

CHAPTER-3

A PHILOSOPHY OF THE HEROIC

This chapter proposes a philosophy of the 'heroic', which comprises the discussion of the heroic as a permanent and invaluable truth. It also discusses the nature of the heroic as a malleable concept, adapting according to the social and cultural contexts.

Heroism is a relative concept which cannot be identified as an isolated quality having fixed definitions. It is difficult to view heroism out of the context of a specific culture, as a feature that remains constant. It is necessary to think of heroism as a dynamic concept, which acquires meaning in the light of certain situations and circumstances. At the same time, it is also an immutable concept because some basic characteristics of marking out a heroic personality are more or less unchanging. Characters display heroic qualities through their actions and the philosophy they hold. Their self-knowledge lends their heroism a very distinct quality. In the previous discussions it was noted that the epics present their characters as embodiments of certain values. Besides, the reader or listener fills in the sketched-out image with his/her own colours. The succeeding generations of readers read the ideology of their own age and their own unconscious perceptions into the characters portrayed. Yet, the characters also reveal their own understanding of heroism through their actions and attitudes. Their responses to some eternal questions of human life philosophical dimension.

The attitude of the characters to concepts like Death, Destiny and Immortality differs, depending on their cultural context and the age in which the epics are composed. Epics represent the age in which they are composed. since the epoch has an influence in the structuring of the epics. This necessitates, for us, a philosophy of the heroic, enumerating the prismatic quality of the concept of heroism. These observations may indicate that there cannot be one universally valid definition of a 'hero' or the 'heroic' and that it is possible to define the heroic in multifarious ways by employing a variety of approaches. In the following sections some of the approaches will be discussed with a view to highlighting the complexity of the problem.

HEROIC AS A DYNAMIC CONCEPT

Heroism is the crucial component in the epics. However, it cannot remain a fixed or static concept. It adapts to the contemporary trends of thoughts, and thus becomes context-bound. It is possible to look at heroic characters from different perspectives and classify them as heroes belonging to the same class, even as they retain their distinctiveness. For instance, characters like Duryodhana and Dhritrashtra offer ample scope to study the psychological types. With their tendencies to run into excesses, the father-son pair exhibit narcissistic qualities which do not allow them to see beyond their self-gratification. Dhritrashtra is a weak person who uses destiny as his escape-route in adverse conditions. Vidya Niwas Misra's comment on this aspect is illuminating.

The respite he gets from fighting gives Achilles a chance to reflect on heroic life, and his own personal stake in the war. Again, it is his realization of the similarity between his own predicament and that of his enemies which facilitates an unique understanding in him. The fame and glory much coveted by him seem useless when faced with death. It is too late for him also, and he has to face his own destiny in the guise of death. The situations of Achilles and Duryodhana are different. Whereas Achilles is a hero despite his unbending attitude, Duryodhana is seen as a selfish and devious man for the same reasons. Placed in the culture of rising individualism, Achilles retains his heroism when he decides to indulge his pride. But in the Indian context of sacrificing individual needs for general upholding of *Dharma*, Duryodhana becomes ambiguously heroic, or rather, 'aheroic'. The dynamics of heroism operating in the specificity of situations creates this nebulous demarcation. The difference in the two types of heroism is an integral element of the concept of heroic.

The mental agility and cunning of Odysseus and Krishna are in contrast to the traditional idea of heroism. Both are folk-tale characters, mythicized by their numerous exploits and adventures. A different kind of heroism is at work in the depiction of these two characters. The prowess they display on the battle-field is secondary to the alertness and intelligence they exhibit in moulding situations and circumstances to their own advantage. Krishna's strategies help the Pandavas to win the war and, similarly, it is Odysseus' ruse of the wooden horse which decides the result of the Trojan war. It is significant that both these characters are

important figures in the epics despite their passive role in physical fighting. Krishna believes in shaping his own destiny, even if it is within the sphere of a predetermined teleology. It is his own actions which guide the Pandavas who have an immense faith in him. The doctrine of *Karma* is elaborately described by Krishna in the *Gita*. The stress on desireless action is a keynote of the ideal projected in it. In the changing epoch of the Bharata war, the mental qualities of the individual had slowly started gaining precedence over the physical qualities. Hence a person with a sharp mind, even though otherwise passive, was an indispensable figure. The epics nowhere state that Krishna and Odysseus lacked physical strength, but the characterization highlights their mental qualities more than their physical qualities.

Odysseus's belief in his own mortality and weakness enables him to successfully accomplish impossible tasks. He has supernatural aid to help him because of which he is able to complete his tasks, but apart from the general favourable destiny on his return from Calypso's island, he relies totally on his own wits to overcome his difficulties. The *Odyssey* is hailed as the work of an aging poet who has realized the supreme value of peace, and the poem is a tribute to this calming emotion. In accordance with the mood of the poem, the hero is a figure who is no longer young in body, but is mentally alert. H. V. Routh emphasizes this point about Odysseus, that "— he does in the highest degree typify the man who overcomes brute force by sheer brain power." (1927: 112). This view clearly indicates the rising importance of the mind and it can be seen in the depiction of Odysseus. One can say that the changing conditions of the society were

grasped more quickly by Odysseus and Krishna. They adapt to the vicissitudes, and therein lies their success.

The tragedy of Karna and Hector springs from the circumstances that surround them. Inadvertently, they are bound by it to act out differently than they would choose to. Their heroic energy has its roots in their admirable conduct despite being in adverse circumstances. Hector's tragedy is that he has to fight with a heavy conscience. The act of abducting Helen is abhorrent to him, and yet he must fight the Greeks to support his brother's selfish act. Hector also knows the weak character of Paris, and knows that the fate of Troy depends on himself. Death is inevitable in such an attempt, but he tries his utmost to uphold a lost cause. He gets a hero's death on the battlefield, but not before he too has a realization of his own triviality as a mere human being.

Karna's tragic fate always manages to elude his grasp. His lifelong quest to be admitted into the *kshatriya* fold is fulfilled at a time when his choice would be crucial for the real cause of the war - that is, the upholding of *Dharma* over *Adharma*. He chooses wisely, knowing death faced him; yet the freedom he exercises in choosing to remain on the wrong side is paradoxically for the sustenance of *Dharma*. Krishna Chaitanya writes about Karna,

But Karna redeems himself, and thereby becomes a far greater heroic and tragic figure than any other character in the epic.

(1993: 353-354)

Thus, though both Karna and Hector fought on the wrong side, what is remembered is their action despite the knowledge of truth. Their choices are heroically made, and their heroism shines even more because of this.

The traditional heroic mould from which Arjuna is carved out has no room for ambiguity. He exemplifies the life and death of a real epic hero, and his character has very few moments of difficult choices. The other characters represent alternate visions of heroism, and offer an ambivalent outlook to heroism. The negative points are equally stressed in all the cases, making them vulnerable, yet no less significant. There is one more character, who is distinctive for the values he upholds, but not for the accepted norm of heroism.

Yudhishtira is highlighted as the real hero of the *Mahabharata* by many critics and scholars. Traditionally he could be considered the hero, since he is the main protagonist in the whole struggle for kingship. It is to install him as the rightful heir and king that the war is waged. But he displays none of the heroic qualities that are inherent in the others. He is described as being an expert in the art of driving a chariot and fighting at the same time. But not a single physical activity that shows any unique strength is attributed to him. He also does not exhibit great restraint where his kingdom and possessions are concerned, or else he would not have gambled them away without a thought. He has to depend on Bhima and Arjuna to secure his own kingdom, and also to win the war. Though extremely wise, Yudhishtira lacks the cunning needed for a statesman. Yet he embodies the ultimate goal of every Hindu who wishes to lead a perfect life. His strict adherence to truth and *dharma* at the cost of

personal injury belongs to a closing era of heroes like Harishchandra and Rama. In the coming era of cunning and trickery, he feels at a loss, and is unable to adjust himself to it. Yudhishtira's life is an ideal life upheld by most Hindus as the epitome of perfect life. His weaknesses are overlooked, because he provides an excellent example of a morally upright person. The resulting experiences are overshadowed by his personality.

Yudhishtira's heroism stems from his spiritual quest. As an incarnation of Dharma, he is constantly in search of answers to the riddle of life. He is keen on grasping the mysterious aspects of the universe, and for the spiritually inclined Hindu, he becomes the ideal hero who is to be emulated. Buddhadeb Bose argues in favour of Yudhishtira by applauding him as an example of a person who has an empathetic feeling for others,

All his boons and curses were hidden within him. How he had gathered them together and developed them in order to become an earthly being with every attribute of humanity - that is what *Mahabharat* is all about.

(1986: 193)

V. N. Misra also regards Yudhishtira as the hero because, "— he can feel for everyone and in feeling understand the fallibility in others." (1990: 33). The heroic energy in Yudhishtira's case is spiritual, offering another mode of heroism.

According to Joseph Campbell's theory of the emergence of a hero, the life of a hero has certain evolving stages, on the completion of which, a character becomes 'the Hero'. Beginning from the hero's birth, through his life and adventures till his death, the path charted out by Campbell is confirmed by most of the heroes of the epics in one form or the other. The full course may not be followed by a single hero, but at any stage, Campbell's theory is generally valid.

On examining the variety of characters, one can say that there is no single and universal idea of an epic hero. No fixed or static idea of heroism is possible because of the different situations and circumstances the heroes are pitted against. Their heroic energy assumes distinct and different forms of representation. Heroism thus, is a dynamic concept, which keeps changing from age to age and epic to epic.

HEROIC AS AN IMMUTABLE CONCEPT

As a dynamic concept, heroism is seen differently manifest in different heroes and throwing light on some new quality of heroism. But even amidst this constantly fluctuating degrees of heroism, one can identify some characteristics which are unchanging and immutable. The actions of the heroes may take on different modes of representation, but all actions ultimately lead to a single constant ideal. Depending on the culturally specific qualities, the ideal might differ. The hero's struggle to achieve the ideal renders him heroic, but at the same time he is not always successful in his endeavour. W. F. Jackson Knight points out.

— the direction of the poetry. the implied moral of it, is towards a courageous and gentle ideal. The characters can, or should, see the ideal, but they are proud individualists, who often do not reach it, and for that or another reason come to disaster. There is a tendency to pessimism, and the faith that men have glory, and not much else, for which to hope. Therefore the heroes passionately love glory.

(1968: 24)

A heroic character may fall short of achievement because of some innate flaw in his own character or destiny. This humanizing effect is absolutely essential to make a character heroic, which is also an image of glorified humanity. It is an image in which we see ourselves, yet superior to us because of its capacity to transcend the barrier of ordinary humanity.

Following the unchanging code of heroic conduct, a hero retains his own basic character through all the turmoil of life. Sri Aurobindo's words for Vyasa's characters hold true even for Homer's protagonists,

— his characters having once adopted by intellectual choice & in harmony with their temperaments a given line of conduct, throw the whole heroic force of their nature into its pursuit.

(1991: 61)

A heroic persona may develop as a character, but is usually not transformed beyond recognition. His behaviour and action are consistent.

leading towards the heroic ideal of being strong and courageous, in the face of adversities too. The strong urge to achieve glory and fame remains constant in both the Indian and Greek heroes, though the degree of intensity is considerably less in the Indian heroes. These heroes, as embodiments of ideal behaviour and life, are role models for ordinary mortals. In the society depicted in an epic, a brave warrior is the ideal to be emulated. The essence inherent in a hero's life is an ideal one, which is sought by all men. In a sense, all men are potential heroes. It is only those who realize this to its fullest extent, by virtue of special knowledge, that are recognized as heroes. The ideals of an age or culture are put forward through these images for the common man.

Most instances show that the heroes manage to realize the ideal, but not altogether. It is the effort of reaching the ideal which sets the way for others to follow. The instances of Hector, Karna and Bhishma, mark this out. Hailed as the heroic figures of the epoch, nonetheless, they are forced to side with the wrong doer. This is their 'Destiny', but the way they work out their own living destiny, in the larger preordained plan through their actions, distinguishes them as 'heroic'. The choices made by them are made consciously and though aware of the fallacy of the choice, they do not regret it.

Duryodhana is consistently 'evil', even after his realization that these deeds are immoral. But having made his choice, he cannot swerve from it. Krishna Chaitanya classifies Duryodhana as the *Asuric* type and writes about him.

Duryodhana identified himself with his pride and his hate and dies without regret when the consequences of his actions prove fatal. He shows no self-pity.

(1993: 76)

His endeavour to be the king leads him to various transgressions, and till the end he clings to his choice. Such unity of character is the hallmark of all heroes. By defying his preordained Destiny, Duryodhana tries to be the maker of his own destiny. His valiant efforts to win the war result from his desire to control his own life. As a man who can exercise his own freedom in a limited sphere, he is unmatched. The clutches of Destiny are alike for all, but heroism is to make and attempt to transcend the binding. Duryodhana strives for his own ideal, and Karna and Hector for their own, but in the end, none is able to achieve it. This constant feature is applicable to the Pandavas and the Achaeans too. They win the wars, but the victory is diluted due to the vast annihilation of men and destruction of property. Yudhishtira is so grief-stricken that he has to be persuaded to take up his right to the throne. Similarly, none of the returning Greek heroes are exultant after their victory. They carry their victory with sadness and a sense of futility. The cause of strife is to uphold certain accepted values, and personal interests are treated as being secondary, though it is not always the case with the Greek heroes. The heroic efforts can be applauded, but in the end all the heroes are reduced to their human stature. It is a constant feature of their heroism. Their fortunes keep on changing, but they stick to their own choices.

The severe failure faced by the victors is consciously highlighted by both Homer and Vyasa. The futility of ravaging wars is the message of the epics. In the Hindu context, all actions are to be desireless. It was the prevailing ideology of the society. Those who are able to do it, like Yudhishtira and Bhishma, are able to renounce their own rights even after victory. The *Gita* offers a lesson for all warriors. To do one's duty, without expectation of the fruits of action, is the ideal of life. Hinduism propagates both renunciation and action. Renunciation is an easy way out, by escaping the responsibility of action. To act is to be heroic, provided the action is not an outcome of personal desire.

The disregard of prophecies from the Divine is the source of misery for the Greeks. Heeding to gods is an important aspect of the success of one's own actions. The wrath of gods becomes instrumental in deciding the fortunes of men. Agamemnon did not pay heed to Zeus' deliberate wrong dream. While Achilles and Odysseus pay attention to the gods' messages. Achilles' fury is abated only after he receives Zeus' message to hand over the body of Hector to Priam. It enables him to come down to an ordinary mortal level, and to realize the humanness he shares with his enemy. Odysseus follows Athena's advice and is able to return home safely, and also routs his enemies. Gods thus play a crucial role in Homer.

A conquest of the self is vital to be a hero. An excess of *manas* or *menos* can lead only to one's downfall. Both Duryodhana and Achilles realize this. A man in possession of his own self, by conquering his ego reaches a sublime state. Ascetism thus gains priority for the Hindus. Nabaneeta Dev Sen emphasizes this aspect,

— the ascetics lend a complexity to the simple heroic idea of human prowess. It is not by mere physical strength that man is a hero. Another depth, another richness is added to his personality. The ascetic's moral prowess, his spiritual strength acquired by harsh penance, which is a training of the mind, is distinguished from the physical prowess and skill of the warrior.

(1974 :42)

Transcending the limits of humanity is desired, but the state of being human cannot be forgotten. The human state of the heroes logically implies that they fall short of being divine. For, if the heroes become divine or immortal, they no longer remain heroes. This dichotomy is integral for being heroic. Mortality separates gods from men. By allowing men to compete with gods, men are raised in stature, but they cannot equal gods. The willful choice of Duryodhana and Karna, the tragic acceptance of Hector and Bhishma, the valiant efforts of Arjuna and Achilles, are unchanging qualities, making them more heroic than the others. Action which allows the acceptance of destiny is a touchstone of heroism. The chink in the armour is their humanity which makes the heroes near perfect, but never entirely so.

The illusory nature of life is felt by all heroes and they display a desire to enter into this *maya* or illusory reality with their fame and glory. The notion of rebirth amongst the Hindus offers a consolation to the fearful minds of men. The idea of death is less fearsome if one believes in the cycle of births. The permanence of the soul allows for the idea of

continuous existence. The concept of Time in Hinduism points to this fact. 'Time' is eternal, from which the universe and all beings emanate. The life lived by men is but a small fragment of Time. The fixed duration of human 'time' is the source for the thirst of glory and fame. If man can see beyond his own limited time, he would not seek to retain his constricting reality. Eternal Time is a transcendental phenomenon, it is 'just there', and all events keep on recurring within Its confines.

The theory of the four *Yugas* in Hinduism is consonant to that of the four Ages in Greece. The deteriorating *Dharma* or 'goodness' is in fact only part of the cyclical nature of Time. For, after the last age of Iron or *Kali* has passed, the cycle begins again, with *Krtayuga* or Golden Age. Such notion of time gives a quality of permanence to man's deeds and actions. For the Greeks too, time is cyclical where each event is repeated. Citing a quotation from a paper by Erich Frank, Heinrich Zimmer writes "--- the history of the universe they (i.e. Greeks) considered as a natural process in which everything recurred in periodical circles, so that nothing really new ever happened." (1990 : 20). Zimmer then states his own agreement to this idea in ancient Greek thought and compares it to the Hindu view of time. "This is precisely the idea of time underlying Hindu mythology and life. The history of the universe in its periodic passage from evolution to dissolution is conceived as a biological process of gradual and relentless deterioration, disintegration, and decay" (20). The laws of the universe are immutable, and any effort to step out of them is likely to fail. Heroic characters seem to accept this and strive to live a full life within the confines of time.

Very few human beings can completely grasp the notion of eternal Time, and those who are successful chart their own life accordingly. Heroes are beings who are conscious of this aspect and their actions are in accordance with the constant laws of nature. The eternal quality of Time lends permanence to their actions and the qualities they exhibit become immutable within the 'reality' of Time. The lives of the heroes are in historic time, but their heroism belongs to Time. Hence a hero who realizes and accepts this is a man par excellence, giving meaning to existence and actions. His heroic qualities thus acquire a permanence of sorts, changing only the form, the matter remaining the same.

HEROIC AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The conscious understanding of the interlocking of the reality of Time and illusion of time is the result of a deeper knowledge, a prerequisite of heroism. A hero is conscious of his own self. A comprehension of the workings of the human mind as increasing one's self-recognition empowers an individual, especially if it is his own mind. Man, as a social being, grows up with an acute consciousness of his role as a member of his society. All his actions are centrifugal, tending towards the fulfillment of his social role. It is only when he realizes the need to look inwards, as a result of reaching a saturation point in material acquisitions, that he directs his actions centripetally, towards his own inner being. Joseph Henderson describes it as a need to look for hero symbols in one's life, through which a man can be heroic, an integrated personality, in his own right. He writes,

As a general rule it can be said that the need for hero symbols arises when the ego needs strengthening - when, that is to say, the conscious mind needs assistance in some task that it cannot accomplish unaided or without drawing on the sources of strength that lie in the unconscious mind.

(1978 :114)

Then starts the process of integrating his personality, by gaining a knowledge of his own being. Self-awareness is an important key to their heroism. The man then starts the journey towards acquiring his 'whole' personality, by overcoming the demons in his own soul. It is a heroic adventure that every man must complete on his own.

The realization of the externally placed God or Divine as being a part of himself, lifts a character to a higher plane of heroism. Here it is one with the Divine, and at the same time, conscious of its distinct humanity. V. S. Sukthankar explains this phenomenon as the result of a divided consciousness from the divine, he writes,

— all our suffering appears to be due to the building up of a strong consciousness of our existence as a separate entity and to our frantic efforts to cling to that personal separateness and identity. One must transcend that separateness and unite oneself to that Power from which one proceeds - and everything proceeds - to know oneself one with the universe, which is also one's self.

(1957 : 114-115)

Epics can be said to have been composed to glorify the ways of God to men, to alter the Miltonic phrase, "to justify the ways of God to Men." Hence, the relationship between the divine and the human is of crucial importance in epics. All epics propagate a philosophy of the relationship, and the actions of the characters are directed towards that end. The *Mahabharata* has been described as a search for an ideal life by V. S. Sukthankar. He classifies the dominant passion of the Greeks to be the quest for ideal beauty and the goal of every Hindu to follow an ideal life (1957: 3). The Pandavas' life is one fraught with terrible vicissitudes, and their victory is earned at a great price. Such a life, which does not swerve from the path of *Dharma*, is not an easy life. Yet for those who strongly believe in their own strength of character, victory is there without any doubt.

The Pandavas are the embodiments of five *gunas*, hence their existence as a collective entity predominates their singular, individual existence. During their exiles they have the time not only to gather forces for the eventual war, but also to contemplate on their own lives. Yudhishtira gets the maximum benefits through his various discussions with the *rishis* who visit them. His questing mind is eclectic, taking in every bit of knowledge it can. He also has the time to reflect upon his behaviour during the dice game, and he admits that his proud display of wealth was uncalled for. He agrees to being guilty of greed when he staked all he had, in the hope of winning the Kauravas' wealth.

Arjuna's heroism is tested in his encounter with Shiva dressed as a *Kirata* in the forests. In accordance with the Hindu belief of ascetic

power as an integral quality of a hero, Arjuna undergoes severe penance to go to the heavens and get divine weapons for the war. Ascetism gives a spiritual aura to the singularly physical heroism. It enables the hero to comprehend his position in relation to the world. Arjuna also gets the benefit of being the subject to whom a profound discourse is narrated. He does not feel guilty any longer when he realizes that his enemies are dead, morally and spiritually, long before he would kill them. A sense of detachment is necessary for self-conquest. It is only then, that the individual can see beyond himself in an objective manner. Detachment was the spirit of the age and the grand ideal of the whole epoch.

Karna could never resign himself to accept the low station he had been awarded in life. His craving for identity as a *kshatriya* leads him to project an image of excessive generosity. His resolution to stick to his oath proves fatal, when Indra asks for his armour and earrings, his protection against death. But he would rather face Arjuna in battle without them, than refuse a gift to a *brahmin*. Karna becomes a tragic figure, because when he is gifted with a *kshatriya* identity, he no longer craves for it and refuses to own it. His realization of Yudhishtira as being more suitable for kingship than Duryodhana also reveals his own fate. By opting for a side which cannot be victorious he exercises his freedom of choice, but he comes out as a morally superior person in contrast to Krishna, who tries to bribe him by using Draupadi as a bait. Karna's integrity does not allow him to abandon the friend who gave him an identity. He is remembered as a tragic figure who is lost in a world of fateful complications. Krishna Chaitanya's analysis of Karna's

character is apt when he comments that,

— by his Dharmic choice, he both won what his self at last recognised and desired as the highest value, a finer world, and expanded his ego boundaries to assimilate the whole world, finding his fulfilment in its well-being.

(1993: 405)

Homer has made his two important characters the vehicle of his philosophy. By portraying Achilles and Hector as unchallenged heroes, Homer lifts them to a godlike status, though they cannot be gods. M. I. Finley notes the difference.

They were heroes not because at the call of duty they marched proudly to their deaths, singing hymns to God and country — but because at the call of honour they obeyed the code of the hero without flinching and without questioning.

(1956: 125-126)

The love for physical vigour and strength is primary in the Greeks, and physical pleasure is of utmost importance to them. Hence, Homeric heroes despise death that turns them into disembodied souls. Death puts an end to the enjoyment of fleshly desires. It is to be despised, and the only compensation accepted is fame and glory, which would guarantee perpetuation of life even after death. Fate cannot be overcome, yet actions

must be performed. As humans, the Greek heroes cannot escape their roles. Achilles' own impending death, and the death of Patroclus creates an unusual understanding in him. He becomes aware of the common ground of humanity and death he shares with his enemies. He could have many foes in life, but they can be only friends after death. Hence, when he calls the enemy 'my friend' he does so with a conscious understanding of their similar positions. He is one of the two characters who grow as individuals. During his respite after he retires from fighting temporarily, Achilles reflects bitterly on heroic life and death. He had joined the war in the hope of winning fame and glory or at least to die a hero's death. But his injured honour makes him question the need of fighting without personal stakes. His imminent death demanded satisfactory compensation in the form of glory. He had been promised eternal fame, but that seemed to be a distant possibility to him.

On the other hand, fighting for a losing cause Hector knows the importance of his life. The fate of Troy depends on him, and with his fall, the capture of Troy is certain. He too reflects bitterly on the state of his city, his parents and family who would be totally helpless after his death. Yet, fight he must, and being only a mortal unlike Achilles, he fights courageously. But gods had decreed the fall of Troy, and he too was a victim of their plans. If the half-divine Achilles could not hope to escape death, Hector was fully human, and death was certain for him. His tragedy is that he has to fight even after realising its futility.

Both Vyasa and Homer invest most of their characters with an ability to delve deep into their own souls and comprehend their fallibility as

humans. A self-consciousness is necessary for them to rise above the level of sheer physical heroism. Every character has to live by the duties of his/her own class, and even the 'enemy' has to behave according to the same code of heroic conduct. In the Greek poems, the source of heroism is often innate, that is either birth or divine aid. Such aid is extended only as per divine wish. Whereas in the Indian context, heroism is also more than the traditional strength and courage. It is cultivating a sense of disinterestedness while performing actions, not for personal glory and fame, but for changing or establishing a new world order. But despite all the heroism, the characters are extremely fallible. Their strength and courage are useless when their time is over. Those who are able to develop detachment like Achilles and Arjuna, are gods' favourites, and self-knowledge is necessary for these heroes. Heroes then set the path for others, themselves being recipients of divine grace and knowledge. They exhibit the heights to which human beings can aspire, and also the limitations implied in such aspirations.

ARCHITECTONICS OF THE HEROIC

Heroic qualities are structured on certain attitudes to archetypal truths and some elemental experiences of human life, such as Death, Destiny and the intimations of Immortality. The hero's reaction to these archetypes determines the quality of his heroism. An attitude or response to death, destiny etc. is premised on the character's perception of a philosophy prevalent during its times. A culture's world-view moulds

the perception of its individuals, making them aware of their relation to the phenomenal or transcendental world. Joseph Campbell describes the attitudes of the Greeks and Indians.

— in India an attitude of devotional love and fear of God is cultivated in numerous popular cults where the personality of some deity is emphasized, while in depth the ultimate teaching is of an absolute law. Likewise, among the Greeks, where the gods in the tales so well known to us appear to be self-moving and willful, there was a deeper teaching of divine destiny, *moira*, personified in the Fates, against which not even Zeus himself could strive.

(1991: 123)

Death is a fact of life. All those who are born have to die. Since no human being can know about the life after death, death may create a sense of fatalism in most individuals. Even when men know about a possible life in Heaven or Hell, the fear of an oncoming end unsettles those who do not have recourse to a satisfactory explanation, sought in religion or philosophy. An individual who is able to comprehend the relation between time and death, would see it as not a finite end, but as an eternal process. Theories of incarnation and rebirth in India, and those of a life-after-death in Hades in Greece, are such attempts to stretch finite experiences into a teleological discourse.

Karmic law prevents individuals from choosing the wrong path, for otherwise the wrong deed catch up with them eventually. Also, doing good deeds or *karma* in a present birth ensures a happy existence in the next one. In the *Anusasana Parva*, Yudhishtira asks Bhishma the reason for his own disturbed state of mind even after attaining his goal of winning the war. Bhishma relates an episode of encounter between *Mrityu* and Gautami with *Kala* and the Fowler and the serpent, who had killed Gautami's Son. The Fowler blames the serpent for the child's death, who in turn passes on the onus of the death to *Mrityu*. *Mrityu* reveals that *Kala*, in fact, had directed him. Lastly, *Kala's* speech reveals the real cause of the child's death and the speech also explains how the doctrine of *Karma* operates. *Kala* says,

Neither *Mrityu*, nor this serpent , nor I, O fowler, am guilty of the death of any creature. We are merely the immediate exciting causes of the event. --- the `Karma' of this child formed the exciting cause of our action in this matter. There was no other cause by which this child came by its death. It was killed as a result of its own Karma. It has met with death as the result of its Karma in the past. Its Karma has been the cause of its destruction. We all are subject to the influence of our respective Karma. Karma is an aid to salvation even as sons are, and Karma also is an indicator of virtue and vice in man. We urge one another even as acts urge one another. As men make from a lump of clay whatever they wish to make, even so do men attain to various results determined by Karma. As light and

shadow are related to each other so are men related to Karma through their own actions.

(*Anusasana.1.5*)

Such a conception lessens the fear of the world of mysterious forces like death. The Hindu, trained from childhood to believe in the concept of rebirth, *karma* and of death as inseparable, accepts his finiteness with a certain calmness. It does not create terror in him, and he is thus able to look at his life as *maya*, an illusion. If the soul is undying and only the external forms perish, there is no cause for worry. Such a philosophy shows death as a liberating force, as a means to attain *moksha* by doing one's duties. The Greek remains in awe of the inscrutable phenomenon of death. Death would mean an end to sensual pleasures, and in ancient Greece the final aim of life was to enjoy it to the maximum. The body was seen as the source of pleasure and without this external manifestation, the eternal soul was seen as without purpose. Hence, the individual seeks compensation in the form of eternal glory and fame, by warring and also by extending the physical and geographical boundaries of his world. In his world, death is a nuisance by its very presence. Joseph Campbell observes in the context of the *Iliad* that.

— the tragic sense of that works lies precisely in its deep joy in life's beauty and excellence, the noble loveliness of fair women, the real worth of manly men, yet its recognition of the terminal fact, thereby, that the end of it all is ashes.

(1974: 162)

Heroes are described as the sons of gods, but despite the divine lineage, they must die. According to Ruth Cecily Katz, "Mortality may perhaps be seen as the primary mark of humanity in a hero." (1990: 141). The Greek heroes have a short life, as they are killed in war and glory is the only way of avoiding total death. If their names are remembered, and their deeds looked at with awe by posterity, it is a kind of life to them. Consequently, honour is valued above all, an injury to it is a grave offense. Achilles has a short life, and though his mother manages to help him during the *Iliad*'s events, he would not be able to escape his predicted death. Fateful choices have to be made and endured. When Achilles chooses a short but glorious life, he intends to be the best among all. The massacre that follows Patroclus' death is almost a vengeance for his own impending death. Destiny cannot be changed. It was a potent force for the Greeks. H. V. Routh deduces.

— the doctrine of Fate must have been supreme during one phase of Homeric development. Nor can it be denied that the actions of men seem somehow to be solemnised and rendered less petty or futile by the consciousness of this invisible and impersonal power, which shapes their course.

(1927: 67)

Being half-divine, Achilles has a foreknowledge about his death, and it is his effort to live a life of his own choices which makes him heroic. Achilles had come to war out of a purely personal motive, of winning fame.

In fact, he curses Helen for whose recovery they were fighting, because the chance to achieve glory had been snatched away from him. The glorified heroic life is no longer attractive for him, and he questions the need to fight at all. Such an unheroic view of war is juxtaposed against a glorified picture, to bring out the futility of war. Homer depicts both the negative and positive sides of such a heroic life.

Hector, on the other hand, is fully human and though he knows he may die in the war, he has a hope of life since he does not know his own fate. His actions lead him to the fulfillment of his destiny, but he remains unaware of it. Achilles' actions have a tragic finality, but Hector's are only those of a courageous warrior. The death Hector thinks about is probable, but the one Achilles knows about is definite. This makes their attitude to death different. Hector exultantly fights to win the war, as a part of his duty towards his family and kingdom, with little personal interest. Whereas, Achilles' very reason for coming to war is personal. It is the way they look at their deaths which makes them heroic. A hero's death is sought by them. If death is inevitable, why shouldn't one do his duties and make choices by exercising the limited freedom given by Destiny. A hero's destiny is death, and hence it cannot be overcome.

The heroes of the *Mahabharata* are makers of their own destiny even within the larger scheme of things. Death is accepted as a foregone conclusion, but they have things to do before that. Conscious and willful decisions are taken, and nowhere else it is more fitting than in the case of Duryodhana, Karna and Bhishma. These heroes try to chart out their own destiny, but cannot escape the larger design of things. Bhishma's destiny

is sealed the day he is saved by his earthly father. From then on Destiny plays cruelly with him. His renunciation of his right to the throne is in the interest of the kingdom. But Fate has other things in store for him. Because of the intermittent lapse in succession, he is forced to look after the kingdom. His half-brothers die childless, and once again he tries to thwart destiny by refusing to be the king and beget sons through the widows of his demised brother.

The promise made by Bhishma devastates the kingdom loved by him. Eventually, the internecine conflict destroys the whole clan. Couldn't Bhishma have avoided it by becoming the king? Or was it his destiny to watch his beloved kingdom torn apart? He is offered opportunities to change his destiny, but his refusal is a conscious choice which acquires a greater importance for him than the destiny of his kingdom. By remaining on the Kaurava side he, in fact, becomes instrumental in starting the war. Unlike Karna, he is under no obligation to do so. Even though he is sustained on the kingdom's wealth, he has every right to stop the war as the eldest Kuru. His refusal to fight would have, by itself, stopped the war, since Duryodhana depended on him and Karna to win the war. At every step, Bhishma makes a willful choice, keeping in mind only his promise and image. His promise, and later his refusals are conscious decisions that bring on catastrophic events. He becomes heroic by his promises and choices, but there lingers a doubt about the rightness of his decisions. Irawati Karve, however, points out that there is something in his character that resolves the paradoxes, "Bhishma's life was full of apparent contradictions, but beneath these contradictions there was a

logic in his actions and thoughts.” (1991: 9). She does not specify in her essay what the logic was, but does raise the question, “Had Bhishma accomplished anything in keeping his vows? The question remains.” (29). Even with this ambivalence, the grand old sire of the Kuru family remains a towering personality, unmatched by any other. His heroism rests on the attempt to defy his Destiny by creating his own destiny.

Karna’s example shows how an individual can counter his destiny by his conscious choice. In Irawati Karve’s words.

Each character in the Mahabharata was aware of the framework of moral values and when faced with a choice, chose according to his or her lights.

(1991: 192)

He had, all his life, struggled in vain to know the reason for the difference between him and the family in which he was supposedly born. The difference was due to his armor and earrings, which were present since his birth. Karna is aware of a missing link in the story of his birth. Answers to this mystery do not come easily to him, and despite being excellent in the duties of a warrior, he has to content himself by accepting the honorary role of the king of Anga, bestowed on him by Duryodhana. The much coveted identity comes to him on a platter when Krishna asks him to cross over to the Pandavas’ side, being Kunti’s first son. Till this time, Karna comes across as a hotheaded, arrogant person who is overzealous in pleasing his patron and friend. But during his dialogue with Krishna.

Karna's character undergoes a change, and he comes through as a man of wisdom and integrity. His decision to remain with the Kauravas is again a conscious one, by doing so he was rejecting a chance to be what he had always wanted. However, like Bhishma, he too has no regrets. Life had put him in a corner and the space he rejects as a Pandava, or at least as *Kaunteya* - for he cannot be called Pandu's son - is a bid to defy the destiny which had denied him his right.

Another example of the defiance of Destiny is Duryodhana who makes his choices knowingly. His stubbornness regarding the Pandavas is almost a challenge to tradition which prevented Dhritrashtra from being crowned as a king because of his blindness. By natural inheritance Duryodhana would have been the king in that case. This is a sore point with both the father and the son. After the battle begins, Duryodhana realizes his grave mistake on many occasions. For the sake of his personal whim he watches his friends and relatives dying before him. But he cannot go back on the choice he has made. He has to continue, even if it is to avenge the deaths of his fellow-warriors. He refuses to admit his fault openly. However, he is a changed character by the time he is killed by Bhima. He has realized the consequences of defying Destiny. Even though he tries to chart out his own destiny, the victims who suffer are too many. But in keeping with his character, he does not wish to acknowledge his failure. It is a path he has willingly chosen, and with no regrets. Even the heavens shower him with flowers, applauding him as a hero.

The examples of Bhishma, Karna and Duryodhana show that Destiny as a potent force in one's life can be moulded to suit oneself by one's

actions. Destiny cannot be fulfilled without actions and vice versa. All actions, positive or negative, lead towards the realization of Destiny. Even though *Niyati* remains a powerful force in human life, it is possible to act as one chooses to, within the limited freedom granted to man. The comparative powerfulness of Destiny and Exertion, or *Niyati* and *Karma*, is excellently portrayed in the *Mahabharata* text. Yudhishtira asks Bhishma about the relative powerfulness of Exertion vs. Destiny. Bhishma narrates the story of the conversation between Vasishtha and Brahma. Upon Vasishtha's asking as to what is more powerful between the *Karma* of a creature and his Destiny, Brahma says,

Nothing comes into existence without seed. Without seed, fruits do not grow. From seeds spring other seeds. Hence are fruits known to be generated from seeds. --- As, unsown with seed, the soil, though tilled, becomes fruitless, so, without individual Exertion, Destiny is of no avail. One's own acts are like the soil, and Destiny (or the sum of one's acts in previous births) is compared to the seed.

(*Anusasana*. 6.16)

He further says,

If one's *Karma* bore no fruit, then all actions would become fruitless, and relying on Destiny men would become idlers. He who, without pursuing the human modes of action, follows Destiny only, acts in vain, like unto the woman that has an impotent

husband. --- Man's powers, if properly exerted, only follow his Destiny, but Destiny alone is incapable of conferring any good where Exertion is wanting. -- How does *Karma* originate, if Destiny form the prime spring of human action? (The answer is) that by this means, an accretion of many virtues is made even in the celestial regions.

(*Anusasana.6.17*)

He explains further,

Destiny does not help the man that is steeped in spiritual ignorance and avarice. Even as a fire of small proportions, when fanned by the wind, becomes of mighty power, so does Destiny, when joined with individual Exertion, increase greatly (in potentiality). As with the diminution of oil in the lamp its light is extinguished so does the influence of Destiny is lost if one's acts stop. --- The man that does not exert himself is never contented in this world nor can Destiny alter the course of a man that has gone wrong. So there is no authority inherent in Destiny. As the pupil follows one's own individual preception, so the Destiny follows Exertion. The affairs in which one's own Exertion is put forth, there only Destiny shows its hand. --- By the influence of Destiny, and by putting forth individual Exertion, do men attain to heaven. The combined aid of Destiny and Exertion, becomes efficacious.

(*Anusasana.6.18-19*)

Death and Destiny play a significant role in shaping the life of the epic heroes. None is able to escape either death or destiny, decreed by the Gods and Fate. The difference between the heroes and gods is the latter's immortality. It gives the gods a power over men. But the very mortality of the humans makes them more heroic. Gods possess immortality, which does not increase their heroism. The deeds of Gods are not taken as marvellous, because being divine, nothing is impossible for them. No action can remain unperformed for the gods, to make them struggle to perform it despite all adversities. Man, being a limited being, has to struggle to achieve heights of glory. A man who acts willingly as an instrument of Divine Will has a chance of being heroic, while those whose choices do not accord with God's will are negatively heroic or rather, 'aheroic'. Krishna Chaitanya sees an intention in divine design and he finds the intention to be one which can,

--- raise the man, who exercises his autonomy in the most conscientious way and thereby converges in the same direction as deity's movement in history, to a "like status" (*sadharmaya*) with himself.

(1993: 366)

The scheme of things that regulates the actions of men prompts them to transcend their own limits. The result of such an endeavour may not meet with success. But the very attempt to go beyond is heroic. With no boundaries set around them, gods have everything at their disposal. The

tragedy of death that awaits every hero is lacking in the Gods' actions, who are immortal.

The makers of Destiny do not have to work against an adverse Fate. Immortality grants them the necessary platform to perform their actions without any fear of death. Their actions do not acquire a profound significance that is attached to human action. A half-divine hero acts even on knowing his fate, while a fully mortal hero acts without the knowledge of death. Epic heroes know that death is inevitable, hence their actions and struggles to overreach themselves gain a significance that is exclusively reserved for humans. One may even argue that heroism is a gift to mortal heroes to compensate for the inevitable death. The marked difference between men and gods is more pronounced in the Greek epics, where the gods' actions are set against human action. A hero is made thus only when he acts on his own conscious choice, with little regard for his death or predestined fate. His actions, set against a cosmic background, are rendered heroic because of his mortality. Death gives a new significance to the heroes' lives.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE HEROIC

The preceding sections examined the concept of heroism as an innate quality of the heroes. The attitudes and reactions of the hero to certain truths and values of life seem to be determining the degree of heroism. Whereas both Homer and Vyasa believe in representation of characters by delineating them in an unobtrusive manner, the characters

can be interpreted differently by different readers. The differences in the reading of the text and the characters reveals the phenomenological conditioning of the given epoch. Heroism is a much coveted quality, but very few men are able to realize their own potential to its fullest extent. In an epic, one comes across an amalgamation of three worlds, namely the fictional, historical and mythical world of the narrative, the writers' epoch and the world of the reader. These three realms together attempt to give rise to a universal concept of heroic. Perspectives of heroism keep changing largely due to the social and historical changes. A culture's ideology is imbibed by its people, who in turn, read their own aspirations and dejections into the poems. Accordingly, one or the other character gains primacy in a particular age.

At any given time, the ideological beliefs prevalent in a society are projected on the texts read by its people. No epoch is self-sufficient, and a vacuum is created when explanations sought to the critical inquiries are revised. The transference of such ideological aspirations to epic characters is an attempt to make up for cultural inadequacies in one's contemporary world. Sri Aurobindo comments,

It was left for Vyasa to create epically the human divine and the human anarchic so as to bring idealisms of the conflicting moral types into line with the daily emotions and imaginations of men.

(1972: 177)

A mythical story creates a sense of timelessness by the very fact that it is

placed in an imaginary time and space. A belief in such a narrative enables an ordinary individual to take part in an unconscious fantasy, which is normally not fulfilled. The catharsis felt by the recipients of the narrative is by proxy. It allows them to participate in the action, even as they are not active participants. The wondrous images of the heroes allow them to transcend the restrictive barriers of human time and space. The heroes complement a lack in the reality of the life of the readers. Talking about psychoanalysts' explanation about the desire for having an image of the hero, V. S. Sukthankar points out,

The Ego, they say, is for ever dissatisfied with the reality, especially with the small quota of happiness that is his allotted share in real life, and he makes up the deficit by freely imagining fictitious persons who have in abundance whatever he himself lacks and by identifying himself with them, being at the same time blissfully unconscious that he is doing so.

(1957: 40-41)

Unfulfilled desires of the unconscious are reflected on the heroic icons, enabling the reader to go beyond his physical time and space.

During the times in which the epics are situated, the image of the hero was traditional. He was one who had exceptional courage, and was capable of performing marvellous deeds. The action was confined to seizing new geographical territories, and one who was a 'sacker' of innumerable cities was considered a hero. Conquering fresher territories

was an important function of the heroes. It brought not only material profits, but also fame and power. Thus, we have in Homer, all the main protagonists described as 'sackers of cities'. This was the time when these wandering heroes came upon settled civilizations. The clash was inevitable, and the survivors were hailed as the new lords of that territory.

G. R. Levy observes,

In this period of warfare and wandering, when survival depended upon loyalty, initiative and endurance, the weakening of the old ties of a settled society and religion, developed individuality and the ideals of personal freedom, in which a man might challenge the gods to his undoing.

(1943: 87)

Transitional cultures have their own value judgements about a heroic personality. They build certain kinds of images for a successful warrior. Such traditional conception of heroism is exemplified by Achilles and Arjuna, who are emblems of traditional heroism, dependent on physical prowess. Both are accepted as the heroes of the epics. However, as a settled civilization emerges, the individuals seek a new heroic image. Man's transactions with Nature till this stage are based on his fear and awe of the mysterious forces of Nature. But, as he conquers Nature, he develops a higher rationality and thinking. The mind gains prominence over the body, giving rise to heroes like Krishna and Odysseus, whose heroism is concerned with the use of intelligence.

Both Krishna and Odysseus are ambiguous characters for their contemporaries. Odysseus is contemptuously brushed off as a trickster for his cunning intelligence. His comrades are cautious and wary of him. Yet it is his ruse of the wooden horse which makes the Achaeans victorious. Krishna too is not accepted as one of them by most *kshatriyas* of his time. Without the label of an *avatara*, he is looked upon as a cunning cowherd. Krishna is demythologized, first by Shishupala during the *Rajasuya Yajna* and then by Duryodhana, at the time of Krishna's peace mission, which is an expressive narrative strategy of Vyasa. It was a time when, in royal politics, matters were decided by wars, and plotting strategies was not favoured. It is again a questioning acceptance of a new order by an established one. Odysseus and Krishna became popular with readers of an age who relied more on thought than physical action, thus a heroism of mind replaced the heroism of body.

In the transitional civilizations, physical prowess no longer remains a necessary virtue of a hero. Intellectual heroism too loses its overwhelming importance. New problems cropped up in the form of class struggle, when the socially and politically suppressed, and also the ruling classes began questioning the existing norms of thought and behaviour. This also suggests that the society is getting fragmented in terms of its values. Earlier, 'class' seemed to include only the *brahmin* and *kshatriya* segments. But with the changes in the possession of the 'capital' of the society, the other two *varnas*, that is *vaishyas* and *shudras*, were also in a position to take an active stand in society. An awareness of the oppressive inferiority imposed upon a certain section of people, gave rise

to a new image of the hero. Heroes like Karna and Ekalavya from the *Mahabharata* were accepted by the lower classes as their heroes. The tragic story of Karna became the story of the oppressed people all over the world. Various literary, critical and political theories were instrumental in a re-reading of these ancient texts from the point of view of the socially oppressed classes. The modern day 'class' struggle is on no way anticipated in the Greek epics, however, Karna became an emblem of the resilience of the oppressed in India.

Such context-bound readings of the epics keep on shifting the dignity of heroism from one character to another. The readers attribute their own inadequacies and desires to the heroic images as an escape from their own mundane reality. One of the reasons for such identification is that the heroes are essentially human. In epics even the sons of gods are mortals. This shared ground brings the heroes and the people nearer. Lascelles Abercrombie's remark about the general importance of such individual works like epics is illuminating,

- such poetry has symbolically to re-create the actual fact and
- the actual particulars of human existence in terms of a general significance.

(1922: 57)

The outcome of the heroic endeavour becomes less important for the characters and the readers than the very endeavour itself, which lifts these heroes above their humanity.

Authors represent the characters, and readers invest them with heroism they themselves cannot hope to achieve. It is the readers' consciousness which gives meaning to the text. The responses of the readers are based on their own subjective reaction to a particular heroic image. Therefore, it becomes important to find an absolute image of the heroic, acceptable as such for all readers of all ages. A universal image of the heroic is possible only so far as the common features of heroism are concerned. Characteristics like strength, courage, valour, ability for introspection, and recognition of absolute Truths, make a character heroic. While epic poets reflect their own aspirations and theories through their literary creations, the heroism of the characters, within the context of the epic narrative, is largely determined through their placement in certain situations and through the actions performed by them. Also, while proposing a universal image of the heroic, the responses of readers are necessary to flesh out the image. The combination of the authors' representation of heroes, the characters' inherent heroic qualities, and an intended reading of the characters by various readers of different ages, together gives us a definition of the heroic generally valid for all times. Paul Merchant makes such an attempt,

It is this sharp focus on to the central figure in his massive isolation that gives the great epics their grandeur and universality. We are confronted not by a man at a moment in history, but by Man in History. We are all involved in what becomes of him.

(1971: 4)

Such a universal reading of epics attributes a timelessness to these sagas of men and mankind. Merchant further writes, "In each case the writers look back to a period of extraordinary significance in an attempt to define in some way the nature of man and his relation to the world." (9).

CULTURE AND THE HEROIC

The multidimensional aspects of heroism, are in many cases, the result of culture-specific qualities. A given culture, at any time, has its own culture-bound perspective. A common search for the unattainable, by transcending one's own limitations distinguish the heroes from other men. Though this quality is basic to any heroic character, the heroic characters are shaped within the sphere of cultural expectations. Heroes act according to the received norms within the social milieu depicted by the composer/author. Since culture-specific norms can be distinctively different for each culture, the heroic outlook too can be different. It was observed earlier that epics are written during the times when great cultural transitions take place. They are composed during turbulent times, when an old order is on the verge of extinction, and a new one is trying to establish itself.

The Greeks were a wandering people, capturing whatever land and seas they could. The sea routes used by them are indicative of a fluid state of living. Land routes were very few, and hence seas play an important role in their history. Any kind of permanence was alien to the Greeks, and their wanderings made them incapable of rooting them-

selves. A defined philosophy of certain absolute truths could not develop in ancient Greek civilization. The much coveted fame and glory become metaphors for their rootless wanderings, and also, in a way, their absolutes. A kind of permanence is sought by the Greek heroes in fame and glory, and thus these become their ultimate goals. As a result, death occupies a place of greater significance in their thinking. Death on the battlefield is considered an ideal, though, at the same time it is feared. A physical space was a necessary requisite for existence for the ancient Greeks. The body was, for them, the source of life and pleasure. Even a philosophy of the life of the soul in the Netherworlds or Hades, was looked at with suspicion. What is the use of having an eternal life of the soul if an individual cannot have a body? Men were highly individualistic, and a community spirit was grudgingly accepted, only when it led to the fulfillment of one's desires. Such an outlook is distinctly Greek.

The different philosophical tempers of Greece and India are distinguished by Joseph Campbell,

— the pleasant, open waters of the ship-filled Mediterranean beckoned the Greeks to learn of distant lands and to keep their eyes alert, whereas the land and mountain vastnesses of Asia, never overcome by man, always threatening to reply to his little victories with a force infinitely surpassing anything humanly imaginable, kept before the mind the aspect of the universe that is experienced rather as sublime than as beautiful.

(1991: 247)

On the other hand, Hindus of the *Mahabharata* times had developed a philosophy of rebirth and eternal existence of the soul. Life was looked at as a temporary resting space, in a chain of innumerable spaces. The cycle of birth-rebirth continues, till one attains *Moksha* - or liberation - from this unending cycle. Such a liberation of the soul was considered the goal of every Hindu, and the only way to achieve it was by doing one's own *karma*, or fulfilling one's duties conscientiously. *Dharma*, or Absolute value of existence, is to be followed to reach *moksha*. It is when *Dharma* is violated that catastrophes occur, and according to a preplanned scheme of the Divine, saviours in the form of *avatars* take birth to balance the equilibrium. Such a conception of life diminishes the fear of death, so that one could meet death with a calm acceptance. Indian culture developed within a general spirit of permanence. Land territories were captured, and settlements were possible. This advancement beyond nomadic existence gives meaning to life, and a philosophy of cyclical, eternal existence, is possible. If life is a stopgap, then it is illusory, and all is *maya*, or illusion created by Gods. Perceiving life as *maya* enables an individual to detach her/himself from its binding qualities. Renunciation of desires is sought, and therefore, performing one's duty without expectation of results, is the *Mahabharata*'s lesson.

Literature of a culture reflects the prevalent ideologies of the time, and in a way, it also lends permanence to them. Jasper Griffin stresses the importance of the role of society in producing literature,

A work of fiction illuminates the society within which it is

produced, because it makes sense in terms of the attitudes of that society and shows how they work.

(1983: 146)

An interdependent, symbiotic relation exists between cultures and literature, especially epics. The reason for this is that epics are man's earliest attempts; in the form of sagas and lays; to capture and relate the relationship between Nature/God and man. The philosophy of life prevalent in a particular epoch structures the image of the hero. Heroes act as intermediaries between the fantasy of a whole people and their grounded in reality. Such an interface bridges the gaps between reality and fantasy. Heroes are projections of the way the people think. W. F. Jackson Knight highlights the importance of social conditions in his remark that. "Literature must be expected to emerge from social conditions, in accordance with them." (1968: 17).

Greek heroes are in quest of the ideal beauty. The Trojan war starts on the abduction of a woman hailed as the most beautiful woman. In a male-dominated society, the abduction of Helen by Paris is an act of bravery. No Trojan accuses him of transgression. His act gives rise to innumerable tensions, but the act itself is never questioned. Beauty is the territory of every man, and its pursuit is the goal of the Greeks. Such a conception is based on the external, physical recognition of beauty.

The Hindu view of life lays stress on living an ideal life. All actions are directed towards the achievement of this goal. An ideal life is the one led by virtue of *Dharma*, by fulfilling one's duties, and a renunciation of

desire. The four stages of life as a child, a youth, a family-head, and lastly as an ascetic, are prescribed. The four complementing aims of life, *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*, are to be successfully maintained. Since no man can hope to fulfill all these conditions, the ones who are able to live in such a manner are considered as heroes. Heroism has an ascetic basis for Hindus. A control, not only of the senses, but also of the mind, determines the heroism of an individual. Rest of the actions performed by a person during his lifetime, are part of one's existence, but the ultimate goal of every Hindu prescribed by the scriptures, is abstinence. Sister Nivedita explains the difference between the Hindu and Greek view of life thus,

A certain aroma of poetry there cannot fail to be in productions that have engaged the noblest powers of man; but this in the Indian seems always to be unconscious, the result of beauty of thought and nobility of significance, while in the Greek we are keenly aware of the desire of a supreme craftsman for beauty as an end in itself.

(1994: 216)

The difference in the outlook of the Greeks and Indians gives a specificity to the conception of the heroic. The endeavour advocated by both cultures remains the same, but the goal remains distinct and different. Attaining the goal is part of the heroic process. but more than the achieving of the goal, the journey renders them heroic. Thus, it can be

argued that a single, universal conception of heroic is possible only in a limited sphere of determination. Being culturally conditioned, a hero cannot escape the definition of a culture or an epoch. Heroic qualities are universal, but a hero is bound by the specific age and culture. His heroism cannot be seen in its fullness apart from the cultural context of his age.

The philosophical temper of these two different cultures, though so similar in many ways, accounts for the epics being considered as a *Dharmagranth* by one and a piece of *Lofty poetry* by another. A philosophical strain of attaining *moksha* dominates the philosophy of *Mahabharata*, and the *shanta rasa* is hailed as its aesthetic essence. Whereas, the Homeric epics propagate a philosophy of enjoyment. The *Mahabharata*'s philosophy of the futility of war is echoed in the Homeric epics too. The lives of the heroes may be short or long, they can endure the strain of being heroic only by the tantalizing allure of seemingly rich rewards; glory and fame for the Greeks, and for the Hindus, becoming instruments of the Divine in bringing about a new, regenerative order. Therefore, a corollary of difference is necessary to the theory of universality of the 'heroic'.

Thus, we can see that the cultural specificity of a heroic image cannot be ignored. A hero has to be examined from the perspective of his location in a particular epoch, in a given set of circumstances. The author too cannot be isolated from his milieu, for he too writes from a culture-specific point of view, reflecting the aspirations and latent desires of his age. Also, extending the same logic of geographical and cultural

location, the readers too cannot remain unaffected by their own times and ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to define the concept of the heroic by bringing together various viewpoints. It is important to perceive it in the light of prevalent doctrines of the time and place of the composition itself, of its authors as well as of the readers of successive ages.

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