



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2019; 5(10): 234-239
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 11-08-2019
Accepted: 14-09-2019

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Epics: Treasure trove of ethical values for the modern youth

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to examine, understand and present the ethical and universal human values projected and highlighted in the two prominent epics - The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, highly revered and respected spiritual texts in the Hindu culture. Spiritual, social, moral, civic values contained in these texts can elevate humanity. The researcher used content analysis to carry out an in-depth analysis of several source books, translations, transliterations and articles related to these epics in order to portray the values contained in these texts along with an understanding of their rational application in the lives of people in the present times. Systematic analysis of literature review has been made to throw light on the demonstration of universal human values since times immemorial and their pertinence to the modern era. The findings reveal that the values enshrined in these spiritual texts are timeless jewels which hold great relevance in the lives of modern youth to aid in their pursuit of meaningful living and helping them to cast off the delusion arising out of materialistic attitude, material prosperity, erosion of values and loss of morals. Understanding and inculcation of ethical values discussed in the present study in the light of ancient scriptural texts like the epics can foster development of enlightened and socially-conscious citizens.

Keywords: Epics, Ethical Values, Human values, Spiritual texts

1. Introduction

“A good person is strong, stronger than the whole world” (Soren Kierkegaard, 2006, p.14)^[10]. The Hindu culture considers the four principle values (*purusharthas*): *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha*. These are part of the *Sanatana Dharma* which was given to us from the Upanisads (*sruti*). Imbibing such good values help in *atmavikas* meaning ‘expanding the sense of selfhood’ leading to cordial coexistence and personal development (Swami Ranganathananda, 2011)^[25]. Ethical values such as compassion, devotion, non-injury, sense of oneness emerged and evolved with the growth and refinement of human intellect and they remain common across religions (Swami Jitatananda, 2003)^[19]. The National Policy on Education (1986) emphasized the urgent need for imparting ‘democratic, spiritual, moral and ethical values’ to the youth in view of the progressive erosion of values in the present westernized educational context. Epics are long narrative poems expressing the welfare centric deeds and values of heroic personalities. In the words of Ghosh (2011)^[7] “a poem may be called a true epic when it is composed by an entire race over the ages on the basis of its author’s poetic background” (p.9). The Ramayana and the Mahabharata (two principal Indian epics) are recited regularly in every Hindu home and exist as a parallel body of work with the oldest scriptures – The Vedas. These epics contain religious, moral, spiritual, civic, social and personal values. These portray an idealistic civilization, aspired by human races in all ages (Ghosh, 2011)^[7].

According to Swami Prabhavananda (2013)^[21] these epics act as medium for imparting basic human values to the young and the old, irrespective of their literacy levels, thereby helping them lead a living in line with scriptural injunctions and making everyone spiritually informed. The epics are often considered as true records of history and thus are an integral part of the rich Indian diaspora and cultural heritage. The values enshrined in these scriptures are timeless and are of greater relevance in the modern world facing value crisis, moral dilemmas and numerous social conflicts. “*Spiritual culture and values are two sides of the same coin*” (Swami Jitatananda, 2003, p.7)^[19], the scriptural texts in the present study have been specially selected with the principal aim of highlighting the hidden values which are

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still not properly understood. Hence this study has been performed with two major objectives: (1) to understand and analyze the ethical values contained in the epics; (2) to understand the relevance of these values for the modern youth and (3) to suggest strategies for imparting values present in the epics.

Ramayana meaning “The life of Rama” is the oldest of the epics. It is composed by the great sage Valmiki and is referred to as *smriti* (memory). It is set in the Indian town of Ayodhya, in a province called Oudh (Complete Works, Vol-4, 75-88). It is regarded as the *adikavya* meaning first man-made poetical work belonging to the legendary *treata yuga*, emerging in the lands of ancient kingdom of Kosala, a tale of the Solar races (Ghosh 2011) [7] which showcases the political, civic and social climate prevalent in India at that time. It sheds light on the warship system, duties of a king towards protection of citizens and universal values such as brotherhood, honesty, loyalty; obedience to parents, truthfulness, courage, sacrifice, righteousness and respect for women (Srinivasan, 2003) [14]. Rama became *dharmaatma* (an embodiment of *dharma*) through his strict adherence to righteousness (*dharma*) and truth (*satya*). Thus he became the benefactor of all and is worshiped as god Sri Rama in Hindu culture. Rama is referred to as *Purushottama* meaning possessor of all virtues. His divine consort, Devi Sita is referred to as *sahadharmaचारिणी*, an inseparable companion who gladly sacrificed the luxuries of the palace and followed her husband into the forest (Subrahmanyam, 2002) [15].

The term Mahabharata is derived from the union of two words: ‘*maha*’ meaning great and ‘*bharata*’ meaning descendants of Bharata. It is a mighty epic containing hundred thousand couplets by Sage Vyasa and is set in

ancient India. It revolves around the great war fought between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. It conveys the essential wisdom of the epic: law and justice will protect its protector and conscious citizenship is a product of dharma.

Bhagavad Gita, also known as ‘song celestial’ was delivered by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. According to Swami Vivekananda “*Gita is a commentary on Upanishads*” (Complete Works, Vol.1, p.455). The *Gita* inspires ‘humanistic concern’ and is aimed at “*saksatabhyudayanihsreyasahetuh*” meaning achieving real social welfare and spiritual freedom for all beings (Swami Ranganathananda, 2011) [25]. It urges man to attain prosperity and welfare by following *karma yoga* philosophy of disinterested action through unselfish conduct (Ghosh, 2011) [7]. The ways of dharma are inclusive in nature “*parasparambhavayantahsreyahparamavapsyatha*” (cited by Swami Ranganathananda, 1985, p.79) [24].

According to Goyandka (1984) [8] *Gita* is the universal practical gospel of mankind having a universal message which when properly understood and applied can help man attain the highest truth, raising man from base nature of self-centeredness to divinity. It reveals the nature of man, the natural inherent tendencies in the form of three *gunas*-*sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (activeness) and *tamas* (inertia) which are present in varied combinations and must be sublimated (Swami Ramsukhadas, 2007) [23].

It explains that features of *sattvik* nature for the benefit of human race thereby highlighting various virtues, such as eating of *sattvika* food; performing *sattvik* worship and *sattvik* speech as explained in table-1. *Sattvik* persons perform austerity pertaining to body, mind and speech. The actions by steadfast men with *shraddha* is said to be *Sattvika* (Avinashilingam & Swaminathan, 2017) [1].

Table 1: Comparison of Sattvika, Rajasika and Tamasik natures according to the *Gita* (adapted from Swami Tapasyananda, 2013; Swami Swarupananda, 2012) [26, 27].

<i>Sattvika</i>	<i>Rajasika</i>	<i>Tamasika</i>
nature of food (<i>Gita</i> - Chapter 17, sloka: 8,9,10)		
Promotes longevity, vitality, energy, health, happiness, cheerfulness. Foods those are juicy, soft and nourishing.	Promotes excessive heat, brings on depression, uneasiness and disease. Foods that are bitter, salty, sour, pungent and thirst producing.	Foods which are stale, tasteless, putrid, decayed and unclean.
nature of worship (<i>Gita</i> - chapter 17, sloka: 11, 12, 13)		
In accordance with scriptures, performed as duty (dharma).	Performed with desire for rewards and for vain display.	This type of worship is not sanctioned by the scriptures; it is without gift of food, without chanting of holy mantras and without faith.
nature of speech (<i>Gita</i> – chapter 16, sloka: 15, 16)		
Truthfulness, genial speech, non-violence in word, thought and deed, absence of malicious gossip.	cherish desires	untruth, cherish hatred

2. Research Method

Document analysis was used to make a systematic, careful, critical and detailed study of the texts under presentation through review of several source books, research journals and articles, translations and transliterations available on the epics. The findings and conclusion of the present study were triangulated from the theoretical schemes mentioned or suggested in the reviewed literature. The adopted method enabled the researcher to objectively code and interprets the available data on ethics contained in the epics.

3. Findings

Findings related to values identified in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

After performing and in-depth analysis of several source books, magazines, articles, translations and transliterations of the two principal epics considered in the present study, the researcher identified six ethical values which hold the key for solving problems and moral issues faced by today’s youth. These ethical values are presented in figure 1.

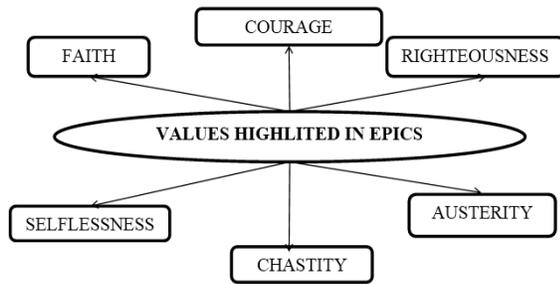


Fig 1: Ethical values highlighted in the Ramayana and Mahabharata

Courage

Rama and Lakshman were brave, strong and highly proficient in weaponry and martial arts. They were slayers of demons and defenders of the good. They possessed great physical and mental strength. The great bow of Lord Shiva broke under Rama's mighty strength. Despite his great strength he was filled with humility and he protected followers of *dharma* (Swami Raghaveshananda, 2011) [22]. The Mahabharata stresses the need for courage to practice ones *dharma* simultaneously conveying "*hatred breeds hatred; covetousness and violence tend to ruin*" (Ghosh, 2011) [7].

Righteousness

Universal one-ness is the fundamental core for all righteous actions. This very ideal directed the actions of ancient Indian kings "*Sukhasya Mulam Dharmam*" meaning righteous actions are the root cause for happiness (cited by Swami Jitamananda, 2003, p. 17) [19]. A unique moral dilemma faced by Gandhaari, mother of the Kauravas is foregrounded in the epic Mahabharata, when her son Duryodhana seeks her blessings for emerging victorious in the great war of Kurukshetra. Being a mother and a pious lady, she is torn between the love for her son and awareness about his unrighteous actions. Her strict adherence to *dharma* and *satya* (truth) makes her bless him as "*Yatho dharmam, tatho Krishna, Yatho Krishna tathojaya, Yatho dharmam tathojaya*" meaning Krishna is found where there is *dharma*, and where there is Krishna, there is victory. A similar incident finds mention in the Ramayana when Rama seeks mother Kausalya's blessings before proceeding for fourteen years of exile in the forest. She says "*Yam paalayasidharmantvam, dhritvaacha, niyamenacha, savai Raghavasardoola, Dharmatwaamabhirakshathu*" meaning may the *dharma* followed with steadfast sincerity by you, protect you always (cited in Subrahmanyam, 2002, p. 21-24) [15]. We also find the deity *Dharmaraaj* testing Yudhishtira's affixation to *dharma* in the Mahabharata and on finding him successful granting life to all his four brothers (Subrahmanyam, 2002, 97-101) [15]. Swami Budhananda (1985) [17] has made a reference to Bhishma's account on *dharma* "Whatever brings about the advancement maintenance and growth of all creatures, preventing injury" (Mahabharata, *Santi Parva*, verses 10-13, cited in Enlightened Citizenship, p.8).

Austerity

Austerity is defined as restrain from sensory pleasure while luxury is sense gratification and opposing to austere living. Austerity conserves energy, promotes concentration and

strengthens the mental makeup of man. Self-control is the harbinger of success, wisdom and perfection, while indulgence is weakening by nature. Transcendence of sensory pleasures makes one 'morally upright and superhuman'. Aryans are considered those born of austerity as defined by Swami Vivekananda (Subrahmanyam, 2002, 122-123) [15]. Austerity begets self-control, self-discipline and a regulated way of living. Rama personifies austerity by embracing the austere life of the forest with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. They sacrificed royal living for fulfilling *dharma* and *satya* (truth). Prince Rama gladly gave up his kingdom with a smile for helping his father fulfill his promise of three boons towards queen Kaikeyi. He was free of any material desire and hence met the opposing commands of coronation and banishment with the same equanimity.

According to Swami Prabhavananda (2013) [21] truth is believed to be God in Hinduism and one who loves truth loves god and thus Sri Rama is worshipped as God. Another glaring example of austerity and profound renunciation as mentioned in Ramayana is the life of Bharata, brother of Sri Rama. His love for his brother and *dharma*, made him renounce the crown which he had gained through queen Kaikeyi's boons. He chose to rule the kingdom acting as Rama's deputy and placed Sri Rama's sandals on the throne while he chose to live in a small hut awaiting Rama's return (Swami Raghaveshananda, 2011) [22].

The *Gita* mentions three kinds of austerity: mental austerity, physical austerity and speech austerity (Avinashilingam & Swaminathan, 2017) [1]. Mental austerity involves calmness of mind, self-control and an unpretentious motive; physical austerity mandates worship, continence, purity and straightforwardness; while an agreeable, non-hurting, truthful speech is called speech austerity.

Selflessness

The Mahabharata proffers an example of two dynamic personalities: Arjuna and Duryodhana. Despite being equal in valor and power only Arjuna is hailed. Swami Jitatananda (2003) [19] attributes this to Arjuna's acceptance of Lord Krishna's message "*Those who accept all work as a sacrifice for the welfare of all, are freed from all sins and attain success, but those who work only for self-benefit are defeated*" (*SrimadBhagwad Gita* 3;13 as cited by Swami Jitatananda, 2003, p.19) [19]. As seen in Ramayana, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata all demonstrate selflessness through their decision to accompany Rama in his exile and another sterling example is set by Jatayu. He was the king of eagles who fiercely attacked Ravana with his talons and beak sacrificing his own life for saving Sita. Swami Vivekananda strongly advocated the value of selflessness (Complete works-Vol.5). Hanuman emerges as the true servant and *bhakta* (devotee) of Rama through his steadfast and selfless devotion to his master.

Chastity

Sita is the embodiment of purity and chastity forever devoted to Rama. The chaste Sita lived in Lanka for an agonizing year tempted and threatened by him to become his queen yet she was forever immersed in the thought of her beloved husband (Swami Raghaveshananda, 2011) [22]. Swami Vivekananda urged mankind to be chaste and be pure (Swami Vivekananda, 1992) [29].

Faith

In Mahabharata we find mention of faith in the story of Draupadi. On facing dishonor in the court hall of the Kurus she cried out to Lord Krishna with her sincere faith for help. Dharma in the form of Krishna came to her help and infinite garments were showered on the lady as seen in the verse “*Krishnamcha Vishnamcha, Harimnamcha, thraanaaya vikrosathi, Yaagjnaeni; that hastu, Dharmathahamtharitha, sammavrinovividhaisuvasthrai*” (cited in Subrahmanyam, 2002, p.26) [15].

We find faith extolled in the Ramayana as well during the fierce battle between Lakshmana and Indrajit. According to Subrahmanyam (2002) [15], Lakshmana’s faith in his brother Rama enabled him to kill the invincible Indrajit with an ordinary arrow as seen in the verse “*Dharmaathma Satyasandhas cha Raamo Dasarathiyadipourushechaapratidvandahsarayenamjahi Raavanim*” (p. 27). Development of *Shradha* protects one from vices and attains success just like the faith of Pandavas in Lord Krishna helped them emerge victorious. Tiwari (2019) [31] mentions the vices which distort human intelligence and impinge on virtues as *Kama* (lust), *Krodha* (anger), *Lobha* (greed), *Moha* (blind attachment), *Irshya* (envy) and *Ahankara* (pride). It is seen that Raavana fell victim to lust, Valli suffered due to pride and Duryodhana’s weakness was greed (Subrahmanyam, 2002, p.164) [15].

Findings related to relevance of identified values for modern youth

- The youth today often wrestles with a sense of inner weakness - mental and physical. He finds the ‘self’ devoid of strength and courage and falls prey to ‘moral decline’ manifested as addiction, stress related diseases, antisocial behaviors, and family dysfunction (Swami Jitmananda, 2003) [19]. The Hindu philosophy considers man as the union of three elements: body, mind and soul (Brahmachari Pradeep, 2013) [3]. Hence it is imperative for modern man to cultivate physical strength through exercises, mental strength through meditation and spiritual strength through renunciation of the sensory pleasures. Assimilation of such ethical values will equip the youth with courage to face challenges of life with ease and promote spiritual advancement.
- The epics are capable of bringing positive social changes in human living by imparting values such as tolerance, cooperation, sense of equality, human freedom and dignity.
- Righteous actions foster human welfare and promote peaceful living in harmony with self. This finding is in line with the holistic truth “*I and my brother are one*” meaning the value of universal brotherhood (Swami Jitmananda, 2003, p.17) [19]. Swami Budhananda (1985) [17] mentions some pre-requisites for development of enlightened citizenship such as (1) need for performing ones allotted duty, (2) practicing *dharma* which forms basis of good conduct, (3) acceptance of responsibilities.
- Austerity helps to cling to principled living, thereby developing patience and strong will power which are stepping stones to success. Self-regulation, emotional control, healthy lifestyle and leading a disciplined life will help the modern youth to successfully face trials in life. This finding is in line with findings of

Subrahmanyam (2002) [15] and Swami Jitmananda (2003) [19]. Swami Chidbhananda (2009) [18] mentions that student should follow an austere lifestyle, get up early, speak the truth, respect elders and practice *brahmacharya* (continence). Such living has been likened to the tuning of a *veena*, optimum tightening of strings produces melody and maintaining the body through moderate and simple living promotes well-being.

- Performing selfless actions for the salvation of self and service of mankind will enable young men to become heroes.
- The ancient Indian educational system of *Gurukula* and following of *brahmacharya* ensured the practice of chastity by students. India is regarded as the “divine custodian” of all excellences which are enlightening to other nations (Swami Tathagatananda, 2012, p.63) [28]. ‘Self-chastening’ is a major code of conduct which should be inculcated among educated youth (Swami Budhananda, 1985, p.2) [17].
- Today’s youth must develop tremendous faith in self and God. This finding is in accordance with remarks of Subrahmanyam (2002) [15] that divine protection is unfolded on all yet it is the virtuous man having faith who receives lord’s grace while the wicked man lacking faith refuses the gift and becomes victim of moral weakness. The modern youth should develop faith in themselves and faith in God, as faith is seen as the key towards human development and nation building. Faith gives courage and awakens the inner strength and divinity. This finding is in line with that of Swami Jitmananda (2003) [19]. The finding is also supported by Mathur (1985) [12] reporting the need for cultivation of *bhakti* for development of purity and good character.
- Another interesting finding that needs to be mentioned in this context is the need for maintaining prenatal well-being in the light of the epics. The Mahabharata lays significance on directing prenatal influence as seen in the incident of Abhimanyu learning in the womb of his mother. Such knowledge can be used in scientific fields to improve early childhood development and give greater attention to prenatal health of both mother and child.
- Respect for women can be taught by teaching the examples of women heroes from our epics such as mothers Kunti, Gaandhari, Kausalya; princesses Sita, Draupadi; great women like Shabri, Ahalya, Savitri who are ever-suffering yet brave, highly patient, devoted, loyal, forgiving and compassionate towards all.

Findings related to strategies for imparting values contained in the epics

In-depth analysis of reviewed literature yielded some measures to be undertaken for creating awareness regarding the hidden values in the epics and also inculcating them among the modern youth. These strategies are as follows:

- Conducting youth conventions, seminars, exhibits and guest lectures to highlight the message of the *Vedas* and ancient scriptures relating them to the needs of the modern youth.
- Organizing study circles in schools, colleges, universities to acquaint youth with traditional yet relevant values through discussions, debates, quiz etc.

- Competitions, essay writing and other literary events can be organized with themes revolving around the values present in the epics.
- Encouraging publication of ancient values in simple, understandable and readable formats in accordance with the needs of the modern youth to help them understand and apply such values.
- Training camps in the form of personality development camps, value clubs and study circles can be formed in educational institutions which will enable youth to discuss and implement the learnt values in their daily living.
- Emphasis on teacher training regarding value education with sensitization on imparting traditional ethical values highlighted in scriptural literature.
- Regular study of the Vedas, Upanisads and other scriptures can be introduced in higher educational institutions to promote practice of speech austerity and spread awareness of the rich, value laden cultural heritage of India.
- Teachers, parents and elders should become good role models by imbibing these ancient values and imparting them to the youth. Practice of self-control, disciplined life and meditation should be taught to all. This finding is in line with Swami Muktidananda (2012) [20] who stresses the need for careful training by parents as inculcation of mental impressions (*samskaras*) impact a child's personality.

These findings are in line with suggestions made by Swami Abhiramananda (2012) [16] regarding character formation among pupils through: (a) structured religious education, (b) chanting of *mantras* and verses from the *Gita*, (c) discussion on teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada, the Ramayana and other texts, (d) recitals from Hindu scriptures, (e) performance of dramas based on stories from the epics and *Puranas* and (f) participation in outreach programmes. Such suggestions have also been discussed by Avinashilingam (2014) [2].

4. Conclusion

The present study is an exercise to highlight and bring out the hidden values in the epics for development of character through disciplining of mind and senses (*samaandama*) as mentioned in the Vedas. "In present times men and women need to acquire: *bahubala* (physical strength), *vittabala* (money power), *buddhibala* (intellectual strength) and *atmabal* (spiritual strength)" (Swami Ranganathananda, 1985, p.77) [24]. The texts under contemplation in this study indicate that strict adherence to righteousness under all circumstances helps one to manifest the inner divinity. Imbibing universal values promotes holistic living. This finds resonance in the words of Swami Vivekananda "every soul is potentially divine. Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man while religion is the manifestation of the divinity in man" (Letters of Swami Vivekananda, 2016, p.70) [11]. Swami Vivekananda exhorted the youth to develop truth, purity and unselfishness (Complete works, Vol.4). The epics clearly mention how people in the grip of vices lose their self-control and face doom therefore acting as powerful lessons in value training for the modern youth. From the present study it can be concluded that ethical values form the very core of human race and history. Both the epics emphasize the victory of virtue over vice, i.e. prevalence of good over evil. These are

part of '*pratishthitaprajna*' meaning established wisdom (Swami Vivekananda, 2014, p.103) [30]. On one hand the Ramayana proclaims values of domestic relations and social structures while the Mahabharata signifies eternal conflict between *dharma* and *adharm*a (Ghosh, 2011) [7]. The epics exhibit the acceptable social practices and policies of ancient India thus presenting some unique and valuable ethical values (Jairam, 2016) [9]. Such values need to be imparted from early years for promotion of social welfare, national development and true shaping of personality of the modern youth. Hence the present study holds great scope for creating awareness regarding the relevance of the epics and the hidden timeless ethics in modern times which needs to be realized by scholars, policy makers, teachers and parents for imparting necessary values among the youth.

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