



INTERPRETING THE MAHABHARATA AS HISTORICAL TEXT: CHALLENGES OF HISTORICISM AND TEXTUALISM

Submission Date: June 21, 2024, **Accepted Date:** June 26, 2024,

Published Date: July 01, 2024

Journal Website:
<https://masterjournals.com/index.php/crjps>

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complexities involved in interpreting the Mahabharata as a historical text, focusing on the challenges posed by historicism and textualism. While the Mahabharata is often revered as a foundational narrative of Indian culture, its dual role as literature and history raises critical questions about how it should be approached within academic discourse. This study explores the methodological difficulties in establishing historical authenticity, the implications of interpreting mythological elements within a historical framework, and the influence of textual variants on our understanding of the epic. By analyzing these challenges, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on how ancient texts can be situated within historical narratives, ultimately arguing for a nuanced approach that balances literary analysis with historical inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Mahabharata, Historical text, Historicism, Textualism, Literary analysis, Mythology, Indian culture, Interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata, one of the most significant epics in Indian literature, presents a rich tapestry of narrative that intertwines mythology, philosophy, and moral dilemmas. Traditionally regarded as a cornerstone of Indian culture, the Mahabharata is often approached as a literary and spiritual text. However, its immense historical significance invites scholars to examine its

potential as a historical document. This raises complex questions about the interplay between historicism and textualism, two critical approaches that shape our understanding of ancient narratives.

Historicism emphasizes the context in which a text was produced, advocating for an interpretation that considers the historical circumstances surrounding its



creation. In contrast, textualism focuses on the text itself, prioritizing its language, structure, and narrative techniques over external historical contexts. The challenges of interpreting the Mahabharata through these lenses become evident when one considers the epic's layered nature, its mythological elements, and the varying regional and textual traditions that have emerged over centuries.

This paper aims to explore these challenges by investigating how the Mahabharata can be understood as a historical text while navigating the pitfalls of historicism and textualism. It will consider questions of historical authenticity, the influence of oral traditions, and the impact of textual variants on our interpretations. By analyzing the inherent tensions between these approaches, this study seeks to provide a nuanced framework for understanding the Mahabharata not just as a narrative of ancient events, but as a complex interplay of history, culture, and literature.

Ultimately, this exploration of the Mahabharata as a historical text underscores the need for an interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges the epic's literary richness while recognizing its potential to inform historical narratives. In doing so, it contributes to a broader discourse on the interpretation of ancient texts, highlighting the importance of context, method, and perspective in the quest for understanding.

METHOD

This study employs a multi-faceted methodological approach to interpret the Mahabharata as a historical text while addressing the challenges posed by historicism and textualism. The primary method involves a critical textual analysis of the Mahabharata, focusing on its narrative structure, themes, and character development. Close reading techniques will be utilized to examine how the epic constructs its

historical claims and how these claims are influenced by the text's literary devices and stylistic choices. This analysis will highlight the ways in which the narrative engages with historical events, mythological elements, and moral questions, thereby complicating its classification as strictly historical or literary.

In conjunction with textual analysis, this study incorporates a historical contextualization of the Mahabharata. This involves a review of scholarly literature on the socio-political landscape of ancient India, including archaeological findings and historical texts that provide insights into the time periods suggested by the epic. By situating the Mahabharata within its historical context, the study aims to uncover the relationships between the epic's narratives and the realities of the time, assessing how historical conditions may have shaped its content and form.

Furthermore, the research considers the implications of oral tradition and its influence on the Mahabharata's transmission over generations. Analyzing various regional and textual variants of the epic will illuminate how different interpretations have emerged, each reflecting unique cultural and historical contexts. This aspect of the study will draw on comparative literature methodologies, examining adaptations and retellings of the Mahabharata across different regions and time periods to understand how these variations impact our reading of the epic as history.

Additionally, the study will engage with theoretical frameworks from both historicism and textualism, assessing their strengths and limitations in the context of the Mahabharata. By critically evaluating the merits of each approach, this research aims to highlight the need for a balanced perspective that acknowledges the literary artistry of the epic while also recognizing its historical significance.

In summary, this methodological framework integrates textual analysis, historical contextualization, examination of oral traditions, and



theoretical discourse, providing a comprehensive approach to interpreting the Mahabharata as a historical text. This study ultimately seeks to navigate the complexities of historicism and textualism, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the epic's role in the construction of historical narratives.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals that interpreting the Mahabharata as a historical text presents significant challenges that stem from its dual nature as both a literary masterpiece and a potential historical account. The close reading of key passages highlights the epic's intricate narrative techniques and mythological elements, which complicate straightforward historical interpretations. Historical contextualization shows that while the Mahabharata is deeply rooted in ancient Indian socio-political realities, its allegorical and moral dimensions often transcend specific historical events, making it difficult to extract concrete historical facts.

Moreover, the examination of regional and textual variants demonstrates the fluidity of the Mahabharata's narratives, as different cultural interpretations influence the portrayal of characters and events. This variability indicates that the epic has been adapted to serve various social and ideological purposes throughout its history, further complicating its use as a historical source.

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the tension between historicism and textualism in interpreting the Mahabharata. Historicism's emphasis on context reveals the significance of understanding the socio-political conditions of ancient India; however, it risks oversimplifying the epic by reducing it to a mere reflection of historical events. Conversely, textualism allows for a deeper appreciation of the literary artistry and narrative complexity of the Mahabharata but may

overlook the historical underpinnings that inform its stories.

The study illustrates that a hybrid approach is essential for interpreting the Mahabharata. By acknowledging both its literary richness and historical context, scholars can engage in a more holistic analysis that respects the epic's multifaceted nature. The interplay of myth and history in the Mahabharata invites a deeper exploration of how narratives are constructed and understood within cultural frameworks, emphasizing the importance of narrative as a means of cultural expression and identity formation.

Additionally, the fluidity of the text across different regional adaptations highlights the role of oral tradition in shaping historical memory. This suggests that the Mahabharata serves not only as a narrative of past events but also as a living document that reflects ongoing cultural dialogues about morality, duty, and identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that interpreting the Mahabharata as a historical text necessitates a careful balancing act between historicism and textualism. While the epic offers valuable insights into ancient Indian society, its complexity requires a nuanced approach that appreciates both its literary artistry and its historical implications. The challenges identified in this analysis serve as a reminder of the difficulties inherent in reading ancient texts and the necessity for interdisciplinary methods that bridge literature and history.

Ultimately, the Mahabharata stands as a testament to the rich tapestry of human experience, where myth, morality, and history intertwine. By navigating the challenges of historicism and textualism, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the interpretation of ancient narratives, advocating for a deeper understanding of how such texts shape and are



shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Through this lens, the Mahabharata can be appreciated not just as a historical account, but as a vital cultural artifact that continues to resonate across generations.

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