

## Historical Development of the epic *Mahābhārata*

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### Abstract

*This research article deals with the evolution of the epic Mahābhārata in the present form. The study has its relevance to understand the historical origin of the text so that the reader could able to probe its importance in the present context. The article addresses on the research problems concerning to the historicity of Mahābhārata war, the text's stages of development, its authorship and date of production. Is the Mahābhārata war historical or fictional? Is the text written at a time or it is an evolutionary text? Who wrote it and when was it written? The article seeks answers to the aforementioned research questions by applying the methodological tool of the Marxist concept of historical materialism. The study reveals that the Mahābhārata is found to be an evolutionary text and evolves to the present form in three stages. The scholars are not unanimous regarding to the historicity of Mahābhārata war, the text's authorship and its date of production.*

**Keywords:** authorship, date of production, historicity, Mahābhārata war, stages of development

### Introduction

The *Mahābhārata* is one of the important treatises of Hindu thought. The text, which contains 18 chapters, is the longest epic in the world. The epic has one million verses, which is more than seven times the combined length of the Iliad (760–710 BCE) and Odyssey (725–675 BCE) (Kuiken 20-1). The *Mahābhārata*'s main narrative describes the historical events that took place in the Hastinapura kingdom in antiquity. It tells the story of the battle between the Kauravas and Pandavas, two lineages of Kuru dynasty cousins, for control of the Hastinapura realm. The Kauravas plotted deceit and conspiracies against the Pandavas in an effort to seize the throne, which ultimately sparked a massive battle of destruction that wiped off the heroes of the entire *Kshatriya* race as well as the Kuru dynasty. Only ten warriors—seven on the Pandava side and three on the Kaurava side—of the vast army that fought in this conflict lived to see its conclusion. This exhibits the significant damage of the human race in the battle.

The *Mahābhārata* is based on the Mahābhārata conflict, but there is disagreement among experts regarding the war's historicity. Some experts are convinced on being the war as historical while others interpret the war as being the internal duel that exists inside the human psyche. The majority of experts discusses the epic's three main stages of growth and

agrees on how it evolved. However, there are divergent opinions among scholars as to who wrote it and when it was created.

### Portrayal of the Issue

The Mahābhārata war is the subject of the epic; however, experts have differing views on whether or not the war actually took place. Is the Mahābhārata war historical? This is the crucial question in this regard. Mohan Das Karmachanda Gandhi interprets the war as being internal duel that consists inside human psyche. He describes the epic as a poetic work written by the poet to convey his personal philosophy of life. He argues: "... it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring" (127). Gandhi has interpreted the epic as a poetic work that expresses a life philosophy that addresses the struggle between right and wrong that exists within the human heart. In the epic, the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas represents the struggle between a person's inner virtues and vices.

Mahadev Desai offers both a historical and a non-historical reading of the epic. According to his historical interpretation, the Mahābhārata war was real, and all of the combatants were actual people. He rejects the idea that Kṛṣṇa, the *Gītā*'s teacher, is a supernaturally powerful deity. Instead, Kṛṣṇa has the incredible ability to convince others that he is an *avatār* or the manifestation of God. Desai clarifies:

There can be no doubt, however, that an extraordinary personality combining in himself the qualities of a hero and a statesman, a warrior and a philosopher, did exist at a time of which we have no record, that he grew to enormous proportions in the race-memory of the Aryans, so much so that he came to be revered as an *avatāra* and later on as the Incarnation and countless traditions and legends grew up about "the ideal man" according to the varying psychological and spiritual levels of the ages that followed. (9)

Desai has chosen to view Kṛṣṇa as a historical figure. The exceptional nature of Kṛṣṇa, in his interpretation, led many to think that he was a manifestation of God. As time went on, a plethora of traditions and legends about Kṛṣṇa developed, bestowing him with various statuses. Desai also provides a non-historical analysis of the epic. He characterizes the epic as a deeply significant poem. He ascribes an allegoric significance to the epic: "... the *Gītā* conveys an allegorical meaning: some likening the Pandavas to the forces of light and the Kauravas to the force of darkness, and making the human body the field of dharma . . ." (11). The *Gītā* is a section of the epic, and when Desai quotes it, he is actually referring to the *Mahābhārata*. The epic, in his view, tells us about the ongoing struggle between the forces of light and darkness within the human body.

D.D. Kosambi expresses the similar views. He calls the Mahābhārata war a "fictitious great war" ("Aryans" 92). The extent of the Mahābhārata war recorded in the

epic's current form, which, in his opinion, was not feasible in prehistoric India, led him to this conclusion:

If a Mahābhārata war had actually been fought on the scale reported, nearly five million fighting men killed each other in an 18-day battle between Delhi and Thanesar; about 130,000 chariots (with their horses), an equal number of elephants and thrice that many riding horses were deployed. This means at least as many camp-followers and attendants as fighters. A host of this size could not be supplied without a total population of 200 millions, which India did not attain till the British period. . . . ("Social" 17)

Based on the magnitude of the war described in the epic's current form, Kosambi's assumption that the Mahābhārata war was fake is implausible because the epic only reached this size after much later inflations, as he admits:

The Brāhmin redaction, which is all that now remains, took its present form between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200 as a collection of over 80,000 verses, with a few prose passages. . . . The new editors added every conceivable sort of legend and myth to attract varied audiences. Many episodes that have nothing to do with the war as such appear nevertheless as tales within the tale, narrated by various characters. The inflation was made more natural by adding a frame story. ("Aryans" 92)

This demonstrates that there must have been a Bhārata war in ancient India, but on a lesser scale that was afterwards expanded by the epic's editors and reciting bards to its current size.

Shripad Amrit Dange offers contrasting opinions on this subject. Based on his historical materialistic analysis of "Hindu mythology and religious social laws and practices," he provides the following ideas on the issue:

Several scholars denounced the whole *Mahābhārata* to be a fiction or at best an allegory. It is my firm opinion that the vast store house of Hindu mythology and religious social laws and practices, if read and sifted on the basis of historical materialism, would yield a consistent and rational picture of India's ancient history. ("Contemporary" 19)

The historical materialistic analysis of "Hindu mythology and religious social laws and practices" reveals "a consistent and rational picture of India's ancient history." Dange has therefore concluded that the Mahābhārata war was a historical event. According to Dange, the Bhārata war would not have served as the foundation for all of ancient India's history if the Mahābhārata war were merely a work of fiction and allegory:

All ancient history of India thus can be divided into the pre-Bhārata and post-Bhārata periods. Every tradition – popular, historical, mythical – agrees that that was an event in history which changed the whole course of development and ushered in a new epoch. Tradition sums it up by saying that the present *Kaliyuga* – *Kali* era – began with the Bhārata war. ("Mahābhārata" 155)

This suggests that the Bhārata War existed in the past of ancient India. According to Dange, the incident was a turning point in Indian history that ushered in the "new epoch" or "the current Kaliyuga, Kali era."

S. Radhakrishnan confirms the historical veracity of the epic by acknowledging the occurrence of the Bhārata War in ancient India. He claims: "The Mahābhārata describes the great war waged in ancient times between the two branches of the one royal family, that of the Bhāratas." This supports Radhakrishnan's acceptance of the Bhārata War's historicity as the basis for the epic. However, he believes the original events of the epic to be non-Aryan and later transformed into the Aryan story: "The original event seems to be a non-Aryan one, if we may judge from the bloodthirst of Bhīma, the polyandry of Draupadi and such other incidents. But it was soon converted into an Aryan story. It has become a national epic, with tales from different parts of the country worked into a single whole" (404). Whether they stem from non-Aryan or Aryan history, all of the events in the epic are described by Radhakrishnan as historical. He forbids the use of non-historical or metaphorical interpretations of the epic. He focuses more on how the epic gradually took on its current form by incorporating well-known tales from many eras and regions of the nation. The epic gradually succeeded in achieving the status and popularity of the national epic as a result.

The aforementioned discussions support the claim that although the *Mahābhārata* is historical, its current form evolved over time. K. C. Mishra asserts: "It is an undisputed fact that the epic has reached its present form by a gradual process of additions and alterations" (3). The *Mahābhārata* is generally acknowledged to have gone through three significant editions, each of which saw changes to the title and subject matter. The original copy of the *Mahābhārata* was exceedingly compact and was referred to as *Jaya*, which is Hindi for "Triumph." There were just eight thousand eight hundred shlokas in it. The second version, with its twenty-four thousand verses, was referred to as *Bhārata*. The third edition of the epic, which had ninety six thousand eight hundred thirty six shlokas, or around one lakh verses, became known as the *Mahābhārata*. The conflict between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas was the only subject of the original *Jaya*. The *Bhārata* evolved from a strictly historical book into a didactic work intended to impart a proper code of social, moral, and religious obligations. The historical tales and minor floating legends that existed independently of the *Bhārata* were included in the last version of the epic. Additionally, it was transformed into a reservoir for learning and information by adding all fields of expertise, including politics, geography, and archery. This made the *Bhārata* larger, turning it into the *Mahābhārata* (Ambedkar, "Literature," 80-1).

Even though Radhakrishnan does not refer to the original edition as *Jaya*, he accepts the existence of these three parts of the epic. He articulates the *Bhārata* as an earlier version of the *Mahābhārata*: "It is now agreed that the present Mahābhārata is an enlarged edition of an earlier tradition called the Bhārata" (405). He acknowledges that the *Bhārata* is only the second version of the epic, though: "It is clear that while the ballad stage is the first, the Bhārata is the next" (406). The first edition of the epic, *Jaya*, is what Radhakrishnan's "ballad stage" refers to. Radhakrishnan clarifies:

But even this Bhārata must have been based on lays, ballads and versified traditions of the events of the war. Ballads and songs recording the doughty deeds of great heroes, singing the praises of great warriors, the beauty of queens, the pomp of court, could have been composed only when the echoes of the war were in men's ears. (405)

This demonstrates that Radhakrishnan's "ballad stage" tells the same tale as *Jaya*, the first version of the *Mahābhārata*. This is an entirely historical composition that relates the tale of the war while praising the bravery of the soldiers and singing songs about kings and queens and other war-related topics.

The earlier two epic inflations have not been sufficiently studied. The inflation of the text from *Jaya* to *Bhārata* has received little research (Meghnad Desai 42), but Kosambi has looked into the inflation of *Bhārata* into *Mahābhārata*:

To be sure it is called the *Mahābhārata* near the beginning (1.1.10), but the name throughout is merely the Bhārata. The adjective is explained at the end (1.1.208–9). The greatness is not derived from the extent but from its importance and weight, for it outweighed all the four *Vedas* taken together when the gods and sages put it in the other pan of the balance. (qtd. in Meghnad Desai 43)

Kosambi evaluates the significance of the epic after the *Bhārata* converted into the *Mahābhārata*. The epic gained the name *Mahābhārata*, when the *Bhārata* consisting of twenty-four thousand *shlokas* was enlarged with one lakh *shlokas* and this enlargement of the epic makes Kosambi to figure it out as being more important treatise than the four *Vedas* combined.

It is challenging to identify who wrote the ancient texts. Devdutt Pattanaik argues: "Everyone worked anonymously and attributed their work to one Vyasa, who was the son of a fisherwoman. He was also credited with reorganizing the lost Vedas. The word 'vyasa' means compiler: compiler of Vedic knowledge, as well as compiler of Puranic stories" (20). It was customary for various ancient authors to write under false names and attributed their works to the single author Vyasa. They did so to raise the status and legitimacy of their

writings. Otherwise, the same author, Vyasa, could not have written all of ancient literature, which was separated by several centuries. B. R. Ambedkar claims:

. . . we have Vyasa as the author of the Mahābhārata, Vyasa as the author of the Purāṇas, Vyasa as the author of Bhagavat Gītā and Vyasa as the author of the Brama Sūtras. It cannot therefore be accepted as true that the same Vyasa is the author of all these works separated as they are by a long span of time extending to several centuries. ("Essays" 194)

It is widely accepted that Vyasa is credited with writing the original edition *Jaya*, his student Vaishampayana with writing *Bhārata*, and Sauti or Suta with writing the final edition of the epic *Mahābhārata* (Ambedkar "Literature" 80; Mishra 2- 3).

The dates of the ancient books are elusive, much like their authors' identities. As Pattanaik puts it: "Dating of Hindu history is always approximate and speculative, and often a range, as orally transmitted scriptures precede the written works by several centuries, and parts of the written work were composed by various scribes over several generations, in different geographies" (13). Ancient writings were not produced at a specific time and place by a single author. These texts were not authored by a single author; rather, they were assembled and written by a number of authors. They were created from elements that had previously been verbally communicated and were based on specific occurrences or ideas, beliefs, and ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to treat the ancient texts' and events' dates as speculative and approximate.

It is important to consider the timeline of the Mahābhārata war, upon which the epic is based, before speculating on the composition date of the *Mahābhārata*. Dange Claims:

It is after reaching the Gangetic valley that the classical Hindu slave State becomes ripe for birth. It is then that the Mahābhārata war takes place. This has occupied the period of 2,000 B.C. to 1,500 B.C. which is the latest date given for the Mahābhārata war. Some give about 3,000 B.C. as the date of the Mahābhārata war, which, however, is not generally accepted. ("Gana-Samghas" 136)

Dange places the dating of the Mahābhārata war between the years 2,000 and 1,500 B.C., albeit this estimate is hypothetical. It was the era when Aryans overthrew the civilization of the Indus Valley and founded the traditional *Brāhmaṇic* slave-state in the Gangetic valley. This provides some insight about the composition date of the epic. The conflict between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas was a long-ago occurrence, but this does not imply that the creation of the epic had to take place at the same time as the conflict or immediately after it (Ambedkar, "Literature," 81). The initial poets and singers were the professional bards (*suta*), who composed the panegyric verses extolling the war hero (Kosambi, "Aryans," 92). The songs were sung by the bards for many generations before being written down by gathering all the verbally transmitted words. Mishra places the epic's creation between 1,000 B.C. and 500 A.D. (9); Ambedkar between 400 B.C. and 400 A.D. ("Essays" 193); K. Damodaran between 300 B.C. and 200 A.D. (186); Richard Garbe between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. (qtd.in Damodaran 186) and Kosambi between 200 B.C.

and 200 A.D. ("Aryans" 92). It demonstrates the lack of consensus among academics regarding the date of the *Mahābhārata* epic.

### Conclusion

The Mahābhārata war, the basis for the epic, is the subject of divergent opinions among scholars. Gandhi sees the conflict as a struggle within the human psyche. Mahadev Desai expresses similar opinions. He sees the battle as an internal struggle between the forces of light and darkness. Kosambi classifies the Mahābhārata war as fictional while examining its scope and size, even though he acknowledges the existence of the Bhārata conflict. Dange and Radhakrishnan confirm the historicity of the Mahābhārata war. The majority of historians concur that the epic developed in three stages. The original *Jaya* grows to become the *Bhārata*, and finally the *Mahābhārata*. There are differing views regarding the authorship and the date of the epic. The scholars are not unanimous in accepting Vyasa as being the author of the epic and they each place a different date on when it was written.

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