

INDIAN EPICS: THE RAMAYANA AND THE MAHABHARATA AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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The ageless epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have continued to rapture crowds with their glory in the Information Age. The essence of their divine light has remained unchanging even as the world transformed through listeners, readers, spectators and viewers. The world today is becoming increasingly paperless, people are substituting books with e-books, C.Ds, television and movies. Inevitably important epics and classic literature throughout the world do not enjoy a firsthand reading in the book format. With the increasing use of internet knowledge seekers try to gain information through summaries and notes available online. In this age, dominated by the restless energy of consumerism, it is laudable that these epics can hold their lustre. These eternal epics enjoy mass popularity, even in this age. Their telecast on television had a phenomenal reach with people all across the country gathering close to television sets to watch the epic saga. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the contemporary electronic media.

Electronic media refers to media in which the end users or the audience, access content using electronics or electromechanical energy. The electronic media primarily includes audio-video recordings, multimedia presentations, slide presentations, CD-ROM and online content. It also includes television, radio, telephone, desktop computer, game console, handheld devices. Today, the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata can be read not only in Sanskrit and Hindi, but in several other languages in countries such as China, Thailand, and Indonesia etc. Their being read in an electronic form offers not only the choice of language but also the ease of access. These choices have enhanced and ensured a greater reach to people and thus, more number of people can read these epics, more number of times. They are also available as in the video format in C.Ds and on sites such as the YouTube. Numerous movies and animation films are available on these serials. There are many sights on the internet that provide useful insights on the understanding, appreciation and interpretation of these sacred texts.

The Ramayana directed by Ramanand Sagar was released in 1987-88 and ruled the television screen arena. It still holds the Limca Book's world record for being the world's most watched mythological serial. It had prominent television personalities like Arun Govil, Deepika Chikalia and Dara Singh in the cast. *The Mahabharata* was released in electronic form in the 1980s when it was telecasted in serialised form from 2nd October 1988 to 24th June 1990 on Doordarshan National Channel. The serial topped the TRP charts and people remained glued to their television sets; streets became deserted on Sunday mornings as families, colonies and even entire communities in villages, gathered together around television sets in deep reverie paying

homage to their Gods being aired on screen, in flesh and blood. The chant "*Main Samay Hoon*" which followed the title song "*seekh hum beetein yugon se naya yug ka karein swaagat*" still reverberates in our hearts.

The telecast of epics *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* on Indian Television in the 1980s is an extremely important socio-cultural event as it spread awareness of our rich cultural heritage to even those uneducated thousands, who were beyond the reach of books. Children and the future citizens were introduced to these epics in a lucid, entertaining manner and their cultural foundations were grounded firmly. The serials made palpable abstract concepts like *nirvana* or salvation, *maya* or illusion and *dharma* or duty to viewers and reinforced the collective strength of our nation.

It may be stated that if *The Spectator* "brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools, and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses" in England; the telecast of epics- *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* serials brought religion and philosophy out of holy texts and scriptures, *gurus* and *pandits*, temples and *ashramas*, to dwell in the hearts and minds of the Indian public.

The Mahabharata serial was a huge success and was shown in the United Kingdom by the BBC, where it achieved audience figures of 5 million. It was dubbed in Tamil, Telugu, and Indonesian among other languages. It was re-casted again by Ekta Kapoor, in a modern and westernized version as *Kahaani Hamaaray Mahaabhaarat Ki* on the channel 9X in 2008. It was aired again on Star Plus in 2013. A retelling of *the Ramayana* was done on NDTV Imagine in 2008 and on Zee TV in 2012.

The retelling of the serials time and again marks their majestic quality as the truly 'sublime' in a Longinus-like sense; boldly standing the test of time. The idle action of *maryada purshottam* Shri Ram and the *Karma Yog* philosophy found in the Bagavad Gita endows us with the most sublime form of knowledge and direction for progress in spiritual life and achieving perfection in action. This understanding can never fade away with time and will continue to be relevant for all ages.

This universal wisdom was brought forth for the common man by the telecast of these epics in electronic form on television. Through the telecast on television, flowed to the rich and poor alike, the educated and uneducated, the old and children, the men and women and most importantly to the Hindus and non-Hindus. In a vast and diverse country like India, where religious tolerance is put to test time and again, it was very significant that the non-Hindus also saw these epics. In fact, the epic *the Mahabharata* was adapted for the serial by the notable Muslim poet Rahi Masoom Raza. Raza spent three years researching the Hindu epic and studying it with *pandits* and handled the complex plot most respectfully with all the details and intricacies. These serials thus fostered religious tolerance and promoted fraternity among citizens.

Just as many critics contemplate over the negative effects of media on society, it is not irrelevant to observe the positive effect of the epics on people. The epics cast a positive influence on people and the society at large. For instance, the characters of Mahabharata are paragons of virtues. The ideals, moral uprightness and sense of duty possessed by Yudhisthir are highly inspiring. Krishana's wisdom in *the Gita* and Arjuna's subsequent enlightenment towards detachment and perfect action showers us with unparalleled divine wisdom. The vow of Bhisma pitamah, his commitment, benevolence and self sacrifice are exemplary. The Mahabharata had inspired Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders of the freedom movement towards civil disobedience during the British rule. It has also influenced great western poets, writers and

thinkers including Albert Einstein, Henry David Thoreau, T.S. Eliot, Martin Luther King, Jr., Herman Hesse, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Aldous Huxley. Thus, if citizens can become criminals by watching crime movies, is it not justified to conclude that the viewers did inculcate positive virtues by watching the epic serials?

The Mahabharata and *the Ramayana* epic serials were pioneers in epic serial drama and started a cult of epic drama such as Shri Krishna, Chandrakanta, Jai Jai Jai Bajrangbali and Devon ke Dev Mahadev to name a few.

Many Bollywood movies too have been inspired by these epics. Prakash Jha's film *Rajneeti* shares many similarities with the plot of *the Mahabharata* and the characters symbolically possess shades of the characters from the epic: Nana Patekar (Krishna), Ranbir Kapoor (Arjuna), Ajay Devgan (Karna), Arjun Rampal (Bheema) and Manoj Bajpai (Duryodhana).

Similarly, Shyam Benegal's, award winning film *Kalyug* (1981) retold the epic war through showcasing the modern day infighting among rival business families. Mani Ratnam's movie *Raavan* with actors Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai has plot and themes similar to *the Ramayana*. Soraj R. Barjatya's movie *Hum Saath Saath Hain* is a retelling of a modern day *Ramayana* concerning family relations between three brothers. Some Hollywood movies have also taken inspiration from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. James Cameron had made a award winning, high budget movie *Avatar* in 2009, based on the epic *Ramayana*. He has been reported to have undertaken a similar project on the epic *Mahabharata*. The movie *The Legend of Bagger Vance* starring Will Smith and Matt Damon, has a thematic similarities to *the Mahabharata*. Bagger Vance (Krishna) appears in the movie, when the hero R. Junuh (Arjun) refuses to fight; leading him to follow his path as the warrior.

There are numerous animation movies on *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* dubbed in several languages across the globe. The fans and admirers of these epics are not confined to India only but are spread in nations outside India particularly in South East Asia and Europe. A dubbed version of *the Mahabharata* serial 2013 was released in Indonesia, where it created a storm. *Mahabharata* was aired just prior to FIFA World Cup opening matches. It turned out that Indonesians waiting to watch well- built men to take to the football field, ended up watching well-built men in faux-gold jewellery fighting with magical weapons instead. As reported in Business Standard magazine, the ANTV soon discovered that the ratings for the Mahabharata series were higher than those for the football. At its peak, the show reached 7.6 per cent of Indonesia's television viewership; the World Cup final reached only 6.2 per cent.

Today, these epics can be read electronically not only in Hindi and Sanskrit but numerous other languages like English, Indonesian, Telgu, Tamil and Chinese among others. Mahabharata has inspired the Chinese as well as the Buddhists and the Jains.

However, as every coin has two sides, the electronic media too has a flip side. By the dissemination of information through this medium the poetic beauty of the verse and its symbolical and allegorical connotations are lost. However, the benefits such as spreading awareness to a greater number of people, particularly the uneducated not having access to books; nation building through moral education and religious tolerance etc far outweigh the pitfalls.

Thus, it can be concluded that the electronic media has played a detrimental role in bringing the Hindu epics *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* to the homes and hearts of people in India and abroad; and in reaching all the nooks and corners evenly at grass root levels. It is also important to note that in the globalisation era when family ties are becoming weak these epics act as the light house from where the society can take lessons in morality and ethics. They

significantly exemplify the importance of values such as loving and respecting family, keeping promises, protecting the weak, following the *dharma* or duty in relationships and being able to identify the right from wrong. The majestic works of seers Maharishi Ved Vyas and Valmiki have on the grass root level been amplified to reach the masses by the likes of Ramanand Sagar and B.R Chopra. While the epics continue to illuminate minds in book form, their being telecasted surely spreads awareness to a greater number of people.

Work cited

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