



COSMIC FATE: ANALYSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VEDIC ASTROLOGY IN THE MAHABHARATA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON INDIAN CULTURE THROUGH MYTH CRITICISM

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Abstract : This research paper examines the foundational role of Vedic astrology in the Mahabharata through the framework of myth criticism, uncovering how cosmic forces intricately shape the lives and destinies of specific characters. The Mahabharata reflects a profound belief in the interconnectedness of the universe and human experience, where celestial alignments, omens, and astrological predictions serve as pivotal influences on key events and critical choices. Vedic astrology emerges as more than a mere cultural motif; it functions as a cosmic framework, guiding the fates of significant specific characters and their destinies while illuminating the epic's ethical and existential dilemmas. Additionally, this study explores how these astrological elements resonate within contemporary Indian society through traditional and cultural practices rooted in deeply held astrological beliefs. The Mahabharata's enduring impact is evident in the rituals and customs that reflect its cosmic principles, reinforcing its relevance in modern life. By bridging ancient myth with current traditions, this paper highlights Vedic astrology as an essential and lasting legacy of the Mahabharata, reflecting its vital role in shaping Indian spirituality, cultural identity, and social values. In this way, the epic not only narrates history but also continues to influence the spiritual landscape of India today.

Key Words : Mahabharata, Vedic Astrology, Myth Criticism, Indian Culture, Indian Spirituality

Introduction

The Mahabharata, attributed to sage Vyasa, is a cornerstone of Indian literature and philosophy, exploring profound themes of dharma, morality and human nature through the epic tale of the Kurukshetra War. Central to its narrative is Vedic astrology (Jyotisha), an ancient system rooted in the Vedas, encompassing the twelve zodiac signs (Rashis), twenty-seven lunar mansions (Nakshatras), and planetary influences (Grahas). In the Mahabharata, astrology profoundly shapes characters' destinies and decisions, illustrating the interplay between cosmic forces and individual agency. This paper employs MYTH CRITICISM to analyse how Vedic astrology informs the characters' fates and moral dilemmas, revealing cultural beliefs about destiny and free will. The primary research question guiding this exploration is: How does Vedic astrology, as presented in the Mahabharata, influence the characters, choices and destinies, and how has this shaped Indian culture and society today? By examining key figures and pivotal moments, this study will illuminate the critical role of astrology in the Mahabharata's narrative structure and its lasting impact on contemporary understandings of fate in Indian culture.

Analysis

The significance of Vedic astrology in the Mahabharata and its influence on Indian culture can be explored through the lens of Myth Criticism by analysing a few significant characters in the story.

Pitamaha Bhishma

A pivotal character- Pitamaha Bhishma's decision to take a lifelong vow of celibacy and dedicate himself to the Kuru lineage was monumental. Rooted in dharma- the ethical and cosmic order upheld in Vedic astrology- this oath bound Bhishma to protect the Kauravas at all costs. His choice reflects the immutable power of cosmic forces; once bound by a vow, influenced by his astrological duty to his lineage, Bhishma's path was cosmically set. His oath left him no option but to support the Kauravas despite recognizing the Pandavas as rightful adherents of dharma. Vedic astrology often reinforces that dharma, once chosen, transcends personal preference, aligning the individual with broader cosmic laws. Bhishma's conflict embodies this struggle, as his astrological duty (protecting the lineage) outweighed his personal allegiance to righteousness. Further, Bhishma's ability to choose the time of his death, known as 'Icchamrityu' (death by will), symbolizes the intersection of free will and astrological determinism. Shot down by Arjuna, Bhishma lay on a bed of arrows for 58 days, waiting for the 'Uttarayana'- the auspicious day marking the sun's movement toward the northern hemisphere. According to Vedic astrology, Uttarayana is

associated with divine favour and liberation, believed to ensure a path to 'moksha' (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). Bhishma's choice to die on this day reflects the belief that auspicious timing is integral to attaining cosmic harmony, emphasizing astrology's impact on life events, even death. In modern India, 'Bhishma Ashtami' (observed on the eighth day of the Magha month in the Hindu calendar) is celebrated in regions such as West Bengal and parts of southern India. This day commemorates Bhishma's death and is viewed as auspicious, particularly for marriage ceremonies, births and even deaths, as it aligns with the sacred timing that Bhishma chose for his departure. The reverence of Bhishma Ashtami illustrates how the astrological principles from the Mahabharata continue to shape societal customs today, as timing governed by Vedic astrology remains significant for important life events.

Duryodhana

According to the Mahabharata, sage Vaishampayana, a disciple of Vyasa and narrator of the epic, described the birth of Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava, as a deeply ominous event, marked by astrological signs and unnatural disturbances. As soon as Duryodhana was born, he let out a harsh cry, akin to a bray, unsettling all who heard it. When King Dhritarashtra declared his son as the heir to the throne, the atmosphere shifted drastically: the howling of jackals and vultures filled the air, violent winds erupted, and fires broke out spontaneously. The sky darkened, casting a gloomy shadow across the land. In response to these unsettling signs, Vidura and the assembled Brahmanas warned Dhritarashtra, saying, "O king, O bull among men, when these frightful omens are noticeable at the birth of thy eldest son, it is evident that he shall be the exterminator of thy race." (*Mahabharata, Adi Parva, Book 1, Section 116*). This warning, rooted in the interpretation of astrological omens, indicated that Duryodhana's birth signified doom for the Kuru Dynasty. In Vedic astrology, the presence of bad omens, particularly during birth, is believed to foreshadow the character and fate of the individual. Duryodhana's birth marked by such ominous signs, directly correlates with his destiny as a harbinger of destruction, reinforcing the role of cosmic indicators in shaping both individual and familial fate. His life, entwined with violence and tragedy, exemplifies how Vedic astrology uses omens to anticipate future calamities especially for those destined to disturb cosmic balance.

Draupadi

In the Mahabharata's Adi Parva, Draupadi and her brother Dhristadyumna are born from the sacred flames of a yagna (sacrificial fire) conducted by their father Drupada. This ritual, often called the 'yagnic fire', was not only a tool for creating divine beings but also a powerful Vedic practice meant to invoke cosmic blessings, often guided by astrological auspices. In Vedic culture, yagnas are intended to purify, empower, and bring desired outcomes, such as Draupadi's birth as a form of divine justice. Drupada, humiliated by Drona who captured the former with the help of his student Arjuna, sought progeny who could avenge him, and Draupadi's birth embodies the potential to reclaim honor and challenge Drona's arrogance, especially through her marriage to the five Pandavas. Her resilience, particularly during the dice game incident, galvanizes the Pandavas to seek justice, escalating tensions that lead to the Kurukshetra war. Astrologically significant, her birth aligns with cosmic forces, positioning her as an agent of change and retribution in a world governed by duty and fate. The concept of yagnic fires has endured through the ages, as modern society has adapted these Vedic rituals into 'homas', performed for various life events, from welcoming a child to praying for fertility. Couples who have difficulty conceiving may conduct 'homas' to invoke blessings from deities associated with fertility and prosperity. Astrologers today still recommend auspicious timings for such rituals, adhering to Vedic astrology's guidance on the most favourable dates and planetary alignments. This cultural continuity illustrates how deeply embedded Vedic astrology and ritual practices remain, as they are seen to align personal events with cosmic order, as they were in the epic's time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of Vedic astrology within the Mahabharata through myth criticism reveals the intricate ways in which cosmic forces shape the fates of its characters, particularly Bhishma, Duryodhana, and Draupadi. Their stories not only illustrate the complexities of duty, honour, and justice but also underscore the philosophical and moral dilemmas inherent in human existence. The enduring significance of these narratives in Indian culture is evident in contemporary practices, where astrology and rituals continue to influence personal and societal values. By examining how Vedic astrology informs character destinies and reflects larger cultural themes, this study emphasizes the profound interconnectedness between ancient texts and modern life, affirming that the wisdom of the Mahabharata remains relevant in understanding the complexities of fate and human agency.

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