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The Richness of India's 'Epics'

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In terms of world literature and storytelling modes and methods that are shared across cultures, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have long been designated 'epics.' But in terms of our own languages and literatures, and the retrospective indigenous aesthetic systems and theories that embrace these magnificent compositions, they are classified differently: the *Ramayana* is the *adikavya*, the first poem that created a genre of *mahakavyas* ('great poems') that came after, and the *Mahabharata* is an *itihasa*, a word that has come to mean 'history' in most of our modern languages.

Rather than dismiss their inclusion in the larger category of 'epic' as a pernicious colonial construct, I have found it useful and rewarding, in a study of these texts, to consider their similarities with other stories in terms of narrative structures, themes, motifs, characters and events. At the same time, the Indian epics are uniquely "Indian" in that they are told within the frameworks of seminal Hindu ideas such as dharma and karma. No matter the aesthetic and cultural contexts in which we place these texts, the discussions they can generate in terms of both form and content remain rich and full, especially when we believe, as this volume does, that the stories and the texts are fundamentally permeable.

Under an open, catch-all title, *Epic in India*, edited by Tutun Mukherjee and Bharathi Harishankar, this volume brings together a collection of papers that consider various aspects of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – from their diversity to the similarities that warrant their being spoken about in a single volume of essays, from genre considerations to descriptions of unexpected and often, challenging versions.

The volume reaches far and wide to include folk versions, heterodox tellings and non-conforming versions of these great stories and asks at least one question about how a "kissa" might relate to the genre of epics. Essays on the Tamil texts, *Silapaddikaram* and *Manimekhalai*, are also included. The contributors also come from a variety of (largely) academic backgrounds: not all of them are scholars of literature per se, as the editors have sought out religious and spiritual responses to the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from believers. The volume also presents a spectrum of political and ideological positions, apparent in the arguments made and critiques offered in the essays.

For me, the most compelling essays in the volume are the ones about regional variations and so-called folk retellings. Not only do these 'other' (here, Bhil, Mewati and North-eastern) versions remind us of the essential diversity and pluralism that the epics encompass, they often throw light on characters and aspects that the classical versions ignore or quickly elide. Minor characters have their say, 'outsider' characters are developed with emotionally moving stories of their own, major characters often show their clay feet in their interactions in episodes that inhabit the margins of the main story.

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The discussion of how the classical and the folk versions relate to each other is multivalent – how do Muslims, women, Dalits, adivasis tell these stories and to what purpose, where are the subversions of elite cultures and practices, how do indigenous gods and other local divine beings enter the stories and how do they relate the pan-Indian divinities, how do fundamentally different world views exist together and animate the frames which contain the old and the new stories? Reading these essays one after the other, we see that here, too, there is no single way in which the great and little traditions, the *marga* and the *desha*, speak to each other. Each instance where the pan-Indian and local merge seems to present a substantially different if not utterly unique fusion. Multi-vocality is a wonderfully appropriate to think about narratives that refuse to be contained by genre, language, religion or culture and yet, remain entirely true to the ethos that produces them.

The critiques of western scholarship of the classical Sanskrit tellings included here are somewhat humdrum and, to my mind, rather too embedded in the current nationalist discourse. Sheldon Pollock, for example, is an easy and well-marked target and Mohan Ramanan's

otherwise persuasive essay on reading Valmiki as a ‘devout believer’ is marred by his take-down of Pollock reading the epic differently. Even more unfortunately, he suggests that Rajiv Malhotra provides the arguments against Pollock with ‘an intellectual heft’ (p.79). Nandini Bhattacharya argues passionately for the significance of the late 19th century Mahabharata translation commonly known as “Ganguli and Roy,” named after the translator and the publisher, but finds it necessary to go after JAB van Buitenen’s ‘Introduction’ to his own translation of the Adi Parvan. This volume, and the conference that generated the essays, surely point to the fact that there are many ways to read the epics and that each translation adds another layer to our understanding of what the stories are telling us – van Buitenen’s incomplete Mahabharata project in no way diminishes the Ganguli and Roy work and Pollock’s understanding of the how the *Ramayana* was used politically from the second millennium onwards does not preclude Ramanan from reading the text as a believer. Nor does it diminish the text itself. I would rather argue that the text is expanded by being open to multiple readings, all equally coherent.

Perhaps most important of all, an epic is a (once oral) story told about a ruling warrior class at a very particular moment in history that was shared by many cultures in a connected and well-defined linguistic and geographical space.

The last third of *Epic in India* reaches beyond the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, looking at the classical Tamil texts, *Silapaddikaram* and *Manimekalai*, two long poems from within an Islamic milieu (including Waris Shah’s Heer) and so-called epics from Ladakh and the Punjab. In a way, these are the most interesting sections of the volume because they take on the question that really does underpin the volume: what is an epic? Further, what is an epic in the Indian context? An epic, although it is a (very) long poem, is more than a *mahakavya*, for example, as it is also more than an *itihasa*. An epic is not only a way of telling, it is also about what is told. So also, an epic is more than a systematic exposition of religious and philosophical doctrines. Its exemplars have structural features in common as well as themes and motifs. Perhaps most important of all, an epic is a (once oral) story told about a ruling warrior class at a very particular moment in history that was shared by many cultures in a connected and well-defined linguistic and geographical space.

When we speak of “Indian” literatures, it is increasingly important to consider texts and stories that come from outside hegemonic systems based in caste and religion in the sub-continent. I am not sure, however, that they need to be defined against the epics, or be made to join that club, as it were. While genre comparisons are often useful, I think we have far more to gain by considering the specificities of these other long narratives and acknowledging the particularities of each. How do we think about long, oral, culture-defining narratives when they come to us from outside the Hindu world view and the specific social and political norms and values of Brahminical Hinduism? To define them, for example, as *avaidika* (as CT Indra does in his essay on “Silapaddikaram”), points merely to the fact that they are heterodox in terms of Vedic Hinduism – the centre has not shifted, it has, in fact, been reinforced. Is it possible to think of non-Hindu texts from the sub-continent as epics at all?

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Epic in India is a bit of a grab bag, as all compilations of conference presentations tend to be. This volume comes out five years after the event for which the papers were written, at a moment in which a discussion of the idea of the ‘epic’ could not be more timely, when belief in one version of the *Ramayana* has become the cornerstone, not only of nationalism but of citizenship and belonging in India. There are some essays here which describe syncretistic narratives where Muslim devotees appear in Hindu stories or, speak of Muslim tellers of Hindu tales. But there is nothing about the politics of separation, the divisions into “us” and “them” that epics can generate and perpetuate. The volume seems to avoid any discussion of how epics work in contemporary society and what happens when epics are politicised. The “Introduction” to *Epic in India* lists the many exalted functions that Indian epics perform and lauds them in particular for providing “. . . moral motivation . . . to the people in times of political-social-cultural crises to fight against evil forces whenever threats arise, as during India’s freedom struggle.” (p. xv). I leave it to the discerning reader to figure out the implications of this apparent anachronism.

Arshia Sattar works with the epics and storytelling traditions of the Indian sub-continent.