

FROM MYTH TO EPIC

The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata. By Alf Hiltebeitel. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1976. Pp. 368.

In the last decade or so there has occurred in the study of Hindu mythology what can only be described as a fluorescence. Not only has new light been cast on such traditional subjects for scholarly investigation as Viṣṇu and Śiva; in addition, several new perspectives have been developed and successfully applied which have proved incisive for the whole body of Hindu mythology. Much of the impetus for the development of these perspectives is directly traceable to the ongoing work of Madeleine Biardeau, Georges Dumézil and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. The major thrust of each of these scholars has been to penetrate beneath the surface narrative of the myths they have studied in order to discover the constantly recurring motifs which underlie such myths, motifs which are the expressions of a coherent value system or ideology. Dumézil, working essentially from an Indo-European perspective, has been successful in showing the extent to which the first level of the mythology of the *Mahābhārata*—that dealing with the Pandavas and Kauravas—is underpinned and has been shaped by the tripartite ideology common to all branches of Indo-European mythology. Beginning from indigenous perspectives Biardeau and O'Flaherty have shown how Puranic cosmogony and the mythology of Śiva respectively, can be understood in terms of the tensions between two opposed sets of values, that of the renouncer (*nivṛtti*) and the man in the world (*pravṛtti*).

Theirs is not the only approach that has been applied to Hindu mythology. Many German scholars, drawing inspiration from Kirfel's, *Das Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa*, have utilized text-critical methods to unravel the intricacies of mythology. In general, such scholars have concentrated their attention on a single figure—Prahlaḍa, the Kūrma *avatāra*, Vāmana, etc.—and have plotted the 'evolution' of this figure from its earliest textual appearances through to the latest Purāṇas. By adhering to a rigorous philological method which aims to determine the relative ages of texts and portions of texts which correspond almost literally, later interpolations and reworked passages can be isolated, leaving what should be the 'Ur-text'. This method is especially useful as a means of uncovering the different chronological layers of narrative elements that constitute a mythologem and for showing the way in which distinct religious doctrines such as *bhakti* can transform the surface structure of the myths. However it tells us little about the meaning of the myths. Little or no attempt is made to understand the particular myth or myths being studied in terms of the wider context of Indian mythology or to isolate the set of values

underlying the myth. Certainly, philological precision and clarity is attained, but at the cost of hermeneutic and meaning.

The book under review is largely a product of the first approach to the study of Hindu mythology which I have outlined above. Nevertheless, in his judicious use of the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* the author retains philological precision whilst, at the same time, brilliantly illuminating the corpus of 'myths' and legends grouped around Kṛṣṇa and his interrelations with the main characters of the epic, especially the five Pāṇḍavas. I use myth here in inverted commas because Hildebeitel treats epic as a category *sui generis* (p. 28) and believes that it should be regarded as legend rather than myth. He sees the distinction between myth and legend in terms of the contents of the two genres. Myth is comprised of stories taking 'place in the fullest expanses of times and space (they articulate a cosmogony)', stories dealing with cosmogony and cosmology and having gods as their principle characters. Legends on the other hand are comprised of stories which 'take place at a specific times and on a specific terrain; they deal with the origin, nature, and destiny of man, and their most prominent characters are heroes' (p. 32). This distinction conforms well to the contents of the *Mahābhārata*, as the stories of the Pāṇḍavas fit the category of legends whereas those of the gods, interposed throughout the didactic portions of the text, are better placed in the category of myth.

Hildebeitel goes further than merely defining the difference between myth and legend. His first chapter entitled 'Traditional Epics' deals at some length with the methodological study of epic, focussing on such concepts as a 'heroic age', epic fatalism, characters and psychology, and contrasting these to myth. At the conclusion of this chapter, following from Wikender and Dumezil, he raises the possibility of an Indo-European epic, and points out the close analogues between the *Mahābhārata*, the Persian *Shāh-Nāmāh* and the account of the battle of Bravellir recounted in the seventh and eighth books of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (p. 58). Since the latter two texts are outside my area of competence I can pass no comments about them. However, the notion of an Indo-European epic is certainly an intriguing one. In regard to this question it is well to ask if the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* reflect a common Indo-Aryan epic tradition? That is to say, is there enough similarity in structure and content between the two epics to suggest that they come from a common source or prototype?

Having established differences between epic and myth, the author spends the rest of the book working through the *Mahābhārata* concentrating on the stories surrounding the Pāṇḍavas, their battle with the Kauravas and especially the pivotal figure of Kṛṣṇa. His aim is to understand the conflicts, relationships and exploits of the main characters of the narrative in terms of the 'mythical' backdrop which has shaped this

narrative and the way in which this has been creatively translated into epic.

First of all he discusses the so-called 'three Kṛṣṇas'; that is, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, Draupadī Kṛṣṇā and Kṛṣṇā Dvaipāyana. These three are similar in more than name. They are shown to be mediating figures: 'Where stress and opposition, as well as rituals and games, occur between the two "phatries", at least one of the "three Kṛṣṇas" is usually in a position to mediate between them' (p. 69). The author sees these characters who constitute a 'vaiṣṇava triad' as figures who can 'turn moments of stress and conflict, where the Kurus and/or *adharmā* appear to be on the verge of triumph into scenes of victory for the Pāṇḍavas and subtle *dharma*. . .' (p. 73). Thus is raised one of the central themes of the *Mahābhārata*, the conflict between *dharma* and *adharmā* and its ultimate resolution.

The subsequent chapters of the book focus on Kṛṣṇa's activities before the war, on Śrī (born on earth as Draupadī), the virtues associated with kingship, the sins of the king and the bearing these have on our understanding of the 'infamous' slayings of Bhīṣma, Drona, Karna and Śalya by the Pāṇḍavas. The final two chapters treat of the 'absolutions' for these killings and Epic Eschatology. I have not the space to describe any of these in detail. Suffice to say, each of them is a contribution to *Mahābhārata* scholarship, and in particular, to our knowledge of Kṛṣṇa's role in this text. For the remainder of this review I shall try to show how Hildebeitel has successfully demonstrated the way in which some fundamental mythologems and a distinct ideology have shaped and moulded the contents of the epic. By using these mythologems and ideology to interpret the narrative of the epic, many hitherto problematic passages can be better understood and can be shown to be consistent with the rest of the narrative.

One of the central mythologems underlying the epic narrative are the complementary roles of Viṣṇu (re-construction and preservation) and Śiva (violence and destruction), so well portrayed in many myths of the Purāṇas. This is not to say that the epic is above all a Vaiṣṇava and Śaivite epic. For, in the author's own words, 'The *Mahābhārata* is a poem where 'all the gods' are active in human form, with Viṣṇu—incarnate as Kṛṣṇa—at their head, or at their 'centre', while Śiva remains typically remote until the moment when he must, after all, get his share and do his work' (p. 356). Throughout the epic narrative there are several instances where the complementary roles of Viṣṇu and Śiva can be seen at work. A typical example is the night raid made by Aśvatthāman on the camp of the victorious Pāṇḍavas after the completion of the battle. It is described in the *Sauptika parvan*. Hildebeitel argues convincingly that the mythic model for this whole episode is to be found in the myth of Śiva's destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice.

In the Purāṇas Śiva's destructive role is above all manifested in his destruction of the *triloka* at the end of the *kalpa* and also in his destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice. Śiva is an outsider at this sacrifice and is

'piqued' because he has not been invited and so will not receive a share (*bhāga*). When the sacrifice is almost complete, Śiva moves in and destroys it, beats up a few gods and takes his share.¹ During the whole episode Viṣṇu is absent from the scene. Like Śiva, Aśvatthāman is an outsider, excluded from the victory celebrations: 'on the one side is festivity, on the other embittered isolation; on the one side inclusion, on the other exclusion' (p. 317). Aśvatthāman deprived of his share during this ritual of battle (*raṇayajña*, *Mbh.* 5, 57, 12), that is, the great battle between the two sides, takes it after the completion of the battle. His share as fixed by Dhṛtarāṣṭra is to kill Dhṛṣṭadyumna, *senāpati* of the Pāṇḍavas' army. Every other participant in the battle has already received his share. For example, Yudhiṣṭhira for his share was required to kill Śalya, which he did. In killing Dhṛṣṭadyumna after the battle, Aśvatthāman is receiving the share he did not gain in the battle itself, just as Śiva gains his share after the sacrifice has been nearly completed or fully completed.

Whilst the carnage occurs in the night raid, Kṛṣṇa is absent from the camp, waiting outside with the Pāṇḍavas. In fact he has absented himself by design (p. 315), in the same way that Viṣṇu is absent when Śiva burns up the universe in the *pralaya*. Moreover, Viṣṇu (=Kṛṣṇa) is absent from Dakṣa's sacrifice (or absents himself from it) just before Śiva runs amok. Hildebeitel understands this appearance and absence of the two gods to refer to the restoration of *dharma* (=Viṣṇu) and to the destruction of *dharma* or *adharmā* (=Śiva), which does correspond in some degree to their role in the cosmogonic scheme of the Purāṇas. Their activity, which is complementary, not opposed, is analogous to the destruction of *dharma* in the dice game where Duryodhana cheats Yudhiṣṭhira out of his kingdom. There, Kṛṣṇa is absent from the scene, whereas there is some evidence of Śiva's presence (ch. 4).

This essentially Purāṇic mythologem (which is probably much older than the dates of the earliest Purāṇas) is not the only influence of this type on the formation of the epic. The tripartite ideology is in evidence everywhere, and throughout the book the author shows how it has been creatively used by the epic 'composers' in the shaping of myth into epic. In the collective virtues (*sarvagunopeta*, *sarvagunasampanna*) used to describe Yudhiṣṭhira and other kings, there is a consistent tri-functional theme (p. 229). On the basis of the trifunctionality of these virtues, Hildebeitel is able successfully to account for the problematical 'sins' of Yudhiṣṭhira (and the other Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa) in the slayings of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya. Yudhiṣṭhira's role in the killings of Bhīṣma and Drona involves the misuse of a vow in the first case and the telling of a lie in the second. The notion of *vrata* (vow) is connected with a first function characteristic of kings—*satya* and *dharma*. The second function is characterized by honourable relations with other warriors, fame, strength and others. On the level of this function Yudhiṣṭhira participates in Karṇa's death, because prior to the battle he had extracted a vow from Śalya that he would destroy Karṇa (p. 255). The death of

Karna therefore, involves a betrayal of friendship (a dishonourable relationship between warriors) on the part of Śalya, instigated by Yudhiṣṭhira. Regarding the third function, the 'sin' is not Yudhiṣṭhira's but Śalya's and consists 'of a violation or despoliation of the earth, and, in particular, of an oversensitivity to wealth, gifts and sense enjoyments' (p. 280). All of these are third function characteristics. This final 'sin' is explicable in terms of the myth of the sins of Indra, who 'sins' on the first two levels by killing Vṛtra and Namuci, but is replaced in the third function by Nahuṣa (who temporarily takes the kingship from Indra), who performs the 'sin' by lusting after Sacī.

In concluding this chapter (10) where the deaths of the four marshals is discussed, Hildebeitel writes, 'Thus, through the deaths of the four marshals, the epic illustrates a theme of moral decline and restoration within the framework of the three functions' (p. 280). Each of the four marshals has violated the ordered hierarchy of *varṇa*, so each is guilty of endangering the fabric of *dharma* (p. 282). Consequently, Kṛṣṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira and the other Pāṇḍavas are re-establishing *dharma* by killing them, and this is the duty of warriors, especially of kings.

The net effect of Hildebeitel's study is to demonstrate how various ideologies and value systems had been integrated into what was probably once just an epic narrative. Over a period of time this narrative has been altered and modified by some central motifs of Purāṇic mythology and, perhaps from the beginning, by the trifunctional ideology. Nevertheless, despite the consistent use and interweaving of these motifs into the epic narrative epic cannot be reduced to myth.

It is difficult to find any faults in this study and it is no doubt destined to be a catalyst for *Mahābhārata* studies and hopefully for epic studies in general. As I indicated earlier it gives impulse to certain other questions relating to Indian epics. Could there be a common base for the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*? Why are some gods such as Brahmā, so prominent in the didactic and mythological sections of the *Mahābhārata*, almost completely missing from the narrative of the battle and not 'incarnated' as one of the participants? If two members of the *trimūrti* play such a vital role in this epic which makes such a generous use of myth, why not the third member, who in so many contexts is depicted as the embodiment of *dharma* like Yudhiṣṭhira?

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1 This is an exceedingly brief summary of this myth. Some versions of it are translated by W.D. O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 118-125.

FROM THE SACRED TO THE SCIENTIFIC

Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred: A Sketch for a New Social-Scientific Theory of Religion*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1976, pp. xvi, 326, 8 pounds.

Sociologists are sometimes divided into two sub-species, the data-collectors, and the theorizers. Hans Mol, who is well-known as a member of the former group, especially for his *Religion in Australia*, has now, and with some trepidation as he himself confesses, crossed the border into the camp of the theorizers. The result is a book that should amply reward a serious reading by anyone interested in interpreting his own religious experience and that of others.

Mol describes his project as a 'critical dialogue' with his own previous work, and it is in this spirit that the reader should approach it. I believe its major contribution lies not in the comprehensiveness or even the ultimate validity of the whole structure, but in its general thrust and direction. He argues that *being* religious, is prior to, and vastly more important than *theorizing about religion* ('Introduction', p.x.—author's emphasis). Theories about religion may aid the self-awareness of the religious man, but the theory that does not match the experience of religious men is false and useless. Biography is the root of religious thinking, as Mol, like Harvey Cox and others recently, acknowledges. His definition of religion—'the sacralization of identity'—is a dynamic one, stressing process not structure, function not abstract essence. And his method is dialectic not exclusive, attempting to hold together the positive insights of over a century of sociological thought about religion.

To the non-sociologist, the last aspect may prove a serious barrier. The pages are littered with references to writers and concepts that require much more elaboration than they are given if they are to represent a genuine three-way dialogue between the author, his predecessors and the reader. The historical examples are thin and over-general, and the material, despite an occasional nod in the direction of non-western religions (often inaccurate) almost exclusively Judaeo-Christian.

This focus on western religions may, in the end, be the most serious weakness in Mol's analysis. 'Sacralization', for example, is only useful if 'sacred' and 'profane' can be kept conceptually distinct. Mol is aware of the problems but, I believe, far too cavalier in his dismissal of Evans-Pritchard's critique of this basic dichotomy. If in Africa, and I would add amongst the Chinese and the Australian aborigines, the sacred does not function as separate, set apart, an area of permanent and unshakable values removed from this world, then 'sacralization' itself is a suspect notion.

However, if we see the work as a 'sketch for a new social-scientific theory of western religion', an outgrowth of the massive Mol, Hetherington, Henty *Western Religion* survey (1972), then it must be acknowledged as a masterly sketch indeed, and a considerable advance on recent attempts.

Firstly, the concept of 'identity' embraces both the personal dimension and its interface with society, both world interpretations and organization, morality as well as ritual. It may be even more useful as a focus for exploring the lineaments of the sacred than Mol suggests in his analysis, since it embraces self-realization and the less formally organized religions as well as the Christian cults and sects which Mol concentrates on.

In the section on 'The Mechanism of Sacralization' we are presented with a very carefully thought out schema. It is, perhaps, excessively abstract—the term 'mechanism' would be, in itself, objectionable to many. In places the mechanical analogies become almost ludicrous, as, for example, the notion of God as a 'fulcrum' who must be conceived as sufficiently removed from the mundane to produce useful manipulative effects, and not overloaded lest 'the link of faith' snap (pp. 208-209). But the concept of 'objectification', the projection of meaning and order onto mundane reality by relating experience to a transcendent point of reference, is in itself an important one, and saved from banality by a stress on emotional commitment and the reinforcing effects of ritual.

Perhaps the most valuable chapter in the whole book is that dealing with myths. As well as providing a masterly summary of the complexities of modern treatments of myth, Mol demonstrates the value of his focus on identity in reconciling apparently incompatible approaches. Myths, he argues, whether narrative, or speculative, function to place man, and to sacralize his identity. The binary oppositions that Levi-Strauss and his school find in myth-making are then seen as a means of reconciling and integrating not only the intellectual level, but on the emotive as well. Myths arouse commitment and attach the emotions to a world of meaning. They provide the link between individual experience and social identity.

I do not think that Hans Mol has succeeded in elaborating a definitive trans-cultural theory of religion. What he has done, however, is to provide a set of conceptual tools, and suggest a basic approach which may avoid the distortions of most contemporary social-scientific theories about religion. It is indeed a 'sketch' which any reader may profitably fill out in relation to his own field of interest. It is always provocative and solidly anchored in the experiences and beliefs of ordinary men and women that Mol's earlier work captured. It would be churlish to demand more.