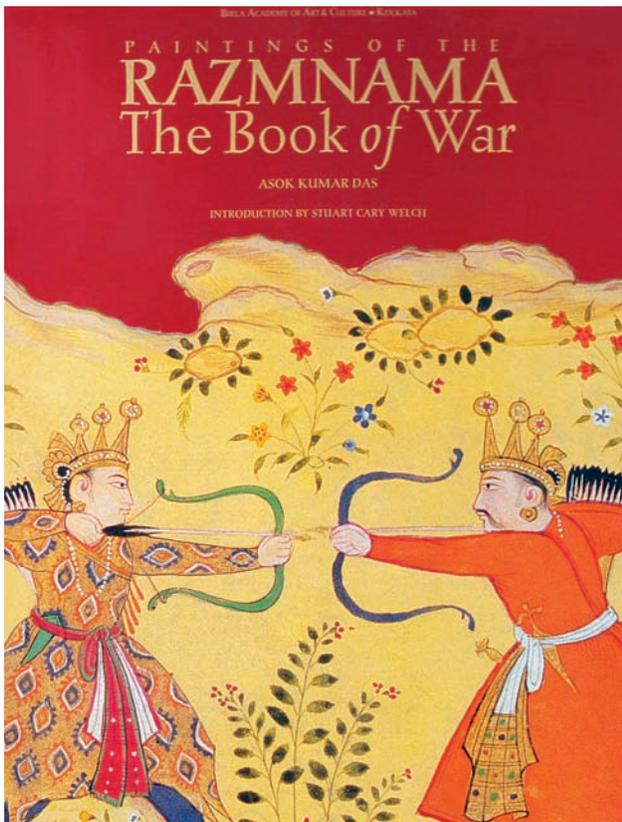


INTANGIBLE INDRAPRASTHA 6

Mahabharata and Misperceptions

Despite being a repository of wisdom because of its insight and foresight into human life, the Mahabharata is invariably referred to as the book of war due to the misconceptions created over a period of time



Cover of *Razmnama*, acquired by BKBirla and Sarla Devi in about 1978 for Birla Academy of Art Kolkata. It dates 1014 AH, the year Akbar died

■ Neera Misra

It is one of those peculiar paradoxes in our society. While we swear by the *Bhagwat Geeta*, it being our revered holy book, we shun the presence of its source book, *The Mahabharata*, in our homes? Why is it that the word 'Mahabharata' is so loosely and invariably referred to as 'war'? Was there no war in the *Ramayana*? The fact is, both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, narrate tales of inevitable war against a devious 'political ambition' that

aspired to gain power by deceit, shattering the 'Dharmic Principles' of society of that bygone period.

While '*Ram-ayana*' is a mirror on the life of Ram, heir to the Ayodhya Kingdom, a treatise on the political and inter-personal struggles of an ideal son and the king, *Mahabharata*, as its name suggests, encompasses the larger Bharat, covering the Aryavarta region. It tells us about a war that was necessitated to maintain the supremacy of 'right *karma*' for sustaining 'dharma and *nyaya*'. It is another matter that rules get broken by all concerned. But the objective is to defeat the deceitful negative forces that have violated the dignity of not just a particular woman, but their mother country. *Mahabharata* is not just a tale of a war at Kurukshetra. Rather, it is a repository of wisdom, often referred as 'Pancham Veda' because of its insight and foresight into human life.

What is it that denies *Mahabharata* its pride of place in our homes? The reason is misperceptions created over the period of time. In order to understand this we take a peep into 'evolution' of *Mahabharata*, and why it may have acquired the 'war' title. Many scholars opine that the original book of Dwapar era '*itihas*' was titled '*Jay*' and consisted of 8,800 verses. It was then expanded to 24,000 and named '*Bharata*'. As the names suggest, '*Jay*' denoted victory of '*dharma*' and righteousness over '*a-dharma*', and '*Bharata*', as the tale of the 'Bharta-vansha, rule and struggles. The third and current version, made popular by the Geeta Press, titled *Mahabharata*, is a voluminous series having one lakh verses. This version is so vast and deals with such multi-level multifaceted aspects and episodes that it said that *Mahabharata* encompasses all dimensions of life. Something that does not find mention in *Mahabharata* essentially does not exist on the earth at all.

It is greater in size, treatments and dimensions of the subjects, than just Bharat. Thus, it is the '*itihas*' of the Great Bharat, or Maha-Bharat. Probably, realising that the previous books had limitations in representing real depth, and massive involvement of many kingdoms, as well as implications and effect of the political and moral turmoil, a further expansion was undertaken, for a holistic view.

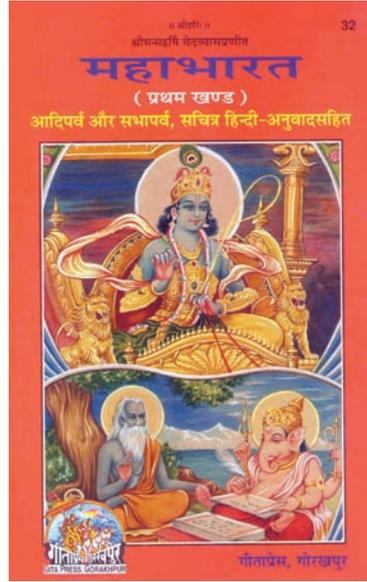
The one lakh verses of this great book of the larger, and Great Bharata, are divided into 18 Parvans, which denote the 18 sections or divisions of the book. Each deals with a specific aspect

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of the story and gets its name from the dominant characters and episodes that are highlighted in that particular section. The 18 Parvans are Adi Parvan, Sabha Parvan, Vana Parvan, Virata Parvan, Udyoga Parvan, Bhishma Parvan, Drona Parvan, Karna Parvan, Shalya Parvan, Saughtika Parvan, Stri Parvan, Shanti Parvan, Anushasna Parvan, Ashvamedha Parvan, Ashramvasika Parvan, Mausala Parvan, Mahaprasthanika Parvan and Swargarohan Parvan.

Which of these 18 sections are titled 'Rann' or 'war'? Not even one. So where are the Kurukshetra war episodes described, and how much of the book deals with the 18 days of war? Several sections like, Bhishma Parvan, Drona Parvan, Shalya Parvan, Stri Parvan, etc describe the fight at Kurukshetra, even its effect. But when we consider the whole book, majority of it does not directly describe the war per se. It deals with dynasties, their relations and multi-faceted emotional and power influences that create the situation for the war. Efforts of Krishna to prevent it are highlighted. Seeing the adamancy of a power hungry and jealous Duryodhana, Krishna finally gives up, and ensures that Arjuna realises that War is inevitable to establish the rule of law. The immortal *Bhagwata Geeta* thus comes from Krishna, to benefit all humanity.

So how did this book become 'infamous' as the 'Book of War'? The first time we hear about *The Book of War* is during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar. Akbar was very keen to learn about the knowledge and wisdom of ancient Indian Sanskrit texts. With personal interest and under his own supervision, he had the *Mahabharata* translated into Persian. He commissioned renowned Sanskrit scholars, invited Persian scholars, artists, paper makers, book binders from Persia and the Islamic places. During his 'Ibadatkhana' deliberations



Mahabharata published by Geeta Press is vast and deals with the multifaceted aspects. It encompasses all dimensions of life. Something that does not find mention in the Mahabharata essentially does not exist on the earth at all

with priests, clerics and scholars of various religions and faiths, Akbar was exposed to wealth of knowledge of Bharat. He wished to know more and decided to translate several Sanskrit texts, *Mahabharata* being the important one. This transition is recorded by one of Akbar's biographers, Abdul Qadir Badauni in the *Muntakhab ut-Tawarikh*. Badauni, writes: 'He (Akbar) thought why should I not have the Sanskrit works translated in my name; for they are written by the ascetics and sagas of the past and all of them embody correct and convincing proof (about Hinduism) and are the very pivot of the Hindu religion and beliefs. They are by no means trite but quite original; and they will produce all kind of fruits of felicity, both temporal and spiritual, and will be the cause of affluence and power, and will ensure abundance of children and wealth, as is written in the prefaces of these books.'

"Akbar chose the saga of the *Mahabharata*, Badauni says, because 'this is the most famous of the Hindu books and contains all sorts of stories and moral reflections, and advice, and matters relating to conduct and manners and religion and science,And the Hindu believers consider it a great religious merit to read and copy'. The translated version was titled *Razamnama: The Book of War!* Akbar distributed this book to his

nobles, and his son too. However, the original copy of *Razamnama* commissioned by Akbar is now at City Palace Museum, Jaipur, under seal of Supreme Court of India, due to family disputes in the Jaipur Royal family. It became so popular that its many copies and versions were made and are to be found in various Libraries like Raza Library, National Museum etc, and as personal collections too.

Abul Fazl, leading historian commissioned by Akbar to record history of his reign, states, in its preface that '...the study of history enables

the people to take lessons from the past and to devote their present to compliance with the commandments of God Most High in the right spirit.Thus Kings, more than anyone else, are in need to obtain knowledge from the past.'

Very critical in this book is political lessons. The partition of Kuru Kingdom did not lead to the anticipated peaceful co-existence between the Pandavas and Kuru son Duryodhana. Contrary to expectations, Dhritarastra's eldest son Duryodhana became so disturbed by the popularity and wealth, of Pandavas, that possessing Indraprastha became an obsession, leading to the infamous tragic incidents at the Hasitnapura Sabha, and the massive War at Kurukshetra.

Likewise, after Partition of India in 1947, neither side is in peace. This is the lesson from Indraprastha, this is what we must learn from our history. Had our leaders of yester years actually read and understood the significance of the herculean task of compilation of our Dwapar era history, they would not have succumbed to the tricks of division of land or people of this great nation. At least let us now preserve and protect our historical and cultural roots from any further damage.

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