

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata**, Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 246 pp. \$65.00, Reviewed by Priyank Kumar Chauhan, Research Associate, Rashtram.

The book *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata* offers fresh insights into India's negotiation culture, as observed in its international bargaining behaviour. The authors, Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar, bring together scholarship from two different streams—international relations and the Mahabharata, to convincingly argue for the continued relevance of “culture” in India's approach to negotiation in bilateral and multilateral settings. This is done by exploring a series of interconnected claims—first, that India's style of negotiation on the international stage and the difficulties usually associated with it are not random quirks but a manifestation of a coherent culture of negotiation; second, that this unique culture exhibits deep continuity across the large timespan of Indian civilisation; and third, that such a continuity can be demonstrated by comparing behavioural similarities across time between characters of a representative text like the Mahabharata and negotiators representing modern India on the international stage.

To explore the cultural rootedness and continuity of India's negotiation behaviour, the book analyses its four different bargaining tendencies on the international stage—the broad strategy of approach, the frame in which demands are articulated, the logic of coalition building, and the unique conception of time. Individual chapters in the book dedicated to dealing with them follow the same broad logic. The authors start off by providing a theoretical overview, followed by an analysis of the dominant trends in India's diplomatic history associated with that particular issue. Then specific episodes from the Mahabharata that exhibit similar traits of negotiation are discussed in detail. Finally, lessons offered by these episodes are analysed to understand the extent to which these traits can be observed in India's bargaining behaviour as a rising power. This is done by comparing the insights drawn from the Mahabharata episodes with modern-day negotiations, focussing particularly on the two regimes of international trade and nuclear non-proliferation.

An illustrative example of the book's convincing attempt to show a sense of continuity in India's bargaining behaviour is the exploration of time as a variable in its negotiations. India's tendencies display a “geologic sense of time” (pp. 168), underscored by a very deep invocation of its historical past. It clearly looks upon itself as not merely a state but as a civilisation, embodying a particular set of values and thus deserving of special recognition on the international stage. Such an attitude makes it easier for India to accept delays or even abandon some negotiations altogether rather than conclude them hastily. After Independence, India initially displayed a streak of enthusiastic multilateralism, which helped cement its claim to a new statehood and displayed its wish to become a full-fledged member of the international community.

This enthusiasm proved short-lived as India failed to receive expected support at the international stage and the multilateral institutions themselves became dead-

locked. Its approach since then has been described as obstructionist, contributing to delays in negotiations where the terms were reasonably friendly. The authors add that culture-specific hypotheses may explain this ready acceptance of delays on the Indian side. They turn to the Mahabharata to explore the relevant episodes, including the setting up of terms for Pandavas' exile after the dice game, Yudhishthira's successful argument for delayed revenge as the virtuous course of action, Krishna's great patience with Shishupala's offences before ultimately killing him, and Bhishma's choice of a prolonged death, all of which deal with the variable of time. All these stories show a ready acceptance of delay over quick action by all sides involved in the negotiations. Time is supposed to have a superior agency of its own, which can always surpass human effort and frustrate human action. The shadow of time stretches far back into the past and human activity can always result in unforeseen and undesirable consequences; caution and patience are always rewarded over hasty action. These insights are then mapped onto India's behaviour as a bargaining party in international negotiations on trade, climate change, and nuclear non-proliferation. On all of these fronts, the insights drawn from the Mahabharata are shown to have been relevant.

The gist of the book can be described through its broad characterisation of Indian bargaining behaviour, for which it seeks explanations rooted in culture and demonstrates a continuity between the Indian past and the present through the use of the Mahabharata. Indian negotiators in general look at issues from a zero-sum lens and display a marked preference for distributive strategies, where the gain of one side is seen as the loss of another. They tend to formulate demands and arguments in a moralistic tone and display a historical preference for loose coalitions with the like-minded over issue-based alliances. Finally, there is the culture-specific notion of time, through which negotiators display a ready acceptance of delay over hasty action.

This rich and truly interdisciplinary text will make for a highly interesting reading to a whole range of readers. People interested in international organisations, negotiation strategy, and India's foreign policy will find it a substantive contribution that provides a highly original perspective into these fields. The book argues for a uniquely Indian way of bargaining so that the negotiation spaces that Indians create contain multiple presuppositions and are charged with energies that are not immediately visible to the other party. This perspective adds great clarity and will be of use to both Indian and foreign practitioners who deal with one another on the negotiating table. People interested in the Mahabharata or Indian culture in general will also find a special appeal. The book moves beyond the questions of the Mahabharata's originality, interpolation and integrity; it instead makes it the ground for introspecting a fresh, exciting perspective. The Mahabharata is usually associated with themes of war, ethics and morality, but this book places the theme of negotiation at the very core of the epic. From this approach, many crucial episodes of the Mahabharata are reinterpreted as either explicit or disguised attempts at negotiation. It is the success or failure of these attempts and their interwoven unfolding, which pushes the epic forward and gives richness to its plot.

The novelty of its central idea, however, manages to create more questions than the book can answer. Perhaps the biggest question that one is left struggling with at the end of this text is whether or not the Mahabharata is a great teacher when it comes to

negotiation. Consider the international politics depicted in the Mahabharata, in which one finds the Indian society as a moral and cultural universe unto itself, thus transforming the Indian order of things into an effective international order. Do the presuppositions of such a society, which animate all things, including the negotiation space, as consistently demonstrated in the book under review, translate well to the present international order dominated by the forces of globalisation? If one is convinced by the book's argument of the cultural rootedness of Indian bargaining behaviour, it is then natural to wonder about the direction of such a contribution. From the perspective of a practitioner, the idea of using the rich and diverse content of the Mahabharata as a source for new approaches suited to the fundamentally different needs of our own time also arises. The book deals with international negotiations; future explorations could be extended to domestic negotiations. The characters in the Mahabharata are for the most part negotiating with other characters who share the same culture. Do Indians still display the same behaviour while bargaining among themselves? Do the same misunderstandings that characterise India's negotiations on the international stage also contribute in some way to the negotiating style of domestic players? If this link can be credibly established, it could go a long way in explaining the general character of the Indian negotiation culture. The huge disruption caused by the current farmers' protests all over the country and the inability of both sides to arrive at a settlement even after a whole year of crippling crisis is enough to demonstrate its relevance.

The book *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata* uses the epic poem as a literary resource to illuminate the continuity in Indian negotiation culture. It successfully applies the insights drawn from its own comparative method to offer lessons for bargaining more effectively with a rising India. But perhaps the greatest contribution of this book is an invitation to think about India "civilisationally," by enabling India's past to illuminate a part of India's present. In this sense, this breakthrough text will hopefully inspire many more such works across a variety of fields.