

Inclusions, Exclusions and Interpolations in the Critical Edition of *Mahabharata*: Debates and Dilemmas

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I

It is impossible for an Indian to even remember their first brush with the epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. They exist within our consciousness as stories and metaphors. A.K. Ramanujan in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas” rightly says that the various tellings¹ of the ancient epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* often remain unread and the stories pervade the Hindu consciousness through their oral narrations. For it is through oral narratives that they are introduced to us. But, it is within the written form of epics that they have the potential to influence the readers globally. It becomes especially important when the more popular the *Mahabharata* episodes that are retained in the Indian consciousness find no trace in some of the most eminent editions and translations of the classical epic. One of the most significant amongst them is the Critical Edition (CE) or Poona Edition, edited by V. S. Sukthankar, which is considered to be the most authentic source of the epic both for the domestic as well as the international scholars. Most of the modern scholarship on the epic is based upon this version. The critical edition is claimed to be the “veritable thesaurus” of the epic which was a culmination of the decades of research into nearly a thousand manuscripts by most notable scholars in the field (Sukthankar 13). Within this edition, an attempt has been made to steer clear from interpolations that have seeped into the epic due to its repeated oral enunciations and codification into written script.

This paper discusses the dilemmas and debates arising out of the excision of a particular episode as an interpolation from the critical edition and its influence upon the modern critical scholarship of the epic which largely relies upon the manuscript tradition. These will be explored through the prominent episode of Krishna’s intervention for Draupadi in the disrobing scene. The various critical interventions regarding the episode will be included and a discussion into the formulation of the CE will also be made.

The manuscript tradition of the *Mahabharata* was derived out of this oral tradition, which still continues to be prevalent with the epic being memorized and recited in its various versions. The variations and mixers of these versions

produced were partial to corruption, elaborations and interpolations². These variations exist both in the oral as well as the manuscript tradition existing in nearly all Indian languages. To retrace all the extant versions of the Sanskrit epic and to locate a fixed and authentic archetype seems to be an impossibility that was faced by the critics and commentators of the much loved epic. But still there was a necessity for an archetype that would provide a basis for modern critical study of the *Mahabharata*. The need for such an archetype had been voiced by Sanskritists such as Professor M. Winternitz³ who wished for a *correct version* of the *Mahabharata* as a basis upon which critical enquiries could be made into the text. This call was answered by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) which took it up and accomplished this herculean task in 1966, with the completion of their Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*. Its completion marked a rare accomplishment as it enabled the formulation of a much more condensed version of the epic based upon both the Northern and the Southern recensions (divided according to the scripts) which had previously been studied in isolation. The epic contained within itself manuscripts from all over the country, assimilating within itself the commonalities of the different manuscripts to construct the CE. The critical edition and the translations based upon it were different than the existing translations which were said to be based upon the *Mahabharata* written by Ved Vyasa containing an account of the most popular episodes of the epic. Many of these translations lacked a strong manuscript support while some had no authentic manuscript support at all. It was argued that many episodes included within them were spurious popular imaginations and some interpolations that were later added to the original nucleus of the epic. In an attempt to create the *purier Mahabharata* many of these interpolations and exaggerations had been omitted from the CE. Its creation is a feat of scholarship which is seldom surpassed. Its importance lies in its extensive research, detailed analytical notes and appendices.

While the text has contributed immensely in the study of the *Mahabharata*, it has also confronted the researchers with doubts about its claim of authenticity and its relevance in the anthropological and textual study of the same. One such conundrum that has perplexed the Indian and Western critics alike is the excision of Krishna's intervention in the very prominent disrobing scene of Draupadi in the Sabha Parva of the *Mahabharata*. The episode of Draupadi's prayer for Krishna's help and his intervention has been regarded by critics as an element of bhakti tradition (primarily Vaishnavism) that was added to the epic in the 4th century by the redactors of the epic. It was characterized as an

interpolation for its absence in various manuscripts. This deliberate omission aligns itself with the assertions of the oriental scholars that had oft regarded the bhakti elements as interpolations added later to the epic. It was argued that the presence of gods and godly interventions takes away, rather than enhancing, the humanist values embodied in the original nucleus⁴. The popularity of this episode within the oral tradition as well as literary and cinematic adaptations has made it an intrinsic and unalienable part of the epic for the Indian consciousness and culture. It is a metaphor embedded in the iterations of the generations of Indians. Its absence in the ‘authentic text’ does not remove it from the minds of the Indian masses. Furthermore, this contention has been noticed by researchers of the *Mahabharata* tradition (such as anthropologists) who have been dissatisfied and have often perceived the CE as being rubbish. They rather point deliberate upon the notes and appendices of the CE which contains all that has been left out of the epic. As James Hegarty, Professor of Indian religion in Cardiff University, pointed out that the notes have a richer material for study and become source of translating entire manuscripts or various variations of the *Mahabharata*. The semblance of an authentic text may lead away from plurality of the epic which has evolved over generations of revisions and reinterpretations.

II

An understanding of the excision of Draupadi’s prayer has become problematization of the creation and codification of the epic with a several critical commenting upon the omission. This episode persists in the Northern recension is among the popular episodes of the epic. It appears in Sabha Parva within the chapter “Dyutta Parva”, when Draupadi is brought down to the assembly hall by Dushasana, having been ‘lost’ in the game of dice by Yudhishtira. When both rationality and pleading fails to sway the entire clan, she is then forcibly stripped by Dussasana. Having no other recourse she prays to Krishna. The cry of “O Govinda!” calls upon Krishna who is still in Dwarka. He miraculously rescues Draupadi with a never ending garment instantly establishes him as a godhead even before he proclaims himself as one in the battlefield to Arjun. This episode is credited with various critical responses from scholars and it still remains one of the most disputed episodes in the *Mahabharata*.

One such critic is M. Winternitz for whom the entire episode of the Draupadi’s disrobing scene is an interpolation. He considered it to be a later addition, added after 4th century. Interestingly, the CE also considered the scene

to be a later interpolation due to its absence in some manuscripts. Sukthankar, the general editor of the CE, in his notes mentions this omission and claims that this scene is most assuredly a later addition, representing a phase of Krishna's worship.

The disrobing scene also becomes relevant in analyzing the epic where Draupadi's prayer to Krishna can be perceived as the interpolation in the epic which has been summarily eliminated in the CE. The narrative continues with Draupadi's garments reappearing though a supernatural element but without divine intervention of Krishna. The text reads:

40. Then Duhsasana, O king, forcibly pulled off Draupadi's garment in the middle of the assembly, and began to strip her.
 41. But whenever one of Draupadi's garments was removed, O king, another similar garment repeatedly appeared.
 42. Then there rose a mighty roar of approval—a terrible roar from all the kings watching the greatest wonder in the world.
- (II. 61)

Franklin Edgerton, the editor of Sabha Parva in CE, felt that the act "implied that cosmic justice automatically... [and] prevented the chaste Draupadi from being stripped in public" (quoted in Hieltebietel 250). This version explicably relies on the chasteness of Draupadi which could not be disregarded and her honour upheld by dharma itself. The intervention of Krishna was not required; thereby his status as a divine being which had been established in the scene is revoked only to be later revealed in the epic battlefield before Arjun.

Interestingly, this episode can also be seen as an example of religious verbosity from which the venerated text must be rescued within the critical edition. This is further substantiated when Edgerton claims that later redactors felt the need to embroider the story whereas he preferred the "original form," for its brevity, simplicity and forcefulness. The implicit meaning being that the almost magical act of Draupadi's garment being recreated could not be understood in its simplicity by the redactors. Therefore, there was no other recourse available to them than to ascribe it to godly intervention, thus embroidering the tale that is more 'preferable' to Edgerton. The matter is further complicated due to these assertions for the "cosmic justice" or dharma mentioned by Edgerton that stopped Draupadi from being stripped publically. Does dharma allow her to abide by this humiliation? It is a question asked by Draupadi in the

court and one that should be considered by the critic as well. The question is one pertaining to law within the epic and has thus been greatly argued by the critics.

Iravati Karve in her critical commentary on the *Mahabharata, Yuganta*, claims that Draupadi had no legal right to question the authority of Yudhishtira over her, irrespective of his status as a slave to Duryodhan. The scathing commentary establishes the legality of Draupadi (with emphasis on Draupadi being the property of Yudhishtira) being dragged to the assembly hall. The act is allowed to go nearly undisputed though goes against all unwritten law of humanity. The unspoken sanction underlying the act is reflected in the silence which is the response to Draupadi's question regarding her status. Thus, can't it be inquired whether dharma could truly save Draupadi if no *adharma* took place in the sabha? It must be reiterated here that the text is historically situated with its own rules and laws. Karve's remarks are of relevant here as they allow for the possibility of dharma not being breached. Thus, could the same dharma proclaim her chastity and disrupt the happenings within the hall when so many remained silent. Furthermore, in this instance wouldn't Krishna's intervention be a better argument for the "cosmic justice" that takes place within the epic. This devious deity is not bound by the rules of dharma that bind the humans and he often circumvents them as seen in the later *parvas*.

Some other critics who have also attempted to justify the exclusion of the plea present some interesting arguments. The eminent critic M.K. Dhavalikar in his text "Draupadi's Garment" accepts Krishna's intervention as a 4th century interpolation and further expound upon the garments being removed from Draupadi as merely an "upper garments" or *uttariyas* which were worn by Kshatriyas. Thus the act of removal of the garment from the bodies of Pandavas and Draupadi become symbolic of their reduced status in the assembly hall rather than an attempt at stripping her. Similar argument has been made by M.A. Mehendale, who also maintains that the garment being removed was merely the *uttariyas*, thereby disregarding any need for divine intervention. This notion has been contested by Alf Hiltebeitel⁶ who claims that Draupadi's garment has nowhere been called *uttariyas* but rather *vastra*, *vasa*, *vasasa* and *ambara*, none of which implies upper garments. He argues that Mehendale and Dhavalikar's insistence on the *uttariyas* is an "attempt to claim a purer past" (Hiltebeitel 250).

Among the various arguments put forth by the critics there still remains

an element of unease. While some have replaced divine intervention for an equally if not more ambiguous cosmic justice, others have attempted to do away with the episode of Draupadi's stripping devolving into arguments over verbal jugglery. It must be noted that the abrupt removal of the interpolations that has been incorporated within the epic for centuries is bound to leave some loose ends that would disrupt the flow of the narrative of the epic. The original kernel of the epic may have contained instances that are better able to justify the dilemma that arises in the episode. But, it cannot be denied that they could have been lost over the centuries and been replaced by the interpolations that have been embedded within the epic. An attempt at stripping the epic and culling out traces of nucleus is a herculean task. And there exists possibilities that what will be derived is a forced articulation designed out of the scholarly expectations. It would be worth considering Hiltebeitel claim to consider the episode more than a mere interpolation. It should be accepted as the oldest variation⁵ in the *Mahabharata* manuscript tradition.

III

The western scholarship has often characterized the Sanskrit epic of the *Mahabharata* as a literary monstrosity. The claim belongs to the existing western scholarship that characterizes the epic as a literary 'unthing' which is further burdened by their perception of what the epic ought to be rather than what *it is*.⁷ The biases and influences often seep within the text constructing it in the image we wish it to be. This urge to assimilate and recreate the most apt version may have been the reason for the very existence of the variations present within the *Mahabharata* tradition. This also leads to problem within the scholarship that is based upon such texts that are not free from influence and are marred by their own complications and problematics. The biases within the base texts also influence the critical commentary based upon it. Draupadi's prayer symbolizes risk in interpreting the ancient epic without an understanding of the *Mahabharata* tradition which has evolved over generation of revisions and reinterpretations within the manuscripts.

The sureness of the CE being the original construction is a reminder that the CE holds the stamp of approval by critical thinkers of the epic. Its claim of being original is tenuous at best, yet the repeated emphasis on it being the *Ur-Mahabharata* alienates the other variations of the text. It endorses all the alterations made to the epic in the CE and also vilifying the variations such as the one mentioned above as mere interpolations. This recourse offers a host of

complications, central among them being the rejection of all the instances that are not included in the text as interpolations and thus summarily rejecting them in the critical evaluations of the epic.

In fact it is nearly impossible to reconstruct an original Ur-*Mahabharata* from the corrupted manuscript tradition of the epic. Therefore, it is impossible to consider CE as a source text of the epic tradition while disregarding the existing manuscript and oral epic tradition. This deliberate elimination of the episode points towards the flaw in considering the CE to be an archetype or a source text that may have been prevalent in certain time period and from where the subsequent versions had evolved. It is problematic to consider the CE to be a true version of the *Mahabharata* and considering it to be a genuine historical⁸ reconstruction of the original epic. To claim that is to deny plurality of the *Mahabharata* with its various versions and variations that exists within the South East Asian landscape. The CE is rather an edition based upon the common denominators in the certain manuscripts selected for the study. The dismissal of such scenes as interpolations may disregard the evolving tradition of the *Mahabharata* manuscripts available.

Moreover, the plurality of the epic makes its critical interpretation an impossibility while perceiving a singular text as authentic. Indeed any enquiry into such a tradition calls forth multiple perspectives derived not only from what has been classified as original, but also those elements which have been reviled as being popular interpolations. The propensity for alteration in the *Mahabharata* is such that it is difficult to reconstruct an original which may have been completely lost to us in various revisions that led to multiple variations available today.

It can be safe to assume that if episodes and instances have been added within the *Mahabharata* many may also have been lost. Thus, it would be futile to ignore the generations of revisions and reinterpretations to look for an ideal archetype that may never be reconstructed as it once was. As with the CE, for it has become what it wished to eliminate, another variation of the *Mahabharata*.

End Notes

- 1 A.K. Ramanujan in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas” calls the various versions of the Indian Sanskrit epics as *tellings*, a word he uses in lieu of variations which presupposes the existence of an original epic.

- 2 The evolution of the manuscript tradition from the oral has been provided within by V.S. Sukthankar in his Foreword to the Adiparva, Fascicule I.
- 3 Professor M Winternitz at the XIth International Congress of Orientalist, in Paris, in 1897 drew attention to the South Indian manuscripts of the *Mahabharata* and in his ending remarks emphasized upon a great need for a critical edition of epic which could provide a basis for the studies to be undertaken in the field of the *Mahabharata*.
- 4 This argument is especially relevant for Van Buitenen, the man who began translating CE in 1970's (an endeavour that is being continued by his students after his death) and successfully published first three books of this enormous epic. In his introduction to Book 1 Buitenen argues that the *Mahabharata* can be read in two major perimeters. The first perimeter, he claims, is the original 'nucleus' of the epic called *Jaya*, which tells the story of a clan war fought over the rightful claim to the throne of Hastinapur. The second perimeter, he argues, was added later upon *Jaya* adding episodes of divine elements such as gods and demi-gods. The enormous narrative thus created was the *Mahabharata* as we know it today. Buitenen believed that these later inclusions destructed the original kernel of the epic which talked about 'human values'.
- 5 Hildebeitel uses the phrase oldest variation for the episode in the northern recension.
- 6 He contests the argument in his text *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*.
- 7 This argument has also been perpetuated by Alf Hietebeitel who claims that the *Mahabharata* should not be saddled with the scholarly expectations but rather must be seen as a conscious artistry.
- 8 The terminology is taken from John Duncan's essay "Manuscripts used in the Critical Edition of the Mahâbhârata: A Survey and Discussion."

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