

The Influence of the Epics (Ramayana & Mahabharata) on Indian Life and Literature

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The Indian civilization is unique in many ways, its antiquity and its classism has been envious from ages among the other civilizations. Its ancient texts have been always a source of mystery and curiosity to the whole world order of all times. There is great deal of Indian way of life from ancient times originated from the texts fetched by the sages, thinkers, spiritualists and philosophers who descended on this land of so called Gods and Goddesses or charismatic sages with unbelievable supernatural powers. Theism and atheism, both existed together in this land of marvels and extraordinary gifts of thoughts which it has rendered to the world order. The western civilization has been always critical and explorative of the findings of the Indian sages and thinkers. The literary grandeur of the ancient texts available in India are often viewed with awe even today. India has been revered for its ancient epics which have laid the very foundation of Indian culture which reflects the plurality and complexity of the inclusive cultures which have evolved over the centuries on this land, which has been named as a composite and concerted culture today. The constitution of India also defines the culture of India as a composite culture which contains the elements of the hundreds and thousands of religious, linguistic, ethnic and modern social groups. Evidently the cultural values which Indian subcontinent has derived, are the evolutions from the epic literature penned in Sanskrit mainly, followed in other subsequent Indian languages from ancient times.

Although all the languages of India do not belong to the same family, yet their literary inheritance is common. The literary wealth of Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita has been inherited by all Indian languages alike. These have directly or indirectly influenced the thought content of the Indian writer in every language. These have been really the perennial sources of inspiration for all the Indian literatures and their influence has gone a long way in bringing the Indian literatures together. Thus, there is an inherent unity in the Indian literature as a whole which has flourished against a common socio-political, cultural and literary background ever since its birth.

The origin of epics, as that of all forms of Indian literature, has been traced to the *Vedas*. There is, however a difference of opinion as regards the particular portion of the *Rig-veda*, which is to be taken as the source of the epics. Oldenberg, who styled the *samvada* (dialogue) hymns of the *Rig-veda* as *akhyanas* (ballads), started a theory that the oldest form of epic poetry in India consisted of prose and verse, of which the latter, containing speeches was fixed and committed to memory. The *samvadas* have preserved only the verse portion containing dialogues ; the prose portion comprising the narrative has been lost. This *akhyana* theory was opposed by Max Muller and Levi, who, however, discovered the germs of dramatic literature in the *samvada* hymns, while Hertel and Von Schroeder worked out a theory that the *samvada* hymns constituted the speeches pertaining to some dramatic performance connected with the religious rituals. After stating these different views about the nature of the *samvada* hymns, Winternitz styles them as ancient ballads and holds them to be the source of both the epic and the drama, the epic having been developed from the narrative, and the drama from the dramatic elements of the ancient ballad. Though the epic can thus be connected with the *samvada* hymns

by the fact that both have a narrative to tell, though there are essential differences between them with regard to form and purpose.

The epics differed from the earlier literature regarding their subject-matter, which was distinct from praises of the deities, sacrificial details, or high philosophical speculations which formed the main characteristics of the latter. The epics on the other hand, dealt with the deeds of kings and heroes, descriptions of wars, and practical philosophy.

The Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the eighteen Puranas, form the massive basement on which stands the magnificent edifice of Indian religion and thought, culture and literature. Of these, the two great epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) form the strongest single factor that has sustained and held together Indian life, in all its growth and ramifications, through the vicissitudes of centuries. The Vedas were confined chiefly to the priestly and aristocratic classes, and the Upanishads, to the intellectuals and philosophers ; it was the epics and the Puranas that became the real Vedas for the masses, which molded their life and character for the last two thousand years. There is hardly any other work whose influence on all aspects of life in India has been so profound, lasting and continuous, as that of the epics and the Puranas. Language being the first and foremost means of expressing feelings and communicating thoughts, an account of the influence which epic poetry has exercised over Indian literature embodied in the different languages and in their various stages is relevant to understand the influence of the epics.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata began to influence the modern Indian literatures from their early mediaeval period. For centuries before that, people in all parts of India were no doubt acquainted with the stories of the epics, but direct access to the originals was confined to the learned few. So the need for their translation, or adaptation into the spoken languages of the day, was essentially felt. The revival of the devotional cult in different parts of India and, in some cases, the interest taken by local rulers soon provided the necessary support in transforming the epics in to local expressions. Once the golden gate to the vast treasure house of romances and legends was opened widely, modern Indian literatures got an opportunity to become nurtured, nourished, and enriched. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been an inexhaustible source of inspiration ever since.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata portray pictures of ideal men and women, and preach through a popular medium the gospel of Dharma (righteousness). The Ramayana does this by glorifying domestic relations and family life sustaining the entire social structure and the Mahabharata shows that hatred breeds hatred, that covetousness and violence lead inevitably to ruin, that the only real conquest is the battle against one's lower nature. Rama represents an ideal son and king, a perfect Man, Lakshmana and Bharata ideal brothers, Sita an ideal wife, a perfect Woman, Hanumat an ideal devotee, Yudhishtira an ideal upholder of moral virtues, and Bhishma and Arjuna ideal heroes. Parents and elders have for generations used the themes and stories of these epics for imparting wisdom and instruction to younger generation. The themes of these epics are create an indelible impression on the young minds. The educative influence of the epics on an Indian, is sustained through all the stages of life by such means as mass recitations of the epics in the temple, or in public on festive and other occasions and by such open air popular performances as the Rama-lila, Yakshagana, Dasavataras and dances like the *Kathakali* and other regular dramatic performances. These are entertainments which always attract vast and varied crowds, irrespective of creed or faith, and they are an evidence of the perennial and dynamic appeal of the epics to all. To millions of Hindus it has been a religious duty to recite at least a few verses from the epics before taking their meals.

Works which have affected so large a population over so long a period of time and molded the character and civilization of so vast a region, often transcending geographical limits, cannot be termed mere 'epics'. Indeed the Ramayana and the Mahabharata should better be regarded as the true history of India, history of not events, but of the urges and aspirations, strivings and

purposes of a great nation. Encyclopedic in nature, together they form the content of India's collective conscious, wherein they breathe the united soul of India and the individual souls of her people. The two epics represent the two moods of Aryan civilization, namely, moral and intellectual, and therefore it is impossible to grasp the true spirit and meaning of Indian life, without a thorough and intelligent understanding of the epics. These epics have thus been the deep well of strength to our forefathers, from which they derived, and which inspires us to derive the enduring vitality of our cultural and spiritual basis as well as of our social and political life.

The Mahabharata contains a celestial subtext in the form of Bhagavad Gita, which defines the very ethical and moral code of conduct of every human being. Therefore it is imperative to dwell upon the influence of Bhagavad Gita, on Indian Life and literature. The Bhagavad Gita is universally acclaimed as comprehending the quintessence of the Mahabharata philosophy.

Influence on Indian literature :

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have exerted great influence on Indian literature. The series of narrative poems based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are common to all the languages of India. The *Kamba Ramayanam* in Tamil, the *Ranganath Ramayana and the Bhaskara Ramayana*, *Molla Ramayana* in Telugu, the *pampa Ramayana* in kannada, the *Adhyatma Ramayana* of Eluttaccan in Malayalam, the *Ramakatha* of Moropant in Marathi, the *Krittibasa Ramayana* in Bengali, the *Ramayana of Madhava Kandali* in Assamese, the *Bilanka Ramayana* of Saraladas and the famous *Ramayana of balaram Das* in oriya, and the *Ramacharitmanas* of Tulsi Das, Saket by mathilisharan Gupta, Ramachandrika and Vaidehi Vanavas by Ayodhyasingh Upadhyaya Harioudh in modern times in Hindi are beads of same rosary. Similarly, the poetic narratives based on the Mahabharata are spread over the whole country : in Telugu three ancient poets Nannaya, Tikkana and Errana completed the Mahabharata, in kannada the Mahabharatas of Pampa and Kumara, Vyasa are very famous and in Malayalam the Mahabharata or Elittaccan is in a way more original and complete than his Ramayana itself. In Marathi, Shridhar wrote the Pandava Pratap but that is not quite remarkable; in Bengali there were about thirty renderings of the Mahabharata in the 17th and 18th centuries of which the Mahabharata of Kashiram is easily the best, in Assamese Ramasaraswati composed several Vadha-Kavyas based on the Mahabharata, in Oriya the famous Mahabharata poet is the great SaralaDas who is known in Odisha as the ' Utkal Vyas ', in Punjabi Krishnalal produced a verse-translation, and in Hindi the Mahabharata of Gokulnath etc, in the later medieval age and *jaya Bharat* of Mathilisharan Gupta and Kurukshetra of Ramdharisingh Dinkar in modern times are works of permanent literary merit.

Influence of Ramayana :

The greatness of Ramayana seems to lie in the appeal it has to the head and heart of the common folk as well as the elite and the intellectuals. There is so much to learn from the Ramayana on good conduct eg. the relationship between parents and children, husband and wife, how brothers should conduct themselves etc. Friendship is yet another matter on which the Ramayana has so much to say. Likewise there is abundant enlightenment in the great epic on the art of good Governance. The Ramayana is indeed a grand treatise on personal qualities and conduct. Again, the Ramayana places before us the ideal of a harmonious pursuit of the four principal goals of life, namely :-

- Dharma (righteousnes and duty)
- Arth (material prosperity)
- Kama (legitimate sex and their pleasures)
- Moksha (liberation of soul)

Such is the manifold greatness of Ramayana. It is truly an epic of eternal interest and enlightenment. These are the tenets of Indian life from ages till today. Ramayana has indeed influenced and affected the way of life in India, it exerts its influence across the faiths and beliefs. Ramayana defines the social values, family bondages and duties of every family member in a commune. Indian way of life has been, from centuries an assimilated and collective way of living with parent and children generations living together, sharing every happiness and sorrow, along with achievements and failures. Indian way of life is the holistic and collective form of life. Ramayana inspires the modern generation also, however today, the socio-cultural ethos has shifted to the globalized and self-centric way of living. Ramayana defines the institution of marriage as the most sacred in Indian way of life, the relationship of married couple is eternal and beyond one life. This has been widely accepted in the Indian way of life and being practiced even today.

Influence of Mahabharata :

The Mahabharata is the oldest epic in world history, except the Ramayana which was composed a few centuries earlier. More ingeniously conceived than the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Mahabharata stands out as a marvel of creative imagination, composed by the sage Veda Vyasa about 2000 BC. It depicts almost every conceivable human emotion, love and hate, forgiveness and revenge, truthfulness and falsehood, celibacy and promiscuity, commitment and betrayal, magnanimity and greed. But what is most remarkable about Vyas's genius is the uncompromising integrity in presenting the baffling complexities of human existence in its contradictions and coherences.

Since the Mahabharata is a unique work of art, it transcends the limits of time and space. Although it speaks to every epoch in its own language, it carries significant relevance to our age, in view of our concerns with such issues as social justice, partitioning of a state as political expediency, women empowerment, and the games that politicians play.

One need not engage oneself in any scholarly discourse as to whether or not this epic is historically authentic, what is important to note is its impact on all those who visit, even today, Kurukshetra, a small town in north India, and imagine, the ground there still stained with the blood of the warriors who were killed in the eighteen day war, thousands of years ago.

The Mahabharata or the Great Epic is held to be the fifth Veda. The Bhagavad Gita finds a place in this stupendous record of human activities, aspirations and achievements.

Chapters twenty-five to forty-two of the Bhishma parva of the Mahabharata constitute this immortal discourse in eighteen sub-chapters consisting of seven hundred verses. Among modern scholars there are those who hold that the Bhagavad Gita is an interpolation in the Mahabharata. But the internal evidence does not bear any testimony to this contention. Both in diction and in development of the subject there is homogeneity running all through. The philosophy of the Gita explained and expanded, becomes the Mahabharata. Conversely, Mahabharata condensed into philosophy, becomes Gita. What the heart is to the human body, so is the Gita to this great epic. Hence any attempt to trace a separate origin to the song celestial serves no purpose.

The way of action : Karma Marga :

The Gita opens with a problem. Arjuna refuses to fight and raises difficulties. He puts up a plausible plea for abstention from activity and for retreat from the world, an ideal which dominates even today among certain sects. To convert him and such human beings is the purpose of the teaching of Gita. It raises the question, whether action or renunciation of action is better and concludes that action is better. Arjuna decides that his perplexities are ended and he would carry out the command to fight. Right through, the teacher (Krishna) emphasizes the need for action. He does not adopt the solution of dismissing the world as an illusion and action as a snare. He recommends the full active life of man in the world with the inner life anchored

in the eternal spirit. *The Gita is therefore a mandate for action.* It explains what a man ought to do not merely as a social being but as an individual with a spiritual destiny. It deals fairly with the spirit of renunciation as well as with the ceremonial piety of the people which are worked into its code of ethics.

The teacher of Gita points out the extreme subtlety of the problem of action. It is not possible for us to abstain from action. Nature is ever at work and we are deluded if we fancy that its process can be held up. Nor is cessation from action desirable. Inertia is not freedom. Again the binding quality of an action does not lie in its mere performance but in the motive or desire that prompts it. Renunciation refers, not to the act itself but to the frame of mind behind the act. Renunciation means absence of desire. So long as action is based on false premise, it binds the individual soul. If our life is based on ignorance, however altruistic our conduct may be, it will be binding. The Gita advocates detachment from desires and not cessation from work.

The Mahabharata reinforces the concept of life as a battle field, where one is constantly face to face with death, where man struggles and overcomes the challenges, or is overpowered by the challenges and court death – that is the philosophy that makes a nation great.

Mahabharata is an epic of conflicts, at physical, psychological and spiritual levels. It deals with the body, mind and soul. The conflicts depicted in the epic are of infinite scale. The battle field is all around the man. It exists inside the mind of a man also and it exists for ever. Man has to fight his battle, inner and outer every minute. Every man has to fight his war with evil and unjust system in this mortal world. Mahabharata enthuse the spirit of valor and courage to face the challenges of life and invokes the might and strength which every human being has been bestowed upon by the creator. Mahabharata is the epic, which provokes man to fight the injustice and untruth. It propagates to protect the dignity and honor of woman at all costs against the tyranny of evil forces like that of Dushasana, and Duryodhana. As Shakespear said- ‘ cowards die many times in their lives, but the valiant taste of death but once’. Mahabharata rouses that valour, courage and strength to inspire mankind to fight the battle against greed and desire and against injustice and untruth. Mahabharata defines justice and righteousness (dharma) and differentiates between dharma and adharma (injustice).

In a battle field one must be able to face all the odds with courage and determination. The whole of Bhagavad Gita is a great saga of such a robust philosophy. Life is truly life, not when measured in terms of years, but in terms of quality and richness.

“ It is better to flame for one instant, than to smoke away for ages.”

“ *Muhurtam Jvalitam sreya, na tu dhumayitam ciram* “. (Mahabharata : Udyogaparva 120,15)
How many lives remain un-ignited, but simply smoke away for years and years. A short intense life, burnt out in a great struggle and achievement of the humanistic impulse, is preferable to a hypocritical life of long duration. That is the message from our own past. In this modern period, we have Vivekananda. During his short life of thirty-nine years, he made a tremendous impact on both East and West; even in that short span of life, his actual public work was only during the last nine years. And how he compressed so much into that intense life of nine years!

‘ *Glory to the twin poets whose names are lost in the morass of time, but whose message brings strength and peace in a thousand streams to the doors of millions of men and women even to this day, and incessantly carries silt from long-past centuries and keeps fresh and fertile the soul of India*’.- RABINDRANATH TAGORE