

Comment

'Nature' in the Epic *The Mahâbhârata*

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The Sanskrit for 'nature' is *prakṛti*, which means 'production, completion'; the word comes from a root *pra-KR-*, meaning 'produce, carry out' but also 'marry, name'. These values seem to cover quite well the way Indians used to perceive nature in the past. It is true that this production is marked by a certain degradation: perfection is *sanskṛiti* (hence the Sanskrit or 'perfect' language, just as the *prakṛit* languages are the vernaculars, which are felt to be inferior). But like human life, which is capable of becoming excellent (the role of asceticism), nature possesses parts that are admirable in themselves and come close to perfection.

If we limit our discussion to *The Mahâbhârata*,¹ this epic, attributed to Vyasa and written between the 4th century BC and the 4th century AD, recounts a feud between two branches of the same royal family whose effect is to bring about the destruction of humanity (save for a few individuals). It is an essential text for the whole of Indian and South East Asian culture, and because of its philosophical scope and encyclopaedic character it is in many respects universal. How does nature appear in it? What relations with humans are developed?

There is a kind of 'feeling for nature' (in the sense of an attitude of aesthetic contemplation and moral admiration) that focuses on certain objects: forests, to which one withdraws to become an ascetic, rivers, mountains, the ocean, trees and the monsoon. So within this very limited context, which is repeated over and over, where nothing is individualized (no particular landscape is defined, no real science of observation appears), the construction of the perception of nature is contained.

First of all, it is a spectacle for the senses ('what is produced' for our perception) where the sense of sight predominates: very quickly there arise those dualistic speculations of *samkhya* where nature presents itself to the mind (the transcendental

self) in its most magical aspect to charm it and make it turn away from this magical spectacle (the theme of nature as a *bayadère*, dancing and casting a spell from which the mind must abstract itself). Such spectacles are only found close to hermitages. *The Mahābhārata* sets out the doctrine of *samkhyā* in several places.

This provides a second, more dynamic way of looking at nature. It is the site of autonomous achievements. So it is less 'produced' in order to please than a 'force of production'. The forest in its luxuriance is a source of awe for the lonely traveller,² the mountain continues its growth, the ocean conceals its sea monsters, the mountain is used as a pestle by gods and demons to churn up the ocean. This nature has no need of humans. It continues its existence with an immeasurable brutal force. These are the sections of *The Mahābhārata* that tell stories of the gods rather than anything else. Here humans do not yet have any real status.

Nature is also 'the bride'; the hero – whether primal ascetic (creator) or warrior or even merchant – travels through it and seeks in it something to demonstrate his value, not because he wants to challenge it but because it is the backdrop that *witnesses* his exploits. The god has his *paredra* which he uses to show himself, the hero has nature as a *paredra*. Everything is large, vast, powerful, alive with ferocious animals, alive with nobility like the hero: consider, for example, the journey through the air that closes a pilgrimage:³ the lofty mountains, the whirling waterfalls are contrasted with the luminous hermitage of the original god (Narayana) where there grows a huge tree (a jujube). There is a cosmic fate on both sides; human and nature are destined to disappear one day in agitation (end of the world, end of the hero) and from a calm centre be reborn.

The idea of reabsorbing (and its opposite) that predominates in the life of ascetics: anything can become a point, we would say now, and thence become itself again. Thus the ascetic Cyavana who 'became an anthill'⁴ by staying still so that creepers and ants covered him. The story even tells that the king's daughter did not recognize his eyes and pierced them with a thorn. The kingdom was punished by a widespread retention of urine and excrement. The hermit had to be conciliated. The ascetic dissolves into nature, disappears into it, assists its flow (the vital, so-called natural functions). On the other hand a young ascetic, who is born with a horn on his head (his father's sperm mingled with water drunk by a gazelle) and lives so isolated from the world he has never seen a woman,⁵ learns to live at a king's court. In this tale the ascetic seems 'to emerge' from nature as if from a background and gradually stands out from it. But he makes rain fall on the kingdom. He helps nature to regulate itself.

Elsewhere, women are cursed by an ascetic who turns them into crocodiles until the hero arrives to release them from that sorry state.⁶ Other women give birth to children only by swallowing a fruit or cutting a gourd. Nature and human are thus in a relationship not of opposition but of conspiracy and transition: they act to remove impediments – sometimes nature waits for man like the crocodile women waiting for their liberator, sometimes man takes something from nature to progress, like one of the epic's heroes – Bhīma – who has a half-brother Hanuman, a monkey renowned for having invaded Ceylon and freed a kidnapped queen, and learns to be like him.

Some animals – snakes, monkeys, crocodiles – like some plants – lotus, fig-trees, jujubes – are predestined to conspire with humans because they are powerful and

surprising, and even secretive. This is why there is a less loving relationship between humans and nature than between husband and wife. A contract binds them, or the sacred word of an ascetic. The river Sarasvatī was cursed by an ascetic; its waters were filled with blood, ogres slaked their thirst in it,⁷ but Brahmin brought liberation and gave back its brightness (its purity) to that holy river. Therein lies the understanding between humans and nature: husband should assist wife, wife should support husband. They should both vanish into something other than themselves and reappear in luxuriant shapes. They lead parallel lives with frequent points of contact, moments of agreement and exchange.

One does not objectify nature (for instance, by giving it the attributes of matter or describing its laws); neither should one aim to merge with it in a mystical impulse or to make it the mother or matrix of the world; the epic grasps it in its heuristic possibilities (what aspects does it not take?), which chime quite well with those that humans also deploy.

Finally, nature is the object of a naming project: lists of trees, lists of animals or plants are there to form a first nomenclature that is as imprecise as it is transversal, as if the kingdoms were not yet quite separate (for example, the same word, *naga*, means both 'tree' and 'mountain'). We try to differentiate, but at the same time the similar shape is enough to destroy that classification, because without a doubt nature transcends the powers of language.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. *The Mahābhārata*, text translated from the Sanskrit and annotated by G. Schaufelberger and G. Vincent, Quebec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004. Vol. I: *La Genèse du monde*, April 2004; vol. II: *Rois et guerriers*, January 2005; Vol. III: *Les Révélations*, forthcoming in October 2005.
2. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 687–91.
3. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 548–54.
4. *Ibid.*, I, p. 184.
5. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 447–60.
6. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 379–82.
7. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 637–41.