



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My grandmother introduced me to these stories. In a traditional dinner-time routine, she would seat my siblings and me around her on the floor and efficiently get us to eat, doling out a tablespoon of *thayir-sadam* with a spoonful of *sambar* in our hands. With each spoonful came a bit more of an episode from the great epics.

My father introduced me to reading. He did not control the quality or quantity of the books I read, both bought and borrowed. As a boy, I often settled down for hours in the India Book House in downtown Mumbai, and the British Council and the USIS libraries in Delhi, while he completed errands.

My mother scolded me when I told her that I was “writing the Mahabharata” as this epic tale of intra-family war is believed to bring bad luck to the extended family of the writer. So I was surprised when she asked for a copy of my work-in-progress and read the whole manuscript in one long sitting. She then told me that we need not worry – what I had written was not the Mahabharata after all – the curse would not apply. She was the first reader of this curse-free version. She even said she enjoyed the story, an accolade not ever bestowed easily. After that ringing affirmation, I had no choice but to get on with it and publish the book.

My wife and daughters have been tolerating my obsession with the Mahabharata for a long time and they are overjoyed that I am finally done with this book. I appreciate their patience; through their love and support, they created a world in which I could write and not worry.

Finally, my thanks go to my editors Jayashree Anand and Padmini Smetacek for their careful reading and their encouraging comments. Their critiques have been crucial for finishing this work.



INTRODUCTION

As a child, the Mahabharata fascinated me – not only did it have heroes, heroines, villains, and fast-paced action, but it also raised profound human questions about fairness, the need for revenge, the horror of war. When I became interested in history and pre-history, I struggled to fit the stories into what the archaeological record showed on the ground. The histories of other vanished cultures of the ancient world, Greece, Egypt, and Sumer seemed to be grounded in verifiable fact while this epic history of a still-alive-and-beating culture seemed to lack any foundation in the reality we could unearth.

One fact we do know from satellite images and excavations – around 2000 BCE in South Asia, a great river with almost a thousand urban settlements on its banks dried up and disappeared. This river, the Sarasvati, is mentioned in the *Puranas* and the *Vedas*. The vanished settlements, called the Sarasvati-Sindhu Culture (SSC, initially called the Indus Valley Civilisation after settlements first discovered on the banks of the Indus) were spread out over modern-day Pakistan and western India. When the river dried up, the SSC towns collapsed, sending refugees in all directions. Refugees moving east into the Gangetic plain would have encountered a native, forest-dwelling, non-urban population, leading to conflict. These were unresolvable conflicts with no compromise – one side had to lose and the other side had to win. War would be the solution, both awful and unavoidable; with peace would come a new way of life.

The Last Kaurava is a novel set against the background of a crisis circa 2000 BCE caused by the drying up of the Sarasvati. Hastinapur on the Ganga is a frontier town that is overwhelmed by immigrants. Social policies set to manage the crisis fail and

set the stage for the Great War that destroyed one civilisation and established the first empire in the region.

A frame story, set in 850 BCE (over a thousand years after the Great War) reimagines the meta-episode in the epic of how the god Ganesha agreed to be Vyaasa's scribe, subject to unusual conditions. I connect what might be a metaphor to known events from a time when the city of Hastinapur (literally, *The Elephant City*, or perhaps, *Ganesha's city*), was destroyed in a flood. Its oral archives including an epic poem about the Great War, held in human memory by the guild of bards was threatened with extinction as almost all the bards of Hastinapur had died. The solution was to write it down. But how?

I *imagined* a highly evolved, non-literate and orally based culture in 850 BCE, utterly unlike its "literate" Western (i.e., Persian, Assyrian, Greek, etc.) contemporaries. The decision to write down the memorised archives was not just a break with tradition. The bards did not know any script, they could neither read nor write and needed help – just like Vyaasa needed Ganesha's help in the original. Vyaasa called upon Ganesha to be the scribe – the bards asked the Elephant City to provide the scribes who would write down as they recited. This was an expensive proposition that the city was unhappy with and every delay or slowdown would provoke demands to end the project – just like Ganesha's demand for non-stop recitation of the poem by Vyaasa. The guild of bards cooperated with the guild of traders and merchants to solve problems that arose. The solution? It's in this novel.

I followed some ground rules. Nothing fantastic – no gods, goddesses, or demons; no magic; no magical weapons; no miraculous conceptions; no karmic explanations. Situating the Great War in 2000 BCE limited the technologies available – for instance, no nuclear weapons, but more to the point, no horses or iron or million-man armies. Iron was scarce or unknown; armies were small; horse-drawn war chariots would not exist for

another two hundred years; transportation was by carts drawn by oxen or onagers (the "Asian wild ass"). The people were not all that different from us – they loved, they hated, they were kind, they got angry, they acted without thinking, they plotted, they lied, they demanded the truth, etc. Not better than us, and not worse either. They were just like us.

The result is this novel.

Many other writers and texts have influenced me. The great scholar and poet A. K. Ramanujan's collection of folktales acted as inspiration; likewise, Iravathi Karve's *Yuganta's* analysis of the main characters of the epic; J. A. B. van Buitenen's translation of the critical edition produced by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute was a key reference; information about ancient India came from the *Brihatkatha*, the *Jataka* tales, and the *Panchatantra*; the controversial anthropologist Marvin Harris (*Cultural Materialism*) provided a theoretical foundation; insights into ancient cultures came from Robert Graves (*The Greek Myths* and other works); and the amazing novelist Gore Vidal (*Creation* and *Julian*) provided a model for the writing.

I take full responsibility for this work of fiction. Its contents and the opinions in it are a product of my imagination. All my life I have read widely in the fields of history, archaeology, mythology, philosophy, science, and technology, and I drew on this to create this story. I do not claim historical authenticity or scriptural validity. The novel does not represent my beliefs about what may have "really" happened. This novel does not represent the views of the Publisher or anybody else. It is not endorsed as authentic or historical by the Publisher or by anybody else.



AMBA'S VISIT



"I am Amba."

The voice rang in Devavrat's ear like a forgotten melody. Initially, the voice evoked in him a sense of lightness; it enveloped him in a warm glow like the break of dawn cradling the river Ganga. Ancient memories from lost time veered in and out of focus. The memories came with flooding questions. *How could it be Amba? What was she doing, here and now?* The questions stuck in his throat, refusing expression. Then the voice fell to the ground and a grey miasma, a grey that he associated with pain and anger, seemed to crawl out of the fallen voice – the glow faded and the grey fog grew until it shadowed every coloured point. *Amba. She is here. I must see her.* He tried to turn. The stub of an arrow, sticking under his left shoulder, made him pause with every move, however slight.

"You killed Shikhandin. You killed my son."

The greyness increased. *Yes, he had killed Shikhandin.* His mind raced ahead of his turning head. Shikhandin had lured him into an ambush. He had dealt Shikhandin a fatal blow. Then

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the ambushers attacked and a well-aimed arrow had penetrated under his arm to his lungs. His arms rendered useless, he had fought and fallen by Shikhandin's side. He was now a prisoner. Shikhandin and he had been transported to the Pandava camp in the same cart and he had listened to Shikhandin moan as he died. *Shikhandin was Amba's son?* He should have known. It explained so much. It had been so easy and comfortable for Devavrat to trust him. An image of Amba's profile as she looked out at the sunrise over the garden town of Varanavata, his model town for resettling the Panchnad refugees, melded into a profile of Shikhandin looking out over the Ganga at the remains of a settlement burnt in the war. That was why he had dropped his guard as he followed Shikhandin into the ambush. He recalled the surge of anger when he discovered Shikhandin's betrayal; that was why he had slashed Shikhandin down. *Shikhandin,¹ well-named and well-aimed, truly an arrow aimed at him,* was the only person he had killed in this war, for at his age he was useless in battle but an asset in conducting the war. *But... there were so many buts.*

"You killed your son. Die."

The greyness became darker. Devavrat wanted to face Amba and deny the astounding charge, but then he felt her hand push on his left shoulder, the one with the arrowhead. The bed pushed back against the broken shaft of the arrow.

The pain... the pain exploded all over his body, a burn that would not stop. He was a warrior. He said to himself, *I will not scream*, and he threw himself into this struggle against the scream with the roar he had used in battle. He was *Devavrat Bhishma*, Devavrat the Terrible, four times Regent of Hastinapur, the bulwark of an empire built to last an eternity, an empire that must save the refugees fleeing from their ancient home of Panchnad in the west into the embrace of the Ganga and the

¹ One of the meanings of *Shikhandin* is "arrowhead".



Yamuna. He was the saviour of that civilisation, and he would not scream.

His challenge did not stop the arrowhead—*Shikhandin!*—from pushing deeper past his lungs to his heart already fractured by the presence of Amba. His last memory was of a glimmering haze into which guards rushed in and pulled Amba away, and regrets that he had not been able to look at her face.



WRITING AN EPIC

OVER A THOUSAND YEARS LATER



KAUSHAMBI/HASTINAPUR
CIRCA 850 B.C.E.

“You were too fast for me, my friend. I couldn’t write it all down.” Bhargava the trader, doubling as scribe, had given up trying to write down the words and listened to his friend Vaishampaayana tell the story. He held down a pristine palm-leaf with his left hand on the small wooden platform, gripped a sharp scribing stylus in his right, and frowned at the few marks he had managed to make on the palm leaf. He shook a cramp out of his fingers. *I am getting old. This sharpened and charred bamboo twig is no good. I should bring the iron stylus that the trader from Assyria gave me last year.*

Vaishampaayana, the one-hundred-and-eighth Vyaasa² to head the Kavi Sangha,³ rubbed his temples with his fingers as he watched Bhargava. *It was hard to recite the story in this manner. Bhargava’s fingers are already complaining. Would Bhargava be able*

² *Vyaasa* is the traditional author/compiler of the Mahabharata. In this novel, the Vyaasa is the title of the head of the Kavi Sangha (see below).

³ *Kavi Sangha* means “Society of Poets”.

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to continue writing? Bhargava had not understood the scope of the task when he signed up for it; Vaishampaayana himself had doubts that the project could be completed, but he had kept those doubts well hidden. Even if he could finish it, would he be able to do so with the meagre support promised by the leaders of Hastinapur?

Vaishampaayana and Bhargava were seated on reed mats under the ficus⁴ tree outside the house that had been allotted to the Vyaasa. A small alcove had been cut into the tree and a little knob of stone was placed in it, daubed with red lead and grey ashes. It reminded the Vyaasa that they were on Kashi-controlled land. *Pashupati’s land.* There were no clouds in the sky. Despite the sun, the air was cool. *Not as cold as it would have been in Hastinapur,* the Vyaasa thought. He had only come out at the urging of Bhargava. The sun felt alien, was alien. *I haven’t seen the sun in many days.* It wasn’t strictly true, but he had stayed in his bedroom far longer than was reasonable. *I will spend the rest of my life in this room.* Again, not true, but it felt like that. The only hindrance to seeing the sun had been the quilted curtain on the doorway of his personal room. The light of the winter sun just reaching its southernmost extent elbowed its way through windows and doors, but not through that last barrier. He had been in a diffused light, not the direct brightness of the sun’s beams. Thinking about the task ahead reminded him of his friend Jayakumar, who had been the co-bearer of the city’s historical archives. Now Jayakumar was dead, a victim of the flood, and he, Vaishampaayana, was alive. The Great Goddess’s gifts came with a bitter aftertaste.

He shook his head as if to dissipate the worries clustering around him. Nothing could come of replaying these thoughts. The flood had come and gone, leaving a destroyed city in its wake.

⁴ This tree is the *ficus religiosa*, called the *peepul* by Indians. It has been considered sacred in South Asia for over four thousand years (it even appears in seals found in Mohenjodaro and other sites).

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If not for the people of Kashi, who had rallied to the cause and transported the residents of Hastinapur to this new, temporary location, Hastinapur would have vanished into the fog of time, much like the empire of which it had been the capital. Kashi was the capital of an empire now – it had extended its charity to the old capital and resettled the traumatised survivors on the banks of the Ganga at a place they called Kaushambi.

His mind refused discipline and continued to wander. There were so many similarities between the crisis Kashi faced now to the crisis faced by Hastinapur in the story that Bhargava was writing down. The story he was reciting was part of the oral archives of Hastinapur, maintained by the living stores of the much-reduced Kavi Sangha; he, Vaishampaayana, was the only complete living store left, along with junior members who maintained parts. All the other senior members, along with many younger members, had died in the flood. The people of Hastinapur were unhappy and discontented refugees, not unlike the Panchnad refugees in this remembered history. Hastinapur was dependent on the charity of Kashi, a city of benevolent strangers. The unhappy and discontented Panchnad refugees had been dependent on the charity of ancient Hastinapur. Kashi was the prosperous capital city of an empire that could provide for the refugees from Hastinapur. For the Hastinapur of that past age, years before it became a great city, the refugees were an overwhelming crisis.

Hastinapur had been a small, if prosperous, trading outpost just beyond the frontier of the Panchnad civilisation. The outpost had existed in uneasy equilibrium with surrounding forest dwellers and had only very recently established its hegemony over a small tract of land surrounding it. Then the refugees had flooded in and overrun everything – in time, the refugees became immigrants and then became the rulers of Hastinapur. Between the old and the new, they created a new culture shaped by the exigencies of the situation on the ground. Hastinapur became an empire, the first empire in that land. This was nothing like the

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Panchnad the refugees had left behind. Peace had reigned in Panchnad, conflict being the exception; the empire that Hastinapur became was a militarised state that responded violently to trouble. Traders and their concerns had been primary in Panchnad; the Hastinapur Empire, concerned about maintaining and extending its hegemony, focused on its growing army. In Panchnad, the cities governed themselves under the benign oversight of their own matriarchs and their councils; Hastinapur, the trading outpost that had become a fortified capital, was ruled by its King, a trader-turned-warlord, and his council of war.

Yes, a listener could acquire a lot of merit by listening closely to that ancient history.

His meandering mind was brought up short by a sound. Bhargava's voice broke through Vaishampaayana's reverie.

"Vais! Wake up!"

"Yes, yes! I'm awake. I heard you, I heard you."

"And..."

Bhargava's protest had to be addressed.

"You want me to go slower?" said Vaishampaayana.

"Yes, Vais," said Bhargava.

Vaishampaayana sighed. Bhargava should not call me that in public. People will interpret it as lack of respect. Memories came crowding in and his eyes lost their focus again.

"What's the matter, Vais?" said Bhargava. "I know you can go slower, I've heard you perform."

Vaishampaayana moved his head from side to side to stretch his neck and shoulders. *These depressing thoughts are making me slump.*

"I'm fine. I was just thinking. I'll begin now."

Vaishampaayana began again: "I am Amba."

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“Hold on,” Bhargava said. “Are we at the beginning of the recital?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Didn’t the city council say that they wanted the written version to be like the recital in every way?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been to quite a few recitals and they never began with an episode.”

“Huh? How did they begin?”

“There is usually some kind of introduction praising the listener, or a god, or the sponsor, or a blurb about the benefits of listening carefully.”

“Ah-ha! The benediction.”

“Yes.”

“We leave that to the bard responsible for the recitation. He has to customise it to the context of the recital.”

“Hmm. He makes it up for the occasion?”

“Yes.”

“What would be the occasion for the recital of this written text?”

“I don’t know,” Vaishampaayana said. “The Kavi Sangha’s archives do not constrain the context and so we do not memorise a prepared benediction. There is nothing to write down.”

“You know the city council will not accept that.”

“What do they care? We had asked for ten apprentices to be trained to replace the bards who died in the flood; we had asked for support for them and the rest of the Archivists who should be busy making duplicates of the archives, not working at earning their livelihood.”

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“Vais! That’s what you wanted. What did the city council want other than writing this down?”

“Other than cutting expenses?”

“Yes.”

“Cut more expenses.”

Bhargava pretended to knock Vaishampaayana’s head with his knuckles. “My friend! Stop that. There’s no point being cynical.”

Vaishampaayana sniffed. Then he said, “Exactly what I told the council. They think that cheap readers can be trained to replace expensive bards reciting this epic. Yes, that would cut costs, if it became possible. I gave in on this because the Kavi Sangha, the guild of bards, will disappear if we do not recover now after the flood. I’ve agreed because we need to survive. I think the council will learn how foolish their ideas are after the first few recitals.”

“You think you will be proved right when they are forced to employ a bard for the benediction. Before even one word is read? Is that it? You think it shows how committed you are to this project.”

Vaishampaayana pursed his lips and closed his eyes. His friend was right – the council would doubt his sincerity if a bard had to be hired just to start a reading recital. He had not planned it, but it would certainly look like he had plotted it that way.

Bhargava said, “Tell me this, my friend. Floods come and go. Hastinapur is not the first city in the world to be destroyed in a flood. After a few years, people rebuild and go on. That is what Hastinapur will do too. Both you and the council seem to think that this writing down of Hastinapur’s history is important. I don’t understand. If I remember correctly, these events occurred over a thousand years ago. Why is this so critical?”

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Vaishampaayana said, “History must be remembered. Without history, we are like the animals in the forest.”

“Please do not mouth platitudes. Yes, history is important. It is more important to stay alive, to restore everyday life, and to restore agriculture, brick making, home building – commerce, in short. You made demands on the council that they could not possibly meet, given those everyday demands. You, of all people, understand that it is critical to start living a normal life.”

“There are times, Bhargava, when that thought crosses my mind. Why does it matter that a thousand years ago we were a great city? That will not feed the refugee stranded in one of our camps over there. Yes, yes, I understand the impulse to ever go forward. However, my friend, history forgotten is history repeated. Here we are, on the verge of repeating history.”

“What do you mean ‘repeating history’? Hastinapur has almost nothing. It isn’t going to repeat anything, especially if it comes at an exorbitant price.”

“I meant exactly that. We could easily ‘repeat history’. Even the council understands that. That is why they were willing to fund this project. When I told them what it would take, they balked. Then somebody came up with the idea that if it were written down, it would cut future costs. That was it – after that they would not listen to my asking for more – I had to accept.”

“Vais, you keep repeating it like a mantra. Perhaps, like history, huh?”

“Yes, exactly. We repeat history if we do not learn from it. The forge that built Hastinapur and made it the great capital of a growing empire was caused by water. Even so, the path to greatness was strewn with one disaster after another that threatened that future – each disaster caused by the foibles of an individual ignorant of the past.

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“Our city has been destroyed by a flood. A thousand years ago, at a time when Hastinapur was a small and failing settlement, it was threatened with destruction, not once but many times over four generations. That is the story told when we recite the *Jaya*.⁵ Knowing it makes us wiser.”

“I see,” said Bhargava. “We will then be wiser about... what exactly?”

“Riverine changes destroyed the civilisation that our ancestors had built in Panchnad, the land of the Sindhu and the Sarasvati. The resulting flood of refugees threatened to destroy Hastinapur. Natives, some of whom resisted, occupied the land that these refugees wanted to settle as immigrants. The leaders of Hastinapur could not agree on what was to be done. Personal issues and personalities exacerbated these disagreements into outright conflict and, for the first time for that culture, large-scale war. Nobody came out unscathed – the natives were expelled from the areas occupied by the refugees, a militarised empire came into existence and the immigrants were subject to a new and rigorous yoke, that they called Dharma. During the era of peace that followed, the empire’s hold faded away and the world we live in came into existence. With this recitation we celebrate the victory of that empire centred on Hastinapur.

“The recent floods have destroyed our city and by the grace of Kashi we have been saved. Already, already, we put a burden on Kashi. Kashi cannot support us forever. We are the refugees; we are a burden; and we are a threat. This will not resolve itself in my lifetime, or the lifetimes of the remaining senior members of the Kavi Sangha. We must find a way to save the history of the past, for we may need to learn from it. The Kavi Sangha can no longer do this by memorising – we do not have enough bards to hold these memories.

⁵ *Jaya*, means Victory. The word also refers to a poem composed in an epic style (a “lay”) to memorialise a famous victory.

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“That is why I agreed to write down the archives of the Kavi Sangha. If we are to learn from history, we must not forget it.”

Bhargava shook his head. He said, “People listen to your recitation as it entertains. You are an optimist if you believe that they will learn anything from this history.”

“Now, it is you who is being cynical, my friend.”

“No, Vais, I am being a realist. I have visited the lands to the west of Moolasthan;⁶ you have not. You have not seen how they live, despite their never-ending wars. Their rulers profit from the war for it is the source of their power over their own people. Each city accuses the enemy of disrespect to the gods, the first of whom is the god of the city itself. A male military class rules roughshod over all the other residents; the military recruits men rather than women with the result that the man is valued and the woman not; instead, beautiful women become choice prizes that the men fight over while the rest of the women are treated like cattle and only considered fit to give birth to children.”

Vaishampaayana said, “You are one to criticise them, with a woman in every town from here to Su-meru.⁷ I understand that – you are a realist, after all.”

Bhargava said, “They are not my property – I am a man to each of them when I visit them – the women stay behind to rule their family, and I follow their rules when I visit. Each of my wives runs her own establishment over which she has complete control, without me to tell her what to do. As a Master Trader, only the caravan is my property; in the towns whose rulers I trust, I own property that my wife or other agent manages. That is why I have no wife or family in Sumer – the women there are expected to manage only the ‘women’s affairs’, know little about the family’s

⁶ *Moolasthan* is near the modern city of Multan.

⁷ The name “Sumer” could easily morph into the Sanskritic “*Su-Meru*”. Future references to the Mesopotamian city will use the name “Sumer”.



affairs, and are subject to a man’s rule – under those conditions, I would not have the liberty to be absent for long periods.

“My wives are from trading families and they are matriarchs in their own house – they have power independently of their men and therefore do not seek to bind him to a single wife like your bards. We’ve been friends for a long time; surely you know this about me.”

Bhargava had stood up during the discussion. He was frowning, and his eyes refused to meet Vaishampaayana’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” said Vaishampaayana. “Yes, I do know something of it and someday you should tell me more about how it works. I apologise for my thoughtless remark.”

Bhargava grunted, but he stayed standing.

Vaishampaayana said, “Come, my friend. We’ve known each other for too long to fight over this matter. Let’s drop this digression and return to our tasks.”

Bhargava slowly sat down on his mat. He said, “You still haven’t convinced me. What’s so important about saving your ancient archives?”

“The events in the *Jaya* portray a breakdown fuelled by anger between refugees and their hosts. We are refugees here – we must find a way to be grateful to Kashi and not resent them. We must find a way to return to the old relationship. Among other aspects, the *Jaya* is a story of a failure to accommodate and adjust.

“Reflect on it, Bhargava. When you have heard the whole story, I will ask you your own question. For now, let’s return to the benediction.”

Bhargava nodded. “Alright, I’ll accept that challenge. I still have a problem, though. A benediction is just that – a small thing that says little. Why can’t you just say a prayer to your gods? Compose something like that and I’ll write it down.”



Vaishampaayana shook his head. “That does not work. What’s the context? Who is the sponsor? What good does the sponsor expect to receive? What god or force is being invoked? Those are the elements of the benediction.”

“What do you think the city council would want?”

“Bhargava, I see where this is going. Keep in mind that a written benediction must cover future sponsors and future listeners, maybe unknown future contexts. The sponsors this time are the city councillors, but membership of the council changes with time as well – so the sponsor is the city, not its council. The Kavi Sangha is also the sponsor for without our cooperation this will be lost. Yes, yes! I’ll weave it all in.”

He continued, “The listeners are the people, all the people, not just the *jana*,⁸ the electors, but all the listeners gathered there, the *gana*,⁹ if you will. The *gana* are both the sponsor and the listener and it is for their entertainment and understanding that the recital is being held. The context? That’s a little trickier.”

“Why don’t you make it appropriate for all events conducted by the city?”

“We don’t recite this *Jaya* at every event held by the city, only the most important – the four *melas*¹⁰ for instance. The *gana* wait eagerly for entertainment at these festivals. The god can be *Ganapathi*,¹¹ the god of our city, for he is also the god of the people.”

“That leaves us with the good that the city and its people might expect from the recital.”

⁸ *Jana* probably means “the people”, but could also be “the citizens/electors”.

⁹ *Gana* means “the people”, but with a lower class connotation (so can be everybody not covered by *Jana*). A pejorative interpretation would be “the rabble”.

¹⁰ Annually, the city holds four *Mélās*, (meaning a fair) – on the two equinoxes and the two solstices. See Endnotes on redistributive festivals.

¹¹ *Ganapathi* means the “lord of the Gana(s)”. Pejoratively, “leader of the rabble”.

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“A smaller budget?”

“Tut-tut. Something else.”

“Don’t worry, I have something,” Vaishampaayana said. He closed his eyes.

Bhargava waited. A few *vighatis* went by. Meanwhile Bhargava discarded the palm leaf he had been using and prepared a fresh one.

Then Vaishampaayana said, “I have made up a benediction. Are you ready?”

“Vais, my friend, I am ready.”

Vaishampaayana began. “Write this. The *Jaya*, composed to memorialise this war, begins and ends with Devavrat. That is the tradition. That is how we tell this history. In accordance with the tradition, we begin with Devavrat’s death and narrate his story. Though we begin with the story of Devavrat, we are narrating the history of our city, Hastinapur, the city of the Elephant, Ganesha’s¹² city.”

“Hold it. You’ll have to go slower.”

“I am going slower. That was about one *vighati*.¹³”

“Well...”

“I can go even slower. The slower I must go, the more I despair of completing this project. My mind wanders and I repeat the arguments I made to the city council. *Give me apprentices who will become bards, and I can teach them to memorise and sing the history.* The old way is the only way to save our history. Writing is useless. The city council will not listen to me; this is their solution... You want me to go slower, I’ll go slower.”

¹² *Ganesha* is another name for *Ganapathi*.

¹³ A *vighati* is a unit of time equal to twenty-four seconds. A *ghati* is sixty *vighatis*, i.e. twenty-four minutes. See Endnotes.

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“Vais, I am not part of your debate. I’m only doing it because... I volunteered. You think that a trader’s business goes on without his presence? I am losing opportunities to trade even as we speak. Go slower or I quit.”

“Bhargava, you leave me no choice. I agreed to this only because they said you would write for me.”

Bhargava squinted at his friend. “Is that true, Vais?”

Vaishampaayana smiled but with frown-lines showing on his brow, “Well... in a manner of speaking. I’ll go slower. From the beginning, then.”

He spoke slowly. “The *Jaya*, composed to record this war, begins and ends with Devavrat. That is the tradition. That is how we tell this history. In accordance with the tradition, we begin with Devavrat’s death and narrate his story. Though we begin with the story of Devavrat, we are narrating the history of our city, Hastinapur, the city of the Elephant, Ganesha’s city. It is the story of a city on which was built an empire, an empire of the people. It is a story without end for the story of this city, this empire of the people, is the story of humanity – how can it end? Devavrat was named so by his mother at the beginning of his life; he was called *Devavrat Bhishma*¹⁴ by the people at the end of a long life. Just as we sing of the life of Devavrat Bhishma, so shall we write of the life of Devavrat Bhishma. As the bard enters the soul of Devavrat to speak for him, so will the reader enter the soul of Devavrat to read his words. When Devavrat speaks through the bard, he must speak the truth; likewise, when a reader utters Devavrat’s written words, he must read the truth.

“The truth, whether uttered or listened to, makes both the speaker and the listener free. We offer this truth to Ganesha, the protector of the ganas. Lord Ganesha, extend your grace to us, the denizens of your city, the city of the Elephant, our city,

¹⁴ *Devavrat Bhishma* means “Devavrat the Terrible”. How he came by this name is part of this story of his life.



Hastinapur, the city of the Snakes, our city Nagapura.¹⁵ We offer this truth to our ancestors, protectors of our family. Respected Ancestors, shield us from evil fates, and as we prosper, so shall you rest in the after-life. This truth, the story of Devavrat Bhishma, heard with respect, will free seven generations of ancestors from purgatory. Read with respect, the reader should expect to gain merit of the same magnitude.” He paused.

“You got all that, Bhargava. Written it down?”

“Yes.”

“Jaya.”

“Jaya-he. Are we done?”

“Write that down.”

“What? Write what down?”

“Jaya.”

“Jaya?”

“Yes. Every telling of a *Jaya* begins with a benediction and the pronouncement of *jaya*. The bard proclaims ‘Jaya’ to which the audience responds with ‘Jaya-he’.”

Bhargava wrote down the last utterance.

“I got that,” Bhargava said. “I have a question – since the benediction is made to suit the occasion, should we include some guidance on how the reader is to use this benediction?”

“The city elders wanted a reader to tell the story in public exactly the way a bard might. That is not possible. The writer cannot cover all the contingencies of a future reading. I fought against this order. You know why they did it? Hah! Of course you do. They don’t want bards anymore. Readers and announcers will replace bards – that’s their hope. I am glad you brought up the benediction, for if we do not include at least one

¹⁵ *Nagapura* is another name for Hastinapur.



such benediction, the idea itself – the idea of the introductory benediction – will be lost.

“That is what happens when you have readers, not bards. A written down item, when lost, is lost forever. Bards may forget to recite a verse, but it is not forgotten. Other bards will have memorised it too. Our descendants, in a time when writing dominates, will remember nothing. That will be our future. To let go of memory passed from the cold and unresponsive past to the warm present and welcoming future. To let go of the Songs that link and bind all our bards from the first Vyaasa, Guru Vasishtha,¹⁶ down through the chain of teachers and disciples to our future bards.

“An even greater loss is the loss of participation in the creation of memory. Every recital recreates and reimagines the story for the benefit of the audience. That is why a recital is not like a memorised mantra, but partakes all facets of *Naatya*.¹⁷ A recital is a reimagining – what, indeed, is a *reading*? I do not know what is to come when readers replace bards, but the reader’s eye is on the palm-leaf and where the eye goes, there goes vision, with vision goes thought, thought carries the mind, and the mind, that hound-dog of habit, is mired in its expectations of rewards from smooth reading and anticipation of the content of the next leaf to be read. Reading is not *Naatya*. The connection to the audience, so essential to recital, to *Naatya*, is lost. Both reader and audience will become observers and not participants.”

Bhargava said, “Yes, yes, Vais, I see. I’m sorry to have interrupted the grand chain of poetic transcreation. Let us continue.”

“My apologies, Bhargava, I am lecturing. I’m not offended that you would rather not be subjected to my digressions and

¹⁶ *Vasishtha* is a famous sage of antiquity. In this novel, he is the founder of the Kavi Sangha.

¹⁷ *Naatya* is the traditional Sanskrit term for all kinds of performance art, ranging from acting to dancing to story-telling.



exeges. What you did when you asked a question about the benediction is exactly what I want you to do when I recite the history. Question me. A bard responds to an audience. I cannot recite the poem without an audience. You are it. It is your duty – to stop me and ask questions. Consider it your dharma.”

“Hmm... I see. You could go a little slower, perhaps? Even if I can keep up, my apprentices won’t when it is their turn.”

“Slower than this?”

“Yes. I know that it is hard and you are not used to being told how to perform, but you must go slower if we are to finish this.”

“We shall see. Did you get the whole benediction?”

“Yes. This time. Slow down, please. Let’s continue.”

“Jaya.”

Bhargava of Kamboja, a trader by profession, involuntary scribe, an old friend of the Vyaasa, wrote down these words recited by the Vyaasa.

Vaishampaayana, the last Vyaasa, the last head of the Kavi Sangha, last living Archive of Hastinapur’s History, of the city destroyed by a flood, continued his recital.

“‘I am Amba.’ The voice rang in Devavrat’s ear like a forgotten melody. Initially, the voice evoked in him a sense of lightness... His last memory was of a glimmering haze into which guards rushed in and pulled Amba away, and regrets that he had not been able to look at her face.

“Thus ends the confrontation of Devavrat Bhishma and Amba Nagini as the Regent lay on his death-bed in the forest camp of the Pandavas, enemies of the Empire he had built.”