

## INTRODUCTION

### A HYPOTHESIS OF THE HEROIC

The muse of epic poetry, Calliope, holds a distinctive position among the nine Muses. All poets aspiring to write an epic invoke her blessings before embarking on their momentous task, the task of recording the deeds of men of bygone eras. An 'epic', by definition, is a long narrative poem depicting the great deeds of warriors and heroes. The grand scale of an epic postulates a magnified perception of life. The life delineated in an epic is one lived not by ordinary men and women, but by individuals who are humans, yet who strive to overreach their own humanity. They are not gods, though some of them are half-divine, being the sons/daughters of gods themselves. The peculiar relationship they share with the gods brings out the best in them. The heroic endeavour's result is not necessarily success, but that is rendered secondary when pitted against the grand attempt itself. The aim of this dissertation is to examine some major epic characters as representations of the quality of 'heroism' and to analyse the specificities and generalities the 'heroes' express when they map the terrain of heroism.

Heroic ventures can be fruitfully mapped in the vast canvass of an epic, and the characters display an amazing versatility in their delineation as heroic characters. However, heroic adventures create an ambiguity regarding the individuals themselves. The possibility of a character being 'heroic' is always debatable - since in literary criticism

characters like John Milton's Satan or Christopher Marlowe's Faustus too have been considered 'heroic'. Besides, in modern literature apparently 'anti-heroic' characters too have become culture heroes. Therefore, the notion of the heroic is highly problematic. However, the focus of this dissertation is on the polyphonic discourse of the heroic in the epic genre, specifically in the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer.

The epic genre flourished in most of the ancient civilizations of the world. It was probably the most central literary form given by both India and Greece. The Homeric epics - the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* - are presupposed by the European literary tradition as the finest examples of the genre, and all subsequent attempts at writing long narrative poems are measured against these literary touchstones. They are classed as the first examples of the epic form. Western epic theories have been formulated based on these two primary or oral epics.

The conventional definition of an epic classifies the form into two kinds - primary and secondary, or oral and written. Primary epics are orally transmitted and are written down only at a later stage. While secondary epics are written down at the time of composition, by conscious use of the epic form and style. The Homeric epics and the Indian *Mahabharata* belong to the oral tradition. The *Mahabharata* is an oral epic even though it is considered to be more of a *Shashtra*, a codified manual of instruction, a fifth *Veda*, having various strands of religious, didactic, preaching material.

Primary epics were committed to memory by the wandering rhapsodes and bards, who sang of the glory of the past and present ruling clans. To facilitate their singing, these ancient poets composed their verse along some basic rules, since the poems were mostly sung and heard. These ground rules gradually formed the mechanism which helps literary scholars to identify an oral epic. Formulaic phrases, stock epithets and many such usages were part of the composition.

During the early stages of a literary tradition, oral epics are composed because primitive cultures, which are emotionally intense and volatile, are in a position to raise some of the basic issues of human existence using the mythic-epic mode in such a way that the future generation will benefit by the discourse created. Cultures in the early stages of settling down, are the sources of epic tradition. A settled existence, with the advent of scientific rationality is instrumental in the loss of such an epic vision.

The modern world has no epic in verse but epic novels, epic theatre and poems with epical tenor. The grandeur and sublimity, the necessary ingredients for an epic are lost to contemporary man : he is neither the subject of epics, nor the composer of epics. There is a distinct loss of epic vision, grand imagination and also the loss of the ability to mythicize and romanticize, with the primitive man's mind becoming civilized and rationalized. There is no apparent need for the modern, civilized man to scale the ecstatic heights of mythical imagination to form his myths. Poetry is more personalized, intent on portraying the psyche and trauma of an individual rather than a culture.

Epics offer a vast variety of characters and scope of study to analyse the concept of the heroic. Ancient cultures of the world have their own epics which broadly sing of similar themes - the glorious deeds of heroes of the past. These cultures give rise to such magnificent poems at a certain point in history, when a new culture is in the process of displacing an older one. The strife is imminent, and great, destructive wars are said to have taken place for the re-establishment of a new cultural order in mythical history. The older order was a magnificent but a degenerating one, and a new, regenerative order was called for. The continuous ages of strife gave rise to an altogether different class of men who were the fighting desperadoes, in search of new territories and in protection of the existing leaderships.

Two calamitous wars have seized the imagination of great minds and artists; these are the Trojan War fought in Greece and the Kurukshetra War fought in India. These two wars are said to have wiped out generations of men in a single stroke, thus bringing an end to two oldest civilizations. The actions of the protagonists who fought in these wars are legendary. These are the heroes of a dying civilization, who won eternal fame for the deeds they performed. Their deeds are catalogued in two of the most famous epics of the world, namely the *Iliad* and the *Mahabharata*. Both are basically war epics, narrating the story of vast scale destruction and annihilation.

To understand the heroic temper of the two epics, it becomes necessary to examine the cultural temper of two seemingly different countries and cultures. G. C. Pande remarks about the

*Mahabharata* that it,

— reflects the critical representation of a bygone heroic age from the point of view of a subsequent age of enlightenment. It reflects the contradictions of an age of transition when an old aristocratic and ritual order was yielding place to a new order in which lawless tyranny, social miscegenation, religious scepticism, and heterodoxy were emerging as significant features.

(1990: 123)

Similarly, W. F. Jackson Knight puts the epics of Homer in proper perspective,

Homer is about heroes, and Homer is not about heroes. The question of Homer is interwoven with the heroic, perhaps in many senses of the word. Homer makes a spatial pattern of the temporal sequence in which imagined forms became heroes, gods and human men very like ourselves, and in which, concurrently and causally, the relations of individuals in societies altered towards civilization, with change of custom and law.

(1968: 198)

Both epics reflect the changes of society, but while man as a collective identity is the problem tackled by Vyasa, Homer chooses to focus on the individuality of his men. Ancient mythology in Greece and

Puranic mythology in India are repertoires of knowledge. These speak of times when the divine and human world still communicated with each other. It was still possible to have an access to the god's world by men for the Hindus, and gods were in their anthropomorphic forms. Two mythological characters in each culture are excellent examples of the philosophies embodied in them, of the Greek and the Indian temper. Prometheus in Greece and Bhagiratha in India are emblems of human endeavour in its ultimate form, acted not in any personal interest but out of a love for the human race as a whole. Prometheus brought the gift of fire to mankind and Bhagiratha was instrumental in bringing the celestial river Ganga to the earth, which is said to purify the souls of every person who bathes in it.

In Greek mythology, the two worlds - divine and human - are distinctly divided. Any human trying to gain access to the divine world is not tolerated. Prometheus' act balances the two opposing worlds, of the divine and the human, and his effort is laudable, for it aimed at creating harmony. The ideal of Hindu life is to be the ideal man. Opportunities are sought to go beyond one's restrictive human aspirations. Ascetic feats are said to raise the status of the performer, and the struggle to transcend human limitations is eternal. Yogic and ascetic powers are the source of metaphysical strength. The doctrine of rebirth is also the opportunity given to man by gods. Hindus do not demarcate the human and the divine strictly, for, the human can always aspire to gain *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth-rebirth and attain heaven. The philosophy is to strive for continuous and eternal perfection.

The examples of Prometheus and Bhagiratha put the concept of the heroic in proper perspective. A hero then, would be a human who strives to be, or is, more than a human, not just for the sake of personal glorification, but for the collective good of mankind. Human action becomes significant for its very purpose and lifts it to a plane on par with Divine action. Destiny here plays an important role and it is left to the hero to either submit to it totally or work towards the fruition of the general Destiny bestowed on him by making the right choice of action within the little space left for him. He can also defy it totally by choosing to act willfully against its fruition by negating it. All these efforts are not heroic just by themselves. It is only when they are tested against the moral, ethical, political, cultural and historical backgrounds, that they become heroic, unheroic or aheroic\*.

Epic is a literary form which takes a glorious delight in enumerating the deeds of men of bygone eras - men who were the links between the divine and the human. The now missing link is largely due to man's disbelief in his own past, to consider it as myth rather than history. The rationality of modern man does not allow him to conjure men of towering strength and stature who made the world a better place to live in through their acts. The constrictions of physical time and geographical space restrict man's imagination to delve into a realm of myths and half-truths.

---

\*The word 'aheroic' has been used in the dissertation in the sense of being neither traditionally heroic nor completely villainous.

Myths are an ambiguous genre, being neither history nor fantasy. The niggling doubt about myths being half-truths takes them to a time and space beyond rational comprehension. Yet, the modern man has found his own myths in science fiction, and only the futuristic tone of these myths separates them from the atavistic tone of the earlier myths. The vacuum left by unexplained facts of life can be filled only with myths. Myths provide a step-stone to an impossible world, a world sought, but never possessed. The deeds of the heroes prove to have a cathartic effect, and man escapes to an alien yet strangely familiar reality of a forgotten dimension. A time when gods and men interacted with each other, but gradually lost each other through man's need to be free, and god's necessity to remain divine.

Yet, there were some species of men who were markedly different from both. These were the half-divine, half-human heroes, the favourites of gods who performed miraculous feats and were dearer to gods than others, yet destined to live their charted fate. No other genre, except the epic, can bring to light the complexity involved in this relationship between the divine and the human. The fallibility of humans and infallibility of the divine creates situations of dead-lock out of which only one can emerge as the victor. The key to the consequent victory is immortality. Gods possess immortality, they constantly sought elixir, and yet they cannot be heroic. The paradox lies in the fact that heroism is granted to man in lieu of denying him immortality.

The first cultures of the world spring from the earliest civilizations : Sumerian, Greek and Indian. These had something to boast about to posterity, and wanted the future generations to know about their struggle



to chart out an existence in a still primitive and marvellous world. Poems were composed by rhapsodes of their times, singing about their wondrous deeds, and the epic took its primary shape from the stray songs of these minstrels who sung about the glory of the past rulers. The songs about these heroes fulfilled a human need for having hero-myths. These myths had, and still have power over the human mind.

A study of the mythologies of a culture becomes important, since myths eventually structure the thinking, expectations and imagination of a people. The myth of the birth of a hero gives a clue to the creative power of the poet of the time. As such, myths are the guiding milestones of a culture. Their origins and their spread involve the people's imaginative genius. The myths prevalent during Vyasa's and Homer's time moulded the thinking of the poets as well as the protagonists.

Myths about heroes and of their birth-life-death have been characterized as 'hero-myths' by scholars. A heroic pattern of life begins with the hero's miraculous birth, and his adventurous and heroic feats as an infant and as a child. He is deprived of his rightful social status and is able to retrieve it only after contending with the usurper. During the process he has to combat monsters and supernatural powers, which involves exceptional strength and courage. This evinces the hero's supra-human strength and he emerges as the victor in the end. Such hero-myths are an essential part of a culture's mythology, and the characters in the Indian and Greek epics follow the pattern to a large extent.

The need for such myths is universal, and hence countries and cultures across the globe and across the ages have hero-myths which

have certain common characteristics. Joseph Henderson analyses these hero-myths.

They have, that is to say, a universal pattern, even though they were developed by groups or individuals without any direct cultural contact with each other.

(1978: 101)

He further endorses,

— this pattern has psychological meaning both for the individual who is endeavoring to discover and assert his personality, and for a whole society, which has an equal need to establish its collective identity.

(101)

Such universality of the heroic pattern of life is due to some of the philosophies and the manner of living prevalent during the particular age or epoch. Heroic qualities in the physical sphere were integral to civilizations in their early, fluid state.

India and Greece have given the most well-known epics to the world in the form of the *Mahabharata*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They are not simply 'source texts' of Indian and Greek cultures but also poems of literary value. The epics have an infinite number of characters who offer a kaleidoscope of emotion and action. These heroes are not the cardboard

kind, but highly individualistic, living individuals, representative of their own times. Such individualism arose out of a strong sense of collective identity which pervaded societies in primitive times. Men felt the need to assert themselves as an identity apart from the group. Joseph Campbell observes,

Then all meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forms,  
none in the self-expressive individual: today no meaning is in the  
group - none in the world: all is in the individual.

(1993, 388)

Yet, exclusive emphasis on individuality has been one of the reasons for the quality of alienation and fragmentation noticed in modern literature. However, while some epic characters can be tested against their rising individualism, there are some characters which need to be examined from a particular cultural context and point of view. Lascelles Abercrombie remarks, “ — the morals of the Heroic Age are founded on individuality, and on nothing else” (1922: 14). But this individuality is subsumed in an epic in the general mythological and metaphysical framework of the time. Hence, the use of the term ‘epic’, which reflects the ‘epoch’.

The question then is, what are the factors that contribute towards making the characters heroic or unheroic? The answer can be sought if we start with an exploration of the ‘Heroic Ages’ of the two countries. An examination into the very conception of a hero would lead to formulating some guidelines regarding the heroic. Heroic Ages mark those epochs of

cultural history where the predominant function of the ordinary man was to search for lands of possible settlement and consequently, to wage battles, to fight and win the terrain. W. F. Jackson Knight defines a Heroic Age,

A heroic age is short and destructive, a time in which a young virile culture, influenced by an adjacent culture more advanced than itself, generates an adventurous individualistic aristocracy which lives for war and honour.

(1968: 16)

The degree of heroism depended on the subsequent victory, or as in India, birth into a particular caste, categorized the men as warriors or *kshatriyas*. Certain set rules were to be followed by these men and this set the heroic code or pattern. Was this age man-made? It could be more because of the advent of a superior and advanced civilization on the land of the native settlers. Jackson Knight elaborates,

— ages of epic have started in one particular way. A more backward people develops quickly by contact with a more cultured people. It then adopts a life of aggressive adventure, captures civilized territory, and gives free, glorious, but destructive play to its new found individualism, because it has grown up too quickly. That is a 'heroic age'. Heroic ages do in fact come that way. And heroic ages start epic ages.

(1968: 20)

The question next in line is, what is the birth-place of a hero, or what makes a human a hero? The answers are varied and disputable. The poet's mind is the most likely place after one disperses the clouds of historical and mythical assimilation. A writer's creation is definitely the child of its creator, and the artist contributes in the shaping up of his/her characters. The characters have an autonomy within their existence as literary characters placed in particular situations. The freedom granted to the characters by their creator can be used by them to develop in a certain way. The reader also makes his own contribution by attribution of the doctrines of his own age to the portrayal. Readers of different ages, places and epochs add their own understanding of the characters in their reading. Apart from the translations of the epics which include the translators' perceptions of the heroes, the epic heroes are also the subjects of other forms of art. They appear as recurrent motifs in various literary forms, but more often their representation is partial, showing or highlighting only one facet of their personality. Even when they are portrayed as the main protagonists in other works, the reinterpretation of their characters differs from one writer to another. The myth about how a hero should be or should not be has been a topic of dispute, and it is difficult to trace out a fixed picture, or reach any definite and conclusive statement regarding the concept of the heroic.

An examination of the various forces that go into the making of the hero reveals the protean quality of heroism. The time of existence of these heroes, as depicted in the epics, is one of constant strife and continuous

invasions. As a consequence of invading foreign lands and people, these warriors came to view Nature either as an ally or as an enemy, and they tried to diminish their own fear and awe by attributing human qualities to various natural forces and by personifying them. The natural forces had to be appeased when they were malevolent and the strength this merited was inherent in few men. This is a key to the concept of the heroic, which has brute force and primitive strength as its inevitable ingredients. Overcoming the resistance of native settlers too asked for skill and courage. The one who managed to overcome these two aspects was hailed as 'hero'.

One significant fact is that both India and Greece boasted of highly stylized and sophisticated civilizations before the Heroic Ages. The Minoan-Mycenaean civilization in Greece, and the Harappan-Mohenjodaro one in India, were civilizations which flourished in these lands, but were so completely wiped out with the invasion of the Dorians in Greece and the Aryans in India, that no traces were left behind. Joseph Campbell explains the difference faced by the invaders of these two grand civilizations,

— whereas the invaders of the Aegean were entering a world of still powerful archaic empires, those of India, having passed and left behind the two crumbling citadels of an already worn-out colonial establishment of some kind, saw before them only comparatively rude jungle planters, hunters, and collectors, the Dasyus of their deep disdain.

(1991: 247)

In order to get into the spirit of the themes (and they can be innumerable) depicted in the oral epics it is necessary to take into account these high points of civilizations. The times depicted in the epics are just the points before the invaders came, or immediately after they did. G. R. Levy writes about the Heroic epics that,

They take their origin, as far as is known, among the Indo-European speaking peoples who irrupted into India and the Aegean world during the second millennium B.C., and portray a transitory age, without fixed traditions or long established ties.

(1943: 15)

These are extremely primitive times when the infiltration of other races was more likely. Levy emphasizes, "In each case there is likely to have been a preliminary infiltration, which utilized, without weakening, the political and cultural achievements of the older community, and this phase may be responsible for the later nostalgia which glorified a legendary past" (1943: 69). Though the heroes of the Heroic Ages seem to have ancestral links with the older civilizations, their descendants have no significant historical or literary mention. The whole age, which left a distinct mark on history and literature alike, feels like an ephemereal and magical phenomena, vanished into the mythical sands of time. This vastly unreal, mythical quality is enhanced by the myths and legends woven into the rich tapestry of these epics.

Classical antiquity in Greece classifies the history of the world into four Ages, beginning with the Golden Age, which is the perfect age, when men did not have any vices and death was not known; followed by Silver Age, then the Bronze Age, and lastly the present one, the Iron Age. These ages have a descending order of things which deteriorates as one age slips into another. Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, puts the Heroic Age of Greece between the Bronze and Iron Ages, the age when men of mettle lived. Corresponding ages in ancient India can be marked out. Hindus divide the existence of man on earth into four *Yugas* or ages, starting with *Krtayuga* or *Satyuga*, when things were perfection personified, *Dharma*, that is the right code of behaviour was properly followed; then *Tretayuga*, followed by *Dwaparayuga* and then *Kaliyuga*. In this case too, the *Mahabharata*'s Kurukshetra war is slated to have been fought at the end of the *Dwaparayuga*, just before *Kaliyuga* begins. *Dharma* was already on the decline and the Heroic Age of India was the age of heroes, whose *dharma* still struggled against its changing perceptions.

Archaeological researches reveal very little and uncertain facts about the Heroic Ages, as to when the battles of Troy and Kurukshetra were fought. Though there are indications of nearly total destruction of the sites of war with very little evidence, it is amazing that nothing is heard about the surviving heroes or their descendents after a time. Historical research is even more vague because the stories have gathered unimaginable additions around the nucleus. There is so much mythical material surrounding the main stories of the epics, that it is difficult to get to the core to dissociate historical information of those times.



An inquiry into the epics as literary works of art is also faced with some peculiar problems. The story of the epics is said to belong to a much earlier date but, having been transmitted orally, the written records of the epics are of a much later date. An added problem is that the bards who sung these epics would have added their own versions and preferences to the poems and hence, because of the numerous interpolations one would be guilty of judging too harshly.

The ambiguity surrounding the victory of the surviving clans is similar in both the epics. No one is ecstatic at the victory, since it is bought at a very heavy price and through unfair means. In the *Mahabharata* there are obvious references to foul play in the war, and in the *Iliad* the total destruction of the sacred city of Troy has shades of divine displeasure against the victors. Such ambiguities leads one to re-examine the parameters of heroism as they existed in these distant ages. At the same time, one should also consider the fact that the time elapsed between those ages and the present one is not just of decades or centuries, but of aeons. The criteria for evaluating the concept of heroic would be different, for it is assumed that the action takes place in a mythical time and space.

A certain code of conduct followed by the people of those times leads one to assume that there were Heroic Ages in these two civilizations. During the said ages, the primary motive of men was to fight and annex new territories. H. V. Routh asserts that, “— an epic must deal with action, and that action must in some way reveal the possibility, the dream of human greatness” (1927: 153). The action is commemorated in the songs

or lays and thus it grants eternal life to the memory of the performers of the actions. Life was difficult, and the avenues for enjoyment were few. Such living conditions gave rise to supreme importance of personal honour and vindication. Prowess of body and skill on battlefields formed the fringes of acclaimed heroism. Certain features were accepted as essential for being hailed as a hero; physical splendour, link to divinity, skills as warriors, were common to the heroes of both India and Greece.

When the context and background of the epics are taken into account it can be seen that these heroes display specific but enduring qualities, predominant in the particular culture. The consequent end and goal in life are different for the Greek and the Indian heroes. Joseph Campbell notes the difference between the tempers of India and Greece, and stresses that the mythology of each culture highlights the aims of philosophical inquiries. Talking of the Oriental and Occidental myths and their aims, he writes, "The supreme aim of Oriental Mythology — is to establish — identity with that Being of beings which is both immanent and transcendent" (1974: 3). Whereas, "The high function of Occidental myth and ritual — is to establish a means of relationship - of God to Man and Man to God"(4). This leads him to conclude that the critical line of difference between India and Greece is between " — the way of disengagement and of tragic engagement". (173)

The Greek hero's ultimate search is for fame and honour, in compensation for his own death and mortality. Hence the Greek heroes need to be examined against this context. The Indian hero is in quest of living an ideal life, lived according to the prescribed rules of his religion.

Preserving one's integrity through all odds, and aiding to maintain a balance of good and evil, is the Indian hero's prime motive. Such a context is to be kept in mind while examining the *Mahabharata* protagonists.

The times of transition which form the backgrounds of the epics have a prevailing ideology of their own. Thus, a man who displays exceptional physical and moral courage is a representative of the image of a hero in the minds of the people. A hero thus is a human who is in the mould of a saviour with his heroic qualities, one who would be able to deliver his people from a difficult existence. Yet, a hero cannot cease to be human, he retains all human weaknesses, but the one who tries to overcome them is rendered more heroic than the others. Jan de Vries categorizes a hero as the one who is “— complete and unbroken as an image of glorified human nature” (1963: 18). Vyasa and Homer portray normal men and women who try to be something more than their accepted mode of behaviour. Some choose to act negatively, while others follow the right path. Joseph Campbell observes,

The world, consequently, is a compound wherein good and evil, light and dark, wisdom and violence, are contending for a victory. And the privilege and duty of each man - who, himself, as a part of creation, is a compound of good and evil - is to elect, voluntarily, to engage in the battle in the interest of the light.

(1991: 7)

The fact remains that both choices lead to action, but the one who chooses

to act positively is more heroic in the traditionally accepted way. Both choose to act and change, or go beyond a plain, mundane level of existence, and this makes them heroes. Their choice makes them heroes or villains, but both remain heroic.

The Hindu way of determining the *Yugas* suggests that, according to the declining quality of the Ages, righteousness and moral conduct also decline. The cycle of evolution to dissolution involves deterioration, disintegration and decay, not just in the morality, but even in the conception of a hero. Hence, even a villain has heroic characteristics which enables him to transcend the limits of the role thrust upon him. Every man has a latent quality of heroism, but only a few are able to realize it to its fullest extent.

The question then becomes, what makes some characters heroic, and some not, or who is the hero in the context of an epic narrative? If each individual is heroic in his/her own right, and so such exclusivity is no one's domain, then the corollary is that the 'hero' or the 'heroic' cannot, and should not be essentialized. But by using the very term 'hero' for a character sets her/him apart, and s/he is essentialized. The concept of the heroic is primarily based on observations related to certain literary characters. The concept then is put to use in order to identify these or such other characters as 'heroic'. There is, then, a certain circuitousness and an inherent paradox in it. Critics have tried to explain the use of the term 'hero' and C. M. Bowra writes about the meaning of the term,

Though the word 'heros' originally meant no more than warrior, it

came to assume more august associations and to imply a special superiority in human endowments and endeavours.

(1972: 79)

In the Indian experience, Joseph Campbell writes that, after the catastrophic *Mahabharata* war, the meanings of the term changed. "Following that disaster the term *vira*, "hero" was no longer applied primarily to chariot fighters but to yogis" (1991: 249). Hence, in the Indian context, the term 'hero' has many equivalents. The sense in which it is used in the dissertation is in the Western way of examination.

Hindu philosophy preaches passivity or inaction as far as personal ambitions and desires are concerned. Curbing or renouncing desires is called for, and anyone not following the line of *karma* is said to have swerved from one's *dharma*. This kind of renunciation is essential to be a good ruler, and such morals and ethics are applauded. There is no 'I' in this doctrine, it is always 'We'. Any independent decision on the part of an individual is spurned, and the person is rejected. Heinrich Zimmer traces the change, development, and evolution of the meaning of the term 'hero' or *vira*, from the Vedic-epic times to later ages,

As early as the sixth century B. C. the term *vira* has ceased to be used to denote the valorous knight of the feudal epic, the kingly warrior and hero of the battlefield and of the mythical combats with demons and monsters. The earlier usage is represented by the heroes of the feudal warfare of the *Mahabharata* —

- conqueror of monsters and demons. But as understood, for example, in the sixth-century name Mahavira, *vira* denotes the ascetic hero, the man perfectly shock-proof, impassive amidst the self-inflicted tortures of ascetic austerity, and amidst temptations and allurements, even threats of death, from without. — The *vira* has become the perfect yogi, a true spiritual Superman, a “man hero”, no longer merely the human beast.

(1990: 171-172)

However, such renunciation is applauded by some composers of the *Mahabharata*, wherein Yudhishtira emerges as the true ‘hero’ of the epic. Such renunciation of fleshly desires is the motto of Hinduism. However, the Greeks advocated a philosophy of enjoyment and individualism. To take life head on and to meet its challenge, despite knowing what Fate has in store, was the prime objective of the Greeks. Hence, inaction was considered cowardly and condemned as inglorious. Barbarity, primitive behaviour, mutilating the body of the enemy - his source of existence and pleasure - in the battlefield, were ritual behaviour. Gentleness and concern were looked upon as unheroic. These contrasting attitudes towards action can be traced to the cultural and climatic differences. The climate in Greece promoted action to sustain the physical vigour of the body in the relatively cooler climate. Whereas the severe heat in India lends primacy to inaction, thereby controlling barbarism and extreme violence in most cases.

Greeks and Indians have a different cultural make-up, giving rise to different reactions. Joseph Campbell distinguishes between the Occident and the Orient,

Our concept of the hero, that is to say, is of the actual, particular individual, who indeed is mortal and so doomed. Whereas in the Orient the true hero of all mythology is not the vainly striving, empirical personality, but that reincarnating one.

(1991: 137)

The Greek by temperament is a physical person, and the Indian is more spiritually oriented. Their attitude to death determines their approach to life and fame. Fame is much sought after by the Greeks to remain gloriously immortal for posterity. To perform deeds without an expectation of the results is more important for the Hindus, so that posterity can either emulate them or learn from their mistakes.

One significant fact about the epics is that the protagonists are not absolutely evil, but merely villainous. Evil has little place in the epics. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do not depict any evil character, merely stubborn and headstrong ones. The *Mahabharata* too does not castigate the Kauravas as evil, except as epic epithets. But, in an age of moral righteousness their behaviour does not accord them the status of 'heroes' despite their physical valour; since, though they are great warriors their moral conduct is reprehensible. Vidya Niwas Misra reiterates when talking of the *Mahabharata*,

— Duryodhana's is not called the tree of Adharma - it is the tree of dark anger. It does not lack Dharma, but its Dharma is not clean, is not unalloyed; it is replete, clogged, with ego.

(1990: 23)

It is this obsession with his own ego that makes Duryodhana less heroic than the Pandavas.

No man can be said to be totally good or wholly evil according to Carl Jung and he explains the concept of evil and good thus, "Evil needs to be pondered just as much as good, for good and evil are ultimately nothing but ideal extensions and abstractions of doing, and both belong to the *chiaroscuro* of life" (1986: 280). Literary characters may have such absolute qualities but images which are culture-heroes cannot be portrayed thus. A man who chooses to be a willing partner of Divine will and design is a 'good' man; while the one who chooses to follow his individual choices is termed as a 'bad' man. In which case, the highly individualistic character of the Greek heroes would be looked upon as villainous, like that of Duryodhana by the Hindus. The motto of Hinduism is to have all men acting in the interests of society for the sustenance of *Dharma*, and a willful action is looked down upon. Such a conception of the Hindus would be incomprehensible to the Greeks, who have a developed sense of individualism. But again, cultural differences play a major role here.

The inherent duality of good and evil in man is explained by Hinduism, which looks upon all existent things as a paradox. Heinrich Zimmer explains the dual nature inherent in man. "Such a blending also,



are we ourselves, though unaware of our twofold nature: we are at once the illimited, unconditioned divine Self, and the shrouding attributes of personality-experience and ego-consciousness" (1990: 89). There is a constant ambivalence of the dreadful-yet-benign, the good-yet-evil and vice versa. The dualism of things is inherent in the concept of Hinduism. Heinrich Zimmer comments on the secret of Maya, or illusory nature of things,

The secret of Maya is this identity of opposites. Maya is a simultaneous-and-successive manifestation of energies that are at variance with each other, processes contradicting and annihilating each other: creation *and* destruction, evolution *and* dissolution, the dream-idyll of the inward vision of the god *and* the desolate nought, the terror of the void, the dread infinite.

(1990: 46)

Since God as the Creator creates both the divine and the daemonic on His own, they have to exist side by side. Heroes come into action when the evil raises its ugly head to an unbearable extent, and they curb it. With the complete annihilation of evil, the universe will have regained complete benignity and there is dissolution, for future regeneration. Thus the balance has to be maintained in the universe. The *Mahabharata* exemplifies this phenomenon accurately.

Further, this dualism can be explained in psychoanalytic terms. The psyche of an individual is formed by the conscious and the unconscious. What V. S. Sukthankar has noted about the epic heroes of

*Mahabharata* can be applied to Homer too,

--- the main interest of the epic is held and centred precisely on the subtle interplay of personality, on the disparity and conflict between the “Inner Man” and the “Outer Man”, in other words, on happenings hidden from the outside world in the very soul of man.

(1957: 19)

The “Inner Man” and “Outer Man”, in psychoanalytic terms, can be looked upon as the ‘unconscious’ and ‘conscious’ personality. The duality is present in every person. The balance in the psyche is disturbed when the unconscious becomes dominant. A mediating influence is needed to strike a balance between the two. The physical manifestations of the unconscious, i.e. the evil men, are curbed and the balance is restored by the Hero-Saviours who are themselves a blend of the dichotomy of the world, yet function as per the roles assigned to them. The realm of the unconscious is dormant in normal circumstances, like the evil in universe, but when it becomes uncontrollable, it has to be brought back to an order.

Maintaining life-order depends on the tension between two opposites. The myths about the epic heroes are based on their birth and death, the creation and dissolution of the universe, and the creation and destruction of evil and goodness. The friction between the two opposites gives rise to life-giving forces, and hence it is vital for sustaining the order of the universe. Buddhadeb Bose’s description of such a time, when a new

order is necessitated, is worth noting here.

--- there are points of transition when the wheeling of time stops momentarily. At such points all wars have ended, all effort is exhausted, all heroes on earth are gone or about to go, no danger or conflict is in the offing, nor is there hint of any new beginning. At such a time 'preservation' and 'destruction' acquire the same meaning, some circle completes itself, and devastation becomes necessary in order to restore balance and order in the universe.

(1986: 163)

The philosophy of the regenerative power of conflict, contributes in the shaping of a heroic persona. Buddhadeb Bose writes, while commenting on the *Mahabharata*, that, "Those who oppose each other are at the same time in profound alliance - where rivalry is at its most intense, there cooperation is at its keenest" (1986:55).

Even though the two cultures - Indian and Greek - have many differences, there is a oneness at the metaphysical level, where mythologies merge and philosophies give rise to a single perspective. By looking at the different attitudes of the Greeks and Indians towards various aspects of life - viz. Death, Destiny, Fate, Divinity, Honour, Immortality, Action. One can gain a better perspective of the heroic which emerges out of these attitudes. Honour was the prized possession of the epic heroes. It was held dear to the heart. If there was no honour there was no life. Thus it is equated with life itself. Death is preferred over the losing of one's

honour. For the Greeks, however, death was not an enticing prospect, for it robbed one of the vigour of life. It is barely and grudgingly accepted, but is constantly bemoaned. It is not to be feared, but it is to be avoided.

The belief in the existence of Hades, and in the disembodied soul raised pessimistic helplessness in the Greeks of those times. Hence, in a way, the heroes' hunger for immortality through enjoyment in life, lessens the fear of death. Immortality is sought through wondrous deeds, by getting incomparable honour in the battlefield, so that one's name is not forgotten. Similarly, the Hindu conception of life views everything as *maya* or illusion. The stories and philosophies of creation-destruction, *karma*-rebirth generate a calm acceptance of things in the Hindus. Doing one's work with detachment is encouraged, hence even death is accepted with an inevitable calm. Such myths mould the perceptions of a culture, and are reflected in the behaviour and attitude of the heroes of the epics.

For the Hindus, death is only a release from the bindings of life. It holds a promise of *Moksha* or Liberation, and hence coveted by many. Immortality is not sought, for it only means prolonging the suffering of life. The Greeks envied the immortal Gods, and though they did not covet immortality, they envied it. For the heroes, the only difference between them and the gods was immortality. They feared God's wrath. Hindus had a more benign vision of Divinity. God granted wishes and helped man in adverse circumstances. Gods are not feared in the way the Greeks feared them. But Gods in both epics hold the key to the sufferings and joys of the humans. Fate or Destiny, too plays a significant role, for no one, not even God, can thwart it. It has to be accepted with grace, since it is inescapable.

Moral choices can be made either to try to unsuccessfully thwart Fate, or be its instrument despite all other efforts. In Hinduism, challenging the authority of Fate and acting in accordance with the negation, made a man heroic, yet villainous, for none can avoid destiny. Morality thus depends on the choice of the course of action taken to reach the goal.

In which case, the circumstances of the character, as also Fate, decides the 'hero'. Lascelles Abercrombie distinguishes between heroes and gods,

It is of man, and man's purpose in the world, that the epic poet has to sing; not of the purpose of gods. The gods must only illustrate man's destiny; and they must be kept within the bounds of beautiful illustration.

(1922: 69)

The way in which a man acts in a given set of conditions raises him to the level of an extraordinary human being. Abercrombie further stresses the way a man can choose to be a hero, "The life of man matters to nobody but himself. — If man is to find any value in life it is he himself that must create the value." (1922: 81). Some qualities, which are accepted as normative, determine the line of action chosen by the characters. External circumstances also contribute towards the decisive qualities.

Destiny or Fate plays a significant role in the determination of a heroic personality. No man is born without his own share of destiny, hence man is put in a complex situation in relation to God. In which case man becomes an instrument in the divine hands, used to fulfill His own design.

Man's actions then take on cosmic significance, an active participant only when his Destiny wishes it, and a passive recipient when God does not wish him to act. Every man who is classified as a hero or a villain is thus so, because the Divine chooses him to be.

Divine action is towards the fruition of human destiny, hence these actions cannot be set against a larger sphere of unchallengeable actions. On the other hand, human action is to strive for autonomy and freedom from Destiny. It is this striving for the unattainable, and consequent failure to do so, which makes humans heroic. Their actions work against a larger sphere of 'divine actions. Jasper Griffin's observation is pertinent here,

--- events are given a character exclusively in terms of heroism; but behind the heroic the audience is aware of other powerful currents and is moved by them, without their needing to show themselves above the surface.

(1983: 47)

The struggle for maintaining human dignity despite the ultimate denouement is a human right. No god can deny this to man. Willful actions on the part of humans, regardless of the consequences, only differentiates the heroic mould. Actions that defy Divine will are heroic, and those that serve to fulfill the intended Destiny are no less heroic. The difference is only of degree.

Epics thus depict an ideal of the relationship between man and god. This is of prime importance, for they can be said to have been composed especially to glorify the ways of gods to men by pointing out the difference and similarity between them. Hence, gods or divinity play important roles in epics. It is an epic convention to have *deus ex machina*. The gods retain the power of deciding or decreeing the fate of man, and they allow him to have his momentary glory. This is vital, to retain His own glory as a God. What seems to be immortal glory for men through the medium of epics, is actually an exchange or compensation for human mortality. At the same time, the heroes do not forget their mortality. It reminds them constantly of their frail humanity, and such realization makes them scale the heights of heroism. Vidya Niwas Misra writes about the state of man while talking of the *Mahabharata*,

The *Mahabharata* of Vyasa is not a poem of pathos; it is a poem of the knowledge of pathos, — Through this knowledge man may vow to be man, and not to be a god or demon, for, both gods and demons desire humanness. This does not imply that man is the superiormost; it does mean, however, that the state of being man is that which allows one to feel for others. The state of being man is the state that accepts everyone and desires humanness for all - desires that humanness which is exclusive but which merges in all.

(1990: 29)

The heroes, who are semi-divine at birth or have miraculous births, grow more and more human as they approach death. The circumstances and fate which make them human are divinely fated, and realizing their conscious humanity makes them heroic. This kind of consciousness makes them aware of the similarity, and the difference, between gods and themselves. In becoming more human they do not lose their divine element, but their mortality is the key quality of difference. Because the heroes are mortals, their actions gain heroic proportions. Whereas, gods who are deathless cannot become heroic, because their actions lack the fatality associated with human action. Actions of gods are taken for granted because of their immortality and power, while the heroes have to strive to overreach themselves. This overreaching makes them at once human and divine, which is the culminating point of the 'heroic' - the apex when a hero becomes heroic. Joseph Campbell calls this state of awareness as the

— all-supporting midpoint, a hub where the opposites come together. like the spokes of a wheel, in emptiness. — its location is psychological. It is that point of balance in the mind from which the universe can be perfectly regarded: the still-standing point of disengagement around which all things turn.

(1991: 17)

At this point of convergence, the conflicts and contradictions felt by the hero are resolved, and he emerges as 'Hero'. He is conscious at



that moment of time, at the self-same instant, of his simultaneous divinity and humanity. He is a key figure of his world and culture at such moments. Such a high point cannot be achieved by all men of all ages. There are ages when such a significant event does not take place at all; for it is the political, socio-cultural conflict in an age which produces such heroic personalities who aware of their own duty and responsibility towards the world as a result of their own divinity-humanity.

The epics seem to suggest that man has a total freedom of choice within a limited sphere of duty. Since every man has his own share of goodness and evil, he has to choose his line of action. Such a freedom is given to him by God, and his choice renders him a hero or a villain. Each individual has divinity present in him. To deny this divine aspect is to be 'evil' and to affirm it is to be 'virtuous'. Such an affirmation of the divinity in oneself helps man to transcend the ordinary conception of the universe. An action may be positive or negative, but it is action nonetheless.

The burden of heroism once borne is unshakeable, the heroes cannot shed the weight of heroism like Prometheus. It is the price they have to pay for being more than human, yet less than divine. They have to fulfill the task of delivering humanity from the clutches of Destiny like Bhagiratha. Heroism, thus, is a mantle which cannot be donned by ordinary mortals.

A hero is one who is capable of growth, one who admits to his weaknesses and learns to accept the responsibility for his own actions. Achilles, Karna and Duryodhana realize their folly and accept full respon-

sibility for their actions. Even though the heroes act according to their own destiny and the wish of the Divine, they do express their individuality by acceptance of their responsibility for the actions. This recognition on their part is in fact a step towards their freedom. It enables them to retain their own choice, even as they act out their roles to fulfill their destiny. Divine intervention does not exceed beyond a limit, and it allows the heroes to recognize the convergence of their own divinity and humanity. It is this recognition which makes them heroic.

The difference between a heroic personality who is capable of growth, and the one who remains unchanged and thus unheroic, is a recognition of one's own frailty as a human, identifying a feeling of comradeship with the enemy. Arjuna, in the *Mahabharata*, is the one who has a sudden revelation of this common frailty just before the war begins. Achilles, in the *Iliad*, too realizes the common humanity he shares with his enemies, after Patroclus' death. The protagonists remain heroic because of such changed perspectives. But by then Fate catches up and it is rendered futile, for then, only death awaits them. Duryodhana and Achilles too realize the futility of the wars waged, but they have no choice when pitted against Destiny. Each of them have a fate to fulfill, and it is their duty to meet their death. A hero who is able to feel for others, suffer with, and for, others and who is able to shoulder full responsibility for his own actions, has access to real knowledge of the existence of man. Such a man has scope for growth and development. Krishna Chaitanya comments on this,

Without being self-centred in the sense of narrow egoism, the self remains aware of the centre, actually advances from the centre, in this expansion of the radius of the realm it is able to assimilate, and relishes the expansion from the centre. And this assimilation is possible only if the self works hard on itself, and for itself, for its growth in authenticity.

(1993: 402)

Krishna Chaitanya further states, "If one chooses to focus on the self, one can develop a hard concept of an independent, autonomous, lonely, natively competitive and hostile individual" (1993: 403). This is the case with Duryodhana. Whereas, "If one chooses to focus on the other beings, the self becomes a faceless entity eclipsed by the others" (403). Yudhishtira is a victim of such thinking; but Achilles, Karna and Arjuna are distinct as being both, "If, however, one focuses on the interactional process, a more meaningful, dynamic and intensely dramatic picture emerges" (403).

Recognizing their humanity and its sharing by their enemies is an essential lesson of heroism. As heroes they are self-assured and feel invincible, but as humans their egos are unsure. The heroic outlook and the human outlook are opposed to each other, as are divinity and humanity, Ruth Katz stresses this point (1990: 134). She also classifies a hero as a representative of society, "In any society the figure of the hero represents people's desire to transcend human limitations" (274). The egoism associated with heroic behaviour is lowered once the hero faces

his humanity. Such a recognition is necessary, for it facilitates the hero's conception of the universal values of humanism as similar to his own.

Epic characters thus, have lasting values which have an eternal aesthetic appeal for readers. Arjuna's concentration as a warrior, Karna's generosity as a donor, Achilles' realization of the truth of heroic life and death, Hector's compassion and his valiant attempt to save his people, are imprinted in the minds of the readers. They represent ideals which are beyond social realms and remain unattainable for most men. The characters do not lose their human touch, but they are mythicized over the successive centuries, and it is their mythicization which makes them heroic. The mythicization is due to the embedding of fantastic stories over the core story. Readers too contribute to this establishment through their own perceptions and attitudes. An ideological concept prevalent at a particular time determines the image of the heroic at that time. Heroic qualities are thus in a fluid state for some centuries, but after a time they settle down to a basic singular concept accepted by the people.

Heroic characters have a fluctuating graph in their careers as accepted heroes in society. While some characters are accepted as heroic in one age, they are rejected by another. The acceptance and rejection continues till the commonalities of the concept solidify and gain a permanence. Cultural, social, religious differences remain, which decide the specificities of heroism. No work of art can be best understood if it is removed from its contextual and cultural background. A particular way of living and looking at things gave birth to the epic form. The characters of the epic have the freedom to shift images till they are settled into a

unified image. After the rudimentary form of the heroic stabilizes, the characters take on a culturally and socially accepted image because of the values they embody. Thus, the concept of the heroic becomes a dynamic yet an immutable concept.

The heroes, as well as the villains, are significant within the context of the text, because not only are they part of an historical moment, but by taking part in the event decreed by Divinity, they are instrumental in bringing about a new order of life by wiping out the old one in a mighty destruction. In Greece, the burning of Troy was decreed by the Gods, and the Trojan war destroyed generations of men. In India too, the Kurukshetra war was supposed to be the most disastrous event of the age, wherein generations of men were wiped out. Historically, the epic plot may not have any truth, but in the history of the epic text, these events are momentous.

In both the epics, the surviving victors too do not meet with a glorious end, but live only to witness the disastrous consequences of the catastrophe of the war. The victory is won at a high price. Though the epics describe wars and battles at length, the lesson they strive to teach is about the futility of war. It was the decree of Fate and Gods, but it also had a regenerative spirit. New epochs were ushered in; epochs of continuous strife and regeneration had their seeds in it. Krishna Chaitanya calls these epic characters “partners of divinity” (1993: 444). They aid Divine design to its fulfillment. Such a view leads to their mythicization, and lifts them to a mythical plane by enhancing their superhuman, heroic qualities in a degenerating world. Their role in the reshaping of mythical history makes them heroic.

Every epoch has its own parameters of moral behaviour, hence the writer who creates his characters, inadvertently reflects the beliefs of his own age. Similarly, the reader over the ages reads into the characters according to the dictates of his own age. So what is constant and unchanging with each reading; whether according to literary, philosophical, mythological, heroic or human level; is the attitude, which can be claimed to be heroically right for all fields, ages and people. This is the permanent Truth - not the Absolute Truth - which holds true for all human beings of all ages. Looking at hero/man from the perspective of the Absolute indicates a primordial search - an interminable search for the Self. Absolute Truths by nature cannot be conclusive statements, for even Absolutes are different for all.

The quest for the 'Self' can never end, since no man can truthfully look for himself within his own reality. Because, the man who finds himself truthfully and completely by resolving the contrasts and similarities will be *the Hero*, The ultimate Hero. The author/writer, as an artist, tries to search for the absolute self of Man in his conception of the heroic image, when he portrays his characters. Whereas, the reader is in search of his own self in his reading of the text, of the characters. And a culture or an epoch, signified by the whole people, is in search of the Absolute Self, of the ultimate perfection of Man. These are the underlying truths when they invest the concept of the heroic with their own perspectives and ideologies. The search for the 'self', as well as the ideal 'Self', lies at the core of the concept of the heroic.

The concept of the heroic is thus like the prism, which is constant by itself, but gives out lights according to the lights reflected on it. The truth about 'heroic' is protean. It can never remain constant. Like Proteus, it evades the grasp of the seeker. Mythically, one who is able to hang on to all the changing shapes of Proteus is able to know the Truth, with a little divine help. However, with concepts that defy definition one can only point out that like the prism, the light of the age, thought, culture, history, thrown on the touchstone of heroism, is the light that is reflected. Protean truths about the concepts of the heroic can never be stated in absolute terms.

The following chapters analyse in detail the arguments presented here. The first chapter outlines the history and the context of the epics, giving an introduction to the plot of the poems. A discussion of critical opinions on the epics and psychoanalytic and mythological theories forms a part of the chapter. It identifies the protagonists of the narratives and forms a basis for the discussion taken up in the subsequent chapters. The second chapter examines several major protagonists in the Indian and Greek epics in the light of their origin/birth, physical/intellectual prowess and their location in the space of heroism. The varying tenors and hues of the concept of heroism are highlighted during the analysis. The third chapter locates the concept of the 'heroic' within certain philosophical and cultural premises. It also examines the emerging discourse of the concept based on six axiomatic truths by giving illustrations. The conclusion, while summing up the arguments put forward in the preceding chapters, also links up the quest for the concept of the heroic as a

'virtual' concept. to the eternal search for an identity. The questing spirit of Man in search of his self and of the essential Self is seen as part of the quest for the concept of the 'heroic'.



### Works Cited

- Abercrombie, Lascelles. 1922. *The Epic, an Essay*. London: Martin Secker.
- Bose, Buddhadeb. 1986. *The Book of Yudhisthir, A Study of the Mahabharat of Vyas*. Trans. Sujit Mukherjee. Hyderabad: Sangam Books, Orient Longman.
- Bowra, C. M. 1972. *Homer*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1974. *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*. London: Souvenir Press Ltd.
- . 1991. *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Arkana. Penguin Books.
- . 1993. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Hammersmith, London: Fontana Press, Harper Collins.
- De Vries, Jan. 1963. *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*. Trans. B. J. Timmer. London: Oxford University Press.
- Griffin, Jasper. 1983. *Homer on Life and Death*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Henderson, Joseph L. 1978. "Ancient Myths and Modern Man" in *Man and his Symbols*. Ed. Carl Jung. London: Picador, Pan Books.
- Jackson Knight, W. F. 1968. *Many-Minded Homer*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Jung, Carl. 1986. *Jung: Selected Writings*. Hammersmith, London: Fontana Press.
- Katz, Ruth Cecily. 1990. *Arjuna in the Mahabharata, Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

- Krishna Chaitanya. 1993. *The Mahabharata, A Literary Study*. Delhi: Clarion Books.
- Levy, G. R. 1943. *The Sword from the Rock, An Investigation into the Origins of Epic Literature and the Development of the Hero*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd.
- Misra, Vidya Niwas. 1990. "Key-note address" in *The Mahabharata Revisited*. Ed. R. N. Dandekar. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Pande, G. C. 1990. "The socio-cultural milieu of the *Mahabharata*: an age of change" in *The Mahabharata Revisited*. Ed. R. N. Dandekar. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Routh, H. V. 1927. *God, Man and Epic Poetry, A Study in Comparative Literature, Vol. I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sukthankar, V. S. 1957. *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. Bombay: The Asiatic Society of Bombay.
- Zimmer, Heinrich. 1990(Ind. rpt.). *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Ed. Joseph Campbell. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.