

Shaping and Reshaping Destiny in Dharamveer Bharati's *AndhaYug*

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Abstract

Dharamveer Bharati's play *AndhaYug* is set in the backdrop of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*, but the questions that Bharati posits find relevance through ages. Bharati uses the backdrop of the great war as a curtain for the manifestation of perpetual questions pertaining to morality, its application within a reality, the bloodshed that stems from an obsession and the basic dichotomy between good and evil. The play highlights within itself the growth of an idea that is motivated by a collective passion, the sheer strength of which lead the characters into a mania and a destructive frenzy. The pre-determinism that Bharati initially builds upon through the "stock metaphor of blindness" is effectively debunked in the play, which the paper will attempt to establish. Thus, this paper seeks to elicit the position of Bharati that is traced through his characterisation and their introspections which finally shape and reshape their ultimate destiny.

Keywords: Time, Characterisation, Fate, Free-will, Blindness, Hysteria, Frenzy

The Hindu philosophy and cosmology understands time as possessing a cyclic nature, transcending linear boundaries. Ancient Indian mythology reinforces the idea of the cyclic nature of time where, the “eternal wheel” of time rotates the cosmic order into a never-ending cycle of creation, sustenance and finally dissolution. With each dissolution, begins a new cycle of creation and thus, time, emerges out of the rubble, left by its destruction. As the *Vaisheshika* philosopher, Prashasta iterates, “After a cycle of universal dissolution, the Supreme Being decides to recreate the cosmos so that we souls can experience worlds of shape and solidity.” It is through this experience that these souls in their bodily constitutions attain vices as each of the cycles of time progresses. With every ending cycle, the vices that man accumulated through its’ course, heighten and attain its’ zenith. Humanity then degenerates, and time lapses into a “cosmic deluge,” (Viswanathan 292) resetting itself to a new beginning. Based on this philosophy the great Indian epic, *The Mahabharata* too traces the accumulation of vices through the course of *Dwaparyug*, that resulted in a colossal event in the form of the battle at Kurukshetra and led to the end of a cycle of time and the beginning of a new one. The war witnessed not only the dehumanising of men but also the mortality of God, it became a journey through decisions, that had repercussions as great as the end of an era. *The Mahabharata* is not merely a literary text but, it seeps deep into the human psyche, its horizons are broadened through its multidisciplinary readings and its interpretations change with every mind it passes. Therefore, this transition that the epic traces from the *Dwaparyug* to the *Kaliyug* does not remain an isolated process, it becomes the coming together of fundamentally opposing ideas in order to define the complexities of *dharma*.

DharamveerBharati presents one such perspective and set of interpretations by setting his play *AndhaYugin* the backdrop of the war at *Kurukshetra*. It echoes the sentiment of a post-apocalyptic world, where dissolution engulfs not only the environment but also the emotions of the survivors. A semblance can be found between the political situations that were contemporary to Bharati and the play that he knits around the war at *Kurukshetra*. In 1953, when the play was first published, the world had fresh the memories of two massive World Wars and at a closer front, India had recently gained Independence and had been partitioned. The violence had caused dismay, that affected Bharati too. The play resonates the bloodshed and destructions that the great contemporary wars caused. Thus, even though Bharati sets his play within the backdrop of an age-old event the concerns that he puts forth, the dismay that the characters showcase is equally representative of the contemporary sentiments of survivors

of the World Wars, he thus says in the very beginning of the play, "A profound sadness lies over everything" (7). The setting of the play acts only as a medium for the presentation of these post-apocalyptic sentiments. Prof. Niranjana Sahay suggests in this regard that on a closer reading of the play, one would realise that *Andha Yug* is in fact not about *The Mahabharata*, but in acting as the backdrop it merely takes up an appearance on which Bharati reflects serious questions. However, the answers to these questions lie within oneself, which can be only attained through introspection. The violence is not isolated to the war at *Kurukshetra* alone.

In the context of the play the war was fought over the rightful accession of the kingly throne of *Hastinapur*. The ability to assert oneself over others, to establish one's superiority act as the explicit motifs of the play, while in the contemporary wars these abilities act as implicit yet present, latent motives. Bharati foreshadows the consequence that unfold by the end of the play, it comes through his reference to the *Vishnu Puran* that proclaims that in the dark age the "whole earth shall slowly perish" (5) and people shall "hide in real caves or in the caverns of their souls" (5). It is from these dark caverns that a corrupt idea is delivered into an environment that is infected with desires and passions ready to take an unpleasant form provided the gruesome stimuli. Blindness becomes the genesis of this unchecked mania the results of which are unmeasurable. As Deepak Gupta asserts, blindness becomes a "stock metaphor" that is "metaphorically represented as an ethico-moral and an intellectual lacuna, narrow mindedness and a diseased mentality"(12). Honour that stems out of this blindness is farce and misunderstood, it acts as a "rotten whore, who had infected everybody" (Bharati 8).

An ill-conceived notion of honour gives rise to a kingdom ruled by an "old and blind ruler whose children in their blindness declared a bitter war" (Bharati 8). The shared lust for power that passes on from one generation to the next becomes the seed idea, which when nourished by the latent desires of individuals such as Duryodhana, causes a lack of discretion, thereby creating a force that pulls everyone into a frenzy. The effect of this frenzy is so strong that even those who do not relate with the concern are pulled into the force of the action, like the dark passions of Duryodhana pulled great warriors like Bhishma, Drona and other kingdoms into the action of the war. Bharati, however portrays this pull of frenzy not through the major characters of *The Mahabharata*, but through a creative characterisation of minor soldier characters. The guards while presenting a criticism of the war comment, "for seventeen days we have defended the life and honor of a blind and sick kingdom...all our actions are meaningless, our faith, our decisions, our courage, our lives are meaningless, utterly meaningless" (Bharati 8).

In the cyclic accumulation of vices, nature endows certain people with the circumstances that render their desires to grow uncontrollably, they find support from some who lose their foresight in the heat of the action and finally the ones who find themselves unable to oppose the blinded hysteria provide the perpetrators with encouragement. Be it the *Dwaparyugor* today, such hysteria engulfs mobs where otherwise innocent and peaceful people get enraged by passionate blindness and become a part of the turmoil. After the heat of the action resides, introspection begins and the relevance of the action comes into question. The parallelism is so synonymous with *AndhaYug* that Bharati too sets his play on the eighteenth and final day of the war. It is once the tumult settles down and contemplation begins, that Dhritrashtra realises the inherent blindness, “I was born blind. How could I have discerned the real world or recognized its social codes?” (Bharati 12). The blindness of Dhritrashtra is all pervading, his “blind ambition and blind love is responsible for the moral blindness of others: as if it is he who breeds blind envy in Duryodhana, stirs blind rage in Gandhari and Ashwatthama, and ultimately drives the entire Kaurava clan to be blind” (Gupta 12). It is in this introspection that the characters come to realise the basic premise of *Dharma*, which itself lies in timely impartial evaluations of actions. The realisation for the characters comes when they must face the consequences of their decisions. Thus, Dhritrashtra remarks, “I realized that there is a truth that lies beyond the boundaries of my selfhood. I realized that only today” (Bharati 13).

The ability to seek righteousness while remaining neutral is absent in *Gandhari* too. She curses *Krishna* manifesting her sorrow for the demise of her sons. The acceptance of her curse by *Krishna* allows her to reflect on the magnitude of her curse and she regrets, “I did not weep like this for my hundred sons” (Bharati 81). It is her rage that takes the vices of the age to their zenith, it becomes a decisive moment directing the fate of the subsequent ages. The fulfilment of the curse changes the fate of all, while Ashwatthama and the hunter find their redemption and faith witnessing the bodily agony of God; Sanjaya and Yuyutsu, however lose their faith due to their abandonment by the divine. Circumstances might not have changed for them but their outlook changes, Thus, “the word “honor” which had gathered meaning over ages lost all value for the living” (Bharati 82).

Thus, in *AndhaYug* the decisions of some influence the lives of others and the mania is heightened to have influenced even time itself. Yet again, his choice of using the great epic as the backdrop for his discourse through his characterisation brings forth the biggest argument that Bharati puts forth over the subject of destiny. He breaking away from the tradition of the great epic creates a minor character to reflect the flaws of the major characters of the epic. To deal with the essential question of destiny, Bharati asserts on the character of Duryodhanabut the commentary is marked through a minor character of the fortune telling mendicant. Bharati establishes the role of a pre-destined path in the lives of individuals that brings them to their decreed fate. The fortune telling mendicant had prophesised, "Duryodhana shall be victorious" (Bharati 31). His prophesy had been proven true, for Duryodhana had been victorious several times be it the game of dice or the accession of the throne. His destiny had taken its rightful course. But it is after this employing of the destined values that man through his actions can change the course of his fate.

Therefore, Bharati introduces the idea of pre-determinism but he brings it under the influence of a strong acting free will. The mendicant says, "I suddenly understood as if in a flash of revelation that when a man surrenders his selfhood and challenges history, he can change the course of the stars. The lines of fate are not carved in stone. They can be drawn and redrawn at every moment of time by the will of man" (Bharati 18). Gandhari nurtures every alternate possibility that pays to her aspirations. In her vanity she chooses to blind herself, as Bharati writes, "sick of all this hypocrisy I chose to live with my eyes blindfolded," she considers, "morality, selflessness and surrender" "masks that cover" (15) blindness. She covers her eyes with an ambition to hear that her son Duryodhana is victorious, she feeds on these ambitions, also in the form of half-truths to give reassurance, not only to herself, but to her son too. However, in her inability to acknowledge the victorious fate of Duryodhana, she finds herself amongst "Many false prophecies broken dreams half-truths" that "lie scattered in every nook and corner of the city of the *Kauravas*" which she "fondly nurtures" (Bharati 18).

Duryodhana like the words of the mendicant had indeed been victorious. He had had the pleasures of the throne, he was to rule *Hastinapur*, he could have never been defeated. But it was Duryodhana himself that changed the course of his fate, his actions not just changed his fate but also of everybody else's, who was destined to rule with him. As the mendicant says, "Truth resides in the acts we perform. What man does at each moment becomes his future for ages and ages" (Bharati 31). It was Duryodhana's frenzy to push the *Pandavas* to the point where they would have nothing more to lose, and thus a battle for them would be a means of

survival and while Duryodhana had everything at stake, it was supported by Dhritrashtra's inability to understand the social conventions and Gandhari's motivations.

The action of the play takes place on the last day of the battle, since characters like Ashwattama and Gandhari find their expression on the last day of the battle unlike the protagonists of the epic. They focus on the here and now of the war and thus find themselves wronged against. But the conflict of the last day in terms of the war is but a consequence of the actions that preceded the war and although theirs' seem a very strong voice in the pretext of the last day of the action, it removes them from taking responsibility for their decisions. For Bharati, the modernist readers, the aversion of the war becomes the foremost and utterly imperative action which stands in contrast with the idea of justice. However, when Gandhari claims, "I had seen the ways of the world and knew that dharma, duty and honour were illusions" and later goes on to claim, "I told Duryodhana: O fool, where there is Dharma there is victory" (Bharati 5), she effectively asserts her minimal awareness towards a holistic and objective truth. Her awareness, like her, is blinded by her false beliefs. She blinds herself with prophecies that she would like to believe in, which stops her from judging the moral calls in an unfavourable situation. Her act of blindfolding herself causes a lack of foresight in her son as well, which grows out of her false reassurances and with this Gandhari not only changes her own course of destiny but that of Duryodhana as well.

The characterisation of Gandhari, Duryodhana and Dhritrashtra comes in contrast with the characterisation of Sanjaya, Yuyutsu and Vidura. This brings to light the subjective versus the objective truth that Bharati deals with in the play. While for the former the concentration is on a subjective truth the latter find themselves adhering to an objective reality. Dhritrashtra comprehends, "My love, my hate, my law, my dharma had evolved out of my peculiar world." (Bharati 12). Bhumika Sharma comments in this regard, "Dhritrashtra's confession exhibits the limitation of subjective perception" (177). Yuyutsu seems to be in sync with the objective reality that stemmed from a moral reaction. But he constantly struggles with his decision, he is pulled into the passions of his parents and his conscience. He is lured into a subjective truth of being wrong even when it was proclaimed that *Dharma* was with the victors. Even though in the face of the conflict Yuyutsu retains his sense of discretion but he keeps losing it with every stone that is hurled his way. He too had won in the battles of rightful action, but it is his weakness in the face of the consequences that render him long dead before he actually

commits suicide. He too takes a decision that he is too afraid to bear the consequences of and thus Bharati through Dhritrashtra rightly comments, "you were conceived in blindness. It defined the boundary of your existence" (71). The shadow of an inherent blindness overpowers the conscience of Yuyutsu and he despite choosing what he considered to be the ethical side in the war reshapes his fate and parks his soul in the unending torments of the after world. "Yuyutsu also ultimately turns out a blind spirit, even though he fought from the side of *Pandavas* in accordance with his subjective conception of reality. Yuyutsu's subjective truth is already fractured and therefore cannot accord him a life of dignity" (Gupta 13).

However, a modernist critical reading of the play that understands it as inspired by the painful series of events that preceded the writing of the play, might render it as well a well-placed "dystopian allegory" (Arora 36), symbolic of the contemporary turbulence that often leads to bloodshed. But the issue rises with its setting in the backdrop of the Mahabharata, as the epic, in itself, is a complex discussion, a constant questioning and answering to put forth the intricacies of *Dharma*, *Adharma*, destiny and reshaping the pre-destined, making its purpose larger than the narration of a family feud. So, while the futility of the war might be effectively argued by drawing a parallelism between the feud of a family and the partition of the country, but this overshadows the purpose of the play. The purpose being, to understand the motivations that render one powerful beyond control, resulting into bloodshed along with the didactic purpose of the epic itself. When *dharma* is removed from the great narration what is left is a war of better trickery, which sufficiently distances itself from the purpose of Bharati while making the choice to use the epic as the backdrop of his play to highlight bigger moralistic issues. Thus, through a strict parallelism between the war of the epic and the World Wars, Bharati raises the essential questions of what happens when unchecked power is fuelled by corrupted ambitions, but the answers that one is to draw from a subsequent introspection after reading the play is highly based on its' setting. This is when the backdrop comes strongly in the foreground and becomes more than an allegory. It becomes more than a curtain on which Bharati aims to reflect his concerns pertaining to humanism.

In dealing with these questions effectively Bharati consistently balances between an argument of the winning end with those of the losing end. "Making of the Beast" is one of the pivotal events of the play. The focus of Bharati and the characterisation that he employs becomes fact of his narrative from the point of view of the losing end. Bharati's transformation of Ashwatthama into a beast somewhat draws on similar lines as the proclamation of Draupadi in the epic. The magnitude of Ashwatthama's pain recreates the scene of Draupadi's disrobing,

while one takes place in a battle the other takes place in a courtroom. This becomes important because the battleground is symbolic of the war, where the action is directed towards winning. When the war begins, it is fought to win and this becomes true of the war of *Kurukshetra* too. As Bhalla iterates, “The sacred, after all, is not required to make sentimental compromises when it comes to restoring the just balance of the world in which we live. In the face of an annihilating power, the sacred may use all the available ruthlessness that it can muster up in order to survive” (xvi).

While, for Draupadi the injustices she met were in a courtroom, in the presence of all learned men who were the final voices in the interpretation of *Dharma*. The courtroom becomes symbolic of the injustices that prevailed in the *Kaurava* kingdom. The discussion over *Dharma* rightfully takes place inside a courtroom, when the conflict moves outside of the courtroom, it no longer remains about mediation and when the war begins, it is fought to be won. Finding a semblance between the play and the epic, considering Bharati’s idea Draupadi should be entitled to a similar beastly manifestation as Ashwatthama takes up. Yet, Bharati chooses to dehumanise Ashwatthama and not Draupadi in the play. Bharati writes, “My bow is a crushed snake terrified and helpless like my mind” (25), his disarming is parallel to her disrobing, the preference of Ashwathama for questioning the subtlety of morality by Bharati yet again points towards his choice of minor characters to uncover the flaws of the major characters of the epic. Ashwatthama presents an argument against the winning side. He foreshadows what would eventually happen in the land of the moral. Thus Bharati, through the dehumanising of Ashwatthama brings the discussion of morality outside of the courtroom. He brings it to the very battlefield that lies beyond all discussions and debates where the final action takes place.

The effect of the war is stated through Ashwatthama who is dehumanised. Much like Draupadi, Ashwatthama is wronged but he unlike her, he chooses to transform his destiny and thus, becomes part of Bharati’s narration. He struggles between a desire to avenge and a fear of death that pushes him to insanity. He symbolically brings out what happens when a brutal frenzy and disorder takes grip of a person. As at the time of the partition of the country, the latent motivations that otherwise would have never found manifestation in people came out and they exercised power and penetration into the social order in whatever way they could. Similarly, Bharati’s Ashwatthama’s, transformation was the manifestation of what was vested deep in his unconscious. It was something savage and beastly that made him stoop below what

essentially makes mankind human. In this regard Paranjape comments, "...he alone is condemned to roam the worlds without peace for having descended below the threshold of the human in his pursuit of revenge in exterminating the *Pandavas*, down to their unborn child." The death of God restored what was humanly in not just Ashwatthama but also in the age that was to come.

Frank Stewart writes, "*AndhaYug*, is essentially a play about morality: it questions whether we are accountable for our moral choices, whether the quality of our actions can transcend the time, place and circumstances of our existence, and whether we can be more than the agents of destiny" (111). Bharati effectively through his unmatched use of characterisation brings to light the question of morality which shapes the destiny of an individual, he simultaneously brings to light the futility of morality if its' adherence is impractical as in the case of the *Pandava* rule of *Hastinapur*. The guards thus comment, "knowledge and morality, what do we do with them? grind them or wear them or eat them or lie on them? If only we had enough grain, clear instructions, a strong leader and orders we could blindly follow to wage war or live in peace" (Bharati 87). This ironic summation of the rule of the *Pandavas* by the guards draws similarity with their initial summation of the *Kaurava* rule that they termed as blind. These are the spectators of the action that are affected collectively but not personally, their dissatisfaction reflects the insanity that pervades in the kingdom that led them into war and then further led the era into devastation. Thus, Dharamveer Bharati through his play, *AndhaYug* traces a growth of an idea that manifests the vices that a cycle of time accumulates, nature as a rule provides it circumstances to grow and people with a strong will power as that of Duryodhana can re-write their own destiny. The essence of the play can therefore be summed up through the musings of the mendicant who suggests to Duryodhana, "The future is never independent of the present moment. There is still time, Duryodhana there is still time. Each moment can transform history and time" (Bharati 32).

Conclusions

The discussion of Dharamveer Bharati's play *AndhaYug* entails the play of destiny and desires, and how circumstances lead to the development of these aggressive desires into a destructive frenzy. It has, alongside, attempted to highlight the effective characterisation that Bharati employs in his play, which establishes the said interplay between pre-destiny and the desire. The consequence is understood in terms of the Hindu philosophy of the cyclic

movement of time. The entire argument is studied in the light of the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*.

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