Introduction

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> Shri Krishna was a politician without parallel – accomplished as providence in building and dissolving empires – hence conceived to be the incarnation of God.... His aim was not merely to make the Pandavas [the] sole master. His aim was the unity of India.
>
> —Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Krishnacharitra', 1875[1]

> In the Mahabharata a very definite attempt has been made to emphasize the fundamental unity of India.... That war was for the overlordship of India ... and it marks the beginning of the conception of India as a whole, of Bharatvarsha.
>
> —Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 1946[2]

> The speech of the Mahabharata is same as ambrosia
> In every era, it is interpreted in new ways
> Interpreted in ever new ways.
>
> —Shaoli Mitra, 'Nathavati Anathavat', 1983[3]

Arguably, the Mahabharata is India's most influential political text. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* may seem a close contender, but it never attained the epic's social depth and was, in any case, forgotten for a millennium before its rediscovery in 1905.[4] The Constitution of India certainly plays a more important role in shaping the modern Indian state, but, as a text, it hardly permeates popular consciousness in the way the Mahabharata does. For over two millennia, the Mahabharata has shaped Indian politics. It has nourished the statecraft

of Hindu rajas and Mughal emperors, stirred anti-colonial nationalism and peasant rebellion, moulded Dalit–Bahujan and feminist activism. Beyond India, it has profoundly shaped political cultures across Southeast Asia, inspired pan-Asian thinking in China and Japan, activated the philosophical imagination of European and Arab thinkers, and conversed with Iranian nationalism.

Like one of its protagonists, the divine statesman Krishna, the Mahabharata exists in multiple avatars. The Sanskrit text, ascribed to Vyasa, coexists with versions in several Indian and extra-Indian languages. For many decades now, scholars have written about these textual traditions as well as about the popular appeal of Mahabharata stories. Historians, anthropologists, religious studies scholars, and philosophers have all written about the epic. Admittedly, much more has been said about the pre-modern lives of the Mahabharata than about its modern incarnations – but even on the latter the scholarship is rich and growing.[5]

In this milieu, why is a new book needed about the epic? We offer two compelling reasons. First, there exists no single volume that engages with the Mahabharata's role in shaping modern social, political, and religious thought. A monograph by Nagappa Gowda and an edited volume by Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji address the role of the Bhagavadgita in shaping modern Indian political thought – but no comparable volume exists on the epic as a whole.[6] Second, scholarship on the Mahabharata has, by and large, with only a few exceptions, focused on India. We know far less about the epic's role in the global history of ideas.

Our volume addresses both research gaps. It studies the impact of the epic as a whole in shaping modern intellectual history. And, going further, our gaze extends beyond India to also focus on Japan, China, Thailand, Iran, the Arab world, Germany, and Britain. Our authors show how the Mahabharata helped connect India to much wider, pan-Eurasian, intellectual, and political networks. They also demonstrate how the Mahabharata became central to globally entangled debates about religion in general and Indian religion in particular.

Studying the Mahabharata on this global scale requires new methodological frameworks. All of our authors engage, in one form or another, with the history of ideas. Yet intellectual history, as it has been practised in the past, has two main limitations. First, intellectual historians have traditionally focused on 'great men'. Second, they often inordinately focus on metropolitan geographies. We shall not be able to appreciate the Mahabharata's role in shaping global thought if we continue with these limitations. After all, the epic has commanded

such power and prestige precisely because it has gone beyond great men and big cities to stir the multitudes.

In expanding our gaze, we have been inspired by new directions in global intellectual and religious history. To overcome the limitations of older forms of intellectual history, global intellectual historians have made two major interventions. First, going beyond canonical intellectuals – Plato to Karl Marx, the Buddha to Jawaharlal Nehru, so to speak – they have started recognizing a much broader array of actors as intellectual agents. In a common-sense way, this should be obvious. Everyone can think, can generate new ideas – hence, anyone and everyone can be a subject matter of intellectual history. However, within the walls of academia, it still feels quite a revolution to claim that peasants and artisans, traders and tribesmen, women and working classes can all be intellectuals. Fortunately, there is a growing group of scholars who are precisely focusing on such actors, studying their ideas as intellectual history.[7]

Second, global intellectual histories have relentlessly emphasized transnational movements of ideas. Ideas seldom remain imprisoned within borders. Though intellectual historians had long recognized this, they – especially those studying the modern world – often remained content with studying the formation of modern ideas within Europe and North America. At most, they might study the 'diffusion' of these ideas to the non-Western world. In the wake of global intellectual history, there is an increasing impetus to also study other kinds of movements, connecting different parts of Asia and Africa to the wider non-white world.[8] Centring non-white actors, especially subaltern actors, can contribute in important ways to challenging Eurocentrism and thereby decolonizing intellectual history.[9]

These concerns also relate to recent debates in religious studies, where the approach of global religious history has been proposed as the basis of a decentred historiography of religion.[10] Indeed, the Mahabharata was in the spotlight within global debates about the origin and meaning of religion, not least with regard to the colonial context. The epic's antiquity could be invoked to ascertain the authority of Indian learning, which Orientalist scholarship often identified as the root of an 'Aryan' primordial civilization shared by Asia and Europe. This allowed for the contestation of colonial hierarchies within a complex tangle of exchanges, in which the role of the Mahabharata was elevated by anti-colonial nationalists and movements such as the Theosophical Society alike, which, in turn, shaped perceptions of the epic in India and elsewhere.[11]

Our volume draws inspiration from these debates. Our authors do analyse a range of canonical figures, such as the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel,

the Prussian statesman and thinker Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Japanese pan-Asianist Kakuzo Okakura, the Thai king Rama VI, the literary progenitors of anti-colonial Indian nationalism such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Kazi Nazrul Islam, and the statesmen M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Some of the actors we study are celebrated in their own countries but, unfortunately, are less-known outside, such as the Chinese revolutionary Zhang Taiyan and the Sino-Japanese poet Su Manshu.

Simultaneously, our authors go beyond the historiographical canon to illumine an oceanic multitude of charismatic figures – to name only a few among them, a commercial translator like Munshi Tota Ram Shayan; 'lower-caste' political leaders and intellectuals like Panchanan Barma and Jagat Mohan Devsimha Barman; the Chinese art collector Liu Jiping; the Arabic litterateur Wadi' al-Bustani; the pioneer Odia female writer Pratibha Ray.

From rural 'lower-caste' women's journals such as *Mahishya-Mahila* to the Constituent Assembly of India, the Mahabharata has been discussed and debated across the length and breadth of modern India. In the Constituent Assembly, the Indian Constitution was itself conceived of as a second Mahabharata. In the original illustrated edition of the Constitution, Part IV: 'Directive Principles of State Policy' begins with an image of Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra – a despondent Arjuna urged into action by Krishna's sermon, known to us as the Bhagavadgita.[12]

When we thus expand our range of thinkers, we also expand the geographies we study. Intellectual histories of modern India tend to focus on specific regional clusters, such as Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) and, more broadly, southern Bengal; the larger cities of northern India, such as Aligarh, Allahabad, and Delhi; or cities of western India, such as Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and Pune. This volume studies in detail these metropolitan intellectual landscapes but also pays attention to lesser-known centres of political thought, such as sub-Himalayan northern Bengal, the princely states of Tripura and Manipur, and prisons in Belgaum and Dhule in south-western India. The authors in this volume often emphasize intellectual networks rather than only singular individuals.

In expanding our gaze transnationally, even beyond India, we are forced to ask: Why was the Mahabharata so attractive to political actors across Eurasia? What was its mystique that drew so many thinkers? We would argue that if one central rationale is to be suggested, it would be 'sovereignty'. Across the long nineteenth century, European states expanded their power across Asia. In the process, the modern European-origin form of sovereign state also got globalized. In Europe, as well as among anti-colonial Asian elites, nationalism became the

hegemonic ideology.[13] This was closely related to religious identities. For instance, the elevation of the Gita to the 'Hindu Bible', as well as the socio-religious teachings contained in the Mahabharata more broadly, enabled universalist claims to equality between Christianity and Hindu *dharma*, or even claims to superiority of the latter over the religion of the colonizers.[14]

In this milieu, the epic form came to be seen as foundational to the birth of a nation. In other words, every nation needed an epic to describe its founding moment. In the age before the globalization of written constitutions, Romantic nationalism cast heroic literature as the constituent moment of a nation, when a nation came into self-consciousness and became a being-for-itself. In this volume, Philipp Sperner refers to Hegel's concept of *Nationale Grundbücher* (national origin-books) to conceptualize this role of the epic form and underlines how the Mahabharata played a significant role in the development of early German nationalism (Chapter 4). Milinda Banerjee and Sperner further show how across nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Hindi-speaking northern India, Bengal, and the princely states of Cooch Behar, Tripura, and Manipur, the Mahabharata was shaped into the founding moment of the nation (Chapters 1 and 4).

For Hindu Indian nationalists, the war described in the Mahabharata culminated in the unification of the Indian nation. The epic gave them the hope that colonized India would, one day, recover its freedom and unity. Inspired by Italian and German nationalism, they saw Krishna as an ancient Cavour or Bismarck. They found the globally most ancient forms of social contract theory enunciated in the epic and used that to carve out modern Indian constitutionalism. At the same time, local polities in north-eastern India also rooted their origin moment of sovereignty in stories derived from the Mahabharata. In this volume, Alok Oak demonstrates, with particular reference to Maharashtra, that the chronology of the Mahabharata thus assumed paramount importance. Fixing the date of the Mahabharata amounted to nothing less than determining the antiquity of the Indian nation (Chapter 2).

This was not a process confined to India. As Amanda Lanzillo shows, Iranian nationalists, struggling against British and Russian dominance, saw Firdausi's *Shahnamah* (The Book of Kings) and the Mahabharata as comparable national epics (Chapter 6). In East Asia, as Egas Moniz Bandeira underlines, Chinese nationalists even rooted the very name 'China' in the Mahabharata. From a pan-Asianist perspective, they cast the Mahabharata as an Asian epic – for some comparable to and for others slightly less philosophical than the Buddhist canon (Chapter 8). The Mahabharata inspired Chinese and Japanese visions of turning away from the West to 'return to the East'. This was not the case in the Kingdom

of Siam, as David M. Malitz shows. After a period of obscurity in the early modern period, the Mahabharata, once cherished at courts, was translated at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it never gained the appeal that the epic had elsewhere or that the Ramayana had (and has) in Siam/Thailand (Chapter 9). In the Arab world, as Christopher Bahl and Abdallah Soufan highlight, Wadiʿ al-Bustani's translation project was similarly motivated by the desire to challenge the political and cultural hegemony of the West. Hence, the Mahabharata was posited against the Iliad and the Odyssey (Chapter 10).

However, 'sovereignty' is not a monolith; it is always liable to fracture. If 'high-caste' Hindu nationalist men crystallized their projects of nation-making around the epic, so did subalterns. Scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies Collective have alerted us to the fact that elites may often exercise political dominance, but they seldom enjoy hegemony. That is, they are often unable to control the minds of non-elite classes – peasants, artisans, and so on. Ranajit Guha, founder of the Subaltern Studies Collective, referred to this as dominance without hegemony.[15] Guha especially posited the Mahabharata as a narrative form that escapes top-down control by a narrator. Through a close reading of the Sanskrit version of the epic, Guha suggests that

> it will unfold in a retelling that works closely with its listeners as a conversational process. Called *kathāyoga* in the text (*MBh* 1.4.3), that process requires the bard to consult his audience about their preferences not only at the start of the narrative cycle but all throughout. At the end of an episode he will leave it to them to advise what they want to hear next, and an interlocutor who speaks for them will name an event or personality or sometimes even a moral or metaphysical topic around which to spin the next round of tales.[16]

Guha concludes: 'It is thus that provenance makes for a clear distinction between the two paradigms: in the West the narrative issues from the narrator's initiative, in South Asia from the listener's.'[17] We do not need to accept the radical distinction that Guha draws between Europe and India. Nevertheless, Guha stimulates us to think of the epic as exchange. This dovetails with the manner in which Sudipta Kaviraj encourages us to conceptualize a narrative as a social contract.[18] From our standpoint, a narrative embodies an exercise of sovereignty. To tell a story is to narrate 'what is' or at least 'ought to be' – that is, to narrate, shape, and control Being – the world in its total and ultimate reality. In practice, narratives always confront counter-narratives; sovereignties are fractured by counter-sovereignties. The Mahabharata has never been a singular text; it has always existed in multiple renditions. With the advent of print capitalism,

as Lanzillo underlines, the Mahabharata rapidly circulated through the novel form of lithograph. Older modes of storytelling, assembly speech, and liturgy now coexisted with print versions of the epic (Chapter 6).

Across India, subaltern communities and individuals were quick to seize on the opportunities offered by print and, indeed, by new forms of modern public association. Banerjee explores how 'lower-caste' peasant and pastoral communities in India deployed the Mahabharata to proclaim their own sovereignty. In their association meetings and printed texts, they drew descent from the gods and heroes of the epic. Lucia Michelutti refers to this as the vernacularization of democracy.[19] Subaltern actors saw in the *dharma samsthapan* (establishment of *dharma*) of the Gita a prefiguring of their own constituent law-making power. Socialists used the Mahabharata to speak about working-class revolution (Chapter 1). Melanie J. Müller highlights the feminist afterlives of the epic, as women writers across India have drawn upon female characters of the epic to describe their own resistance to patriarchy (Chapter 5).

What explains this enormous political fecundity of the Mahabharata? Is it its ability to be both a text of state power and a weapon of subaltern resistance? Taking a cue from Paulus Kaufmann, we may say the Mahabharata is so powerful because it is a properly dialectical text. Kaufmann suggests that a work, to be truly philosophical, must create a dialogue between contradictory ideological positions. It cannot simply declare 'this is how things are'. Rather, it must allow a conversation between the opposing sides, between thesis and antithesis, so that a higher synthesis is reached through that dialogue. Dialogues, dialectical modes of argumentation – to use the Indian terms *vada*, *samvada*, *vichara*, *tarka* – are thus central to philosophy.[20] Kaufmann argues, against Hegel, that the Gita is a work of true philosophy in this sense. There is a genuine crisis, a moral dilemma, a philosophical struggle in the battlefield of Kurukshetra that is resolved through the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Kaufmann compares the situation to dialogues between Socrates and his disciples in ancient Greece (Chapter 7).

The Mahabharata repeatedly says *dharma* is *sukshma* (subtle).[21] Since it is difficult to know what is right, there opens up space for contradiction. Philosophical contradiction and political contradiction are two sides of the same coin. Arkamitra Ghatak thus shows how the Gita, which was often used by militant Indian nationalists to justify anti-colonial violence, was transfigured by Gandhi into a text about non-violence. At the hands of Vinoba Bhave, the Gita became a blueprint for non-violent revolution to usher in an egalitarian society. That a text about war could be interpreted as a programme for non-violence demonstrates the protean magic of the Mahabharata (Chapter 3).

Taking a cue from Sperner but also departing from him, we may say the Mahabharata ultimately resists transcendental closure. As the Bengali dramatist Shaoli Mitra emphasized, every epoch will interpret the Mahabharata in its own way.

Global intellectual historians tend, in general, to be modernists. They explain the globalization of ideas by taking recourse to modern historical phenomena – attributing intellectual globalization to the operations of global capitalism,[22] mass violence,[23] or developments in high-velocity transportation and print media.[24] Similarly, religious studies scholars often focus on the modern colonial period, in which 'Western ideas' supposedly diffused into the rest of the world.[25] The story of the Mahabharata's globalization opens up a much deeper time frame – where ancient ideas inspire actors across distances of space and time. In David Armitage's words, this is transtemporal intellectual history.[26] Ideas refuse to die, to be immured in narrow historical contexts – they have millennial afterlives.[27]

Drawing together the insights of Guha and Kaufmann, we may see that the movement of a narrative does not only depend on the original narrator but rather also on those who listen. This is certainly true of the fundamentally dialogic structure of the Mahabharata. Given the many versions of the epic, as well as its wide spatial and temporal influence, we may say that the epic's dialectics span across vast distances of space and time. Perhaps this even endows the epic with a certain immortality. We may almost describe the Mahabharata in the way that its Gita episode (chapter 2, verse 20) describes the soul:

> Neither is this
> Born nor does it die at any time,
> Nor, having been, will it again come
> Not to be.
> Birthless, eternal, perpetual,
> Primaeval,
> It is not slain when the body is slain.[28]

If this volume underlines anything, it is that the Mahabharata has never been a narrowly Brahmanical tradition. The epic is protean and pluriform. If, in some avatars, it announces ruling-class hegemony, in other avatars it is a subaltern manifesto, a global palimpsest. The Mahabharata has been used to legitimate the Mughal and the British empires; it has also been used to justify rebellion against those very empires. It has been deployed to articulate 'high-caste' male dominance; it has also been used to question and dismantle these hierarchies.

Ultimately, the Mahabharata is perhaps simply what its listeners think it is. The audience is the author. Every act of listening can potentially turn into a constituent act, an act of political mobilization and transformation, of norm-making and lawgiving. *Dharma* may be subtle, but the Mahabharata continues to energize collective politics from the most ancient times until today. When Dalit–Bahujan actors, Adivasi thinkers, feminists, and Muslims voice and interpret the text, they announce their constituent power, they move the wheel of law. Democracy is perhaps just this – an unceasing renovation of constituent power, a relentless opening up of sovereignty by and to the multitudes. In this sense, the Mahabharata is, perhaps, the constituent text par excellence of India.

Notes

1. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Krishnacharitra', in *Bankim Rachanavali*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1954), 903–04.
2. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 107.
3. Shaoli Mitra, 'Nathavati Anathavat', in *Nathavati Anathavat o Katha Amritasaman* (Calcutta: Mitra o Ghosh, 2012), 20.
4. Patrick Olivelle (trans.), *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthasastra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
5. It is impossible to summarize scholarship on the Mahabharata here. See, for example, Bimal Krishna Matilal (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989); Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Laurie Sears (eds.), *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991); John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi among Rajputs, Muslims, and Dalits* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Catherine A. Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gita and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the German Reception of Indian Thought, 1778–1831* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (eds.), *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Pamela Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining*

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6. Nagappa Gowda, *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji (eds.), *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
7. See, for example, Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage (eds.), *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Noenoe K. Silva, *The Power of the Steel-Tipped Pen: Reconstructing Native Hawaiian Intellectual History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Milinda Banerjee, *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018);