IS VIGHNESVARA THE SCRIBE OF THE MAHABHARATA?

By Pendyala Venkata Subrahmanya Sastri

While Vyasa was doing severe penance in the Himālayan grottos intent upon bringing out the Mahābhārata, Brahmā very much pleased with his devotion appeared to him. Approaching him in all humility Vyasa begged ‘O Lord, I desire to write the Mahābhārata to the edification of the world. May I know a proper scribe for it?’.

‘For such a great work Vighnesvara is the only fit scribe. Better I pray for him’, said Brahmā and disappeared. In answer to his devotion when he presented himself to him, Vyasa requested Vighnesvara to be his scribe. He readily gave in on condition that the dictation should be without a stop, for his style brooked no rest. Vyasa agreed stipulating that he should catch the spirit of the verse and write, to which he gave his consent. This is narrated in the first chapter of the Mahābhārata.

How the several stories originally stood in the earliest publication of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata can only be gathered from Nanniah’s translation, the foremost authentic record available. It is an unparalleled work done in the presence of many approving Pañdits with the help of Nārāyaṇabhaṭṭa, a man well versed in the different languages of several countries. Hence the stories in his reduction are our best authority.

Leaving aside the omission of certain minor points as being unsuited to his times and to the then prevailing customs, and said to have existed by his predecessors Kumārīlabaḥṭa and others, I may now turn to the point whether Vighnesvara is the scribe of the Mahābhārata?
In the great work of Nanniah is not found the story that Vyāsa requested Vighnesvara to be his scribe. So that must have been interpolated in the subsequent Sanskrit editions of that Epic. For in the beginning of the work he writes 'that this admirable work was brought out by the son of Parāśara with a clear vision of the characters and deeds of the heroes of that world enraptured Epic, truly reflected in the clean mirror of his mind. (Chapter I, Ādiparva). From the above circumstance the safe assertion can be made that the belief that Vighnesvara is the scribe of that Epic, is a later interpolation. Further, Bhārata is considered the fifth Veda. Bhārata Samhitā is 'Śruti' (what is heard). It is heard by the Śisyas as the Guru repeated, voiced by them along with him with exactitude even in their intonation for several days, and then indelibly got by rote unlike the reading of the written books. The same method was followed with regard to the Pañcama Veda, the Bhārata Samhitā is related in the Ādiparva 93rd chapter, thus: 'The great sage Vyāsa made his disciples Sumanta, Jaimini, Pyla, his son Śuka and Vaiśampāyana repeat the four Vedas, including the Mahābhārata as the fifth, as evidenced by the separate Samhitās (compilation of the Mahābhārata stories) they each produced.

Clear it is from the above that Vyāsa never got his Śisyas read a work written by him, for obviously Vedas and the Mahābhārata were taught on the same lines. There are several Vedasamhitās and they were all evidently communicated by word of mouth and not by writing for which there was neither necessity nor possibility as in that age there seemed to be no writing in vogue as Paleographists allege. They further give non-existence of writing as a reason why the Vedas were called Śrutis (what is heard).

To add to the above, in the Mokṣa-Dharmaparva, of Śāntiparva, the statement is found that the caves in
the Himalayas are echoing and re-echoing with the recitals of the Vedas taught by sage Vyāsa. Hence the conclusion is that the Bhārata Samhitā was not at first in writing. In this connection the article under the caption ‘Āksara’ in the ‘Āndhravignāna Sarvasva’ may be read with advantage to confirm the opinion that Vighneshvara never wrote the Mahābhārata. Sri P. P. S. Sastry Sanskrit Pāṇḍit, Presidency College, Madras, writes in his poem to the revised edition of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata of the Vāvilla Press, that Vighneshvara is the scribe is not found in the copies of that Epic in the South and that it was a subsequent interpolation in the northern edition.

Worship of Vighneshvara.

By the way I have to touch a little on this subject here. The Śaivas of Northern India were the devotees of Vighneshvara, the chief of the ‘Gaṇa’ (several groups of attendants on Śiva). It might be due to their devotion to him, that he was named the writer of the Epic in those copies which were obtained there.

It is further to be considered whether Vighneshvara was a Vedic deity at all. In none of the mantras of the Vedas, there is any reference to that deity. We now recite in all ceremonies, nuptial or obsequial, at their commencement, invoking Vighneshvara, the Mantra ‘GAṆĀṆĀMTVĀ GAṆAPATIM HAVĀMAHE’ I invoke you the Lord of the Gaṇas) found in the first Book of the Rgveda, the Rṣi of which being Gritsnamada and the presiding deity Brahmaṇaspati. But as a matter of fact we invoke the chief of a ‘Gaṇa’ whose face resembles that of an elephant, but not the vedic deity.

Vighneshvara is only a Puranic deity. The versions in the several Purāṇas, the Skanda, the Brahmānanda, and the Varāha, differ with one another. The last of the above stated Purāṇas, gives in detail that the Gaṇa of whom
Vighneshvara is the Chief, possesses the elephant-head; and hence, the worship of the elephant-headed God. A misconception (mantralinga) of the word ‘Gaṇapati’ which in the Rgveda is applied to Brahmaṇaspati, the lord of the Universe, as applicable to the head of a particular group of lesser potentiality, makes Vighneshvara steal the name ‘Gaṇapati.’

One other reason to prove that the worship is of purely Puranic origin is that no codifiers of Hindu Law as Āpastamba, Bodhāyana and others have anywhere in their codes laid down either in domestic or social laws, that any Karma shall be initiated with this worship.

So I wish finally to impress that the Bhārata Samhitā was at first not in writing and that Vighneshvara was not the scribe thereof.