

Review

Jaiminīya Āśvamedhika Parva in the Mahābhārata. Shekhar Sen (trans.) and Pradip Bhattacharya (ed.). Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2008. 488 pp. Rs 800 (hardback), Rs 500 (flexiback). ISBN 978-81-8157-849-5 (hardback), 978-81-8157-850-1 (flexiback).

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The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is an account of King Janamejaya's *sarpasatra* (snake session), including a report of the long tale of King Janamejaya's ancestors—the Pāṇḍavas—that Vyāsa had compiled beforehand and that was told to Janamejaya at the *satra*, at Vyāsa's behest, by his student Vaiśampāyana. Vyāsa had several students, and had taught this tale to them all; and the *Jaiminīya Āśvamedhikaparvan* presents itself as part of an alternative version of the Bhārata tale, in which it was not Vaiśampāyana but Jaimini who was chosen to tell the Pāṇḍava tale to Janamejaya. But where Vaiśampāyana's version exists in a full version of eighteen *parvans* (of which the *Āśvamedhika* is the fourteenth), Jaimini's *Āśvamedhikaparvan* stands alone; the remaining *parvans* either never existed, or are lost.

Shekhar Sen is a retired Major-General, and Pradip Bhattacharya has previously written extensively on the *Mahābhārata*. Their pretty book is the first English version of Jaimini's text (following the Gita Press Sanskrit edition, Gorakhpur 1961, repr. 1995), and as such it is an important publication which can bring the text to an enormously enlarged audience. It is not a rigorously scholarly translation—the word 'transcreation' is used instead, and the notes are somewhat cursory—but it reads nicely enough.

The translation is preceded by a sixty-page introduction that mentions previous secondary literature including R. D. Karmarkar's discussion in the introduction to the critical edition of Vaiśampāyana's *Āśvamedhikaparvan* (which compares the two *Āśvamedhikaparvan* narratives in detail; vol. 18 of the Poona *Mahābhārata*, 1960) as well as papers by Duncan Derrett, W. L. Smith, Petteri Koskikallio, and Christophe Vielle. In 1970 Derrett dated the text to about the twelfth century, and later writers have tended to agree. Sen and Bhattacharya argue—in my opinion unconvincingly (and the quotation at the very end of this review may have some bearing on this issue)—that a full Sanskrit *Jaiminibhārata* once existed. They also discuss adaptations of Jaimini's *Āśvamedhikaparvan* in languages other than Sanskrit, most notably the one included in place of Vaiśampāyana's *Āśvamedhikaparvan* in the *Razmnama*, the sixteenth-century Persian *Mahābhārata* produced at the behest of the Mughal emperor Akbar. At the appropriate junctures in Sen and Bhattacharya's translation, five handsome illustrations from a seventeenth-century *Razmnama* are reproduced as plates.

Before the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* begins, the Pāṇḍavas have won the Kurukṣetra war and Yudhiṣṭhira has been consecrated king of the reunited kingdom. Both versions of the *parvan* narrate events surrounding the *aśvamedha* that Yudhiṣṭhira sponsors in order to expiate his war-crimes and consolidate his imperium. Vaiśampāyana's version features various other incidents before the ritual—including the *Anugītā* (chapters 16–50) and the stillbirth and revival of Arjuna's grandson, the future king Parikṣit (chapters 65–69)—and narrates Arjuna's rounds with the horse only in a thirteen-chapter highlights package (chapters 73–85). But Jaimini's version has no *Anugītā* and no birth and revival of Parikṣit, and dwells at length on the horse: how it was obtained, where it travelled, and the various battles that were fought to protect and/or liberate it. The rounds with the horse cover chapters 14–63 of the 68 that comprise the *Jaiminīya*, and the battles are vivid and often protracted. Both *Āśvamedhikaparvans* end with the mongoose criticising Yudhiṣṭhira's *aśvamedha*, and with the narrator's deconstruction of the mongoose's position.

In the *Jaiminīya*, notwithstanding the fact that Janamejaya is called the son of Parikṣit (at 36:84, p. 303), it seems that the next king will most probably be Karṇa's son Vṛṣaketu, or his son. This is the most obviously consequential narrative difference between the two *Āśvamedhikaparvans*, and it might potentially furnish a partial explanation for the *Jaiminīya*'s composition. One of the main results of Vaiśampāyana's *Āśvamedhikaparvan* is the lineal continuation through Parikṣit after the Pāṇḍavas' lineally available sons have all been killed in the war or the night massacre; but in Vaiśampāyana's *Mahābhārata*, as far as we can tell, Karṇa-the-secret-Pāṇḍava's sons have all been killed too, and there is no mention of Vṛṣaketu. The younger generation plays a significant role in the *Jaiminīya*, with Vṛṣaketu and Kṛṣṇa's son Pradyumna and grandson Aniruddha accompanying Arjuna and fighting boldly alongside him.

The central incident in Vaiśampāyana's horse-tour highlights package is the visit to Mañipūra, where Arjuna is killed by his non-lineal son Babhruvāhana and then revived using the snakes' magical gem. This scene is also the central incident in Jaimini's *parvan*, but here Vṛṣaketu and Arjuna are both killed (and beheaded for good measure), and the arrival of the revival gem is suitably delayed by the scheming of Dhṛtarāṣṭra the snake. Jaimini's Mañipūra section is also preceded by his narration, in chapters 25–36, of a thematically related Rāmācarita story. Years after Rāma had abandoned Sītā and she had given birth to the twins Kuśa and Lava in Vālmiki's hermitage, they seized his *aśvamedha* horse and defeated its protectors and successive parties of reinforcements, until Rāma himself went along and met them. These incidents are not narrated in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, and Sen and Bhattacharya argue in their introduction that the Kuśa and Lava story is based on a version found in the *Padma Purāṇa*. Elsewhere in the *Jaiminīya* the most protracted interruption to the main narrative is the *kāvya*-esque story of Candrahāsa, which Nārada narrates in chapters 50–58, and of which there is no trace in Vaiśampāyana's text. Candrahāsa is born the son of a king; he is then displaced and fostered among the working classes; but eventually, after a slaughter at night, he becomes a king. It would seem that the story of Candrahāsa is to be read in light of Jaimini's continuing story of Karṇa.

The *Jaiminīya* brims with linguistic and inter-textual invention, much of which is, apart from anything else, extremely funny. The footnotes explicate some of its more obvious jokes, but I came away with the impression that it is an extraordinarily sophisticated piece of work containing much that I am probably too ignorant to appreciate. With this caveat, overall it seems to me that the piece is in two main keys:

patrilineal family life sharp minor, and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva's glory major. The saving power of Kṛṣṇa, and the ability of individuals to mobilise that power through their own thoughts and words, is exemplified here on innumerable occasions, sometimes in extremely fantastic ways; and though Kṛṣṇa's initial intention is to remain in Hāstīnapura with Yudhiṣṭhira while the horse is out roaming, he is never far from the action.

I now mention some formal presentational aspects of Sen and Bhattacharya's volume which potentially reduce its ability to accomplish the already incorrigibly fraught business of mediating a brilliant Sanskrit text to those who do not have the time or ability to read it.

The translation is presented with a separate paragraph for each numbered verse, or, where the syntax demands, for each small group of verses. For those using the book in conjunction with the Sanskrit edition, this presentational convention will make it easier to track the translation back to the root text. But for some others it may be less propitious, since the English translation is in prose, and English prose is normally presented in paragraphs whose beginnings and ends are dictated by—and crucially contribute to the reader's perception of—the arcs of the narrative. The micro-episodic style used here visually omits some expected narrative-structural prompts, and may thus leave swift readers at a distance from the content.

The book includes a seven-page contents list with summaries of each chapter. This is a valuable reference tool, and readers will consult it often—but perhaps not as often as they might have, for it is hidden away after the introduction, on pp. 72–78. It might also have been enhanced had the chapter titles been copied from the colophons at the end of each chapter and pasted in as headings for the chapter summaries, thus giving an at-a-glance impression of which event is considered to be the most salient in any given chapter.

The book has four useful glossaries; but it lacks an index, and this will exasperate many readers. If anyone were to compile one and post it online, they would surely gain the merit of a thousand *āśvamedhas*. But despite the book's minor drawbacks, Sen, Bhattacharya, and the Writers Workshop are to be heartily and gratefully congratulated for the contribution they have made. This book will undoubtedly reinvigorate scholarly and public interest in Jaimini's *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, and hopefully will pave the way towards an eventual dual-language edition with more extensive apparatus and interpretive notes.

I end with two extracts from the *śraṇaphala* collection in the *Jaiminīya*'s final chapter (p. 469):

He who listens to this *Ashvamedhika* gets the entire merits of gifting a thousand cows and he, who gifts this book, gets a hundred times of that.

...

The fruits that accrue on reading the eighteen *Puranas*, the same fruits accrue after listening to the *Bharata*. Whoever listens to the entire *Ashvamedhika* with devotion, O Bharata, has listened to the entire *Bharata*.