

THE NEW MAHABHARATA : Rebuilding Khandava

Present in China since 1,8 million years, the tiger arrives in India until by the end of Upper Pleistocene (some fossil residues dating from 15 000 years have been authenticated).

The animal won a formidable prosperity in the sub continent during the wet Holocene optimum, when India, particularly arid up to this period, becomes green in huge proportions. Subtropical forests expand far to the North, until himalayan counterforts. The tiger replaces the lion as dominant predator of the region.

6000 years ago, India is perhaps as much « saturated » of tigers as Oriental China 40 000 years earlier. Tribal people living in forests adulate the animal and make all efforts to have the best relationships with him.

Then, the post neolithic arid period overthrows green ecosystems and strongly threatens the tigers. Lions are back, and partially refind their ancient domination on indian Nature. In the same time, nomadic populations come from iranian table – lands invade northern India and impose a concrete and ideological domination to tribal people. Lion cult becomes dominant.

Northern indian submit massive clearing and forests are replaced by settlements.

That what is infact narrated in Mahabharata, epic poem that founds indian civilization up to now, synthesis of nomadic warriors civilization with this of tribal people of forests.

« Mahabharata » seems « The Great Battle » and describes the war between two northern indian clans, Pandavas and Kauravas.

Replacement of forests by settlements are presented as extermination war acts.

For instance, the raja Dushyanta hunts in the forest accompanied by heavily armed soldiers and hundred of horses and elephants. Whole families of tigers and deer are killed, and wounded elephants trample on the forest in their pain.

So fierce is the slaughter that animals are normally the prey take refuge with the predators.

The most symptomatic episod is probably that of the destruction of the Khandava forest. to clear land to build the capital of the Pandavas at Indraprastha, with an enormous palace of laque in its center.

Helped by the fire god Agni , one of the 5 Pandava brothers, Arjuna, and his mentor Krishna, methodically slaughtered animals of the forest during 6 days.

So great is the carnage that even the gods ask whether the day of ultimate destruction of the universe has arrived.

Then, Arjuna plunged to a perpetual disgust for what he has done.

The snake Taksakha is the lonely survivor of this gigantic holocaust, and he later avoids *in extremis* the « sacrifice of snakes » of king Janamejaya. He is the symbol of Nature, its invulnerability, its eternity.

Much later, victorious Pandavas organize the festival of white horse sacrifice, of iranian origin, where the sacrifice takes a unique dimension both in space, time, and practice modalities.

At the end of this tremendous and haunting ceremony, a giant golden blue – eyed mongoose appears, and says that the offering of a corn seed could have been sufficient. This animal is the symbol of Anger.

Then, the Pandavas die during a « walk to death » in Himalaya snows. The father alone can access to the celest world, as he imposes to Indra the presence of a dog.

This text who founds the soul of India shows a unique view of relationships with Nature and animals.

Emergence of a structured compassion ideology, buddhism (7th century BC) before its accession to state religion status (4th century) is a logical following to such a cultural context.

During a millenary (up to 7th century AD), the empathy of rural communities with their environment is a general phenomenon, with the tiger as social and religious flagship as well as ecological keystone.

Muslim invasion induces tremendous slaughters of indian people.

Tigers are massively killed in great royal hunts. Some paintings show dizains of decapitated or disembowelled tigers of various colours, in scenes that evoke the hunt of raja Dushyanta in the Mahabharata as well as destruction of lions by Assurbanipal in antic Mesopotamia. Progressively, muslims take indian habits as well as Mongols do in China. Moghol princes take the Tiger as symbol of their royalty.

But real animal are still persecuted by them and former relations of predators to villagers are broken. Tigers sometimes attack villagers and cattle that are not considered as preys but enemies. In some extreme cases, villages are abandoned by terrified populations, who flee without understanding the dreadful anger of their god.

After 1750, the two centuries long english domination induces an ecological, social and cultural earthquake.

Tigers, that where hundreds of thousands at the end of muslim period, have numbers divided by 30 in two centuries.

Muslim opponent Tippu Sultan fights against english occupation under the flagship of the tiger.

Like romans of the first century, who had ambitioned to « free Africa from the lions », imperial England « frees India from the tyranny of the Tiger ». Some agents heavily implicated in this crusad are convicted that their mission of extermination is sacred. Without their salutary intervention, « tigers would have been the masters on Earth ».

Indian people loose their cultural repaires. Influence, strongness and compass of tiger cultures is shot down.

Mowgly (in Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling) says : « I danse upon the skin of Shere Khan, but my heart is very heavy... these two things fight together inside me like snakes in Spring. Water falls from my eyes, and thus, I laugh. Why ?... My heart is heavy of things I don't understand.

India obtains independance in this situation.

Demographic explosion and destruction of nature in a materialist and modernist political context (1947 – 1972) push indian tiger to the margin of extinction.

Authorities vigorously react, putting in place a « Tiger Project », audacious protection plan, that produces , in less than a decade, impressive results : tiger number is multiplied by three or four.

But this plan has an enormous weak point. Authorities protect tigers in determined zones from where human communities are expelled. Of course, tiger cultures submit a new and important hurt, and many villagers associate tiger protection to their misfortune.

After the death of Indira Gandhi, Tiger Project looses its strongness and efficiency. During 23 years, indian authorities, in a complete deny of reality, say that populations of tigers are stable (almost 3700 for a census in 2002 (!) despite alarming reports regularly established during this period by the greatest naturalists (Valmik Thapar, Bittu Sahgal, Billy Arjan Singh). Since 2004, 1000 supplementary tigers have probably been killed.

In 2007, the Wildlife Institute of India claims that in any way, wild indian tigers are less than

1500 (results finally accepted by authorities at the beginning of August). The true number is probably much less than 800.

The « Taj Mahal » of Nature is ruined since more than 20 years. Authorities admit the fact only now.

In the present situation, India can offer a future for wild tigers.

But a new « Tiger Project » can't have the same modalities as the first one, as political and social context is quite different, and much more dangerous for Indian Union.

Temptation to protect tigers against populations must be avoided, as it will be an ecological, social and cultural suicide.

Rehabilitation and rebuilding of tiger cultures in tribal people of Indian forests are the key axis for a long – term efficiency, and a massive and vigorous fight against poaching will be much more efficient if combined to this indispensable cultural revival.

A new Great Battle (Mahabharata) must now be engaged, to rebuild Khandava forest and linked human spirituality. India, like Arjuna, must be discharged of its sickly disgust towards itself.