

THE CONCEPT OF *ANŪSĀMSYA* IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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There has been some talk here about 'being and becoming', but my paper is not really about being and becoming. I would say more if at all it did concern the totality of life. I would like to say something on 'being and becoming' just to make a beginning, but not as a philosophical concept. What I would like to point out is that the *Mahābhārata* has been in our life, and in many aspects of our life it serves as a kind of source for becoming — in art, for example, we have used the *Mahābhārata* very often as source for becoming — in arts it has been the inspiration for new creations. I think it can also be a source for thinking. We have not used the *Mahābhārata* till now for deriving inspiration for new thoughts. The *Mahābhārata* is, indeed, a very thoughtful work. It is not just an epic; in fact, one of the criticisms raised against it has been that it is too thoughtful. It cannot be an epic; it contains too much of thought. Anyway my aim here will be to present before you a kind of central thought, a central concept, a central moral concept in the *Mahābhārata*, namely, the concept of *anūśāmsya*. It has been a kind of discovery for me, a kind of voyage of discovery for me, to understand what *anūśāmsya* means in the *Mahābhārata*; and if I could convey to you a little bit of the excitement which I felt in getting to know this concept, I would be very happy. I will not say that I have really been able to work out a philosophy of this concept; nor do I intend to do it here. *Anūśāmsya* is a new word. Many of you may not have heard of it as much as you may have heard of, say, *ahimsā*. I would like to point out here that the *Mahābhārata* is very rich in moral terms. I hope our modern languages will learn from the richness of its moral discourses. We do not have in our languages such richness; and one concept which may provide them with that kind of richness is the concept of *anūśāmsya*.

I need not emphasise that the *Mahābhārata* embodies one of the greatest adventures of the human spirit into the field of the perennial moral question: What should I do; what should we do? Its explorations are as meaningful today as they ever were. The question, as we know, has no easy, simple answer, for, human action is a field beset with dilemmas. Dharma represents the area of human actions and the codes and norms governing them. It is also inherently an area of *dharmaśāstra*, that is of a dilemma. Supremely aware of the complexity of the moral problem of action, the *Mahābhārata* comes up with more than one supreme moral principles, *paramadharmas*, that should guide our action. One of these is *ānṛśāmsya*, often extolled as *para dharmaḥ* in the epic. My attempt here will be to make a small essay in probing into the meaning of *ānṛśāmsya*, especially in relation to another supreme moral principle, namely, *ahimsā*, which is extolled in the epic as *paramo dharmaḥ*. We all know the story in the *Aranyakaparvan* of the little pond guarded by a Yakṣa (III. 296-298). A drink from that pond killed all the Pāṇḍava brothers except Yudhiṣṭhira who brought them all back to life because he could answer the Yakṣa's questions. One of the questions which the Yakṣa had asked was: *kaś ca dharmaḥ paro loke* (III. 297. 54) (What is the highest dharma for the people living in this world?); and Yudhiṣṭhira answered: *ānṛśāmsyaḥ paro dharmaḥ* (III. 297. 55) (*ānṛśāmsya* is the supreme dharma). The Yakṣa was pleased and expressed willingness to give life back to one of the four Pāṇḍavas whomsoever Yudhiṣṭhira chose. Yudhiṣṭhira is said to have actually practised *ānṛśāmsya* in asking for the life of Nakula, his step-brother. The Yakṣa, who was the god of *dharma* himself, tried to dissuade Yudhiṣṭhira pointing out that Nakula was not really the one most dear to him nor the bravest nor the most powerful, hence not the most useful of the brothers, nor even a real brother; but Yudhiṣṭhira persisted. He was unwilling to give up his *dharma* i. e. *ānṛśāmsya*. He wanted that both his mothers, Kuntī and Mādri, should each have a son living, and he insisted that what he said was *ānṛśāmsya* (III.

297. 65-73). I think *ānṛśāmsya* is the supreme *dharma* from the highest point of view. Therefore, the Yakṣa let Nakula live again.

The Yakṣa-Yudhiṣṭhira story gives us some hints about what *ānṛśāmsya* means. The hints are enlarged and deepened all over the epic. The *Mahābhārata* seeks to unravel the meaning of moral concepts through a living story, through the action itself in which the concepts are embedded. It is there that we must look for the meaning of *ānṛśāmsya*, specially because, outside the *Mahābhārata*, whether in the literature preceding the *Mahābhārata* or following it, the word hardly has the supreme significance it has in the epic. Literally the word *ānṛśāmsya* means the state, the attitude, of not being *ṛśāmsa*. The word *ṛśāmsa* is common enough in Sanskrit literature; it literally means one who injures man, from which other meanings follow such as mischievous, noxious, cruel, base, vile, malicious. *Ānṛśāmsya* would then mean an attitude where such qualities are absent. But the word has more than a negative connotation; it signifies good-will, a fellow feeling, a deep sense of the other. A word which occurs often with *ānṛśāmsya*, therefore, is *anukrośa*, to cry with another, to feel another's pain. All these meanings are brought out in the epic stories, and through those stories themselves I will give some illustrations. I will not go into the details for I assume that most of the stories are quite well-known. But I will still give you some hints so that you can be reminded of those stories and the context in which the word occurs.

Damayantī, looking for Nala after he had abandoned her alone, helpless in a forest, tells the royal messengers to announce the following message, wherever they go: *ānṛśāmsyaḥ paro dharmas tvatta eva hi me śrutam* (III. 67. 15) (It was from you that I had heard that *ānṛśāmsya* was the supreme *dharma*). Now why is it that you have forgotten that *ānṛśāmsya* of which you yourself had talked to me. She also speaks of his *anukrośa* (III. 67. 14). *Ānṛśāmsya* and *anukrośa* seem to go together,

Really when Kali entered Nala (III. 56. 3), it was the will to act on *ānṛśāmsya* that Nala lost. This is what the story seems to suggest.

Another story which is told by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira in order to illustrate the meaning of *ānṛśāmsya* is about a parrot who lived in the vault of a tree which sheltered him giving him food and much happiness (XIII. 5). The poisonous arrow of a hunter once strikes the tree, and it withers away. All creatures living on it leave it but not the parrot who refuses to move away. This, Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira, is *ānṛśāmsya* and *anukrośā*. This is perhaps an extreme example, but it helps to clinch the point. Similar is the episode at the end of the *Mahābhārata* (XVII. 3. 7-20) in which Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to go to the heaven when the dog, who had been his lone companion, was refused entry. This again was out of *ānṛśāmsya*, and the dog significantly was Dharma himself.

Now a little bit about how I would distinguish *ānṛśāmsya* from *ahimsā* which latter is another central idea in the *Mahābhārata*. It is, indeed, one of the facts responsible for the continuing appeal of the *Mahābhārata* that its dynamic reflection on *dharma* is expressed through a vital living story. The *Mahābhārata* calls itself a *dharmasāhitiā* i. e. compendium of *dharma*, but it is unlike all other *dharmasāhitiās* of which we have no dearth. We have nineteen *dharmasāhitiās*, most of them still lying unpublished. But this particular *dharmasāhitiā* is quite unlike them, because it treats of *dharma* through a living story, through actual situations which make its various concepts come to life. What gives depth to this *sāhitiā* is the poignant manner in which the reflection on *dharma* is woven into the very texture of the story of the epic. This weaving, many critics think, was historically an afterthought. I do not want to enter into the merits of this criticism except to remark that the *Mahābhārata* will surely lose much of its richness without this so-called afterthought. It has also been characterised as an inveterate obsession with *dharma*. Even if it were really possible to free the text of the

epic of this element I would think that it should be there. We should regard it as something inherent to the epic itself. Today we have a critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*. It is a kind of cultural myth that the original, the pristine, text is somehow always better than what emerges after something accrues to it later; the pristine text is believed to somehow lose its power through such accretions. But this is not what the Indian tradition shows. We have now a critical text which is not really very different from the text that we have had. The scholars who have constituted the critical text have said so themselves. We may, therefore, stick to the old text which is a very rich text. Secondly, we have been talking of the various formulations of the *Mahābhārata*. But, for certain purposes, I would go back to the formulation according to which Vyāsa dictated the text to Gaṇeśa, and thereby get back the text directly from the author himself.

What fascinates us in the *Mahābhārata* today is not the mere preponderance of *dharma* in it but its spirit of open-minded enquiry into *dharma*. The *Mahābhārata* presents before us the deepest moments of crisis in human life both at the personal and the social levels, when the question, what is *dharma*?, becomes a truly urgent question. The *Mahābhārata* suggests no simple solutions of the kind which mankind has always sought, for example, in revelation. Even a revelation, the *Mahābhārata* is aware, has to be constantly examined and re-examined. We must interpret a revelation in our own life, and the *Mahābhārata* is constantly interpreting the old thoughts which have come down from what was considered a revealed text.

It has been said that the spirit of questioning is probably something which comes with the *Mahābhārata*. Now, if the *Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra* is older than the *Mahābhārata*, it certainly has that kind of spirit. I was surprised to find that the passage which reflected this spirit was not usually much quoted; so probably I can interest you in it. In answer to the question, what is *dharma*?, *Āpastamba* makes the following remarkable

statement (I. 7. 6-8) : *Dharma* and *adharma* themselves do not go about telling us what they are. Nor are there gods or gandharvas or pitrs who can tell us, this is *dharma* and this is *adharma*. The answer which Āpastamba himself gives to the question is that we should let the tradition decide. The tradition as we have it should be the source of our knowledge of *dharma*; we should conduct our own actions according to the tradition that we have. But if we once admit questioning into the realm of *dharma*, not only revelations but even traditions will be questioned.

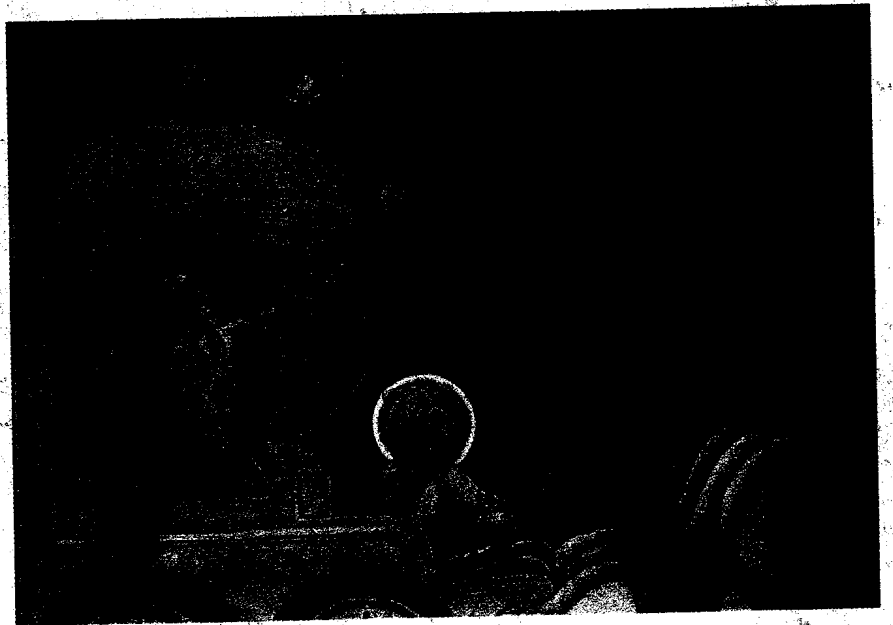
The milieu which the *Mahābhārata* presents does have occasions where the tradition is very seriously questioned. I will give you an example. There is in the *Sāntiparvan* the story of Tuladhāra and Jājali (XII. 253-256). Tuladhāra is an honest merchant famed for his knowledge of *dharma*. A sage named Jājali, who wants to know what *dharma* is, is advised by *ākāśavāṇī* to go to Tuladhāra. Tuladhāra is a person who is very critical of tradition. He does not find any rationale behind traditional practices. They are, according to him, accidental accumulations like pieces of wood which accidentally enter a river at various points and come together somewhere down the stream. It would be absurd to say that there was some rational reason either for their entering the stream of the river or for their coming together to form a concourse. There can perhaps be no more devastating criticism of tradition than this. The questioning is then routed into the discussion of the ideals of renunciation and *ahimsā*. Tuladhāra criticises the social practices which involve *himsā*. What he preaches is withdrawal, an *udāsīna bhāva*. One should be like the blind, the deaf, withdrawn from the world, living in himself, looking at all beings with equanimity, desiring nothing, hating none; only thus can one attain *Brahman*.

Now it is here that I would like to draw your attention to the distinction between *ahimsā* and *ānṛśāmsya*. *Ahimsā* is the ideal which Tuladhāra is actually trying to preach. This is an ideal which is central to what is called the *nivṛttimārga*, the

mārga of *sainmyāsa*. But the *Mahābhārata* is, if anything, a great text of the *pravṛttimārga*. It argues for the *pravṛttimārga*, though it is also very much attracted by *nivṛttimārga* and *ahimsā*. But total *ahimsā* cannot be practised, because the human condition is such that some *himsā* has to be there for the practice of both the *grhasādhadharma* and the *rājadharma*. Therefore, what the *Mahābhārata* preaches is not *ahimsā* but *ānṛśāmsya*. This latter is one of the most outstanding moral concepts in the epic. *Ānṛśāmsya* is *ahimsā* adapted to the *pravṛttimārga*.



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Revisited



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Under its programme 'Akademi organized an International Seminar on *Mahābhārata*' in New Delhi on February 17-20, 1990. The Seminar rightly claimed, is no dim and very much present in the flow of Indian thought, especially, it is the Book through which the Indian people reflects, in a highly animated manner, the original words of Vyāsa (*mahatvād bhāratatvāc ca Mahābhārata*) on account of 'Indianness'. Naturally engendered a lively interest in India and abroad.

The Seminar was divided into six themes were mainly discussed: (1) Organic growth of the *Mahābhārata*; (2) The *Mahābhārata* as a totality of life; (3) The socio-cultural significance of the *Mahābhārata* as an epic; (4) The *Mahābhārata* in art; (5) The impact of the *Mahābhārata* abroad; and (6) The attitude towards the *Mahābhārata*. These sessions were presided by Professor R. N. Dandekar, Prof. Chandra, Dr. (Smt.) Kapila and Shri S. H. Vatsyayan. The discussion that the various papers were presented and the discussions were provocative, and contributed to the cumulative enrichment of the study of the *Mahābhārata*.

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। शुद्धोदन के दरबार का वह दृश्य है, जिसमें
माया के स्वप्न की व्याख्या कर रहे हैं। इसे
में यह लेखन-कला का संभवतः सबसे प्राचीन



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