

Mahabharata: an Ideal *Itihasa* (History) of Ancient India

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Dharme ca arthe ca kâme ca
mokṣe ca bhārata ṛṣabha
yad ihi asti tad anytra
yad na iha asti na tat kvacit
(*Mahābhārata*, 1.56.34)

(Giant among Bhāratas whatever is here on righteousness,
on material welfare, on sensuality, on liberation is
elsewhere, but what is not here is nowhere)

It is difficult to characterize *Mahābhārata*. It is the longest poem ever written, there are over 100,000 verses, most of them sixteen syllables each. It is not just a heroic tale of battles and conquests; in it prayers and hymns are recited, long passages of advice are given on ethics and on kingly duties, all the places of pilgrimage are described, and all systems of philosophy and asceticism are summarised. In one section, the *Bhāgavadgītā*, Krishna as the incarnation of God Viṣṇu advises Arjuna, the third Paṇḍava, how to attain liberation. As Katz has suggested¹,

The *Mahābhārata* may be said to embody the abundance of India, a nation that has been, through centuries, uniquely capable of living with untrammelled growth, even contradictions. To this day, "Bhārata" (the family of Bhārata) is the name for India in the modern Indian languages, with the implication that Bhārata, besides simply having been the distant

1 Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata. Where Krishna is, there is victory*, (Delhi, 1990), p. 3.

ancestor of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas was somehow the forerunner of all Indian culture.

This unique document is the ancient Indian ideal *itihāsa* (history). The Indian attitude to the epic has not changed. It is still considered at once a great heroic story, history of India's hoary past, story of family squabbles, a moral tale to instruct men and women from generation to generation how to lead a virtuous life and it is considered to be a popular version of the great *Vedas*.

I feel that this idea of an all comprehensive history could be best illustrated from a short excursion into my family life in Calcutta, in the late eighties and early nineties.

The readers might wonder what an epic, written in eight hundred years (c. 400 B.C. - c.400 A.D.) based on oral traditions dating back to a pre-historical period c.1500 B.C. has got to do with modern society. Epics are, however, part of India's living past. At present (June 1993) India is torn apart; thousands have lost their lives, a sixteenth century mosque has been pulled down, for it is believed by a significant minority that where the mosque stood was the birthplace of Rāma, the hero of another Indian epic, *Rāmāyaṇa*. In India there is no dead past, there is imperialist past, nationalist past, Marxist past and now a fascist past.

In the late eighties, till about mid 1990, Indian TV was showing first the *Rāmāyaṇa* and then the *Mahābhārata*. The long saga of the Bhārata dynasty, their births, youthful exploits, family feuds and the great battle for the throne was on the TV screen every Sunday at 9 am; and for nearly three years India came to a halt on Sunday mornings. In the neighbouring Islamic Republic of Bangladesh too people were glued to TV sets to watch the heroic deeds of Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. In some villages, it was reported, the devotees of Krishna offered flowers to TV sets, as this twentieth century media had brought the god incarnate alive.

One winter Sunday morning in early 1990, when I was in Calcutta, I heard the collapsible gate next to my bedroom being pulled open to have access to the family TV room. I heard someone switching on the TV, and many more footsteps followed the first one. Soon, I also joined the crowd. It was not yet 9 am, but they were all there, my father (then 86), my mother (then 77), my brother, his wife, their daughter, their grandchildren, the old Bihari gatekeeper (*kṣatriya* by caste, he was the head servant of the household, but then retired), the family cook (cultivator by caste), the maid servant and her mother (by caste they belong to a low unclean *śūdra* group), a

Nepali servant from a neighbouring household and a family friend. I thought that the TV room was India in miniature - all kinds of people were there, from rich to poor, from highly educated to illiterate, from high Brahmins to low *śūdras*, from all age groups, four generations in one room, and people from various regions, Bengal, Bihar and Nepal.

They were all there watching a TV serial, the story of which they know in detail, (for often they nod their heads with disapproval when the TV version does not tell it like it is). They know it all yet they sit there to reaffirm their faith, their moral code of behaviour - social and familial. They were there to hear familiar stories of heroism, love, jealousy, squabbles over inheritance, political intrigues, violence and religious instructions.

The situations and characters are both fabulous and real - there is no boundary between reality and fiction, between myths and history, heroes and gods, past and present, The epics entertain, educate, and reaffirm life. In India today they do something else, they give people a great pride in their hoary past, which sometimes lead to xenophobia and fascism.

This has been going on for at least twenty-five centuries, if not for a longer period. Men, women and children from all over the sub-continent, from all castes and ranks, in villages and in towns would gather together in small or sometimes even large groups to listen to the readings from the epics. The tradition lives on, only the media has changed from the traditional readers or traditional theatre groups to modern film stars on the TV screen.

I think that the experience of watching or listening to the *Mahābhārata* or *Rāmāyaṇa* is part of a long tradition of *itihāsa-purāṇa*.

In modern Indian languages the word *itihāsa* is used for history. What was *itihāsa* to the ancient Indians? It is generally assumed that Ancient India produced no historical literature. In the Sanskrit literature there is no Indian Herodotus or Thucydides. Kalhana, whose *Rājatarāṅgini* comes close to what ancient and medieval Europeans would call history, lived in the twelfth century A.D. As Basham once said "the work is unique as the only attempt at true history in the whole of surviving Sanskrit literature, for the numerous *praśastis* of inscriptions, the biographical *kāvya*s such as *Harṣacarita* and *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, the legends of epics, the king lists of the *Purāṇas* cannot be considered history"². Basham was right but I suggest that all these works including Kalhana's chronicle was considered *itihāsa* in ancient and early medieval India. They, like the *Mahābhārata*, would entertain and

² A.L. Basham, "The Kashmir Chronicle", in C.H. Philips (ed) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*. (London, 1961), p 58.

doctrine of *Karma*.³ Although some etymologists have suggested that *itihāsa* could mean some "customary humourous stories", the ancient Indians considered *itihāsa* to be the fifth *Veda*. In the *Arthaśāstra* it is so regarded (Bk1 Ch III). Later in the same work it is defines as *purāṇa*, *itivyṛitta*, *ākhyāyikā*, *udāharana*, *dharmaśāstra* and *arthaśāstra*. The standard definition of *itihāsa* as quoted by Apte in his dictionary confirms *Arthaśāstra's* definition, *itihāsa* means past events accompanied by or arranged in dharma (morals) *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (sensuality) and *mokṣa* (salvation).⁴ So *itihāsa* was an all comprehensive concept about the past. It is not "history" as understood by the Greek or Latin sources - "enquiry" or "research". Literal meaning of the Indian word (iti-ha-as, "so it has been") is close to the German word *geschichte* which is derived from *geschehen* "to happen" . So there was a long historical tradition in ancient India quite distinct from the ancient European or Jewish traditions.

The tradition dates back to the *Vedas*, in the form of *gāthās* (songs), *naraśaṃsī* (eulogies to heroes) and *ākhyāna* (dramatic narratives). They were oral compositions of priest-poets attached to various tribes. They were put to writing much later and then they were edited and re-edited. The collectors of these stories were *sutas* and *māgadhas*, bards and chroniclers. They preserved the genealogies of the gods, the kings, the sages and the heroes and some ancient stories related to dynastic histories and military victories.

These oral histories were first written in Prakrit and edited by several writers. This part of *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition was later translated into Sanskrit and put down in the sacred *purāṇas* or that portion of them which deals with political history and heroic deeds. To date, the best account of this tradition is given by Pargiter.⁵ What is remarkable is the fact that most of the genealogies and political events mentioned in the *purāṇas* can be attested by Buddhist and Jain records, Greek accounts and the archaeological evidence, chiefly inscriptions and coins. These histories are however, only valid from about 500 B.C , till the emergence of the Guptas in 320 A.D. Even then there are discrepancies among the *purāṇas*. It would seem that these discrepancies crept in because they were originally composed by different priests-poets attached to different tribes, moreover the discrepancies were due to errors made by copyists of the *purāṇa* texts.⁶ After the Gupta period "kinglists" or

3 *op. cit.* pp 64 - 65.

4 V.S.Apte, *Sanskrit English Dictionary*, (Bombay, 1912).

5 F.E.Pargiter, *The Purana text of Dynasties of Kali Age*. (London, 1913) and *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, (London, 1922).

6 D.D.Kosambi, *An Introduction to the study of Indian History*, (Bombay, 1956) p 120, cf. R.C.Majumdar "Ideas of history in Sanskrit literature", in C.H.Philip (ed) *op cit.* pp 15 - 17.

political events are not to be found in the great *purāṇas*. It is more than likely that the *purāṇas* (at least the political history part of them) were put into writing in about 320 A.D., when the Guptas came to power. The *purāṇas* acquired such sacred status after that date that nothing new could be incorporated, after all they have, according to tradition, prophecies of ancient sages, hence the *itihāsa* was written in future tense.⁷

Itihāsa-purāṇa did not die with the emergence of the Guptas. It survived in Kashmir, Nepal and Gujarat and in a slightly different form in Assam and Sindh. But there was a difference. These chronicles were not sacred and they were interested only in their respective regional dynasties. During the Gupta period the Imperial record keepers kept the genealogies up to date and were mentioned in all the official inscriptions, but not in any literary text.

During the post-Gupta period, between 600 A.D. and 1200 A.D., there appeared a number of biographies both of secular leaders, like emperors or ministers, or of monks, chiefly Jain monks. In this genre the better known works are Bāna's *Harṣacarita* and Merutuṅga's *Prabandha-chintāmani*. They were still *kāvya*s but contain many historical events. They refer back to the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition and uncritically accept old authorities.⁸ Romila Thapar has summed up the situation best:

It was an important part of the Hindu cultural form of the *purāṇas* which ensured its preservation and transmission, since the *purāṇas* acquired the status of sacred literature. Historical changes of various kinds in the post-Gupta period led to the emergence of historical writing which was always regarded as secular literature although it had links with the *purāṇa* tradition.⁹

The three main constituents of *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition - mythology, genealogy, and historical narrative - are to be found in the epics. They come from the same tradition. The *Rāmāyaṇa* developed into long narrative poetry, *mahākāvya*. The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, was considered much more than a *mahākāvya*, it is an *itihāsa*, or a *dharmagrantha* (sacred text). It is possible that the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the last five sections (*khaṇḍa*) of its seven sections were written or edited by one person. The *Mahābhārata*, on the

7 For instance the *purāṇas* tell us that "the Guptas will enjoy the kingdoms of Prayaga on the Ganga, Saketa and Magadha". The italic is mine, and the Sanskrit word is *bhokṣante*, Pargiter, *Dynasties*, p 53.

8 For a detailed study of these works see V.S.Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, (Bombay, 1966), cf. R.C.Majumdar, "Ideas of History in Sanskrit literature", Philips (ed) *op. cit.* pp 13 - 28.

9 R.Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*. (Bombay, 1978) p 191.

other hand, was composed by many poets and compiled by many editors before the "final" Sanskrit version became "sacred" so that it could not be changed.

It is now generally believed that the *Mahābhārata* was not written, composed or even edited by one single hand, not even of a single period. The style and action of the epic are uneven; there are repetitions in it and not all of its symbolism is carried through with regularity. But reading it, or watching it performed, one does feel that there is a central guiding force in the epic. Most western scholars have failed to find this "central guiding force". But Vishnu Sitaram Sukhtankar, the first editor of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, pointed out that "one should bear in mind that however much the textual critic might peel off from the external trappings of the Great Epic its *gestalt* remains absolutely unaltered".¹⁰ This central guiding force which is given out in mythical/historical form, is what kept the *Mahābhārata* alive in India, it is an integral part of Indian mythic/historic past for at least two and half millennium. The epic grows, the oral and written traditions continue to this day, but for the Indian the basic message remains intact. It is, as Katz pointed out, a complete mythic corpus in the Levi-Straussian sense and "by means of repetitions, permutation, transformation, and multivalent symbols" conveys a chosen message.¹¹ The Sanskrit text, which took the Pune team of Sankritists over thirty-nine years to edit, developed through centuries in four stages. Firstly, there were heroic tales told by the *sutas*, charioteers-cum-storytellers. They were in the great battles, but not as participants, hence they could observe and tell stories. Secondly, the court chroniclers, *māgadhas*, put them in verse and added the oral heroic tales to their genealogies and chronicles. In the third stage the epic continued to be transmitted in both oral and written forms. While the basic work remained the same, many interpolations took place during this period. A clan of Brahmins called Bhṛgu were mostly responsible for re-editing the *Mahābhārata*. The clan added many Bhṛgu stories and characters to the main story. Thus the original heroic *kṣatriya* (warrior) tale was turned into a Brahmanic didactic story (*dharmagrantha*). Krishna, a hero, became God-incarnate. The process probably started in 200 B.C. but was not completed till well into the Gupta period. At the last stage

10 Vishnu Sitaram Sukhtankar, *On the meaning of Mahābhārata*. (Bombay, 1957) p 23. Pune critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* was published in 19 vols between 1933 and 1972. There are 6 vols index to the work as well.

11 Katz, *op. cit.* p 14.

the *Mahābhārata* spread throughout the sub-continent and separate manuscript traditions developed.¹²

In the *Mahābhārata* itself it is stated that the great epic was written by many hands. According to the story it was Vyāsa who composed the *Mahābhārata*. Then he taught it to his five disciples who spread the story to the human world. One of the disciples Vaiśampāyana recited it at the snake sacrifice of King Janmejaya (Arjuna's great grandson). A *suta* called Ugraśravas heard it at the snake sacrifice and he in his turn recited it to a group of Brahmins led by Bhargava Śaunaka. There is yet another *suta* called Saṁjaya who describes the battle to the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Katz has tried to correlate the first three stages as suggested here with the three recitations mentioned in the epic.¹³

There are a number of other scholars who have tried to discover ur-*Mahābhārata*. Mary Carroll Smith from America has used the computer to establish a correlation between the narrative and metrical patterns; and she found that there is a nucleus of about 3000 pre-classical *triṣṭubh* verses in the Pune edition of the epic and she suggested those to be the ur-*Mahābhārata* and the rest to be interpolations.¹⁴ Yardi from India has used statistical methods to show that there are at least three layers of stories in the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁵ What is, however, important for our purpose is the fact that there is no precise date for the beginning of the story nor for the final version of the epic. Unlike the Greek and Roman epics, *Mahābhārata* is not just an ancient text - it was and still is a living organism, it changes but retains a core moral theme. It is an ancient text, and enjoyed by scholars, but as a living past, it has transmitted both orally and in writing to the people of all classes through centuries. In India there are a number of *kāvya*s and dramas based on the epics; then there are vernacular translations of the epics, and the modern epics written in the nineteenth century based on the stories from the great ancient epics. We go back to my family TV room; all know the story of the drama, some have read it in the original or in translation, some have read it in the vernacular versions (Bengali or Hindi) and those who cannot read have

12 It was Sukhtankar who first pointed out the significance of the Bhargavas in the great epic. See *Idem* "The Bhṛguṣ and the Bhārata : a text-historical study", *Annals of the Bhandarkar Research Institute* vol 18. pp 1-76. More recent studies on the Bhṛguṣ are by Robert O. Goldman, *Gods, Priests, and Warriors: The Bhṛguṣ of the Mahabharata* (New York, 1977), and Jayati Panda, *Bhṛguṣ. a study* (Delhi, 1984).

13 Katz, *op. cit.* pp 9 - 13.

14 Mary Carroll Smith "The Mahabharata's core", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, (95, 1975), pp 479 - 82.

15 M.R.Yardi, *The Mahabharata. its genesis and growth.* (Pune, 1980) pp 231-32.

heard the story many times or watched traditional dramas or modern films based on the stories from the *Mahābhārata*.

The epic can look back to a pre-historic Indo-European past, it can also look forward to a futuristic world or can talk to us here and now. Patil has shown that the *Mahābhārata* contains within itself some stories which probably are older than the *Vedas*. But there was, however, a shift to a much simpler form of religion which was slowly replacing the religion of sacrifice - a shift from the pre-historic Indo-European Vedic gods to the Indian- Puranic gods.¹⁶

Bakhtin has studied the epic in opposition to the carnival, the official as against the unofficial. To him the epic represents, "the serious, official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political", the carnival, on the "other hand, is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it , and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people."¹⁷ In India epics were originally heroic tales, but later retold by a clan of Bhrgu Brahmins in praise of monarchy and Brahmanism, giving the epics both "official" and "ecclesiastical" (if not "divine") characters, but much of the epic genre is celebratory and unofficial. This is particularly true for the *Mahābhārata*. Bakhtin's idea of "polyphony" is more applicable to the Indian situation than his definition of epic. The *bhakti* (devotion) movement influenced the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*. It is the *Mahābhārata*, however, where almost a whole section is devoted to devotionalism (*bhakti*).¹⁸

By the time the Guptas emerged as an imperial power, the stories of the epics and the gods and goddesses of the *Purāṇas* were widely known and revered. And the Imperial Guptas considered themselves as the worshippers of Viṣṇu and used Garuda (a mythical bird which carries Viṣṇu through the universe) as their royal insignia. In the official inscriptions the emperors like Samudra Gupta, Chandra Gupta II, Kumara Gupta I and Skanda Gupta are often referred to as mighty warriors, as mighty as some of the Purāṇic gods like Indra or some of the epic heroes like Arjuna.¹⁹ Many temples were built for gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu and Surya. Viṣṇu was worshipped as Krishna, as

16 N.B.Patil, *The Folklore in the Mahabharata* (New Delhi, 1981), p 6.

17 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, (ed) Michael Holoquist, (trans) Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin Texas, 1981), pp 5,13 and 84 and *Idem, Rabelais and His World*, (trans) Helen Iswolsky, (Cambridge, Mas, 1965), p 7, cf. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, (Cambridge, Mas, 1984) pp 273-74, 287-88 and 295-306.

18 Katz, *op.cit.* pp 4, 219, and p 233.

19 *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol II: *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings* (ed.) J.F.Fleet (London, 1888).

Rāma, as *varāha* (boar), and in all other forms mentioned in the *Purāṇa* mythology.²⁰

Almost all the land grants of this period end with quotations from the *Mahābhārata*. In the Damodarpur copper plate of the year 129, for instance, there are two verses regarding land grants.

O Yudhishtira, best of land holders, preserve with care land already given to the twice born (Brahmans), for the preservation of land grants is more meritorious than the making of a grant.

[Land has been given by many (persons) and will be given by many (in future); (but) the fruit (of land grants) belongs to whosoever at any time possesses the earth.²¹]

So *Mahābhārata* was a familiar text in the Gupta period. *Rāmāyana* too was familiar to them. Kālidāsa wrote a mini epic *Raghuvamśa* based on the *Rāmāyana*. It was however, written to legitimize the Gupta dynasty.²² Many stories of this short epic were taken from the history of the Guptas. Agrawal has shown how some of the stories in Samudra Gupta's Allahabad Pillar Inscriptions and Chandra's Mehrauli Iron Pillar inscription²³, are to be found in *Raghuvamśa*. The motif of abdication of a ruling king and selecting his successor can be found in the epics and in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*. This motif is also used by Hariṣena, the court-poet and minister of Samudra Gupta. Two other motifs, dispute over succession and *digvijaya* (world conquest), are in the epics. They are also used in the Gupta inscriptions.

J.A.B. Van Buitenen has drawn our attention to the fact that the "Sabha Parva" (the book of the Assembly Hall) is the "pivotal" of the eighteen major books of the *Mahābhārata*.²⁴ In this book Yudhishtira establishes himself as the supreme king, with the aid of Krishna; many kings are captured and then set free. This is what a *digvijayi* (world conqueror) should do, while some kings like Jarāsandha and Śiśupāla are eliminated. The observation of the *rājasuya* sacrifice demands the ritual acceptance of Yudhishtira's suzerainty and the elimination of possible challengers²⁵. In Hariṣena's story we have a

20 R.C.Majumdar (ed), *The Classical Age*, (Bombay, 1954), pp 414 - 21.

21 Radhagovind Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions", *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol XV, p.134.

22 D.D.Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, (New Delhi, 1977), p.201.

23 Ashvini Agrawal, *Rise and Fall of the Imperial Guptas*. (Delhi, 1989), pp 34 - 5.

24 *The Mahabharata*, Books 2 and 3. (trans) J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago, 1975) pp 113 - 30.

25 van Buitenen, *op.cit.*

description of kings of North India who are eliminated (*unmulya*), while the kings from South India were captured, liberated and favoured, (*grahana, mokṣa, anugraha*). Samudra Gupta, the hero in Hariṣeṇa's *kāvya* (in this case the Allahabad Pillar inscription) had performed *aśvamedha* sacrifice, another ritual related to *digvijaya* or *dharmavijaya*²⁶ (conquests according to the rule of *dharma*).

So here we have a text which Hariṣeṇa could use as his model. As we have already noticed, Agrawal has pointed out that there are verses in the Allahabad Pillar inscription which are similar to some of the verses in *Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa. I suggest that Kālidāsa's mini-epic and the two great epics were all used by Samudra Gupta's minister.

The fourth verse of the Allahabad Pillar inscription refers to an emotional court scene. The father, Chandra Gupta I, in the presence of the full court embraced his son Samudra Gupta and overcome with emotions, "with the hairs of his body standing erect and tears in his eyes" declared "you are worthy, protect the earth". We are told that this declaration caused joy among the courtiers, (*sabhyesucchavaneṣu*) and heartburning among others, of equal birth, who looked with sad faces at Samudra Gupta (*tulyakulaja mlān ānan advisi/ta/h*).²⁷

The emotional scene indicates abdication of throne and selection of a successor. It is found in the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyana*, and *Raghuvamśa*. But the mention of a *sabhā* along with the accession and the victories of Samudra Gupta reminds one of the "Sabhā Parva" of the *Mahābhārata*. In the "Sabhā Parva" the central theme is the establishment of Yudhiṣṭhira's suzerainty and then the loss of his empire at a game of dice. The ritual *rājasūya* demanded *grahana, mokṣa, anugraha* of kings who accepted the supreme ruler's formal authority; but the challengers of the "world conqueror" could be eliminated (*unmulya*). All of these events are mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar inscription. But the game of dice which is also a part of the *rājasūya* ritual, is not mentioned by Hariṣeṇa. It seems that for most of Indian history the conquests of land were more symbolic than real.²⁸ In "real" history kings like Puṣyamitra Sunga, Samudra Gupta and Kumāra Gupta all performed *aśvamedha* not *rājasūya*. *Aśvamedha* was also performed by the heroes of the great epics.

26 There is numismatic evidence for *asvamedha*, see R. Vanja, *Indian Coinage*, National Museum, (New Delhi, 1983), pp.15 - 16.

27 S.N.Mukherjee, "Polygamy and Genealogy in the Gupta Age : a Note on Feudalism from above in Ancient India ", *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, vols 22 and 23 (1990- 91).

28 van Buitenen, *op. cit.* pp 21-24.

There was also a war of succession following the accession of Samudra Gupta. There is enough numismatic evidence to show that there was in this period another Gupta king who ruled for about five years and issued coins. His name was Kāca. It seems that Kāca, who was one of the sons of Chandra Gupta I, rebelled against his father and brothers and proclaimed himself king.²⁹

One of the most important themes of the *Mahābhārata* is the "purity" of the genealogy of the Bhāratas. But as Vijay Mishra has pointed out that genealogy is "completely illusory".³⁰ Bhīṣma's half brother died without fathering a child. But the royal line continued for Vyāsa (the legendary author of the epic) slept with the two wives of the dead king (the "last" of the Bhāratas) and fathered Dhṛtāraṣṭra and Pāṇḍu. Pāṇḍu was cursed so he could not have sex with his wives Kunti and Mādri. So Kunti invoked various gods who gave her and her co-wife five sons. So the line of Bhāratas continued through two generations of daughter-in-laws, who produced sons from sexual unions with gods and sages. The women were very powerful for they knew the secret of the genealogy. The Pāṇḍava's claim was supported by Krishna, who was related to them through Kunti. Arjuna the great warrior was no son of Pāṇḍu, but was a son of Indra, the god in heaven, and Kunti.

The power of the women in the *Mahābhārata*, for their knowledge of the true genealogy of the house of *Bhārata* is like the power of the women in the Gupta lineage. In a patriarchal and a patrilineal society as India was, genealogies did not usually record women members of the families in their works. In the ancient period the *purāṇas* ignored women, as did the bardic poets of late medieval Rajasthan and the seventeenth-century matchmakers of Bengal. What is unique about the Gupta and post-Gupta genealogies of the early medieval period is that the names of the mothers of the emperor are proudly mentioned in them. This was true for the Guptas and for the dynasty of Harṣavardhana of Thaneswar and for many other dynasties of North India. The Guptas proudly called themselves descendants of a daughter of the Lichchavis (*Lichchavidauhitrīya*)³¹.

The Gupta princes and princesses strongly identified themselves with their respective maternal families. Prabhāvati Gupta proudly mentions her mother's *gotra* (clan), Dharana. Dharana was not her husband Rudrasena II's *gotra* nor was it her father Chandra Gupta II's *gotra* but it was the *gotra* of

29 S. N. Mukherjee, *op. cit.*

30 Vijay Mishra, "The great Indian Epic and Peter Brook" David Williams (ed). *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata*, (London, 1991), p 196.

31 Mukherjee, *op. cit.*

her maternal family, the Nagas. The only prince whose inscriptions do not record his mother's name was Skanda Gupta. And he was the only prince who proclaimed himself as the proud protector of the Guptas. His half-brother Puru Gupta who succeeded Skanda Gupta proudly recorded his mother's name.

It would seem that the system of polygamy and "feudalism from above" gave women's *kulas* (families) an important political status in the Gupta court. The "men of equal birth" (*tulyakulaja*) mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar inscription refers to princes belonging to various queens of the reigning monarch. The women of the Gupta dynasty were important like the women in the *Mahābhārata*, their blessings being necessary to maintain the Gupta lineage.

Most scholars have agreed that the *Purāṇas* took their final and "sacred" form during the Gupta period. We suggest that the epics were also "finally" edited into their present form during this period. The Guptas emerged as an imperial power from obscurity. They needed a genealogy and the support of the Brahmanic tradition. They made marriage alliances with the Licchavis, an ancient tribe, and patronized Vaisnavism and Sanskrit. Their court poets compared them with the heroes of the epics but more particularly to Arjuna of the *Mahābhārata*. The events of their dynasty were narrated in the fashion of the *Mahābhārata*. It is in the Gupta Age that the great epic became an ideal *itihāsa*.