

THE MAHĀBHĀRATA
Its Antiquity, Historicity and Impact on Society

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Editors

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PREFACE

The history and literature of the ancient civilizations arouse emotions in people and form the basis of understanding and learning's from the past. This is because they also act as a mirror, and become a basis of connecting to the roots of human, social, political and cultural evolution of nations and their values and philosophy.

It is amazing to delve in how old the Vedas could be and how old the ancient Indian texts are. In Bhārata, the written texts evolved from *smṛti*, the traditional way of knowledge transmission. Ancient texts are a reflection of a society, of a period in the history of a nation, and, like legendary personalities, legendary texts become larger than life. Our epics fall in this category. As recently as 1947, Albert Einstein had said about Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi “generations to come, it may well be, will scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth.”. Some personalities, some happenings in the evolution of nations become so unique and are rich with such high values and probity of social responsibility, and are yet so true to life, that they blur the lines between reality and imagination. We find it difficult to believe that such persons ever existed or such incidents actually happened in the history of a country.

The same seems to be true about the ideas some people have regarding many things related to ancient India's journey till today. What happened centuries ago now seem unbelievable? We see this most prominently in the way many of the present generation looks at its two famous and popular epics -the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

While the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the mirror of the life of Rāma, heir to the Ayodhyā kingdom of north India and is a treatise on the political and interpersonal relationships of families, the *Mahābhārata*, as its name suggests, encompasses the whole of the Āryāvarta region. It tells us the history of several generations of rulers and the society, where begins a fight against falling value systems in all fields. The *Mahābhārata* explains the supremacy of ‘right *karma*’ for sustaining dignified human life on this planet. The *Mahābhārata* deals with every aspect of existence on earth - political, social and interpersonal and relationship of man with nature. It attempts to make humans realize their real self, the soul, the responsibility of being on this planet and the actions needed to preserve, protect and enhance the creation of the superior being ‘brahma’.

Could such a huge canvass of events, feelings, teachings and array of actions, be mere imagination? Is there no truth in it? Is it not a historical depiction of a society that had reached a pinnacle of high values and could not let a few wayward beings mar their journey of progress? For centuries volumes have been written on the *Gītā*, the characters of the *Mahābhārata*. Why? Many a time reality is stranger than fiction.

It is hardly surprising that a certain section of society does not even believe that Kṛṣṇa existed or that the *Mahābhārata* can be close to truth and historical literature, as the belief about high values of Mahatma Gandhi are already eroding. We invited eminent archaeologists, historians and Sanskrit scholars to be the leading lights in our quest to find and understand the historicity, antiquity, and impact of the *Mahābhārata* on the Indian civilization. To understand this, and to create awareness of the research findings of scholars, through scientific methodology, of our archaeologists, historians and Sanskrit scholars, Draupadi Dream Trust organized an International Conference on the topic ‘The *Mahābhārata*: Its Historicity, Antiquity and Impact on Indian Civilization’. This epic is a milestone in the history of ancient India and is a very crucial link to our prevailing civilization ethos and value systems.

Many books have been inspired by the legends of this greatest of epics. Kṛṣṇa, and his teachings of the *Gītā*, are followed by many communities of the world. Stories of Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā, Arjuna, Bhīṣma, Duryodhana are quoted as examples in households and Draupadī, with a unique identity of her own, stands out as the first liberated woman, who challenged a king when her modesty was threatened. In fact most queens of the *Mahābhārata* are examples of empowered women. Finding out their historicity will add weight to the knowledge their conduct gives to many modern liberated women. Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it - but to learn from history, let us first understand it. The *Mahābhārata* is a very important piece of ‘literary’ and ‘traditions’ evidence in our historical evolution as a civilized race and nation.

The fact cannot be denied that the sayings of the *Gītā* are eternal truths and till date as valid as when they were propounded by Kṛṣṇa. So what is the date of this writing and the personalities that were the centerpiece of the evolution of the *Mahābhārata*. The impact of *Mahābhārata* is not just national but international. But in India, the *Mahābhārata* forms the soul of its philosophy and values of life. Thus it is imperative that we do look into its authenticity and put it in proper historical perspective. The three days’ conference covered multiple aspects of the *Mahābhārata*.

The Main Objective of this conference was to put in proper perspective the historicity, authenticity and the events narrated in the book *Mahābhārata*. Other Objectives were to

give a scientifically and logically researched authenticity to our ancient Indian history, its characters and important events in chronological order in relation to present times, to learn about the past and connect it to the present so “that generations to come will believe’ the reality as it was and not blur it with ‘isms’ or ignorance.

This volume comprises 18 papers as by coincidence 18 paper presentations were delivered during the *Mahābhārata* conference and the *Mahābhārata* comprises 18 chapters. For some reasons, two of our invited scholars could not submit manuscripts of their presentation for publication. Since we wanted to keep the figure of 18 chapters in our publication, two more papers related to Mathura have been added by Dr. Vinay Kumar Gupta. As Mathura is well associated with the life saga of Lord Kṛṣṇa, the chapters could fit in our volume and is expected that these additions would be appreciated by the readers.

Editors