

PURĀ-JAGAT

INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY HISTORY AND CULTURE

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HISTORICITY OF THE *RAMAYANA* VERSUS THE *MAHABHARATA* : AN ANALYSIS

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For a very long time, the two Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have formed the most significant part of Indian culture and till about the end of the eighteenth century, no scientific research was done on these epics. As these were thought to be related with Hindu religion, there was no requirement for it. When Europeans, started taking interest in Indian culture, they began translating Indian texts and the historical analysis of these works. As Europeans, they were true Christians and being new colonizers, put their religious beliefs in forefront and gave secondary importance to Indian culture and thoughts except in a few cases. Before 1920, earliest civilization in India began in the Early Historical period i.e., from about 6th century B.C. but the great Indian literature of past possibly proved to be a hurdle in this respect. As the British attempted to show the supremacy of the West in early Indian works, they in spite of being scientific could not date the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* in the time frame of 6th century B.C. The vast literature had to be provided a short time frame, that's why keeping in view the Biblical theories, all these were put within the time frame of 1600 B.C. and were related to Indo-European or Indo-Aryan culture, of which there were no remains. All these would have got a setback with the discovery of Harappan civilization, but they related them with Pre-Aryan or Dravidian culture and the followers continued to support them. Evidently Indian researchers could not come out of this mind-set even now.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which were directly related with people could not be discarded completely and were related with second wave of Aryans and thus the early date for the *Mahabharata* was limited to 1200-1400 B.C., because many of the characters of the epic found mention in the *Rigveda* and other older texts. *Ramayana* was not considered so worthwhile to be dated at all. Almost all the episodes mentioned in these epics were considered as poet's fantasy and not as historic events. Still some of the episodes had to be considered historical and were analyzed. Thus, Krishna was given the status of a tribal God and the *Mahabharata* considered as a tale of feudal wars. Archaeologists like H.D. Sankalia and B.B. Lal did their researches keeping in mind the queries of Aryan invasion, the antiquity of iron and the direction of migration.

The *Ramayana* – An Historical Analysis

The *Ramayana*, an *Adikavya*, is considered to be composed by Valmiki during the time of Rama. Thus Valmiki was a contemporary poet and the text of the *Ramayana* is first hand narrative rather than a legend or story. Subsequently more interpolations were incorporated. By observing the personality of

Rama, one can easily say that he was a meritorious person, an ideal man to be followed by masses except for one or two instances. These exceptions were also not challenged until the time of Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Ramacharitam* in the Early Medieval period.

First to consider the traditional approach to the *Ramayana vis-a-vis* a chronological approach. All the Ikshvaku rulers are related with the Solar dynasty in which had existed Sagara, Harischandra and Raghu before Dasaratha and Rama, all being ideal beings. The time of *Ramayana* events is assigned to *Tretayuga*. The data of the Yuga could not be assessed and no archaeological evidence exists to compare. In the present stage, the legend of Rama must be placed in the pre-historic times at the most. What was the actual story, cannot be stated as the whole events adjusted in providing Rama a complete divine status as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. One point is clear that this episode took place before the *Mahabharata* war and was also composed before it. Archaeologically, there is an hurdle as no evidence for writing is known before the Mauryan times. But Al-Biruni in 11th century mentions that Indians had lost the knowledge of writing and it was revived by Vyasa, which proves that when the *Mahabharata* was being composed for the first time, the *Ramayana* and other ancient texts were also being written simultaneously. Hence many overlaps in these texts occur.

A few scholars have worked on the historicity and culture of the *Ramayana*. They are C. V. Vaidya, P.V. Kane, H.D. Sankalia and B.B. Lal. The first two worked on literary aspect and the latter two on archaeological. The first two scholars put the date of composition to about 2nd-3rd century B.C. The actual period of the *Ramayana* was not dealt, but was assigned at least before the *Mahabharata* times. Sankalia did critical study and said that most part of the *Ramayana* was composed between 5th century B.C and 5th century A.D. The period for the episodes to have occurred was dated by him to about 15th-16th century B.C., keeping in mind the *Mahabharata* period identical with PGW times. B.B. Lal gave his opinion that *Mahabharata* war was a reality which happened about 9th century B.C. and the events of the *Ramayana* happened after it in the NBPW cultural phase. What Lal proposed, could not be agreed but for Sankalia he had many views on Aryan invasion and it was a historical factor which played a vital role.

The Mahabharata – An Historical Analysis

The *Mahabharata* as the first *Itihasa* text was composed by Krishna Dvaipayana Veda Vyasa who lived during the time of the *Mahabharata* war and thus the information provided by him was the first hand account. Though scholars differ on the chronological aspect, all of them agree with its composition in three stages. First was of 8800 *slokas* told to Yudhishtira by Vyasa. Then, was followed by 24,000 *slokas* recited by Vaisampayana before King Janmejaya at the time of *Sarpasatra*. In the last stage 100000 *slokas* were recited by Sauti or Sutaji in front of Saunaka. The first work was called *Jaya Bharata* second *Bharata* and last one was the present day *Mahabharata*.

Traditionally, the period assigned to the *Mahabharata* war coincides with the beginning of *Kaliyuga* which is 3102 B.C. but this was disagreed by archaeologists since they had accepted Aryan invasion theory and proposed two different dates for this war i.e., 1200-1400 B.C. and about 900 B.C. Except Dr. D.C. Sircar, almost all the archaeologists believed in Bharata war as a reality whereas the astronomers supported the traditional date while the archaeologists does not accept for many reasons. Firstly, Harappan civilization was considered as Pre-Aryan in nature and secondly, what has been mentioned a

ayas in Vedic literature and the *Mahabharata* was taken to be iron and its date was considered to be 1000 B.C. at the earliest which coincided with the PGW culture. Thirdly, the evidence of horse was considered an essential component for any Aryan settlement which was also found at the earliest in the PGW horizon, so with the finding of PGW in the region mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, it was taken to be the representative of the period by Prof. B.B. Lal and others.

Traditional view was supported by many factors viz., the Greek historians mentioning that Dionysius and Heracles separated from Sandroktas by 153 and 137 generations. Hence the date of Krishna will be nearly the same as traditional date; secondly the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II mentions the *Mahabharata* era. All the ancient texts followed the date except some later *Puranas* like *Vishnu* etc.

Relation Between The Ramayana and The Mahabharata

After the composition of Vedic texts, the composition of the *Ramayana* took place ^{after} ~~then~~ the *Vedas* and the *Brahmana-Upanishads*. It was the first social book of mankind though primitive in nature. As it does not mention Vasudeva-Krishna and Pandavas hence *Ramayana* definitely indicates an earlier composition. It was so popular in society in Early Historical times that dramatist Kalidasa based his *Raghuvamsa* on it and Bhavabhuti wrote *Uttararamacharitam* in 7th - 8th century. A.D. Though images of Rama have not been found, but its antiquity is proved by many terracotta and stone panels of the *Ramayana* episodes before 500 A.D. In the *Ramayana*, Rama has been shown in human form and in spite of being divine he was not divine as such and lived a normal human life.

The advancement of this human nature to completely divine nature is given in the *Mahabharata* in the form of Lord Krishna. The *Mahabharata* is advanced in all aspects than the *Ramayana*, such as in the field of prose and poetry, art of warfare, complexity of characters, decline in human ideals, technological advancement etc. *Ramayana* characters like Rama, Hanuman and others have been mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and a chapter *Ramopakhyana parva* has been added to it. The antiquity of all the dynasties and the cities is associated with the *Ramayana* times, are also found viz, for Mathura, Kalanemi, Ahiravana etc.

The theory that the *Ramayana* happened after the *Mahabharata* and the former borrowed from the latter considered by eminent archaeologists is not tenable on many aspects. A study of *Srimadbhagavadgita* will reveal the details. Though *Gita* was written by Vyasa, it was told to Arjuna by Lord Krishna himself. This indicates at least one point that it would not have passed through the chain of later interpolations and thus most part of *Gita* was composed in a single stretch and at one time. It was composed during the composition of *Upanishads* and definitely earlier than *Chhandogya Upanishad*. In *Gita*, Rama has been mentioned only once in the tenth chapter in which Lord Krishna has compared him with other important personalities of that time. Some important *slokas* are as follows-

आदित्यानामहं विष्णुज्योतिषा रविरंशुमान् ।
मरीचिमस्तिनास्मि नक्षत्राणामहं काशी॥21॥

It means that amongst twelve *Adityas*, he is Vishnu, among the brightest he is the Sun, among constellations he is the Moon and he is the intensity of 49 Vayu *devatas*. All this indicates towards the supremacy of Vishnu over the Vedic Gods or to say natural Gods.

वेदानां सामवेदोऽस्मि देवानामस्मि वासवः॥२२॥

This indicates towards the importance of the *Samaveda* than the *Rigveda* as God identifies himself with the *Samaveda*, though Indra was the supreme deity among the *devatas*.

पवनः पवनामस्मि रामः शस्त्राभूतामृतम्॥३१॥

Lord Krishna identifies himself as the velocity of Pavana God and says that He is Rama among *Sastradharis* i.e., warriors. Here Rama is mentioned along with Vayudeva and not as an incarnation, rather just as the greatest warrior and it proves the earlier antiquity of Rama than Krishna when Rama was at least not considered as an incarnation.

वृष्णीनां वासुदेवोऽस्मि पाशुवनां धरञ्जनः।

मुनीनाम्यहं व्यासः कवीनामुशना कविः॥३७॥

This *sloka* either indicates the later composition some centuries after Vyasa or it was a later interpolation. As God himself cannot say to Arjuna that he is Arjuna among Pandavas, and Vyasa being a great man cannot praise himself by saying himself the best among all the *Munis*. It appears somewhat out of context in the given situation so it might be a little later addition or interpolation. But all such internal evidences prove the earlier antiquity of Rama than Krishna.

The Ramayana, The Mahabharata and Archaeology

Archaeology is the art as well as science of reconstructing past and in archaeology, the most interesting part is that one which deals with historical archaeology i.e., of comparing archaeological work with ancient literary texts. In some instances, historical archaeology succeeds e.g., at many Buddhist sites like Sugh or the Mauryan. In respect of *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* related archaeology, so far successful efforts could not be made to compare archaeological data in a scientific manner. One person in the field of Buddhist historical archaeology was Sir Alexander Cunningham, but for Hinduism related historical archaeology there is none to mention so far. The first time when such an attempt was made was at the time of excavations of Hastinapur by Professor B.B. Lal. Till recently, Harappan civilization was thought as an isolated one with no bearing on Indian culture. Thus, North India which included Kuru, Panchala, Surasena areas, the earliest culture was thought to belong to the *Mahabharata* times. Though, besides Harappans, Ochre coloured pottery culture is the earliest in this area, most of the important sites of this region were found to have started with PGW period. Thus, Prof. Lal identified PGW with the *Mahabharata* period with the arguments

That at *Mahabharata* sites like Hastinapura, Indraprastha, Ahichchhatra, Mathura, Paniprastha, Vrikaprastha, Sonaprastha, and Tilaprastha the earliest important culture is PGW culture. He ascribed PGW a date bracket of 1100 B.C. - 600 B.C. which coincided with his presumed *Mahabharata* war of 9th century B.C. Iron appeared for the first time around 1000 B.C. in PGW period only and horse skeletal remains for the first time were found in PGW deposits. At Hastinapura were found evidences of a great flood after which King Nichakshu had shifted his capital to Kausambi and the Kausambi PGW is later

in date than the Hastinapura PGW. Considering the fact that Aryan wave had entered India from the west, the eastward movement of people can be explained by the spread of PGW culture.

About Ramayana, B.B. Lal opined that at most of the archaeological sites mentioned in the *Ramayana* like Ayodhya, Nandigrama, Sringerapur, Bharadvaja Ashrama etc., the earliest cultural sequence begins with NBPW culture except at Sringerapur where the presence of BSW and OCP can be related with pre-Aryan stock. Thus the time bracket of *circa* 700 - 300 B.C. was assigned by him to the *Ramayana* period. To prove the genuineness of his argument, he gave the example of Bharadvaja Ashrama where only NBPW was present and not later cultures; thus, at the time of composition of the *Ramayana* around 2nd B.C. or so, Valmiki was well aware of the tradition about this site which was not in habitation at that time.

Another picture of this study was presented by archaeologist Dr. H.D. Sankalia. He presented a confused picture of it as he was never in a position to come out of the British ideologies but his Indian heart wanted and that is why he based his chronology of the *Ramayana* times on the works of A.D. Pusalkar and hence at one place in 1973, he ascribed a period of about 1600 B.C. to Rama and in 1975, he studied all this in more detail and said the time of Manu Vaivasvata was about 3100 B.C. when Great Flood came and the time of *Ramayana* days was 2350 B.C. to 1950 B.C. and for the *Mahabharata* episodes 1950 - 1400 B.C., though in spite of such a great contradiction he did not give an opinion against the identification of PGW as the *Mahabharata* period culture.

Present Scenario

Harappan : Since 1990, new archaeological information has been gathered by explorations and excavations. Most of earlier theories were propounded in the lack of archaeological information need to be improved. Some new evidences are mentioned detail. In the case of Harappan civilization, it is thought that it was based along two major river systems Sindhu and Sarasvati and this Sarasvati is identical with the Sarasvati of Vedic texts. Thus the Sindhu-Sarasvati civilization was indigenous in nature and it is still in practice in India. One of the chief proponent of it is Prof. B.B. Lal. There was nothing as the so called Aryan invasion. This term was misinterpreted by the foreigners and it just denotes the more civilized one. Excavations at Harappan sites of Rakhigarhi, Baror and Bhirrana indicate towards a certain fact that is Mature Harappan civilization was not a sudden one and it was just an advanced stage of Early Harappan culture because at the last two sites of Baror and Bhirrana at least, there was found no hiatus between these two and a good depth of deposit belonged to the transitional phase. Thus all this denotes a general archaeological advancement. Harappan civilization needs to be studied with a new approach ^{to} study ~~and~~ the variations present at every site rather than emphasizing on certain characteristic features. That will take the shape of regional cultures rather than a Harappan kingdom which most people have tried to form.

Mid-Ganga Region

The earlier held hypothesis that whole mid-Gangetic plain area was a forest and the element of civilization entered there with the eastward movement of Aryans (those Aryans who destroyed the Harappan civilization) has got disapproved from all quarters. A number of sites belonging to Narhan and pre-Narhan cultures have been explored and excavated by archaeologists of U.P. State Archaeology

Deptt., BHU., Gorakhpur and Allahabad Universities. Excavators are S N Chaturvedi, P. Singh, V.D. Misra, B.R. Mani, and Rakesh Tiwari. Sites like Lahuradeva, Imlidih Khurd, Fakkara Baba, Jhusi, Malhar, Raja Nal Ka Tila, Agiabir, Sisuwania, Waina, Dadupur etc. have changed the whole archaeological scenario. A lot of early dates for the antiquity of iron have been got and it goes to 1800 B.C. at some sites like Malhar while a date from south Indian megalithic site Watgal takes it back to 2000 B.C. Other earlier dates are between 1800 B.C. - 1200 B.C. at the above-mentioned sites along with Atranjikhhera and Jakhera. A distinct and earlier BRW culture has been encountered at most of these sites which is termed as Pre-Narhan culture. At many sites it has been found associated with iron. So one thing is very clear that use of iron was known to the sub-continent people before the PGW culture. The earliest date of BRW culture has gone further back at the site of Lahuradeva and this chalcolithic BRW has given a date of about 4000 B.P. while the Neolithic BRW goes back to sixth-seventh millennium B.C. These sites indicate towards a gradual evolution of Black Slipped Ware from Black-and-Red Ware and also of PGW from BSW and it challenge the migration theory for every ceramic and cultural change. The date of BSW is earlier than PGW at many of these sites in a separate horizon and then this BSW is found in an earlier horizon than PGW at Atranjikhhera and Jakhera and then it is found with PGW at most of the sites of Western U.P. and N.E. Rajasthan. In the mid-Gangetic plains, near after Kanpur, this BRW and BSW horizon is succeeded by NBPW culture while in the Western U.P., it is PGW culture and then its succession by NBPW with an overlapping phase also. The earliest date for NBPW culture comes from the recently excavated disputed site of Ayodhya which pushes it back to at least 1000 B.C. The earliest date for PGW is till now considered to be 1300-1400 B.C. from Jakhera and Bhagwanpura. All this indicates that PGW and NBPW cultures are somewhat contemporary than as believed earlier. All these earlier dates are limited to Ganga-Yamuna doab only which means, the development of these two ceramic cultures have taken place only within this zone and are indigenous cultures. The earliest theory of eastward movement of PGW gets a setback with the disapproval of Aryan theory as well as with the earlier dates and also the view given by scholar M.D.N. Sahi that the origin of PGW can be sought in Malwa region, cannot be supported now as the dates of an earlier as well as contemporary culture of Malwa and Kayatha culture have been got from Eastern U.P. The earliest date of rice from Lahuradeva in the Neolithic context supports the views of Prof. G.R. Sharma and this approves a separate evolutionary zone for rice in this area in 7th millennium B.C. Besides these, some dates of various plant remains are the earliest in this region. *Satapatha Brahmana's* evidence which was linked with Aryan invasion in this region also gets a setback which means if the information given in *Satapatha Brahmana* is correct, it speaks of more earlier pre-historic times. It is not impossible as the new dates of early farming from China are a revelation.

To consider the topical theme of *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* and archaeology, the afore said details clearly refutes B.B. Lal's identification of PGW as the *Mahabharata* culture. To mention further with the identification of Harappan culture with the Vedic people by Lal now the identification of PGW with the *Mahabharata* period requires scrutiny. Another important point is that Lal has conceived the time of *Rigveda* about 1500 B.C. and when he had counted the generation gap from the side of Udyan to Parikshita based on some *Puranas*, he would have definitely dealt with the generation gap between the time of *Dasarajayuddha* and the Pandavas. There is a definite relation between the tribes mentioned to have taken part in *Dasarajayuddha* and the establishment of Kuru Empire. At that time, it would definitely had been conceived with the initial phase of PGW. Now, when Lal himself has changed one

of his identification, should he not change the second identification also. Hastinapura and Ahichchhatra had certainly an OCP horizon below the PGW horizon. Another very important site Atranjikhhera identified with the *Mahabharat* events then it would also be an important *Mahabharata* site and the earliest horizon will be OCP and Mathura and other such large settlements. Thus, on the basis of earliest cultural horizon, PGW cannot be identified with the *Mahabharata* story. Another very important point which Lal gave to support his *Mahabharata* theory was the absence of habitation at Hastinapura after the Great Flood. The finding of PGW sherds 15m. from natural surface of river bed also require further confirmation.

Secondly, the degenerated PGW of Kausambi which he related with Hastinapura PGW was a regional character of PGW of that area. The epic mention was just a symbolic one which indicated towards the shifting of power centre. The flood of Hastinapura was the same type of flood as is found at other archaeological sites. Further the theory proposed by Lal about the antiquity of the *Ramayana* versus the *Mahabharata*, also need substantive proofs. This theory goes against the popular Hindu tradition. With the latest date from Ayodhya of the early NBPW phase, Lal's argument of dating the *Ramayana* period after the *Mahabharata* period require discussion. If PGW was the pottery of the *Mahabharata* times, then why PGW pottery does not occur beyond Jaipur region? It is well known there was a certain migration from Mathura to Dvarka in the *Mahabharata* times. D.D. Kosambi just by identified P G W as Kuru-Puru ceramic.

Sankalia's views on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* needs to be followed further since during his time these new archaeological findings were not known. His argument for the location of Lanka is also very innovative but the findings of various Chalcolithic and pre-historic cultures which existed in his identified Dandakaranya area has altered all his arguments.

Conclusion

To conclude the theory of supporting PGW culture as the *Mahabharata* sites cannot be supported in the present day situation. No doubt *Ramayana* is to be placed before *Mahabharata* and both the epics contain a fair amount of reality, the *Ramayana* belonging to an early society's incident, the *Mahabharata* should be placed to its traditional date of 3100 B.C. About the antiquity of iron and identification of *ayas*, M.D.N. Sahi's views need more consideration and thinking.

There is need to ponder over the limitations of archaeology as many problems to be solved before proposing something on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The archaeological material from an excavated site presents only 5% picture of the past. For the earlier cultures like PGW, OCP etc., it is much less to understand the past as the evidence for writing before Mauryan period is not known and it is equally true of the composition of Vedic and later Vedic literature. It is not possible that such a great literary knowledge was known to the people of Mauryan age from such a great past just orally.

Pondering over the reasons for the limitations of Indian archaeology one can take clue from F.S. Growse's *Mathura: A District Memoir*. He explains the uncaring nature of Indians towards their heritage especially the built heritage. Later he goes to say that Europeans were more conservative than Indians. It is enough to emphasise one has to approach in a practical manner and with a scientific spirit rather than sticking with a particular set of theory at the most the findings can only be tentative.

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