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Goldman, Robert P. / Tokunaga, Muneo: *Epic Undertakings*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ. 2009. XIII, 401 S. 8° = Papers of the 12th World Sanskrit Conference, 2. Lw. Rs. 600.00. ISBN 978-81-208-3382-1.

This volume includes sixteen papers presented at the 12th World Sanskrit Conference in Helsinki in 2003, in alphabetical order. Refraining in this way from suggesting a connection between individual papers, either thematically or methodologically, matches a certain variety and even disparity which emerges even more clearly after reading the whole volume (probably something only reviewers will do). This impression can well be seen as indicative of the broad spectrum of issues to be addressed when coping with the richness of the Sanskrit epics. In terms of methods it seems, though, that the basic divide between text-historical perspectives and more holistic approaches, which has been accompanying epic studies since the 19th century, is still in place.

This divide is made explicit in the volume in particular in Alf Hildebeitel's paper on the *Rāmopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* (= MBh). He asserts, following Madeleine Biardeau, that "there is nothing to be gained by excavating or surgically peeling back from their 'extant' texts to uncover cores, interpolations, and strata" (p.169), and that the critical edition closes the issue of the text's history. Such a statement is somehow astonishing, not only because it is based on the "surgical" work of scholars employing text-critical methods in order to produce a critical edition; it also seems to be taking the critical edition as the closing bell for dealing with questions of the narrative coherence of the text – as constituted in the critical edition. The latter seems to be almost equated with an archetype, since Hildebeitel views it as the evidence which "nullifies" all arguments about textual strata (p.198). It is not explained what this evidence implies with regard to the history of the composition and transmission of the epics as constituted in the critical edition. Such an explanation would have been welcome, since a critical edition does not settle the issue of an "original"

or questions of narrative structures and compositional coherence, of the juxtaposition of different versions of a theme, of disruptions and interruptions in an argument or a narration. This can be seen in the case of the critical edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (= Rm), of which it is argued that it does not allow drawing conclusions about a single written archetype, but rather points to different versions that were "independently fixed in writing at different times and places".¹ While the case of the MBh may be different with respect to the assumption of a single archetype, it is similar to the Rm in that the versions which were put into writing seem to have been further developed in the course of manuscript production. The text as constituted in the critical edition allows applying a variety of methods for its analysis, including those of "higher criticism", which focus on additions and digressions as well as on the ways in which differences, divergences, contradictions, or juxtapositions constitute integral features of the epics.

While some implications of text critical methods may be contested as applying a "Western" (or even "Orientalist") logic to the text and therefore as being in danger of distorting its meaning, other methods are not free from such implications either. For instance, superimposing or postulating a "deep structure" or overall "significance" pervading the whole text without demonstrating the presence of such a structure in detail is also in danger of distorting the text by reducing its complexity. Mapping pathways is not the same as dealing with those parts of the epic that seem most difficult to read as a coherent argument or (con)sequential narrative (such as the *Nārāyaṇīya*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, parts of the *Udyogaparvan*). The challenges posed not only by these passages probably need a multi-faceted approach and more than one method – and even additional methods.

The idea of shunning text-historical issues is all the more astonishing not only for the above-mentioned reasons, but also given the situation that in recent years some studies have been published proposing to bring both, text-historical and holistic perspectives, together in order to enhance the spectrum of meanings and interpretations of the epics.² This approach is represented, in particular, in the paper by Robert P. Goldman who deals

¹ Sheldon I. Pollock: "The *Rāmāyaṇa* Text and the Critical Edition", in: Robert P. Goldman, Sally J. Sutherland: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki. An Epic of Ancient India. Volume I. Bālakāṇḍa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984, pp. 82–93; see p. 88.

² For instance by Christopher Minkowski, Anette Mangels, Angelika Malinar for the MBh, and Robert Goldman, Sally Sutherland Goldman, Sheldon Pollock for the Rm.

with the different narratives on the giant Kumbhakarna. He critically discusses, on the one hand, attempts made by the Sanskrit commentators to generate a unified narrative from a variety of narrative perspectives, and, on the other hand, the equally one-sided emphasis on contradictions and incoherence in text-critical studies. In contradistinction to – but not in rejection of – the two approaches Goldman stresses the importance of viewing different narrative perspectives and intentions as an intrinsic feature of the Rm. A similar emphasis on narrative structure guides Sally J. Sutherland Goldman's intriguing essay on the role of female voices in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of the Rm, in particular those of Sitā and of some Rākṣasīs (demonesses). She analyses how the interventions by females are not necessarily to be read as “self-assertions” of women, but rather serve to develop and support the “priority of the masculine concerns of the narrative and the patriarchy it defends” (p. 165). Aspects of gender are also taken up by Simon Brodbeck with respect to the MBh. A clarification of the methods used and of intentions pursued would have been necessary; a less selective incorporation of available results of research on some of the issues raised (in spite of the rather long bibliography) would have been welcome – such neglect of research results can be observed in other papers as well.

Aspects of the narrative structure are taken up in Danielle Feller's in-depth study of the story of Asita Devala and Jaiṣavya in MBh 9, in which she demonstrates how Asita Devala is made to validate the epic's claim of textual authority. Mary Brockington deals with the intentions of the composers of the *Sabhāparvan* of the MBh, focusing on Draupadī's rescuing her husband from enslavement while he does not raise his voice when his wife is being dragged into the audience hall like a slave. Yudhiṣṭhira, Mary Brockington argues, has accepted being a slave “with perfect propriety” (p. 27) when Draupadī is humiliated in the *sabhā*. All this serves to motivate the call for revenge so important in unfolding the narrative. Drawing on what he considers as the narrative structure underlying the MBh as a whole, Georg von Simson argues that the epic is a hitherto unrecognised source of the plot of Viśākhadatta's drama *Mudrārākṣasa*. The drama, like the MBh, draws on solar and lunar symbolism in the portrayal of its characters, and on astronomical and nature symbolism for the development of its plot. This line of interpretation is part of the interpretive spectrum applied to the epic since the 19th century, and von Simson himself has returned to this perspective in several studies. The perspective ties into the metaphorical structure of the epic, in that metaphors of nature, astronomical-astrological references etc. are frequently

used as literary devices. It would be helpful to know how to decide when the “moon” is to be taken as a metaphor and when it is to be taken as pointing to the narrative structure or the myth underlying the epic.

Proceeding from a text-historical perspective, Muneo Tokunaga analyses the implementation of Bhīṣma's instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira in Book 12 of the MBh and states: “From the viewpoint of textual development, no one would deny that originally Bhīṣma's discourse was not a part of the MBh” (p. 371). This position is unimpressed by as well as diametrically opposed to the one maintained by Alf Hildebeitel. Tokunaga proposes that the *Śāntiparvan* was composed by adding textual material in three stages. This resulted in the juxtaposition of information which resulted in the situation that Yudhiṣṭhira ascends the throne twice, before and after the newly inserted speech of Bhīṣma. In a similar vein, Horst Brinkhaus analyses the insertion of the *Pitṛkalpa* into the *Harivaṃśa* (= HV) since it forms an excursus on death rituals inserted in a chapter actually dealing with genealogy. After a discussion of parallel versions in Kṣemendra's *Bṛhatmañjarī* as well as in the *Matsyapurāṇa* and *Padmapurāṇa*, Brinkhaus concludes that the composers of the Purāṇas knew the version of the HV and removed the contradictions contained in it when they composed their versions. Miroslav Ježić discusses various parallels between the *Bhagavadgītā* and the Upaniṣads with regard to their chronological relationship. James L. Fitzgerald offers a meticulous analysis of the Triṣṭubh passages of the MBh and thereby continues an aspect of studying the epics that should not be neglected: their metrical structure and design. The question of the text-historical impact of his findings is raised, but left open, which invites one all the more to pay attention to these verses.

John Brockington and Renate Söhnen-Thieme offer comprehensive analyses of the depiction of two epic characters, Hanumat in the Rm and Indra in the HV. Brockington bases his analysis on the distinction between the different textual layers of the Rm reconstructed by him in his monograph *Righteous Rama*.³ He demonstrates that in the original Rm Hanumat supported Rāma's cause out of loyalty to King Sugrīva, not because of his being devoted to Rāma. Renate Söhnen-Thieme studies the names and epithets of Indra in, as well as the depiction of the god in the few stories in which he plays a role in the HV. Interestingly, Indra is seen in a rather positive light in the sections dealing with the supremacy of Kṛṣṇa. Although Indra is subordinated to the new god,

³ J.L. Brockington: *Righteous Rama. The Evolution of an Epic*. Delhi/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.

he is not discredited as is the case of other stories which show him as a deceitful deity. Dealing with an epic character as well, Ram Karan Sharma discusses the arguments put forward on the issue of whether Bhīṣma was ever married or rather incorporates the ideal of celibacy from studentship onwards (*naiṣṭhika- brahmacarya-*), and concludes that there is no (substantial) textual evidence which would support that Bhīṣma was ever married.

The volume also includes studies dealing with aspects of a word or a term. Nicolas Dejenne analyses the significance of the number “thrice seven” as a “Bhārgava” number. This means that it occurs prominently in passages of the MBh that have been connected by scholars to the so-called “Bṛghuisation” of the epic, that is, the idea that the text was reworked by Brahmins from the Bhārgava clan. It is suggested that the number is a token of Vedic knowledge since it is closely connected to ritual practices and to passages in the *Atharvaveda*. This can be seen as pointing to the emphasis on the Bhārgavas and the Rāma Jāmadagnya Myth in the extant MBh. Paolo Magnone studies the term *tejas-* (fierce, mighty energy) as a qualification of gods (especially Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa) as well as of both Brahmins and Kṣatriyas, with an emphasis on its relationship with the word *kṣamā-*

(patience, forgiveness). He observes a shift in the application of *tejas-* as a peculiar power from Brahmins to Kṣatriyas, which goes along with declaring *kṣamā-* to be the quality par excellence of Brahmins. This finding is then rather generally connected to the thesis of an increasing predominance of the Kṣatriyas over Brahmins that can be detected in the epic. Magnone seeks to corroborate this by drawing on passages in which both words are now ascribed not only to gods, but also to kings. This thesis could have been substantiated more strongly by referring to the various discourses on kingship and divinity as well as on *rājadharmā-* in the epic, which should be taken into account in order to explain the attribution of both terms to the king. The inclusion of some recent research on these matters would have been welcome.

The variety of the studies, the questions raised and the results that emerge from the studies collected in this volume do not suggest that one should go for less variation and for silencing the results of any of the methods employed in analysing the epics. Not all the studies collected in this volume may be convincing or significant to the same extent; in some instances the reason for this is that recent research is not sufficiently recognised. Yet, when seen collectively, they rather call for more than for less epic studies – with all the methods available.