

True Significance of Mahabharata as a Great Epic of India: A Critique

Dr. Narasingha Charan Panda*

Abstract

India is one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse nations in the world, with some of the most deeply religious societies and cultures. Religion plays a central and definitive role in the life of many of its people. Besides, India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other religions.

Besides, the Indian literary tradition is the oldest in the world. The earliest works were composed to be sung or recited, and were so transmitted for many generations before being written down. Apart from the Vedas, which are a sacred form of knowledge, there are other works such as the Hindu epics Ramayana and Māhābhārata, treatises such as Vāstu śāstra in architecture and town planning, and Artha-śāstra in political science. The most famous works in Sanskrit are the Hindu holy texts like the Vedas, Upaniṣads, and Manusmṛti.

The Māhābhārata is an ancient Indian epic, which is very famous in the world. The Bhagavad Gītā is also a part of this great epic. It is very big in size and covers every subjects of Indian traditions. All the scholars like this epic due to its greatness and different subject matters. However, this paper will deal in brief all about its importance as the scholars speaks and writes since last thousand years.

Keywords: Māhābhārata, great epic, spiritual knowledge, Indian tradition

The word Māhābhārata means the great history (Itihāsa) of ancient Bhārat (India) and ancient Bhāratas (Indians). When the epic was originally composed, sage Veda Vyāsa, called it Bhārata only, because it was a story of the kings and people of an ancient world who were descendants of king Bharat, who was the first king of the Indian subcontinent. For long a time, the epic is considered a history (Itihāsa) of Ancient India. Its significance can be understood from the fact that in the Indian constitution, the official name of India is Bhārat only.

How the epic Bhārata subsequently became Māhābhārata is also explained in the first chapter (Ādi 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 Māhābhārata 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

*ICCR Chair Visiting Professor of Sanskrit, Sanskrit Studies Centre, Faculty of Archeology, And: Editor, International Journal of Indology & Culture, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. Email: ncpanda@gmail.com

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 Māhābhārata, rather than mere Bharata. It means gods declared that the Māhābhārata was the greatest (mahā) of all works known in the world of the Bhāratas.

The Māhābhārata is the earliest example of Itihāsa. So; the original work was in its nature a historical and not a didactic work. The Māhābhārata (I.2.83) itself claims that Maharshi Vyāsa composed the work as a great Dharma-śāstra, as Artha-śāstra, Mokṣa-śāstra and also Kāma-śāstra (I.2.83 & 62.23). So, it is rightly said:

*dharme ca arthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha/
yadīhāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tatkvacit kutracit//* (Māhābhārata, I)

It means, “O hero of the Bharata clan! Whatever is present here (in the Māhābhārata) about the matters related to dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa, that alone is present in other texts, and that which is not mentioned here is not present elsewhere.”. The said verse is a eulogy portraying the greatness and comprehensiveness of the epic, Māhābhārata, in everything related to the above mentioned four puruṣārthas:

In the last parvan it claims that whatever is said in it would be found elsewhere and what is not contained it would not be found anywhere else, i.e. it claims to be encyclopedic be found anywhere else, i.e. it claims to be encyclopedic work and hence there was a great incentive to later scholars to add to it fresh matter.

In the Udyoga Parva (130.18) and Adi-parva (62.20) the Māhābhārata is spoken of as Jaya and in the last parvan (5.51), the epic is also called Saṃhitā (1.16; 63.90), Purāṇa (I.17), Ākhyāna (2.388–389), Itihāsā (1.19,26 & 2.36, 41, etc.), Kāvya (I.61 & 73, 2.3.90), Kārṣṇaveda (I.268 and 62.18). In the Svargārohaṇa-parvan it states that the epic is so called because of its greatness (mahattvād-bhāravattācca-mahābhāratam ucyate–) and the greatness (of its contents) and that the epic is equal (in importance) to the eighteen Purāṇas, all the Dharmaśāstras and the Vedas with their subsidiary lore (Ch. V. 45-46). As said:

*aṣṭādaśa purāṇāni dharma-śāstrāṇi sarvaśaḥ/
vedāḥ sāṅgāstathaik atra bhāratam caikataḥ//* (Māhābhārata, Svargārohana parva, 5.45-46)

It is stated that Bhārata means the epic without the upākhyānas (tales) and contains 24000 verses and the work Māhābhārata consists of one hundred thousand verses inclusive of the upākhyānas (Mbh, Ādiparva, 1.101-2). The Ādiparva states that sage Vedavyāsa taught the four Vedas together with the Mahābhārata as the fifth to four pupils, viz. Sumantu, Jaimini, Paila, Vaiśampāyana and to Śuka his own son and these five promulgated separate five versions of the story. As said in the following text:

*Vadānadhyāpayāmāsa mahābhārata pañcarmān, sumanturṇ
jaiminim pailam śukam caiva svamātmajam, prabhurvariṣṭho
varadovaiśampāyana eva ca; saṃhitāstaiḥ prthaktvera
bhāratasya prakāśitā //* (Māhābhārata, Adi-parva, 63.89-90)

The Śāntiparva (Ch. 327.26-33 & 349.10-12) repeats the same story about the five pupils of Vedavyāsa. The extant Mahābhārata is supposed to be the one that Vaiśampāyana narrated to Janmejaya, son of Parikṣit, the latter being the grand-son of Ajjuna and son of Abhimanyu.

The epic in its present form is divided into eighteen parvans (parts), viz. Ādi, Sabhā, Vana, Virāṭa, Udyoga, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Śalya, Sauptika, Strī, Anuśāsana, Aśvamedhika, Āśramavāsika, Mausalya, Mahāprasthānika and Svargārohaṇa-parvans, with a supplement called the Harivaṁśa. The famous Bhagavad-gītā is a part of the Bhīṣma parvan and contains eighteen sections. The Bhagavad Gītā is a simplification in verse of the general doctrines in Hindu Philosophy and is a book specially meant for the dwellers of the society rather than for one who has renounced it.

The book Bhagavad Gītā is not doubt one of the finest fruits of Indian Philosophy and has gained worldwide recognition in the hands of philosophers. The theme of the book is the advice, given by Lord Kṛṣṇa for counseling dispersed Arjuna, mainly dwelling on the doctrines of Karman, Jñāna and Bhakti. Hence, the Bhagavad Gītā has been widely and admired for many countries past, ever since Alberūṇi spoke highly of it. Its language, style and metre (chandas) prove that the poem is one of the earliest parts of the Mahābhārata.

The nucleus of the Mahābhārata is the great war of eighteen days fought between the Kauravas, the hundred sons of king Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the Pāṇḍavas, the five sons of Pāṇḍu. The poet narrates all the circumstances leading up to the war. In this great Kurukshetra battle were involved almost all the kings of India joining either of the two parties. The result of this war was the total annihilation of the Kauravas and their party, and Yudhiṣṭhira, the head of the Pāṇḍavas, became the sovereign monarch of Hastināpura.

But with the progress of years new matter and episodes, relating to the various aspects of human life, social, economic, political, moral and religious as also fragments of the heroic legends and legends containing reference to the famous kings, came to be added to the aforesaid facts and this phenomenon probably continued for centuries till the early part of the Christian era the epic gathered its present shape, which said to contain one lakh verses. It is therefore, that the Mahābhārata has been described not only as a heroic poem, but also as a 'repertory of the whole of the old bard poetry'.

The subject matter of Mahābhārata:

The Ādi-parvan describes the early life of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadi's marriage and the Pāṇḍava's acquaintance with Kṛṣṇa, the hero of the Yādavas. The second parvan describes the prosperity of the Pāṇḍavas at Indraprastha, and the losing of everything, including Draupadi, by Yudhiṣṭhira in a play of dice with Duryodhana. The Pāṇḍavas ultimately agree to go into banishment for a period of twelve years and to remain incognito for a thirteenth. The Vana-parvan elaborates the forest life of the Pāṇḍavas for twelve years in the Kāmyaka forest, and the Virāṭa-parvan narrates how they spent the thirteenth year in cognit as servants of Virāṭa, the king of Matsyas. The

Udyoga-parvan narrates the preparations for war by the Pāṇḍavas as the Kurus give no sympathetic response to their just demands.

The next five parvans describe in detail an account of the great battle in which, all except the Pāṇḍavas and Lord Kṛṣṇa were lost. The eleventh parvan deals with the funeral rites of the dead. The next two deal with Bhīṣma's lengthy discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira on Rājadharmā. The fourteenth parvan deals with Yudhiṣṭhira's coronation and the horse sacrifice; the fifteenth with the resort to forest of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his queen Gāndhārī; and the sixteenth with internecine conflict of the Yādavas and Lord Kṛṣṇa's accidental death at the hands of a hunter. The seventeenth parvan describes how the Pāṇḍavas get weary of life and make the great departure to the Meru Mountain, leaving Parikṣita, Arjuna's grandson, in charge of the government. The last parvan narrates the Pāṇḍavas ascent to heaven.

The Harivaṁśa is regarded as a supplement or appendix to the Mahābhārata but the connection between the two is purely external and is limited essentially to the fact that the same Vaisaṁpāyana is the speaker of the both. The Harivaṁśa contains 16374 (Approx.) verses and is divided into three sections. The first section deals with Kṛṣṇa's ancestry, the second with Kṛṣṇa's adventures and the third with the future corruptions of the Kali age.

No date can be assigned to the Mahābhārata as a whole. As it is noticed above, there are three definite stages of evolution. The date of the original Mahābhārata, therefore, differs from the date of present Mahābhārata by several centuries. To the strictly orthodox Indian mind, the Rāmāyaṇa appears to have been composed earlier than the Mahābhārata. Indians believe that of the two incarnations of the Lord, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the former was born earlier. Professor Jacobi also thinks that of the epics, the Rāmāyaṇa is the earlier production and he bases his theory on the supposition that it is the influence of the Rāmāyaṇa which has moulded the Mahābhārata in to a poetic form.

That the Rāmāyaṇa is earlier than the Mahābhārata may be proved on the strength of the following points. The Vana-parvan of the Mahābhārata contains references to the Rāma's story while no such reference to the Mahābhārata story in to be found in the Rāmāyaṇa. Again, the Mahābhārata contains reference to the burning of widows as evinced in the story of Mādri's satī-dāha (death in the fire). But nothing akin to it is found in the Rāmāyaṇa. From the references of Megasthenes we come to know that the practice of burning of widows was in vogue in the third century B. C. In the Vedic period such a system was unknown to this country. Further Pāṭaliputra is mentioned as a city in the Mahābhārata which according to Megasthenes was founded by Kālāśoka in the fourth century B.C. But it is interesting to note that this important city is not mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa though many cities of lesser importance and some of them again very close to Pāṭaliputra have been alluded to.

It is asserted by Dr. Winternitz that the Rāmāyaṇa appears to be an ornate poem having served as the pattern to which later Indian poets admiringly aspired. What Wintemitz mean by ornate poetry is that kind of poetic composition in which greater

importance is attached to the form than to the matter and contents of the poem and in which literary embellishments are profusely used even to excess? The Rāmāyaṇa is the first literary work in which the aforesaid peculiarities of ornate poetry are found.

These peculiarities, however, are not present in the Mahābhārata which is, therefore, presumed to be the earlier composition. Again, it has been pointed out that such expressions like 'Bhīṣma spoke'. 'Sañjaya spoke' which the poet of the Mahābhārata, uses to introduce a character, are reminiscent of ancient ballad poetry. But in the Rāmāyaṇa, the speeches are introduced in verses and therefore in a more polished form.

The theory of Professor Jacobi may be further contested on the ground that from a perusal of the two epics, the reader will unmistakably carry the impression that while the Mahābhārata describes a more war-like age, the Rāmāyaṇa depicts a comparatively refined civilization. Hence, it is to be concluded that Rāmāyaṇa is to be considered as the earliest composition with comparison to the facts of Mahābhārata.

Now the importance of Bhagavad Gītā will be highlighted in brief. The Gītā is also a part of Mahābhārata. It has about 700 verses, which is divided into eighteen chapters and believed to be a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the field of battle. When the armies of both the sides are arranged ready for battle and Arjuna hesitates to fight, being shocked at the thought of slaying his own kinsfolk and preceptors, Lord Krishna expounds to him the great truths of real duty and the knowledge of the self, so as to inspire into him the spirit of selfless service.

The Bhagavad Gītā sets forth elaborately the eternal nature of the souls, the need for the proper performance of one's own dharma, the value of karma or selfless action, jñāna or the spiritual knowledge and bhakti or incessant devotion as the means of attaining liberation from the bondage of worldly existence. The doctrine of self-surrender, the lesson of detachment from the fruits of one's own action and numerous other similar great principles of Hindu Philosophy all compressed in the Gītā and it has therefore been all along the most popular and adored treatise on Hindu Philosophy.

Numberless Philosophers like Ācārya Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja and Mādhva have commented on it. There are translations and commentaries on Bhagavad Gītā in all the Indian and many foreign languages. In short, Gītā is the greatest and most popular text in Indian Philosophical literature.

Like Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata is also known as a spiritual epic. But apart from its spiritual value, the epic Mahābhārata 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 Veda Vyasa.

It need hardly be said that the Mahābhārata is a work of paramount importance in Indian life and cultural history. The sublime form, comprehensive scope, and timeless popularity of the poem naturally make it a treasure-house of ideas- religious, moral, philosophical of a very long period. It may aptly be called "a miscellaneous encyclopedia of history and mythology, politics, law, theology, and philosophy. It contains what is

worth knowing about the ancient India, it's cultural history of social, moral, and spiritual development. It covers the whole mental life of ancient India.

The Mahābhārata is a magnificent literary time capsule of a period of our remote antiquity to the days of known history. The specimens of each type and class of humanity and human knowledge of nearly thirty centuries have been conserved together in the epic and they are even through the ages as fresh and vivid as ever. The entire floating literature that was considered worth preserving by the people of antiquity have found place in the great epic and they are all dexterously woven together in the texture of the epic.

The Mahābhārata, has attained the distinction of being a great work, perhaps, the greatest not merely by its extent but by some intrinsic excellences both in matter and manner. Whatsoever might be our view with regard to the present text, the attractiveness of the work appears to have been the same, since it was first given to the world.

The fact that the epic is still revered is not only because of its poetic grandeur. The stories that almost all of us have grown up with hold relevance even during present times. The deeply philosophical ideas that perpetuate throughout the epic have a lot to teach us about the art of living. However, there is no doubt that the Mahābhārata is a great epic which explains satya and dharma. There are other supplementary components like ahimsā, śānti, jñāna bhakti, karma, etc. The Mahābhārata explains how we should take care to follow Satya and Dharma in our life even to a minute extent to reap the blissfulness in the life.

In fact, the Mahābhārata is a great Epic which consists of various episodes, Gītās, and other significant advises related to human life and society. If a man truly follows these advices then he may live peacefully in the society and may get reach at his destination in time. Besides, it teaches us that if we respect dharma, it will respect us, if we follow dharma, it will follow us and if we adhere to dharma, dharma will adhere to us (dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ).

Thus, we see that our great epic Mahābhārata has manifold significance - historical, literary, ethical, religious, and philosophical. However, this most popular as well as glorious epic remains popular to this day in India. It has been adapted and recast in contemporary mode in several films and plays. Children continue to be named after the characters in the popular epic. The Bhagavad Gītā is one of the holiest of Hindu scriptures. Beyond India, the Mahābhārata story is also popular in south-east Asia in cultures that were influenced by Hinduism such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Truly, the Mahābhārata is the original masterpiece in human history on war and peace. Finally, it can be said that the epic Mahābhārata is not only just an epic, but it is a positive mirror for all human beings, through which the human beings can do better positive work and live peacefully in the society.

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