



RELEVANCE OF MAHĀKĀVYAS IN PRESENT SOCIETY

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Abstract

The socio-economic and politico-religious institutions existing in the modern societies find their origin in history. These institutions had undergone evolution since the period of three Mahākāvya viz. Kirātārjunīyam, Śīsupālavadhā and Naiṣadhīyacaritam commonly known as Bṛhatrayī. In the present socio-economic and political order, the objective and nature of relations amongst nations are not limited to defending the boundaries. It encompasses welfare, education, trade, commerce, technology, nuclear weapons etc. During the period of Mahākāvya, the objective of the king was not only to defend the boundaries but also to expand them through battles. Therefore, one can see the limited focus on welfare measures during that period. However the influence of Mahākāvya period can be evidently seen in modern orders where defense has attained the main focus of any nation and increase in military and defense expenditure can be viewed as preparation against perceived threat from other nations.

Political Relevance

The modern society is a welfare society where enforcement of law is strict but the culprit cannot be punished without proper and fair trial. Even the terrorists killing innocent people cannot be hanged without proper trial. No judgment can be delivered in haste to ensure that the innocent is not punished. The serious criminals are handled with compassion and instead of hanging them, there is inbuilt system of awarding them life imprisonment and help them to improve. During the Mahākāvya period also, one can see the similar type of compassion and the criminals were given chance to improve. Even in the absence of strong judicial system, one can come across instances when the culprit had been given an opportunity to improve. For example, in *Kirātārjunīyam* when Bhīma and Draupadī were urging Yudhiṣṭhira to wage a war against Kaurava-s, Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to act in haste. He believed that forbearance and patience would pay in long run. Similarly in *Śīsupālavadhā*, Kṛṣṇa pardons

Śīsupāla till hundred sins, which shows that even enemies were not punished and killed in haste. The idea was to treat even the culprit with humanity and compassion.

In present political system, although the Prime Minister and President are elected by the people depending upon the system of government, yet the cabinet colleagues and secretariat play important role in making key decisions in the administration of internal and external affairs. This system can be found during the period of Mahākāvya too, when the king, despite being omnipotent, had been taking advice from elders and trustworthy people. For example, in *Śīsupālavadhā* one can see Kṛṣṇa holding consultation with Balarāma and Uddhava for deciding a proper course of action. Similarly, Yudhiṣṭhira solicits Bhīma's advice regarding the presentation of respectful offering.⁴ In *Kirātārjunīyam* too, one can witness political discussion amongst Bhīma, Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira, Both Bhīma and Draupadī were urging for a war against Kaurava-s and Yudhiṣṭhira pacifies them to



avoid hasty action. Strict secrecy was maintained about these consultations.

The role of ambassadors and external bodies is to protect the interest of nation and also to put-forth the views and policies of a particular nation before the other nations on international platform. In this process, a host of ambassadors and diplomats are active in various countries, so as to keep the relations amongst the nations within a defined framework of policies of that nation. The similar examples of ambassadors can be found during the period of Mahākāvya. For example, in *Kirātārjunīyam*, there is mention of Śiva sending a forester as dūta to Arjuna, who advises Arjuna to attain the friendship of his king. In *Śisupālavadhā*, Nārada becomes a messenger of Indra to convey his message to Kṛṣṇa to kill Śisupāla. Similarly one can find reference of Śisupāla sending a dūta or emissary to Kṛṣṇa who delivers an equivocal message, which overtly seeks alliance from Kṛṣṇa and in fact challenges him to fight a war with him. The example of dūta can also be seen in *Naiṣadhīyacaritam*, where Indra, Agni, Yama and Varuna send Nala as their messenger to Damayanti.

In present system of governance within and outside the nation, the system of spying is still in vogue. Every nation is keen to acquire secret information in key areas like nuclear plants, military establishments etc of other nations. Spying in the contemporary period can be viewed more as pre-emptive move by the nations to protect their interest against the adverse policies of other nations in the sphere of nuclear proliferation, expansion of military establishments and acquisition of large scale military equipments such as ultra-modern weapons. Now-a-days, due to globalization, economies of various nations have become interdependent. The period relevant to Mahākāvya can be marked with high level of spying undertaken to know the internal secrets of kings mainly for protecting

themselves and expanding their kingdoms. There is a reference of Yudhiṣṭhira, engaging a spy to get information of the kingdom of Duryodhana in *Kirātārjunīyam*. The spying, in that period, appeared to be a rough style of entering into the army of enemies and to get information about them. Modern spying system, though has undergone a major change as a result of information technology and various means of communication and transportation, yet the origin can always be traced in relevant period of Bṛhatrayī.

Impact on Social Structure

The modern society represents various social norms and values like respecting elders, honouring guests, obeying parents etc, though on declining trends, these were actually present in Mahākāvya period. These norms and values are greatly influenced by the social etiquette prevalent in Mahākāvya period, where one can find Bhīma and Arjuna obeying their elder brother Yudhiṣṭhira in *Kirātārjunīyam*. Similarly, in *Śisupālavadhā*, the way Kṛṣṇa receives Nārada and Yudhiṣṭhira receives Kṛṣṇa in his sacrifice ceremony, suggest that these values were dominant during that period. These social values have been very strong during the Mahākāvya period, which have left strong impact on the social behavior of modern society.

The modern society, is based on the equality between men and women. The constitution of the Nation makes special provision for women for protection of their rights and ensure equality and liberty. Women have excelled in the field of education and reached to the top of the national and international bodies. In the field of astronomy, army, air force and research, women have overtaken their male counterparts. The position of women in the present politico-social order is considered best except in backward nations and rural areas where due to inadequate education,



women have yet to give manifestation of their dreams. The period relevant to Mahākāvya can also be considered as good period for women, as far as education, art etc. are considered. The daughters were loved and cared by their parents. This fact is evident in *Naiṣadhīyacaritam*, where Damayanti's father was seen caring for her all the time. The role of women in discussion, precedent to any decision can be witnessed, when Draupadī took active part in discussion with Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira in *Kirātārjunīyam*. Therefore, the respectable place of women in society can be attributed to Mahākāvya period to some extent.

Modern society attaches great importance to the institution of marriage and ceremonies which are considered sacrosanct. Monogamy is a lawful system of marriage. The present socio-religious order is governed by law as far as marriage is concerned. The Hindu Marriage Act is one of the examples. The system of more than one wife and husband is not allowed as per law. The Mahākāvya period is also marked by monogamy except for kings and nobles. The system of Gotra-exogamy and Pravara-exogamy was prevalent. The ladies played an important role in decorating the house of bride. The system of procession and lighting of path was also prevalent. The musical instrument played the main role in marriages. There are references to priests performing marriage rituals. Therefore, the system of marriage narrated in Mahākāvya period are mainly the basis for present system of marriage.

The prevalence of Varṇāśramadharmā, during the period of Mahākāvya, has a discernible impact on modern society. The division of duties on the basis of Varna-s was in existence just for specialization in a particular work assigned to a particular caste. Though such division on the basis of caste has been constitutionally done away with by the government, yet the dominance

of Brahmins in the field of education and Vaishyas in the field of trade and commerce is still discernible. The system of battles against various nations have come to an end, the role of Kṣatriya-s as warriors cannot be identified with their specialized field. The defined jobs of Sudras can be seen performed by a particular community, yet due to strong occupational mobility, many members of the Brāhmin community are in trade and commerce. The Vaishyas and Sudras, have also risen in occupational hierarchy. They are doing much better in the field of education. Therefore, the impact of literature during the period of Mahākāvya can be found in modern society, yet in changed form due to democratic system of government and constitutional rights of equality. The occupational mobility amongst the communities, is possible as far as adoption of occupation is concerned.

Influence on Economic System

The economy plays an important part in determination of socio-political system of any nation. It is also an important determinant of position of any nation on the international platform. The trade, commerce and industry in any nation has attained priority over military and weaponry. The per-capita income of citizens and standard of living of people are the indicators of prosperity. The contemporary nations have become more committed towards economic well-being of the citizens. They formulate the economic policies in such a way that the available resources of the nation are optimally exploited and exports are encouraged. The nations selectively promote imports too, but not at the cost of local industry. The imports are encouraged only of those items which are extremely difficult to be produced internally. Due to recent phenomenon of open market, globalization etc., the economies of various nations are opening up for trade and commerce resulting in interdependence of



nations. It is a healthy scenario for the consumers because the quality goods will now flow from the other countries at much lesser prices, than those being produced internally.

Therefore, the modern economies can be termed as advanced, open, global, consumer-friendly and I.T.-based. The relations amongst nations have also improved due to liberal economic policies. During the period of Mahākāvya too the economic conditions were good. But since the focus was on boundaries and battles, it had not attained priority. There are stray and occasional references to the economic conditions, one has to infer more to get direct information. The section of people, mainly upper strata can be found leading a prosperous life. People had tendency to make adequate provisions for their off springs. This tendency can be found in modern societies too. Trade was flourishing during that period and there are references to merchants too. The prevalence of barter economy and law of contracts can also be found during that period. The means of transportation were ships, boats, elephants and horses. The study of the economic conditions during the period of Mahākāvya makes it evident that trade and commerce was important at that time too. The people who resided in villages, were mainly dependent on agriculture.

Therefore, one can see that modern economies have been greatly influenced by and evolved from the economies of that period. The objectives have remained the same but means of achievement have changed in modern societies.

Comparative Religious Systems

India is a nation of many religions and a number of beliefs. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism etc. are main religions. In Hinduism, people believe in many gods and deities. The prominent amongst them are

Lord Śiva, Vishnu, Goddess Lakṣmi, Sarasvati, Indra, Agni etc. Islam is based on tenets of Prophet, Sikhism on various Gurus, Jainism on Jain Saints. Besides these religions, people have faith in various sects such as Brahmakumārī, Rādhāsvāmī, Nirañkāri etc.

During the period of Mahākāvya, the religious beliefs and practices were very strong. They were considered creators and upholders of the universe. They were the residents of heaven and enemies of demons. Some of the prominent gods were Trinity of Gods, viz., Brahmā, Vishnu and Śiva. The Brahmā is considered creator of the Universe. **It is evident** that religion and worship system prevalent in modern society, draw their basis during the period relevant to Mahākāvya. The elements of Supernatural power, incarnations, rebirths etc. are prevalent in modern societies, the basis of which can be traced back to the period of Mahākāvya.

For example, Nārada descending from sky, Śiśupāla's soul entering into Kṛṣṇa's body in *Śiśupālavadhā*, witnesses the supernatural power. A similar form of beliefs and instances are found in modern society, where through magical activities and supernatural powers, one can do miracles. The entering of souls in the human bodies is also found in modern society. Therefore, it can be said that even the concept of supernatural power, incarnation and rebirth are based on the beliefs and concepts of the period relevant to the Mahākāvya.

It becomes evident from the above discussion that political and socio-economic systems today have their origin and basis in the period relevant to Mahākāvya. The governing orders have undergone change due to advancement in education, information-technology, means of communication and transportation. The present social system can also find its roots in history and the period of Mahākāvya.



Now the society has attained individualistic character, yet interdependence, systems of marriages, the place of religions, social stratifications etc are still there in vogue. The place of superstitions, religious beliefs etc. can also be seen in modern society as some of them were prevalent during the Mahākāvya period. The economic activities were important in those periods too, but now they have attained great priority due to welfare character of the nations. Globalization, open market, consumerism have made the nations highly interdependent and progressive. Therefore, trade, commerce and industry are booming. In short, the socio-economic and political systems are the same as they are rooted in history, but the nature, character and objectives have changed due to advancement in means of communication and information technology.

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