

## BOOK REVIEWS

*J.A.B. Van Buitenen (Trs. & Ed).*

**The Mahabharata, Vol. 2:**

**Bk. 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall,**

**Bk. 3: The Book of the Forest,**

Chicago and London: The university of Chicago Press,  
1975, 864 pp; \$ 33.00

One of the major projects undertaken in recent times for communicating the Wisdom of the East to the West is the translation into English of the Mahabharata, the monumental epic about India's Great War, from the Sanskrit original running into about 100,000 couplets. This is a very important undertaking since the Mahabharata brings the Indian philosophical and religious ideals from the hoary heights of Vedic thinkers and Upanishadic sages down to the level of the concrete experience of the common man, in the form of legends and folklore, in the exercise of the duties of the warrior class and of the ordinary householder. The central story, the momentous war between the Kauravas and Pandavas takes place in Kurukshetra. This theme has not only deep roots in the history and the sociological evolution of the Indian nation, but also enduring religious significance since it points to the fight between good and evil in the battlefield of the human mind. An accurate and readable translation was a long felt need since the available translations date from the last century, and a reliable, scientifically prepared critical edition of the original Sanskrit text was made available only in the recent past.

It is an enormous task especially if the work has to be done by a single dedicated scholar. A joint project of translation by several scholars could be conceived as easier, and might in certain respects be more advantageous, since it would pool together the varied talents required for bringing out the meaning of a complex religious classic like the Mahabharata. But there are some obvious practical difficulties in the way of such a joint effort. In addition to the difficulty of bringing together several people of the highest scholarship willing to dedicate their time and talents to this task for a considerable length of time, there are the requirements of a unity of style, and the deeper insight into the unifying spirit of the classic which can be gained only in the course of a long and continued struggle with the text, in the work of translating it couplet by couplet, chapter by chapter and

book after book. Even the Roy translation now available (Calcutta 1883-96) was executed mostly by one man, K.S. Ganguli.

So Dr. J.A.B. Van Buitenen, who has undertaken to accomplish this translation by himself, is doing a singular service to India and to the world. It is difficult to find a more competent person to do the work than Dr. Van Buitenen, a consummate scholar in Sanskrit literature, who is not only well-read in the Sanskrit texts of the various ages, but has also proved his competence by his already published translations of difficult texts like Sri Ramanuja's *Vedārthasamgraha* and *Gitābhāṣya*, and the *Brahatkathā slokasamgraha* (Tales of Ancient India). When the first volume of his translation of the Mahabharata, *The Book of the Beginning (Adiparvan)* was published in 1973 it was acclaimed by scholars as a masterpiece of scholarship and clarity, though some like Robert Goldman of the University of California, Berkeley, expressed their persistent scepticism about the success of a one-man effort. Dr. Van Buitenen has clearly set at rest such qualms by his pointed reply to his critics then, and especially through the publication of this second volume, which has definitely profited by the criticism. The patient dedication of a scholar who has set himself a long range project of completing the work by a steady programme of translating thirty to fifty couplets a day deserves admiration all round.

The matter of this volume is also more central to the story and message of the Mahabharata than that of the first volume. *Adiparvan* was just a beginning setting out the ancestry of the protagonists and antagonists, their childhood, education, alliances, as well as the general political scene. *Sabbāparvan* explains the building of the Assembly Hall, the source of jealousy for Duryodhana against the Pandavas, the game of dice and the banishing of the Pandavas to the forest. This book is very important since it sets forth the distinct personalities and character traits of Yudhishtira and his brothers, and of Duryodhana and the other Kaurava chiefs who are to play decisive roles in the story. If history is decided by the personalities involved this book is of crucial importance in the whole of the *Mahabharata*. Dr. Van Buitenen sets forth in the Introduction, the cultural, political and ritual implications of the book, like the cultural and religious links of Northern India with Iran, especially in mythology and architecture, the aspirations of a new king for suzerainty, the challenging position of Magadha and the dependence of the whole story on the Vedic Rajasuya ritual, all of which are very important for the understanding of the Mahabharata itself.

The *Vanaparvan* or *The Book of the Forest*, which covers the twelve years the Pandava brothers spent in exile in the forest, may look like a later addition to the story of the Great war of India, brought in simply for the gripping romance of the life in the

wilderness. But Van Buitenen considers it an important part since it builds up the character of Yudhishtira, and presents a feature in common with the *Ramayana*—the story of Rama, also exiled into the forest for fourteen years. In fact this book contains a brief story of Rama, which Van Buitenen thinks is a summary of the ancient folklore and parallel to the *Ramayana* and not an abbreviation of it.

The book has a number of narratives like the destruction by Krishna of the city of Saubha, which darts about the sky like a spaceship with its demon king Salva, spewing flames and missiles, the story about the generosity of king Sibi, the ancient tale of Nala and Damayanti, and the world-famous story of Savitri who by her wisdom and love freed the soul of her husband from the clutches of Yama, the god of death. All these stories and other narratives regarding personalities like Agastya and Rshyasrnga, though apparently unrelated to the story of the Mahabharata reinforce the central, religious and moral message of family kinship, obedience to parents, mysticism close to nature, the importance of hospitality and generosity, and the superiority of wisdom over love, all basic to the religious context of a land of rivers and mountains, where animals and men live in close harmony with the gods and spirits.

Dr. Van Buitenen's translation makes delightful reading. He is very faithful to the Sanskrit text. But no one can ignore the intrinsic limitations of a translation. Competence in the Sanskrit and English languages is not all that is needed to bring out the meaning of the religious classic. The *Mahabharata* is not a cold Sanskrit document. It is a living tradition sung by bards wandering from village to village through the length and breadth of the great Bharata land, and presented in religious drama at the temple festivals in dance, music and acting. It is the convergence of these different sensoria of human experience that makes the *Mahabharata* an enduring religious event for the people. As one reads the story in English translation, the occasional statement of the narrator that a person who at least listens to this narrative will be liberated from his sins and terrestrial bondage, sounds like mockery. These are difficulties intrinsic to translation that no translator can adequately surmount.

Perhaps of greater importance is the translator's sensitivity to the philosophical and religious thought behind the letter of the text. One trained in the Western tradition may miss some shades of meaning and this will affect his choice of words. This is a point that cannot be demonstrated by specific instances, since it concerns the general outlook and total context. That Van Buitenen looks upon the stories in the Book of the Forest as a library of folklore or pious narratives is an indication of this inevitable drawback. Translations like Kshatriya by 'baron' and Dharma by 'Law', though sanctioned by Western scholars like Macdonell and Keith are, nevertheless, jarring

to the Indian ear. But translation is a two-way traffic: Any translation adds its own shades of meaning to the original through the choice of words, each one having its own individual history. On the other hand, the original language enriches the translating language as well: Once the present translation is accepted, no one is going to take the word 'Law' in its purely juridical sense.

Dr. Van Buitenen's translation of the *Mahabharata* is a singular achievement. Our only prayer is that some joint American-Indian scheme will bring the price of the book down to make it possible for the average Indian reader to buy it.

John B. Chethimattam.

*S.S. Barlingay,*

**A Modern Introduction to Indian Logic**

New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1976,  
Second Edition, xviii+231pp.

This absorbingly interesting book comprises eleven chapters including the one numbered V-A. There is an historical introduction (pp. 1-13) followed by a discussion on the notion of *pramāna* (pp. 14-22) and on knowledge and language (pp. 23-42). The third and the fourth chapters analyse judgements, propositions and functions (pp. 43-62) and identify Indian counterparts of several truth-functional operators in Indian Logic. The theory of definition and the concept of *upādhi* also are discussed here (pp. 63-71). The next three chapters are devoted to a detailed discussion on negation (pp. 72-86), *sāmānya* (pp. 87-95) and the logic of relations (pp. 96-110). The two chapters that follow are excellent essays on the theory of inference (pp. 111-161), and the inductive elements in Indian Logic (pp. 162-183). The last chapter discusses symbols, formalized language, and metalanguage (pp. 184-191). There are six appendices at the end of the book accompanied by notes on each chapter (pp. 205-219), a short bibliography, and an Index.

Dr. Barlingay's book is the first of its kind in recent times coming from the hands of an Indian author. It is written against the background of the study of Indian Logic as first evidenced in the writings of the oriental scholars like Keith, Randle, Stcherbatsky, and Vidyabhusana in the early twentieth century and carried on by contemporary thinkers like Daniel Ingalls, Karl Potter, and J.F. Staal since the second World War. These modern thinkers often employ symbols and techniques of mathematical logic for the analysis and