

Mahabharata Manthan book (image of bk), Review by Shankar Sen, Major General, Additional DG of Army Postal Service

Book: *Mahabharata Manthan, Vols 1 & 2*

Editors: *Neera Misra & Rajesh Lal*

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Draupadi Dream Trust, New Delhi, has brought out Mahabharata Manthan, 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 Pauravas 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 threeheaded 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 is 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 Bhrgivangiras (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 everdeveloping 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 Bhishmaparva 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 mostly 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 Dosser, 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 (Kiratarjuniyam) 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 sideissue, 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 proofreading 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, Shankar Sen, retired as Major General, Additional DG of Army Postal Service. He is an Indologist)