

Mahabharata A STUDY

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RĀMĀYANA AND MAHĀBHĀRATA, the two great epics of India, have captivated the hearts of its people for several millennia. Whether it is literature — both Sanskrit and vernacular — arts, crafts, painting, music, dance and drama, or temple motifs, no aspect of Indian culture has escaped the stamp of their influence. The simple village folk who shed tears while listening to the ballads on the banishment of Sītā or the highly skilled artisans working on the temple motifs depicting the Kurukṣetra war, are both responding to a dynamic and continuing culture of these epics.

Hindu tradition has always considered these two epics as *itihāsa* ('verily did it exist thus') or history. Modern scholars have largely conceded that the core of the epics could have had a historical basis.

Reputed scholars, both Eastern and Western, have battled for years to fix the date of the Mahābhārata war, also known as the Kurukṣetra war. Incidentally this would also fix the date of its heroes and, of course, their historicity. If the meticulously preserved Hindu oral traditions based on their notion of time as the *yuga*-system are to be relied upon, the great war should have taken place during 3139 BC. Writings of Megasthenes (312 BC) as also internal astronomical evidence corroborate this date. Modern historians, however, have assailed this theory and are inclined to

accept a much later date, viz 1424 BC or 950 BC.

Traditional lore ascribes the authorship of this epic to the great sage Veda Vyāsa also known as Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana. He was a contemporary of the grandsire Bhīṣma and had a firsthand knowledge of most of the events described in the epic. Research-scholars, however, feel that the original work called *Jaya*, written by Vyāsa to commemorate the victory (*jaya*=victory) of the Pāṇḍava princes over the wicked Kauravas, might have been a much smaller work comprising about 8,800 verses. This was subsequently revised and enlarged into *Bhārata*, a work of 24,000 verses, by Vaiśampāyana, a disciple of Vyāsa, and recited during the Sarpayāga (serpent sacrifice) of Janamejaya, the great grandson of the Pāṇḍava hero Arjuna. The final edition that has come down to us is the work of Sūta Ugrasravas, son of Lomaharṣana (also spelt as Romaharṣana), and was recited at the Sattrayāga (a kind of sacrifice, the performance of which is spread over several years) of the sage Śaunaka in the Naimiṣa forest. It is this that has been called *Mahābhārata*, due to its immense size (*mahā*=great) and its dealing with the story of the people of the race descended from the ancient emperor Bharata, culminating in the war. This edition is reputed to be 'Śatasāhasrī Samhitā,' a collection of 100,000 verses, though the extant text

A senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Harshananda is the head of Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bangalore. He is an accomplished orator, musician, and author of several books in English, Kannada and Sanskrit, a few of which have also been translated into Korean, German and French. Some of his more well-known books are *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, *Hinduism through Questions and Answers*, and *All about Hindu Temples*.

contains less. The round figure is obviously an approximation. Some scholars have tried to establish that the epic has evolved over a period of eight centuries (from 400 BC to 400 AD) to its present proportions. At the present stage of the research it has not been possible to clinch the issue, and hence chronological questions continue to remain open to discussions.

Different regions of India have preserved different recensions of the text of this epic. These have been broadly classified as the Northern and the Southern recensions. Scholars opine that the latter which is the longer of the two is more impressive because of its precision and schematization as also its practical outlook. One of the standard editions published contains 95,826 ślokas or verses, in 18 'parvans' or books, with 107 sub-parvans and 2,111 chapters in all, including the appendix *Harivaṃśa*. This just gives an idea of the immensity of this epic poem, which is eight times as big as Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* put together.

Since the text contains quite a few riddles known as *kuṭaślokas* and vast portions of didactic material, several commentators have tried their skill on it. The gloss of Nīlakaṇṭha (16th cent.) is more well-known and is widely referred to.

The contents of the eighteen major books may be briefly summarized as follows: *Ādiparva*, the first book, is fairly long and deals with several ancient episodes connected with Śukrācārya, the preceptor of the Asuras, and his intractable daughter Devayānī, and Yayāti, a prominent king of the lunar dynasty, as also the famous romance of Śakuntalā and the king Duśyanta. However, the major part of the book is devoted to the story of the ancestors of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas like Śantanu, Bhīṣma, Vicitravīrya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu; the birth and education of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas; their early

rivalries; marriage of Draupadī, the Pāñcāla princess, to the Pāṇḍavas; Arjuna's pilgrimage and marriage with Subhadṛā, sister of Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

Sabhāparva, the second, deals mainly with the performance of the Rājasūya sacrifice by Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍava princes, the game of dice manoeuvred by the wily Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, and its tragic consequences for the former.

Aranyaparva, also called *Vanaparva* (and sometimes as *Āraṇyakaparva*) is the third book that covers the story of the Pāṇḍavas in exile in the Kāmyaka forest. This voluminous book is replete with several stories from the past like those of Nala and Damayantī, Sāvitrī and Satyavān, of sages like Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, Agastya and Mārkaṇḍeya, as also of kings like Bhagīratha and Śibi. The famous quiz, Yakṣapraśna, belongs to this book.

Virāṭaparva, the fourth, is one of the smaller books dealing mainly with the stay of the Pāṇḍavas incognito in the kingdom of Virāṭa. Slaying of the villain Kīcaka and the battle for rescuing the cattle of the king Virāṭa which had been captured by the Kauravas to force the Pāṇḍavas to come out of their hiding, as also the wedding of the Virāṭa princess Uttarā with Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, are the chief incidents portrayed here.

Udyogaparva, the fifth, is also a short book which deals with the peace parleys and preparations for the war curiously going together. The most touching scene of Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, disclosing to Karṇa the secret of his birth in her womb, and the statesmanship of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who makes a last minute bid for peace, are the highlights of this section. The famous discourse of the sage Sanatsujāta to the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, well-known as the

Sanatsujātīya, which is full of philosophical truths, forms a part of this book.

The next book, *Bhīṣmaparva*, contains the crown-gem of the epic, viz the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Detailed descriptions of the first ten days of the war containing the superhuman exploits of the grandsire Bhīṣma, ultimately ending in his being mortally wounded by Arjuna, form the bulk of this section. Since Bhīṣma had the unique boon of dying at will, he preferred to lie down on the bed of arrows and postpone his demise till the beginning of Uttarāyana or the northern solstice.

Droṇaparva, the seventh, apart from describing the heroic exploits of Droṇa, the preceptor, culminating in his death through stratagem, also contains an account of the brilliant achievements of the boy-hero Abhimanyu on the battlefield and his tragic death.

The eighth book, *Karnaparva*, details the gory death of the evil genius Duśśāsana, the second of the Kaurava brothers, at the hands of the colossal Bhīma, and the fall of Karṇa himself at the hands of Arjuna after a bitter fight.

Śalyaparva, the ninth book, describes the final encounter between Bhīma and Duryodhana on the last day of the war, the latter succumbing to the mortal blow received during the duel.

Sauptikaparva, the tenth, delineates the gruesome massacre of the Pāṇḍava army and its allies, in the night during sleep, by Aśvatthāman, Droṇa's vengeful son.

The next book, *Strīparva*, describes graphically the pitiful lamentations of the women and widows of the dead warriors.

Then come the twelfth and the thirteenth books, the *Śāntiparva* and the *Ānūsāsanikaparva*, containing wonderful discourses on all aspects of *dharma* by the patriarch Bhīṣma at the request of

Yudhishthira. Bhīṣma's demise and Yudhishthira's coronation are the other incidents dealt with. The two well-known hymns, *Viṣṇusahasranāma* and *Śiva-sahasranāma*, as also the *Anugītā* (a subsidiary discourse by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna) are parts of these books.

Aśvamedhikaparva, the fourteenth, describes the departure of Śrī Kṛṣṇa for Dvārakā and the horse-sacrifice (Aśvamedha) performed by Yudhishthira. The humiliation of Yudhishthira by a talking weasel that describes the supreme sacrifice of a Brāhmana family is an interesting sidelight of this book.

The next book, *Āśramavāsikaparva*, describes the departure of the old Dhṛtarāṣṭra to the forest along with Gāndhārī, his spouse, and Kuntī and their subsequent death in a forest fire.

The sixteenth book, *Mausalaparva*, gives an account of the mutual destruction of the Yādava heroes as also the death of Śrī Kṛṣṇa at the hands of a hunter. The *Mahāprasthānika* and the *Svargārohaṇa Parvas*, the last two books, give an account of the final journey of the Pāṇḍavas, their death on the way, with Yudhishthira alone reaching heaven.

The *Mahābhārata* presents us with a veritable array of human characters, from the sublime to the ridiculous. No type of human emotion, no deed of valour, generosity, sacrifice or meanness is missed here. Nor is there any artificiality in these portrayals. A brief delineation of some of the more important characters may now be attempted here.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa is undoubtedly the most brilliant and picturesque personality projected by the epic. He appears on the scene rather suddenly at the time of Draupadī's *svayamvara* (formal selection of husband by a maiden princess), and continues to saunter the scenes right up to

the end. All his energies are channelized only in one direction — protection of the right and the good, and punishment or destruction of the wicked. His remarkable prowess, matched only by the bewitching beauty of his perfect form, sage counsels, superb stratagems and immensely superior statesmanship, captivate our heart. There is absolutely no doubt that the epic projects him as God Himself come down to save mankind, as he himself admits in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Bhīma, the grand old man, is another towering personality that awes and inspires us, whether in the supreme sacrifice of abdicating his right to the throne or the vow of celibacy or the matchless heroism on the battlefield. It is but meet that Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who recognized his encyclopaedic knowledge and wisdom, has got it preserved for the posterity by prodding him through Yudhisthira to unfold it. The *Śānti* and the *Ānūsāsanika Parvas* are practically the repositories of his teachings.

Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, is perhaps the most dominant character of the epic, next only to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. He was not only a great hero on the battlefield, true to his name (*yudhi*=in battle, *sthira*=one who is steady), but a veritable incarnation of *dharma* or righteousness, a rare combination indeed. That is why he is often addressed as Dharmarāja ('the monarch of righteousness') too. Come what may, he would never swerve from the path of ethical uprightness about which his thinking was **always crystal clear. The Yakṣa-praśna-episode is replete with the gems of his wisdom.**

The epic pictures Bhīma, the colossus, and Arjuna, the warrior, in more human terms. If down-to-earth common sense characterizes Bhīma, Arjuna is more idealistic and dreamy. However, both were extraordinarily devoted to Śrī Kṛṣṇa and implicitly obedient to Yudhisthira.

Drona, the preceptor-warrior who was forced to take to the military profession in spite of being a Brāhmana, appears a shade darker than Bhīma. Notwithstanding his learning and austerity, he exhibited a streak of vengeful nature.

Vidura, the 'son of the maid-servant, is another personality who strikes us not only by his sagacity but also by his intense devotion to Śrī Kṛṣṇa about whose divinity he had absolutely no doubt. Here is a living example to show that it is not birth or caste that makes for greatness but intrinsic character. His discourse to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the *Udyogaparva* is now well-known as *Viduranīti*.

Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, is the chief villain of the epic. His greed and jealousy overshadowed whatever heroism or virtues he had, resulting in the near-total destruction of the two races and untold misery to millions.

If the word 'tragedy' needs any illustration, one should turn to Karna. A victim of circumstances, his story can never be read with the eyes dry or the heart unmoved. He was supremely noble and generous in every inch of his personality. He is perhaps the last word for friendship, loyalty and generosity.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind and vacillating king, was blind not only physically but also in wisdom. His inordinate infatuation for his children, the Kauravas, prevented him from exercising his authority to uphold *dharma*.

Among the women characters it is Draupadī, the Pāñcāla princess and the queen of the Pāṇḍavas, that strikes us most. Endowed with striking beauty, a sharp intellect and a sharper tongue which she could wield effectively, she remained absolutely faithful to her husbands. By her supreme sacrifices she has set an example of wifely virtues.

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universe are animated and made real. This unity, this actual immediate, perceivable, and unchanging reality of the Self's infinite and indivisible presence, was always to Vivekananda the great, single master-fact of the human world and of the human person — the great 'open secret,' as he called it.²⁶ It is likewise the heart, mainspring, and

26. *Ibid.*, 2:397

substance of his man-making humanism. As to the truth, effectiveness, and value of Vivekananda's forged-in-the-Self humanism, it is plain that never before in human history have the uses of reason, freedom, and individualism been raised to such an exalted yet pragmatic level or shown to be so attractive, joyous, and necessary. □

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Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, impresses us as a helpless but noble princess. The fortitude with which she silently bore all her misfortunes and miseries is unparalleled.

Gāṇḍhārī, who made the utmost sacrifice of denying herself the pleasures of eyesight because Dhṛtarāṣṭra, her husband, was born blind, is a paragon of the ideal of wifedom. Unlike her husband, she was bold enough to admonish her son Duryodhana for his wicked behaviour and warn him of its dire consequences, because she was ever devoted to *dharma*.

The *Mahābhārata*, also known as the *Pañcama Veda* ('the fifth Veda'), is a veritable encyclopaedia of Hindu religion and culture. The claim of the Sūta Ugrasravas that 'anything anywhere is an echo of what is here' and 'what is not here is nowhere' is no exaggeration. Every aspect of *dharma*— whether it is *rājadharmā* (statecraft), *āpad-dharma* (conduct permissible during dire calamities), *dānadharma* (liberality) or *mokṣadharmā* (pertaining to emancipation) — finds its due place here. In fact, the very purpose of the *Mahābhārata* is to expound *dharma* in all its ramifications. The celebrated *Bhagavad Gītā*, the less known *Anugītā*, as also the two

well-known hymns *Visnusahasranāma* and *Śivasahasranāma*, have been sources of inspiration to philosophers and votaries of religious pursuits over the millennia. The cult of Visnu and the reconciliation of the various warring faiths also find an appropriate place. Along with the growth of rigidity of the caste system, honest attempts at extolling human excellence and treating it as the real basis of Brāhmaṇahood are also conspicuous. In spite of the misogynists of the age, women did find a place of honour during the epic period.

There is enough evidence to admit that the *Mahābhārata* had migrated outside India too, especially to the South-East Asian countries. Incidents from this epic have been portrayed in stone relief in the Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom of Kampuchia.

Whether the *Mahābhārata* was the composition of a single poet or the compilation of several editors, whether the great war was fought in 3100 BC or 1400 BC or 950 BC, whether it was a family feud or a ferocious war, it is verily the biggest classic ever composed by man and will retain its relevance as long as the sun and the moon shine or the stars twinkle, because it mirrors the eternal drama of human existence. □