

## Electronic *Mahābhārata* project

This report details progress during the year April 2002 to March 2003, the third and final year of the project.

My two assistants in Pune, Kirti Sameer Kulkarni and Shilpa Bidnoor, have continued to carry out computer-based analyses of the repeated phraseology occurring in the *Mahābhārata*. Following on from their earlier general investigation of representative samples of the text — specific passages selected as typifying the various recognisable stylistic components of the epic, such as earlier and later battle narrative, central non-battle narrative, inserted tales, etc. — they have now branched out in two somewhat different directions. Kirti has concentrated on an examination of the battle books for signs of earlier and later narrative elements, whilst Shilpa has focused on ‘grammatical formulae’ — patterns of grammar that recur frequently even though the actual words used may differ.

It is worth reporting that both assistants were invited to attend and make presentations at the All-India Oriental Conference held in Puri, Orissa, in 2002. In the event domestic constraints prevented Kirti from making the trip, but Shilpa was able to attend and to present a résumé of her findings so far. She has told me that a number of scholars attending the panel expressed interest in what she was doing, and offered helpful suggestions.

As before, I have exercised supervision over the assistants’ work via email for the most part, but I visited Pune in July 2002 and again in March 2003. These visits offer a chance for face-to-face discussions (though enormously useful, email has its limitations); in addition they give me the opportunity to give the assistants further training in the techniques they need to use, such as complex Unix regular expressions. The visit in 2003 also marked the formal conclusion of the project, and it was necessary to devote quite a lot of time to discussing plans for the future.

The project has yielded a great deal of information on the use of diction in the *Mahābhārata*. As I noted in my previous report, however, the patterns of distribution have proved to be more complex than any of us had initially suspected: there is no simple correlation between highly repetitive ‘bardic’ diction and evidently early composition. The most valuable single strand of the project has proved to be Shilpa’s work on patterns of grammar; her study of this has intersected in a number of ways with the work currently being done in Cambridge by my research student Tiffany Schofield, who is approaching the text from the quite different direction of analysing favoured metrical word-patterns. An informal collaboration between these two has already begun, and will continue during the coming months. Though funding from the U.K. has now ceased, Shilpa intends to pursue her study with the aim of securing a Ph.D. (under the official supervision of my Pune colleague, Prof. Saroja Bhate). The intention is that her work and Tiffany’s will both form part of a monograph jointly authored by the two of them and myself. However, writing up for publication will probably have to be deferred until both of them have completed their Ph.D.s.

Kirti’s collaboration in the project has been less successful. Though she has continued to produce some useful analyses of both diction and narrative elements in the battle books of the *Mahābhārata*, she has become increasingly uncomfortable with a subject that yields little in the way of clear-cut, black-and-white results. She too intends to continue her study of the *Mahābhārata* as a Ph.D. student, but she will shift her attention from issues of diction to more straightforward linguistic topics.

In conclusion, I wish to express my gratitude to the Society for South Asian Studies for their generous support of this project, which has allowed an extended collaboration across continents and encouraged the application of modern IT techniques to an ancient text. Formal publication of the project results will take some further time, but those involved in the work have already gained valuable experience which would not otherwise have been possible.

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