Overview of the Indian Epics in a Historical Perspective

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
	Ramayana and Mahabharata both are important part of the Hindu culture, polity and society of early India which have influenced the Indian people from centuries. As a literary source material these epics are also important to understand early history of India. An attempt is made in this paper to understand epics as literature of historical importance and to understand how they got this big massive structure of literature. We will try to understand questions like what is *Itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition and how important are the historical narrative particularly the interpolated one, apart from myths, in these epic for us to understand transition in ancient society and culture? Was writing these epic happened in brief period of time or it took centuries to compile and write these massive piece of literature? We will also focus on the textual scope and limitations of epics in this paper.

Introduction:

Text and Context

Two highly significant genres of India's brahmanical narrative traditions are the north Indian Sanskrit epics, specifically the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These books, also referred to as the "fifth Veda". It is difficult to extract history from such works since myths and stories have been freely woven into real-life

events, diminishing their value as reliable historical records. Before evaluating the significance of the Epics in reconstructing the social and cultural history of early India, and put them in historical venture, it is crucial to identify them. The story is centered on one of the two primary lineages, and each epic has its own unique setting. Since both the Kosala and Videha families are members of this line, the Ramayana thus concentrates on the *Sūryavaṃśa* or Solar lineage. Migrations southward into the Vindhyana region are of concern to the descendants of *Ikṣvāku*, who are supposed to inhabit a geographically distinct area that includes what is now eastern Uttar Pradesh and the middle Ganga plain in Kosala and Videha.

It is a patrilineal descent. Primogeniture and going from eldest son to eldest son are so crucial, and this is a major theme in the Ramayana. As an epic, the Mahabharata focuses on the *Chandravaṃśa* or Lunar lineage is completely contrast to Ramayana as it being with a female ancestor named *Ilā*. Among the Lunar lineage the most important lines were those claiming descent from Yadu and Puru. Heroic poetry about Pandavas is a central to the narrative of Mahabharata and War mentioned in it, which comes from Puru line of the Lunar lineage.

Nature and Character of the Indian Epics

Jan Varsina illustrates that all oral traditions contain kernel of historical truth of preliterate society As Sanskrit Epics are also part of the oral tradition one needs to be conscious about the historical truth these two provides to us. Epics are supposed to be the part of itihasa purana tradition of ancient India along with Puranas. Mahabharata and Purana are said to be the fifth Veda. Scholars like M. Winternitz and V S Pathak traced the beginning of the epics in later Vedic times as towards the end of the later vedic period literature of itihasa-purana grew considerably. 'Geneological chapters or *Vaṃsanucarita* of purana consists three sections of the early purana, first section deals with cosmological time describes the seven Manus and the offspring of Manu Vaivasvat is described in the second section constructs a record of what was perceived as the lineages of ruling clans such as suryavamsa/solar line and chandravamsa/lunar line(These include the families and clans which are the subject of the two epics, The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) and third section includes listing of kings and dynasties of Magadha and north India, recording the establishment of the monarchical state'.

According to Romila Thapar, "Genealogies claim to be records of succession in the past although their preservation or even invention can derive from the social institutions of the present for which they provide legitimizing mechanisms". Now the question arises that who had preserved and remembered these sections about the royal families and clans of purana? It is being argued by scholars that these

sections were being preserved orally by bards called *sūta* and *Māgadha*, the professional bards and chroniclers.

As an oral tradition, *Itihāsa-purāṇa* is said to have been kept initially by the *sūta*and the *Māgadha*. Suta derives from the root 'su' as is generally believed, then it can mean, 'to impel' or 'to give birth to'. The *Gatha-narsamsi*, *akhyana*, *Itihasa*, *Puranam*, etc. of the Brahmanas, whose recital formed part of the religious ceremonies at the sacrificial and domestic festivals, however, supplied real parallelism with epic poetry approaching it both in language and metre. These terms are variously used to designate different kinds of narrative or used synonymously. The Mahabharata calls itself alternately as *Itihāsa, Purana, kavya* and *akhyana* in the introductory portions. Mahabharata and Ramayana were also originally composed by bards, the sutas. Before they were taken over by brahmana authors (Bhrgu brahmana in particular), who probably recorded them in written form. As the control over this data was linked to controlling some aspects of the legitimacy of those in power. To this extent it parallels the resort to history for purposes of legitimacy by many groups in contemporary times.

Romila Thapar, additionally, talk about the two most important concepts related to the historical consciousness in itihasa-Purana tradition including Sanskrit Epics. She classify two kinds of history that we can trace from them one is embedded History- forms in which historical consciousness has to be pried out – and its opposite, 'externalized History- Which tends to bring embedded consciousness into the open, as it were, and to be more aware of its deliberate use of the past. (Thapar, 2000)

Authorship and Dates of the Mahabharata and Ramayana

According to the popular beliefs of our country Mahabharata was written by Veda vyasa, but when we look at the modern analytical criticism of Mahabharata it is believed that Mahabharata could not be work of a single author as it is impossible to write poem of 100000 stanzas by a single person. Thus, the poem is, therefore, unquestionably a compilation, embodying the work of many writers of varying abilities — some of them even real poets — who have added to the original corpus from time to time as it pleased them. The result is naturally a confused assemblage of heterogeneous matter originating from different hands and belonging to different strata. Scholars like M Winternitz, V S Pathak and E W Hopkins have illustrated the time period of compilation of epic like Mahabharata is between 400 BC to 400 AD. As Mahabharata was not work of a particular time period thus the text was revised and interpolated time to time by the hands of people who had authority. Coming to Ramayana, the oldest human epic, which was composed in Sanskrit. "Rama's Journey" would be the literal translation. The epic is composed of 500 *Sarga* (chapters) and seven *Kāṇda* (books), totaling 24000 verses. If we talk about the chapters in present

form of the Ramayana we have, it has seven chapters or Kanda named respectively 1- 7 are *Bāl Kāṇḍa, Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Āraṇya Kāṇḍa, Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa, Sundara Kāṇḍa, Yuddha Kāṇḍa and Uttara Kāṇḍa* Vālmiki wrote the Ramayana.

It is believed that Ramayana is India's *Ādi-Kāvya*, or first poetry, and Vālmiki is India's *Ādi-Kavi,* or first poet. Although there were poets and works of poetry before to Valmiki and the Ramayana, the Ramayana is the oldest epic poem—at least the one that has survived—in the realm of epic poetry. The Valmiki Ramayana is the name given to this original epic poem in order to differentiate it from several of its later versions. Similar to the Mahabharata, the Ramayana is *Itihasa* (as I have mentioned above) and hence contains a history of historical events.

Ramayana along with Mahabharata is termed as Itihasa but as a separate literary unit Ramayana is also termed as *Ādi-kāvya*, or first poetry. About starting of the kavya literature in cultural history of India, and as characterized by Sheldon Pollock that '*Kāvya* literature had been a new type of literature emerged after later Vedic age and 'From the first, *kāvya* was almost certainly composed and circulated (though not typically experienced) in writing'. Its novelty was thematized in the Sanskrit tradition itself with the story of the invention of *kāvya* told in the prelude to what came to be called the "first poem," the Valmiki Ramayana. In reflexively framing its own orality in a way that would be impossible in a preliterate world, and in doing so around the narrative of human response to problems of a human scale, the Ramayana account captures some central features of the new expressive form that was kavya'.

Narrative and Didactic portions of the Epics:

D.D. Kosambi argues that the earliest stories in the epic have three distinct sources: Puru-Kuru war ballads, aboriginal myths, and Yadu sagas. Scholars like E.W. Hopkins have argued that there were two kinds of layers in the epic, the actual epic, and the pseudo-epic all contain it. Pseudo-epic contains *Sānti Parva(twelfth book)* and *Anusāsana parva(thirteenth book)* of the Mahabharata. Further Romila Thapar states about the structure of the Mahabharata that "one was the earlier, narrative layer reciting a series of stories based on bardic material. The other consisted of a number of didactic sections which were interpolated into the epic at later periods". It is being argued that the didactic part of the epic reflect the features of a complex, developed societies of Maurya, post-Maurya and Gupta times as it is added in later time.

Mahabharata reflects a transitional period between two different structures, the society of the lineage based system and that of the monarchical state system. There are two examples by which we can

understand this clearly. First is reference of lineage based tribal society in the *Ādi parva* of Mahabharata where Arjuna won Draupadi. According to the tribal based society each member of the kin claims an equal portion of the loot that is taken by another member of the kin. Arjuna's victory against Draupadi powerfully illustrates this notion. Pandavas explained to the Panchala king that they did not wish to go against the custom of the Pandavas sharing the *ratna* that each of them won among themselves. Second example stating emergence of monarchical state system as described in the interpolated part of the epic. I will take example of taxation system which was there in evolving state. The didactic portion, particularly the *Sānti parva* of Mahabharata gives clear indication on a Varna divided society, system of taxation and a professional army.

Hopkins argues that there are three types of caste's people were mentioned in the didactic part of the epic; priest caste, warrior caste, and people caste. According to this part of the epic those who practiced farming and did trade were bound to pay taxes viz., vaisyas. Only priests and soldiers were exempted from paying taxes. Other than vaisyas, elaboration of the duties of ksatriya is also being discussed in didactic portions, other than protection of the honor of the clan and feats of personal valour in battle, other duties were added to ksatriya were giving of *dāna* or gifts of charity, the ordering of sacrificial ceremonies and study of the Vedas.

Development of Ramayana as a text has also been done in centuries. About the time period of compilation of Ramayana again Winternitz concluded that 1) it is probable that the Ramayana had its present extents and contents as early as towards the close of the second century AD; 2) The whole Ramayana, including the later portion, was already an old and famous work when the Mahabharata had not yet attained its present form. He further argued that chapter I and VII are later interpolated portions of the Ramayana while other chapters are comparatively archaic.

H.D. Sankalia argues that Ramayana as we have it in present form consists of both earlier and later materials whose dates of composition range from the fourth century BC to the second century A.D. Coming to the interpolated part of the Ramayana, *Balakāṇḍa* and the whole of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* were probably added under Brahmanical influence and a new list of contents along with a mythical account of the epic's origin through divine inspiration experienced by Valmiki was included. Also, Ramayana as text was used to propagate Vaisnavism, with the transformation of the hero-prince into an avatara of Visnu and it also symbolizes the triumph of the monarchical state, and thus it becomes a charter of validation for the monarchical state.

Anand Guruge discussed about the stages of development of Ramayana. According to him there are five stages through which Ramayana as an epic developed. Stage 1- orally transmitted from about the fifth to fourth century BC ; Stage 2- approx third century BC to First century AD; Stage 3- composed between the first to third century AD (Book 1 and Book 7 were added); stage 4 was composed between about fourth to twelfth century AD; and stage 5 – from about 12th century AD. (Guruge, 1991, p.389)

Both epics had constant revisions and additions to meet the evolving needs of the social and political structures. There may have been modifications and interpolations because the final form of the Mahabharata contained an incredibly high number of slokas—1,00,000—compared to the original 8,000. However, these latter accretions also reflect the transition from one form of society to another, even though they make it extremely difficult to extract history from the texts.

There are two separate literary sections in the Ramayana as well. According to philological studies, the language structure of the first and end chapters, the *Bālakāṇda* and the *Uttarakāṇda*, is distinct and more sophisticated than that of the text's main body and was most likely added later.

Textual Scope and Limitations of the Epics

Understanding the differences in the two epics' depictions of society—the narrative and didactic sections—is essential to comprehending both works historically. The epics' narrative parts typically provide details on myths and beliefs. In contrast to the narrative portion, the didactic and interpolated sections are historically significant since they show a socioeconomic and political progression. A historian can see a glimmer of historicity in the epics here. Epics exhibit a multitude of layers that contribute to their complexity. Scholars have argued that it is essential to comprehend the nature of the epic and its historical function, rather than focusing solely on its historicity.

As a textual source both epics lacks historicity and authenticity. Epics could not be termed as history in modern sense. To get the historical data from these epics one has to be conscious about the fact that they carry historical tradition within them. Romila Thapar says that 'when epic literature ceases to be the part of the oral tradition and is frozen into a written form, reflections begin to tail off'. Reflections here might be used for limitations of oral tradition which lacks history within itself. When bardic material went under the process of writing it had been influenced by the changing social and political circumstances of their contemporary time of their writing. It was legitimized by the people in power and thus composition and compilation of both the epic was the gradual process which took place in centuries.

Conclusion

There are layers within epics. We have to pick each layer to understand the nature of it and to put it in a chronology and understand it within the canvas of the narrative and didactic portions of the epic only then we will be able to understand which layer was added in later time and on what circumstances it might have been inserted. For example the rajādharma-anusasana parvan, a sub section of the śānti parvan of the Mahabharata talks about the king's duties and also about the existence of the council of ministers. So, we can say that this section was interpolated when a state was already in existence and we also see that such inserting in the epic like Mahabharata is also similar to the *Dharmaśāstras* as both are supplementary to each other. Similarly the interpolated section of Ramayana for example *Bālkāṇda*, it is shown that Rama is a incarnation of lord Visnu, which suggests that this part was added later because of the changing nature of the religious milieu and by the influence of Vaiśanavite people.

The Epics, irrespective of their mythical nature, can therefore provide forays into the social and cultural history of early India. Initially being part of the oral tradition we can say that both the epics had gone through a long process of inserting material time to time according to the need of the time by the people having authority to give themselves legitimacy. Ignoring myths, the epics also provide certain kind of information which is useful to understand society and culture of the ancient time. We can find the transitional period between the pastoral and tribal society to monarchical state formation in ancient time. We see how interpolated sections of the both epics are proof of the changing nature of polity, economy and society.

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