non-separation" with the Supreme God you should go further and — do what ? — develop "DISTASTE FOR THE SOCIETY OF MEN."⁵ What a horrid thing to preach! And yet ... and yet ... Ranganathananda tells us:

In these days of conflict, struggle and confusion, we can have no better guide to show us the path to freedom and peace than the message of the rational, universal and comprehensive spirituality which Krishna taught in his *Gita* over 2,000 years ago. It is God's message to man — eternal, ancient and ageless. Momentous problems are there before us which stagger the wisdom of the earth's bravest and best. Let us hope and pray that the new interest that is evident in many quarters in the *Song Celestial*, as Edwin Arnold called the *Gita*, may be productive of real and lasting benefit to humanity at large. ⁶

How can a scripture which makes a reluctant Arjuna take up his arms again and kill his kinsmen to gain a petty kingdom promote world peace ? How can a scripture which tells Arjuna that he has no freedom of action, that he should kill his guru and his grandsire and the rest because they were already killed by Krishna himself — well, how can such a scripture promote freedom? These are perhaps great esoteric truths which only Ranganathananda Swami can comprehend. I find that among the books I collected on the *Gita* there is one entitled *The Esoteric Gospel of Gita* by Susruva. Being a very un esoteric person, I could not understand, try however much, what the author meant by the following two sentences: "In this path there is just no way to codify the fruits of the individual's experience for easy imitation by the masses. There is always an element of risk, a gap of uncertainty, as the sole portals to self-knowledge lies within oneself." Among the other books which I have — books which have a direct bearing on the ethics of the *Gita* — one is the "Ethics of the *Gita*" by G.W. Kaveeshwar, a Professor of Philosophy. On page 198, he speaks of "the final goal for the tendency to action" which the *Gita* placed before humanity. I presume that he means Karma Yoga when he speaks of "the final goal for the tendency to action". With this plausible explanation, I proceed to quote him:

The final goal for the tendency to action, placed by the *Gita* before humanity, is naturally in line with the general current of Indian philosophical thought. The *Gita* has all along been regarded as the quintessence of such ancient Indian philosophical literature as the *Upanishads*. The final ... is beyond the reach of mind and of language too.

And yet this learned professor has written a whole book of more than 300 pages mostly on what is "beyond the reach of mind and of language too."

Kaveeshwar seems to have read Plato, Kant, Mill, Russell and other leading lights of European thought. It did not, however, occur to the Professor of Philosophy that it is foolish to write on subjects that are beyond the reach of both mind and language. Most of our academic philosophers indulge in such foolishness; it is their forte, their fortune, their future !

As real Yogis, that is, without caring whether the end product of their labours is good, bad or indifferent, some of our Philosophy Professors link up Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva or even a lesser Vedantists with some European or American theologian or philosopher. It helps them to pass off as equal masters of both the Eastern and Western thought. The provocation for these remarks is the little return by way of intellectual stimulation which I get from a majority of books belonging to this genre. One is *"Ethics of Butler and the Philosophy of Action in the Bhagavad gita according to Madhusudana Sarasvati"* (A Critical and Comparative Study) by S.S. Sarma. What a mouthful of a title! Joseph Butler was not much of a philosopher. The other Butler (Samuel) finds a place in Russels' *"History of Western Philosophy"*, but not this Butler (Joseph). Nor was Madhusudana much of an original thinker; at best, he was a scholarly commentator. Why drag down the first from his Christian heaven and the second from his Hindu svarga? To be sure, they may have both stressed the virtue of duty for duty's sake. But is it such a profound truth as to deserve from our Professor "a critical and comparative study"? This question is all the more pertinent as he admits that "ethics was not treated separately and independently in Indian thought."⁹

A more pretentious work in this genre is *"The Concept of Perfection in the Teachings of Kant and Gita"* by B.S. Gauchwal, a Philosophy Lecturer. One of the great discoveries made by this luminary is that "the similarities between the two [Kant and Gita] are so numerous and close that no serious student can ignore them as mere [sic] accidental. Indeed, they were so impressive that they easily invite speculation as to whether the German Philosopher could possible have been acquainted with the main spirit of *Gita* teaching)^o

Disturbing him for a moment from his profound speculation, we may be permitted to ask the Philosophy Lecturer some searching questions. Kant died in 1804; the first English translation of the Gita appeared in 1785, the French in 1789, and it was only in 1808 that Friedrich Schlegel published in German some extracts from the Gita in his anthology of Sanskrit classics.¹¹ Is it not silly to say that Kant was influenced by a book of whose existence he was in all probability unaware ? Then, again, while Kant was a thoroughgoing monist, is not the Gita ambivalent on the point? Has not S.S. Raghavacharya written a treatise to expound that, according to Ramanuja, the Gita is a scripture of *"Vishista-Advaita"*?^z Furthermore, one of the cardinal principles of Kant's philosophy is to treat every human being as an end in himself ? Can this be said of the Gita ? Does it not tell you that if you are really an enlightened man you should treat a savant and a dog as equals ? (V.13).

The late P.N. Srinivasachari was also a Professor of Philosophy. His treatise *"The Ethical Philosophy of the Gita"* is a rehash of the *atma* and *paramatma*, the *Karma* and *Nishkama Karma*, and the rest of the vaporosity which has been smothering all original thought in this country for more than two thousand years now.

But some of the other writers on the Gita are worse; I refer to the late Sir H.V. Divatia. Starting off with the general statement, "Like its philosophy, the ethics of the Gita is inseparably connected with its metaphysics", the noble knight plunged straight into the muddy waters of the karmic laws, the *atma* and *paramatma*, and the rest of Hindu theology with all its dogmas. And he ended up by stating: "The metaphysical concept of the Gita underlying its social ethics may be regarded as too high and unapproachable ..."¹⁵ Obviously the "past karma" of Divatia was of a high order. For he had the best of the two Indias, the British India and Independent India. Likewise, we can be sure that after having the best of this world, he is having a good time

in the other world. How hateful is the cant and hypocrisy of our upper castes and classes ! Attributing their own social prestige, economic privilege, political power and the rest of the good things of life to those two big and black lies, the past birth and the good karma accumulated in that birth, they lecture to the victims of an unjust and cruel social order on such virtues as meekness, poverty, suffering, and above all, on respect to the prince in his castle and the priest in his chapel.

What Kaveeshwar, Srinivasachari, Divatia and others present to us is not, it cannot be, ethics; it is the old dope of Vedanta in new capsules. Kaveeshwar talks of Utilitarianism and Divatia of Socialism in the context of the ethics of the Gita. Only a glib tongue can do that!

Whatever these and other commentators on the Gita might say, the concern of ethics should be, not with god and his angels, but with man and his fellow-men. Its aim should be "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". It should set its sights on a free, just, egalitarian and happy society. It should promote amity, not strife; it should work for peace, not for war. Is not the Gita a total alien to all these objectives of a sound ethical system ?

There are many system of ethics. They range from the one formulated by Hammurabi through the one proclaimed by Asoka to the one sketched by Marx and Engels. According to Will Durant, they can ultimately be divided into three broad systems. As he is not only a popular but a precise writer, it is, I think, best to quote his own words

Ultimately, there are but three systems of ethics three conceptions of the ideal character and the moral life. One is that of Buddha and Jesus, which stresses the feminine virtues, considers all men to be equally precious, resists evil only by returning good, identifies virtue with love, and inclines in politics to unlimited democracy. Another is the ethic of Machiavelli and Nietzsche, which stresses the masculine virtues, accepts the inequality of men, relishes the risks of combat and conquest and rule, identifies virtue with power, and exalts an hereditary aristocracy. A third, the ethic of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, denies the universal applicability of either the feminine or the masculine virtues; considers that only the informed and mature mind can judge, according to diverse circumstance, when love should rule, and when power; identifies virtue, therefore, with intelligence; and advocates a varying mixture of aristocracy and democracy in government.¹⁶

The ethics of the Gita belongs to the second system. Krishna, the putative author of the Gita, was both a Machiavelli and Nietzsche in a superlative degree. The Italian statesman and the German philosopher stood equally for naked autocracy. The former pleaded for a strong prince, and the latter, for a superman. Neither cared whether the means were fair or foul as long as the end was achieved. Falsehood, trickery, deceit, treachery, murder — anything is permissible as long as it furthers your objective. Love, pity and compassion weaken your will; you should not allow any of them to sway you. Might is right; war is the ultimate instrument of policy. Roughly such was the ethics of Machiavelli and Nietzsche. Is not Krishna's ethics very much the same ? This may be true, it can be argued, of the Krishna of the *Mahabharata* and of the Puranas, but not of the Gita. My contention is that it applies to both the Krishnas in an equal measure, and I will proceed to present my case, avoiding the points made in the earlier chapters.

Was not Krishna a leader of the Yadu clan which lived, not under kingship, but under an oligarchic democracy? Why, then, did he not lend all his support to democratic forces ? Why did he encourage monarchy as a first step towards imperialism ? Why did he claim; "Of men, I am the monarch" (X - 27). Had he not enough influence with the Pandavas to ensure a peaceful

settlement of their dispute with the Kauravas? Why did he not use it to that effect ? •True, he went as an envoy of peace to Hastinapur. But why, then, did he present unacceptable demands in the guise of opting for the barest minimum ? The popular impression is that the Pandavas were prepared to give up their claim to their half share of the kingdom provided they were offered five towns together with their hinterland. But what is forgotten is that two of them were snatched by Drona from his boyhood friend, and later enemy, Drupada. Being honourable men, how could the Kauravas ask their teacher Drona to give up his possession so that they could make peace with the Pandavas ? Krishna was well aware of this and yet he did his best to paint the Kauravas as so proud and power-drunk as not to agree to the lowest minimum terms in the interests of peace.

And once the war started, why did Krishna pretend to be a non-combatant? In reality, did he not play a more crucial role in the war than any combatant? Had he allowed Arjuna to retire from the fray, would the war have continued ? Most decidedly, not. And for making Arjuna change his mind, did not Krishna use every means such as persuasion, temptation, intimidation, blackmail and browbeating? Besides telling him that if victorious he would enjoy a kingdom and if he falls on the battlefield he would enjoy heaven, did he not use blackmail ? That this is no baseless indictment is amply proved by the following verses taken from the Gita :

Besides, men will ever recount thy ill-fame and for one who has been honoured, ill-fame is worse than death (II-34).

The great warriors will think that thou hast abstained from battle through fear and they by whom thou wast highly esteemed will make light of thee (II - 35).

Many unseemly words will be uttered by thy enemies, slandering thy strength. Could anything be sadder than that ? (II-36).

Asking Arjuna to act against his conscience holding out the threat that otherwise he would be ridiculed and reviled is not worthy of an ethical teacher, in fact, it is a form of intimidation or blackmail which only an unethical person would resort to.

From blackmailing Krishna proceeded to browbeating. He told Arjuna; "Being a fool, you think you will be killing Bhishma, Drona, Karna and others. In fact, they are already killed by me." To an Arjuna much bewildered and broken down by then, Krishna gave a stunning glimpse of his cosmic form. It was something ghoulish and blood-curdling. It should have been a case of hallucination on the part of Arjuna or Krishna should have been an adept in hypnotism.

However that may be, the core-teaching of the Gita, as Prem Nath Bazaz has put it boldly, succinctly and truly is this: "Murder with impunity". Elaborating this point, D.D. Kosambi wrote that the ostensible moral of the Gita is: "Kill your brother if duty calls, without passion; as long as you have faith in Me, all sins are forgiven", and he went on to add:

But the history of India always shows not only brothers but even father and son fighting to the death over the throne, without the slightest hesitation or need for divine guidance. Indra took his own father by the foot and smashed him, a feat which the brahmin, Vamadeva, applauds. Ajatasatru, King of Magadha, imprisoned his father Bimbisara : o usurp the throne and then had the old man killed in prison. Yet, even the Buddhists and Jains as well as *Brahadaranyaka Upanishad* praise the son (who was the founder of India's first great empire) as a wise and able king. The *Artha sastra* devotes a chapter to precautions against such ambi-ti- 's heirs-apparent; he could circumvent them if he were in a hurry to wear the crown. Krishna

Yadava contingent, his own people, who were fighting in the opposite ranks. The legend tells us that all the Yadavas ultimately perished fighting among themselves."

In Another context, Kosambi reverted to the subject, and wrote:

... Krishna as he appears in the *Mahabharata* is singularly ill-suited to propound any really moral doctrine ... At every single crisis of the war, his advice wins the day by the crookedest of means which could never have occurred to the others. To kill Bhishma, Sikhandin was used as a living shield against whom that perfect knight would not raise a weapon, because of doubtful sex. Drona was polished off while stunned by the deliberate false report of his son's death. Karna was shot down against all rules of chivalry when dismounted and unarmed; Duryodhana was bludgeoned to death after a foul mace blow that shattered his thigh. This is by no means the complete list of iniquities. When taxed with these transgressions, Krsna replies bluntly at the end of the *Salya-parvan* that the man could not have been killed in any other way, that victory could never have been won otherwise. The calculated treachery of the *Arthasastra* saturates the actions of this divine exponent of the *Bhagavad-gita*. It is perhaps in the same spirit that leading modern exponents of the *Gita* and of *ahimsa* like Rajaji have declared openly that non-violence is all very well as a method of gaining power, but to be scrapped when power has been captured: "When in the driver's seat, one must use the whip".

To those who admire and adore the *Gita*, these are minor points. They will tell you that the *Gita* is not merely the quintessence of the Upanishads but something more; it brings them down to earth. Unlike the Upanishads, the *Gita*, you are told, asks you firmly to come down to the world and to fight its battles. But even on this problem, as Arun Shourie points out, the *Gita* is not consistent. It tells you to act not to make the world a better place to live in or to make your fellow-men better citizens to live with, but to seek the merger of your individual soul with the supreme soul. To quote the actual words of Shourie:

The similarity of the *Gita* to the basic Upanishadic doctrine as well as its characteristic ambiguity can be seen by recalling its view about the goal itself and about the knowledge that will lead us to the goal. In the *Gita*, as in the Upanishads and, of course, in the *Brahma-Sutras*, the highest goal is the same - freedom from the cycle of birth and death, the submergence in Brahman. And in the *Gita*, as in the other works we are considering, internalizing the same knowledge of one's non-difference from the Brahman remains the way to merging with Him.'

With his wonted thoroughness Shourie proceeds to quote verse after verse from the *Gita* in support of his contention. This merger business is, to my mind, the most narrow, the most selfish and the meanest goal to aspire for. The ideal man should seek merger not with a mythical *paramatma* but with life in general and with humanity in particular. Countless generations lived and died to make us what we are today. We owe all our humanity and everything that goes with it — our arts and crafts, our science and philosophy, our culture and civilization, and all the graces of life which make it meaningful — to the heritage handed down to us by those past generations. What is more desirable, more noble, more self-fulfilling than safeguarding that heritage unimpaired and handing it over to the next generation, and if we could, to enrich it in how so ever small a measure ?

But to get back to the Gita, while action without seeking some personal gain can be noble, action without any care for its evil consequences to other men and the world at large is something reprehensible, even diabolical. You should refuse to act when you are sure that only something ill, something evil, would come out of it. To justify your unjustifiable action as your caste duty or as an inevitable expression of your nature, *prakriti*, is to make yourself a robot, an unfree man, a member of a herd of wolves and jackals. I can think of nothing more shocking, more despicable than the doctrine "Kill, kill one and all, kill without the least constraint, because it is your caste duty, because it is in consonance with your nature."

To sum up, the ethics of the Gita is wholly Machavellian and Nietzschean. It is not entirely without significance that while Machiavelli spent his last years in comparative obscurity after divestment of his public office and a term in prison, that Nietzsche died in a madhouse, and that Krishna met his end after being shot by an aboriginal hunter who mistook him for a quarry.

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EPILOGUE

Twelve hundred years ago Sankaracharya picked up the Gita from the dust it was gathering, wrote a commentary on it with his unmatched genius for sophistry, and placed it before the people as the supreme guide to their life and thought and salvation. Since then its influence has been all too pervasive, all too pernicious. It has made our national mind flabby, our national spirit feeble. It has made us callous to human inequality and human suffering. It has made us shameless psychopants and sanctimonious hypocrites. This is the basic theme of a big and bold book by Prem Nath Bazaz. Of its 750 pages, nearly 500 discuss this particular aspect. Next only to the scattered writings on the Gita by Kosambi, the best critique on it is by Bazaz.

As I pointed out once earlier, the emergence of the Gita as a national scripture and the emasculation of the national mind and spirit are closely linked. This is a historical truth which can hardly be challenged. But no devotee of Krishna, nor an admirer of Sankara, would take that statement lying down. They will react strongly, and call me all sorts of names. The more violent their tirade against me, the happier will I be. For there can be no surer indication that my writing did have the desired effect. What, I desired most was to start a dialogue, to provoke a debate, to stir up a disputation. It is all the same to me whether people agree or disagree with me, whether they praise or abuse me. What I always seek — as I remember to have said elsewhere — is a clash of minds, a flash of ideas. It is the only means for the upsurge of a new spirit, indeed, for the birth of new life.

As I have had my say, it is time for me to wind up. But before doing so, I very much wish to give expression to two of my most ardent wishes. The first is that Krishna, if he is really the greatest god as he claimed to be again and again in the Gita and elsewhere, should not keep his promise to come down again and again to our poor little earth, whenever he thinks that righteousness is in jeopardy (IX - 7). His coming on the last occasion did infinitely more harm than good. In the name of reinstating righteousness, he was primarily instrumental to the outbreak of a terrible war, and if we were to go by the *Mahabharata*, the number of survivors at its end was just nine from among the millions of its active combatants. What is worse, it marked the end of a better age (the Dwapara) and the beginning of a worse age (the Kali). It may also be recalled in this context that Krishna claimed that, of weapons, he was *Vajrayudha* or "the thunderbolt", as Radhakrishnan preferred to translate it (X - 28). If he were reappear now, he would claim that he is the latest among the nuclear weapons. And the war which he would actively promote to reestablish righteousness would result in the extermination of all life from the face of our earth.

Now my second wish, no less ardent, is that we as a nation should forget the Gita as Arjuna did. In less than a year or two after it was taught to him by Krishna as a special favour, he told his friend and mentor that it had all "disappeared" from his mind. It will be a great blessing if our nation, too, allows the Gita to disappear completely from its mind. Only then can we awaken from the slumber of ages; only then can we shake off our many illusions and delusions; only then can we know the value of free, daring and original thought. And then only can we learn to despise the ideal of personal salvation and fix our sights on the future of humanity, indeed, on the time when man can migrate to other, and perhaps better, worlds in our vast cosmos. If only he could reach them what a great triumph will it be for the ever-questing, ever-soaring and ever-daring spirit of man! According to Sagan, there may be millions of such worlds in our galaxy alone. Being much older than our earth, some of these worlds may have far surpassed us in arts, science, philosophy, literature, culture, civilization and the rest of the graces of life.

I will not live to see that happy day when India will forget, like Arjuna, the Gita with all its contradictions and confusions, its equivocations and evasions, its twists, turns and trickeries. But such a day will come, may be a long time after my death, but come it will. And when it comes the people of India will begin to live again, vitally, joyously, meaningfully. They would then stop fixing their gaze on the tip of their nose to still the mind and to kill all thought; they would then cease to peer into the so-called empty space within the heart where the soul is believed to have its temporary tenement, they would then scorn the ideal of union with that mirage, the Supreme Soul (Paramatma). With a new awakening, a fresh vision and a burning zeal, they would join the progressive world community in trying to unravel the many mysteries which are still locked inside the microcosm of the atom and the macrocosm of the cosmos.

To hasten that golden dawn on the murky history of India the first step to be taken is to disown Krishna and to discard the Gita.

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Dear Mahipalji

I sent the Prologue already. This is first chapter

V R Narla, humanist, editor of Two Telugu dailies, twice Rajya sabha member, dedicated his books to V M Tarkunde, Premnath Bazaz, M N Roy etc

Innaiah Narisetti

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CHAPTER I

The Truth about Gita by V R Narla A DOUBTFUL WAR

"The word Mahabaratha", wrote Edward Washburn Hopkins, "Is used by Panini, but only as an adjective which might be applied to anything great, connected with the Bharathas, a hero or town, as well as a war or poem". There can be no doubt that the Mahabharatha is a great poem regarding the Bharathas. As we have it today, it is "about eight times the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together"². But can it also be taken to mean a great war that was fought on the plain of Kurukshetra between the Bharathas, that is, between the Kurus and Pandus ? There are very many reasons to hold that no such war was fought and they can be said down serially:

(1) While the Kurus are well known to the Vedic literature, the Pandus are not. As was pointed out by Hopkins, who made a special study of the *Mahabaratha* they do not find a place even in the Brahmanas and Sudras'. This was specially emphasised by Max Muller. He said:

The names of the Kurus and Bharathas are common in Vedic literature but the names of the Pandavas have never been met with. It has been observed that even in Panini's grammar the name Pandu or Pandava does not occur, while the Kurus and Bharatas are frequently mentioned particularly in rules treating of the formation of patronymics and similar words°.

This means that even during the lifetime of Panini, that is, during the middle of the fifth century, B.C., the Pandavas were unknown.

(2) When the *Rig veda* takes notice of a local and tribal war fought between Sudas, the king of the Bharatas, and a confederacy of ten kings on the banks of Parushani (the modern Ravi)⁶, surely a war on a national scale, indeed, on an international scale as the *Mahabharata* would have us believe, could not have been left unrecorded in the whole corpus of the Vedic literature. To quote Max Muller again:

The war between the Kurus and Pandavas, which forms the principal subject of the *Mahabharata*, is unknown to the *Veda*'.

(3) Kurukshetra is frequently mentioned in the Vedic literature as a holy place but never as a battlefield'.

(4) Vyasa and Vaisampayana figure in the 'Taittiriya' 'Aranyaka' but not as the first two authors of the *Mahabharata*'.

(5) In the *Kathaka Samhita* there is a specific reference to a Kuru king named Dhritarashtra, but that reference is not in the context of the Kurukshetra War; it pertains to a ritual dispute between Dhritarashtra and his priest.¹⁰

(6) Parikshit is praised in the *Atharva Veda* as the ruler of a prosperous kingdom; Janamejaya is lauded in the *Sathapatha Brahman* as a performer of sacrifices and a lavish giver of gifts to priests. But neither is specifically mentioned as a descendent of Arjuna'.

(7) In the *Mahabharata* Arjuna is the natural son of Indra but in the 'Satapatha Brahmana', he is Indra himself 2.

(8) An *akshauhini* (an army corps) consists of 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants, 65,610 horses and 1,09,350 foot-soldiers". It is said that as many as eighteen *akshauhinis* were assembled on the plain of Kurukshetra, eleven by the Kurus and seven by the Pandus. The assembly of such a mammoth force is not easy even today, and impossible in the ancient times. Moreover, no single battlefield can hold such a gigantic force"

(9) The total number of horses in the Kurukshetra War works out to be 11,80,980. And yet, strangely we do not hear of any major cavalry engagement. Now, the number of foot-soldiers is of the order of almost two millions. In spite of it, the role of infantry in the war is nebulous. But references to single combats are plenty. It is, therefore, quite reasonable to presume that the war, if it was fought, comprised mostly single combats, as it was the general practice among all primitive peoples.

(10) On a very liberal estimate the total number of participants in the war could not have been more than four millions. (In arriving at this figure two men for each chariot and two for each elephant are allowed.) And yet, the total number of the dead exceeded 1660 millions¹⁶. So we have to presume that each combatant died more than four hundred times !

(11) In the age in which the Kurukshetra War is said to have been fought, the weaponry was crude, and no great war can be fought with crude weaponry. In this context, it should be noted that even the Harappans with a higher civilization used as their weaponry only stones and slings, clumsy axes and arrowheads made of copper, bronze and stone.

(12) Iron weapons, which are essential for a major war, could not have played any significant part in the Kurukshetra War. Iron came into general use in India only after the sixth century B.C., and it was definitely unknown before the eleventh century B.C. "

(13) Magadha was held to be non-Aryan and hence an impure region till a fairly late date. So, too, was all land that lies to the south of the Vindhya. Because of this, neither Magadha nor any of the South Indian kingdoms could have, as it is claimed, taken part in the Kurukshetra War.

(14) When communications were primitive, transport of large armies from distant places in India and abroad would have posed insurmountable obstacles.

(15) It is simply absurd to say, as it is done in the *Mahabharata*, that Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyothisha (Assam) played an important role in the Kurukshetra war.^{1e} He does not figure in the Vedic literature, either the earlier one or the later. Even Panini of the fifth century B.C., shows no knowledge of him.

(16) A more absurd thing is to say that the Yavanas the Sakas and the Pahlavas fought on the side of the Kurus. None of these peoples had any active role in Indian history before, say, the fifth century B.C.

Many more points can be adduced to doubt the historicity of the Kurukshetra War. But I will make just one more. The army assembled for the war, it is stated consisted of eighteen akshauhnis; the duration of the war was eighteen days; of the active combatants, the survivors after the war on the side of the Pandavas were six, that is, one-third of eighteen, and three on the side of the Kurus, that is one-sixth of eighteen; Yudhishtara ruled for thirty-six years, that is twice eighteen; Krishna died thirty-six years after the Kurukshetra War, that is, again, twice eighteen; the epic which records the war has eighteen cantos and even the chapters of the Gita are eighteen. This cannot be something fortuitous. Some superstitious fellow, who was a believer in numerology and had a hand in the redaction of the *Mahabharata*, must have contrived this silly nonsense.

In view of these and other considerations, not a few men of eminence questioned the historicity of the Kurukshetra War.

I will refer only to some of them. R.G. Bhandarkar, one of the earliest historians of modern India, much respected for his sound scholarship and sober judgment, had no doubt in his mind that not only the *Mahabharata* but also the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* (mythologies) were not historical works.¹⁹ Time and again he bemoaned why modern education was not instilling into us the modern spirit, the spirit that questions everything and puts everything to the test of reason before accepting it as truth.

Another historian and a junior contemporary of Bhandarkar, R.C. Dutt, went a step further; he stated that "the incidents of the war in the *Mahabharata* were undoubtedly mythical." He also thought that "the five Pandava brothers and their common wife were myths."²⁰ Dutt may not have been a specialist in history as Bhandarkar was. But he had the distinction of translating the Rig Veda into Bengali, defying the hue and cry raised against him by the orthodox folk as to how a Sudra dare go anywhere near the Vedas. And his abridged translations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* into English are still rated high. So, Dutt should have spoken with knowledge and conviction when he dismissed the Kurukshetra War and the Pandavas and their joint wife as fictitious.

Much earlier than either Dutt or Bhandarkar, Rammohan Roy had drawn pointed attention to one of the opening verses of the *Mahabharata*. In that verse Vyasa calls his epic "a work of imagination." After having acquainted himself thoroughly with the scriptures of all the major

religions of the world, and having initiated a new branch of study which has since come to be known as "Comparative Religion", Roy placed no value on the Gita. In his voluminous writings on religion he ignored it almost totally.

Unlike Roy, Gandhi valued the Gita greatly. "Gita", he said "has been a Mother to me ever since I became first acquainted with it in 1889.⁷² Even so, he had serious doubts about the historicity of the *Mahabharata*. He thought that the battle which formed, so to say, the backdrop to the Gita was none other than the battle that goes on all the time in every individual between the forces of good and evil.

Years earlier to Gandhi, Vivekananda took exactly the same stand. He said:

There is enough ground of doubt as regards the historicity of Arjuna and others, and it is this: *Shatapatha Brahmana* is a very ancient book. In it are mentioned somewhere or other all the names of those who were the performers of the Ashvamedha Yajna but in those places there is not only no mention, but no hint even, of the names of Arjuna and others, though it speaks of Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit, who was grandson of Arjuna.

Yet in the *Mahabharata* and other books it is stated that Yudhisthira, Arjuna and others celebrated the Ashvamedha sacrifice."²³

Despite all this, Vivekananda thought, like Gandhi, that the mythical nature of the *Mahabharata*, does not take away the value of the epic as a whole, or its most important section, the Gita. It is a stand that cannot be accepted without demur. Surely, if Arjuna was mythical, his alter ego, Krishna, cannot be historical personage. And if both were mythical, how could one discourse to the other ? And if some nameless author or authors fabricated the Gita and interpolated with into the *Mahabharata*, how can it be called the "Song Celestial or the Divine Lay" ?

Traditionalists - they are always with us in their serried ranks, and their ranks consist not only of the illiterate but also of the highly learned-, including many scientists and philosophers - well, our traditionalists may dismiss Dutt and Bhandarkar as historians of yester year; they may maintain that while Roy and Vivekananda and Gandhi might have made history, each in his own way, they were no historians. But can they deny the standing or stature of that multi -faceted genius, D.D. Kosambi, as a historian ? A mathematician of international repute, he applied scientific methods to the study of Indian coins. He brought to bear the Marxist approach on Indian history. Though our professional historians did their best, first to ignore him, and then to ridicule him, towards the closing stages of his life, and more so, after his death at the age of 58, he came to be recognized as a trend-setter. Apart from his keen perceptions, his capacity to combine many disciplines, and his power to understand the workings of historical forces in shaping the life and thought of a people, he was a man of intellectual integrity. He stated his convictions clearly, sincerely, boldly. Before I finish, I will have occasion to quote from his writings quite often. For the time being, let us hear what he said about our epics:

From our material **it** is still impossible to say where the great theme-battles of the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were fought, let alone when — if indeed they represent any historical events at all.`

Returning to the subject some years later he had no more lingering doubts and referred to the Kurukshetra War as "this fictitious great war."⁵

Now we may turn our attention to a couple of living historians, D.C. Sirkar and H.D. Sankalia. To be sure, the former is primarily a specialist in epigraphy and the latter in archaeology. But neither subject can be mastered without a firm grounding in history. Both of them are fully convinced that in case the Kurukshetra War really took place, it was no more than a family or

tribal feud. Some of the points which I made in the opening part of this chapter are based on their writings; those who are interested can refer to their contributions to the co-operative study entitled *Mahabharata: Myth and Reality*, edited by S.P. Gupta and K.S. Ramachandran.'

Personally, this study has left me a sad man. For it is clearly indicative of the crushing weight of tradition - *silly tradition, dead tradition* —on the Hindu mind. Out of its forty-one contributors, not even half a dozen show any capacity to think boldly, rationally, originally. And one or two of them have such a fuddled mind as to argue in all seriousness that what millions and millions of people believed for thousands of years as true cannot be fictitious. By the same token, we have to accept the widely prevalent belief over the ages that the eclipses of the sun and the moon are caused by those two impish demons; Rahu and Ketu.

Are our minds so conditioned by our puerile puranas that we can be fooled by any fantastic nonsense ? Is there something basically wrong with our national psyche ? I am pretty sure that most of the contributors to *Mahabharata: Myth and Reality* fast during an eclipse and take a bath at its end, feeling joyous that by their piety they saved the sun or the moon from mortal danger. It is significant that the sub-title of their co-operative study is not "Myth or Reality" but "Myth and Reality". It is a clear proof that they were born as believers, grew up as believers and one day will die as believers. They are incapable of doubting, of questioning and of putting anything to the acid test of reason. In their view, to doubt any old belief is to be an infidel, to question it is to be guilty of sacrilege, to seek to put it to the test of reason is to condemn oneself to a long term in hell. It is mostly these folk that are in charge of our universities, our national laboratories, our technological institutions, and to our shame, even of our government at every level. I know that these are strong words, perhaps harsh words, but they are, I submit, not uncalled for in view of the credulity, bordering on imbecility, which is so much in evidence in every sphere of our national life today.

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CHAPTER II

The Truth about The Gita

False Signposts

There is only one firm date in the history of ancient India and that is the year of Alexander's invasion (327 - 326 B.C.). The reason for it is quite simple. The Indian time is cyclical. Prabhava, Vibhava, etc., come round once every sixty years. No year in that cycle of sixty can, therefore, be pinpointed on the scale of linear time.

To be sure, there is a Vikrama Era. There is also a Salivahana or Saka Era. But none can be too sure about the starting point of either. The Vikrama Era, for instance, is said to have begun in 58-57 B.C. Who is this Vikrama after whom the Era is named ?

What is the great deed, the historic event, which it commemorates? There is no clear answer to these questions. He cannot be the Vikramaditya who won a mighty victory over the Hunas in A.D., the fifth century. For the era starts almost six hundred years prior to that victory. He cannot be Pushyamitra, who assassinated the last Mauryan Emperor and founded the Sunga dynasty. For the date of that assassination falls in the last quarter of the second century B.C. He cannot be Kanishka, the most famous emperor of the Kushana dynasty, the reason for it being that he flourished, not during the middle of the first century B.C., but about a century later. Nor can he be Goutamiputra Satakarni of the Satavahana dynasty. He did, no doubt, crush the Sakas in a heroic battle, but that battle took place in or around A.D. 124 - 125. Furthermore, the

inscriptions, brimful of his panegyrics, do not mention "Vikramaditya" as one of his titles. So, when each of these to whom the credit of starting the Vikrama Era is given by one historian or the other is ruled out, there remains Azes the Parthian who established a large and prosperous kingdom in the Punjab and Sind by about 60 B.C. And he did initiate an era. But he name it after himself, the most sensible thing to do. In Prakrit his era is called the Aya or Aja Era; in no language, be it Prakrit or Sanskrit or Palhavi, is it called the Vikrama Era.

In their desperate bid to solve the unsolvable riddle of the Vikrama Era some of our historians maintain that originally it was known as the Krita Era or the Malva Era in honour of some Malva king or general who defeated the Sakas somewhere, sometime, somehow. At this point I may record the reaction of D.D. Kosambi to this futile debate. Referring to the *Vikrama Volume* , published from Ujjain to commemorate the completion of the first two millennia of the Vikram Era. he wrote:

The 2000th anniversary of Vikram was celebrated with due pomp in 1943, though neither the press agents nor the luminaries publicized were able to shed any light on the problem. The memorial Volumes [in English and Hindi] issued on the occasion prove only the futility of such research. None of the mutually contradictory essays in such volumes proves anything beyond the will to believe.²

Regarding the other, that is, the Salivahana or Saka Era which, it is said, starts in A.D. 78, there is an equally unresolved controversy. When the chronology of ancient India is so uncertain, so hazy, even when we come down to historical times, is it not useless to try to fix a period for the persons and events mentioned in our two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the thirty-six Puranas, major and minor ? Though called epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are, in fact, Puranas only. It is not only useless but, if I may be pardoned a strong expression, utterly idiotic. And yet, that very thing is done in all **seriousness**.

Whoever started the farce — yes, it is nothing else — it was given a fillip by F.E. Pargiter. He was a British I.C.S. Officer who rose to be a judge of the Calcutta High Court. Having mastered Sanskrit, he first translated the *Markandeya Purana* into English. Next he collected the more important of the dynastic lists carried by the Puranas, rendered them into English and published them in book form with a long introduction. The title of his book is also rather long and it reads: *The Purana Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age* . ' A little later he set down the results of his study of these lists in a book entitled *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* . ` All the history, dependable history as different from conjectural history, which he could extract from the Puranas is just about a thimbleful. Small wonder, despite their claim to be *Itihasas* (current histories) the Puranas are myths and mythologies. They begin with the creation of the cosmos, its dissolution and its renewal; next they talk of Manu, the Hindu Adam, and his wives and his progeny. Then they give the lists of the kings of different dynasties, past, present and future. In between these things they emphasize the virtues of the principle of inequality between man and man, the principle institutionalized in the caste system. They expatiate on the risk of the world going to pieces unless the primacy and the privileges of the priest class are fully protected by the king. And they end up by laying down stringent rules which should govern a man's life from birth to death, and even beyond death, for they tell him how to find his way to heaven, and once there, how to make a beeline for the gorgeous bedroom of a gorgeous Rambha or a Menaka ora Tilottama or a Varudhini or—well, he has a wide choice.

From out of this piffle how much history can be gathered ? Nothing or practically nothing. What is worse, it has a highly deleterious effect on our moral fibre. If this is taken to be a

reckless, almost a rabid indictment, my submission is that it is late by 2500 years. What Valmiki and Vyasa are to us, Homer and Hesiod are to the Greeks. Both of them came under heavy attack by Plato, or more correctly, Plato speaking through Socrates. When your gods and heroes are gamblers and drunkards, when they lie and boast, when they are lustful and indulge in fornication, when they are mean, cowardly and vengeful, in short, when they are given to every weakness and vice, will they not, asked Plato, encourage everybody to find excuses for his own weaknesses and vices? Unless one is familiar with the writings of Homer and Hesiod, what all Plato said in condemnation of Greek myths and mythologies cannot be properly appreciated; hence direct quotations from him are cannot be properly appreciated; hence direct quotations from him are being avoided. Those who are interested can turn to the third book of Plato's Republic. The best translation I know of is by Jewett. 5

Now, in some respects, Xenophanes was more caustic than Plato in his condemnation of Homer and Hesiod. An out and out rationalist and materialist, he poured vitriol on mythological gods and condemned anthropomorphism without any reservation.' Euripides, the playwright, also attacked the myths and mythologies in his own original, subtle and effective way. And yet, here in India we have poets, playwrights and philosophers who go into ecstasies over the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the thirty-six Puranas and the stuff and nonsense they purvey. However, it is not always an act of foolishness. For hidden behind it, there is a well-planned motive, a long-range plan. It is to arrest the growing forces of freedom, democracy and equality and to continue in a camouflaged form the old order of society based on "The gradations and degradations" of the caste system. It is significant that C. Rajagopalachari, K.M. Munshi and other highly astute politicians turned into active protagonists of the Hindu epics and Puranas in post-Independence India

Though all myths and mythologies, to whichever nation they may belong, are intrinsically nasty, ours are easily the worst from an amoral point of view. Furthermore, they are most undependable as sources of history. On this last point, I may quote the eminent Indologist and historian, A.L. Basham. He wrote:

The names of many of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* may genuinely be those of contemporary chieftains, but we must regretfully record that the story is of less use to the historian than the (*laid*, or most of the Norse and Irish saga literature It is futile to try to reconstruct the political and social history of India in the 10th century B.C. from the *Mahabharata* as it would be to write the history of Britain immediately after the evacuation of the Romans from Malory's Morte d' Arthur.'

Our Pargiters and Pradhans cannot dismiss out of hand the point made by Basham. And so, we see that, Sita Nath Pradhan himself had to admit the very many difficulties posed by the Puranas as sources of history. He bemoaned:

The Puranas profess to give us the ancient history of Aryan India ... In this ... business, the Puranas sometimes naturally conflict; sometimes the same Purana makes, though rarely, different statements in different places; very often they corrupt the names of persons; sometimes one dynasty is merged or interwoven into or tacked on to another owing to the corrupt reading that have (sic) crept in, the result being a preposterously long line of kings; sometimes collateral successions are described as lineal; sometimes the orders of succession reversed; sometimes the dynasties are lengthened

owing to various kinds of corrupt readings; even a synchronism has been found misplaced owing to a similarity of names; divergent synchronisms have been recorded.'

This did not, however, deter Pradhan from using the Puranas to frame a chronology for the history of ancient India. He was a brave man indeed !

Pargiter himself was no less aware how exasperating could be the problems posed by the Puranas to a historian. Without boring you or

_ myself by giving a lengthy quotation, like the one I gave from Pradhan, I will point out that Pargiter had to tackle eighty Janamejayas, a hundred Nagas, Haihayas, Dhritarashtras and Brahmaddattas, two hundred Bhimas and Bhishmas and one thousand Sasabindus! And this is only a partial list. 9

This mad confusion would surely make every Pargiter to swear under his breath. After wrestling with the Puranas and their dynastic lists for a lifetime, out of sheer irritation, if not desperation, Pargiter himself once exploded violently and said that the Brahmins who wrote the Puranas could see "No valid distinction between history and mythology and naturally there was a tendency to confuse the two, to mythologize history and to give mythology an historical garb. We can thus see why there was a total lack of historical sense among the brahmins who composed the brahmanical literature". 10

Well, I have, I hope, said enough to convince any open-minded man that the Puranas are false signposts for ancient Indian history. Yet, those very Puranas are followed to decide when the Kurukshetra War took place. How the thing is done will be sketched briefly in my next chapter.



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