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The Mahābhārata: A Summary of the State of Play[1]

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Abstract: The *Mahābhārata* is an immense epic which likely dates to the second or first century BCE. This article benefits from the publication of two studies by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (*The Nay Science*, 2014; *Philology and Criticism*, 2018) in order to take stock of the work on this epic. It is also intended to serve as an introduction to this field of research.

What is the *Mahābhārata* [Mbh]? It concerns the "great [war] of the Bhārata", the Bhārata (or descendants of a king of the name of Bharata) being the name specific to the inhabitants of the whole of the subcontinent that one today calls India (in Hindi, Bhārat or Bhārata-varṣa, the nation of the Bhārata). The greater part of this epic describes a combat of cosmic dimensions. The Indians attribute this long narrative to a certain Vyāsa, a sage said to have formerly divided the Veda into four great collections before writing this text which is also spoken of as a fifth Veda. Western scholarship most often posits that the Mbh was composed in successive stages from the 4th c. BCE to approximately the 4th c. CE. This narrative comprises eighteen books (*parvan*), as well as a supplement called *Harivaṃśa* ([HV], "the genealogy of Hari[-Kṛṣṇa]"). This work encompasses 100,000 verses, making it three and a half times the length of the Bible or seven times that of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined, which makes it even more impressive. The aim of this short popularizing text is to permit a non-specialist to understand the interest of the West in this epic and to appreciate the difficulties that must be overcome in approaching it. Its occasion

[1] The French version of this text can be found on the same website under the title "Le Mahābhārata: un bref état des lieux".

is the publication of two important works on these questions by two American researchers, Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee.[2]

A Summary of the Epic

The Mbh is said to have been told by the famous Ugraśravas, son of Lomaharṣaṇa, a storyteller belonging to the caste of the *sūta*s (at once herald, counselor to the king and his charioteer), famous for his knowledge of ancient stories. This man of prodigious memory is said to have gone to the legendary forest of Naimiṣa at the edge of the Gomatī river, a tributary of the Ganges, to the place where Brahmans had gathered in order to celebrate, under the direction of the great Śaunaka of the line of Bhārgava, a sacrificial session lasting twelve years. During the long intervals left free by the ritual, the participants were entertained by listening to this storyteller telling them his stories. The narrative that Ugraśravas presented to them had previously been told during another sacrifice celebrated by King Janamejaya, son of Parīkṣit and sole survivor of the Bhārata war. The story actually goes back to the great Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, even if it was one of his disciples, the Brahman Vaiśaṃpāyana, who then told it to King Janamejaya. Indeed, King Parīkṣit died as a result of the bite of the terrible snake Takṣaka, and that is the reason why his son King Janamejaya then undertook this sacrifice aimed at exterminating the cursed brood. It was on this occasion that Ugraśravas heard the Brahman Vaiśaṃpāyana tell the story of the appalling war which, at the end of Dvāparayuga, the age immediately preceding the current Kaliyuga, had opposed two lines belonging to one great family, as well as everything pertaining to the famous Kṛṣṇa, who had tried to pacify the belligerents. We understand that the story of the Mbh, as it is presented in this text, is embedded within a sacrifice of snakes, then of a sacrificial session celebrated in the forest of Naimiṣa, a double sacrifice which we must necessarily take into account in order to understand that the combat which is the very subject of this vast epic is directly compared to a gigantic sacrifice.

[2] Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014; and *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism*, London and New York, Anthem Press, 2018.

The battle recounted by the Brahman Vaiśaṃpāyana to King Janamejaya in a way allows the listener to participate in the very collapse of the socio-cosmic order, *dharma* in its most encompassing sense. It is the result of a long downfall and the opportunity to discuss the great values around which it is traditionally said that Indian society was built: desire in all its forms (*kāma*), that which relates to wealth and profit (*artha*), that which pertains to duty on a ritual as well as a social plane (*dharma*), and finally the possibility of giving up all these secular values and leaving the world (*mokṣa*). The main plot opposes two lines of descendants: the Pāṇḍavas, the five sons of Pāṇḍu, incarnations of deities (*deva*), and the Kauravas (or Kurus), the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the younger brother of Pāṇḍu, namely the rude Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers, manifestations of *asura*s who together represent the multiple and disorderly forces which traditionally confront the gods. After having ensured the education of his hundred sons (the Kauravas) and of his nephews, the five Pāṇḍavas (whom he entrusts to the Brahman warrior Droṇa), the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra appoints Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, to succeed him on the throne. The Pāṇḍavas then narrowly escape a plot hatched by the Kauravas. The Pāṇḍavas then marry Draupadī, who will become their common wife. Book 2 of the Mbh describes the rise of the Pāṇḍavas, but at the same time the increasing jealousy of the Kauravas, who manage to temporarily triumph over their opponents following a game of rigged dice. The Pāṇḍavas are immediately condemned to a twelve year exile in the forest (Book 3) as well as to a thirteenth year that they spend incognito in the kingdom of the Matsyas (Book 4, chapters 23-40). Upon their release, the situation continues to worsen and total war becomes inevitable between the two clans, which multiply their forces tenfold by creating multiple alliances with tribes from all over India. Kṛṣṇa, who intervenes from Dvārakā (in the west of India, near the Indian Ocean), fails to avert war, and decides to take sides for the Pāṇḍavas (Book 5).

When the two camps are about to confront each other on the immense Kurukṣetra plain ("the field of the Kurus", a mythical battlefield sometimes located in the vicinity of Delhi) and Kṛṣṇa is playing the role of charioteer for Arjuna, one of the Pāṇḍavas, the action suddenly stops to make way for an extraordinary scene (Book 6). Rather than indulging in such violence, the towering warrior Arjuna sees no other way out than to withdraw from combat. In a famous dialogue, which is called the *Bhagavad-Gītā* [BhG, "the song of the

Blessed One"], Kṛṣṇa convinces this warrior to return to battle. "It is not only by refraining from acting (*karman*)," he says, "that man achieves freedom from non-acting (*naiṣkarmya*); it is not only by renunciation that he rises to perfection [...] Perform the prescribed actions (*karman*)," he tells him, "for action (*karman*) is superior to inaction (*akarman*), and your corporeal life cannot be maintained without your action (*akarman*). For this reason, without attaching yourself to it, never cease to perform the prescribed actions (*kāryaṃ karma*). The man who, detached, discharges it (*karman*), attains the Sovereign Good (*para*)," (BhG 3, 4. 8. 19, trans. Esnoul and Lacombe). The man who wants to follow me, Kṛṣṇa notes again, has no choice but to always engage in the necessary action while refusing to attach himself only to objects of desire. And in a properly apocalyptic scene, Kṛṣṇa then appears to Arjuna in his gigantic form of supreme God who acts constantly and without attachment, always in the process of emitting the worlds and reabsorbing them into himself.

After these eighteen short chapters devoted to teaching, the war finally breaks out: single combats succeed single combats and always the dead accumulate. Saṃjaya, the charioteer of the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, receives from Vyāsa the gift of divine vision: he therefore sees everything that is happening on the battlefield and can tell the king the vicissitudes of the war. Books 6-10 present a succession of combats. Finally, in Book 10 there remain three survivors among the Kauravas, including Aśvatthāman, son of Droṇa, who take advantage of the night to attack together the sleeping Pāṇḍavas, but Kṛṣṇa and the five Pāṇḍava brothers are absent and thus escape the carnage. Book 11 depicts the women who mourn over so many missing husbands and sons, then describes the funerary rites.

After a battle lasting eighteen days, in a dramatic scene, the great and terrible warrior Bhīṣma, the father of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, lying on a bed of arrows, delivers a final and very long lesson concerning the duties of a king (Books 12 and 13). The five Pāṇḍavas have survived the combat. As if he wishes to purify himself of all the violence of the war and reaffirm his sovereignty, Yudhiṣṭhira makes a yearlong horse sacrifice (Book 14). Whereas at the beginning of Book 1, the various characters had somehow entered the cosmic scene to play out there the whole of the episodes of this great war (the term *avataraṇa*, used in the first book, is a technical term from the theater and means for one to "go down" onto the stage),

the protagonists of this drama finally withdraw in turn and return to their respective worlds (Books 15-18).

Some Important Links in the Interpretation of the Mbh

This brief summary, even if it has chosen to leave out most of the episodes that adorn the narrative, has sought to evoke as far as possible the ritual and didactic framework in which it is inserted. The Mbh, its teachings, in particular the BhG, have been part of the great religious tradition of India for probably two millennia. Certain commentaries (often partial) upon the whole (or important parts) of the Mbh have been preserved for us from the 11th and 12th centuries, the best known being that of Nīlakaṇṭha in the 17th century. As for the BhG, it was commented upon by, among others, Śaṅkarācārya in the 8th century and Rāmānuja in the 12th century. This means that the study of this epic (like that of the Rāmāyaṇa, the other great epic, probably slightly later) is an integral part of Hinduism and that one cannot dispense with it if one wants to learn about the religious culture of India.

The West began to take an interest in the Mbh with translations of selected portions. The Englishman Charles Wilkins published in 1785 the first complete translation of the BhG,[3] while Franz Bopp published in 1819 the first Latin translation of the episode of Nala and Damayantī, followed in 1828 by a German translation by Friedrich Rückert. The Germans were the first researchers to take an interest in the epic of the Mbh as such. They did so under the sway of a Romanticism which, from the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, led them to rediscover the power of great myths which had, it was believed, shaped German identity before the Semitic religions (specifically Judaism and Christianity) had penetrated Europe. The discovery of the Mbh, written in Sanskrit, a sister language of Latin, Greek and ancient German, could only in their eyes confirm the greatness of the ancient Aryan world which was to have extended once from Europe to Northern India. Several of the first German Indologists saw in the discovery of the Mbh the possibility of finally reclaiming a warlike tale common to the whole of this great ancient culture, and it was with this in mind that they began to study it.

[3] Wilkins' work was translated into French in 1787 and into German in 1802. Adluri and Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 2014 have a section on "The first phase of German Gītā reception", p. 31-40.

During the 19th and much of the 20th century, German Indology dominated the critical analysis of the Mbh. One of its preoccupations consisted in discovering, within a text considered as a jumble of episodes of disparate origins, a "primitive epic" (*Urepos*),[4] a kind of Aryan heritage common to the ancient Aryans and the ancient Germans and conforming to the idea that Romanticism had then formed of it. But for the Mbh to be easily analyzed, it first had to be accessible other than in manuscripts. The most common text at that time, which is still designated as the Vulgate, was thus published for the first time in Calcutta in four volumes from 1834 to 1839. There followed in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1863 and 1901 two other editions including the famous commentary by Nīlakaṇṭha (17th century), which Indian tradition considered essential for the proper understanding of this text. The first complete translation of the Vulgate was by Kisari Mohan Ganguli and was made in Calcutta from 1884-1896 under the patronage of Pratap Chandra Roy. It remains useful, even if it sometimes tends to merge the text and its commentary. Manmatha Nath Dutt then published a revised version of this first translation, among other things eliminating certain archaisms and adding the verse numbers (Calcutta, 1895-1905). Whatever their quality, these first tools were essential to the Western reception of this text and to the progress of its interpretation. Before returning to the reasons for a certain blockage of research due to presuppositions endorsed more or less consciously by researchers and which are precisely the subject of the two books recently published by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, it is important first to highlight two other important moments in the study of the Mbh, namely the production in India of a critical edition and, on the Western side, the renewal of research that took place in Paris thanks to the work of Madeleine Biardeau.

The production of a critical edition of the Mbh (1919-1966)

To get out of the impasse at the end of the 19th century in the critical analysis of the Mbh, a German researcher by the name of Moriz Winternitz suggested, during the 11th International Congress of Orientalists held in Paris in 1897 (an idea further defined in Rome in 1899, then in Hamburg in 1902), to proceed with the establishment of a critical

[4] *Urepos*, a German term composed of '*epos'*, epic, and '*Ur*', first, primitive, and designating "the epic in its first, original form".

edition of the Mbh: it was a matter of collecting the manuscripts still accessible, of classifying them, of comparing them, so as to obtain a text as close as possible to the original composition. The purpose of this critical edition project was to resolve the impasse in which the study of this epic then stood. After a few soundings, the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute (having just been founded in India at Poona [now Pune]) agreed to carry out the project, which was started in April 1919. Unsuspected, however, were the extent of the means which would need to be implemented to achieve the desired goal, as well as the resistances and pitfalls that would have to be overcome. The enterprise began with the collection of manuscripts and the publication of a preliminary essay in 1923. In August 1925, the project came under the direction of Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar (who died in January 1943), a former pupil of Moriz Winternitz. The first six fascicles of the *Ādiparvan* (the first book) appeared between 1927 and 1932. The project had eleven editors, including four general editors, and ended in 1966.[5] As for the *Harivaṃśa*, the long supplement which accompanies the Mbh, it appeared in two volumes in 1969 and 1971.[6] This work, which was carried out according to the most rigorous criteria, had its supporters as well as its detractors. Let us say that one can only note that the results of this critical work have proven to be in clear opposition to the habitual presuppositions of German research, and an important part of the second book by Adluri and Bagchee (*Philology and Criticism*, 2018) justly highlights the manner in which German scholarship subsequently attempted to circumvent its principal conclusions. We shall have to come back to it.

Madeleine Biardeau (1968-2010) and the renewal of the interpretation of the Mbh[7]

Even if the German way of understanding the Mbh was already a problem for a number of researchers, it was not until the 1970s that the controversy organized itself in large part

[5] For more information on this enterprise, see, among others, John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 1998, p. 56ff.
[6] An overview of this publication can be found in Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, 2018, p. 343-344.
[7] For information on Madeleine Biardeau's academic career, see Gérard Colas, «Histoire, oralité, structure: à propos d'un tournant dans l'œuvre de Madeleine Biardeau», *Journal Asiatique* 300, 2012, no. 1, p. 17-32; and Nicolas Dejenne, "The Status of Upākhyānas in Madeleine Biardeau's Reflection on the Mahābhārata", in Adluri and Bagchee (ed.), *Argument and Design*, 2016, p. 358-377. Faithful to her master Sylvain Lévi, and for reasons that are not always very obvious, Madeleine Biardeau opposed German Indology as well as the critical edition of the Mbh. Although she never failed to consult the critical edition, she always favored the text of the Vulgate for her translations as well as her commentaries.

around the work of the French Indologist, Madeleine Biardeau. It was indeed in 1968 that the first volume of *Mythe et épopée* by Georges Dumézil appeared, an important part of which was devoted to the Mbh. Even if Biardeau was immediately critical of the possibility of discovering in the Mbh an application of the trifunctional theory dear to this great specialist in Indo-European mythology, she perceived in it a refreshing way of approaching this text and appreciated in particular in Dumézil "the method of relating characters to each other, a structuration of the epic heroes which no longer relied upon psychology or literature, but upon their respective positions in the staging of the action which would constitute the framework of the poem and give to it its sense."[8] What Biardeau here seeks, then inspired by the thought of sociologist Louis Dumont and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, is a way of approaching "as a totality" this vast poem "already so battered and torn to pieces by contemporary science."[9] Among the convictions that drive Biardeau throughout her work and which she brings together at the beginning of the research forming the two volumes of her *Mahābhārata* (1998 and 2002), there is *in the first place* that of a unity of author. Here's what she says about it:

> Fortunately, I shared with Dumézil (and already J. Dahlmann in 1895) the conviction that this poem had not been formed—according to an opinion still common—during a period of approximately eight hundred years (why these eight hundred, I never understood), with all that this implies of "interpolations" and transmission errors. For me it is the work probably of a single poet, probably working under the protection of one or more allied minor kings who paid him and encouraged him in every way.[10]

In 1985, in the introduction to the translation that she published with Jean-Michel Péterfalvi, she clarified her thought thus:

> The refinement of construction and invention that the Mbh implies can only be the work of a genius and I don't see what we would gain from pluralizing

[8] Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, t. I, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 15-16.
[9] Ibid., p. 16, for both citations.
[10] Ibid., p. 16-17. Animated by the same concerns, Alf Hiltebeitel specifies that this composition could have taken place between the middle of the 2nd century BC and the turn of the millennium, probably by a committee or a team, and have spread "at most through a couple of generations" (Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 2001, p. 20).

> it. If it is really necessary, I would imagine a father, a son, a maternal uncle of the father or of the son working together and, in a remote corner, just out of earshot, a woman, wife of the father, mother of the son and sister of the uncle. This schema is taken from the Mbh itself, but places the composition of the poem in the south of India rather than in the north… but that is another story. For my part, I prefer to assume the creation of a single Brahman genius.[11]

A *second* conviction touches on the bond of the religion of *bhakti* (devotion) to which the Mbh testifies with the Vedic tradition that preceded it. While the great Vedicist Louis Renou maintained that *bhakti* was in complete rupture with the Vedic world, Madeleine Biardeau refused to make it an "a-Vedic" phenomenon.[12] She even finds it impossible to read the Mbh outside the Vedic world, and she likes to find all kinds of signs of transition between these two worlds.

> Readers will have already understood that the epic does not arise *ex nihilo* from the creative power of the author. Not only does he have before him a corpus of texts clearly more ancient, if only with respect to language, relatively diverse, but more highly valued since it is a self-revealed whole, literally "heard", without an author, which he must have memorized, at least in part, from a human master. It is therefore a matter for the poet, inevitably a Brahman, and even if he is aware of having something else to say, of taking the utmost account of it.[13]

The Veda therefore remains for Biardeau "the primary source of inspiration for the poem,"[14] so much so that it seemed essential to begin her presentation of the Mbh with a chapter on "The Revelation".[15] In the introduction to the work published with Péterfalvi,

[11] Biardeau and Péterfalvi, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 1985, p. 27; cited and translated into English by Alf Hiltebeitel in *Rethinking the Mahābhārata* (2001, p. 165).
[12] For example, Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. I, p. 133.
[13] Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. I, p. 22.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 33-64.

she also specifies, for example, that the *varṇa*s (the four major social categories which appear from the Veda) have not ceased to structure Brahmanic (and later Hindu) society:

> the Brahmans, who are the priests of the sacrifice and the custodians of the Vedic Revelation and its extensions, the Kṣatriyas, warrior kings responsible for ensuring the protection of their subjects but above all of the Brahmans, the Vaiśyas, comprising farmers, herders and merchants, and finally the Śūdras, a category whose only duty is to serve the other three in the most perfect obedience. This fourth category is clearly inferior to the others since it does not take part in the sacrificial cult and is excluded from its direct benefits, but the very possibility of the sacrifice would vanish if it did not exist and did not perform certain unclean tasks for others. Vice versa, the prosperity engendered by the harmony of the first three *varṇa*s extends to all four. It is therefore inconceivable to separate this *varṇa* of the servants from those of their masters, to imagine for example that they are peoples defeated by the invading Āryas. They are part of the system.[16]

It is therefore necessary to locate the Mbh as the continuation of the Veda to understand

> the authority with which it imposed itself, to the extent that it was quickly called metaphorically the "fifth Veda", while it inaugurates the Tradition [*smṛti*] as opposed to the Revelation [*śruti*] (not taking into account the commentaries on ritual). The authority which he exercises derives exclusively from revelation. Not only is it given as author the promulgator of the Veda himself [Vyāsa], making him play at the same time a role as a very important actor, but its mythical material is partly taken from the Veda, in scraps… but in scraps often barely identifiable as they are cut from their original context.[17]

A *third* conviction appears later with Madeleine Biardeau, but in a way allows us to better contextualize the epic: it is that this text is constituted as a response of the Brahmans to the

[16] Biardeau et Péterfalvi, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, p. 23.
[17] Ibid., p. 26.

Buddhism which was imposed politically upon India in the third century BCE with the reign of Aśoka [273-232], the third emperor of the Maurya dynasty, and to the famous inscriptions, on rocks and pillars, which he spread over the whole of the immense region that he claimed as territory. These inscriptions are, Madeleine Biardeau remarks,

> … the main Indian source of documentation that we have on this period (second half of the 3rd century BCE?), and it is there, for us, that is located approximately the historical niche where the project of the epic is lodged, in the manner of ambitions political rather than religious, since Aśoka is more concerned with the morals of his subjects, a morality which we cannot call Buddhist rather than Brahmanic or the converse, but which he intends above all to impose and oversee. The event is important enough in the eyes of the Brahmanic society of the upper castes for our epic to be succeeded by another, the Rāmāyaṇa; both are promised a great destiny, the first having had a greater bearing on the development of temple worship than the second. We have gone from Vedic rituals based on the sacrifice of fire oblation to the cult of Viṣṇu in shrines that will become more and more important. It would be more accurate to say that the latter has encompassed the former or superimposed itself upon it.[18]

While presenting this date as a simple working hypothesis, Biardeau believes it entirely plausible that the Mbh may have been written during the second half of the third century BCE (whereas Hiltebeitel places its writing about a century later), in any case in a context where Brahmanism was looking for a way to assert its existence and to manifest its capacity to respond. Madeleine Biardeau, moreover, sees the new religion of *bhakti* which appears in the Mbh as a legitimation of the return to power of a Brahmanic sovereign.

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[18] Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. I, p. 24; see also p. 136f. It was Alf Hiltebeitel who first had the idea of comparing certain elements of the epic with the rise of Buddhism in India, an idea which he did not however pursue further [see A. Hiltebeitel, "Kṛṣṇa at Mathurā", in Doris Meth Srinivasan (ed.), *Mathurā: The Cultural Heritage*, New Delhi, American Institute of Indian Studies and Manohar Publications, p. 93-102, esp. p. 98-99; see also Biardeau, ibid., p. 21, n. 7. Biardeau concedes that there is no evidence to put the Mbh in immediate connection with a known political fact or episode of Buddhism (Biardeau and Péterfalvi, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, p. 30), but it is no less convinced that the epics are a response to imperial Buddhism (see *Le Rāmāyaṇa de Vālmīki*, 1999, p. XXIV-XXX).

> This is where we can try to show the need, both for kings and for their Brahmans, to give expression to a new religious form, whose name—*bhakti*, "devotion"—is already provided by an Upaniṣad, linked to Śiva rather than to Viṣṇu moreover, suggesting a coexistence of the two great divinities before they later become rivals, while always structurally complementary. It is the Mahābhārata first which, in a rather apocalyptic mode, describes a crisis in the world from which the Brahmanic king, on the one hand, comes out strengthened and legitimized by his essential bond with the supreme divinity in his form of "descent" into the world, the *avatāra*, and from which the world, on the other hand, comes out assured of its sustainability in an endless succession of temporal cycles.[19]

The research of Madeleine Biardeau on the Purāṇic cosmogonies and mythologies, concerning the relation between the religion of *bhakti* and the notion of *avatāra*,[20] would necessarily be introduced here to better understand her way of interpreting the Mbh, but can only be mentioned here.

The recent works of Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee: a certain context

Madeleine Biardeau and those who are inspired by her work hold in common that the narrative of the Mbh bequeathed by Indian tradition is not a kind of artificial construction, composed of a number of overlapping editorial layers. The task of the Indologist is to read the text in its entirety and not to strip it until it reveals a primitive nucleus which alone ultimately matters. Such a conception seems indeed to rest on specific assumptions and ideology dating back to the 19th century, much more than on a true historical criticism of the sources. Two important studies, written by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, were published in 2014 and 2018, trying to take stock of the methodological issues underlying the German way of approaching the Mbh.[21] Obviously, I do not intend to give a full account here of these two large works, but only to provide students interested in these questions with some essential elements to understand the great ideas which are exposed there. These

[19] Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. I, p. 24-25.
[20] See Madeleine Biardeau, *Études de mythologie hindoue*, vol. I & II.
[21] See note 1.

are outstanding works, supporting theses which appeared to Alf Hiltebeitel sufficiently conclusive for him to agree to write the following paragraph on the back cover of *The Nay Science*:

> This book begins at a point where Edward Said [*Orientalism*, 1978] left off. Rather than replicate the 'Orientalist' critique as so many have done, Adluri and Bagchee offer a diagnosis of German Indology as a form of 'Occidentalism': rather than accomplishing its stated goal of defining the other (which would be 'Orientalism'), it represents the other so as to define itself. The authors explore how nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century German Indology both tapped into and enabled German longings for an Āryan identity, and how this search for Āryan origins was, from the very beginning, coupled with polemical attacks on Indian Brahmins for having corrupted that identity by interpolating late strata into the Indian epic. *The Nay Science* challenges scholars to recognize that the 'Brahmanic hypothesis' was not and probably no longer can be an innocuous thesis. The 'corrupting' impact of Brahmanical 'priestcraft' served German Indology as a cover by which to talk about Catholics, Jews, and other 'Semites.'[22]

Vishwa Adluri was first trained in Greek philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. Influenced among others by the work of Reiner Schürmann (1941-1993),[23] sensitive to the fact that we are brought to study other cultures by submitting them to our own prejudices, he meets Joydeep Bagchee, a student who had followed the same university course as him and then lived in Berlin, and both decide together to study the influence of Western methods on the development of German

[22] Alf Hiltebeitel, back cover of Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 2014.
[23] Reiner Schürmann, *Des hégémonies brisés*, Mauvezin (France): Trans-Europ-Repress, 1996, written in French, but first published in English under the title *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003. Also *Le principe d'anarchie: Heidegger et la question de l'agir*, Bienne / Paris, Diaphanes, 2013. Entered the order of Dominicans in 1961, he was ordained in 1970, but left the priesthood in 1975 and began teaching philosophy at the New School as a protégé of Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas (then retired). *Broken Hegemonies* was published posthumously and translated into English in 2003. Adluri has made no secret of the great influence that the man he called his mentor had on his thinking (see http://socialresearchmatters.org/against-occidentalism-a- conversation-with-alice- crary-and-vishwa-adluri-on-the-nay-science-2/ , accessed July 13, 2019). At the same time, we understand Adluri's interest in Heidegger and questions of epistemology.

Indology from the 19th century. Continuing at that time studying Greek philology at the University of Marburg (Germany) under the direction of Argobast Schmitt, but also interested in the Mbh which he had read in parallel with Homer, Adluri realizes, when discusses a possible pilot project between the Classics and Indology departments of this university, the enormous resistance that such a project can generate and then seeks to understand the reasons.

> The racism I encountered in Marburg was not the kind we see among the "alt-right" or the discrimination black and minority citizens face daily. That kind of racism is easier to spot and to call out. This was more insidious. It was scientific or scientized racism. The Indologists had for so long told themselves that Indians lacked access to the "true" meaning of their texts that they no longer considered it a prejudice but a methodological principle and a necessary one at that. The question was, "How do we approach these texts scientifically and critically?" The answer was, "Obviously not as Indians read them, for Indians never developed scientific, critical thinking." Apart from the fact that, except by skin color, I am not Indian—I have lived and studied in the US most of my life, have a PhD in Western philosophy and know German intellectual history inside out—I was not approaching the Sanskrit epic in a "traditional" way. I was reading it alongside Homer and the tragedians. I knew the scholarly literature, had presented at the American Philological Association (now known as the SCS) and was offering a cogent interpretation. Yet, whenever I opened my mouth, the Marburg Indologists could only hear an Indian, and thus, whatever I said had to be negated to maintain Indology's status as a science. And then I realized: scientism and racism are linked. Indologists enact this discrimination not because they are vulgar racists—obviously, they think they are cultured, enlightened and cosmopolitan—but because their authority depends on it.[24]

[24] http://socialresearchmatters.org/against-occidentalism-a- conversation-with-alice- crary-and-vishwa-adluri-on-the-nay-science-2/, accessed July 13, 2019).

Suspected during the evaluation of a work presented in Indology of offering an "Indian religious view" (that is to say, being unable to accept the foundations of German Indology), whereas it was a question of a project of deconstruction based on a number of western philosophers including Derrida, Adluri decides to examine in depth the problem he then had to face, which triggered the writing of the two large books, written jointly with Joydeep Bagchee, which will now be discussed and which present themselves as "a nuanced critique of 'method' in the humanities" (ibid.). The authors justify their point of view by arguing that it is essentially based on the English translation of everything that these Indologists said at the time in German ("we just translated everything the Indologists had said into English", ibid.).

Methodological issues related to the German approach to the Mbh.

In their first book, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (2014), Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee show that much of 19th century German science, which has often been passed down to this day under the guise of philology or textual science, is in fact based on methodological principles borrowed from works of biblical exegesis ("We are claiming that academic Indology, as it developed in Germany between the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had been influenced by a Protestant inheritance mediated via the historical-critical method").[25] Obviously, the expression "German Indology" refers to a certain way of approaching India and its texts,[26] that one must not, above all, generalize to all German Indologists, but which also includes other Indologists who have had careers elsewhere, for example in India or the United States.

Some 18th century biblical scholars had in fact begun to use a so-called "historical-critical" method in order to separate Christian dogma in its universal truth from its particular historical coverings. These first works, carried out for theological purposes, gave birth to a second historical-critical method, more neutral in its objectives but always focused on critical analysis of texts, and capable of being used to read texts from other cultures, like the epic texts of India. It is this method, joined to convictions drawn from Romanticism (mentioned above), in particular the conviction of being bearers of an Aryan identity buried

[25] *The Nay Science*, p. 20.
[26] "… primarily a mode of doing scholarship", ibid., p. 21.

under centuries of Semitic religions (Judaism and Christianity), which has been used by a large part of the Oriental studies developed by Germans with the avowed aim of finding the true content of the epic of the Mbh beyond the diversions produced by the Brahmans. If the historical-critical method aimed, in the case of biblical research, to identify a nucleus of authentic traditions swallowed up by the later additions of the rabbis, the same principles could be used in the case of the Indian epic to find this time the authentic heritage of the ancient warrior traditions (*Urepos*) of the Āryas that philosophical speculations added by successive generations of Brahmans had completely submerged. Whether to find the purest Christian dogma or to recover the true Aryan tradition, the historical-critical method was first used to circumvent the vain speculations elaborated by priests. To better understand the reasons for which certain hypotheses are judged more and more questionable in the field of Indology, I will mention two of the authors who were at the source of what is still the most widespread the conception of the Mbh today and that Adluri and Bagchee present in their study.

Christian Lassen (1800-1876). The Mbh was first known from 1792 by extracts, then complete translations of the BhG.[27] But since this text, comprising eighteen short chapters, is only a tiny part of the Mbh, which includes eighteen books, often very long, it is not surprising that the Germans were curious about the complete work. Christian Lassen, a Norwegian, was the first Indologist to formulate principles in 1837 that had a lasting influence on the interpretation of this work. He did so as a geographer, ethnographer and historian. The edition of the Mbh of 1834-1839, discussed above, enabled him to make a first examination of the work. Here are some of the key ideas that emerge from it:

— The heart of this poem is said to have constituted an ancient historical document recounting the decisive confrontation between the two races that once sought to dominate India, the Āryans, paler and superior in military terms, and the darker Dravidians.

[27] The first complete translation into German was done in 1802 from the English translation of Charles Wilkins (1785). See *The Nay Science*, p. 31-32 for more details.

— A shorter warrior tale, covering only the current books 6 to 10, was then transmitted orally within the royal caste of the Kṣatriyas. It is important to study this precious testimony carefully to establish the history of ancient India.

— The assumption that Lassen makes to understand the state in which the Mbh reached us is that the Brahmans would have seized the text that these warriors transmitted orally and supplemented it with ritual and doctrinal speculations. The task of the researcher therefore consists in identifying within the current Mbh these older parts, and by that very fact dissociating the materials which would have been added over the centuries (royal histories, material concerning the origin of the world, stories of divinities, didactic sections).

— Since the Mbh is to testify to an ancient warrior tradition (related to that of the ancient Germanic people), appropriated later by the Brahmans, one can understand the anti-Brahmanism to which the first writings of Lassen already testify, an anti-Brahmanism which will be accentuated in later authors.

Lassen becomes convinced that his work as a historian allows him to go back to the origins of the tradition, against the grain of the treatment that the Brahmans had given to the real Mbh. Adluri and Bagchee conclude: "By proposing a pseudo-historical approach to the Indian epic, Lassen had laid the grounds to a thoroughgoing historicization of the Mahābhārata."[28] The authors will go so far as to speak of racial and pseudo-historical reconstruction.

Adolf Holtzmann Jr (1838-1914). In a work in four volumes (1892-1895), Adolf Holtzmann Jr lays claim to his predecessors, in particular his uncle Adolf Holtzmann Sr and Christian Lassen. He broadly contrasts the old Indo-Germanic vision (even going so far as to include Buddhists) with that of the Brahmans. Like Lassen, he is convinced that it was the latter who undertook a complete revision of the ancient epic.[29] It was Holtzmann Jr who, in 1892, literally created the myth of an original Indo-Germanic epic.[30]

[28] *The Nay Science*, p. 48.
[29] See *The Nay Science*, p. 73-155.
[30] And not only Indian, see ibid., p. 48f.

— For Holtzmann it was obvious that the ancient Germans and the ancient Āryas shared the same epic tradition, rooted in the same ethnic identity. What this researcher hopes to discover in India are the vestiges of this ancient warrior tradition.

— For him the most ancient epic undoubtedly celebrated the warlike virtues of Duryodhana, the hero of the Kauravas. But according to Holtzmann's hypothesis, the Brahman scholars responsible for the current Mbh are to have transformed the five Pāṇḍava brothers and the devious Kṛṣṇa of the real Mbh into a virtuous hero and demonized the Kauravas, so that the epic is now presented as a story in honor of the Brahmanic heroes (what will ultimately be called the theory of inversion).

— Following Lassen, but more systematically, Holtzmann uses the distinction that will ultimately be imposed between war narrative and didactic episodes. In 1901 (in *The Great Epic of India*), Hopkins will transform these categories into "epic" and "pseudo-epic", categories which will not be called into question until the work of V. S. Sukthankar, the editor of the critical edition.[31]

After analyzing six BhG studies from the early era of German Indology, the authors conclude them to embody a form of analysis which completely rejects the theology or philosophy which is an important part of the epic as it has reached us, has unlimited confidence in the historian's ability to recover the "original" text, rejects all Indian hermeneutics as "uncritical", and claims sovereignty over both the text and over the tradition.[32] As Adluri declares himself to have been formed by a scientific tradition based on respect for ancient texts and dialogue with these ancient masters, he says that he is surprised, if not shocked, to discover in this German tradition an inability to read these texts in accord with the tradition.[33]

Reflections on the creation and the use of the critical edition. Adluri and Bagchee's second book, *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism*, analyzes the scope of the critical work carried out by the Pune team on the Mbh and discusses the

[31] See *The Nay Science*, p. 26-7.
[32] Ibid., p. 28.
[33] See at the end of "Mahabharata & Modern Scholarship: An Interview With Dr. Vishwa Adluri", http://indiafacts.org/mahabharata-modern-scholarship-an-interview-with-dr-vishwa-adluri/ , accessed 30 July 2019.

reception given to it by the Indologists who opposed it, in particular those who still fall in line with 19th century German Indology. One can indeed say that one of the most outstanding scientific achievements of the 20th century (1919-1966, for the Mbh; 1969-1971, for the HV) was precisely the development of this critical edition. Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar had trained as a mathematician before turning to Indology and the demands he imposed on the methodological level were those of a man of science. The paragraph on the back cover accurately summarizes the intentions of the authors and the scope of their book.

> *Philology and Criticism* contrasts the Mahābhārata's preservation and transmission within the Indian scribal and commentarial traditions with Sanskrit philology after 1900, as German Indologists proposed a critical edition of the Mahābhārata to validate their racial and nationalist views. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee show how, in contrast to the Indologists' unscientific theories, V. S. Sukthankar assimilated the principles of neo-Lachmannian textual criticism to defend the transmitted text and its traditional reception as a work of law, philosophy and salvation. The authors demonstratate why, after the edition's completion, no justification exists for claiming that an earlier heroic epic existed, that the Brahmans redacted the heroic epic to produce the Mahābhārata or that they interpolated "sectarian" gods such as Viṣṇu and Śiva into the work. By demonstrating how the Indologists committed technical errors, cited flawed and biased scholarship and used circular argumentation to validate their racist and anti-Semitic theories, *Philology and Criticism* frees readers to approach the Mahābhārata as "the principal monument of *bhakti*" (Madeleine Biardeau).[34] The authoritative guide to the critical edition's correct use and interpretation, *Philology and Criticism* urges South Asianists to view Hinduism as a complex debate about ontology and ethics rather than through the lenses of "Brahmanism" and "sectarianism." It

[34] The exact quote from Madeleine Biardeau, "the principal monument, and undoubtedly the most ancient, of bhakti" can be found in *L'hindouisme: anthropologie d'une une civilization*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995, p. 114, n. 1, or again in *Clefs pour la pensée hindoue*, Paris, Seghers, 1972, p. 96, n. 1. Alf Hiltebeitel cites the passage in "The Two Kṛṣṇas on one Chariot : Upaniṣadic Imagery and Epic Mythology," *History of Religions* 24, 1984, p. 1.

> launches a new world philology—one that is plural and self-reflexive rather than Eurocentric and ahistorical.[35]

It is a book sometimes technical, but indispensable for the correct understanding of the critical edition. In addition to discussing the nature of the critical enterprise and discussing with all possible rigor the misunderstandings it has aroused, it ends with a series of eighteen appendices which bring together a wealth of valuable information, as well as an annotated glossary and bibliography. Without going into the details of a meticulous demonstration, I will recapitulate some of the assertions that seem essential to me.

An enterprise intended to support the theories of German Indology. Already at the end of the 19th century a series of questions had arisen concerning the Mbh which some specialists thought they would resolve by drawing up a critical edition of this text. "A new set of concerns emerged in the late nineteenth century, as the Mahābhārata became an object of specialist concern: What is "the Mahābhārata"? What was the oldest form of the text? Between two competing versions, which one must be judged more authentic? It was partly to resolve these questions and partly to bear out their own theories about an original epic (the so-called *Urepos*) that calls for a single, scientifically validated text arose."[36] Contrary to the purified and very short edition that some hoped to see emerge from this operation, what stands out clearly is that this edition, in general, confirmed the complexity of the text with its mixture of descriptions of combat and didactic passages, and therefore offers a reconstituted text in deep dissonance with what German scholarship had supposed for decades.[37] If one correctly understood the significance of this critical work, the hypothesis of an *Urepos*, which would have been transmitted by bards and which would be prior to the text reconstructed by the critical edition, became simply impossible to support.

The constitution of a critical edition: a rigorously hierarchical procedure. To grasp the scope of the critical enterprise, it must first be realized that the procedure on which such an edition is based consists first of all in establishing a family tree of the manuscripts

[35] Back cover. For more information on Lachmannian and neo-Lachmannian textual criticism, see http://www.atilf.fr/cilpr2013/actes/section-0/0_2_1_CILPR-2013-Conference-pleniere-Segre.pdf
[36] *Philology and Criticism*, p. 12.
[37] *The Nay Science*, p. 20.

(*stemma codicum*) based on the relationships between the manuscripts, then from there to reconstruct an archetype, that is to say a first ancestor common to this set of manuscripts, and only to this set of manuscripts. Visually, all the readings supposed to represent the ancestor of all the manuscripts examined are printed at the top of the page, while the other variants (the corruptions of this ancestor) are found at the bottom of the page (under the line which separates the two parts of the page) so as to constitute what is called the critical apparatus. A critical edition is a practical way to synthesize the manner in which a text has been transmitted over the centuries. "A critical edition thus creates an overview of the entire tradition, assigning the available readings a specific place either above or below the line depending on how archaic they can claim to be."[38]

Detection of shared errors: principal criterion for establishing the archetype. Contrary to a common idea, the archetype is not formed from what the different versions of the text have in common (shared readings), but from the errors that can be detected in the transmission of this text (shared errors). "Filiation can be established only through shared errors, which permit us to identify two manuscripts as more closely related than others of that family (all of which will contain the same text, but not the same errors, which are unique to this branch of the tradition). It is hence incorrect to establish filiation on the basis of shared readings, as they identify the two manuscripts only as members of the family chosen for study (manuscripts of the Mahābhārata), but do not permit us to define them as a specific branch of that family—manuscripts descended from the first source of the error or errors."[39] It is therefore the errors shared by different manuscripts which reveal a filiation between manuscripts, and not the fact that different manuscripts have an identical reading. "The notion that manuscript filiation becomes apparent when one looks at the inherited errors of manuscripts—these 'fossils' of the process of textual transcription, as Paul Maas calls them[40]—underpins the critic's practice. Since no scribe would intentionally copy errors from a source text (although he will copy passages from it), if his manuscript

[38] *Philology and Criticism*, p. 13.
[39] *Philology and Criticism*, p. 164-5.
[40] The article to which this passage refers is Paul Maas, "Leitfehler und stemmatische Typen", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 37, 1937, p. 289-294.

contains all of the former's errors, plus at least one more unique error, then we can infer that the first manuscript must have been his source."[41]

The status of the reconstructed text. As it comes from a rigorous scientific procedure, the text reconstructed by the critical edition remains a working hypothesis with its inevitable artificial aspect as well, a text which can never be described as a faithful image of the original text. "As Gianfranco Contini observes,[42] 'a critical edition is, like any other scientific act, a mere working hypothesis, the most satisfactory, namely, the most economic one, and one which proves apt to connect a system of data'."[43] This conception of the critical edition has replaced that of being "a facsimile of an existing text", whether the author's real text or a copy of the text which would be the primary source of the manuscript tradition. It is obvious, Sukthankar noted already, that all the elements of the reconstituted text do not have the same age, but it is the best image at which it is possible to arrive taking into account the manuscripts which have reached us. It is not a monster, as some have said. "It is, rather, a particular arrangement of textual materials (as *every* edition is) undertaken to expunge centuries of scribal error and variation, and to provide as close an approximation of the original text as possible. It is furthermore a rigorously scientific text in that it follows a rational logic and that each of its steps is clearly documented. Contrary to the charge that it creates a new text, one that lacks either an organic community or continuity with the tradition, every line of the reconstructive edition is validated by the tradition."[44] But it must also be said that the text is not just a working tool. While being a reconstruction of the best text that can be accessed, this text, which wants to be readable by contemporaries, also seeks to respect the intentions of its author.[45] Nor is it a text like any other. "It is, rather, the living image of the text's diachronic history. By considering on what manuscripts a reading is based, the reader can intuit not only the attestation for it but also its relative antiquity and authenticity … A critical edition represents the editor's best

[41] *Philology and Criticism*, p. 165; see also p. 47.
[42] The article to which this passage refers is Gianfranco Contini, "Ricordo di Joseph Bedier", in *Esercizi di lettura sopra autori contemporanei con un'appendice su testi non contemporanei*, Turin, Einaudi, 1974, p. 358-372, esp. p. 369.
[43] *Philology and Criticism*, p. 13.
[44] *Philology and Criticism*, p. 14.
[45] Ibid., p. 15.

understanding of the tradition, based on his years-long digestion of the manuscript evidence."[46]

The limits of a critical edition. The editor relies solely on the information provided by the manuscripts (manuscript evidence) and cannot make inferences that go beyond the evidence provided by the manuscripts.[47] The fact that we do not have all the copies of this text that were able to circulate does not mean that the family tree which was developed at the end of the critical work does not constitute an exact representation of the reality[48] and that we would be entitled to postulate the existence of another, different ancient text. Nor is it possible to respect the limits of critical work and to assert at the same time, as authors like Andreas Bigger or Georg von Simson still do, that the reconstructed text would be a "normative redaction" created at a certain era by Brahmans to replace the ancient oral tradition which would be that of the Kṣatriyas. Such an assertion does not arise from the critical process, but only from unacknowledged prejudices whose origin lies elsewhere than in the critical process. Adluri and Bagchee conclude that a large part of the errors of interpretation made by German Indology stem from a misunderstanding of the limits of what can be taken from a critical edition at the same time as from a mistake concerning the classification of manuscripts. It is not, for example, the brevity of a version that automatically makes it a reliable candidate, but the fact that this version contains passages which are not attested in the reconstructed text.[49] Contrary to what is too often asserted, the craftsmen of the critical edition of the Mbh also did not classify the manuscripts according to the type of writing (script). "Regardless of what Grünendahl claims, there is no justification for thinking that script was the criterion of classification. At this stage, the editor has merely introduced his system of nomenclature. If that system bears a reference to the predominant (but not sole) script of that group as their most visible feature, this does not mean that he has grouped them according to their script. The latter must take place based on the actual textual affinities between the manuscripts, which the editor can only

[46] Ibid., p. 16.
[47] "cannot make inferences beyond what the evidence warrants", see *Philology and Criticism*, p. 163.
[48] See ibid., p. 23.
[49] Ibid., p. 169-182.

determine once he studies the manuscript evidence … In fact, the manuscripts themselves, or, rather, their contents will tell him whether they belong together."[50]

I conclude this succinct presentation by saying that the current work on the Mbh is in fact divided into two main trends. Some follow in the footsteps of a certain German scholarship that took hold in the second half of the 19th century. They postulate the existence of an ancient nucleus (representing a warrior tradition) that the Brahmans gradually recovered and overlaid with different layers of more or less recent speculation. In this group, in addition to several German authors, there are among others the great American Indologist James Fitzgerald, who supposes that there was originally "some kind of 'Bharata' epic" transmitted orally by bards, and who then speaks of a Brahmanic counter-revolution at once creative and reactionary, a position that can be described as neo-Holtzmannian.[51] John Brockington also defends, with a few nuances, a similar position. On the other hand, other Indologists, those who draw rather upon the works of Madeleine Biardeau and now those of Alf Hiltebeitel, as well as all those who now endorse the recent clarifications of Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, accept *prima facie* the unity of the Mbh and think that it is scientifically more acceptable to consider this epic as a literary work fully aware of its existence as a *dharma* text.[52] It was already in this spirit that Jacques Scheuer worked in Paris in the 1970s. Explicitly taking the opposite view of the theory of, among others, Holzmann Jr., he showed that "the interventions of Śiva are generally well integrated into the narrative fabric … Their relationship to the whole of the epic is not purely extrinsic or artificial."[53] Having attended Madeleine Biardeau's lectures for several years, it always seemed essential to me to approach the HV as a literary work having a unity and it is with this conviction that I later studied, for example, the place of Saṃkarṣaṇa alongside Kṛṣṇa in the Mbh and the HV. While the frequent assumption was that Saṃkarṣaṇa, this older

[50] Ibid., p. 189; see also p. 185-209 for further explication.
[51] See "Mahābhārata", in *The Hindu World*, 2004, esp. p. 52 and 72. Also "Mahābhārata", in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. II, 2010, p. 72-94. For the designation "neo-Holtzmannian", see Adluri and Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, p. 53.
[52] "…a highly self-conscious work of literature, a dharma text from its inception and not a Kuru epic with didactic interpolations, as had long been suspected." Vishwa Adluri, "From Supplementary Narratives to Narrative Supplements," in Adluri and Bagchee (ed.), *Argument and Design*, 2016, p. 7.
[53] Jacques Scheuer, *Śiva dans le Mahābhārata*…, p. 344 (see also p. 20-23, where Holzmann is explicitly among those from whom the author distinguishes himself). See also "Sacrifice. Rudra-Śiva et la destruction du sacrifice," in Yves Bonnefoy (ed.), *Dictionnaire des mythologies*, Paris, Flammarion, 1981, vol. 2, p. 417-420. Note that Jacques Scheuer worked under the supervision of Madeleine Biardeau.

brother, had once existed independently of his younger brother as an agricultural deity on account of the plow and pestle which are associated with him (an idea that dates back to Christian Lassen) and that the vagaries of history had integrated him more or less awkwardly into Viṣṇuism, the thesis defended in this study considers that Kṛṣṇa and Saṃkarṣaṇa are presented in the texts as manifestations of the god Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and the serpent Śeṣa during the cosmic night, a perspective that must be respected. Such an assertion means, among other things, that the moments when these two brothers are separated from one another remain relevant and in fact connote times of destruction comparable to those which precede cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*).[54]

I would add that a significant contribution of Adluri and Bagchee was the publication of fifteen essays concerning the *upākhyāna* of the Mbh and the Rāmāyaṇa, particular episodes, sub-narratives (subtales), considered most often as appetizers interpolated more or less awkwardly into the main narrative. Inspired by an article from Hiltebeitel of 2005 entitled "Not Without Subtales …",[55] as well as by a study on the episode of Nala and Damayantī in which Madeleine Biardeau describes this episode as a "mirror-story … which reflects by this narrative process the whole of the MBh and helps accentuate what truly matters,"[56] these studies each show in their own way that these stories fit perfectly into the main narrative, to the point that without them this narrative would be completely different. "A Mahābhārata without its upākhyānas would not only be an abridgment in the sense of being a shorter version but it would also be an abridgment in the sense of being a Mahābhārata shorn of its pedagogic, philosophic, and transformative functions; it would

[54] See the articles collected in the two volumes of *Kṛṣṇa in the Harivaṁśa* (Delhi, DK Printworld, 2015 and 2017), several of which indirectly affect the Mbh, and in particular André Couture, "Saṃkarṣaṇa et ses rapports avec Kṛṣṇa: un jeu de présences et d'absences, de rapprochements et d'éloignements," *Bulletin d'études indiennes*, 2010-2011, 28-29, p. 5-49; translated into English under the title "Saṁkarṣaṇa and His Relationships with Kṛṣṇa: Presence and Absence, Coming Together and Moving Apart," in *Kṛṣṇa in the Harivaṁśa*, vol. 2, p. 217-292.

[55] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Not Without Subtales: Telling Laws and Truths in the Sanskrit Epics", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33, 2005, p. 455-511; reprinted in Adluri and Bagchee (ed.), *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 131-184; as well as in Adluri and Bagchee, *Argument and Design*, 2016, p. 10-68.

[56] On this notion, see Madeleine Biardeau, "Nala and Damayantī. Héros épiques," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 1984-1985; also in Adluri and Bagchee (ed.), *Argument and Design*, 2016, the articles by Adam Bowles (p. 326-329) and Nicolas Dejenne (p. 372-375).

be an epic that had lost its stated purpose: of being in size and weight, a text rivaling the four Vedas as a source of salvation."[57]

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[57] Vishwa Adluri, "From Supplementary Narratives to Narrative Supplements," introduction to Adluri and Bagchee (ed.), *Argument and Design*, 2016, p. 8; the text of the Mbh to which the author refers is 1,1,208a-209c. Finally, mention should be made of the publication by these two authors of a selection of forty articles by Alf Hiltebeitel (*Reading the Fifth Veda* and *When the Goddess was a Woman*, 2011), which in itself constitutes a major contribution to the study of the Mbh, but which cannot be discussed here.

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