Mortality in the Mahabharata: An Exploration in Historical Demography

Lord Meghnad Desai, Padma Bhushan and former Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, delivered the Seventh Pravin Visaria Memorial Public Lecture on "Mortality in the Mahabharata: An Exploration in Historical Demography". The lecture was presided over by Professor Yoginder K. Alagh, Professor Emeritus at the Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research, Ahmedabad. Connoting Mahabharata as a story based on the family dispute, Lord Desai observed that the war that was claimed to have lasted for 18 long days. As per the epic, eighteen *akshauhinis* participated in the Mahabharat war and each *akshauhini* consisted of 21870 chariots, 21870 elephants, 65619 horses and 108350 soldiers. Going by these figures and the fact that only ten people survived by the end of the war, Lord Desai held that nearly 2 million lives were lost by the end of the war. Based on various historical evidence of different wars fought so far, he surmised that not more than 5 per cent of the population of a country dies in a war and, hence, the numbers stated in Mahabharata are incorrect. Moreover, as the geographical area of the Mahabharata did not include South India, and the war took place only in North India, he conjectured if India's population at the time of Mahabharata was 100 million.

The audience very much appreciated Lord Desai's intellectually stimulating lecture, and engaged in a question-answer session for more than half an hour following the lecture.