



Dharma in the epics

The two great epics of India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1500 BC) and the *Mahābhārata* (1000 BC) are born out of archetypal myths and have become a part of the collective unconscious of the people. Both are repositories of the ethnic memory of the people and are epics of the people. They were composed over a long passage of time, not by one poet, but by many poets, for the purpose of oral transmission by singers and story tellers. However, these epics are ascribed to Vālmiki and Vyāsa respectively. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is known as 'kāvyā'. Kāvya is poetry, but it is mythical poetry. Myth presents a scheme of thought that arises out of the collective consciousness of a nation. It reflects the ethos and psyche of a people, not only in a given temporal frame, but also in its layered universal frame. This, in fact, accounts for their worldwide appeal as constructs of enduring significance.

The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, is 'Itihāsa purāṇa'. It is mythical history. Here history does not denote merely an event that will always happen and repeat itself in certain circumstances. The *Purāṇa* (mythology) reveals eternal principles or archetypes. Writers of all ages have taken this theme and interpreted it from their own points of view, and in the process made it a multi-dimensional book of entertainment and wisdom.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the archetypal myth is depicted in the form of a war at the cosmic level between light and darkness. The two terms 'divine' and 'demonic' do



[*The eternity of the Himalayas and its depiction in the Mahābhārata as the path to attainment of mokṣa attract the Indian mind*