

Observations on the Geographical Data in the Mahabharata

Dilip K Chakrabarti

(Emeritus Professor, Cambridge University)

In a paper in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1908, pp.309-336, F.E.Pargiter analysed the distribution of the various states aligned on the sides of the Pandavas and the Kauravas and reached some basic conclusions. The identifications of the ancient territories were not certain in all cases and the smaller territorial groups which contributed contingents to the larger groups have been ignored in his calculation, but within these constraints the basic distribution was the following .

On the Pandava side in *Madhyadesa* were the Panchalas and the so-called Rakshasa or forest people to their north, Matsyas, Chedis, Karushas, Dasarnas, Kasis, eastern Kosalas, western Magadhas and the groups dwelling in or near the Vindhyas and the Aravallis. In the west, all the Yadavas from Gujarat and the territory to the east of Gujarat were on their side, along with some Kaikeyas and Abhisaras in the northwest and the Pandyas and a number of Dravidian contingents in the south.

The Kaurava support base was much wider . In the east were the eastern Magadhas, Videhas, Pragjyotishas (the latter with contingents from the Chinas and Kiratas), Angas, Vangas, Pundras, Utkalas, Mekalas, Kalingas and Andhras (the latter with contingents from all the tribes

bordering them). In *Madhyadesa* the Surasenans, Vatsas and Kosalas were on the Kaurava side. Throughout the northwest including the outer arc of the frontier there was a strong Kaurava support base : Sindhus, Sauviras, Madras, Valhikas, Kaikeyas, Gandharas, Kambojas, Trigartas, Ambasthas, Sibis and contingents from the tribes all around them. Hill tribes all along the Himalayas except those to the north of Panchala were in favour of the Kauravas. In the west, they received the support of the Salvans and the Malavas. In central India to the south of Madhyadesa, the Yadavas from the country south and southeast of Vadodara, Avantis, Mahismakas, Vidarbhas, Nishadas, Kuntalas and the contingents of the people bordering them in the Deccan joined them.

A limited number of groups , such as the South Kosalas and Odras, remained neutral.

Pargiter (1908) summarized these conclusions further by confining his attention only to the leading nations.

Those on the Pandavas side were the Panchalas, Matsyas, Chedis, Karusas, Kasis, and Western Magadhas from Madhyadesa ; all the Yadavas from Gujarat and the country east of it; and the Pandyas. On the Kaurava side were all the nations from North and South-Eastern Behar, all Bengal and West Assam, and all the region south of Bengal as far as the River Godavari; the Surasenans, Vatsas, and Kosalas in Madhyadesa; all the nations in the north and northwest with the Salvans and Malavas ;

and the Avantis and all the nations of Central India. Stating these conclusions more generally still, we may say that the Pandava cause combined the Panchalas and all the kingdoms of South Madhyadesa (except the Surasenas and Vatsas) together with the Yadavas of Gujarat against the rest of Northern, Central, and Eastern India.

Pargiter also drew attention to the way each side marshalled its force. The Pandava centre was Upaplavya, the capital of Matsya, and the Kaurava centre was their own capital, Hastinapura. The hosts that assembled on the Kaurava side are said to have been so vast that they could not concentrate at Hastinapura, and they stretched in a curve from the southern portion of the Panjab round the north of Kurukshetra to the north of Panchala. The Pandava allies concentrated in and around Matsya.

The Matsya kingdom lay focussed in the modern Alwar, Jaipur and Bharatpur areas, and the fortified settlement of Bairat is acknowledged to be its capital city. One is not sure if Upaplavya was another name of the ancient Bairat or Viratanagari, but if not, one has to admit that Upaplavya has not yet been archaeologically identified. It may be noted that in the Bharatpur belt bordering the Mathura area there are a number of large and high unexcavated mounds. It is possible that the ancient Upaplavya was located in this belt.

An issue which is far more significant than the identification of Upaplavya is what the distribution of states on Pargiter's map suggests in

terms of our ancient history. A point to note is that this is before Magadha became the paramount state in northern India. It was indeed the paramount state in the whole of the country during the Mauryan period or even during the period of the Nandas before the Mauryas. There were many small territorial groupings all around, and on the whole one gets the distinct feel of the country even before what the Buddhist and Jaina sources call the period of the 'sixteen major principalities'. I would personally put Pargiter's political map before the Mahajanapada period of c.600 BC. I cannot suggest any specific date before this point but can only recall that the process of early historic urban growth in India may be bracketed between c.800 and c.500 BC. I shall not be surprised if Pargiter's political map suggests the general configuration of political principalities in India around 800 BC. Basically the probable historical context of this map is the dawn of the early historic period, covering the whole area from the southern fringe of central Asia to the deep south.

The *Tirtha Yatra* section of *Vana Parva* is among the most important repositories of geographical information in the Mahabharata. Its 'section 82' calls Pushkara, the foremost of all *tirthas*. Not all the points of the pilgrimage after Pushkara can be specifically related to the ground, but certain points are easy to identify and impart an idea of the basic pilgrimage map. From Pushkara, one goes through a chain of

sacred spots till one reaches *Mahakala*, i.e. the place of *Mahakala Siva* of Ujjayini. From there one reaches the Narmada, apparently crossing the Charmanvati or Chambal on the way. In a sense, the first stage of the journey took one from Pushkara to the Narmada. In the second stage, the route is from the Narmada to Prabhas or Prabhas Patan near Verawal in the southern coast of the Saurashtra peninsula, and from there to Dwaravati or Dwaraka and then to the Indus or *Sindhu*, ‘the spot where the Sindhu mingles with the sea’. The Sindhu is associated with another ‘celebrated tirtha’ known as *Sindhuttama* (unidentified). Beyond this, one apparently went as far as ‘the country of the Kashmiras’ where Vitasta (the name of a river or a place ?) was situated.

The next major focus of this section is the Sarasvati which disappears at Vinasana and reappears at Chamasa, Chamasaveda and Nagodveda. There is a reference to bathing in the Sarasvati, and importantly, one is advised to go to “to that highly sacred and celebrated region where the Sarasvati mingles with the sea”.

The section 83 of *Vana Parva* begins with a description of the merits of Kurukshetra as a sacred spot : “they that dwell in Kurukshetra which lies to the south of the Sarasvati and the north of the Drishadvati are said to dwell in heaven”. Reference is made to other sacred spots of the area including Prithudoka or modern Pehoa where the Sarasvati united with the Aruna.

The Sarasvati figures prominently also in the section 84 : from Saugandhikavana (unidentified), “ one should repair to the sacred goddess Sarasvati, known there as the goddess Plaksha, that best of streams and foremost of rivers”. In the next major stage of the journey, one goes to Himavat and bows to the source of the Ganga. One then goes to Prayag via Kanakhala, and rather confusingly refers to the confluence of the Ganga and the Sarasvati. From this point onward, the section 84 is a medley of sacred place names, among which there are mentions of *Yamuna-Prabhava* (the source of the Yamuna), *Sindhu-Prabhava*, Sarasvati, *Akshaya-Vata* in Gaya, the Kausiki or Kosi river, Mani Naga (of Rajagriha), Champa where one bathes in the Bhagirathi or Ganga, and many other places which cannot be identified.

One of the first sacred spots mentioned in the section 85 is Lauhitya or some place on the bank of the Brahmaputra, and this is followed by the mention of the Karatoya in north Bengal, on the bank of which Mahasthangarh or ancient Pundranagara is located. Reference is also made to the spot where the Ganga mingles with the sea, and I would suggest that this refers to the area of Gangasagar south of Kolkata. One then crosses over to the opposite bank of the Ganga and reaches eventually the Vaitarini in Orissa. Quick references are made to the Son and the sources of both the Son and the Narmada, a *tirtha* called Rishabha in Kosala or South Kosala, Mahendra mountains in Tamil Nadu,

Rishabha mountain in the Pandya country and finally, Kaveri. One proceeds next to Gokarna on the Konkan coast and after that, rather abruptly, the Godavari and the Wainganga or the Vena. Mention is also made of the ‘sacred forest of Dandaka’ in this context. The subsequent references to *Surparaka* or Sopara, *Kalanjara* or Kalinjar, Chitrakuta and *Sringaverapura* are somewhat sudden, but the legend of Rama’s crossing of the Ganga at Sringaverapura is remembered. It appears that Prayaga and the areas around it are mentioned at the end of the section 85.

The section 88 deals with the ‘sacred *tirthas* of the south’ : the rivers Godavari, Venna or Wainganga, Bhimarathi or probably Bhima and Payosini, possibly a river in Vidarbha. There was supposed to be a *tirtha* called Asoka at Surparaka, and in the Pandya country in the deep south were the *tirthas* named Agastya and Varuna. *Kanyakumarika* is mentioned as the *tirtha* called the Kumaris , and *Tamraparni*, apparently either the river or its valley is mentioned immediately after this. One goes from here to Gokarna of Konkan. After Gokarna there are references to the peaks of Debasabha and Vaidurya, both unidentified. ‘Surashtra country’ figures clearly in this section after Gokarna and the coastal place of Prabhasa is mentioned again. Reference is made to the *Ujjayanta* hill which is unidentified but may represent the Junagarh hill which is still considered sacred in various ways. Finally, there is a reference to *Dvaravati* or Dwaraka and the association of ‘illustrious Krishna’ with it.

The section 89 of the *Vana Parva* begins with the ‘country of the Anarttas’ and the Narmada flowing through it. The Vaidurya peak is supposed to be in this area, along with the mountains of Mainaka and Asita and the lake called Punya (all unidentified). “ Here also is the region called Jamvu-Marga” inhabited by birds, deer and ascetics. Jamvu-Marga was apparently a forested tract somewhere in the bordering area of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.. There is an abrupt reference to Gangadwara at this point, although in the section 90, Gangadwara is described as “the spot where the Ganga rushes past cleaving the foremost mountain which is frequented by the Gandharvas and Yakshas and Rakshasas and Apsaras and inhabited by hunters and Kinnaras”. Reference is also made in the section 89 to ‘the well-known woods of Saindhava’, meaning possibly some woodland in Sindh. The section 89 ends with a further reference to Pushkara.

The section 90 deals with the ‘tirthas that lie to the north’, beginning with the Sarasvati.

“In that region is the highly sacred Sarasvati abounding in tirthas and with banks easy of descent”... which is ever worshipped by the god, where, in days of yore, the Valikhilyas performed sacrifices”

The Drishadvati has been described as a “well-known river productive of great merit.

The Yamuna has been described as ‘impetuous’ but curiously, ‘ocean-going’. Kanakhala is mentioned again here. More important is the reference to *Vadari ashrama* or the pilgrim spot of Badrinath in the Himalayas.

There is reference to “Prabhasa and other tirthas, Mahendra and other hills, Ganga and other rivers, and Plaksha and other gigantic trees” in the section 93. This is followed by references to Nimisha on the Gomati and Prayaga, but perhaps more intriguing is the reference to *Mahidhara*, in which region are a hill called *Gayasura* and a river named Mahanadi. The sacredness of Plaksha tree (*Ficus religiosa* or banyan tree) is clearly acknowledged here. The reference to Gayasura is a positive proof that Gaya had attained its sacredness by now.

In the section 104 the course of the Kausiki or modern Kosi river is alluded to, but the notion that it “came to the sea where the river Ganga falls into it” is wrong. More interesting is the mention of the “shores of the sea where the Kalinga tribes dwell” and through which passes the Vaitarini river. In the same section, reference is made to Mahendra hill southwest of modern Tirunelveli in Tamilnadu. The section 108 refers to the Godavari, “a river that falls directly into the sea” and reaches the sea “in the Dravida land”. From here, the scene abruptly shifts to Surparaka, and Prabhasa, the latter described as “the sacred landing place on the coast of the sea”.

One gets a detailed mention of the Sarasvati in the section 130, and that is followed by references to “the sacred spot known by the name of Sindhu”, Prabhasa, Vishnupada, sacred river Vipasha and the sacred region of Kashmir and the gate or the entry area of *Manasa Sarovara*. The gate of Videha or the Mithila region has been named *Vatikhanda*. The sacred stream of Vitasta is mentioned along with the Yamuna and the Mandara mountain which is supposedly “inhabited by the Yakshas, Manibhadra and Kuvera”. The Mandara mountain is mentioned again in the section 141, but the mention of the ‘mighty and beautiful river Alakananda’ in this context seems to suggest that the usual identification of the Mandara hill with a hill near Deoghar may not be applicable here. In *Vana Parva*, one has to take cognizance of the description of the river Sarasvati in its section 130 :

“Here is the beautiful and sacred river, Saraswati, full of water, and here ... is the spot known as Vinasana, or the place where the Saraswati disappeared. Here is the gate of the kingdom of Nishadas and it is from hatred for them that the Saraswati entered into the earth in order that the Nishadas might not see her. Here too is the sacred region of Charmodveda where the Saraswati once more became visible. And here she is joined by other sacred rivers running seawards”.

S.M.Bharadwaj in his *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: a Study in Cultural Geography* (1973, pp.31ff) discusses the distribution of sacred spots in the Mahabharata and the implications of this distribution. According to him, the following observations may be made among a

plethora of other observations. There is a general association of *tirthas* with water, although there is no hard and fast rule in this regard. The sacred spots are also distributed throughout much of the country, although in certain areas there may not be any such spot. However, I shall not draw any cultural inference from the absence of sacred spots in certain pockets, as Bharadwaj does. It is the general pan-Indian distribution and not its absence in certain pockets which is significant. Bharadwaj also notes certain clustering of sacred places, e.g. the Doab, the Sarasvati valley, etc. To me, such clusterings are not particularly important. The fact that by the time the Mahabharata was composed, virtually the whole of the subcontinent from the Himalayas to the deep south was dotted with sacred sites. This geographical picture tallies well with the pan-Indian distribution of states taking sides or remaining neutral in the Pandava-Kaurava struggle for power. I have argued that the latter distribution fits well the general historical image of India before the period of the sixteen *Mahajanapadas*, i.e. a general span of time reaching roughly 1000 BC or incorporating the first 3 or 4 centuries of the first millennium BC.

In my *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain : the Upper Ganga* (2007) I tried to assess the probable antiquity of the sacredness of the Uttarakhand Himalayas. The argument was as follows.

Among the major entry points to the Himalayas in this sector, the westernmost one is at Kalsi where the upper course of the Yamuna has formed an approach route, the earliest evidence of which is marked by the site of an Asokan edict at the spot where the Yamuna enters the plain. This approach follows the Yamuna till the Painted Grey Ware site of Purola in the upper reaches of the valley. Moving east, there is an entry at Haridwar, and towards Rishikesh and not far from Haridwar, is a Painted Grey Ware site. In the outskirts of Srinagar, roughly half-way towards Badrinath from Rishikesh, there is also a Painted Grey Ware site. It is also important to add that the plain across the Ganga in the shadow of the Manasa Devi hill at Haridwar has yielded painted pottery of the Harappan tradition, and that there are sites of the Ochre Coloured Pottery and painted pottery of the Harappan tradition in the Saharanpur plain at the foot of the range where Kalsi is located. The third entry further east is by Kotdwar near Najibabad. Kotdwar is linked with Pauri, from where it is possible to join the Rishikesh-Badrinath route via Srinagar. The Najibabad sector also possesses Painted Grey Ware. The fourth entry is through Kashipur which has a rich Painted Grey Ware site near it and there are also sites with the painted pottery of the Harappan tradition in this area. The fifth major entry, further to the east, is from Tanakpur which is connected with the Champawat and Pithoragarh sectors. A few kilometres west of Tanakpur, there is a Buddhist stupa site of c.2nd

century BC, and from somewhere in Pithoragarh, copper anthropomorphs, which are considered inseparable parts of the upper Gangetic valley 'Copper Hoards' and have to be considered related to the late Harappan tradition after the discoveries at Sinoli, have been reported. It is also crucial to note that Pithoragarh is located on the way to Manas Sarovar.

The Uttarakhand Himalayas are a land of steep V-shaped valleys with little cultivable lands either at the valley-bottoms or on their sides. The question which has to be asked is why the Painted Grey Ware settlers were moving into this area along well-defined routes oriented to some pilgrim centres? Was there any awareness of the sacred character of this zone among the people of the Copper Hoard/late Harappan tradition in the plains? There is as yet no valid pre-Painted Grey Ware archaeological evidence except the occurrence of copper anthropomorphs in Pithoragarh. As far as the Painted Grey Ware is concerned, the evidence is unequivocal: from the Uttarkashi sector (cf. Purola) to Haridwar entry and Srinagar the Painted Grey Ware people moved deep into the Uttarakhand Himalayas, particularly towards Badrinath which looms large in the Indian sacred geography. There is no independent date of the Painted Grey Ware from this sector but a date around 1000 BC should not be unacceptable, providing a clue to the time when the sacred character

of the geography of this part of the Himalayas may be assumed to have acquired a clear profile.

It is on the basis of the above-mentioned series of arguments that I propose that the *tirtha Yatra* section of *Vana Parva* with its clear delineation of sacred spots from the Himalayas to the deep south is likely to reflect a geographical vision of India around 1000 BC, a conclusion I reached also on the basis of Pargiter's political map of India at the time of the Mahabharata war.

In various forms and quantities the geographical data are scattered throughout the Mahabharata, but for a concise mass of data describing the land, one has turn to the section 9 of Book VI or *Bhishma Parva* : seven *Kala* mountains and many other 'smaller mountains inhabited by barbarous tribes' ; 142 rivers and about 208 'provinces' and 'tribes'. A good many of them are not identifiable, and the occurrence of names such as *Chinas*, *Sakas*, *Yavanas* , *Hunas* and *Parasikas* seems to evoke basically an uncertain time-bracket but not before the late centuries BC and early centuries AD. There is, however, nothing conclusive about this assertion. For example, in view of the Asokan or the third century BC Indian familiarity with the Mediterranean world, there is no reason why the Indian knowledge of the *Parasikas* or the *Sakas* and *Yavanas* cannot date from a period earlier than the late centuries BC. The location of the Asokan edicts at Takht-i-Bahi and Manserah, both oriented to the route

towards central Asia, may even imply that the Indian knowledge of the *Chinas* is pre-Asokan. On the other hand, one would hesitate to ascribe a similar antiquity to the term *Hunas* or *Tomaras*, the latter also occurring in the list of people of the section 9 of *Bhishma Parva* . However, issues such as these are unlikely to be satisfactorily settled in the present stage of our knowledge.

In a massive text such as the *Mahabharata* there are possibly various chronological layers of geographical data, some acquired early in the sequence and some later. A general chronological assessment which should be applicable to all these layers is not possible, but on the whole a beginning around 1000 BC will not be out of place for the composition of the text as it has come down to us. Our argument is based entirely on the geographical data and the extent to which this relates to the other categories of evidence has to be separately examined.