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The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 2012 47: 245
DOI: 10.1177/0021989412445422

THE JOURNAL OF
COMMONWEALTH
LITERATURE

Article

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature
47(2) 245–263

DOI: 10.1177/0021989412445422
jcl.sagepub.com
SAGE

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Abstract

At the turn of the last century, the Indian poet, novelist, economist, historian, and civil servant Romesh Chunder Dutt published two English-language "condensations" and translations of the authoritative Sanskrit tellings of the ancient epics: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.* This essay argues that, for Dutt, the epics document the past, its social mores and its artefacts, while simultaneously serving as historical artefacts of, as well as living organisms from, that past. The epics are excavated treasures that embody not the dead weight of a now inanimate object but a living, breathing, speaking voice. In transposing the Sanskrit *sloka* into the English trochaic octametre in his translations, Dutt measures out "India" in verse, transposing the material, metrical, and spoken form of the once-known to the once-again nation. Thus, his translations of the ancient epics simultaneously establish and blur the epochal time of a supposedly historically and geographically stable and singular entity known as "India" and in so doing illustrate the fraught category of "Modern Indian Literature" and the modern Indian nation, which depends on recovering an "authentic" pre-colonial identity to inaugurate its modernity under British colonial rule.

Keywords

epics, Indian literature, Indian national identity, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, Romesh Chunder Dutt, translation

At the turn of the last century, the South Asian subcontinent was embarking upon what would later be cast as a new epoch in its history, an era in which anti-colonial struggles, crystallized in the creation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, would lead to the "birth" of India as a modern nation state. However, burdened by the weight of colonial discourses, India's modernity was made possible only by a discussion of her antiquity.

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Thus this period also saw the publication of two English-language translations of the authoritative Sanskrit versions of the Indian epics, the *Maha-Bharata: Epic of the Bharatas, Condensed into English Verse* (1898) and the *Ramayana: The Epic of Rama, Prince of India, Condensed into English Verse* (1899),[1] both of which purported to connect India's historical past to its future through its literature. These "[c]ondens[ations] into English [v]erse" were published by the Bengali poet, novelist, economist, historian, and civil servant Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909).

A member of the famous Dutt family of Calcutta, which comprised his uncle, the poet Shoshee Chunder Dutt, and cousin, the "poetess" Toru Dutt,[2] Romesh Chunder Dutt published works in a variety of genres in both his native Bengali and in English. These included a travelogue entitled *Three Years in Europe* (1872); political and economic treatises such as *The Peasantry of Bengal* (1874), *England and India: A Record of Progress During a Hundred Years, 1785-1885* (1897), *Open Letters to Lord Curzon: Famines and Land Assessments in India* (1900), *The Economic History of India*, Vol. 1 and 2 (1902, 1904); two literary-historical studies, *The Literature of Bengal* (1877) and *A History of Civilization in Ancient India* (1889-90); four historical novels in Bengali entitled *Bangabijeta* (1874), *Madhabi Kankan* (1877), *Maharastra Jiban Prabhat* (1878) and *Rajput Jiban Sandhya* (1879); two social novels in Bengali entitled *Sansar* (1886) and *Samaj* (1894); two English-language romances entitled *The Lake of Palms: A Story of Indian Domestic Life* (1902) and *Slave Girl of Agra: An Indian Historical Romance* (1908); another translation and compilation of poetry, *Lays of Ancient India: Selections from Indian Poetry Rendered into English Verse* (1894); as well as one work of original poetry, *Reminiscences of a Workman's Life* (1896). Like many later twentieth-century nationalists, Dutt was a product of imperial rule; but he was also a supporter of rising nationalist movements at the end of the nineteenth century as evidenced in works critical of British imperial policy. Educated in Calcutta as well as at University College and Middle Temple, London, Dutt worked as an Indian Civil Service Officer (ICS) from 1871 to 1897. Upon retiring from the ICS, Dutt returned to University College, London, where he published his famous translations of the epics, to act as lecturer in Indian history from 1898 to 1904 and begin another, unofficial, career as an advocate for India in public speeches and periodicals across Britain.

This essay's interest lies in Dutt's *Maha-Bharata* and *Ramayana*, which were reissued in multiple editions throughout the early twentieth century. Originally published in England as part of the Temple Classics series under the general editorship of Israel Gollancz, a lecturer in English at Cambridge University, uncle to the publisher Victor Gollancz, and later the first Secretary of the British Academy, these texts were later subsumed by the Everyman's Library series.[3] Both translations were published together in one volume (Dutt, 1900), which showcased an introduction by the Orientalist scholar Max Müller and "Twenty-Four Photogravures from Original Illustrations Designed from Indian Sources" by the English illustrator Evelyn Stuart Hardy, in 1900. In fact, Müller's introduction and twelve of Hardy's illustrations had been features of the 1899 reprinting of the *Maha-Bharata* as well. The inclusion of Dutt's texts in both Temple Classics and Everyman's Library canonizes these works. Arguably, however, what is canonized is the "Indian epics" in the abstract, which these works

serve as signifiers of, rather than Dutt's translations of these epics. Yet only a figure comparable to Dutt possessed the literary and institutional clout necessary to have his works considered for the series. Dutt's renderings came to be seen as authoritative translations of the authoritative textual versions of the Indian epics in part due to the status of the author himself, and in part through his claiming for his works the status *of* "condens[ations]" and translations-accurate, because selective, renderings of an original.

While Dutt's works are placed within the newly formed and amorphous category of "Modern Indian Literature" by English literary critics, his "modern" translations attempt to make a place for India's textual productions in British literary culture as well as the developing sphere of Indian literature in English. His claims for the importance of the epics within the epilogues to his two translations reflect a long-standing tradition within Indian writing in English to establish the worth of literary texts from the subcontinent and to place those works alongside, or even within, the canon of Western literature. In doing so, Dutt attempts to "recover" India's cultural, and thus national, identity within and in reaction to British imperialist discourse by presenting to a contemporary audience the literary treasures of India's pre-colonial past.

This essay argues that Dutt establishes the epics, and more specifically his translations of the epics, as possessing not only literary but also social scientific value as remnants of a past, but still vital, civilization. For Dutt, the epics both document the past, its social mores and its artefacts (weapons, jewels, temples), and serve as historical artefacts of, as well as living organisms from, that past. The epics are excavated treasures that, for Dutt, embody not the dead weight of a now inanimate object but a living, breathing, *speaking* voice. Thus, the excavated written text transmits the echoes of orality, the voices of ancient India, into the present. In transposing the Sanskrit *sloka* into the English trochaic octametre in his translations, Dutt measures out "India" in verse, transposing the material, metrical, and spoken (or chanted) form of the once-known to the once-again nation. His translations of the ancient epics simultaneously establish and blur the epochal time of a historically and geographically stable and singular entity known as "India" and in so doing illustrate the fraught category of "Modern Indian Literature" and the modern Indian nation, which depends on recovering an "authentic" pre-colonial identity to inaugurate Indian modernity under British colonial rule.

"Modern Indian literature"

Dutt wrote in two languages, English and Bengali, and translated from a third, Sanskrit. Drawing from three literary traditions and participating in two contemporary literary cultures (English and Bengali), Dutt was positioned, like many Indian writers of the time, as a multi-lingual artist. The early part of the nineteenth century, which saw publications by the English-language poet Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and the social reformer Raja Rammohun Roy, is often cast as the beginnings of a period of cultural renaissance in Bengal (a period that would continue into the early twentieth century). Bengali-language literature flourished after mid-century with the publication of such works as

poet Michael Madhusudhan Datta's *Meghnadbadh Kayva* (2004/1861),[4] a revisionist telling[5] of the Ramayana which places Ravana (cast as villain in the authoritative Sanskrit telling by Valmiki) at its heroic centre. In her biography of Dutt, Meenakshi Mukherjee has shown that his well-regarded novels in Bengali as well as his interactions with figures such as the novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore placed Dutt firmly within contemporary Bengali literary production (2009: 63-71, 83-4).

The first English-language text, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, a native of Patna in Bengal, through several parts of India, while in the service of the Honourable the East India Company* (Mahomet, 1997/1794),[6] published by an Indian heralded the subsequent development of English literary culture by Indians in earnest during the nineteenth century. Most English-language writing from the subcontinent during the early-nineteenth century was produced in Bengal, although by the time Dutt issued his translations in the latter half of the century, Indian-English writing from around the subcontinent, particularly in the three presidencies of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, was published with much greater frequency.

As a translator of texts from Sanskrit into Bengali (such as the Rig Veda) as well as from Sanskrit into English, Dutt also self-consciously placed himself within a tradition of translations by Orientalist scholars such as William Jones, H. H. Wilson, Max Müller, and Edwin Arnold of ancient Sanskrit texts from the subcontinent within the preface to his own first work of translation of Indian literature into English, *Lays of Ancient India* (Dutt, 1894: vii). He justifies this major translation of Sanskrit into English as essential, even considering the numerous existing translations by well-regarded Orientalists, by casting his work as a survey of ancient India's literary history, since "such a book, comprising specimens from the literature of successive periods, is likely to give the English reader a general bird's eye view of Indian poetry, Indian thought, and Indian religion" (1894: vii-viii). His repetition of the (anachronistic) adjective "Indian" upholds nation as the constitutive identification for this ancient literature, as well as the "thought" and "religion" it illuminates. He divides India's ancient past into five historical epochs, each of which corresponds with a particular type and style of literature: the Vedic period; the epic period; the period from 1000 B.C.E. to 320 B.C.E.; the period from 320 B.C.E to 500 C.E.; and the period from 500 to 1200 C.E., also known as the Puranic age. Interestingly, Dutt here pointedly abstains from translating either the Mahabharata or the Ramayana of "[t]he second or epic period" so as not "to do once more what these eminent writers [Griffiths, Dean Milman, and Edwin Arnold] have done" (1894: ix), and instead includes selections from the Upanishads.

Translations of ancient Sanskrit texts are a legacy of Orientalist scholarship beginning in the eighteenth century with the publication of Charles Wilkin's translation of the Bhagavad-Gita in 1785 and William Jones's translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* in 1789.[7] Indeed, such translations "served for generations (among Indians and Europeans) as an 'authentic' account of India" (Kothari, 2006: 9). As Aijaz Ahmad contends, the Orientalists' construction of a canon of ancient religious and literary Brahmanical Sanskrit texts has contributed to our contemporary, often unquestioning, understanding of Indian literature and history so that "the whole of the *Mahabharata* [for example] gets bathed in sacrality and becomes, simultaneously, over a period of time, the constituting

epic of the nation and its literature" (1992: 261). Dutt's editorial comments in *Lays of Ancient India* as well as in his later translations of the two epics upheld and promoted this belief.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata took on the status of epics of the Indian nation through an insistent comparison to the ancient Greek epics by both Orientalists and Indians during the nineteenth century.[8] Dutt similarly establishes the worth of the Indian texts through a parallel to the Greek ones: "The *Maha-bharata*, based on the legends and traditions of a great historical war, is the Iliad of India. The *Ramayana*, describing the wanderings and adventures of a prince banished from his country, has so far something in common with the Odyssey" (Dutt, *Ramayana*, 1899: 181).[9] This somewhat disingenuous conflation, especially considering that both works revolve around the themes of war, exile, and return and do not detail a continuing saga but are separate events, nevertheless illustrates the way Orientalists and Indians attempted to understand or explain the "Orient" through a Western counterpart. Dutt goes further in claiming that "[n]o 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, *Maha-Bharata*, 1899: 185).[10] His emphasis, through repetition, on "nation" (the texts are the "*national* property of the nations") posits ownership as that which defines collective identity as well as determines the extent of that identification. He also limits this identification to Hindus, thereby excluding other religions from a stake in the nation and its history. This imagining of the nation as Hindu was a feature of his literary work, which as Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, was at odds with his determinedly secular political attitudes as a civil servant and reformer (2009: 231-2).

Engagement with the epics was part of a long-standing tradition of English-language literature on the subcontinent. As Priya Joshi notes, between 1868 and 1885, both poetry and translations of the epics comprised a bulk of the literary production on the subcontinent. Despite differences in regional output in the three presidencies of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay, "[o]ver half the literary titles published in Indian presses were works of poetry; approximately a third were works of fiction; and less than a sixth were dramatic works, often translated or adapted from the ancient epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana" (2002: 145). While there were innumerable tellings in a variety of genres and details of plot and characterization varied according to region, caste, religion, and language, Indian-English epic productions particularly reflected the class, status, and privilege of those educated in English and had the potential to reach beyond the regional boundaries that necessarily constrained texts written in the vernaculars. Dutt's translations of the epics are intended for an audience of English-educated Indian elites as well as for a Western audience, as seen in the inclusion of a "Glossary of Sanscrit [*sic*] Words" in the 1899 reprinting of the *Maha-Bharata*, so his constant comparisons in style, metre, and content to literary texts from the ancient and recent Western literary canon are unsurprising.

A postscript by Gollancz (signed I.G.) to Dutt's epilogue for the first edition of the *Maha-Bharata* justifies the inclusion of these foreign texts within a series that sought to shape the canon of world (read: Western) literature in English or in English translation: "In view of the comprehensive character of the 'Temple Classics', it has seemed

desirable to include Mr. Dutt's version of India's great Epic—the work of a distinguished soldier and patriot" (Dutt, *Maha-Bharata*, 1898: postscript). Gollancz goes on to reaffirm Dutt's credentials by noting that "[t]he translator's high position in Modern Indian Literature is attested by [a] reference in Mr. R. W. Frazer's recent 'Literary History of India'" (postscript).

In *A Literary History of India* (Frazer, 1898), originally published only a year before Gollancz's reference, Frazer comments that though it is "difficult… to discriminate in how far the British rule in India has worked towards implanting new ideals destined to advance the moral and intellectual condition of the people" (1898: 386), literature from the period can serve as "[t]he surest evidence", though certainly not incontrovertible, of this supposed advance (387). In the final chapter of his monograph, entitled "The Fusing Point of Old and New", Frazer sings the praises of "the first great creative genius modern India has produced", the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who is "the first clear type of what a fusion between East and West may yet produce, and the type is one reproduced in his successor, Romesh Chandra [*sic*] Dutt" (420). Although his discussion of Dutt is brief and focuses mainly on the latter's novels in Bengali, Frazer places him among a cohort of mostly English-language Indian writers from the latter half of the nineteenth century, including other members of the Dutt family of Calcutta (Shoshee Chunder Dutt and Toru Dutt) as well as the Bombay-based Parsi poet and social reformer Behramji Malabari and the Madras-based novelist Krupabai Satthianadhan. In defining "[M]odern India" as a successful "fusion between East and West", Frazer implicitly presumes a lack of distinction between writing in the vernaculars and in English (even while implicitly privileging the latter) in defining modern Indian literature.

Although Gollancz, following Frazer, assigns Dutt a position within this newly formed category of "Modern Indian Literature", he never clearly delineates what such a category would include and why contemporary translations of ancient epics were necessarily "modern". Indeed, Gollancz's postscript for the first edition of Dutt's *Ramayana* admits the hesitation with which Dutt's first epic "translation", the *Maha-Bharata*, was published, but then assures readers that:

> the well-merited enthusiasm with which it has been received has been a gratifying proof of the growing desire on the part of Englishmen to understand aright the genius of that far-off civilization…To have made these ancient epics live again in the language of Shakespeare and Milton is indeed an achievement. (Dutt, *Ramayana*, 1899: postscript)

Whether "far-off" measures distance in time (the epics as a portrait of an ancient civilization) or space (the epics as literary products of the "Orient"), it designates India as other than English, something to be understood, through translation, within the language of the English literary canon (Shakespeare and Milton).

The "trace[s]" of civilization

Dutt makes a point that both translations, as indicated in the titles themselves, are not merely translations but also "condens[ations]" of the authoritative Sanskrit telling. Dutt's claim to have whittled down the *Ramayana* to its "leading incidents" and excavated the

original core of the *Maha-Bharata* from centuries of accretion, indicate his interest in narrative plot and the epics' evidentiary possibilities: first, as material remnants or artefacts of the past; second, as purveyors of information on other material artefacts (such as weapons, jewels, and so on), as well as social customs and religious practices from the past; and, third, as conveyors of a living voice from the past.

In his first "Translator's Epilogue", Dutt offers a lengthy accounting of his process in assembling the "buried" *Maha-Bharata* by translating the "main incidents" (those recounting the events leading up to the war and the war itself) of the epic in a "full and unabridged translation into English verse…linked together by short connecting notes" (177). Authorship of the Sanskrit Mahabharata is traditionally attributed to Vyasa, who as a character within the epic conveys the narrative of the epic to the god Ganesha, who acts as transcriber. Yet the epic has accreted many layers over the centuries, including tales that date to the Vedic period and so are older in provenance than the "original" Mahabharata (of the epic period) itself. Dutt laments that the poem grew to include "ninety thousand odd couplets, about seven times the size of the Iliad and the Odyssey together" (175) over the last thousand years but assures his reader that "although the old Epic has thus been spoilt by unlimited expansion, yet nevertheless the leading incidents and characters of the real Epic are still discernible, uninjured by the mass of foreign substance in which they are embedded" (176). Dutt, like an archaeologist on a dig, will "exhume this buried Epic" and, like an art restorer, present his reader with a pristine artefact, free "from the superincumbent mass of episodical matter" (176). As Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes of the nineteenth-century project of "recovering" ancient monuments and relics on the subcontinent:

> For both the architectural historian and the archaeologist, the aim was to strip away all that was suspected to be later accretions and corruptions on the body of a monument, in search of an originary moment in which it could be fixed in history. What they worked with and acted on was inevitably the ruin in the present, the structure transformed and decayed in time. (2004: 33)

Similarly, as a literary excavator, Dutt seeks an *Ur*-text that will authenticate that originary moment of India's ancient civilizational advancement in order to allow for her reinsertion, wholly and completely resurrected as well as cleansed of all later degradations, into the narrative of history.

For Dutt, these epics are valuable both as archaeological remnants of a past India and as a repository of detail regarding material artefacts, now lost, from that past. For example, in the introduction to Book VI of the *Maha-Bharata* Dutt asserts that the poem's "description of the bows, arrows, and swords of the Pandav brothers…throws some light on the arts and manufactures of ancient times" (74). Müller's comments on the Mahabharata in his introduction to Dutt's translation also make this point:

> Unfortunately there are no ancient temples, or palaces, or works of art in India to serve as guides. The very idea of stone buildings does not go back beyond the time of the invasion of India by Alexander…The Mahâbhârata tells us of weapons…[and] these things seem to testify to an early cultivation of arts and crafts of which no remnants have survived. Again, we read of mimes and actors, and of bards reciting ancient songs; but of the poems themselves which they recited, or of the plays which they acted, nothing remains to us, not even their names and titles. (xii)

Despite Müller's disappointment in the lack of material evidence of the past outside the text, he still sees the Mahabharata "[a]s a mine of information" (xii).

According to Dutt, not only do both epics "together present us with the most graphic and life-like picture that exists of the civilization and culture, the political and social life, the religion and thought of ancient India" (Dutt, *Ramayana*, 1899: 181), but they are also sociological tracts that allow insight into present-day social norms and mores. Indeed, "to trace the influence of the Indian Epics on the life and civilization of the nation, and on the development of their modern languages, literatures, and religious reforms, is to comprehend the real history of the people during three thousand years" (192). Dutt uses the epic genre to establish a social scientific value to literary texts by "trac[ing]" the historical remnants of a culture into the present and determining the continuing influence and development of that culture on the people it has engendered ("the real history of the people"), reflecting a shifting interest in the latter part of the nineteenth century from the Orientalist focus on Sanskrit texts to the social sciences.

And yet this shift assumed different valences for Indians such as Dutt, whose investment lay in proving the worth of Indian culture and the spread of Aryan civilization (and thus Hinduism) across the subcontinent, and for Orientalists like Müller, who believed the Vedic era was the apogee of Aryan civilization on the subcontinent and that proceeding epochs evinced a gradual decline. For Müller, there was "no heroic poetry after the Vedic age. The germinal sections of the two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata belonged to the Vedic period, since identical genealogies could be traced in the Ved" (Dalmia, 2003: 12). However, unlike Dutt, who justified his whittling away of "accretions" to the Mahabharata, Müller sees these "later" additions as a source of information, however contaminated and imprecise, about the past:

> Quite apart from the story of the ancient heroic war, the great bulk of the later accretions also is full of interest and instruction. Of course there exists always one great difficulty; we cannot tell which period of Indian history is represented to us in each of its various component parts. (Dutt, *Maha-Bharata*, 1899: xi)

Such interest in documentation, classification, and accuracy reflected the interests of the colonial project insofar as "the practices of subjection/subjectification implicit in the colonial enterprise operate not merely through the coercive machinery of the imperial state but also through the discourses of philosophy, history, anthropology, philology, linguistics, and literary interpretation" (Niranjana, 1992: 1).

Dutt, on the other hand, sees the epics as living, breathing, *speaking* organisms from the past as evidenced by his obsessive attention to the epics' orality. He points out in his epilogue to the *Ramayana* that "the sons of Rama recited the whole poem of 24,000 verses, divided into 500 cantos or sections, in twenty-five days" to their father. Since "[t]he modern reader has not the patience of the Hindu listener of the old school", Dutt has whittled down the epic into "a selection of the leading portions of that immortal song arranged in 2,000 verses and in 84 short sections", thereby modernizing this epic through the transcription from oral to written form (189).

Orientalist scholarship famously articulated the Valmiki-"authored", Sanskrit-language Ramayana[11] as definitive, authorized as it was by the voice of the ancient

Aryan Hindu Brahmin male. In this authoritative telling, the eldest son of King Dasaratha wins Sita's hand in marriage by demonstrating his strength and skill as a warrior. When his father retires from the throne, Rama is prevented from ruling due to a series of prior promises and his own sense of duty, and is sent into exile for fourteen years accompanied by his wife and faithful brother, Lakshman. Rama's other brother, Bharata, rules Ayodhya in Rama's name during the latter's exile. Several years pass in the forest until one day, Ravana, the demon-king of the island of Lanka, abducts Sita, whom he desires, while Rama and Lakshman are away. With the aide of the monkey Hanuman and his followers, Rama wages battle against Ravana, eventually defeating Ravana's army, killing Ravana, and rescuing Sita. Upon reclaiming his throne in Ayodhya, Rama asks Sita to prove her chastity through a trial by fire. Despite this proof of her purity, however, Rama is eventually persuaded by his subjects that Sita's abduction has meant the loss of her chastity. He forsakes his wife and sends the pregnant Sita to the forest, where she stays with the sage Valmiki (author of the epic) and gives birth to twin sons. After some years, Sita's sons recite the tale of Sita and Rama to Rama in Ayodhya whereupon Rama realizes the two young narrators are his own children. Chastened by his previous actions, he asks Sita to return to him. Sita refuses and asks goddess mother earth, who had given Sita earthly life, to open up and receive her back into her bosom.

The "Recital of the Ramayana", the third section of the last book, Book XII, of Romesh Chunder Dutt's translation of the Sanskrit-language Ramayana, is a meta-commentary on the composition and recitation of this ancient epic from the Indian subcontinent. It also highlights Dutt's role as translator, as the medium through which the poet, "Saint Valmiki" who is "Father of this deathless Lay", speaks as a living voice, and not merely a ghostly echo, from the past:

> "Noble children!" uttered Rama, "dear to me the words you say,
> Tell me who composed this Epic, – Father of this deathless Lay?"
>
> "Saint Valmiki," spake the minstrels, "framed the great immortal song
> Four and twenty thousand verses to this noble Lay belong,
>
> Untold tales of deathless virtue sanctify his sacred line,
> And five hundred glorious cantos in this glorious Epic shine,
>
> In six Books of mighty splendour was the poet's task begun,
> With a seventh Book, supplemental is the poet's labour done,
>
> All thy matchless deeds, O monarch, in this Lay will brighter shine,
> List to us from first to ending if thy royal heart incline!" (176)

Valmiki has both "composed", given content, and "framed", or endowed with structure this epic, which is relayed through an echo chamber in which Valmiki has created, the minstrels (Rama's sons) have recited, and Dutt translates so that the chain of communication can be said to be unbroken, continuous, from past to present. The unrelenting use of adjectives (deathless, immortal, sacred, glorious) emphasizes the inadequacy of language

to describe the epic, which is constructed through language and which, ironically, can only be known here through the surfeit of language. Yet it is exactly that surfeit, not so much of language, but of detail, of characters, of plot, that Dutt seeks to curb in his "condens[ations]".

Dutt explains in the introduction to Book XII that "[t]he real Epic ends with Rama's happy return to Ayodhya. An *Uttara-Kanda* or Supplement is added, describing the fate of Sita, and giving the poem a sad ending" (171). Banished to the forest by the poem's hero Rama, his wife Sita is offered "asylum in the hermitage of Valmiki, the reputed author of this Epic" as narrated by Dutt in his note to the translation of the "Supplement" (171). It is in this section, in which Rama's sons recite the epic to their father, that "we find how songs and poetry were handed down in ancient India by memory. The boys had learnt the whole of the Epic by heart, and chanted portions of it, day after day, till the recital was completed… It was by such feats of memory and by such recitals that literature was preserved in ancient times in India" (171). Thus, the preservation of this literature is possible not only materially (in the form of written text) but immaterially, which can be understood as a type of material instantiation when transmitted *through* text.

Although it is perhaps contradictory that Dutt would include this "Supplement" in a whittling down or condensation of the Ramayana, he does so partly in order to provide documentary evidence of the process of oral transmission, as discussed further in the next section. As a supposedly accurate accounting of the process of oral transmission, this scene, a later addition which is not part of the "real Epic", nevertheless allows Dutt to ruminate on the epic as an artefact of "ancient times in India" (171). This inclusion also highlights a central problem in the process of excavation: Dutt is unable to fragment something which is "whole", to leave incomplete and inconclusive by not translating the supplement to the Ramayana, even in an abridgement and condensation. The fragment is impossible since it would indicate a lack or gap in the national narrative and would reconstitute the past *as* a fragment rather than as the "time, when the [currently existing] fragment, reimagined as a whole, first came into being" (Guha-Thakurta, 2004: 33).[12]

"Mark[ing]" metre

For Dutt, oral transmission is not merely just as accurate as writing but rather more accurate, as noted in *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*:

> The earliest effusions of the Hindus [unlike inscriptions on stone and writings on papyri] were not recorded in writing, – they are, therefore, full and unrestricted, – they are a natural and true expression of the nation's thoughts and feelings. They were preserved not on stone, but in the faithful memory of the people, who handed down the great heritage from century to century with a scrupulous exactitude which, in modern days, would be considered a miracle. (1889: 2-3)

This voice is the expression of a collective, of the "people", of a nation characterized as Hindu.

Dutt comments in his epilogue to the *Maha-Bharata* that although his translation is a "condensed version of the original Epic…[t]he advantage of this arrangement is that, in

the passages presented to the reader, it is the poet who speaks to him, not the translator" (177). His contention that the voice of the poet "speaks" directly to the reader is bolstered by the attention paid to explicating the *process* of translation for the reader. For example, "[t]he crisp and ornate style, the quaint expression, the chiseled word, the new-coined phrase, in which modern English poetry is rich, would scarcely suit the translation of an old Epic [the Mahabharata]", which is remarkable for its "plain and unpolished" poetic style and which Dutt has attempted to convey in plain English (181). Yet in declaring that the poet "speaks" directly to the reader, Dutt simultaneously obscures the agency of the translator and the act of translation,[13] which alters meaning as well as metre and thus meaning *through* metre.

For Dutt, faithfulness to the originals is accomplished in part through an attention to the regular metrical form of the Sanskrit as he explains in his "Translator's Epilogue" to the *Maha-Bharata*. One of his "greatest difficulties" in rendering this metre into English for both the *Maha-Bharata* (and later the *Ramayana)* was

> to try and preserve something of the "musical movement" of the sonorous Sanscrit poetry in the English translation. Much of the Sanscrit Epic is written in the well-known *Sloka* metre of sixteen syllables in each line, and I endeavoured to choose some English metre which is familiar to the English ear, and which would reproduce to some extent the rhythm, the majesty, and the long and measured sweep of the Sanscrit verse. (179)

This passage emphasizes the epic genre's aurality: the "sonorous Sanscrit poetry" and the "long and measured sweep" of its verse. Dutt assumes the English reader will listen to his verse, just as he has listened to the Sanskrit, and assures that reader that the musicality and accuracy of his translation has been verified by outside sources: he "recited a verse in this English metre and a *sloka* in the presence of listeners who have a better ear for music than myself, and they have marked the close resemblance" (179-80).

The briefly alluded to yet never fully explored issue for Dutt seems to be that, unlike most contemporary accentual-syllabic English metre, the Sanskrit metre is largely quantitative (the *sloka* is measured by "sixteen syllables in each line") and depends, both in the original and in Dutt's translation, on the regular pause of a medial caesura in each line. Unable to find an exact equivalence of English to Sanskrit, Dutt settles for a "nearer approach" in the trochaic octametre couplet instead (Dutt, *Maha-Bharata*, 1899: 179). After transliterating into English four Sanskrit couplets in order to show the "varieties of the *Sloka* metre", Dutt quotes from Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and "The Lord of Burleigh" as well as Longfellow's "The Belfry of Bruges" and "Nüremberg" to compare "them with the scheme of the English metre selected" in his tellings (180). Although Dutt proffers the usual humble apologies for his lack of success in rendering his translation, the lengthy explanation of its difficulty promotes his accomplishment, which includes excavating and presenting to the public a national form, the *sloka*, to take the measure of a nation.

Dutt's interest in the *sloka*, a Sanskrit metre composed of four feet (with eight syllables per foot and two feet per line), as historically truthful, literarily authentic, and appropriately national echoes Mathew Arnold's assertions on the use of hexametre as an

English national metrical form in his published lecture "On Translating Homer: Last Words" over thirty years earlier. For Arnold, contemporary criticism "must acknowledge that by this [current English] hexametre the English ear, the genius of the English language, have, in their own way, adopted, have *translated* for themselves the Homeric hexametre" (1862: 43).[14] While both Dutt and Arnold locate the accuracy of translation within the "English ear", Arnold's "English ear" actively determines for itself. Dutt's more passive "English ear", on the other hand, must be placated by hearing something "familiar" within Anglophone verse translations, which must still nevertheless work to approximate the Sanskrit originals. Dutt's concern with locating an accurate metrical adaptation, in the form of the trochaic octametre, points to a similar need to legitimate the Indian epics as national texts *within* English literary culture.[15]

The reader is guided through this English metre in Section III, "The Forest of Panchavati", of Book V of the *Ramayana*. Rama asks his brother, Lakshman, to take note of the forest and its features:

> "Mark the woodlands," uttered Rama, "by the Saint Agastya told,
> Panchavati's lonesome forest with its blossoms red and gold,
>
> Skilled to scan the wood and jungle, Lakshman, cast thy eye around,
> For our humble home and dwelling seek a low and level ground,
>
> Where the river laves its margin with a soft and gentle kiss,
> Where my sweet and soft-eyed Sita may repose in sylvan bliss,
>
> Where the lawn is fresh and verdant and the *kusa* young and bright,
> And the creeper yields her blossoms for our sacrificial rite."
>
> "Little can I help thee, brother," did the duteous Lakshman say,
> "Thou art prompt to judge and fathom, Lakshman listens to obey!"
>
> "Mark this spot," so answered Rama, leading Lakshman by the hand,
> "Soft the lawn of verdant kusa, beauteous blossoms light the land,
>
> Mark the smiling lake of lotus gleaming with a radiance fair,
> Wafting fresh and gentle fragrance o'er the rich and laden air,
>
> Mark each scented shrub and creeper bending o'er the lucid wave,
> Where the bank with soft caress Godavari's waters lave!["] (83)

Rama's repeated injunction to his brother to "mark" their new forest dwelling and its features in detail is a "turning point" of the narrative that asks the reader to also "mark" out the metre. Rama "lead[s]" both his brother Lakshman as well as the reader in "mark[ing]" that metre by emphasizing, through repetition, its initial trochees ("Mark the", "Mark this"). Just as Lakshman, "[s]killed to scan the wood and jungle", is instructed by Rama to employ those skills to find a place of rest from the characters' wandering, the reader is also instructed to employ his/her skills to "scan" metre during a moment of repose from the forward momentum of the plot. Like Lakshman, the reader "listens to obey".

By bringing the reader's attention to the metrical movement of the poem, Dutt establishes a corollary to both the poem's narrative movement and the hero's physical movement within the narrative. As Dutt notes in the introduction to Book V, the reader accompanies the epic hero Rama on his journey across the subcontinent: "the reader has now left Northern India…the scene of the present and the succeeding five books is laid in the Deccan and Southern India" (77). The shift in scenery corresponds to a shift in the poem's thematic concerns: "The description of the peaceful forest-life of the exiles comes in most appropriately on the eve of stirring events which immediately succeed, and which give a new turn to the story of the Epic. We now stand therefore at the turning point of the poet's narrative" from "domestic incidents" to "dissensions and war" (77-8). Thus the "where" in this excerpt serves as both place descriptor, drawing attention to the beauty of the landscape, and as a temporal marker, demarcating before from after (as most Indian readers would be aware, Sita will soon be kidnapped while in the forest by Ravana, setting in motion the events of the war within the narrative). This "turning point" serves as an occasion not only to remind readers of the poem's metre but of the grand events, the "dissensions and war", that "mark" this text as an epic, narrating events of a glorious past epoch.

Epic/epoch time

The Mahabharata and Ramayana were constructed as pan-Indian through their reconstruction as Sanskritic and Hindu by the mid-nineteenth century. For educated native elites, the Mahabharata and Ramayana presented a glorious ancient India to a present India, thereby implying the possibility of a glorious future India. These elites, as Gyan Prakash writes, saw ancient India as defined by "the long and unchanging existence of a Sanskritic Indic civilization" (1990: 388) and worked under "the assumption that India was an undivided subject, that is, that it possessed a unitary self and a singular will that arose from its essence and was capable of autonomy and sovereignty" (389). This ontological state was supposedly disrupted only by Moghul invasion, a dark period itself only eventually relieved by British occupation. Elites constructed India as geographically stable, ignoring the different histories of conquest and rule in the southern part of the subcontinent and employing "India" as a metonym, in Romila Thapar's words, for "the Ganges heartland", or the northern part of the subcontinent (1968: 330). They also constructed India as genealogically unbroken, positing a line of descent from the ancient Aryan ancestor to the modern Indian, as Dutt himself does in his three-volume prose history, *A History of Civilization in Ancient India, Based on Sanscrit Literature* (1889). Dutt bases his epoch designations on the movement of Aryan civilization, or the "tide of Hindu colonization [, which] rolled southward and eastward in each successive period" (1889: 167), since he believes that "the literature of each period speaks of the portion of India under the Aryan influence and domination in that particular period" (167-8).

For example, Dutt's poem "Lines on India", included in his collection of original English-language poetry, *Reminiscences of a Workman's Life* (1896), begins with a meditation on the Ganges River, witness to India's glorious ancient past, "the land of ancient pride", and her subsequent decline after Mughal invasion. In the seventh stanza of this eight-stanza poem, the speaker exclaims on the futility of such thoughts:

Enough! Enough! What boots it then
To sing of days now passed away,
In halting verse why call again
The glories which have had their day?—
Because I cannot e'er forget
My ancient country once was great. (1896: 11)

The speaker's injunction to cease this line (or such lines) of thought is emphasized through the initial substitution of two trochees (Enough! Enough!) for the otherwise mostly iambic tetrametre of the poem. The "halting verse" noted in the third line only comes to bear in the fourth line, which includes an unusual pyrrhic substitution in the second foot of that line, effectively slowing the metre. This pyrrhic substitution also reflects the "halting" movement since ancient glories of epochal time, in which "[a] nation sleeps—the sleep of death!", as the speaker exclaims in the fifth stanza.

The colonial project advanced a view of history as linear, causal, and teleological. If the West located itself at the near-pinnacle of progress and enlightenment, then the colonies, Africa and India for example, were situated either at the nadir or altogether outside this developmental narrative.[16] Dutt uses the epic genre not only to place "India" as a geographically and historically singular entity, back within the narrative of history in an attempt to insert it into a Western ideology of progress, but also to assert India's relative (if now forgotten) civilizational advancement.

David Quint compellingly posits a connection "between power and narrative" in the epic genre, which claims a victorious end from the very beginning (a "teleology" associated with the narrative form) that "is defined by its capacity to maintain itself across time" and which "therefore requires narrative in order to represent itself" (1993: 45). The generic distinction between epic and romance in the Western literary tradition is thus the result of the battle waged between the two sides of the epic conflict, resulting in the historical "persistence of two rival traditions of epic" (8). The ability to write a coherent narrative that leads to a predetermined end is the result of historical justification in the "defining" tradition of the imperial victors. In contrast, the losers' narratives "fail *as narratives*" (99). They "approximate and may explicitly be identified with romance" since they "valorize the very contingency and open-mindedness that the victors' epic disparages: the defeated hope for a different future to the story" (9).

Indian-English epic tellings uniquely stand on both sides of the conflict: they represent the winners by drawing from the Sanskritic Hindu ideology that dominated Indian cultural discourse in the nineteenth century and thus stand in a position of narrative authority, but it is within the larger historical framework of "losing" through colonization by the West so that narrative authority, the authority of the Indian author, is always politically contested and contestable in imperial structures. For Quint, the "losers" want to be the "winners" as seen through the appropriation of the epic form itself but, ironically, "[i]n order to contest the claims that their victorious enemies make to have the last word on history, they have to open up and break apart their own poems, to focus on a series of parts rather than the whole" and so become generically questionable as epics (1993: 209).

Dutt's focus on relaying the narrative "essence" of both epics through condensation manifests from his compulsion to locate the narrative authority of these epics, a narrative

unblemished by additions, accretions, and digressions that mark the epics of the "losers". The Sanskrit epics, in particular the Mahabharata, are fluid in their conception of time: as circular, cycling in a continual loop of re-tellings; sedimentary, acquiring new details, interpretations, tales, and so on; digressive, telling multiple and seemingly tangential stories through allusion; and repetitive, in which incidents or circumstances repeat themselves over the course of the narrative.[17] Dutt determinedly reshapes, by supposedly whittling to an "original" core, these epics in order to impose a linear narrative and teleology. The epoch recorded by linear time constructs a "winner's" epic, in which an event is long past but still functions as a constitutive and memorialized part of national identification. This past is reflected upon by an omniscient and authoritative figure, which in Dutt's "translations" is the narrative voice of the prose passages that link the books of each epic together since he continually declares the poetic passages as the voice of the "original" poet.

In literary critical terms, the position of the epic as an "early" literary genre in the Western tradition influenced nineteenth-century Indian-English writers familiar with this tradition.[18] Epics record a nation's history, the passing of epochs, through the narrating of an ancient, and supposedly great, epoch in verse. Dutt similarly seeks to establish a genealogy of the nation in order to recount, if not the origins, then a primordial era that was not primitive but advanced as a civilization, signified most prominently through the cultural artefacts supposedly left by that past, so that the very thing, the epic, that narrates history is also an artefact of that history, "like those immortal marble figures… recovered from the ruins of an ancient world" (Dutt, *Maha-Bharata*,1899: 176). As Dutt notes in an earlier work, *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, although ancient Sanskrit texts "are defective as accounts of dynasties, of wars, of so-called historical incidents" they nonetheless "give us a full, connected, and clear account of the advancement of civilization, of the progress of the human mind, such as we shall seek for in vain among the records of any other equally ancient nation" (1889: 2).

In order to claim that the influence these epics have had on the nation's civilizational development is profound, Dutt must establish a causal relationship between two related points. First, he must construct the two epic tales as singular texts rather than acknowledging the multiple tellings, or regional, linguistic, religious, and generic variations, of these tales. He must not only disavow any variations in epic tellings, but also rid his translations of the authoritative versions of epics of any later accretions or "foreign substance" appended to the "originals" (Dutt, *Maha-Bharata*, 1899: 176). Thus, Dutt's epic tellings necessarily become monolithic constructions of a pan-Indian literary culture that can form the basis for the category of "Modern Indian Literature". Second, because Dutt must posit his tellings as translations of the singular and authoritative Sanskrit "originals", they come to represent a monolithically conceived past of a singular and timeless entity known as "India", which as both a place and a concept, takes on a constructed historical and geographical singularity and stability. Thus Dutt's "translations" not only translate Sanskrit into English and the *sloka* into trochaic octametre, but they also translate the regional, religious, cultural, linguistic, and historical differences of the South Asian subcontinent into the supposedly historically and geographically stable and singular ideal of "India". It is only by doing so that Dutt can claim a place for "Modern Indian Literature" and South Asia under colonial rule.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. I have kept the original spelling and punctuation of the texts when quoting. I have not included diacritical marks for Sanskrit words in my own editorializing.
2. See Chaudhuri for a detailed exposition of the Dutt family and their literary production (2002: 134).
3. J. M. Dent (1849-1926), whose "move to the middle, the appeal to the popular taste of the educated middle class and its upper and lower borderlands, lay at the heart of the success of J.M. Dent", began the Temple Classics Series in 1896 and the Everyman's Library series began in 1904 (Feather, 2006: 160).
4. See Datta (2004/1861).
5. This term is taken from Ramanujan: "I have come to prefer the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur*-text" (1999: 25). See also Richman (2001).
6. This text was written in epistolary form by Dean Mahomet, a Muslim soldier in the service of the East India Company, after his emigration to Cork, Ireland in 1784. See Mahomet (1997/1794).
7. See Sinha (2010) for a fascinating discussion of the Gita and the reception history of its various modern translations.
8. For example, the Scottish Orientalist Sir Monier Monier-Williams posits a common origin for both European and Oriental myths: "A careful study of the Vedic records proves beyond a doubt that the source of Asiatic and European mythologies is the same, just as the origin of Indo-European races is the same" (1863: 48). See Pollock (2006) for a discussion of the composition, circulation, and transformation of the epics during the ancient period.
9. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.
10. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.
11. Goldman regards the author known as Valmiki as a construct insofar as "virtually nothing of a genuinely historical nature is known and which is, in any case, a text that cannot be confidently ascribed to a single author or even a single historical period. For the epic has grown with the culture it has served, adding and changing episodes and passages, incorporating and preserving ideologies and, above all, serving as the foundation for a massive cultural edifice of commentary, interpretation, refiguration, and performance" (2005: 21).
12. As Dutt's note for the "Conclusion" to the *Mahabharata* explains, the "real Epic ends with the war and with the funerals of the deceased warriors, as we have stated before" but he extends the narrative of this epic to include a portion of "the concluding personal narratives of the heroes who have figured in the poem", especially focusing on the meeting of the eldest brother, Yudhishthir, with his family in the afterlife (*Mahabharata*: 1899: 171).
13. See Milton and Bandia on the role played by patrons, those individuals or institutions interested in producing, promoting, and preserving cultural artefacts, in influencing decisions made by the translator (2009: 3).
14. Prins links Arnold's interest in the hexametre and the Victorian "hexametre mania" to anxieties regarding national identity: "Like other print media, metre served as a medium for the creation of a national literature that could be called English" (2005: 229).

15. Even Dutt's "translations" of poetry from the "five successive periods" of ancient Indian history and their supposedly "corresponding literary productions" (1894, vii) in *Lays of Ancient India: Selections from Indian Poetry Rendered into English Verse* do not exhibit the same obsessive attention to metre.
16. As McClintock writes, history is seen to progress forward to reason but is always threatened by the movement back in time to a primitive (in her example, African) past "from white, male adulthood to a primordial, black degeneracy usually incarnated in women" (1995: 8-9).
17. A. K. Ramanujan writes: "I'd suggest that the central structuring principle of the epic [the *Mahabharata*] is a certain kind of repetition" (1991: 421).
18. See Bowra (1957), for example.

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