**Dissolution of Time and Space: Employment of Narrative Devices of *Mahabharata***

The epic is traditionally ascribed to the sage Vyāsa, who is also a major character in the epic. Vyāsa described it as being itihāsa (history). He also describes the Guru-shishya parampara, which traces all great teachers and their students of the Vedic times. The first section of the Mahābhārata states that it was Gaṇeśa who wrote down the text to Vyasa's dictation.

The epic employs the story within a story structure, otherwise known as frame-tales, popular in many Indian religious and non-religious works. It is first recited at Takshashila by the sage Vaiśampāyana, a disciple of Vyāsa, to the King Janamejaya who is the great-grandson of the Pāṇḍava prince Arjuna. The story is then recited again by a professional storyteller named Ugraśrava Sauti, many years later, to an assemblage of sages performing the 12-year sacrifice for the king Saunaka Kulapati in the Naimiśa Forest.

**First Narration:**

Although it challenges our modern ‟sensibilities and credulity rather sharply, till quite recently, it was hardly a rarity to find people who had committed the entire text to memory and were ready to give a non-stop recital of it. William Dalrymple records a modern instance. He writes: “Even today, when the wandering bard has followed the Indian lion into nearextinction --- killed off, in the case of the epic, by Hindi movies and national television -- - it is just possible, in very remote places, to find men who still know the epic. A friend of mine, an anthropologist, met one such wandering storyteller in a little village of Andhrapradesh. My friend asked him how he could remember so huge a poem. The bard  
replied that in his mind each stanza was written on a pebble. The pile of pebble lay before  
him always …”.

At the snake sacrifice (sarpasatra) Janamejaya requested Krsnadvaipayana Vyasa to  
narrate the story of the great battle that his ancestors fought. It was a prevalent custom to  
narrate stories on the occasions of great sacrifices. “Sir, you had seen”, said Janamejaya  
to Vyasa, “with your own eyes both the Kurus and the Pandavas. I want to listen to their  
life stories (carita) narrated by you (kathyamanam tvaya).Even though they could  
smoothly achieve all their undertakings (aklistakarmanam), how this difference grew  
between them and how this all destroying (bhutantakaranam) war arose, tell me the  
history (vrtta) of all these”. Vyasa then asked one of his students, Vaisampayana, who  
had accompanied him to the sacrifice to narrate the story.

It was also a fit and proper occasion for the narration. It was natural for a descendent of a great ruling family to be interested in listening to a firsthand account of the great and momentous battle of self destruction his ancestors fought. Moreover, the snake sacrifice itself was a part of the history of the Bharata family; a continuation of the family saga. That way the occasion of the first narration of the Mahabharata was thematically connected with the narrative. Besides this, there was another bond --- violence,  
retribution and revenge. Violence and revenge are among the principal motifs of the story  
of the Mahabharata. The snake sacrifice too was occasioned by a sequence of violence  
and revenge --- king Parkshit violating the sanctity of a hermitage, the death of Parikshit  
by snake bite, Janamejay‟s resolve to avenge the death of his father. And further deep  
down in the background, a very remote background, there lies another story of sibling  
rivalry and treachery, the rivalry between the sisters Kadru and Vinata, the mothers of the  
snakes and birds respectively, leading to the final sequel of the snake sacrifice.

**Second Narration:**

*The Mahabharata* opens with the description of the arrival of Sauti at Saunaka’s hermitage and his acceding to the request of the sages to narrate (pravaksyami) the wonderful creation (adbhutakarmanah) of Vyasa. This innocuous opening of a tale of violence in a hermitage, an abode of peace and contemplation and far removed from the hub of politics where ambitions and egos collided in wasteful frictions, is worth noting. We will revert back to this point in the last section of our presentation. It is also worth noting that Sauti Ugrasrava is the “primary‟ narrator of the text of the *Mahabharata*. The text begins by challenging the simple chronological order. It opens with a later event, and an event not really related to the main story, the arrival of Sauti to the satra of Saunaka. And then it leisurely weaves the matrix of the main story. We will again come back to this flashback technique in the text.

**Criticism against the Narration:**

The text has been described by some early 20th-century western Indologists as unstructured and chaotic. Hermann Oldenberg supposed that the original poem must once have carried an immense "tragic force" but dismissed the full text as a "horrible chaos." Moritz Winternitz (Geschichte der indischen Literatur 1909) considered that "only unpoetical theologists and clumsy scribes" could have lumped the parts of disparate origin into an unordered whole.

**Universal and the Particular: Dissolution of Time and Space**

What does the narrative structure of the text signify? We venture to suggest that the  
narrative devices are not just clever and novel tools to stir and hold the interest of the  
listeners/readers. There is a purpose beyond that. The structure and the devices have been  
consciously chosen to serve a consciously chosen end. The purpose is to convey the  
message that the story basically is one of universal import. At the apparent level it is a  
story of a specific time-space locus. It is obviously time-space specific; it does not have  
the „once upon a time‟ air or form. It concerns the history of a particular dynasty and it  
shares the characteristics of vamsa literature. Yet it does not lie trapped and frozen in its  
defined locus. The form and the narrative devices signify the breaking of boundaries of  
the time-space context of the narrative.

Conscious efforts to symbolize the dissolving of time-space boundaries and the linearity of time are important elements of the modes of narrations in the Mahabharata. The intention is clear. The dead set linearity of time has been defied to convey that the story although located in a particular timeframe, is not a prisoner of that timeframe; its significance overflows the boundaries of that particular timeframe and carries it to the domain of universality. It thus appears that the narrative modes and devices were consciously chosen to convey that the story of the Mahabharata was of universal import and validity.