

Book Review: A book that goes on a quest of Indraprastha's legacy

By [Come Carpentier de Gourdon](#) | 23 December, 2017

Indraprastha Revisited is a well illustrated, highly readable compendium of information on almost all aspects of Indraprastha's legacy, and provides a wealth of information on many aspects of the city's history, from its remote origins until the recent past.



Indraprastha Revisited

Edited by Neera Misra and Rajesh Lall
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Since the days of the Mahabharata, Indraprastha, the seat of the Pandavas has frequently been evoked in literature, art, history and mythology. An international seminar held at the National Museum by the Draupadi Foundation as part of the 1st Indraprastha festival in November 2016, was dedicated to the exploration of the archaeological, cultural and religious legacy of that ancient city on whose site a long succession of dynasties, from the Chandravanshis to the Mughals and British, established their headquarters along many centuries before it was retained as the capital of newly independent India in 1947.

The volume containing the papers presented at the conference is a well illustrated, highly readable compendium of information on almost all aspects of Indraprastha's legacy. It brings together the findings and conclusions of

renowned archaeologists such as B.B. Lal, Vishnu Kant and B.R. Mani, the results of archaeo-astronomical computations by the likes of A.K. Bhatnagar, B.N. Achar and Koenraad Elst, geographical and ethnographic studies of the area comprised between the Yamuna and the Saraswati and chronological interpretations of Puranic and other ancient but imprecise or fanciful dynastic nomenclatures by various historians as well as speculative and artistic reconstructions of the Pandava city inspired by the descriptions contained in the epic.

At the core of every historical evaluation of the story narrated in the Itihasa lies the uncertainty about dates. The book presents side by side various versions, from the traditional account which situates the great war and surrounding events in the final century of the 4th Millennium BCE to the perspective given by B.B. Lal, who, on the basis of retrieved materials (mainly painted grey pottery ware) and of traces of a later flood at Hastinapura settles for the period between the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, in keeping with the estimations of Pargiter and other historians of the last 200 years. In between the two extremes, Bhatnagar and Elst, by combining archaeo-astronomical data provided by the epic with hydrographic ones such as the evidence of gradual drying out of the Saraswati, conclude that the war must have taken place between the late 3rd millennium and the middle of the 2nd, coinciding with the declining phase of the so-called Harappan, or more accurately, Sindhu-Saraswati-Yamuna civilisation, seven to 15 centuries earlier than Lal's datation. Given that the Mahabharata explicitly portrays the end of an era, this indeed seems to be the most reasonable assumption, but the chronological controversy will not be settled until new and definite evidence is either unearthed from a site or deciphered in reliable documentary sources.

Apart from the reflecting the inconclusive discussion on the dates, Indraprastha Revisited provides a wealth of information on many aspects of the city's history from its remote origins until the recent past. It is not commonly known that there are abundant traces of human habitation in the area going back to the late Acheulean stage in the Paleolithic Age, tens of thousands of years ago, as A.K. Sharma demonstrates. It is hence not hard to believe that urbanisation was initiated very early in this fertile region strategically located at the crossing of various North-South and East-West routes.

Logically, the most powerful ruling clan of the area in the late Vedic era would have chosen the hillock on the banks of the Yamuna to build a pura and prastha, later known as the Old Fort (Purana Qila), perhaps far earlier than B.B. Lal assumes on the basis of material vestiges found to date. Indeed the region between the Indus and the Yamuna along the Saraswasti was thickly populated in very ancient times as attested by the remains of numerous settlements going back to the early Harappan and even to the Proto-Harappan era. Would the site of Delhi have been urbanised only from 900 BCE, after the apparent collapse of the "Sindhu-Saraswati" culture? That is doubtful.

In any event, the lasting memory of the glorious Kuru-Pandava era, maintained throughout the janapada, Buddhist, Medieval and Turco-Mongol periods, is

highlighted in architecture (silpa), plastic arts and epigraphy by various contributors to the volume. General G.D. Bakshi sees in Sri Krishna's Yadava clan of Mathura one of the early "republican" polities which rose amidst the hereditary kingdoms and developed in the Gangetic plain until the advent of the Mauryan empire.

The co-authors of the book together make a convincing case that the Mahabharata does not rest on a legend devoid of a historical basis because the events it records are vividly remembered in the national psyche, while the locales in which they take place still retain the same names and are well identified since time immemorial. As Koenraad Elst remarks, ancient civilisations did not conceive of purely invented literature and their heroic texts narrated real happenings, however much they embellished, magnified or romanticised them. J.N. Ravi provides a detailed reconstitution of Balarama's periplum between the Saraswati and Yamuna, thereby presenting a fascinating picture of the physical and human geography of the period. S. Chakraverty is less convincing when he attempts to assign distinct ethno-cultural identities to various tribes and peoples taking part in the story since there is no clear distinction between indigenous and alien elements in the text.

Neera Misra, the founder and president of the Draupadi Trust and others show how the layout and monuments of the fabled Pandava city, named after Indra, the thunderbolt-wielding celestial king of the gods, inspired the design of royal capitals in a large part of Asia for many centuries to come, from Tibet to Indonesia and even in China and Japan. The Mahabharata points out that Arjuna's domain was not restricted to the Purana Qila, but encompassed a wide area which today comprises most of Old and New Delhi along the Yamuna, all the way to the Nigambodh Ghat. The Prastha was indeed the forerunner of today's NCR.

Indraprastha, as on-site excavations confirm, is to be regarded as one of the world's most ancient continuously inhabited capitals. The book makes an appeal for various initiatives to be taken in order to celebrate, revive and illustrate this hoary past in the interest of art history, culture, heritage, tourism and environmental conservation. The creation of an archaeological park has already been decided upon by the government and other projects for excavations, restoration of ancient buildings and beautification of areas of interest are being considered. A useful addition to the Purana Qila championed by Neera Misra would be a state-of-the-art historical interpretation centre for visitors, providing audio-visual retrospectives and CGI evocations of the civilisation of the Mahabharata age described in the epic.

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