

Transcendentalism in R.K. Narayan's 'The Mahabharata'

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan abridged the Mahabharata. He simplified and summarized the epic with his splendid art of narrating the tale again.. This way at least we may have the taste of magnificent Indian spiritualism and value system which may further be applied in various arenas of life. The sublime faith of R.K. Narayan in transcendentalism, rooted in great Indian history, may easily be seen in the Introduction of The Mahabharata. He is in agreement with 99% of Indian public who consider Vyasa as an immortal and inspired sage. Thus Vyasdeva's life span was spread for more than 5-6 generations. Not only this, he considers the conclusions of 1% research minded scholars as "catching the rainbow with one's fingers." Therefore the so called mythology of India is not a myth but facts as far as RK Narayan is concerned.

Key words: R.K.Narayan, The Mahabharata Simplified, taste, spiritualism, transcendentalism value system, sublime faith, mythology, facts

"Perhaps you fear that if I marry, my sons will be rivals to your daughter's progeny. I hereby promise that I'll live and die a bachelor. This is a firm vow." (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 24)

The above is the famous vow of *Bhishma* to his would be mother *Satyawati* for the sake of his father's happiness. *Bhishma* remained unmarried for the whole life. He had taken this vow when his step-mother, *Satyavati*'s father asked him about the successor of his kingdom, within a moment he took this decision, it shows his duty towards elders and detachment from the physical enjoyment. *R.K.Narayan* retold the story of *The Mahabharata*. He simplified it and made it so interesting that ordinary reader may take the advantage of this great epic. The writer divided it into 16 chapters like 16 Kalas (moon phases) of *Lord Krishna*. He began it with The Eighth Baby. The title Eighth baby reminds of the birth of *Krishna* as Eighth baby to *Devaki* in *Kansa*'s prison house. But factually it is about the *Bhishma*. This one is the significant chapter in *The Mahabharata* because we may understand about origin of each character and about the *Kaurava* dynasty.

Narayan is a great Indian writer. He wrote on Indian background. He was born and brought up in India. He was a scholarly novelist and short story writer. He was the most

distinguished writer of India. In his novels we find the fictional world of *Malgudi*. Each Indian knows him by his popular TV Serial – *Malgudi Days*. He was awarded the *Sahitya Academy* award which is India's highest literary honor on his well known novel-*The Guide*, in 1958. In the year 1980 he was honored with *A.C. Benson* medal by the royal society of literature. He was selected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982. In 1986, he was nominated for a six year term to *Rajya Sabha*, the Upper House of Indian Parliament in recognition of his outstanding literary stature.

The sublime faith of *R.K. Narayan* in transcendentalism, rooted in great Indian history, may easily be seen in the *Introduction* of his work *The Mahabharata*. He is in agreement with 99% of Indian public who consider *Vyasa* as an immortal and inspired sage. Thus *Vyasdeva's* life span was spread for more than 5-6 generations. Not only this, he considers the conclusions of 1% research minded scholars as "catching the rainbow with one's fingers." Therefore the so called mythology of India is not a myth but facts as far as *R.K. Narayan* is concerned. The moment writer catches the key point of Faith; he could easily draw the nectar out of it. Further he mentions the manner how the epic originally was written. He is so impressed by the origin of epic that he mentions *Brahma, Vyasa and Ganesha* incident twice in his *Introduction*:

"When the vision of it came to him through the grace of *Brahma*, the Creator, and *Vyasa* needed someone to take it down as he recited it. *Ganesha*, the God with an elephant head, accepted the assignment on one condition- that there should be no pause in the dictation. The author accepted this condition, provided that *Ganesha* realized and understood the meaning of every word before putting it down in writing. *Vyasa* kept his dictation at a breathless speed and *Ganesha* took it down with matching zest. When at one point his stylus failed, he broke off one of his tusks and continued the writing. The composer, whenever he found his amanuensis outrunning him, checked his speed by composing, here and there, passages- terse, packed and concentrated – which would force him to pause to get at the meaning. There are several passages in the *Mahabharata* which convey layers of meaning depending upon the stress and syllabification while reciting them aloud." (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 8)

Further in *Introduction*, *R.K. Narayan* depicts the summary of *Mahabharata* in the words of *Vyasa* wherein he mentions again: "When *Vyasa* had the epic all complete in his mind, he invoked *Brahma*, the creator, and explained, "I have composed a poem which is vast. Therein are revealed the mystery and subtleties of the Vedas and the Upanishads; descriptions of creeds and modes of life; the history of past, present and future; rules for the four castes; the essence of Purans, of asceticism and the rules for the acolyte; the dimensions of the sun, moon and stars; a description of four yugas; a definition of charity, the subject of incarnation of souls for specific purposes; the sciences and healing of sickness; also description of places, of pilgrimage, of rivers, mountains, and forests, and of heavenly cities and palaces; the art of war; descriptions of different nations, their languages, and their qualities; and of all

pervading universal spirit.” And at this stage Brahma said, “Call on Ganesha. He is the one fittest to take down your poem as you recite it.” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 10)

It is rich in spiritual, cultural and historical background of India. The literary meaning of *Mahabharata* is great or noble India. It was the battle between *Kauravas* and *Pandavas*. The reason of this battle was the egoism, obstinacy, self-centered attitude and greediness of Duryodhan. Even Duryodhan's father *Dhritarashtra* was under his impression. He used to take decisions under his influence. He was too much attached with his son. On the other hand *Pandavas* were very much humble. The way they faced calamities in their life is worth reading and inspires us for true development. Looking at the vast scope of *The Mahabharata*, the hugeness of its potential may be estimated. It is generally said that whatever is possible in the three worlds and beyond, it is there in *The Mahabharata*. The transcendentalism is what Vedic literature aim for and which puts weight to their content: “Another factor which swells ‘The Mahabharata is philosophic discussion – discourses on life and conduct which one or another of the sages expounds – sometimes running to several hundred lines at time. The Bhagavad Gita is an instance of such a situation. When the opposing armies are ready to attack each other, Krishna reveals and elaborates (in eighteenth chapter) the Gita Philosophy.” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 11)

R.K. Narayan continues to highlight the transcendental theme of the epic: “For me, the special interest in this work is the role of author himself plays in the story. Vyasa not only composed the narrative, but being aware of the past and future of all his characters, helps them with solutions when they find themselves in a dilemma. Sometime he may see into the future and emphasize the inevitability of certain coming events, making heroes resign themselves to their fate.” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 12) Before we try to catch some incidental references where transcendental qualities of its Characters are depicted, let us see what *BhagavadGita*, a part of *The Mahabharata* explains about transcendentalism. In the 14th chapter of *BhagavadGita* Arjun asks Krishna about a transcendental person (who is beyond the modes of material nature). Transcendentalism is explained then by Krishna in the verses 14.22-25:

“Arjun submitted three different questions and the Lord answers them one after another. In these verses, Krishna first indicates that a person transcendently situated has no envy and does not hanker for anything. When a living entity stays in this material world embodied by the material body, it is to be understood that he is under the control of one of the three modes of material nature. When he is actually out of the body, then he is out of the clutches of the material modes of nature. But as long as he is not out of the material body, he should be neutral. He should engage himself in the devotional service of the Lord so that his identity with the material body will automatically be forgotten. When one is conscious of the material body, he acts only for sense gratification, but when one transfers the consciousness to Krishna, sense gratification automatically stops. One does not need this material body, and

he does not need to accept the dictations of the material body. The qualities of the material modes in the body will act, but as spirit soul the self is aloof from such activities. How does he become aloof? He does not desire to enjoy the body, nor does he desire to get out of it. Thus transcendently situated, the devotee becomes automatically free. He need not try to become free from the influence of the modes of material nature. The next question concerns the dealings of a transcendently situated person. The materially situated person is affected by so-called honor and dishonor offered to the body, but the transcendently situated person is not affected by such false honor and dishonor. He performs his duty in Krishna consciousness and does not mind whether a man honors or dishonors him. He accepts things that are favorable for his duty in Krishna consciousness; otherwise he has no necessity of anything material, either a stone or gold. He takes everyone as his dear friend who helps him in his execution of Krishna consciousness, and he does not hate his so-called enemy. He is equally disposed and sees everything on an equal level because he knows perfectly well that he has nothing to do with material existence. Social and political issues do not affect him, because he knows the situation of temporary upheavals and disturbances. He does not attempt anything for his own sake. He can attempt anything for Krishna, but for his personal self he does not attempt anything. By such behavior one becomes actually transcendently situated.”(Prabhupad 705)

There are various characters in *Mahabharata*. These characters itself speak a lot: “Although this epic is a treasure house of varied interests, my own preference is the story. It is a great tale with well-defined characters who talk and act with robustness and zest – heroes and villains, saints and kings, women of beauty, all displaying great human qualities, super-human endurance....” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 11)

Bhishma:

Coming back to the first character Bhishma, he performed his duty towards the crown of *Hastinapur* with great courage, confidence and enthusiasm amidst all kinds of odd situations. He even arranged for the wives of his half brother. He went in the assembly of *Swayamvar* of *Amba*, *Ambika* and *Ambalika*. He fought and forcefully took the three daughters of the King of Kashi. All the trouble and risk he had taken for the sake of promoting the dynasty of *Hastinapur*: “Bhishma, anxious not to let the family become extinct, waited for a chance to find a bride for his ward. When the ruler of Kashi announced a *swayamwara* for his three daughters named *Amba*, *Ambika* and *Ambalika*, he presented himself at that court, where many princes from far and near had assembled to catch the eye of the beauties. At a crucial moment, Bhishma rose and announced, “Of the several forms of choosing a bride, as the sage have mentioned, the noblest is that in which a maiden is acquired by force from amidst a valiant gathering such as this.” Thus saying, he seized the three girls before anyone could understand-----He fought his pursuers off and arrived

at Hastinapur with the girls intended for his half –brother, Vichitravirya.”(Narayan,*The Mahabharata*24)

Yudhisthir:

Many incidents relating to *Yudhistira*’s life are very touching because these are having selflessness and truth. His positions were too complex like *Bhishma*. He had to make a perfect balance among Justice, Morality and fate. He was told about the fate of his dynasty’s destruction 13 years before by Vyasa. Still he carried that prophecy in his heart and continued his duties without any shaking:“Vyasa hints to Yudhisthir that he will be the total destroyer of their clan and race thirteen years hence. Yudhisthir accepts this news with terror and resignation, stating, “We cannot change the circumstances that destiny decrees .But I shall do nothing to provoke any one in any manner and practice absolute non-violence in thought word and deed. It is the only way to meet the decrees of Fate.”(Narayan,*The Mahabharata*12)

What *Krishna* did for Arjun in the beginning of war, in a similar sense *Yudhisthir* also consoled the uneasiness of his brother during their exile. His brothers were not in a position to forget the horrible scene which was created by Duryodhan, He suggested that revenge and anger are always harmful and weakens our concentration. The nature of forgetting the bad days and remain peaceful show *Yudhisthir*’ s transcendental virtue :“At Ekavrata, Vyasa introduced the Pandavas to a hospitable family who gave them shelter. They were at peace with themselves now, but for the gnawing memory of their cousin’s vileness. Yudhisthir always calmed them with his philosophy of resignation and hope.”(Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 47)

We can see the god’s mercy on *Yudhisthir* when he was in critical situation and confusion. *Lord Krishna* appears physically in the scene through some or other arrangement whenever *Yudhisthir* remembered him mentally:“Yudhisthir once again looked about for guidance. Only a god, who could take in at a glance the past, present and future, could guide him at this crucial moment. Krishna happened to be at the court on a visit. He knew that the destiny of the Pandavas was soon to be in his hands. When they turned to him for advice, he said, “I feel that you should all go to Hastinapur, and I will go with you.” (Narayan,*The Mahabharata* 62) Though *Shakuni* was an enemy, had faith on *Yudhistira*’s mind: Shakunisaid, “Give up the idea of challenging them to a war. Some other way must be found to humiliate them...”He thought over it and said, “Challenge them to a game of dice. Well I’ll help you; we will finish them through it. I know Yudhistira’s mind. He can never decline an invitation to a game, though he is a worthless player, the weakest player one could imagine!”(Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 68). *Duryodhan* forced *Dhritarashtra* to call back *Pandavas* for gambling for defeating them again. *Yudhisthir* again accepted King’s summon as god’s call:“Yudhisthir thought it over, and looked at his brothers and wife, who stood

speechless, unable to comment,. He was always their leader and they could make no decisions. Yudhishthir said,” What God wills we cannot avoid. It is the king’s summons again. I must go back and play...” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 84).

Sometimes due to lack of information / understanding of higher religious principle which are transcendental to modes of material nature, we miss the intricacies of some apparently contrasting incidences as per our general moral principle which is based on modes of nature. Similarly one may ignorantly blame *Yudhishthir* for gambling and putting *Draupadi* on stake. The fact is that Yudhishthir accepted gambling for honoring King’s summon not for the sake of gambling. He had firm faith in Dharma (and in turn in Krishna, Supreme Personality of Godhead who laid down principles of religion in form of Vedic literature). As per this religious principle, the King (enthroned according to religious principles) is supposed to be representative of God. Further his putting *Draupadi* on stake is like *Sita*’s exile by Ram. Ram did it for establishing high moral standards for the common man. Similarly, *Yudhishthir* put her stake in the hope of winning the Kingdom back for the sake of citizens. *Draupadi* was put on stake considering if she is lost then she had to work as a maid servant. A queen to work as a maid servant is a great sacrifice and at the same time for a loving husband, even to think of it, is still bigger sacrifice. But for a king it is the duty of saving his kingdom and his citizen up to the point of his last capacity. She is not treated like a property but as a symbol of great religious sacrifice. According to Vedic literature, woman and child are given protection under the man for the purpose of their gradual rise in spiritualism not for the sake of ownership as misunderstood by some. *King Harishchandra* also sold his wife and son but he is famous for his truthfulness. We know the consequences of *Harishchandra*, his wife and his son. Similarly it was *Duryodhan* who made that blunder of considering maid servant as object of sexual desire and means of insulting. This was a big sin. As a result he along with *Dronacharya* and *Bhishma* were killed in the war. The result of such a transcendental faith in higher religious principle is no doubt achieving highest standard of transcendentalism but they can be seen even materially. *Duryodhan* could not harm / insult to *Draupadi*. Rather due to such committed sin he lost his kingdom and life both.

Vidur:

Vidur’s courage to tell the truth and reality to *Dhritarashtra* about *Duryodhan*: “At this point, *Vidur* said to *Dhritarashtra*, “This has gone too far. Stop it, and if you are not obeyed, get that jackal in our midst, your son, destroyed. Otherwise, I see the complete destruction of your entire family, sooner or later. To save a family or a clan it is proper to sacrifice an individual. -----Before it is too late, stop it and order *Dhananjaya* to kill *Duryodhan* here and now, and you will save the entire race...” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 74-75). *Vidur* commented to old king on not following the advice of him: “*Vidur* turned to the old king.” All right, I will now, “he stated. “You are fickle minded and partial to this jackal in your family. You think that your sons are your well-wishers, and if you wish to

follow them to your doom, I can't prevent you. Any advice I give will be like a medicine rejected by a diseased man, a man who is dying.....”(Narayan,*The Mahabharata* 75). Vidur rebuked Duryodhan in the assembly of the king at Hastinapur without fear and hesitation. This was his straightforwardness towards truth and reality: “You jackal in human form, don't talk. You are provoking the tigers. When destruction begins, it will be total, caused by you and your indulgent, thoughtless father. Even now it is not too late.....don't utter such irresponsible, sinful words.....”(Narayan,*The Mahabharata* 77)

Draupadi:

In the fourth chapter named ‘Bride of Five’ Draupadi remembered Krishna when she found herself helpless among her own family people:” In that assembly, unobserved, was a person who was to play a vital role in ‘The Mahabharata later. It was Krishna, the King of Dwarka, actually the eighth incarnation of the god Vishnu, who took his birth in the Yadava clan. He had incarnated as a human being as he had explained:

“For protecting the virtuous
For the destruction of evil, and
For establishing righteousness

I am born from age to age.”(Narayan,*The Mahabharata*75)

It was the intensity of her faith in Krishna that Krishna appeared in the form of sari. Although she had best of men as her husband, best of people as her relatives present in the court, still nothing worked out in front of the destiny's path. God put us through tests to make us strong in our faith. It is whom we remember as the last resort and with what intensity. “No one made any move to help her. “Oh, Krishna, God incarnate, help me!” She cried in the end. And now the miracle happened. As Dussasana tried to snatch away her sari, it kept growing. Draupadi could not be disrobe. She shut her eyes and remained in meditation. This episode concluded when the elders of the family, who had found it all amusing at first, became repentant at the signal of God's help and came up to Draupadi and said, “ What can we do for you? Draupadi briefly replied,” Give me back my husbands, and give them back all that they have lost in foolish gambling.”It was granted.” (Narayan, *Gods, Demons & Others* 158)

She did not reject her husbands who put her in such a shameful condition; rather she wished to restore them and their kingdom understanding their condition. The following conversation of Draupadi and Krishna showed her great understanding of fate's happening and divine intervention. She shouted and condemned his husbands for their not helping her. She was enraged out of her dishonor; still she could remember the destiny's path. But then she confirmed her status from the Krishna whether she should continue her tease of dishonor or withdraw from it on the name of fate. “Enraged, Draupadi said, “Neither the elders nor my husbands want to help me in any way; perhaps fate wills it that I should suffer. Fate wills it that we should lose the kingdom through unfair trickeries. “Krishna said, “If I had been free I should have come to Hastinapur and stopped the gambling whether they wanted me there or

not. But I heard you cry when they attempted to shame you in public. I will help you. We will fight and win. Have no fear. Draupadi said, “When Dussasana tugged my hair, it fell loose on my back, and I have left it thus. I shall never do it up again until I am able to dip my hair in that monster’s blood. This is my vow, and I beg of my valorous husbands to help me achieve. (Narayan, *Gods, Demons & Others* 159-160).

Once she got the support from *Krishna*, she immediately turned her rage into a vow, thus making clear the road ahead for *Great War – Mahabharata*. Thus *Draupadi*’s deep understanding of transcendentalism can be witnessed finding way out in the midst of worldly struggle with divine guidance. Thus in consensus with the words of *RK Narayan* on the rebirth of *Nalayani* as *Draupadi*: The god apparently spoke in jest, but he had his purpose. In the vision of a god there is no jest, everything works according to a scheme and towards a fulfillment. Justice and goodness had to be reinstated in this world. (Narayan, *Gods, Demons & Others* 150)

Vikarna:

Though *Vikarna* was the brother of *Duryodhan* still he opposed him. His courage to speak truth in the favor of *Draupadi* among the assembly even though he was the brother of *Duryodhan* makes him transcendental: This unfortunate person has asked a question which has not been answered. *Bhishma*, *Drona*, *Dhritarashtra* and even *Vidur* turn away and remained silent. Will no one give an answer?” He paused and looked around and repeated *Draupadi*’s question, but no one spoke. Finally he said, “Whether you kings of the earth answer or not, I will speak out my mind. It has been said that drinking, gambling, hunting and the enjoyment of women in excess will bring down a king, -----People should not attach any value or authority to acts done by anyone under the intoxication of wine, women or dice.” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 80-81)

Gandhari:

Gandhari’s suggestion to the king is authentic and impartial, making her one of the great heroines. She was not only a good mother, better wife but also best as a queen. She even was ready to reject his son and same she advised his husband, *King Dhritarashtra*: “----*Gandhari*’s, his wife wailed, “When *Duryodhan* was born, he howled ominously, like a jackal, and the seer *Vidur* advised, “throw away this child and him parish: otherwise our entire dynasty will be destroyed when he grows up....’ Now I understand what he meant O king, ignore this son or cast him away and save our race. Don’t join in his malicious plans, don’t be the cause of the destruction of our race.” (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* 84). Here again we see apparently contrast feature – a mother rejecting her son. But factually it underlies the wellbeing of his son. She wants to save the dynasty on physical level but at the same time she is saving her son from the cause of further possible sins. This kind of understanding raised her to transcendentalism.

Conclusion:

Transcendental means above the modes of material nature. It is the extraordinary qualities which lead one to his faithful performance of own duty as well as obeying the will of almighty without hesitation. This can be well understood by the various characters of *Mahabharata*. R.K. Narayan who had the great art of story-telling, retold the story of the great epic 'The *Mahabharata*' which is originally written in Sanskrit by inspired saint Vyasdeva around at least 3500 years ago. It is the longest of the world's epics- in one hundred thousand stanzas in verse. He simplified and summarized the epic with his splendid art of narrating the tale again. He made it easier and approachable to modern readers by providing it in a condensed form. Still he did not lose its spirit. In each of his chapter lies undercurrent of transcendental qualities of the characters. This way at least they can have the taste of magnificent Indian spiritualism which may further be developed. 'The *Mahabharata* is like the lamp which clears the darkness of illusion and ignorance, it lights up human beings with real knowledge. On the basis of *Pandavas*' wisdom, they achieved triumph and the real pleasure in life. The real pleasure lies in transcendentalism. When someone forgets himself and does it for others- the attitude of giving, which exhibits at the minimum in the form of benevolent works for the humanity/common mass on physical basis and at the maximum for the spiritual *upliftment* of every living being? The transcendental actions of great characters of *The Mahabharata* were based on the principles of religion guided and suggested by *Veda Vyasa* and *Krishna*.

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