

Studying Epics as Archives

T.C.A. Achintya

Department of History, Delhi University, Delhi

Email: tca.achintya@gmail.com

Received July 01, 2016; Revised October 19, 2016; Accepted October 21, 2016; Published October 23, 2016

Abstract

Epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata have been the focus of historical and literary research for many decades. Academic discourse however has tended to focus more on the physical evidence and the historicity of the literature. My paper outlines a slightly different method of analysis. The paper argues that looking at this Literature as a form of archive or a quasi-archive, and analysing the material contained within as it is, or by comparing across versions and variants, without attempting to get bogged down by questions of historicity of the specific events might open up interesting avenues of Historical Research. While this paper broadly looks at three methods of analysis, namely: locating historical narratives, comparing variations in the study cultures, and analysing differences within the text, it also encourages us to examine the vast body of Epic Literature through other approaches of textual and literary interpretation for the purposes of Historical Research.

Keywords: Archives, Epics, Historiography, Literature, Mahabharata, Ramayana.

Introduction:

The Mahabharata is one the longest examples of literary works known to man. It is an epic that talks extensively of the nature of politics, of human interactions, covering, at its core, not just the realms of history and literature, but also sociology, political science and theory, and even psychology. It is often described in superlative terms for the breadth of human experience that it covers. So, the saying goes “if any event or experience happens it is already there in the Mahabharata”.

The Ramayana too is a narrative of considerable length and of enormous religious and spiritual significance across South and South East Asia. The journey of Rama is among the most adapted texts of Indian history. From Valmiki and his Sanskrit original to Kamban’s Ramayana evolving into the *Ramakien* in Thailand, the *Ramacharitramans* by Tulsidas, it continues to be adapted into unique versions by authors today.

Historians of Indian history have always worked very closely with myths, legends and epics. Traditionally, a lot of discourse on the Mahabharata has focussed on the historicity of the text and the events in the story. Historians and archaeologists such as BB Lal, KP Jayaswal, AS Altekar, FE Pargiter, and HC Raychaudhary, believe the Mahabharata to have been real, and have conducted extensive research trying to prove that the events contained therein did occur. These scholars have tried to establish a date and chronology for these events, usually with the more

comprehensive Mahabharata (Lal, 2012). Others such as SSN Murthy reject this idea, and believe the Mahabharata to be a fable (Murthy, 2003).

However, historicity is not the only way with which we can study the epics. Most scholars agree that, regardless of the historicity of events, the texts were composed over a long period of time, stretching across centuries. The mythologies themselves record this aspect of their composition. For instance, the Mahabharata records that it originated as the *Jaya*, consisting of a mere 25,000 verses, later evolving into the *Vijaya*, then the *Bharata* and finally the *Mahabharata*, composed of over 100,000 verses (Patnaik, 2010). The story of the Ramayana records that it is not in fact the original that Valmiki himself composed. Rather the most original version that came to us was the story as recited by Lava and Kush, Rama's sons, who themselves had heard it from Valmiki. Thus, even were we to work with the premise that the literature deals predominantly with a historical context, we have to recognize that interpolations and additions have taken place. Given that the texts themselves acknowledge that they have been added to and interpolated, we must also recognize that even in its "original" Sanskrit form, the texts we have are edited narratives.

Given then that the Mahabharata and Ramayana were composed and compiled over a long period of time, and so involved the work of multiple authors, the two texts can provide a unique insight into the minds of their writers. For instance, since the Mahabharata story was composed and compiled over several centuries, it could allow us to analyse how the authors perceived historical trends and events as they unfolded around them or had occurred in the near past. Another avenue of exploration lies in gleaning historical information about different societies by comparing the differences and similarities in their Ramayanas. What conclusions might we be able to draw about Thai society by looking at the *Ramakien* and comparing it to the prevalent versions of the Ramayana? Even comparing the differences within the texts, analysing what might for instance appear to be inconsistencies or errors, could provide avenues for historical information.

It is thus the study of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and other such epic literature as objects that the paper seeks to explore. In essence what is being proposed is that we consider texts like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata as **Archives**, or rather **Quasi-Archives** – as an aggregate of narratives and stories rather than a linear body of literature. An approach which would recommend a deconstruction of the literature, much like how scholars might approach the repository of texts within an archive, breaking down the stories in narratives, considering the fact that different sections of the story might point to information about different periods in time, differences among the authors, and differences in culture. This form of approach towards the texts would essentially blend literary and historical forms of thinking. Historians and academics such as AK Ramanujan and Alf Hiltebeitel are individuals who have used these forms of analysis. However this form of analysis has traditionally not been as comprehensively explored by historians, and has thus remained more in the preserve of Sanskritists and scholars of Literature.

Locating historical narratives:

The first form of analysis that I wish to deal with is the location of historical narratives. Reading the literature can provide insight into the perceptions and opinions of historical authors towards actual historical processes and events. These opinions would have manifested themselves as stories of praise or condemnation towards characters and events in the Epic literature. In this paper, the example used to illustrate this is that of the *Rajasuya yagna* episode of the

Mahabharata. Based on this, we could draw conclusions both in locating the tentative date of composition of the episode in the Mahabharata, as well as glean information about the process it describes.

Vishnu S. Sukthankar, who has proved central to the creation of the critical edition of the Mahabharata, argued that its composition ranged from 400 BC to AD 400. More recently scholars have suggested that the oral epic was put together as a text in about 150 BC and that this may have taken a century or so (Thapar, *The Epic of the Bharatas*, 2010).

Magadha started to rise as a major regional power sometime during the beginning of the 5th Century BCE. Although creating precise chronologies is usually difficult, historians such as Romila Thapar and Upinder Singh place the beginning of the rise of Magadha as an important player in regional politics around the 5th century BCE (Singh, 2012, pp. 270-72). The first historical dynasty that brings Magadha into prominence is the Hayanka Kings, who ruled from the ancient capital of Girivraj. Romila Thapar states that the Nandas are described as the first dynasty with Imperial Ambitions (Thapar, 2003, p. 156) based on the Puranic texts; however descriptions of the previous wars, such as the conquest of Vaishali by Ajatshatru as described in the *Samaññaphala Sutta* (Buddhist tradition of the story of the life of Ajatshatru) and the *Uvavai/Aupapātika sutta* (Jain tradition of the story of the life of Ajatshatru), would indicate that an imperial ambition had become part of the policy of Magadha from the time of Ajatshatru onwards.

Magadha's rise as an imperial power and its imperial ambitions are in contrast to the policy of previous kingdoms and dynasties. According to our various religious texts, and even the epics, the traditional method of war involved defeating an enemy state in the field of battle, and claiming tribute. This would often be done as part of a *Yagna* such as the *Ashwamedha* or *Rajasuya*. Magadha's policy of outright conquest and incorporation of the existing kingdom and the replacement/abolition of the ruling dynasty or system, thus made it different. Within a couple of centuries from the time of Ajatshatru, the boundaries of the kingdom of Magadha started to expand aggressively (Thapar, 2003, pp. 154-56) into a vast state.

Historians largely agree on the timeline described above. But what relevance does the Mahabharata have in this historical narrative?

The story of the *Rajasuya Yagna* as described in the Mahabharata is as follows.

After the coronation at *Indraprastha*, *Yudhisthira* set out to perform the *Rajasuya Yagna* to become the Emperor of the World. He is motivated to do this by *Krishna* and *Narada* who inform him that doing so is imperative to allow his father and his ancestors to ascend to heaven. *Krishna* further counsels him to conduct the ceremony to restore *Dharma* to the world, since *Adharma* has become rampant, especially under the rule of *Jarasandha* of Magadha. *Yudhisthira* is thus persuaded to undertake the ceremony for the good of mankind, as well as authorize a mission against *Jarasandha* to eliminate him and weaken his confederacy (Smith, 2009, pp. 84-95).

This interesting story is the focus of this paper. The story of the ceremony as described in the Mahabharata appears to provide an insight into the minds of the authors of the text. The motives of *Jarasandha*, who expands his kingdom through force of arms, are castigated and contrasted against the *Dharmic* method of conducting war, which consists of defeating a king and accepting tribute, without altering geographical and political boundaries of nations and empires. *Jarasandha* who displaces kings either through forcing them to flee or by capturing them, and then incorporates their kingdoms, is treated with great revulsion by the authors of the Mahabharata.

The following translation is taken from Bibek Debroy's translation of the Mahabharata (Debroy, 2010)ⁱ 238 (13)

“Oh lord! Out of fear of Jarasandh, the eighteen branches of the northern Bhojas have fled to the west and so have the Shurasenas, the Bhadrakaras, the Bodhas, the Shalvas, the Patachcharas, the Sutharas, the Sukuttas, the Kunindas and the Kuntis. The kings of the Shalveyas, together with their brothers and their attendants, the southern Panchalas, and the eastern Koshalas from the Kunti region have also fled [...]

“When that enemy killing king retreated, we were delighted and began to live happily in Mathura again [...]

“Oh supreme among the Bharat lineage! Oh descendant of the Bharat lineage! You alone possess the qualities of becoming a universal emperor. You are capable of becoming the sovereign of the Kshatriyas. But in my view, you are incapable of performing the *Rajasuya* as long as the immensely powerful *Jarasandha* is alive. He has conquered and imprisoned all the kings in Girivraja, the way a lion imprisons giant elephants in a cavern in that king of mountains [...] After having defeated the vanquished kings and their followers, he took in fetters to his city and took and built a prison for men.”

239 (14)

“We have heard that five have become emperors- Youvanashva by eliminating taxes, Bhagiratha through protecting his subjects, Kartavirya through the powers of his austerities, the lord Bharat through his power and Marutta through his wealth [...] Know that in accordance to the principles of dharma and artha, *Jarasandha* is now the one to be punished. One hundred and one dynasties of kings have failed to accept his suzerainty and he therefore claims his empire through force...He uses force to conquer foremost men and kings who have been anointed. Not a single man can be seen who does not offer him tribute [...] thus has he brought under his power those kings, who number almost one hundred...how can these kings, who have been cleaned and washed like animals in Pashupati's house be happy with their fate? It has been said that a Kshatriya is honoured when he is killed by weapons [...]

The dialogue is interesting because it reveals how the rise of this new policy of rule was received. The ruler of Magadha is a king who conquers kingdoms, who forces kings to accept his suzerainty, flee or be captured by him. Thus the actions of Magadha are deemed illegitimate and immoral, because it displaces kings and Kshatriyas and incorporates their kingdoms. The act of committing violence against the Kshatriya is not condemned. However by forcing kings to flee or capturing them after defeating them, *Jarasandha* has increased the size of his borders, and has committed an impiety against Kshatriyas, and the rightfully anointed kings. On the other hand, the legitimate actions prescribed to become an emperor are fivefold. To become an emperor, a king should either

- A.) Abolish Taxes
- B.) Perform Austerities
- C.) Procure Great Wealth
- D.) Protect One's Subjects and/or
- E.) Project Power

It is the fifth that is interesting. From the description of the actions of *Jarasandha*, he simply seems to be following the fifth method to becoming an emperor that is by projecting power. *Jarasandha's* actions are however still immoral and illegal, because of his propensity to expand his borders, dethrone kings and imprison or exile them. In contrast, the proper method as described in the Mahabharata by *Krishna*, *Ved Vyasa* and *Narada*, is to fight the kings who refuse to acknowledge suzerainty, but having defeated them, to accept a onetime tribute and subsequently invite them as allies and friends to the *Rajasuya* ceremony. Thus from the Mahabharata text, it becomes clear that personal action against the king and Kshatriyas of other nations and states is considered immoral, as is the notion of expanding the borders of a nation through conquest.

The following dialogue provides more insight into this perception of immorality. 245 (20)

Krishna says "...the three of us have acted against you at his request (Yudhishthira). Oh king! The Kshatriyas who live in this world have been abducted by you. Having committed this cruel act, how can you think of yourself as innocent?...How can a king do violence to honest kings? [...] We follow dharma and are capable of protecting dharma ... You are of the same varna. Yet you have treated those of the same varna as animals."

"*Jarasandha* said "I never take a king until I have vanquished him. Who is here who has not been vanquished? Whom have I not conquered? O Krishna! These kings have been collected for a divine purpose. Remembering the duty of Kshatriyas, how can I free them today out of fear? [...]"

The reasons why *Jarasandha* is condemned and castigated by Krishna are not for his ambition to become emperor, but because of his actions, of his commission of violence against kings, of his abduction, and mistreatment of his fellow Kshatriyas.

The passages of the Mahabharata relating to the *Rajasuya Yagna* provide an important insight into ancient perceptions of historical trends and narratives. The Mahabharata text is an epic, and thus has enormous variation across stories. However on many aspects, there is a complete absence of variations among the different versions. These aspects of the story where there is no variation in the different version can be reasonably assumed to be part of the core text and therefore part of the oldest traditions. These core stories (which undergo no change) would be the ones around which the later variations evolved, and the many interpolations were added. The identification of *Jarasandha* as a king of Magadha, his evil practices, the centrality of his purpose as a foil for *Yudhishthira's* own imperial ambitions, all indicate that the condemnation of the Imperial Ambition, of the policies of expansion through annexation, of the displacement of the kings and rulers was one that became part of the Mahabharata tradition from an early period.

The conclusion we can draw is that the character of *Jarasandha* served the purpose of a metaphor. The story of the *Rajasuya Yagna* allows us to glean an insight into the minds of the authors, showing how they felt about the rise of the Magadha, about its territorial growth. The Mahabharata thus becomes a tool to examine various ancient perceptions. The ascent of Magadha, as we can see from the treatment of the character of *Jarasandha*, was not well received by the authors of the Mahabharata. It is a different question as to whether or not these perceptions were shared by the majority of the political classes of the time. However it is reasonable to assume that this is so. The non-existence or non-survival of a "pro-Magadha" narrative or one that identifies *Jarasandha* as the ruler of some other kingdom indicates that the condemnation of Magadha enjoyed popular support.

Now how can we be reasonably certain that this view is contemporary to the historical rise of Magadha as imperial power circa 6th-5th century BCE onwards? There are several reasons for

this conclusion. Firstly, the narrative of the story condemns the imperialist ambitions of the Magadha state. Had this story been a later interpolation, from the time of the Sungas or even the Guptas, then the interpolation would likely not have been an anti-Magadhan one. By the Post-Mauryan period of Ancient Indian History, large kingdoms that underwent territorial expansion and contraction had become prevalent. Imperial Nations, based on the precepts of texts such as the *Arthashastra* had become a norm, with several large nations coming to power. Large regional kingdoms such as those of the Sungas, Satvahanas and Guptas were prevalent, and several large kingdoms existed across the subcontinent. Thus it would be reasonable to assume that Imperial state structures had become the norm by about the post 300 BCE scenario in India.

Another reason why the association of *Jarasandha* with the Early Imperial Magadha makes sense is because the story manages to dovetail with the descriptions of the geo-political landscape from historical sources from this period. The pre-Mauryan political landscape of ancient India was one with both monarchical states and also republican nation or city states known as *Gana-sanghas*. As Upinder Singh puts it “Ancient Indian texts recognize the difference between the political structure and functioning of the *rajyas* and the *ganas* or *sanghas*”. She goes on to point out that “It is interesting to note that most of these *ganas*, especially the politically important ones, were located in or near the Himalayan foothills in eastern India [...]” (Singh, 2012, p. 265). As Professor Singh points out, these *Ganas* were not democracies (contrary to popular opinion) but were political structures where power was vested within Aristocracies comprising the heads of leading Kshatriya families, without an individual hereditary monarch (Singh, 2012, p. 267). The descriptions in the Mahabharata also tend to correlate with this view, since *Jarasandha*’s conquests comprise not only monarchies, but also various political entities that were clearly governed by Kshatriya families, as evidenced by the repeated mention of displacement of entire Kshatriya clans and families. *Jarasandha* was thus a king who was displacing the *Ganas* and incorporating their territories into his kingdom, and was clearly the first, since his actions appear to be unprecedented as far as the Mahabharata authors are concerned. A further correlation with the time period of 6th-3rd Century BCE is that this period is one where there is more historical literature concerning the difference between *Ganas* and *Rajyas* as well as the various methods to conquer them. The Buddhist stories of the conflict between the Sakyas and Kosalans, Ajatshatru’s conflict with and eventual annexation of the Vajjis, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, and later the Arthashastra’s descriptions of the best methods to act against and undermine the *Ganas* allowing for their conquest (Singh, 2012, pp. 266-8), all indicate that this was a period of growth for the Imperial Idea, and thus a time when both small monarchies and republics were being subsumed and absorbed by the growth of the larger Magadha state.

The origins of the *Rajasuya* sections of the Mahabharata can thus be dated to a time period which identifies with or was soon after (within the time span of a couple of centuries or so) the ascent of Magadha as an imperial power. The Mahabharata therefore becomes an important text to analyse the psychology and perceptions of ancient populations. The story of the *Rajasuya* ceremony shows that the authors of the Mahabharata were deeply critical of Magadha’s rise and the Imperial notions of policy that had been adopted by it. They represent a section of the political population in favour of the traditional policies of statecraft and inter-nation relations, where the conflicts were localized and the territorial identities of nations remained reasonably well defined and static. *Krishna* is thus the mouthpiece for a demand to return to traditional methods of policy. It is interesting to note that, as far as *Krishna*’s mission to return to *Dharmic* ideals is concerned, he fails in part. The Mahabharata represents a society where *Jarasandha*’s policies and model for state governance fail, and which seeks to restore relationships between

states to the “*Dharmic*” ideals as represented by *Yudhisthira*. This is in stark contrast to our historical narrative where the Imperial Policy was in fact the policy that became predominant.

We can conclude that those who were involved in the composition and compilation of the Mahabharata viewed the rise of the Magadha and its approach to war and conquest in an intensely negative light of being quintessentially uncivilized. Through the metaphor of *Jarasandha* they seem to indicate a marked preference for what would have been the traditional political system at the time, when Magadha’s approach towards conquest and annexation would likely have appeared to be highly heterodox and alien and thus repugnant.

Comparing versions to compare cultures:

The second form of analysis that I wish to consider is the comparison of versions. As pointed out above, many different versions of the stories exist. From a purely historical perspective, and in fact from the point of view of the above method of analysis, these different variations can pose several problems. For instance, different variations of an episode in different regions make historical analysis difficult. Which version is the original? Which is more accurate? Given the existence of the differences, which version is more capable of providing an accurate analysis of historical trends? There are no simple answers, but the regional variations could provide important insights into the variations of the regions themselves.

In this section, the example is from the Ramayana. Differences in the Ramayana across regions, specifically the character of Hanuman in the Indian Sanskrit version and the Thai *Ramakien*, can inform us about the societies they exist in. The characterization of Hanuman and its implications in a wider text may help corroborate our understanding of the social mores and trends across the two cultures.

The general character and story of Hanuman is of course well known and does not need elaboration, but aspects of how the character is described do in fact vary widely across versions. In the traditional Indian versions, Hanuman is mostly celibate, a *brahmachari* without any significant sexual motivation or desire. In general, Hanuman here follows an overall pattern - the Indian versions of the Ramayana depict most of the noble characters as being sexually faithful, while characters who are sexually promiscuous or aggressive tend to be negative, or at least invite adverse repercussions for their behaviour. *Ravana*, *Takeyi*, *Supanakha*, *Ahalya*, are all examples of individuals who engage in behaviour that involves somehow contravening the precepts of sexual morality and marriage. Inevitably, each of them attracts a fate which is quite unpleasant. *Ahalya* is punished for her “infidelity” with the long term curse of being “turned into stone” till she is redeemed by *Rama*. The effects on *Supanakha* are more physically disfiguring and permanent, as *Lakshman* cuts off her nose and ears for seeking to attack *Sita* after propositioning the two brothers.

It is in this context of the narrative conveying specific messages regarding sexual morality that Hanuman’s character should be considered. The sexually faithful behaviour of *Rama* and *Lakshmana* is contrasted to the sexually inappropriate behaviour of the others. While this is not a hard and fast rule, by and large none of the positive characters act in a manner which can be construed as being sexually aggressive or promiscuous. If they do, consequences tend to be uncomfortable.

The *Ramakien* however diverges considerably from this message. Indeed, it arguably undermines it. The strongest example of this is the character of Hanuman. The Hanuman of

South East Asian traditions of the Ramayana is far (and perhaps for many in India blasphemously so) from the chaste and celibate *doot* that we all know (Royal Thai Embassy). In South East traditions such as the *Ramakien*, he is extremely promiscuousⁱⁱ and his sexual escapades and exploits are a comic foil for the story. Where the Indian Hanuman baulks at even gazing at the many wives of Ravana as they sleep in their beds, in Thailand Hanuman takes enormous pleasure in doing so (Ramanujan, *The Lord Takes Many Forms*, 2008).

This stark difference in characterization can allow us to draw various conclusions about the different societies. The Indian version's emphasis on morality and fidelity in contrast to that in the *Ramakien* may simply be a difference in audience requirements. Alternatively, it could be more significant. First, however, it is important to recognize that such forms of analysis can easily lead to over-extrapolation. For instance, one might easily conclude that this sort of characterization indicates that promiscuity was better received in Thailand, or that polygamy or sexual freedom was higher in South East Asia. These conclusions run contrary to our knowledge of the two regions. Thus when doing such analysis it is crucial to keep in mind the fact that they must not be inconsistent with our knowledge of the actual customs of a region. Looking at epic literature to gauge customs is a useful tool, but due to the intrinsically subjective nature of the analysis, it cannot assume a higher degree of value than more objective sources of data, such as legal codes or observations by contemporaries.

Returning to the point, we can see the corroboration of the religious notions of marriage across the two regions. The *Ramakien* is more traditionally influenced by Buddhist Traditions (Reynolds, 1992), and so its views on marriage were perhaps more consistent with the Buddhist conception of marriage rather than the Hindu. Where Hinduism tends to see marriage as a sacred rite, and indeed a bond transcending lifetimes, Buddhist theology and doctrine views marriage as essentially a secular affair, and thus mostly outside the purview of religious notions (Buddhanet). We can perhaps also note that this is generally consistent with the religious approach to polygamy. In Hinduism polygamy is allowed, but not usually encouraged, at least in the religious literature. At best it is considered a necessity (Jayaram). While Buddhism has no clear views on polygamy, in Thai society in the Ayutthaya kingdom, there was a significant legal classification on the forms of polygamy, the classification of the hierarchies of wifedom, the laws governing the sexual obligations of women (Kapur-Fic, 1998, p. 460) and upholding the institution of polygamy in society. In Medieval India contemporaneous to Ayutthaya, the Hindu Laws tended to be less clear on the subject. Though polygamy was allowed, and even widely practiced (especially in the ruling classes) there was a tendency to not see it as something that needed encouragement.

Using the epic for the purposes of comparison across regions and drawing conclusions based on the differences is something authors such as Ramanujan (Ramanujan, *Three Hundred Ramayanas*, 1999) and Vijaya Ramaswamy (Ramaswamy, 2009) have looked closely at. Other types of comparison can also lie in religious differences, such as the variations in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist traditions (Reynolds, 1992) as well in the comparison of the written traditions to folk tales. For instance, some tribal versions of the Mahabharata can be quite at odds with traditional variations. The Gonds of Madhya Pradesh worship both *Ravana* and his son *Indrajeet* as deities; analyses of various narratives in their versions have the potential to unlock much information about their cultures and traditions.

Analysing differences within the text:

The last form of analysis that I wish to examine is the study of the apparent contradictions and seeming errors within the same tradition or narrative. The example I will take here is from the Mahabharata, once again returning to Magadha.

As we saw above, the treatment of Magadha in certain sections of the Mahabharata is far from positive, based on which we can infer a certain historical context for the origins of specific narratives. How Magadha is treated later in the narratives is downright confusing. To begin with, it is important to first understand a crucial point regarding the centrality of the war. The Kurukshetra war, the combat between the 7 *Akshaunis* of the Pandavas and the 11 of the Kauravas dominates the story of the Mahabharata. The number of verses concerning the war far outnumbers the verses in the rest of the story. The books (*parvas*) concerned with the war stand at a rather impressive tally of 7 out of the 18: one each for the five commanders of the Kauravas (from *Bhishma* to *Aswatthama*) and another two about the preparations for it. One reason for the size lies in the fact that the section sees consistent repetition, spending a lot of time detailing the names of various parties involved; parties who would invariably be the ancestors of most (if not all) of the kings and kshatriyas of Ancient and Early Medieval India. It has long been accepted by scholars that much of this is aimed at creating forms of legitimacy and ancestry in literature, and were thus additions by various rulers through history in attempts to glorify their ancestry and lineage.

In fact, if one were to sit and actually total up all the participants, the numbers simply do not add up. For instance if one were to examine the total number of rulers who eventually end up flocking to the Pandava banners, and the number of troops they supposedly bring with them, in contrast to the far fewer kings who rally to the Kauravas, one would be wholly puzzled by how the Pandavas are numerically inferior by 4 whole *Akshaunis* to the Kauravas.

Of these inconsistencies, the most striking appears to be that of Magadha. I noticed this inconsistency when reading Ramesh Menon's rendering of the Mahabharata (Menon, 2004). We see that at the council of Upaplavya where the Pandava forces gather strength, Magadha sends one of the *Akshaunis* that comprise Pandava forces, led by a son of *Jarasandha* called *Jayatsena* and described as their king. Later however, Magadha seems to be fighting with the Kauravas against the Pandavas! For instance, on the fourteenth day, we see Magadha being led by an individual called *Sahadeva* (distinct from the Pandava brother) who commands a large force of elephants that *Bhima* and his son *Ghatotkatcha* spend an inordinate time devastating. In some other versions however, this tends to be reversed. *Sahadeva* is a Pandava ally, killed by *Bhishma*, while *Jayatsena* is an ally of the Kauravas.

Is this simply an error? Perhaps there is an episode which was lost? Maybe there are explanations in the different versions of the texts? All of these are valid possibilities to explain this inconsistency. It might nonetheless, also offer an historical insight. As I have noted above, we can see that Magadha is not received well in one section of the Mahabharata, but we also know that historical Magadha eventually became a superpower. It would have thus been natural for the rulers of Magadha to interpolate their ancestors into the text, and on the side of the Pandavas. Thus the inconsistency can be seen as a natural contradiction that would have existed in History. Where Magadha and its power would have been the source of support and praise for some sections of the literate elite, for others (perhaps those who were subordinate to politics and powers threatened or displaced by Magadha) its rulers would have been the target of criticism and denigration. For those praising them, painting them as allies and supporters of the Pandavas

in the *Dharma-Yuddha* that was the Kurukshetra war was perhaps natural; while for those who sought to criticize Magadha, showing them as part of the defeated enemies, ranged alongside *Asuras* like *Bhagadatta* and *Alambusa* and immoral powers like the Trigartas and Cedi would have been irresistible. Historically this would in fact confirm our conclusions about Magadha, which was often the recipient of both praise and condemnation in various historical texts.

Alternatively, we may be able to draw a different conclusion about these varied individuals from Magadha fighting on both sides. The description of the forces of Magadha mirrors the dispositions of the Yadavas. The Yadus were not a homogenous state as the Kurus or Panchalas under a single ruler or family. The Mahabharata descriptions of the Yadavas and their historical descriptions instead paint a picture of a confederacy, almost a tribal community, with different clans all operating under the most diffuse form of leadership. The Yadavas fought for both Kauravas and Pandavas, with individuals like *Kritavarman* and his clan members fighting alongside *Duryodhan* while *Satyaki* and the Vrishnis fought with the Pandavas. This may allow us to look at Ancient Magadha too as a confederation, which is at odds with our knowledge of Magadha as an historical entity. The Magadha of History is one of monarchy, not like that of the Yadus comprising various clans and rulers. Could the Mahabharata war's record of Magadha be an older memory of its pre-Mahajanpada era, before it became a stable singular monarchical polity? Was Magadha perhaps, far in the past, a confederacy, and what remains in the Mahabharata in the form of a kingdom fighting on both sides, in fact a representation of this? This is not a question I can answer at this stage, nor can I point out which of the above two interpretations is more valid, indeed if either is. The point is to highlight the potential for research and avenues of exploration of history by analysing the text of the Mahabharata as an object, much as how we would analyse Archives.

Thus analysis and deconstruction of what would seem to be errors and contradictions can help us glean historical information as well from texts like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. It can become especially interesting once we start considering all these various approaches together outlined above.

Conclusion:

The forms of analysis detailed above are not the only way by which we can deconstruct and read Epic literature to gain historical information. Other forms of analysis rest on more technical analyses, such as linguistic research which seeks to study the construction and origins of specific words and concepts in the Sanskrit versions of the Ramayana or Mahabharata in an attempt to date not just the text, but also processes and phenomena the literatures describe. What we can see, however, is that epic literature and the corpus of mythology and legend can be analysed much like how we study modern archives. It is for this purpose that I seek to describe the Mahabharata and Ramayana as Quasi-Archives. The breakdown and deconstruction of the texts and the study of their constituent narratives can allow us to access information about historical trends, societal differences and mores, the opinions of classes in historical societies and much more. Research may even allow for close study along archival principles such as those described by Ann Stoler (Stoler, 2002) as *Against and Along the Archival Grain*, by locating not just the narratives as described in the texts, but even narratives that the texts sought to suppress, or voices that it sought to deny legitimacy. What some modern authors in the field of Historical Literature have doneⁱⁱⁱ may well be a form of analysis that historians and academics will want to consider in their study of the literature.

It must be kept in mind that epic literature cannot be considered the equivalent of a regular archive. The narratives that we seek to deconstruct are not clearly delineated as in an archive. The dating and chronologies both of the literature itself and within it are ambiguous and often fluid. In an archive identifying authors, locations, periods of creation of the texts, etc. does not require the sort of work, or contain the uncertainties, that we come across when dealing with mythology and legend. Studying the Mahabharata or Ramayana as we would study an archive or texts within an archive may certainly provide much useful information and avenues of research, but this study must be tempered with an awareness of the many special weaknesses of the primary source material.

For the purposes of this article, it should be mentioned that my primary sources for the Mahabharata have been Bibek Debroy's ten volume translation, as well as Ramesh Menon's two volume rendering. For the Ramayana, I have looked to Ramesh Menon's text as well. For the purposes of research I have consulted *The Collected Essays of A.K Ramanujan, Text and Variations of the Mahabharata* by KK Chakravarty and Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas*. Other sources that were consulted are listed below.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Buddhnet. (n.d.). *Buddhist Ceremonies*. Retrieved from Buddhnet: <http://www.buddhanet.net/funeral.htm>
2. Continuing Education Center. (2008). *A Survey of Thai Arts and Architectural Attractions: A Manual for Tourist Guides*. Continuing Education Center, Chulalongkorn University.
3. Debroy, B. (2010). Section 16 - 32. In B. Debroy, *The Mahabharata* (Vol. II). Penguin Books.
4. Jayaram, V. (n.d.). *Hinduism and Polygamy*. Retrieved from Hindunet: http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_polygamy.asp
5. Kapur-Fic, A. R. (1998). *Thailand: Buddhism, Society, and Women*. Abhinav Publications.
6. Lal, B. (2012, June 24). *Mahabharata Historicity*. Retrieved from Slidshare.net: <http://www.slideshare.net/sfih108/mahabharata-historicity-prof-b-b-lal>
7. Menon, R. (2004). *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering* (Vol. II). Rupa & Co.
8. Murthy, S. (2003, November). The Questionable Historicity of the Mahabharata. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*(5). Retrieved from <http://www.ejvs.laurasianacademy.com/ejvs1005/ejvs1005article.pdf>
9. Patnaik, D. (2010, August 29). *From Jaya to Mahabharata*. Retrieved from devdutt.com: <http://devdutt.com/articles/mahabharata/from-jaya-to-mahabharata.html>
10. Ramanujan, A. (1999). Three Hundred Ramayanas. In V. Dharwadkar (Ed.), *The Collected Essays of A.K Ramanujam*. Oxford University Press.
11. Ramanujan, A. (2008, March 17). The Lord Takes Many Forms. *Outlook*, p. 57.
12. Ramaswamy, V. (2009). Tamil Women and a Mahabharata Myth. In K. K. Chakravarty (Ed.), *Text and Variations of the Mahabharata*. National Mission for Manuscripts.
13. Reynolds, F. E. (1992). Ramayana, Rama Jataka and Ramakien. In P. Richman (Ed.), *Many Ramayanas*. Oxford University Press.

14. Royal Thai Embassy. (n.d.). *The Ramakien*. Retrieved from http://www.thaiembassy.no/News/joe_louis/en_Ramakien.html
15. Singh, U. (2012). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Pearson.
16. Smith, J. D. (2009). *Penguin Classics the Mahabharata: an Abridged Translation*. Penguin Books.
17. Stoler, A. L. (2002). Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance. *Archival Science*. Retrieved from http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/41825/10502_2004_Article_5096461.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
18. Thapar, R. (2003). *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Penguin Books India.
19. Thapar, R. (2010, April). *The Epic of the Bharatas*. Retrieved from India-seminar.com: http://www.india-seminar.com/2010/608/608_romila_thapar.htm

ⁱ *The Mahabharata; Volume 2 (Sections 16 to 32)*, translated by Bibek Debroy

ⁱⁱ (A Survey of Thai Arts and Architectural Attractions: A Manual for Tourist Guides, 2008, pp. 94-95)

ⁱⁱⁱ Texts such as "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished" by Anand Neelkantan or the Mahabharata by the late KM Munshi.

T.C.A. Achintya is a student of M.A History, Department of History, Delhi University, Delhi.