



## The Relevance of Indian Epics Today - Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

The two Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have been an essential part of life and culture of India throughout the past thousands of years since these epics came into existence. A few years ago, a dramatized version of Mahabharata, one of the two Indian epics was shown on an Indian television channel and became an extremely popular series; the multi-dvd set is bought and brought to North America and watched regularly by many expatriates. Such is their appeal even in this century, even among fashionable, technologically savvy Indian people. Particularly Mahabharata is rich with stories of every possible human situation, emotion and drama: such as, jealousy, power politics, fraud, intrigue, violence, assassination plots, friendship, respect, family pride and loyalty, love affairs, betrayals, disguise, heroism and cowardice in battles and moral instructions. There is a saying, "If it is not in the (Maha) Bharata, it is not to be found anywhere in Bharata (India)".

In rural India, sons are still named after the principal characters (or the sacred verses in one of them) of these two epics, such as Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Krishna, Bhima, Paban, and Arjuna, and daughters are named Ganga, Janaki (another name of Sita), Subhadra or Urmila and even Gita. Krishnaa, Sudeshna and Shantanu happen to be relatively 'modern-flavored' ancient names from Mahabharata. More importantly, the characters, in many cases, represent the highest values held dear to Indian hearts. I will give a few examples – a complete list is beyond the scope of this article.

Most people from Indian ancestry, at least in our generation, would be familiar with the two very tragic stories of a son's loyalty to his father: the first one is about King Dasharatha and Rama, the Crown prince and the second story relates to King Shantanu and Devabrata (later known as Bhishma), another Crown prince. Each of these Crown princes gave up their claim to the throne and made enormous sacrifices to honor their fathers' wishes or promises: illustrating love and loyalty to one's father and selflessness. According to some modern standards, they might have been 'fools'. I prefer not to judge –

since that was then, and this is now, and undoubtedly they showed selflessness, discipline and moral courage regardless of which standards are used.



Pictures by P. C. Chakraborti – photos taken by the author from a Bengali book retelling the story of Ramayana [Left: Dasharatha laments when Rama greets him before leaving for the forest; Kaikeyee listens in the background. Right: Sita and Rama, dressed as an ascetic, in the forest.]

Very briefly, the first story as found in the Indian epic "Ramayana" says that Rama, Dasharatha's oldest son born of the first queen Kaushalya was about to be sworn in as the new king, as King Dasharatha was getting old. On the eve of this joyous event, the second queen, Kaikeyi reminded the king of his prior unconditional promise, to grant her two wishes. For these two boons, first she demanded her own son Bharata to be the king instead of Rama, and secondly, to banish Rama from the kingdom for fourteen years to live in the wild. The king fainted, but Rama unhesitatingly conceded on his father's behalf. Totally shocked, the king died heart-broken as Rama, his other step-brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita left the kingdom in ascetic attires. Bharata, however, refused to usurp the throne from Rama and pleaded with him to return to the palace. Rama did not agree because that would mean dishonoring his father's promise. So Bharata then placed Rama's footwear on the throne and reigned for fourteen years as his elder brother's humble, ascetic representative. Lakshmana and Bharata are considered ideal brothers for their undying loyalty to Rama. Sita is considered an ideal consort since she, a princess, chose the rigors of living in a forest to be with her husband rather than enjoying the luxuries of a royal palace.

Lakshmana circumscribed a security zone by drawing a protective magic line around Sita when the two brothers had to leave her alone in the cottage, and hence the term "Lakshmana's security line" – still used in common parlance – came to refer to a territory one considers safe and unwise to trespass, as Sita had done. She had to pay a very significant price. She came out of the secure zone and was kidnapped by King Ravana of Lanka (Sri Lanka) disguised as a religious mendicant asking for alms. Once Sita was abducted to his palace, Ravana asked (pressured) Sita to marry him, but she resisted all his advances for years, and remained faithful to Rama in her lonely adversity.



[While relaxing with Rama, Sita sees the beautiful golden deer at a distance, and begs Rama to get it for her. The ever-faithful brother Lakshmana stands guard outside the cottage.] Photo of a reproduction of the famous artist Jamini Roy's stylized painting: taken by author.

Bibhishana, Ravana's brother joined Rama in the fateful battle between the two that ended in Ravana being killed and Sita getting rescued. But Bibhishana's name has ever since been associated with betrayal of one's own relatives despite the fact that he had followed his conscience in protest of improper conduct of his brother. Even today, "Bibhishana, the inside enemy" is used to refer to such circumstances. Sadly however, Sita, once rescued, had to prove her chastity by entering a fire (and coming out unharmed) – and we say "tested by fire" (agni-pariksha) when an individual has to go through extreme hardship or trials in life.

The second story of a son's sacrifice for his father is from the other Indian epic "Mahabharata". King Shantanu met a beautiful maiden, Satyawati, while taking a stroll on the river bank. He had been abandoned by his first wife, Ganga, so undoubtedly felt lonely. He was smitten with the beautiful Satyawati and approached her father for her hand in marriage. The father, wise in worldly matters, agreed to accept his offer, with a difficult condition: Satyawati's sons would be the heirs to the throne, instead of the Crown Prince Devabrata, the only surviving son of Ganga. Shantanu was heart-broken. He could not accept this unfair condition and deprive his beloved and most deserving son of his legitimate inheritance. However, when Devabrata found out the reason for his father's anguish, he himself went to see Satyawati's father and promised to relinquish the throne. Satyawati's father, however, escalated the challenge further and asked him: why would Devabrata's sons agree to follow their father's example and not claim the throne in the future? Devabrata did not go there to take "No" for an answer, and without a moment's hesitation, made a vow of celibacy right then and there to ensure there would never be such problems whatsoever. Henceforth, Devabrata was renowned as "Bhishma", which meant 'one who made a terrible vow'. Indian people still talk with admiration about "Bhishma's vow" if someone does not budge from his/her determination.

Draupadi, the wife of five Pandava brothers in Mahabharata, was a devotee of Lord Krishna, believed to be a divine incarnation. Krishna rescued Draupadi from many awkward situations by his divine power. Once when a very short-tempered sage, Durbasha came with his hundred disciples at the modest cottage of banished, forest-living Pandavas and asked for a meal, Krishna ate a single grain of rice to make all those unannounced guests suddenly feel embarrassingly full. Another time, when one of the Kaurava brothers tried to disrobe Draupadi in a royal court in the presence of all dignitaries, Krishna made sure that an unlimited supply of sari rolled off her body to save her from public humiliation.



[Krishna gives his immortal advice in the form of 'Bhagavat Gita' to dejected Arjuna]  
Picture by unknown artist – photo taken by author from a book retelling the story of Mahabharata in Bengali

Arjuna, one of the five courageous Pandava princes was also a faithful friend and devotee of Lord Krishna. Krishna, acting as Arjuna's unarmed charioteer persuaded depressed Arjuna to fight a 'righteous' battle against the greedy, evil and unjust Kauravas; he delivered his immortal advice in verses renowned collectively as "Gita" or "Bhagabat-Gita" that captured the essence of Hindu philosophy. One of his teachings was "You only have the right to act, but not to expect any fruits thereof. You must accept the station in your life and act according to the calls of duty dictated by that station." Now we have verses from the "Gita" recited on many sacred occasions, and often during a funeral, to remind ourselves of the immortality of souls and the inevitable mortality of physical bodies. The Gita verses have never become obsolete among Hindu Indians, and I don't think they ever will.

We exclaim "Hey or Hai Ram!" if something unforeseen or undesirable happens, or even when we accidentally drop something. The "reign of Rama" means fair and equitable treatment of all subjects by a just king, even ready to make personal sacrifices to make his subjects happy. We talk about "Durbasha" to refer to someone who loses temper easily. The phrase "the attack of seven warriors (in chariots)" refers to an unjust battle in which seven veteran warriors simultaneously attacked a young warrior, Arjuna's son Abhimanyu in a totally unaccepted, unethical manner and killed him. Another phrase

from Mahabharata, "ASHWATTHMA IS KILLED (- the elephant)" is used by us to mean a partial truth or a lie disguised as truth – which the ever-truthful, epitome of righteous conduct Yudhisthira uttered to cause Ashwathama's father Drona, the great warrior, to give up arms in grief. Karna was another extra-ordinary character in this epic. Abandoned as a new-born baby by his unwed mother, he was lovingly brought up by a childless couple, a chariot-driver and his wife. With innate talents and training by Drona, the royal teacher, he achieved superb skills in arms and was confident enough to challenge Arjuna at an archery competition. The officials did not allow this on the ground that he, a son of a chariot-driver could not compete against Arjuna, a royal. Karna's proud and oft-quoted reply was: "My birth was determined by fate, but my valor is in my own hands." There are hundreds of sub-plots in the Mahabharata, including the reason why Draupadi was married to five husbands at the same time, and corresponding idioms and phrases that Indian people still use everyday as a simple short-cut to explain a complex situation or a character-trait – good or bad.

Throughout the history of the Indian subcontinent, these two epics have inspired various forms of art – such as dramas, dance styles, songs, paintings (painted murals of Ramayana can be admired even in the royal palace in Bangkok, far beyond India), sculptures and poetry. For this reason alone, these two epics should be considered an integral part of Indian culture. The famous medieval poet Kalidasa wrote his Sanskrit drama "Abhigyanam Shakuntalam" borrowing a short episode from the Mahabharata. The classical dance styles of Bharatnatyam, Odissi and Kathakali depict many stories from these epics through dance movements. In more recent times, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote poems and a drama based on Mahabharata anecdotes.

In Indian villages, where a large majority of people may still be illiterate or barely literate, these epics provide material for local dramas, called 'yatras' – both male and female roles are acted by local actors (no actresses), in the open, unadorned "stage" at the center of the audience who sit around and use their imagination to 'fill in the gaps'. Before the advent of televisions and radios, people used to read or sing Ramayana and Mahabharata aloud to villagers gathered together in communal halls for this traditional form of 'learning and entertainment'. Old ladies and gentlemen with literacy used to read these epics respectfully to pass time and be reminded of the important lessons in life, full of role models and warnings for misdeeds. An example of a lesson would be the answer to a question "What is the most surprising thing in the world?" The answer was: "Every single day people see others dying and still they are not prepared for their own [or their loved ones'] death." How true, for ever, for all of us!