

CONCEPT NOTE
32nd Session of IAHC

“RENDERING OF INDIAN EPICS IN ART AND CULTURE”

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An epic is a lengthy narrative recounting the heroic deeds of extraordinary characters who, in dealings with other superhuman forces, give shape to the mortal universe. Indian epics are traditionally called *kāvya*. The *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, the two most ancient epics of Bharat-India(1500-800 BCE) ,were composed in Sanskrit, and were later translated into many other Indian languages, each translation becoming an epic with local variations. The episodes of these epics find enormous space in visual renderings, both tangible and intangible, as well. Of all such works of narrative mythology, none have been as vividly represented in every form of art and culture as the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, presenting social moral values, unifying the country in the name of the divine heroes Rama and Krishna.

Indian epics were preserved by bards who sang and narrated the stories from village to village to educate the public. The *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* are a cornucopia of stories, a wonderful subject for artistic reproduction. Scenes from the epics were sculpted on the walls of temples, both as illustrations and as guides for a *dharmic* way of life, for *Dharma*, comprising laws of righteousness, justice and morality, is righteous behaviour, which includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and the “right way of living.” Those who followed Dharma were heroes; those who did not were demons and villains. The reproductions in art in different mediums and mode are constant reminders of the upper hand of virtue over vice. Indian epics are not rough, oral sagas exulting over battles, nor are they mere conglomerations of super-human mythology. They represent the intricacies of life, the importance of nobility and righteousness and the great heritage of Indian philosophy and culture. Political in-fighting and societal and ethical dilemmas are still analysed in terms of the characters and events of the epics.

The *Rāmāyana* is a linear story, thus making it easier to depict as a continuous narrative. Scenes from the *Rāmāyana* were recreated in early coinage and sculpture. As narrative art spread, the representations became large and dynamic, with dramatic scenes like the abduction of Sita, the killing of Jatayu, the Vali-Sugriva and Ram-Ravan battles and so on. The Gupta era saw a proliferation of sculptures depicting the events of the epic. This was followed by the Chalukyan sculptures and the *Rāmāyana* panels of Ellora, where the entire epic was depicted. Animals play a prominent role in the *Rāmāyana*, where they are often depicted with human qualities and even deified. This portrayal of animals as noble and virtuous beings underscores their significance in Indian culture and mythology.



Rāmāyana scene, Kailash temple, Ellora, 8th century CE

The *Mahābhārata* is the longest epic in the world, a collection of philosophical discussions with several stories woven through the story of the Kurus: tales of Krishna; the fratricide between the Pandavas and Kauravas and the Kurukshetra war; gods and demons; the incarnations of Vishnu; and minor stories unrelated to the main text, like that of Shakunthala that were inspirations for later literature. Beginning from the second century BCE, figures of Krishna, Samkarshana and Garuda appear on coins, sculptures and pillars. The Vrishni heroes, divine incarnations and legends of Krishna made excellent subjects for sculpture and painting. From the Gupta period onwards there is a spate of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahābhārata* (mostly Krishna-related episodes) imagery at Deogarh, Mathura and Udaigiri. The Gupta period was a classical age of Indian art and some of the most beautiful examples are to be seen in this period. This was followed by sculptures of the Chalukya period and the walls of the Kailasa temple at Ellora, and Hoyasala temples at Halebid, Amritapur, Somnathpur. There are hundreds of other temple sites such as Modhera, Khajuraho, Bhuvaneshvara, Nagada, Hampi.

The epic tradition resulted in a rich heritage of music, dance and drama, including folk theatre forms, *harikatha*, inscriptions, sculpture, painting and even architecture. Recently Sri Ram *Mandir* was built and consecrated at Ayodhya (U.P.) in January, 2024. Paintings in both folk and classical traditions gave the stories the colour inherent within them and brought them to life. Even architecture was inspired by Rama and Krishna, for whom temples were built all over the country.



Rama leaving for fourteen year of exile from Ayodhya, painting late mediaeval period

Visually Rama and Krishna *lila* (play), dramatic scenes like Draupadi-*vastrahāran*, the burning of the house of lac, the game of dice, Bhishma's bed of arrows and the Kurukshetra war are among the most dynamic reproductions. Whether the medium was classical or folk, sculpture or painting, the great epics were the greatest source of inspiration for the artist.



Bhishma lying on the bed of arrows, Virupaksha temple, Pattadakal, 8th century CE

The *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* know no boundaries of religion or nation. They have taught values of life and behaviour to men and women over centuries, across India and South East Asia. There is no finer example in the world of a multi-religious, international culture than the two epics. Scores of generations of adults and children have watched performances and listened to narrations of the great epics and observed their depiction in sculpture and painting on the great temples of India and south-east Asia. The story of the *Rāmāyana*, especially, is enacted more often in music, dance, drama and puppetry than any other story in the world. It is performed by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. It is the most important cultural tradition of Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, besides India. The *Rāmāyana* is the great bond of culture which unites India and the countries of South East Asia.

The *Rāmāyana* transcended Indian borders, with the first known non-Indian version appearing in Chinese around the fifth century CE. Tibetan, Nepalese, and Chinese Turkestan versions emerged around 700 CE. In Cambodia, an inscription dating back to 600 CE mentions a sage presenting the *Rāmāyana* to a temple, indicating its early presence there. The spread of the epics continued, reaching Thailand, and Laos by the seventh century. By the tenth century, a Sanskrit scholar expounded both epics at the Cambodian court. Ayutthaya, Thailand's ancient capital, derives its name from Ayodhya, Rama's capital. Indonesian versions, influenced by early Indian variants, are depicted in shadow plays and temple bas-reliefs, and incorporate traditional legends of Java, Sumatra and Bali, with each island having its own version. The panels depicting the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* on the walls of the temples of Cambodia, particularly Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, are dynamic and probably the greatest works of sculpture. In the sixteenth century, Mughal Emperor Akbar had the

Rāmāyana translated into Persian, accompanied by exquisite miniatures. The artistic works inspired by these two epics are legendary.

Blending history, myth and folklore, the epics possess an enduring appeal that transcends time. Embedded within them are profound moral, ethical and religious values that have left an indelible mark on the daily lives of countless generations. The influence of these timeless tales has shaped cultural norms, guided personal conduct, and fostered a sense of identity and belonging among millions of men and women throughout history. Both epics have deeply ingrained themselves in the cultural fabric of India and Sri Lanka, with thousands undertaking pilgrimages to the sites associated with events from the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*. Many Indian festivals are closely linked with the *Rāmāyana*, while many others revolve around Krishna, the hero of the *Mahābhārata*.

All over India, inexpensive prints depicting scenes from the two great epics adorn the walls of individual homes, and daily worship is also offered to the depictions of Rama and Krishna. In fact, the images in the paintings by the nineteenth century artist Raja Ravi Varma have become the standard images of the various characters of the two epics and of Rama and Krishna for the common person. In contemporary times, the epics have crossed the digital divide. The television series *Rāmāyana* (1987-88) and *Mahābhārata* (1988) broke all records and created yet another imagery and a political storm.

These examples illustrate the remarkable phenomenon of not the mere survival but the vitality and continued relevance through millennia of the two great Indian epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, as essential components of living cultures. All arts, both classical and folk, both plastic and performing, continue to draw inspiration from themes spanning millennia.

The main objective of the forthcoming session of IAHC is to share research-oriented papers on different artistic expressions (both tangible and intangible) of the two great epics of India on stone, terracotta, wood, textile, paper and other materials, as well as their expression in the performing arts: music, dance and theatre, classical and folk. Papers also dealing with the aspects of value oriented Indian Culture based on visual renderings will be accepted. The comparative study of different episodes and their cultural significance in spatial and temporal terms will also be appreciated. Also their rendering outside India with the spirit of comparison should be an aspect of paper presentation. It is expected that the papers will be holistic, supported by illustrations, and will invite interactive discussions.