

Renate Söhnen-Thieme

Vedic lore in the epic: some case studies

ABSTRACT

Considering that both the ancient Indian epics Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa in their formative stages were shaped and transmitted in Brāhmaṇical circles, the question must arise how much these authors made use of stories from the ‘pre-epic’ Brāhmaṇical tradition (i.e. Ṛgveda, Brāhmaṇas, and Upaniṣads) and how they actually adjusted them to their new context. Hiltebeitel, partly following Sukthankar, observes about the ‘Bhārgava material’ (in his article ‘Reconsidering Bhr̥guization’, DICSEP 1997) that some of it ‘is created with the Mahābhārata’; likewise many other such stories may actually have been invented for the sake of inclusion in the MBh, rather than genuinely inherited from the Vedic tradition, from which sometimes only names are taken over, without the appropriate story.

This paper attempts to analyse individual narratives with roots in the Vedic tradition, such as the stories of Agastya and Lopāmudrā (RV), Trita Āptya (ṚV), Cyavana and Sukanyā (Śat.Br.), Manu and the fish (Śat.Br.), Naciketas (Taitt.Br., KaṭhUp.), etc., in comparison with the original stories, and to identify, interpret, and evaluate the changes that have been made in the individual cases, so as to make the stories suit the narrative context and the ideological message of the MBh.

The most spectacular case is probably provided by the accounts of the battles between the gods and the demons in general, and between Indra and various individual demons in particular (Jaim.Br., Taitt.Br., Śat.Br., etc.), where the development of a new Hindu ‘pantheon’, centering on either Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa or Śiva, becomes especially obvious.

As another facet of this investigation it is interesting to establish which particular Vedic traditions were used and assimilated, and how far knowledge of Vedic traditions in general was actually spread among the Brāhmaṇical authors/transmitters of the MBh.