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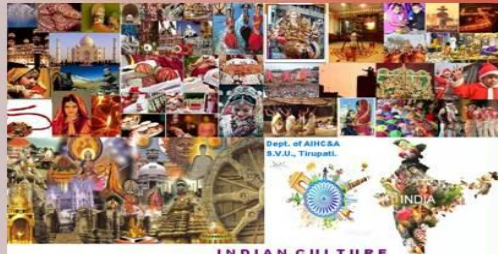
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Paper : **Indian Religion and Philosophy**
Module : **THE EPICS: RĀMĀYAṆA AND MAHĀBHĀRATA**


INDIAN CULTURE


ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

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Component-I (B) – Description of module:

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Religion and Philosophy
Module Name/Title	The epics : <i>rāmāyaṇa</i> and <i>mahābhārata</i>
Module Id	I C / IRP / 05
Pre requisites	Knowledge of Indian Epics
Objectives	To study the great epics of Indian thought, the <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> and the <i>Mahābhārata</i> , and their social, ethical, metaphysical aspects
Keywords	<i>Śruti</i> , <i>Smṛti</i> , <i>Purāṇas</i> , <i>Itihāsas</i>

E-Text (Quadrant-I):

1. Introduction

The Hindu scriptural literature is so vast and comprehensive that there is no branch of knowledge left uninvestigated by the great thinkers of India. These scriptural texts of the Hindus are broadly divided into two categories- the *Śruti* and the *smṛti*. The *Śruti* texts are 'God revealed' and the *smṛti* texts are 'Man realized.' While the *Śruti* texts deal with eternal principles, the *smṛti texts* deal with the practical application of those eternal principles according to the changing times. In the Hindu religious thought, '*Śruti*' stands for the Vedas. *Śruti* literally means what is heard. Great *ṛṣis* are said to have heard the eternal truths of religion and have left a record of them for the benefit of others. *smṛti* collectively means the secondary scriptures. They derive their authority from the *Śruti* because their object is to expand and exemplify the principles of the Vedas. The difference between *Śruti* and *smṛti* is that *Śruti* is the eternal Veda, not the compilation of any mortal being, while *smṛti* is literature composed by various sages on the basis of their spiritual insights. Therefore *Śruti* is regarded as superior to the *smṛti*. According to some scholars, *smṛti* texts consist of – (1) codes of law (*dharmaśāstras*), (2) epics (*Itihāsas*), (3) legends (*purāṇas*), (4) manuals of worship (*āgamas*), and (5) schools of philosophy(*darśanas*). Among these *dharmaśāstras* cater to the needs of intellectuals, the *purāṇas* and *itihāsas* are mainly directed to the masses that need more of an emotional satisfaction from religion. The teachings of the Vedas are so subtle and abstract that they are very difficult of being grasped and assimilated by the ordinary man of the world. But the quintessence of the Vedas has to be mastered by the common man to have a thorough knowledge of the highest Truth. So our ancient sages

have reduced the Vedic ideals into simple and understandable compositions commonly known as the *purāṇas* and *itihāsas*. They are in the form of stories and narratives with a historic touch behind them which not only impress the reader but also expound the philosophical truths in such a lucid style that a sincere spiritual aspirant will get a spontaneous urges from within to live the ideals in his own life. As the seeker progresses, he finds new and higher meanings in the same text which take them forward in their spiritual pursuits. Thus they help to grow from *bhakti* to *jñāna* and from there to realization.

2. Epics (*Itihāsas*)

Itihāsa (*Iti-ha-asa*) literally means 'It-so-happened.' It also means that 'It is happened.' So these are considered as permanent histories of human life and endeavour. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are the two great *itihāsas* or epics of the Indian tradition. These two epics have exercised a profound influence upon India. They are very popular among the Hindus as the repository of great ethical and human values. Presented in their essential force and implication they are out and out moral. The *Rāmāyaṇa* inculcates within its body almost all the moral ideals which may be connected with the human life in all its personal, domestic, social and political aspects in their fullest perfection. Here ethical percepts and ideals are not talked of separately, but are intertwined within the flow of the story itself in all its steps. On the other hand, the *Mahābhārata* deals with the moral percepts separately also in the form of moral counsels from Bhīṣma, Yudhiṣṭira and others. The *Gītā*, which form a part of *Mahābhārata* may be treated as a treatise on ethics itself. Over and above these ethical concepts, the legends which comprise them, the national heroes who they celebrate and the truths implied in these great epics have supplied poets, dramatists, theologians, political thinkers, painters and many others with their principal themes. Along with the educated section of people, uneducated group were also familiar with them. Hence directly and indirectly, they have permeated into the national consciousness from the highest classes to the lowest of the Indians. Public and private recitations of these two epics are common and incessant and this testifies to the religious and moral significance of these two great epics. While the Vedas are very sophisticated, prosaic and abstract, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* form a popular 'Veda' and provide the simplest and most graphic introduction to the Hindu thought, culture and philosophy.

2.1. The *Rāmāyaṇa*

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is regarded as the first poetical work (*Ādikāvya*) of purely human origin in the literature of India, and its traditional author, Vālmīki as the first Indian poet (*ādi kavi* -) since he was the first author in Sanskrit who produced *ślokas*. Before his time there were only the mantras of the Vedas which were difficult to understand. Vālmīki himself says

'*sañkalpithaāthapradam Ādi kāvyam,*' which means that with whatever *sañkalpa* you approach this book; you will get that meaning out of this book. The word 'Rāmāyaṇa' is a combination of 'Rām' and 'āyaṇ' which means 'going of Rāma' or the 'travels of Rāma.' The *Rāmāyaṇa* consists of 24,000 verses in seven cantos divided into 500 songs. The seven cantos are: *Bālakāṇḍam, Ayodhyakāṇḍam, Āraṇyakāṇḍam, Kiṣkindakāṇḍam, Sundarakāṇḍam, Yudhakāṇḍam* and *Uttarakāṇḍam*. It has been translated into most of the Indian as well as several foreign languages including Russian. Among the many versions of Rāmāyaṇa, the most important is the original Sānskrit version and the Tamil version of Kambar. Equally important is the *Rāmācharitamānas* which is a Hindi version of Rāmāyaṇa written by Tulasidas. It is the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* retold in Hindi version with a poetry and deep devotion. Tulasidas looks upon Śrī Rāma as the supreme incarnation of the divine being, born for the salvation of mankind. Other notable translations are that of the Kannada poet Narahari Kavi's Torave *Rāmāyaṇa* and Thunchath Rāmānujan Ezuthachan's Adhyātma *Rāmāyaṇam* Kilipattu in Malayalam. As stated earlier, Rāmāyaṇa is the story of Rāma. According to Swāmi Nityānanda, 'Through the vehicle of an interesting story centering around the incarnation of Vishnu as Rāma, the Prince of Kosala (capital of Ayodhya) believed to have happened in *Treta yuga*, and his queen Sīta; the *Rāmāyaṇa* instructs humanity how to lead a fruitful life and attain the *Puruṣārthas*, the *summum bonum* of human birth and existence. In the ultimate analysis, it is an allegory of high philosophical knowledge- the story of the progress of man- which is the secret of its every growing and immense popularity.'

2.2. Social and Ethical Aspects of the Rāmāyaṇa

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is pregnant with the highest philosophy that mankind can ever conceive of. It represents the true Hindu spirit of unconditional adherence to the law of righteousness and the performance of one's prescribed duty. To assert the greatness of a life of activity based on the righteousness underlying the law of the Divine Being is one of the main aims of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. According to this work *dharma* is the soul of life. Śrī Rāma represents in himself the ideal son, the ideal brother, the ideal husband, and above all the ideal king. Through the characters in it the *Rāmāyaṇa* teaches man how he can fulfill the demands of *dharma*. Social life and spiritual life are wonderfully harmonized in it. *Ahimsā* and *Kṣatriyadharmā* are brought together in it. *Bhakti yoga* and *karma* and *jñāna* are fused into it. Social life is emphasized here, for man is a member of society and without society's good, his good cannot be achieved. And without God's grace no individual and no society can progress. Śrī Rāma's government is a specimen of ideal administration. It is in fact an earthly representation of the divine government of the universe under the supreme sovereign, the

almighty. To bestow due attention on *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, on the individual, the society, the nation and their relation to the universe as a whole is the duty of an ideal monarch. Śrī Rāma, the hero of Ramayana, is such a ruler. In fact, the vision of an ideal state presented in the Ramayana has been an important aspect of Indian political thinking from ancient times till today so much so that Mahatma Gandhi, a contemporary political thinker, used the term '*Ram Rajya*' for his conception of the ideal state. The ideal organization of the *Rāmarājya* has been providing constant inspiration to Indian political thought from the period of the *Rāmāyaṇa* till the present. Indian political thought has consistently supported the state, but the ideals of the king stated in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are humanist ideals, which is made clear from the fact that Rama banished Sīta on the basis of the allegations made by a simple washerman. Hence, the advocacy of kingship in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is ultimately based on humanist postulates. The state was a means to public welfare, which was the purpose for which it was created, and since human welfare was impossible in a state of anarchy, the political state was considered essential. However, since the basic objective was public welfare, the Ramayana also, like the Mahabharata, evinces the humanist viewpoint in its socio-political thought.

2.3. Metaphysical Teachings of the Rāmāyaṇa

Vālmīki commences his poem with a description of the ideal individual. He then gives the description of the ideal society, ideal administration of country and the ultimate ideal of life, the attainment of God. This epic tries to bring to light that all our attempts and endeavors based on *adharma* and selfishness are doomed to failure at the iron hands of the Divine law. The *Rāmāyaṇa* thus portrays the victory of dharma and the final defeat of *adharma*. This great work pays due respect to the physical, the vital, the mental, the moral and the spiritual values of life and teaches a gospel of the integration of these in the Divine Harmony of the Supreme Being. In Rāma and Sīta, we behold the embodiment of Brahman in his dual aspect, the unmanifest and the manifest. Rāma represents the impersonal absolute and Sīta represents the personal, creative and self-projecting absolute. Rāma is the embodiment of all virtues especially the virtue of truthfulness. It is for the sake of truth that he loses his kingdom. His extreme devotion to truth is to be understood in the light of the characteristic Hindu belief that is this quality by which God himself is chiefly known. God is truth. The man who loves truth must therefore in the end, love God.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* suggests that through one-pointed devotion to God one can get over the influence of *māyā* and attain the goal of merging oneself in the *Paramātman*. In worldly life whatever might be the spiritual progress one has achieved, he will never attain *mokṣa* unless he is detached from all worldly ties. This aspect is fully depicted in the ascetic march

of Sri Rama. Sri Rama was in front, Sita in the middle and Lakṣmaṇa at the back. While on their march, because of Sita's presence in the middle, Lakṣmaṇa could not see his brother properly and at frequent intervals he used to request his sister-in-law to make room for him to see Rama. In this context, Sri Rama is to be compared to *Paramataman* and Lakṣmaṇa the individual soul, *jīvātman*. *Jīvātman* constantly endeavours to attain oneness with the *Paramātman* but *māyā* (Sīta) stands in the way, but with an intense yearning it is possible to get rid of *māyā* and attain the goal of merging oneself in the *Paramātman*. In Yoga Vaśiṣṭa, the derivative *Rāmāyaṇa*, also we can see the traces of metaphysical aspects. In this poem Sage Vaśiṣṭa, the chief priest of king Daśaratha, is instructing Śrī Rāma about the unchangeable Reality through many interesting stories. Śrī Rāma, while he was young, had a feeling of detachment from the world and he brooded on the fate of human beings. Vasiṣṭa through this poem convinced Śrī Rāma that by right thinking and diligent discrimination we attain to the truth of Brahman.

Thus the study of the *Rāmāyaṇa* will be a useful guide to the true aspirants in treading the path of spirituality leading to complete emancipation from the cycle of birth and death. This great work has under its possession a unique moral and spiritual treasure capable of inspiring the whole human race. It may provide the right solution for almost all human problems and miseries. It is capable of giving what has been missing, in spite of everything that science and technology has given us. The great leaders who have shaped the destiny of India, and continue to shape it, have all been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its eternal virtues. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is probably one of the few epics in the world to remain a living literature. We are proud that the centuries old valuable literature is still living for us till today. We regard Ramayana as heart and soul of India because our age old culture, high principles and great ideals together with universal spiritual values and their underlying truths, have been truly depicted in it. In spite of the fact that it has been part and parcel of Indian life from time immemorial, Ramayana now belongs to whole mankind because of its universal appeal based on all time great message and still greater divine inspiration.

3. The *Mahābhārata*

The Mahabharata has the honor of being the longest epics in the world with one lakh *ślokas*. Hence it is called '*śatasāhasī*,' It is the monumental work of the great sage Kriṣṇa Dvaipāyana, Badarāyaṇa, Vyāsa, commonly known as Veda Vyāsa, because he was the person who first collected and codified the Vedas. Vyāsa is considered as a personality with powers far beyond those of most mortals. He has divine insight that enables him to gain knowledge of all things in all times. The story goes that when Vyāsa planned to compose the

Mahābhārata, he could not find a competent person to take his dictation. Finally, he approached Lord Ganeṣa to take up this difficult task. The Lord agreed upon one condition that his pen must not stop for Vyāsa to think things over. This was difficult because poetry requires a perfect arrangement of perfect words which needs thinking. Vyāsa agreed, but added that the Lord must not write down any verse without first understanding its meaning. Making use of this clause, Vyāsa composed more than eight thousand complicated verses which even the Lord found it difficult to understand. This gave Vyāsa the required time to compose a great many verses. That is how this great epic was completed. By composing this great epic, he brought religion and the value system more closely to the common people as it was enough to know the highest truth given in the Vedas. It is divided into 18 sections or *parvas* written in Sānskrit. The eighteen *parvas* are: Ādīparvam, Sabhāparvam, Āraṇyaparvam, Virātaparvam, Udyogaparvam, Bhīṣmaparvam, Droṇaparvam, Karaparvam, Salyaparvam, Saupātikaparvam, Streeparvam, Sāntīparvam, Anusānaparvam, Aśwamedhaparvam, Āśramavasaparvam, Mausalaparvam, Mahāprasthānaparvam, Swargarparvam.

It is a rich collection of many histories and many legends. It contains virtually all the ancient legends of Hinduism which are also very much a living tradition to this day. The sage Vyāsa is traditionally named the author of the *Mahābhārata*. But he is more likely to have been its compiler. There are scholars who think that this is not the work of a single author. The epic seems to be a collection of writings by several authors who lived at various times. According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, 'The great Vyāsa himself mentions five direct pupils. It has passed through different stages marked by the names Jaya, Bharata, and the *Mahābhārata*. There are many editions, manuscripts, translations in different languages. The *Mahābhārata* is not merely a historic work, but it reflects the dynamic culture of India.' It represents a whole literature rather than a single homogenous work. The core event of this great epic is the great battle that was fought on the field of Kurukṣetra between the five sons of king Pāṇdu, the Pāṇdavas and the hundred sons of king Dhritarāṣṭra, the Kauravas. But there are hundreds of other major stories linked with that main story. It deals with almost every subject and politics, economics, astrology, wrestling, diplomacy, finance, ruler of conduct, prayers of God, birth and death, life before birth and after death, philosophy, psychology, chronology, cosmology, origin of the world etc- all find a place in it. Hence it is given in it:

'Yadhi haasti tadanyatra

Yannehaasti na kutra chit,'

'That which is herein can be seen elsewhere, but that which is not herein cannot be seen anywhere else.' This verse gives us an idea of the comprehensive coverage of the subjects

contained in it. The famous the *Bhagavadgītā*, the most popular exposition of Hindu philosophy, religion and way of life is a part of the *Mahābhārata*. It comes under the *Bhīṣmaparva*. The ethical parts of the *Mahābhārata* have so decisively influenced the later Hindu philosophers and law-givers that they have conferred on it the title of the fifth Veda. The book is full of lofty instructions on all aspects of human life and endeavour. The guiding spirit throughout the epic is the divine figure of Lord Krishna who brings home unto Him the pure and the virtuous and exterminates evil and evil-doers. The central theme of the work is 'Yato dharmastato Jaya'- which means where there is Dharma, there is victory. The ultimate triumph of good over evil is the underlying theme of the epic and the story in it is only a vehicle to convey eternal philosophical truths of the highest order.

The whole story which forms the chief theme of the *Mahābhārata Mahabharata* makes up only about a quarter of the poem. It also contains a number of other popular stories, including the tales of Nala and Damayanti, Sāvitrī and Satyavan, Sakuntala and many others. The battle of Kurukṣetra offers an opportunity to discuss military strategy. Some scholars are of opinion that the modern day chess originated from *chaturāṅga*, the board game mentioned in Mahabharata. But the underlying theme of the Mahabharata concerns moral duty and right conduct.

3.1. Ethical Aspects of the Mahābhārata

The *Mahābhārata* deals with moral precepts especially in the form of moral counsels from Bhīṣma, Vidhura, Yudhiṣṭira and so many other characters including Lord Krishna. Gita which forms an important part of it can be considered as a treatise on ethics itself. The ethical ideals in the *Gīta* gives us a clear picture about the development of Indian moral thought from its crude and rudimentary form in the Vedas to a very fine and elevated position as in the *Gīta*. Though the importance of Vedic ritualism and virtues of individual purity are not ignored, it gives equal importance to the high ideals of social morality also. The primary aim of moral conduct, according to the *Mahābhārata* is social good or social welfare. This was made clear by Dr. Surama Das Gupta when he wrote, 'The standards of morality as preached in the *Mahābhārata*. recognize both the absolute and relative nature of morality. There the ideals of social progress through the maintenance of social equilibrium are partly determined by scriptures and partly by the standard of public good, the latter sometimes superseding the injunctions of scriptures and sometimes being supplementary to them.' Along with the observance of *varṇāśramadharmā*, the *Mahābhārata* also advise to follow certain general duties like non-violence, truth, avoidance of anger, egoism, avoiding of speaking ill of others etc. We can see the emphasis of the ideals of social good such as *lokasthiti*, *lokasaṅgraha*, *lokakalyana*, *lokayatra* etc in it.

Another important ethical aspect of the *Mahābhārata* is that it propounds an internal conception of morality. It emphasized that what rewards or stains is not the outer action, but the inner motive, will or intention. So, according to the *Mahābhārata* one should avoid narrow egoistic passions while doing actions and one should do his duty selflessly. All our action should be aimed at either social good or individual liberation. Even the performance of Vedic rituals with narrow egoistic aim is discouraged and depreciated. For morality, inner purity is needed and not mere external work will not do. As stated earlier, what stains, according to Mahabharata is bad motive and ill-will, and not the action. This idea will lead us to the ideal of *Niṣkāma karma*, the basic philosophy of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Ethics of the *Bhagavadgītā* may be shortly described as the advice to practice *Niṣkāma karma* and *svadharma*. The former means passionless actions and the latter means one's duty in accordance with one's station in life as determined by one's *varṇāśrama dharma*. The *Bhagavadgītā* holds that God realization is the ultimate end. It is the sole end of all actions. It has preached the dharma of *varṇāśrama*, but the fulfillment of this dharma becomes a duty because it has been ordained by God. The daily duties also have been ordained by God. The daily duties also have been elaborately discussed in the *Gītā*, according to which every man has some determined action to perform. He can achieve his ultimate end and also the social end by performing these determined actions. But all these activities should be performed with the intention of submission to God. The desire of result is the cause of enchantment and leaving or abandoning it brings everlasting peace.

The ethics of the *Gītā*, thus, arranges for and organizes the proper development of all aspects of man. It synthesized both social and individual interests. The ultimate end is absolute perfection of the individual but this perfection can be attained only through consolidation of society and God realization. According to the *Gītā*, the only way of freeing the soul from its various limitations is social service and devotion to God. This is a humanistic ideal and it is attainable through knowledge, devotion or action. The *Gītā* provides a detailed consideration of each of these paths. It provides a harmonious blend of external action and internal peace, activism and renunciation, involvement and detachment, knowledge and devotion, individual freedom and social solidarity. Thus the most important teaching of the *Gītā* is the devotion to one's duties in society. It holds that the establishment of social harmony is a must and man has to follow it without attachment.

The sole aim is to suppress righteousness and establish *dharma*. It stands for the universal brotherhood of all beings and highlights the importance of selfless service to benefit the entire cosmos. It instructs people to perform their duty without caring about rewards. When each one does his duty, without selfish desires, the well-being and the solidarity of the world

is preserved. The *Gītā* thus preaches the message of *lokasangraha* or welfare of all. This message of the *Gītā* is universally comprehensive and everlasting. In today's atomic age, when human society is grievously endangered by excessive materialism some of the message of the *Gītā* like that of *Niṣkāma karma yoga* have assumed an even greater importance.

3.2. Political Aspects of the Mahābhārata

According to the *Sāntiparva* in the *Mahābhārata*, Viṣṇu first created a monumental text on life and administration, and then established a king, government and state. This implies that power should not be used as a means by the state. This implies that power should not be used as a means by the state, instead the state should be considered as a means whereby power is concretized so as to help in the maintenance of social organization. We can understand from this that from very ancient times to the present day, the state has been a means to public welfare in India. According to the *Mahābhārata*, administration is a part of the normal social organization. The duty of the state is to establish the *varṇāśrama* system. The state should create such an organization in which every individual should be able to perform the duties appropriate to his station and stage of life.

The *Mahābhārata* theory concerning the origin of the state postulates the concept that not merely men but even the Gods consider it the king's divine duty to promote the welfare of the populace. If the king fails in this duty not only men but even the Gods consider it necessary to depose him and to replace him with one who is devoted to his fundamental duty. The king's duty is assumed to be the establishment of social harmony without which he cannot administer the state. So in the *Mahābhārata* as in the Vedas and *Upaniṣads*, the harmonious relationships between different classes have been considered as important for political organization. These texts support the theory of welfare state, because its objective is security and happiness and the people have been directed to show patriotism to the state. The state must create conditions which are conducive to the achievement of the values of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. Although wars appear frequently in these texts, these wars were considered religious wars which were characterized by the observance of certain moral rules. We can see that the *Mahābhārata* though it deals with the selfishness of princes, wars and threats of war, it ends with an invocation of peace. Gandhi may be having this fact in his mind when he said that the *Mahābhārata* did not encourage war but it portrayed its futility by showing the amount of bloodshed and destruction it can bring about. We all know that the *Bhagavadgītā* was a source of inspiration for him till the end of his life. For the modern Hindus, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavadgītā* in particular, is one of the most authoritative scripture of his tradition. The teachings of this great epic as we have discussed above are a

vital source of inspiration in confronting the ethical, political, social and religious dilemmas of life.

4. Summary

We can say that these two famous epics- the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* –drive home to all Hindus the laws of *smṛtis* and the principles of the Vedas through their heroes. We get the earliest notions of our religion from these stories. The ideal characters like Rāma and Sīa, Kriṣṇa etc firmly establish the Hindu *dharma* in our minds. Therefore Vālmīki and Vyāsa, the authors of these works are looked upon as great nation builders because the Hindu society is still following the lines chalked out by them. Even today our domestic, social and national ideals are dominated by characters in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

