

A story of tangible and intangible heritage

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SHEKHAR SEN

Draupadi Dream Trust, New Delhi, has brought out a two-volume set of 30 papers, edited by Neera Misra, founder trustee and chairperson of the Draupadi Dream Trust and Air Vice-Marshal Rajesh Lal. These were part of the International Conference held in July 2017 in New Delhi. The focus is on the historiography and historicity of the epic and a critical evaluation of the Critical Edition of the MB. Related topics like geography, archaeology, astronomical dating, philosophical perspectives, etc have also been covered. The valedictory address by Dr Bibek Debroy, eminent economist and Sanskrit scholar who has translated the Critical Edition into English, prefaces the book. The book also has some impressive plates at the end of Volume 1. Due to paucity of space only some important papers are reviewed.

What is striking about the book at the first glance is its presentation. It is tastefully conceived, very elegant and pleasing. The miniature used on the cover is beautiful and relevant. The editors and the publishers must be congratulated for such an attractive production. It is indeed a collector's item.

Six papers examine the date of MB from literary, archaeological, astronomical and geographical angles, deluging us with a plethora of differing dates. BB Lal gives a date of 900 BCE depending on genealogical tables of the Puranas from Puranas and some archaeological finds of pottery ware. DK and Hema Hari give the exact date of Krishna's birth as 27 July 3112 BCE, the MB war as beginning on 22 November 3067 BCE and many other dates. They claim the Mohenjodaro steatite of 2600 BCE depicts the Yamalarjuna episode of Krishna's life, so that Krishna existed before 2600 BCE. This interpretation is not generally accepted. The three-headed seal in the Dvaraka excavations is claimed to tally with the identity seal "given to the people of Dvaraka in the Mahabharata text". No date of the seal has been given. Hari Nilesh Oak and Aparna Dhir conclude that the war occurred in 5561 BCE on the basis of

"more than 215 specific astronomy references" in the text. This is fortified by non-astronomical evidence in the MB such as, hydrology, climatology, oceanography, anthropology and genetics.

In an excellent article, BR Mani deftly considers most of the evidence finally arriving at 3102 BCE as the year of the war. Mohan Gupta, in another fine essay, fixes 17 October, 1952 BCE for commencement of the war and provides other connected dates. Ashok Bhatnagar's highly technical essay, using astronomical software, pinpoints Bhishma's demise on 20 September, 1793 BCE, the war beginning on 14 October, 1793 BCE, etc.

Thus, there is total confusion. The possible date ranges between 900 BCE and 5561 BCE! But one thing is clear. The scholars are on the right track. There are possibly some glitches in the Stellarium and Planetarium softwares which need to be looked at. Archaeological evidence must be more conclusive.

The Critical Edition (CE) of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) was completed in 47 years (1919-1966). Five articles deal with it and all of them criticise it. Jhanavi Vidhur holds that the CE "satisfies not Indian readers but European scholars." It "delegitimised the traditional reception of the MB as a Dharmashastra and a Mokshashastra". As a combination of kavya and Shastra, it should be studied with the commentaries.

Pradip Bhattacharya's essay approaches the CE through the attempt to strip Draupadi. It is a veritable storehouse of information. He points out that the CE did not study several important versions e.g., the Nepali palm-leaf mss, the Razmnama, the Arabic translation etc. He lists inconsistencies, contradictions and repetitions in the CE, underlining the need for revision. He cites from the epic and other Sanskrit works to establish that Draupadi was never stripped by Duhshasana. Still the CE includes it. His well-laid arguments can hardly be ignored. The essay has some remarkable pictures.

The CE has excised many portions of the Harivamsha even though Indian tradition has held it as part of the MB. Harindranath and Purushottaman

explain why it is called the "Khila" of the epic and critically look at the excisions. They examine eight sections in detail and claim that these should never have been removed. Though too long, the essay is rich in information.

Abhay Singh holds that history is made by incorporating both historical facts and cultural truths. The methodology CE adopted has risked missing out the cultural truths of that society. The MB is like a free-flowing river, an oral tradition, gathering stories and facts as it travels, reflecting the social and individual values of the time. It is therefore futile to try to get to the root. So, the CE is just another version. "The best way is to let the streams of diversity flow unabated without diverting."

BVK Sastry urges identification of monuments related to the epic and preserving them. The problem is that these must be validated by textual references. His point about the revision of the CE is well-taken. A long essay, full of insights and an engrossing read.

Heramb Chaturvedi shows how the Indian system of writing history is more comprehensive than the European. The Vasisthas, the Bhrigvangiras (Veda Vyasa included) and sutas were responsible for the development of the historical and the sacred traditions.

Frederick Smith in a fascinating article writes about the development of the regional MBs through the ages. The ever-developing local and oral versions are as important as the CE. The Pandava Lila performances or Panduan of Garhwal has roots in Indian religious culture that are "so deep that the Paharis themselves are barely aware of its extent." The actors identify with the epic characters, "acting as magnetic centres through whom the local people see and identify with their deep history." Thus, in Raithal village near Bhatwari the actor who performed as Arjuna for 40 years, decided to pass on his role to his son. The procedure he followed was almost exactly the one described in Brihadaranyaka and Kaushitaki Upanishads.

JN Ravi traces the geographical information contained in what he identifies as the Jaya section of MB (from Bhishma-parva till Sauptikaparva, the duration of Sanjay's cosmic sight). He identifies locations of the epic, regions, mountains, rivers, oceans, with the present, with charts and maps, ignoring information that appears unreasonable and exaggerated. It is a long essay, simply written, devoid of technical jargon and full of interesting information.

Bhuvan Vikrama writes about cities in Panchala times archaeologically (Ahichhatra, Sravasti, Mathura, etc). The excavations reveal they developed most-

ly following the Arthashastra plan. But how can we be sure that these remains are of the epic cities? The essay does not contain any such evidence. It has interesting plates depicting the excavations.

Yvette Ram Rani Dossier, in an emotional article, rues the negative and mocking attitude of Occidental Indologists and occi-centric Indian scholars and historians towards Indian ethos and traditions.

Alexis Pinchard takes the discussion to the rarefied sphere of theology, ontology and philosophy. He declares that MB is a story of tangible and intangible heritage - the intangible world of gods and the tangible world of their human avatars, born to fulfil some purpose. The intangibles know their avatars but the tangibles do not know their intangible selves. That enables the human tragedy to be played out.

Indrajit Bandyopadhyay travels through the maze of Vedic-Puranic literature to find the similarities between Draupadi and the Vedic Vak-Sarasvati. He shows how Draupadi, Krishna, Brihati, Pandita, a dynamic, strong, bold woman must have been the inspiration for the Vedic Vak-Sarasvati, another Krishna, Brihati, "majestic among the mighty ones," protector, a dynamic woman who is also the goddess of war, wealth and power. The "lost Sarasvati" of the Vedas is indeed the "lost Draupadi" of MB, both suffering narrative loss. Bandyopadhyay delves into the scriptures, sometimes so deep that it becomes difficult to keep up with him, to establish their real as well as spiritual and metaphorical identities. He describes Draupadi beautifully: Brihati essence in an anushtup body. So is Sarasvati. A very erudite and remarkable essay.

Jana Bandyopadhyay compares two Draupadis - Bharavi's (Kiratjarjunyam) and Vyasa's. Quoting copiously she narrates how Bharavi depicts the aggressiveness of Draupadi's character and how Vyasa portrays multiple aspects of her character as a learned, compassionate, considerate and understanding wife. She points out that "Draupadi is capable of shattering patriarchal norms and stereotyped boundaries" and that "she is a bold and determined kshatriya woman representing the status and empowerment of woman in ancient India".

Misra wonders why the MB, the Pancham Veda, is shunned in Indian homes. If it is for fratricidal wars,

Ramayana too has them, viz., Bali-Sugriva, Ravana-Vibhishana. She argues Akbar's Razmnama names the epic as a book of war for the first time.

In Ramayana, the rift between brothers is only among non-humans, a side-issue, whereas in MB that is central to a royal family. The MB is too close to us!

One notices a problem in the essays. Most of the authors state that Jaya consisted of 8800 shlokas, Bharata 24000 and MB more than a lakh. The vulgate clearly mentions that the 8800 verses are the riddling, knotty verses strewn through the epic to confuse Ganesha. Vyasa created Bharata samhita first with 24000 verses and later increased it to 60 lakh of which one hundred thousand was meant for the human world, to be recited later by Vaishampayana.

A rose must have its thorns. Why repeat the Introduction in the second volume? A table of contents would have sufficed. More careful editing and proof-reading were required. Lack of this has rendered some articles

somewhat unintelligible. The e-mail of authors is a good idea. A few lines about each author would be very helpful. One major problem is that most of the Sanskrit texts quoted are not translated. Most readers have little or no knowledge of Sanskrit and diacritics. Since they cannot follow the meaning of the verses, much of the arguments of the writer are lost on them. Another problem is use of technical jargon without an explanation. These essays become fairly obscure to the reader.

The Draupadi Dream Trust and its untiring chairperson, Misra, deserve congratulations for their valuable contribution towards establishing the epic's date and historicity and revising the CE. They have organised three manthans and a lot of amrita has already appeared. The volume of information and insights presented in these two beautiful volumes is phenomenal.

The reviewer retired as major gen-



eral, Adtl. DC of Army Postal Service. He is an indologist.

Life & Letters

With innumerable mythological tales

Signifying bonhomie, togetherness and equality, Holi may be regarded as a sweet protest against apartheid that still prevails in different shapes and forms in the world

BUDDHADEV NANDI

Holi is one of the major Hindu festivals observed predominantly in the Indian subcontinent with pomp and grandeur. According to the *Vikram Samvat* Hindu Calendar, Holi is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Phalgun. This boisterous Hindu festival befittingly equates *Rituraj Basanta* (King of Seasons) when there is a riot of colours in nature with blooming *Palash*, *Simul* and *Krishnachura*. Therefore, *Basantotsav*, another name of Holi, is the eponym of "Basanta Ritu" in the Bengali almanac.

There are a number of mythological stories surrounding the festival of Holi. According to Hindu scriptures, the name "Holi" derives from Holika, the sister of demon king Hiranyakashipu who was killed by Narsimha (semi-man-semi-lion), one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Though Lord Vishnu was the sworn enemy of Hiranyakashipu, his young son Prahalad was an ardent devotee of the former. Despite his sincere efforts to kill his own son, the demon king failed to get rid of him.

Then he invoked his ogress sister Holika and entrusted her with the onus of killing Prahalad. Holika was empowered by a strange boon — she could enter the fire unscathed. Holika entered a blaz-



Celebrating Holika Dahan

ing pyre with Prahalad in her lap. But her sinister desire backfired because she was unaware of the fact that the boon would work only if she entered the blazing fire alone. So, the magical cloak that had so far protected Holika from the rage of fire flew away from her body and instead wrapped Prahalad leaving him unhurt. But Holika was burnt to death. As a mark of the great triumph of a true devotee of Lord Vishnu, the effigies of Holika are burnt in huge bonfires in many parts of Northern India. Therefore, "Holika Dahan" symbolises the victory of good over evil.

Another legend explains that it was the Ogress Putana who was sent by Kansa, the king of Mathura, to kill his maternal nephew Lord Krishna who was then a new born baby. But Krishna killed Putana. Therefore, the day is observed by burning the effigy of Putana symbolising the same theme of the triumph of good over evil.

Another legend says that Holi originated when Lord Krishna was extremely jealous of Radha's fair complexion in comparison with his dark one. He often whined and wondered why Radha was so fair. His dotting mother Yashoda advised her son to smear Radha's face with different colours.

In South India, Lord Shiva has a connection with the legend of Holi. After the self-immolation of goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva, renouncing his duties towards the universe, plunged into deep medi-

tation. On the other hand, Parvati craved Shiva as her consort once again. Therefore, she summoned the Hindu god of love named Kama on Vasant Panchami. Kamadeva, the god of love and passion, shot his arrows at Lord Shiva to break his meditation but he opened his third eye and burnt Kamadeva to ashes. Thus, Lord Shiva had conquered carnal desires. Then Rati, the wife of Kama, with the power of her meditative asceticism, pacified Lord Shiva who revived the god of love. The day of Kamadeva getting back his life is celebrated as the festival of Holi.

According to another legend, there was an Ogress named Dhundi. She troubled little children. But no one could suppress her as she was endowed with a boon bestowed upon her by Lord Shiva. The boon made her almost invincible. However, the boon also entailed that her defeat could be possible only by the crazy group of boys. Therefore, on the day of Holi, in some parts of the country boys hurl abuses and play pranks to chase away Dhundi.

Historically, Holi dates back to several centuries before the inception of the Gregorian calendar. In ancient Hindu literature and the Puranas, there are references to Holi. Besides, the celebration is mentioned in the book by the great poet Kalidas in the fourth century and the seventh century Sanskrit drama *Ratnavali*. The reference of Holi is engraved and painted in sculptures and murals of ancient Indian temples.



Needless to say, various legends and historical events associated with Holi mainly recognise the ultimate victory of good over evil. It is also the harvest time and Nature turns into a collage of colourful landscapes. The festival of colours plays the role of a mighty leveller to do away with discrimination and differences among people irrespective of their cast, creed, complexion, sex, age and social status.

Holi is also a symbol of freedom. In this regard, one may recollect how one thousand widows shunned the fetters of social stigma and played Holi with colours, gulas and flower petals at about the Meera Sahabgini Ashram in Vrindavan a few years ago. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that Holi is the festival of bonhomie, brotherhood and above all humanity in the true sense of the term.

In the past the hues and colours used to smear one another were widely derived from herbal and organic origins. Green was obtained from mehendi and dried leaves of *neem*, *gulmohar* et al. Yellow, red and orange were extracted widely from turmeric, whereas, indigo plants were the basic sources of blue. Besides, a variety of fruits, flowers and vegetables including grapes, beetroot, tea, amla, hibiscus, *palash*, *krishnachura* et al were widely used to prepare colour dust and gulas of different hues. But in this modern synthetic age, herbal colours have been replaced by

cheap and bright chemical colours prepared with toxic metal-based pigments including mercury sulphide, lead oxide, aluminum bromide, copper sulfate and so on. It is heartening to note, with the ever increasing sense of health-consciousness, the use of organic and herbal colours are gaining ground again.

Holi is celebrated in different ways in different parts of India. "Lath Mar Holi" is celebrated at Barsana, a town near Mathura in Uttar Pradesh. Women with sticks run after and beat men who protect themselves with shields. In Mathura, Vrindavan and other parts of the Braj region, Holi is celebrated almost in the same manner. The festival lasts more than two weeks there.

Holi in Gujarat is called *Dhuleti*, which is celebrated with rangoli and colour dusts. In Bihar, Phagua or Phagu Purnima is the name of the festival of Holi. Huge bonfire is lit with cow dung cakes, araad and redi creepers and even grains from the fresh harvest. *Abeer* or colour powders and water colours are applied to observe Holi. Besides, Holi is known as *Dulandi Holi* in Haryana, *Rangpanchami* in Maharashtra, *Hola Moholla* in Punjab, *Kama Dahanam* in Tamil Nadu and so on.

But the festival of colour is popular as *Dol Yatra* in Bengal and Odisha. In Odisha, the idols of Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra are installed on the podium called Dolamandapa, whereas, the idols of Radha and Krishna are placed

on a well decorated palanquin in West Bengal. In this regard Basanta Utsav in Shantiniketan deserves special mention. Rabindranath Tagore introduced the occasion in his Vishva Bharati University. There, students celebrate the occasion by singing, dancing and throwing colour powders. Many tourists from our country and abroad turn up to become the part of the Basanta Utsav.

Bishnupur of Bankura district also has a rich tradition of celebrating Holi in the precinct of the famous Madanmohan Temple. The Malla kings of erstwhile Malabhum (now Bishnupur) encouraged their subjects to observe Dol Yatra with the presentation of devoted songs hailing Lord Madanmohan and Sri Radha. Now this has turned into dirty political contention. Transcending the boundary of our country, Holi is celebrated in Nepal, Indonesia, Fiji, US, UK and even in Pakistan.

However, Holi is a vibrant festival containing multifarious aspects. It is the festival of bonhomie, forgiveness and equality. In the blaze of the bonfire called *Holika Dahan*, six rudimentary enemies including lust, anger, greed, jealousy, conceit and craving ingrained innately in our character are supposed to combust. The burnt ashes of Holika turn into colour powders of different hues of the rainbow. The festival may well be regarded as a sweet protest against apartheid that still prevails in different shapes and forms in the world.