correspondents at large

War in the *Mahabharata*

ROMILA THAPAR

THE *MAHABHARATA*, COMPOSED IN SANSKRIT, IS GENERALLY DESCRIBED AS AN EPIC. OTHER SANSKRIT TEXTS REFER TO IT OCCASIONALLY AS A *kavya*, or poem, and more often as an *itihasa*, which literally means "thus indeed it was," suggesting an element of history. As with many early epics, it carries a consciousness of history but does not claim historicity. It evokes a past society of clans and narrates the events that bound them together or tore them asunder, focusing on the actions of those regarded as heroes.

At one level, the war depicted in the *Mahabharata* comprises literal battles. But beyond this, the daily contests mark the demise of clan polities, and the period subsequent to the war presages the coming of caste society and the polity of state systems. The contrast between clan and caste society has not attracted sufficient attention from modern scholars. Initially, the epic eulogizes clan society, but the lengthier, latter part involves adjusting to the new social structure. Perhaps recognizing the meaning of their victory, the victors are depressed by the outcome and have to be persuaded that the new order will be superior.

The *Mahabharata* is the story of the Puru and Yadava clans, which belong to the *kshatriya*, or the warrior aristocracy of ancient times in India. The narrative revolves around two sets of cousins claiming to belong to the Puru lineage: the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The Kauravas claim inheritance of the clan territory and refuse to share it with the Pandavas, who have equal rights to it. The problem of succession arises because neither Dhritrashtra, the head of the Kaurava family, nor Pandu, after whom the Pandavas are named, is eligible, since each has a physical disability. Eventually, the territory is divided between the two. But the Pandavas lose their half to the Kauravas in a game of dice. Draupadi, the joint wife of the five Pandava brothers, is insulted and swears vengeance.

The Pandavas are forced into exile for twelve years, after which they again claim their share of the territory. The dispute is settled through a battle lasting eighteen days. The Kaurava heroes are killed,

ROMILA THAPAR is emeritus professor of history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her research has centered on the sociocultural history of early India and on its historiography.

© 2009 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1830 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the Pandavas survive. They win largely through the not-altogether-ethical advice of Krishna, a close friend of the Yadava clan. The transformation of Krishna into the incarnation of the god Vishnu is a later idea.

The disputed territory lay in the western Ganges Plain in the vicinity of present-day Delhi. Some of the place names from the epic have been identified with current names of villages in the area, such as Hastinapur and Indraprastha. The battlefield was called Kurukshetra, "the field of the Kurus."

The date of the battle remains controversial. It could have occurred in the early first millennium BC, since there are references to places and persons in the compositions of that period that correspond to those in the epic. Archaeological excavation of the sites mentioned suggests they were well settled at that time, and, doubtless, conflict over territory was not unusual. The epic was probably composed later and looked back at past times, which is characteristic of epic forms. Historical analyses of the present recension suggest a period between 400 BC and AD 200, and this includes the many interpolations and revisions, although even this date range is not unanimously accepted (Sukthankar).

Authorship is variously attributed to *sutas*, or bards, and to brahmana priests. It is likely that bards composed narrative fragments associated with the Puru and Yadava clans, which brahmanas may then have collated and edited into a sequential narrative. The text mentions a single author, Vyasa, a brahmana of ambiguous antecedents, but his authorship is unlikely, given the composition's immensity. The epic states that he taught it to his disciples, a group of bards and brahmanas responsible for its dissemination.

Hostility between the cousins is an underlying theme. It builds systematically from event to event—from the frequent cattle raids to insults when the Pandavas lose at the game of dice to its culmination in the formal battle. A substantial part of the epic is concerned with the war, which is altogether different from the normal skirmishes between clans and marks a historical change. It is defined by a demarcated battlefield with encampments of large, well-equipped armies; by the display of single combat between heroes; and by a victory decided only when one side is virtually wiped out. This is no cattle raid.

The battle at Kurukshetra, loosely referred to now as the Mahabharata war, is described in minute and sometimes gruesome detail. Arrows tear apart the chests of the warriors, and the free flow of blood creates pandemonium, in which horses and elephants rush hither and thither. Familiar bardic techniques of holding an audience in suspense are evident—multiple similes and poetic comparisons, details of ill omens, and long speeches before the action. The more fearful the contest, the more awesome the shaking of the earth and the blazing of the heavens (9.58.48–49). The battle involves chariots, foot soldiers, elephants, and cavalry, but the poem focuses on the combat between the heroes.

This combat is generally single and thus requires the heroes to be of equal status. This causes problems for Karna, the unrecognized natural son of the wife of Pandu and the solar deity. Although theoretically of a higher status than the heroes, he is nevertheless illegitimate and was adopted by a socially less prestigious family. But the code of chivalry can be transgressed when required, as when the Kauravas kill the young Pandava Abhimanyu, who is trapped in an unfamiliar military formation (9.32.53 ff.).

This section of the epic comments on the frequency of lapses from the *kshatriya dharma*, the *kshatriya* code (9.58.41–46, 9.60.5 ff, 9.60.24 ff.), and accuses Krishna of suggesting unethical ways of defeating the Kauravas (9.61.27–68). It reveals a curious reversal—in earlier events the lack of ethics was characteristic of Kaurava actions, but during the war the Pandavas act deceitfully. Krishna defends his advice by comparing it to the deception

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1830 Published online by Cambridge University Press

used by the *devas*, or gods, to kill the *asuras*, or demons, who were as evil as the Kauravas.

Uneasiness with Krishna's argument may have led to the best-known interpolation into the epic, the Bhagvad-Gita. This dialogue between the Pandava hero Arjuna and Krishna, acting as his charioteer, is a prelude to the battle. Arjuna, dismayed by the thought that he would have to kill his close kin and thus decimate the family, questions the ethics of fighting such a battle. The killing of kinsmen seems to have been more heinous in a clan-based society than in a caste-based society, where kin ties are not so central. One's identity in a clan is drawn from kin relations.

Krishna explains that according to the code of caste society it is Arjuna's moral duty as a *kshatriya* warrior to do battle against evil, even if it means killing his kinsmen. The caste code has priority. The eldest Pandava is advised to kill his maternal uncle because he is an ally of the Kauravas. The essence of the social code is to act according to *svadharma*—the social obligations of one's caste—and for the *kshatriya* this includes violence in defending good against evil. One does not hear too much from Krishna about the moral dilemma of killing a kinsman. To give his advice greater force, Krishna reveals to Arjuna that he is the incarnation of the god Vishnu, containing within himself both time and the universe. Arjuna's objections are overwhelmed.

As a late interpolation, the Bhagvad-Gita was intended to reiterate the *varna-ashrama-dharma*—the social code of caste society—which had been challenged by Buddhist, Jain, and other thinkers (described by the brahmanas as heterodox) who did not concede its validity as a social norm (Kosambi).

Clan societies of the early period were ultimately converted to caste societies. The hierarchy essential to caste broke the more egalitarian clan connections. The chief of the clan mutated into a king whose authority was underlined by the emerging state system. Justification for the killing of kinsmen was also conducive to breaking kin ties, which were replaced with caste identities.

Curiously, the battle at Kurukshetra is in a sense extraneous to the story. According to lineage rules, neither the Kauravas nor the Pandavas are eligible to rule, since neither group is of the Puru bloodline. The last of the Puru line was Bhishma, who is referred to in the epic as the *pitamaha*, the paternal grandfather, but only out of respect, since he was not actually the grandfather of the contestants. He had forsworn marriage and children so that the succession would pass through his brothers' sons, but they died early and childless. Bhishma arranged for Vyasa, the ostensible author of the epic, to impregnate the two widows, who each bore a son. But even this supposed continuity was marred by the sons' physical disabilities, which disqualified them from ruling. Consequently, the succession went to the next generation to be contested by the two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Technically, they are not of the bloodline, and the battle may have little to do with succession in the Puru lineage. It is a feud between two families who were stitched onto the lineage and fight for territorial control. Vyasa's role as the link seems an obvious fabrication but is nevertheless intriguing, because the author of the epic becomes the grandfather of the contestants. If, however, Bhishma was the actual grandfather but paternity was attributed to Vyasa so that Bhishma could claim that he had observed his vow, then the battle is the means of establishing succession through a Puru bloodline. There is no reference to Bhishma's being the actual grandfather, but some have commented on his introducing the paternity of Vyasa through the observance of *niyoga*, or levirate, where a widow was permitted to have a son from her late husband's brother or near of kin.

The most telling comment on the battle is Krishna's: "sarvam kshatram kshayam gatam" ("the entire *kshatriya* order has been destroyed" [Meiland 9.63.43]). The *kshatriya*'s

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1830 Published online by Cambridge University Press

destruction would have weakened clan society, although a few clan systems continued into the first millennium AD. Clan society differed from caste society but was in some ways its precursor. In clan society, birth determined identity, clan affiliation, and marriage rules. But caste could be determined by a range of factors, including occupation, and the diversity within castes required an overall control, encouraging the concept of a kingdom.

The war solves the problem of succession with the deaths of the Kaurava contenders. But those deaths—of half of the victors' kinsmen—make the taste of victory bitter. The bitterness leads the eldest Pandava, who is now required to rule, to renounce his claim to power. Eventually, through an enormously lengthy set of arguments, he is persuaded to take up the kingship. But the war has also destroyed the way of life associated with clan society. In the new postwar world, the Pandavas and their descendents gradually fade away.

The battle becomes a time marker in the construction of the past: it separates one age from the other, the Dvapara-yuga (before the battle) from the Kali-yuga (after the battle), in the reckoning of time in cyclic ages. In a looser correlation, the genealogies and descent lists of the *kshatriyas*, built generation by generation, come to a close soon after the war. The *Puranas* written in the early years of the first millennium AD present an overview of the moment when listing *kshatriya* clans after the war gives way to listing dynasties and indicating caste, when dynasty and caste become new social structures around which identities and kingdoms take shape.[1] This change from clan- to caste-based society introduces a new style in the polity and in written records, and the tense changes from past to future.

Note

1. The *Puranas* are religious sectarian texts that focus on particular deities and their worship but also incorporate material on cosmology, lineages, etc.

Works Cited

Kosambi, D. D. "Social and Economic Aspects of the Bhagvad-Gita." *Myth and Reality*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962. 12–41. Print.

Mahabharata. V. S. Sukthankar et al., eds. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Inst., 1933–66. Print.

Meiland, J. Maha·bhárata *Book Nine:* Shalya. Vol. 2. New York: New York UP, 2007. Print. Clay Sanskrit Lib.

Sukthankar, V. S. *On the Meaning of the* Mahabharata. Bombay: Asiatic Soc. of Bombay, 1957. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.5.1830 Published online by Cambridge University Press