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MAHABHARATA: ADAPTATION OF MYTHIC FOLK LITERATURE OF INDIA FOR CHILDREN

Dr. Deepak Rana

Assistant Professor of English

Rajkiya Mahavidyalaya Kamand, Tehri Garhwal,

Uttarakhand, India

Abstract:

Mahabharata, the magnificent epic, with its numerous myths and metaphors, can be called the real folk literature of India. It has been interpreted, reinterpreted and even misinterpreted, but its significance has grown with time, but the newer generation needs its own adaptable Mahabharata. "There is no single Mahabharata; there are hundreds of Mahabharatas, hundreds of different manuscripts and innumerable oral versions.... It has been called 'a work in progress,' a literature that 'does not belong in a book'" (Doniger, Foreword). To find one's own Mahabharata, one must seek diligently, and it will appear significantly—so every child must know what the Mahabharata is! Mahabharata, one of the greatest mythologies, is the story of Indian culture which contains indefinite stories about the societies of India which covers politics, history, religion, law, medicine, social structure and everything which serves the role of specific social element. Irrespective of religion, Mahabharata is already established in psyche of an Indian child, and the ambiguous epic will come to a child's clear consciousness only when told orally, in written form, cinematic or gaming form-but the adaptive medium must be chosen carefully for the future 'avatars' to reinvent themselves. These are the great texts, and first and foremost, it must start with a short folktale for children.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Folk Literature, Children's Literature, India, Myth, Metaphor, Folktale, Story, Epic etc.

"Om! Having bowed down to Narayana and Nara, the most exalted male being, and also to the goddess Saraswati, must the word Jaya be uttered" (Ganguli, 4). *Mahabharata*, one of the greatest epics of India, grew out of a folktale, and passed on by word of mouth through generations until it took the written form, and later the visual form. As Ramanujan, the learned scholar and author, said, "A Folktale is a traveling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling" (*Folktales*, xi). One might consider it as a proverb which gathered meaning from time to time, adding layers to it, until it became the great *Mahabharata*. The great epic traversed the path of generations like any other great myth which sustained itself over the centuries. Ramanujan said:

A story travels every time it is told. It crosses linguistic boundaries any time a bilingual person tells it or hears it...in a folktale that goes on changing from teller to teller, the structure of the tale may remain constant while all



the cultural details change. Parts of different tales are combined to make a new tale which expresses new aesthetic and moral form characteristic of the culture. When the same tale is told again in a different time or place, it may come to say fresh and appropriate things, often without any change in the story line. Any fixity, any reconstructed archetype, is a fiction, a label, a convenience (*Folktales*, xx-xxi).

Folktales are traditional stories that gives contemporary relative existence to any individual of a culture. “Psychologists such as Freud and Jung have attended mostly to myths; but folktales are a potent source of psychoanalytic insights, for they concentrate on close family ties and childhood fantasies” (Ramanujan, *Folktales*, xxix). Folk literature has been a part of every culture since the civilization was born, and it presents itself in a new form every time someone newer tells it—in his/her own way.

Wherever people live, folklore grows; new jokes, proverbs, rhymes, tales, and songs circulate in the oral tradition...all expressive folk forms weave in and out of every aspect of city, village, and small-town life. Both public culture and domestic culture cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of the folk idiom. Every kind of Indian cultural practice, every Indian cultural performance, whether it is the classical epic and theater or modern film and political rhetoric, is indebted to oral traditions and folk forms (Ramanujan, *Folktales*, xiii-xiv).

Oral culture, the essence of folk literature, is not as predominant in present times anymore as the old eras; it is receding in value and form in almost every tradition and culture. The informal small-talks and the platonic chit-chats, the favourite pastimes of past, is no more, and newer generation are hooked to the six inches screens forever. As the medium has taken a completely different form, virtual generation’s expectations are far more than a folk tale, but *Mahabharata* must be told—adapting to the child’s different belief system. As Ramanujan said, “Nothing can reproduce the original telling of a tale,” but it might not remain the truth forever (*Folktales*xi). For today’s children, *Mahabharata* must be altered in the best possible manner and presented as the original truth of the society which started with a folklore. In the present times, oral literatures, after becoming written literature, have become visual and interactive literatures with the advent of TV, Cinema and Video Games. If not attention deficit disorder, today’s children have short attention span—they would not listen and they would not read attentively as much as past generations had absorbed in their own times, but they love their virtual screen participation as any kind of thrilling adventure where they interact with a known species of their own kind. India might feel threatened that epics like *Mahabharata* would get lost, if not preserved; so, to make the new Indian children realize the true spirit of Indianness, epics such as *Mahabharata* would have to take a new avatar. Folk *Mahabharata* of tribal people is already on the verge of extinction, and written *Mahabharata* of great size and content preserved in eighteen par vans are being threatened as the future child wants virtual reality rather than ancient scriptures, so animated films and TV series and interactive video games and recent advent of artificial intelligence must be put to use and make Indian



children more excited for the *Mahabharata* than just the oral or written form of the epic. *Mahabharata* is the *grantha* of wisdom, and for better understanding it has to be assimilated, but to cater to the demands of the young future, the quicker generation, the epic requires to be curtailed for their tastes. Otherwise, it might be possible that *Mahabharata* would be lost in the history of the future, after taking an unknown face and shape of the true Hindu treasure. Today, Hindu culture needs *Mahabharata* more than anything else, as it runs in our veins and consciousness of Indians, and without it Indianness might lose forever. And if we lose our great book of wisdom, everything from our origins to culture is threatened and with it we will lose our cultural experiences and values-we will become a 'no one.'

Every folk literature consists of themes and ideas which made people stick to their places, until they had heard the resolution of the story. Presently, to educate our children, we need to sort out these themes which created our past, and in *Mahabharata* there are many. As Lukens said, "Thematic wealth in a book for children often lies in the continuous discoveries" (Lukens, 140). 'Good conquers evil' is the commonest theme in folk literature, and it is still the predominant theme among all the basic themes of life and death, so to express it to children every storyteller, writer, filmmaker, or videogame creator, with their creative visions, must focus on making a child understand the significance of the theme. Every tale must tell a universal truth, and the statement should be concise, not implicit, entertaining and morally sound; it must not be as complex as the adult narratives. "Younger children will be less likely to sit still for long descriptions that take them away from the conflict and characters. For them, and for many adults as well, setting interwoven with action is the most interesting and readable" (Lukens, 168). New adaptive settings for children might prove beneficial and they might learn in the process while escaping from reality to an easier life of wonderful literature. The intellectual and spiritual wealth must be circulated thoroughly by adapting to newer forms of literature which will preserve India's national identity. Indian children must be aware of the rich cultural heritage of India and the treasures of literature the great country of India contains. As Ramanujan said:

Stories are part of a more pervasive process in society. The tales demonstrate over and over again that daughters (and sons), wealth, knowledge, and food must circulate. These are *danas*, or gifts, that in accordance with their nature must be given and received. Stories are no different. Communities and generations depend on such exchanges and transfers (*Folktales*, xxxiv).

Pikkov said, as folktales start with 'once upon a time,' "In folk tales, the stories usually take place in the past, unwind in linear order, without jumping back and forth in time, and are told from the perspective of an outsider or one of the characters" (67). In ancient times, storytellers told stories in order to get a free meal and lodgings, but today's stories are made with different motives of moolah, cultural ascent or teachings. As Ramanujan said, "Stories are metaphors in search of a context, waiting to be told and given new relevance" (*Folktales* xxii).



Great myths like *Mahabharata* need to be told to younger generation, like a myth narrative or a simple folktale. Frye, in his essay on *Myth and Metaphor*, points out the differences between a myth and a folktale.

Myths stick together to form a mythology, unlike folktales, which simply interchange themes and motifs so stereotyped that they can be counted and indexed...a mythology nearly always begins with some form of creation myth, and all other myths unfold from it. A creation myth is in a sense the only myth we need, all other myths being implied in it (Frye, 241).

Mahabharata is not only the mythical, sacred stories of Hindus, but “a key scriptural text of Hinduism, with tremendous power to shape and form the imagination of modern Hindus” (Dhand, 259). The core story of *Mahabharata* is well known to every Indian, which is the great war fought between the Pāṇḍavas (the good incarnates) and Kauravas (the evil incarnates) under the guidance of Lord Krishna for the preservation of *dharma*. How did *Mahabharata* start is a long story?

In the opening scene of the *Mahabharata*, the professional storyteller Ugrasravas Sauti approaches a group of brahmins in the Naimiṣa Forest. After a brief exchange, Ugrasravas recounts another conversation, this one between the brahmin Vaiśampāyana and King Janamejaya. It is this verbal encounter that then segues into Vaiśampāyana telling the tale of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, the narrative that most readers today would recognise as the central story of the *Mahabharata* (Black, 1).

The *Mahabharata* was originally narrated by Vyasa, and the text was supposed to have developed in the three stages: “The first by Vyasa was that of 8800 verses called *Jaya*, the second by Vaiśampāyana of 24000 verses called *Bhārata*, and the third by Sauti of 100,000 verses called the *Mahabharata*” (Pande, 47). Growing out of a folktale, *Mahabharata* has now grown into literature of epic proportions. “The *Mahabharata*,” wrote Herman OLDENBERG, “began its existence as a simple epic narrative. It became, in course of centuries, the most monstrous chaos” (Sukthankar, 1). That the *Mahabharata* provides inspiration to everyone alike, especially writers and filmmakers, for it has abundant supply of material for them. There are the dialogues apart from the *dharma* and karma which makes the *Mahabharata* a repository of knowledge and wisdom. As Black points out about the text of *Mahabharata* which “includes conversations and debates about truth (*satya*), fate (*daiva*), human agency (*puruṣakāra*), karma, liberation (*mokṣa*), yoga, non-violence (*ahimsā*), ultimate reality (*brahman*), the self (*ātman*), and devotion (*bhakti*)” (Sukthankar, 2-3).

Though it is clearly manifested in the culture the disappearance of folk literature, there is also visible the emergence of new mediums to restore the folk literature in new forms. It is only the experience which has to be changed which suits the new audience of children. With fantastic elements, children need enjoyment and pleasure for understanding a thing, and storytellers must focus on the fact to include entertainment and less complexity in their adapted stories, as these are the straightforward audience who will not take ‘no’ for an answer. As Lukens said, “Since their understanding is more limited, the expression of ideas must be



simple-both in language and in form...and children may accept the fantastic more readily than many adults” (Lukens, 9). Experimentation is absolute necessary to create a relative medium for children. As Lukens further adds, “Children are frequently more open to experimenting with a greater variety of literary forms than many adults will accept-from poetry to folktales, from adventure to fantasy” (Lukens, 9). In oral cultures, the learning process is not similar to written or visual forms. “In a largely oral tradition, one learns one's major literary works as one learns a language-in bits and pieces that fit together and make a whole in the learner's mind, because they are parts that reflect an underlying structure” (Ramanujan, *Repetition*, 421). Learning takes time, be it in any medium, but the process for comprehension is similar to any culture. As Northrop Frye puts, “The unconscious cannot be hurried or forced or consciously invaded; some learn more easily and quickly than others, but everyone learns in essentially the same way” (Frye, 149).

Mythical stories are tales of gods and though inexplicable these myths are normal part of the verbal culture of a society. In addition, Frye said:

In structure, mythical stories hardly differ from folktales, but the social use made of them is different. Folktales may be told for amusement, and tend to lead a nomadic existence, wandering over a wide area through all barriers of language. But myths, though they also travel widely, form in addition a central body of stories that it is particularly important for a specific society to hear, because they set out what are regarded as the essential facts about its gods, its history, and its social structure. Hence myths, in contrast to folktales, have a higher proportion of stories about recognized deities in them, and they also unify into a mythology and form the core of a body of shared imaginative allusion and shared experience for a society. They add the dimension of history and tradition to a society's verbal culture (Frye, 115-116).

Myth shares some space with folktale in some aspect, but the detailing and grandness of the myth is incomparable to folktale. In his essay on *Myth and Metaphor*, Frye further adds about the seriousness of a myth in comparison to a folktale.

A myth is primarily a *mythos*, a story, narrative, or plot, with a specific social function. Every human society has a verbal culture, and in the preliterate phase, when abstract thought has not developed, the bulk of this culture consists of stories. Usually there then arises a distinction between stories which explain to their hearers something that those hearers need to know about the religion, history, law, or social system of their society, and less serious stories told primarily for amusement. The more serious group are the myths: they grow out of a specific society and transmit a cultural heritage of shared allusion. We may call the myth a verbal *temenos*, a circle drawn around a sacred or numinous area. The less serious group becomes folktales, which travel freely over the world through all barriers of language. Myths travel too, but they tend to keep settling down (Frye, 238).



Children need their myths as children also need their folktales; myth is already established but folktales are losing its essence, and it is not far behind the time when myths will change dramatically and a child would want an Arjuna to fly an airplane or call Krishna a cricket player. This is not amusing, as tendencies are changing with time, and children want to frame great mythical characters in the attire of their dreams. One needs attention, one needs care, and one needs to preserve the culture or there will remain no culture of the past, but a culture of the future with different set of demands and expectation which might be compatible to historic times or not. If not followed properly, in the future patterns of literature for children, there will never be “Once Upon a Time” again....

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