

# Itihasa and Epic: A Contrastive Analysis\*

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Before we make any statement about epic traditions in world literature we must make explicit the fundamental assumptions about the nature of epic and its relation to literary forms like itihasa, purana, secondary epic and literary epic mahakavya. In other words, the contrastive analysis of epic and itihasa will be useful in avoiding terminological confusions and in identifying main characteristics of subclasses. This identification and analysis may be relevant to the genesis and interpretation of the classics.

'Which is the longest epic in the world?', the teacher asks. 'The Mahabharata', the student answers. This situation may be quite familiar and acceptable to many teachers and students. But Sri Aurobindo has a point to make: 'These two poems ("Mahabharata and Ramayana") are epical in their motive and spirit, but they are not like any other two epics in the world, but are entirely of their own kind and subtly different from others in their principle. It is not only that although they contain an early heroic story and a transmutation of many primitive elements, their form belongs to a period of highly developed intellectual, ethical and social culture, is enriched with a body of mature thought and uplifted by a ripe nobility and refined gravity of ethical tone and therefore these poems are quite different from primitive Edda and saga and greater in breadth of view and substance and height of motive—I do not speak now of aesthetic quality and poetic perfection—than the Homeric poems, while at the same time there is still an early breath, a direct and straightforward vigour, a freshness and greatness and pulse of life, a simplicity of strength and beauty that makes of them quite another kind than the elaborately constructed epics of Virgil or Milton, Firdausi or Kalidasa... One of the elements of the old vedic education was a knowledge

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of the significant tradition, itihasa, and it is this word that was used by the ancient critics to distinguish the Mahabharata and Ramayana from the later literary epics'.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of itihasa, as defined by Mahabharata (Al—267) is the description of Veda: "itihasa puranabyam Vedam Samupabrumhayet", 'itihasa and purana must describe veda'. The Mahabharata is usually labelled as the fifth veda. This is beautifully explained by Sri Aurobindo: 'The itihasa was an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned to creative use as a significant mythus or tale expressive of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and formative of the mind of the people. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are itihesas of this kind on a large scale and with a massive purpose. The poets who wrote and those who added to these great bodies of poetic writing did not intend merely to tell an ancient tale in a beautiful or noble manner or even to fashion a poem pregnant with much richness of interest and meaning, though they did both these things with a high success; they wrote with a sense of their function as architects and sculptors of life, creative exponents, fashioners of significant forms of the national thought and religion and ethics and culture. A profound stress of thought on life, a large and vital view of religion and society, a certain strain of philosophic idea runs through these poems and the whole ancient culture of India is embodied in them with a great force of intellectual conception and living presentation.<sup>2</sup> In short, the whole tone of itihasa is coloured by the suggestion of the spiritual and infinite. Swami Vivekananda also treats itihasa as an integral part of religion.<sup>3</sup> These scholars experience the presence of a religio-philosophical mind in itihasa. The Western definition of the epic has not any parallel to this element.

Harry Shaw defines the epic as follows: A lengthy narrative poem in which action, characters and language are on a heroic level and style is exalted and even majestic.<sup>4</sup> The major characteristics of an epic are: (1) a setting remote in time and place; (2) an objective, lofty, dignified style; (3) a simple plot; (4) a central incident (or a series of incidents) dealing with legendary or traditional material; (5) a theme involving universal human problems; (6) a towering hero of great stature, superhuman strength of body, character or mind; (7) supernatural forces entering the action. This definition of the epic, based on primary and secondary epics of the West, cannot do full justice to

the itihasa of India. 'It is notable that the two vast Indian epics have been considered as much as Dharma-Shastras as great historico-mythic epic narratives, itihisas. They are, that is to say, noble, vivid and puissant pictures of life, but they utter and breathe throughout their course the law and ideal of a great and high ethical and religious spirit in life and aim in their highest intention at the idea of the Divine and the way of the mounting soul in the action of the world'.<sup>5</sup> So the itihasa of Indian literature transcends the limits of the Homeric epic of Western tradition and presents a more *holistic view of life*. This does not rule out the possibility of an integral approach for the analysis of epics and itihisas but it has limitations. New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstruction have offered tools for the analysis of myths, and they can be profitably used in the study of epics and itihisas. But more important is the literary understanding of these works and for this 'Grammar of narration' has to be understood. 'Grammar of narration' is the set of principles or tendencies governing the story-telling process. The old-fashioned literary criticism of the epic and itihasa, the separating out of historically different layers in composite works, has become irrelevant.

It is true that the itihisas and primary epics, before scriptal fixation, have passed through shapeless, anomalous and unorganised stages. Both epic and itihasa make the reader aware of the fragmentary nature of the texts, the constant stitching together of earlier sources. But this has become an elaborately layer-composite artistry which may be compared with photographic montage or postcubist painting. In epic and itihasa *cohesion* takes the place of unity and harmony. So any analytical approach is not likely to meet with complete success. The great lovers of Indian epics like Sri Aurobindo were aware of the massive complexity of itihisas and they spoke of 'total impression'. 'There is the same power to embrace great spaces in a total view and the same tendency to fill them with an abundance of minute, effective, vivid and significant detail. There is brought too into the frame of the narrative a very considerable element of other tales, legends, episodes, most of them of a significant character suitable to the method of itihasa, and an extraordinary amount of philosophical, religious, ethical, social and political thinking sometimes direct, sometimes cast into the form of the legend and episode. The ideas of the Upanishads and of the great philosophies are brought in continually and sometimes given new developments, as in the *Gita*; religious myth and tale and idea and teaching

are made part of the tissue; the ethical ideals of the race are expressed or are transmuted into the shape of tale and episode as well as embodied in the figures of the story, political and social ideals and institutions are similarly developed or illustrated with a high vividness and clearness and space is found too for aesthetic and other suggestions connected with the life of the people. All these things are interwoven into the epic narrative with a remarkable skill and closeness. The irregularities inevitable in so combined and difficult a plan and in a work to which many poets of an unequal power have contributed fall into their place in the general massive complexity of the scheme and assist rather than break the total impression. *The whole is a poetic expression unique in its power and fullness of the entire soul and thought and life of a people.*<sup>6</sup>

The Western mind failed to grasp this central principle of epics and itihisas. They adopted a highly intellectual and analytical approach which failed to see the soul-life of these works. 'Socrates, though he steadily testified to the exemplary value of the old poems and offered no other explanation of Homer's felicitous expression and greatness of mind than divine prompting, began to find fault with the poets as thinkers and historians. He noted in them error in fact and warned against their more general ignorance. In the *Republic* Plato, his pupil, began an attack particularly on epic and drama...Plato decried the effect of the Homeric poems on the young; they reported scandal of the gods and suggested weakness in the heroes.'<sup>7</sup>

This tradition continued through the ages in the West. The dogmatism of the various Christian sects and spread of Islam only intensified this objection to anything that is not intellectually convincing. The subsequent development in the realm of Western culture is recorded in many twentieth-century writings. 'The belief in the certainty of scientific knowledge lies at the very basis of Cartesian philosophy and of the world view derived from it, and it was here, at the very outset that Descartes went wrong. Twentieth-century physics has shown us very forcefully that there is no absolute truth in science that allow concepts and theories are limited and approximate. The Cartesian belief in scientific truth is still widespread today and is reflected in the *scientism* that has become typical of our Western culture... The acceptance of the Cartesian view as absolute truth and of Descartes'

method as the only valid way to knowledge has played an important role in bringing about our current cultural imbalance.<sup>8</sup> But the rich Indian imagination has always resisted this temptation: they always understood itihisas as essential *vehicles to convey the doctrines of a philosophy rooted in mystical experience*. Of course there are a few exceptions. The most striking exceptions are the writings of the great Indologist D. D. Kosambi who applies the principles of Marxism to the interpretation of history: 'Modern life is founded upon science and freedom. That is, modern production rests in the final analysis upon accurate cognition of material reality (science), and recognition of necessity (freedom). A myth may grip us by its imagery and may indeed have portrayed some natural phenomena or process at a time when mankind had not learned to probe nature's secrets or to discover the endless properties of matter. Religion clothes some myth in dogma. 'Science needs religion' is a poor way of saying that the scientist and those who utilise his discoveries must not dispense with social ethics. There is no need to the Gita or the Bible for an ethical system sandwiched with pure superstition. Such books can still be enjoyed for their aesthetic value. Those who claim more usually try to shackle the minds of other people and to impede man's progress under the most specious claims'.<sup>9</sup> No doubt this is an over-simplification of a complex truth. It is this type of simplistic application of Marxian principles that is resisted by the Indian mind which believes in the interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena. The Indian mind which is more interested in the experience of the reality than in the description of it, had developed special forms of communication and one of them is the style of epics and scholars try to discover hidden meanings in these classical poems. Some others try allegorical interpretations. But the typical Indian mind may be satisfied with an *impressionistic description*. The best examples are Sri Aurobindo's descriptions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.<sup>10</sup>

Epics of all nations express a *national tradition* with due emphasis on political ideals, social values, and social conflicts. The itihisas give special importance to spiritual and religious aspirations of the nation. So there is a certain measure of truth in the saying that the Mahabharata and Ramayana provide the yardstick of Indianness. Some may even go to the extent of saying that whatever Indian is in the itihasa. Of course this is an exaggeration. The masses of India, in spite of their poverty and social segregation

through centuries have maintained many value systems and institutions which are not attested in modern versions of itihasa. But the fact remains that itihisas have contributed very much to the development of the political and cultural unit called India. For example in the Ramayana there are clear descriptions of various geographical zones and ethnic groups of India. Modern Indian literature though written in different languages is one and the same primarily because all these languages are impregnated with itihasa motifs. This phenomenon may be explained from a different perspective. Neither the Mahabharata nor the Ramayana is the work of a single individual mind 'but of the mind of a nation; it is the poem of itself written by a whole people'.<sup>11</sup>

In the itihisas an *objective and disinterested element* is always present when the human condition is depicted. This maturity of mind, a world vision, not marred by personal attachments, is maintained by keeping *aesthetic distance* between the writer and the characters. In these works the fate of a character is part of the pattern; the writers leave the stage to the characters like Arjuna, Duryodhana, Karna, Bhishma, Rama and Lakshmana. One of the objections raised against itihisas by Western scholars is that in them the individual loses his attraction as a human person and becomes a puppet in the cosmic drama. The mingling of terrestrial nature and supernature, though adversely criticised in the past, has now become acceptable to Western writers also. The magical realism of modern fiction is the best example. In modern fiction and the epic theatre *exaggeration* has a purpose to do *full justice to the truth* of the status of life perceived in the imagination of the poet.

The defamiliarisation process which is used as a literary device also is helped by mingling the natural and the supernatural elements. Through this process the *authorial voice becomes objective* and authentic. It is this objectivity and authority that our contemporary writers are seeking—Marques in fiction, Brecht in epic theatre, James Joyce in *Ulysses*, Anand in *Abhayatikal*, O. V. Vijayan in *Dharmapuram* and Ayyappanikkar in *Kutumbapuram*. The epics and itihisas continue to fascinate contemporary writers however they may struggle to interpret them. It is their plurality of meaning which is more rewarding for literature than dogma. (See charts.)

When epics and itihahas are subjected to contrastive analysis the irresistible conclusion is this: 'As rich in freshness of life but immeasurably more profound and evolved in thought and substance than the Greek, and advanced in maturity of culture but more vigorous and vital and young in strength than the Latin epic poetry, the Indian epic poems were fashioned to serve a greater and completer national and cultural function and that they should have been received and absorbed by both the high and the low, the cultured and the masses and remained through twenty centuries an intimate and formative part of the life of the whole nation is of itself the strongest possible evidence of the greatness and fineness of this ancient Indian culture.'<sup>12</sup>

*Feature-Contrast in Epic Forms*

Contrasting feature	Itihasa	Primary epic	Secondary epic	Literary epic/ Mahakavya	Purana
Age	Remote past	Remote past	Past	Past	Past
Time Concept	Cyclic time A—B—A	Linear time- Alpha to Omega	Linear or Cyclic	Linear	Linear or Cyclic
Centrifugal Force	Cohesion	Cohesion	Unity	Unity and harmony	Unity
Best literary description	Impressionistic description/ Grammar of narration	Impressionistic description/ Grammar of narration	Analysis	Analysis	Impressionistic description/ Grammar of narration



*Selected Characteristics of Epics Along a Scale 0—100*

Features	0	25	50	75	100
Literariness	Puranas		Secondary epics	Primary epics,	Itihasas, Literary epics
Religio-Philosophic Hollistic tone/ View of life	Primary epics, Literary epics		Secondary epics	Puranas and Itihasa:	Sacred Texts
Objectivity/ aesthetic distance and authenticity	Puranas		Secondary epics	Literary epic	Epics, Itihasa
Length	Puranas		Literary epics,	Secondary epics,	Epics, Itihasa

*Examples of*

- a) Itihasa: Mahabharata and Ramayana
- b) Primary epics/Homeric epics: Iliad and Odyssey
- c) Secondary epics: Aeneid, Adhyatma Ramayana
- d) Literary epics: Paradise Lost, Raghuvamsa
- e) Puranas: Stories in the book of Genesis and Siva purana.

### References

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- 6 *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, p.288.
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- 8 Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (Fontana, 1988), pp: 42—43.
- 9 D. D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality* (Sangam Books, 1983), p. 37.
- 10 *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, pp. 286—90.
- 11 *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, p. 287.
- 12 *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, p. 293.

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