

The Mahabharata: A Compendium of Ancient Indian Culture and History

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Abstract

One may hope that the Mahabharata, as a compendium of ancient Indian culture and history, would provide some insight into the Indus Tradition. Ekasrnga, the one-horned or the unicorn, is one of the most stunning images from the final stage of this tradition and is used to refer to Visnu and Siva in the Mahabharata and the Puranas. Many international leaders have found wisdom in the pages of the Mahabharata, making it one of the greatest epics ever written. At King Janamejaya's Sarpasatra in Takshasila, modern-day Pakistan, Vyasa's disciple Vaisampayana delivers the first recitation of the Mahabharata. Ugrasravas later retold the story at Naimisaranya, a village on the banks of the Gomti River not far from Lucknow, providing more evidence of the epic's long history of oral transmission. Ugrasrava Sauti, son of Lomaharsana, retells the story of the Mahabharata to a group of sages in Naimisaranya, led by Saunaka. This paper evaluates an interpretation of India as presented in the Mahabharata. The article also examines the epic as a literary masterpiece, tracing the roots of Indian culture back to the epic.

Keywords: *Indian culture, History, tradition, Mahabharata, epic, Culture*

1. Introduction

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the two great Indian epics written in Sanskrit. The Mahabharata represents the height of creative achievement with over a hundred thousand poems and extensive prose sections. Ganesha traditionally recorded the Mahabharata after being dictated by Shri Veda Vyasa. This epic is thought to have been written sometime between the eighth and ninth centuries BCE. The Mahabharata is remarkable for its comprehensive approach to every aspect of the human condition and way of life. The four yugas (epochs) depicted in the epic are the Satya-yuga, the Treta-yuga, the Dwapara-Yuga, and the Kali-yuga. The age of moral decline and disillusionment, Kali-yuga, is described as the final battle in the Mahabharata's epic tale of virtue vs evil.

2. Background of Study

The Mahabharata, originally an oral ballad, employs a compelling narrative technique by nesting stories within stories (a technique known as "frame tales"). The epic focuses on the rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two families who want to rule Hastinapura. The Mahabharata is full of rich and varied narratives that probe universal themes such as diversity, community, change, and more. Critics and writers get inspiration from its mythological depictions, which they interpret symbolically to examine society's

responses to difficult situations. Many authors and playwrights have found inspiration in the Mahabharata throughout the ages. Famous classical playwrights like Bhasa, Mahakavi Kalidasa, and Bhatta Narayana used numerous scenes from the Mahabharata. Bhasa, the creator of ancient Sanskrit theatre, wrote six plays based on various epic events.

3. Discussion

Kulasekhara Varman's *Subhadradhananjaya*, Rajsekhar's *Balabharata*, and Kanchana Pandit's *Dhananjaya Vijayavyayoga* all gained popularity in the middle ages and continue the legacy of Mahabharata-based dramas. The mediaeval playwrights continued to use the big themes and dramatic conventions of their forebears. Plays with patriotic themes existed even during the colonial period, with the Mahabharata as a source of inspiration. Numerous important works were written during this period, including Rabindranath Tagore's one-act play, *Chitra*, KP Khadilkar's *Kichakavadh*, and Radheshyam's *Veer Abhimanyu*. The Mahabharata has had a significant effect on the human imagination. It has been able to represent universal themes across the ages, as seen by its ongoing influence on Indian culture and literature.

Following India's independence, post-independence dramatists and poets embarked on a journey to explore the country's age-old history and lineage, exposing its fallacies and complexities in their creative endeavours. They confronted the challenges faced by the developing nation, delving into issues such as corruption, deprivation, imbalance, illiteracy, communal discord, and the partition of the province, among other crucial questions affecting the post-independence era. This literary period did not confine to traditional threats like the cold war or nuclear battles. Instead, it explored the myriad of inhumane actions that challenge humanistic activities within society. Contemporary Indian plays, initially composed and performed in the native languages and later translated into English, vividly portrayed the socio-cultural hardships, drawing upon the rich content of the epic Mahabharata to craft narratives and theatrical conventions that entwined epical myths with their contemporary contexts.

Renowned postmodernist and post-colonial authors contributed significant works, such as Adya Rangacharya, Bhisham Sahni, Girish Karnad, Buddhadev Bose, Ratan Thiyam, and Saoli Mitra. Nonetheless, the Mahabharata remains a gripping epic, symbolising the essence of Indian culture and ethos. It is a profound source of inspiration for novelists seeking to address their socio-cultural and political contexts locally and internationally. Some authors have reinterpreted the events of the epic war, employing a metaphorical language that recontextualises ancient symbols within contemporary frameworks. By scrutinising the inner workings of these occurrences, they aim to unveil the loopholes in traditional interpretations and align them with the contemporary trends of the modern world.

Prominent works that undertake this task of merging essential circumstances from the Mahabharata and present them through a modern lens include Peter Brooks' *The Mahabharata*, Saoli Mitra's *Timeless Tales*, Ratan Thiyam's *Chakra Vyuha*, and Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*. These literary masterpieces bring forth a deeper understanding of the epic's timeless wisdom and relevance in addressing the complexities of the present-day world. As a reader, delving into the Mahabharata-inspired works and then experiencing them as a viewer provides a profound comprehension of the epic's transformation into

accomplishment texts. Through these literary endeavours, one can discover the relevance of the ancient epic in today's world, which is marked by hatred, turmoil, and hostility. Buddhadeva Bose, Protiva Bose, and Irawati Karve, among others, have pondered at length the sociological, philosophical, and chronological significance of the Mahabharata's legendary tales.

In *The Book of Yudhisthir: A Study of the Mahabharata of Vyas*, Buddhadeva Bose (1986) describes the Mahabharata as a record of ancient wisdom interwoven with the flux of human existence. He recognises the crucial significance of the metaphysical circumstances depicted in the epic. In her work *Mahabharater Maharanye*, Protiva Bose interprets the various events, well-known characters, and diversified relationships from fresh psychological and socio-historical vantage points. In her book *Yuganta*, Irawati Karve explores the mythology of the Mahabharata through sociological, descriptive anthropological, and archaeological examinations of its various elements. D. Bharati's play *Andha Yug* examines the relevance of the epic crusade in contemporary times, concentrating on the consequences of the Kurukshetra battle. It depicts the catastrophic effects of conflict on the victorious and the defeated. The play focuses on the aftermath of conflict and its disruptive effects on society and individuals, highlighting that war has no positive outcomes.

Similarly, *Chakravyuha*, written by R. Thiyam, draws parallels between contemporary struggles for power and the brutal murder of the righteous Abhimanyu. The play symbolises the helplessness and exploitation that contemporary youth confront at the hands of political actors. It depicts the coalition between main powers such as the United States and Russia and third-world countries such as Iraq and the province of India. These works provide profound insights into the timeless relevance of the Mahabharata and its capacity to cast light on contemporary sociopolitical complexities, making them a valuable source of contemplation and reflection for both readers and viewers. (Truschke, 2020)

The Indian civilisation is a unique and ancient marvel, revered by other cultures for its antiquity and sophistication. Its ancient texts have always captivated the world with their charisma and wisdom. These ancient texts, written by sages, thinkers, spiritualists, and philosophers, capture the essence of Indian existence. Theism and atheism coexist in this land, adorned with exceptional ideas and beliefs that have influenced the global order. The insights provided by Indian sages and philosophers have long been scrutinised and investigated by Western civilisations. Even in modern times, the literary grandeur of ancient Indian texts is regarded with awe and reverence. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, two ancient Indian epics, are the foundations of Indian culture. They reflect the richness and variety of the many civilisations that have coexisted here over the centuries to form the composite and harmonious tradition for which India is today recognised.

4. Influence of Mahabharata on Indian Culture

The Indian constitution defines Indian culture as synthesising countless historical and modern social, linguistic, and religious traditions. Culture in the Indian subcontinent was shaped by epic literature that was originally written in Sanskrit and then translated into other Indian languages. The Indian languages come from different groups but have a shared literary history. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and Bhagavad Gita are literary

masterpieces passed down through the generations in every Indian language (Sharma, 2017). They have all impacted Indian authors in some way. These epics have been vital in connecting different types of Indian literature and providing lasting inspiration for generations. India's literary, cultural, and political climate has been stable and supportive of the arts ever since the country's creation. These ancient scriptures are an indelible part of Indian culture because of their profound wisdom and insights, which have guided and inspired people for centuries.

India's literary traditions, including the Indian epics, are rooted in the Vedas. It is debated which section of the Rig Veda provides the textual basis for the epics. Hermann Oldenberg hypothesises that the Rig-Vedic Samvada hymns are akhyanas, or ballads. Based on his theory, the earliest form of epic poetry in India included prose and verse, with the poem section including speeches written down and memorised (Sharma, 2017). The narrative prose, however, has been lost to time and obscurity. The Samvada hymns were found to contain dramatic aspects. There's also the notion put out by Hertel and Von Schroeder, which holds that the Samvada hymns are dramatic performances of religious ceremonies with spoken word components. After hearing different interpretations of the Samvada hymns, Winternitz concluded they were old ballads. He reasoned that the epic and the theatre drew inspiration from these ballads. Winternitz argues that the dramatic features of old ballads gave rise to the epic, while the narrative elements of the former were responsible for the latter's development. As can be seen, there are substantial formal and thematic differences between the epic and the Samvada hymns, despite their shared narrative structure. Finally, scholars continue to argue about the Indian epics' genesis, with each competing theory presenting its take on the texts' early history. It is unclear where or when the epics were written, but they have significantly impacted Indian literature, society, and philosophy.

The epics are unique from other works of literature because of their focus on royal and hero exploits, battle accounts, and pragmatic philosophy. The epics provide a fascinating tale of human experiences and adventures, in contrast to earlier literature that focused mostly on praises of deities, sacrificial details, and high intellectual musings. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the eighteen Puranas are the cornerstones of Indian religion, thought, culture, and literature. Among these, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata stand out as the most important source of strength and continuity for Indian culture throughout its many iterations and modifications.

During the early mediaeval, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata began to impact contemporary Indian literature. Although the epics' tales were well-known throughout India, only scholars could access the texts. As a result, there was a pressing need to render them in contemporary vernaculars. The epics could be adapted to regional cultures because of the resurgence of devotional practises and the involvement of local rulers. This unlocked a treasury of myths, folklore, and love stories that have nourished and enriched contemporary Indian writing.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are used to preach the gospel of Dharma through stories about perfect men and women. In contrast to the Mahabharata, which emphasises the repercussions of anger, covetousness, and bloodshed, the Ramayana celebrates marital bonds and family life to maintain social order. Parents and grandparents have used the ideas and stories from the epics to teach lessons and instill values in their children for

centuries. The epics have a lifelong, profound impact on an Indian's education. Open-air popular performances such as Rama-lila, Yakshagana, Dasavataras, and numerous ancient dances like Kathakali continue to draw diverse crowds, transcending religious borders and are sometimes held in temples or public gatherings on special occasions. These occurrences show how the epics continue to captivate people of all ages and backgrounds. Millions of Hindus have felt obligated to recite sacred text before eating for millennia. The cultural and spiritual importance of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to the Indian people is reflected in this site. These epics have been treasured as part of Indian culture for centuries because of their profound impact on future generations' minds (Chaitanya, 1985)

Epics and Puranas became the true Vedas for the masses, whereas the Vedas were primarily accessible to the priestly and aristocratic elites, and the Upanishads appealed to intellectuals and philosophers. Over more than two thousand years, the teachings and insights into human nature and societal values presented in these epics have shaped the lives and characteristics of the people. The epics and Puranas have had a deep, enduring, and continuing impact on Indian culture and society. They have influenced literature and social norms, ethical principles, and religious tenets. These classic works, which have stood the test of time, have come to represent the identity and culture of the Indian people as a whole.

The influence of works like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on such a large population over such a long period extends beyond that of mere 'epics.' Instead, they should be considered India's real history because they reveal not just the nation's past but also its present and future hopes, struggles, and goals. These epics represent India's national spirit and its people's unique identities. They have a comprehensive scope, depicting all aspects of Indian culture and history regardless of location.

The Bhagavad Gita, for instance, is a divinely inspired scripture hidden within the Mahabharata that establishes universal norms for human behaviour. The Bhagavad Gita is often considered the philosophical heart of the Mahabharata. As a timeless guide through the intricacies of life and the moral difficulties encountered by individuals, it has great relevance in Indian life and literature (Chaitanya, 1985). This means that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are more than just old stories; they are essential to Indian culture and civilisation, illuminating the path forward for countless people. These epics are an essential part of India's cultural and spiritual history because of their timeless lessons.

The epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have enormously impacted Indian literature. Narrative poems based on these epics have been written in several Indian languages, attesting to the epics' ongoing influence and cultural relevance. The Mahabharata, written by the sage Veda Vyasa circa 2000 B.C.E., is one of the world's oldest and most brilliantly designed epics. It is a literary masterpiece, on par with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in terms of originality and innovation. Vyas's brilliance is revealed in the honesty with which he depicts the ambiguities and inconsistencies of human life. The Mahabharata's universal themes and language make it applicable to people of many eras and languages. Topics covered include women's rights, political empowerment, political gamesmanship, and social justice. The Mahabharata's impact on people's hearts and minds persists despite scholarly disagreements on the epic's historical truth. Kurukshetra, the site of the great battle, is inextricably linked to the epic, and even now, tourists can almost smell the blood of the ancient soldiers who battled there.

In the Mahabharata, often called the "fifth Veda," Lord Krishna and Arjuna have a timeless conversation known as the Bhagavad Gita. This fascinating conversation comprises seven hundred verses and spans chapters 25–42 of the Bhishma Parva. Some modern academics have suggested that the Bhagavad Gita was inserted into the Mahabharata, although the epic's own textual evidence belies this theory. The philosophy of the Gita fits so naturally into the story of the Mahabharata that it seems to be at the very centre of the epic. The Mahabharata is a treasure of human wisdom and philosophy that reflects the vast complexities of life and existence, and it remains relevant today because of its unbreakable connection to the Bhagavad Gita.

Arjuna, the protagonist of the Bhagavad Gita, faces a predicament right off the bat when he opts out of fighting and instead seeks detachment from worldly responsibilities. The Gita was written to help Arjuna and anyone facing similar internal struggles. It examines the pros and cons of doing something against not doing anything and concludes that doing something is better if done with the appropriate mindset. Krishna stresses the importance of being involved in the world while keeping in touch with one's inner eternal spirit (Bakshi, 2017). The Gita discusses more than just one's civic responsibilities; it also tackles one's ultimate spiritual fate. It recognises renunciation's worth but views inner calm and a lack of cravings as genuine renunciation. It teaches that actions have no legal repercussions unless done maliciously. It follows that the way to freedom is through abandoning desires and performing acts that benefit others. However, the Mahabharata depicts life as a battleground whereby individuals battle on multiple fronts, including the physical, psychological, and spiritual. It explores the depths of human existence and the immensity of human conflict.

The epic's depiction of conflict extends beyond the physical world and into its readers' brains. Every human constantly faces demons both within and without. The epic gives readers the strength and fortitude they need to endure life's hardships and stand up for what is right and just. It affirms the value of safeguarding women's rights and freedoms from tyranny and oppression. The notions of Dharma (righteousness) and Adharma (injustice) are defined and contrasted in the Mahabharata. Both the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata contain profound wisdom on the nature of humanity, the difficulties of living, and the necessity of seeking enlightenment. They provide insightful advice on fulfilling one's existence by focusing on others and doing the right thing. These classic works have a lasting impact on readers of all ages, serving as beacons in the search for truth, justice, and personal fulfilment. On the battlefield, one needs to be brave and resolute no matter what he faces. This persistent mindset is well chronicled throughout the Bhagavad Gita. Life is truly life when measured not in years but in richness and wealth.

How many people lie inert, smoking their lives away for decades? It is better to be a hypocrite for the long haul than to live a heroic life and die trying to do the right thing. This is the lesson that our history teaches us. In the modern day, we have Vivekananda. His final nine years on earth were the most productive of his short life, during which he changed the course of history in both the East and the West. And to think of all he accomplished in just nine short years!

For countless generations, the story of the Mahabharata has been a staple of Indian culture. The story of how the Pandavas were deposed from their rightful position as rulers of Hastinapur is well known. Who among us is unaware that Bhima sought revenge at the

Battle of Kuruksetra after Draupadi was unjustly humiliated in front of Bhima, Dronacharyya, and others in a public court? It is common knowledge that Krishna helped the Pandavas win the Great Battle of Kurukshetra. Karna exemplifies the value of perseverance and hard work in achieving one's goals despite external circumstances. This figure stands for kindness, bravery, and selflessness. It speaks to the Indian people's lofty aspirations and profound emotions, which serve as an endless wellspring of guidance for how a man should live.

Although Holi is celebrated as a celebration of spring, it is also a celebration of Krishna's heroic achievements. Krishna is celebrated with a zillion more holidays. Lord Krishna is worshipped in a huge variety of temples across the world. The Mahabharata had several major characters, including Lord Krishna. Thus, the politics and drama of the Mahabharata are thoroughly engaging. It is safe to say that the two major Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have had a profound effect on the Indian people and have influenced their psyches ever since their inception.

The majority of Indians feel that reading the Mahabharata in private is taboo. However, the Ramayana is a book that can be read. While the former fosters conflict, the latter fosters tranquilly. This worldview is an example of "imitative magic," the notion that certain actions can change one's surroundings by telling a story or performing a ritual. Like attracts like. The same fundamental idea underlies Feng Shui. Some schools of contemporary interior design still hold that people's moods can be affected by wall colour and the subject matter of artwork hanging on those walls.

The Mahabharata, without a doubt, is the more challenging and complicated of the two epics. It is a maze of plots and personalities. Nobody is born good or bad. Even Krishna, depicted as God, has a mysterious function in the epic. The characters in the Ramayana are less nuanced; Rama is the picture of unattainable perfection, while Ravana is the picture of pure evil. The Ramayana, however, is not so easily disregarded. Reading the Ramayana is essential for understanding the Mahabharata. In many ways, both epics can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Each describes an incarnation of Vishnu. His role in the Ramayana is that of a law keeper. He establishes order in the Mahabharata, the other epic. In one of them, he serves as king. On the other, he is a power broker. When it comes to one thing, you can count on him every time. On the flip side, he may be manipulative and unpredictable.

Nonetheless, Dharma (or social order) is a central theme in both. The driving power of desire is disruptive in both circumstances. While Rama is forced to leave the innocent Sita behind because of social pressure, Krishna is forced to watch his children kill each other. "Indian" may be used instead of "Vedic" because similar ideas are found in Buddhist and Jain texts. Karma, or the effect of one's actions in the past on one's present, is a central theme in Buddhist and Jain stories as well as the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. For example, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been adapted for the Jain religion. Because he is peaceful, Rama of the Jains does not kill Ravana. Since Jain Krishna hates violence, he can't join the ranks of the Tirthankara until the following rebirth. Like Vishnu's avatars, Buddhists believe that Bodhisattvas can help lead the world's population in the right direction. The Bhagavata attempts to merge the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, two of Vaishnavism's most important religious texts. The villains of the Ramayana and

Mahabharata, such as Ravana and Kumbhakarna, are reincarnations of Vishnu's doorkeepers, Shishupala and Dantavakra.

The Shakti canon, Devi Bhagavata, depicts Sita and Draupadi as incarnations of the Goddess. Sita and Draupadi are the main characters of the epics. Draupadi is the wife of all five Pandavas, while Sita is Rama's wife. Friend and travel partner of Krishna. She can only marry the queen because she is a deity. Rama is a great king who can care for her independently. The Pandavas are like weaker kings who can't care for their queen without Krishna's help. In both epics, chaos is represented by the heroine's hair becoming untied. When Sita is kidnapped, her hair gets untied, and when Draupadi's husband gambles her away, her hair also becomes untied. Sita is saved but has to leave the kingdom since Rama's people won't accept a queen with a bad name. Draupadi washes her hair in the blood of her captors, the Kauravas, and ties it with their intestines, yet she loses every child in the Great War. (Doniger, 2020)

Hanuman, the monkey god, is the sole character to appear in both stories. He helps the protagonists win in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata by appearing (on Arjuna's banner) in both stories. Both epics' authors take part in them, letting readers know that the stories they're reading are based on real events. From this root, the term "itihasa" is derived, which is commonly used to refer to both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. After Rama leaves Sita for dead, the reformed robber Valmiki takes her in. Rama's sons are born in his hermitage, and he tells the story of the Ramayana for the first time at a yagna he conducts.

Vyasa, an illegitimate child, wrote the Mahabharata. Parasara's mother, Matsyavati, later known as Satyavati, is a fisherwoman who carries him across the river while the two engage in sexual activity. In his native language, he is known as Krishna Dwaipayana, which translates to "river-island-born-darkone." He plays a pivotal role in the epic as the grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas and the biological father of Pandu and Dhritarashtra. The great-grandson of the Pandavas, Janamajeya, son of Parikshita, son of Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna, and Krishna's sister, Subhadra, tells his epic for the first time at a yagna he is leading.

The Vedic stories, including the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were supposedly forgotten until Vyasa collected them. Vyasa is Sanskrit for "compiler." He pieced together the fragments of the Veda. Then he pieced together the Puranas' forgotten histories of deities, kings, and sages. Thus, Vyasa is the connecting thread in the tapestry of Indian thought and myth. As Vyasa's scribe for the Mahabharata, Ganesha, the God of beginnings and the removal of hurdles, gave the epic a divine mark. Hanuman, a god, supposedly penned the Ramayana before anyone else.

After reading Hanuman's version, Valmiki was devastated. "It is much prettier than mine," he exclaimed. Plantain leaves were used for Hanuman's script. He ate these leaves after seeing Valmiki sobbing. The world has lost his version forever. Justify your action. Valmiki asked. "Since you wanted your audience to remember the Ramayana, my dear Valmiki", said Hanuman. "To keep Rama's legacy alive, I composed the Ramayana. The ancients said stories should outshine their tellers, or Sanatana dharma, the eternal laws regulating existence".

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