# RELIGION Mahabharata's enduring appeal

In a time dominated by the Manichean concepts of good and evil, G.N. Devy re-reads an epic, with its unique place in the Indian imagination, as a call for sanity

#### Sukumar Muralidharan

he Mahabharata inhabits a crowded field in epic literature but has a unique place in the Indian imagination. It shines bright despite the historical precedence of

the Ramayana and its obvious lineages in the obscurity of the Vedas. Philosophically, there are other dense scriptures with meaning that have engaged scholarly attention far longer. What then accounts for India's enduring fascination with the Mahabharata?

#### **Fusion of culture**

**Ethics of** warfare A

scene from the

Mahabharata

where Arjuna

requests

instruction

from Krishna

and receives

Gita. • WIKI

COMMONS

the Bhagavad

Among the forces shaping Mahabharata, the epic, literary critic and archaeologist of language the Nation Ganesh N. Devy argues, are G.N. Devy references to the formation Aleph Book of India through a fusion of Company various cultural threads. ₹499 David Reich, whose work Devy cites, has found from all availa-

ble genetic evidence, that not very much could be gleaned about "the end of the Indus Valley Civilization", though undeniable evidence exists of "dramatic demographic change and... cultural exchange... close to the fall of Harappa". Drawing on David Anthony's work on material cultures, Devy then asks if the Mahabharata could be read as a tale of the "early contact of the horse-driven chariot-riding pastoral people and the agrarian city-building people".

Prior to the grand epic, Devy sug-

gests, there was perhaps a war waged that acquired a resonance in the popular imagination, engendering the practice, diverse and diffuse, of the recitation of the Bharata. Vyasa's rendition of the epic into a written text, when it acquired the prefix connoting its grandeur, happened

perhaps between the third and first centuries BCE. It was not exactly "original", but a vast and sprawling corpus incorporating an "earlier orally transmitted epic... and several other narratives".

Vyasa may also have absorbed an entire catalogue of "remembrances of things past", beginning with the early Vedic era.

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana were distinct from other ancient literature in not being "guarded Vedic Brahminism". They enjoyed a "free circulation among all classes of

society", being somewhat "ambivalently, exempted from the strict pollution rules of the time"

## **Supernatural agencies**

History is a narrative of causality. A conjuncture of circumstances leads to outcomes through active and passive agency. These consequences in turn become the cause for another sequence of events. Devy argues that epics are different in their placement "at the beginning of a new civilization or a new era", which makes them a statement of the "unconscious metaphysics of their time". The epic is distinct also in having supernatural agencies that deflect them from rational historical causality.

### **Battlefield dilemmas**

Among the literary devices the epic deploys to express the "metaphysics of the time", is the debate "evaluating philosophical positions and existential choices". These are typically, posed in their starkest form on battlefields where human and divine protagonists reckon with the dilemmas of engaging in all-out war in the quest of moral ends.

Despite the persisting ambiguity about when it was incorporated into the epic, the Bhagavad Gita - a debate on the ethics of warfare – is the moral core of the Mahabharata. It is a debate dominated by Krishna, a stranger to the Vedic pantheon till then, though celebrated by later Vedantic exponents - Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhava - as an embodiment of the highest virtues.

In Devy's reading, it was the 11thcentury philosopher Abhinavagupta who found the true sense of the Gita in the rasa or poetic sentiment of shanta or tranquillity. Abhinavagupta wrote many centuries after the theory of the nine rasas had been proposed but found them incomplete without the attribute of the *sthitpragnya* or *sakshi*, who bears tranquil witness, devoid of internal moral conflict.

The essence of the Mahabharata is perhaps its recounting of a story where the origins are "perennially

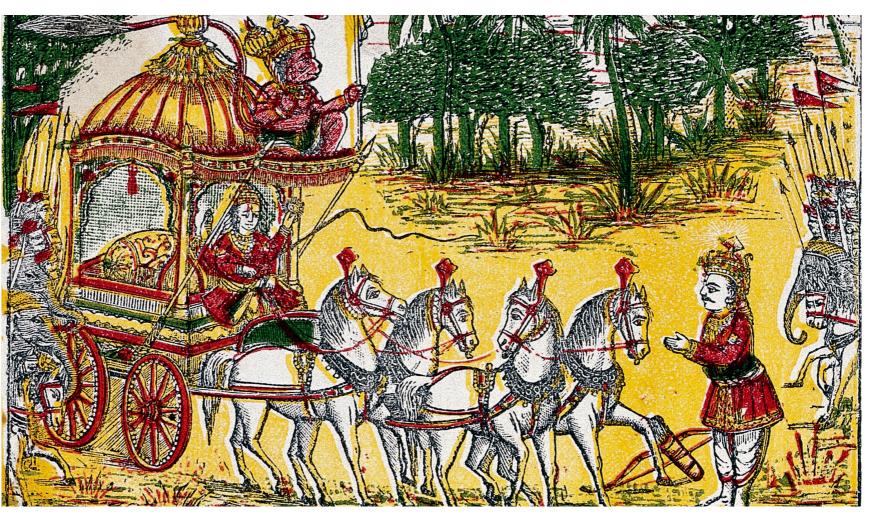
open", affording a unique civilisational foundation for India. Unlike other epics, it has no single protagonist who provides narrative continuity from beginning to end, aside from Vyasa himself. Devy also finds another recurrent presence through the epic in Yama, seen once as the messenger of death, though more appropriately viewed as the arbiter of time.

#### **Relatable tale for all**

The Mahabharata is a way of perceiving a past of many beginnings, where time in all its dimensions cosmic, mythical, historical and psychological - fuse together. There are aspects of the Mahabharata that legitimise the worst of an ascriptive, hierarchical social order. But in the vastness of its sprawl, it provides a richness of narrative detail and moral ambiguities, to be a relatable tale for all.

Devy's extended essay follows a rich tradition but comes at a fraught moment in history. Magical thinking ostensibly drawn from the epics has trumped rationality, and faith in a messianic saviour has overwhelmed an inclusive appreciation of the politics of the "nation". In a time dominated by Manichean conceptions of good and evil, Devy speaks up courageously for sanity and an appreciation of ambiguous origins. His extended essay will richly reward multiple re-readings.

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AHABHARATA The Epic and

