

My Meeting With Mahabharata

By BORIS SMIRNOV

THE medical profession has established itself as a kind of tradition in our family. My father had worked as a village physician for 18 years and only towards the later years of his life moved into town. Three of his four sons—of whom I am one—decided to take up their father's profession.

The three of us graduated from the Army Medical College in Petrograd, now Leningrad. Besides taking a keen interest in everything connected with medicine, all members of our family were very fond of literature. My brothers wrote poems; my mother liked to write stories and some of them were published in youth magazines. She also had a great love for folklore in which I too began to take great interest. Thus, already in the days of my youth a love for works of folklore had been born in me.

In the days when our century was still young, most of the educated families were afflicted with a sort of "language cult", which meant that everyone constantly watched everybody else's speech, whether it was correct and good and that no words were mispronounced or wrongly stressed. A game, not yet forgotten today, was very popular in those days: a certain quotation was cited, usually some lines of verse, and you had to name the author and the title of the work from which the quotation was taken. This game developed in us a feeling for language, improved speech and instilled in us a profound love for literature.

Physician

But I also felt greatly attracted to the life of a physician, as already in my schooldays I got into the habit of helping my father while he mixed medicines, solutions, etc. What attracted me most in medicine was the clearness of the practical purpose. And I finally decided that it was impossible to receive a medical education without attending a special institution, whereas the humanities could be studied independently.

I was in my fifth year at the Army Medical College when the First World War broke out, as a result of which our curriculum was shortened and we graduated in December 1914, ahead of time.

Three years went by. In March 1918, while passing through Kiev, I accidentally dropped in at a second-hand book-store and came across a manual of the Sanskrit language by Knauer, a professor of Kiev University. By the time I had gained command of English, French and German and thought: "Why not study Sanskrit for a change?" So I bought the text-book. Thus, my first step in the study of Sanskrit was made.

Short Study

Time was short and I could only allot 30 minutes a day to Sanskrit, as my current work took up most of my time. However, when the winter of 1918-1919 began, I was already able to decipher some Sanskrit texts and, in particular, the poem "The Grandeur of Conjugal Faithfulness" ("Savitri" from the Third Book of the Mahabharata).

In the years that followed, my studies of Sanskrit were forced to the background as Russia was plunged into the Civil War. There was no time to spend on linguistic studies, as I was a physician in the Red Army. After the Civil War I could naturally spend more time on Sanskrit, although at that time I was working very intensively on my thesis, after the presentation of which I hoped to receive the position of assistant professor at the Kiev Medical College Chair for Neurotic Diseases.

I was lucky enough to come across the *Bhagavad Gita* published in the Devanagari script. Still greater success awaited me when I



One of the books of the Mahabharata translated by the author and his favourite souvenir, an Avalokitesvara statuette.

managed to acquire a dictionary in the following rather unusual way. As a result of a flood in Leningrad in 1930, some extremely rare books cropped up in second-hand book-stores. These books, previously kept in the basement of the Academy of Sciences library were considered damaged by the flood and consequently were sold.

Among them was the well-known Big Petersburg Dictionary by Bettling and Root, which had long since been listed in all catalogues of Oriental literature as "rarissime". So I bought one of these dictionaries bearing the stamp "damaged by the flood", but I must say that the stamp was the only noticeable trace left by it.

Now that the question of the dictionary was favourably solved, all other difficulties were of less importance. Besides the dictionary, I managed to acquire a Sanskrit manual written by Bueller (Stockholm, 1923).

My work had now become much more fruitful, although I prepared and submitted a candidate's and a doctor's thesis on medical subjects in the course of the 1930s. At the same time I studied all the literature on the *Gita*, which was available in the Saltykov-Schedrin Library in Leningrad, in the Library of the Leningrad Branch of the Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies and in the Moscow Lenin Library. The list of books is given in the second and seventh books of the series of translations from the Mahabharata.

Opportunity

During the Second World War I worked in Turkmenia and was often summoned to fly to different places to treat patients and perform neurosurgical operations. The time spent in flights was used on my Sanskrit studies and I must say that I could do a lot, considering that in those days hospital planes flew at a speed not exceeding 95 or 100 km. per hour.

From 1955 to 1963 the Turkmen Academy of Sciences printed a series of my translations of the Mahabharata. I translated altogether 20,000 *shloka*s or couplets. In the course of the same years, three of my articles on the Mahabharata, as well as four articles dealing with Indian philosophy for the Philosophical Encyclopaedia were printed.

INDIAN DISCS

By KRISHNA CHAITANYA

RAJASTHAN LYRICS BY SOUTHERN SINGER

BESIDES being incredibly beautiful in themselves, a Meera Bhajan or a Thyagaraja Kirtan, like a Bach chorale or a Sufi lyric, should be regarded as a window, a magic casement opening on the foam, not of perilous seas, but of great streams that originated in the distant past and have been flowing through the centuries.

The concept of God as the beloved of the soul emerged spontaneously as early as in Vedic poetry. One can weave a garland of verses from the Vedas as exquisite as the best offered by Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross centuries later. "What has become of our friendship, when without enmity we walked together? If he, your true ally, has offended you, still, Varuna, he is the friend whom once you loved. Cast all these stains away like loosened fetters, Varuna, and let us be your own beloved... Like the husband to the wife, may God, the upholder of the heavens, lord of all bliss, turn towards us... Your are ours and we are thine."

Exquisite Myth

But it is in the *Bhagavata* that the way of love finds the most exalted and most poetic elaboration. The story of the love of Krishna and the cowherd maidens of Gokul is spun here out of the loveliest material that nature can furnish, moonlight on the river, the scented breath of the night breeze flowing from the heart of the woods and the call of Krishna's flute heard by the maidens even in their sleep.

An exquisite myth of astonishing vitality was created by this great poem and as the centuries rolled by, its inspiration seemed in-

exhaustible, originating currents of mellifluous poetry in Lalasuka and Jayadeva in Sanskrit and innumerable poets of the regional languages, classical dances like Manipuri and Kathak, a great variety of folk dances, the exquisite miniature painting of the Rajput and Pahari schools, and the songs of Meera, the sixteenth century Rajput princess who abandoned the palace to wander among the humble and the lowly singing of a great love that could transform their lives as it had radiantly transformed hers.

An HMV disc (EALP 1297: Rs. 30) presents ten of the finest Meera Bhajans sung by M. S. Subbulakshmi, one of the foremost musicians of India.

Meera's legacy belongs to the folk heritage today. But this is because in India there has always been a continuous osmosis between the culture of the elite and the tradition of the people. The conceit and other stylistic peculiarities of the Kavya tradition linger in many of these lyrics. "Had I been a cuckoo I would sing sweetly when you come to the forest grazing the cattle. If only I were a fish, I would touch your feet as you bathe in the stream. If I were a pearl I would sparkle as a gem in your necklace. But being none of these, how am I to get close to you?"

This poetic mannerism unconsciously aligns the musical interpretation to a classical manner of a weight and complexity a shade too heavy for lyrical directness. But this is the only instance of the kind and it serves a useful purpose by being a foil against which the poetic and musical spontaneity of the other songs can be better relished.

These songs rove through light and shade, wintry desolation and vernal exaltation, in fact all the

moods that can express the derivative emotions (in the McDougallian sense) of the great focal upsurge of love. In "Come, dwell within mine eyes," the melody has an irresistibly ingratiating quality which reinforces the lyric's appeal. "I am the footmaiden of Hari" has a warm, sensuous exaltation which throbs deep below, like the swell of the bass deep below the woodwinds in a Mozart adagio.

The anklets jingle in ecstatic dancing in *Pag Ghunghru* while in *Mere to Giridhar* where Meera says she has no kin except Krishna, the melody exhales the profound repose of the spirit that has reached its haven. *Hari Tum Hara* with its refrain "Lord, take away pain from mankind," which was one of the favourite Bhajans of Gandhiji, is the concluding song of the disc.

Identification

Subbulakshmi's musicianship would have made the rendering flawlessly superb in any case. But actually the final result is something far greater, for she has been able to manage a complete identification with that frail princess of Mewar who poured out her heart in longing and ecstasy four centuries ago.

For over a decade of his career in South Indian films, the late M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was the idol of millions. An Angel disc (3 AECX 5509: Rs. 27.50) presents eleven of his most popular songs. The greatness of M.K.T. lay, far more than in the golden quality of his voice, in his sure grounding in classicism and in his ability to adapt himself to the peculiar demands of screen music without compromising that heritage. He could interpolate brilliant passages of Sargam singing without disrupting lyrical continuity. Quite a

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