

Why Great Texts Refuse Simple Answers

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Human beings are naturally attracted to certainty. Faced with complexity, we seek clarity. Faced with ambiguity, we seek conclusions. Faced with difficult questions, we often hope for simple answers.

This tendency is understandable. Simplicity provides comfort. Definitive answers reduce uncertainty. They allow decisions to be made and opinions to be formed with confidence.

Yet some of humanity's most enduring texts appear strangely resistant to this impulse.

The great civilisational works of the world have survived not because they offer simple answers to every question, but because they repeatedly confront readers with questions that refuse easy resolution. Their enduring value lies not merely in what they explain, but also in what they compel us to continue examining.

This can appear frustrating to the modern reader.

Contemporary culture frequently rewards certainty. Public discourse often expects immediate conclusions. Complex issues are compressed into short statements. Debates are reduced to opposing positions. Individuals are encouraged to choose sides quickly and defend them confidently.

Civilisational texts often proceed in the opposite direction.

Rather than eliminating complexity, they reveal it.

Rather than simplifying every dilemma, they expose its competing dimensions.

One reason why complexity appears so frequently within Indic civilisational literature is that many of these works were not composed merely as stories, biographies or chronicles intended to glorify a particular ruler, dynasty or historical moment. They represent the accumulated reflections of generations that observed

human conduct, political organisation, social order, spiritual inquiry and the relationship between individuals and larger systems of life. Even where particular compilers, seers or narrators are associated with a text, the knowledge preserved within it often extends far beyond the experience of a single lifetime.

This characteristic distinguishes civilisational texts from many ordinary literary works. Their purpose is not merely to entertain, persuade or celebrate. Rather, they preserve observations gathered across generations concerning states, kingdoms, governments, communities, families and individuals. They record not only what happened, but also recurring patterns in how human beings respond to power, responsibility, desire, fear, duty and uncertainty. Complexity therefore should not be regarded as an accidental feature of such texts. It is a natural consequence of attempting to understand reality in its fullness.

For this reason, civilisational texts should not be reduced to moral slogans or one-size-fits-all solutions. Human circumstances differ. Contexts change. Competing obligations arise. A principle that appears appropriate in one situation may prove inadequate in another. Great texts acknowledge this reality. Instead of prescribing a single formula applicable to every circumstance, they encourage readers to cultivate judgment. Their objective is not merely to provide answers but to develop the intellectual and moral capacity required to navigate complexity itself.

This distinction is crucial.

A simple text often answers a question.

A great text frequently transforms the question itself.

The difference may appear subtle, yet it profoundly influences the reader's experience.

When a text provides only conclusions, the reader's task largely ends with acceptance or rejection.

When a text presents enduring questions, the reader becomes a participant in inquiry.

This is one reason why civilisational texts continue to generate interpretation across centuries.

Each generation encounters new circumstances.

New institutions emerge.

New technologies appear.

New social realities develop.

Yet many of the underlying human questions remain remarkably familiar.

How should authority be exercised?

What obligations do individuals owe to family, society and political order?

When duties conflict, which should prevail?

Can power remain legitimate without restraint?

How should justice be pursued when every available option carries consequences?

These questions rarely admit permanent answers.

Nor do great texts pretend otherwise.

Instead, they create intellectual spaces within which such questions can be examined repeatedly from different perspectives.

Another remarkable feature of Indic civilisational literature is the degree to which its texts converse with one another. Narratives, characters, ideas and philosophical concerns frequently reappear across different works, often in new contexts and for different purposes. A reader moving from one text to another repeatedly encounters familiar themes expressed through different narratives. The result is not repetition but continuity. The civilisation appears to be engaged in a long conversation with itself.

This interconnectedness explains why isolated reading sometimes produces incomplete interpretations. Individual texts undoubtedly possess integrity and can be studied independently. Yet deeper patterns often become visible only when texts are viewed as components of a larger civilisational consciousness. At the same time, the great works possess a remarkable quality: each often contains within itself a synthesis of broader civilisational insights. A single text, approached with patience, sincerity and method, can become a complete inquiry in its own right. The reader therefore need not master every text before beginning. What matters is the seriousness of engagement. The deeper one travels into a text, the more it begins to reveal its connections with many others.

Perhaps this is another reason why great texts refuse simple answers. Their purpose is not to terminate inquiry but to deepen it. They encourage readers to move beyond the search for a single conclusion and towards the exploration of multiple possibilities. What appears at first to be complexity gradually reveals itself as an invitation to think more carefully.

The modern search for certainty sometimes obscures this purpose.

Readers occasionally approach civilisational literature hoping to discover a fixed answer applicable to every circumstance. When the text presents competing considerations, apparent contradictions or unresolved tensions, disappointment follows.

Yet these tensions may not represent weaknesses within the text.

They may constitute part of its design.

Human life itself is rarely governed by a single principle operating in isolation.

Compassion may conflict with justice.

Loyalty may conflict with impartiality.

Personal obligations may conflict with public responsibilities.

Prudence may conflict with courage.

Order may conflict with freedom.

Any text that seeks to examine human conduct seriously must eventually confront such tensions.

A civilisation demonstrates intellectual maturity not when it eliminates complexity, but when it learns to engage complexity without surrendering to confusion.

This requires a different approach to reading.

Instead of asking:

"What is the answer?"

The reader sometimes benefits from asking:

"Why has the question been preserved?"

This shift transforms the nature of inquiry.

The purpose of reading ceases to be the collection of conclusions alone.

Reading becomes an encounter with the enduring concerns of human existence.

A further obstacle arises from the manner in which readers often approach civilisational texts. There is a tendency to divide narratives into simple categories of positive and negative, right and wrong, success and failure. Such classifications may provide convenience, but they frequently obscure the circumstances that produced particular outcomes. Readers become preoccupied with judging consequences while neglecting the conditions that gave rise to them.

The result is that conclusions are examined in isolation from context. Yet civilisational texts rarely seek to present outcomes alone. They seek to illuminate the relationships between decisions, circumstances, motivations and consequences. When context disappears, interpretation becomes distorted.

The tendency towards literalism sometimes produces similar difficulties. Consider the frequently cited statement in the Valmiki Ramayana that Rama ruled for twelve thousand years after his coronation. Some readers interpret such passages literally and subsequently dismiss the entire text as mythology or poetic imagination. Yet poetic exaggeration is neither unusual nor unique to ancient literature. Human beings routinely employ expressions that communicate magnitude rather than precise

numerical accuracy. A person describing a crowded pilgrimage may say that hundreds attended, even when the actual number was far smaller. The purpose of the expression is not statistical precision but the communication of scale.

The challenge therefore lies not in the text alone, but in the manner of reading. When every statement is approached with rigid literalism, readers risk overlooking the larger message being conveyed. Conversely, when every statement is dismissed as fiction, the possibility of learning from the text disappears altogether. Great texts demand a more balanced approach. They require readers to distinguish between narrative device, symbolic expression, contextual observation and enduring insight. When approached with such sensitivity, the text gradually begins to reveal dimensions that remain invisible to purely literal or purely sceptical readings.

Many of the questions that preoccupied earlier generations continue to shape contemporary life.

The context changes.

The vocabulary changes.

The institutions change.

Yet the underlying dilemmas often remain recognisable.

This is one reason why civilisational texts continue to remain relevant despite the passage of centuries.

They speak not merely to particular events, but to recurring patterns of human experience.

The enduring value of a great text therefore lies not in its ability to remove every uncertainty.

Its value lies in its capacity to illuminate uncertainty without trivialising it.

Such texts do not always provide comfort.

They provide perspective.

They do not eliminate difficult choices.

They help readers think more deeply about them.

This is why familiarity alone is insufficient.

It is also why understanding requires more than recollection.

A reader who approaches a great text seeking only simple answers may leave disappointed.

A reader who approaches it seeking deeper questions may discover a lifelong companion.

For the measure of a great text is not how quickly it resolves inquiry.
It is how long it continues to sustain it.

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