

Social Classes of People in *Mahabharata* and *Shahnameh*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine Iranian *Shahnameh* and Indian *Mahabharata* as two of the world's greatest epics in human literature. Both these epics have played crucial role in the history of human beings in general and in Indian and Iranian societies in particular. Indian and Iranian nations have common historical backgrounds that are revealed in their social and cultural aspects. Every social class depends on the society's tribal and national attitudes of the social class. A comparative study of *Shahnameh* and *Mahabharata* can be used as a cultural bridge between the two nations. In a study of *Mahabharata*, social classes and ranking people can be seen in every part of *Mahabharata*, in a way that some of the social privileges such as wisdom, and knowledge were considered just for Brahman class. In this article, the social classification positions between *Mahabharata* and *Shahnameh* will be investigated.

Keywords: *Shahnameh*, *Mahabharata*, social class, Iranian and Indian people

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the two important human epics from two cultures in Asia. The relationship between Iran and India nations existed before the advent of Islam. During the time of Persian kings there were trade ties between these two nations who travelled with their ships and passed from Persian Gulf to Indian Ocean (Khansir and Mozafari 2014). Safavi (2006, p. VI) argued that India and Iran have shared close relations with each other, besides their racial affinity, even before the advent of Islam. She added that Persian kings, until the end of the Sasanian dynasty, had held Western Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan under their rule. The book of *Shahnameh* is one of the longest epic poems in the history of human. It was

written by the Great Persian poet Ferdowsi, during the Ghaznawi power. In addition, this book is written about the Iranian Greater who have influenced the Iranian national epic between 977 A.D and 1010 CE.

Mahabharata is one the important epic books of the world and is very rich in poetry. This book is written by many great poets in Sanskrit language over 2000 years ago in India.

Mahabharata made great impact on socio-cultural life of the Indian people. It is known as one the oldest epics in India. In addition, Mahabharata is a story of two families, namely, Pandava and Kaurava. This book has been called using different names as follows:

1. Jaya
2. Bharat
3. Mahabharata

Faali (2008) mentions that, by the late seventh century BC, Aryan group had taken control of India and it established the social hierarchy. Aryans made a great impact on social-cultural life of Indian people. The Indian people were divided into four social classes. However, about the establishment of Indian society in "caste system", Naini (1996) reports that Hindu Legislators, during the establishment of the Aryan society, used "spiritual perfection" rather than the size of the population, power, wealth and property as the criterion of reliable value. They believed that the established ethics and morality must be obeyed and followed by the population, wealth and power. They considered society as a progressive one if it adhered to the ethical principle of "Werne Dehram" (varna dharma) . "Werne" means color and "Dehram" means duty. Both of these are believed to be due to the innate and natural talents of people.

According to Turabi (2003), "after the conquest of India country by the Aryans group , the Aryans group tried to demote or reject the pre-existing Indians' gods and goddesses and their worship targets. Besides, the Aryans group called Indian native people as base people. They contemplated higher respect and dignity for themselves. The "caste" or social class was made

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from this time in India. And, little by little, it affected Indians' beliefs, social structures and other aspects of life.

Indian Society (Hindu Society)

Indian's human social classes were divided into four groups: 1. Brahmans (Clergymen), 2. Kshtryh (soldiers, army), 3. Vysyh (farmers) and 4. Shweder (slaves).

Hindu society considered these divisions as God's will and orders. It was noticed in the *Upanishads* that: "According to the Hindu's custom, Brahman class was created from Brahma's head and it is emblematic and the specialty of the innate power of this class. Kshtryh class (Chahtry) was created from Brahma's arms and was ranked the same as the first class. Vysyh class was created from Brahma's thigh and was ranked lower than the two other classes. Then, fourth class was Shweder who was created from Brahma's legs and was the lowest in rank (reported in Naini, 1991). In the Mahabharat, Brahma created Brahman from its mind to cosmos, and then it created Kshtryh from its arms, Vysyh from its thigh, and finally, Shwede from its legs (reported in Naini, 1996). According to Mahabharata, Hindu society is divided into four classes that are considered as follows:

1. Brahmans as the highest Indian social class. It manages the religious affairs and guides Hindu population.

According to Turabi (2003), Brahman is one person whose parents are noble'; he is knowledgeable and his worship is based on the rules and provisions. Brahman is the important and greatest of all. If Brahmins were not nobles, no one would differ in good and evil, so the world would be dark. Wherever the Brahmans have a good performance in their lives, the result of charity will be found. By expressing the provisions and religious guides and singing Bid (religious songs), Brahman can take you to the paradise. So, Brahmans are superior to all the other creatures. The social rank of Brahmans in Indian Society is the highest of other classes in the society, because Brahmans are created from the Brahma's head. The head of everything is the high point of it. The best part of each animal is its head. Brahmans are the best chosen

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creatures and persons; in a way, they are supported by gods. According to Naini (1996), we will be dissatisfied and become enemies to those who curse the Brahman. We will be satisfied with those who respect him. The cause of Brahmans' dignity is due to their austerity. The creation of Brahmans is like the creation of other people, but the focus is on austerity. The groups, who are more ascetic, are more exalted and dearest.

The behavior of Brahmans contained four things: It is such that after the birth, Brahmans do what is customary of that day and on the twelfth day after the birth, they appoint his name. Then they supply his requirements. Later, in his sixth month, they feed him and do the customs of that day. And in the third year, they shave his hair on his head and conduct the ceremony of that day. When his age is eight, they put Zunnar (thread) around his throat, make him to sing Bid (hymn) and order him to serve the master (teacher). At the time he is free from Bid, the Master (teacher) gives some gifts to all. Brahman then takes a special religious bath and selects one of the four Ashazm (steps): Brhmchrj (being wifeless, remain unmarried), Grhst (having a wife), worshipping Ban (choosing nomadic life), or Synas (leaving all) (reported Naini 1996). The job of Brahman is to protect his own ego and read just what the elders order him to read. Brahman must not do things that other usual people do (reported in Naini 1996).

Naini (1996, p 13), indicates in the introduction of Mahabharat in his book that the literature of Hindu was mostly formed by Brahmans, the Hindu's clergyman class. Thus they tried to keep and maintain their power and influence in the government and among other classes. They have introduced themselves as the first and superior Hindu social class and the creators of Hindu literature and customs. Their curses were considered as the winning means which cause every official to obey them. Meanwhile, their blessing brings victory, prosperity and fortune for everyone.

2. Kshatryh (the Chahtry) is the second class of Hindu society. This class includes fighters, kings and princes. The main task of this group is to maintain national security and bravery. "Chahtry has done three worthy duties: vouchsafing, reading, and fighting in the war to protect people." (Naini, 1991, p. 236)

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Or “courage, cunning, independence and standing in the field of battle and chivalry all are Chahtryans’ characteristics (Naini, 1991, p. 105). Chahtryans insist on their decisions and their determination .They never run away from the battle field. Death is sweet for them. “I have faith in my belief about Chahtary customs, and never come back from them by others words ” (Naini , 1991, p. 236).

3. The other class in the Hindu society is called "Vyshyh". This group has done "Economic Affairs". They have to do the work that will provide the comfort for higher classes. “Vyshyhs have to provide life earnings, pay more attention to the charity and do alms. They also must introduce equal laws for Brahmans and Chahtries ” (Naini 1991, p. 73). “The job of Vyshyhs are: agriculture and business and raising the cattle" (Naini 1991, p. 428).

4. The last group of the Hindu society is named Shweders. Shweders are the lowest class of Hindu society whose lives are like slaves. Their tasks are just serving, working and accomplishing anything that higher classes assign to them. “It is good for Shweders to serve Brahman and Chhtry." (Naini,1991, p. 553).

Shweders will never reach the top positions. “If Brahman studies a little and even takes a little austerity, and Shweder does the opposite, you must pay attention just to Brahman and no attention to Shweder. As leaving a cow aside for kicking, you cannot get milk from a female donkey. If a Shweder becomes a scientist, you should not act on his statements. It is the same as the time that nobody eats a dog’s food that remains" (Naini,1991, p. 416).

The description of tasks assigned to four classes is observable in every part of Mahabharata. No class is allowed to enter the other classes. People are forced to stay on their own social classes, since classes are decided upon by birth.

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

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In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the four social classes of people were mentioned too. Of course, these classifications belonged to the pre-Islamic era. "According to *Shahnameh*, the first kingdom that divided people to several groups and ranked them in each group based on their services to the community. King Jamshid Pishdadi was Iranian king. He had two duties: the royal title of king (political affairs) and also the priest (religious affairs). He was not only the king but also the religious leader" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 21). In *Shahnameh*, the king Jamshid was also described as a king and a religious leader. "King Jamshid put the crown on his head and prayed god for being both the king and the religious leader" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 22).

Before Jamshid's classification, people had professions such as making war devices and spinning and weaving. Learning these crafts needed at least fifty years.

And in his third year of fifty years of crowning, King Jamshid divided the people of his community: "He used his treasure to teach a group of people to be good soldiers and during the other fifty years of his Kingdom, he planned the other group to learn how to spin and weave the fabric" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 23).

سردرد گردان به جسد تن نام در بر دست را جنگ آلات نخست
...جوشنا چون کرد زره و خود چو آهنا کرد نرم گیتی فر به

گنج نهادب چند وازین به برد رنج پناه سال اندرون به دین
"ن برد و ننگ هذگام پوشند که کرد جامه اندید شه پناه دگر

"His first group was considered as Clergymen or "Katuzyian" who were religious leaders. They lived in the mountains, and their tasks were to worship and perform religious rites." (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 24).

خورد پناه نیز اندرون به دین کرد گرد و رپیشه انجمن هر ز
اش دانی پرستندگان رسم به اش خوانی که آتد وزیران که گروهی
کوه کرد جایگاه را پرستنده گروه میان از کردشان جدا

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"جهاندار شان روشن پيش وانن کار شان بسود پي رسد تش تا بدان

The second group whom Ferdowsi called "Nysaryan" was responsible for country's security. "Nysaryans were armies and militants. Their task was to guard the boundaries of the country" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 25).

خواندند نيساريان نام هي بد نشاندد دست دگر بر بر صد في "
ك شورند ول شكر ف روزنده آورند جنگ مردان شيرك جا
"پاي به مردی نام پي ودوزي شان بد جای شاهی تخت پي ودك زي شان

"The third group was farmers and the economy of the country was based on their works. Ferdowsi called them besudi" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 26).

سد پاس بری شان كس از نديست ك جا شناس راگ سه بسودی "
"نشنوند سرزندش خورش گاه به بدروند خود و ورزند و بكارند

"The fourth group consisted of craftsmen and industry men that Ferdowsi called Ahtvkhvshy. They had the lowest rank" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 27).

سرک - شی اباورزان دست هان اهتوخوشی خواندند كه چهارم "
"بوداندي شه پي ره پيشه روان شان بدود پي پيشه هگانن كار شان ك جا

We understand from Ferdowsi's comments that the word "class" which referred to "group" in Shahnameh , has two sociological concepts. "One has the concept of dignity and status of any person or any group in a social system. And the other one has a functional concept which means to show the importance and value of the job and task of each group of people in that Iranian culture and civilization" (Tayyibi, 1998, p. 28).

راه بسود و بگزي د سزاوار پياي گاه پي - كي راي كي هراين از "
"رابيش و كم بداند پي پي بند، راخويش اندازه كس هوتا كه

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As it was stated before, Ferdowsi's division of the classes was in practice in pre-Islam era. In addition, he used another source called "Namak's God", a famous book in Sassanid's era. It might be possible that the society's division of into several classes was based on this book or other Sassanid's books. Main purpose of this division was just to express people's roles and duties in doing their jobs rather than showing the superiority of one class over another class. Even if it was supposed to show the superiority of one class over the other, it was not as strict as seen in Mahabharata. Hindu caste system has been proposed as a matter of God's affair and it is something that nobody can change. Ferdowsi also narrated the duties of these classes, but he never mentioned these classifications in any other part of Shahnameh except in the story of Anoushiravan and shoemaker. However, there were many comments about these four human classifications in every chapter of Mahabharata. As it was mentioned before, in Mahabharata, the amount of attention given to and the intensity of these classifications are much more severe than in Shahnameh.

Conclusion

In any comparative study, the study is used in order to show differences and similarities between areas of the study. In this study, the researchers tried to discuss similarities and differences between the two great epics Shahnameh Ferdowsi and Mahabharata. Shahnameh Ferdowsi is part of Persian literature and it is one of the most important epics known by literary experts not only in Iran but also all over the world. Mahabharata is recognized as a great epic in Indian literature in the history of human beings. Society is formed by a group of people who live together. Human beings will reach maturity and accomplishment, just by communicating with other members of society. In Hindu society, human's social classes were considered as a divine's will. These classifications were divided into four groups: Brahmans, Kshtryh, Vsyh, and Shweder. No member of each group has the permission to progress or move to the other group. This classification of four categories also existed in Shahnameh: Katuziyan, Nysaryan, Besudi and Ahtvkhvshy. In Shahnameh, people's classification is based on the concepts of dignity and status of any person or any group in the social system. It also shows their jobs and

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responsibilities. These classifications are not divine's will. Human's classifications in Shahnameh are not as rigid as Hindu's classifications (caste). In Mahabharata, the amount of attention to and insistence on these classifications are much more intensive than in Shahnameh.

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