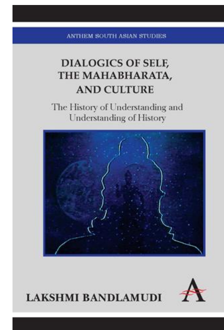
Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata, and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History, by Lakshmi Bandlamudi



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The Mahabharata is an enormous and ancient Indian tale attested first in Sanskrit, and later in a wide variety of versions in vernacular languages and in all manner of narrative and performance traditions. Its most famous story tells of the succession conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two sets of cousins descended from King Bharata—a conflict that leads to a devastating war prefaced by the Bhagavadgita or "Song of the Lord," in which Krishna persuades Arjuna Pandava to fight and kill his relatives and gurus. The Mahabharata claims to contain all that is contained anywhere on the topics of propriety, profit, pleasure, and salvation, and its interweaved narratives are an enduring cultural resource in the Indian tradition, being "good to think with" in diverse situations. For example, in the early twentieth century a series of plays and poems re-used the old tale to alle-

gorise the political struggle between Britain and India.[10] The Mahabharata's status as a national epic (alongside the Ramayana) is now long-established, with the word "Bharata" signifying India itself on postage stamps and elsewhere. The Mahabharata story is widely held to be true by Hindus, and the 94-episode version screened on Indian television between October 1988 and June 1990 was watched by millions, constituting a significant national heritage event. This television version, labelled "the Chopra Mahabharata" in what follows (after Baldev and Ravi Chopra, respectively its producer and director), plays an important role in the book under review.

The book proceeds from research conducted in the 1990s among forty-eight adults of Indian origin residing on the east coast of the United States of America (in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut). The participants were recruited through Bandlamudi's existing social networks; those unfamiliar with the main characters of the Mahabharata or without a listening facility in Hindi were not selected. Bandlamudi had three interview sessions with each participant: an initial one-on-one session "designed to gather demographic information and generate autobiographical narratives and to explore the subject's past engagement with the epic text" (29); a session in which participants, grouped in pairs, were shown four episodes from the Chopra Mahabharata and encouraged to voice their thoughts upon them to Bandlamudi and to each other (pausing the tape where necessary); and a brief final session in which participants commented upon the experience.

After the first part of the book has introduced the project, the four subsequent parts comment upon the data collected. Part 2, "About Self," discusses the autobiographical narratives that the participants produced. Bandlamudi presents this material in terms of seven types of self: the traveller, the biographer, the clan self, the seeker, the scriptural self, the gendered self, and the dialogic self. This typology is an adaptation of Mikhail Bakhtin's typology of novelistic genres, and references to the works of Bakhtin and other literary, cultural, and semiotic theorists are common here, as they are throughout the book. The types of self are detailed one by one and illustrated with quotations from the participants, each of whom was pigeonholed as a specific type. These quotations, which sometimes form quite long indented paragraphs, are peppered with sets of three dots in the manner of a Céline novel; they form the basis of the book's longer chapters, and sometimes they fairly

[10] See Pamela Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

jump off the page, showcasing the individual voices of the participants with their specific vocabulary, phraseology, and preoccupations.

Part 3, "About Memory," provides an introduction to the Mahabharata, to the four episodes shown to the participants, and to the principal characters of those episodes. It then explores the participants' accounts of their prior engagements with the Mahabharata, and their prior impressions of its main characters, in particular its leading lady Draupadi, the joint wife of the five Pandava brothers. Participants ranged from those who had heard Mahabharata stories daily in a family setting in India to those who had only come across it in written (or comic-book) form. In terms of impressions of characters, the participants were unanimously respectful of Karna (a champion and ally of the Kauravas who is actually the Pandavas' elder brother), and were predominantly either indifferent or even hostile to Draupadi.[11]

Part 4, "About Interpretation," discusses the participants' responses to the four episodes: the episode of Draupadi's bridegroom choice (in which she rejects Karna's suit because he is thought to be of low class by birth); the episode in which Draupadi laughs at Duryodhana Kaurava when he is a guest at her husbands' court; the dicing episode in which Yudhishthira Pandava stakes and loses his wealth, his brothers, and his wife, and Draupadi is abused by the Kauravas, makes a rousing speech in her own defence, and has her honour preserved by Krishna's intervention; and the episode in which the Pandavas' mother Kunti tells Karna that he is actually her son and asks him to switch sides just before the war. In this part of the book, the quotations are often in the form of dialogues between the participants, and the analysis is in terms of three "discourse types" taken from the work of Bakhtin (direct unmediated discourse, unidirectional discourse, and vari-directional or dialogic discourse), and also, in the case of the dicing episode, in terms of the rhetorical tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synechdoche, and irony.

Part 5, "About Self, Memory and Interpretation," briefly relates the previous parts to each other—in particular, the types of self established in part 2 are connected with the different types of discourse discussed in part 4—and closes with reflections on monologic and dialogic styles of interpretation. The appendices present statistical tables, questionnaires and interview protocol documents, and transcripts of the four Mahabharata episodes used. There is, unfortunately, no index.

[11] Sally J. Sutherland, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 1 (1989): 63–79.

There is a lot in this book, and the discussions succeed in illustrating and exploring the complex relationships between individual history and memory, sense of self, cultural background, contemporary cultural location, and textual interpretation. From one point of view, the book's purpose is to show how open the text is to multiple interpretations and how these emerge in correlation with, and through moments of action upon, specific selves. But although at one level this is an argument about the Mahabharata (which seems to revel in setting up complex and ambiguous narrative situations), more broadly it is also an argument about textual interpretation, or even about interpretation *tout court*. At the same time, from another point of view the book seems to want to make an argument about the categories that Bandlamudi uses to arrange and analyse the interview data. Yet although these categories lend structure and purpose to the analysis, they will seem obtrusive to some readers, and it is here that most of the book's methodological problems lie.

In part 2, when each participant is pigeonholed as an instance of a particular type of self, this pigeonholing process seems to me to be too subjective to carry the weight that is placed upon it. Although there are other well-known taxonomies of self (the Myers-Briggs type indicator comes to mind), self-type according to the modified Bakhtinian scheme is reified here as an ongoing characteristic of the person, rather than as a characteristic of Bandlamudi's situational analysis of the artificially produced interview data.[12] It was particularly striking to me that the "gendered self" category, which was devised by Bandlamudi, contained no men, and that Bandlamudi considered this to be natural (they are "all women, of course" [75]).

Similar criticisms can be levelled at the analytical schemes applied in part 4. Although here the discourse types that the participants manifested are situational rather than native to the specific participant, in part 5 much is made of the tendency for certain types of self to manifest certain types of discourse. Yet there is scant consideration (166) of the possibility that the discourse type manifested by a participant could have been partially dependent on the behaviour of their viewing partner. It is not clear how it was decided who to pair with whom for the viewing sessions, yet the data would surely be sensitive to such choices.

[12] This is so despite Bandlamudi's acknowledgement that "The typologies of autobiographical narratives … refer less to the essentialized features or traits of the individual than to the recognizable features of the verbal transaction and my interpretation of the accompanying behavior" (91–92).

The reservations expressed here concerning the book's analytic taxonomies would not seem so pressing were it not for Bandlamudi's apparent favouritism towards the dialogical type of self and its discursive and rhetorical correlates (vari-directional discourse and the ironic mode). Such favouritism is presumably inherited from Bakhtin, but it seems slightly out of place in this project. The book contains germinal arguments that might have been used to justify this favouritism (e.g., an ethical argument in terms of global citizenship, 262), but these remain undeveloped and unconvincing. The favouritism appears in a rather crass form when Bandlamudi employs Giambattista Vico's correlation of the four rhetorical tropes with different stages in a social-developmental scheme—from theocratic, to aristocratic, to democratic, to decadent societies (33–34, 194–96, 254–56). If one characterisation must exclude the others, I wonder how one might go about trying to determine which type of society one is in.

Notwithstanding the foregoing criticisms, and whatever one's view of Bakhtin and his admirers, the book is rescued by the voices of the study's participants. Although Bandlamudi makes no argument concerning how representative those voices are, they provide an intriguing array of contemporary, non-scholarly Mahabharata interpretations—a rather neglected topic in itself—that bear upon the issue of diasporic self-identity vis-à-vis the old country and culture. As James V. Wertsch's back-cover puff states, the book "has something to offer readers of many backgrounds." However, I am sceptical about some of the other claims made on the back cover. I would not agree with Wertsch that "Bandlamudi provides a model of textual scholarship for us all," since the texts in question are a certain specific type of interview transcript, and the model is not necessarily applicable to other kinds of texts. In the following puff, Velcheru Narayana Rao's mention of the "author's insightful readings of the ancient text" seems misplaced, since Bandlamudi's readings are of interview transcripts, which themselves are readings of (sections of) one particular non-ancient version of the Mahabharata. Indeed, as several scholars have pointed out,[13] the Chopra Mahabharata is remarkable for its elision of much of the subtle framing of the Sanskrit Mahabharata,

[13] For studies of the Chopra Mahabharata, see James M. Hegarty, *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in South Asia: Past and Place in the Sanskrit Mahabharata* (London: Routledge, 2011), 192–98; Angelika Malinar, "The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata TV Serial: Domestic Drama and Dharmic Solutions," in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (Delhi: Sage, 1995), 442–67.

which presents the story of the Pandavas and Kauravas as told in a specific way, to a specific audience, for specific purposes, and which thus implies that were it told to other audiences for other purposes, it might be told rather differently.

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