

## Safety of Silence and the Possibility of Dissent:

### Theatrical Responses to the Mahabharata.

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The eternal saga of Mahabharata( mba) is described in the Adiparva. It proclaims – Every age has its own mba and every mba has its own interpreter. Our search here is for the mba of our age.

#### *Determinism and Free - will*

Many of you might have seen the Mba serial of B.R.Chopra on TV. Every episode in it starts with a rolling Wheel and many other wheels of different size on the screen. Wheel is the symbol of kala - time. For us kala is chakra –cyclic. Never does kala takes a linear path. We do not, therefore, have progression or regression. Extended further, we reach the solar system wherein every planet has its position motion and speed. There is no choice. Everything is predetermined. This is the universal rtam of life in which our role is pre destined.

In spite of it each planet moves in the orbit in its own axis. Here it has a limited choice. Ekalavya had no option to exercise his free will, yet he survived and practiced to send arrows with the remaining four fingers. His successors of the tribe still do not use the thumb while shooting .This is what we call the survival instinct. Thump, in India, is a great symbol. The weavers in Bengal, in the 19<sup>th</sup> cen. when the colonial masters imposed laws against their traditional job cut their thumbs in protest

Let us come to more recent times. Many of us were born as slaves in the British Empire. When we were children grandmothers encouraged us to read Ramayana and Puranas. But they did not permit us to read or hear Mahabharata. They feared that reading mba will bring in quarrel in the household. As there is a philosophy for reading there is also one for unreading. A king of ours put in jail his uncle suspecting his loyalty. He was the greatest of the Malayalam poet of that time. In all humility he composed thousand verses of apology seeking pardon and sent it to the king. The king read the first verse and let it out. The poet was enraged. In his anger he wrote hundred slokas praying the God of Death to take away the life of the king. The interesting part of the story is the reason given by the king for not reading it. The first verse the king feared that if he continues to read he will pardon the poet much against his own will. This is the philosophy of unreading the text. What our grandmothers feared in mba?

The two primordial instincts inherent in man, crude and savage, are the greed for wealth and women. Had not Santanu run mad after the fisher girl the story have been otherwise same with the fisher man. His claim on the throne upset everything. The objects of human life were only two. Artha and Kama. Bharata allows only two rasas to dominate a play- vira and sringara. It was after a long time in the history of humanity that a regulatory mechanism to distinguish man from anima became necessary. So when Dushyanta became infatuated on the hermit girl his first doubt was

whether she is fit to be married or not. It is here that the Dharma came in. It provides a value system.

Acquire wealth, enjoy women; but be within this frame. Thus trivarga governed the life for long. It became difficult to enforce this moral code? Of course police and penal code are there. But a better way is to persuade so as to ensure their will full acceptance. Like we tell our children go and study today tomorrow we will take you to the film. Remember, if only you get good marks. Thus came the concept of Svarga. The elders offered a temptation to enforce dharma. The chief attraction of svarga is that the apsaras will be all around us. Then all kinds of allurements, dishes, gardens flowers and what more. It is a kind of tourist destination once the purse is empty one has to check out. Humanity by this time had marched a long way. Other thoughts began to disturb the minds. Goutama found the escape in nirvana. Svarga pleases, nirvana freezes. By 9th cen. Santa became accepted as the chief motive of mba. Two centuries later Abhinava accepted santa as maharasa.

Those grandmas are no more. The value system in which they lived has also vanished. The children today are born to an entirely different set of values which give them multiple choices. No more, any of us teachers take Drona as a model; not because we have grown immensely good but Ekalavyas before us have the freedom to choose. They will either lock us in our room or file a suit in the High-court. This is the background of the Mba School encouraging us to read the epic. The distance from the grandmas to the scholars is not of decades but of values that govern the society. To put it in the language of agency the track for universal movement remains more or less pre destined. But that of individuals have become more flexible. Individual fate is not as pre determined as it was in older generations. The system now provides a public space and a civil society for Ekalavya to move though he is conditioned by the universal ordinances.

## *2. Forms of Popular Dissent.*

In the first part we were moving around the metaphor of wheel. Here we depend on another image that of a magnificent edifice. Mba is a colossal structure. It has three levels. In the outer level the court yard and gardens were anyone moves freely. This is the sphere of popular mba. When we move closer the watchman stops us. Admission is restricted. The structure built on one lakh twenty-five thousand bricks is amazing. This is the second level- the text of mba. When we move in and in we reach the innermost chamber- the sanctum sanctorum. This is the abode of geeta. Sankaracarya, for reasons best known to him took out geeta from mba and elevated it to the rank of Upanishads. Yet this forms the integral part of mba. These are the three levels of mba- popular textual and philosophical. Our engagement here is confined to the first two. Everybody knows that the mba war was fought by the pandavas and kauravas. But the heroes of kurukshetra really are the aborigines. 361 aboriginal groups drawn from different parts of India participated in it. Anthropologists have identified 38 groups of adivasis who joined the pandava camp and 59 with the kaurava. The rest might, perhaps, have disappeared or merged with other clans. The aborigines fought with vigour many fell dead and others returned to their native place. Those who returned carried with them the memories of what they saw and heard. They narrated, of course, with inflated imaginations these stories to their kith and kin. Thus a parallel oral tradition grew up. Everywhere in India there is a river where Kunti took her daily bath or a cave where pandavas lived in. The rustic fascination of the innocent rural folk gave fanciful pictures of

their heroes. They differed very much from the official releases of Sanjaya. The sympathy of the innocent people were with those who suffered or humiliated. They built temples for Draupati. You will be surprised to know that there is a temple for Duryodhana in Kerala. There are thousands of stories popular all over India orally transmitted from generation to generation. This mass of tales is an integral part of our mba tradition.

This tradition, in most cases expresses the voices of dissent from textual mba. We take some examples from theatre. They are more faithful to the fact. Actors use masks to uncover the truth; we on the other hand conceal the truth with golden covers.

We all know that Paschalis in exile got the akshayapatra. The beauty conscious rural folk of Gujarat worried that how much she suffers in the absence of a mirror. They gave her a mirror. Our mirrors reflect the image of he who holds it. But this mirror reflects the image of the one whom she likes most. The play based on this theme is Chhayamukhi. There is another popular play jampoophal. During their exile Draupadi came across a wonderful fruit. She plucked it. Now the tree spoke. Hold it back. This is indented for that sage who will shortly open his eyes after the fast for 12 years. You will be cursed. Frightened she put it back. But failed. The tree said. You are unchaste; otherwise you would have been successful. She pleaded innocence. Tree insisted otherwise. At last she said .Once, only once a thought came to me that I need not have to suffer these ordeals had Karna being successful in svayamvara. She was excused for being truthful. Everything ended happily. The poor folk in their innocence hopes to save her.

Many of you might have seen therukkuth. After the scene of disrobing Panchali the Jester (kattikkaran) comes out and tells the audience what a gruesome act .We do not endorse it. We presented it only because Vyasa described it so. We need not multiply the examples. Only two more. Keecakavadha of Khadiikar was staged in Pune in 1907by Maharashtra natak mandali. The audience soon realised that Kecaka is intended to be Lord Curson and Draupati is India and that Yudhishtira and Bheema the moderate and extremist parties respectively. The British govt was terrified and prohibited the play on charges of sedition. This is the first political incarnation of mba in theatre. I would like to add the Andhayuga of Dharmavirbharati staged in Delhi in 1954 to the group. Aswathama was the central character of the play. Gandhari encourages him and inflix a terrible curse on Krishna.

Last month I went to Kerala to inaugurate a play on draupati. It is an enquiry of a college girl of today as to how Draupati is relevant to her today.

In this part we are discussing the popular face of mba.

### *3. Textual Mahabharata*

Sanskrit plays generally follow the textual mba and reproducing the sentiments expressed by Sanjaya and the sutas. But even there there are isolated voices of dissent. One is of Bhasa. He is a critical insider. Bhasa is not far distanced from Vyasa. Hence at times

he corrects Vyasa and leads him to the alternatives. Bhasa has six plays based on mba. Madhyamavyayoga is during the exile. Pancaratram at the end of the exile and

Dutavakyam before starting the war. The last three are during the Great War. Dutakhatokaca on the 12<sup>th</sup> day after the fateful fall of Abhimanyu, Karnabhara on the 17<sup>th</sup> day followed by Urubhanga on the 18<sup>th</sup> day with the death of duryodhana. All except Pancaratra are one act plays. Pancaratra is in three acts. The feud between the brothers end without war by the intervention of Drona. They share the country and live happily. Bhasa dreams a mba without kurukshetra. Vyasa says war is inevitable. There is no alternative. Bhasa corrects there is alternative. Who was responsible for war? Gandhari says Krishna is responsible. Hence she curses him. We are discussing whether it is principal agency or subordinate agency. Bhasa says –no the silence of the elders cost the war. We will call it negative agency. To be fare I will borrow a better term from Dr. Howard zinn to explain the situation- safety of silence. Wilful Silence in crucial moments a nation perishes when the intelligentsia keep silent. Yes it is what the wise men are for. It may cost their positions, perhaps even lives. John the Baptist lost his head. It was presented in a golden plate in Herod. Yet they do not keep quiet. Our elder's fate in the most ignoble context of offending the modesty of a woman in the royal court. Pancaratram thus is Bhasas critique of intelligentsia. The silence of Kunti also comes under this category. We call it negative agency but the victims of her silence cannot endorse our views. Kinti by her silence was making herself safe. There is an interesting story by Mahasweta devi. At the fag end of Kunti's life before being burned by the forest fire she comes across a woman who was the eldest daughter in law of the nishadhini who was burned in the jatugriha with her sons. The woman reminds Kunti of her crime in burning six innocent tribal's to death to serve her self interest. Kuntz cannot absolve herself from the responsibilities of these acts.

Base's Karnabharahas been variously interpreted. What is the burden of Karna? Prof. Bhattacharya in his illuminating introduction told that the burden of Karna was his past. I beg to differ. Krishna had offered him the kingdom and even Draupadi on the sixth year. He could have easily accepted it. Kunti also would have been very happy. But his moral consciousness. Sense of loyalty did not permit him. This leads to his tragic end. Bhasa is shocked. How Dharma becomes a burden? Karnabhara can also be read in a subaltern perspective. We did so during mandal agitation. Two more Bhasa plays can be read in this perspective. In Madhyamavyayoga the situation is abhasa's imagination. Here he presents hidumbi and khatokaca in bright colours. The situation in Dutaghatokaca is also not in the mba. After the death of the son of Arjuna Bhasa sends deliberately the son of Bheema to the kaurava court. Those live in the city have only contempt for him; but his behaviour is highly dignified. When khatokaca fell bravely fighting for pandavas Krishna is overjoyed. One reason was that Karna lost his last defence. The more he danced celebrating the death. He did not think even of Bheema who lost his son.

This is the nature of the official release of Sanjaya. Bhasa's dissent was against this. He admired Duryodhana, sympathised with him and sided with subalterns. He was perhaps inviting us to the other side of the coin.

### *Conclusion*

The Mahabharata tradition comprises both the oral and textual. It is an organic part of Indian life. The growing interest in modern times in Mahabharata is a welcome trend. Western intelligentsia is blissfully ignorant of the oral traditions of Mahabharata. Hence the new academic studies should not distance the masses from Mahabharata.

Vedas were central to our culture. The expansion of it has three streams. The intellectual plane is left to the Upanishads. It is the realm of Yajnavalkyas, Maitreyees and Gargees. The ritualistic part is inherited by the priesthood. Itihasas and puranas lead them to the masses. Mahabharata is the one text closest to the Vedic world.

To contemporaries of this tradition we should be daringly selective. Govt. of India names a prestigious award in the name of Dronacharya. How can a dalit receive it without fear of his thump? At the same time there are contexts most suitable to the present. After the advice the Lord tells Arjuna think on it and do however you like. This is the highest value in a democratic society. The need of the hour is an intelligent hamsa who can distinguish milk from water.