Study of Importance of Mahabharata in Indian Culture

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Abstract:

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata (Mahabharat in Hindi) are considered the greatest epics ever in the history of human civilization and will remain so forever. There is a saying among the Telugus, historically known as Andhras, that if you want to eat something you should eat garelu (a traditional snack), and if you want to listen to something, you should listen to the epic Mahabharata. Until the modern era, the two epics were the main sources of folk entertainment and ancient history (Itihasa) to the people in the Indian subcontinent. They not only entertained the masses, but also enlightened them about duty, morality, and salvation and served as the starting point for religious practice.

Key -Words: Kauravas, Pandavas, gandharvalok, Vaishnava.

Introduction:

Mahabharata, (Sanskrit: "Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty") one of the two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India (the other being the *Ramayana*). The *Mahabharata* is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism between 400 bce and 200 ce and is regarded by Hindus as both a text about dharma (Hindu moral law) and a history (*itihasa*, literally "that's what happened"). Appearing in its present form

about 400 ce, the *Mahabharata* consists of a mass of mythological and didactic material arranged around a central heroic narrative that tells of the struggle for sovereignty between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas (sons of Dhritarashtra, the descendant of Kuru) and the Pandavas (sons of Pandu). The poem is made up of almost 100,000 couplets—about seven times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined—divided into 18 *parvan*s, or sections, plus a supplement titled *Harivamsha* ("Genealogy of the God Hari"; i.e., of Vishnu). Although it is unlikely that any single person wrote the poem, its authorship is traditionally ascribed to the sage Vyasa, who appears in the work as the grandfather of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The date and even the historical occurrence of the war that is the central event of the *Mahabharata* are much debated.

Apart from its spiritual value, the epic Mahabharata also contains a lot of information about the ancient world and how people lived long before the great flood. It lists the lineages of 24 kings who ruled the earth in the beginning of the current human civilization, and how the epic itself came into existence through the enlightened mind of the great seer Vyasa. The Bhagavadgita, which consists of 700 verses divided into 18 chapters, forms part of the Mahabharata only, which makes the

epic even greater than being the mere narrative of a war story. Truly, the Mahabharata is the original masterpiece in human history on war and peace.

How the Mahabharata was conceived

From the Mahabharata we learn that the story was originally conceived by the great sage Vyasa, also known as Krishna-Dwaipayana, as a poem. Since it was conceived by him as a poem, Brahma, the creator god, wanted the world to recognize it as a poem only. We further learn that having conceived it, Vyasa was concerned that it was humanly impossible to render such a large and voluminous work into writing by himself. It needed a super human effort for which divine help was needed. Therefore, he went to Brahma, the creator god, and sought his help. Brahma suggested that he should seek the help of Ganesha, the leader of the warrior gods (ganas), and the son of Shiva.

After seeking his advice, Vyasa returned to his abode and contemplated upon Ganesha. As soon as Vyasa thought of him, Ganesha promptly appeared before him. After paying his respects, Vyasa asked him to write the poem for him. Ganesha obliged on the condition that the narration should go uninterrupted and he would cease writing if his pen ever stopped writing. Vyasa assured him that he could stop writing the moment he did not comprehend any of his words or the narration. Ganesha obliged and with the utterance of Aum began writing Vyasa's narration.

Ganesha's connection with Mahabharata

We have to understand why Brahma recommended the name of Ganesha for the purpose. Ganesha resides in the minds of people as the remover of fear and doubts. He quietly listens to everything we say and every prayer that we utter before he passes them on to other deities and their respective spheres. He also personifies the virtue of listening with devotion. It is symbolized in his iconography as the deity having the elephant ears. He listens with great reverence to his own father, the great God (Mahadeva) Shiva. Hence, Shiva blessed him and given him all the knowledge and the power to remove any obstacle, fear, or self-doubt from our minds. As a listener, Ganesha also personifies his mastery of the sruti literature, or the transcendental knowledge that is acquired through psychic hearing. The Vedas are considered sruti because they were heard psychically by the seers from the highest heaven of Brahman, where the Vedas said to exist eternally.

There is another reason why Ganesha was chosen for the purpose. Mahabharata is about a war between two groups of cousins, with Krishna, the Supreme Self, as the witness. There is no better deity than Ganesha to render such a violent story. Outwardly, Ganesha may have a grotesque form, but he is a warrior god who marches

ahead of his band of devotees into the battlefield to destroy the demons and enemies of God. Mahabharata emphasizes the unavoidable nature of suffering that arises from the violence in which humans indulge, while God himself may allow that violence to happen for the order and regularity of the world. Ganesha is the leader and foremost among the gods who are by nature warriors and act as the guardians of the worlds. They preach non-violence and exemplify highest virtues, but do not hesitate to fight the demons and evil people for the order and regularity of the worlds. They keep peace from a point of strength and on their terms, rather than making any truce with the evil forces unless they surrendered. The Pandavas were virtuous people and devotees of God, but they had to fight a terrible war as willed by God himself to protect the world from cruel and violent people. Hence, there was no better deity than Ganesha, who was the leader of such gods, to render the Mahabharata, a story on war as a duty, into human language.

The length of the Mahabharata

What we have today as the Mahabharata is a fragment of the epic that was originally conceived. In the Mahabharata itself it is stated that in the first stage, Vyasa originally conceived 24,000 verses in his mind and called it the Bharata. It was probably the earliest version, or the rough draft. Later he added to it another 150 verses as an introduction or prologue. He taught the early version first to his son Suka and later to some of his disciples.

Afterwards, knowing that the intelligence levels differed in each sphere, he created four different versions of the work with a total of 6,000,000 verses. Of them the first version consisting of 3,000,000 verses was

communicated to the gods in heaven (devlok). The second version consisting of 1,500,000 versions was communicated to the ancestors in the world of ancestors (pitrlok), and the third version consisting of 1,400,000 verses was communicated in the world of celestial beings (gandharvalok). Finally, due to the limitations of the human knowledge and intellect, the fourth version consisting of only 100,000 verses was communicated to the humans in the mortal world.

In today's world, the 100,000 may also be too much for the people to read. You can count on your fingers the number of people who might have completely read the original Mahabharata of 100,000 verses. Due to lack of time, nowadays many people get their knowledge of the epics from movies and television serials. These modern formats do render a good service. They introduce the epics to the people, who are otherwise disinterested to know them. However, since they are made with a commercial motive, they do not do full justice to the story. For example, the current television serial, Mahabharat, presents the story with a lot of glitter and glamour but with little reverence for the original intent and purpose of the epic. If you love the original, you will not be happy to watch it because it numbs your senses with Hollywood imagery and presents the characters in Greco-Roman styles as if to make people believe that there was an invasion of fair skinned Aryans in ancient India from the West and they resembled more like the Bollywod crowd from Mumbai. If Hinduism has to survive and maintain its purity, we have to preserve the integrity of the ancient history of India and the unique identity of its ancient civilization. We must not be ashamed of how we look or what faith we practice.

How the epic came to be known as the Mahabharata

Mahabharata means the great (hi) story of ancient Bharat (India) and ancient Bharatas (Indians). When the epic was originally composed, Vyasa, called it Bharata only, because it was a story of the kings and people of an ancient world who were descendents of king Bharat, who was the first king of the Indian subcontinent. For long a time, the epic is considered a history (itihasa) of ancient India. Its significance can be understood from the fact that in the Indian constitution, the official name of India is Bharat only.

How the epic Bharata subsequently became Mahabharata is also explained in the first chapter (Adi Parva) of the epic itself. We learn that because of its spiritual value and content, the epic was deemed greater than all the four Vedas combined. The Vedas contain transcendental truths that are inviolable. However, the Mahabharata contains even more significant knowledge that can destroy sin and grant its listeners a place in the higher heavens or even salvation. We further learn from it that the creation of the epic led to a debate among the gods about its importance in relation to the Vedas and which of them was greater. To settle the matter, the gods assembled in heaven and weighed the pros and cons of both. Eventually, they concluded that in knowledge and substance the epic weighed heavier than the four Vedas combined with all their secrets. From then on, the epic became known as the Mahabharata, rather than mere Bharata. It means gods declared that the Mahabharata was the greatest (maha) of all works known in the world of the Bharatas.

It is unfortunate that the current generation of Indians know so little about the epic. A good percentage of them cannot even name the five Pandavas in a proper sequence or explain why there was a war between the two groups of cousins. The two epics are like the two eyes of Hinduism. For the last 5000 years they have played a vital role as its traditional missionaries, messengers, teachers, and prophets, in keeping the people informed and enlightened about their spiritual values and ideal conduct with excellent examples. If Hinduism has to survive the onslaught of decadent ideas and ideological propaganda that led to the breakdown of family values and traditional virtues in the West, we have to create awareness about them among the younger generation. To those who want to read the original Mahabharata in English, we recommend the English translation by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, which is freely available on the Internet. With nearly 6000 pages, it is indeed by far the most complex and comprehensive translation of any single Sanskrit work ever made into English. You may download it (23MB file) from the links provided below. Even on broadband it takes a while, but if you are on a slow Internet it may take forever.

Importance of Mahabharata:

The story of the Mahabharata is well-known to the thousands and millions of Indians through ages.

Everybody knows how the Pandavas were deprived of their legitimate claim for the throne of Hastinapur. Who does not know how Draupadi was insulted in an open court in presence of Bhima, Dronacharyya and others for no fault of hers and how Bhima subsequently took revenge in the battle of Kurukshetra?

It is also not unknown to the people how Krishna took the side of the Pandavas and helped them in winning the great battle of Kurukshetra.

The character of Karna teaches us how to rise to eminence by dint of self-effort and perseverance caring little for the dictates of fate. This character is the emblem of munificence, sacrifice and valor. It appeals to the innermost love of the hearts of the Indians who get lofty idealism add inexhaustible source of inspiration about how a man should be.

The Holi festival though a jubilant spring festival, commemorates Krishna's heroic exploits. There are a thousand other festivals which relate to Krishna.

There are thousands of temples where Lord Krishna is worshipped. Lord Krishna was one of the central characters in Mahabharata.

Conclusion:

Thus the plots and the politics of the Mahabharata are really very absorbing, interesting and exciting to sum up in fire, we may unhesitatingly say that the influences of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata upon the Indians are tremendous and these two great epics of India have been molding the sentiments of the Indian people from time immemorial.

Most Indians believe that one should not read the Mahabharata inside one's house. But one can read the Ramayana. Reading the former invites strife, the latter brings harmony. This belief is a kind of 'imitative magic': the ability of stories, symbols and rituals to influence the surroundings. Like creates like. The same principle that is followed by Feng Shui. And even certain schools of modern interior decoration, which believe that the colour of the walls and the content of paintings influence the mood of people in the room.

Mahabharata is the story of a family feud that ultimately leads to division of property and a terrible war. Ramayana narrates the tale of a family that struggles, and triumphs, over forces that seek to divide it. Quite naturally, a traditional Indian family terrified of any disruption of the family fabric prefers Ramayana over the Mahabharata. As I write these lines I wonder if Dhirubhai Ambani let the Mahabharata be read in his house or was the division of the Reliance Empire between his two sons simply the natural way forward. Man struggles to keep things together. Yet everything falls apart. Is the collapse of unity and order nature's way? Is the aspiration for unity and cohesion merely a cultural dream? Is Mahabharata an expression of reality and Ramayana the imagination of a poet? Most people think so. Ramayana is too idealistic; Mahabharata is more realistic, they say.

There is no denying that Mahabharata is a more complex, hence more challenging, epic. It is a maze of stories and personalities. No one is truly good or bad. Even Krishna, who is identified as God, plays an ambiguous role in the epic. Characters in the Ramayana seem more one-dimensional; Rama is perfection personified, too good to be true, while Ravana is evil incarnate.

But it is not so easy to dismiss the Ramayana. Any study of the Mahabharata, necessitates a reading of the Ramayana. The two epics are two sides of the same coin. Both are tales of Vishnu's incarnations. In one, the Ramayana, he is the rule keeper. In the other, the Mahabharata, he is the rule

maker. In the one, he is king. In the other, he is kingmaker. In one, he is predictable and dependable. In the other, he is manipulative and mercurial. Yet both are concerned about dharma – social order. In both, desire is the disruptive force. Both Rama and Krishna triumph, but each one pays a price: Rama has to abandon the innocent Sita under social pressure while Krishna has to watch his children kill each other.

Deconstruction of the two epics reveals that the two epics complement each other. They are part of a grand 'Vedic' continuum. Being constituents of Vaishnava literature,they must be seen within the context of Vaishnava world-affirming philosophy and hence must be contrasted from the Shaiva world-denying philosophy. Vaishnava and Shaiva literature, in turn, must be contrasted from Shakta or Goddess literature. The former discuss responses to the challenge of life while the latter focuses on the nature of the challenge that is life. Together, the Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta worldviews are narrative expressions of a wider thought process, whose principles are rooted in the Vedas and germinated in the Upanishads. Any attempt to study the Mahabharata in isolation is to understand only a part of a grand puzzle.

Rather than 'Vedic' worldview, one may choose the term 'Indian' because similar ideas can be found in Buddhist and Jain scriptures. The idea of karma, or influence of past deeds on the present, for example, is an important element of Ramayana and Mahabahrata and Buddhist and Jain stories. Jains, for example, have their own version of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Rama of the Jains does not kill Ravana for he embraces non-violence. Krishna of the Jains does embrace violence hence can become a Jain Tirthankara only in his next life when

the new cycle of life begins. Likewise, Buddhists refer to Bodhisattvas who direct man in the right path much like the avatars of Vishnu.

The Bhagavata, the holiest of Vaishnava literature, attempts to weave the Mahabharata with the Ramayana. Not only do the protagonists, Rama and Krishna, have a common root in Vishnu, the antagonists Ravana and Kumbhakarna of the Ramayana and Shishupala and Dantavakra of the Mahabharata are incarnations of Vishnu's doorkeepers, living out a curse until it is time to return home.

Devi Bhagavata, the Shakta literature, presents Sita and Draupadi as forms of the Goddess. Sita and Draupadi are the heroines of the epics. Sita is the wife of Rama, Draupadi is the common wife of the five Pandavas. She is a friend of Krishna. As Goddess she can only be a wife of a king. Rama is the great king, capable of taking care of her alone. The Pandavas are lesser kings, unable to take care of her collectively, hence needing Krishna. In both epics, the unbinding of the heroine's hair is associated with the collapse of order. Sita's hair becomes loose when she is abducted and Draupadi's hair becomes loose after she is gambled away by her husband's. Sita is rescued but is forced to leave the kingdom by Rama's subjects who reject a queen of soiled reputation. Draupadi has her revenge, washes her hair with the blood of her abusers, the Kauravas, and ties it with their entrails, but loses all her children in the Great War.

Hanuman, the monkey-god, is the only character to participate in both epics. In both he leads the heroes to victory, by participation in the Ramayana and by

presence (on Arjuna's banner) in the Mahabharata.

Author of both epics participate in the epics, thus informing readers that the tales are not fantasies, they are reports. 'This is how it happened' – the root of the word 'itihasa' that refers to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Valmiki, a reformed thief, gives shelter to Sita after she is abandoned by Rama. In his hermitage are born Rama's sons who narrate the Ramayana for the first time during a yagna conducted by Rama. Author of the Mahabharata is Vyasa, a child of illicit union. His father, Parasara, makes love to a fisher-woman called Matsyavati, later known as Satyavati, while she is ferrying him across a river. His original name is Krishna Dwaipayana or the 'dark-one-born-on-a-river-island'. He is very much part of the Mahabharata because he is the biological father of Pandu and Dhritarashtra, hence grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas. His epic is also narrated for the first time during a yagna, conducted by the great grandson of the Pandavas, Janamajeya, son of Parikshita, who is the son of Abhimanyu, who is the son of Arjuna and Krishna's sister, Subhadra.

It is said that all Vedic stories, including the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, was lost to the world until Vyasa compiled it together. Vyasa means compiler. He compiled the lost Veda. He then compiled the lost stories of gods, kings and sages chronicled in the Puranas. Vyasa is thus the common thread through all Indian philosophies and stories. Ganesha, god of beginnings and remover of obstacles, served as Vyasa's scribe for the Mahabharata, thus giving his epic a divine stamp.

It is said that the Ramayana was first written not by man, but by a god, by Hanuman. When Valmiki read Hanuman's retelling, he wept. "It is so beautiful and so much better than mine" said he. Hanuman had scratched out his version on banana leaves. When he saw Valmiki weep, he ate these leaves. His version was lost to the world forever. Why did you do that? asked Valmiki. Because, my dear Valmiki, said Hanuman, You wrote the Ramayana to be remembered by your readers. I wrote the Ramayana to remember Rama. This is the Vedic way – to let the narrative be greater than the narrator so that it directs the soul of the listener to the eternal principles governing life, principles the ancients called sanatana dharma.

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