

Vicissitudes of Reading the *Mahabharata* as History: Problems Concerning Historicism and Textualism¹

Avishek Ray

Summary

One of the significant developments in contemporary Cultural Studies is the emergence of the concept of “modernities” in its multiple and vernacular iterations as opposed to “Modernity”, purportedly understood with reference to the epistemic legacies set forth by the Western frameworks. This article takes on Simonti Sen (2005) – who assumes colonialism to be a watershed that renders rupture between the “traditional” and the “modern” – and demonstrates why the tradition/modernity dichotomy is a “false paradox” when it comes to discussing travel(ling) in the Indian context. Working on the interface of literature, translation and historiography, this article unpacks Sen’s historicist and textualist reading of the *Mahabharata*, and examines how it forecloses the multifarious hermeneutic possibilities of the text, while problematising a certain reductive translation upon which her reading is apparently premised.

Opsomming

Een van die deurslaggewende ontwikkelings in hedendaagse kulturele studies is die sigbaarwording van die konsep van “moderniteite” in sy veelvuldige en inheemse iterasies, teenoor “Moderniteit”, wat na bewering verstaan word met verwysing na die epistemiese nalatenskappe wat deur die Westerse raamwerke verklaar word. Hierdie artikel betwis Simonti Sen (2005) se aanname dat kolonialisme ’n waterskeiding is wat skeuring tussen die “tradisionele” en die “moderne” bring – en demonstreer waarom die tradisie-/moderniteit-digotomie ’n “valse paradoks” is wanneer reis in die Indiese konteks bespreek word. Hierdie artikel werk op die koppelvlak van literatuur, vertaling en historiografie, om Sen se historistiese en tekstualistiese lees van die *Mahabharata* te ontleed, en bestudeer hoe dit die uiteenlopende hermeneutiese moontlikhede van die teks oproep, terwyl ’n bepaalde reduktiewe vertaling waarop haar interpretasie blykbaar berus, opgeroep word.

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1. This article has benefited from the conversations I had with Shibaji Bandyopadhyay on the *Mahabharata*. Preliminary versions of this article (as a paper) have been presented at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Gandhinagar, the International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), Hyderabad and the University of Delhi, New Delhi. I thank the audience for their feedback. I also thank the anonymous peer-reviewers for their feedback.

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The Orientalist aggrandisement of the “classical” Indian texts led to a massive translation endeavour in the nineteenth century. The Orientalists were pre-occupied with translating the classical texts, purportedly embodying India’s “national” past.² Indeed, this was bolstered by the emergence of the printing press, which was instrumental in envisaging the “Indians” as “imagined community”; and was guided by a historicist impression that the nation’s past was embedded in its literary repertoire. This schema soon rendered the Indian epic *Mahabharata* (among other texts) a microcosm of the nation, which has to be read against the grain. This article takes on Simonti Sen (2005) and demonstrates how her thesis concerning travel(ling) practices in the Indian context – inferred from one particular translation of one particular *sloka* (couplet) from the *Mahabharata* – is politically manoeuvred. I argue that the tradition/modernity dichotomy that Sen invokes is evocative of a colonial paradigm, and, more importantly, her tendency to buttress historical claims with a reductive translation of a tailored fragment of the *Mahabharata* strips the epic off its literariness. Working on the interface of literature, translation and historiography, this article unpacks Sen’s historicist and textualist reading of the *Mahabharata* and examines how it forecloses the multifarious hermeneutic possibilities of the text, while problematising a certain reductive translation upon which her reading is apparently premised.

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2. The “Orientalists” here do not refer to William Jones and his acolytes in particular: the intellectual association that had taken off at the Asiatic Society, Calcutta during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, although the translation endeavours had kick-started with them; or Edward Said’s (1994: 2) broad definition of “Orientalist” as “[a]nyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient”. When I invoke “Orientalism” I hint at the cultural hegemony connected to linguism, which is to say, the belief that “language is the product of a mystic folk unity and its speakers have, therefore, an inalienable right to govern the region which they occupy. It identifies language with culture and equates culture with political frontiers” (Mishra 2005: 276). William Jones’ interest in and love for Sanskrit literature was derived from the “beauty and sophistication” of the Sanskrit language, which purportedly reflected an elevated level of civilization and culture. However, Jones and his contemporaries did not invoke India as a *nation*, although their works would strategically be taken up and put to distinct use – to engender the fervour of nationalist ethos – from the middle of the nineteenth century by the Hindu nationalists. In my use, “Orientalists” refer to this subsequent generation of Orientalists. Speaking of which, it is germane to note that Orientalism, in the Indian context, yielded multiple, disjunctive temporalities and diverse iterations. There were at least three distinct strands of Orientalists: first, Jones and his contemporaries (typically the Germans); second, the Hindu-nationalist Orientalists (typically the Indians); and third, those who inverted the first two toward subjugation and eventual colonisation (typically the British). That being said, my use of “Orientalism” here provisionally refers to the second strand, its nationalist undercurrent and the claim of cultural supremacy associated therewith.

“Textualism”, in the legal discourse, indicates the tendency “to discover the intent of the legislature ... [only through] the text of the statute” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Likewise, Sen’s intent to make sense of the “pre-modern Indian travelling practices” by limiting herself to certain couplets from the *Mahabharata* is textualist. Also, immanent in this approach is a predisposition that the *Mahabharata* is historical (rather than literary), what I call “historicism”. Notwithstanding the fact that the Indian travelogues thrived within the colonial exposure, and the nationalist consciousness and the literary modernity that purportedly ushered thereafter (Mukhopadhyay 2002; Chatterjee 1998; Ray 2016a), the way in which Sen derides the “pre-modern Indian” worldview to have prohibited travelling, has been contested here. I must reiterate, at the onset, that the primary focus of this article is not travelling practices in “pre-modern India” or in the *Mahabharata*, which have been adequately discussed in the existing scholarly literatures. Precisely, my “object of study” is Sen’s arguments. In writing about the “Indian travelogues”, Sen’s contemporaries – Mukhopadhyay (2002) and Chatterjee (1998), for example – never invoke the *Mahabharata*, or for that matter, do not squarely juxtapose the “modern travelogues” with the “pre-modern” worldview. In that case, one may argue that Sen’s arguments are discrete and, therefore, do not warrant attention. Categorisations and taxonomies are anyway problematic, not least because they involve exclusionary politics, and therefore, perpetrate epistemic violence (Foucault 1972; Hacking 1999). In categorising the “modern travelogue”, Sen furnishes a certain understanding of the “pre-modern” worldview. Sen’s book, it bears mention, was published in the series “New Perspectives on Indian History”. Thinking in these terms, in taking Sen to task, I intend to problematise the very *perspective* that involves a certain structure of epistemic violence.

This article, therefore, places Sen’s perspective in history and context. This perspective assumes colonialism to be a watershed that renders rupture between the “pre-modern” and the “modern”. In so doing, it fails to see the subtle “hybridity” (Bhabha 1994) and the subcutaneous connections between what seemingly appears as binaries: “West” and “non-West”, “modern” and “traditional” etc. This has larger ramifications for historiographic practices, in the erstwhile colonies in particular, and precisely is what is at stake in my critique of Sen’s arguments. Taking off from here, the first part of the article enunciates the context-specificity of the miniscule fragment that Sen retrieves from the *Mahabharata*. The second part highlights the semantic-hermeneutic nuances that Sen, in relying on one particular translation, has ignored. In the third part, I highlight the methodological underpinnings of my difference with Sen. In the concluding part, I situate the translation in history and context: within the broader rubric of the Orientalist discourse and its implications on questions concerning nationalism, historicity and territoriality.

2

When Yaksha asks: “Who is truly happy?”, Yudhisthira answers: “A man who cooketh in his own house, on the fifth or the sixth part of the day with scanty vegetables, but who is not in debt and who stirreth not from home, is truly happy” (Ganguli 1974[3]: 610).³ Now, Simonti Sen (2005: 2) concludes from this that “[b]anishment from home is *thus* a curse that befalls an ill-fated person” (italics mine). For a number of reasons, Sen’s claim is contentious. There are at least three layers of problems in Sen’s argumentation: first, in the context-specificity of the dialogue, which loses significance in Sen’s gross generalisation; second, in the credibility of her textual reading; third, in the politics of her selection of the source she cites. It is from this dialogue that she concludes: “It was *only* in the instance of pilgrimage that venturing out of home could not only be permitted but also prescribed” (p. 2, italics mine). The expression that has been translated into English as “who stirreth not from home”, that what Sen’s inference is apparently founded upon, appears in the “original” as *aprabasi* (<a+prabas+I, wherein *a* is the prefix meaning *non-* (negative), *prabas* meaning exile, and *I* is the syntax meaning *one who*). Therefore, *aprabasi* literally translates as *one who isn’t exiled*. *One-who-is-not-exiled* is not necessarily the same as *one-who-is-at-home*. In other words, no expression in the source language text alludes to the idea of home. Where from does, then, K.M. Ganguli’s translation invoke the idea of home? Notwithstanding the problems in the translation and Sen’s citation without cross-referencing, one must question the efficacy of Sen’s methodology that draws inference on prevailing customs of an era based on a random utterance by Yudhisthira.

The dialogue – featuring in the third book of the *Mahabharata*: the *Arranyaparva* (*The Book of the Forest*) – was unfolding on the last day the Pandavas were supposed to complete twelve long years of exile, while the anxiety of another year of exile in disguise still lay ahead. Before answering, Yudhisthira already exhausted and thirsty, had to withstand his brothers’ death. The rest of the Pandavas had failed to answer the Yaksha’s riddles and were by now all dead. In this situation, can Yudhisthira’s utterance be generalised it as the prevailing worldview of the time and place? One may, however, argue that Yudhisthira was an exemplar of what in the *Bhagvatgita* has been explicated as the *sthidadhipurusa*,⁴ which is also prefaced by his

3. *Yaksha* is a minor character in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Here, he is engaged in a riddle contest with *Yudhishthira*, the elder among the *Pandavas*. The *Pandavas* are the protagonists of the *Mahabharata*, which comprise five brothers, all descendants of the mythic king Pandu. In the epic, they contest their immediate cousins, the *Kauravas*, descendants of the mythic king Kuru.

4. S.N. Dasgupta (1922[2]: 440) translates “sthitadhi” as “unperturbed wisdom”. The idea of “sthitadhi” occurs in the 56th *sloka* of the *Geeta: Dukhesu*

name itself, Yudhisthira (Yudhi=war; sthira=steady), literally meaning one who remains steady in war. In that case, it is indeed conceivable that he was in total composure while answering the Yaksha. The counter-question, then, is: did Yudhisthira, by any means, represent the ethos of an average Hindu of his time? In fact, Yudhisthira was an embodiment of *dharma* (righteousness), often going out of his way to practise *dharma*. In the *Mahabharata*, there is surfeit of instances that portray Yudhisthira as someone beyond an average human and his actions in ways unexplainable in terms of average humane emotions.⁵ He is indeed, to borrow Shulman's (1996: 152) evocative expression, the "dharmic hero" of the epic. Therefore, singling out this one couplet, among 80,000 in total,⁶ as a representative of the ethos of his time is grossly erroneous.

Set out to seek answer to "Is there an Indian way of thinking?". A.K. Ramanujan (1989) observes modernity to have marked a shift away from the "context-sensitive" to the "context-free". According to him, "pre-modern" Indian narratives are typically "context-sensitive", a characteristic that gave way to "context-free" aesthetic standardisations with the advent of modernity. Say for example, Ramanujan recalls the story of Nala, been narrated to Yudhisthira, as capable of functioning as a stand-alone narrative. However, embedded within the larger epic, this micro-narrative is actually subservient to the narrative progression (Ramanujan 1989: 49):

Yudhisthira, following the full curve of Nala's adventures, sees that he is only half-way through his own, and sees his present in perspective, himself as a story yet to be finished.

anudvigna nanah/ Sukhesu vidata-sprha/ Vita raga bhaya krodha/ Sthitadhi munir uccyhate, which has been translated by Amarnathananda (1998: 67) as: "He is a steady minded man who is not dejected at the time of sorrow and agitated at the time of happiness. A wise man is always free from evil desires, fear and anger." For analysis of Yudhisthira's character and how he fits into the criterion for "sthitadhi", see Basu (1998: 71-81) and Bhaduri (1998: 84-163).

5. For details, again see Basu (1998: 71-81) and Bhaduri (1998: 84-163). Basu (1998: 21-23), for that matter, takes on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1954 [1888]) for attempting to seek historicity in the *Mahabharata*. Chattopadhyay aimed "to show that the character of Krishna was, in the ancient writings, an ideal perfect man, and the commonly-received legends of his immorality and amours were the accretions of later and more depraved times" (Frazer 1898: 420). Basu, however, argues that trimming the "accretions" is decremental to the literariness of the narrative.
6. The number of couplets varies according to editions. This is a rough estimation from the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata* published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.

This story-within-story narrative structure of the *Mahabharata* is meant to metaphorically bring out the complexity of the complete plot, and micro-narratives, if and when extracted individually, will fall short of a holistic reading of the text. Accordingly, Ramanujan (1989: 47) signals: “Actual behavior may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor guiding the behavior”. It is important, therefore, to situate the micro-narratives within the rules, contexts and conjectures, and be open to the nuances of interpreting. Taking cues from Ramanujan, what I insist is that the Yaksha-Yudhisthira narrative will be prone to misreading if liberated from its context. Let us remember sage Sounaka’s discourse to Yudhisthira on the idea of contentment and happiness right in the beginning of the *Book of Forest* (3.2.15-3.3.1). In that light, one can read Yudhisthira’s answer to the Yaksha’s question as a metaphor of his minimalist belief – reinforced after Sounaka’s discourse – concerning frugality. As a poetic device, this understandably brings a cyclic closure to what the *Book* started with: Sounaka’s advices on contentment.

Seen from another angle, Yudhisthira’s answer can also be interpreted as totally didactic, as opposed to reflective of the prevailing customs. “The so-called narrative and didactic material”, asserts Matilal (1989: 5), “are found inextricably fused together in the text, such that they cannot be often differentiated”. One can tell from a cursory glance over what Yaksha asks Yudhisthira that the dialogue has a metaphysical aspect to it. Take for example, when Yaksha asks: “What is heavier than the earth?”, Yudhisthira holds one’s mother to be heavier than the earth. Are we, here, going to take his words *literally*? In fact, there is no one straight-forward meaning, let alone literal meaning to these utterances. Shulman, in this context, reminds:

[L]et us bear in mind that they [Yaksha’s questions] are classed precisely as such, as *prasna* – not “riddles” in a strict sense ... the *prasna* points to a baffling, ultimately insoluble crystallization of conflict articulated along opposing lines of interpretation Both questions and answers tend to be metaphysical.

(1996: 153)

The distinction between *prasna* and *riddle* is, in essence, premised on the fact that *prasna* (etymological root: √prach, meaning to inquire, to interrogate) has a deep philosophical concern, as opposed to *riddle* being “a question or statement intentionally phrased so as to require ingenuity in ascertaining its answer or meaning” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). The *riddle*, therefore, is an end in itself while the *prasna* is rather a means to an end, the end being a solemn metaphysical inquiry. J.A.B. van Buitenen (1975: 29) notes that these kind of *prasna* is a generic character of the *Mahabharata*: “The epic [*Mahabharata*] is a series of precisely stated problems imprecisely and therefore inconclusively resolved, with every resolution raising a new problem until the very end.” In that sense, one can view a *prasna*, and by

extension the Yaksha-Yudhisthira dialogue, purely as a poetic device, arranged in patterns across the narrative, doctored to simulate the epic's philosophical quest in general.

3

Furthermore, for the *Mahabharata* – an oral narrative that has undergone several extrapolations and existed in multiple versions – it is indeterminable which element in the *representation* is actually reflective of the *real*, and more importantly, if it at all reflected anything, then of which historical period.⁷ My final objection against Sen is based on a cultural-historical ground. Just before mentioning of Yudhisthira, Sen writes:

It is interesting that ... the Hindu *shastric* (ritual/canonical) tradition either remained eloquently silent on the issue or explicitly condemned travel. In Bengali the word travel translates into *bhraman*, a derivative of the Sanskrit root word *bhram* meaning to make a mistake or to err. In this sense, *bhraman* can be taken to mean aimless or disoriented wandering, an act which would

7. The need for standardisation of the *Mahabharata* was realised by the Orientalists at the end of 19th century, precisely because “The Mahabharata began its existence as a simple epic narrative. It became, in course of centuries, the most *monstrous chaos*” (H. Oldenberg, cited in Hill 2001: xv; italics mine). Moriz Winternitz (1863-1937), an Orientalist and Max Muller’s assistant during 1888-1892, emphasised on the importance of a critical edition at the XIth International Congress of Orientalists at Paris in 1897. He personally retrieved different editions of the *Mahabharata* from across undivided India; and took those with him to the Royal Asiatic Society, UK. In 1866, the Government of Bombay started collecting *Mahabharata* manuscripts from across India. The Government collection, now under the holding of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), Pune, presently archives some 17,877 manuscripts, although BORI estimates that there are still some 11,633 uncollected manuscripts. In other words, according to BORI’s estimates there are some 29,510 manuscripts in total (BORI website). The Critical Edition, published during 1933-1966, consulted 1259 manuscripts, of which only 800 were chosen to be collated. I retrieved the figures to attest to the textual pluralities. Lipner (1998: 280, n.39) succinctly points to the central problematic in the process of the “monstrous chaos” been tamed: “Can there be a ‘critical edition’ of the kind of oral transmission that the *itihāsa* represents? Similarly, it is futile to seek out ‘the original text’ of either epic. Critical editions of oral epics are the constructs of scholars; with variant readings and addenda as footnotes they give us an idea of the main story-line as it has developed over time in style and content.” For a quick and handy reference on the development of the Critical Edition, see Brockington (1998: 56-81); alternately, see Suthankar (1933) for a more detailed and comprehensive discussion on the subject.

not normally be valorised in the Hindu tradition, which is heavily biased in favour of sedentariness.

(2005: 2)

The assumption here, to begin with, is totally lopsided. While Sen is correct that some (earlier) canons remained silent about or condemned travelling, what she does not attend to is the ambivalence towards travelling in the later *shastric* texts.⁸ The *shastras* can be classified into two distinct schools: the *Samuccaya-badi* and the *Vikalpa-badi*. While the *Samuccaya-badi*, exemplified by *Manusmriti*, strictly stressed on the order of sequence of the four folds in life, that is the *brahmacharya*, *garhastha*, *banaprastha*, *sanyasa*, and necessarily in this order of progression; the *Vikalpa-badi* schools did not care much about the order of progression (c.f. *Vasistha Dharmasastra* VII: 3; *Yajnavalka Smriti* III: 56). This implies someone who subscribed to the *Vikalpa-badi* school, at least notionally speaking, could renounce the *garhastha* (household), and take to travelling, quasi-religious itineracy without any injunctive prohibition. It is true, though, that some other *Smritis* held that the household (*garhastha*) phase is of chief, if not of sole, importance (*Gautama* III: 1,35, 36; *Baudhayana* II: 6,11, 27, 29), which complies with Sen's observation. But, the *shastric* canon, anyway, is not a monolith. What crystallised as "Hindu canon" over a few thousands of years is a diverse, and often contradictory, body of injunctions "engineered" by different people during different historical times as a reaction to different socio-political stimuli. What needs to be examined, then, is the politics of Sen's elision of that part of the *Shastras* which admittedly tolerated travelling.⁹

Secondly, ascribing the Bangla word *bhraman* (travel) to *bhram* (mistake) is not free of problem. For that matter, there is no evidence to suppose that

8. By "later" I mean the younger ones in terms of composition. Olivelle (1984), for example, points to the paradox in the earlier Dharmasūtras strictly disapproving renunciation while the later ones being comparatively tolerant towards it. For details, see Ray (2016b).

9. It is worth noting in this context that Sen's (2005: 3) contention – "when Hindu traditional literature gave endorsement to travel, it was heavily laden with religious connotation" – is tautologous. It would be rather anachronistic to seek archival evidences of a-religious leisure travelling in the *Shastras*. This is firstly because the recognition of leisure as "leisure" is a phenomenon intrinsically tied with the Capitalist-Protestant work ethics. Secondly, the idea of a-religious documentation, as embodied in the Hegelian (2007) vision of objectivist history-writing supremely guided by Reason, would emerge as a corollary of the Enlightenment project. That Sen cannot find *enough* evidence in support of secular travelling is more because of the fact that a "secular" genre of expression was lacking than any aversion or prohibition to travel(ling). Rather, in a "pre-modern" oral culture, as Walker (1938[2]: 520) asserts, Indians "preserved no record of their wanderings".

this pair of words, as Sen uncritically insinuates, is actually etymologically cognate, as opposed to being merely homophonic. Take for example, the word *bhramar*, which is very much still in use in Bangla and Hindi, means a wasp. Is then *bhramar* a derivative of the idea of “mistake”?¹⁰ The *Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary* (2008) gives a number of different meanings for *bhram*, of which *only* one is “mistake”. Some of the rest are: a circle, a potter’s wheel, a gimlet, a fountain, a whirling flame, a grindstone, dizziness, wandering or roaming about etc. As evident, none of these (except mistake) has any negative aspect to it. There is, however, one thing common in all the meanings: the undertone of (perpetual) movement or mobility. Why does Sen then zero in on “mistake”? If *bhram* already means wandering or roaming, then Sen’s thesis – *bhraman* is a derivative of the “mistake” aspect of *bhram* – does not make sense. Based on this flawed derivation, Sen’s arrival at the conclusion that “*bhraman* can be taken to mean aimless or disoriented wandering”, thereby, forecloses the possibility of considering the cascade of other meanings and allusions the word *bhraman* evokes/evoked. On the contrary, of some twenty five English words for *bhraman*, as featured in the *Spoken Sanskrit Dictionary* (online), one is *excursion*, which, in essence, is directly in opposition to what Sen calls “aimless or disoriented wandering”.

Language, according to Derrida (1998), reduces the ambivalence in the conceptual realm, a phenomenon he calls “homo-hegemony”. This linguistic hegemony – “the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations” (p. 39) – depletes the way in which “every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (Derrida 1982: 11). Thinking along these lines, it would be redundant to investigate whether or not two homophonic words – take for example, the Greek words: *xenia* (hospitality) and *xenos* (stranger) played on by Derrida (2000: 29) – has “originary” connections. Instead, the point is to understand the “chain” of signification – the context, history and contingency – that renders possible relationality and conceptual overlap between pairs of (different) words. Likewise, trying to determine if *bhraman* is a derivative of *bhram* – an attempt to seek for “the prosthesis of origin” – actually limits the (plurality in the) potential

10. On the contrary, *bhramar*, at least in context of Bangla and Hindi popular culture, is always invoked as an eternal wanderer symbolizing transient love. I have retrieved the title lines of only a few of the popular numbers where the *bhramar* feature as a wanderer and is closely associated with love/lovability: “Gunjane Dole je Bhramar” (Bangla), “Gunguna Rahe Hai Bhramar” (Hindi), “Gharate Bhramar Elo Gungunie” (Bangla), “Dil Ka Bhawar Kare Pukar” (Hindi), “Phuler Kane Bhramar Ane” (Bangla), “Bhramar Baul Tomar” (Bangla), “Bhramar Koiyo Giya” (Bangla), “Aawara Bhawren Jo Hole Hole Gaaye” (Hindi). The last one is also the latest of the examples and from a 1997 Hindi movie, *Sapnay*.

expressibility of word(s)/language, precisely because of “the structure, [that] compels a neutralization of time and history” (Derrida 1993: 239).

In driving home her blithe claim that “Hindu tradition” was “heavily biased in favour of sedentariness”, Sen writes:

In most of the traditional literary productions where we have some sort of description of travel, such as the “Vanaparva” and the “Ajynatavasaparva” in the Mahabharata, the idea has mostly remained associated with banishment.

(2005: 2)

What are “traditional literary productions” anyway? Which tradition is she referring to? Is it the Vedic-Hindu tradition? Is it the *itihasa* tradition? Is it the oral tradition? Is it the epic tradition? Sen’s sweeping and overtly generalised claim concerning “most of the traditional literary productions” apparently rests on (just) a tangential reference (without any textual analysis whatsoever) to *only two parvas* (chapters) of a single epic. How and why does *Vanaparva* and *Ajynatavasaparva* qualify as the only examples of what Sen calls “traditional literary productions”? Clearly, Sen’s invocation of “traditional literary productions” is contrived and a-historically. Her invocation of *Vanaparva* and *Ajynatavasaparva* in association with the idea of banishment is not wrong, but again, I insist, is entirely lopsided. One can *also* interpret these two *parvas* as preparatory stage for the Pandavas. The hardships of thirteen years of exile that started with banishment actually bore fruits in the form of the Pandavas being equipped with the repertory to retaliate against their rivals, and retrieve their kingdom and lost glory. Moreover, in *Vanaparva* itself, there is an episode of Arjuna setting out to acquire the *Pashupatastra* (a deadly weapon) from Lord Shiva. Arjuna makes several detours to reach Shiva to seek what would literally make the Pandavas invincible in the imminent war. Take for example, the *Swargarohanaparva*, the eighteenth and last book of the *Mahabharata*, in which the Pandavas and Draupadi are featured undertaking extensive travel before ascending to heaven. Far from any association with banishment, these episodes of travels in the *Mahabharata* itself have deep undertones of achievement.

4

My differences with Sen over the literary interpretation are, however, not based on the lines of truth or falsity. What I am questioning here is the credibility of the conclusiveness in her reading, the basis of her conviction to have the correct or true reading. To put it in Spivak’s (1996: 9) words, my contention does not concern “the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced”. Any reading of a text is, after all, a subjective reading that is always “prejudiced” by the reader’s individual dispositions, what Gadamer (2013) calls the “fore-structures” of

one's understanding. In other words, there is no "true meaning" inherent in the text, rather the meaning one derives from the text is what one *wants* to derive from the text. The point, therefore, is to examine the politics of the prejudicial "fore-structures" that informs Sen's consistent reductive readings of her sources. After referring to the Yaksha-Yudhisthira dialogue, Sen proceeds to argue:

On the one hand, in the Hindu shastric tradition travel was never encouraged, if anything then discouraged. On the other hand, that part of the ancient and medieval Indian tradition which can be classified as Hindu did not accord much recognition to travel as an autonomous cultural practice, perhaps under the influence of the shastric genre.

(2005: 3)

What Sen misses out in her argument, and which is really important, is the indeterminant fuzzy zone between travelling being encouraged and discouraged. One has to understand here that until the time when travelling became a concern, which is with the rise of Buddhism, the question of either encouraging or discouraging travel did not arise at all. More to it, the ancient "Indian" legislatures had room for tolerance towards travelling, while in the "medieval" tradition the epithet of travelling (along with that of "madness") would gain a positive currency within the discourse of the Bhakti movements.¹¹

Sen (2005: 3), however, does acknowledge that in reality the Hindus did travel far and wide "through trade, exile and search of fortune", and maintains that pilgrimage was something that had been perennially encouraged. Nonetheless, her claim is:

[A]s far as Brahminical authoritative opinion was concerned, travel meant being exposed to the unwholesome auras of alien people and influences, drinking impure water, eating food from unrighteous lands, walking highways polluted by the passions of men of all castes and classes bearing with them uncertainties, fears and discomforts engendered by homelessness and insecurity.

(2005: 3)

Having written so far, Sen, in a footnote, mentions her source, which is Benjamin Walker's (1968) famous and oft-cited encyclopaedia on Hinduism. Curious about what exactly in the secondary source she draws her understanding from (because she does not use quotation marks), I looked into the encyclopaedia myself to cross-check her citation. Sen cites from Walker's

11. To note, the epithet of "mad traveler" in medieval Indian literature, particularly in context of the Bhakti and the Sufi movements, invokes a towering prophetic figure to be looked up to.

entry on “travel”, and to my utter surprise, only a few paragraphs ahead of where Sen cites from, the encyclopaedia reads:

In actual fact the social mobility of the Indian was far less restrictive than would appear from the interdictions of the lawgivers Says the *Aitareya Brahmana*, “There is no happiness for him who does not travel. Living with the same people the best of men becomes a sinner. Indra is the friend of travellers. Therefore wander.” The ancient Indians seem to have been great travellers, although they preserved no record of their wanderings, and information is to be gleaned only from outside sources, or by inference.

(Walker 1938[2]: 520)

If there is one thing that comes across with explicit clarity out of the encyclopaedia entry, then it is the *aporia* concerning travel in the Indian tradition. What follows from here is: inasmuch as scriptural prohibition did not imply that travelling was discouraged, scriptural tolerance did not imply that travelling was encouraged. What makes this case interesting is rather its indeterminacy.

This makes me wonder if Sen’s reading is accusable of misappropriation, if not tampering, of the sources. The paranoia about travelling that Sen says to have cited from Walker and goes on to uncritically ascribe to “Brahminical authoritative opinion” had, in fact, crystallised *only* in a certain historical conjecture. Walker (1938: 520) emphatically mentions that “(t)he tendency to travel received a considerable set back under the Brahminical dispensation, *particularly after the Revival* ... [following which] heretical Buddhists continued to travel” (italics mine). So, it is against the backdrop of (Buddhist) “heresy” that the fear of (spiritual) “contamination” from travelling sounds perfectly cogent. It is of utmost importance here to take note of what Sen naively ignores: the temporal rupture in the form of a Hindu Revival, suggestively that during the Gupta era,¹² altering the gaze towards travelling. Immediately after her argument that traveling was discouraged in the “Hindu shastric tradition”, Sen (2005: 3) contends: “Colonialism marked the point of departure”. This explains why tradition worth a few thousand years before and after the “Revival” has been, in Sen’s account, serenely rounded up as “Brahminical authoritative opinion”; and her myopic readings of the sources.

It is obvious from here that Sen’s agenda is to juxtapose the two phenomena: “Hindu shastric tradition” (as the domain of tradition) with colonialism (as the domain of modernity). Constructing one as the antithesis of the other is

12. Walker (1938) does not explicitly mention Gupta Era (320-554). However, the Gupta Empire is purportedly credited for a liberal “Hindu revival” ever since the rise and spread of Buddhism. For details, see Mookerji (2007). I am aware of the Hindu nationalist underpinning in periodising or classifying the Gupta Era as “Hindu revival”, which is problematic. Though outmoded, this is a conventional perception that, I presume, Walker has adopted. This, by no means, reflects my views.

reflective of a “vulgar” historicist vision.¹³ While acknowledging colonialism as a temporal rupture and its importance as a conceptual apparatus in cultural analysis, scholars have pointed to the fact that colonialism (in India), and by extension, modernity, is not a linear progression, but comprises complex nuances and epistemic overlaps in the transition (Chakrabarty 2009; Chatterjee, 1997; Eisenstadt, 2000). However, in maintaining:

It is perhaps not inappropriate to maintain that a traveller has never been a popular figure in the Hindu canonical tradition. In contrast, from ancient lore, through medieval romances to genres of modern self-expression, a traveller has variously featured in Western imaginative articulation, travel being persistently viewed as exciting and liberating.

(Sen 2005: 1)

Sen assumes colonialism to be the watershed, the departure point that necessarily marks a dualism between travelling hitherto being discouraged and henceforth perceived as liberatory. Sen’s claim is debatable, and one can cite numerous examples to contradict her.¹⁴ However, my point is not to

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13. I am using the expression “vulgar” in the same sense it is used in “vulgar Marxism”. Inasmuch as vulgar Marxists imagine the *base* and the *super-structure* always in dyadic terms Sen sees tradition and modernity as water-tight oppositional compartments. The vulgar Marxists believe in the teleology of an incremental progress toward Socialism. Likewise, for Sen, the liberatory aspect of travelling culminates with colonialism. The expression “vulgar”, in my usage, gestures towards the historicist determinism in Sen’s hypothesis.
14. Let us consider the cascade of Sanskrit vocabulary for “vagabond”. The *Online Spoken Sanskrit Dictionary* shows the following synonyms for “vagabond” and “vagrant”: *avanicara* (etymologically: globe trotter; now obsolete), *paribhramin* (wanderer/roamer; now obsolete), *vaGka* (etymologically: crooked/bent; which is how now used, ornamentally though), *paryaTaka* (tourist; in use), *saMcAraJivin* (*saMcAra*= motion, *jIvin*= the subject of [motion]; now obsolete), *parisaMcara*, *vipruta*, *azuddhavAsaka*, *vrAtyA* (colloquially: outcast), *vrAtyagaNa*, *anagAra*, *yAyAvara* (tramp), *saMghajIvin* (*saMgha*= group; the hint being towards Buddhist bhikshus who wandered in small groups), *vrAtyacarya*, *vrAtyacaraNa*, *raktAmbara*. The *Apte English Sanskrit Dictionary* gives the following additional synonyms for “vagabond”: *svecchācārin* (colloquially: autocrat), *yathēcchavīhārin* (colloquially: whimsical), *ajñātanivāsa* (colloquially: stranger; etymologically: one whose abode is unknown), *gūdhacārin*. The synonyms in the Monier Williams dictionary overlap with those already cited. All inputs in parentheses are, however, mine. Why are these words there in the lexicon unless people traveled? Think of the demi-god figures like Durvasa, Agastya and Narada from the “Hindu canon” itself. All three sages took to extensive traveling. Beyond all, think of Arjuna who, according to Basu (1998: 71), seemed to have “seen all the mountains, dipped in all rivers,

counterpoise Sen’s argument with contrary examples, but rather to problematise the “fore-structures” that informs her hypothesis, the very basis of her truth claim. Despite the *verisimilitude*, the cultural text is, after all, a mediated representation. Hence, Sen’s reliance on a historicist and textualist methodology to get to the “core” of history is questionable. Notwithstanding the shifts colonialism brought about in worldviews and cultural perceptions, the problem with Sen’s hypothesis is that it reduces a very complex phenomenon into a simplistic binary. In order to make colonial modernity appear liberatory, Sen’s “imaginative articulation” of the “shastric genre” has to be radically contrastable. This requires Sen to tailor the source reductively, cookie-cut Yudhishthira’s utterance, and rely solely on Ganguli’s translation, among others.

5

When K.M. Ganguli, anecdotally himself a Brahmin, translates the *Mahabharata* during 1883-1896, there was a prominent tendency to translate classical texts assumed to be representing India’s “national” past.¹⁵ Going by Anderson’s (2006) hypothesis, this current of literarising the nation’s (mythic) past immediately followed the accessibility of the printing press and was intrinsically tied to an “emancipatory interest” of envisaging an “imagined community” fostering the ethos of cultural nationalism. In his preface, Ganguli lays down clearly:

The object of a translator should ever be to hold the mirror upto his author. That being so, his chief duty is to *represent* so far as practicable the manner in which his author’s ideas have been expressed, retaining if possible at the sacrifice of idiom and taste all the peculiarities of his author’s imagery and of language as well. *In regard to translations from the Sanskrit, nothing is easier than to dish up Hindu ideas, so as to make them agreeable to English taste.*
(1974[1883]: xi; italics mine)

Indeed, Ganguli was aware of the problem – the heavy Christian bias of the Western-Orientalist *Mahabharata* critics, and therefore seeks to represent the

known all pilgrimages in India”. Minor characters like Baka and Hidimba, though portrayed in negative light as monsters, also used to be nomadic.

15. This was in fact bolstered by the “revivalist” propaganda aimed towards “retrieving” the Indic “glorious past”, which, according to Bandyopadhyay (1999), was a strategic intervention by the elite-nationalist Hindus to dismiss the achievement of the Mughal Sultanate and the prosperity of the medieval era – henceforth reduced to Dark Ages – in order to project the themselves as more competent future administrators in the eyes of the British.

author's perspective rather than achieve a modernising or, for that matter, Orientalising representation of the *Mahabharata*.¹⁶ However, the problem, in the case of the *Mahabharata*, is: who is the author Ganguli would "mirror upto"? First, the *Mahabharata* is not the work of a single author. Second, *Mahabharata* is an oral narrative that predates its Sanskritised-printed corpus. The Orientalist assumption that "the key to understanding Indian traditions was to be found in the ancient texts of India" (Gelders & Balagangadhara 2011: 102), of which Sen is also a victim, fuelled massive translation projects that eventually lead to the foundation of "Hindu" canonicity.¹⁷ Immanent in Ganguli's endeavour to "clean up" the biases was an attempt to "Indianize" the *Mahabharata*, which has to be understood with reference to Ganguli's Orientalist and Hindu inheritances. What was at stake in these translation projects undertaken by Ganguli and suchlike has been succinctly brought up by one of Ganguli's cohorts, R.C. Dutt (1848-1909), who had translated both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Dutt (1899: 185), in an epilogue to his translation of one of the books of the *Mahabharata*, opines:

No work in Europe, not Homer in Greece or Virgil in Italy, not Shakespeare or Milton in English-speaking lands, is the *national* property of the nations to the same extent as the Epics of India are of the Hindus (Dutt's italics).

(Dutt 1899: 185)

Here, Dutt makes a subtle, but grossly de-historicised, syllogistic proposition: Indian epics are of the Hindus; Indian epics are (also) national properties; (but) national properties belong to the nation. Implicit in Dutt's tendency to speak for the nation is an assertion of exclusive Hindu proprietary rights over the (Indian) epics, which is indexical to laying claim to the territoriality of the nation. As evident, the translation endeavours reinforced "the asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages" (Niranjana 1992: 1); and were part of a larger project of Hinduisation of the epics. Ganguli's translation of *aprabasi* as "who stirreth not from home", in that case, is a symbolic erasure of the *aporia* centring the "home" in the Hindu-Sanskritic past. In the context of the parallelism between the idea of the nation-state and

16. Curiously, in his notes to the *Narayaniya Mahabharata* (Book 12; SECTION CCCXXXVII), Ganguli writes: "Professor Weber supposes that in this narrative of the three Rishis *Ekata*, *Dwita*, and *Trita*, the poet is giving a description of either Italy or some island in the Mediterranean, and of a Christian worship that certain Hindu pilgrims might have witnessed. Indeed, a writer in the *Calcutta Review* has gone so far as to say that from what follows, the conjecture would not be a bold one that the whole passage refers to the impression made on certain Hindu pilgrims upon witnessing the celebration of the Eucharist according to the ordinances of the Roman Catholic Church".

17. See supra note 2. For details on politics of colonialism and the symbolic power of translation, see Gelders & Balagangadhara (2011) and Niranjana (1990).

that of Hinduism, this erasure, now validated by the (printed) *Mahabharata*, would make those “who [did] stirreth ... from home” – the Buddhists, in particular – appear in the nationalist “imagination” as *outside* of the Indian tradition.¹⁸

The popular Bangla saying: *Ja nei bharate, ta nei bharate* (What isn’t in the *Mahabharata* isn’t there in India), playing on the homophony – wherein one “bharat(e)” is the acronym for *Mahabharata*, and another the vernacular for India – is symbolic of this totalising metonymy. While, with the aid of the printing press, canonising epics and mythic literatures went hand in hand with the rise and spread of Hindu nationalism, the cultural practice of projecting *Mahabharata* as the microcosm of the nation became a problematic site for questions concerning historicity and territoriality. One has to situate these translations, including Ganguli’s, in history and context; and read these as texts involving mediation and implicit manipulation by and for certain “imagined communities”. Attempting to retrieve, recast and represent a canon in order to meet the requirements of changing historical and political milieu, the act of translating, in this context, is “self-referential, problematical expression of interests – an ideological-interpretative discourse ... meta-historical construction, like all constructions, ultimately [an] arbitrary way of carving up what comes to constitute its field” (Jenkins 1997: 6, 8). Likewise, Sen’s reliance on Ganguli’s translation, more precisely, on an instance of Yudhisthira’s utterance from Ganguli’s translation, is a piecemeal tailored for her “field”.

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18. From the orthodox Hindu point of view, one must remember in this context, the *Buddhist sramana* was perceived to be a “bad” wanderer, precisely because the *sramana* was a political dissident who intended to topple the Brahminical status quo. For details on the Vedic-Buddhist feud on wandering, see Thapar (1978) and Chakrabarti (2006).

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Avishek Ray

India

avishek.avishek@gmail.com