

Seminar on

Text and Variation of the Mahabharata

Session III: Mahabharata in visual and performing Arts: Texts, Contexts and Images

MAHABHARATA AS REPRESENTED IN THE CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY THEATRE OF KERALA

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Three ancient texts – Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata has moulded the mindset of Indians for centuries. Ramayana is the model for intra-domestic affairs, Mahabharata for interaction with society and Bhagavata for spiritual purity. Mahabharata, unlike the other two, is not permitted to be used for regular chanting for fear of creating quarrel in the household.¹ Mahabharata presents man as he is where as the other two depicts a sophisticated and idealized levels of living. It is precisely because of this that theatre likes Mahabharata more than anything else. The influence of Mahabharata on theatre is tremendous.

Bhasa and Kalidasa

Mahabharata has been a veritable source for Sanskrit dramatists to develop their themes. Bhasa and Kalidasa were the earliest playwrights who were inspired by the great epic. Of the two, Bhasa revolted, often amending Vyasa by suitable substitutes and filling his silence with own interpretations. Kalidasa, on the other hand, often compromised to the epic narrative.

Bhasa was sympathetic towards the characters who were marginalized, neglected and condemned - Karna, Duryodhana, Gatotkacha, etc.. He made them heroes. Krishna, Dharmaputra or even Arjuna became pale in their presence. In *Pancharatra* Bhasa goes to the extent of suggesting an alternative to Vyasa.² Vyasa tells us that there is no alternative to bloodshed to solve the Kuru-Pandhava feud. It is an indirect approval for warfare. But Bhasa amends and corrects that there are alternatives, the way of negotiations, peaceful settlements. The indictment here is on the *pitamahs* and *acharyas*. In spite of their having eyes they behaved like the blind father. Had they sincerely wished and worked, they could have avoided the horrible war. Bhasa envisioned a Mahabhara without a Kurukshetra! Bhasa was rebellious, and theatre liked this rebellion. Kalidasa was soft. His *Sakuntala* differs not much from that of Vyasa, the minor changes brought about were by the compulsion of time. These two trends – the interpretative mood of Bhasa and the compromising tone of Kalidasa – are visible throughout the history of theatre; the greater influence of course, being that of the former.

Classical Theatre

The only living tradition of the ancient Sanskrit theatre today is the *Kutiyattam*, of Kerala, declared recently by UNESCO as the intangible heritage of humanity. *Kutiyattam* theatre is the

continuation of Bharata's theatre, but it has improvised considerably Bharata's concepts. The actor in Bharata is an imitator; in *Kutiyattam* he is a narrator and interpreter too. The actor himself turns out to be a stage on which multiple characters, through the technique of transformation of roles, enact their roles. Also, while indulging in imaginative acting, the actor breaks the frame of the dramatic text and context. Liberated from the text, he creates his own sub-texts providing exciting moments to the connoisseurs on each performance. Bhasa hides many such situations in his plays, which provide ample scope for the actors to exhibit their histrionic talents in different ways.³

It is interesting to note that the first major contribution of Kerala to Sanskrit theatre is a play that makes a harmonious blend of the two streams of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The *Kalyanasougandhika Vyayoga*,⁴ arranges symbolically a meeting between the two brothers – Hanuman of Ramayana and the Bhima of Mahabharata. This is very much popular in almost all theatrical forms like *Kutiyattam*, *Kathakali*, *Thullal*, etc. The major plays that followed⁴ – *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Taptisamvarna* – drew their theme from Mahabharata. The presentation of these plays marked the deviation from the national pattern⁵. Shortly after this the Bhasa plays became the favorites of Kerala actors. When *Kutiyattam* moved to temple premises, Ramayana plays gained dominance, the principal emotion depicted being devotion.⁶

The emergence of *Kathakali* gave another impetus to the theatrical movements in the classical field. *Ramanattam*, the proto-type of *Kathakali*, continued the Ramayana legacy. But at a mature stage later, plays of *Kottayam Thampuran* brought Mahabharata to the centre-stage⁷. Heroism followed by love as in *Nalacharitam*, replaced *bhakti* practised by Ramayana plays. These features have become the main of *Kathakali* now. The most important pieces in the *Kathakali* repertory are drawn from Mahabharata. In some cases, they rely more on *venisamhara*.

Anti – hero cult

An important characteristic feature of Kerala classical theatre is its adherence to anti-hero cult. The traditional heroes like Dharmaputra or Srikrishna are insignificant minor characters on the stage where as anti-heroes like Dhuryodhana, Dussasana etc. reign supreme. Their roles are donned by major characters.

Bhasa is at his best when he depicts the *pratinayakas*.⁸ The traditional anti-heroes command respect in Bhasa's plays. He is sympathetic towards Kaikeyi in *Pratima*. Rama is pale before Bali in *Abhiseka*; unable to answer his questions. Karna is held in high esteem in *Karnabhara*. *Urubhanga* extols Duryodhana.

Bhasa thus rebels against the traditional readings of the *itihasa*. He re-reads these texts and reveals the inner struggle of these characters who are ordinarily condemned as evil.

Sympathy for the anti-heroes endeared Bhasa to the Kerala audience. Consequently the *Kutiyattam* and *Kathakali* theatre became stages for the display of the valour and struggle of the anti-heroes. Bali, Ravana, Duryodhana etc. have become the major characters in the classical theatre. The real heroes like Rama, Krishna, etc. have been withdrawn to the background. Thus the theme of the Kerala theatre became abundant with battles and killings.

Another point of conflict with traditional view is in the treatment of Rasa. Most of the interesting scenes in which *rasa* is delineated are cases of *rasabhasa* in the technical sense. Love in these instances are not mutual – Ravana’s love for Sita, Kichaka’s love for Draupati etc. But their exquisite beauty surpasses all the definitions of poetic propriety.⁹

Contemporary Theatre

There is a vibrant contemporary Sanskrit theatre in Kerala. The heroes there are Duryodhana, Karna, Dushyanta, etc. drawn from Mahabharata. But they are not repetitions of Vyasa’s characters, but new creations, novel interpretations. The presence of Mahabharata in the classical and contemporary theatre of Kerala is not in the form of direct readings of Vyasa; they are all re-readings. Theatre reads and re-reads the epic.

Take for example the interpretation of Urubhanga on the contemporary stage:

Duryodhana (*Urubhanga*) is not the Duryodhana of Vyasa or Bhasa. There are three Duryodhanas in *Urubhanga* – The valiant hero, an ordinary mortal perplexed when facing death and the third a different person strange to him self. The third is presented as a *teyyam* standing on the stills.¹⁰

The play starts with a description of the fight.. The cruelty of war is portrayed through the words of several characters. This is followed by the entry of Duryodhana; he drags himself along the ground, his thighs being broken. Bhasa has compared him to Vasuki; after the churning of the milky ocean, crushed floating with its hood withdrawn.¹¹ The director has fully understood the significance of the image. Vasuki is not the hero or the beneficiary of the churning; he is only a tool. Death is the hero and war is the villain. War is the ultimate victor. Those who fought the war crawl with their hoods crushed.

Duryodhana sees his preceptor burning in anger, ready to smash everything. The terrible vow of Balabhadra is to annihilate all the Pandavas for treachery they have committed on Duryodhana. But when he came to know that the cheater was none other than his brother lo! he is freezed!

On the other side he sees the son of his preceptor- Aswathama. Treachery wins and he becomes one among the immortals!

There is one more fascinating image in the second half of the verse: *Balavratam Grahitah*. Face to face to death everybody becomes innocent like a child. Duryodhana come to know the value

of love for the first time – he sees his mother with a new eye. Her eyes, through tightly covered, turn wet. All through the drama she calls her Suyodhana – Oh! Valiant fighter. He wants to live more on the earth. He desires to be born to the same mother again. If he gets another life, he would not live it as he did. Death has taught many things to him. His misdeeds haunt him; the spring of love sprouts in his mind.

This is not the old text. It is a new commentary, interpretation or vision. This can be read as a play against war, against treachery, against cheating; also a play of love when a man relieved sees his naked self himself and longs for another life to live a better life.

*Karnabhara*¹² raises a big social issue: the way a society reacts to one when he is a *sutaputra* and again as a *suryaputra*. The play raises higher questions: Karna believes in values but becomes a victim of cheating. He realizes the treachery when death confronts him, but he is unable to escape from the trap. That is the tragedy of Karna. Karna's burden is not his actions; on the contrary it is his belief in values. Alas! These are not real values; they are artificial, counterfeit values!

The relevance of Mahabharata is not lost by time. It contains in itself several layers of meaning. Every age reads what it needs. And theatre is the best medium for such re-readings.

1. It is interesting to note in this context that the ninth century critic Anandavardhana considers Mahabharata as a *purvapaksha*. The end according to him is the Harivamsa where one attains the bliss by conquering all desires (*trikshnakshayasukha*). Does he mean that Mahabharata arouses only *thrshnas* without really answering to the real challenges of life?
2. At the end of a sacrifice, Duryodhana offers *dakshina* to Drona. He can ask for anything. The preceptor demands, as *dakshina*, the restoration of half of the Kingdom to the *Pandavas*. This is accepted on condition of discovering *Pandavas* within five nights. (Hence the title *pancharatra*). On the advice of Bhishma, *Kauravas* carry away the cattle of Virata king. They were defeated in a rescue operation led by Arjuna. This leads to the discovery of *Pandavas*. As had promised Duryodhana shares the Kingdom with the *Pandavas* and everything ends happily. The disastrous was in averted. The play in three acts belongs to the *Samavakara* type of *rupakas*.
3. For more details – *Kutiyattam Theatre: The Earliest Living Tradition*, K.G. Paulose, D.C. Books, Kottayam, Kerala, 2006
4. *Bhima in search of Celestial Flowers*, K.G. Paulose, Bharatiya Book Corporation, New Delhi, 2001
5. *Vyangyavyakhya*, the stage manual for the presentation of the two dramas.
6. Kutiyattam became confined to temple theatres by 14th Century. Ramayana plays became more popular during this period. Kutiyattam came to be performed on public stages in the latter half of 20th Century.
7. Kathakali had a wider range as it could be presented anywhere by anybody.

8. *Bakavatham, Kalyanasougandhikam, Kirmiravadham* and *Nivathakavachakalakeya vadham*. Theme for the last three is drawn from Mahabharata.

9 Bhasa has his own assesment of the epic characters which differed fundamentally from that of Vyasa. Duryodhana, Salya, Karna, Balarama, etc. are not the same as conceived by Vyasa. Bhasa casts aspersion even in the character of Krishna. In *Dutavakyam* he challenges through Duryodhana Krishna’s right to be an envoy in bringing about peace among kinsmen as he himself had set an example otherwise by killing his own uncle.

Following are the plays of Bhasa the themes of which are drawn from Mahabharata - *Pancharatnam, Dutakhatokacham, Urubhangam, Madhyamavyayogam, Dutavakyam* and *Karnabharam*. Ghatotkacha’s role as an envoy is Bhasa’s on invention.

10. *Urubhangam* directed by Kavalam Narayana Panicker.

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Glorious, smeared with blood which is like the sandal paste of war
 In infant's role now, crawling with dusty arms on the ground,
 He looks like Vasuki plying exhausted in the sea
 After the churning when released by gods and the demons.

Looked in this way the discussion regarding the play being tragedy or not seems to be ridiculous. Duryodhana is not the hero. He is only a tool. War is the hero as well as the villain. It is the final triumph of war at all ages that Bhasa has depicted in this drama.

12 *Karnabhara* directed by Chandradasan, Lokadharmi Tripunithura