

From Classical to Postclassical: Changing Ideologies and Changing Epics in India

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The idea of this paper is to examine the variegated reality of texts classified under the notion “epic” in the Indian tradition. My aim is to study the relation between epics and various religious trends in Indian history, so I shall especially concentrate on the function of epic material as a bearer of religious ideologies. This subject includes diverse ideologies, on the one hand, and different texts, some of which might sometimes turn out not to be epics in the strict sense, on the other. In fact, the main question I want to present for discussion is the problematic idea of epic in the Indian context.

The material with which this paper deals consists without exception of written texts. The main reason for this choice is my own indological perspective. Consequently, I am treating the subject using material that mainly belongs to the great tradition, concentrating on two massive epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and in particular their various literary retellings. Besides textual history, I shall follow the history of ideas and emphasize the role of epics and related texts in the continuing theological or philosophical debate. As the title indicates, the central concepts are *change*, *ideology*, and *classical/postclassical*.

Epics and ideologies

In my own work the main theme has been ritual and ritual thinking. I have investigated different ideas on sacrifice filtered through Indian literature. In this way, I have followed long-term ritual change from pre-Vedic ideas to the imposing sacrificial system of Vedic ritualism and further to post-Vedic ideas about the earlier ritual system (Koskikallio 1993). I have used epics as a corpus of texts, under the broad term “postclassical” in relation to classical Vedic ritualism. In this paper,

however, the concepts classical and post-classical have been applied to the whole of Indian epics—if there is indeed any such totality. Thus, I have separated the conglomerate of the two great epics (classical) and later texts using the epic plot (post-classical) from each other. These post-classical literary works can either narrate some parts of an epic or retell the whole epic, either the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Sometimes post-classical epic texts even claim to be another branch of the ancient epic tradition. It is worth remembering that the difference between classical and post-classical epic texts is not just a matter of literary composition or structuring principles but also a matter of ideology.

It has been said that it is possible to distinguish—but not separate from each other—two continuous traditions or levels in Indian literature: that of the epic and that of the story or “folktales” (van Buitenen 1974:43). The former is understood as basically moralistic, the latter more secular. This is a very simplified starting point, even if we are willing to study Indian epic material in the context of the larger notion of Indian literature or Indian literatures. It is true that larger Indian epics are one important point of departure for other genres of literature, but because this paper principally deals with the history of ideas rather than the history of literature, I shall leave this subject matter for further discussion. Furthermore, there is no reason to overanalyze the concept of epic as stories or as ideological or moralistic issues. Actually, the latest tendency in the indological study of epics is to see an epic as a whole. The Indian epics are totalities of different, or even contradictory, ideas about morality or religion, the one *dharma*. At the same time, they are totalities consisting of a massive number of tales, with interdependent teachings and stories. Therefore, for example, questions about the core of an epic or later interpolations are not regarded as so essential as they were in earlier scholarship.

While the analytical study of the single epic has been pushed into the background, the study of different epic texts has gained ground in indology. So, we can say that indological and folkloristic research have been fruitfully influenced by each other lately. The method of studying one question by using epic material from different levels (the classical text, its different retellings, literary versions composed on epic themes, local texts, oral material) has been introduced and applied more widely. One example is what McKim Marriot and John Leavitt call a “liquid metaphor to characterize the history of tradition in South Asia” (see Leavitt 1991:444-45). This means that the continual interchange between the different categories (fixed text and folk text) has been taken into consideration. Behind the term there also lies the “oceanic” terminology of Indian tale-collections (for

example *Kathāsaritsāgara* = “the Ocean of Streams of Story”). Along with this comprehensive view of epics, even the priority of Sanskrit versions of an epic is questioned. As A. K. Ramanujan puts it, “No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn’t usually read it in Sanskrit” (1991:419).

Now we are in a position to realize that from the native perspective Indian epics as a source of tales or teachings have been encountered primarily through local language for a long time. As a result, an average western Sanskrit scholar and an average folklorist or anthropologist might have very different ideas about the world of Indian epics. And neither notion is, of course, similar to that of the average Indian “consumer” of the epics. But the reason for these divergent ideas about epics is not only the language used, but also the fact that different versions of an epic carry their own ideological universe within them. Although a tale or plot might be almost identical from one version to the next, different texts emphasize different scenes and characters. Some versions of the epic texts are more oriented towards the idea of personal godhead (a tendency called *bhakti*), while others want to stress ideal personalities and moralistic issues. For example, the classical epics often emphasize the virtues of a soldier or a king. On the other hand, there are epic texts with, for instance, a Jainist worldview and in these works “all the popular figures . . . are made to fit the Jaina mythological molds” (Sumitra Bai and Zydenbos 1991:252). Furthermore, some later texts on epic themes are primarily the products of literary skill and many of them are in fact works of classical Sanskrit literature. Although there are distinguished studies concerning the relationship between these classics and their epic models,¹ I choose not to extend discussion to include those texts, which are intended primarily for aesthetic rather than ideological purposes.

Even if our starting point is a concrete text—a critical or popular edition of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* or *Rāmāyaṇa* or some retelling—we must not forget its nature as a bearer of tradition.² Before going into the subject in detail, I have again to cite A. K. Ramanujan’s words: “Thus a text like the *Mahābhārata* is not a text but a tradition. It used to be every poet’s ambition to write a *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata*” (1991:420). In

¹ See, e.g., Gitomer 1991, where a Sanskrit drama called *Veṇisaṁhāra* of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa is an important basis for a writer’s ideas about Bhīma’s role in the *Mahābhārata*.

² See critical editions: *Mahābhārata* 1933-66; *Rāmāyaṇa* 1960-75; the question of the priority of critical or other editions is a controversial issue in indology today, cf., e.g., Sullivan 1990:13-21, 25; Doniger 1992:286.

other words, every rewriter of an epic theme considers himself or herself a continuer of the “eternal” epic heritage. But from our point of view it is more significant that these retellers are always commenting on their own era and respective ideologies by using the epic world as a medium for their views.

If we bear in mind the Indian context, an essential explanation for this kind of intensive utilization of epic resources is the great prestige inherent in tradition—and for that matter the great prestige one can often achieve (for one’s own work, too) by basing it on and linking it to the tradition. This power drawn from the tradition is what Brian K. Smith calls “traditional legitimacy” and “canonical authority” (1989:202). Smith is writing chiefly about the ritual tradition, but the idea of traditionalization, that is, the continual use of the prestige of tradition, is a very useful term when studying a changing and continuing epic tradition. He gives two explanatory and authoritative categories that he finds to be powerful channels of Indian tradition: sacrifice (*yajña*) and the notion of Veda. I do not want to overemphasize the significance of the epic category, but it is obvious that epics also form a category of continual foundation for regenerating tradition and ideologies.

The idea of epics as a stage for tradition and ideologies leads us to ask about the means that epics have at their disposal to transform traditional material for different purposes. To be able to answer that question it is necessary to look at the rules and structures behind the overall structure of an epic. One attempt is offered by Ramanujan, who has studied the unity of the *Mahābhārata* and found one “central structuring principle”: repetition (1991:420). I think Ramanujan’s idea about repetition is based not so much on the oral character and background of the epic as on the *Mahābhārata* as a textual whole.

In his analysis Ramanujan finds many themes that come up continuously during the epic story (1991:422-24). Many of these repetitions have something to do with a character’s origin or past: for example, the theme about the heroes’ two fathers, physical and social, or the idea of sons without a father or with a deficient father. There are, however, not only recurrent relationships between the figures, but also the repetitive appearance of certain characters and settings. In a way this tendency “punctuates the continuity of narrative” (423). In addition, Ramanujan mentions some themes occurring over and over again in the *Mahābhārata*, among them fires and exile linked with the disguise of the heroes.

One important characteristic of the whole of the Indian narrative tradition is the use of substories (*upākhyāna*) that seem to interrupt the

frame story. According to Ramanujan, they are “performative, i.e. they too are acts, not merely explanations” (427). The interest in substories is reasonable, since we are interested in the continuity of tradition in epics, and these minor episodes are often incorporated in the epic text precisely because of the continuity of tradition. This means in turn that they include references to Vedic mythology. Alf Hiltebeitel (e.g., 1976:97-98), whose ideas are often based on Georges Dumézil’s works, has been especially active in evolving a method in which the epic text and many of its structures are seen against old mythological parallels.

When we turn from the substories inside an epic toward separate retellings of epic themes, we find ourselves once again in the midst of the continual commentary of tradition. For this reason, the postclassical epics can be understood as literal substories outside the classical form of the epic corpus. The usual datings of the *Mahābhārata* (400 B.C.-A.D. 400) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (200 B.C.-A.D. 200) in themselves reveal that even these classical texts cannot be very homogenous from an ideological point of view. One example of this lack of homogeneity is the role of *bhakti* and Kṛṣṇa devotion in the *Mahābhārata*. It is possible to find different layers of *bhakti* ideology within the text (Deshpande 1991:347-48), and this continues in the retellings. One example of this is a work called *Jaiminibhārata*, written down in circa the twelfth century A.D., which has been of great importance to my own study.

All the above-mentioned points give only a rough idea of the continuity of the Indian epic tradition. In the next section I will concentrate on illustrating epic continuity by taking up some postclassical texts and very briefly discussing their characteristic features.

Epics and post-epics

We can summarize the diverse field of written epic texts of India under three main headings. First, we have two great epics attributed to Vyāsa (the *Mahābhārata*) and Vālmīki (the *Rāmāyaṇa*), respectively. The second group of texts is the body of various literary retellings, both in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. Usually they have one author, either historical or at least partly mythical, with the author continuing or varying the original Vyāsan or Vālmīkian tradition. Thus their works can be considered independent. This group also includes some classics of Sanskrit literature. Because texts of the second group participate in the ideological discussion of the great tradition, I call them *postclassical epics*.

The third set of Indian epics is again heterogenous; it is a group of so-called *folk epics*. They are in regional languages, either written or oral.³ John Leavitt describes them in this way (1991:447): “Vernacular versions of the epic have generally remained autonomous while developing according to specific cultural dynamics alongside and in interaction with the continuing transmission of the Sanskrit version.” In other words, they occupy the ground between the great tradition and the little tradition.⁴ Ramanujan and Leavitt find two main changes when classical myths or epics are retold. The first is “fragmentation;” that is, only part of the classical whole is taken up and retold in a new form. Another feature is called “proximation,” which includes “domestication,” “localization,” and “contemporarization.” With this change the gods and heroes are seen more like tellers and listeners of the story, while pan-Indian myths are transferred to local places and everything happens nearer the present time.

In leaving the question of classical versus folk epics *per se* I shall continue within the frame of ideological change, or the movement from classical to postclassical epics. My first postclassical example is a group of *bhakti*-oriented texts attributed to Jaimini, whom the tradition mentions as a disciple of Vyāsa, the traditional author of the *Mahābhārata*.

There are at least three works included in this cluster. These texts also have a close connection to the vast entity of encyclopedic *Purāṇa*-texts, but the epic connections of at least two of them suffice for them to be called post-epics. The most important is the *Jaiminibhārata*, a retelling of the fourteenth book of the *Mahābhārata*. The others are more marginal: the *Jaiminīyabhāgavatapurāṇa* is found only in manuscripts and of the “*Rāmāyaṇa*-version of Jaimini” (*Jaiminirāmāyaṇa*) only some fragments are extant. However, it is important to note that there has been at least an attempt to rewrite the two great epics and the most important devotional *purāṇa* under the name Jaimini and with a strong emphasis on *kṛṣṇa-bhakti*.

The *Jaiminibhārata* is a narration about the horse sacrifice of the Pāṇḍava brothers. The story differs in many ways from the *Mahābhārata* original. The overall tendency is to highlight the superiority of Kṛṣṇa. This “propagandistic” idea culminates in the immolation of the horse in which the old Vedic frame is used, but the sacrifice is presented as a miraculous and nonviolent offering. It is shown as the last ritual of the era, a sacrifice to end the traditional “slaughtering.” This kind of utilization of

³ On oral epics, see, e.g., Blackburn et al. 1989.

⁴ A. K. Ramanujan has further analyzed the differences between these “folk versions” and the “classical myths” (Ramanujan 1986:64-68; see also Leavitt 1991:453).

the Vedic ritual system and epic format is a clear example of the postclassical harnessing of the tradition in favor of the new ideology.

Besides the *bhakti* religion, there are also other ideologies that have used the epic tradition to promulgate their own views. One example of these is Jainism. Throughout Indian history, Jainas have devoted much energy in preserving the literary tradition, whether inside or outside their own doctrinal sphere. Many compilers of Indian story literature have been Jainas. Especially during the Middle Ages Jainism was very popular, and even various royal dynasties patronized the Jaina culture in southern and western India. At the same time the popularity of stories about the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa were at their height. Consequently, these heroes of the *Mahābhārata* and of its supplement the *Harivaṁśa* were adapted to the Jainist literature, too, and several *Jaina-Bhāratas*, *Jaina-Harivaṁśas*, and *Jaina-Rāmāyaṇas* came into existence.⁵ These are usually works by one author and they are written in Sanskrit, in Prakrit languages, or in local languages.

The most important of the Jaina epics is the *Harivaṁśapurāṇa* of Jinasena. This “essential Jaina Mahābhārata” again deviates significantly from the classical *Mahābhārata*. The *Harivaṁśapurāṇa* fuses the Pāṇḍava story with the biography of the twenty-second universal teacher (*tīrthāṅkara*) of Jainism, called Nemi or Ariṣṭanemi. The work also concentrates on Kṛṣṇa’s life, but unlike the *Jaiminibhārata*—and partly the *Mahābhārata*, too—it does not show him as a paramount god. Kṛṣṇa’s role is rather that of a prince and war hero; he is an honored person but not a man who corresponds to the Jaina ideal. Additional features illustrating Jainist ideology in the text are, among others, the final salvation (*mokṣa*) attained by the Pāṇḍavas after severe penance and a solution according to which Kṛṣṇa’s brother Balarāma became a Jaina monk.

My last group of examples is from a more regional level. One can find postepic retellings all over India, but when we study the connections between the epic tradition and different ideologies, one of the most interesting areas is Karnataka in southwestern India. Kannada literature has a rich postepic tradition in which various ideological tendencies are represented. Unlike, for instance, Tamil culture, Kannada has no indigenous epics. Thus the central feature of Kannada literature “is its ability to assimilate influences” (Aithal 1987:1). We can find both *bhakti*-oriented and Jainist versions of the epics in Kannada, but other kinds of emphases also exist. The earliest and most important local version of the *Jaiminibhārata* in Kannada was written by Lakṣmīśa (thirteenth century).

⁵ See details in Sumitra Bai and Zydenbos 1991.

Another Kannada work based on the *Mahābhārata* and dominated by *kr̥ṣṇa-bhakti* is the fifteenth-century *Karṇata-bhārata-kathamañjarī* or *Kannāḍabhārata* by Kumāravayāsa (Mulagi 1990; Rao 1990). The first complete retelling of the whole of the *Mahābhārata* in Kannada is the *Vikramārjunavijayam* or *Pampabhārata* of a Jaina poet Pampa (tenth century). An interesting Kannada text called *Sāhasabhīmavijayam* or *Gadāyuddha* also dates to the same century. This last version of the *Mahābhārata*, written by Ranna, brings Bhīma, the fierce fighter, to the fore of the five Pāṇḍavas and concentrates on his figure.⁶

In conclusion we can say that there is much to study in the relationship between the Indian epics and the spectrum of ideologies. This subject is extremely varied owing to the vast collection of texts—let alone oral material. Even the classical versions of the two epics include extremely heterogenous ideas, but when we extend our interest to the postclassical literature, such contrasts multiply. One way of understanding and analyzing the skillful “utilization” of the epic story for the sake of different ideologies is to concentrate on the various characters and their relationships in different retellings. The logic behind this approach is the epic heroes’ role as bearers of ideology. Even the characters of the *Mahābhārata* are “not singular but representative, tokens of a type” (Ramanujan 1991:427). Of course, this kind of reduction of epics and literature to a play of tokens and ideologies might be construed as dangerous. It can also mean that the expression of the stories is diluted and loses many of its nuances. At any rate, within the vast totality of Indian epics there is perhaps room even for this approach.

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⁶ For a detailed description about different postclassical *Rāmāyaṇas* that have been and still are current in the Karnataka area, with both Sanskrit originals and Kannada retellings, see Aithal 1987.

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