



Chronological Conundrum: A Comparative Analysis of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

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Abstract: This research paper undertakes a comparative study of the ancient Indian epics, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, focusing on societal structures, cultural practices, and geographical elements presented in these texts. While historical, archaeological, and astronomical dating of these epics has been a subject of scholarly debate, this study aims to explore the evolution of societal norms by examining the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy reflected in the narratives. It has been considered by all that Ramayana is an older epic than Mahabharata because of the Hindu philosophical cycle. There are four Yuga according to the Hindu Cycle, Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kaliyuga respectively. According to popular belief, Valmiki had written Ramayana in Treta Yuga, which is in the 2nd phase, and Mahabharata written by Vyasa in Dvapara Yuga, which is in the 3rd phase. Unlike the previous data, this research does not delve into philosophical or religious aspects but concentrates on social and cultural customs, orders, and topographical elements, proposing that the Ramayana can be considered as a later text than the Mahabharata. This paper will investigate comparatively to know the chronological timeline of these two great Indian epics.

Keywords: comparative study, cultural practices, society, dating epics, Mahabharata, Ramayana, societal transformation, geography.

Introduction:

Dating Indian epics of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata involves establishing timelines for events mentioned in these texts. Dating is important for historical context and understanding geographical and cultural evolution. Scholars use different approaches, i.e. Linguistic analysis, archaeological, historical, and astronomical references to approximate dates, but consensus remains elusive due to varying interpretations. European scholars have done their research and mentioned that the events described in the ancient Sanskrit text are imaginary and fictitious tales of war. For example, the European Indologist Maxmuller tried to prove that the observations recorded in the Hindu Scriptures were not real because they did not match the prevalent views of European historians. On the contrary, Many Indian scholars have vehemently mentioned the actual occurrence of the Mahabharata and Ramayana War. The fifth-century Mathematician, Aryabhata, calculated the date of the Mahabharata war to be approximately 3100 BC. From the planetary positions recorded in the Mahabharata. Prof C.V Vaidya and Prof Apte had derived the date to be 3101 BC and Shri Kota Venkatacharan reckoned it to be 3139 BC. However, the astronomical data used by the above and many other scholars contained some errors as examined by a Scholar from Pune Dr. P.V Vartak. Using Astronomical references and a variety of other sources, Dr. P.V Vartak derived the date of the initiation of the Mahabharata war to be 16th October 5561 BC (Vartak 1).

Astronomical observations of the Mahabharata War (c. 5561 BCE) and the Rama-Ravana War (c. 12,209 BCE) were assessed by Nilesh Oak, an anthropological, archaeological, and astronomical researcher. Indraprastha and Hastinapur were the sites of excavations conducted in 1951–1952, by renowned archaeologist B.B. Lal. He also uncovered the painted greyware culture, from which he deduced that the Kurukshetra conflict occurred between 800 and 900 BC. These were the earliest examples of common pottery connecting all the Mahabharata sites, including Hastinapur, Mathura, Kurukshetra, and Kampilya. Sanjay Manjul, who was involved in the Sanauli excavation, which took place 68 km from Delhi, refuted these findings once more, and the conclusion drawn from their research was that the

Mahabharata war might have taken place 1500 to 2000 BCE. Numerous studies on this dating have been conducted up to this point and are currently ongoing, but no definitive information has yet been obtained.

Here, in this paper, I am not going deeper into all the datings and historicity, and reality of these Epic texts, instead this will study the Ramayana and Mahabharata within a comparative lens to find which epic was earlier. It has been considered by all that Ramayana is an older epic than Mahabharata because of the Hindu philosophical cycle. There are four Yuga according to the Hindu Cycle, Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kaliyuga respectively. According to popular belief, Valmiki had written Ramayana in Treta Yuga, which is in the 2nd phase, and Mahabharata written by Vyasa in Dvapara Yuga, which is in the 3rd phase. Another popular belief is Bhagawan Rama is the 7th incarnation of Bhagawan Vishnu and Krishna is the 8th incarnation, so it says that Rama's incarnation was before Krishna. It can also find Hanuman's character in "Mahabharata" which also can infer that Ramayana must have occurred before Mahabharata. But here I am not digging into the philosophical and religious aspects of the text instead comparatively studying these texts through the social and cultural customs, orders, and topographical elements provided by the text and inferring that Ramayana could have been considered as the later text and Mahabharata as the early one.

The Shift of Matriarchy to Patriarchy:

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana provide us with insights into the societal structures and practices prevalent during that time. There are a few instances in the Mahabharata where matriarchy appears to have an impact. For instance, the character Draupadi demonstrates power, wisdom, and dominance. She clearly has influence over the five Pandava spouses because she is a major factor in determining their choices and behaviours. The Kuru dynasty itself can also be traced back to queen Satyawati, Gandhari, Kunti, Madri, and other women, indicating a lineage that valued women's strength and intelligence. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas displays strong matriarchal traits in the epic. She significantly shapes her sons' destinies, serving as their guide and counsellor. In matriarchal society, women had more powers and enormous freedom. In Mahabharata, we can find Kunti enjoying freedom even having children before marriage, and no social stigma upon them for their immoral conduct.

Polyandry, which is a matriarchal practice was there during that time, Draupadi having five husbands is a significant example. It is clear from Nala-Damayanti's narrative that a wife can declare her remarriage after her husband left her. The practice of "Niyoga" was also followed during the Mahabharata time. "Niyoga" refers to the ancient practice of appointing a man to procreate with a woman in certain circumstances. Kunti and Madri conceived children from another man as their husband Pandu was cursed. Satyawati, the queen of Hastinapur used Niyoga to have sons with sage Parasara who gave birth to the writer of Mahabharata, Vyasa. She also summons her son Vyasa to do the same with her daughters-in-law to continue the Kaurava line. During ancient times, it is indicated that polyandry and Niyoga were customary practices in the existence of matriarchal societies. Polygamy emerged during the transition to a patriarchal system, replacing the older systems. Given the presence of both polygamy and polyandry examples in Mahabharata, it can be deduced that the narrative of Mahabharata likely developed during a period of societal transformation, where the society transformed from matriarchy to patriarchy.

On the other hand, when we look at the Ramayana, we will find that the patriarchal society was strongly established by then. Polygamy was accepted in that era, but more emphasis and praise were given to the practice of monogamy. The central focus of the epic is Lord Rama, who is depicted as the ideal man and King among all. The whole story revolves around his journey to rescue his wife, Sita, and restore order in society, while Sita is portrayed as a virtuous and devoted silent wife. Her character is often overshadowed by the dominant male figures in the narratives while being the central woman character of the epic.

In Ramayana all the women seem to have lost their freedom of everything; even sexual thought of any man other than husband seems to be considered as a sin. Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautam, who dares to enjoy her sexuality is cursed to be a stone for life. Surpanakha, the sister of King Ravana, who openly expressed her attraction towards the Ram, ending up with her nose being cut by Lakshmana. Sita doubted by his husband that she might have cohabited with his prime enemy Ravana and that is why abandoned by her own beloved husband.

The contrast between the Ramayana and Mahabharata is evident in their portrayal of distinct societal structures. The Mahabharata encompasses both matriarchal and patriarchal perspectives, whereas the Ramayana leans towards a more traditional patriarchal order. Written in different eras, these epics mirror the evolving societal norms over centuries. The narrative shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in these stories reflects the changing power dynamics in ancient Indian society. The Mahabharata seems to capture a transitional period, marking the decline of the old system and the emergence of a new societal order.

Comparing the style of War:

The war mentioned in Ramayana, known as the Battle of Lanka, primarily involved more traditional human weapons such as bows, arrows, swords, stones, and various hand-to-hand combat weapons, which weapons we can also see in

our primitive culture or society, which the ancients or primitive men were using for their daily survival. This reflects a more primitive and archaic setting aligning with the early stages of human civilization. On the contrary, the war of Mahabharata features more divine and mythical weaponry such as celestial bows, powerful divine Astras, and mystical sophistication, emphasizing a more divine and complex from the era depicted in the Ramayana. This analysis portrays the evolving nature of human civilization from divinity to more human form.

Tracing the Topographical Elements:

The Mahabharata primarily focuses on the events related to the Kuru Kingdom in the northern part of ancient India. While it does not mention regions like Gandhara, which is in the Northwest, it does not extensively detail South Indian geographical sites. The Mahabharata unfolds along an East-West axis, with Krishna reigning as the coastal monarch of Dwaraka on the western shores. In the north, the Kuru clan governs Hastinapur, located in present-day Haryana. Krishna's early years transpire in Mathura and Vrindavan, while the Pandavas conclude their exile in Tripura, situated in the easternmost part of India. Although regions like Gandhara in the northwest are mentioned, the epic does not extensively elaborate on geographical sites in South India.

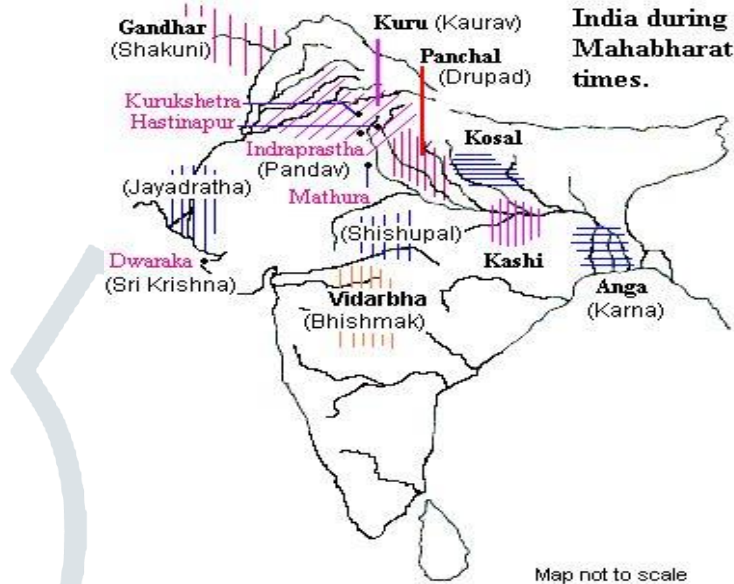


figure 1, map of India depicted in the Mahabharata narrative, Pinterest.

On the other hand, the Ramayana covers a more extensive geographical landscape. It describes the journey of Lord Rama, taking him through various regions, including Maharashtra, South India, and eventually to Sri Lanka. Ramayana begins with Ayodhya, which is often associated with present-day Uttar Pradesh in northern India. As the story unfolds, Lord Rama travels through various regions, including the Dandakaranya forest (located in central India), Panchavati (believed to be in Maharashtra, and Kishkindha (associated with the part of South India Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh), and later the journey to Sri Lanka. Moreover, Ramayana provides a more elaborate panoramic view of the Indian Subcontinent compared to Mahabharata.



Bharat during Ramayan times.

figure 2, map of India depicted in the Ramayana narrative, Pinterest

Saraswati was alive throughout the time of the Mahabharata since it is mentioned in the Mahabharata that Krishna drove his chariot along the Saraswati River from Indraprastha (modern-day Delhi) to Dwaraka. The mention of Saraswati can be traced back to the Rigveda, one of the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism. It is regarded as one of the biggest and most powerful rivers. However, in Ramayana, there is no mention of Saraswati only of Sarayu, which passes through Ayodhya. During the Mahabharata period, there was a trek performed by Balarama along the bank of Saraswati from Dwaraka to Mathura. The Mahabharata mentions Saraswati several times. In fact, the river's demise can be linked to the time when it dried up to become a desert and joined the sea. There are no references to Saraswati in the times of Ramayana, which means at the time of Ramayana Saraswati was dried up. From this topographic comparison, the inference can be drawn that Ramayana was a later text than Mahabharata.

Conclusion:

This comparative study of Ramayana and Mahabharata mainly focuses on societal structures, cultural practices, and geographical elements that were narrated in these texts at that time. Considering these factors, including the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, the evolving style of war, and the topographical differences, it can be inferred that the Ramayana is the later text compared to the Mahabharata. The descriptions of time, societal, and cultural practices in the Ramayana suggest a more contemporary narrative style than that of the Mahabharata. Unlike the Mahabharata, which explores concepts of divinity and human nature through characters like Krishna, the Ramayana emphasizes human virtues and moral dilemmas, presenting Lord Rama as an exemplary human rather than a divine figure, to which one human can closely relate. The topographical depictions in the Ramayana also provide a more extensive view of the Indian subcontinent, further implying its status as a later text compared to the Mahabharata. Although accurately dating these epics is a challenging task, this comparative study offers important insights into the evolving societal norms and cultural developments reflected in these ancient Indian epics. Additional research and analysis are needed to delve deeper into the dating and historical aspects of these texts in order to establish their chronology within the ancient Indian context.

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