Importance of Mahabharatha – A Brief Overview

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Abstract - The setting of the epic has a historical precedent in Iron Age (Vedic) India, where the Kuru kingdom was the center of political power during roughly 1200 to 800 BCE. A dynastic conflict of the period could have been the inspiration for the Jaya, the foundation on which the Mahabharata corpus was built, with a climactic battle eventually coming to be viewed as an epochal event.

Introduction -

Puranic literature presents genealogical lists associated with the Mahabharata narrative. The evidence of the Puranas is of two kinds. Of the first kind, there is the direct statement that there were 1015 (or 1050) years between the birth of Parikshit (Arjuna's grandson) and the accession of Mahapadma Nanda, commonly dated to 382 BCE, which would yield an estimate of about 1400 BCE for the Bharata battle. However, this would imply improbably long reigns on average for the kings listed in the genealogies. Of the second kind are analyses of parallel genealogies in the Puranas between the times of Adhisimakrishna (Parikshit's great-grandson) and Mahapadma Nanda. Pargiter accordingly estimated 26 generations by averaging 10 different dynastic lists and, assuming 18 years for the average duration of a reign, arrived at an estimate of 850 BCE for Adhisimakrishna, and thus approximately 950 BCE for the Bharata battle.

B. B. Lal used the same approach with a more conservative assumption of the average reign to estimate a date of 836 BCE, and correlated this with archaeological evidence from Painted Grey Ware sites, the association being strong between PGW artifacts and places mentioned in the epic.

Attempts to date the events using methods of archaeoastronomy have produced, depending on which passages are chosen and how they are interpreted, estimates ranging from the late 4th to the mid 2nd millennium BCE. The late 4th millennium date has a precedent in the calculation of the Kaliyuga epoch, based on planetary conjunctions, by Aryabhata (6th century). His date of February 18 3102 BCE, claims that 3735 years have elapsed since the Bharata battle.) Another traditional school of astronomers and historians, represented by Vriddha-Garga, Varahamihira (author of the Brhatsamhita) and Kalhana (author of the Rajatarangini), place the Bharata war 653 years after the Kaliyuga epoch, corresponding to 2449 BCE.

Mahabharatha as Literature - Vyasa's Mahabharata is one of our noblest heritages. the highest literature transcends regionalism and through it, when we are properly attuned, we realise the essential oneness of the human family. The Mahabharata is of this class. It belongs to the world and not only to India. To the people of India, indeed, this epic has been an unfailing and perennial source of spiritual strength. Learnt at the mother's knee with reverence and love, it has inspired great men to heroic deeds as well as enabled the humble to face their trials with fortitude and faith. The Mahabharata is a noble poem possessing in a supreme degree the characteristics of a true epic, great and fateful movement, heroic characters and stately diction. The characters in the epic move with the vitality of real life. It is difficult to find anywhere such vivid portraiture on so ample a canvas. In this ancient and wonderful epic of our land there are many illustrative tales and sublime teachings, besides the narrative of the fortunes of the Pandavas. The Mahabharata is in fact a veritable ocean containing countless pearls and gems. Mahabharata is one of the greatest Indian epic. It narration is breathtaking in its poetic and intellectual quality. The Mahabharata belongs to the genre of “Itihasa”, which in hindi means history. In Sanskrit “Itihasa”, it mean “so indeed it was”. The Mahabharata narrative structure matches its complexity and depth of philosophy. The technique of narration is that of a story inside another story. Stories in Mahabharata state various responses to a specific problem which adds to the comprehensive dimension of the text. The base of the narration stands on “dialogues”, which bring out various view points on a particular situation. Every character in Mahabharatha has its own stand and ideologies, but the narration is done so beautifully that no view point is stated best or superior than the other. Though the structure of Mahabharatha is
complex in style, its language is so free flowing and rhythmic that it makes the hardest philosophy to look simple.

**Similarity between Ramayana and Mahabharatha** - Both Ramayana and Mahabharatha are great works of art in itself. But Ramayana is more famous and recited in many houses on a daily basis. Ramayana is considered as more religious book than Mahabharatha. From the point of view of drama and thrill both are equally good works. Then why is this partiality towards Ramayana? Rama is more loved hero than Dharmaputra. The reason could be because; Ramayana is more popular with Ladies. Ladies don’t find the Mahabharata attractive as it is more on ethics of state craft. Whereas Ramayana is more on mundane relations such as Brothers (Rama and Bharata or Sugriva and Ravana and Vibhishana and Kumbakarna). Father and Son (Dasaratha and Rama, Vali and Angada, Ravana and Indrajit), Mother and son (Kausalya and Rama, Kairey and Bharata, Sumitra and Lakshmana), Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Kairey and Seetha, Kausalya and Seetha), master and servant (Rama and Hanuman), Friends (Rama and Sugriva) etc. The ethics and emotions are more common in our day to day life and can easily relate. Understanding them makes our life richer and livelier. Hence Ramayana has become more popular and is enacted as Drama even in far of places such as Indonesia, even by Muslims there etc.

Mahabharata is the story of a family feud that ultimately leads to division of property and a terrible war. Ramayana narrates the tale of a family that struggles, and triumphs, over forces that seek to divide it. There is no denying that Mahabharata is a more complex, hence more challenging, epic. It is a maze of stories and personalities. No one is truly good or bad. Even Krishna, who is identified as God, plays an ambiguous role in the epic. Characters in the Ramayana seem more one-dimensional; Rama is perfection personified, too good to be true, while Ravana is evil incarnate.

But it is not so easy to dismiss the Ramayana. Any study of the Mahabharata, necessitates a reading of the Ramayana. The two epics are two sides of the same coin. Both are tales of Vishnu’s incarnations. In one, the Ramayana, he is the rule keeper. In the other, the Mahabharata, he is the rule maker. In the one, he is king. In the other, he is kingmaker. In one, he is predictable and dependable. In the other, he is manipulative and mercurial. Yet both are concerned about dharma – social order. In both, desire is the disruptive force.

**Three stages of development** - Jaya, the core of Mahābhārata is structured in the form of a dialogue between Kuru king Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya, his advisor and chariot driver. Sanjaya narrates each incident of the Kurukshetra War, fought in 18 days, as and when it happened. The Mahabharata itself (1.1.61) distinguishes a core portion of 24,000 verses, the Bharata proper, as opposed to additional secondary material, while the Ashvalayana Gṛhyasutra (3.4.4) makes a similar distinction. At least three redactions of the text are commonly recognized: Jaya (Victory) with 8,800 verses attributed to Vyasa, Bharata with 24,000 verses as recited by Vaisampayana, and finally the Mahabharata as recited by Ugrasrava Sauti with over 100,000 verses.

The core of the Maha Bharatha ideals with the defeat in the battle of Kauravas at the hands of the Pandavas. The epic was called "Jaya" because it describes the story of the victory of the Pandavas over the Kauravas. It was called "Bharatha" since it dealt with the lives of the people of the Bharatha race. It was called Maha Bharatha or Ithihasa, since it recorded the chronicles of the monarchs of those times. First stage was the Jaya stage. This consisted of 8800 slokas and related to the main theme of the work, namely, the feud between Kauravas and the Pandavas. This portion contains poetic descriptions relevant to such a narration.

The second stage Of "Bharatha" evolved with the addition of the greatness of the personages involved in the family war. At this stage, the epic had 24,000 slokas. It contained the description of the glory of personages like Bhishma, Dhrona, the stories relating to the birth of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, their education and upbringinging, the virtues of the royal class, the troubles and travails of the Pandavas during their period of exile and particularly the one year of living incognito in the court of Virata, the efforts made to prevent the great war, the teaching of Krishna to Arjuna, the description of the war that lasted for eighteen days and the final victory gained by the Pandavas. All of these topics relating directly to the main theme were perhaps added on in the second stage known as Bharatha with 24,000 slokas. During the third and final stage, a number of upakhyanas (other stories and anecdotes) were added on to this great work to make it, "Maha Bharatha". The size swelled upto 100,000 slokas. In this form, Maha Bharatha became an encyclopedia of Knowledge and wisdom of humanity.

**Eighteen Parvas** - The division into 18 parvas is as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parva</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Sub - Parvas</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adi Parva <em>(The Book of the Beginning)</em></td>
<td>1 – 19</td>
<td>How the Mahabharata came to be narrated by Sauti to the assembled rishis at Naimisharanya. The recital of the Mahabharata at the sarpasattra of Janamejaya by Vaishampayana at Takṣasila. The history of the Bharata race is told in detail and the parva also traces history of the Bhrigu race. The birth and early life of the Kuru princes. <em>(adi means first)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sabha Parva <em>(The Book of the Assembly Hall)</em></td>
<td>20 – 28</td>
<td>Maya Danava erects the palace and court <em>(sabha)</em>, at Indraprastha. Life at the court, Yudhishthira's Rajasuya Yajna, the game of dice, and the eventual exile of the Pandavas.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Vana Parva also Aranyakaparva, Aranyaparva <em>(The Book of the Forest)</em></td>
<td>29 – 44</td>
<td>The twelve years of exile in the forest <em>(aranya)</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Virata Parva <em>(The Book of Virata)</em></td>
<td>45 – 48</td>
<td>The year in incognito spent at the court of Virata.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Udyoga Parva <em>(The Book of the Effort)</em></td>
<td>49 – 59</td>
<td>Preparations for war and efforts to bring about peace between the Kurus and the Pandavas which eventually fail <em>(udyoga means effort or work)</em>.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Bhishma Parva <em>(The Book of Bhishma)</em></td>
<td>60 – 64</td>
<td>The first part of the great battle, with Bhishma as commander for the Kauravas and his fall on the bed of arrows.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Drona Parva <em>(The Book of Drona)</em></td>
<td>65 – 72</td>
<td>The battle continues, with Drona as commander. This is the major book of the war. Most of the great warriors on both sides are dead by the end of this book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Karna Parva <em>(The Book of Karna)</em></td>
<td>73</td>
<td>The battle again, with Karna as commander.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Shalva Parva <em>(The Book of Shalva)</em></td>
<td>74 – 77</td>
<td>The last day of the battle, with Shalva as commander. Also told in detail is the pilgrimage of Balarama to the fords of the river Saraswati and the mace fight between Bhima and Duryodhana which ends the war, since Bhima kills Duryodhana by smashing him on the thighs with a mace.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sauptika Parva <em>(The Book of the Sleeping Warriors)</em></td>
<td>78 – 80</td>
<td>Ashvattama, Kripa and Kritavarma kill the remaining Pandava army in their sleep. Only 7 warriors remain on the Pandava side and 3 on the Kaurava side.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strī Parva <em>(The Book of the Women)</em></td>
<td>81 – 85</td>
<td>Gandharī, Kunti and the women <em>(stri)</em> of the Kurus and Pandavas lament the dead.</td>
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### Causes for the popularity of Mahabharatha

- **Shanti Parva (The Book of Peace)**
  - Page: 86 – 88
  - The crowning of Yudhisthira as king of Hastinapura, and instructions from Bhishma for the newly anointed king on society, economics and politics. This is the longest book of the Mahabharata (*shanti* means peace).

- **Anushasana Parva (The Book of the Instructions)**
  - Page: 89 – 90
  - The final instructions (*anushasana*) from Bhishma.

- **Ashvamedhika Parva (The Book of the Horse Sacrifice)**
  - Page: 91 – 92
  - The royal ceremony of the Ashvamedha (Horse sacrifice) conducted by Yudhisthira. The world conquest by Arjuna. The Anugita is told by Krishna to Arjuna.

- **Ashramavasika Parva (The Book of the Hermitage)**
  - Page: 93 – 95
  - The eventual deaths of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti in a forest fire when they are living in a hermitage in the Himalayas. Vidura predeceases them and Sanjaya on Dhritarashtra's bidding goes to live in the higher Himalayas.

- **Mausala Parva (The Book of the Clubs)**
  - Page: 96
  - The infighting between the Yadavas with maces (*mausala*) and the eventual destruction of the Yadavas.

- **Mahaprasthanika Parva (The Book of the Great Journey)**
  - Page: 97
  - The great journey of Yudhisthira and his brothers across the whole country and finally their ascent of the great Himalayas where each Pandava falls except for Yudhisthira.

- **Svargarohana Parva (The Book of the Ascent to Heaven)**
  - Page: 98
  - Yudhisthira's final test and the return of the Pandavas to the spiritual world (*svarga*).

- **Harivamsa Parva (The Book of the Genealogy of Hari)**
  - Page: 99 – 100
  - Life of Krishna which is not covered in the 18 parvas of the Mahabharata.

### Dharm, Kama, Artha, Moksha

- **यदेहास्ततः तद्विषयः सचिवासितः नतत्क्षरितः**
  - Meaning: O great man, you will come across whatever is written in this holy text about the four pursuits (*purusharthas*), that is Righteousness (*Dharma*), wealth (*artha*), desire (*kama*) and the Final Liberation (*Moksha*) in all other texts and whatever is not given here will not be found anywhere.

- **Glorification of Righteousness**
  - The chief objective of the Mahabharat is defining Righteousness and explaining it. When describing any event, Sage Vyasa’ expansive motive was only to preach Righteousness. Throughout the Mahabharat there is a constant mention of Righteousness ‘यतो धार्मिका च जयः’ meaning victory prevails where there is Righteousness’ which is the slogan of the Mahabharat.
In the real sense the Mahabharat is an encyclopaedia of ancient India (Bharat). It is a renowned epic in world literature. On one hand the Mahabharat is an eternal treasure house of morality and Righteousness (Dharma) and on the other a compilation of the ancient eternal science of unmetrical compositions (gathashastra). Sage Vyasa has not written the Mahabharat simply enumerating the events of the past, were it so then it would merely gather dust in a bookcase like any other historical text. However the Mahabharat is presented before us as a live event. Maha Bharatha is more than simply a story of kings and princes, sages and wisemen, demons and gods; its legendary author, Vyasa, said that one of its aims is elucidating the four Purusarthas (goals of life).

The crux of the matter is that the entire Mahabharata has one obvious aim -- to awaken a love of truth and right action. The core story is the thread that ties together a profound philosophical content. Embellished by substories to clarify various ethical premises, the central theme always leads in one direction -- the ascendency of right over wrong, justice over injustice, truth over untruth. In the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas it is made clear that the side of Truth (represented by the Pandavas) will ultimately win. The reasons for this war and the human aspects of the story are what make the epic ever fascinating -- its slokas are the mirror whereby we see into our own souls, and the consequences of actions, both gross and subtle, are laid bare for scrutiny. The importance of 18 is best illustrated in Veda Vyasa’s Mahabharata, the greatest epic of the world which in volume is more than eight times the size of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey put together. In philosophical content, Mahabharata is unparalleled in any other literature of the world. It is valued for its high literary merit and religious inspiration. The philosophical content of the epic lies concentrated in 18 chapters (chapters 25 to 45 of Bhishma Parvan) of Bhagavad Gita, the song celestial. It is one of the greatest and most beautiful of the Hindu scriptures. It is written in the form of a dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and his friend and charioteer, Krishna who is said to be the earthly incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The popularity of Bhagavad Gita is evident from the commentaries, glossaries and expository books written on it in both ancient and modern times. The earliest commentary that has come down is that of the great philosopher Sankaracharya. Outstanding modern commentaries are those of B.G.Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

**Influence of Mahabharatha** - MAHABHARATA—the very mention of the name gives a thrill of holy ideas. This is a great epic heroic poem. It contains one hundred thousand verses. It contains the essence of all scriptures. It is an encyclopaedia of ethics, knowledge, politics, religion, philosophy and Dharma. The Mahabharata still exerts a marvellous influence over the millions of Hindus. The lustre and high renown of these brilliant personages of Mahabharata has not suffered a diminution, in spite of the ravages of cruel time. Their character was untainted and sublime. Hence their deeds also were admirable, laudable and sublime. Determination has ever been the key to success in the lives of great men of all countries. Heroes would not move an inch from the path of their duty when they are called upon to perform it. They were fiery in their determination. They had iron will.

The noble and heroic grandsire Bhishma—who had control over his death and who was unconquerable in war even by the gods—still inspires us with the spirit of self-sacrifice, undaunted courage and purity. Yudhishthira is still a model of justice and righteousness. Remembrance of his very name generates a thrill in our hearts and goads us to tread the path of truth and virtue. Karma still lives in our hearts on account of his extreme munificence and liberality. Karma’s name has become proverbial. People even now say, whenever they come across a very generous man, “He is like Karna in gifts.” The message of the Mahabharata is the message of Truth and Righteousness. The great epic produces a moral awakening in the readers and exhorts them to tread the path of Satya and Dharma. It urges them strongly to do good deeds, practise Dharma, cultivate dispensation by realising the illusory nature of this universe and its vainglories and sensual pleasures, and attain Eternal Bliss and Immortality. The Mahabharata is a powerful and amazing text that inspires awe and wonder. It presents sweeping visions of the cosmos and humanity and intriguing and frightening glimpses of divinity in an ancient narrative that is accessible, interesting, and compelling for anyone willing to learn the basic themes of India’s culture. The Mahabharata definitely is one of those creations of human language and spirit that has traveled far beyond the place of its original creation. In its scope, the Mahabharata is more than simply a story of kings and princes, sages and wisemen, demons and gods; its legendary author, Vyasa, said that one of its aims is elucidating the four Purusarthas (goals of
life): Kama (pleasure), artha (wealth), dharma (duty), and moksha (liberation). The story culminates in moksha, believed by many Hindus to be the ultimate goal of human beings. Karma and dharma also play an integral role in the Mahabharata.

The Mahabharata has exercised a continuous and pervasive influence on the Indian mind for millennia. The Mahabharata, originally written by Sage Ved Vyas in Sanskrit, has been translated and adapted into numerous languages and has been set to a variety of interpretations. The Mahabharat is an unending treasure of topics for poets. Great Sanskrit poets like Kalidas, Bharavi, Magha, etc. have chosen their main topics of poetry from the Mahabharat itself. The tradition of selecting a story or event from the Mahabharat and transforming it into poetry is continuing even today. Dating back to “remote antiquity”, it is still a living force in the life of the Indian masses.

The Mahabharatha has had a culturing influence in Indian society through ages and has its relevance even today. The Mahabharatha which is a vast tree of virtues and passions significantly guides a man through the conflicts of life. Each character, each scene, each action, each dialogue and each discourse has a contribution to make in some field – ethical, political, sociological, religious or even military in character. The study of the Mahabharatha can have a potent and sobering influence on the young minds in formulation of their character and their behaviour in domestic, social, political and religious fields. The Mahabharatha has a secular, popular and human approach.

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