The Greatness of India and Its Culture

9. The Greatness of Indian Literature – 7

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana

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The Mahabharata and the Ramayana

"The Veda is… the spiritual and psychological seed of Indian culture and the Upanishads the expression of the truth of highest spiritual knowledge and experience that has always been the supreme idea of that culture and the ultimate objective to which it directed the life of the individual and the aspiration of the soul of the people: and these two great bodies of sacred writing, its first great efforts of poetic and creative self-expression, coming into being at a time preceding the later strong and ample and afterwards rich and curious intellectual development, are conceived and couched in the language of a purely psychic and spiritual mentality. An evolution so begun had to proceed by a sort of enriching descent from the spirit to matter and to pass on first to an intellectual endeavour to see life and the world and the self in all their relations as they present themselves to the reasoning and the practical intelligence. The earlier movement of this intellectual effort was naturally accompanied by a practical development and organisation of life consciously expressive of the mind and spirit of the people, the erection of a strong and successful structure of society shaped so as to fulfil the mundane objects of human existence under the control of a careful religious, ethical and social order and discipline, but also so as to provide for the evolution of the soul of man through these things to a spiritual freedom and perfection. It is this stage of which we get a remarkably ample and effective representation in the immediately succeeding period of Indian literary creation."[1]

1. The Age of Darshanas, Smrities and Sutras

"This movement of the Indian mind is represented in its more critical effort on one side by a strenuous philosophical

thinking crystallised into the great philosophic systems*, on the other by an equally insistent endeavour to formulate in a clear body and with a strict cogency an ethical, social and political ideal and practice in a consistent and organised system of individual and communal life and that endeavour resulted in the authoritative social treatises or Shastras of which the greatest and the most authoritative is the famous Laws of Manu. The work of the philosophers was to systematise and justify to the reasoning intelligence the truths of the self and man and the world already discovered by intuition, revelation and spiritual experience and embodied in the Veda and the Upanishads, and at the same time to indicate and systematise methods of discipline founded upon this knowledge by which man might effectuate the highest aim of his existence. The characteristic form in which this was done shows the action of the intuitive passing into that of the intellectual mentality and preserves the stamp and form expressive of its transitional character. The terse and pregnant phrase of the sacred literature abounding in intuitive substance is replaced by a still more compact and crowded brief expression, no longer intuitive and poetic, but severely intellectual, – the expression of a principle, a whole development of philosophic thought or a logical step burdened with considerable consequences in a few words, sometimes one or two, a shortest decisive formula often almost enigmatic in its concentrated fullness. These Sutras or aphorisms became the basis of ratiocinative commentaries developing by metaphysical and logical method and with a considerable variety of interpretation all that was

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**These are namely, the Uttara Mimansa (Vedanta) of Badarayana, Sankhya of Kapila, Yoga of Patanjali, Vaisheshika of Kanada, Nyaya of Gautama and the Purva Mimansa of Jaimini.*

contained at first in the series of aphoristic formulas. Their concern is solely with original and ultimate truth and the method of spiritual liberation, *mokṣa*.

The work of the social thinkers and legislators was on the contrary concerned with normal action and practice. It attempted to take up the ordinary life of man and of the community and the life of human desire and aim and interest and ordered rule and custom and to interpret and formulate it in the same complete and decisive manner and at the same time to throw the whole into an ordered relation to the ruling ideas of the national culture and frame and perpetuate a social system intelligently fashioned so as to provide a basis, a structure, a gradation by which there could be a secure evolution of the life from the vital and mental to the spiritual motive. The leading idea was the government of human interest and desire by the social and ethical law, the Dharma, so that it might be made, – all vital, economic, aesthetic, hedonistic, intellectual and other needs being satisfied duly and according to the right law of the nature, – a preparation for the spiritual existence. Here too we have as an initial form the aphoristic method of the Vedic *grhyasutras*, afterwards the diffuser, fuller method of the Dharma Shastras, – the first satisfied with brief indications of simple and essential socio-religious principle and practice, the later work attempting to cover the whole life of the individual, the class and the people. The very character of the effort and its thoroughness and the constant unity of idea that reigns through the whole of it are a remarkable evidence of a very developed intellectual, aesthetic and ethical consciousness and a high turn and capacity for a noble and ordered civilisation and culture. The intelligence at work, the understanding and formative power manifested is not inferior to that of any ancient or modern

people, and there is a gravity, a unified clarity and nobility of conception which balances at least in any true idea of culture the greater suppleness, more well-informed experience and science and eager flexibility of experimental hardihood which are the gains that distinguish our later humanity. At any rate it was no barbaric mind that was thus intently careful for a fine and well unified order of society, a high and clear thought to govern it and at the end of life a great spiritual perfection and release."[2]

2. The Itihasa: The Mahabharata and the Ramayana

"The pure literature of the period is represented by the two great epics, the Mahabharata, which gathered into its vast structure the greater part of the poetic activity of the Indian mind during several centuries, and the Ramayana. These two poems are epical in their motive and spirit, but they are not like any other two epics in the world, but are entirely of their own kind and subtly different from others in their principle. It is not only that although they contain an early heroic story and a transmutation of many primitive elements, their form belongs to a period of highly developed intellectual, ethical and social culture, is enriched with a body of mature thought and uplifted by a ripe nobility and refined gravity of ethical tone and therefore these poems are quite different from primitive edda and saga and greater in breadth of view and substance and height of motive – I do not speak now of aesthetic quality and poetic perfection – than the Homeric poems, while at the same time there is still an early breath, a direct and straightforward vigour, a freshness and greatness and pulse of life, a simplicity of strength and beauty that makes of them quite another kind than the elaborately constructed literary epics of Virgil or Milton, Firdausi or Kalidasa. This

peculiar blending of the natural breath of an early, heroic, swift and vigorous force of life with a strong development and activity of the ethical, the intellectual, even the philosophic mind is indeed a remarkable feature; these poems are the voice of the youth of a people, but a youth not only fresh and fine and buoyant, but also great and accomplished, wise and noble. This however is only a temperamental distinction: there is another that is more far-reaching, a difference in the whole conception, function and structure.

One of the elements of the old Vedic education was a knowledge of significant tradition, Itihasa, and it is this word that was used by the ancient critics to distinguish the Mahabharata and the Ramayana from the later literary epics. The Itihasa was an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned to creative use as a significant mythus or tale expressive of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and thus formative of the mind of the people. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are Itihasas of this kind on a large scale and with a massive purpose. The poets who wrote and those who added to these great bodies of poetic writing did not intend merely to tell an ancient tale in a beautiful or noble manner or even to fashion a poem pregnant with much richness of interest and meaning, though they did both these things with a high success; they wrote with a sense of their function as architects and sculptors of life, creative exponents, fashioners of significant forms of the national thought and religion and ethics and culture. A profound stress of thought on life, a large and vital view of religion and society, a certain strain of philosophic idea runs through these poems and the whole ancient culture of India is embodied in them with a great force of intellectual conception and living presentation. The Mahabharata has been spoken of as a fifth Veda, it has been said of both these poems that they are not only great poems

but Dharmashastras, the body of a large religious and ethical and social and political teaching, and their effect and hold on the mind and life of the people have been so great that they have been described as the bible of the Indian people. That is not quite an accurate analogy, for the bible of the Indian people contains also the Veda and Upanishads, the Purana and Tantras and the Dharmashastras, not to speak of a large bulk of the religious poetry in the regional languages. The work of these epics was to popularise high philosophic and ethical idea and cultural practice; it was to throw out prominently and with a seizing relief and effect in a frame of great poetry and on a background of poetic story and around significant personalities that became to the people abiding national memories and representative figures all that was best in the soul and thought or true to the life or real to the creative imagination and ideal mind or characteristic and illuminative of the social, ethical, political and religious culture of India. All these things were brought together and disposed with artistic power and a telling effect in a poetic body given to traditions half legendary, half historic but cherished henceforth as deepest and most living truth and as a part of their religion by the people. Thus framed the Mahabharata and Ramayana, whether in the original Sanskrit or rewritten in the regional tongues, brought to the masses by Kathakas, – rhapsodists, reciters and exegetes, – became and remained one of the chief instruments of popular education and culture, moulded the thought, character, aesthetic and religious mind of the people and gave even to the illiterate some sufficient tincture of philosophy, ethics, social and political ideas, aesthetic emotion, poetry, fiction and romance. That which was for the cultured classes contained in Veda and Upanishad, shut into profound philosophical aphorism and treatise or inculcated in dharma-shastra and artha-shastra, was put here

into creative and living figures, associated with familiar story and legend, fused into a vivid representation of life and thus made a near and living power that all could readily assimilate through the poetic word appealing at once to the soul and the imagination and the intelligence."[3]

* * *

"It has been said truly that the Ramayana represents an ideal society and assumed illogically that it must therefore represent an altogether imaginary one. The argument ignores the alternative of a real society idealized. No poet could evolve entirely out of his own imagination a picture at once so colossal, so minute and so consistent in every detail. No number of poets could do it without stumbling into fatal incompatibilities either of fact or of view, such as we find defacing the Mahabharata. This is not the place to discuss the question of Valmiki's age and authorship. This much, however, may be said that after excluding the Uttarakanda which is a later work, and some amount of interpolation for the most part easy enough to detect, and reforming the text which is not unfrequently in a state of truly shocking confusion, the Ramayana remains on the face of it the work of a single, mighty and embracing mind. It is not easy to say whether it preceded or followed in date Vyasa's epic; it is riper in form and tone, has some aspects of a more advanced and mellow culture, and yet it gives the general impression of a younger humanity and an earlier, less sophisticated and complex mind. The nature of the poem and much of its subject-matter might at least justify the conclusion that Valmiki wrote in a political and social atmosphere much resembling that which surrounded Vyasa. He lived, that is to say, in an age approaching the present disorder and turmoil, of great revolutions and unbridled aristocratic violence, when the governing chivalry,

the Kshatriya caste, in its pride of strength was asserting its own code of morals as the one rule of conduct. We may note the plain assertion of this standpoint by Jarasandha in the Mahabharata and Valmiki's emphatic and repeated protest against it through the mouth of Rama. This ethical code was, like all aristocratic codes of conduct, full of high chivalry and the spirit of *noblesse oblige*, but a little loose in sexual morality on the masculine side and indulgent to violence and the strong hand. To the pure and delicate moral temperament of Valmiki, imaginative, sensitive, enthusiastic, shot through with rays of visionary idealism and ethereal light, this looseness and violence were shocking and abhorrent. He could sympathise with them, as he sympathised with all that was wild and evil and anarchic, with the imaginative and poetical side of his nature, because he was a universal creative mind driven by his art-sense to penetrate, feel and re-embody all that the world contained; but to his intellect and peculiar emotional temperament they were distasteful. He took refuge therefore in a past age of national greatness and virtue, distant enough to be idealized, but near enough to have left sufficient materials for a great picture of civilisation which would serve his purpose – an age, it is important to note, of grandiose imperial equipoise such as must have existed in some form at least, since a persistent tradition of it runs through Sanskrit literature. In the frame work of this imperial age, his puissant imagination created a marvelous picture of the human world as it might be if the actual and existing forms and materials of society wee used to the best and purest advantage, and an equally marvelous picture of another non-human world in which aristocratic violence, strength, self-will, lust and pride ruled supreme and idealised or rather colossalised. He brought these two worlds into warlike collision by the hostile meeting of their champions and utmost evolutions of their

peculiar character-types, Rama and Ravana, and so created the Ramayana, the grandest and most paradoxical poem in world which becomes unmatchably sublime by disdaining all consistent pursuit of sublimity, supremely artistic by putting aside all the conventional limitations of art, magnificently dramtic by disregarding all dramatic illusion, and uniquely epic by handling the least as well as the most epic material. Not all perhaps can enter at once into the spirit of this masterpiece; but those who have once done so, will never admit any poem in the world as its superior.

My point here, however, is that it gives us the picture of an entirely moralised civilisation, containing indeed vast material development and immense intellectual power, but both moralised and subordinated to the needs of purity of temperament and delicate ideality of action. Valmiki's mind seems nowhere to be familiarised with the high-strung intellectual gospel of the high and server Dharma culminating in a passionless activity, raised to a supreme spiritual significance in the Gita, which is one great key-note of the Mahabharata. Had he known it, the strong leaven of sentimentalism and feminity in his nature might well have rejected it; such temperaments when they admire strength, admire it manifested and forceful rather than self-contained. Valmiki's characters act from emotional or imaginative enthusiasm, not from intellectual conviction; an enthusiasm of morality actuates Rama, an enthusiasm of immorality tyrannises over Ravana. Like all mainly moral temperaments, he instinctively insisted on one old established code of morals being universally observed as the only bases of ethical stability, avoided casuistic developments and distasted innovators in metaphysical thought as by their persistent and searching questions dangerous to the established bases of morality,

especially to its wholesome ordinariness and everydayness. Valmiki, therefore, the father of our secular poetry, stands for that early and finely moral civilisation which was the true heroic age of the Hindu spirit.

The poet of the Mahabharata lives nearer to the centre of an era of aristocratic turbulence and disorder. If there is any kernel of historic truth in the story of the poem, it records the establishment of those imperial forms of government and society which Valmiki had idealised. Behind its poetic legend it celebrates and approves the policy of a great Kshatriya leader of men who aimed at the subjection of his order to the rule of a central imperial Power which should typify its best tendencies and control or expel its worst. But while Valmiki was a soul out of harmony with its surroundings and looking back to an ideal past, Vyasa was man of his time, profoundly in sympathy with it full of its tendencies, hopeful of its results and looking forward to an ideal future. The one might be described as a conservative idealist advocating return to a better but departed model, the other is a progressive realist looking forward to a better but unborn model. Vyasa accordingly does not revolt from the aristocratic code of morality; it harmonises with his own proud and strong spirit and he accepts it as a basis for conduct, but purified and transfigured by the illuminating idea of the *niṣkāma karma*.

But, above all, intellectuality is his grand note; he is profoundly interested in ideas, in metaphysics, in ethical problems; he subjects morality to casuistic tests from which the more delicate moral tome of Valmiki's spirit shrank; he boldly erects above ordinary ethics a higher principle of conduct having its springs in intellect and strong character; he treats government and society from the standpoint of practical and discerning statesmanlike mind, idealising solely

for the sake of standard. He touches, in fact, all subjects and whatever he touches he makes fruitful and interesting by originality, penetration and a sane and bold vision. In all this he is the son of the civilisation he has mirrored to us, a civilisation in which both morality and material development are powerfully intellectualised. Nothing is more remarkable in all the characters of the Mahabharata than this puissant intellectualism; every action of their seems to be impelled by an immense driving force of mind solidifying in character and therefore conceived and outlined as in stone. This orgiastic force of the intellect is at least as noticeable as the impulse of moral or immoral enthusiasm behind each great action of the Ramayana. Throughout the poem the victorious and manifold mental activity of an age is prominent and gives its character to its civilisation. There is far more of thought in action than in the Ramayana, far less of thought in repose; the one pictures a time of gigantic creative ferment and disturbance; the other, as far as humanity is concerned, an ideal age of equipoise, tranquility and order."[4]

3. The Mahabharata

"The Mahabharata... is not only the story of the Bharatas, the epic of an early event which had become a national tradition but on a vast scale the epic of the soul and religious and ethical mind and social and political ideals and culture and life of India. It is said popularly of it and with a certain measure of truth that whatever is in India is in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is the creation and expression not of a single individual mind, but of the mind of a nation; it is the poem of itself written by a whole people. It would be vain to apply to it the canons of a poetical art applicable to an epic poem with a smaller and more restricted purpose,

but still a great and quite conscious art has been expended both on its detail and its total structure. The whole poem has been built like a vast national temple unrolling slowly its immense and complex idea from chamber to chamber, crowded with significant groups and sculptures and inscriptions, the grouped figures carved in divine or semi-divine proportions, a humanity aggrandised and half uplifted to superhumanity and yet always true to the human motive and idea and feeling, the strain of the real constantly raised by the tones of the ideal, the life of this world amply portrayed but subjected to the conscious influence and presence of the powers of the worlds behind it, and the whole unified by the long embodied procession of a consistent idea worked out in the wide steps of the poetic story. As is needed in an epic narrative, the conduct of the story is the main interest of the poem and it is carried through with an at once large and minute movement, wide and bold in the mass, striking and effective in detail, always simple, strong and epic in its style and pace. At the same time though supremely interesting in substance and vivid in the manner of the telling as a poetic story, it is something more, – a significant tale, Itihasa, representative throughout of the central ideas and ideals of Indian life and culture. The leading motive is the Indian idea of the Dharma. Here the Vedic notion of the struggle between the godheads of truth and light and unity and the powers of darkness and division and falsehood is brought out from the spiritual and religious and internal into the outer intellectual, ethical and vital plane. It takes there in the figure of the story a double form of a personal and a political struggle, the personal a conflict between typical and representative personalities embodying the greater ethical ideals of the Indian Dharma and others who are embodiments of Asuric egoism and self-

will and misuse of the Dharma, the political a battle in which the personal struggle culminates, an international clash ending in the establishment of a new rule of righteousness and justice, a kingdom or rather an empire of the Dharma uniting warring races and substituting for the ambitious arrogance of kings and aristocratic clans the supremacy, the calm and peace of a just and humane empire. It is the old struggle of Deva and Asura, God and Titan, but represented in the terms of human life.

The way in which this double form is worked out and the presentation of the movement of individual lives and of the national life first as their background and then as coming into the front in a movement of kingdoms and armies and nations show a high architectonic faculty akin in the sphere of poetry to that which laboured in Indian architecture, and the whole has been conducted with a large poetic art and vision. There is the same power to embrace great spaces in a total view and the same tendency to fill them with an abundance of minute, effective, vivid and significant detail. There is brought too into the frame of the narrative a very considerable element of other tales, legends, episodes, most of them of a significant character suitable to the method of Itihasa, and an extraordinary amount of philosophical, religious, ethical, social and political thinking sometimes direct, sometimes cast into the form of the legend and episode. The ideas of the Upanishads and of the great philosophies are brought in continually and sometimes given new developments, as in the Gita; religious myth and tale and idea and teaching are made part of the tissue; the ethical ideals of the race are expressed or are transmuted into the shape of tale and episode as well as embodied in the figures of the story, political and social ideals and institutions are similarly developed or illustrated with a high vividness and clearness and space is found too for

aesthetic and other suggestions connected with the life of the people. All these things are interwoven into the epic narrative with a remarkable skill and closeness. The irregularities inevitable in so combined and difficult a plan and in a work to which many poets of an unequal power have contributed fall into their place in the general massive complexity of the scheme and assist rather than break the total impression. The whole is a poetic expression unique in its power and fullness of the entire soul and thought and life of a people."[5]

4. The Ramayana

"The Ramayana is a work of the same essential kind as the Mahabharata; it differs only by a greater simplicity of plan, a more delicate ideal temperament and a finer glow of poetic warmth and colour. The main bulk of the poem in spite of much accretion is evidently by a single hand and has a less complex and more obvious unity of structure. There is less of the philosophic, more of the purely poetic mind, more of the artist, less of the builder. The whole story is from beginning to end of one piece and there is no deviation from the stream of the narrative. At the same time there is a like vastness of vision, an even more wide-winged flight of epic sublimity in the conception and sustained richness of minute execution in the detail. The structural power, strong workmanship and method of disposition of the Mahabharata remind one of the art of the Indian builders, the grandeur and boldness of outline and wealth of colour and minute decorative execution of the Ramayana suggest rather a transcript into literature of the spirit and style of Indian painting. The epic poet has taken here also as his subject an Itihasa, an ancient tale or legend associated with an old Indian dynasty and filled it in with detail from myth and folklore, but has exalted all into a scale of

grandiose epic figure that it may bear more worthily the high intention and significance. The subject is the same as in the Mahabharata, the strife of the divine with the titanic forces in the life of the earth, but in more purely ideal forms, in frankly supernatural dimensions and an imaginative heightening of both the good and the evil in human character. On one side is portrayed an ideal manhood, a divine beauty of virtue and ethical order, a civilization founded on the Dharma and realising an exaltation of the moral ideal which is presented with a singularly strong appeal of aesthetic grace and harmony and sweetness; on the other are wild and anarchic and almost amorphous forces of superhuman egoism and self-will and exultant violence, and the two ideas and powers of mental nature living and embodied are brought into conflict and led to a decisive issue of the victory of the divine man over the Rakshasa. All shade and complexity are omitted which would diminish the single purity of the idea, the representative force in the outline of the figures, the significance of the temperamental colour and only so much admitted as is sufficient to humanise the appeal and the significance. The poet makes us conscious of the immense forces that are behind our life and sets his action in a magnificent epic scenery, the great imperial city, the mountains and the ocean, the forest and wilderness, described with such a largeness as to make us feel as if the whole world were the scene of his poem and its subject the whole divine and titanic possibility of man imaged in a few great or monstrous figures. The ethical and the aesthetic mind of India have here fused themselves into a harmonious unity and reached an unexampled pure wideness and beauty of self-expression. The Ramayana embodied for the Indian imagination its highest and tenderest human ideals of character, made strength and courage and gentleness and

purity and fidelity and self-sacrifice familiar to it in the suavest and most harmonious forms coloured so as to attract the emotion and the aesthetic sense, stripped morals of all repellent austerity on one side or on the other of mere commonness and lent a certain high divineness to the ordinary things of life, conjugal and filial and maternal and fraternal feeling, the duty of the prince and leader and the loyalty of follower and subject, the greatness of the great and the truth and worth of the simple, toning things ethical to the beauty of a more psychical meaning by the glow of its ideal hues. The work of Valmiki has been an agent of almost incalculable power in the moulding of the cultural mind of India: it has presented to it to be loved and imitated in figures like Rama and Sita, made so divinely and with such a revelation of reality as to become objects of enduring cult and worship, or like Hanuman, Lakshmana, Bharata the living human image of its ethical ideals; it has fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character, and it has evoked and fixed in it those finer and exquisite yet firm soul tones and that more delicate humanity of temperament which are a more valuable thing than the formal outsides of virtue and conduct.

The poetical manner of these epics is not inferior to the greatness of their substance. The style and the verse in which they are written have always a noble epic quality, a lucid classical simplicity and directness rich in expression but stripped of superfluous ornament, a swift, vigorous, flexible and fluid verse constantly sure of the epic cadence. There is a difference in the temperament of the language. The characteristic diction of the Mahabharata is almost austerely masculine, trusting to force of sense and inspired accuracy of turn, almost ascetic in its simplicity and directness and a frequent fine and happy bareness; it is the speech of a strong and rapid poetical

intelligence and a great and straightforward vital force, brief and telling in phrase but by virtue of a single-minded sincerity and, except in some knotted passages or episodes, without any rhetorical labour of compactness, a style like the light and strong body of a runner nude and pure and healthily lustrous and clear without superfluity of flesh or exaggeration of muscle, agile and swift and untired in the race. There is inevitably much in this vast poem that is in an inferior manner, but little or nothing that falls below a certain sustained level in which there is always something of this virtue. The diction of the Ramayana is shaped in a more attractive mould, a marvel of sweetness and strength, lucidity and warmth and grace; its phrase has not only poetic truth and epic force and diction but a constant intimate vibration of the feeling of the idea, emotion or object: there is an element of fine ideal delicacy in its sustained strength and breath of power. In both poems it is a high poetic soul and inspired intelligence that is at work; the directly intuitive mind of the Veda and Upanishads has retired behind the veil of the intellectual and outwardly psychical imagination.

This is the character of the epics and the qualities which have made them immortal, cherished among India's greatest literary and cultural treasures, and given them their enduring power over the national mind."[6]

5. The Value of the Western Criticism of the Great Epics

"Apart from minor defects and inequalities such as we find in all works set at this pitch and involving a considerable length of labour, the objections made by Western criticism are simply expressions of a difference of mentality and aesthetic taste. The vastness of the plan and the leisurely

minuteness of detail are baffling and tiring to a Western mind accustomed to smaller limits, a more easily fatigued eye and imagination and a hastier pace of life, but they are congenial to the spaciousness of vision and intent curiosity of circumstance, characteristic of the Indian mind, that spring as I have pointed out in relation to architecture from the habit of the cosmic consciousness and its sight and imagination and activity of experience. Another difference is that the terrestrial life is not seen realistically just as it is to the physical mind but constantly in relation to the much that is behind it, the human action is surrounded and influenced by great powers and forces, Daivic, Asuric and Rakshasic, and the greater human figures are a kind of incarnation of these more cosmic personalities and powers. The objection that the individual thereby loses his individual interest and becomes a puppet of impersonal forces is not true either in reality or actually in the imaginative figures of this literature, for there we see that the personages gain by it in greatness and force of action and are only ennobled by an impersonality that raises and heightens the play of their personality. The mingling of terrestrial nature and supernature, not as a mere imagination but with an entire sincerity and naturalness, is due to the same conception of a greater reality in life, and it is as significant figures of this greater reality that we must regard much to which the realistic critic objects with an absurdly misplaced violence, such as the powers gained by Tapasya, the use of divine weapons, the frequent indications of psychic action and influence. The complaint of exaggeration is equally invalid where the whole action is that of men raised beyond the usual human level, since we can only ask for proportions consonant with the truth of the stature of life conceived in the imagination of the poet and cannot insist on an unimaginative fidelity to the ordinary

measures which would here be false because wholly out of place. The complaint of lifelessness and want of personality in the epic characters is equally unfounded: Rama and Sita, Arjuna and Yudhisthira, Bhishma and Duryodhana and Karna are intensely real and human and alive to the Indian mind. Only the main insistence, here as in Indian art, is not on the outward saliences of character, for these are only used secondarily as aids to the presentation, but on the soul life and the inner soul quality presented with as absolute a vividness and strength and purity of outline as possible. The idealism of characters like Rama and Sita is no pale and vapid unreality; they are vivid with the truth of the ideal life, of the greatness that man may be and does become when he gives his soul a chance and it is no sound objection that there is only a small allowance of the broken littleness of our ordinary nature.

These epics are therefore not a mere mass of untransmuted legend and folklore, as is ignorantly objected, but a highly artistic representation of intimate significances of life, the living presentment of a strong and noble thinking, a developed ethical and aesthetic mind and a high social and political ideal, the ensouled image of a great culture. As rich in freshness of life but immeasurably more profound and evolved in thought and substance than the Greek, as advanced in maturity of culture but more vigorous and vital and young in strength than the Latin epic poetry, the Indian epic poems were fashioned to serve a greater and completer national and cultural function and that they should have been received and absorbed by both the high and the low, the cultured and the masses and remained through twenty centuries an intimate and formative part of the life of the whole nation is of itself the strongest possible evidence of the greatness and fineness of this ancient Indian culture."[7]

The Problem of the Mahabharata*

"An epic of the Bharatas was written by Krishna of the Island called Vyasa, in 24,000 couplets or something more, less at any rate than 27,000, on the subject of the great civil war of the Bharatas and the establishment of the Dhurmarajya or universal sovereignty in that house."[8]

The problem of Mahabharata is to disengage the original epic from the present poem of nearly 1,00,000 slokas. "…the solution of the Mahabharata problem is essential to many things, to any history worth having of Aryan civilisation and literature, to a proper appreciation of Vyasa's poetical genius and, far more important than either, to a definite understanding of the great ethical gospel which Sri Krishna came down on earth to teach as a guide to mankind in the dark Kali yuga then approaching."[9]

1. European Scholarship and the Solution of the Problem

"It is certainly not creditable to European scholarship that after so many decades of Sanscrit research, the problem of the Mahabharata which should really be the pivot for all the rest, has remained practically untouched. For it is not exaggeration to say that European scholarship has shed no light whatever on the Mahabharata beyond the bare fact that it is the work of more than one hand. All else it has advanced, and fortunately it has advanced little, has been rash, arbitrary

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**Notes on the Mahabharata of Krishna Dwypaiana Vyasa were prepared by Sri Aurobindo to disengage the original epic from the enlargements, accretions and additions made by Vyshampaian, Ugrosravas and innumerable other writers.*

or prejudiced; theories, theories always theories without any honestly industrious consideration of the problem. The earliest method adopted was to argue from European analogies, a method pregnant of error & delusion. If we consider the hypothesis of a rude ballad-epic doctored by "those Brahmins" – anyone who is curious on the matter may study with both profit & amusement Fraser's History of Indian Literature – we shall perceive how this method has been worked. A fancy was started in Germany that the Iliad of Homer is really a pastiche or clever rifacimento of old ballads put together in the time of Pisistratus. This truly barbarous imagination with its rude ignorance of the psychological bases of all great poetry has now fallen into some discredit; it has been replaced by a more plausible attempt to discover a nucleus in the poem, an Achilleid, out of which the larger Iliad has grown. Very possibly the whole discussion will finally end in the restoration of a single Homer with a single poem subjected indeed to some inevitable interpolation and corruption, but mainly the work of one mind, a theory still held by more than one considerable scholar. In the meanwhile, however, haste has been made to apply the analogy to the Mahabharata; lynx-eyed theorists have discovered in the poem – apparently without taking the trouble to study it – an early and rude ballad epic worked up, doctored and defaced by those wicked Brahmins; who are made responsible for all the literary and other enormities which have been discovered by the bushelful, and not by European lynxes alone – in our literature and civilisation. Now whether the theory is true or not, and one sees nothing in its favour, it has at present no value at all; for it is a pure theory without any justifying facts. It is not difficult to build these intellectual cardhouses; anyone may raise them by the dozen who can find no better manner of wasting valuable time. A similar method of "arguing from Homer"

is probably at the bottom of Professor Weber's assertion that the War Purvas contain the original epic. An observant eye at once perceives that the War Purvas are far more hopelessly tangled than any that precede them except the first. It is here & here only that the keenest eye becomes confused & the most confident explorer begins to lose heart & selfreliance[.] But the Iliad is all battles and it therefore follows in the European mind that the original Mahabharata must have been all battles. Another method is that of ingenious, if forced argument from stray slokas of the poem or equally stray & obscure remarks in Buddhist compilations. The curious theory of some scholars that the Pandavas were a later invention and that the original war was between the Kurus and Panchalas only and Professor Weber's singularly positive inference from a sloka which does not at first sight bear the meaning he puts on it, that the original epic contained only 8800 lines, are ingenuities of this type[.] They are based on the Teutonic art of building a whole mammoth out of a single and often problematical bone, and remind one strongly of Mr. Pickwick and the historic inscription which was so rudely, if in a Pickwickian sense, challenged by the refractory [Mr. Blotton.] All these theorisings are idle enough; they are made of too airy a stuff to last. Only a serious scrutiny of the Mahabharata made with a deep sense of critical responsibility and according to the methods of patient scientific inference, can justify one in advancing any considerable theory on this wonderful poetic structure.

Yet to extricate the original epic from the mass of accretions is not, I believe, so difficult a task as it may at first appear. One is struck in perusing the Mahabharata by the presence of a mass of poetry which bears the style and impress of a single, strong and original, even unusual mind, differing in his manner of expression, tone of thought & stamp of

personality not only from every other Sanscrit poet we know but from every other great poet known to literature. When we look more closely into the distribution of this peculiar style of writing, we come to perceive certain very suggestive & helpful facts. We realise that this impress is only found in those parts of the poem which are necessary to the due conduct of the story; seldom to be detected in the more miraculous, Puranistic or trivial episodes, but usually broken up by passages and sometimes shot through with lines of a discernibly different inspiration. Equally noteworthy is it that nowhere does this poet admit any trait, incident or speech which deviates from the strict propriety of dramatic characterisation & psychological probability. Finally Krishna's divinity is recognized, but more often hinted at than aggressively stated. The tendency is to keep it in the background as a fact to which, while himself crediting it, the writer does not hope for universal consent, still less is able to speak of it as of a general tenet & matter of dogmatic belief; he prefers to show Krishna rather in his human character, acting always by wise, discerning and inspired methods, but still not transgressing the limit of human possibility. All this leads one to the conclusion that in the body of poetry I have described, we have the real Bharata, an epic which tells plainly and straightforwardly of the events which led to the great war and the empire of the Bharata princes. Certainly if Prof. Weber's venturesome assertion as to the length of the original Mahabharata be correct, this conclusion falls to the ground; for the mass of this poetry amounts to considerably over 20,000 slokas. Professor Weber's inference, however, is worth some discussion; for the length of the original epic is a very important element in the problem. If we accept it, we must say farewell to all hopes of unravelling the tangle[.] His assertion is founded on a single & obscure verse in the huge prolegomena to the poem which

take up the greater part of the Adi Purva, no very strong basis for so far-reaching an assumption. The sloka itself says no more than this that much of the Mahabharata was written in so difficult a style that Vyasa himself could remember only 8800 of the slokas, Suka an equal amount and Sanjaya perhaps as much, perhaps something less. There is certainly here no assertion such as Prof. Weber would have us find in it that the Mahabharata at any time amounted to no more than 8800 slokas. Even if we assume what the text does not say that Vyasa, Suka & Sanjaya knew the same 8800 slokas, we do not get to that conclusion. The point simply is that the style of the Mahabharat was too difficult for a single man to keep in memory more than a certain portion of it. This does not carry us very far. If however we are to assume that there is more in this verse than meets the eye, that it is a cryptic way of stating the length of the original poem; and I do not deny that this is possible, perhaps even probable – we should note the repetition of वेत्ति – अहं वेद्मि शुको वेत्ति सञ्जयो वेत्ति वा न वा. Following the genius of the Sanscrit language we are led to suppose the repetition was intended to recall अष्टौश्लोकसहस्राणि etc. with each name; otherwise the repetition has no raison d'etre; it is otiose & inept. But if we understand it thus, the conclusion is irresistible that each knew a different 8800, or the writer would have no object in wishing us to repeat the number three times in our mind. The length of the epic as derived from this single sloka should then be 26,400 slokas [or something] less, for the writer hesitates about the exact number to be attributed to Sanjaya. Another passage further on in the prolegomena agrees remarkably with this conclusion and is in itself much more explicit. It is there stated plainly enough that Vyasasa first wrote the Mahabharata in 24,000 slokas and afterwards enlarged it to 100,000 for the world of men as well as a still more unconscionable number of verses for the Gandhurva

and other worlds. In spite of the embroidery of fancy, of a type familiar enough to all who are acquainted with the Puranic method of recording facts, the meaning of this is unmistakeable. The original Mahabharata consisted of 24,000 slokas, but in its final form it runs to 100,000. The figures are probably loose & slovenly, for at any rate the final form of the Mahabharata is considerably under 100,000 slokas. It is possible therefore that the original epic was something over 24,000 and under 26,400 slokas, in which case the two passages would agree well enough. But it would be unsafe to found any dogmatic assertion on isolated couplets; at the most we can say that we are justified in taking the estimate as a probable and workable hypothesis and if it is found to be corroborated by other facts, we may venture to suggest its correctness as a moral certainty.

But it is not from European scholars that we must expect a solution of the Mahabharata problem. They have no qualifications for the task except a power of indefatigable research and collocation; and in dealing with the Mahabharata even this power seems to have deserted them. It is from Hindu scholarship renovated & instructed by contact with European that the attempt must come."[10]

"I have said that no foreigner can for a moment be trusted to apply the literary test to a poem in our language; the extraordinary blunders of the most eminent German critics in dealing with Elizabethan plays have settled that question once for all. Educated Indians on the other hand have their own deficiencies in dealing with Vyasa; for they have [been] nourished partly on the curious and elaborate art of Kalidasa and his gorgeous pomps of vision and colour, partly on the somewhat gaudy, expensive & meretricious spirit of English poetry. Like Englishmen they are taught to profess a sort of official admiration for Shakespeare & Milton but with them

as with the majority of Englishmen the poets they really steep themselves in are Shelley, Tennyson & Byron and to a less degree Keats & perhaps Spenser. Now the manner of these poets, lax, voluptuous, artificial, all outward glitter and colour, but inwardly poor of spirit and wanting in genuine mastery and the true poetical excellence [is] a bad school for the appreciation of such severe & perfect work as Vyasa's."[11]

2. Some Important Considerations for the Solution of the Problem

"In solving the Mahabharat problem... intimate feeling for the language is of primary importance; for style & poetical personality must be not indeed the only but the ultimate test of the genuineness of any given passage in the poem. If we rely upon any other internal evidence, we shall find ourselves irresistibly tempted to form a theory and square facts to it. The late Rai Bahadur Bunkim Chundra Chatterji[,] a genius of whom modern India has not produced the parallel, was a man of ripe scholarship, literary powers of the very first order and a strong critical sagacity. In his Life of Krishna (Krishnacharitra), he deals incidentally with the Mahabharata problem; he perceived clearly enough that there were different recognizable styles in the poem, and he divided it into three layers, the original epic by a very great poet, a redaction of the original epic by a poet not quite so great and a mass of additions by very inferior hands. But being concerned with the Mahabharata only so far as it covered the Life of Krishna, he did not follow up this line of scrutiny and relied rather on internal evidence of a quite different kind. He saw that in certain parts of the poem Krishna's godhead is either not presupposed at all or only slightly affirmed, while in others it is the main objective of the writer; certain parts again give us a plain, unvarnished & straightforward biography & history,

others are a mass of wonders and legends, often irrelevant extravagances; in some parts also the conception of the chief characters is radically departed from and defaced. He therefore took these differences as his standard and accepted only those parts as genuine which gave a plain & consistent account of Krishna the man and of others in their relation to him. Though his conclusions are to a great extent justifiable, his a priori method led him to exaggerate them, to enforce them too rigidly without the proper flexibility & scrupulous hesitation and to resort occasionally to special pleading. His book is illuminating and full of insight, and the chief contentions will, I believe, stand permanently; but some parts of his argument are exaggerated & misleading and others, which are in the main correct, are yet insufficiently supported by reasons. It is the failure to refer everything to the ultimate test of style that is responsible for these imperfections. Undoubtedly inconsistencies of detail & treatment are of immense importance. If we find grave inconsistencies of character, if a man is represented in one place as stainlessly just, unselfish & truthful and in another as a base & selfish liar or a brave man suddenly becomes guilty of incomprehensible cowardice, we are justified in supposing two hands at work; otherwise we must either adduce very strong poetic and psychological justification for the lapse or else suppose that the poet was incompetent to create or portray consistent and living characters. But if we find that one set of passages belongs to the distinct and unmistakeable style of a poet who has shown himself capable of portraying great epic types, we shall be logically debarred from this saving clause. And if the other set of passages show not only a separate style, but quite another spirit and the stamp of another personality, our assurance will be made doubly sure. Further if there are serious inconsistencies of fact, if for instance Krishna says in

one place that he can only do his best as a man & can use no divine power in human affairs and in another foolishly uses his divine power where it is quite uncalled for, or if a considerable hero is killed three or four times over, yet always pops up again with really commendable vitality but without warning or explanation until some considerate person gives him his coup-de-grace, or if totally incompatible statements are made about the same person or the same event, we may find in either or all of these inconsistencies sufficient ground to assume diversity of authorship. Still even here we must ultimately refer to the style as corroborative evidence; and when the inconsistencies are grave enough to raise suspicion, but not so totally incompatible as to be conclusive, difference of style will at once turn the suspicion into certainty, while similarity may induce us to suspend judgment. And where there is no inconsistency of fact or conception and yet the difference in expression & treatment is marked, the question of style & personality becomes all-important. Now in the Mahabharata we are struck at first by the presence of two glaringly distinct & incompatible styles. There is a mass of writing in which the verse & language is unusually bare, simple and great, full of firm and knotted thinking & a high & heroic personality[,] the imagination strong and pure, never florid or richly-coloured, the ideas austere, original & noble. There is another body of work sometimes massed together but far oftener interspersed in the other, which has exactly opposite qualities; it is Ramayanistic, rushing in movement, full & even overabundant in diction, flowing but not strict in thought, the imagination bold & vast, but often garish & highly-coloured, the ideas ingenious & poetical[,] sometimes of astonishing subtlety, but at others common & trailing, the personality much more relaxed, much less heroic, noble & severe. When we look closer we find that the Ramayanistic

part may possibly be separated into two parts, one of which has less inspiration and is more deeply imbued with the letter of the Ramayan, but less with its spirit. The first portion again has a certain element often in close contact with it which differs from it in a weaker inspiration, in being a body without the informing spirit of high poetry. It attempts to follow its manner & spirit but fails and reads therefore like imitation of the great poet. We have to ask ourselves whether this is the work of an imitator or of the original poet in his uninspired moments. Are there besides the mass of inferior or obviously interpolated work which can be easily swept aside, three distinct & recognisable styles or four or only two? In the ultimate decision of this question inconsistencies of detail & treatment will be of great consequence. But in the meantime I find nothing to prevent me from considering the work of the first poet, undoubtedly the greatest of the four, if four there are, as the original epic."[12]

"Now the most essential part of a story is the point from which the catastrophe started; in the Mahabharata this is the mishandling of Draupadie & the exile of the Pandavas; but this again leads us back to the Rajasuya sacrifice & the imperial Hall of the Pandavas from which the destroying envy of Duryodhan took its rise. In the Sabhapurva therefore we must seek omissis omittendis for the hand of the original poet; & the whole of the Sabhapurva with certain unimportant omissions is in that great & severe style which is the stamp of the personality of Vyasa. This once established we argue farther from the identity of style, treatment & personality between the Viratapurva & the Sabhapurva[,] certain passages being omitted[,] that this book is also the work of Vyasa. From these two large & mainly homogeneous bodies of poetical work we shall be able to form a sufficient picture of

the great original poet, the drift of his thought and the methods of his building. This we shall then confirm, correct & supplement by a study of the Udyogapurva which up to the marching of the armies presents, though with more but still separable alloy breaking in, the same clear, continuous & discernible vein of pure gold running through it. Thus armed we may even rely on resolving roughly the tangle of the Adi & Vana Purvas and it is only when the war begins, that we shall have to admit doubt, faltering and guesswork; even here however we shall not be without some light even in its thickest darkness. That the poem can be disentangled, I hold then to be beyond dispute, but it can only be done by a long and voluminous critical analysis, and even this must be supported by a detailed edition of the whole Mahabharat in which each canto & chapter shall be discussed on its own merits. At present therefore I propose to pass over the method after once indicating its general nature and present certain definite results only. I propose solely to draw a picture, in outline merely, of the sublime poetical personality which an analysis of the work reveals as the original poet, the Krishna Dwaipayana who wrote the Bharata of the 24,000 [slokas] and not the other Vyasa, if Vyasa he was, who enlarged it to something approaching its present dimensions. And let me express at once my deep admiration of the poetical powers & vast philosophic mind of this second writer; no mean poet was he who gave us the poem we know, in many respects the greatest and most interesting & formative work in the world's literature. If I seem to speak mainly in dispraise of him, it is because I am concerned here with his defects and not with his qualities; for the subject I wish to treat is Krishna of the Island, his most important characteristics and their artistic contrast with those of our other greater, but less perfect epic poet, Valmekie."[13]

Vyasa as a Poet: A Critical Evaluation

"Vyasa is the most masculine of writers. When Coleridge spoke of the femineity of genius he had in mind certain features of temperament which whether justly or not are usually thought to count for more in the feminine mould than in the masculine, the love of ornament, emotionalism, mobile impressionability, the tyranny of imagination over the reason[,] excessive sensitiveness to form and outward beauty; [a] tendency to be dominated imaginatively by violence & the show of strength, to be prodigal of oneself, not to husband the powers, to be for showing them off[,] to fail in selfrestraint is also feminine. All these are natural properties of the quick artistic temperament prone by throwing all itself outward to lose balance and therefore seldom perfectly sane and strong in all its parts. So much did these elements form the basis of Coleridge's own temperament that he could not perhaps imagine a genius in which they were wanting. Yet Goethe, Dante & Sophocles show that the very highest genius can exist without them. But none of the great poets I have named is so singularly masculine, so deficient in femineity as Vyasa, none dominates so much by intellect and personality, yet satisfies so little the romantic imagination. Indeed no poet at all near the first rank has the same granite mind in which impressions are received with difficulty but once received are ineffaceable. In his austere selfrestraint and economy of power he is indifferent to ornament for its own sake, to the pleasures of poetry as distinguished from its ardours, to little graces & self-indulgences of style; the substance counts for everything & the form has to limit itself to its proper work of expressing with precision & power the substance. Even his most romantic pieces have a virgin coldness & loftiness in their beauty. To

intellects fed on the elaborate pomp and imagery of Kalidasa's numbers and the somewhat gaudy, expensive & meretricious spirit of English poetry, Vyasa may seem bald and unattractive. To be fed on the verse of Spenser, Shelley, Keats, Byron & Tennyson is no good preparation for the severest of classics[.] It is indeed I believe, the general impression of many "educated" young Indians that the Mahabhara[ta] is a mass of old wives' stories without a spark of poetry or imagination. But to those who have bathed even a little in the fountain-heads of poetry & can bear the keenness & purity of those mountain sources, the naked & unadorned poetry of Vyasa [is a perpetual refreshment.]* To read him is to bathe in a chill fountain in the heats of summer; they find that one has [available an unfailing source] of tonic & [refreshment] to the soul; one [comes into relation] with a [mind] whose [bare strong contact] has the [power] of infusing strength, courage and endurance.** There are certain things which have this inborn power & are accordingly valued by those who have felt deeply its properties, such are the air of the mountains or the struggle to a capable mind with hardship and difficulty; the Vedanta philosophy, the ideal of the निष्काम धर्म, the poetry of Vyasa, three closely related entities, are intellectual forces that exercise a similar effect & attraction.

The style of this powerful writer is perhaps the one example in literature of strength in its purity; a strength

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**Cancelled in MS. Several other words, also cancelled, were written above this phrase. The last complete version may have been "is a companion that never palls."*

***The words between brackets are cancelled in the MS. There are a number of uncancelled words between the lines whose connection with the text is not evident.*

undefaced by violence & excess yet not weakened by flagging and negligence. It is even less propped or helped out by artifices and aids than any other poetical style. Vyasa takes little trouble with similes, metaphors, rhetorical turns, the usual paraphernalia of poetry; nor when he uses them, is he at pains to select such as shall be new & curiously beautiful; they are there to define more clearly what he has in mind, and he makes just enough of them for that purpose, never striving to convert them into a separate grace or a decorative element. They have force & beauty in their context but cannot be turned into elegant excerpts; in themselves they are in fact little or nothing. When Bhema is spoken of as breathing hard like a weakling borne down by a load too heavy for him, there is nothing in the simile itself. It derives its force from its aptness to the heavy burden of unaccomplished revenge which the fierce spirit of the strong man was condemned to bear[.] We may say the same of his epithets, that great preoccupation of romantic artists; they are such as are *most* natural, crisp & firm, best suited to the plain idea & only unusual when the business in hand requires an unusual thought, but never recherche or existing for their own beauty. Thus when he is describing the greatness of Krishna and hinting his claims to be considered as identical with the Godhead, he gives him the one epithet अप्रमेयः immeasurable, which is strong and unusual enough to rise to the thought, but not to be a piece of literary decoration or a violence of expression. In brief, he religiously avoids overstress; his audacities of phrase are few, and they have a grace of restraint in their boldness. There is indeed a rushing vast Valmekeian style which intervenes often in the Mahabharata; but it is evidently the work of a different hand; for it belongs to a less powerful intellect, duller poetical insight and coarser taste, which has yet caught something of the surge

and cry of Valmekie's Oceanic poetry. Vyasa in fact stands at the opposite pole from Valmekie. The poet of the Ramaian has a flexible & universal genius embracing the Titanic and the divine, the human and the gigantic at once or with an inspired ease of transition. But Vyasa is unmixed Olympian; he lives in a world of pure verse and diction, enjoying his own heaven of golden clearness. We have seen what are the main negative qualities of the style; pureness, strength, grandeur of intellect & personality are its positive virtues. It is the expression of a pregnant and forceful mind, in which the idea is sufficient to itself, conscious of its own intrinsic greatness; when this mind runs in the groove of narrative or emotion, the style wears an air of high and pellucid ease in the midst of which its strenuous compactness and brevity moves & lives as a saving and strengthening spirit; but when it begins to think rapidly & profoundly as often happens in the great speeches, it is apt to leave the hearer behind; sufficient to itself, thinking quickly, briefly & greatly it does not care to pause on its own ideas or explain them at length, but speaks as it thinks, in a condensed often elliptical style, preferring to indicate rather than expatiate, often passing over the steps by which it should arrive at the idea and hastening to the idea itself; often also it is subtle & multiplies many shades & ramifications of thought in a short compass. From this arises that frequent knottiness & excessive compression of logical sequence, that appearance of elliptical & sometimes obscure expression, which so struck the ancient critics in Vyasa and which they expressed in the legend that when dictating the Mahabharata to Ganesha, the poet in order not to be outstripped by his divine scribe – for it was Ganesha's stipulation that not for one moment should he be left without matter to write – threw in frequently knotty and closeknit

passages which forced the lightning-swift hand to pause & labour slowly over its work. To a strenuous mind these passages[,] from the exercise they give to the intellect, are an added charm just as a mountain-climber takes an especial delight in steep ascents which let him feel his ability. Of one thing, however, we may be confident in reading Vyasa, that the expression will always be just to the thought; he never palters with or labours to dress up the reality within him. For the rest we must evidently trace this peculiarity to the compact, steep & sometimes elliptical, but always strenuous diction of the Upanishads in which the mind of the poet was trained & his personality tempered[.] At the same time like the Upanishads themselves or like the enigmatic Aeschylus, he can be perfectly clear, precise & full whenever he chooses; and he more often chooses than not. His expression of thought is usually strong and abrupt; his expression of fact and of emotion strong and precise. His verse has similar peculiarities. It is a golden and equable stream that sometimes whirls itself into eddies or dashes upon rocks; but it always runs in harmony with the thought. Vyasa has not Valmekie's movement as of the sea, that wide and unbroken surge with its infinite variety of waves, which enables him not only to find in the facile anusthubh metre a sufficient vehicle for his vast & ambitious work but to maintain it through [ ]* couplets without its palling or losing its capacity of adjustment to evervarying moods & turns of narrative. But in his narrower limits & on the level of his lower flight Vya[sa] has great subtlety & finesse. Especially admirable is his use, in speeches, of broken effects such as would in less skilful hands have become veritable discords; and again in narrative of the simplest & barest metrical movements, as in the opening Surga of the Sabhapurva to create certain calculated effects. But it

would be idle to pretend for him any equality as a master of verse with Valmekie. When he has to rise from his levels to express powerful emotions[,] grandiose eloquence or swift & sweeping narrative, he cannot always effect it in the anustubh metre; he falls back more often than not on the rolling magnificence of the [tristubh]* which best sets & ennobles his strong-winged austerity[.]

Be its limits what one will, this is certain that there was never a style & verse of such bare, direct & resistless strength as this of Vyasa's or one that went so straight to the heart of all that is heroic in a man. Listen to the cry of insulted Draupadi to her husband

उत्तिष्ठोत्तिष्ठ किं शेषे भीमसेन यथा मृतः।
नामृतस्य हि पापीयान्भार्यामालभ्य जीवति।।

'Arise, arise, O Bhimasena, wherefore sleepest thou like one that is dead? For nought but dead is he whose wife a sinful hand** has touched and lives.", or the reproach of Krishna to Arjoun for his weak pity which opens the second surga of the Bhagavadgita. Or again hear Krishna's description of Bhema's rage and solitary brooding over revenge and his taunting accusations of cowardice[:] "At other times, O Bhemasena, thou praisest war, thou art all for crushing Dhritarashtra's heartless sons who take delight in death; thou sleepest not at night, O conquering soldier, but wakest lying face downwards, and ever thou utterest dread speech of storm and wrath, breathing fire in the torment of thine own rage; and thy mind is without rest like a smoking fire; yea, thou liest all apart breathing heavily like a weakling distressed*** by his load; so that some who know not even think thee mad. For as

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Blank in manuscript* * Or Wretch* **** Or borne down*

an elephant tramples on uprooted trees and breaks them to fragments, so thou stormest along with labouring breath hurting earth with thy feet. Thou takest no delight in all the people but cursest them in thy heart, O Bhema, son of Pandou, nor in aught else hast thou any pleasure night or day; but thou sittest in secret like one weeping and sometimes of a sudden laughest aloud[,] yea, thou sittest for long with thy head between thy knees & thy eyes closed; and then again thou starest before thee frowning and clenching thy teeth; thy every action is one of wrath... 'Surely as our father Sun is seen in the East when luminously he ascendeth, & surely as wide with rays he wheeleth down to his release in the West, so sure is this oath I utter and never shall be broken[.] With this club I will meet & slay the haughty Duryodhan' thus touching thy club thou swearest among thy brothers. And today thou, thou!, thinkest of peace, O warrior! Ah yes, I know the hearts of those that clamour for war, alter very strangely when war showeth its face, since fear findeth out even thee, O Bhema! Ah yes[,] son of Pritha[,] thou seest adverse omens both when thou sleepest & when thou wakest, therefore thou desirest peace. Ah yes, thou feelest no more the man in thyself, but an eunuch & thy heart sinketh with alarm, therefore art thou thus overcome. Thy heart quakes, thy mind fainteth, thou art seized with a trembling in thy thighs, therefore thou desirest peace. Verily, O son of Pritha, wavering & inconstant is the heart of a mortal man, like the pods of the silk cotton driven by the swiftness of every wind. This shameful thought of thine, monstrous as a human voice in a dumb beast, makes the hearts of Pandou's son[s] to sink like (shipwrecked) men that have no raft. Look on thine own deeds, O seed of Bharat, remember thy lofty birth! arise[,] put off thy weakness; be firm, O heart of a hero; unworthy of thee is this languor; what he cannot

win by the mightiness of him, that a Kshatriya will not touch[.]'

This passage I have quoted at some length because it is eminently characteristic of Vyasa's poetical method. Another poet would have felt himself justified by the nature of the speech in using some wild and whirling words, in seeking vividness by exaggeration, at the very least in raising his voice a little. Contrast with this the perfect temperance of this passage, the confident & unemotional reliance on the weight of what is said, not on the manner of saying it. The vividness of the portraiture arises from the quiet accuracy of vision and the care in the choice of simple but effective words; not from any seeking after the salient and graphic such as gives Kalidasa his wonderful power of description; and the bitterness of the taunts arises from the quiet & searching irony with which [each] shaft is tipped and not from any force used in driving them home. Yet every line goes straight as an arrow to its mark; every word is the utterance of a strong man speaking to a strong man and gives iron to the mind. Strength is one constant term of the Vyasic style; temperance, justness of taste is the other.

Strength and a fine austerity are then the two tests which give us safe guidance through the morass of the Mahabharata; where these two exist together, we may reasonably presume some touch of Vyasa; where they do not exist or do not conjoin, we feel at once the redactor or the interpolator. I have spoken of another poet whose more turbid & vehement style breaks continually into the pure gold of Vyasa's work. The whole temperament of this redacting poet, for he is something more than an interpolator, has its roots in Valmekie; but like most poets of a secondary and fallible genius, he exaggerates while adopting the more audacious and therefore the more perilous tendencies of his master."[14]

Vyasa and Valmiki

"Both excel in epical rhetoric – if such a term as rhetoric can be applied to Vyasa's direct & severe style, but Vyasa's has the air of a more intellectual, reflective & experienced stage of poetical advance. The longer speeches in the Ramayan[,] those even which have most the appearance of set, argumentative oration, proceed straight from the heart; the thoughts, words, reasonings come welling up from the dominant emotion or conflicting feelings of the speaker; they palpitate and are alive with the vital force from which they have sprung. Though belonging to a more thoughtful, gentle and cultured civilisation than Homer's they have, like his, the large utterance which is not of primitive times, but of the primal emotions. Vyasa's have a powerful but austere force of intellectuality[.] In expressing character they firmly expose it rather than spring half-unconsciously from it; their bold and finely-planned consistency with the original conception reveals rather the conscientious painstaking of an inspired but reflective artist than the more primary and impetuous creative impulse. In their management of emotion itself a similar difference becomes prominent. Valmekie when giving utterance to a mood or passion simple or complex, surcharges every line, every phrase, turn of words or movement of verse with it; there are no lightning flashes but a great depth of emotion swelling steadily, inexhaustibly and increasingly in a wonder of sustained feeling, like a continually rising wave with low crests of foam. Vyasa has a high level of style with a subdued emotion behind it occasionally breaking into poignant outbursts. It is by sudden beauties that he rises above himself and not only exalts, stirs and delights as at his ordinary level, but memorably seizes the heart and imagination. This is

the natural result of his peculiarly disinterested art which never seeks out anything striking for its own sake, but admits it only when it arises uncalled from the occasion.

From this difference in temper and mode of expression arises a difference in the mode also of portraying character. Vyasa's knowledge of character is not so intimate, emotional and sympathetic as Valmekie's; it has more of a heroic inspiration, less of a divine sympathy. He has reached it not like Valmekie immediately through the heart and imagination, but deliberately through intellect and experience, a deep criticism and reading of men; the spirit of shaping imagination has come afterwards like a sculptor using the materials labour has provided for him. It has not been a light leading him into the secret places of the heart. Nevertheless the characterisation, however reached, is admirable and firm. It is the fruit of a lifelong experience, the knowledge of a statesman who has had much to do with the ruling of men and has been himself a considerable part in some great revolution full of astonishing incidents and extraordinary characters. With that high experience his brain and his soul are full. It has cast his imagination into colossal proportions & provided him with majestic conceptions which can dispense with all but the simplest language for expression.; for they are so great that the bare precise statement of what is said and done seems enough to make language epical. His character-drawing indeed is more epic, less psychological than Valmekie's. Truth of speech and action give us the truth of nature and it is done with strong purposeful strokes that have the power to move the heart & enlarge and ennoble the imagination which is what we mean by the epic in poetry. In Valmekie there are marvellous & revealing touches which show us the secret something in character usually beyond the

expressive power either of speech [or] action; they are touches oftener found in the dramatic artist than the epic, and seldom fall within Vyasa's method. It is the difference between strong and purposeful artistic synthesis and the beautiful subtle & involute symmetry of an organic existence evolved and inevitable rather than shaped or purposed.

Vyasa is therefore less broadly human than Valmekie, he is at the same time a wider & more original thinker. His supreme intellect rises everywhere out of the mass of insipid or turbulent redaction and interpolation with bare and grandiose outlines. A wide searching mind, historian, statesman, orator, a deep and keen looker into ethics and conduct, a subtle and high aiming politician, a theologian & philosopher, – it is not for nothing that Hindu imagination makes the name of Vyasa loom so large in the history of Aryan thought and attributes to him work so important and manifold. The wideness of the man's intellectual empire is evident throughout his work; we feel the presence of the Rishi, the original thinker who has enlarged the boundaries of ethical & religious outlook.

Modern India, since the Musulman advent, has accepted the politics of Chanakya in preference to Vyasa's. Certainly there was little in politics concealed from that great and sinister spirit. Yet Vyasa perhaps knew its subtleties quite as well, but he had to ennoble and guide him a high ethical aim and an august imperial idea. He did not[,] like European imperialism, unable to rise above the idea of power, accept the Jesuitic doctrine of any means to a good end, still less justify the goodness of the end by that profession of an utterly false disinterestedness which ends in the soothing belief that plunder, arson, outrage & massacre are committed for the good of the slaughtered nation. Vyasa's imperialism frankly

accepts war & empire as the result of man's natural lust for dominion, but demands that empire should be won by noble and civilized methods, not in the spirit of the savage, and insists once it is won not on its powers, but on its duties. Valmekie too has included politics in his wide sweep; his picture of an ideal imperialism is sound and noble and the spirit of the Coshalan Ixvaacous that monarchy must be broad-based on the people's will and yet broader-based on justice, truth and good government, is admirably developed as an undertone of the poem. But it is an undertone only, not as in the Mahabharata its uppermost and weightiest drift. Valmekie's approach to politics is imaginative, poetic, made from outside. He is attracted to it by the unlimited curiosity of an universal mind and still more by the appreciation of a great creative artist; only therefore when it gives opportunities for a grandiose imagination or is mingled with the motives of conduct and acts on character. He is a poet who makes occasional use of public affairs as part of his wide human subject. The reverse may with some appearance of truth be said of Vyasa that he is interested in human action and character mainly as they move and work in relation to a large political background.

His deep preoccupation with the ethical issues of speech and action is very notable. His very subject is one of practical ethics, the establishment of a Dharmyarajya, an empire of the just, by which is meant no millennium of the saints but the practical ideal of a government with righteousness, purity and unselfish toil for the common good as its saving principles. It is true that Valmekie has a more humanely moral spirit than Vyasa, in as much as ordinary morality is most effective when steeped in emotion, proceeding from the heart & acting through the heart. Vyasa's ethics like everything else in him

takes a double stand on intellectual scrutiny and acceptance and on personal strength of character; his characters having once adopted by intellectual choice & in harmony with their temperaments a given line of conduct, throw the whole heroic force of their nature into its pursuit. He is therefore preeminently a poet of action. Krishna is his authority in all matters religious and ethical and it is noticeable that Krishna lays far more stress on action and far less on quiescence than any other Hindu philosopher. Quiescence in God is with him as with others the ultimate goal of existence; but he insists that this quiescence must be reached through action and so far as this life is concerned, must exist in action; quiescence of the soul from desires there must be but there should not be and there cannot be quiescence of the Prakriti from action.

न कर्मणामनारम्भान्नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्नुते।
न च संन्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति।।
न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत्।
कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः।।....
नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः।
शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिध्येदकर्मणः।।

"'Not by refraining from actions can a man enjoy action-lessness nor by mere renunciation does he reach his soul's perfection; for no man in the world can even for one moment remain without doing works; everyone is forced to do works, whether he will or not, by the primal qualities born of Prakriti.. Thou do action self-controlled (or else "thou do action ever"), for action is better than inaction; if thou actest not, even the maintenance of thy body cannot be effected[.]'"[15]

"...Vyasa has not only a high political & religious thought and deepseeing ethical judgments; he deals not only with the massive aspects & worldwide issues of human conduct, but

has a keen eye for the details of government and society, the ceremonies, forms & usages, the religious & social order on the due stability of which the public welfare is grounded. The principles of good government & the motives & impulses that move men to public action no less than the rise and fall of States & the clash of mighty personalities and great powers form, incidentally & epically treated, the staple of Vyasa's epic. The poem was therefore, first & foremost, like the Iliad and Aeneid and even more than the Iliad and Aeneid, national[—]a poem in which the religious, social and personal temperament and ideals of the Aryan nation have found a high expression and its institutions, actions[,] heroes in the most critical period of its history received the judgments and criticisms of one of its greatest and soundest minds. If this had not been so we should not have had the Mahabharata in its present form. Valmekie had also dealt with a great historical period in a yet more universal spirit and with finer richness of detail but he approached it in a poetic and dramatic manner; he created rather than criticised; while Vyasa in his manner was the critic far more than the creator. Hence later poets found it easier and more congenial to introduce their criticisms of life and thought into the Mahabharata than into the Ramayana. Vyasa's poem has been increased to threefold its original size; the additions to Valmekie's[,] few in themselves if we set apart the Uttarakanda, have been immaterial & for the most part of an accidental nature.

Gifted with such poetical powers, limited by such intellectual and emotional characteristics, endowed with such grandeur of soul and severe purity of taste, what was the special work which Vyasa did for his country and in what beyond the ordinary elements of poetical greatness lies his claim to world-wide acceptance? It has been suggested already

that the Mahabharata is the great national poem of India. It is true the Ramaian also represents an Aryan civilisation idealised: Rama & Sita are more intimately characteristic types of the Hindu temperament as it finally shaped itself than are Arjouna & Draupadie; Srikrishna though his character is founded in the national type, yet rises far above it[.] But although Valmekie writing the poem of mankind drew his chief figures in the Hindu model and Vyasa, writing a great national epic, lifted his divine hero above the basis of national character into an universal humanity, yet the original purpose of either poem remains intact. In the Ramaian under the disguise of an Aryan golden age the wide world with all its elemental impulses and affections finds itself mirrored. The Mahabharata reflects rather a great Aryan civilization with the types, ideas, aims and passions of a heroic and pregnant period in the history of a high-hearted and deep-thoughted nation. It has, moreover, as I have attempted to indicate[,] a formative ethical and religious spirit which is absolutely corrective to the faults that have most marred in the past and mar to the present day the Hindu character and type of thought. And it provides us with this corrective not in the form of an alien civilisation difficult to assimilate and associated with other elements as dangerous to us as this is salutary, but in a great creative work of our own literature written by the mightiest of our sages (मुनीनामप्यहं व्यासः Krishna has said), one therefore who speaks our own language, thinks our own thoughts and has the same national cast of mind, nature & conscience. His ideals will therefore be a corrective not only to our own faults but to the dangers of that attractive but unwholesome Asura civilisation which has invaded us, especially its morbid animalism and its neurotic tendency to abandon itself to its own desires.

But this does not say all. Vyasa too beyond the essential universality of all great poets, has his peculiar appeal to humanity in general making his poem of worldwide as well as national importance. By comparing him once again with Valmekie we shall realize more precisely in what this appeal consists. The Titanic impulse was strong in Valmekie. The very dimensions of his poetical canvas, the audacity and occasional recklessness of his conceptions, the gust with which he fills in the gigantic outlines of his Ravana are the essence of Titanism; his genius was so universal & Protean that no single element of it can be said to predominate, yet this tendency towards the enormous enters perhaps as largely into it as any other. But to the temperament of Vyasa the Titanic was alien. It is true he carves his figures so largely (for he was a sculptor in creation rather than a painter like Valmekie) that looked at separately they seem to have colossal stature but he is always at pains so to harmonise them that they shall appear measurable to us and strongly human. They are largely & boldly human, impressive & sublime, but never Titanic. He loves the earth and the heavens but he visits not Pataala nor the stupendous regions of Vrishopurvan. His Rakshasa[s], supposing them to be his at all, are epic giants or matter-of-fact ogres, but they do not exhale the breath of midnight and terror like Valmekie's demons nor the spirit of worldshaking anarchy like Valmekie's giants. This poet could never have conceived Ravana. He had neither unconscious sympathy nor a sufficient force of abhorrence to inspire him. The passions of Duryodhana though presented with great force of antipathetic insight, are human and limited. The Titanic was so foreign to Vyasa's habit of mind that he could not grasp it sufficiently either to love or hate. His humanism shuts to him the outermost gates of that sublime and menacing region; he

has not the secret of the storm nor has his soul ridden upon the whirlwind. For his particular work this was a real advantage. Valmekie has drawn for us both the divine and anarchic in extraordinary proportions; an Akbar or a Napoleon might find his spiritual kindred in Rama or Ravana; but with more ordinary beings such figures impress the sense of the sublime principally and do not dwell with them as daily acquaintances[.] It was left for Vyasa to create epically the human divine and the human anarchic so as to bring idealisms of the conflicting moral types into line with the daily emotions and imaginations of men. The sharp distinction between Deva & Asura is one of the three distinct & peculiar contributions to ethical thought which India has to offer. The legend of Indra & Virochana is one of its fundamental legends. Both of them came to Vrihaspati to know from him of God; he told them to go home & look in the mirror. Virochana saw himself there & concluding that he was God, asked no farther; he gave full rein to the sense of individuality in himself which he mistook for the deity. But Indra was not satisfied: feeling that there must be some mistake he returned to Vrihaspati and received from him the true Godknowledge which taught him that he was God only because all things were God, since nothing existed but the One[.] If he was the one God, so was his enemy; the very feelings of separateness and enmity were no permanent reality but transient phenomena. The Asura therefore is he who is profoundly conscious of his own separate individuality & yet would impose it on the world as the sole individuality; he is thus blown along on the hurricane of his desires & ambitions until he stumbles & is broken, in the great phrase of Aeschylus, against the throne of Eternal Law. The Deva on the contrary stands firm in the luminous heaven of self-knowledge; his actions flow not inward towards

himself but outwards toward the world. The distinction that India draws is not between altruism and egoism but between disinterestedness and desire. The altruist is profoundly conscious of himself and he is really ministering to himself even in his altruism; hence the hot & sickly odour of sentimentalism and the taint of the Pharisee which clings about European altruism. With the perfect Hindu the feeling of self has been merged in the sense of the universe; he does his duty equally whether it happens to promote the interests of others or his own; if his action seems oftener altruistic than egoistic it is because our duty oftener coincides with the interests of others than with our own. Rama's duty as a son calls him to sacrifice himself, to leave the empire of the world and become a beggar & a hermit; he does it cheerfully and unflinchingly: but when Sita is taken from him, it is his duty as a husband to rescue her from her ravisher and as a Kshatriya to put Ravana to death if he persists in wrongdoing[.] This duty also he pursues with the same unflinching energy as the first. He does not shrink from the path of the right because it coincides with the path of selfinterest. The Pandavas also go without a word into exile & poverty, because honour demands it of them; but their ordeal over, they will not, though ready to drive compromise to its utmost verge, consent to succumb utterly to Duryodhana, for it is their duty as Kshatriyas to protect the world from the reign of injustice, even though it is at their own expense that injustice seeks to reign. The Christian & Buddhistic doctrine of turning the other cheek to the smiter, is as dangerous as it is impracticable. The continual European see-saw between Christ on the one side and the flesh & the devil on the other with the longer trend towards the latter comes straight from a radically false moral distinction & the lip profession of an ideal which mankind

has never been either able or willing to carry into practice. The disinterested & desireless pursuit of duty is a gospel worthy of the strongest manhood; that of the cheek turned to the smiter is a gospel for cowards & weaklings. Babes & sucklings may practise it because they must, but with others it is a hypocrisy."[16]

List of References:

1. *SABCL 14, Page 282,*
2. *SABCL 14, Pages 282-84,*
3. *SABCL 14, Pages 284-86,*
4. *SABCL 3, Pages 217-21,*
5. *SABCL 14, Pages 286-88,*
6. *SABCL 14, Pages 289-91,*
7. *SABCL 14, Pages 291-93,*
8. *On the Mahabharata, Page 1,*
9. *On the Mahabharata, Page 9,*
10. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 4-9,*
11. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 34-35,*
12. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 11-14,*
13. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 32-34,*
14. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 35-43,*
15. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 56-61,*
16. *On the Mahabharata, Pages 70-76,*

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