

Path to Dharma

தர்ம நெறி

News Letter - 14 - செய்தி மடல்



ஷேத்திர(வயல்)விநாயகர் ஆலயம்,
ஸ்ரீ முன்னேஸ்வரம், சிலாபம், இலங்கை.

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*extract from the book 'An Introduction to Hinduism' by B.S.Sarma

The Epic and Classical Periods (400 B.C. - 600 A.D.)

The Itihasas

The Itihasas narrates the stories of absorbing interest and importance, by which most of the fundamentals of Hinduism are indelibly impressed. The laws of Smritis and the principles of the Vedas are stressed deeply in the minds of the common people, through the noble characters and courageous deeds of the distinguished heroes. The actual concepts of Hinduism are set into the minds of the mass from these sublime stories.

The common mass cannot understand the high abstract philosophy of the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. Hence the sages Valmiki and Vyasa wrote the Itihasas for the benefit of the general mass. The same philosophy is presented with analogies and allegories in an interesting manner for the benefit of mankind.

Throughout the epic period (400 B.C.-400 A.D.), the Indo-Aryans settled in the Gangetic Plains of North India, and they infused their religion with the religion of the indigenous people. The two greatest Hindu epics, the *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* were written during this period. Both epics concern themselves with the duties of royal the heroes to maintain the harmonious realm of dharma and preserve and refine social order, as well as those Vedic rituals and religious practices that ensure it.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, gives new doctrines, namely *bhakti* (devotion to God) and *avatara* (incarnation of God), were introduced in this text. The Laws of Manu (Manu dharma sashtra) literature on the ideal nature of society, to maintain social stability were also a product of the epic period.

The Epics- Mahabharata and Ramayana

The two great Hindu Epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are the main mythology. According to recent evidences it is proved that both are accounts of real events, not merely mythological. *Itihasas*, literally means 'that which happened'. The epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are interwind in Hindu philosophy and serve as parables and sources of devotion for Hindus into the present day.

The Ramayana, The first epic poem (Adi-Kavya), narrates the story of Sri Rama, the ideal man. It is the history of the family of the solar race descended from Ikshvaku, in which Sri Ramachandra, the Avatara of Lord Vishnu, and his three brothers were born. The ideal characters like Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata and Sri Hanuman that we see in Ramayana clearly

established Hindu Dharma in the minds of common man. The story of the birth of Rama and his brothers, their education and marriages, the exile of Sri Rama, the carrying off Sita by Ravana and recovery of Sita, by Sri Rama and the destruction of Ravana, and the reign of Sri Rama, are described in detail in Ramayana. The Ramayana in Sanskrit means the march or journey (ayana) of Rama. This is part of the Hindu smriti, composed by Valmiki. This epic of 24,000 verses compiled in seven *kandas* (chapters).

Ramayana gives the teachings of the ancient Hindu sages and explains through allegory in narrative style and the interspersion of philosophic and devotional. The Ramayana is written in the Treta Yuga. Many infer this based on astronomical data as in 3000 B.C. Thus Ramayana has established a code of conduct which is widely considered by Hindus to be the benchmark for posterity.

Timeline

The Ramayana would have been written between the 4th and 2nd century B.C. There is a belief to say that the first and the last books of the Ramayana are later additions. The details consisting in the books II to VI, represents Rama as an ideal hero. In books I and VII, Rama is made an avatara (incarnation of Vishnu).

According to the traditional astronomical back-projection and by interpolation by Vedic means, the war between Rama and Ravana would have taken place 880148 years ago, as on 2006. This is an important observation made in invariably all astronomical almanacs (Pancanga).

According to Hindu tradition, Rama is an *avatara*, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu or God. The main purpose of his incarnation is to demonstrate the ideal human life on earth. Ultimately, Rama slays the rakshasa king Ravana and re-establishes the rule of religious and moral law on earth known in Hinduism as dharma. Gaudiya Vaishnava acharya Rupa Goswami in his *Laghu Bhagavatamrta* says that Ramayana manifests in 24th chatur-yuga.

"Splendid as a new blade of durva grass, and accompanied by Sumitra's two sons and by Bharata, He appeared in the Treta-yuga of the 24th chatur-yuga as the son of Kausalya and Dasaratha." (*Laghu Bhagavatamrta* 1.3.78).

Lessons from the Ramayana

Ramayana illustrates

- 1 Dharma in the form of Rama, who is the personification of this Hindu concept of duty.
- 2 An ideal son, an ideal king and ideal husband through Rama.
- 3 An ideal wife through Sita.
- 4 An ideal brother through Lakshmana and Bharata.
- 5 An ideal unassuming and loving devotee through Hanuman.
- 6 The dangers of lust and ego as seen in Ravana.

The Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is the second of the two major ancient Hindu epics. The *Mahabharata* is also of immense religious and philosophical importance in India. The term *Mahabharata* gives the meaning as 'the Great Epic of the Bharata era, (*bhārata* means the progeny of Bharata, the king founded the Indian kingdom of Bhāratavarsha). *Mahabharata* contains more than 100,000 verses. The epic Mahabharata's scope and grandeur is given in a nutshell by one quotation from the beginning of its first *parva* "What is found here, may be found elsewhere. What is not found here will not be found elsewhere."

The nucleus of the story is that of a struggle for the throne of Hastinapura, the kingdom ruled by the Kuru clan. The two collateral branches of the family that participate in the struggle are the Kauravas, the elder branch of the family, and the Pandavas, the younger branch. The struggle culminates leading to the 'Great battle' of Kurukshetra, and the Pandavas are ultimately victorious. It also marks the beginning of the Hindu age of Kali Yuga, through the steady breakdown of truths of which the eighteen-day war of Kurukshetra, the clash of hundreds of

thousands of men, elephants and horses, consisted. This is the fourth and final age of mankind, where the great values and noble ideas that humanity represented have crumbled, and man is speedily heading toward the complete dissolution of right action, morality and virtue in general. Some of the most noble and revered figures in the history end up fighting on the side of the Kauravas, due to allegiances formed prior to the conflict.

The Mahabharata gives a description of the Great War, the 'Battle of Kurukshetra', which broke out between the Kauravas and the Pandavas who were cousins and descendants of the lunar race. It is rightly called the fifth Veda. There is really no theme in religion, philosophy, mysticism and polity which this great epic does not touch and expound. It contains very noble moral teachings, useful lessons of all kinds, many beautiful stories and episodes, discourses, sermons, parables and dialogues which set forth the principles of morals and metaphysics. The Mahabharata is written in one hundred thousand verses by Sage Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa

In its scope, its author, Vyasa, says that one of its aims is elucidating the four goals of life: *Kama* (pleasure), *artha* (wealth), *dharma* (duty) and *moksha* (liberation). The story culminates in moksha, believed by many Hindus to be the ultimate goal of human beings. Karma and dharma play an integral role in the Mahabharata.

Structure of Mahabharata

The **Mahabharata** is written in eighteen parvas (chapters) which are:

1. *Adiparva* - Introduction, birth and upbringing of the princes.
2. *Sabhaparva* - Life at the court, the game of dice, and the exile of the Pandavas. Maya Danava erects the palace and court, at Indraprastha.
3. *Aranyakaparva* (also *Vanaparva*, *Aranyaparva*) - The twelve years in exile in the forest.
4. *Virataparva* - The year in exile spent at the court of Virata.
5. *Udyogaparva* - Preparations for war.
6. *Bhishmaparva* - The first part of the great battle, with Bhishma as commander for the Kauravas.
7. *Dronaparva* - The battle continues, with Drona as commander.
8. *Karnaparva* - The battle again, with Karna as commander.
9. *Shalyaparva* - The last part of the battle, with Shalya as commander.
10. *Sauptikaparva* - How Ashvattama and the remaining Kauravas killed the Pandava army in their sleep.
11. *Striparva* - Gandhari and the other women lament the dead.
12. *Shantiparva* - The crowning of Yudhisthira, and his instructions from Bhishma.
13. *Anushasanaparva* - The final instructions of Bhishma.
14. *Ashvamedhikaparva* - The royal ceremony or ashvamedha conducted by Yudhisthira.
15. *Ashramavasikaparva* - Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti leave for an ashram and eventual death in the forest.
16. *Mausalaparva* - The infighting between the Yadavas with maces.
17. *Mahaprasthanikaparva* - The first part of the path to death of Yudhisthira and his brothers.
18. *Svargarohanaparva* - The Pandavas return to the spiritual world.

There also exists an appendix of 16,375 verses, the *Harivamsaparva*, which focuses specifically on the life of Lord Krishna. Among the principal works and stories that are a part of the Mahabharata are the following. They are often isolated and presented as works complete in and of themselves.

1. Bhagavad Gita (Krishna instructs and teaches Arjuna. Bhishmaparva.)
2. Damayanti (or Nala and Damayanti, Aranyakaparva.)
3. Krishnavatara (the story of Krishna, the *Krishna Leela*, which is woven through many chapters of the story)
4. Rama (an abbreviated version of the Ramayana. Aranyakaparva.)
5. Rishyasringa (also written as Rshyashringa, the horned boy and rishi. Aranyakaparva.)

6. Vishnu sahasranama (the most famous hymn to Vishnu, which describes His 1000 names; Anushasanaparva.)

The Bhagavad-Gita

The most important part of the Mahabharata is the Bhagavad-Gita. It is a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield, before the war started. Lord Krishna became the charioteer of Arjuna. Lord Krishna explained the essence of Hindu dharma to Arjuna. Just as the Upanishads contain the essence of the Vedas, so does the Gita contain the essence of the Upanishads. The Gita is a universal gospel. The Gita teaches the Yoga of Synthesis.

The Puranas

The Puranas cover the intermediate period between the Vedic and the Classical epochs. Cast in the form of parables and narratives, became the scripture of the common. Apart from their religious and often sectarian significance, they furnish a picture of social, political and cultural life and comprise an astonishingly varied repertory of folklore and information regarding diverse topics including philosophy, ethics, legal institutions, popular festivals, and several arts. They deal even with subjects like grammar, prosody, rhetoric, archery and care of horses and elephants.

The language of the Vedas is archaic, and the subtle philosophy of the Vedanta and the Upanishads is difficult to understand and assimilate. Therefore, the Puranas are of special value as they put forward the philosophical truths and precious teachings in an easier manner. They give ready access to the mysteries of life and the key to bliss. Imbibe their teachings.

The Puranas belong to the class of Suhrit-Samhitas and they have five characteristics (Pancha Lakshana):

1. History
2. Cosmology
3. Secondary creation
4. Genealogy of kings
5. Manvantharas

Vyasa is the compiler of the Puranas from age to age; and for this age, he is Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, the son of Parsara. The Puranas were written to popularise the religion of the Vedas. They contain the cream of the Vedas. The aim of the Puranas is to stress on the minds of the common people, the teachings of the Vedas and to generate in them devotion to God, through concrete examples, myths, stories, legends, lives of saints, kings and great men, allegories and chronicles of great historical events. The Puranas were meant, not for the scholars, but for the ordinary people who could not understand high philosophy and who could not study the Vedas. The Puranas are meant for the masses with inferior intellect. Religion is taught in a very easy and interesting way through these Puranas. Even now, the Puranas are very popular.

The Puranas contain the history of remote times. They also give a description of the regions of the universe not visible to the ordinary physical eye. They are very interesting to read and are full of information of all kinds. The most popular Puranas are the Srimad Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, and Markandeya Purana.

Srimad Bhagavata Purana and the Ten Avatars

The Srimad Bhagavad Purana is taken here as an example from the whole heap of Puranas. This Purana is a chronicle of the ten various Avatars of Lord Vishnu. The aim of every Avatara is to save the world from some great danger, to destroy the wicked and protect the virtuous.

The ten Avatars are:

1. Matsya (the Fish), to save Vaivasvata Manu from destruction by a deluge.

2. Kurma (the Tortoise), -to enable the world to recover some precious things that were lost in the deluge.
3. Varaha (the Boar), to support by its back for keeping (supporting) the churning rod when the gods and the Asuras (demons) churned the ocean of milk.
4. Narasimha (the Man-Lion), to rescue from the waters, the earth which had been dragged down by a demon named Hiranyaksha.
5. Vamana (the Dwarf), to free the world from the oppression of Hiranyakasipu, a demon, the father of Bhakta Prahlada.
6. Parsurama (Rama with the axe, the destroyer of the Kshatriya race), -to restore the power of the gods which had been eclipsed by the penance and devotion of King Bali.
7. Ramachandra (the hero of Ramayana, the son of King Dasharatha), -to deliver the country from the oppression of the Kshatriya rulers.
Parasurama destroyed the Kshatriya race twenty-one times, to destroy the wicked Ravana.
8. Sri Krishna (the teacher of the Bhagavad Gita), -to destroy Kamsa and other demons, to deliver His wonderful message of the Gita in the Mahabharata war, and to become the centre of the Bhakti Schools of India.
9. Buddha (the prince-ascetic and the founder of Buddhism), - to prohibit animal sacrifices and teach piety.
10. Kalki (the hero riding on a white horse, who is still to come at the end of the Kali-Yuga). is to the destruction of the wicked and the re-establishment of virtue.

The Tamil Puranas

Lord Siva incarnated Himself in the form of Dakshinamurti to impart knowledge to the four Kumaras. He took human form to initiate Sambandhar, Manikkavasagar and Pattinathar. He appeared in flesh and blood to help his devotees and relieve their sufferings. The divine Lilas (sports) of Lord Siva are recorded in the Tamil Puranas like Siva Purana, Periya Purana, Siva Parakramam and Tiruvilayadal Purana.

Study of the Puranas, listening to sacred recitals of scriptures, describing and expounding of the transcendent Lilas (divine sports) of the Blessed Lord – these form an important part of Sadhana (spiritual practice) of the Lord's devotee. Sravana (hearing of the Srutis or scriptures) is a part of Navavidha-Bhakti (nine modes of devotion). Kathas (narrative or story) and Upanyasas open the springs of devotion in the hearts of hearers and develop Prema-Bhakti (divine love for God) which confers immortality on the Jiva (individual soul).

The nine modes of devotion (Navavidha-Bhakti)

1. hearing His (God's) names and glories,
2. singing them,
3. remembering the Lord,
4. worship (service) of His Feet,
5. adoration with flowers,
6. prostrations,
7. regarding oneself as His servant,
8. as His friend,
9. total self-surrender