

MAHABHARATA

THE GREATEST EPIC OF MANKIND

ItihAsa, ('indeed it was') or 'history' is the collective Sanskrit term for the RAmAyaNa and the MahAbhArata, usually described as 'The Great Epics' in western publications. These epics have inspired millions of devotees, for more than fifty-odd centuries that they have been in existence. They are truly the soul of the Hindu society and of India, even today. The RAmAyaNa is now believed to have taken place around the period ~4750 BCE and the MahAbhArata War is pinned down to have occurred in November, ~3067 BCE. These dates have been calculated by astronomers on the basis of the planetary positions and also as recorded by Sage VyAsa. The immortal Bhagavad Gita (GITA) is also enshrined in the MahAbhArata. GITA is a discourse on Duty and Right Action by the Supreme Lord Krishna to his disciple, Arjuna, on the field of battle at Kurukshetra. An inspiration and guide to humanity in its conduct through life, GITA is beyond Religions and has few parallels in the world.

The followers of SanAtana Dharma (now known as 'Hindus') believe that the two eyes of our civilized society are the Great Epics of Mankind, RAmAyaNa and MahAbhArata. The primordial civilization, also known as BhArata continent, utilized these two epics as the fundamental guides to human conduct. These epics described (in an unbiased fashion and in plain format of storytelling), 'good and bad' to draw from, and to steer the human civilization.



Hinduism is very much a Code of Revelation. Hindus are acknowledged universally to be the most thoughtful people and their literature is characterized by constant concern with humanity's spiritual journey. The philosophical concepts, commonly known as *vedic tradition*, were handed down starting from the 'four vedas' - transmitted by a phenomenal human chain of memory – and later written down, centuries, if not millennia, after their actual creation or compilation. The early phase of Vedic tradition is dated between 10,000 and 7,000 BCE.

If the circumstances described in the later epic MahAbhArata (also described as MahAbhAratam) were true as of its original composition (now believed to be between 4,000 BCE and 3,000 BCE), they are unmistakably true and relevant even in this day and age. The greatest challenge since the seventeenth century has been the determination of the exact period of the epic. According to Aryabhata (476 CE), one of the greatest astronomers and mathematicians, and according to the planetary positions recorded in the epic itself, the approximate date has now been accepted to be about 3,100 BCE.

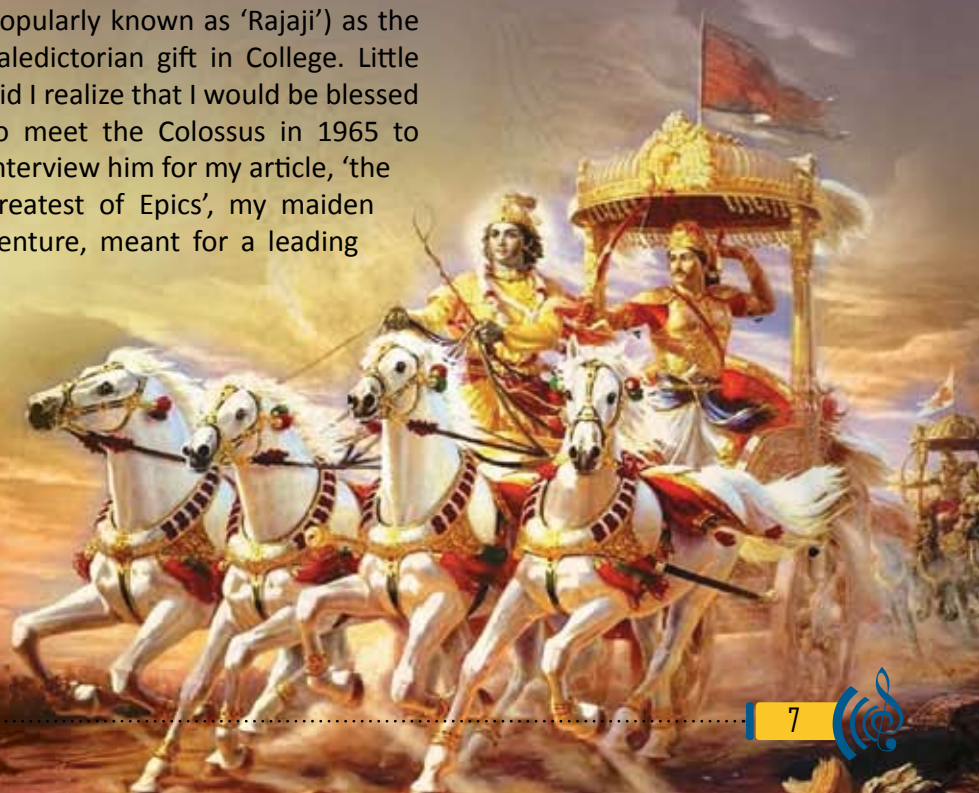
Indologists and philosophers such as Prof Klaus Klostermaier, philologists Sir William Jones and orientalist Dr Max Muller, Surgey Oldenburg, Dravidologists Prof PT Srinivasa Iyengar & Dr S Krishnaswamy Iyengar, Dr Pandurang Vaman Kane, Professor Fitzgerald, Dr. BR Ambedkar, historian K A Nilakanta Sastri, Prof Sondekoppa Srikanta Sastri, Mahapandit Sankirtayan,

educationist Dr Jagdish Chandra Jain, Prof Pushp, Sri Aurobindo, Chakravarthy Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) and Prof Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and a hundred other eminent scholars spent most of their lives exploring the greatness of MahAbhArat as a reference book for the spiritual wellbeing of Mankind. Dr. Max Muller, a relatively household name with three generations of Indians, grudgingly acknowledged, *"In thus giving the Noetics the first place, the thinkers of India seem to have again ranked superior to most of the philosophers of the West."* and *"....."The Vedic literature opens to us a chapter in what has been called the education of the human race, to which we can find no parallel anywhere else."*

This author was first fascinated with this epic, as a teenager, when presented with a book written in Tamil, 'VyAsar virundhu' (later repeatedly published as MahAbhAratam, written by Chakravarthy Rajagopalachari, popularly known as 'Rajaji') as the valedictorian gift in College. Little did I realize that I would be blessed to meet the Colossus in 1965 to interview him for my article, 'the greatest of Epics', my maiden venture, meant for a leading

Indian newspaper! While I could not forget his laughter at my impetuous summation, when questioned, of my understanding of the epic, I still remember the angst that Bharata Ratna Rajaji (the first Governor General of free India and one of the greatest scholars of modern India) expressed, albeit in rightful indignance, that MahAbhArata has been 'sadly misunderstood, exploited and poorly interpreted, so far', and that genuine 'awareness' of its greatness was lacking even amongst Indians. He admonished that I read the epic over and over, if possible, almost weekly or at least monthly to 'get to the Truth of Human Behavior' if I were really interested in knowing the intent and ambit of the epic.

After a thousand publications and interpretations over centuries and through international theater by as many scholars and film makers, over seven decades, and with several television serials in a dozen



languages, the epic continues to provide, nevertheless, fodder for hundreds of millions, both economically and intellectually.

Simplistically put, the MahAbhArata is the story of two sets of paternal first cousins - the five sons of the deceased king PANdu (the five PANdavAs) and the one hundred sons of the blind King DhritarAshTra (the hundred DhArtarAshTras aka kauravAs) - who became bitter rivals, and opposed each other in



war for possession/control of the ancestral Bharata kingdom with its capital in the "City of the Elephant" (Hastinapura), on the banks of Ganga river in north-central India. What is dramatically interesting within this simple dynasty feud is the large number of individual agendas the many characters pursue, and the numerous inter personal conflicts, grand ethical puzzles, myriad subplots, and bizarre plot twists that give the greatest story of human race a

strikingly powerful development-by-the-day. The five sons of PANdu were actually fathered by four Gods (as PANdu could not be their biological father, because of a curse) and these heroes, pANdavAs, were assisted throughout the epic by various Gods including their respective godly-fathers, eminent sages, and venerable Rishis, and by the greatest seer Krishna-Dvaipayana, the VyAsa (who later became the author of this grand epic narrating the minutest detail in poetic format); VyAsa was also their actual grandfather (i.e., he had engendered PANdu and the blind DhritarAsTra upon their respective nominal fathers' widows, as ordained by VyAsA's mother, the Queen of the dynasty, just to preserve the grand lineage). The one hundred DhArtarAshTras, on the other hand, had a grotesque, demonic birth, and are (as described more than once in the text) to be human incarnations of the demons (asurAs) who are the perpetual enemies of the Gods (DevAs). The most dramatic figure of the entire MahAbhArata, however, is Krishna-VASudEva, the supreme God Vishnu himself (who descended unto the planet Earth in human form to rescue "Law, Good Deeds, Righteousness, and Virtue" - all referring to different aspects of "Dharma"). Krishna-VASudEva ("Krishna") was also the cousin of both parties, but he was a close friend, advisor and guardian of the PANdavAs; he became the brother-in-law of Arjuna-PANdavA, and served as Arjuna's mentor and charioteer in the great war of KurukshETra. Krishna is portrayed in the narration several times as eager to ensure the purgative war occurs,

and in many ways used PANdavAs as his human instruments for fulfilling that conclusion.

The DhArtarAshTra party behaved viciously and brutally toward the PANdavAs in many ways, from the time of their early youth. Their malice displayed itself, most dramatically, when they took advantage of the eldest PANdavA, Yudhishtira (who had by then become the universal ruler of the land) in a game of dice: The DhArtarAshTras 'won' over Yudhishtira, his brothers, and even the PANdavAs' common wife draupadi; The DhArtarAshTras humiliated all the PANdavAs in public and physically abused draupadi; they drove the PANdavA party into the wilderness for twelve years, and those twelve years had to be followed by the PANdavAs' living in exile, somewhere in disguise ('agnyatavAsa'), without being discovered by DhArtarAshTras for one more year. The PANdavAs fulfilled their part of that bargain, but the villainous leader of the DhArtarAshTra party, DuryOdhana, was unwilling to restore the PANdavAs to their rightful half of the kingdom when the thirteen years had expired. Both sides then called upon their many allies and assembled two large armies which arrayed on 'Kuru's Field' (Kuru was one of the eponymous ancestors of the clan), eleven divisions in the army of Duryodhana against seven divisions for Yudhishtira. Much of the action in the MahAbhArata is accompanied by discussion and debate among various interested parties, and the most famous sermon of all time, Krishna's ethical lecture and demonstration of his divinity to his *disciple* Arjuna



(the justly famous Bhagavad Gita occurred in the MahAbhArata just prior to the commencement of the hostilities of the war).

The PAnDavAs won the eighteen-day battle, but it was a victory that deeply troubled all except those who were able to understand the happenings on the *Divine Level* (chiefly Krishna, VyAsa, and BhIshma, the Bharata patriarch who was emblematic of the virtues of the era, now passing away). The PAnDavAs' five sons by Draupadi, as well as Bhimasena PAnDavAs' and Arjuna PAnDavAs' two sons by two other mothers (respectively, the young warriors GhaTotkaca and Abhimanyu), were all tragic victims in the war. Worse perhaps, the PAnDavA victory was won by the PAnDavAs slaying, in succession, four men who were quasi-fathers to them: BhIshma, their teacher Drona, KarNa (who was, though none of the PAnDavAs knew it earlier, the first born, pre-marital, son of their mother Kunti), and their maternal uncle Shalya (all four of these venerable men were, in succession, 'supreme commander' of Duryodhana's army during the war). Equally troubling was the fact that the killing of the first three of these 'fathers,' and of some other enemy warriors as well, was accomplished only through 'crooked stratagems' or 'devious tactics' (jihmOpAyAs), most of which were orchestrated by Krishna as absolutely required by the then compelling circumstances. The ethical gaps were not resolved to anyone's satisfaction on the surface of the narrative and the aftermath of the war was dominated by a sense of horror and malaise.

Yudhishtira alone was terribly troubled, but his sense of the war's *wrongfulness* persisted to the end of the text, in spite of the fact that everyone else, from his wife to Lord Krishna, told him that the war was, necessary, right and good; in spite of the fact that the dying patriarch BhIshma lectured Yudhishtira at length on all aspects of the Good Law (*the Duties and Responsibilities of Kings - which have rightful violence at their center; the ambiguities of Righteousness in abnormal circumstances; and the absolute perspective of a beatitude that ultimately transcends the oppositions of good versus bad, right versus wrong, pleasant versus unpleasant, etc.*); in spite of the fact that Yudhishtira performed a grand Horse Sacrifice ('Aswamedha') as expiation for the putative wrong of the war. These debates, the instructions and the account of this Sacrifice are told at some length after the massive and grotesque narrative of the battle; they form a deliberate tale of pacification (*praSamana/sAnti*) that aims to neutralize the inevitable miasma of the Great War.

In the years that followed the war, DhritarAshTra and his queen Gandhari, and Kunti, the mother of the PAnDavAs, lived a life of asceticism in a forest retreat and died with yogic calm in a forest fire unbenounced to the rest of the clan. Krishna and his always unruly (yAdava) clan slaughtered each other in a drunken brawl thirty-six years after the war, and Krishna's soul dissolved back into the Supreme God Vishnu (Krishna had been born, in (that) dwApara yuga, when a part of Vishnu took birth

in the womb of Krishna's mother, Devaki). When PAnDavAs learned of this, they believed, it was time for them to leave this mortal world and they embarked upon the 'Great Journey,' which involved walking far north toward the polar, that is believed to be toward the heavenly worlds, until one's body dropped dead. One by one Draupadi and the clan died along the way until Yudhishtira was left alone with a dog that had followed him all the way to the gate of Heaven; he then refused the orders of the Gatekeepers to drive the dog back; at which point, the dog revealed itself to be an incarnate form of Lord Dharma (the 'Yama' God who was Yudhishtira's actual, physical, father), who was there to test Yudhishtira's virtue one more time. Once in Heaven, Yudhishtira faced the final test of his virtue: He saw only the DhArtarAshTras in Heaven, and was told that his brothers were all in Hell! It was then that Yudhishtira insisted on joining his brothers in Hell, if that be the case! Finally, it was revealed that they were really in Heaven, and that this illusion had been one final test for him.

The MahAbhArata is probably the longest of all the world's epics. It contains 96,635 couplets, carefully decked in 98 sections within 18 'parvas' or master cantos. These 18 cantos were subsequently, logically, divided by scholars into four major parts, 'Adhya pancakam (5), Yuddha pancakam (5), sAnti triyam (3), and antya pancakam (5)'. These are further divided into 'avAntara parvas', and 'adhyAyAs' totaling in all, 2,382 sub-sections making the grand total of 96,635 verses. It is



still believed by many Indo-scholars that the original work should have had as many as 6 million couplets/verses and only 96,635 now remain as of the first publication in the 19th century.

The MahAbhArata, one of the great sources of Hinduism, is also an account of its beliefs. It is, above all, a verse-chronicle of Krishna, the real hero of the epic, an incarnation of the Supreme God Vishnu, whose divine nature reveals often in His magisterial interventions. Hundreds of carefully woven subplots, chronicles and episodes fruitfully soften the horror of the Kurukshetra war; they are full of charm, interposed as a form of digression; and they are based on high social ethics. For example, Damayanti's devotion, tinged with unflinching fidelity, succeeds in saving her husband, king Nala, from the demon of gambling. The deep love of Savitri and Satyavan persuades the God of death (Yama) to give back the spouse. These stories are also used to emphasize the importance of virtuous living and dhArmic beliefs.

But the most admirable and notable offshoot is the Bhagavad Gita (the Song of the Lord). In it, Lord Krishna, revealing Himself as Bhagavan (the *Supreme Lord*), destroys Arjuna's fear and admonishes him on his unsteady mind at the very last moment of the commencement of the monumental war. Krishna teaches Arjuna, and thus to the millions at the battleground and to the rest of humanity, the philosophy of *action without attachment*, 'nishkAmya karma' leading to deliverance by Bhakti, the ardent

love and of union with the Blessed One, "participation with Him in Life and Death". Krishna reminds Arjuna his duties as a warrior and also as a prince and distinguishes the Yogic and Vedantic philosophies with numerous examples. This didactic analysis (of 'swadhArma') has made GITA the accepted concise guide to Hindu Philosophy and a practical guide to Life. Several of the important ethical and theological themes of the MahAbhArata are tied together in this sermon, and this "Song of the Blessed One" is believed to have exerted the most powerful and far-reaching influence in global Civilization and scriptural works in Christendom. Henry David Thoreau, one of the greatest 19th century philosophers, from The New England Transcendentalists - *reading the GITA on the shore of Walden Pond* - wrote the famous essay 'On Civil Disobedience' for coping with societal injustice. It was this analysis/philosophy and Thoreau's essay that inspired Mahatma Gandhi formulating 'satyAgraha' or passive resistance. Martin Luther King, another luminary, was inspired by Gandhi and the spark from Thoreau, all of them finding inspiration from the immortal GITA. Swami Vivekananda and a host of scholars and free thinkers have used this text to inspire the Indian Independence Movement and to emphasize the values of Life.

The younger generation worldwide would appreciate that the most successful series of movies in International film history, *Star Wars* & *Lord of the Rings*, seem to have generously benefited from MahAbhArata. By these popular

media and means, the merit, both poetical and historical, of the MahAbhArata are becoming more extensively known; but in the amplitude of it, extant in the numerous traditions, legends and tales which it contains, and in its many didactic and philosophical paragraphs, it offers an accumulation of materials adopted to different tastes, and auxiliary to diverging researches, which must long advantageously engage the attention, and reward the industry, of Sanskrit scholars.

In the expression of Bharata Ratna Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the second president of India and one of India's best and most influential twentieth century scholars of comparative religion and philosophy, MahAbhArata is one of the greatest works of Sanskrit literature, and the longest poem in world literature. It is a perceptive record of a great period of India's history. Mahabharata has also been described as "the longest exposition on Dharma to be ever written" and that which reflects the dynamic culture of India. It is a veritable encyclopedia and it carries this verse about its own scope. It is said that what is found here may be found elsewhere but, what is not found here cannot be found elsewhere.

*nArAyaNam namaskrutya
naranchaiva narOttamam |
dEvIm sarasvatIm vyAsam
tatO jayamUdIrayEt
[Srimad Bhagavatam - 1.2.4]*

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