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p. 258 Although the epice age in India must necessarily be an epoc too elastic for historical purposes, since it is not at all certain that any one epic statement may not be many years later than another, yet the effect of this now trite observation is to exaggerate the relation between isolated cases and the epic mass. It is true that we have additions to the greater epic which are hundreds of years later than the mass, but it is possible from the mass to get an impression which will represent conditions on the whole, and we are tolerably sure that this whole is bounded by the space of from three to four centuries, since external evidence, inscriptions, the Greek reference to the Indian Homer, etc., prove that the great epic in nearly its present extent existed before the fourth century A.D., and negative evidence in India makes it improbable that any epic existed earlier than the fourth century B.C. Since the length of the work requires the assumption of several centuries for its completion as it now exists, the centuries immediately preceding our era seem to be those to which it is most reasonable on general grounds to assign the composition of the Mahābhārata as a whole. This agrees best also with the external data to which reference has been made in the preceding chapter.

Again it is not unreasonable to assume a certain connexion between the two epics. We cannot think of them as isolated productions of the western and eastern parts of the country. That they represent in general a western and eastern cycle of ^{epic} material is true, but there are sundry considerations which make it impossible to believe that they arose independently. In the first place, while the metre of the Mahābhārata represents a less polished verse than that of the Rāmāyana, that metre is so nearly that of the Rāmāyana, especially in its later portions, that the two are practically the same. Secondly, there are many tales, genealogies, fables, etc., which are identical in the two epics. Thirdly, the phraseology of the two epics is so cast in one mould that hundreds of verse-tags, phrases, similes, etc., are verbally the same. These correspond to the iterata found in Homeric verse, and indicate as do the Grecian parallels that there was a certain common epic body of phrase and fable. Fourthly, the economic conditions and social usages as represented in the two epics are sufficiently alike for us to be able to draw on both together for a picture of the times showing few discordant elements. In detail, the references in the Rāmāyana betray a later or more advanced stage in some particulars, such as architectural elaborations, plans of temples, etc., which may be due to a higher civilisation; but in general the life of priest, noble, people of the lower castes, slaves, etc., is the same in both epics, and except for the use of caste-names does not differ from that exhibited by Buddhistic works of the same period.

p. 261 Before discussing the conditions found in the epics it will be necessary to mention adversely two hypotheses in regard to the time in which the great epic was composed. Both are exaggerations, based partly on neglect of pertinent data, of views already considered. The first of these is the theory that the Mahābhārata is a product of our middle ages, that is, that it was a later output of the renaissance. The discovery of inscriptions showing that the epic was essentially the same as it is now centuries before the middle ages of course disproves this ill-considered theory, but the great work in which it is elaborated will always remain a mine of useful information. (Adolf Holtzmann, Das Mahabharata und seine Teile (1892-95)). On the other hand, the theory that the Mahabharata is a work of the fifth or sixth century before Christ and the product of one author who composed it as a law-book (J. Dahlmann, Das Mahabharata als Epos und Rechtsbuch (1895); and Genesis des Mahabharata (1899)), is a caricature of a ~~fruit~~ fruitful idea of the late Professor Buhler. As it violates every known principle of historical criticism it may be passed over without discussion.

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