

6. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata may be hailed as the two feet on which ancient Indian culture stands. Their influence on the mind and the life of the people of this country has been considerable. The Ramayana is the story of Lord Ram who is the eighth avatara of the Hindus. Lord Ram's story was first penned by Lord Valmiki in about fourth century B.C. Valmiki's story is known as the Ramayana. The Ramayana relates the story of Lord Ram who was the son of Dashrath, the king of Ayodhya. Lord Ram's rescue of Sitaji, who had been abducted by Ravana is the staple story of this grand epic.

6. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

Originally the book consisted of five cantos, but was later presented in seven-book form. It is one of the greatest epics of the world. It consists of more than 24000 Sanskrit couplets. The Ramayana also depicts the social life, the beliefs, customs, traditions of the times. The religion of these people must have been polytheistic because besides the Vedic Gods with Indra as their chief, new deities like Kama, Kuber, Ganga, Kartikeya, Laxmi and Uma are also mentioned. Some deified creatures also get honourable mention. Prominent among these deities are Hanuman ji, Jamvant, Garuda, Jatayu.

6. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

By the beginning of the Christian era the story of Ram had become a national treasure of India. It was being appreciated not only by the Vaishnavas but also by people belonging to the other sects. Moreover, the story was transported to nearby countries like Java, Sumatra, Thailand and Cambodia. In Indonesia, Ramkatha is still popular. People appreciate the character of Lord Ram because he is the symbol of perfection. Likewise, his consort, Devi Sita, is worshipped as the ideal of Hindu womanhood.

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In the sixteenth century Mahakavi Tulsidas wrote the story of Ram in his inimitable style. The story came to be known as the Ram Charitamanas. This epic story is told in Hindi couplets. The popularity of Tulsidas's Ramayana has pushed the worship of Shakti to the background at least in northern India where Hindi is the dominant language. Even the illiterate try to learn the story of Lord Ram through its presentation in Ramlila. During the Dushera the whole story of Lord Ram is recited and enacted through Ramlila.

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Among the epics of the Hindus, the Mahabharata occupies a pride of place. According to the Hindu view the Mahabharata was known as the Bharata Samhita and was composed by Vyasa and contained 24 thousand verses. Later it was increased to six lakh verses though only one lakh verses exist today. The Mahabharata is an encyclopaedia of Indian knowledge which had been attained here before the composition of this great epic. In its introduction it has been rightly pointed out that what is not contained in the Mahabharata cannot be found elsewhere. The Mahabharata also called the fifth Veda, is looked upon as an authority on conduct and society.

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Pargiter closely examines the chronology of the Puranas and on the basis of his findings asserts that the Mahabharata might have been fought sometime in 1100 B.C. and the epic, consequently, must have been composed near about that century. The story continued to be larded with more facts and by the fifth century A.D. it acquired its present form. Originally it was a heroic poem but generally it acquired a religious orientation. In the end it became a theistic treatise in which Vishnu is elevated to the rank of the Supreme Being.

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The religion accepted by the Mahabharata is Vedic but it gradually modified into modern Hinduism. The Vedic gods, Indra, Vishnu, Agni, Surya, Vayu and Varuna continue to have importance but they soon yield the palm to the new order of deities represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who came to be regarded as the different aspects of the same Supreme Being. Later on Krishna came to be identified with Vishnu. The place of Prajapati is taken over by Narayana.

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The Mahabharata also contains the Upanishdic idea of monoism. According to the Mahabharata the different gods are simply, the manifestations of the Supreme Brahma. However, the Brahma of the Upanishads becomes Ishwara in the Mahabharata. He acquires a different personality. He acquires different names like Shiva, Vishnu and Krishna. Although the Mahabharata relates stories of wars and internecine wars, yet ethics has an important place in this work. It says that in this world pleasure and pain are intermixed and both are ephemeral and short-lasting. Hence, we should so discipline ourselves that we can accept both pleasure and pain with equanimity.

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One must follow Dharma, which is the ethical code; it is relative and dependent on the conditions of life. It is dharma which only keeps the society stable. Without dharma the society would become chaotic and anarchy would result. It is dharma that one should not do others what is disagreeable to his own self. Caste and family do not lead to success. The means to success are self-control, generosity, non-violence, constant virtue and asceticism. The highest virtue is truth. Kingdom, progeny, glory, wealth, all combined do not equal to one sixteenth part of truth.

6. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

The Bhagvad Gita is part of the epic Mahabharata. Since the theme of the Mahabharata is the struggle between rival factions of the Bharata clan, the Bhagvad Gita begins with a description of the battlefield and the innumerable warriors lined up for fighting. The scene is laid in Kurukshetra, near Hastinapur, near modern Delhi. We find Arjun, one of the warrior princess, stationary in a kind of no man's land between the two warring armies, his own and the enemy's. Krishna is his charioteer. Arjun expresses some qualms about killing people, some of them his own kinsmen. This leads Krishna to expound his philosophy which is contained in this beautiful work.

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Krishna, according to the Bhagavad Gita, is the Supreme God. This deification of Krishna came about by a slow process. Sisupal, a rival chieftain, countered this deification of Krishna. The Mahabharata portrays many roles of Krishna. By slow process he becomes an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu.

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According to the Bhagvad Gita, the world was produced by Krishna from his own prakriti (nature). Krishna says: "All things exist in me. Supported by my material exigence. I cause this entire system of existing things to emanate again, without any power of their own, by the power of their material essence, when a devotee recognises the individual essence of every thing to be comprehended in one and to be the only emanation of it, he then attains to the supreme spirit. Earth, water, fire, wind, ether, heart, intellect, and egoism: into these eight components is my nature divided. This nature is my inferior one; but learn my superior nature other than this, of a vital kind, by means of which this universe is sustained. Understand that all things are produced from this latter, or higher nature.

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The Bhagvad Gita affirms that though human body is mortal and perishable, the soul is immortal and eternal. The first is an emanation of Krishna's inferior nature, while the latter comes from his superior nature. The soul is subject to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth till it unites with Krishna's essence and thus achieves nirvana. This is the only real existence of spirit which is eternal. As Arjun feels qualms about killing his own kinsmen, Krishna, tells him that dying is not a reality, because the soul cannot be killed; it will either be reincarnated or absorbed into Brahma.

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According to the Bhagvad Gita prakriti is composed of three qualities known as gunas – the sattwa (goodness), the rajas (passion) and the tamas (ignorance). Since the soul is united with prakriti it comes under the influence of these three gunas. These gunas unite the soul with maya or illusion. Krishna is responsible for all our actions, good as well as evil and hence the question of free will does not arise. Since, nirvana is the release of the soul from maya and from the influence of the above-mentioned three gunas, the best way to effecting this release is by meditation. The Bhagvad Gita shows that man cannot live without action. He is obliged to perform actions that are imposed upon him by the obligations of caste. Krishna tells Arjun it is caste obligation (being a Kshatriya) that he not only may kill, but he must go to the battle. Salvation may come through devotion to Krishna.

6. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

1. Who first wrote the story of Lord Ram?

Answer: Lord Valmiki first wrote the story of Lord Ram.

2. Who was the father of Lord Ram?

Answer: King Dashrath was the father of Lord Ram.

3. Where did Ram go to rescue Sita ji?

Answer: Ram went to Sri Lanka to rescue Sita ji.

5. How many cantos were there in the original Ramayana?

Answer: There were 5 cantos in the original Ramayana.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

6. How many Sanskrit couplets are there in the Ramayana?

Answer: There are 24000 Sanskrit couplets in the Ramayana.

7. What else, beside the story of Ram, does the Ramayana depict?

Answer: Beside the story of Ram, the Ramayana depicts the social life, the beliefs, customs and traditions of the time.

8. What sort of religion did the Vedic people have?

Answer: The Vedic people had the Polytheistic religion.

9. Who was the chief of the Vedic Gods?

Answer: Indra was the chief of the Vedic Gods.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

11. By what time did the story of Lord Ram become a national treasure of India?

Answer: The story of Lord Ram became a national treasure of India by the beginning of the Christian Era.

12. In which neighboring countries is the story of Ram known?

Answer: The story of Ram is also known in the neighboring countries like Java, Sumatra, Thailand, Cambodia and indonesia.

13. Who wrote the Ramcharitmanas?

Answer: Mahakavi Tulsidas wrote the Ramcharitmanas.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

14. How do illiterate people try to learn the story of Lord Ram?

Answer: The illiterate people tried to learn the story of Lord Ram through Ramlila.

15. Who was the author of the Mahabharata?

Answer: Ved Vyas was the author of the Mahabharata.

16. How many verses does the Mahabharata contain?

Answer: The Mahabharata contains 24000 verses.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

17. When, according to Pargitar, was the battle of Mahabharata fought?

Answer: According to Pargitar, the battle of Mahabharata was fought sometime in 1100 B.C.

18. When did the Mahabharata acquire its present form?

Answer: The Mahabharata acquired its present form by the fifth century A.D.

19. Who is elevated to the rank of the Supreme Being in the Mahabharata?

Answer: Vishnu is elevated to the rank of the Supreme Being in the Mahabharata.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

20. Which new order of deities occupies an important place in the Mahabharata?

Answer: The new order of deities occupies an important place in Mahabharata are Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh.

21. Which Upanishadic idea is contained in the Mahabharata?

Answer: The Mahabharata contains the Upanishadic idea of monoism

22. With whom is Lord Krishna identified in the Mahabharata?

Answer: Lord Krishna is identified with Lord Vishnu in the Mahabharata.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

23. What should human beings accept with equanimity?

Answer: Human beings accept pain and pleasure with equanimity.

24. What is the highest virtue according to the Mahabharata?

Answer: Truth is the highest virtue according to the Mahabharata.

4. Who abducted Sita?

Answer: Ravana abducted Sita.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

25. Where has the scene of the Bhagvada Gita been laid?

Answer: The scene of the Bhagvad Gita has been laid in Kurukshetra.

26. How did Lord Krishna create this world?

Answer: Lord Krishna created this world with his Prakriti or Nature.

27. What are the eight divine components of God's nature?

Answer: The eight divine components of God's nature are: earth, water, fire, wind, ether, heart, intellect and egoism.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

28. Name the qualities of which Prakriti is composed?

Answer: The Prakriti is composed of three qualities named as Sattwa (goodness), Rajas (passion) and Tamas (ignorance)

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29. Is there free will available to man, according to the Bhagvad Gita?

Answer: According to the Bhagvad Gita, there is no free will available to man.

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Comprehension

Answer the questions given below in one sentence each: -

30. Why are actions necessary?

Answer: Actions are necessary for a man to do because he is obliged to do so.

10. Which deified animals got honourable mention in the Ramayana?

Answer: Hanuman (monkey), Jambant (bear), Garuda (bird), Jatayu (bird) and Nandi (ox) got honourable mention in the Ramayana.

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Vocabulary

Find out the meanings of the following words and use them in sentences: -

- a. Rescue = to set free
Lord Ram went to Sri Lanka to rescue Sita.

- b. Abduct = kidnap
Ravana abducted Sita.

- c. Couplets = Verses of two lines
Ramayana has many couplets.

- d. Polytheistic = believer in many Gods
The Hindu religion is polytheistic.

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Vocabulary

Find out the meanings of the following words and use them in sentences: -

e. Treasure = wealth

A hidden wealth is called treasure.

f. Worship = to pray

I worship Lord Shiva.

g. Dominant = prominent

He has a very dominant position in the society.

h. Encyclopedia = full of knowledge

She is an encyclopedia of cooking.

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Vocabulary

Find out the meanings of the following words and use them in sentences: -

i. Chronology =

In history, we study events in a chronological order.

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Vocabulary

Give the Synonyms of the following words: -

1. Rescue = save, free
2. Dominant = prominent
3. Larded = decorated
4. Chaotic = disorderly
5. Progeny = breed
6. Qualm = anxiety

calm