Deciphering The Mahabharata: Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan and his Conceptualisation of Lord Krishna

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Abstract

Culture, spirituality and tradition, can undoubtedly be traced back to times unknown, or to times of civilisation and settlement. The morality of a race was for sure put into importance as the influence of divinity is quite evident in anything that is related to culture and tradition, ie; literature, sculpture, painting, murals, music and performances. The rise of Bhakti Movement from southern parts of India, did have its fair share of popularity in the northern parts as well when devotion of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna increased subsequently.

Thunchatch Ramanujan Ezhuthachan, the literary genius from Kerala can be considered as a personification of revival by reaching out with spiritual perfection. The deep rootedness towards culture and unshattered devotion of Ezhuthachan urged people of Kerala to revisit their spiritual expedition that might have been put to question due to the political tensions that were relevant during those days. With his simple words and peaceful representation, he unified, simplified and universalised the concept of God as a supreme existence that resides irrespective of the subject or form.

This paper, is therefore, an humble attempt to revisit the legacy left behind by notable writers who gave importance to spirituality, god, mythological text and the human connection possible for an moral uprising of society as whole.

Keywords— Mahabharata, Bhakti Movement, Ezhuthachan, Concept of Krishna,Mythology, Indian Epic, Spirituality, Tradition, Culture.

1 Introduction

The Bhakti Movement is recognised as a moral resurgence which began in India in the 12th century and continued till the 17th century. Its influence has been evident in all spheres of literature, sculpture, painting, music, and dance. It has developed into a popular movement in India. The early proponents of the Bhakti Movement in Tamil Nadu are the Vaishnavite Arvans and the Shaivite Nayanars. They primarily use songs of dedication as their worship method. The Bhakti Movement has started to be popular throughout India following the Arvars and the Nayanars era. Most of the leaders of the movement are Vaishnavas, the devotees of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. The Shiva worshippers are relatively few. The exceptions are the Lingayatism or Veerashaivism founded by Basavacharya (1105 -1167), who lived in Karnataka in the first half of the twelfth-century, and the Rudra Sampradaya founded by Vallabhacharya (1473-1531), one of the pioneers of the Bhakti Movement.

The devotion to Sri Rama has gained a great deal of prominence in Northern India. It has reached its heights during the time of Tulsi Das. His Ramacharitmanasam is still an exceedingly popular version of the Ramayana. The greatest propagandists of the devotion towards Sri Krishna are the devotional poets of Bengal. Chandi Das is the chief proponent among them.

Jayadeva considers love and devotion as one and introduces love as the central focus in his Geeta Govindam. Another poet is Vidyapati who has composed devotional poems of Sri Krishna in Maithili [1] and Sanskrit. The devotional poems of Krishna Chaitanya (1488-1533) spread to every nook and corner of India.

The first devotional composition praising Sri Krishna is the Srikrishnamruta of Vilwamangalam Swamiyar, in the late thirteenth century Kerala. This book is written in Sanskrit describing the nectarian pastimes of Sri Krishna. Krishnagatha of Cherusseri Namboothiri (1375-1475), Sri Mahabharata of Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan (1495-1575), Jnanappana of Poonthanam Namboothiri (1547-1640), The Narayaneeyam of Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri (1559-1632), Kunchan Nambiar's (1700-1770) Thullal songs, and Kuchelavritham Vanchippattu of Ramapurathu Warrier (1703-1753) etc. are some of the devotional poems written during this period praising Lord Vishnu and his avatars.

2 Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan and the Bhakti Movement

Kerala had been culturally and spiritually degraded just before the time of Ramanujan - Ezhuthachan. The souls who died in darkness overwhelmed the land. There was only fear and insecurity everywhere. Looting and war had wiped out the feelings of mercy and compassion among the people. The mighty ruled the land. A monstrous compulsion for the display of physical strength had been proliferated. The physical persecution and caste feud were so hard that even the little bit of happiness and prosperity remained had gone. The detestable ideals and thoughtless arguments had corrupted the people's minds. In short, Kerala had become the arena of bestiality during that period.

The land had been met with a very pathic experience. Ezhuthachan came during a time when the people of Kerala were distressed and were in need of a spiritual revival to resolve this crisis. The people were mainly concerned with reaching spiritual perfection. In the cultural, spiritual, and political decline of the day, an avenue for emancipation was necessary. Ezhuthachan had such a deep and devoted cultural presence that people had taken him to the fore. As a torrent, devotion streamed to soothe desperate human souls. Ezhuthachan's goal is to make life enjoyable. By taking a very indifferent standpoint, he regularises literature and philosophy. He revises the traditional perspectives based on the ponderous thoughts of the Atman, Jagat and Brahman. An ethical perspective and a realistic search for spiritual experiences in worldly matters become the taproot of the philosophy of Ezhuthachan. As the spokesperson of the simplest and most peaceful path of devotion, he observes that God, who lives in stone and steel, is a permanent resident of the human mind.

3 The Iconic Lord Krishna in Sri Mahabharata

The versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the major works of Ramanujan - Ezhuthachan. Though the story of Sri Rama has been popular from ancient times, people of Kerala have accepted Adhyathma Ramayana wholeheartedly. He conveys his spiritual discernment into words through the unceasing current of Rama Nama. To praise the rich glories of Sri Rama, the deluge of words employed by Ezhuthachan is like 'the waves in the sea'. The feeling of devotion and the ethereal personality of Sri Rama attracted the readers. His presentation encouraged the readers to consciously connect with the story, an element which was missing in the original Ramayana. As he embraces his own heartfelt emotions in each line, Adhyathma Ramayana gains an amazing picturisation of events that outshines word classics. The time taken for the flowers to produce fruits is the interspace between the Adhyathma Ramayana and the Sri Mahabharata. In Sri Mahabharatam, we can see the poetic freedom and egotism that Ezhuthachan gained. It is a profound effort to edify the human mind. Still, it is not evident. This can be regarded as an extraordinary effort to polish the literary scenario of the time.

[1] Mythili is an Indo-Aryan language native to the Indian Subcontinent mainly spoken in India and Nepal. In India, it is spoken in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand and is one of the 22 recognised Indian languages. In Nepal it is spoken in the eastern Terai and is the second most prevalent language of Nepal.

Ezhuthachan is more devotional than the abhorrence of a sage towards worldly life. For this, he takes a strong and courageous stand. He makes systematic changes in the arrangement and naming of the Sri Mahabharata to establish that the true revolution lies in the sobriety of mind. The story of Sri Krishna, which is less important in the Mahabharata of Vyasa, is presented with greater importance. By cherishing the story of the Pandavas and embellishing the Sri Krishna narrative, he inculcates God's omnipotence in the reader. Sri Krishna, who appears for the first time with Balarama in Draupadi's wedding scene, becomes more familiar in Subhadra's wedding. He intervenes at all critical junctures in the life of Pandavas until he ascends to Heaven. The veneration of Sri Krishna, which was only a belief among the devotees and the dependents, is placed deeply in the context of Panchali's disrobing. Never again does he become the player behind the curtain. When he enters the Kuru Mahasabha as the messenger of the Pandavas, he shows the Vishvarupa (Omni-form) and confuses everyone, and he evolves into the main character of Sri Mahabharata. The reciprocity of the Nara-Narayana synthesis is complete when the Pandavas are portrayed as weak and destitute, losing all glory during his disappearance at the end of the epic.

Sri Krishna is the one who carries and endures the strength and essence of a godly figure. The Pandavas are only the shadow of that shade. Success in life is possible only when human instinct synthesises with the power of God. The concept that the avatar of Sri Krishna in Mahabharata has such a purpose has attracted Ezhuthachan. So, he is able to be prudent in the wholistic representation of his beloved God. If the Mahabharata of Vyasa is an ocean, the translation of Ezhuthachan is a pond that contains its essence. It is the most convincing version of the translation. He makes it possible by omitting the unnecessary and summing up the crux of a beautiful poem. We see Ezhuthachan here as a modern poet who respects the trajectory of the poem and poetic beauty.

Anyone who reads the Sri Mahabharata will know that it is the story of the Pandavas. And that is what Ezhuthachan wishes for. He knows that only by portraying the life of the sons of Pandu can he draw their guide, Sri Krishna. At the beginning of the poem, he indicates that he has to tell the story of Sri Krishna as written by Vyasa. The parrot presents it. The goal of the avatar is specified at the beginning of each parvas (chapters).

> "paidahadikaḷ tirttu vaikāte paṟayaṇaṁ
> kaitava mūrtti kriṣṇan tannuṭe kathāmṛutaṁ" – from 'Pauloma Parva'

> "paiṅkiḷi paitale bhaṅgiyil collu m
> paṅkajākṣan kathāpaṅkaṅṅaḷ nīṅṅuvān" – from 'Astika Parva'

Thereby in the parvas such as Sabha, Sambhava, Aranya, Virata, Bheeshma, Karna, Salya, Sauptika, Aishika, Stree, Asvamedika, Asramavasika, Mausala, Svargarohana etc. describes the raison d'être of the avatar.

4 Why is Lord Krishna Important?

In Hindu mythology, Sri Krishna is the eighth incarnation of the ten avatars of the Supreme Lord Vishnu. In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Sri Krishna is considered as the quintessential incarnation of Vishnu. Sri Krishna, who appears as a chakradhari like Lord Vishnu, is an important character in the Mahabharata.

The theories on the devotional path prescribe that the realisation of God can be achieved only by true devotion, which is more a short-lived way than the paths of knowledge, yoga and karma. When Sri Rama, who eliminated Ravana, is worshipped in North India, the people in Kerala worship the assassin of Kamsa, Sri Krishna. He becomes the saviour of the people by killing the sinner Kamsa and maintains dharma (righteousness).

The Bhakti Movement in Kerala attracted a section of the people who were under the misrule of the feudal lords and the kings. And they took it in its essence. Ezhuthachan was only interested in moving with the Vaishnava movement that had been swerved in Kerala. Hence, it had become necessary to present Sri Rama and Sri Krishna as the incarnations of Vishnu. Sri Mahabharata is a perfect blend of devotion, a portrayal of the blissful nature, and alluring poetic

imagination. The Keralites are robbed of their hearts by looking at the exuberant, flautist, lover of Radha, who is attired in yellow.

Sri Krishna is full of love. In this vision lies the soul of all creatures. The language of love has no boundaries. In love with Sri Krishna, all the creatures in the Vrindavan are lost. The image of Sri Krishna changes according to the devotee's mental image. No deities have this much of transformative power. Bal Gopal or the Divine Child Krishna, the Radha-Madhav, Parthasarathi or the charioteer of Arjun – all these are alternative expressions of the same God. This may be the basis of the delightful devotion to Sri Krishna.

Sri Rama and Sri Krishna are two of the best characters developed by Ezhuthachan. Though both are excellent personalities, Sri Krishna is very different from Sri Rama. When Sri Rama is a universally respectable man, Sri Krishna simply lives in the hearts of the people. Ezhuthachan, very carefully and thoughtfully designs the character of Sri Krishna. In Sri Mahabharata, we see a Sri Krishna who is vulnerable to emotions like any human being. Ezhuthachan has given a purely human view of Sri Krishna, that he and his devotees are experiencing the same vital force. That is, the one who worships and the worshipped are the same. The Lord, who thinks that nothing is different from him, draws closer to the people. This is what Ezhuthachan considers to be the most acceptable element of the nature of Sri Krishna.

"madhu mathananamaravarasutanoṭupadēśamāy
maya prabhāvamatu nāṅṅuṁ prakāramuṭan
uzhaṟiyaruḷinamozhikaḷupaniṣattākaya-
lōtināṟ gītayennādaraāl jñānikaḷ" – from 'Bheeshma Parva'

Ezhuthachan's intention of condensing the philosophy of Bhagavat Gita into these four lines shows its relevance. The great poet wants a blend of spiritual and physical figures. And to make it relevant, he fascinatedly combines many life situations with decorum. We see Sri Krishna who takes a careful stand during Subhadra's marriage, during the Rajasuya (consecration of a king) and the disrobing of Panchali, as a messenger to the Kuru Mahasabha, the Parthasarathi or the charioteer of Arjun, on the occasion of the murder of Karna, the murder of Duryodhana and during the Ashvamedha or horse sacrifice ritual. Instead of a Veda scholar's philosophic speech, there are imaginary, spiritual, divine lyrics. Those exciting words are filled with a divine aesthetic movement. Ezhuthachan suggests that we should love this most beautiful pneuma of Sri Krishna. For that, he gives divinity to Sri Krishna, who becomes the pious soulmate of everyone. Ezhuthachan's portrayal of Sri Krishna has the power of the waves that are striking the shore. He gets immersed into devotion while chanting the name of Him. The Drona Parva has established that the Saiva/Vaishnava theories are fundamentally the same, despite his Vaishnava bias:

"compolttaḷiriṇa kumpiṭṭa nērattu
jambhāri nandanan kantānoratbhutaṁ
tān talēnāḷati bhakti pūṇṭetrayuṁ
śāntanāy tante niyamavidhiyiṅkal
viṣṇupādattiṅkalarppicca puṣpaṅṅaḷ
vismayattōṭu kantū śivanmauliyil
viṣṇuvennuṁ śivanennuṁ bhūvanattil
vijñānikaḷ paṟayunnatorajñānaṁ
kaṇṭavarokkavē raṇṭennu colluvor
kaṇṭavarallavararume nirṇayaṁ" – from 'Drona Parva'

Moreover, the exaltation by cursed Parikshit in the Astika Parva, by the brahmin messenger in the Sabha Parva, by Garuda in the Astika Parva, of Jataveda (the Vedic God of fire) by the sarngaka bird in the Sambhava Parva, the vision of Vishvarupa (Omni-form) in Sabha Parva and Udyoga Parva, by Bhishma in Bhishma Parva, the lament of Uthara in Ashvamedhika Parva etc. are the major exaltations in Sri Mahabharata.

The practice of the relentless singing of chants is a poetic tactic that is exclusively employed by Ezhuthachan alone. When it is repeated and heard, even hardcore atheists will slip into an indescribable experience. He wants such an evolution to take hold in this awful time. Here we

see a psychoanalyst who has understood the different aspects of human nature. The famous exaltation of the Partha Saradhi (the charioteer of Arjuna) is a highly picturesque description. For example, the following lines describe the eyes of Sri Krishna. This description can answer why Ezhuthachan's Sri Krishna is so attractive.

aṭiyārekkuṛiccoru karuṇayuṁ
kaṭhina duṣṭarōṭezhunna kōpavuṁ
maṭumozhimāril vaḷarnna rāgavuṁ
kalahaṁ koṇṭoratbhuta rasaṅṅaḷuṁ
capalanmāroṭu kalarnna hāsavuṁ
etiriṭunnōrkku bhayaṅkaratvavuṁ
palavumiṅṅane navanavarasa-
miṭayiṭakuṭikkalarnna netravuṁ – from 'Karna Parva'

In terms of planning and narration, Sri Mahabharata outshines the original because of its tight plot. The main character, Sri Krishna, is the perfect combination of godliness and humanness. The beauty and impression of Sri Krishna's personality are not visible anywhere else. Sri Krishna is in the heartbeat of Ezhuthachan; with all the emotions, he enjoys the presence of Sri Krishna. Like one life is on another life. You can only love the winsome personality of Sri Krishna. This is the opinion of Ezhuthachan, and this is what he asks his readers.

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