

Editorial

Special issue on the Indian Epics in Adaptation

By KBS Krishna, Editor

Epic presupposes a community for the good of which the hero strives. Such epics strengthen the social and cultural foundation of the community by prescribing a code of conduct for its members. Homogeneity is important in an epic, as every element, from the gods that help the superhuman heroes, to the problems that the characters face, is community-specific. Therefore, it may be safely said that epics are products of an age where identification with a community was possible and not problematic. For instance, readers could identify with Ram, the “Suryavamshi” king, who is the hero of *Ramayana*, and support him in his struggles with Ravana, the Asura king. Both the supernatural acts he undertakes (such as his building a bridge to Lanka), to his acts that prove him human (such as his killing of Vali), have the sanction of the readers precisely because they sympathise and/or empathise with Ram. The readers accepted everything that was said as part of a grand narrative that not just explained everything, but also justified them; thus, legitimizing power relations.

However, epics cannot be looked at in such a simplistic manner in the present day. A reason may be increasing alienation due to disillusionment with society caused by a dawning sense, mainly by the beginning of the twentieth century, that the Machiavellian notions of power are nightmarishly true. This, thus, resulted in making each individual a separate entity, and undeniably putting an end to communal harmony. Such a lack of community prevents the acceptance of a hero who would prove to be the saviour of that community. The inability and unwillingness of modern day readers to accept a grand narrative, both due to its failure to solve the readers’ own problems, as well as the readers’ refusal to accept power relations as legitimate makes them read the epics closely and more diligently than their predecessors. Reading epics in this day and age, therefore, becomes an analytical exercise, speaking not just about the power structures of the age in which the epics were written, but also about the power dynamics in the current age.

Furthermore, as epics imply a hierarchical society, (as the very notion of a hero carries within it the sanctioning of a being superior to others), traditionally they celebrate the acme of power in contrast to the sidelining of those beneath. Such marginalization is naturally pointed out in the modernist era with its obsession with binaries. However, the all-pervasive disillusionment which not inevitably is a result of enlightenment and rational thinking, has also led to questioning not just the privileging of those in power, but also the very existence of God. As a corollary to this, other creators *vis a vis* authors and their right to project their vision as the only way of viewing the world is questioned. Hence, epics, which have been traditionally accepted as either cultural representatives or factual/allegorical retellings of legendary heroes, in the current milieu, have to undergo the throes of being reborn as such tales are challenged by numerous novel voices representing the margins – and they have been: the various retellings of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are a case in point.

Those re-imaginings of epics, of course, undermine and/or subvert what has once been considered valid as well as the only way of telling a story. The current volume is a synthesis of articles which aims to bring to light the myriad manners in which such retellings have been depicted, while critically interpreting and/or evaluating them.