
Impact of Indian Epics on Literary Traditions in India

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Abstract

India boasts a profound literary heritage that extends back thousands of years, such as epic poetry, drama, philosophy, and religious texts. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are part of the oral legacy of Indian literature. Storytellers and poets performed the epics, traveling from village to village and telling the people the stories. Not only did the epics provide amusement, but they also educated people about ethics, morals, and values. People all around India were certainly familiar with the stories of the epics, but after translating them into regional languages, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have served as a never ending source of inspiration to writers. These great epics are foundational texts in Indian literature, fostering moral instruction and cultural literacy. They have had a significant impact on Indian literary traditions, establishing standards for poetical forms and narrative devices. Characters, tales, plots, themes etc from these great epics have been reiterated, modified, and added in numerous literary genres in Indian literature. This study examines at how Indian literature has been influenced by the Mahabharata and Ramayana in general.

Key Words: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Mythology, Indian Writings in English**Introduction:**

Mahabharata and Ramayana influenced India's knowledge tradition since many centuries. Indian literature is enriched with stories from these epics. The Mahabharata is the longest epic in the world, tells the detailed story of the Kuru family and talks about many themes like courage, heroism, dharma, and human life. It is a rich collection of stories, dialogues, and deep ideas. Within it, the Bhagavad Gita is a very important part which gives timeless teachings about doing one's duty and finding spiritual freedom. The Ramayana tells the story of Prince Rama, who is believed to be an incarnation of the god Vishnu and represents the ideal of dharma. The epic describes his life and adventures, while also highlighting values like justice, sacrifice, and loyalty. In the book *Indian Aesthetics -An Introduction*, V S Sethuraman mentions so, "Valmiki's slokas, spontaneously emanating from his being overpowered by an intense feeling of pathos, and his own appreciation of it indicate that he was, at one stroke, both poet and a critic. The Karuna Rasa of the epic Ramayana has made all the later critics and poets look upon him (Valmiki) as the father of

Rasa Theory". The Ramayana not only tells a story but also strongly influences the aesthetic, moral, political, and social values of society. The stories of the epics were known to people in all parts of India, but direct access to the originals was confined to the educated people during medieval period. Rulers provided support in translating the epics into local languages. Ramayana and Mahabharata are foundational works that assist in forming great literatures, present ideas like karma, dharma, truth, which have been central to Indian philosophy. They are essential books in Indian Literature, Indian education, promoting cultural literacy and moral education.

Indian knowledge systems offer an understanding of the epics, that have influenced Indian intellectual traditions and culture, in every age. Classical Sanskrit thrived between the 4th and 6th centuries during the Gupta period, marked by significant contributions to drama, poetry, and aesthetics. This era also preserved the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which received scholarly attention for their deep philosophical and moral teachings. As Bhimshankarappa points out,

In the realm of literature, the Gupta period produced literary masterpieces that continue to captivate audiences to this day. Playwrights like Kalidasa crafted timeless works that showcase the depth of Indian storytelling and artistic expression. The codification and preservation of ancient epics like the "Ramayana" and the "Mahabharata" ensured their enduring relevance and cultural significance.

During the Gupta period, Kalidasa emerged as a great playwright, and his poetic skill continues to inspire millions of readers. Kalidasa's lyrical works Ritusamhara, Meghaduta, Kumarasambhavam, Raghuvamsa, and the iconic play Abhijnanashakuntalam has got rich references from great epics. Besides Kalidasa other prominent figures like Bhabhuti, Bhasa further enriched literary tradition of India taking stories from the great epics. The medieval period of Indian literature witnesses the rise of religious and devotional literature in regional languages particularly noted for the contributions of saints and mystics. Mirabhai, Surdas and Tulsidas, through poetic compositions that have influence not only Indian literature but also world literature. Tulsidas's Ramacharitamanasa has been a key text in both the religious and literary domains.

The Bhakti movement, a religious movement that emphasized devotion to a personal god, had a significant impact on 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, Molla Ramayana in Telugu, the pampa Ramayana in Kannada, the Adhyatma Ramayana in Malayalam, the Ramakatha in Marathi, the Krittibas Ramayana in Bengali, the Ramayana of Madhava Kandali in Assamese, and the famous Ramayana of Balam Das in Oriya, and the Ramacharitmanas of Tulsi Das, 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, and in Malayalam the Mahabharata of Ezhuthachan is in a way more original. In Marathi, Shridhar wrote the Pandava, in Oriya the famous Mahabharata poet is the great Sarala Das who is known in Odisha as the 'Utkal Vyas'.

During the British colonial period Indian literature was influenced by Western literature. English became the language of education, and Indian writers began writing in English. As Sajini Kripalani points out that "The British agenda for education in India was always very clear. The dissemination of western education was to establish and perpetuate their own power". But our epics created literary and critical interest among contemporary writers during colonial period. Prominent writer of this period was Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. His Gitanjali and other works reflect Bhagavat Gita's teaching. In the below given song 11 from Gitanjali says God is with tiller who works hard.

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Yet another prominent writer Aurobindo, a well known philosopher and yogi, was very much influenced by the greatest epics. Peter Heeb's clearly explains in his article *Sri Aurobindo* that "In early drafts Savitri (published 1950-1) is a narrative closely following the famous episode of Mahabharata. During successive revisions, this legend became symbol of Aurobindo's yoga". Some examples of retellings are *The Death Conqueror: The Story of Karna* (1989), *Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni* (1995), *M T Vasudevan Nair's Second Turn* (1997), *Mahasweta Devi's After Kurukshetra: Three Stories* (2005), *Chitra Divakaruni's The Palace of illusions* (2008), *Iravati Karve's Yuganta* (2008), *Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik Introducing Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* (2012), *Aditi Kotwal Draupadi in High Heels* (2013), *Karthika Nair's Until The Lions: Echoes From the Mahabharata* (2015), *Amish Tripathi's Sita-Warrior of Mithila* (2017) and many more.

Writers like R.K. Narayan and Kamala Das have experimented with these techniques in their works, creating narratives that echo the complexity of Valmiki's epic. Critic Mirza Sibtain Beg emphasised the richness of Bhagavat Gita teachings in R K Narayan's works in his article as follows. "His characters are immersed in the fervour of universal theory of karma as propagated by Bhagawat Gita a famous Hindu scripture.... Narayan's character essence a fusion of flesh and spirit through the philosophic interpretation of their own practical activities". The diversity of interpretations and retellings of the epic in Indian English literature reflects the richness and complexity of the epic. From ancient poets like Kamban, who composed the Ramavataram in Tamil, The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva to

contemporary writers, each version brings a unique perspective, emphasizing different aspects of the story. Barbara Stoller Miller analysed that “In Gitagovinda Radha is neither a wife nor a worshipping playmate. She is an intense, solitary, proud female who complements and reflects the mood of Krishna’s passion.... Her relationship with Krishna culminates in their union and mutual victory over each other.” In Indian English poetry, poets have often drawn upon the emotional and spiritual dimensions of The Ramayana. Writers like A.K. Ramanujan, through his poem "A River" and Kamala Das, in her work “The Old Playhouse”, have explored the epic, offering innovative thoughts.

Modern interpretations of the epics encourage critical thinking, especially regarding gender roles and social norms. Characters like Draupadi and Sita are now studied not only as symbols of virtue but also as individuals who faced injustice and showed strength. Prathibha Ray ‘s Yajaseni and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Forest of Enchantments offers a feminist perspective by narrating the story from epics. In drama, The Ramayana has been adapted for the stage, providing a visual and performative dimension to the epic. Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana is a play that incorporates elements of The Ramayana while exploring themes of identity and desire. Sethu’s Pandavapuram, Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night, Devdutt Pattanaik ‘s , An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana", Anand Neelakantan's "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished" etc provide new perspectives and see different epic characters in depth. These retellings of epics provide new and creative ways to experience these timeless stories.

People often face moral confusion and dilemmas in this busy world. The teachings of the epics guide them. For example, the idea of performing one’s duty without expectations, as taught in the Bhagavad Gita, is still meaningful in modern professional and personal life. Modern Indian writers continue to draw inspiration from the epics. In films, television, theatre, and digital media, epics have a strong presence. Adaptations of the Ramayana and Mahabharata are widely watched and continue to attract audiences of all ages. These stories are retold in new formats, making them accessible to younger generations. The epics play a key role in shaping Indian cultural identity. They influence festivals, rituals, and everyday values such as respect for elders, importance of family, and commitment to truth. In a globalized world, these texts help individuals stay connected to their cultural roots while also promoting universal human values.

The enduring appeal of the Ramayana and Mahabharata extends far beyond the borders of India. These epic narratives have captivated the interest of people from diverse cultures worldwide, sparking scholarly debates and inspiring creative works in literature, theatre, and cinema. Their universal themes of love, sacrifice, duty, and the battle between good and evil resonate with audiences across cultures, making them a bridge that connects humanity’s shared values. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are central pillars of Indian Knowledge Systems that have shaped literary traditions for centuries.

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