

Prolegomena to Any Future Mahābhārata Studies

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A reader of our work interested in the Mahābhārata rightly observes, “there exists a (largely German) overenthusiasm of looking for some mysterious core in texts and then trying to explain away the rest. For example, Hebrew Bible studies are full of such efforts. I’m not sure where is the enjoyment in this, maybe I’m just missing the point.”

The following piece, which developed out of a response to them, first addresses their specific queries before answering this larger question (the abbreviations *AD*, *NS*, *PC*, and *PL* refer to our works, specifically *Argument and Design*, *The Nay Science*, *Philology and Criticism*, and the monograph “Paradigm Lost”; many are available from this site).

1. How did the sequence of the multiple sub-stories of the Mahabharata form? Has the phenomenon of intertwining stories been analysed linguistically?

Nesting of stories within one another, repeating narrative themes and motifs and using sub-tales to mirror, anticipate, or reflect on issues within the “basic” story is integral to the Mahābhārata’s literary and philosophical design (*AD*, intro., ch. 1, 4, and 9).

The idea that sub-tales are secondary is part of a set of prejudices developed within Germany, more specifically, from a Protestant literalist hermeneutic to texts (*NS*, intro. and ch. 1). These prejudices are in essence anti-Judaic and anti-clerical, reflecting the anxieties of mostly Protestant Indologists (*NS*, ch. 2 and 4).

German Indologists posited an “original” *Urepos*, which allegedly recounted a historical racial battle that allegedly occurred in Indian prehistory between “Aryans” and dark-skinned aboriginals (*NS*, ch. 1–2). In their view, this racial “core” (also variously called the “war narrative” or the “Kṣatriya epic” was corrupted, changed, inflated, interpolated, or contaminated by “Brahmanic” elements (*NS*, ch. 1–3). For these scholars, anything lying outside the “*Blut und Eisen*” (or perhaps, Bronze Age) narrative was Brahmanic: ritual elements, sub-tales, philosophical tracts, theological tracts, Kṛṣṇa, etc.

These prejudices were then baptized as *Wissenschaft* by the application of the so-called text-historical method (*NS*, intro. and ch. 4–5). This method, borrowed from Protestant biblical criticism, was haphazardly applied to the Mahābhārata. While it did not generate any scientific results (in terms of criteria such as verifiability, predictability, non-question begging arguments, mechanical and objective analyses), it did create a privileged class of experts who grasped and were willing to defend the essential dogma:

(1) Indians are unscientific, traditional, superstitious (Roth, Hanneder, Stietencron, Malinar). Worse still, they are “Hindus” as opposed to ancient Indian, Vedic, Aryan, scientific, rational, etc. (Oldenberg, Garbe). The pandit differs essentially from the professor, but he can be used as a source, i.e., his knowledge must be extracted from him and reformulated within a Christian supersessionist historical framework, where the professor seizes not only knowledge but also authority (Hanneder).

(2) The Mahābhārata is a chaotic, monstrous text (Oldenberg); a literary absurdity (Winternitz). It ought to be tamed or purified somehow (Oldenberg, Holtzmann), surgically altered to yield a “history” of India (Lassen), a history which recounts the story of racial miscegenation and decadence (Lassen, Oldenberg, Garbe), leading to a people ripe for upliftment through colonization (Holtzmann, Garbe) and evangelization (Hacker) or secularization and the establishment of a Marxist revolutionary utopia (Ruben).

(3) The method is thus legitimate only in its application, i.e., its violence. Layers, nodes, interpolations, rings, additions, etc. had to be identified. The text was in need, not of understanding, but of pruning and assimilation to a broader project of the march of historical reason: progress from religious superstition (Judaism) to spiritualized religion (Christianity) to enlightenment universalism (Protestantism) to secular rationality (science, paradigmatically presented in the form of Indological *Wissenschaft* with the professor as the embodiment of ultimate social and spiritual advancement) (*NS*, ch. 4–5). Several Jewish and Hindu scholars participated in this project, with inevitably disastrous consequences for their communities (see “Jews and Hindus in Indology”).

2. *What ways exist of determining older and newer additions as the epic evolved?*

The sole objective means to determine older and newer additions is through collating manuscripts and establishing the genealogical descent of manuscripts (i.e., a stemma). Most so-called critical editions of Sanskrit texts (e.g., those by Witzel, Slaje, Hanneder, Grünendahl, and others) fail to do so (*PC*, ch. 3 and concl.), but it is neither as difficult nor as superfluous as they claim. For a start, it would help if they would learn to distinguish between significant errors and interpolations, and above all not build stemmata on agreements in the truth. Our article on the Gītā, which you mentioned, shows how arbitrary and tendentious attempts at separating “layers” are if they are not underpinned by a rigorous and objective method, and based on a study of manuscripts. The various criteria proposed for drawing up temporal distinctions inevitably suffer from circularity, i.e., scholars identify sections as old or new based on a priori hypotheses of the text’s development and then present this chronological distribution as “verification” of the respective hypothesis (*PL*, 248–50 and 276, n. 60). Instead of clear principles and a commitment to provide a better and more legible text, what German Indologists have sold in the name of “criticism” (*Kritik*) is snake oil. Their higher criticism

never worked because it failed to generate scientific consensus as opposed to merely institutional consensus. Ježić's work proves this: he fudges his own criteria to produce results that confirm existing German dogma.

3. What is known about how reciters memorised epics?

As we saw, the “oral bardic hypothesis” is a dead issue. The epics imitate orality, but they are written texts. The evidence for their written character and transmission as written works is monumental. In contrast, those who have assumed antecedent oral stages and tried to “text-critically” prove this (by introducing extra-stemmatic contamination, assuming a period of flux or asserting “written fixation” of an antecedent floating “oral tradition,” or claiming that the constituted text reconstructs but a “normative redaction,” etc.) have produced truly bad argumentation (*PC*, ch. 1–2). But some sections of the epic are recited ritually (e.g., the various *stotras* and *sahasranāmas*). Everything we know suggests the epics have reached us through a careful and conscientious scribal-custodial tradition. While there has been ongoing expansion of sections, there is no need to assume these expansions were “oral” in nature: indeed, even if they *were*, we could neither distinguish them from written additions nor does any reason exist for doing so (*PC*, ch. 2). These additions, which several good scholars (Sukthankar, Edgerton, Biardeau, etc.) grant, are not what the German/Germanophile critics (Witzel, Bigger, Brockington, Fitzgerald) have in mind. When they use the expression, they always mean a tradition prior to the written text that preceded the alleged Brahmanic takeover of the epic materials and was under the control of bards allied with heroic warrior princes (*PC*, intro. and ch. 1–2). It is the privilege of the historical-critical scholar to divine or disclose this “oral tradition” through his innate suspicion that the “priestly” elements of a text—be it the Mahābhārata or the Torah—are later than the original historical revelation.

These questions are important and they open up a rich avenue to understand why German Indologists asked the questions they did of other cultures. You are quite right to ask “where is the enjoyment in this.” It indeed appears rather pointless to show that Ruth, Esther, and Ezra are later additions or that there are repetitions or inconsistencies in the canon (which the rabbinic tradition already knew). It is only in the larger context of the German Protestant-Nazi destruction of European Jewry that we can begin to make sense of the incredible amount of time and resources that was spent on making these textual points stand as a matter of “scientific” fact.

We quote from *Philology and Criticism*:

Jewish scholars have long recognized the motivations underlying German scholars' development of new “critical” methods of biblical scholarship. Writing in 1935, Benno Jacob asked: “Has anybody considered what share in the immense suffering brought recently on mankind and on the Jewish people in particular has to be accredited to the

modern German-Protestant science of the Old Testament?” Benno Jacob, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 26 (1935–36): 189, cited in Alan T. Levenson, *The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible: How Scholars in Germany, Israel, and America Transformed an Ancient Text* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 66. Solomon Schechter is even more radical: “my real suffering began later in life, when I emigrated from Roumania to so-called civilized countries and found there what I might call the Higher anti-Semitism, which burns the soul though it leaves the body unhurt. The genesis of this Higher anti-Semitism is partly [...] contemporaneous with the genesis of the so-called Higher criticism of the Bible. Wellhausen’s Prolegomena and History are *teeming with aperçus* full of venom against Judaism, and you cannot wonder that he was rewarded by one of the highest orders which the Prussian Government had to bestow. Afterwards Harnack entered the arena with his ‘Wesen des Christenthums,’ in which he showed not so much his hatred as his ignorance of Judaism. But this Higher anti-Semitism has now reached its climax when every discovery of recent years is called to bear witness against us and to accuse us of spiritual larceny.” Solomon Schechter, “Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism,” in *Seminary Address and Other Papers* (Cincinnati, OH: Ark Publishing, 1915), 36–37 (Schechter’s italics). We are in full agreement with them as to the specious nature of historical criticism, which in Mahābhārata studies as in biblical studies was applied with the sole intent of delegitimizing traditional communities of the book. (*PC*, 313, n. 359)

Fanon has a wonderful passage where he says, “It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: ‘Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.’ And I found that he was universally right—by which I meant that I was answerable in my body and in my heart for what was done to my brother. Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro.” We found this to be eminently true. Everything that has occurred in Mahābhārata studies—the disintegration of the text; the recomposition of its constituent parts into a different narrative; its subsumption into “history”; the supersessionist argument for why tradition must yield to modernity; the bias that the pandit’s authority is merely a result of prejudice or parochialism, whereas the professor is the legitimate arbiter of truth and reality, etc.—has a precursor in the German Protestant science of historical criticism. We therefore found it unavoidable to relate Indology to larger social and historical contexts, above all, to the relationship of Protestantism to Judaism and, ultimately, to anti-Semitism.

(We are currently working on a second book on German Indology showing how it is, in essence, a *Rassenwissenschaft* or race science. We are also translating Richarz’s splendid book on the fate of Jewish academics within the Prussian/German university system, which we are issuing with a new foreword on Jewish academics’ situation today. The textual aspects are inseparable from

the social aspects, which create and demand a certain type of scholarship and force everyone (at least those who want to be in the institution) to participate in it.)

Indology failed not from the perspective of Indian tradition, which has continued largely unaffected. Neither did it fail from the perspective of Sanskrit, which produced a wealth of literature, which anyone today can read and which will exist long after the last Indologist. Indology failed from the perspective of the claims *it itself* asserted: science, university discipline, humanities, European tradition, and history.

- (1) Indology is not a science; neither did Indologists have any clue of what “science” is.
- (2) No one at German universities recognizes Indology; despite belaboring the parallel with classical philology, Indologists are figures of ridicule to classicists.
- (3) Indology failed to contribute to the humanities, especially if we regard the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, broad-mindedness, openness to other cultures, humility, ethics, etc. as the goal of humanities education.
- (4) Most Indologists are ignorant of broad movements in European intellectual history and philosophy; they keep telling themselves they are important and European, but this posture only works in front of Indians.
- (5) Indologists are ignorant of their own history: for all that they propagate the idea of Indology as a “historical-critical” discipline, they failed to engage in either historical self-reflection or self-critique. Ultimately, this is the real reason Indology failed as evinced by the rapid closure of departments.