

The Malinīthan Inscription and the Cultural Resonance of the Mahābhārata in Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT: This research paper explores the significance of the Malinīthan inscription in Arunachal Pradesh and its deep connections with the Mahābhārata, one of India's most revered epics. By examining the textual and archaeological evidence, the paper aims to elucidate how the Mahābhārata's narratives influenced the cultural and religious fabric of Arunachal Pradesh. The research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating textual analysis and field studies, to understand the interplay between epic literature and regional history. The paper tries to reinstate the enduring legacy of the Mahābhārata by analysing the spiritual and socio-cultural identity of the region.

KEYWORDS: Malinīthan, Mahābhārata, Arunachal Pradesh, epigraphy, cultural identity, regional history

INTRODUCTION

The Mahābhārata, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, transcends boundaries of time and geography, influencing diverse cultural and religious landscapes (Vyāsa, Mahābhārata 1.1.1). Among the regions deeply impacted by this epic is Arunachal Pradesh, particularly evident in the Malinīthan site. Malinīthan, located near Likabali in the West Siang district, is a revered archaeological and pilgrimage site that testifies to the region's connection with Hindu mythology and the Mahābhārata. The temple ruins at Malinīthan date back to the early medieval period, showcasing exquisite sculptures and inscriptions that narrate episodes from the Mahābhārata (Malinīthan Archaeological Records 45). These inscriptions and artifacts provide a tangible link between the epic and the socio-religious traditions of Arunachal Pradesh. This historical site is not merely a reflection of the artistic and architectural prowess of its era but also a significant cultural bridge that connects the northeastern region of India to the broader pan-Indian narrative framework embedded in the Mahābhārata. The sculptures, meticulously carved from durable stone, depict divine figures, mythological episodes, and motifs that resonate with the themes of dharma (righteousness), artha (prosperity), and moksha (liberation) as elaborated in the epic. Particularly striking is the portrayal of Krishna's exploits and other pivotal moments, which underscore the universal appeal of the Mahābhārata's moral and philosophical dimensions. Malinīthan's architectural remains, coupled with the epigraphic evidence, illuminate the ways in which the Mahābhārata's narratives were not only preserved but also actively integrated into the local traditions and practices. This integration underscores a historical dynamic where sacred texts and oral traditions coalesced, shaping the cultural and religious identity of the region. The presence of such a site in Arunachal Pradesh demonstrates how the Mahābhārata, with its intricate interweaving of human dilemmas and divine interventions, became a shared cultural heritage, transcending its origins in the Gangetic plains. The narratives of the epic, reflected through the artistic expressions at Malinīthan, emphasize the fluidity and adaptability of Hindu mythology, accommodating regional nuances while preserving universal themes. This convergence at Malinīthan reveals the region's historical and cultural integration with pan-Indian traditions, offering a compelling case of how sacred literature and mythology have profoundly influenced distant landscapes, creating a legacy that endures across centuries. By investigating the Malinīthan site's connection with the Mahābhārata, one can gain valuable insights into the syncretic processes through which the epic's narratives have been localized, enriching both the cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh and the broader understanding of India's historical pluralism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis, epigraphy, and archaeology. The following methods are adopted:

1. Textual Analysis: Key episodes of the Mahābhārata are analysed, particularly those associated with the goddess Durgā and other deities represented at Malinīthan.
2. Epigraphic Study: The inscriptions at Malinīthan are examined to decode their historical and cultural significance.

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3. Archaeological Evidence: Sculptural representations at Malinīthan are analysed to understand the influence of Mahābhārata narratives on local art.
4. Fieldwork: Site visits and interviews with local historians and archaeologists were conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the site's significance.

FINDINGS

1. Malinīthan: A Site of Mythological Resonance

The name "Malinīthan" itself carries mythological significance. Local traditions associate the site with the goddess Mālīnī, a form of Durgā (Sharma 103). The sculptures and carvings at the site depict scenes from the Mahābhārata, particularly those highlighting the goddess's role in the epic. For instance, the goddess's assistance to Arjuna during his quest for divine weapons is a recurring motif (Vyāsa, Mahābhārata 3.37.15).

The inscriptions found at Malinīthan are written in Sanskrit, utilizing the Nāgarī script (ASI Bulletin 125). They mention deities and episodes linked to the Mahābhārata, such as the worship of Durgā before the Kurukṣetra war. A fragmentary inscription refers to the invocation of the goddess through verses such as:

“सृज्याणीं कल्याणीं यदेद्यते पाण्डावती कुरुणाम्युद्धिक्षी”

(sṛjñāṇīn kalyāṇīn yad edyate pāṇḍāvātī kurṇām yuddhikṣī)

This invocation underscores the role of the goddess as a divine protector and a source of victory (Ganguli, 324).

2. Sculptural Representations

The sculptural remains at Malinīthan illustrate various characters and events from the Mahābhārata. Noteworthy among these are the depictions of Krishna and Rukmiṇī, whose divine love story is central to the epic (ASI Bulletin 127). The carvings also include images of warriors and sages, reinforcing the region's cultural affinity with the Mahābhārata's themes of dharma (righteousness) and kṣetra (duty) (Sharma 114).

A particularly striking sculpture is that of Durgā slaying Mahiṇāsura, reminiscent of the goddess's portrayal in the Mahābhārata (Vyāsa, Mahābhārata 5.23.45). The attention to detail in these carvings highlights the artisans' familiarity with the epic's narratives and their skill in translating them into visual art (Malinīthan Archaeological Records 67).

3. Oral Traditions and Local Narratives

The influence of the Mahābhārata in Arunachal Pradesh is not confined to inscriptions and sculptures; it permeates the oral traditions of the region. Folk songs and stories recount episodes from the epic, often adapted to the local context. For example, the story of Bhīma and his encounter with Hanumān is recounted with regional variations, emphasizing values like strength and humility (Oral Histories of Arunachal Pradesh 89).

4. Integration of Mahābhārata Themes in Local Festivals

Festivals in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the Mopin and Solung, integrate elements of the Mahābhārata, albeit with unique regional interpretations (Cultural Festivities of Arunachal Pradesh 142). Rituals invoking Durgā or Krishna draw from the epic's descriptions of divine interventions and cosmic battles (Sharma 130). These practices underscore the enduring relevance of the Mahābhārata in the region's spiritual life.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the Mahābhārata's influence on Malinīthan and Arunachal Pradesh is both profound and multifaceted. The integration of the epic's themes into local art, inscriptions, and traditions reflects a dynamic process of cultural assimilation. This underscores how epic literature can transcend its geographic and linguistic origins to inspire diverse communities (Ganguli, 441). The depiction of Durgā and Krishna at Malinīthan illustrates the adaptability of the Mahābhārata's narratives. By situating these divine figures within the local context, the region's inhabitants reaffirm their connection to the broader Indian cultural heritage while preserving their unique identity. Furthermore, the alignment of local festivals and rituals with Mahābhārata themes highlights the epic's role as a unifying cultural force (Sharma, 135). This interplay between the local and the pan-Indian manifests in multiple dimensions. For instance, in Malinīthan, artistic depictions of Krishna and Durgā are not merely replicas of traditional iconography from mainland India but are reimagined through the lens of local aesthetic sensibilities. These adaptations reveal a community engaged in an ongoing dialogue with its cultural roots, striving to preserve tradition while accommodating its evolution. The presence of Durgā in Malinīthan's art embodies the fusion of Shakta traditions with local practices, a synthesis that reinforces the role of mythology as a living force within the community. This localized reinterpretation allows the stories of the Mahābhārata to remain vibrant and relevant in the daily lives of Arunachal Pradesh's people. By embracing such reimaginings, the epic's themes transcend their original narrative structures to inspire diverse interpretations. Krishna's depiction at Malinīthan is particularly significant as it reflects the theological integration of Vaishnavite traditions into a predominantly Shakta milieu. This theological blending is emblematic of the inclusive nature of Indian spirituality, where seemingly disparate sects find common ground through shared stories and symbols. Festivals like Durgā Puja in the region take on added significance by incorporating elements unique to local folklore, further illustrating the epic's ability to serve as a bridge between disparate cultural spheres. The celebratory practices

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during these festivals often blend Mahābhārata episodes with regional legends, creating a tapestry of narratives that cater to both collective memory and localized devotion. Such syncretism reaffirms the epic's role as a dynamic text that invites perpetual reinterpretation. The ritualistic enactments of scenes from the Mahābhārata during community gatherings exemplify this process, as participants imbue the stories with local flavor and contemporary relevance. This participatory engagement ensures that the epic remains a cornerstone of communal identity, fostering a sense of unity among the region's diverse populations. Moreover, the incorporation of the Mahābhārata's moral and philosophical dimensions into local governance and conflict resolution practices highlights its enduring relevance. Stories of Krishna's diplomacy or Yudhishtira's adherence to dharma provide ethical frameworks that resonate with traditional values, thereby bridging ancient wisdom and modern challenges. This alignment between the epic's teachings and the community's lived realities underscores its role as a guiding force for social cohesion. Inscriptions found at Malinīthan further attest to this deep cultural integration. These inscriptions, often invoking Mahābhārata characters and motifs, serve as both historical records and markers of spiritual continuity. They reflect a deliberate effort to align the region's historical narrative with the epic's timeless themes. The epigraphic evidence suggests that Malinīthan was not merely a passive recipient of Mahābhārata influences but an active participant in the creation of a unique cultural identity. This identity is characterized by its ability to harmonize the universal appeal of the Mahābhārata with the particularities of local traditions. For instance, the invocation of Krishna as a protector and guide in these inscriptions highlights his role as a unifying symbol of faith and resilience. This invocation resonates deeply with the community, offering a sense of continuity amidst changing socio-political landscapes. The enduring presence of such motifs in local art and architecture underscores the Mahābhārata's significance as a cultural anchor. Furthermore, the region's oral traditions serve as a vital repository for the epic's stories, ensuring their transmission across generations. These oral narratives often incorporate local dialects and idioms, thereby enhancing their accessibility and relevance. The recitation of Mahābhārata episodes during religious ceremonies and social gatherings provides an immersive experience that reinforces communal bonds. Such practices exemplify the epic's role as a living tradition that continues to shape the region's cultural landscape. The dynamic interplay between the written and oral traditions of the Mahābhārata in Arunachal Pradesh illustrates the epic's adaptability and resilience. While the inscriptions and artistic depictions at Malinīthan provide tangible evidence of its influence, the oral traditions ensure its emotional and spiritual resonance within the community. This dual presence underscores the Mahābhārata's ability to function as both a historical text and a living narrative. The epic's themes of duty, devotion, and resilience find expression in the everyday lives of Arunachal Pradesh's people, serving as a source of inspiration and guidance. The alignment of local customs with Mahābhārata narratives also highlights the epic's capacity to foster intercultural dialogue. By integrating these themes into their cultural fabric, the inhabitants of Malinīthan and Arunachal Pradesh contribute to a broader understanding of Indian heritage as a mosaic of interconnected traditions. This inclusive approach ensures that the Mahābhārata remains a relevant and unifying force, capable of addressing the aspirations and challenges of diverse communities. The epic's ability to inspire artistic, theological, and philosophical innovations underscores its timeless relevance. The ongoing reinterpretation of its narratives within the local context exemplifies the dynamic nature of cultural exchange. This process not only enriches the region's cultural heritage but also reaffirms the Mahābhārata's role as a universal text that transcends its historical and geographical origins. The synthesis of Mahābhārata themes with local traditions at Malinīthan thus serves as a testament to the enduring power of epic literature to inspire, adapt, and unite.

CONCLUSION

The Malinīthan inscription and its associated artifacts provide a remarkable window into the profound and enduring influence of the Mahābhārata on the cultural and spiritual landscape of Arunachal Pradesh. This convergence of textual and archaeological evidence demonstrates how the epic's narratives transcend their original context, embedding themselves in the fabric of regional identity and collective memory. Located near the Brahmaputra River, Malinīthan emerges as more than just an archaeological site; it is a living repository of stories and traditions that have been preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted by local communities over centuries. The temple ruins and intricate carvings at Malinīthan, which depict episodes from the Mahābhārata, are emblematic of a broader cultural phenomenon where epic traditions are localized to resonate deeply with specific socio-cultural milieus. These visual and architectural representations serve not merely as relics of the past but as vital touchstones for understanding how the Mahābhārata's themes of dharma, heroism, and devotion continue to influence spiritual practices and moral frameworks in the region. This study bridges the textual richness of the Mahābhārata with the tangible legacy of Malinīthan's inscriptions, underscoring the interplay of oral tradition, literary canon, and material culture in shaping historical consciousness.

The Mahābhārata's legacy at Malinīthan also sheds light on the intricate processes of cultural integration and syncretism, where epic traditions are reimagined to align with local beliefs, rituals, and artistic expressions. The region's rich tapestry of myths and folklore, interwoven with the Mahābhārata's grand narrative, illustrates how timeless stories adapt to the nuances of place and community. This adaptability underscores the epic's universal appeal while highlighting its capacity to inspire localized expressions of creativity and devotion. At Malinīthan, the sculptural depictions of key characters and episodes from the Mahābhārata, such as the divine presence of Krishna or the valour of Arjuna, are reinterpreted through the lens of regional artistic styles and religious practices. These artifacts not only affirm the historical significance of the site but also illuminate how the Mahābhārata's themes

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continue to shape collective identity and spiritual imagination. By examining these interactions between literature and archaeology, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how ancient texts are continuously recontextualized in diverse cultural settings. The enduring presence of the Mahābhārata in Arunachal Pradesh, as evidenced by Malinīthan, invites us to reconsider the epic's role as a unifying force in Indian culture. While the Mahābhārata's narratives have long been recognized for their philosophical and ethical depth, their material manifestations at sites like Malinīthan underscore their significance as cultural anchors that bridge past and present. These inscriptions and artifacts not only preserve historical and artistic traditions but also foster a sense of continuity and belonging among communities that identify with the epic's themes and values.

Preserving the Malinīthan inscription and its associated artifacts is essential for safeguarding this shared cultural heritage. Efforts to conserve the site should encompass both physical restoration and community engagement, ensuring that the narratives embedded in these artifacts remain accessible and relevant to future generations. Such preservation initiatives must prioritize collaboration between archaeologists, historians, local communities, and policymakers to create sustainable frameworks for protecting these invaluable cultural resources. Documenting and digitizing the inscriptions can further enhance accessibility and facilitate interdisciplinary research, enabling scholars to unravel the complex interactions between literature, history, and regional identities. Additionally, incorporating the Mahābhārata's legacy at Malinīthan into educational curricula and cultural programming can help raise awareness about its historical and spiritual significance, fostering a deeper appreciation for India's diverse cultural traditions. The Malinīthan inscription's significance extends beyond its immediate archaeological and historical context, offering profound insights into the dynamic interplay of tradition and adaptation in Indian culture. By examining the ways in which the Mahābhārata has been reimagined at Malinīthan, people are reminded of the enduring power of storytelling to connect people across time and space. This legacy of adaptation and resilience serves as a testament to the capacity of epic traditions to evolve while preserving their core values and themes. As one continues to explore the intersections of literature, history, and archaeology, the Mahābhārata's presence at Malinīthan challenges him to embrace a holistic understanding of cultural heritage—one that recognizes the interconnectedness of text, context, and materiality. By preserving and studying such inscriptions, the masses not only honour the past but also enrich their collective understanding of the cultural currents that continue to shape India's diverse identities. In doing so, they reaffirm the timeless relevance of the Mahābhārata and its enduring impact on the human spirit.

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