

# 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

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The *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 scriptures dense with meaning that have engaged scholarly attention far longer. What then accounts for India's enduring fascination with the *Mahabharata*?

## Fusion of culture

Among the forces shaping the epic, literary critic and archaeologist of language Ganesh N. Devy argues, are references to the formation of India through a fusion of various cultural threads. David Reich, whose work Devy cites, has found from all available 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 by 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 "un-

conscious 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, Ramana and Madhava – as an embodiment of the highest virtues.

In Devy's reading, it was the 11th-century 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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**Mahabharata, The Epic and the Nation**  
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**Ethics of warfare** A scene from the *Mahabharata* where Arjuna requests instruction from Krishna and receives the *Bhagavad Gita*. • WIKI COMMONS

