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The Mahābhārata and the revival of Brahmanism

abstract

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a need to rethink the history of Brahmanism. Various factors indicate that it makes sense to think that this tradition underwent a major transformation during the final centuries preceding the Common Era. It seems no longer possible to look upon brahmanical culture and religion as the more or less universal background of most other cultural and religious developments in the Indian subcontinent. Quite on the contrary, Brahmanism presents itself as initially belonging to a geographically limited area, with its heartland in the middle and western parts of the Gangetic plain. It was in this region that Brahmanism was at that time the culture of a largely hereditary class of priests, the Brahmins, who derived their livelihood and special position in society from their close association with the local rulers. This situation changed. The most plausible hypothesis as to the reasons of this change sees a link with the political unification of northern India, begun by the Nandas and continued by the Mauryas. Both the Nandas and the Mauryas had their home base in the region called Magadha and had no particular interest in Brahmins and their sacrificial tradition. As a result Brahmanism as an institution was under threat; it either had to face disappearance, or reinvent itself. It did the latter. Brahmanism underwent a transformation which enabled it to survive and ultimately flourish in changed circumstances.

It will be argued in this paper that the *Mahābhārata* can be looked upon as an element in this brahmanical project. Far from being a mere collection of stories and general good advice, it was an instrument in the hands of a group of people who were determined to change the world in a way that suited them, and

who to a considerable extent succeeded in doing so during the centuries that lay ahead.