

# And the Nobel goes to...Vargas Llosa

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The last time a South American writer got a Nobel Prize was in 1982 --- Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia. The last time a writer in the Spanish language won the Nobel Prize was in 1990 --- Octavio Paz from Mexico. This year the Swedish Academy has decided to add the Nobel feather in the cap of yet another Latin American writer. Mario Vargas Llosa from Peru has won it "for his cartography of the structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt and defeat."

While responding to the Nobel news at a press conference in New York, Vargas Llosa said, "Latin America seemed to be a land where there were only dictators, revolutionaries, and catastrophes. Now we know that Latin America can produce also artists, musicians, painters, thinkers and novelists." He can make such a boastful claim because of his involvement with "the boom generation" (comprising authors such as García Márquez, Julio Cortázar of Argentina and Carlos Fuentes of Mexico) that catapulted Latin America to the world literary scene in the 1960s. And he has done so not only in the capacity of a fiction writer but also in the role of a journalist, filmmaker, political activist, academic and critic.

Vargas Llosa is considered to be one of the most read Latin American writers, and he was being tipped to win the Nobel for quite some time now. He came close to winning the prize on several occasions, just as he came close to winning the Peruvian presidency in 1990 only to lose out to Alberto Fujimori. His defeat alienated him from the Peruvians who probably saw him a bit too Europeanised for Latin America. Taking his cue from writers such as Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar, Vargas Llosa left Peru for Europe at the age of 22 and spent much of his early writing career in the Old World. He worked as a journalist in Paris, language teacher in Spain and visiting professor in London. He got his PhD from the University of Madrid in 1976 for his dissertation on García Márquez. He eventually returned to Peru in the 1980s, and got involved in politics. An enthusiastic supporter of Fidel Castro in his early days, Vargas Llosa swerved from political left to political right to vie for the election from the conservative Democratic Front Movement (Fredemo) party.

Ironically, a writer, who got noticed for writing against the military academy in his first novel, *The Time of the Hero* (1963), and seeing hundreds of his books being burnt in public, loses his radical wings and opts for an economic view that highlights individual freedom and the role of a privileged educated leader in shaping civil society, an idea that he poses in his *El Hablador* (*The Storyteller*, 1987). Disenchanted with Peru, Vargas Llosa applied for and received Spanish citizenship in 1994. He is at present living in the US, teaching at Princeton University.

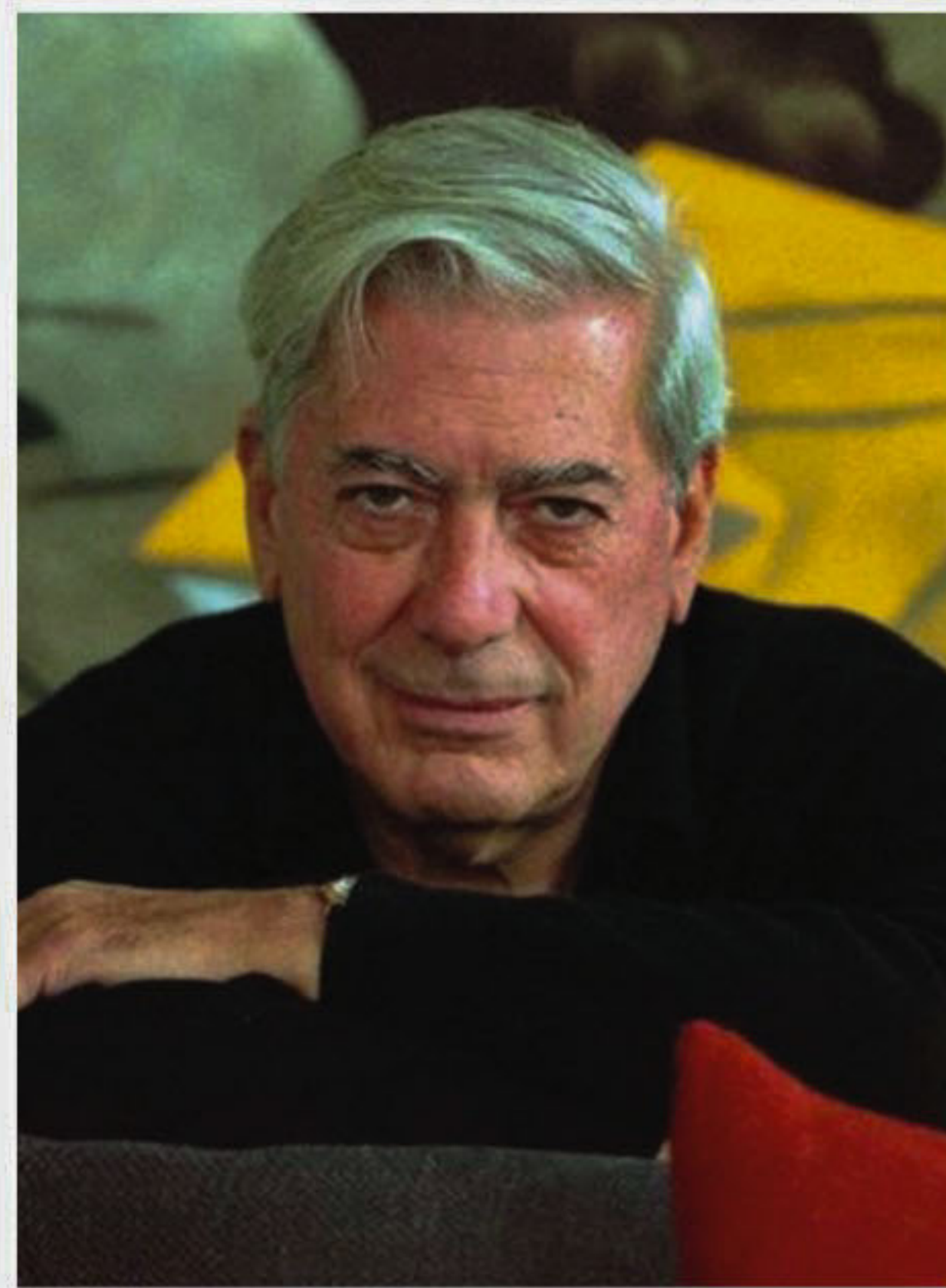
Nevertheless, his love for Peru pervades almost all his writing. He got international recognition as a writer for his second novel, *The Green House*, which is set in one of his childhood homes of Peru. The corruption within the military posted near his hometown Piura, nestled between the jungle and desert, occupies a special place in the novel. The corruption of his native country is explored in his next novel, *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), an experimental fiction that interlaces stories with histories.

Vargas Llosa never liked the regimented life of the military. As a young man he was sent to the military academy by his father who did not approve his son's passion for poetry. He eventually studied literature and law at the Major National University of San Marcos in Lima. In 1955, he married his aunt Julia Urquidí, an account of which is fictionalized in his fifth novel *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977). He got divorced

from his first wife in 1964 and married his cousin Patricia Llosa, and had three children. It seems his life is no less interesting than his fiction. In 1976, Vargas Llosa 'famously' punched García Márquez in a Mexican theatre in front of a packed audience. They have not talked to one another ever since. Although neither has opened his mouth about the incident, strange stories about adultery or jealousy are in circulation.

Llosa's 1981 novel, *The War of the End of the World*, set in Brazil, recounts the heavy-handed attenuation of a fanatical religious movement in the nineteenth century. Repeatedly, Vargas Llosa tries to expose the inefficacy of bureaucracy both civil and military and identifies it as a root cause of Latin American drawbacks. *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1985) and *Who Killed Palomino Molero?* (1987) are cases in point.

Llosa's bitter experience of the presidential election



Mario Vargas Llosa

(expressed in his 1994 memoir *A Fish in the Water*) led him to reflect on Peru's social and political degradation in *Death in the Andes* (1993). However, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1998) departs from his previous political concern. In it, he records the disintegration of a character called Don Rigoberto, which imaginatively constructs the erotic escapades of his ex-wife. His epistolary novella, *Letters to a Young Novelist* (1997), explores the life and work of a writer. Vargas Llosa is always interested in sharing his ideas about the writing process. Along with Márquez he wrote *The Novel in Latin America* (1968). His study of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, curiously titled *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary* (1986) and *Writers and their Reality* (1991) are examples of his critical work. His collection of essays, *Making Waves*, covers a wide range of issues such as his political career, the Cuban revolution, twentieth-century literature and pop culture.

In 2000, Vargas Llosa brought out *The Feast of the Goat*, which is both fiction and fact as it centres on the Dominican Republic's sadistic dictator Rafael Trujillo. The author's use of the non-linear style form to blur the categories of time and space fictionalizes the facts of Trujillo's reign between 1930 and 1960. In his next novel, *The Way to Paradise*, (2003), Vargas Llosa compares the life of his progressive grandmother with that of the artist Paul Gauguin. He goes on to show how travelling can dislocate one from the familiar location of one's cultural norms. He becomes even more candid in his latest novel, *The Bad Girl* (2007). Set in 1950s' Lima and various cities worldwide, the book follows a Peruvian boy's obsessive love for a girl who changes identities and countries to suit her needs.

His long writing career and versatility suggests his voracious reading habit. He indulges in intense research for most of his work. In an interview, he once claimed, "I am better at judging other people's work than my own. I know that I have finished a book when I feel I can no longer correct it, that I should start doing something else or else I will ruin it. But total satisfaction I never have. I always want to continue making it better, but at the same time I don't want to fall into a trap of trying to make it perfect. That becomes paralyzing."

This critical outlook gives impetus to many of his works. His work befriends the boundary between reality and fiction, and invites readers to reach their own conclusions. *El Hablador* (*The Storyteller*), for example, is a metanarrative in which a writer is writing about writing. The readers are invited into the personal story of the author. The author introduces a storyteller from the Machiguengas tribe from the Peruvian Amazon. The novel begins in Venice, when the author chances on a photograph of an Amazonian tribe. He then starts talking about his Jewish friend Saul Zuratas, suggesting a possible connection between the tribal storyteller and his ethnographer friend. When at the end of the novel, the author 'decides upon' his hypothesis, the reader receives an "I knew that" kind of satisfaction. The novel thus involves two storytellers in which the author is investigating the second one's transformation (rite-of-passage) from a university student to a tribal storyteller. These two storytellers are poles apart in their attitude towards a preservation of indigenous culture. Saul's attitude is scorned as 'primitive' by the 'modern' author.

The author asks, "In order not to change the way of life and the beliefs of a handful of tribes still living, many of them in the Stone Age, the rest of Peru abstain from developing the Amazonian region? Should sixteen million Peruvians renounce the natural resources of three quarters of their national territory so that the seventy or eighty thousand Indians could quietly go on shooting each other with bows and arrows?...Should we forgo the agricultural, cattle raising, and commercial potential of the region so that the world's ethnologists could enjoy first-hand kinship ties, potlaches, the rites of puberty...No Mascarita, the country has to move forward... Do you think polygamy, animism, head shrinking and witch doctoring...represent a superior form of culture?" (21-24)

Saul retorts, saying, "inferior, perhaps, if the question is posed in terms of infant mortality, the status of women, polygamy, handicrafts or industry" (24).

*The Storyteller* is a signature text that helps us understand Vargas Llosa's novelistic theatre. He is an extremely crafty writer who creates and acts out situations that draw readers to imaginatively engage with real issues under fictive garbs. Looking at his prolific career, one can simply heave a sigh of relief hearing of the Nobel and say: "It's about time! Bravo!"

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## At the Antique Shop

--- SHOMIR THEO

A tiger's mask beside brassy chalice,  
Copper cups, wooden buckets,  
Copper-pots staring at a dancing maiden  
on red saree with doll-eyes.  
Forest in a vase  
Wooden carved door,  
Candle stand with two golden heads  
A silver Shisha stand  
Leather laces, boxes, bags  
A museum of last decades.

Her eyes blinked thrice like shutter,  
She picked her prayer instrument:  
A golden candle stand with two heads  
and a pale silver foot-

"How much?" with a choir singer's voice  
"350 taka, antique-won't get it"  
The seller announced his point.

("Worship and candle industry  
Go hand in hand even today?")

She muttered silence.

Wrinkles on her face  
Run like tiny rivers  
Surety of her eyes  
Brazen with cataract

"I used to come here  
With Mrs. Kabir"

Moments of life-left-back,  
sophisticated roaming  
tinged her flight of fancy.

She paid the bill  
Walked off the doorstep  
While pills she got  
From the drug-store  
Prepared with a lascivious gaze  
For midnight's urgency.

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## THE ALBERTA JOURNAL

## NON-FICTION

# Of boreal forests and boomtowns

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

I am walking near a path leading to a Boreal Forest. There is a mist that ascends above the tops of the elongated coniferous trees and hangs in the northern air in wisps, rises and vanishes in the early morning sunshine. A boreal forest is named after Boreas the Greek God, and is also known by the Russian Word "Taiga". It is a unique ecosystem of a productive mosaic of interconnected habitats that include forest, lakes, river valleys, wetlands, peat lands and the Tundra at its northern reaches.

I have never seen a forest like this before. The trees are like wiry green bottle brushes and the trees are densely packed together like toothpicks in a box. There are huge patches in the forest where it appears that trees have been chopped. There are the signs of the coyote, and the elk. I have read that the Canadian Boreal forest is unique in its kind and is one of the largest intact ecosystems remaining on this planet. It is also the nesting ground for over 300 species of birds. From where I stand I can see the Athabasca River, twinkling at me in the sunlight. There is a little movement on the surface, fish perhaps. Fishermen have reported seeing a lot of deformed fish lately in the water.

The forest looms all around like a living presence. A bird flies out behind me jolting me into the grim irony of what lies before me. I am reminded that underneath this beautiful natural terrain lies the second largest reservoir of oil and petroleum in the world. These are the Athabasca oil sands and extracting this oil is not easy. This oil comes in a form of bitumen, a viscous substance that is mixed with sand and clay. Hence the term "oil-sands". They spray steam through this mixture to separate the oil from the sand. A lot of water is required for this process.

Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, fishermen from North West Europe were taking rich catches of cod from the west banks of Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St Lawrence in Canada and at times exchanged metal and cloth goods for furs and pelts from the Native Indians. The fishermen found an eager market for the furs and pelts in Europe and this exchange of goods set up the fur trade. The North West Company and the Hudson Bay Company were competitors in the fur trade and set up trading posts in Fort Edmonton and Fort McMurray as well as on the East coast.

Fort McMurray, also called "Canada's economic engine", now plays an important role in the history of the petroleum industry in Canada. Canada holds the world's second largest reserves of oil and petroleum (the first being Saudi Arabia). The Athabasca oil sands are large deposits of bitumen that are centered on the boomtown of Fort McMurray.

I venture into a Tim Horton's near Highway 63, the narrow highway that connects Fort McMurray to Edmonton, the capital of Alberta. My daughter wants a chili and a peach drink, while I settle for a medium double, double (which translates into two sugar, two creams) coffee. Huge trucks and SUVs pull up at the Tim Horton's drive through. I see a lot of tattoos and greased overalls. Oil workers flood this boomtown from all corners of

Canada as well as the world. I see more immigrants here than I do in Edmonton or Calgary. A couple of ladies wearing the hejab are having lunch in a corner. I notice some South Americans, speaking in low Spanish tones, probably from Venezuela judging from their tee shirts. I choose a cheese bagel with my coffee. Outside the cafe window, I can look over Highway 63. It is construction season; half of the road has construction crew with yellow hardhats scattered all around. There are said to be two seasons in Alberta --- winter and construction. This crew is obviously on a tight deadline as the snows may come any time soon. There is a sound of a mini-blast on the highway and everyone inside the Tim Horton's rushes to the windows to see what is going on. Ambulances and fire engines rush to the spot. It is nothing major. However, the crowd still lingers on to watch in case something happens in a moment of inattention. Fort McMurray is a quiet place and any little activity is a source of entertainment. I see in the local newspaper "Connect" a picture of some Bangladeshi children dancing at an Eid festival.

Fort McMurray has astonishing vistas and one of the most awe inspiring sights in this town from one of the hills is the confluence of the four rivers: the Horse, the Hangingstone, the Clearwater and the Athabasca River. The view from Abasand drive is particularly breathtaking at night as the rivers shine in the moonlight while the lights of this northern town flicker and shimmer and rise in the cool northern air.

We take a drive to Gregoire Lake, only a half hour's drive from Fort McMurray. There is a sandy beach that my daughter takes to in a whoop of joy and I sit and watch the boats go by. It is hard to believe that I am so far in the north, almost near Yellowstone and yet have a sandy beach with white sailing boats before me. For a moment I visualize Lake Ontario, but that moment is fleeting and soon vanished buried forever in the recesses of my mind. Lake Gregorie offers catch and release fishing for those looking for more stress-relieving aspects of the sport.

Driving back to Fort McMurray, I notice humongous trucks moving towards the oil sands. From where I sit in the SUV, I cannot see the driver. It reminds me of the trucks in the movie *Avatar* (by James Cameron) with which they begin to cut down the trees and drive out the native people in the forest. This boreal forest also reminds me of the forest in the movie, in the manner that it almost has a living presence. I wonder to myself if James Cameron ever came to Fort McMurray before he made the movie.

Something troubles me in Fort McMurray, although I am not able to pinpoint the exact reason. On one hand is nature so vast, dignified, beautiful and plentiful in its resources. On the other hand are the needs of man and the maintenance of all that he has created through civilization. Could there not be a balance between the two? I think to myself: perhaps I should leave these questions to more able mortals like David Suzuki and merely take pleasure in what I see before me? A living breathing boreal forest like no other forest on earth!

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# My days with the Mahabharata

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

The *Mahabharata*, the most widely read book of the world both as a literary piece and as religious scripture, has had a deep-rooted influence on my life. Though its religiosity has never been important to me, this acclaimed book has imprinted itself hugely on me for many different aspects --- heroism, wisdom, narrative, characterization and so on and so forth. The *Mahabharata* is a book that can never be completely read; and this is the mystery for which writers of forthcoming generations, after its creation in Sanskrit, have always felt encouraged to remake its episodes, translate the longest poem in newer forms and reproduce it in novel mediums. In my later forties, this gem creates a halo around me and hope.

When in my boyhood I first listened to the story of Avhimanyu, a sixteen year old boy killed in the Chakravayuha by the seven great warriors of the Kauravas in the Kurukshetra War, did I dream of being a hero like him? Or is it general human psychology to identify oneself with great heroes? Was it the cause for which once Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Spartacus came across as heroes to me? The truth is some of them turned pale with the passage of time, keeping the place of Avhimanyu in great nourishment.

During those years a village *dadu* had regular entry to my kindly mother's kitchen veranda during lunch. Finishing his full belly *dal-bhat* he would spend the lazy afternoons reading out from the *Mahabharata*. One day came the story of Avhimanyu, the son of Arjuna, and Subhadra, Krishna's sister and reduced this young reader to tears. Was it the genesis of all my love for this great epic, the *Mahabharata*, and its writer Krishna Dwaipayana Veda Vyasa and his other writings?

The *Mahabharata* a huge book, with so many characters, comprising so many episodes, encompassing so many unbelievable events! But how many people did I get to speak in favour of the book, having one hundred thousand slokas (verses)? Like many others, I have also heard many bitter criticisms of this epic, which has become inextricably linked with Bangla literature with its translation by Kashidasa and Kaliprasanna Singh.

My father, the late Baidyanath Das, tried to convince me this way or that when I would raise my voice against this so-called heavenly book. His views based on religious fervour could not satiate this young mind. And thus, at one time, it went out of my mind for the book being out of my sight. I got engaged in academic courses, like many others; later on in my career became a teacher, and at last started trying to write and thus gradually the *Mahabharata* came forth. It began to appear and reappear on my reading table along with the texts in Bangla and English, prose and verse, shorter and extended, and sometimes with detailed annotations in its newer editions.

Which part of the book do I like most? Which part do I dislike? All these questions intermingle with one another along with their answers while I go through it. Is it really possible to give a to-the-point answer when the question is related to the *Mahabharata*? The reason for which an episode seems insignificant soon proves significant because multidimensional interpretations may be put forward in favour of those episodes too. And thus it has become a most favourite book for millions of readers around the world.

I enjoy going through the conversation between Yudhishthira

and Yaksha or Dharma in the 'Vana Parva' for the brilliance implanted in it. How could a book written some five thousand years back incorporate such wisdom? I am sure many readers will certainly enjoy it if I share some questions and answers with them:

Q: What is grief? A: Ignorance is grief.

Q: What is real oblivion? A: It consists in washing the mind clean of all impurities.

Q: What is weightier than the earth itself? A: The mother has more weight than the earth.

Q: What is higher than heaven? A: The father.

Q: What is the greatest mystery? A: Everyday people around us are dying, but we think ourselves immortal.

How many questions were actually thrown at Yudhishthira? When someone runs through the questions, he realises the philosophical height of the classic. The way Yudhishthira shapes his answers and the patience he shows give us clues to why he and not Arjuna, or Karna or Bhishma or even Drona should be considered the true hero of this monumental work. And such question-answer episodes occur in the *Mahabharata* time and again.

My recent awakening of interest in the book drove me to the internet and, to my great surprise, I discovered hundreds of articles related to the *Mahabharata*. Even insignificant characters or places or events could be looked up there. My joy knew no bounds when I found entries like Satyaki, Chakrabuyha, Yuyutsu, Hastinapur because printed books and journals on the epic are so rare in Bangladesh that sometimes it becomes difficult to have a clear idea of the genealogies of the protagonists, or the participants of the war, or the speakers of some particular philosophical thoughts.

Readers of the *Mahabharata* are well aware that the Gita or Bhagavad Gita is originally part of the epic. Just before the war Arjuna declines to fight on the ground that fighting against his relatives and friends seems to him pointless. Then to encourage Arjuna to fight, Krishna speaks out some seven hundred verses. Since Hindus consider Krishna as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, they take these wise words of Krishna as being heavenly. Even ignoring the religious aspects of this great book a reader can be soothed by the philosophical heights of it. Note the following lines from the Gita, translated by R. C. Zaehner of Oxford University?

From attachment springs desire,

From desire is anger born.

From anger comes bewilderment,

From that the wandering of mind (smrti)

From this the destruction of the soul;

With soul destroyed the man is lost. (2.62-63)

or,

For the protection of the good,

For the destruction of evildoers,

For the setting up of righteousness,

I come into being, age after age. (4.8)

Thus my reading of the *Mahabharata* never stops.

Whenever I come across any Bangla or English work on it, or a newer reproduction of the *Mahabharata* stories, I feel elated. Therein am I enlightened.

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