

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN THE EPICS OF "MAHABHARATA" AND "RAMAYANA"

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Abstract. *Indian culture, which spans a history of several thousand years, possesses a unique and rich diversity. This article examines the primary philosophical themes of the great epics "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana," which held a central place in the formation of the initial roots of philosophy, culture, and history in Ancient India, as well as their significance in the life of the Indian people. It provides detailed insight into the common and contrasting aspects of the core philosophical issues found within both epics, offering a comparative analysis of these two masterpieces of a single nation. The research was conducted adhering to the principles of systematicity, historicity, logic, objectivity, scientific rigor, impartiality, the systematization and generalization of philosophical data, philosophical comparative analysis, and logical consistency.*

Keywords: *Indian philosophy, epic "Mahabharata", epic "Ramayana", Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva, Hinduism, God, Krishna, Rama, Bhakti movement.*

Like much of world literature, ancient Indian literature features its own epic tradition that glorifies the "heroic age" of Indian history. Ancient Indian epic poetry is primarily embodied in two monumental epics compiled in ancient times—the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana"—both of which retain immense popularity in India to this day. A comparative analysis of the

philosophical and social views embedded within these two epics allows us to gain a deeper understanding of ancient Indian philosophical thought.

In the "Mahabharata," we encounter a condensed narrative regarding Rama and Sita. To convince the Pandavas never to quarrel over their wife Draupadi, the sages recite to them a tale about two brothers who took each other's lives due to their love for a woman. Furthermore, while the Pandavas were living in exile in the forest, their wife Draupadi was abducted. This event served as the thematic reason for incorporating the story of Rama (the "Short Ramayana") into the "Mahabharata."

The "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana" are not merely precious cultural heritage monuments for the peoples of India; they represent unique masterpieces of world literature and philosophy. Although at first glance they might appear to be mythological folk tales crafted by ancient peoples, they embody the multi-millennial history, life, and philosophy of an entire civilization. They lack a single, finalized structure because, as they were transmitted orally from generation to generation, new teachings and philosophical perspectives were continuously integrated. Since the world is in constant movement and transforms every second, the scope of these epics expanded dynamically over time. Numerous sources note that even after so many centuries, India still holds countless unknown facets and mysteries. Fully exploring the culture spread across such a vast territory—encompassing thousands of sub-cultures, billions of people, and an immense historical past—remains a daunting task. Even today, the people of India themselves have not fully analyzed these two epics in their entirety.

By the era of the epics—namely, the period when the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana" were created—the pantheon of deities in Indian mythology had become fully formed. As a result, the well-known concept of a pantheon consisting of thirty-three gods emerged. The concept of Trimurti—the triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva representing the unity of three supreme deities—

was established during this period [cite: 1;1]. Although the exact duties of these three gods were not strictly compartmentalized within Hinduism, their roles can be understood through their attributes. The name of Brahma is continuously accompanied by the epithet "Creator of the Universe" (Khalloqi Olam), Vishnu is referred to as the "Preserver/Savior God" (Najotkor Tangri), and Shiva as the "Destroyer/God of Wrath" (Qahhori Olam). From this arises the eternal philosophical principle that creation, preservation and salvation, as well as destruction and wrath, all emanate from the Divine itself. The supreme triad of gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—attained ultimate prominence [cite: 2;2].

Both epics possess an encyclopedic nature, covering a vast expanse of human and cosmic reality. Deities play a vital role in driving the plot forward, resolving complex narrative intrigues, conflicts, and dilemmas. Alongside the gods, demons and semi-divine beings also appear as active characters. A careful reading of the epics reveals that the older Vedic gods receded into the background, clearing the path for the supreme triad: Brahma (the creator god), Shiva (the destroyer god), and Vishnu (the preserver god). The role of Vishnu is particularly noteworthy in both epics: in the "Mahabharata," he appears in his earthly incarnation as Krishna, while in the "Ramayana," he manifests as Rama. In the earliest historical layers of the epics, both Krishna and Rama were depicted without an explicit divine halo; however, in the texts that have survived to our day, there is every reason to recognize them as the two principal avatars of the savior god who appeared on Earth to restore righteousness (Dharma). Consequently, Vishnu is no longer regarded merely as a god, but as the "Supreme Being," the "Highest God," and the "Beginning and End of the Universe."

Within the structure of the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana," characteristics of the primitive social order and tribal democracy are clearly perceptible; tribal feuds and wars over livestock are depicted alongside powerful empires striving for hegemony across all of India (such as the

Magadha Empire in the second half of the 1st millennium BCE). The social background of the epics reflects the somewhat later four-varna system: Brahmanas (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants, artisans, and agriculturalists), and Shudras (laborers and servants) [cite: 2;3].

It appears that the legend of the "Ramayana" underwent deliberate literary processing and transformation into a written poetic text through formal composition to a greater extent and in a different manner than the "Mahabharata." Hence, it was precisely the "Ramayana" that inaugurated a new era of literary creation in India—an era adorned with the names of celebrated poets such as Ashvaghosha, Kalidasa, Bhartrihari, and Bhavabhuti.

The "Mahabharata" was written in approximately 100,000 couplets (shlokas), whereas the "Ramayana" consists of around 24,000 couplets. However, even after their initial composition, they have reached us in dozens of different manuscripts and recensions, likely because multiple written versions and narrations from various traditional storytellers existed from the very beginning [cite: 3;4].

It is not accidental that the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana" are attributed to two distinct legendary authors—Vyasa and Valmiki, respectively [cite: 3;5]. It is probable that neither was a purely mythical figure; however, rather than being authors in the modern sense of the word, they represented the most outstanding and memorable figures among the oral storytellers who transmitted these poems orally from generation to generation. A direct comparison with the "Mahabharata" clearly highlights the prominence of the miraculous and fantastical element in the "Ramayana." If, in terms of style, the latter represents a transitional stage from oral poetry to written literature, in terms of content, it marks a transition from the heroic epic to the poetic legend/fairytale.

While the "Mahabharata" traversed centuries of historical development to evolve into a monumental collection of encyclopedic content—where heroic

legend is intertwined with religious and moral sermons while preserving its core characteristics—the "Ramayana" emerged during a period of historical upsurge that marked the flourishing of individual poetic composition. In contrast, the legends surrounding Krishna consolidated into a distinct cycle somewhat later than the initial layers of the two epics, and their compilations formed in a different milieu and under altered historical conditions. By that time, signs of decline in ancient Indian culture were already becoming evident, with conservative Brahmanism increasingly dictating the dominant ideological trends.

The "Ramayana," as composed by Valmiki, portrays ideal character figures within an overall ideal family context: the ideal son, the ideal brother, the ideal wife, the ideal husband, and the ideal follower. Perhaps in ancient times, moral values among family members were exceptionally strong and society had not yet suffered moral decay. In Aryavarta, familial devotion and brotherly love were particularly pronounced, and family disputes over property were extremely rare. Women, however, did not possess full political or sexual autonomy. The beauty of the "Mahabharata" lies in the absence of absolute, idealized characters. Every character described by Vyasa is portrayed as human and complex. The "Mahabharata" offers a realistic depiction of practical human nature. Women played an active role in politics and enjoyed greater personal/marital freedom. The "Mahabharata" vividly illustrates the psychological reality of both men and women. Here, in accordance with the spirit of the era, familial servitude is less rigid, and brothers actively struggle over rights to property.

The "Ramayana" centers around a confrontation between two distinct ethnic groups, whereas the "Mahabharata" revolves around an internal family conflict. Thus, the "Ramayana" deals with external enemies, while the "Mahabharata" addresses internal adversaries. In the "Ramayana," the pativrata (chastity and absolute marital devotion) of women was deemed paramount

among both the royal family and the general populace. For example, Ahalya was punished by her husband for infidelity; Sita, Mandodari, and Sulochana were celebrated as virtuous women who loyally followed their husbands; and the inhabitants of Ayodhya questioned Sita's purity. In contrast, in the "Mahabharata," both Kunti and Satyawati bore children prior to marriage. Draupadi was married to five brothers simultaneously [cite: 1;6], and no one except Karna raised objections to this. In the "Ramayana," interethnic/inter-group marriages were prohibited in the Kingdom of Ayodhya (with the exception of the union between Ravana's father and mother). When Shurpanakha proposed marriage to Rama and Lakshmana, both rejected her offer, mocked her, and even disfigured her. In the "Mahabharata," however, when Hidimbi proposed to Bhima after an initial rejection, Bhima ultimately married her (though she did not enjoy the same formal status as Draupadi or Subhadra). Krishna married Jambavati, Arjuna married the Naga princess Ulupi, and even King Shantanu's two wives came from a fisherman community. The narrative plots of these two epics are distinct, and their primary protagonists differ, yet both are revered as incarnations of the Supreme God Vishnu.

The distinct philosophical perspectives found within the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana" were later reflected in the development of the Bhakti movement. These two epics served as foundational pillars for two primary schools within Bhakti. In India, philosophers established the Bhakti movement to revive the spirits of a disheartened populace, reawaken lost faith, and strengthen belief in the future. The Bhakti tradition encompasses the Nirguna (formless) and Saguna (manifested) branches. The Saguna Bhakti branch further developed into two major traditions: Ram Bhakti and Krishna Bhakti [cite: 4;7].

A prominent exponent of the Ram Bhakti tradition was the revered poet Tulsidas. The word Bhakti itself signifies "loving devotion to God." As noted

earlier, Tulsidas recognized Rama as the earthly manifestation of God Vishnu. The earthly life and deeds of Lord Rama are inextricably linked to the great epic "Ramayana" [cite: 4;8]. Consequently, for Tulsidas, the entire universe was composed of Rama; he perceived the image of Rama in all things, in every event, and in both animate and inanimate nature.

The most distinguished representative of the Krishna Bhakti tradition was the poet Surdas. He likewise recognized his deity in the form of Krishna—the earthly human avatar of God Vishnu. As is known, Krishna's deeds and teachings are closely tied to the events of the "Mahabharata." For Surdas, Krishna is the ultimate cause of every phenomenon, the bestower and receiver of love, and nothing exists in this world apart from Krishna [cite: 4;9].

Both epics under consideration offer far more than mere historical or literary interest; they continue to possess an extraordinary power of aesthetic and emotional resonance for readers. Rabindranath Tagore wrote that the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana" hold the same monumental significance for India as the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" do for Greece. Krishna and Rama remain the most beloved figures among Hindus. Painters, sculptors, composers, and poets continuously draw inspiration and thematic material from these epics for their creative endeavors. Their influence extends beyond India, profoundly shaping the literature and art of Sri Lanka and Indonesia as well.

In contemporary scholarship, there is no longer any doubt that the "Mahabharata" is grounded in actual historical events that took place in antiquity. Indian traditional chronology places these events around the middle of the 3rd or even 4th millennium BCE. Regarding the historical foundation of the "Ramayana," opinions remain varied. If the core events underlying this epic were indeed real, their depiction in the poem is highly mythologized and imaginative.

In summary, these two epics hold an irreplaceable place in the overall evolution of Indian philosophical thought. Both embody timeless universal

values and ethical categories such as courage, justice, honor, and moral integrity. Through these epics, we gain invaluable insight into the ancient Indian worldview regarding the universe, existence, human life, and morality.

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