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Eternalizing the Epics: Impact of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* Re-Telecasted During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill, leading to lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings. During this challenging time, the re-telecast of two epic Indian mythological series, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, garnered widespread attention. These timeless tales, originally broadcast in the late 1980s and early 1990s, captivated audiences across generations, offering solace, inspiration, and cultural enrichment during the lockdown. This paper explores the impact of the re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, analyzing their influence on society, culture, spirituality, and the media landscape. It also examines the lessons learned from these ancient epics and their relevance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, re-telecast, Indian mythology.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are two of the most revered and widely known ancient Indian epics that have shaped the cultural, literary, and spiritual landscape of India for centuries. These epic tales hold immense significance in Hindu mythology and have become integral to the collective consciousness of millions of people around the world.

The *Ramayana*, believed to have been written by the sage Valmiki, narrates the story of Prince Rama's journey to rescue his beloved wife, Sita, from the clutches of the demon king Ravana. The epic takes readers on a grand adventure filled with noble heroes, powerful demons, divine interventions, and moral dilemmas. Through the trials and tribulations faced by its characters, the *Ramayana* imparts timeless lessons on duty, devotion, righteousness, and the triumph of good over evil. On the other hand, the *Mahabharata*, attributed to the sage Vyasa,

chronicles the great Kurukshetra War between two factions of a royal family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The epic is a sweeping narrative that explores complex themes such as honor, duty, loyalty, kinship, and the ethical dilemmas faced by its characters. Alongside the war, the Mahabharata delves into profound philosophical discourses, including the teachings of Lord Krishna to the warrior prince Arjuna, which form the basis of the revered text known as the Bhagavad Gita. Sri Aurobindo says:

The *Mahabharata* is the creation and expression not of a single individual mind, but of the mind of a nation; it is the poem of itself written by a whole people...the whole poem has been built like a vast national temple unrolling slowly its immense and complex idea from chamber to chamber.... (75)

The above quote highlights the extent to which the *Mahabharata* constitutes a part of Indian culture and its impact on the psyche of the people. Its various characters and episodes make it a treasure trove for authors working on retelling the epic because, as Lakshmi Bandlamudi writes, “the characters are simply seen as prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast and hence their validity is understood as timeless” (105).

The Indian epics have always been a part of the “collective unconscious” of the Indian people. Jasbir Jain writes, that “images drawn from them permeate written and oral cultures, political interpretations, man-woman relationships and perpetuate role models of every kind of human behaviour – father-son, husband-wife, brother-brother, mother-son” (29). Therefore, these epics have played a very important part in the construction of Indian society and its ideals. She writes further that “gender construction in India has its roots in Sita’s *agnipariksha*, Draupadi’s *chirharan* and Damayanti’s adherence to the *pativrata* code” (Jain 29).

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* transcend mere tales of adventure and conflict; they delve deep into the human condition, offering profound insights into morality, spirituality, and the eternal struggle between right and wrong. These epics have not only influenced religious practices, but they have also shaped art, literature, theater, and even the social fabric of Indian society. The popularity and significance of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* extend far beyond the borders of India. These epics have been translated into numerous languages, adapted into various art forms, and their stories have found resonance in cultures across the globe. Their

enduring appeal lies in their ability to resonate with universal human experiences, showcasing the complexities of human nature and the eternal search for truth, justice, and righteousness.

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that resulted in lockdowns and social restrictions, created a unique situation where people sought sources of comfort, inspiration, and cultural enrichment. During this time, the re-telecast of the legendary Indian mythological series, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, became a significant phenomenon. This paper explores the impact of these series during the lockdown, analyzing their influence on society, culture, spirituality, and the media landscape.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the announcement and re-telecast of the epic series, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, garnered significant attention and excitement among the public. The decision to broadcast these iconic series was made with the intention of providing entertainment, spiritual solace, and cultural enrichment to people confined to their homes during the pandemic. The announcement of the re-telecast created a buzz on social media and generated widespread anticipation. Television networks and production houses recognized the unique opportunity to bring back these beloved classics and offer viewers a chance to relive the magic of these timeless stories. The news of the re-telecast spread rapidly, creating a sense of nostalgia and anticipation among both the older generation, who had grown up watching these series, and the younger generation, eager to experience the cultural heritage of their country.

The series was made available on various platforms, including terrestrial channels and popular streaming services. The decision to make them accessible on digital platforms allowed for wider viewership, both domestically and internationally, reaching audiences beyond the traditional television audience. The re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* was not just a mere rerun of the original episodes. The production teams took efforts to enhance the viewing experience by remastering the visuals and improving the audio quality. This ensured that the series retained its charm while providing a more visually appealing and immersive experience for the audience.

The timing of the re-telecast during the lockdown was particularly significant. With people confined to their homes and seeking solace amidst the uncertainties and challenges of the pandemic, the broadcast of these epics offered a much-needed escape and a source of inspiration.

The timeless messages of courage, sacrifice, and righteousness conveyed through the narratives resonated deeply with viewers, providing a sense of hope, comfort, and spiritual upliftment during a difficult time. The re-telecast also leveraged the power of social media and digital platforms. Viewers actively engaged with the series online, sharing their excitement, discussing episodes, and forming virtual communities around the shows. Memes, fan art, and remixes related to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* flooded social media platforms, creating a vibrant online ecosystem centered around these epics. The digital landscape became a space for fans to express their creativity, share their interpretations, and engage in discussions about the characters, storylines, and teachings encapsulated in the series.

The re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* during the COVID-19 lockdown not only provided entertainment but also served as a reminder of the cultural richness and heritage of India. It offered an opportunity for younger generations to connect with their roots and gain a deeper understanding of ancient Indian literature, mythology, and values. The accessibility and widespread viewership ensured that these epics were preserved and made accessible for future generations, contributing to the preservation and dissemination of valuable cultural knowledge.

One of the key sociocultural impacts was the revival of interest in ancient Indian literature and mythology. The re-telecast brought these age-old stories to the forefront of popular culture, rekindling curiosity and sparking discussions about the rich literary and spiritual traditions of India. The younger generation, in particular, had the chance to explore and appreciate the depth and wisdom embedded in these epics, fostering a sense of pride and cultural identity. Moreover, the re-telecast served as a catalyst for intergenerational dialogue. Families gathered around television screens, reminiscing about the days when they first watched these series together. Parents shared their childhood memories with their children, passing on the oral traditions and values associated with these epics. This intergenerational exchange helped bridge the gap between different age groups and fostered a sense of unity and shared heritage within families.

The re-telecast also had a profound impact on spirituality and religious practices. For many viewers, watching the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* became a form of spiritual connection and devotion. The stories, infused with divine characters and moral teachings, provided solace and a sense of transcendence during a period of uncertainty and anxiety. Viewers found comfort in the

timeless messages of faith, courage, and righteousness, and many incorporated these values into their daily lives. Furthermore, the re-telecast sparked a resurgence of interest in Indian traditional arts and performances. Various forms of artistic expressions, such as music, dance, and theater, drew inspiration from these epics, creating new adaptations and interpretations. Artists and performers found creative ways to bring the narratives to life, whether through virtual performances or innovative storytelling techniques. This artistic revival not only preserved the cultural heritage associated with the epics but also showcased the adaptability and continued relevance of these stories in contemporary contexts.

The sociocultural impact of the re-telecast also extended beyond India's borders. For many international viewers, the re-telecast served as an introduction to these ancient epics. It provided a window into the mythology, values, and storytelling traditions of India, which intrigued and fascinated audiences unfamiliar with Indian culture. The international audience appreciated the grandeur of the narratives, the intricacies of the characters, and the moral dilemmas presented in the stories. The timeless messages and universal themes conveyed in the series resonated with the international audience, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. They found relevance in the teachings of righteousness, devotion, and the eternal struggle between good and evil. The spiritual and philosophical aspects of the series resonated with viewers seeking deeper meaning and introspection. Additionally, the availability of these series on digital platforms allowed for greater accessibility and convenience for the international audience. The convenience of streaming services enabled viewers to watch the episodes at their own pace and convenience, fostering a sense of inclusivity and flexibility in engaging with the content.

The re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* during the COVID-19 lockdown also provided psychological relief and had a profound emotional impact on viewers. In the midst of the pandemic, when people were grappling with uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation, these epic series became a source of solace, comfort, and emotional connection. Firstly, the familiar and nostalgic nature of the series evoked a sense of warmth and security. Many viewers had grown up watching these epics, and the re-telecast allowed them to revisit cherished memories, transporting them back to a simpler time. The familiarity of the characters, the iconic dialogues, and the enchanting music created a sense of nostalgia, providing a comforting escape from the challenges of the present.

Moreover, the narratives of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* touched on deep and universal emotions. The struggles, triumphs, and sacrifices of the characters resonated with viewers, evoking empathy and emotional identification. The series delved into themes such as love, loyalty, bravery, and the complexities of human relationships. The emotional depth portrayed in the stories allowed viewers to experience a range of emotions, from joy and excitement to sadness and compassion. This emotional journey provided a cathartic release, allowing viewers to connect with their own emotions and find solace in shared human experiences.

The timeless moral teachings embedded in the series also had a profound emotional impact. The emphasis on values such as righteousness, courage, and compassion resonated deeply with viewers, offering guidance and inspiration during challenging times. These moral lessons provided a sense of hope and reassurance, reminding viewers of the power of virtue and the potential for personal growth and transformation. Devdutt Pattanaik, in *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, has said:

In a way the *Ramayana* warns us about the dangers of excessive reliance on rules. It reveals the personality of a man who values rules above all else: he is predictable, dependable, but not very pleasant. This is balanced by Krishna who looks beyond rules at intent and, more importantly, affection. (479)

Furthermore, the re-telecast of these epics fostered a sense of community and collective experience. Families and friends gathered together to watch the series, creating a shared emotional journey. The discussions and conversations that ensued allowed for emotional bonding and a sense of togetherness, mitigating the feelings of isolation and loneliness that were prevalent during the lockdown. The online engagement and social media conversations further expanded this sense of community, as viewers connected with others who shared their emotional connection to the series.

The re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* during the COVID-19 lockdown also had a notable influence on the contemporary media and entertainment industry. It sparked a renewed interest in classic and mythological content, prompting industry players to revisit and explore similar narratives. The re-telecast of these epic series highlighted the enduring popularity and appeal of mythological stories, and led to a renewed focus on mythological content in the media industry, with production houses and broadcasters recognizing the demand for such

programming. This resulted in the creation of new mythological shows and adaptations, both in television and digital platforms, catering to the audience's interest in these timeless narratives. The re-telecast tapped into the nostalgia factor, reminding viewers of their cherished memories associated with these epics. This trend influenced the entertainment industry to revisit and repackage classic content from the past, leveraging the emotional connection and nostalgia to attract audiences. The success of the re-telecast prompted media companies to explore their archives and consider bringing back other popular shows and films from yesteryears.

The re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* prompted content creators to explore innovative storytelling techniques. While the original series followed a traditional format, the re-telecast provided an opportunity to experiment with visual enhancements, improved special effects, and remastered sound quality. This inspired production houses to adopt modern production techniques to recreate and adapt classic stories, blending traditional elements with contemporary storytelling methods. The availability of these series on digital platforms during the re-telecast showcased the growing influence and significance of streaming services. The success and viewership generated by the online availability of the epics motivated media companies to invest more in digital platforms and prioritize online distribution alongside traditional television channels. This shift accelerated the growth of digital streaming platforms, expanding the reach and accessibility of content to a wider audience. These impacts continue to shape the industry, driving the production and distribution of content that resonates with audiences' enduring fascination for classic and mythological narratives.

The re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* carried significant educational and historical significance as well. It helped preserve and showcase these age-old stories, allowing new generations to access and appreciate them. These epics provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural, political, and historical aspects of ancient India, capturing the ethos and beliefs of that time. By revisiting these narratives, viewers could gain a deeper understanding of the historical context and the societal norms prevalent during those periods.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are not only historical texts but also repositories of cultural and ethical values. These epics contain profound teachings on morality, righteousness, duty, and the complexities of human relationships. They explore the concepts of dharma

(righteousness) and karma (action and consequence), providing valuable lessons applicable to individuals and society at large. The re-telecast allowed viewers to engage with these teachings and reflect upon their relevance in contemporary times, fostering ethical and moral discussions. Mythological stories often serve as a source of inspiration and personal growth. The characters in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* exhibit qualities such as bravery, sacrifice, perseverance, and devotion, which can motivate individuals to emulate these virtues in their own lives. By re-telecasting these epics, viewers were exposed to narratives that can inspire them to overcome challenges, make ethical choices, and strive for personal and societal transformation.

These epics also offer a wealth of learning opportunities across various disciplines. The epics touch upon diverse fields such as philosophy, literature, history, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. They provide a platform for multidisciplinary exploration, allowing individuals to delve into different aspects of these narratives and gain a holistic understanding of the cultural and historical context in which they were created. The re-telecast of these epic series had a global reach, enabling international audiences to engage with Indian mythology and culture. This cultural exchange fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Viewers from different backgrounds gained insights into Indian history, traditions, and values, contributing to a broader understanding and respect for diverse cultures. The re-telecast served as a bridge, promoting dialogue and facilitating a deeper connection between different communities.

Furthermore, the re-telecast provided psychological relief and emotional solace to viewers during a time of uncertainty and anxiety. The timeless moral teachings, emotional depth, and relatable characters in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* resonated deeply with viewers, allowing them to connect with their own emotions and find comfort in shared human experiences. The educational and historical significance of these epic series cannot be overstated. They offer valuable insights into ancient history, cultural values, and ethical teachings. The re-telecast served as a platform for cross-cultural understanding, allowing international audiences to engage with Indian mythology and traditions, fostering dialogue and appreciation for diverse cultures.

Moreover, the re-telecast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* during the lockdown brought forth a myriad of benefits. It entertained, educated, and connected audiences, transcending boundaries and leaving a lasting impact on the media and entertainment industry. These epic series

will continue to hold a special place in the hearts and minds of viewers, reminding us of the enduring power of storytelling and the timeless wisdom embedded within these ancient narratives, as Allama Iqbal says:

*Yunan-o-Misr-o-Roma sab mit gaye jahan se
Ab tak magar hai baki naam-o-nishan hamara,
Kuchh baat hai ke hasti mit'ti nahin hamari
Sadiyon raha hai dushman daur-e-zaman hamara*

[Greeks, Egyptians and Romans have all vanished from this world,

But we are still here,

There must be something special in us that we have not been erased from existence,

For the whole world has been against us for centuries] (*Immortal India* xxiii)

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