It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the *Mahabharata* is the founding text of Indian culture. The Puranas, dramatic texts (both classical and modern), medieval romance, the Indian bourgeois novel and finally the Indian film all retrieve the rules of their formation from the *Mbh*. There is something so dreadfully imperialistic about this text that, in a moment of willful generalisation or enthusiasm, we may indeed claim that all Indian literary, filmic and theatrical texts endlessly rewrite the *Mbh*.

The epic itself reached its final form probably around the second century AD. Its *terminus ante quem* is generally placed around the seventh and sixth centuries BC, making its early versions (which are only a matter of conjecture) almost contemporary with Homer. Throughout its long history, this vast, heterogeneous text of 100,000 verses (or *shlokas*) absorbed a large number of quite divergent narratives – anecdotal and fantastic, as well as historical and theological.

Confronted with such a diversity of discourses and genres, the German Indologist Herman Oldenberg actually claimed, rather excessively, that though the *Mbh* began as a simple epic narrative, 'It became, in course of centuries, the most monstrous chaos'. From this 'chaos' redactors and readers distilled texts (or narrative fragments) to suit their specific needs. One of its best-known sections, the *Bhagavadgita*, quickly became a text in its own right, and began to be seen as a self-contained poem about self and liberation, relatively independent of the *Mbh*. But texts undergo a very different kind of transformation in India. Since the original has no aural status as such, a text is always what it is at a given moment in history. Consequently, the Indian hermeneutic and exegetical traditions never tried to reconstruct the original, but instead allowed the popular imagination to add to the *Mbh* and 'translate' it into a didactic text.
obviously of quite bewildering complexity but with strong religious appeal or dimension.

This transformation – the ‘sanctification’ and consequent canonisation of a text – is very Indian and must be placed in the context of what constitutes literary/religious value in Indian society. Thus the *Mbh* became a *smrti* text, part of an entire tradition of ‘remembered’ texts which collectively constitute the phylogenetic heritage of the race. This tradition of assimilation and absorption, however, hides the *Mbh*’s radical difference from other texts, notably from its sister epic, the *Ramayana*. The Indian sees the latter as life-atoning, and recites it regularly at home. The *Mbh*, on the other hand, is never recited in full for fear that this would lead to disharmony and chaos in the family. Whereas the *Ramayana*, read allegorically, affirms genealogy, order and the sanctity of the family, and constructs the Indian ideals of man and woman, the *Mbh* is about power and politics, about national disintegration and schisms: the Indian here confronts the forces of history and, in the story of Karna, the closest approximation to the genre of tragedy to be found in Indian literature. Through endless variations on the same theme, the *Mbh* telescopes its message of discord and strife into a ritual of battle. These two epics, originally part of a pan-Indian epic tradition, complement each other, as national epics usually do, to warn Indians of the essential precariousness of their lives and the tricks that history is wont to play. Yet the history within the text is an artificial construct, a falsification of history, in fact a narrative.

One of the great Indologists of our times, the late J. A. B. van Buitenen, called genealogy the grand design of the *Mbh*. In the Indian epics (and indeed in many other Indian narratives) genealogy problematises a complex set of relationships around birth, power and ownership. The passion for genealogical purity is an Indian obsession. As if such a passion needed literary endorsement, the *Mbh* too is structured around genealogy. Yet at one level the seeming purity of the *Mbh* genealogy is completely illusory. The epic sets aside a lot of space for its male heroes – Bhishma, Drona, the Pandava brothers, Duryodhana – but the secrets of biological descent are known only to women, whose own sexuality confuses the confirmatory force of genealogy. Seen through the eyes of Satyavati; Ganga, Kunti, Gandhari, Madri as well as the lesser women figures such as Ambika, Ambalika and the ‘Serving Girl’, another picture emerges, a different statement about genealogical purity is made. The dynasty of Bharata, of which Samtanu is in direct line of succession, is in fact rotten from the start. Samtanu’s lineage dies with his two sons; his dynasty moves through his wife, who had borne a child from an earlier affair with Parashara, himself only remotely connected with the dynasty. Thus both Dhrtarashtra and Pandu, ‘fathers’ of the two warring clans, the Kauravas and Pandavas, are themselves polluted; their genealogical connection with the race of Samtanu is symbolic, not real. When the battle between these warring clans is finally fought over eighteen days, Krishna, the Hindu God, must endorse order and genealogical
purity and helps the Pandavas win. But in doing so he does not affirm
the sanctity of genealogical purity, but the superiority of gods over
men. Gandhari's children, the Kaurava clan, are not born of gods
(though the text does in places connect them to anti-gods such as the
Asuras); Kunti's, that is the Pandavas, are. The great Indra, the Wind,
and Dharma himself had fathered Kunti's three sons. But so had the
Sun-god when Kunti was a young girl. The product of this liaison,
Karna, is superior to everyone else through his own special lineage;
but, in an alarmingly contradictory fashion, he is deemed an outsider
because he was born before Kunti married Pandu. This ambiguity
confuses precisely the principles of genealogical purity Krishna
endorses. Since the figure of Karna is subversive of that order, he
must be neutralised. In doing so, Krishna demonstrates that the battle
of the \textit{Mbh} is essentially between those blessed by the gods (who
transcend genealogical transmission) and those who aren't. And such
godly power as may come their way - Gandhari's request to see
Duryodhana naked so that he might become invincible is a case in
point - is neatly circumvented by the divine clown and jester, Krishna
himself.

Whatever there is of Samtanu's lineage (and even this concession is
illusory) disappears upon the deaths of Bhisma and Duryodhana.
What triumphs is matrilineal genealogy, the secrets indeed of Kunti
and her godly lovers. The point I wish to make is that the epic is
ambiguous in its claims on this score, seeming to confirm, and yet
subverting, age-old genealogical principles, patriarchy and the purity
of the race. That these ambiguities have been reduced to a perceptible
order and continuity is a consequence of an Indian regime of reading
not necessarily endorsed by the text, which remains conscious of the
gulf between the ideal and the real, and delights in constructing a
'textual world' capable of sustaining conflicting readings.

At another level, genealogy may be deemed a riddle that the epic
proposes to uncover. Thus the cause of Bhisma's death at the 'hands'
of Shikhandin the transvestite has to be recovered further back in
time, when the imperious Bhisma was insensitive towards Amba, then
already betrothed to the young King Shalva. A similar riddle is
uncovered when Karna realises that Arjuna is his half-brother. Since
Arjuna's father was Indra, the conflict between Karna and Arjuna is a
replay of a much larger conflict between two pre-eminent Hindu
gods. Sandwiched in between these two major heroes is their mother,
who had kept this genealogical secret to herself. Genealogy as riddle
finally endorses our earlier point that, since the secrets of genealogy
are known only to woman, the \textit{Mbh} somewhat radically advances
woman as the source of real power. Central to the whole genealogical
problematic and its resolution is Krishna, who reads the entire epic as
a game that has already been played out in human history. For him,
the epic is a re-presentation of a conflict not unknown to the gods.
And since the cyclical form of the game makes it essential that the
'correct' transmission of genealogy and the maintaining of order be

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confirmed anew in every age, Krishna must take the side of the righteous or the seeming righteous, even when the ‘truth’ of genealogy itself is in considerable disarray.

Krishna thus in one way endorses the importance of order in society. The first readers of the text responded to this by developing ‘essentialist’ readings. Two terms that continually crop up in the critical literature are karma and dharma. When applied to the MBh, these terms produce ‘karmic’ and ‘dharmic’ regimes of reading. Both terms have an enormous semantic field.

The term karma(n) comes from the root verb kr, ‘to do’, and has a range of related meanings. Its first set of meanings incorporates ‘act, action, performance, business’, which extends quite naturally into ‘duty’, ‘office’ and ‘obligation’. As a word signifying action, it is often opposed to inactivity or rest. In religious parlance, karma is a religious act or rite that is undertaken with future recompense in mind. Karma is the first word of many compounds, chief among which are karma-tyaga, the abandonment of worldly duties, karma-phala, the consequence of actions, karma-yoga, the performance of one’s religious duties, and karma-sman, a person endowed with principles of action.

To read the MBh as a karmic text implies two very different kinds of acts in itself. One part of this karmic reading requires a strong metaphysical input. The MBh is read as a replay of a cosmic action, games that the gods and the anti-gods have already played out. There is on this level an ‘action’, a ‘performance’, which at the worldly level confirms those acts which keep the cosmos itself rolling. But the second part of this karmic reading takes us to the notion of character itself, as predicated upon prior actions, and is therefore constant. There is thus a karmic inevitability about the narrative, a fatalistic element that explains why heroes are foredoomed. It also involves a compulsion to repeat, throwing caution to the winds in the process.

Given this karmic inevitability, the narrative functions in two ways. In the first instance, characters are doomed because of some earlier deed: Pandu must die, because he had killed a sage copulating with a doe; Bhishma too must die, at the ‘hands’ of Shikhandin. In the second instance, a character is doomed because his deeds are not seen as pure: there is a motive behind his action. Kama’s nobility leads him to give his coat of arms and ear-rings (signifiers of invincibility) to Indra, who comes disguised as a Brahmin mendicant; but Kama himself is nevertheless condemned because his action is not ‘pure’. He must finally die because in the complex world of the MBh only the ‘compulsively tragic’ can afford to live gloriously in an illusory world of purity.

Cutting right across this idea of ‘fruits of action’ is the concept that higher forces must control the narrative. Thus Indra’s intercession ensures that Karna cannot triumph over his son Arjuna. In another instance, Drona must ask for the right thumb of the extraordinary
Ekalavya, because he threatens the primacy of his favourite pupil Arjuna at archery. In this respect *karma* itself is manipulated to ensure the triumph of a particular narrative, and to create moments in the text that remain alluring and mystifying to the end.

The second regime of reading the *Mbh* is as a dharmic work. Most ancient and modern Indian critics (Madhava, Anandatirtha, V. S. Sukthankar, P. V. Kane, for example) have read the *Mbh* as a treatise on *dharma*, a metaphysical text which is the source of ethical norms for the Indian. Like *karma*, *dharma* has a wide variety of meanings. Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit dictionary has over 200 entries under this word. From these entries I have taken, in summary form, three basic meanings.

(a) that which is established or firm, steadfast; a decree, statute, ordinance, law;
(b) usage, practice, right justice, duty;
(c) virtue, mortality, religion, religious merit.

The word enters into many compounds, among them *dharmaksetre*, ‘law-field’, the first word of blind Dhrtarashtra in the *Bhagavadgita*; *dharma-janman*, born of *dharma*, a name used for Yuddhisthira; *dharma-jnana*, knowledge of duty; *dharma-deva*, god of justice; *dharma-anandana*, joy of *dharma*; *dharma-netra*, eye of *dharma*; *dharma-patri*, a dutiful wife; *dharma-putra*, Yuddhisthira’s name yet again, and *dharma-ashastra*, the holy text.

The ideology of *dharma* is variously manipulated by the text and complicated, furthermore, by its numerous redactors and commentators. In Rajagopalachari’s translation, for instance, the *Mbh* is clearly presented as a dharmic text. He unabashedly appropriates this ideology for political ends, to advance India’s search for a national identity. His preface to the January 1952 edition, for example, is also a plea against the regionalism that had begun to hit independent India. ‘But the highest literature’, he writes, ‘transcends regionalism.’ *Dharma* is seen here as spiritual strength. Yet Rajagopalachari also feels that there is a ‘pure’ *Mbh* from which all ‘floating literature’ may be omitted. This *Mbh* is the ‘pure’ epic, untainted by politics, government or, for that matter, philosophical or theological disputations. It represents India itself, with its many regions and languages unified by a higher order, a *dharma*. Its further association with *jaya*, victory, is meant to underline this equivalence. In Rajagopalachari’s translation, then, it is the third meaning of *dharma* – virtue, morality, religion – that is used as the key to a reading of the *Mbh*. This is also the ideology of popular Indian cinema.

The same emphasis on *dharma* may be detected in one of the best-known film versions of the *Mbh* (*Mahabharat*, 1967). Since the popular Indian film industry simply endorses commonly accepted Hindu norms, filmic representations of the epic simply expand this particular hermeneutic model of reading. One of the great successes of recent times has been the Indian *Doordarshan* (television) version.
of \textit{Mbh}'s sister epic, \textit{the Ramayana}. The serialised version of this epic, in a Hindi translation, has brought the entire Indian nation to a standstill on Sunday mornings. Its success is directly attributable to the way in which this serial responds to Indians' own preferred reading of the text. What it loses as art it gains, I think negatively, in popular appeal and, sadly, jingoistic nationalism.

As I have said, the \textit{Mbh} is a grand text, in fact the founding text of Indian culture. It is arguably the grandest text of world literature, not simply because of its length but because of its uncompromising artistic integrity and moral force. It knows its worth and proclaims as much quite early on:

\begin{verbatim}
dharme ca arthe ca kame ca
mokse ca bharata rsabha
yad iha asti tad anyatra
yad na iha asti na tat kvacit (1, 56, 34)
\end{verbatim}

[Giant among Bharatas, whatever is here on Law, on Commerce, on Sex, on Liberation is found elsewhere; but what is not here is nowhere else.]

Yet precisely because of its 'expansiveness', its encyclopaedic design and claims, in its 'received' forms (and I use 'received' in a much wider cultural sense here) the \textit{Mbh} is a number of texts. There is, of course, the text as edited, the text which is a result of a labour of scholarship probably alien to Indian editorial practices. The monumental Poona Critical Edition gives us variant readings, and a thoroughgoing collation of all the known manuscript recensions. But there are at least three other very important texts of the \textit{Mbh}. The first one comes closest to the Indian's heart, because it is passed on from mother to child. Initially told in fragments, over the years a complete \textit{Mbh} text is handed down. Every Hindu child receives it, and knows its genealogy off by heart. Secondly there is the \textit{Mbh} text as it exists through folk, theatrical and filmic representations. Since these forms permeate Indian society at every level, the \textit{Mbh}, for the Indian, is mediated through these cultural practices or forms. Finally, there is the \textit{Mbh}-in-translation, both in Indian vernaculars and in major world languages. Here, depending upon the culture of the receptor language, the \textit{Mbh} becomes an extraordinarily varied and unstable text.

I have used this lengthy preamble to introduce what I consider is both a continuation and a radical reinterpretation of the textual and critical traditions of the \textit{Mbh} outlined so far. This is Peter Brook's \textit{Mahabharata}, arguably the theatrical spectacle of the century, nine hours of sheer theatre unsurpassed in the known history of the \textit{Mbh}. It is a theatrical event of such epic proportions that it will change the \textit{Mbh}-as-world-text forever. Yet in Australia, at any rate, the publicity it has received, though generous, has on the whole failed to relate the \textit{Mbh} to the known history of the epic or to that essential difference which is the hallmark of Peter Brook's \textit{Mbh}. A quick look at media
coverage indicates that the public utterances of Brook and his somewhat universalistic interpretation of the text have been accepted at face value and not recontextualised into the actual performance. Indeed the ease with which journalistic criticism especially (and most criticism of the \textit{Mbh} has been journalistic in Australia) has dictated the terms in which the epic may be read raises some serious questions about how a non-Western text is received in the West. The criticism, furthermore, implies that at best non-Western art requires no labour of knowledge, and at worst that orientalist modes of thinking are still alive and well. To probe this further let me be the priestly inquisitor and suggest that Peter Brook himself seems to invite this manner of thinking. In other words, if it is true that the source culture alone can represent itself, then by what right can Peter Brook represent the Indian? While conceding that The \textit{Mahabharata} remains to this day, the very basis of cultural life in India', Peter Brook nevertheless succumbs to the seductive extension of the Sanskrit words \textit{maha} and \textit{bharata} to mean 'The Great History of Mankind'. Some Australian reviewers ill-advvisedly reproduced Peter Brook's own ruminations as they appeared in the \textit{Mahabharata} programme brochure. Yet a closer reading of his words indicates that, even with his desire to keep universalistic principles and humanism intact, Peter Brook was conscious of the epic's propensity to destabilise, distort and confuse the basic categories of good and evil, fate and free will. Brook, however, maintains that in 'jumbling' these terms, the epic finally releases them from their historical accretions so that the words, bare, precise, pristine – as a dictionary entry so to speak – look back at us.

This is the strongest part of Brook's interpretation because it is so very post-modern. The weaker sections relate to Brook's nagging belief in mythic correspondence and an almost Gandhi-like insistence that the \textit{Mbh} is really about truth, but truth presented through sets of contradictions which necessitate an extremely high (indeed rare) degree of self-questioning and analysis. I raise this because the night we saw the nine-hour performance at the Boya Quarry, Perth, these philosophical questions were completely subsumed by the form, by the 'theatre' itself. Indeed, the reason why both the orientalist argument (self-representation versus other) and the universalist tendencies (the text of mankind) do not detract from the essential achievement of Brook's version is that Brook in fact used the \textit{Mbh} to revolutionise theatre itself, and to reassert it as spectacle, a role so dramatically wrenched from it by film, that alarmingly anti-auratic product of mechanical reproduction. Yet precisely because of its down-playing of aura and the sanctity of the original text, film becomes an important force in the production. It is film (and filmic techniques of representation, though without the camera) that is the mediating principle in Peter Brook's version of the \textit{Mbh}. Vyasa, the principal interlocutor of the \textit{Mbh}, in fact historicises himself – he is the here and now as well as the there and then. With the use of a viewer or viewers (the child, Krishna/Ganesha) within the play, this
acts as a 'montage', juxtaposing one event and another, one image and another. The parallels are not complete but, in the Boya Quarry performance at any rate, one got a very strong feeling that the audience was in fact beginning to see Brook's *Mbh* as film. This is in fact how the Indian views the *Mbh* anyway, though the mediations in his case are the various filmic representations of the text in Indian vernacular languages.

Brook therefore emphasises the *Mbh*’s own theatricality, its gripping narrative, at the expense of its Indian roots. Indeed he can’t do otherwise, because to return the *Mbh* to its Indian roots would require skills of such bewildering complexity that no-one, not even the Indians themselves, can ever hope to stage it adequately. Yet Brook’s insistence upon the *Mbh*’s universality, as the world text, leads to a basic conflict between the text as performed and the humanistic interpretations advanced in its favour. The performance, in other words, presents a text at odds with its prior commentary. And in this respect it is the presentation which comes closer, ironically enough, to the spirit of the *Mbh*, a text that, like a palimpsest, always betrays its origins. For the *Mbh* is a political text imbricated within history as eschatology: the *Mbh* claims that it is a history (*itihasa*), not an epic (*mahakavya*). But apart from Krishna, no-one knows history or the nature of ends. This lack of knowledge has led, as we have seen, to readings that attempt to slot the text’s political impetus into the metaphysical categories of *karma* and *dharma*. So instead of endorsing history (or negotiating it with a view to blasting open the implied continuum of history), the Indian regimes of reading highlight moments of tension within *dharma* rather than mere political bungling. Central to this dilemma is Yuddhisthira, who lies so as to secure Drona’s downfall and also becomes a compulsive gambler. Since the lie is a threat to *dharma*, which Yuddhisthira symbolises, it is highlighted at the expense of a much more important flaw (the King as gambler) which is at the centre of a political history within the *Mbh*.

Peter Brook’s production – the play as performed – transcends the limitations of these prior readings in which Brook as commentator is himself occasionally trapped. It recognises that the text is outrageously open-ended. Reading it, one gets the distinct impression that it is a collection of voices, each trying to assert its own utterance as logos; yet none gets authorial endorsement. In a proto-deconstructive vein, the text keeps all these voices in abeyance, and releases them like the primal sounds of the unconscious. Not surprisingly, the text is replete with 'Vaishpayana uvaca' ('Vaishpayana said'), 'Bhisma uvaca' ('Bhisma said'), 'Janamejaya uvaca' ('Janamejaya said') and so on. They’re all saying things without anyone ever gaining ascendancy. The text in fact becomes polyphonic.

To retrieve (or reinforce) this sense of polyphony, Peter Brook brought to his *Mbh* a large number of actors who were not native speakers of English: an African/Black Bhisma/Parashurama, Karna,
Bhima, Kunti and Madri; Middle-Eastern Gandhari and Shakuni; Vietnamese Ambai/Shikhandin; Italian Arjuna; Polish Yuddhisthira and Dhrtarashtra; Greek/French Duryodhana; Indian Satyavati/Draupadi; Japanese Drona; Indonesian Pandu. Apart from the Trinidadian Jeffrey Kissoon, who plays Karna, the only major actors who are native speakers of English, whose voice and consciousness are one, are those who play the roles of Vyasa and Krishna/Ganesha. The first group of essentially non-native speakers bring to English a multiplicity of other voices, traces that supplement and add a discordance to the presumed univocality of the theatrical language, English, which is left with the narrator Vyasa, and the divine hero Krishna, who keeps history in check so that it does not spill over into chaos. There is a third 'voice' (beyond the multiplicity of native languages and the language of transmission), belonging to Satyavati/Draupadi, the only role given to an Indian. Through her we get the voice of the 'original', not with the immediacy of the Sanskrit original, but at least a voice that could be traced back to it.

This use of many races and accents, this 'cacophony', may be read either as a sign of 
\( \textit{Mbh} \)'s universality or, more accurately, as an addition to the text. The multiplicity of voices adds a new \( \textit{Mbh} \) text to the canon, as well as extending the sense of 'sounds' and 'voices' that make up any open-air theatre in India. A Western audience sits in silence; an Indian audience adds its own voice to the performance, confusing, 'jumbling up', what is being performed. Peter Brook gave his theatre both these roles, the voices of the performers as well as the chaos of the Indian audience. Incorporating dance and theatrical forms borrowed from Greek, Indian, Balinese and Japanese theatres (here both the Noh tradition and Kurosawa are important) as well as the Australian Aborigines, Brook refined into an art form the 'chaos' that Oldenberg referred to so many years before.

Peter Brook's \( \textit{Mbh} \) (even for an Indian who may wish to demur on narrow cultural grounds) is thus a bold attempt to give theatre life again, to reinforce what has been so rudely prised out of its grip. The epic becomes a vehicle through which an extremely important statement about theatre and drama is made. Many years ago Georg Lukács in his brilliant essay \textit{The Theory of the Novel} read the epic as a product of a total, self-enclosed, economically unfractured society. While ancient Indian society was alarmingly feudal and probably despotic, the epic nevertheless projects a society that did not suffer the social and economic disjunctions which lead to a morbid, ironic world-view and to the novel form. Where the novel (as well as tragedy) asked the question 'How can essence come alive?', the epic, more philosophically, and with a much greater sense of self-assurance, asked 'How can life become essential?' The epic was therefore produced by civilisations that were certain of themselves and knew, or believed in, the 'correctness' of their social and political institutions. In a post-modernist situation, it is really this self-assurance of the epic (its relevance to us now) that must be reread. As the
history of the *Mbh* indicates, each age read it in terms of its own needs. In Peter Brook’s version we return to a *Mahabharata*, as spectacle, as performance, that remains deeply ambivalent about its political implications and about the possibility of order. If this reading leads to a conflict between Brook’s pronouncements on the *Mbh* and his art, then it is art rather than philosophy which must be given the benefit of the doubt. Peter Brook not only makes a statement about the place of theatre in post-modern life, but also adds a fifth text to the *Mbh*. This text will inevitably modify the text as received so far, and radically challenge (if not alter) the Indian regimes of reading.

**NOTES**


