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Many Mahabharatas:  
Linking mythic re-tellings in contemporary India

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD/MPhil

2017

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# Abstract

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The ‘Many Ramayanas’ paradigm has argued for decentering the Sanskrit Ramayana, suggesting that the Sanskrit text(s) are rarely the first point of engagement with the narrative for large portions of the audience (A.K. Ramanujan, 1999). Drawing upon this paradigm, my thesis analyzes and compares the specific networks of production, circulation and influence that exist between different contemporary Mahabharata re-tellings and their cultural milieus. The thesis seeks to understand the re-tellings conjuncturally—the formal choices that each re-telling makes and why, their articulation given the resources available and new demands, the relation of the re-tellings produced after liberalization to older ones, and the position of each in their respective cultural field. The thesis argues that to understand the ways and forms in which the Mahabharata narrative circulates today, we must excavate and foreground the re-tellings, their multiple aesthetics, and their networks of production and circulation.

In particular, the thesis focuses on specific fields—television, modern Indian theatre and poetry, and Hindi and English fiction and publishing. Chapter 1 argues that while there was a correlation between the rise of the Hindu Right and 1988 Mahabharata television serial (Arvind Rajagopal 2003), the serial drew extensively from already popular aesthetics of Hindi films and popular visual art, and created and instituted a mythological aesthetic for Indian

television. Chapter 2 focuses on modern Indian theatre and poetry, which eschewed commercialism, took greater liberties to experiment, and carved out a cultural niche through official canonisation and historic and repeat performances. Chapter 3 deals with popular English abridged translations, arguing that these were specifically meant to 'teach' Indian culture to supposedly deracinated Indian readers and international readers. Deceptively simple, their narrative tends to iron out the problematic episodes from the epic. Chapter 4 charts the new wave of mythological fiction in Indian English literature that has followed the liberalisation of the economy and the growth of Indian English book publishing and market. Chapter 5 turns towards the mythological novel in Hindi, arguing that the pauranik upanyas carves a separate aesthetic niche for itself from Hindi mythological verse, drama and television by re-telling the mythological through psychological realism.

# Note on Translation and Transliteration

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All translations from Hindi are mine unless stated otherwise. I have not bothered to transliterate the character names, though quoted passages and titles have been transliterated. For transliteration I have used the ISO 15919:2001.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available here- <http://transliteration.eki.ee/pdf/Hindi-Marathi-Nepali.pdf>. Last accessed, 29/09/2016.

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## Introduction

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Growing up in a Hindu household in North India, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were integral to the cultural landscape I was exposed to. It was never hard to get a hold of a story from within these two narrative traditions—whether it was through the ubiquitous *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comic book series, chapters in Hindi and English language textbooks, bed-time stories told by family elders, or the colour illustrations of *Kalyan* monthly magazine published by Gita Press Gorakhpur. Sunday mornings were incomplete without watching B.R. Chopra *Mahabharat*. Children with a relatively big appetite were lovingly compared to the “wolf-belly” Bhima from the *Mahabharata*, while an armoured Rama would gaze down benevolently on us

from atop his perch on the wall calendar as we sat in relatives' homes. When Ramanujan writes, "No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit" he is stating a simple fact of life.<sup>2</sup> However, when the *Mahabharata* is considered as a subject of study, its re-tellings are rarely analysed as a network of cultural products, even though their networks of circulation can overlap— for instance, by the time I graduated from my undergraduate course in New Delhi, I had seen B. R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-90), and read Arun Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra* (2004), and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989).<sup>3</sup> Each text had its own unique pleasure, so it never seemed like the products themselves overlapped, but at the same time they were all re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* story. Academic studies on the *Mahabharata* either focus exclusively on the Sanskrit text(s) or their folk counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Where modern *Mahabharata* re-tellings are the focus of analysis, it is usually within a specific field or genre, like television, modern urban theatre, Indian English writing, Hindi novels, comic books et al.<sup>5</sup> This thesis, instead, seeks to provide a networked reading of the different *Mahabharata* re-tellings across Hindi television,

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<sup>2</sup> Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 161.

<sup>3</sup> This is just from the texts I analyse in this thesis. I had also read the numerous *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) *Mahabharata* titles.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Roghair, *The Epic of Palnāḍu*; Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*; Blackburn et al., *Oral Epics in India*; Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahabharata*; Hildebeitel, *Draupadī among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits : Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*; Sax, *Dancing the Self*; Hildebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda: Studies on the Mahabharata- Essays by Alf Hildebeitel, Volume 1*.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*; Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*; Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*; Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*; Zecchini, "Dharma Reconsidered: The Inappropriate Poetry of Arun Kolatkar in *Sarpa Satra*"; Saxena, "Pracchann"; Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007*; McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes*.

modern urban theatre, modern Indian English poetry, Indian English educational and fictional publishing, and Hindi fiction, in order to understand where, why and how the *Mahabharata* narratives circulate today.

This thesis argues that adaptations of the *Mahabharata* in television, modern Indian theatre, Indian English poetry and fiction and Hindi fiction have been part of an attempt by their producers to not just address new sets of issues—of war and nuclear destruction, of just rule and nation-building—but also to articulate new aesthetics in new media and genres.

While discussing works that are all still currently in circulation, these belong to three distinct moments, each situated within their own cultural and aesthetic genealogies. While Independence provided the impetus for playwrights and directors to formulate an Indian aesthetic distinct from the commercial, popular, colonial Parsi theatre, economic liberalisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s opened television airwaves to private producers first, and then to satellite channels, and the English publishing field to established multinational publishers like Penguin, on the other. Economic liberalisation led to cultural globalisation where Indian cultural products— films, television serials, books, music— had to compete with higher production quality, and circulate within visual regimes and cultural circuits that were influenced by American cultural products. The different adaptations of the *Mahabharata* analysed in this thesis—the TV serial, modernist plays and poem, English abridgements, Hindi

fiction and English literary and mythological fiction—each fulfil these different economic and aesthetic needs within their specific cultural circuits. For television, B.R. Chopra *Mahabharat* (1988-1990) provided an immensely popular narrative that also saw a phenomenal increase in television set ownership, transforming the television set from a luxury good to a ubiquitous marker of modernity and consumption for the emerging Indian middle class. In Indian English fiction Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) was a commercial success, before a wave of mythological fiction based on Hindu myths created a new publishing boom that has significantly broadened the Indian English genre fiction market in its wake.

Within the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Mahabharata* had transformed from a vehicle for anti-colonial propaganda in colonial India, to a vehicle for articulating a postcolonial aesthetic that marked a break from colonial past. In 21<sup>st</sup> century India's liberalizing economy, it transformed once again to signify the nation, but this time in contrast to the forces of cultural globalization as a local response manifesting itself in products like Disney India produced and UTV released animated film *Arjun: The Warrior Prince* (2012) and the 3D animated *Mahabharata* (2013) as film and television production houses, publishing companies, and authors seek to mine native cultural products and adapt them to ever newer technologies. It is clear that just like there are Many *Ramayanas*, as Ramanujan and then Paula Richman argue, there are Many *Mahabharatas* as well, and never more so than in the 2010s. The question that arises then is how to



understand and analyse this multiplicity. How do we explain the boom in cultural (re)production of mythologicals, the *Mahabharata* in particular, in the different cultural fields? How was it different from previous traditions of re-telling the *Mahabharata*? Why the *Mahabharata*? The parameters for a meaningful comparison had to span form, genre, cultural genealogy, and the dissemination of the different re-tellings. So first how do we understand the specific formal choices in each re-telling? Do the re-tellings affect each other across different forms and languages, with each situated in its own cultural field and milieu, and if so how? For instance, what is the relation of Hindi and English across different fields? Also, how do we understand the relationship between texts produced at different times, but circulating simultaneously? This dissertation seeks to place each *Mahabharata* within its cultural context—its specific cultural field, position in the growth of its particular medium or genre, its circulation, and the aesthetic and narrative choices made in the adaptation. Viewing contemporary Indian culture through the prism of the *Mahabharata* helps us not only understand the effect of *Mahabharata* across cultural milieus, but also provides an important tool for analysing networks (or their absence) of cultural production.

### **Contextualizing the *Mahabharatas***

When asked what my PhD was on, and especially if I was talking to someone from South and/or South-East Asia, or of that descent, I settled for a one-word answer— *Mahabharata*. The

responses that I got were revealing for my project and fell within two broad trajectories. One was to question whether I had looked at the *Ramayana* along with the *Mahabharata*. When I said that was outside the scope of my project, some were surprised that I was leaving out the *Ramayana*, while others went even further and asserted that studying the *Mahabharata* was less important since the *Ramayana* was a more popular narrative, generally or in a particular medium/genre/language. Alternatively, my interlocutors would ask me if I was looking at the Sanskrit and/or the folk *Mahabharata*. The implicit, and sometimes explicit, assumption was that these were the ‘real deal’, their autochthonous status firmly out of question. Yet, on further probing I would usually find out that their own experience of the story was through TV serials, books and oral storytelling. A paradox emerged in these conversations. I noticed that most of the places of engagement with the *Mahabharata* carried great emotional significance—the experiences of childhood routines and familial love made the moments memorable. However, these were implicitly denied the status of the ‘real’ *Mahabharata*. Both responses demonstrated a perception of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* that was removed from actual practice while raising significant questions for this thesis— one, why look at the *Mahabharata* and not the *Ramayana*; two, why modern, urban *Mahabharata* re-tellings instead of folk or Sanskrit *Mahabharatas*; and three, why post-Independence and post-liberalisation cultural fields and genres?

## (Many) Mahabharata(s) and (Many) Ramayana(s)

That the mention of the *Mahabharata* would elicit questions about the *Ramayana*, and vice versa, is hardly surprising since the two have often been twinned in South Asian culture and history, often in the service of a particular political and/or cultural project. Briefly tracing the history of how these texts are linked to each other and larger political projects to understand why the narrative traditions have become interlinked, I problematize the popular perceptions of the narrative traditions, foregrounding the need to consider each re-telling separately and contextually.

In early modern India, translating one or the other was one of the first steps of building a vernacular canon.<sup>6</sup> In colonial India the two came to symbolize Indian culture *and* history.

Sudipta Kaviraj argues that in colonial Bengal history was not just a chronology of empirical historical facts—

The history of India is inscribed in archives of a different kind, the archives of its intellectual history, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the Buddhist scriptures, for these reveal the basic trends of Indian history: they are less factual records, as dominant and popularly accepted interpretations of what happened. They operate not at the level of ‘mere fact’, but of historical ‘truth’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> V. Narayana Rao and Sudipta Kaviraj both mention that *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* often marked the beginning of a vernacular literary tradition in Telugu and Bangla respectively. See Rao, “Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple, and Public,” 393; Kaviraj, “The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal,” 505.

<sup>7</sup> Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, 122.

The two narratives were deployed against a Euro-centric history that discursively— both implicitly and explicitly— sought to establish the superiority of the colonisers over the colonised by arguing that the latter lacked history. Following British Orientalists, Indian nationalists excavated the two narratives as epics. However, unlike the Orientalists, this was done to construct a national historical and cultural archive. Not only are the two narratives intertwined with one another, but also with the project of building a modern Indian nation. The link between the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and anti-colonialism is further strengthened with the introduction of censorship laws that prohibited explicit criticism of the Raj. As a result, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were often utilised for anti-colonial propaganda, thus forming a close link between the *Mahabharata*, Hindi (especially Khari Boli) and nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

Pamela Lothspeich notes that more Hindi works were based on the *Mahabharata* than any other ritual text (like the *Ramayana* or the *Bhagavata Purana*), often used as an allegory with the Raj symbolised by the evil sons of Dhritarashtra and the nationalists by the pious and wronged sons of Pandu.<sup>9</sup> The re-tellings spanned different genres including *prabandh-kavya* (narrative poetry, often heroic and patriotic in tone), Parsi theatre plays, and early Hindi films, often falling under the label of *vadh* literature. These included *Jayadrath Vadh* [The killing of Jayadrath] (n.d., play), Narayan Prasad Betab's *Mahabharata* (1913, play), Radheshyam

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Mahabharata* as anti-colonial allegory, see Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 2; and Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance*, 21, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 2.

Kathavachak's *Vir Abhimanyu* [Brave Abhimanyu] (1916, play), *Mahatma Vidur* [The great soul Vidur; *Mahatma* was also a reference to Mahatma Gandhi] (1943, film) et al. This choice was not restricted to Hindi alone. Krushnaji Khadilkar for instance wrote the play *Kichakvadh* [the killing of Kichaka] in 1907 in the same anti-colonial vein.<sup>10</sup> Historical (*aitihāsik*) and mythological (*paurāṇik*) categories were often used interchangeably as the source material itself was deployed in the service of anti-colonialism and the discursive construction of the nation and its imagined community.<sup>11</sup>

In post-Independence India twinning the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* has continued to an extent. C. Rajagopalachari wrote abridged English translations of both, for instance. The first two mythologicals on television were adaptations of both narratives. Narendra Kohli also adapted both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* narratives into series of Hindi novels. Devdutt Pattanaik has produced a modern re-telling of both for contemporary Indian English reading audiences.<sup>12</sup> Despite this twinning, various distinctions exist in how they were perceived by my interlocutors. One popular belief, which I found still ran strong in some of my interlocutors, was that the *Ramayana* was an auspicious text, while the *Mahabharata* was not.<sup>13</sup> Another

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<sup>10</sup> Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 28; Hansen, "Ritual Enactments in a Hindi 'Mythological' Betab's Mahabharat in Parsi Theatre."

<sup>12</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the two are always twinned when they are adapted. Dharamvir Bharati, Girish Karnad, Arun Kolatkar, Shashi Tharoor, Krishna Udayasankar, and Amruta Patil have only adapted stories from the *Mahabharata*, for instance, while writers like C. N. Sreekantan Nair only adapt the *Ramayana*.

<sup>13</sup> As Brockington notes, Hindus consider keeping the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* in its entirety at their homes as inauspicious while the *Ramayana*, or at least the *Ramcaritmānas*, is considered highly auspicious and commonly

popular belief, sometimes held concurrently with the first one, was that the *Mahabharata* is, because of its tragic story and moral conflicts, a more realistic depiction of human life than the *Ramayana*. A corollary to the latter belief was the sense that the *Ramayana* was a simpler, happier, life-affirming story, whereas the *Mahabharata* was a dark, problematic, and apocalyptic tale.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, while surveying *Mahabharata* and some *Ramayana* re-tellings, I found that if the *Ramayana* could be seen as a simple, moralistic, Manichean tale, so could the *Mahabharata*. As Paula Richman edited collections *Many Rāmāyaṇas* (1991), *Questioning Ramayanas* (2001), and *Ramayana Stories from South India* (2008) show, the *Ramayana* also has moral dilemmas that can, and are, dramatized. For instance there is G. Aravindan's 1977 Malayalam film adaptation of C. N. Sreekantan Nair's play *Kanchana Sita* [Golden Sita] (1961) focuses on the moral dilemma resulting from Rama killing the shudra Shambuk for practicing austerities and sending away his wife Sita into the forest.<sup>15</sup> Periyar Lalai Singh and Ram Avtar Pal's *Shambuk Vadh* [the killing of Shambuk] (first published in 1962, 7<sup>th</sup> edition 1991) also deals with the killing of Shambuk. Similarly, the *Mahabharata* could still be perceived in a Manichean light with Pandavas as the

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found Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 1.. Noting that my parents kept the entire Sanskrit *Mahabharata* (the Gita Press edition) at their home, so I asked my mother about it. She knew about the belief of course, but, with some unease, stated that she did not believe in it.

<sup>14</sup> This sense is not uncommon, even among academics. Wendy Doniger, for instance, believes that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are marked by differing tones of triumph and tragedy respectively in *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 303.

<sup>15</sup> Zacharias, "Union with Nature: Prakriti and Sovereignty in Aravindan's *Kanchana Sita*," 99; Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 102. An English translation of the play *Kanchana Sita* appeared in Nair and Joseph, *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices From Kerala: "Kanchana Sita" & "Five Ramayana Stories."*

heroes and their Kaurava cousins as villains. For instance, Gajendra Chauhan, the actor who played Yudhishtira on the Chopra *Mahabharat* compares his character to Rama.<sup>16</sup> Both the television serial and Narendra Kohli's *Mahāsamar* series (1988-2000), as I will show below in Chapters 1 and 5 respectively, tended to reduce narrative complexities in favour of a starker, good versus evil narrative, and both end with the Pandavas, symbolising good, ascending to the throne of Hastinapura. Both narratives can be, and have been flattened to provide a simplistic narrative, as well as enlarged to interrogate and problematize moral dilemmas. As I will discuss below in detail, there are as many Mahabharatas as there are many Ramayanas and it is important to analyse each re-telling by situating them within “their own logic, their own intended audience, and their own richness.”<sup>17</sup>

## Folk and Sanskrit

Starting with classical Indologists, scholarly work and debates on the *Mahabharata* tend to focus almost exclusively on either Sanskrit texts or folklore. Most of the early Indological work on the *Mahabharata* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries focused on the search for the original text.<sup>18</sup> The collation and publication of a modern Critical Edition by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) at Pune in 1919, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century helped widen the

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<sup>16</sup> “Yudhishtira’s character in the *Mahabharata* is the same as Rama’s role in the *Ramayana*, because Rama was an ideal man (*maryādā puruṣ*), and after that *yuga*, after Rama, Yudhishtira is the only ideal man” (my translation) Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra’s Mahabharat*.

<sup>17</sup> Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 41.

scope of research on the *Mahabharata* to include structuralist readings of the Sanskrit text. The most notable and influential structural approaches were advocated by George Dumézil and Madeleine Biardeu in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the former tracing shared Indo-European themes and the latter arguing for a universe of Bhakti within the Sanskrit texts.<sup>19</sup> Alf Hiltebeitel went on to develop both Dumézil and Biardeu's approaches in his early works on the *Mahabharata*, arguing for the equal importance of myth and ritual to show how characters like Krishna structured the *Mahabharata* narrative.<sup>20</sup> His later work compares classical and oral epics, drawing from his own studies on the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* and the turn to folk and oral epics in the 1980s and 1990.<sup>21</sup> More recent work on the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* has sought to combine advances in literary theory, especially gender studies, with structuralist close-reading of the Sanskrit text.<sup>22</sup> The trend so far has been towards close textual reading of the modern Critical Edition, which sometimes extends to oral epics.<sup>23</sup> This includes a recently published collection of essays entitled *Mahābhārata Now* (2014) which grew out of a workshop conducted at the prestigious Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. Despite its title, the essays in the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>20</sup> Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahabharata*.

<sup>21</sup> See Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*; Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahabharata*; Hiltebeitel, *Draupadī among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits : Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*; Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda: Studies on the Mahabharata- Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel, Volume 1*.

<sup>22</sup> See Brodbeck and Black, *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*; Dhand, *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahabharata*; Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*.

<sup>23</sup> See Roghair, *The Epic of Palnāḍu*; Blackburn et al., *Oral Epics in India*; Sax, *Dancing the Self*.

There are a couple of exceptions like Pamela Lothspeich's excellent study of Hindi *Mahabharatas* in colonial India and Audrey Truschke's exploration of the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata* in *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, and *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), respectively.



collection focus exclusively on narration, aesthetics and ethics in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, this thesis focuses on contemporary works and media which gesture towards the Sanskrit text as a means of authorization and ignore folk versions.

Scholarship on the *Mahabharata* from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards is also split along political lines of Right-wing religious fundamentalists and the rest who are collapsed within the singular category of the left, sometimes in retrospect. A closer examination of 'left wing' scholarship on the *Mahabharata* reveals that scholars express differing political affiliations, if at all. While some of the early Indian scholars like D.D. Kosambi and Romila Thapar, were indeed Marxist historians, their approach is based on the materialist approach of the Marxist school of historiography. They focussed mostly on the history of the formation of the *Mahabharata* text.<sup>25</sup> Apart from this, regular essays on the *Mahabharata* have appeared in the *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, focusing predominantly on text-critical study of the Sanskrit text. By contrast, the self professedly Right wing scholarship on the other hand has been defined by its continued attempts at proving the plot of the *Mahabharata* as historical fact.<sup>26</sup> Clashes between the ideologically Right wing camp and its opponents have intensified in

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<sup>24</sup> Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay, *Mahābhārata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance Kosambi, "The Autochthonous Element in the Mahābhārata." where he discusses that the historical basis for the *Mahābhārata* is "infinitesimal", focussing instead on the process of its "diaskeuasis". In Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*. (1999) Thapar analyses the representation of the figure of Śakuntalā from the *Mahābhārata* through Kālidāsa, colonialism, to post-Independence India.

<sup>26</sup> Thapar, "History Repeats Itself"; Joshua, "Choice of ICHR Chief Reignites Saffronisation Debate - The Hindu."

the last ten years, spreading to the UK and US.<sup>27</sup> It is the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* that remains the focus in these academic, and increasingly political and politicized debates.

However, as A. K. Ramanujan points out for the *Ramayana* narrative tradition (*rāmakathā*), “it is not always Valmiki’s narrative that is carried from one language to another.”<sup>28</sup> The different *Mahabharata* re-tellings discussed in this thesis similarly have a more complicated relationship with the putative Sanskrit original. As I explain below, this thesis considers the Sanskrit texts as re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* narrative, rather than an original texts in themselves, while recognising that the Sanskrit text can be used as a citational tool for legitimising *Mahabharata* re-tellings that seek to represent themselves as faithful or close to faithful re-presentations of the *Mahabharata* in an already crowded field of *Mahabharata* re-tellings. As I show in the thesis, while B.R. Chopra’s *Mahabharat* and Narendra Kohli acknowledge the Sanskrit text as their source, they only obliquely acknowledge that their own *Mahabharata* re-tellings are affected by *other Mahabharata* re-tellings, popular iconography of gods etc. as well (see Chapters 1 and 5). On the other hand, modernist writers like Girish Karnad who seek to interrogate the narrative acknowledge their distance from the supposedly original Sanskrit text. Karnad for instance mentions that he first read the source story of Yavakri for his *The Fire and the Rain* (1994) in Rajagopalachari’s English *Mahabharata* (1951)

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<sup>27</sup> Redden, “Scholars Who Study Hinduism and India Face Hostile Climate.”

<sup>28</sup> Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 134.

(Chapter 2 and 3). Conversely, Arun Kolatkar does not cite the Sanskrit text in *Sarpa Satra* even though he re-tells story that is only found in the Sanskrit text and almost never really expanded upon by any other re-telling I have come across. In post-millennial re-tellings, the modern critical edition in Sanskrit is only one among his many points of reference. In fact, English novelists like Shashi Tharoor, Krishna Udayasankar and Amruta Patil rarely cite the Sanskrit editions (and when they do, it is an English translation). These texts are more likely to cite a vast array of modern re-tellings (often in translation) and critical studies on the *Mahabharata*.<sup>29</sup> In his ‘Acknowledgements’ section in *Jaya* (2010), for instance, mythographer Devdutt Pattanaik lists a vast and varied list of influences that include the Persian *Razmnama*, Rajagopalachari’s *Mahabharata*, the Chopra TV *Mahabharat* et al.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tharoor cites C. Rajagopalachari’s *Mahabharata* and P. Lal’s translation (1986). Udayasankar cites Ganguli (1883) and J. A. B. van Buitenen’s (1973-78) translations, Rajagopalachari’s *Mahabharata*, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Krishnacharitra* (1888), Bhil and Indonesian *Mahabharatas* sourced from websites and blogs, as well as Karve’s *Yuganta* (1968), Kosambi’s essay “The Autochthonous Element in the Mahābhārata” and Alf Hiltebeitel’s body of work on the *Mahabharata*. Patil cites the Debroy (2010) and Ganguli translations of the *Mahabharata*, Pattanaik’s *Jaya*, Bhairappa and Roberto Calasso’s novels *Parva* and *Ka* (1998), along with critical essays on the *Mahabharata* including Karve’s *Yuganta*, Jean-Claude Carriere *In Search of the Mahabharata* (2001), Chatruvedi Badrinath’s *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry into the Human Condition* (2006) and two essays on the *Mahabharata* in Wendy Doniger’s *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2007). Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 419; Udayasankar, *Govinda*, 450–53; Patil, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, 268–69.

<sup>30</sup> “A. Harindranath (resources on the Mahabharata), Akbar, the Great (paintings of the Razmnama and the Persian translation), Alf Hiltebeitel (research on Cult of Draupadi), Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (Critical Edition), Bhasa (play *Urubhangam* in Sanskrit), B. R. Chopra & Rahi Masoom Raza (teleserial *Mahabharata*), C. Rajagopalachari (Mahabharata retold), Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni (novel *Palace of Illusions* in English), Dharamvir Bharati (play *Andha Yudh* in Hindi), Gajendra Kumar Mitrai (novel *Panchanjaya* in Bengali), Iravati karve (essay collection *Yuganta*), John Smith (Mahabharata translation), K. M. Munshi (novel *Krishnaavatar* in English), Kabi Sanjay (Bengali Mahabharata), Kamala Subramaniam (Mahabharata retold), Kisari Mohan Ganguli (Sanskrit Mahabharata translation in English), Krishnaji Prabhakar Khandilkar (play *Kichak-vadha* in Marathi), M. T. Vasudevan Nair (novel *Second Turn* in Malayalam), Mpu Sedha & Mpu Panuluh (Javanese Mahabharata titled *Kakawin Bharatayuddha*), Niranatt Sankara Panikkar (Bharatamala, Mahabharata in Malayalam), Perum Devanar (Tamil Mahabharata), Pradip Bhattacharya (essays in Boloji.com), Pratibha Ray (novel *Yagnaseni* in Oriya), R. K. Narayan (Mahabharata retold), Ramasaraswati (Assamese Mahabharata), Ramdhari Singh Dinkar (epic poem Rashmirathi in Hindi), Ramesh Menon (Mahabharata retold), Ratan thiyam (theatre performance Chakravyuha), S. L. Bhyrappa (novel *Parvain* Kannada), Sarala Das (Oriya Mahabharata), Shivaji Sawant (novel *Mrityunjaya* in

Simona Sawhney points out that Sanskrit in post-Independence India has become a marker of itself, arguing that Sanskrit texts in the modern world become allegories of a Hindu-Indian antiquity, whereas the contemporaneity of modern languages give readers a sense of immediacy and transparency of language.<sup>31</sup> The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, for the texts I analyse in the thesis, is similarly a sign of itself, it is not really the original but it *signifies* the original text.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, modern re-tellings are also added within the citational matrices without necessarily explicitly influencing the text, thus revealing the authorial desire to be *seen* engaging with the field of *Mahabharata* re-tellings, and not just the putatively original Sanskrit text(s). Citing the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* along with a host of modern re-tellings and critical studies, authors, playwrights, and directors explicitly perform their negotiation between modernity and tradition, immediacy and antiquity when they re-tell the *Mahabharata* for their specific audiences.

### Drivers of modernity: Neo-liberalisation and Globalization

Arjun Appadurai, in his seminal work *Modernity at Large* (1996), writes—

the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form

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Marathi), Shyam Bengal (film *Kaliyug* in Hindi and teleserial *Bharat Ek Khoj*), Teejan-bai (Pandavani performance) and William Buck (Mahabharata retold)” Pattanaik, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, 347.

<sup>31</sup> Sawhney, *The Modernity of Sanskrit*, 4–5.

<sup>32</sup> Arjun Mahey argues in an article published in a collection of essays on the *Mahābhārata* by the Sahitya Akademi, that the modern critical edition too should be regarded as another edition of the *Mahābhārata*. Mahey, “Epic Mediations: Text, Book and Authority in the Organization of the Mahabharata.”

of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.<sup>33</sup>

The modernity-tradition dichotomy proves to be a particularly productive mechanism for imagining post-Independence re-tellings. Unlike the colonial re-tellings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which focused on anti-colonialism along with nationalism, the new re-tellings often grapple with the advent of new technologies opening up new avenues for cultural production resulting from economic and cultural globalization. Re-tellings the *Mahabharata* (and the *Ramayana*) helps produce a sense of Indian culture rooted in tradition while adapting to the technological accoutrements of modernity.

The 1980s saw the slow and ponderous start of the liberalisation of India's markets with Rajiv Gandhi's New Economic Policy. With liberalisation, some forms of cultural reproduction became more available and/or popular, while others suffered. Television and the entertainment industries, for instance, benefitted greatly during liberalisation, though the period saw a parallel rise of the Hindu Right. Over the course of a decade the television set transformed from a box gathering dust in the corner of a middle-class household to an entertainment centre that signified social prestige, economic prosperity and global modernity. The number of television sets purchased rose from 5 million in 1985 to 35 million in 1990.<sup>34</sup> In

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<sup>33</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalizations*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 6.

2013, 234 million households in India owned a television set.<sup>35</sup> In the same year 828 channels, the vast majority privately owned, were aired across a country where once the only television channel had been state owned.<sup>36</sup>

Publishing also grew at the same time, though exact figures are hard to get, partly because of the opacity of the publishing houses themselves. Urvashi Butalia notes that a lot of the ‘wisdom’ in both the English and the Hindi book publishing industry is based on impressions, assumptions, and very few and outdated facts. But Butalia observes that the devaluation of the rupee in 1991 and the concomitant increase in import expenditure costs opened up space for domestic book publishing.<sup>37</sup> At the same time global publishing houses like Penguin and HarperCollins made a direct entry into the Indian book publishing market. This boom has been driven by different genres from the early English-fiction of boom of Rushdie’s generation. Beginning in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the genre of mythological fiction has become astoundingly popular, perhaps taking over from the ACK as the preferred mode of reading the epics in English, and it is finding equal popularity in Hindi translation [Amish Tripathi]. With the advent of social media and literary and theatre festivals burgeoning through both corporate and government patronage, new circuits of circulation have opened up for not only English authors but also Hindi authors and practitioners of modern urban theatre

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<sup>35</sup> “TAM Media Research - Fueling Media Insights That Drive Businesses.”

<sup>36</sup> “.: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting .:”

<sup>37</sup> Griffin, “The Changing Face of Indian Publishing | Forbes India Blog.” ‘Facts’ like the growth percentage of the industry, or its size are bandied about without any consistency.

Concomitantly to liberalisation, India also saw the rise of self-professed Right-wing Hindu nationalism.<sup>38</sup> In quick succession at the beginning of the 1990s L.K. Advani, then the president of the Hindu right party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and later Home and Deputy Prime Minister in the Central government, began a *rath yatra* (literally, a chariot journey) from Gujarat to Ayodhya to lobby for the destruction of a mosque that had allegedly been built on the site of the birth of the Hindu god Rama (the movement was christened Ram Janmabhoomi, The land of Rama's birth, movement)—a clear example of the literal belief in the historicity of the *Ramayan*. Though the *rath yatra*, which began in September 1990, was stopped before it reached Ayodhya, the march towards the mosque, the Babri Masjid, was inexorable. On 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1992, the mosque was demolished by a mob of Hindu right activists which set off a series of retaliatory and counter-retaliatory bombings and massacres around the country.<sup>39</sup> Since then the Hindu Right has remained a formidable political force in the country, and presently the BJP heads the central government. The argument for “Many *Ramayanas*” and

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<sup>38</sup> The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) considered to the parent organisation of this movement and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling party in the Indian parliament, its political wing. Various outfits like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal etc. Collectively, the various political parties and outfits are called the Sangh Parivar.

<sup>39</sup> According to a Delhi based think tank, the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, the years between 1990 and 2003 saw around 60-odd communal clashes in the country, while the years between 1947 and 1990 had seen a little over half those numbers (B Rajeshwari, *Communal Riots in India A Chronology (1947-2003)*, Research Paper, IPCS Research Papers (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2004), <http://sikhsforjustice.org/?q=content/communal-riots-india-a-chronology-1947-2003-by-b-rajeshwari-march-2004>, accessed 5-04-2013).

“Many *Mahabharatas*” has come under fire and articles and re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are increasingly co-opted and/or censored by the Hindu Right.<sup>40</sup>

Globalization, through the liberalization of the economy had (and continues to have) a concrete and significant impact on the cultural economy of the fields that I have included in my study. It allows for technologies to transport visuals across national boundaries, introducing Indian audiences to an increasingly Americanized cultural landscape. English publishing multinationals entered the field of Indian English publishing, broadening the market within India and facilitating the circulation of Indian English authors abroad. Niche, non-commercial products and producers in urban theatre and English poetry also started circulating nationally and internationally in theatre and cultural festivals. More recently, social media has enabled continuous access to cultural products. Television serials like the Chopra *Mahabharat* and the 2013 STAR Plus *Mahabharata* were both hosted on YouTube by Rajshri movies and STAR network respectively. English and Hindi writers like Tharoor, Udayasankar, Patil, and Kohli maintain active Facebook profiles and, with the exception of Kohli, Twitter accounts. If anything, social media has only accelerated and simplified that movement, signifying perhaps a next stage in the development of “modernity at large”.

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<sup>40</sup> As I mention below in Chapter 1, Wendy Doniger blames the Sagar *Ramayan* and Chopra *Mahabharat* for the rise of the Hindu Right. I also mention in Chapter 2 how A. K. Ramanujan’s article, which forms the basis of this study, was withdrawn from the history syllabus at Delhi University after the student wing of the BJP, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) organised protests against it.



A networked analysis of modern *Mahabharata* re-tellings is needed to not only understand why and how the *Mahabharata* is popular in contemporary Hindi and English cultural circuits, but also the significance of *Mahabharata* re-tellings within their specific historical and cultural conjunctures. While the focus of *Mahabharata* studies has hitherto been on mainly Sanskrit and folk re-tellings, this study seeks to foreground the significant role that many modern, urban *Mahabharata* re-tellings play, individually and/or in concert with each other, in renewing the *Mahabharata* for audiences, build bridges across cultural fields usually seen as oppositional, and inaugurate entirely new media and genres.

## **Research Questions**

By considering a range of re-tellings across different media, this thesis seeks to understand the current cultural conjuncture in India. This leads to a series of more specific questions related to each medium and work:

- TV— how was the TV serial produced and what was its actual political and cultural impact? What are the cultural fields it draws on and what is it doing with these influences?
- Modernist interventions— How did modernist writers create alternative takes on the *Mahabharata*? What were their economic and aesthetic choices, and why?

- Storytellers— what has made Rajaji’s and Devdutt Pattnaik’s re-tellings so popular— and in the case of Rajaji so durable?
- Mythological fiction— how has Indian English fiction narrativized the *Mahabharata*?  
What are the narrative strategies and structures of belief that underpin the currently expanding body of mythological adaptations in genre fiction and comic books of the *Mahabharata*, and how do they circulate?
- *Paurāṇik upanyās*— How come, given the current boom of mythological fiction in English, that Narendra Kohli is the only Hindi author writing successful *paurāṇik upanyās*?

To answer these specific questions, the thesis is framed within the Many Mahabharatas paradigm, analysing texts relationally with other *Mahabharata* re-tellings as well as their specific media, genres and languages as I explain in detail below.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

To contextualize the different *Mahabharata* re-tellings, this thesis takes the Many Mahabharatas paradigm as a starting point to understand the multiplicity of narrative traditions in a way that does not give primacy to the Sanskrit text as the original source of all *Mahabharata* re-tellings, while recognising that claiming the Sanskrit text as source is a citational tool. Following the Many Mahabharatas paradigm this thesis wants to look at how

the *Mahabharata* narratives travel, focusing mainly on Hindi and English *Mahabharata* re-tellings. It thus focuses on English and Hindi cultural spheres which tend to be placed in a hierarchical, oppositional and asymmetric relation to each other which Rajagopal refers to as a split public. Using Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the field of cultural production, this thesis seeks to understand how each re-telling is situated with respect to their specific fields— Hindi television, Hindi and English modernist theatre, poetry, and book publishing. To understand the aesthetic strategies employed within these re-tellings, the thesis frames the texts within the context of the genre and form aesthetics within which the re-tellings take place, analysing the effect the genre aesthetics had on the re-telling and vice versa. Lastly, the thesis analyses the effect of the genre on the re-articulation of characters and character-spaces in the respective re-tellings.

### Many Mahabharatas

In his seminal article “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation”, A. K. Ramanujan argues that there is not one, but many hundred Ramayanas, and the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, or Valmiki *Ramayana*, usually considered the most prestigious narrative, is not the point of origin for many of the *ramakatha* narratives.<sup>41</sup> The paradigm warns against fetishizing either the Sanskrit and/or oral folk texts as either original or

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<sup>41</sup> Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 134.

autochthonous text(s). This thesis is based on the premise that the Many Ramayanas paradigm is also applicable to the *Mahabharata* narrative traditions. Firstly, finding an ur-text for the *Mahabharata* is almost, if not completely, impossible. When the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) started compiling a modern critical edition in 1919, the oldest manuscript available to them was from 1511, which is not very old when we think about the supposed age of composition.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, there have been multiple critical editions of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>43</sup> To accord one edition the role of the original would be arbitrary. Interestingly, when the texts in this thesis cite the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, they rarely mention the specific edition and recension.<sup>44</sup> As I mentioned above, while the Sanskrit text is accorded and accords cultural capital as the supposed ‘source’ text, it is only one among the many *Mahabharata* re-tellings that authors engage with, if they do it at all. Instead, for many of the authors in this study C. Rajgopalachari’s *Mahabharata* is the first and most significant point of introduction to the story. The Many Mahabharatas paradigm allows us to foreground re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* in languages other than Sanskrit and in different genres and media. Within this

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<sup>42</sup> Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” vi.

<sup>43</sup> Sukthankar notes at least seven editions with commentaries, four of which are in Devanagari script Ibid., lxxv–lxx. In the process of collating the modern Critical Edition 1,259 manuscripts were examined in the collation of the Critical edition, of which 734 were used, and at an average, 30 to 40 manuscripts were examined for one book of the epic; R.N. Dandekar quoted in footnote 55 in John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 58.

<sup>44</sup> The sole exception to this is the Chopra *Mahabharat*. However, it’s unclear whether the writers ever actually read the texts. From interviews and statements they seemed to have relied more on their Hindu mythology consultant, Pandit Narendra Sharma, and P. Lal’s English translations of the *Mahabharata*. See Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra’s Mahabharat*.

paradigm, the original is a desired idea— rather than a corporeal text—but *always already* out of reach.

To further de-emphasize the idea of an original text as a critical rubric, I rarely use the term ‘epic’ in this dissertation. Ramanujan states that he prefers the terms ‘tellings’ to the usual ‘version’ or ‘variant’, since the implication in the latter is that the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* is the ur-text, of which there are versions or variants.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the term ‘epic’ implies a stable original text that simply does not exist. I use the term re-tellings instead of tellings since, as Sheldon Pollock points out, given the popularity of the narratives, the cultural products now are re-tellings of a tale that is already known.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the thesis seeks to understand how the *idea* of the original is used by creators of *Mahabharata* re-tellings, without subscribing to the possibility that such an original text exists or could be recovered.

### *Mahabharata* re-tellings: Travelling between Hindi and English

If the Sanskrit text is only one citational source amongst a host of different sources, what languages, media and genres are the narratives travelling between. In order to make sense of the different networks of circulation for the *rāmakathā* tradition Ramanujan outlines three *overlapping* modes of translation in the *rāmakathā* traditions, drawing on Charles Peirce’s

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<sup>45</sup> Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 134.

<sup>46</sup> Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination in India,” 263.

typology of semiotics,— iconic, indexical and symbolic.<sup>47</sup> An iconic translation is a ‘faithful’ translation, one that seeks to keep not only the major characters and plot events accurate, but also the form and structure. An indexical translation is when the translated text remains faithful to characterisations, plot details et al, while also choosing to fill the story with local details. A symbolic translation is when a translation makes minimal use of characters and plot, utilising these to “say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text”.<sup>48</sup> However such a model too proves inadequate to analyse how the re-tellings travel since it still assumes a singular source text. This thesis seeks to nuance this by suggesting a framework that focuses on overlaps, negotiations and disjunctures within a matrix of texts.

Such an approach also expands on the notion of ‘split public’ as suggested by Arvind Rajagopal. In his study on the advent of television and its effects on the Hindi and English cultural sphere, especially since the advent of television, Rajagopal uses the term “split public as a heuristic in thinking about an incompletely modern polity, standing for the relationship between the configuration of political society desired by modernizing elites and its actual historical forms.”<sup>49</sup> Specifically, he is thinking in terms of the structural mismatch in reportage and political understanding and sensibilities between the English and Hindi public spheres in

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<sup>47</sup> Peirce 1940 in Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 156.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>49</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 152.

the lead up to the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement, which he argues was used productively by the Hindu Right to further its political agenda. This thesis does not dispute the existence of such a mismatch, but rather argues that there can be productive overlaps and disjunctures between Hindi and English media spheres (which encompasses producers, audiences and texts).

### Contextualizing the Mahabharata *re-tellings*

The Many Mahabharatas paradigm thus leads us to the logical conclusion that there are many *Mahabharata* narratives and narrative traditions. However, we should also keep in mind Philip Lutgendorf who, in his essay on the Sagar TV *Ramayan*, warns against idealizing and fetishizing diversity and creativity in “folk performances”, arguing that, “the adoption and propagation of individual versions of the epic has always been related to assertions of cultural hegemony and has indeed had the effect of suppressing other variants.”<sup>50</sup> Each re-telling is a product of and is situated within specific contexts that are, as Appadurai notes for global cultural flows, “complex, overlapping, [and] disjunctive”.<sup>51</sup>

In order to understand these contexts, Appadurai proposes five specific scapes that frame his way of analysing global cultural flows— ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples,

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<sup>50</sup> Lutgendorf, “Ramayan: The Video,” 168.

<sup>51</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalizations*, 32.

financescapes, and ideoscapes.<sup>52</sup> This thesis is largely concerned with the mediascapes and ideoscapes that are populated by the different *Mahabharata* re-tellings, framing specific moments of cultural production within the changes in technoscapes and financescapes. For instance, Chapter 1 and 2 analyses governmental and commercial patronage in the production of televisual and modernist re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* (thus analysing the effects of ideoscapes and financescapes), while Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on the effect of liberalization on these different mediascapes. However, the idea of the scapes only gives a general overview of the different texts and their economic, cultural, and political contexts.

To systematically map the ways in which the *Mahabharata* re-tellings affect and in their own turn are affected by their respective mediascapes, the thesis examines the texts according to their own particular, as Paula Richman puts it, “logic”, “audience” and “richness”. This thesis analyses the production, circulation and aesthetic choices of individual *Mahabharata* re-tellings across different cultural fields— television, theatre, English literary and book production and Hindi book production.<sup>53</sup> The television serial, plays, poem and novels see overlap in the personnel involved in creating them as well as their audiences. For instance Reza was a noted Hindi-Urdu writer as well a scriptwriter for B. R. Films, while Dharmavir

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<sup>52</sup> Ethnoscape signifies “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live”, while technoscape signifies the fluid global configuration of technology. Financescapes refers to global capital flows. Mediascapes and ideoscapes refer to the landscape of images, with the former specifically referring to image-centred works of re-presentation produced by anyone, whether it be state or private interests, while the latter refers to landscapes of ideology centred around instrumentalising images to capture and/or hobble the power of the state. Ibid., 33–36.

<sup>53</sup> Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, 10.



Bharati worked across different literary fields as a novelist, poet, playwright, journalist, translator and editor. Girish Karnad too has worked extensively as playwright, film scriptwriter, translator in English, Hindi, and Kannada film and theatre. Arun Kolatkar was famously polyglot and a bilingual writer. Similarly those who have seen the serial may have watched either of the plays and/or read any of the novels in the thesis. However, these works also belong to their own specific fields and genre, and thus have their own specific economic and aesthetic logic. Comparing texts to judge which is 'aesthetically more pleasing' would employ arbitrary, subjective aesthetic criteria which are themselves located within a normative concept of taste decided by socio-economic position of the particular judge, and it would not shed any light on how and why the re-tellings were produced and what was their effect within their field as well as across different genres, media and languages. For instance, comparing how television and modern theatre create meaning for their audience, articulate and frame moral dilemmas, and carry out critique of entrenched social systems of power, one is bound to see differences in approach and execution. TV producers have a fiduciary responsibility to their sponsors and are thus invested in attracting a large viewership. To do so, and in a new medium, they necessarily had to adapt already popular and easily recognisable iconography of gods, as well as their own formula for commercial success—these are Hindi film producers after all— i.e. social melodrama and social commentary. Modern

playwrights and poets on the other hand have had to negotiate with a completely different set of considerations. They write for and created a cultural field that was intentionally anticommercial. This does not mean that they do not have an audience, but small (or no) spaces for performance means that economic returns are always low relative to television and even commercial regional theatre circuits in Maharashtra and Bengal. Coupled with the animus towards commercial theatre common in modern Indian playwrights like Bharati, it is clear that the goal in this field has not been mass success but accruing cultural and symbolic capital through patronage systems of critical acclaim.<sup>54</sup> This allows the playwright and/or poet to produce texts that eschew and/or subvert devotional aesthetics, and often interrogate and/or relocate the divine. Each text works within the logic of its own fields.

As this choice of conceptual terms shows, the field of cultural production, as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, is an important framework for this dissertation. I situate texts in relational to their cultural and socio-economic context utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a field of cultural production. Bourdieu defines a field as "a separate social universe that is structured by its own laws independent of those of politics and economy." He organises the field along two poles— heteronomous and autonomous. The former is mass-produced and predicated by

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<sup>54</sup> For more on the anti-commercial ideology animating Bharati and the rest of modern Indian theatre, see Chapter 2.

audience demand while the latter is based on prestige and creating demand through supply.<sup>55</sup>

Bourdieu argues that the producers near the heteronomous pole have a stake in making their narrative the sole narrative of the field, while those tending towards the autonomous pole struggle to obtain the monopoly of literary authority.<sup>56</sup> Cultural products are placed relationally within this field according to the economic, symbolic and/or cultural capital they accrue. Symbolic capital is accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour, founded upon the dialectical process of knowledge and recognition. Cultural capital is a form of capital accumulated through pedagogical actions of family or group members, educated members of a social formation, and social institutions.<sup>57</sup> Bourdieu argues that the autonomous field of cultural production disregards the commercial in favour of accumulating cultural and symbolic capital.<sup>58</sup> He lays out three competing principles of legitimacy in the field of cultural production as ways for cultural objects to accumulate cultural and/or economic capital. First, recognition granted by a set of producers who specifically produce cultural objects for other

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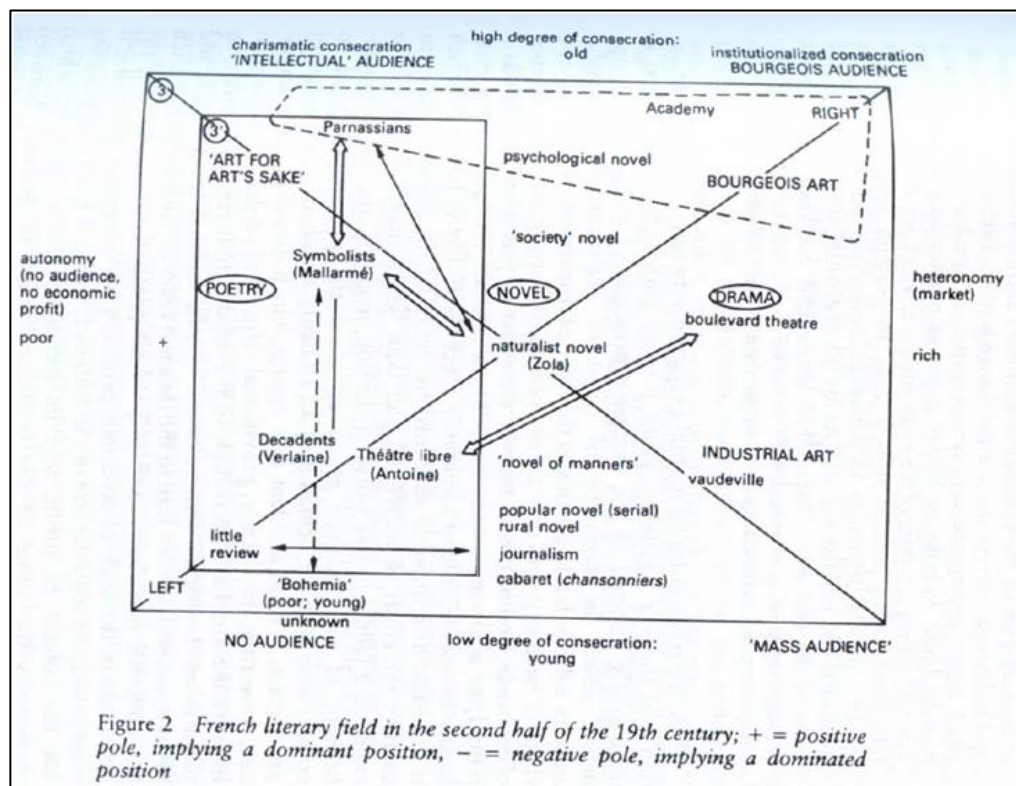
<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 40. Bourdieu seems to feel that heteronomous cultural products are favourable to the elite bourgeois, but I would think that the same can apply to autonomous products.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–42.

<sup>57</sup> “Editor’s Introduction”, *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. According to Bourdieu, the refusal to be commercial leads to the accumulation of symbolic capital for the goods or objects in the field of cultural production. Symbolic or cultural capital is desirable because it increases an object’s cultural value in the field of cultural production. While the internal logic of this field is necessarily at odds with economic wisdom this is only the case for the initial life of the products (*Ibid.*, 82.). *Ibid.*, 97–101. Bourdieu gives the example of three cultural texts published by Editions de Minuit— a prize-winning novel (he does not specify which one), Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* and Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*. The first had a strong initial demand which peters out to low annual sales of about 70 per year. The second, had a small demand but had increased sales as the years went by. The third had extremely anaemic sales for the first five years of its life, it sold exponentially well after that *Ibid.*, 97–98. This does not mean that there is a simple correlation between cultural and economic capital. Bourdieu argues that there is no direct relationship between the cultural and commercial value of a symbolic commodity, i.e., a cultural text, “though economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration” (*Ibid.*, 113).

producers (production for the ‘initiated’/‘enlightened’, so to speak); second, principles of legitimacy based on bourgeois taste, consecration guaranteed by private or state-funded ‘cabals’ like salons or academies; and third, popularity.<sup>59</sup> The first is the most autonomous and least heteronomous; the second, less autonomous and more heteronomous and the third, least autonomous and most heteronomous. Bourdieu’s diagram of the field of cultural production looks like this—



While Bourdieu focuses on only one field over a specific time-period— the French literary field in the latter-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—this thesis situates each text within its own specific

<sup>59</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 50-1. Bourdieu classifies poetry in the first, plays in the second and novel, the most diffuse, in second and third.

field according to medium and language. TV, theatre, English literary production, Hindi literary production, all constitute separate fields since each has its own mechanisms for rewarding cultural and symbolic capital, and its own relative scale of capital distribution. For instance, C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* is by far the most commercially successful book in this thesis, at least in English, with reportedly more than a million copies sold. The TV serial on the other hand is reported to have drawn in as many as 35 million viewers when it was first broadcast in India. Given the fact that it broke the then record for day-time soap opera viewership in the UK, and has circulated on satellite TV networks as well as YouTube for decades following that, its total viewership numbers would dwarf Rajagopalachari's impressive readership numbers. Yet both are classified as popular products because within their respective fields, that is how they are produced and marketed.

Furthermore, each text works within a field with its own logic for awarding cultural and symbolic capital. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*, for instance, accrues cultural capital by appearing on college syllabi, while *Jaya* accrues symbolic capital because it is published by Penguin India. The plays achieve canonical status not just because their playwrights accrued symbolic capital when they were consecrated with prestigious cultural awards from independent cultural institutions like the Bharatiya Jananpith, or State cultural bureaucratic institutions like the Sahitya Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi. Landmark performances of

*Andhā Yug*'s by the legendary theatre directors Satyadev Dubey and Ebrahim Alkazi in the early 1960s first established Bharati's play as a notable cultural phenomena which was then emulated and reproduced by other directors in various cities and languages. Similarly landmark productions of Girish Karnad's *Yayati* (1961) and then later *Tughlaq* (1964) brought him into the limelight, so that by the time he wrote *The Fire and the Rain* in the early 1990s he had already gained symbolic (and economic) capital in the form of grants and cultural awards. Arun Kolatkar on the other hand was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize early in his career, only to shun economic capital, as well as symbolic and cultural capital by the state. Instead he wrote for his own group of friends, creating a niche, specialized circuit in which social capital was accorded by his immediate peers and friends. For Shashi Tharoor and Amruta Patil, who might not win awards, reviews in well-respected literary magazines like *Kirkus* and *Biblio* become forms of symbolic capital, while for Krishna Udayasankar, the same is done just by getting published by a multinational publisher like Hachette. Narendra Kohli on the other hand accrues symbolic capital in the form of cultural awards and a prestigious Hindi publisher, as well as popular acclaim.

The thesis thus complicates the picture of the field(s) of cultural production in contemporary India quite considerably. Each field has its own logic and systems of consecration and economic rewards. In some fields, particular forms of consecration— like

literary awards, or reviews in respected journals— could also spur sales. Alternatively, Arun Kolatkar would shun almost all of these systems to create his own networks of affiliation and recognition based on his own circle of friends. Situating the *Mahabharata* re-tellings in relation to their respective fields and mapping the effects of the flow of cultural, symbolic and economic capital provides a snapshot of the production and circulation of the *Mahabharata* re-tellings.

### Aesthetics of the *Mahabharata* re-tellings

While situating the *Mahabharata* re-tellings in the context of their respective fields of cultural production is important to reveal how the re-tellings circulate, this thesis also seeks to understand the aesthetic choices made in the production of these re-tellings. The thesis analyses the aesthetics of the *Mahabharata* re-tellings, situating the texts within the context of their specific genre history and aesthetics to map the effect of the genre and form aesthetics on the *Mahabharata* re-tellings as well as the reciprocal effect of *Mahabharata* re-tellings on that particular genre and field. For instance, Chapter 1 analyses how the *Mahabharata* appropriates motifs from mythological and social melodrama films, creating a social mythological that appropriates the visual aesthetics of *darśan* as well as the social messaging aesthetic from the social melodrama. B.R. Films appropriates the iconography of gods popular in calendar art, comic books and Hindi movies while re-articulating specific plot points to

deliver messages concerning social issues. In a reciprocal move, due to its immense popularity, the Chopra *Mahabharat* shaped the TV mythological aesthetics. Similarly, Chapter 2 analyses the use of the *Mahabharata* to create a specifically modernist, anti-*bhakti* re-telling in modern Indian theatre and poetry, driven largely by the anti-commercial milieus of theatre and poetry. Chapter 3 analyses the appropriation of the oral story-telling format to re-tell the *Mahabharata* in the 1950s and its development in post-millennial India. Chapters 4 and 5 analyses the appropriation of existing literary and genre-fiction tropes and motifs (in the order that I examine below— the mock-epic, fantasy, graphic novel and autobiography) in re-telling the *Mahabharata*, while also inaugurating new genres and forms.

It is thus clear that the *Mahabharata* is, perhaps unsurprisingly, often used as a vehicle for inaugurating new media and genres in India. In order to do so, the different creative agents (writers, directors, playwrights) appropriate, nuance and/or subvert existing aesthetic tropes and motifs to either create, re-create or subvert specific mythological aesthetic. This mythological aesthetic is similar to what Bakhtin describes as a literary artistic chronotope where

spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 84.



Spatial indicators mark out a distinctively Indian territory in which the narrative unfurls while situated, temporally, either in a distant past, or a parallel timeline, or a post-apocalyptic future. That the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is often classified as *itihasa* further strengthens the evocation to a past that is hard to delineate on a timeline, but is instantly recognisable through aesthetic tropes which themselves often came into being in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and could only become popular due to mechanized cultural production of popular calendar art, comic books, and films.

Aesthetic choices are intricately tied to plot structure and character construction in the *Mahabharata* re-tellings. The plots of the re-telling are driven by and result in character motivations as much as they are by the aesthetics of their milieu. Therefore I utilize Alex Woloch's concept of character-space to analyse how narrative and characters shape each other.<sup>61</sup> Alex Woloch writes that "character-space marks the *intersection* of an implied human personality... with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative".<sup>62</sup> Character-space lays the ground for character systems (the arrangement of different character-spaces within the text) since it allows for theorizing the space a character takes up in the narrative. The character is neither a simple mimetic human being nor a narrative function. Rather they are an inflected human being, a re-presentation. Instead of using the flatness or roundness of

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<sup>61</sup> Genette, *Palmipsests*; Woloch, *The One vs the Many*.

<sup>62</sup> Woloch, *The One vs the Many*, 13.

characters to valorise or castigate authorial or narrative abilities, this dissertation follows Wolloch in arguing that the character-system in most texts requires both flat and round characters, for different purposes.

For instance the TV serial, Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* and Pattanaik's *Jaya* prefer flat characters, but construct the flatness, as well as the character space differently. As I show in Chapter 1, the TV serial uses camera angles, music, body actions and costume design that portrays meaning on a flat surface. In Chapter 3, Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* and Pattanaik's *Jaya* keep characters flat in order to reinforce the moral lessons and explore character symbolisms and motivations. Instead Bharati's and Karnad's modernist plays, as well as the Hindi and English novels, enlarge upon the characters' psyche, thus re-configuring the character space, but again for different purposes. In Chapter 2, *Andhā Yug*'s characters have only enough psychological depth to show pain, while Karnad's plays and Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra* (2004) greatly expand on minor characters to provide critical angles on the normative values underlying the *Mahābhārata*. In Chapter 4, Tharoor, Udayasankar and Patil deploy both flat and round characters, while in Chapter 5, Kohli selectively enlarges character psyche to drive his narrative.

By focusing on characters and character-space we also see narratives clustering around specific kind of characters. For instance, re-tellings that seek to tell the narrative of the

Pandavas life, tend to, understandable focus on the Kuru family, beginning with the patriarch Bhishma, and down the lineage to the Pandavas, their cousins, and their surviving progeny, as in the Chopra *Mahabharat*, and the books written by Rajagopalachari, Pattanaik, Tharoor, and Kohli. Interrogative texts like Bharati, Karnad, Kolatkar and Patil's tend to focus on characters from the margins of the *Mahabharata* narrative, often consciously pushing Pandavas and Krishna (who were central characters in the above narratives) to the margins of their re-tellings. Udayasankar is unique in the sense that she seeks to re-tell the Pandava story narrative from Draupadi and Krishna's points of view. This results in the Pandavas being pushed to the margins of the narrative, while bringing Draupadi and a host of marginal characters like Sanjay, Ashwatthama, and Shikhandi to the forefront, while keeping Krishna as the central figure of her text.<sup>63</sup>

## **Research methods**

The dissertation expands on Lutgendorf and Richman's call to contextualise each re-telling by situating each *Mahabharata* re-telling within its cultural field. This allows the dissertation to map the circumstances of production and frames the reasons for the aesthetic choices made by the different producers. For instance, when analysing the Chopra *Mahabharat* in Chapter 1, the chapter begins by analysing the circumstances of its production at Doordarshan and B. R.

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<sup>63</sup> Characters like Nala-Damayanti, which were immensely popular in Parsi theatre, are completely ignored in these tellings.

Films, situating the two within their political and cultural contexts. The chapter seeks to nuance and counter the literary critic, Vijay Mishra's, argument that "Bombay Films" use narrative structures "homologous with the narrative paradigm established over two millennia ago in the Sanskrit epics, namely the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*".<sup>64</sup> Drawing especially on the place of B. R. Films in the history of the Hindi film industry the chapter argues that the Chopra *Mahabharat* utilizes aesthetic motifs and tropes of the mythological and social melodrama, both popular genres in Hindi cinema to create a television mythological aesthetic. In contrast to Mishra's problematic argument implying narrative homology across millennia of narrative traditions (while problematically assuming the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* as the putative original), the chapter seeks to foreground the interpretive work of the producers in re-tellings and re-producing the *Mahabharata* narrative for the televisual medium and its burgeoning audiences by re-framing narrative episodes using specific motifs from commercial cinema, theatre and visual art. Similarly in Chapter 2, each author is placed within their respective cultural context—Bharati within Hindi *Naī Kavītā* [New Poetry] movement, Karnad within Kannada modernism, both Bharati and Karnad within modern Indian theatre, and Kolatkar in the Little Magazine culture of 1960s Bombay. In Chapter 3, Rajagopalachari and Pattanaik are situated within the fields of the *kathākāra* tradition and the genre of the manual respectively. Chapter 4 situates Tharoor within Indian English literary fiction of the 1980s and 90s,

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<sup>64</sup> Mishra, "Towards a Theoretical Critique of Bombay Cinema," 133.

Udayasankar in the mythological wave in Indian English genre fiction of 2010s, and Patil within a boom in comic books around the same time. Chapter 5 situates Narendra Kohli within Hindi publishing and the *paurāṇik upanyās* genre. By doing so the chapter is able to map out the relative position of each product in the field, the systems of patronage and/or consecration that these products rely on, and their networks of circulation. By first framing the products within their specific fields, the thesis then analyses how the fields shaped the horizons of possibilities in the aesthetic choices made by these producers, and how the producers negotiated with both the source narrative and their specific field.

Through the course of the thesis project my understanding of what constituted the ‘field’ and the archive were also slowly refined as I was confronted by unforeseen lacunae. The lacunae took different forms— lack, or seeming lack of primary texts, secondary readings, and marketing information as well as difficulty in arranging interviews sessions.<sup>65</sup> In some cases, there was simply no way of finding more information, but often lacunae in expected sites of research pushed me to more unexpected fields like websites and social media.

It became apparent in the course of my fieldwork therefore that relying only on library archives and ethnographic interviews was not enough to survey *Mahabharata* re-tellings in their entirety. Library archives were sometimes incomplete, or hard to find, while finding

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<sup>65</sup> In the case of the Chopra *Mahabharata* it was the case of unreliable information. Viewership figures for the television are available widely in news media and were quoted to me by the few people I was able to meet who were either working on the show, or with the production company at the later date. These figures are consistently in the 90s, but no consensus on exactly where in the 90s.

interviewees was a matter of luck. However, participating in sites where culture is produced and disseminated, like theatre and literature festivals, were important in forming a provisional sense of the field, popularity of the text and resonant themes. Simultaneously though I came to realise that websites and social media were also important spaces for cultural texts to circulate. Rajshri films hosted the Chopra *Mahabharata* on YouTube till the 2014 STAR *Mahabharata* (henceforth STARbharata) started airing TV. The STARbharata itself was available on YouTube for a while. A recent production of *Andhā Yug*, directed by Bhanu Bharati in 2011 was also hosted online. In publishing, social media websites like Blogspot, Facebook and Twitter, as well as author websites were important spaces for framing and marketing the book as a cultural object and the author as the creator of culture, while the likes, shares, comments and retweets gave a partial sense of audience engagement.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Rather than being an exhaustive survey of all *Mahabharata* re-tellings, this dissertation instead foregrounds the specific contexts and texts of modern *Mahabharata* re-tellings while opening up avenues for a comparative study across Hindi and English as well as theatre, television and literature.

Chapter 1, “The *Mahabharata* will be Televised”, recovers the 1988 B.R. Chopra *Mahabharata* television serial from the poles of adulation and outright rejection to map its cultural

genealogy as well as its circulation and effects after it initially aired from 1988 to 1990. When the Sagar *Ramayan* was first broadcast Romila Thapar published an essay arguing that by broadcasting the Hindu epic on the state-broadcaster, Doordarshan, the state was effectively appointing itself the arbiter of national culture.<sup>66</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, in his study, *Politics after television* (2004) shows that the serials did have the effect of propagating a hegemonic version of the respective narratives, since they were produced at a time Doordarshan still held its monopoly over viewership. In her ethnography of viewership of early Doordarshan serial, Purnima Mankekar found that the *Mahabharat* was considered less overtly religious than the Sagar *Ramayan*, with the serial providing its viewers paradigms for their contemporary social and political lives.<sup>67</sup> Focusing on B. R. Films' production of the serial, and its circulation after it stopped airing on Doordarshan in 1990, this chapter argues that the *Mahabharat* was an important landmark in the production of television mythologicals. The chapter also argues B. R. Films favoured social melodrama in order to articulate social commentary that would make the films politically and socially relevant for its time. Drawing on Chris Pinney (2004) and Kajri Jain's (2007) work on calendar art, Nandini Chandra's work on the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) (2008) and Peter Brooks' *Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), this chapter argues that B. R. Films combined the aesthetics of the mythological film and the social melodrama to create a social

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<sup>66</sup> Thapar, "The Ramayana Syndrome."

<sup>67</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 227.

mythological that adapts the iconography of gods prevalent in comic book and calendar art as well as the frontal address of melodrama to deliver social commentary. The chapter ends by arguing that while the serial's social commentary opened up space for a dialogue and/or debate about political and social issues like corruption, women's rights and casteism, it also foreclosed these spaces by deterministically linking the issues directly to the nation-state, thus often resolving the melodramatic situation/action, but not the issues themselves.

Chapter 2, "Modernist interventions in the *Mahabharata*", offers a stark contrast to contrasts Chapter 1— if the TV *Mahabharat* was an extremely popular product that for a time overshadowed all other re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*, the modernist interventions tended to be alternative, counter-re-tellings that expanded on minor characters and stories from the *Mahabharata* to critique systems of power. Aparna Dharwadker has shown that Dharamvir Bharati's *Andhā Yug*, as well as Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* were written to articulate an authentically Indian alternative to the commercial, Western theatre-inspired, Parsi theatre.<sup>68</sup> Arun Kolatkar on the other hand, as Laetitia Zecchini shows, was a bilingual, polyglot, "rooted cosmopolitan" poet, who drew upon an eclectic range of cultural influences to similarly articulate an authentic idiom while rooted in Mumbai, the city in which he lived all of his adult life.<sup>69</sup> Writing at different times (1954, 1964, 1994, and 2004) and cultural milieus

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<sup>68</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 39.

<sup>69</sup> Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*, 58–59.



that at times overlapped but mostly did not (Hindi poetry and theatre; Kannada, Hindi, English poetry and theatre; the Bombay little magazine circuit) these poets and playwrights wrote without a commercial motive, for milieus of friends and colleagues that often created their own systems of rewards and recognition.

Chapter 3, “Story-tellers in English”, discusses C. Rajagopalachari’s *Mahabharata* (1951) and Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Jaya* (2010), two abridged English re-tellings of the entire *Mahabharata*. Mostly overlooked in studies of Indian English literature, Rajagopalachari’s *Mahabharata* has sold over a million copies in its more than sixty years of publishing history. Drawing on Joanne P. Waghorne’s argument that Rajagopalachari adapts the persona of the storyteller-teacher in order to impart modern morals, the chapter argues that both Rajagopalachari and Pattanaik create and draw upon their public personae in the writing of the texts.<sup>70</sup> Rajagopalachari’s persona as a storyteller-teacher, created over his long public life, directly results in a narrative that keeps to a plain, easily understood English register while excising most of the didactic sections of the *Mahābhārata*. Characters remain flat in order to reinforce Rajagopalachari’s moral vision. Pattanaik on the other hand, has worked towards creating his persona as a public and corporate mythological consultant, publishing different guide-books to Hindu mythology as well as writing regularly on Hindu mythology for print and online newspapers and magazines. The story beats and language of *Jaya* are similar to that of Rajagopalachari’s

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<sup>70</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*.

*Mahabharata*, but while Rajaji tends to be didactic, Pattanaik takes a more open-ended approach towards drawing lessons from narrative episodes, often opening up avenues of exploration to the readership. This open-endedness is reflected also in the many regional variations of specific episodes that Pattanaik cites.

Chapter 4, on “The Expanding Worlds of Indian English Fiction”, locates the beginning, or rather the pre-history of Hindu myths in Indian English fiction in Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), before moving on to Krishna Udayasankar’s mystery-fantasy series *The Aryavarta Chronicles* (2012-14) and Amruta Patil’s graphic novel *Adi Parva* (2012), which are part of the more recent boom of mythological fiction publishing in Indian English genre fiction. Neelam Srivastava argues that Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* was part of a wave of Indian English writing in 1980s that was set against the disintegrating Nehruvian secularism and the rise of the Hindu Right.<sup>71</sup> Set against this backdrop *The Great Indian Novel* provides an ironic history of the nation, a palimpsestic pastiche that overlays onto the central narrative of the *Mahabharata* the history of the Indian national movement while also creating a web of inter-textual references. Twenty years after its publication, fantasy and graphic novels make up a significant portion of genre fiction publishing, often drawing on Hindu mythology as readily accessible and captivating source stories by adapting aesthetic strategies fantasy and graphic narratives from the subcontinent as well as from Anglo-American cultural products like

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<sup>71</sup> Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, 2.

Tolkien's high fantasy and the Marvel Cinematic projects. I argue that while these works are vastly different from each other, they are all part of the push by Indian English publishers to 'catch' the mythological wave. In contrast to Emma Varughese, who argues that these works can be seen very broadly as historical fiction because for a Hindu readership in general Hindu myths are 'true', the chapter argues that the authors eschew devotional aesthetics, re-articulating the aesthetics of the mythological to produce a satirical national history, a mystery fantasy thriller, and a graphic novel re-telling of the *Mahabharata* respectively.

Chapter 5, "*Mahabharata and paurāṇik upanyās*" turns towards mythological prose in Hindi focusing specifically on the critically acclaimed and popular eight-volume *Mahāsamar* [The Great War] series (1988-2000) by Narendra Kohli. Pamela Lothspeich argues that Hindi verse and drama were the preferred modes of writing for *paurāṇik* literature in colonial and post-colonial India as opposed to prose.<sup>72</sup> Despite the emergence of faux-autobiographies as well as the popularity of *paurāṇik* novels translated into Hindi from other Indian languages, *paurāṇik upanyās* in Hindi have remained few and far between.<sup>73</sup> Narendra Kohli's *Mahāsamar* series is remarkable for being one of the few popular and critical successes of *paurāṇik upanyās* in Hindi publishing. Kohli carves a separate aesthetic niche from Hindi mythological verse, drama and television by re-telling the mythological through psychological realism. By suppressing the

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<sup>72</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of the Divine Monkey*, 122. The text I accessed at the British Library however states that *Bhīṣma kī ātmakathā* is actually a Hindi translation from the original Oriya.

presence of the supernatural, Kohli expands on the characters' psyche, constructing a narrative chain of causality that is driven by the characters' internal motivations with the Kurukshetra war acting as the narrative telos. The chapter argues that while this deepens character construction for the upper-caste, male protagonists in the novel, it also serves to caricature the male antagonists, and suppress the voice of female protagonists and lower-caste characters like Draupadi and Ekalavya.

Across the chapters, the thesis finds certain interesting continuities and discontinuities. For instance, when producers try to adapt the entire *Mahabharata* narrative (or rather a significant portion of it which is concerned almost entirely with the Kuru family) they usually use the character of Bhishma to anchor their narrative, beginning with his birth and ending with his death.<sup>74</sup> Bhishma's character-space is greatly expanded as a result, as is the character-space for the other male members of the Kuru clan. Female and lower-caste characters are usually pushed to the margins.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, by focusing on specific characters outside the Kuru patriliney and sometimes even the central spine of the Pandava story, modernist authors (like Dalit writers) are able to mount an effective critique against social hierarchies.

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<sup>74</sup> See for instance, Chapters 1, 3, and 5.

<sup>75</sup> There are some interesting exceptions in Chapters 3 and 4 however. Pattanaik seems to contrast the centrality of the Pandava story by providing story variants in the grey end boxes. Udayasankar's narrative is also an exception because while it does span Pandava story, it is narrated mainly from Draupadi and Krishna's points of view. Bhishma's importance, along with that of the Kuru family is thus, again, reduced in her narrative.

Also, significantly, almost all of the texts analysed below are significant firsts within their own cultural fields. The *Mahabharata* thus seems to continue to be a preferred vehicle for starting of new literary movements and/or media, often travelling across geographical and linguistic boundaries.

# Chapter 1:

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## The *Mahabharata* will be Televised

### Introduction

Trains ran late, shops shut down, and movie halls sat ruinously empty as B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* aired each Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on the sole television channel at the time, the state-run Doordarshan. Running from 1988 to 1990 with allegedly as many as up to 99% of television viewers tuning in, the Chopra *Mahabharat* aired at a fin-de-siècle.<sup>76</sup> The post-Nehruvian regime was taking the first lumbering steps towards liberalising markets in India, a process that remains incomplete and highly contentious till today. Television serials were a product of a tentative liberalisation of the airwaves that were part of Rajiv Gandhi's New Economic Policy marking a concerted effort to attract a larger viewership to Doordarshan, and the beginning of mediatisation in India.<sup>77</sup> Doordarshan's decision to broadcast the television serial was a polarising one. Critical commentators on the television *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* link the popularity of the show to the rise of the Hindu Right, and the appropriation of the

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<sup>76</sup> Special Correspondent, "99% Viewers See 'Mahabharat'"; Manwani, "The Show of Shows." Gufi Paintal, who played Shakuni in the '88 serial and also worked as a casting director for the show also claimed in an interview with me that *Mahabharat* was known to reach viewership figures well into the late 90s. This claim was repeated by Sanjay Bhutiani, a former CEO of BR films, the production house owned by the Chopras.

<sup>77</sup> The Minister for Information and Broadcasting once remarked that if Doordarshan stopped broadcasting Hindi films, people would turn off their television sets. Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37, 74, 76.

Hindu epics for political, and often violent, ends. More supportive commentators point to the heights of popularity that the television mythologicals received at the time. This chapter retrieves the Chopra *Mahabharat* from these opposing points of view, contextualising the events leading up to the production of the serial, its circulation in India and abroad, and the rise of the television mythological genre as one of the significant genres of television serials in India. The serial presented an innovative move within the genre of screen mythologicals, with B.R. Chopra and his production team combining typical aesthetics of the mythological and popular comics, like *darśan*, along with motifs from social melodrama.

If we consider that the mythological is the foundational genre of Indian cinema it becomes hardly surprising then that one of the first few Indian television serials, and one of the most popular ever, would be a mythological. Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*, the first mythological broadcast on Indian television, began airing on January 25, 1987 and ran for seventy-eight episodes screened on Sunday mornings.<sup>78</sup> Chopra's *Mahabharat*, which began almost immediately after, would even surpass it in popularity. This chapter maps how the serial was sanctioned and produced, its immediate effect in the context of the rise of Hindu nationalism in the form of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as the field of television mythologicals after the Chopra *Mahabharat*. The chapter also argues that drawing on his own aesthetic

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<sup>78</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 165.

inclination for social melodramas, B.R., along with his production team, which included the noted Leftist Hindi-Urdu writer Dr. Rahi Masoom Reza as scriptwriter, adapted motifs and aesthetics from social melodramas as well as calendar art and mythologicals, in order to deliver commentary on relevant social issues. However, I also argue that these social issues remain vaguely defined, unresolved and ultimately contained in the serial, partly due to deterministically linking issues like women's rights and casteism to depict the state of the nation, and partly due to the logic of the melodrama that opened these spaces up in the first place.

### **Making the *Mahabharat***

Television was not a popular consumer product in India till the 1980s. As the story goes, television came to India in 1959 when Philips gifted closed-circuit television equipment it had set up for an industrial exhibition in Delhi to the government. The equipment was operated by All-India Radio technicians and staff with very little training or support, and two-hour long programmes were broadcast on Tuesdays and Fridays, first to twenty-one television sets in Delhi, and then to fifty more television sets gifted by UNESCO for rural areas. Doordarshan, the state television network, was not formed till 1976. Mrs. Gandhi recognised the potential for television to an extent and adopted policies to create infrastructure to make television a possibility, though for a long time the emphasis on programming was on educational programs



for farmers, an effort spearheaded largely by Vikram Sarabhai.<sup>79</sup> However, the Emergency declared from 1975 to 1977 and the Punjab insurgency in the early 1980s also made the government realise the possibility of using television for national propaganda. Anand Mitra argues that this was the reason why Jalandhar in Punjab, and Calcutta in West Bengal—two border states—were the first to get local broadcast facilities.<sup>80</sup>

India hosted the 1982 Asiad, the first time colour broadcasting came to the country. Rajagopal writes that at this time programming content on Doordarshan became more regular and varied when, in tandem with Rajiv Gandhi's liberalising New Economic Policy from the mid-1980s, airtime on Doordarshan was also liberalised in small steps by inviting outside creators to produce shows that would be aired on the channel. When the first soap opera, *Hum Log* [We People], finally aired on Doordarshan, it was due to a variety of reasons and pressures, such as the Doordarshan executives fear that their monopoly over the airwaves would be challenged by audio and video cassettes as well as satellite programming.<sup>81</sup> By contrast, Bhaskar Ghose, Director General (DG) of Doordarshan from 1986 to 1988, writes in his memoir *Doordarshan Days* (2005) that soap operas were suggested to the secretary of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) ministry S.S. Gill by David Poindexter, president of the US-based NGO,

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<sup>79</sup> Ninan, *Through the Magic Window: Television and Change in India*, 18–22. This is not to say that Doordarshan was entirely indifferent to popular culture. The channel also aired a highly popular weekly program entitled 'Chitrahaar' from the late 1970s, which featured sound-and-dance sequences from popular Hindi films.

<sup>80</sup> Mitra, *Television and Popular Culture: A Study of the Mahabharat*, 17.

<sup>81</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 74.

Population Communications International as a way of communicating “social messages subliminally” as in Mexican soap operas.<sup>82</sup>

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* TV serials were sanctioned simultaneously by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. In recounting the events leading up to this decision Ghose paints a picture of bureaucratic overzealousness as well as micro-management and interference at Doordarshan by the Central government:

Early in 1985 or thereabouts Rajiv Gandhi had written or spoken to the minister for information and broadcasting, V.N. Gadgil, about the kind of serials being shown on Doordarshan. The minister said that the PM has given him and the secretary, S.S. Gill, to understand that Doordarshan should broadcast serials that depicted the values enshrined in our ancient texts and philosophy, the kind of values that were contained in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Gadgil told me wryly that the secretary took this to mean that the PM wanted both the epics telecast on Doordarshan, and immediately shot off letters to two prominent film producers in Bombay, Ramanand Sagar and B.R. Chopra, asking them to produce these epics for Doordarshan. No shortlisting of producers who could be asked, no scrutiny of names and abilities, nothing. That, apparently, was Gill's style. He took pride in calling himself the chief producer of Doordarshan, despite knowing little of the way television worked. But then he was the secretary of the ministry and could bully and threaten anyone in Doordarshan to do what he wanted.<sup>83</sup>

Ghose is certain that both producers immediately recognised the commercial potential of the exercise and organised sponsors who also recognised the same potential to fund six or seven episodes by early 1986. What comes through in the accounts is that those running Doordarshan at the time seem to have had a low opinion of the quality of both serials. Ghose

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<sup>82</sup> Ghose, *Doordarshan Days*, 35.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

writes that when joining Doordarshan as DG, Gadgil, whom Ghose describes as “an erudite, gentle and very civilized person who rarely put pressure to get something shown on Doordarshan” despite pressure from “members of Parliament and others”, asked him to take a look at the pilot episodes of the *Ramayan*, stating that, “Personally, I think they are terrible, but you decide for yourself.”<sup>84</sup> When Ghose tried to suggest changes to the *Ramayan* serial, he was rebuffed by Sagar. Similarly, when Ghose tried to delay the screening of the serial, Sagar circumvented him. Ghose does not give the exact details but recalls being called in by Gadgil who told him that the ministry had no choice but to screen the serial since “[s]ome MPs have begun saying we are holding it back”.<sup>85</sup> About the *Mahabharat*, Ghose opines that:

It was relatively better made; B.R. Chopra had spent more money on the battle scenes, on the lavish interiors of the palaces and on costumes. *Nonetheless some of the special effects—particularly in the opening sequences of each episode—were rather crude, even comical...The images of gods and goddesses were so obviously superimposed that it caused a great deal of laughter among the less credulous.*<sup>86</sup>

Ghose’s account of the process of sanctioning and airing *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* is short but suggests that rather than being a calculated move, it was born out of potential miscommunication, the overzealousness of bureaucrats to please their political masters while also flexing their own power, and political interference in Doordarshan from the ruling party.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 39–40.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 43.

While the mythological was an established genre in Indian cinema, the *Mahabharat* was the first time that B.R. Chopra (B.R.) was producing and directing one. B.R. and his production house B.R. Films had gained fame producing and directing movies with a strong social commentary like *Ek hi rasta* [The only way] (1956), *Naya Daur* [New Era] (1957), *Sadhana* [Realize] (1958) et al. Rachel Dwyer suggests that the Chopras's life-membership of the progressive and social realist Indian People's Theatre Association as well as their Arya Samaj upbringing led to B.R.'s inclination to direct and/or produce movies with strong social commentary that managed to attract audiences no matter how controversial.<sup>87</sup> Dwyer also mentions that B.R. used to be a film critic in Lahore before turning to film production. In an interview B.R. told her that his articles

were mostly criticism of the film producers, who, in his opinion, were wasting their time with comedies and mythologicals, dancing and songs, thus avoiding dealing with any social issues.<sup>88</sup>

B.R.'s first foray into producing a mythological would also be the first time so much of the whole *Mahabharata* narrative was depicted on a screen, film or television.

Silent movies like *Keechaka Vadham* (1918, dir. R. Nataraj Mudaliar), and *Prapancha Pasha/A Throw of Dice* (1929, dir. Franz Osten), as well as movies with sound like *Sairandhari* (1933),

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<sup>87</sup> Dwyer, *Yash Chopra*, 25–26, 28. B.R.'s second-to-last film before *Mahabharat*, *Nikaah* [Marriage] (1982) delivers a social commentary on Indian Muslim divorce laws, while *Awam* [The People] (1987) was a political thriller. Rahi Masoom Reza was an adviser on the former and wrote the dialogues for the latter. Chopra, *Nikaah*; Chopra, *Awam*.

<sup>88</sup> Dwyer, *Yash Chopra*, 14.

*Abhimanyu* (1948, dir. M. Somasundaram and A. Kasilingam) and *Mayabazar* (1957, dir. K.V. Reddy) had focused on specific and popular episodes from the *Mahabharata*. Babubhai Mistry's *Mahabharat* (1965) by contrast gave the whole main narrative but had to curtail the side stories. The film begins with the display of skills at the end of the Kuru princes training which also introduces Karna, and ends with the end of the Kurukshetra war. The leaves out most of the stories from the Pandavas's exile as well as Ashwatthama's ambush. The movie ends on a happy note with the Pandavas triumphant on the Kuru throne. B.R. himself acknowledges that a three-hour long film, the standard run-time of a Hindi movie at the time, was not adequate for narrating the *Mahabharata*. By contrast, the serial format allowed greater freedom with time to adapt a greater portion of the *Mahabharata* narrative epic than ever before.<sup>89</sup>

Though the first title card at the opening of each episode proclaims that the television serial took the Poona Critical Edition as the "Basic Source", the serial does not adapt the entire Critical Edition. Spanning 94 episodes, the Chopra *Mahabharat* begins by introducing the legendary King Bharata, one of the Kuru ancestors, followed immediately by the story of his distant descendant Shantanu. From then on the serial spans the life of Shantanu's son Bhishma. Over the next nine episodes the serial narrates the story of the immediate ancestors

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<sup>89</sup> Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat*.

of the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas.<sup>90</sup> Episode 10 to 18 break completely with the modern critical edition in order to narrate episodes of Krishna's birth and childhood, including the incarceration of Krishna's parents by his uncle Kansa, Krishna's father miraculously smuggling the baby out of the prison, Krishna's childhood mischief and exploits with demons and village girls, and Krishna finally defeating Kansa. Episode 18 to 31 show the Pandavas and their cousins Kauravas growing up in the royal household of Hastinapur, interspersing those scenes with shots of Krishna growing up as well. These episodes introduce the characters of Karna and Ekalavya: the former is highlighted as a tragic character while the latter is treated more ambiguously, as I discuss below. The episodes also establish the transition of Krishna from playful child-god to the mature, Machiavellian god of the *Mahabharata*, as well as the hatred and rivalry between the Pandavas and their cousins. Episode 31 is the House of Lac episode, where the Pandavas and their mother Kunti are seemingly burnt to death in a house prepared for them. Episodes 32 to 34 depict the Pandavas's adventures in exile as they live in disguise, hiding from their Kaurava cousins. Episodes 35 and 36 depict Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas, with the Pandavas returning triumphant to Hastinapura with their bride in episode 37. Episodes 38 to 45 depict the ascent of the Pandavas and Duryodhana's growing envy, leading to the Game of Dice episode. Dhritarashtra gives his nephews the fallow

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<sup>90</sup> While the serial uses the term 'Kaurava' to refer exclusively to Dhritarashtra's sons, in the Sanskrit text the Pandavas are also referred to as Kauravas since the term simply signifies that they belong to the Kuru clan. More accurately the sons of Dhritarashtra would be called Dhārtarāṣṭras or sons of Dhritarashtra.

Khandava forest to rule upon in Episode 38, which carries an implicitly comparison to Partition. The story then progresses to show the rise of the Pandavas, foregrounding Krishna's guidance (with the song '*Kṛpā kṛṣṇa kī*' [the grace of Krishna] playing in the background) and the hard work of the Pandava brothers (who are shown cutting grass) as the ingredients of this success. This eight episode block also depicts the defeat of Jarasandha, Yudhishtira's royal sacrifice during which Shishupala is killed and Duryodhana is insulted by Draupadi, and Yudhishtira's gambling addiction. The game of dice episode and its aftermath are depicted in episodes 46 to 49 at the exact midway point of the serial. The Pandavas's entire exile is covered from episodes 50 to 60, while episodes 60 to 71 depict the lead up to the Kurukshetra war. Episodes 72 to 74 stage the *Bhagavad Gita*, with the war starting in earnest from Episode 75 and lasting up till episode 91. Episode 92 depicts Ashwatthama's revenge, and episode 93 the return of the Pandavas to Hastinapur. In episode 94, the last episode of the serial, the Kuru elders Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti and Vidura leave Hastinapura and go into exile. The serial ends with the Pandavas and Krishna visiting Bhishma on his bed of arrows in Kurukshetra, where he delivers a discourse on the responsibilities of kingship, which are framed as respecting and protecting women, national borders and the nation, before he dies.

Despite the enormity of the task in front of him, B.R. was also perhaps the best equipped to deliver such a massive production on a timely schedule. B.R. had established his film

production company, B.R. Films in 1955. Dwyer writes that B.R. liked working with a regular team, which included a story-writing department that had amongst its ranks Kamil Rashid, F.A. Mirza, C.J. Pavri, Akhtar ul-Iman, Dr. Rahi Masoom Reza, Satish Bhatnagar and Hasan Kamaal.<sup>91</sup> Working with a regular team meant that B.R. Films could churn out movies with a good production value regularly and on tight deadlines, a necessity for a weekly telecast.

B.R.'s team for the serial was a mix of old and new hands. His brother Dharam Chopra, another regular at B.R. Films, was the Director of Photography for the serial, while Reza and Bhatnagar returned as scriptwriter and researcher respectively.<sup>92</sup> Pandit Narendra Sharma, founder of the Vividh Bharati Seva of All-India Radio and a respected lyricist, was an adviser on the serial.<sup>93</sup> Babubhai Mistry, who had produced and directed the 1965 *Mahabharat* film, was brought in as Director of Special Effects. The serial was co-produced and co-directed by B.R.'s son Ravi Chopra. In a behind-the-scenes movie, Ravi reveals that relatively unknown actors were chosen to act in the serial partly to reduce production costs, partly to avoid star egos, and partly to ensure that the actors did not have clashing dates, bringing production to a halt.

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<sup>91</sup> Dwyer, *Yash Chopra*, 25.

<sup>92</sup> Reza's selection as a scriptwriter elicited some controversy at the time. B.R. sheepishly admits in *The Making of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat* that the idea of choosing a Muslim to adapt a Hindu story was farthest from anyone's mind. However, B.R. was looking for a suitable narrator, when Reza came up with the idea of creating the character of Samay or Time to narrate the episodes. B.R. claims that he was much taken by the idea and thus chose Reza as his scriptwriter. Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat*. In an interview with India Today, when asked if it was true that "Hindu fundamentalists" had threatened him, Reza replied, "I'm hurt and amazed at the furore created about a Muslim writing the script. Am I not an Indian? The Vishwa Hindu Parishad did write a letter, to which I replied. They later sent an apology. The threats don't worry me." Chandra, "Interview with RM Raza." Accessed online, 13/3/2014

<sup>93</sup> When Sharma passed away shortly before the serial began airing, he was succeeded by Bhiring Tupkari.



They were chosen for how they ‘looked’, rather than whether they could act.<sup>94</sup> Most of the serial was shot in the famous Film City in Goregaon East, while outdoor shots with Ganga and Krishna were shot in Mahad and Chena Creek near Bombay respectively, and the Kurukshetra battle was filmed in the outskirts of Jaipur. Shooting was gruelling and expensive. Kishore Malhotra, the production manager on the serial, claims that the total cost of producing the 94-episode serial was Rs. 9 crores (90 million rupees).<sup>95</sup> The actors were weighed down by their heavy crowns, costumes and wigs.<sup>96</sup>

The serial, aired right after the hugely successful *Ramayan*, immediately found the same amount of success. Exact viewership numbers are impossible to come by, since at the time Doordarshan did not have a technological mechanism to gauge viewership. While Ghose opines that *Mahabharat* never achieved the same popularity as *Ramayan*, his opinion is called into question by news reports and interviews with different people associated with Doordarshan and the serial at the time and since. Ninan writes that,

Doordarshan, it is believed, netted Rs 65 crore from it as advertising revenue, with advertising rates for this one programme being raised three times during its telecast, from

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<sup>94</sup> Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat*. Mukesh Khanna, who played Bhishma in the serial, talks about how he was initially chosen to play Drona but switched to Bhishma because B.R. thought that his look suited Bhishma better. Similarly Nitish Bharadwaj was chosen for the serial because of his smile.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Pankaj Dheer, who played Karna, points out that later mythologicals came up with lighter costumes while his crown would weight around three kilos. Ibid.; Manwani, “The Show of Shows.”

Rs 65,000 for ten seconds in October 1988 to Rs 1 lakh for ten seconds in May 1989. In comparison, the rate for *Ramayan* never exceeded Rs 70,000.<sup>97</sup>

A *Times of India* report drawing on a survey carried out by Operations Research Group (ORG) states that the advertisements preceding the *Mahabharat* were the most watched in Doordarshan's history, with 190 million adults and 100 million children under the age of fifteen watching each episode.<sup>98</sup> The Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB) that was responsible for calculation Television Rating Points (TRPs) for serials estimated that ninety-nine percent of the viewing audience had watched at least one episode.<sup>99</sup>

Ninan reports that M.S. Bedi, a former financial controller at Doordarshan, believed that *Mahabharat* was more popular than the *Ramayan* since the *Mahabharata* was relatively less well-known than the *Ramayana*, thus eliciting more viewer interest. Mirroring Ghose, Ninan also suggests that the relatively elaborate productions and better produced battle sequences could have made the *Mahabharat* more popular.<sup>100</sup> Reviews from the time suggest other reasons as

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<sup>97</sup> Ninan, *Through the Magic Window: Television and Change in India*, 148; Ninan in Manwani, "The Show of Shows."

<sup>98</sup> "Epic Earnings on the 'Mahabharata.'"

<sup>99</sup> Special Correspondent, "99% Viewers See 'Mahabharat.'" Given that television was still not the ubiquitous household commodity it is today, television viewing tended to be a group affair as well. Lutgendorf, "Ramayan: The Video," 136–37.

<sup>100</sup> Ninan, *Through the Magic Window: Television and Change in India*, 148.

well, including (psychological) realism and action spectacle, contemporary relevance, high Hindi linguistic register, and Krishna's portrayal.<sup>101</sup>

Another important point for this thesis is the substantial afterlife of the serial. While expensive and gruelling to shoot at the time, the TV serial continued to be popular long after it went off air from Doordarshan, and started circulating regularly on satellite networks and online video hosting websites. Since Doordarshan, unlike general entertainment channels in India today, did not own the rights to the serial it telecast, B.R. Films struck lucrative deals for circulating the *Mahabharat* TV serial further. After it first aired on Doordarshan, the *Mahabharat* has appeared on both ZEE channel in the 1990s (which is when I saw it as a child), and the STAR network. It was aired in the UK on BBC1 and BBC2 on Saturday afternoons, where it garnered 5 million viewers.<sup>102</sup> It was also dubbed and telecast in Tamil, while another established production house, Rajshri Media, hosted it on their website and YouTube channel at least till 2013, when the new *Mahabharat* on STAR Plus started airing.<sup>103</sup>

As I noted above, the Chopra *Mahabharat* was produced and broadcast at a time when the televisual medium was only beginning to gain in popularity. While at a policy level the decision was part of the liberalisation of the Indian economy and relaxation of the licence

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<sup>101</sup> See "Epi[c]logue"; Gopalkrishnan, "The Nowness of the Mahabharata"; Rao, "Epic Flashback"; Agrawal, "Mahabharata's Krishna Lives up to the Age-Old Image." I unpack how the producers made their serial relevant in further detail below.

<sup>102</sup> Jones, "The Returned."

<sup>103</sup> "Mahabharat on the Net."

permit regime, in practice it was a product of the same regime which fostered overzealous bureaucrats, eager to please their political masters. Having said that, the Chopra *Mahabharat* also marked the first time that so much of the *Mahabharata* narrative was seen on a screen—the plot spanned across Bhishma’s lifetime as well as the story of Krishna’s birth and early adventures.<sup>104</sup> B.R.’s production company, used to producing films on a tight schedule was able to adapt well to the weekly broadcast format of television, and B.R. also brought in other industry professionals to lend their expertise on the serial. However, the serial’s popularity at the time it was screened raised important questions about the increasing saffronization of public discourse.

### ***Mahabharat* and the rise of the Hindu Right**

Over time, commentators have blamed the mythologicals, too, for the rise of the Hindu Right and the 1992 demolition of the Babri Mosque that set off a spate of communal violence across the country, most significantly in Bombay. That prominent actors from both *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* joined the BJP and became Members of Parliament (MPs) for the party further strengthened the impression that the television mythologicals were at least partially responsible for making the Hindu Right and its ideology popular.<sup>105</sup> Wendy Doniger has gone so

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<sup>104</sup> Though not any of the didactic sections or side stories from the *Mahābhārata*.

<sup>105</sup> From the *Ramayan*, Arvind Trivedi and Deepika Chikhaliya, who played Ravana and Sita respectively, became Lok Sabha MPs for BJP in the Tenth Lok Sabha, while Arvind Govil, who played Rama, contested and lost Lok Sabha elections for Congress. Dara Singh, who played Hanuman, was a Rajya Sabha MP, though he was already famous as a wrestler and actor before TV serial. From the cast of the *Mahabharat*, Nitish Bharadwaj became a BJP

far as to assert that the “televising of the *Ramayana...* and *Mahabharata...* was a major factor leading to the destruction of Babur’s Mosque [Babri Masjid] in 1992.”<sup>106</sup>

The official response to these criticisms is typified by S.S. Gill, whose overzealousness resulted in mythological serials that neither the ministers he served nor the bureaucrats who served him approved or liked:

Ramayan is basically a secular epic which portrays a bewildering range of human relationships and socio-political situations. Its enduring appeal lies in the strength of its story-line and the delineation of its epic characters . . . It is this unique combination of a gripping plot of cosmic dimensions teeming with hordes of sharply delineated characters, and its ingenious use as a vehicle for articulating the major individual and societal issues of abiding concern from an essentially humanistic and ethical standpoint that explains the hold of Ramayan on the Hindu psyche . . . It is interesting to note that liberal Hindus feel quite embarrassed and guilty about the preponderance of their community in the Indian population . . . But the fact of the matter is that the Hindus do constitute 83 percent of the country’s population . . . [B]y and large Indian ethos is predominantly Hindu and Ramayan is its centre-piece<sup>107</sup> [sic]

Gill’s response, Rajagopal notes, first claims that the Hindu epic is a humanistic and universal epic which happens to be Hindu. And since India is a Hindu-majority country, the *Ramayana* is Indian, i.e., national. Further, the popularity of the narrative, and then the serial,

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MP in the Eleventh Lok Sabha. Mukesh Khanna, Pankaj Dheer, and Gajendra Chauhan, who played Bhishma, Karna, and Yudhishtira, also affiliated themselves with the BJP. While Dheer seems to have become disillusioned with politics generally, Khanna has continued to make speeches for Hindu Right organisations, some of which can be watched on YouTube. Chauhan became controversial in 2015 when the newly-elected NDA government headed by Narendra Modi nominated him as the Chairman of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). Chauhan’s appointment was seen by FTII students as a blatant political appointment in the service of furthering the ideology of BJP’s parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), given his relative lack of experience and stature when compared to previous Chairmen, which have included canonical authors, directors and playwrights like R.K. Laxman, Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mahesh Bhatt, Girish Karnad, U.R. Ananthamurthy and Saeed Mirza. Chauhan’s appointment led to months long student protests in FTII.

<sup>106</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, 667.

<sup>107</sup> Gill in Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 85.

is justification enough for Doordarshan airing it. Philip Lutgendorf, by contrast, presents the counter-argument when he states that while he supports the TV serial as an example of the continuing multiplicity of *Ramayana* narratives, the “adoption and propagation of individual versions of the epic has always been related to assertions of cultural hegemony and has indeed had the effect of suppressing other variants.”<sup>108</sup>

While Lutgendorf is right on both accounts, as Rajagopal points out airing a Hindu epic did violate the Nehruvian taboo “of the secular and non-partisan status of government institutions.”<sup>109</sup> *Contra* Lutgendorf, Romila Thapar argued, in the context of the *Ramayan* serial, that by broadcasting the serial on the state run television channel, the nation-state became the arbiter of national culture and imposed a ‘normative’ version of the story thereby diminishing the multiplicity of stories and story-telling traditions.<sup>110</sup> Rajagopal further argues that the serials were broadcast in a brief window of time:

roughly between 1984, when the licensing system for radio and TV sets was discontinued, and 1992, when satellite TV began to make its impact, [when] the state not only had a virtual monopoly over television programming, but for the first time also had access to programmers who could actually win audiences. Politically, this represented a rare opportunity to set cultural agenda.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Lutgendorf, “*Ramayan: The Video*,” 168.

<sup>109</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 73.

<sup>110</sup> Thapar, “The *Ramayana* Syndrome.”

<sup>111</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 80.

Both *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* had a large captive audience which would present the image of the ideal Hindu nation. Not just any Hindu nation, but a specifically Brahmanical one.

Supporters of the Dravidian movement have long criticized Doordarshan's North Indian bias.

The late Dr. V. Aravasu, Professor of Tamil at Madras University argued that *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* were

divine propaganda for the Indian administrators and the bourgeois class...Programming on Doordarshan is decided by the bureaucracy, which is constituted mostly by upper class brahmins and those kind to the Brahmin ideology. No counter culture can find entrance there.<sup>112</sup>

It is hard to argue against the Brahmanical bias in the decision to create the mythologicals—most of the bureaucrats, politicians, directors, producers, scriptwriters, actors, are indeed upper-caste. Ghose's critique of the serial in fact was not about the absence of counter-narratives but rather about the 'low' production quality and cultural capital of the TV mythologicals. Besides, Gill's assertion that the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata* are universal and humanist narratives is contradicted by ethnographic research carried out by Purnima Mankekar. Though by no means an exhaustive survey, Mankekar's interviews with viewers of Muslim and Sikh faith reveal that they continued to regard the Chopra *Mahabharat* as a Hindu epic, though less transgressive and intrusive than Sagar's *Ramayan*.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Aravasu in Page and Crawley, *Satellites over South Asia: Broadcasting and the Public Interest*, 205.

<sup>113</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 227.

This does not mean that the Hindu Right necessarily liked the serial—for example Krishna’s Machiavellian portrayal later in the serial was criticised.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, Mankekar’s research suggests that viewers expanded upon and interpreted themes in the serial according to their own needs. For instance, when the Bofors scandal emerged to engulf the Rajiv Gandhi government in accusations of having received kickbacks from Swedish defence contractors, Mankekar found that viewers often appropriated the *Mahabharat*’s discourse to comment on political corruption.<sup>115</sup>

Mankekar also found in her interviews that there was a difference between how the show was seen by its creators and by its male and female viewership. Reza, an Indian Muslim living through the rise of Hindu parties like BJP in Delhi and the Shiv Sena in Mumbai, told Mankekar that for him the serial was about the war between patriotism and secessionism.<sup>116</sup> For Chopra and Reza, the emotional climax of the *Mahabharata* narrative was Bhishma’s death, while for Mankekar’s female interlocutors it was the Game of Dice episode where Draupadi is forcibly stripped in front of her entire family, with most of its male members passively allowing her humiliation to happen. For female viewers, the episode resonated with their experience of

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 237.



sexual harassment and abuse. For male viewers, the episode was important but as a *casus belli* for the Kurukshetra war.<sup>117</sup>

With the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*, and the later crop of TV mythologicals discussed below, Hindu mythologicals have emerged as a product that caters to different markets on different media across countries and time. What was it about the genre that made it popular in the first place?

### **The social mythological**

Dwyer defines the filmic mythological as a film that

depicts tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths, which are largely found in the Sanskrit *Puranas*, and the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

The early mythological was a hybrid form “with strong connections to nineteenth-century Indian popular or middlebrow culture.” The mythological film is quite similar to the devotional film, insofar as it too constructs an aura of sanctity, but the difference between the two is that gods actually appear physically in mythologicals.<sup>118</sup> Iconicity, illusionism and special effects are used to compensate for the descent of the gods into the realm of the realistic.<sup>119</sup> The Chopra

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 239, 240, 248.

<sup>118</sup> Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, 15. As opposed to a devotional film where the appearance of god is usually implied.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 19.

*Mahabharat* takes elements from the filmic mythological and further expands on it, using the mythological as a vehicle for social commentary. Ghose recalls that,

[B.R.] Chopra once said to me, only half in jest, “You see, Gill sahib made a mistake. Ramanand is a staunch Sanatan Dharma man. He should have been asked to make the Mahabharata, which is not really religious, except for the portion where the Gita comes in. Now, I am an Arya Samaji; I would have done the Ramayana with a little more realism and less of the religion.”<sup>120</sup>

Chopra *Mahabharat* aired at a time when TV was still new to the viewers. To make the serial immediately and easily ‘readable’ to its audience, Chopra drew heavily upon the popular iconography of gods, filmic mythological action spectacles, frontal address in screen melodrama, and social commentary. The serial created meaning on the surface, as it were, by framing scenes that resembled comic book and calendar art, and delivering dialogues with a frontal address which, in turn, transformed the characters into icons with fixed positive or negative valences.

By framing its characters as icons, the serial delivered a commentary on social issues of the nation-state. The metaphysical narrator of the serial, *Samay*, or Time, who led the viewer in and out of the serial and every episode, is used to prepare the setting within which the iconic characters are placed, as well as to foreground, repeat, reinforce and expand upon the key messages that emerge from episode’s main action. The serial delivered social

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<sup>120</sup> Ghose, *Doordarshan Days*, 43.

commentary at different points in the episodes, however the Game of Dice and Ekalavya story arcs show that while the serial opened up space for commentary and discussion on issues like women's rights and casteism utilizing aesthetic tropes from the social melodrama, it also forecloses those spaces. Let us now dwell on each of these key elements and techniques one by one, first focusing on how the actors were framed to provide reach surface meaning through frontal address, and then analysing how that was used by the serial in its political and social commentaries.

### Framing the Gods: surface meaning

Mythologicals and social melodramas preform their meaning on the surface of the performance. The Chopra *Mahabharata* appropriated aesthetic strategies from both mythologicals and social melodrama to stage a social mythological serial where the surface became an important and significant node of creating and reading meaning. Derided in the English trades as kitschy, these aesthetic strategies, appropriated from popular, 'low' and commercial art forms like calendar art, were deployed to draw the audience into the serial and guide the way they read the serial.

In her study of Parsi theatre, Anuradha Kapur writes that the surface is a "space for elongation, notation, sedimentation and jointing". The realistic mode of performance, restricts this space to the corporeal body and its behaviour:

Memory, thought, emotion and action are played through the body and are sought to be explained by it [in realism]. Epic characters have surface because they are not merely contained in their bodies— they are displaced in the narrative, in others' perceptions, in their own rhetoric, and in stage devices.<sup>121</sup>

In the mythologicals, characters are formed not just through the expressiveness of the actors' bodies, but on different levels of the text. In calendar art, this is relatively straightforward since there is only a single frame at a time to work with. Comic books like *Amar Chitra Katha* use titles, captions, dialogues, and filmic framing techniques in panels.<sup>122</sup> Kapur gives an example from the Yavanika performance tradition where the character forms “in bits and pieces— sound, hand, feet, *kirit* [crown], look.”<sup>123</sup> The Chopra *Mahabharat*, drawing on early filmic mythologicals, calendar art and popular comics, utilizes costume design, music, actor's bodies and camera frames to put together an easily readable cultural product which explains the meaning of characters and actions through sound and visual effects and the spoken commentary by other characters and by *Samay*.

The creators of the serial were acutely aware that their audience was already familiar with the iconography of gods through popular culture, especially comic book and calendar art. Ravi Chopra, B.R.'s son and the co-director and producer of the serial says,

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<sup>121</sup> Kapur, “The Representation of Gods and Heroes in the Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Twentieth Century,” 415.

<sup>122</sup> There are quite a few overlaps in personnel between the ACK and Hindi film industry according to Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007*, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Kapur, “The Representation of Gods and Heroes in the Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Twentieth Century,” 416.

[...] everybody has an idea what the *Mahabharata* is all about. You have picturised these characters, you have seen them in-in paintings, you've seen them in comic books. So you really know what each character is like. You know what Krishan is like; you know what er-Arjun is like. So you want the character to be close to you- to what- you know, you've had an image of him for so many years.<sup>124</sup> [sic]

Chris Pinney, in his study of calendar art uses the term inter-ocularly to define the routine traffic of images between different visual fields in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This conversation between the fields, he argues, created mutually reinforcing expectations resulting in “a visual inter-referencing and citation that mirrors the more familiar process of ‘inter-textuality’”.<sup>125</sup> The Chopras were not only aware of the existence of such inter-ocularly for their viewers, but also appropriated it to make their serial immediately accessible to their audience.

The characters were adorned in brightly-coloured dresses, jewellery and armour turning them into icons, even though they were derided in the English trades as ‘kitschy’. When the producers were holding auditions for each role, the emphasis was not on the acting skills actor, but on their *look*. The actor would audition for a role in costume so that the producers could judge if he had the right look. Nitish Bharadwaj, for instance, was selected because his smile was apposite for the role of Krishna.<sup>126</sup> Gajendra Chauhan and Mukesh Khanna, the actors

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<sup>124</sup> Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat*.

<sup>125</sup> Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 34–35. He gives the example of a calendar illustration with a photographic portrait of Rama and Sita from the Sagar *Ramayan* at the bottom to show that “what may seem an incongruous mismatch of media makes perfect sense to the consumer of this picture for whom the painted images sit happily with the televisual image”. Ibid., 9–11. Pinney is borrowing the term from Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992, “Museums Are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India.”

<sup>126</sup> Manwani, “The Show of Shows”; Paintal, interview.

who played Yudhishtira and Bhishma, were supposed to play the roles of Arjuna and Drona but the former got his role because he grew out of the costume meant for his role as Arjuna, and the latter because the person who was playing Bhishma backed out and the costume fitted him well.<sup>127</sup> According to Gufi Paintal, the costumes for the characters were carefully colour-coded to subliminally signal the character valences.<sup>128</sup> The protagonists of the serial—Krishna the Pandava brothers, Bhishma, Drona, Kripacharya—wear clothes of a lighter hue, mostly white and yellow (see figures 1, 3, and 5), while the antagonists—Duryodhana and Shakuni—wore the darker, more tempestuous colours, like black and red (see figures 4 and 6). The serial utilizes colour schemes similar to those prevalent in calendar art, as Kajri Jain notes in her study on the economics of calendar art:

It is not icons' sacredness per se that associates them with "popular" taste, but their public claim for attention, indicated by this use of color. Both Sapar and Sharma described the more "artistic" use of softer colors as also associated with "godliness"...bringing out the "sweetness" in the painting or the gentleness of Krishna's smile.<sup>129</sup> [sic]

If loud colours clamour for attention in the public space, drawing in the viewer-devotee, colour coding helped focus the viewers' attention. Though Paintal denies that the *Mahabharat* crew used comic books in the creation of the characters' costumed looks, Ravi Chopra's recognition of the inter-ocular circulation of images might hint at a greater, albeit largely unacknowledged, influence of comic book and calendar art aesthetics. While the serial credits

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<sup>127</sup> Manwani, "The Show of Shows"; Prastaav, *Making of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat*.

<sup>128</sup> Paintal, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 186.

ISKCON for the images it uses as the background for its opening title cards, Karline McLain narrates an account given to her by Yagya Sharma, an *ACK* artist, of how the latter had heard from the cameramen on the serial that the *ACK Mahabharata* series was often brought on set and used as reference material for not only the costume and set design, but also for the story.<sup>130</sup> It is clear that Chopra *Mahabharata* was influenced by comic book and calendar art in its own costume designing, but gauging the exact extent remains a point of conjecture. As Nandini Chandra points out, and as I show below, the comic and the filmic often overlapped in how they framed the mythic and historic icons.<sup>131</sup>

In addition to costumes, the serial utilizes set design, and mid-close ups and medium shots to evoke images from the *jhanki*, calendar art and comic books.<sup>132</sup> This is most noticeable in the case of Krishna, and especially in the episodes that depict his childhood. Figure 1, for instance is a medium shot taken during a song-and-dance sequence with Krishna and the gopis, the village belles who are also his ardent devotees in the Krishna-bhakti mythos. Krishna is dressed like Krishna from calendar art—with yellow clothes, a peacock feather in his turban, and a flute—and centred in the camera frame with the gopis dancing around him dressed in

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<sup>130</sup> Yagya Sharma in McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes*, 212.

<sup>131</sup> Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007*, 9.

<sup>132</sup> David Mason defines the *jhanki* as “a tableau, a picture of the players suddenly coalescing from dance and presenting the characters in iconographic poses explicitly suggesting the poses of temple images and other devotional art” in Mason, *Theatre and Religion on Krishna's Stage: Performing in Vrindavan*, 6. The *jhanki* is one of the ways in which the tableau form is deployed in the serial. I will discuss the use of the tableau in the serial in greater detail below.

white and light pink saris. Radha is dressed in a red sari to differentiate her from the other gopis, and positioned slightly left of centre, beside Krishna. Figure 2, a panel from *Bhagawata Purana* collection of comic books published by Amar Chitra Katha, shows a variation of the scene in Figure 1. Note that Krishna is again in the centre of the circle of gopis in his iconic yellow clothes, peacock feather turban and flute even if his features are hard to discern.

In some respects the inter-ocularity between comic books and TV serial is easy and conspicuous with regard to Krishna's character construction since the norms for representing Krishna in calendar art, comic books, and mythological films are already well-established. In the case of relatively minor characters, the TV serial had a freer hand and added other levels of signification in the actors' performance. For instance, Paintal, who plays Shakuni, clarified that he added the limp to Shakuni's character to create an external marker of Shakuni's inner crookedness, along with the pair of dice which are always in his hands. The background score also changed when Shakuni appeared on screen to suggest the deviousness in his character.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, props became a significant part of surface meaning: weapons became representative of specific characters— the mace for Bhima and Duryodhana, the spear for Yudhishtira, bow and arrows for Arjuna, Karna and Bhishma, and the *sudarśan cakra*, the divine revolving discus, for Krishna.

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<sup>133</sup> A friend told me in the course of my research project that all that she remembered of the Chopra *Mahabharat* was Shakuni *māmā* and his background music.





*Figure 1: A medium shot that centres the young god Krishna (instantly recognisable because of his yellow clothes, peacock feather and flute) while the 'gopis' dance around him.*



*Figure 2: Krishna in the centre of the frame in Amar Chitra Katha comic Bhagawat Purana comic.*



*Figure 3: Duryodhana, the antagonist of the serial, decked in all-black armour, with his signature weapon, the mace. Episode 72*



*Figure 4: Bhishma in his white costume and chariot, with a bow peeking out on the side. Episode 72*



*Figure 5: Krishna, in his iconic yellow and peacock feather crown (mor-mukut) and Arjuna in white. Episode 72*



*Figure 6: Shakuni, the evil but effete figure, introduced in black but without armor. Note that he wears a turban rather than a crown. A pair of dice, which he is rolling in this frame, is always present in his hands in the non-war episodes. Episode 8.*



*Figure 7: From left to right— Yudhishtira, Vidura, and Duryodhana. Vidura is teaching Yudhishtira how to rule wisely, while Duryodhana looks on with palpable anger. Episode 43.*

Using mid-range and mid-close up shots, the camera flattens the scene, focusing the audience's attention on the iconic characters and their pronouncements. These camera angles frame the characters to deploy the visual effects of darśan and the tableau, creating a visual scene with no depth, but rich in meaning on the surface.

### The frontal address

The serial uses frontal address almost exclusively, i.e., the actors speak to each other within the frame, but also directly to the audience. This appropriates two aesthetic strategies from

the mythological/calendar art/comic books and social melodrama respectively— darśan and tableau.

Darśan literally means sight though it has connotations of a ritual exercise. It can refer to insight, knowledge, philosophy or a ritualistic and/or devotional visual regime. It is the last that the serial enacts. Darśan, as a visual regime, refers to ““seeing and being seen””.<sup>134</sup> Dwyer further defines it as “a desire to fuse the image and the beholder with a focus on efficacy of the image.”<sup>135</sup> In both figures 1 and 2 Krishna is centred with his face towards the camera creating the darśan effect. This is carried out even for human characters like Bhishma (fig. 4), Arjuna (fig. 5), and Duryodhana (fig. 3) to further cement them as iconic epic characters. According to Paintal, who also was the casting director on the serial, he had a brief from Pandit Narendra Sharma, who worked as a consultant and lyricist on *Mahabharat* (he wrote the lyrics for the opening title of the serial), to choose actors by trying to imagine them as exalted icons.<sup>136</sup>

Furthermore, Ravi Vasudevan argues that frontal address breaks the self-referentiality of the fiction on screen, thereby offering the viewer subjectivity in the proceedings.<sup>137</sup> Along with the use of colours that I noted above, frontal address brought the viewers into the serial, and

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<sup>134</sup> Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 9.

<sup>135</sup> Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, 19.

<sup>136</sup> To make himself clear, Paintal used gestures to put his point across to me. The gist of what he was trying to say is that while casting actors, the casting team should not think of actors as human being like them, but as epic characters.

<sup>137</sup> Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film, Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*, 123, 133.

focused their attention while also contextualizing it within the framework of devotee gaining darśan of epic characters and icons.

If a visual arc begins with individual frontal address performing darśan, it transforms and sometimes ends with the tableau. Peter Brooks, in his study on melodrama writes that

there tends throughout melodramas, and most especially at the end of scenes and acts, to be a resolution of meaning in tableau, where the characters' attitudes and gestures, compositionally arranged and frozen for a moment, give, like an illustrative painting, a visual summary of the emotional situation.<sup>138</sup>

While the tableau is deployed in a way reminiscent of the jhanki, as I discuss above with regards to fig. 1, it is deployed with more regularity within the serial for a melodramatic effect which may or may not contain overtones of devotionality. In fig. 7 for instance, we see Vidura centred in the frame speaking to Yudhishtira, while Duryodhana looks on. Vidura is teaching Yudhishtira at the end of the Rajasuya Yajna carried out to cement his sovereignty and project his power and strength.<sup>139</sup> Vidura is the only one speaking in the frame and is in the centre so that he can be seen speaking to both Yudhishtira and the TV audience. Duryodhana looks on with anger and jealousy palpable in his stance, signifying to the audience that he is not pleased with Yudhishtira's success, a foreboding to the Game of Dice episode which takes

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<sup>138</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 48.

<sup>139</sup> Vidura begins his speech by telling Yudhishtira, “Apne śatruom par to har koi dṛṣṭi rakhtā hai, parantu rājā ko apne mantriom, sevakom aur amgrakṣakom par bhī dṛṣṭi rakhnī cāhiye.” [Everyone keeps an eye on their enemies, but a king should also keep an eye on their ministers, servants and bodyguards]. This is fairly innocuous wisdom, but perhaps we should also keep in mind that Indira Gandhi had been gunned down by her bodyguards only five years before this serial was aired. Also her son, Rajiv Gandhi's government was embroiled in the Bofors scandal when the serial aired.

place three episodes later. In that scene Vidura, facing the camera, delivers a commentary on the duties of kingship, while tableau reveals the hidden meaning by including Duryodhana's jealousy and his impending destructive result. The frontal address and the tableau are significant aesthetic strategies that draw the audience within the interpretive loop of the television serial, paving the way for delivering political and social commentary. By using these aesthetic strategies, the serial ensured that its commentaries were directly and quite bluntly addressed to its audience.

### Political and social commentary in the Chopra *Mahabharat*

In an interview to the magazine *India Today*, B.R. was asked if the television serial deviated from the 'original' (inverted quotations mine), to which B.R. replied, "At places. We've given extra emphasis to issues like democracy, women's rights, casteism", further underscoring another remark in the interview that his "films always had a social or political relevance."<sup>140</sup> Striving for political and social relevance, the serial sought to open up a space for discussion on political and social issues, often using frontal address and melodramatic registers of excess as a vehicle for delivering social commentary simultaneously within the fiction of the serial

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<sup>140</sup> Chandra, "We've Stressed Current Issues." B.R. underemphasized the extent to which his TV serial changes, deletes, re-situates, re-interprets and/or enlarges upon the Sanskrit narrative in order to emphasize the social and/or political commentary in the television.

and to its captive audience. Society, as Angelika Malinar notes in her study of the *Bhagavad Gita* story arc in the Chopra *Mahabharat*, is defined as an amorphous category that takes on cosmic proportions, where the individual is the sole possible agent for bettering ‘society’.<sup>141</sup> However, the spaces that the serial opens for these discussions are also closed by the serial’s tendency, as Mankekar has noted, to give primacy to a nation-state, where the nation and the state are conflated.<sup>142</sup> The serial opens up a space for discussion on issues like women’s rights and casteism in the Game of Dice and Ekalavya story arcs respectively using the tableau form, varying registers of Hindi (shorn of any Persianate or Urdu words), and background music, but forecloses them at the same time by linking the issue directly with the nation-state.<sup>143</sup>

The Game of Dice episode and Draupadi’s disrobing and humiliation is the place where the serial delivers its most significant commentary on women’s rights. Draupadi’s disrobing takes place in the middle of the game of dice episode, when the oldest Pandava, Yudhishtira gambles her away to his cousins.<sup>144</sup> As already mentioned, the Game of Dice story arc spans five

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<sup>141</sup> Malinar, “The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahabharata TV Serial: Domestic Drama and Dharmic Solutions,” 461–62.

<sup>142</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 239.

<sup>143</sup> While the tableau form and background music draw from the filmic mythologicals— conflict music in Chopra *Mahabharat* and Babubhai Mistry’s film, *Mahabharata* (1965) are the same for instance, and Mistry was also consulted on the action sequences in the Chopra *Mahabharat*— the Urdu and Persian free Hindi in a dramatic re-telling of the *Mahabharata* took place as early as 1913. Narayan Prasad Betab consciously excised Urdu words from his Parsi theatre production of the *Mahabharata* (1913). This was especially striking since Urdu was one of the dominant languages of Parsi theatre since 1880s. Hansen writes that Betab took this decision because while he himself often wrote in Urdu, he felt that the use of Urdu had marred a contemporary rival’s *Ramayan* play. Hansen, “Ritual Enactments in a Hindi ‘Mythological’ Betab’s Mahabharat in Parsi Theatre,” 4985.

<sup>144</sup> The Game of Dice episode is one of the most famous and well known episodes of the Mahabharata. Duryodhana, his uncle Shakuni, and Karna organise a rigged game of dice in their capital Hastinapura to entrap the Pandava brothers. Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas, who has just consolidated an empire for himself, loses everything—in sequence his wealth, his people, his empire, his brothers, himself and finally their chief and common



episodes (46 to 50), with Draupadi's humiliation coming exactly in the middle of the entire run of the serial at Episode 47.<sup>145</sup>

The serial uses the Game of Dice episode to open a discussion about women's rights, but does so in extremely oblique terms. At the beginning of this episode, the serial's narrator Samay says:

Today the story of *Mahabharata* is at a shameful point. Today, no apart from Draupadi is in the right. Everyone in the assembly—Bhishma the son of Ganga, Drona, Kripa and the Pandava brothers included—are in the wrong. That's why we have to stop and think at this point which side all of us would rather be on, *because all of us now and in the future will face this question.*<sup>146</sup>

Samay frames Draupadi's humiliation as an uncomfortable truth that the viewers also have to face. However, her humiliation is framed as a vaguely shameful point without mentioning for

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queen Draupadi. Dushasana drags Draupadi into the hall clad in a single garment which he tries to unravel. Apart from a few honourable exceptions like Vidura and Vikarna, no one in the assembly hall objects to Draupadi's humiliation. According to the modern critical edition, Draupadi's dress lengthens on its own accord, presumably because of the power of her female chastity. In the serial (as well as many popular re-tellings and one Sanskrit recension) Krishna is responsible for miraculously adding length to Draupadi's dress. Both the modern critical edition and the serial agree that Draupadi gets herself and her husbands out of their predicament. Her insistence on questioning the right of her husband to gamble her away eventually forces Dhritarashtra to abjure the game and free the Pandavas. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 121–56; Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episodes 46-51. The serial deviates from the critical edition in significant ways—Krishna comes to Draupadi's rescue, Vidura and Vikarna's interruptions are edited and re-worked to fit the context of the serial, Bhishma interrupts the proceedings at one point, while at other points, shots of Draupadi's humiliation are intercut with shots of Bhishma's anguish. However, the serial also follows the modern critical edition in significant respects, especially in showing Draupadi's dogged insistence on receiving an answer to her question, which is eventually left unanswered, leading to her and her husbands escaping servitude. The narrative arc is so iconic that when I was studying the Game of Dice episode as part of the course requirements for B.A. English Honours in Delhi University, our lecturer began the lecture by stating that we had to throw away our preconceptions of the *Mahabharata*, because unlike what we thought, Bhishma was not a central figure in the *Mahabharata* narrative and Krishna did not save Draupadi from humiliation.

<sup>145</sup> Episode 47 out of a total of 94 episodes.

<sup>146</sup> “Āj mahābhārat kī kathā, ek lajjājanak moṛ par hai. Maryādā kī rekhā ke is pār āj draupadī ke atirikt kot bhī nahīṃ. Aur maryādā kī rekhā ke us pār sabhī haiṃ— gangāputra bhīṣma, guru droṇācārya, kulguru kṛpācārya aur pāṇḍav bhāīyoṃ sahī sabhī is rekhā ke us pār haiṃ. Isiliye yah ruk kar socne kī jagah hai kyomki yah nirṇay *vartamān aur bhaviṣya ke har vyakti ko lenā paregā* ki svayam vah is maryādā rekhā ke is pār hai yā us pār hai.” Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episode 47.

whom. The introductory monologue simply tells the viewers that Draupadi is in the right and the Kuru clan is in the wrong, and that all people of the present and future generations must decide which side of the “maryādā kī rekha” (literally, the line of honour”) they should be on. As Malinar notes, a typical strategy of the serial is to dodge, elide, or only obliquely reference particularities of social welfare or social problems.<sup>147</sup> While the narrator clearly demarcates which character is right and which is wrong, it avoids contextualizing this within a particular context, either of the narrative or of political life.

Purnima Mankekar, in her study of the episode, notes that in her interviews with them, B.R. and Reza interpreted Draupadi’s disrobing and humiliation as indexical of a corrupt national polity. Draupadi in the episode comes to represent all women, with the serial trying to argue that, as B.R. told Mankekar, “If you want to judge a society, judge the place of the woman in the society.”<sup>148</sup> Yet the serial is structured in a way that ensures that it is entirely clear to viewers that the corruption in the polity lies specifically with Shakuni and Duryodhana, even though the address is broader, and diffusing it by showing some resistance by at least some of the elders. While the narrator proclaims that the entire Kuru clan is to blame for Draupadi’s predicament, it ensures that viewers understand who is rather more to blame. Thus, the main action of the episode begins by recapping the last scenes of the previous episode, Episode 46, to

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<sup>147</sup> Malinar, “The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahabharata TV Serial: Domestic Drama and Dharmic Solutions,” 462.

<sup>148</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 235.

show Yudhishtira progressively losing everything in the Game of Dice, Shakuni and Duryodhana taunting the Pandavas, ordering Draupadi to be brought in to the assembly hall, and the dismay of the Kuru elders, especially Bhishma, who breaks his sword and is slowly breaking his throne in his grip, and Vidura, who is still trying to stop the game of dice. The action of the episode really begins with Kripacharya, Bhishma and Vikarna speaking out against dishonouring Draupadi. While Kripacharya simply protests that “lust, luxury, and gambling” are vices that destroy the individual, both Bhishma and Vikarna stress that dishonouring Draupadi will bring dishonour to “*bharatvaṃśá*” [Bharata dynasty, i.e., the Kurus]. In all three instances, for at least part of their dialogue each character is framed within a frontal address in a mid-close-up shot, thus suturing the distance between the character and the audience. The characters thus declaim their critique and protest directly to both the king and the serial’s audience. Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Shakuni, and Karna are thus firmly established as the source of corruption in the polity. Their villainy is highlighted by the sinister background score and the sound effects used to add echo their laughter, as medium range shots focus on Duryodhana standing in front of the bare-headed Pandavas bowing, flush with his victory (fig. 8).



*Figure 8: Duryodhana standing victorious as the Pandavas remove their crowns to signal their servitude.*

The Game of Dice episode gives the serial an opportunity to utilize the melodramatic trope of outraged virtue. Peter Brooks argues that the main action in a melodrama consists of virtue, often represented by a young heroine, standing “opposed to what will seek to discredit it, misrepresent, silence, imprison, or bury it alive.”<sup>149</sup> In the Game of Dice episode, the serial constitutes Draupadi as the young heroine who has to stand against Duryodhana, Karna, and Dushasana, who impugn her character and want to establish their ownership of her by disrobing her. As Mankekar recounts the scene—

Karna [says]: “You are already the wife of five husbands. So what harm is there in holding the hand of a sixth? A woman who lives with five husbands is not a wife but a whore. What honour can a whore have? If Draupadi had been brought here naked, it would not have been inappropriate.” In a manner reminiscent of Hindi film villains, Duryodhana sneers: “My friend is telling the truth. What is honour or dishonour for a whore?” He asks Dushasana to disrobe her so he can see what the woman he has won looks like.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 33.

<sup>150</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 231.

The serial's re-presentation is here quite close to the episode in the modern critical edition, showing how the source text leant itself easily at points to B.R.'s vision of the social melodrama.

Brooks also points out that virtue eclipsed can only recover if those in the position of judges recognise their errors. Thus when Draupadi is dragged into the assembly hall, she goes to each Kuru elder, starting from the king, Dhritarashtra, followed by Drona, Bhishma and Vidura disputing Yudhishtira's right to stake her while also appealing to the clan's honour. She argues the legal point that Yudhishtira could not stake and lose her, separately addressing Bhishma off-camera with her trembling face fills most of the screen as the camera goes for a mid-close up shot:

You know the scriptures Grandsire. Please tell me, how can a person, who has lost himself in a game of dice, have the right to stake someone else's independence and self-respect? I want you to answer this question Grandsire. Your embarrassed silence cannot be the answer to this question. Because Draupadi is not the only one asking this question; the entire womankind, Mother Earth who has given birth to every being, and the future of this country, which is named after your ancestor Emperor Bharata, are all asking this question...If a wife is her husband's property, then I was lost when my husband lost himself. Then how come I was staked separately? And if a wife is not her husband's property, then how can my husband stake me without my consent?<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> “Āp ko to śāstrom kā jñān hai pitāmāh. Mujhe batāīye, jo vyakti svayam apne ko jue me hār cukā hai vo kaun hotā hai kiśī aur kī svatantratā, kiśī aur ke ātma-sammān ko dāv par lagāne vālā? Maiṃ apne praśn kā uttar māng rahī hūṃ pitāmāh aur āpkā yah lajjit maun mere is praśn kā uttar nahīm ho saktā. Kyomki yeh praśn keval draupadī nahīm kar rahī hai, yah praśn kar rahī hai nārī jāti, yah praśn kar rahī hai pṛthvī jo har prāñī ki mā hai, yah praśn kar rahā hai is deś kā bhaviśya jise āpke purvaj cakravartī mahārāj bharat kā nām milā hai... Yadi patnī pati kī sampatti hotī hai, to jab mere pati apne ko hāre, uske sāth mujhe bhī hār gaye; to phir maiṃ dāv par kaise lagī? Aur yadi patnī pati kī sampatti nahīm to mere pati, merī ājñā liye binā mujhe dāv par kaise lagā sakte haim?” Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episode 47.

The monologue begins by highlighting Draupadi's personhood not just defending her personal freedom, but the sense of personhood based on that freedom by focusing specifically on the right to stake a person's independence and sense of self-respect. Then, it widens the focus by connecting the question to all womankind, Mother Earth, and the future of modern India.

Mankekar argues that this dialogue specifically turns Draupadi into an index of Indian womanhood, and her humiliation as symptomatic of societal degradation.<sup>152</sup> The serial is able to carry out its register of excess by positioning Draupadi not just as a (virtuous) individual, but also as the index of the lived Indian experience of women.

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<sup>152</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 235.



*Figure 9: Mid-close up shot of Draupadi as she speaks in the assembly.*



*Figure 10: Krishna comes to Draupadi's rescue. The scene constructed as a tableau showing virtue triumphant over evil.*

Within this melodramatic register, Krishna's appearance presents the triumph of Draupadi's virtue over evil. While sinister music had been playing in the background throughout Draupadi's tirade, the moment she starts praying to Krishna the background music becomes serene and her prayers are the ones that echo. While Dushasana continues to unravel her sari, the background music turns into a steady martial rhythm that builds up suspense before giving way to openly exultant music signifying the triumph of good over evil. Within the logic of melodrama, since the Kuru elders abdicated responsibility Krishna as judge of Draupadi's virtue comes to her rescue.

Virtue thus triumphs over evil. However, while the melodramatic register opens up space for a critique of the violation of Draupadi's personhood and then further broadens it to include experiences of Indian women, its resolution in the form of Krishna's appearance leaves the critique itself unresolved. When in fact, in a scene created for the serial, Draupadi is about to use the power of female chastity to curse the assembly hall, Gandhari stops her mid-sentence, creating a cliff-hanger ending for Episode 47. In the next episode, Gandhari berates the assembly for allowing things to deteriorate as far as they did, but manages to convince Draupadi not to deliver her curse. Later, in episode 89, Arjuna sublimates Draupadi's trauma within that of the city-state Hastinapura, telling her that while her trauma is important,



but not as much as you think it is. You are Draupadi loved one, not Hastinapura... Do not remain Draupadi, you are the symbol of Hastinapura's pride. You were not humiliated, Hastinapura was.<sup>153</sup>

In the last episode of the serial, episode 94, Draupadi herself negates her trauma and anger, sublimating it and re-framing it as a humiliation of the entire Kuru clan, saying, "I am your daughter-in-law...I do not want to see the family divided. My humiliation was not mine, but of the Bharata dynasty."<sup>154</sup> The serial's insistence on controlling Draupadi's rage so that the nation and the family remain unscathed, Mankekar points out, comes at a time when the Indian nation-state was become increasingly fascist.<sup>155</sup> Draupadi's trauma is still considered secondary to the aims of common national good. Thus even though the serial brings up the issue of women's rights, the dramatic resolution of the narrative does not resolve the issue itself but instead sublimates it within the idea of the national good.

The TV serial's representation of the Ekalavya story is different in that the serial finds it hard to sustain a narrative in which two of its main protagonists are morally wrong.<sup>156</sup> The

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<sup>153</sup> "...kintu, utnā nahīm jītnā tum samajh rahī ho. Tum draupadī ho priye, tum hastināpur nahīm ho...tum keval draupadī nā bani raho priye, tum hastināpur ke svābhīmān kā pratīk ho." Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episode 89.

<sup>154</sup> "Maim kulvadhu hūm...maim parivār kā vibhājan nahīm cāhtī. Merā jo apmān huā bhī thā vo merā kab thā? Vo to bharatvaṃṣa kā apmān huā thā". Ibid., 94.

<sup>155</sup> Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 238–39.

<sup>156</sup> According to the Critical Edition, Ekalavya, a *niṣāda* prince wants to learn archery from Drona, the teacher of the royal Kuru household, but Drona turns him away. Undeterred, Ekalavya goes into the forest, builds a life-size statue of Drona, and honouring the statue as his teacher, starts practicing archery. One day when the Kuru princes are out hunting they witness Ekalavya prowess at archery when he shoots seven arrows into the mouth of a barking dog to silence in quick succession. The Kuru princes report the feat to their teacher. Arjuna asks Drona how come Drona had a better archer as a pupil when he had promised Arjuna, that Arjuna would be the best archer in the world. Hearing these words, Drona goes to meet Ekalavya, and demands Ekalavya's right thumb as fee, which Ekalavya happily gives. Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Beginning*, 1:270–72. Simon Brodbeck argues that Drona had to give in to Arjuna's demand because

Ekalavya story arc in the Chopra *Mahabharat* first appears in Episode 23, and the serial re-visits it briefly in Episodes 24 and 25. Episode 23 depicts the education of the main male protagonists of the serial—the Kuru princes, Krishna, Karna, and Ekalavya.<sup>157</sup> Ekalavya’s establishing shot shows him practicing archery with a target painted on a tree trunk. Unlike the Kuru princes in the previous scene who are bedecked in golden crowns, armbands, necklaces, coloured full dhotis and an *angvastra*, Ekalavya wears only a plain white and red half-dhoti and a headband with two bird feathers on the side. Ekalavya is shown practicing when a dog starts barking in his vicinity to which he responds by saying, “cup kar hastināpur ke kutte” [silence, you dog of Hastinapura], seemingly angry at the dog for shouting and revealing his presence and then shoots the dog’s mouth full of arrows. The dog runs through Drona’s class, prompting him to investigate further with his pupils. Drona approaches Ekalavya with his students and asks him to introduce himself. Ekalavya bows and replies, in the same high Hindi register of the Kuru princes, “Vyādhkumār Ekalavya kā praṇām svīkār kījiye gurudev” [“Please accept the greetings of Hunter-prince Ekalavya, O teacher”]. The Kuru princes and Drona are baffled by his salutation. When Drona says that he has not taught Ekalavya, but Ekalavya replies enigmatically that while Drona has not taught him, he has learnt from Drona, and to further explain he will have to take them to his *gurukul*. The scene cuts to a grey statue of a bearded

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<sup>157</sup> In the episode, Krishna’s education seems to be about metaphysics while that of the Kuru princes, Karna and Ekalavya is martial.

man sitting underneath a tree before the camera pans out to show Drona and Ekalavya on either side of the statue and the Kuru princes filed beside them. The background music is serene. Ekalavya then explains himself with two self-contradictory sentences. On the one hand he claims that he has learnt archery from Drona's statue, and on the other hand he immediately claims that he watches Drona's lessons in hiding. Drona then asks for Ekalavya to give a fuller introduction of himself. Ekalavya says that he is the son of a general in the armies of Magadha. Duryodhana asks Ekalavya if he will be friendly, to which Ekalavya replies that he would, but only if Magadha and Hastinapura are friends. Drona praises Ekalavya's skill and asks for payment as his *guru*. The background music rises to a thunder as Drona makes the momentous demand for Ekalavya's right thumb. The Kuru princes are shocked at the request. The music in the background changes from serene to high-pitched string instruments to portray shock. Ekalavya unhesitatingly and unflinchingly cuts off his right thumb and bows down to his guru as the music becomes serene again. The serial, then, highlights the shock of the request through music cues and the Pandavas's reaction, but immediately normalizes it, sublimating it as Ekalavya's devotion to his guru. Immediately after the scene, *Samay* makes a narrative intervention, recognising that this was a momentous act, but also explaining that Drona was simply keeping his promise to Arjuna:

Drona asked Ekalavya for his right thumb as fee, and the blood that flowed as a result, is also a part of the Kurukshetra war, but Drona had to keep his word to Arjuna that he would make Arjuna the world's greatest archer.<sup>158</sup>

Interestingly, the serial then refers back to the Ekalavya story in the next episode. Episode 24 shows the Pandava brothers graduating from their education and taking part in a display of arms for the Hastinapura court and citizenry. Karna interrupts this display and announces himself by taunting Drona— “I have all of Arjuna’s good qualities, except one, which is that I am not your student. If I had been, you might have already had my thumb off by now.”<sup>159</sup> In front of the rulings classes of Hastinapura Drona justifies his actions as motivated by Hastinapura’s interest, saying, “I feared that the thumb could one day wield arms against Hastinapura.”<sup>160</sup> The serial returns to Ekalavya once again in the following episode when a troubled Ashwatthama, Drona’s son, who has just been appointed ruler of the land annexed by the Pandavas for Drona, comes to his father with a question before leaving to assume charge in his province.

ASHWATTHAMA: I have been pondering a question for many days...

DRONA: Who is this question for? Father or Teacher?

ASHWATTHAMA (*bows to his father*): Teacher.

DRONA: Ask.

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<sup>158</sup> “Droṇācārya ne gurudakṣiṇā meṃ eklavya ke dāhine hāth kā anguṭhā māṅg liyā aur yah gurudakṣiṇā dene meṃ eklavya ke hāth se jo khūn bahā vo vāstav meṃ kurukṣetra kī raṅbhūmī ke hisse kā thā parantu droṇācārya ko to apne us vacan kī lāj rakhnī thī jo unhomne arjun ko diyā thā ke vo use sansār kā sarvaṣreṣṭha dhanurdhar banā denge...” Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episode 23.

<sup>159</sup> “Arjun ke sabhī guṇom meṃ se keval ek guṇ mere pās nahīm, aur vo guṇ yah hai ki maiṃ āpkā śiṣya nahīm. Yadi maiṃ āpkā śiṣya rahā hotā to āp ab tak merā anguṭhā bhī kaṭvā cuke hote.” Ibid., Episode 24.

<sup>160</sup> “Us anguṭhe meṃ mujhe hastināpur kī or calnevāle vāṇom ke ankur dikhāi de rahe the.” Ibid.

ASHWATTHAMA: Why did you ask for Ekalavya's thumb in fees? Is it because he isn't a Kshatriya?

DRONA: You aren't a Kshatriya either.

ASHWATTHAMA: But at least I'm a Brahmin.

DRONA: *What came first? Humans or Caste?* You cannot become a Brahmin just because you are born into it. The day the Brahmin forgets his responsibility, he will cease to be a Brahmin. *I did not ask Ekalavya for his thumb because he wasn't upper-caste, because no caste can control knowledge, and neither can we shut the doors to knowledge for anyone.* I asked Ekalavya for his thumb because he did not take his education, he stole it. He did not have any right to that education. Even if he had been a Kshatriya or a Brahmin, I would have still asked for his thumb.<sup>161</sup>

The camera pans into a close up shot of Drona's face that only shows resoluteness, as in the background sung narration starts playing reinforcing the premise of Drona's argument, i.e., that knowledge should not be stolen.<sup>162</sup>

The treatment of Ekalavya's character is significant since movements for Dalit self-affirmation have reclaimed the story and figure of Ekalavya as a symbol of upper caste oppression that brutalizes the lower castes (especially Dalits), excluding them from economic,

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<sup>161</sup>“AŚVATTHĀMĀ: Bahut dinom se ek praṣṇ mem uljhā huā hūm...

DRON: Praṣṇ hai kisse? Pitā se yā guru se?

AŚVATTHĀMĀ (bows to his father): Guru se.

DRON: Pūcho.

AŚVATTHĀMĀ: Āpne eklavya se gurudakṣiṇā mem uskā angūthā kyom liyā? Kyā isiliye ki vo kṣatriya nahīm thā?

DRON: Kṣatriya to tum bhī nahīm ho putra.

AŚVATTHĀMĀ: Parantu maiṃ brāhmaṇ to hūm.

DRON: Pahle manuṣya āyā yā jātiyām? Keval janm se koi brāhmaṇ nahīm ban saktā. Jis din brāhmaṇ apnā kartavya bhūl jāyegā, brāhmaṇ nahīm rah jāyegā. Eklavya se maine uskā angūthā isiliye nahīm liyā thā ki vo ūmṇī jāti kā nahīm thā, kyomki vidyā par kisi jāti kā adhikār nahīm hai, aur nā hī ham kisī par vidyā kā dvār band kar sakte hai. Eklavya se maine uskā angūthā isiliye liyā thā ki usne vidyā lī nahīm, usne vidyā curāi thī. Isiliye us vidyā par uskā koī adhikār nahīm. Yadi vah koī brāhmaṇ yā kṣatriya rahā hotā, tab bhī maiṃne uskā angūthā māng liyā hotā.”

Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episode 24. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>162</sup>“Diye binā gurudakṣiṇā, vidyā dhan niḥsār. Jo aurom kī sampadā, aurom kā adhikār, aurom kā adhikār” [“Without giving the teacher his fees, knowledge bears no fruits. That which belongs to others, is their right, is their right.”]

cultural and educational capital.<sup>163</sup> The Ekalavya story sits uneasily within the serial. In the *India Today* interview, Reza was asked, “What was Drona’s justification for seeking Ekalavya’s thumb?” to which he replied repeating the argument in Episode 25, “He [Drona] had a copyright on the knowledge he was imparting to the princes. Ekalavya imbibed it by defraud. Today, if an examinee is caught copying, wouldn't he be punished?”<sup>164</sup>

The serial changed the Ekalavya story in significant ways from the way it appears in the Sanskrit modern critical edition. It invented his father’s affiliation to the Magadha king, which makes them antagonists, as well as the part where he eavesdrops on Drona’s lessons. The serial does open up space for critiquing Drona: in episode 23 the Kuru princes’ shock as well as the background music clearly suggest that Drona’s demand is shocking, yet the serial first sublimates it as *gurubhakti* [devotion to the *guru*] and then explains it away as an acceptable way for Drona to keep his promise to Arjuna. Then, in episode 24, when Karna enters, his stinging taunt once again opens up a space for critiquing Drona, but yet again Drona’s actions are justified as patriotism. In episode 25 Drona rejects the direct accusation that his motives were casteist by arguing that caste this was not his motivation since should not be a barrier to knowledge. Instead, he reverses the blame by arguing that Ekalavya stole the knowledge, thus

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<sup>163</sup> Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, 31, 41.

<sup>164</sup> Chandra, “Interview with RM Raza.”

implicitly erecting barriers to knowledge by advocating its individual ownership (“copyright”, in Reza’s words) over knowledge.

Both the Game of Dice and Ekalavya story arcs, then, open up a space for discussion of women’s rights and casteism, using the tableau, melodramatic registers of excess, and music deftly to both open *and* foreclose those spaces for discussion, with Samay the narrator further reinforcing and repeating the moral lessons from the stories. Draupadi’s critique of the lack of rights for women is blunted in order to protect the family and the nation, while Ekalavya is re-framed as a threat to honesty and to Hastinapura’s political integrity. By carrying out a sustained social commentary however, B.R. and crew were able to expand the mythological and melodramatic genre and create a social mythological. In so doing, they fulfilled one of the key roles of the epics as providing paradigms by which to live and judge behaviour, as well as discuss and evaluate current events and issues.

### **Mythologicals after *Mahabharat***

While *Mahabharat* was the first foray of B.R. Films into mythologicals, it was not the last. In 1997 the Chopras produced a forty-five episode serial titled *Mahabharat Katha* for a new channel in the Doordarshan stable, DD Metro, which sought to portray stories from the *Mahabharata* narrative that had been left out in the original serial. These were not restricted to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and sought to include folk episodes like the story of Barbarik, a figure

worshipped in Rajasthan as Khatushyamji absent from the Sanskrit narrative. Most of the cast reprised their roles for the serial apart from Nitish Bharadwaj as Krishna, who was replaced by Rishabh Shukla, who in the original cast had played Bhishma's father, Shantanu. The Chopras would then return to mythologicals one last time to produce *Vishnu Puran* in 2003, which saw Nitish Bharadwaj returning as Vishnu, while the rest of the cast appeared only in archive footage. The *Mahabharat* cast returned again for *Mahabharat aur Barbareek* [*Mahabharata* and *Barbarik*] (2013).<sup>165</sup> *Mahabharat Katha* did not achieve strong viewership figures while *Vishnu Puran* did well enough to run to 124 episodes. Both serials however failed to make a mark when compared to other mythologicals of the time, let alone the original *Mahabharat*. Neither the Chopras nor their cast have been able to replicate the success of the original *Mahabharat*, and for a long time nor could anyone else. Ekta Kapoor, the doyenne of Indian *saas-bahu* soap operas, produced her own televisual adaptation *Kahaani Hamaare Mahaabhaarata Ki* in 2008. Airing on the short lived Hindi general entertainment channel 9X, Kapoor's failed to get a high viewership.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Produced by K.K. Yadav, a businessman from Gurgaon, the movie seems to have been a vanity project directed at the devotees of Khatushyamji. The entire movie is available on YouTube and boasts of some truly baffling cameos by established Hindi film stars Jitendra and Hema Malini. Agarwal, *Mahabharat Aur Barbareek*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQmmh2c\\_0Hs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQmmh2c_0Hs) Last accessed 28/07/2016

<sup>166</sup> Dubey, "Soaps Drop off Air without Fanfare - Times of India." <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Soaps-drop-off-air-without-fanfare/articleshow/4265387.cms>, accessed 29/9/2016.



Yet while the B.R. Chopra *Mahabharat* has remained a tough act to follow, it helped inaugurate the field of television mythologicals, which enjoyed great popularity in the 1990s and has seen renewed popularity in recent years. Immediately after *Mahabharat* went off the air, Ramanand Sagar came back to Doordarshan with a new mythological, this time on Krishna. Running from 1993 to 1996 over 221 episodes, *Shri Krishna* replaced *Mahabharat* in Doordarshan broadcast schedule and as a major source for advertising revenue. Following *Shri Krishna* came *Jai Hanuman* and *Om Namah Shivay*.<sup>167</sup> Both *Om Namah Shivay* and *Jai Hanuman* followed *Shri Krishna*'s lead in emphasizing the performance of devotion or *bhakti*. The television serial titles are salutations to their subject gods. While mythologicals usually aired on Sunday mornings, gearing themselves for a family viewership, *Om Namah Shivay* was given the primetime slot (9.30 p.m.) on Mondays (Monday is supposedly Shiva's auspicious day), while *Jai Hanuman* aired on Tuesdays (which is Hanuman's auspicious day) during the same primetime slot, thus further solidifying the serials' connection to their respective deities.<sup>168</sup> Like Sagar's *Ramayana* and Chopra's *Mahabharat*, all three mythologicals—*Shri Krishna*, *Jai Hanuman* and *Om Namah*

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<sup>167</sup> *Jai Hanuman*, created and directed by a minor Hindi film actor and producer, Sanjay Khan, ran from 1997 to 2000 on Doordarshan (initially on DD Metro, and then on the main national channel, DD) spanning 178 episodes. *Om Namah Shivay* was created and produced by Creative Eye Entertainment, similarly running on the main Doordarshan channel from 1997 to 2000, spanning 208 episodes. REF?

<sup>168</sup> When a legal battle forced Doordarshan to push *Om Namah Shivay* to the same timeslot on Tuesday, and *Jai Hanuman* to Saturday, Creative Eye Entertainment's head Dheeraj Kumar sought to stay Doordarshan's action in court by arguing that his serial cannot be on any other day apart from Mondays, since Mondays were Shiva's days. Nair, "There's a Battle on for Monday's Prime Time Slot on DD."

*Shivay*—struck deals with satellite networks when their initial run on Doordarshan ended, as well as with overseas channels, while also preparing DVD collectors sets.

Ekta Kapoor's brand of *saas-bahu* soap operas overshadowed mythologicals for a decade in the noughties and influenced the look of the later crop of mythologicals, particularly for what regards female actors/characters. The daughter of the 70s Hindi film star Jeetendra, Ekta Kapoor started Balaji Telefilms with her parents in 1994. While the production company tried its hand at different genres with some popular TV horror shows, sitcoms and soaps like *Mano Ya Na Mano* [Believe it or not] (1995), *Hum Paanch* [Us Five] (1995-99), and *Koshish-Ek Asha* [Try-a Hope] (2000-2), it really revolutionized the television industry with its wildly popular soap operas *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii* [The story of each household] (*Kahaani*) and *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thii* (*Kyunki*) [Because every mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law].<sup>169</sup> As the titles suggest, the soaps focussed on domestic issues, with female characters in the leading roles. Consistently topping TRP charts, *Kyunkii* ran for 1833 episodes from 2000 to 2008, and *Kahaani* for 1661 for the same time period. Their success gave rise to the *saas-bahu* genre of soap operas, with women in leading roles and negotiating their position as wives and independent women within the confines of the joint family.

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<sup>169</sup>Utilising the massive lead-in from the immensely successful gameshow *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC), the Indian version of the US gameshow *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, which was in the 9-10 pm, STAR Plus launched *Kyunki* on 3 July 2000 in the 10.30-11 pm time slot and *Kahaani* on 16 October 2000 in the 10-10.30 p.m. time slot; see Munshi, *Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television*, 109–10.

It is only recently that we have seen a renewed interest in mythologicals, once *Kyunkii* and *Kahaani* went off the air. Sagar Arts, under the leadership of Ramanand Sagar's sons and grandchildren, has started producing mythologicals again, alongside soaps and sitcoms. They produced *Mahima Shani Dev Ki* [The glory of the god Saturn] and remade the Sagar *Ramayan* in 2008 for NDTV Imagine. In 2011 they made *Jai Jai Jai Bajrang Bali* [Hail hail hail Hanuman] for Sahara One, and *Jai Jag Janani Maa Durga* [Hail the world-mother, Mother Durga] in 2012 Colors channel. However the two mythological shows that come close to matching the success of the first two mythologicals and the Ekta Kapoor *saas-bahu* serials were *Devon ke Dev...Mahadev* [The God of gods, Shiva] and *Mahabharat*, both by/for STAR PLUS. *Devon ke Dev* was created for the STAR Plus owned television channel Life OK and ran for 820 episodes from 2011 to 2014.<sup>170</sup> *Mahabharat* (referred to popularly as *STARbharat*), was produced by Swastik Productions and directed by Saurabh Kumar Tewary for STAR Plus, running for 267 episodes from 2013 to 2014.

Ashwin Punathambekar and Shanti Kumar argue that television as a medium is “at large”—it is not bounded by the borders of the nation-state, or modernist dichotomies and has an ability as a cultural form to represent a “range of ideas, ideals, ideologies, images and imaginations across time and space”.<sup>171</sup> Both *Devon ke Dev* and *STARbharat* topped TRP charts while they were on air and have been dubbed into multiple Indian languages. Like the Chopra

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<sup>170</sup> TNN, “Mahadev Tops TRP Charts with a New Record of 8.2 TVR.”

<sup>171</sup> Punathambekar and Kumar, “Introduction: Television at Large,” 483.

*Mahabharat* before them, the two serials have also circulated outside India, but in different places and with different reactions. Both *Devon ke Dev* and *STARbharat* were dubbed into Bahasa. *STARbharat* was also shown with English subtitles in Mauritius. Shaheer Sheikh, the actor who plays Arjuna on the serial, has become extremely popular in Indonesia. He has hosted *Asia's Got Talent* and *The New Eat Bulaga!* on the Indonesian TV channel ANTV. ANTV also produced a reality gameshow titled *Pana Asmara Arjun* [Arjun's Love Arrow] (2015) in Indonesia, in which the winner gets to travel to India with Sheikh.<sup>172</sup> Following the example of the Chopra *Mahabharat*, the producers of the mythologicals leverage their success in the now much more crowded Indian market to negotiate lucrative deals for satellite, digital and DVD rights, thus ensuring safe profits and continuing circulation of the television serials.

## **Conclusion**

Produced and broadcast at the beginning of mediatisation in India, the B.R. Chopra *Mahabharat* serial was made through a mixture of bureaucratic overzealousness, and upper-caste bias within the offices of Doordarshan and the television producers. Its narrative mode and aesthetics drew upon a range of existing forms—from *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books to mythological films to calendar art, but also innovate existing mythological aesthetic. By adapting visual motifs and tropes of mythologicals and social melodrama, the serial also

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<sup>172</sup> Aiyar, "Love of God"; Prathivi, "Shaheer Sheikh: The Indian Sensation - The Jakarta Post."

delivered a social commentary (particularly through the meta-diegetic figure of *Samay*, Time) and opened some critique which, though unfulfilled, helped cement the impression of continued relevance for both the *Mahabharata* epic and the serial in particular. Broadcasting it on state-sponsored airwaves at a time when state-imposed sanctions made alternative programming impossible had the effect of reaching a very wide audience that was also simultaneously adapting to the new televisual medium.

The Chopra *Mahabharat* is sometimes represented as a baneful influence on India public culture. By itself, its immense popularity cannot be a valid defence against such accusations. Connecting Hindu myths to a national Indian concern and presenting them as secular might seem naïve in the context of the rise of the Hindu right, and betrays a conscious or unconscious caste Hindu bias in the higher echelons of both Doordarshan and the TV serial production companies. At the same time, as Mankekar's research shows, it is important to not flatten viewer responses to the serial so as to prove a chain of causality between the serial and the rise of the Hindu right, even though it is an important and significant context. The viewer responses often tend to vary as viewers, more often than not, carry out a negotiated reading of the serial.

Mythologicals remained popular for the better part of the 1990s until Ekta Kapoor's soap operas overshadowed them in the noughts. It was only in the 2010s that they have been

able to return to relative popularity, though in their current conjuncture they inhabit a much more crowded television landscape. While the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* showed the potential popularity and earning power of mythologicals on the small screen, within the much more crowded and diversified satellite TV landscape of the new millennium—geared both towards India and the diaspora—mythologicals have become an established but not commanding presence on TV channels. And while they have diversified in focus and updated their look in tandem with the glossy and glamourized make-up, costumes, and settings of TV soap operas, they largely remain indebted to the original serials with their mixture of narrative drive, information, and devotional appeal.

## Chapter 2:

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# Modernist interventions in the *Mahabharata*

### Introduction

If television brought the popular iconography of gods to the small screen, appropriating and cementing devotionality in its re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*, modernist re-tellings have been using the same narrative to interrogate and/or militate against the affiliations of the Indian nation and aesthetics of popular devotionality. This chapter looks at two playwrights and a poet and their re-telling of the *Mahabharata* within their particular cultural fields— Dharmavir Bharati in Hindi poetry and modern Indian theatre, Girish Karnad in Kannada literature and modern Indian theatre, and Arun Kolatkar in Indian English poetry, specifically the Little Magazine culture. It argues that these modernist interventions and re-tellings of stories from the epic, while not as popular as the television serial, have achieved popularity through and within diverse networks of circulation that have often crossed the boundaries of language, genre and media. All these authors have taken a steadfast anti-commercial stance in the production and circulation of their works, which on the one hand has meant that the works have only circulated in restricted networks, but on the other hand has meant that they have

been able to interrogate popular concepts of devotion (darśan and bhakti), morality and religion, and affiliation to the Indian nation. I will conclude the chapter by arguing that despite their highly critical stance on nation and religion, the writers have been, to various extents, incorporated into the postcolonial national canons of their separate fields.

Most of the work on dramatic performances re-telling the *Mahabharata* has focussed on ‘folk’ and ‘oral’ epics.<sup>173</sup> This chapter instead looks at *Mahabharata* in urban theatrical and literary circles, and how modernism and *Mahabharata* cut across time, language, and genre. The texts chosen in this chapter— Dharmavir Bharati’s play *Andhā Yug (The Blind Age, 1954)*, Girish Karnad’s Kannada and English plays *Yayati* (1961) and *The Fire and the Rain* (1994), and Marathi-English poet Arun Kolatkar’s *Sarpa Satra* (2004)— were written at times that were far apart from each other and in different languages originally, but there are not only thematic similarities between the texts but also similarities in how the authors participate in cosmopolitan literary circuits, form their own affiliations and are rewarded, to varying extents, with cultural and symbolic capital.

There has been intense debate about the parameters and limits of modernism within the European context. The German concept of ‘die Moderne’ encompasses artistic impulses that were not “reflections of outer reality but...a manifestation of psychological feelings...of the

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<sup>173</sup> See for instance Roghair, *The Epic of Palnādu*; Blackburn et al., *Oral Epics in India*; Sax, *Dancing the Self*.



soul's quandary and expression of vague, at times contradictory moods, tinged with melancholy, pessimism and resignation."<sup>174</sup> In Latin America, 'modernismo' rejected both naturalism and the one-sided influence of the 'mother-country', Spain, opening up instead to cultural influences from other European countries, especially France. In Spain, modernismo instead became a proclamation of "extreme individualism coupled with a strong social protest directed against what it considered to be a profound crisis of the country", leading to the creation of new paradigms between language and object viewed through the lens of the writer's candid inner subjectivity.<sup>175</sup> Within Anglo-American literature, High modernism referred mainly to T.S. Eliot's experiments with free verse and highly symbolist poetry, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf's experiments with stream of consciousness form of novel writing, aiming to better depict "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".<sup>176</sup>

Modernism flourished outside the European context much after its presumed end there. Laetitia Zecchini argues that the acultural, "historicist teleology of a Eurocentric perspective that considers modernism beyond the Euro-American axis and beyond the canonical period of high modernism (1910–1930) as parasitic, derivative, belated or 'manqué'" should be abandoned in order to recognize that "[l]iterary modernism in India is the result of [...] fecund

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<sup>174</sup> Mozejko, "Tracing the Modernist Paradigm: Terminologies of Modernism," 14–15.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>176</sup> Eliot 1923 in Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 167.

intercultural and interlinguistic transactions, of protean belongings and identities”.<sup>177</sup>

Modernism in the works analysed in this chapter thus has aesthetic and thematic similarities with its European counterparts, especially in the rejection of their immediate artistic predecessors. These works break with their immediate past to create their own specific affiliations as they each seek to articulate their own particular themes, idioms and aesthetics, and create their own artistic communities. At the same time these are postcolonial texts, seeking to break from aesthetic and cultural affiliations that were mediated in the colonial regime, like the commercial Parsi theatre. *Andhā Yug* and *Yayati* especially are an attempt by Bharati and Karnad to form a post-colonial idiom of theatre. However as their more than half a decade of performance history, as well as Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain* and Kolatkar’s *Sarpa Satra*, show that while the concern for articulating an authentic idiom and critique of social hierarchies remain central in these texts, they are also able to circulate and gain recognition in cultural networks the authors have been able to build for themselves over their long careers. These could be through circuits connected to cultural entities like the Bharatiya Jnanapith, National School of Drama (NSD), Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) or Sahitya Akademi, as is the case with Bharati and Karnad, or through his specific artistic coterie, as with Kolatkar.

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<sup>177</sup>Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*, 33–34.

The *Mahabharata* then might seem like an odd choice for a source text. Dramatic performance and re-telling of the story in the colonial era were heavily influenced by the inter-ocular aesthetics popular devotionality and anti-colonial, nationalist politics.<sup>178</sup> Nandi Bhatia shows that due to colonial censorship and policing, and especially since the passage of the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, mythologicals became effective vehicles for anti-colonial propaganda. Since colonial authorities wanted to avoid seeming to interfere in the religious customs of the native population, mythologicals were mostly exempted from colonial censorship. Hindu mythology thus became an effective allegorical vehicle for articulating anti-colonial and nationalist politics.<sup>179</sup> However, after Independence, both playwrights and poets sought to interrogate this close connection between the *Mahabharata* and the Indian nation and eschewed popular devotional aesthetics in re-telling Hindu myths. In theatre, the impulse crystallized in the call to reject *both* Western theatre *and* ‘Western-influenced’ commercial theatre (like Parsi theatre, where mythologicals had been extremely popular, see Kathavachak, Lothspeich), as the discussion in the 1956 national theatre seminar organized by the national academy for performing arts (Sangeet Natak Akademi) shows. Suresh Awasthi, general secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi from 1965 to 1975 coined the term Theatre of Roots to “describe modern Indian theatre’s ‘encounter with tradition’ and ‘liberation from Western

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<sup>178</sup> Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 34–35. Also, see chapter 1.

<sup>179</sup> Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance*, 21, 44, 46.

realistic theatre.”<sup>180</sup> Erin B. Mee describes the Theatre of Roots movement as “a post-Independence effort to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by challenging the visual practices, performer-spectator relationships, dramaturgical structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance... the roots movement challenged the colonial culture by reclaiming the aesthetics of performance and by addressing the politics of aesthetics.”<sup>181</sup> The product, in director Habib Tanvir’s words, was to be “a truly Indian theatre, modern in and universal in appeal and indigenous in form.”<sup>182</sup>

Compared to the other fields of cultural production, post-independence Indian theatre developed as an intensely networked and translational field. Key directors (such Satyadev Dubey, Ebrahim Alkazi), theatre groups and centralised institutional sites like the National

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<sup>180</sup> Suresh Awasthi 1989 in Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 10. See also Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 13; Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 187–99. K.N. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam have since become two directors most closely associated with the theatre of roots movement. Both have adapted Bhasa’s *Mahabharata* cycle of plays and performed it multiple times, both using the folk styles of their native states—Panikkar from Kerala, and Thiyam from Manipur. For a list of their *Mahabharata* adaptation see Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 183. For a detailed analysis Panikkar’s *Urubhangam* and Thiyam’s *Chakravyuha* (which, though adapting the *Mahabharata*, was written by Thiyam and his company) see *Ibid.*, 203–16. From the theatrical corpus of these two directors, *Chakravyuha* is the only play that has been translated into English with annotations. See Thiyam, *Chakravyuha*. For a study of the growth of the theatre of roots movement, see Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays and Performances*; Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*; Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. In the 1990s Saoli Mitra wrote, directed and acted in the Bengali play *Nathbati Anathbat* (1991) which has been translated into English and published with another play as Mitra, *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector & Timeless Tales*. Tripurari Sharma, an NSD faculty member, former director and alumni collaborated with a well-known Pandvani performer Shanti Bai Chelak and Sapna Sand to produce *Mahabharat Se* [From the *Mahabharata*] which was first performed at NSD in 2002. Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 276. More recently Atul Satya Kaushik has been developing plays based on the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* which have featured Nitish Bharadwaj and Puneet Issar from the Chopra *Mahabharat*. See Nath, “‘To Understand a Villain, You Must Enter His World’ | The Indian Express”; Sawanti, “Theatre Review: Chakravyuh - Times of India”; Dutta, “A Bouquet of Plays.” Meanwhile Kavitha Nair has also published a long poem titled *Until the Lions* (2016), which was adapted for an experimental dance performance by Akram Khan for the London Roundhouse in January, 2016.

<sup>181</sup> Mee, *Theatre of Roots*, 5.

<sup>182</sup> Habib Tanvir 1977 in *Ibid.*, 198.

School of Drama often pick up plays by contemporary playwrights in different regional languages and translate them “on the hoof.” These translations were then published and re-used by local theatre groups or college productions, while theatre festivals provided precious opportunities for these plays and productions to be watched by audiences and practitioners in other regions—with or without translation. In the process, a canon of contemporary plays and playwrights emerged spanning Hindi (Dharmavir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh), Bengali (Badal Sarkar), Kannada (Girish Karnad), Marathi (Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar), etc.

Keeping in mind Susan Friedman’s exhortation to temporalize and spatialize modernisms, this chapter is divided into three sections, one for each author, with each section first contextualizing the author and their literary careers to trace their specific circles of affiliation and cultural capital in Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, and English literary and/or theatrical circuits. Each author and their works created and circulate in their own specific network of print and performance but intersected in the productions by influential directors and companies. I seek to map each specific network using literary and theatrical studies as well as reviews. All the authors in this study revolutionized their respective fields—Hindi theatre and poetry, Kannada drama, Indian theatre and Indian English poetry—before entering into the canon of the same fields. Mapping the writers’ artistic careers as well as the texts’ circulation and/or performance history is important since a common anti-commercial stance affected the way

these authors accumulated symbolic and cultural capital. Through the four texts in this chapter, I argue that modernist interventions in *Mahabharata* in urban literary and theatrical circuits sought to interrogate ideas of faith, dharma, Brahmanical and patriarchal authority, and the divine. Their most powerful intervention was therefore at the level of character and of language. Characters became sites where these ideas could be questioned through philosophical/existential monologues and dialogues and through dilemmas of interpersonal relationships. In terms of language, we'll see that these modernist works employ either highly poetic language (*Andhā Yug* in particular) or puncture the solemn language of tradition (*Yayati*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Sarpa Satra*). In analysing the works, I will focus in particular on characters, character-space and character motivations and how they are expanded and/or re-articulated around the central theme of each work. The texts in this study engage with the ideas of loss faith, the effect of power and knowledge on its victims and relocating the divine in the everyday 'infra-ordinary', beginning in the next section with Dharmavir Bharati's *Andhā Yug*.

## Andhā Yug

While it began as a radically modern play, *Andhā Yug* immediately garnered critical acclaim and is now an integral part of two literary canons— Hindi poetry and modern Indian theatre. Its author, Dharmavir Bharati has had a long and prolific literary career across multiple forms in Hindi literature, creating multiple networks of affiliation (in literary movements and cultural bureaucracy) and circulation (which are bolstered to an extent by those networks of affiliation). *Andhā Yug*'s re-telling of certain episodes from the *Mahabharata* seeks to interrogate the notion of divinity and divine grace, expanding on the theme of loss of faith through the central trope of blindness. To do this, the play focuses on the antagonists from the *Mahabharata* and their reaction to their defeat. Thus, unlike the Chopra *Mahabharat* or Narendra Kohli's *Mahāsamar*, which glosses over the consequences of war to show the triumphant ascension of the protagonist Pandavas, *Andhā Yug* delves into the consequences of the war for the antagonists and protagonists. While the play does show Pandavas ascension to the Kuru kingdom's throne, it is far removed from the triumphalist tone of the TV serial or *paurāṇik upanyās*. However, by expanding on the themes of defeat and desolation, while Bharati does provide a unique perspective on the *Mahabharata*, it also comes from selectively and exclusively foregrounding those specific emotions in the characters.

## Dharmavir Bharati

Bharati moves across genres and literary cultures creating multiple networks of cultural and literary affiliations, where not only did he accrue critical cultural acclaim for his work, but also, despite disdaining commercial success (a crucial aspect of modernism), accumulated popular acclaim with the support of institutional frameworks.

Dharmavir Bharati was ‘primarily a poet’ according to a profile in the collected volume of interviews and essays on seminal modern Indian playwrights and theatre directors, *Contemporary Indian Theatre* (1989). Though he had been writing poetry before the 1950s, it is in this decade that the majority of his poetic was published. He had appeared in the Ajñeya edited volume *Dūsrā Saptak* in 1951, which followed the famous *Tār Saptak* collection that heralded the start of the poetry movement that became *Nayī Kavītā*. In this decade Bharati published two major poetry collections— *Ṭhaṇḍā lohā* [Cold Steel] (1952) and *Sāt gīt varṣ* [Seven Song Years] (1959). In addition to this, he published his verse-play *Andhā Yug* in 1954, and the poems of *Kanupriyā* in 1959. Themes and motifs of alienation from god, futility of action and experience, defeat, cowardice, and formulating alternative narratives which can be seen in *Andhā Yug* are also found in these collections, especially poems like ‘*Pramathyu gāthā*’ (The saga of Prometheus), ‘*Nayā ras*’ (New Rasa), ‘*Parājit pīrhī kā gīt*’ (The song of a defeated generation),



‘*Bṛhannalā*’, and ‘*Ṭūṭā pahiyā*’ (‘Broken Wheel’).<sup>183</sup> Bharati’s modernist focus on language is evident in *Andhā Yug*, whose poetic language matches his extensive and innovative use of mythic symbolism. Bharati rejected the emphasis of the earlier *Chāyāvādī* poets on the beauty of the metaphor and chose instead to emphasise the ‘*svar*’ (sound) and ‘*laya*’ (tempo, cadence) of the word. One must not only pay attention to the *svar*, he wrote, but also the silence between the words and the shapes those silences take in order to convey meaning, especially in an age where visual spectacle is taking precedence over the aural:<sup>184</sup>

Śabd kī śaktī ko pahcāniye aur uske sur se apnā sur milāne kā pūrā prayās  
kiījiye...Śabd kā āntarik sāmārthya, śabdḡ ke guñjan kī āntarik laya, unheḡ bolne  
meḡ svar kā utār-caṛhāv, śabdḡ kī arthmay gūñj, ek sampann nāṭak kā sabse baṛā  
sambal hotā hai.<sup>185</sup>

[Understand the power of the spoken word, and try to hit the right note when you say it... the sound of the word is an important point of meaning creation. The foundations of a good play rest on its inner strength, its cadence, and strategic stresses.]

Though he was regarded “primarily [as] a poet”, Bharati was immensely prolific in other areas of literary production as well, gaining both popular acclaim and cultural and symbolic capital in the form literary positions and awards. Theatrical and screen adaptation of his

<sup>183</sup> Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī* -2, 2:119–27, 128–29, 137–38, 168–70, 171.

<sup>184</sup> Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh aur pradarsan*, 23. In his direction notes, Dharamvir Bharati however stipulates that the meaning of the words should decide the cadence of the speech. The cadence of the line structure is secondary, but it should keep coming through in the delivery Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī*-1, 1:354.

<sup>185</sup> Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh aur pradarsan*, 24.

literary works would often gain popular and critical acclaim in their own right too.<sup>186</sup> However he retained a disdain for popular acclaim apparent in the performance history of *Andhā Yug*, even though the play is one of the most often and widely performed plays in modern Indian theatre.

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<sup>186</sup> Paul, “Dharamvir Bharati: An Interview by Vasant Dev,” 90. Bharati wrote two popular and critically acclaimed novels, *Gunāhoṃ kā devtā* (The god of crimes, 1949) and *Sūraj kā sātvām ghoṛā* (The Seventh horse of the Sun, 1952). The two novels and his long stories can be also be found in Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-1*. Since its publication, *Gunāhoṃ kā devtā* went into seven re-prints before publication duties were taken over by the prestigious Bharatiya Jnanpith in 1949, and has had 46 re-prints with Jnanpith as of 2006. *Sūraj kā sātvām ghoṛā* has been equally popular, with 46 editions published by Bharatiya Jnanpith as of 2012. The novel was adapted into a Hindi film of the same in 1992 by the famous Indian director Shyam Benegal, went on to win the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi in 1992. The accomplished cast included Neena Gupta, Rajeshwari Sachdev, Amrish Puri, Raghuvir Yadav and Pallavi Joshi. The novel was also translated into English by none other than Ajñeya and published in 1999 by the National Book Trust, India. Bharati also published a collection of long stories titled *Band galī kā ākhiri makān* [The last house in a cul-de-sac] in 1969, and three further collections of short stories titled *Murdoṃ kā gāṃv* [The village of the dead] (1946), *Svarg aur prithvī* [Heaven and earth] (1949), and *Cāṃd aur tūṭe hue log* [The moon and broken people] (1955). *Murdoṃ kā gāṃv* and *Cāṃd aur tūṭe hue log* were first published by Kitab Mahal, while, *Svarg aur prithvī* were first published by Bhasha Bhavan, Benaras (Bandiwadkar, ‘Sampādakīya’, 7). They can be found in Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-2* along with other short stories of his that were published separately or were unpublished. He also wrote five one-act plays in collection titled *Nadī pyāsī thī* [The river was thirsty], first published by Kitab Mahal in 1954, and one of the plays from the collection, titled *Samgmarmar par ek rāt* [A night on marble] was performed by the National School of Drama’s (NSD) Repertory company in 1963. Under the direction of Meena Williams with Sudha Sharma and Mohan Maharishi in the cast; Paul, “Dharamvir Bharati: An Interview by Vasant Dev,” 95. Bharati was also a prolific essayist, publishing three collections— *Thele par himālay* [Himalaya on a handcart], *Kahnī ankanhī* [That which should be said, and that which should be left unsaid], and *Paśyanti* [Seen]. He also published two volumes of literary criticism titled *Pragativād: Ek samikṣā* [Progressivism: a critical study] and *Mānav mūlyā aur sāhitya* [Human values and literature]. Bharati was also famous for his reportage on the 1971 Bangladesh War of liberation. It is collected with his travelogues of England, Germany, Indonesia, and Mauritius in Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-7*. His translation work, though less known, is also prolific. The most well-known perhaps is his translation of Oscar Wilde’s short stories, but in his *Deśāntar*, he translated poets from 21 countries. These were— US (Poetry by white and black authors under two separate sections), Argentina, Ecuador, England, Italy, Cuba, Costa Rica, Greece, Chile, Germany, Turkey, Puerto Rico, Peru, France, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Spain, USSR, and Holland. His translations are collected in Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-8*. Not only was Bharati a prolific author who wrote across different genres, and translator, he was also the chief editor of the prestigious and popular *Dharma Yug* Hindi magazine between 1960 and 1987. The magazine was published from 1949 to 1993. His essays from the magazine are collected in *Śabdītā* (1997). They can also be found in Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-6* along with a collection of his interviews with his literary friends titled *Kuch cehre: kuch cintan* [A few faces: a few thoughts] (1995). Both were first published by Vani Prakashan.

## Performance and literary history: Andhā Yug and Modern Indian Theatre

*Andhā Yug* was an important development in both Hindi modernist poetry and modern Indian theatre.<sup>187</sup> In Hindi poetry, *Andhā Yug* is recognised now as one of the formative and canonical texts of the *Naī Kavītā* movement. Similarly in theatre, Dharwadker writes that *Andhā Yug* was the inaugural play of the “first significant thematic formation to appear in Indian theatre after Independence.”<sup>188</sup> In its more than sixty-years of production history, *Andhā Yug* has gone on to become one the most performed plays in modern Indian theatre, despite, and perhaps because of Bharati’s disdain for commercialism. Though it began as a radical break from the Chayavadi poetry of the time, it gained immediate critical acclaim when it was first performed, and has since become a classic, canonical text in its own right.<sup>189</sup>

The play was first published in 1954 in Allahabad and broadcast on Allahabad Radio in the same year.<sup>190</sup> It would take another eight years for it to be performed on stage. The first performance of the play took place in 1962 at Theatre Unit under the direction of Satyadev Dubey, who had taken over direction duties from Ebrahim Alkazi, who had himself moved to Delhi to head the National School of Drama. Jaidev Taneja opines that at least part of the

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<sup>187</sup> Bharati in fact called it a ‘*dr̥ṣyakāvya*’ [visual poetry], ‘*nāṭak*’ [play], ‘*gītnāṭak*’ and [musical/ song-play]. Hindi critics have since gone on to also qualify it as ‘*prabandhkāvya*’ [long poem], ‘*kāvyaḥṛti*’ [poetic work] and ‘*nāṭyakāvya*’ [dramatic poem]. Jaidev Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh aur pradarsan* (New Delhi: National School of Drama, 1998), 29.

<sup>188</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 165. This thematic formation was a group of plays written within a few years of each other almost immediately after Independence that utilised Hindu myths and ancient Indian history.

<sup>189</sup> Girish Karnad told me that he considered *Andhā Yug* to be the best play written in India in the last millennium.

<sup>190</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 186.

reason for this eight-year gap between publication and production was that the older generation were uncomfortable with the play's iconoclasm and modernity, and the younger generation with its mythological source story.<sup>191</sup> The performance took place on the sixth-floor, rooftop terrace of Ebrahim Alkazi's Cumballa Hill apartment building in Bombay.<sup>192</sup> Dharwadker writes that the performance reportedly took six years of preparation, and finally had a run of twelve performances over November and December 1962, reaching roughly 1,200 middle and upper-middle class spectators.<sup>193</sup> Nemi Chandra Jain, the noted theatre critic writes that it was with this production that Bharati shot into prominence as before this he was better known as a romantic poet and novelist.<sup>194</sup>

Bharati wrote his play with minimal stage directions to allow greater freedom in its performance both on radio and on stage, arguing that

As to whether [*Andhā Yug*] should be regarded as an epic poem or a play, I would like to submit that, in Sanskrit dramaturgy, the drama itself is called 'drishyakavya'. There has never been a clear demarcation between poetry and drama in our traditional poetics.<sup>195</sup>

Though not written for radio, Bharati's friend Gopal Das, the then station director of Allahabad Radio, adapted and broadcast the play, suggesting a couple of improvements to the dialogue

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<sup>191</sup> Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh Aur Pradarśan*, 124.

<sup>192</sup> In a cast that included the film star Rajesh Khanna in a small role and Amrish Puri as Dhritarashtra. Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh Aur Pradarśan*, 125.

<sup>193</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 187.

<sup>194</sup> Jain, "Playwright in Perspective."

<sup>195</sup> Bharati, "Playwright's Note."

which were included in the final draft.<sup>196</sup> That *Andhā Yug* was adapted for radio is hardly surprising since Bharati emphasizes the sound and the tempo of the dialogues, directing that neither should the delivery mimic that of a metre-bound poem, nor that of prose, but somewhere in the middle.<sup>197</sup>

*Andhā Yug* rejected the aesthetics of Chayavadi poetry and the visual regime of the Parsi theatre. Where Chayavadi poetry focused on internal rhymes and metaphors, Bharati emphasizes on the importance of sound and tempo of words in his work. One must not only pay attention to the *svār*, but also the silence between the words and the shapes those silences take in order to convey meaning in the text, especially in an age where visual spectacle is taking precedence over the aural—

Śabd kī śaktī ko pahcāniye aur uske sur se apnā sur milāne kā pūrā prayās kījiye...Śabd kā āntarik sāmārthya, śabdoṃ ke guñjan kī āntarik lay, unheṃ bolne meṃ svar kā utār-caṛhāv, śabdoṃ kī arthmay gūñj, ek sampann nāṭak kā sabse baṛā sambal hotā hai.<sup>198</sup>

[Understand the power of the spoken word, and try to hit the right note when you say it...the sound of the word is an important point of meaning creation. On it rest the foundations of a good play, on its inner strength, its cadence, the strategic stresses.]

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Bharati, “Andha Yug,” 1998, 355.

<sup>198</sup> Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāth Aur Pradarśan*, 23–24. In his direction, Dharmavir Bharati however stipulates that the meaning of the words should decide the cadence of the speech. The cadence of the line structure is secondary, but it should keep coming through in the delivery Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhārati Granthāvalī-1*, 1:354.

Bharati's focus on sound meant that where Parsi theatre focussed on a specific, spectacular and melodramatic visual regime that sought to create meaning on the surface, as mentioned in Chapter 1, his plays did the opposite.

Not only was the focus not on spectacle, Bharati's few stage directions point towards a purposeful minimalism. He writes that the play should be on a simple proscenium stage with a stationary curtain back stage and two movable curtains middle and front stage. The opening and closing of the curtain front stage would indicate act change, while the curtain mid-stage would indicate scene-change.<sup>199</sup> However, at the same time, he adds that he has written the play keeping in mind that it could easily be adapted for amphitheatre or a stage free, folk-play type stage. Furthermore, imaginative directors could create an iconic stage.<sup>200</sup>

Staging *Andhā Yug* has actually taken two distinctly differing strategies, one minimalist and the other monumental. One was instituted by Satyadev Dubey, and the other by Ebrahim Alkazi. Dubey chose to focus on the dialogues themselves, staying true to Bharati's own stark vision for his play, in a way that agreed with his own particular politics. For most of his directorial career, especially at the beginning, Dubey was known for his ideological stand against performing English plays. Performing *Andhā Yug* for Dubey was a political statement as well as an aesthetic one—

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<sup>199</sup> Bharati, "Andha Yug," 1998, 354.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 355.

Now that Hindi has acquired an acceptability in the theatre, my anti-English tirade may sound hysterical, but for me it was a matter of survival in the barren sophisticated English-speaking world... one had to present proof ...that Hindi was a language which was capable of delivering the goods... *Andhā Yug* was the proof one needed and the verdict was in favour of Hindi...The sort of Hindi theatre in which I was interested...had to have an overall relevance to our concept of a dynamic language-oriented theatre, having a personal meaning for us and for our confused national growth. *Andhā Yug* fulfilled all these aspirations...<sup>201</sup>

*Andhā Yug* for Dubey thus was a postcolonial statement that a play in an Indian language, and especially in Hindi, is not just possible but also successful. Dharwadker writes that Dubey's emphasis on sound came especially to the fore in his revival of the production in Calcutta in 1964, which Dubey himself described a production beset with multiple technical blunders that "got away because of language".<sup>202</sup> Dubey returned to the play twice again in somewhat different circumstances. He directed the play again in 1989 for the Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh, an event that Dharwadker argues crystallized the modern Indian urban theatre canon. Naseeruddin Shah, Sunila Pradhan and Amrish Puri, actors who had worked with Dubey previously and had since gone on to make a name for themselves in the Hindi film industry, returned to act in Dubey's production.<sup>203</sup> In 1990, in what Dharwadker points out is a sort of circling back to the first performance of *Andhā Yug* on the radio, Dubey performed a dramatic

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<sup>201</sup> Dubey, "Discovering 'Andha Yug.'" "

<sup>202</sup> Dubey in Taneja p. 127 in Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 199.

<sup>203</sup> Naseeruddin Shah played Ashwatthama; Mohan Bhandari, Yuyutsu; Gandhari was played by Sunila Pradhan; Sanjay by Akash Khurana; Kripacharya by Ahmed Khan and Krittavarma by Dubey himself. Amrish Puri played three roles. Though the review does not mention which three, it mentions one, the character of the ghost. The play was performed in Delhi on 10<sup>th</sup> September, and then in Bombay's Sophia Bhabha Hall on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> October. Appendix I, *ibid.*, 391; Shanbag, "After 27 Years, a Revival"; Kumar, "Justice to Classic."

reading hosted by the Sahitya Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi at Triveni Chambers Theatre, in the Mandi House performance hub of New Delhi.<sup>204</sup>

In contrast to Dubey, Alkazi argued that the *Mahabharata* has to be monumental in its staging.

I see Epic characters against the elements rather than against man-made structures, against canyon, rock, blasted forest, deep jungle cave, marshland, swamp. I see Gandhari small, lost, a mere speck under the huge suffocating bowl of sky, but a frenzied, protesting speck, a cursing atom in the act of explosion, detonating a chain reaction of vengeance against the whole Yadav clan. And then minute, helpless, unable to stop what has been started. But being human, open to suffering, to realizing her part in the terrible game.<sup>205</sup>

It is no surprise then that Alkazi's productions of the play with the NSD Repertory Company favoured elegant, blasted ruins. His first production of the play in 1964 took in the historical ruins of the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century fort Ferozeshah Kotla. Alkazi's revival productions in 1967 and 1974 were performed against the stately backdrop of the Mughal-era Talkatora Gardens and the Purana Qila in Delhi. Alkazi's productions also favoured period costumes depending on the performance styles used. In the 1974 Purana Qila production Gandhari and Ashwatthama used Kabuki and kathakali techniques in their performance respectively and were attired accordingly. The chorus too followed the Kabuki style.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 199; Chander, "Yet Another Landmark."

<sup>205</sup> Alkazi, "Directing 'Andha Yug': Interview with Ebrahim Alkazi."

<sup>206</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 200.



Dharwadker traces Alkazi's influence on both Ratan Thiyam's 1974 Manipuri production and M.K. Raina's 1977 production of *Andhā Yug*, also performed at the Old Fort, "which made spectacular use of painted banners as well as costumes in the yakshagana and kathakali styles".<sup>207</sup> Both productions foregrounded the spectacular in their interpretation of the play. Ratan Thiyam translated the play into Meitoli and, in a style that has now become a trademark of his, used Manipuri martial art forms like thang-ta.<sup>208</sup> Thiyam states in an interview that

I have always found human expression more convincing when it is physically portrayed, when there is a body rhythm. I do not use permanent backgrounds for my plays either. I create a different one onstage for each scene, so it seems more spectacular. If a director is not spectacular, it's his own fault.<sup>209</sup>

While Dharwadker argues that

Alkazi's 1967 production at Talkatora Gardens... [is]a touchstone for the intimate, quintessentially theatrical connection between the performance environment, the moments of poignance in the audience's experience, and the meaning of the drama.<sup>210</sup>

A recurrent criticism of the Alkazi's direction style was that the productions tend to lose the impact of the dialogues. A review of the 1964 Alkazi production that toured Bombay and performed at the Birla theatre states that the play lost its impact because of faulty dialogue

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 198; 'I Communicate to the World: Q&A with Ratan Thiyam'.

<sup>209</sup> Shedde, "I Communicate to the World: Q&A with Ratan Thiyam." Thiyam's insistence on the spectacular might be due to Alkazi's influence. According to Taneja, Thiyam played Yuyutsu in Alkazi's 1974 Old Fort production of *Andhā Yug*. Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh Aur Pradarśan*, 137. However unlike Alkazi, Thiyam cannot rely on stately backgrounds for his productions as but his comment about having no stable background reveals. Thiyam's appropriation of Manipuri folk forms might have more to do with the fact that Chorus Repertory Company, the theatre company Thiyam founded and directed, had to constantly contend with straitened finances, perhaps more so than other metropolitan theatre troupes as he goes on to indicate later in the interview. Thus, the way he constructs the spectacular is directly linked to the economic realities he and his company had to contend with.

<sup>210</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 200.

delivery and a “peculiar” Hindi accent. The review ends by stating that, “though comparisons are odious I did feel that the Theatre Unit team of Bombay had put up a more vivid production of the same play two years ago.”<sup>211</sup> Taneja similarly writes of a Thiyam production that while it executed the spectacular commendably, it could not do justice to the play’s mood of “desiccation, melancholy, desolation, and defeated degradation”.<sup>212</sup> Dubey was characteristically even more biting:

Alkazi’s production at the Birla Theatre in Bombay was pathetic, of course, not as pathetic as MK Raina’s recent production at the Shri Ram Centre. [Raina revived his production of the play in 1986] But not because of the decadent, imposed production values...The indifference to the language of *Andhā Yug* displayed by E Alkazi and MK Raina can only be matched by the pathetic, printed editions of *Andhā Yug* available. I know mistakes are inevitable, but try to read a recent edition of *Andhā Yug*—you will have a nervous breakdown.<sup>213</sup>

Since then, *Andhā Yug* has circulated more widely than any other Indian play in India, a remarkable feat in a country where plays rarely run for more than a few performances. Bajaj writes that

Ādhunik kāl meṃ sambhavataḥ yahī ek aisā nāṭak hai jo asaṃkhya bār, anek jagahom par anek nirdeśakom aur rangkarmiyom dvāra mancit kiyā gayā hai.<sup>214</sup>

[In the modern age, this [i.e. *Andhā Yug*] is the only play that has been performed multiple times, in different places, with different directors and actors.]

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<sup>211</sup> Drama Critic, “Hindi Verse Play with Epic Theme: Fine Production Values.”

<sup>212</sup> Taneja, “Lokrang Aur Umang Ke Nāṭak.”

<sup>213</sup> Paul, “Satyadev Dubey: An Interview by Sunita Paul,” 96. For a majority of Dubey’s career his fight to create a Hindi theatre canon was driven by his belief that Indian conditions could only be expressed and articulated in Indian languages, and his desire to prove that meaningful modern theatre was possible in Hindi.

<sup>214</sup> Taneja, *Andhāyug: Pāṭh Aur Pradarśan*. Bajaj’s words are significant because not only has he himself acted in some of the landmark productions of *Andhā Yug*, and directed some himself, he also served as the director for the National School of Drama from 1995 to 2001.

Jaidev Taneja has collated the impressive performance history of *Andhā Yug*, which

Dharwadker summarizes—

...Ratan Thiyam (1974, 1984, and 1994); Mohan Maharshi (1973, 1975, and 1992); M. K. Raina (1977 and 1986); and Bansi Kaul (1983). Other metropolitan productions have been directed by Ravi Baswani (1974), Ramgopal Bajaj (1992), Arvind Gaur (1994), and Kamlakar Sontakke (1997), while important regional productions have come from Ajitesh Banerji (1970), Dulal Roy (1973), Satish Anand (1973 and 1976), Ravi Baswani (1975), Kamlakar Sontakke (1974), Rajendra Gupta (1974 and 1975), and Bhanu Bharati (1977). The languages of performance have included Bengali, Manipuri, Assamese, and Marathi, in addition to the original Hindi; the venues have ranged from metropolitan areas, midsized cities, and district towns in India to Mauritius, Japan, and Germany. Indeed, with productions in such towns as Agra, Aurangabad, Azamgarh, Banaras, Bilaspur, Chandigarh, Gorakhpur, Guwahati, Gwalior, Imphal, Indore, Jaipur, Jamshedpur, Kanpur, Lucknow, Nagpur, Nainital, Patna, Prayag, Raipur, Sagar, and Ujjain.<sup>215</sup>

The play has found wider and long-term dissemination by being included in the syllabus of college and university courses on modern Hindi drama and, more recently, of modern Indian literature in English translation. Through the powerful mediation of the National School of Drama and occasional theatre festivals, other theatre directors picked up the play as a theatrical project and produced it for theatre companies and festivals as well as for university and college theatre societies.<sup>216</sup> The Chopra *Mahabharat* was popular due to a confluence of

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<sup>215</sup>Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 188–89.

<sup>216</sup> Though Taneja's survey covers the time period up to mid-1990s, the trend seems to have continued after this date. There were two productions of *Andhā Yug* at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM)— an international theatre festival organised by NSD annually from 1999 onwards— in 2002 and 2003. Amateur productions were put up at IIT Kharagpur's Azad Hall auditorium in 2012 and at Rangmanch Utsav organised by the Department of Art, Culture & Languages of the Delhi government and Sahitya Kala Parishad [Literary Arts Council], Delhi. The most notable recent performance has been Bhanu Bharati's production in 2011 which was presented by the same governmental organisations that organised the Rangmanch Utsav. The staging drew heavily from Alkazi's 1964 production and was performed at Ferozeshah Kotla, the same venue as the 1964 production. While the production itself was not innovative, it boasted a star cast with Mohan Maharshi as Dhritarashtra, Uttara Baokar as Gandhari, Zakir Hussain as Sanjay, with Om Puri providing the voice for the absent Krishna.

events—a liberalising government, the single television channel, a popular source story, and easily recognisable aesthetics. *Andhā Yug* has reached its audiences through both print and performance, both in its original Hindi as well as in translation in English (but also in Bengali and Manipuri, among other languages), facilitated in print by established publishers like Oxford University Press, and in performance by either NSD directly or NSD alumni and/or faculty, becoming a canonical text of Hindi literature and modern Indian theatre.

### Re-articulating characters

*Andhā Yug*'s central theme is the loss of faith, re-locates divinity within humanity itself. This is a radical departure from the Parsi mythologicals of the pre-Independence era as well as folk performances of the *Mahabharata* that showed unwavering faith in divinity. The language the characters used is highly metaphorical and poetic, expressive rather than communicative, and drawing attention to its own metaphoricity. This results in the play using the characters of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Sanjay and Ashwatthama to explore the mood of desolation articulated by the central trope of the play— blindness.

*Andhā Yug* is adapted from the later *parvas* of the *Mahābhārata* which narrate the end and consequence of the Kurukshetra war.<sup>217</sup> Bharati enlarges upon the source story to focus on the desolation and moral disorientation caused by the war. The play especially questions the meaning of Dharma after Krishna, as a god, has himself broken it multiple times. In Bharati's play this pervasive breach of Dharma leads to an all-pervasive darkness and to extreme alienation and degradation for the individual characters.

The play is structured into five acts, along with a prologue, an interlude, and an epilogue, each with a different title— *andhā yug* [the age of darkness], *kaurav nagri* [the City of the Kauravas], *paśu kā uday* [the rise of the beast], *Aśvatthāmā kā ardhśatya* [Ashwatthama's half-truth], *Paṅkh, pahīye aur paṭṭiyāṃ* [Wings, Wheels, and Bandages], *Gāndhārī kā śāp* [Gandhari's curse], *Vijay: Ek kramik ātmahatyā* [Victory: A slow suicide], and *Prabhu kī mṛtyu* [The Lord's death]. The chorus is used extensively to introduce acts, and scene transitions, while characters often indulge in long, reflective monologues.

The prologue, or *sthāpanā*, titled *andhā yug*, introduces the setting and theme of the play.

Yuddhoprānt,  
Yah andhā yug avtarit huā  
jismem sthitiyāṃ, manovrittīyāṃ, ātmāem sab vikrit haim

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<sup>217</sup>Duryodhana's death and Ashwatthama's revenge attack on the sleeping Pandava-Panchala army come from *Sauptikaparva*; Gandhari and Dhritarashtra's grief at their sons' deaths and Gandhari curse to Krishna from the *Strī parva*; and Gri, Dhritarashtra and Kunti's death from *Āśramavāsikaparva* as well as Krishna's death from the *Mausalaparva*.

Hai ek bahut patlī ḍorī maryādā kī  
Par vah bhī uljhī hai donom̐ hī pakṣom̐ meṃ  
sirf kṛṣṇa meṃ sāhas hai suljhāne kā  
vah hai bhaviṣya kā rakṣak, vah hai anasakt  
par śeṣ adhiktar haiṃ andhe  
pathbhraṣṭ, ātmahārā, viglit  
apne antar kī andhguphāom̐ ke vāsī  
yah kathā unhīṃ andhom̐ ki hai;  
yā kathā jyoti kī hai andhom̐ ke mādhyam se<sup>218</sup>

[In those dark ages  
which came into being  
at the end of the great war  
all thoughts and deeds of men  
were corrupt and perverse.

Yes, there were still frail threads  
of honor which held men together  
but good and evil were so intricately knotted  
that only Krishna had the courage to unravel them.

Krishna alone was dispassionate and detached.  
Krishna alone  
could be the savior  
of their future.

All the others were blind  
self-absorbed  
depressed and confused  
lost in the dark caverns  
of their souls.

This is the story of the blind—  
or of enlightenment  
through the life of the blind.<sup>219]</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Bharati, “Andha Yug,” 1998, 360.

<sup>219</sup> Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 5–6.

Act 1, titled *kaurav nagri* further expands on the themes of desolation and blindness through the perspective of those awaiting the news of the war—the Kuru elders Gandhari, Dhritarashtra and Vidura. However, in a Brechtian-style innovative move, Bharati first establishes this perspective through two *praharis* or guards of his own creation, rather than the aged royalty, who comment on their own marginality to the Great War and its general meaningless—

Prahari 1: Thake hue haiṃ ham...  
rakṣak the ham keval  
lekin rakṣaṇīya kuch bhī nahīṃ thā yahāṃ....  
Prahari 2: rakṣaṇīya kuch bhī nahīṃ thā yahāṃ ...  
Saṃskṛiti thī yah ek buṛhe aur andhe kī...  
Prahari 1: Jisne ab hamko thakā ḍālā hai.  
Mehnat hamārī nirarthak thī  
āsthā kā,  
sāhas kā,  
śram kā,  
astitva kā hamāre  
kuch arth nahīṃ thā  
kuch bhī arth nahīṃ thā<sup>220</sup>

[Guard 1: We are tired  
very tired...  
We are just guards  
but there is nothing  
here to defend.  
Guard 2: There is nothing here  
to defend.  
This is the kingdom  
of an old and blind ruler...

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<sup>220</sup>Bharati, Dharmavir. *Dharmavir Bhāratī Granthāvalī-1*, 1:362–63.

Guard 1: And now  
we are tired  
very tired.  
All our actions  
are meaningless.  
Our faith  
our decisions  
our courage  
our lives  
are meaningless  
utterly meaningless...<sup>221]</sup>

Act 2, titled 'Paśu kā uday', shows a scene of devastation as Sanjay, Krittavarma, Kripacharya and Ashwatthama traverse the battlefield, shattered by their complete and unfair defeat, and fleeing from the Pandava army. Sanjay, the messenger-narrator of the war to the old blind couple Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, finds himself in a similar position as the people of Hastinapura. His despair is rooted in his nonpartisan position. When he first appears on stage we see him moaning—

Bhaṭak gayā hūṃ  
mair jāne kis kaṅṭak van meṃ  
patā nahim kitnī dūr aur hastināpur hai,  
kaise pahūṃcuṃgā mair?  
Jākar kahūṃgā kyā  
Is lajjājanak parājay ke bād bhī  
kyoṃ jīvit huṃ mair?<sup>222</sup>

[I have lost my way  
on this path of thorns and stones.

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<sup>221</sup>Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 8–9.

<sup>222</sup>Bharati, *Dharmavir Bhārati Granthāvalī-1*, 1:376. There are parallels here with T.S. Eliot's 'Gerontion', where the old wizened persona says, filled with regret, "I was neither at the hot gates/Nor fought in the warm rain/ Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,/Bitten by flies, fought... After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" Eliot, "Gerontion."



How far is Hastinapur?  
Will I ever reach it?  
What will I tell them?  
...Oh, why am I still alive  
after this shameful defeat?]<sup>223</sup>

Like the guards, Sanjay is lost because he didn't participate in the war, burdened further with the task of witnessing the entire war first-hand in order to relay the death of their sons to the old, blind, couple. Physical sterility has led to emotional sterility in Sanjay, and his cries indicate both the overwhelming nature of this sterility, as well as his eternally deferred desire to participate in a war that would have almost certainly resulted in his death. This is in stark contrast to both the *Mahābhārata*, where Sanjay is the narrator to the old king Dhritarashtra, but also his accuser, and Krishna Udayasankar's *Aryavarta Chronicles* discussed in Chapter 4, where he purportedly tries to influence the events of the *Mahabharata* from behind the scenes.<sup>224</sup>

The main character focus in the act however is on Ashwatthama, the son of Drona, who is broken man, hit first by Yudhishtira's lie that brought about his father's untimely death, and then by the successive deaths of the Kuru army and its commanders, till finally all that is left of the once mighty army are three warriors. The title of the act, the Rise of the Beast,

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<sup>223</sup>Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 22.

<sup>224</sup> According to J.D. Smith, Sanjay blames Dhritarashtra for the cataclysmic *kurukshetra* war as he is narrating it to the old king. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 488.

encapsulates Ashwatthama's disillusionment with the Dharma that Pandavas and Krishna have repeatedly broken, leading him to embrace his inner "andh barbar paśu" [Blind, barbaric animal] in order to get his revenge.

Ashwatthama's eighty-eight line long monologue shows the transformation of his character, beginning from his shock at witnessing Duryodhana's defeat and his own father's death. It inaugurates his symbolic descent into a blind, barbaric animal, literally lost in the dark forest.

Mere andar...  
jo śubh thā komaltam thā  
uskī bhrūṅ-hatyā  
Yudhiṣṭhira ke  
ardhsatya ne kar di...  
maiṃ bhī ek andhī gufā meiṃ hūṃ bhaṭak gayā  
gufā yeh parājay kī...  
śeṣ hūṃ abhī tak  
jaise rogī murde ke  
mukh se śeṣ rahtā hai  
gandā kaf  
bāsī thūk  
śeṣ hūṃ abhī tak maiṃ...  
ātmaghāt kar lūṃ?...  
...nahīṃ!  
jīvit rahūṅgā maiṃ  
andhe barbar paśu-sā  
vāṭī ho satya dharmrāj kī...  
...vadh, keval vadh, keval vadh<sup>225</sup>  
[[Yudhiṣṭhira's lie ]...  
ruthlessly slaughtered

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<sup>225</sup>Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-1*, 1:380–82.

all that was good  
or gentle  
in me...  
I am lost  
in a dark cave—  
the blind cave  
of defeat...  
I...  
—foul as the spittle  
stale as the phlegm  
left in the mouth  
of a dying man—  
...am the only one  
alive today...  
Should I commit suicide?...  
But no  
I shall live  
like a blind and ruthless beast  
and may  
Dharmaraj's prophecy come true!...  
...Kill, kill, kill  
And kill again!<sup>226</sup>]

The third act, titled Ashwatthama's Half-Truth, shifts the action to Hastinapura, depicting the return of the sole surviving son of Dhritarashtra, Yuyutsu, who had fought on the side of the Pandavas and his harsh reception by Gandhari, his embittered step-mother, as well as the return of the injured, dying soldiers to Hastinapura. Off-stage, Duryodhana has finally been hunted down, defeated and left for dead by the Pandavas; Ashwatthama has been appointed the new commander of the severely depleted Kuru forces, and tasked with exacting revenge.

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<sup>226</sup>Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 25–27.

The act ends with a small pantomime of an owl killing sleeping crows, leading Ashwatthama to hit upon the plan to kill the Pandava army under the cover of night as they sleep.

While the first act depicted the effect of the war on those who did not participate in it, and the second act, the effect of war on Ashwatthama, the third act broadens its focus to explore the effects of war on the soldiers, their return home and the disillusionment this results in. Thus Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra's only remaining son to survive the war as well as the death of his Pandava cousins in the Sanskrit texts, is here depicted as a staunch believer who sided with what he thought was the righteous cause, but that conviction has not brought him any peace. In fact, it has only brought on the creeping suspicion that there is no peace. One again, the use of abstract vocabulary elevates his monologue to the level of an existential, philosophical reflection.

antim pariṇati meṃ  
donoṃ jarjar karte haiṃ  
pakṣ cāhe satya kā ho  
athvā asatya kā!  
Mujkho kyā milā Vidur,  
mujhko kya mila”<sup>227</sup>

[In the final analysis  
whether you uphold truth  
or untruth  
you are damned.  
Vidura

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<sup>227</sup>Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-1*, 1:398.

what did I gain?  
What did I gain?]<sup>228</sup>

The sense of despair carries over to the next scene in which Ashwatthama, fleeing the Pandavas and driven to desperation hits upon the idea of massacring the Pandava army in the dead of night. However, just as the play starts moving towards the action of the *Sauptika-parva*, Bharati breaks the narrative for an abstract intermediate scene titled Wings, Wheels, and Bandages, where an old astrologer, whom Ashwatthama had killed in the second act, reappears as a ghost, literally holding up the flow of the play and acting like the Sutradhara-Chorus, and further explicating the meaning of the ‘blindness’ surrounding the characters in the play. Yuyutsu, Sanjay and Vidura appear on stage and explain the internal position of their characters, expanding on the exact nature of their existential dilemma, before the old astrologer/ghost takes control of the story to set the scene for the next act. Yuyutsu embodies doubt, which is also portrayed at a more abstract, philosophical/existential level as a self-destructive force that eats the individuals from within.

While Yuyutsu and Sanjay merely repeat their positions, the interval explores the effect of the war on Vidura who despite being a devotee of Krishna has begun to doubt his God’s divinity. “*Maiṃ Vidura hūṃ*” [I am Vidura],” proclaims Vidura

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<sup>228</sup>Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 44.

Kṛṣṇa kā anugāmī, bhakt aur nītigya  
 par merī nīti sādharmaṇ star kī hai  
 aur yug kī sārī sthitiyāṃ asādharmaṇ haiṃ  
 aur ab merā svar sanśayagrast hai  
 kyomki lagtā hai ki mere prabhu  
 us nikammī dhurī kī tarah haiṃ  
 jiske sāre paḥiye utar gaye haiṃ  
 aur jo khud ghūm nahīṃ saktī  
 par sanśay pāp hai aur maiṃ pāp nahīṃ karnā cāhtā<sup>229</sup>  
 [“I am Vidura  
 a devout and righteous  
 follower of Krishna.  
 In an age when everything is  
 so strangely complicated  
 my faith is simple and unassuming.  
 But now my voice is full of doubt  
 for it seems that my Lord  
 is like a useless axle  
 which has lost its wheels  
 and cannot turn by itself.  
 But it is a sin to doubt  
 and I do not want to sin.”<sup>230</sup>]

Vidura also draws a clear distinction between the circumstances that he could understand and manage, and the circumstances that the characters find themselves overwhelmed by. He can only save himself by reposing his trust in his *blind* faith in Krishna. But in a play in which blindness is the central metaphor how good is blind faith?

The fourth act, Gandhari’s curse, begins with the chorus narrating Ashwatthama’s massacre of the Pandava army. While the Kuru elders leave Hastinapura to visit the battlefield,

<sup>229</sup>Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhārati Granthāvalī-1*, 1:412.

<sup>230</sup>Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 57.

Sanjay loses his divine sight, and Ashwatthama is hunted down by the Pandavas and finally cursed by Krishna. Most of the action in this scene is reported—the massacre of the Pandavas, the hunt for Ashwatthama, and Krishna’s curse takes place off stage.<sup>231</sup>

This leads to the emotional climax of the play when Gandhari, learning of Krishna’s curse is driven to call upon her spiritual merit (*puṇya*) to curse the god Krishna to die like an animal after exterminating his own Yadava clan because

Tum yadi cāhte to ruk saktā thā yuddh yah...  
Inḡit par tumhāre hī bhīm ne adhrarm kiyā  
kyom nahīm tumne śāp diyā bhīm ko  
jo tumne diyā niraprādh aśvatthāmā ko  
tumne kiyā hai prabhuta kā durupyog<sup>232</sup>  
[If you wanted  
you could have stopped the war.  
You incited Bhima’s adharma  
but you inflicted  
a vile curse on Ashwatthama  
who had committed no crime!  
You used your divine power  
for unjust ends]<sup>233</sup>

Gandhari’s monologue, twenty-nine lines long, is much shorter than Ashwatthama’s in the second act but mirrors it in voicing outrage at the perceived double standards in the

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<sup>231</sup> Though Ashwatthama comes on-stage when he is finally caught, his hunters are only mentioned in his dialogue, while Vyasa speaks from off-stage. Krishna curses Ashwatthama to eternal life and damnation, to roam the world, removed from human company, covered in wounds.

<sup>232</sup> Bharati, *Dharmavīr Bhāratī Granthāvalī-1*, 1:431.

<sup>233</sup> Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 80.

maintenance of Dharma by Krishna himself. Krishna, still unseen on-stage, is heard for the first time in the play and accepts the curse as a Christ-like figure

Sāre tumhāre pāp-puṇya, yogakṣem maiṃ  
vahan karūṃgā apne kandhoṃ par<sup>234</sup>

[“I take upon my shoulders  
the responsibility  
of all your good and evil deeds.”]<sup>235</sup>

The fifth act ties all the narrative threads from the previous acts, its title Victory: a Gradual Suicide foregrounding the pyrrhic nature of the Pandavas’s victory. The desiccation of human condition that the prologue predicted is at its apogee. Yudhishtira rules Hastinapura but his brothers are spent now. Yuyutsu commits suicide, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra perish in a forest fire, and the news of Krishna’s death and the destruction of the clan reach Hastinapura. The act repeats obsessively the point that there is no happy ending— neither enlightenment, nor catharsis, nor victory bring joy. The play’s epilogue, the Lord’s Death, brings together the three damned voices of the play— Ashwatthama, Yuyutsu, and the old astrologer. The old astrologer is brought back to life by Krishna as Jara, his own murderer.<sup>236</sup> Krishna’s death is presented here as a sacrifice and a release— he hands, somewhat abruptly, the ‘responsibility’ of humankind to humankind itself, and death releases Krishna from his mortal coil and Ashwatthama from his curse.

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<sup>234</sup> Bharati, “Andha Yug,” 1998, 432.

<sup>235</sup> Bharati, *Andha Yug*, 2010, 81.

<sup>236</sup> While parallels have been drawn to Christ, and his suffering for humankind’s sins, within Bharati’s own work,



Suresh Awasthi wrote that the Bharati's focus on desiccation makes characters seem as if they are standing apart from the flow of dramatic action, rather than contributing to it. The narrative flow of the play halts to allow actors to express their own sense of desiccation. Awasthi further goes on to argue that this makes the monologues more intense and suits the "epic story".<sup>237</sup> Bharati's play does not seek to deepen the characters necessarily but to use them as vehicles for exploring the theme of darkness and the loss of faith. Thus, as the play progresses, the darkness— physical (in the case of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari) and moral (Ashwatthama and Krishna) — enveloping the characters necessarily deepens, allowing no redemption till the epilogue where the play suddenly re-situates divinity in humanity. As the respected theatre critic Nemichandra Jain pointed out, the play's focus on death, desolation, and despair is so unremitting that the redemption offered by its epilogue strikes the viewer as unconvincing.<sup>238</sup> Drawing on Taneja and Bharati himself, Dharwadker argues that the central message of the play—that victory brings no enlightenment, only blindness to both victors and vanquished— is a response to World War II, the Bengal famine and the Partition riots.<sup>239</sup> However, Hindi poet and Marxist theorist Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh also pointed out that while Bharati was right in making his civilizational critique, he decontextualized his characters from the class structure they are part of, which results in a failure to take the critique to a

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<sup>237</sup> Awasthi, "Andha Yug' and Mahabharata."

<sup>238</sup> Jain, "Playwright in Perspective."

<sup>239</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 192.

logical conclusion.<sup>240</sup> The sudden turn towards reaffirming human existence does leave a few questions unanswered, such as how was the darkness resolved? What about the guards— do they also find redemption?

Notwithstanding the disappointing ending, *Andhā Yug* continues as a significant work in the Hindi literature and Modern Indian Theatre canon. While it focused on Gandhari and Ashwatthama to structure its focal lens in adapting the *Mahabharata*, Karnad in his plays goes even further afield to expand upon obscure myths from the *Mahabharata* narrative.

### **Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain***

Girish Karnad is one of the most well-known and highly-feted playwrights of modern Indian theatre, associated closely with the post-independence Theatre of Roots movement. But whereas the *Mahabharata* adaptations directed by K.N. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam which are more significant as performance pieces than as texts, Karnad's plays based on stories from the *Mahabharata* are significant literary *and* performance adaptations.

Modern urban Indian theatre has for a long time demonstrated an anti-commercial strain, relying instead on different forms of state and corporate patronage, ranging from awards, to grants, to publishing deals. Thus economic capital is often dependent upon cultural capital. This also leads to agents within this circuit of cultural production to establish and support

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<sup>240</sup> Muktibodh, "Mūlyavān Aur Mahatvapūrṇ Prayās," 449–50.

circuits of cultural production across forms and languages, thereby encouraging these agents to work in different but related fields like films and television while encouraging the translation and/or adaptation of their works into different languages and/or media. Girish Karnad has had an extremely illustrious career in theatre and film. He has received multiple prestigious grants and awards for his work in Indian theatre. Additionally, he has often forayed into movies as actor, scriptwriter and director, as well as administrative posts heading major national cultural institutions. While Karnad originally wrote a majority of his plays in Kannada, he has often been involved with their translation and adaptation in some capacity. Thus we see a pattern emerging in which Karnad produces works that cross language barriers and become part of the national canon, through a mode of circulation markedly different from that of television. Before focusing on the plays, this section traces Karnad's career as a playwright, translator and at times, cultural bureaucrat to contextualize his *Mahabharata* plays as well as the linguistic circuits he worked in, the cultural affiliations he developed, and the cultural capital he accumulated from the time he wrote *Yayati* to *The Fire and the Rain*.

*Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*, both based on stories from the *Mahābhārata*, are pivotal plays in Karnad's playwriting career, though not as famous as *Hayavadana* and *Tughlaq*. They bookend a highly productive period in Karnad's career when he wrote plays only in Kannada, but acted, directed and wrote scripts for films in Kannada and Hindi, often to great critical

acclaim and commercial success. As literary and performance texts they have been translated and performed into different languages. Almost uniquely for *Mahabharata* adaptations, Karnad consciously avoids the central figures of the narrative—the Kuru family and Krishna. Instead, he chooses to adapt small episodic stories from different part of the Sanskrit text. He consciously excludes the presence of divine, without precluding the supernatural, building a play-world where the human and supernatural often intersect and interact, often with tragic consequences. Karnad also introduces, invents and deepens the female characters in his plays, making them both central and tragic foci of his play. By doing so Karnad actively decenters the central story line, popular devotionality and the male characters in his text.

*Yayati* was the first play that Karnad wrote, in 1960. After *Yayati*, Karnad turned to Indian history as well as folktales for source stories for his plays, almost all of which have become canonical plays in their own right. Over the thirty odd years that separate *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad wrote six plays—*Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1972), *Anjumallige* (1977), *Hittina Hunja or Bali* (1980), *Nagamandala* (1988), and *Taledanda* (1990). In these plays Karnad continued to negotiate between differing epistemes, performance practices and technologies. With their use of puppets and masks, plays like *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* especially became heavily identified with the Theatre of Roots movement.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 141–78.

Karnad has also been active in other spheres of cultural policy formation and production. During his time on the editorial board of Oxford University Press (OUP) in the 1960s, he persuaded the London company office to include A.K. Ramanujan's poetry in their Oxford Poets series and translated Badal Sircar's Bengali play *Evam Indrajit* into English in 1974.<sup>242</sup> He participated in the Sangeet Natak Akademi's (SNA) National Roundtable on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre in 1971, served as Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) at Pune from 1988 to 1993, and Director of SNA from 1988 to 1993.<sup>243</sup> Karnad also worked extensively in Hindi, Kannada and English film and television media, forming an important creative partnership with the Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar, and film director Shyam Benegal to create films that "launched and sustained the Middle Cinema movement in Hindi."<sup>244</sup> Karnad has accrued significant cultural capital in the course of his long and successful theatre career and has received some of India's highest civilian awards, the Padma Shri in 1974, and the Padma Bhushan in 1992.<sup>245</sup> These awards and felicitations not only testify to his high degree of canonization, but the prize money and grant awards also allowed

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<sup>242</sup> Dharwadker, "Introduction," xxxiv.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., xxxvii.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., xxxv. Girish Karnad had leading roles in *Nishant* (1978), *Manthan* (1976) and *Umbartha* (1982).

<sup>245</sup> Karnad has been awarded cultural awards for his work across different media. He was awarded Sangeet Natak Academy award for playwriting in Kannada in 1972 and the Sahitya Akadmi award in Kannada in 1994 for his play *Taledanda*. He was also awarded the Jnanpith Award and Kalidas Samman in 1998 for his writing while his work in the film industry has also fetched him multiple National Film Awards, Filmfare awards, and Karnataka State Film Awards. The Bhabha Fellowship (1970-2) and a Fulbright scholarship (1987-88) helped Karnad in writing his seminal plays *Nagamandala* and *Taledanda* respectively.

him to devote himself exclusively to playwriting.<sup>246</sup> When Karnad finally returned to the *Mahabharata* source material in *The Fire and the Rain* in 1993, he had already established himself as a playwright, actor, scriptwriter, director, and translator in Hindi, Kannada and English. The next section contextualizes and directly compares the publication and performance history of *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*.

### The plays: publication and performance history

Circulation of Karnad's plays takes place both in print and performance. Translation plays a significant part in this since both *Yayati*, and *The Fire and the Rain* were translated almost immediately upon their first publication. Again, like Bharati and Kolatkar's, Karnad's plays can circulate due to affiliations he creates with figures in publishing houses and the theatre circuits. The publication of his plays in Kannada is helped by Kirtinath Kurtkoti at the Manohar Granth Mala, while speedy translations into English and Hindi facilitated in part by the directors like Satyadev Dubey and by institutional support from the National School of Drama and, in the case of *The Fire and the Rain*, the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

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<sup>246</sup> Dharwadker notes that the award money from some of these awards like the Jnanpith and Kalidas Samman, also afforded Karnad financial independence to focus exclusively on playwriting, retiring from films. Dharwadker, "Introduction," xxxvi. Though Dharwadker does not specify exactly what aspect of his film career Karnad retired from, it most probably refers to film direction and scriptwriting. He continues to act in Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam play. In fact, I had a chance meeting with him on the sets of the Hindi movie, *Samrat & co.* (2014).

*Yayati* was written over the span of a few weeks as Karnad was preparing to leave for the UK on the Rhodes scholarship in 1960 in Dharwad, Karnataka.<sup>247</sup> The process of writing his first play shows a negotiation carried out by Karnad between imitating European modernism and articulating a theatre for the Kannada literary circuits. He showed a draft of his play to G.B. Joshi, the founder-proprietor of Manahora Grantha Mala, an important publisher of Kannada literature.<sup>248</sup> A few months into his stay in London, he writes, he received a letter from Kirtinath Kurtkoti.<sup>249</sup> Kurtkoti guided Karnad's play towards publication both indirectly and directly—indirectly by mentioning to Karnad in a letter “that he hoped it was not a psychoanalytic reinterpretation of the myth in the manner of Eugene O’Neill”, compelling Karnad to redraft his play. Directly, by working further on the language of the play. As Karnad himself admits, he had been preparing to write in English, like a lot of Kannada authors and had thus been modelling his literary language on modernist heavyweights like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv. The play was published in Kannada in 1961.

<sup>248</sup> Karnad writes that the Granth Mala was “among the many institutions that made the city virtually the cultural capital of North Karnataka in those days”. Karnad also writes that Joshi ran the Mala as a vocation rather than business enterprise promising “‘good, tasteful’ literature of a certain number of pages per year for a fixed subscription and about 1,500 readers trusted his judgement. On this entirely informal understanding, he had been able to discover some of the best writers of that period and bring out books which are today acknowledged as classics. To be published by the Mala was to gain immediate recognition.” Karnad, *Yayati*, viii. The Mala has since gone on to publish all of Karnad's Kannada works as well as a biography.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

Within the Kannada literary circles, *Yayati* was received enthusiastically by reviewers. Kurtkoti, in the preface to the Kannada text, called *Yayati* “a play with a new outlook”, unlike previous Kannada drama before that was heavily influenced by naturalist playwrights like George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen and focused on “tackling the problems of our society.” Karnad himself admits that he was not sympathetic to the idea of modernity put forward by Gopalakrishna Adiga and U.R. Anantamurthy and rather professed that the only Kannada writers that influenced him were D.R. Bendre and Kurtkoti, and that at the time he wrote *Yayati* he was influenced by European playwrights like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. In surveys of Kannada literature Karnad is classed in the ‘Navya’ drama movement along with Adya Rangacharya, Lankesh, Chandrasekhar Kambar and Chandrashekhar Patil.<sup>251</sup>

Translation has been an important part of creating a circuit of textual production for playwrights in post-Independence India. Almost all of Karnad’s plays have been translated, mostly by Karnad himself (and published by his one-time employers, Oxford University Press India). *Yayati* was initially unique in Karnad’s body of work in that it was one of two plays that he did not translate into English himself (the other is *Anjumallige*).<sup>252</sup> Hindi and Marathi editions were brought out by major publishing houses such as Radhakrishna Prakashan and

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<sup>251</sup> Murthy, “Modern Kannada Literature,” 185.

<sup>252</sup>It was first translated into English by Priya Adarkar in the mid-1960s Karnad, *Yayati*, vi. Karnad then translated it himself in 2008. Dharwadker notes that this shows Karnad’s own dissatisfaction with the original material. Karnad himself writes that he “felt uncomfortable with the work and decided to treat it as part of my juvenilia.” Karnad, *Yayati*, vii.



Popular Prakashan (in 2008 and 2007 respectively), translated by by B.R. Narayanan and Vijay Tendulkar.<sup>253</sup> Thus even though Karnad did not translate *Yayati* himself for a long time, it entered circulation through print and, crucially, translation. For

*Yayati* was received enthusiastically by the reviewers, but no theatre person would touch it. The professionals in Karnataka found its form as well as sensibility alien while the amateurs found the demand for four female actors impossible to meet.<sup>254</sup>

Finally, as with Bharati's *Andhā Yug*, it was first performed under the direction of the legendary theatre director Satyadev Dubey and his company the Indian National Theatre in Hindi at the Tejpal Auditorium in Bombay in 1967.<sup>255</sup> While it is hard to track an exact performance history, it seems to have followed a similar pattern of diffusion through key directors and groups working in different locations and languages. Dubey staged another performance of *Yayati*, this time in Marathi, in 1970-71, while Kumar Roy directed a Bengali production for Shombhu Mitra's company Bohuroopee in Bombay in the late 1980s.<sup>256</sup> Apart from the above, the archives at the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi hold reviews of three other productions of the play—one in Bangalore in 1984, directed C.G. Krishnaswamy (possibly in Kannada, but the review, which is in English, does not mention the language of the play),

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<sup>253</sup>Though in all probability written and performed much before. For instance, a 2002 Hindi production is mentioned as having been based on Narayanan's translation.

<sup>254</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, ix.

<sup>255</sup> The cast included Dubey himself as Puru, along with Amrish Puri as Yayati, Sulabha Deshpande as Swarnalata, Tarla Mehta as Sharmishtha, Asha Dandavate as Chitrlekha, Sunila Pradhan as Devayani, and Gurnam Singh as the Sutradhara. Amrish Puri and Sulabha Deshpande went on to become household names in their own right, while Mehta, Dandavate, and Pradhan acted in notable independent movies in the 80s and 90s. *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>256</sup> Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 79, 400. On page 79 Dharwadker mentions that Roy's production was staged in 1988, while on page 400 she mentions 1989.

and two by Bipin Kumar and his theatre company Kshitij in Delhi in 1997 and 2002, the second for the Bharat Rang Mahotsav.<sup>257</sup> Krishnaswamy, also known as CGK, was an academic and theatre director, and at different times held the post of the Chairman of the Nataka Academy. Bipin Kumar is an alumnus of the National School of Drama and started the theatre company Kshitij with NSD graduates.<sup>258</sup>

Written originally in Kannada under the title *Agni Mattu Malé*, Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* was commissioned by Garland Wright, the Artistic Director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis and rendered into English for workshop with the actors at the Guthrie Theatre.<sup>259</sup> Like *Yayati*, *Agni Mattu Malé* has also circulated widely in print and performance in the original Kannada, as well as Hindi and English translations. And again like *Yayati*, the translation and performance direction was carried out by administrators, faculty and/or alumni of the NSD. Dharwadker mentions three significant performances of the play: one, in Kannada, by C. Basavalingaiah, a NSD alumnus. Prasanna, also a Kannada director and NSD alumnus, produced the play with NSD's Repertory company in Hindi in 1998 as *Agni aur barkhā*. The translation was done by Ram Gopal Bajaj, who served as faculty and director of NSD from 1995 to 2001, from the English version and was published by Radhakrishna Prakashan, an

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<sup>257</sup> Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 367.

<sup>258</sup> The company is now run by another NSD alumnus Bharati Mehta. "Kshitij Theatre Group."

<sup>259</sup> Dharwadker, "Introduction," xv. Wright had previously directed Karnad's *Taledanda* as part of the theatre's thirtieth anniversary season. Wright left the theatre soon after however and the play was never performed at the Guthrie Theatre. Dharwadker, "Introduction," xv.

imprint of the leading Hindi publishers, Rajkamal Prakashan, first in 2001 and reprinted in 2010. Arjun Sajnani performed the play in English in Bangalore in 1999 and adapted it as a Hindi film titled *Agnivarsha*, which received mixed reviews critically and failed to gain commercial popularity.<sup>260</sup> Prasanna's production, though criticised by Karnad for the omission of a crucial plot device, had a successful run of 43 productions, including one in Nepal.<sup>261</sup> Since then, the play has been performed at BRM in Kannada in 1999 and 2002, in Hindi in 1999 and 2003 in Hindi, in English in 1999 and in Telegu in 2016.<sup>262</sup>

This is an incomplete performance history of *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*, yet a certain pattern emerges.<sup>263</sup> For one thing, in contrast to Dharwadker's suggestion that plays in modern Indian theatre become canonical first through performance and only then went into print, it seems that both Bharati's and Karnad's plays depended on both print and performance in cementing their status as canonical plays. Moreover, it's not just any print or performance that matters, but printing with publishers with a reputation of being cultural taste-makers, and performance by established directors. Secondly, to become part of the canon the plays have to be translated, performed and published in Hindi and English and produced by either famous

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<sup>260</sup> Of the three productions, Dharwadker writes that while Basavalingaiah and Sajnani's productions were well received, Prasanna's production drew a rare rebuke from the playwright. *Ibid.*, xv–xvi.

<sup>261</sup> "Caught between Fire and Rain."

<sup>262</sup> Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 348–85.

<sup>263</sup> It is virtually impossible to trace the performance history of the plays in amateur circuits in schools and colleges, by companies based outside Indian metropolitan centres, companies within Indian metropolitan centres, and companies in the Indian diaspora.

directors or their affiliates, often graduates of the National School of Drama. Karnad is able to tap into and participate in cultural and institutional networks that do not offer rich economic capital as returns, but allow for his plays to circulate in print and performance. While cultural awards and patronage by cultural institutions is important within this field, in the 1960s the first form of cultural capital the play gained was simply by being performed. This form of anti-commercialism allows Karnad to focus on narratives from the *Mahabharata* that are not part of the main Pandava narrative.

### Expanding on obscure myths

Both *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* draw upon small episodes from the *Mahābhārata*. *Yayati* is based on an episode from the *Ādiparva* concerning an ancestor of the main protagonists. Yayati is a mythical king married to Devayani, the daughter of the sage Shukracharya, preceptor of the *asuras*, with whom he had two sons. Unbeknownst to her, he also begets three sons to her friend Sharmishtha despite Shukracharya warning against it. Devayani discovers her husband's infidelity and as a result returns to her father. Incensed, Shukracharya curses Yayati to premature old age, with the caveat that one of his sons can accept the curse on his behalf. All five sons refuse, except the youngest, born to Sharmishtha, Puru. Yayati passes his curse to his son and rules for a thousand years, before returning his son's youth to him and installing

him as the new king as a reward for his filial devotion. The main Kuru protagonists of the *Mahabharata* narrative are Puru's descendants.<sup>264</sup>

Similarly, *The Fire and the Rain* is based on small episode from the *Aranyakaparva* (The Forest Book) — the myth of Yavakri, the son of the sage of Bharadvaja, and Parvasu and Arvasu, the sons of Raibhya— which Karnad in fact first came across in C. Rajagopalachari's abridged retelling of the *Mahabharata* (see Chapter 3) while he was in college in India.<sup>265</sup> Bharadvaja is an ascetic focussing on penance, while Raibhya is a learned man. Their respective sons take after their fathers: Yavakri practices great penance, forcing Indira, the king of gods to grant him the knowledge of the Vedas. Despite his father's warning, Yavakri becomes arrogant and rapes the wife of Raibhya's eldest son Parvasu. Raibhya summons spirits to kill Yavakri as punishment. Maddened by grief at Yavakri's death, his father Bharadvaja curses Raibhya to die at the hands of his own elder son. Meanwhile Raibhya's sons have been overseeing the great royal sacrifice performed in order to please Indra and ask him for timely rains. Parvasu returns home for a short time, and mistaking his father for a deer, kills him. He then goes back to the sacrifice and asks his brother Arvasu to leave the sacrifice in order to perform penitential rites prescribed for killing a Brahmin. But when Arvasu returns, Parvasu frames him for the murder. Arvasu prays to the Sun god, forcing the gods to intervene and bring the dead to life.

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<sup>264</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 25–28.

<sup>265</sup> It is interesting to note that the Guthrie theatre also began with the aim of providing a non-commercial alternative to the highly commercialized Broadway theatre space.

The central dilemmas in Karnad's *Mahabharata* plays are the consequences of power and death. Karnad adapts these stories into full-fledged plays by reworking character motivations and central dilemmas and inventing new characters. He transforms marginal characters like Yayati, Puru, Devayani, Sharmishtha and Yavakri, Parvasu, and Arvasu in his respective plays into round characters and introduces complex female characters like Swarnalata and Chitrlekha, and Vishakha and Nittilai. By focusing on the small episodes where the divine is usually left out of the action and supernatural actions always lead to tragedy, Karnad subverts the idea of the *Mahabharata* as Great Tradition, while simultaneously contributing to the process of creating a Great Tradition in the form of canonical, modern Indian theatre.<sup>266</sup> He consciously avoids using the aesthetic of theatre and filmic mythologicals, especially *bhakti* and action sequences. Death has to have meaning in his plays for them to succeed as tragedies.

### Yayati

Karnad has often stated that *Yayati* was born out of two very different impulses. One was his own resentment with familial expectations, and their fears that he would settle down abroad:

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<sup>266</sup> Robert Redfield introduced the concept of great and little traditions, the former the tradition of the reflective few (the economic and cultural elite), and the latter the tradition of the largely unreflective few, both of which interact with each other. Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*, 42; Redford in Obeyesekere, "The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism," 139. Ramanujan uses the this term to distinguish the high literary tradition of mythological re-tellings and the more popular, 'folk' re-tellings. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 7, 63 et al. I use the term here specifically to show that Karnad, engages with folk forms to challenge the literary form, but he does so by appropriating the folk form to consciously create an Indian theatrical canon.

I had secured a Rhodes scholarship and I was to leave for England for higher studies. My parents were happy but they also had their anxieties. They began to put certain conditions—that I should return to India soon after my studies and then marry a girl from my own community, etc. I did not like their meddling in my affairs. I thought that I was the master of my destiny. I resented and this resentment must have coloured some of Puru's sentiments.<sup>267</sup>

The second was his engagement with Indian folk theatre like *natak* and *Yakshagana* as a young boy, and his introduction to modernist theatre, first in Bombay, and then in England. Karnad describes the experience of writing this play as “stepp[ing] out of mythological plays lit by torches or petromax lamps into Strindberg and dimmers”, referring in the first case to the *Yakshagana* performances and *natak* companies he watched in his early teens and Ebrahim Alkazi's production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* in Bombay.<sup>268</sup> Writing *Yayati* presented the challenge of working through questions about new technologies of performance and emphasis on the psyche of the dramatis personae.<sup>269</sup>

As a result of this dilemma, Karnad chose to retell the story of *Yayati*, expanding upon certain aspects of the mythological tale.<sup>270</sup> The Indian context, he argues, presents a narrative archetype that is the complete opposite of the oedipal complex—instead of the son aspiring to replace the father (and succeeding in a few instances), the father aspires to control the son.

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<sup>267</sup> Paul, “Girish Karnad: An Interview by Kirtinath Kurtkoti,” 79.

<sup>268</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, 72.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> While the *Yayati* episode is not the most famous or memorable one from the *Mahabharata*, it is not obscure either. In a talk given at the Sahitya Rangbhoomi Pratishthan in Pune, Karnad points out that he was aware of Marathi re-tellings of the *Yayati* episode in prose and drama, referring to V.S. Khandekar's critically acclaimed and popular novel *Yayati* (1959), and V.V. Sherwarkar's popular Marathi *natak Yayāti āṇi Devayānī* (1966) *Girish Karnad Speech on “The Structure of the Play.”* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvrEPHuVTZo>, accessed 15/08/2016.

*Yayati* engages with and depicts the consequences of the exercise of patriarchal power without checks and balances, or as Karnad calls it, 'responsibility'.<sup>271</sup> But while all the characters are round in the play, the male characters are the narrative fulcrums, and the female characters are the fulcrums of the tragedy.

The play is divided into four acts and a prologue, delivered by a Sutradhara, or narrator, a common device in Sanskrit and folk theatre. In his prologue the Sutradhara marks the play's break with traditional Indian theatre by stating:

Our play this evening deals with an ancient myth. But, let me rush to explain, it is not a 'mythological'. Heaven forbid! A mythological aims to plunge us into the sentiment of devotion. It sets out to prove that the sole reason for our suffering in the world is that we have forsaken our gods. The mythological is fiercely convinced that all suffering is merely a calculated test, devised by the gods, to check our willingness to submit to their wills. If we crush our egos and give ourselves up in surrender, divine grace will descend upon us and redeem us. There are no deaths in mythologicals, for no matter how hard you try, death cannot give meaning to anything that has gone before. It merely empties life of any meaning.<sup>272</sup>

Karnad consciously avoids the 'mythological' because he wants to avoid the *bhakti rasa* or devotion in order to create a world where divine grace does not exist, because as long as the possibility of divine grace exists, there is a 'cop-out'. A work of art can never be tragic, according to Karnad, as long as there remains an aspect of devotionism in it. Thus the Sutradhara continues to say:

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid. Accessed 15/08/2016.

<sup>272</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, 5–6.



Our play has no gods. And it deals with death... We turn to ancient lore not because it offers any blinding revelation or hope of consolation, but because it provides fleeting glimpses of the fears and desires sleeping within us. It is a good way to get introduced to ourselves.<sup>273</sup>

In my interview with him, Karnad said that he tried to avoid *bhakti rasa* in his adaptations of the Mahabharata, thereby avoiding the inevitable happy ending *bhakti* allowed, where all tensions, conflicts and dilemmas are resolved by the presiding deity. He wanted to explore the tragic genre and allow conflicts to play out to their logical, bitter end.

There are no divine characters in the play and no supernatural act occurs on stage. The divine in this play is not full of grace, but actively malevolent, because the people wielding it can be malevolent, either intentionally or accidentally. For instance when the play opens with Devayani making preparation to welcome her stepson Puru as he returns home with his newlywed bride, Chitrlekha, it also introduces Devayani's former friend turned slave Sharmishtha.<sup>274</sup> Sharmishtha has been forced into servitude because of how important Devayani's father was to her father's rule. Thus the play introduces a supernatural agent capable of completely changing a person's life for the worse. As Sharmishtha tells Yayati:

SHARMISHTHA: You own hundreds of slaves. But have you ever wondered what it does to a person to be made a slave? It turns that person into an animal. A domesticated animal. One's will to act is destroyed. One's selfhood humbled into grateful

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>274</sup> The story goes that Sharmishtha in a fit of jealousy pushed Devayani into a well, where she is rescued by Yayati. Now, Devayani's father Shukracharya threatens to leave Sharmishtha's father's employ, thus leaving Sharmishtha's father, an asura king, defenceless against his enemies. To appease the powerful sage, Sharmishtha is given to Devayani as a slave on the latter's request.

submission. 'Accept that crumb, wait for a pat on the back.' To be a good slave is to have all your vileness extracted from you

(Pause.)

I snarl because I want to retain a particle of my original self. I abuse and rave to retrieve an iota of it. It's all useless of course . Scream as I may, I know there is no escape from the degradation. The louder I scream, the more I declare myself a slave. That is the point. I have decided to turn myself into a performing freak.<sup>275</sup>

The (mortal) actions of a supernatural agent has turned Sharmishtha into a slave and taken away her sense of personhood from her. Yayati is impressed by her struggle for independence and remarks, "You are a very intelligent woman. I didn't allow for that."<sup>276</sup> However, instead of empathizing with Sharmishtha, he decides to take her as his lover.<sup>277</sup>

In the second act, Sharmishtha is apprehensive about the consequences of Yayati's infidelity while Yayati is unconcerned and keen only to enjoy Sharmishtha as his possession. Devayani finds out about Yayati's infidelity. When Devayani's demands that Sharmishtha be sent away are met with Yayati's announcement that he will wed the latter, Devayani decides to leave Yayati and return to her father. Meanwhile, Puru also enters the play as a young prince disillusioned by his patriliney and who shares a strained relationship with his father.

The supernatural act, when it comes at the end of the second act, is not enacted on-stage but reported to Yayati. Act Three is a short one as the consequences of the supernatural act

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<sup>275</sup> Karnad, *Yayati*, 17–18.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>277</sup> In the Yayāti story, Devayānī proposes that the two of them, i.e., Devayānī and Yayāti should get married because Yayāti held Devayānī's right hand while rescuing her. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 26.

continue to play out. Puru returns to tell Yayati about Shukracharya's caveat to the curse—that the curse will abate if any young man would take the curse for him—and that none of his subject, except Puru himself, are ready to take on the curse. Though Yayati brushes aside this suggestion and storms off-stage, by the end of the Act, he evidently rethinks Pooru's offer as Puru starts feeling the effects of the curse. This is where the malevolence of the supernatural as well as the structures of a patriarchal system come together to deliver the tragic resolution to the play. Act Four introduces us to Puru's newlywed bride, Chitrlekha, an invention of Karnad's. Chitrlekha is aware that her match to Pooru is for his patrilineage rather than Pooru himself, who she finds somewhat unimpressive. Hearing about Pooru's self-sacrifice however, Chitrlekha finds herself overcome with awe before actually seeing his decrepit state make her realise the harsh consequences of his action. She refuses to accept Pooru as her husband, despite Yayati ordering her to do so. Instead, holding Yayati responsible for Pooru's self-sacrifice she offers him the choice of returning Pooru's youth or unleashing chaos. When Yayati continues to prevaricate, she rebukes him, "I am here this moment, sir. And I cannot interest myself in your unborn future".

YAYATI: This is a time when we are all being put to test...There has never been a crisis like this before. Nor is there ever likely to be one again. Rise above trivialities, Chitrlekha. Be superhuman.

*(Pause.)*

CHITRALEKHA: All right, Your Majesty, I shall try. But when I do so, please don't try to dodge behind your own logic.

YAYATI: Beware. No one has ever accused me of cowardice.

CHITRALEKHA: (*scared but persistent*) Yes, this is the moment... I did not know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of those qualities for which I married him. But you do.

YAYATI: (*flabbergasted*) Chitralkha!

CHITRALEKHA: You have taken your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it.

YAYATI: Whore! Are you inviting me to fornication?

CHITRALEKHA: Oh, come, sir. These are trite considerations. We have to rise above such trivialities. We have to be superhuman. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Nothing like this is likely to...<sup>278</sup>

Chitralkha punctures Yayati's self-righteous tone of sacrifice and confronts him with a counter-choice, one that brings him face-to-face with his own actions— either he marries and/or gives her a child or she will commit suicide. Yayati continues to stall, forcing Chitralkha to pick up a vial of poison in her right hand in a gesture that precisely mirrors Sharmishtha's at the end of the first act. Yayati, fully aware of the implication of taking of Chitralkha by her right hand, can only watch helplessly as Chitralkha downs the vial. Chitralkha's suicide finally forces Yayati to face the consequences of his action and return Puru's youth. Chitralkha's tragic death is the logical resolution of a malevolent supernatural

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<sup>278</sup>Karnad, *Yayati*, 65–66.

act as well as Yayati's refusal to take responsibilities for his actions. The Sutradhara ends the play with an ironic note—

Well, conventions of Sanskrit drama require that a play have a happy ending. So let us assume that this question led to many more and that finally Pooru found the question he was seeking.

For we have it on the authority of the epics that Pooru ruled long and wisely and was hailed as a philosopher king.<sup>279</sup>

Instead of a benediction (*phalaśruti*), the play ironically indicates an artificial 'happy ending' to the tragedy. By expanding on the myth of Yayati, Karnad explores the motivations and consequences of his characters' actions. The royal and divine characters are far from heroic and benevolent. Yayati refuses to accept the responsibility of his actions and Pooru's act of heroism leads to Chitrlekha's death. The only supernatural act—Shukracharya's curse—is a malevolent one. The ones who hold the powerful to account are those who are affected by the exercise of power. *The Fire and the Rain* which continues in the same vein as *Yayati* by expanding the characters from the source text, and interrogating the divine generally, but also Brahmanical power and knowledge systems more specifically.

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<sup>279</sup>Ibid., 70.

### *The Fire and the Rain*

*The Fire and the Rain* is divided into three act with a prologue and epilogue. The prologue is used to set up both the action that will span the three acts, as well as a play within a play that will be acted out in the epilogue. The prologue opens to a land struck by a nearly ten-year draught, in the middle of a seven year *yajna* designed to appease the rain gods. Usually because these sacrifices are so long and arduous, entertainment is planned for the participants from time to time. However, since the kingdom has been suffering a severe draught, most of the acting troupes that would perform this entertainment have left. The only performer left is the Chief Priest Parvasu's brother, Arvasu. The prologue shows that Parvasu has, for an undisclosed reason, cast his brother out.<sup>280</sup> Nevertheless, Arvasu is permitted to perform. The prologue ends with Arvasu getting ready for his performance, exclaiming "But... brother knows, and I know that this isn't the real thing... The real play began somewhere else..."<sup>281</sup>

Unlike *Yayati*, which begins with a note of discord, *The Fire and the Rain* takes time to evoke an idyllic setting in the First Act, even if it is a flashback. The flashback takes us a month in the past when Arvasu and Nittilai speak of their plans for a shared future which involves Arvasu becoming an actor and asking Nittilai's tribe's elders for her hand in marriage, both actions

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<sup>280</sup> When I say cast out, or outcast within the context of this play, I mean literally thrown out of caste.

<sup>281</sup> Karnad, "The Fire and the Rain," 2005, 109.

that could lead him to become an outcast. Even though this is a seemingly happy scene, Karnad already foreshadows Arvasu's predicament.

Yavakri is mentioned in this first scene and appears in the very next scene, already famous for performing austerities for ten years. However he is disillusioned with the entire act and the knowledge he as supposedly gained from the gods. As he tells his old beloved Vishakha, now Parvasu's wife:

Universal Knowledge! What a phrase! It makes me laugh now... One should expect the appearance of a god to be a shattering experience. Concrete. Indubitable. Almost physical... [But it was] Not very profound... Some knowledge, but probably very little wisdom.<sup>282</sup>

The scene is a visual and textual counterpart to Arvasu and Nittilai in the scene before.

Whereas Arvasu and Nittilai are innocent and optimistic about their future, Yavakri and Vishakha are meeting after a decade, considerably aged. While Yavakri's penance has taken a toll on him, Vishakha has had to endure a similar toll on her body:

Indra might be immortal. But...my breasts hang loose now...I live in this hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil...I was married off to Parvasu. I didn't want to, but that didn't matter...Exactly for one year...he plunged me into a kind of bliss I didn't know existed...And then [after that]-it wasn't that I was not happy. But the question of happiness receded into the background. He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search... Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me...I let me body be turned inside out

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 119–20.

as he did his own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual?  
We never talked. Only the sense pervaded the air...<sup>283</sup>

Through Yavakri and Vishakha, Karnad interrogates the very idea of searching for knowledge.

The two put their bodies through intense rigours (in the case of Vishakha acquiesced to rather than actively chosen) for the sake of knowledge with very little to show for the efforts.<sup>284</sup>

Meeting after ten years, they form a relationship recognising that they have gone through similar experiences. Unlike Rajaji's re-telling, which depicts this episode as Vishakha's rape, Karnad re-figures Yavakri and Vishakha's extramarital relationship into a consensual one, which is discovered by an unsuspecting and naïve Arvasu. At the end of the act however, the audience and Vishakha both discover however that Yavakri was trying to seduce Vishakha to engineer a confrontation with Raibhya and Parvasu, and use the power he had gained from penance to shame them. Vishakha, stunned by this revelation and almost in a trance, foils his plans, which leads to his ultimate death at the hands of a supernatural demon, a Brahma Rakshasa, summoned by Raibhya to kill Yavakri. Thus we see Yavakri in the first act of the play, who pursued knowledge through penance in order to shame Parvasu and Raibhya while the second act will further reveal that Parvasu is officiating the sacrifice to achieve immortality on his own rather than to bring rain to the drought stricken lands. Both men

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>284</sup> Though Karnad never explicitly names these modes of knowledge, they seem to be approximations of yogic and tantric practices, which at various points and in different incarnations, have been alternatives to, departures from, and part of ritualistic Vedic religion.



pursue knowledge for the sake of gaining power, while Vishakha's body becomes pawn for both men in that pursuit.

Act Three moves the play closer towards a conclusion. It begins with Nittilai running away from her husband and tribe to save and help Arvasu before they fall in with an acting troupe. The stakes are high—on the one hand, an important sacrifice is being carried out by a murderer, and on the other hand, Nittilai's brother and husband are hunting her down. The epilogue brings the play to a conclusion. Arvasu begins acting the myth of Vritra and Indra with fratricidal overtones mirroring his own relationship with his brother. In his character as Vritra, Arvasu sets fire to the actual sacrificial precincts. Parvasu and Nittilai enter the burning structure, Parvasu to die, Nittilai to save Arvasu. Tragically however, this act leads to Nittilai's brother and husband discovering and killing her and she dies in Arvasu's arms. Suddenly Indra appears on stage and offers Arvasu a boon. Arvasu asks for his lover Nittilai to be brought back to life, while unheard voices are urging him to ask for the rains for the draught stricken land. Indra decides that the only way to bring Nittilai back to life is to roll back time. "Those who died all over the earth at the same time as your family. If the wheel of Time rolls back they come back to life too," which, Indra suggests, would only lead to the entire tragedy repeating itself.<sup>285</sup> Eventually rains return to the land, and the Brahma Rakshasa

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<sup>285</sup>Karnad, "The Fire and the Rain," 2005, 174.

that had been summoned by Raibhya finds release, while Arvasu remains clutching Nittilai's dead body.

Karnad thus uses marginal stories and characters from the *Mahabharata* and expands upon them to create a modern tragedy. Coming after *Tale-danda*, a play about caste in the context of the Virashaiva movement, Karnad here interrogates Brahmanical modes of power and knowledge. Expanding on the characters of Yavakri and Parvasu, Karnad questions the different modes of Brahmanical knowledge—practicing penance and Vedic knowledge— which are instrumentalised as means to power, immortality and/or revenge. As in *Yayati*, the female characters are re-articulated or invented to depict the harshest consequences of Brahmanical power. They are the victims of the way this power is exercised, but they are able to resist and hold it to account as well. As I argue below, Kolatkar is moved by a similar concern for the way power is instrumentalised and the effects of such power.

### **Arun Kolatkar and *Sarpa Satra***

Famously reluctant to publish his poetry, Kolatkar published a collection of poems in English, *Jejuri*, in 1976, and another, *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* in Marathi, in 1977. The second burst of

poetry publication came in the middle of the 2000s, with the publication of *Chirimirī* (2003), *Bhijakī vahī* (2003) and *Droṇ* (2004) in Marathi and *Kala Ghoda Poems* (2004) and *Sarpa Satra* in English.<sup>286</sup> Part of the little magazine culture based in Bombay in 1950s and 60s, Kolatkar and his poetry have been ignored by the Indian English canon until recently despite the fact that Kolatkar won awards for his poetry in 1970s. Vijay Dharwadker states that Kolatkar's popularity was due to his coterie charisma rather than participation in public debate. Until recently Kolatkar's work was almost exclusively published by independent publishing houses run by friends, thus ensuring that Kolatkar's readership remained within a chosen circle. This section looks at how Kolatkar's Bombay coterie formed and created art as a way of writing in and from the margins. Kolatkar enacts this marginality by choosing a minor characters from the *Mahabharata* narrative to act as the voice that interrogates and memorializes the violence enacted by Kurus and their Brahmin co-conspirators in carrying out genocide in his poem *Sarpa Satra*.

### The Bombay scene: modernism and cosmopolitanism

Born to a relatively traditional and provincial Brahmin family from Kolhapur, Arun Kolatkar came to Bombay in 1949 to join the fine arts course at the Sir J.J. School of Art. Mumbai, as it is

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<sup>286</sup> Dharwadker, "Arun Kolatkar's Historical Imagination," 151–52.

called now, continues to be a cosmopolitan city, despite the rise of the anti-immigrant and Hindu chauvinist political party, the Shiv Sena, to power in the 1990s and its recent offshoot, the Maharashtra Navanirman Sena (MNS) formed in 2009.<sup>287</sup> When Kolatkar moved to Bombay, it was caught in the midst of two waves of historical development which affected him. One was colonial, which saw the city grow to be the biggest city in the British Empire after London and its busiest port. It saw a constant traffic of goods, as well as people and cultures both within India and from the West, turning what had once been a fishing village into a multicultural, multilingual and cosmopolitan city of immigrants. The second was postcolonial, which saw the creation of a postcolonial and modernist Indian aesthetics in literature, performance and fine arts. Bombay was headquarters of the two major leftist anti-colonial modernist cultural movements— the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA).<sup>288</sup>

The Kala Ghoda locality, where the Jehangir Art Gallery is situated, became the hub where the modernist artists and writers congregated, including Kolatkar, who struck a friendship with Ashok Shahane and Dilip Chitre with whom he launched the Marathi little magazine *Shabda* [Word] (1954-60), thus entering what Laetitia Zecchini calls “little magazine bohemia

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<sup>287</sup> Shiv Sena was founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray. From its inception the party had a knack for violence and disrupting civilian life which finally led it to power in the Mumbai civic elections in 1985 and in Maharashtra state in 1995. Internet Desk, *The Hindu*, “A Timeline: 50 Years of Shiv Sena, Accessed 07/03/2017.”

<sup>288</sup> Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*, 35–40. While IPTA was the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI), PWA was founded by members of the CPI and did not have formal, organisation links with the CPI.



...I went merrily along  
writing one poem in Marathi after another one in English  
sometimes starting one in Marathi and finishing it in English  
or vice versa  
writing one in English and then rewriting it in Marathi  
or the other way around and abandoning many ideas

writing ten in one language then a few in another  
sometimes writing 3 altogether new poems  
in an attempt to translate one  
or indulge in cannibalism

or sometimes constructing one poem[...]  
You need a double barrelled gun to shoot a bilingual poet<sup>291</sup>

When confronted by a choice to identify with a single language, he usually demurred.<sup>292</sup> He further confounded his critics because he also translated poetry, often blurring the line between his own poetic work and his translation work.

Kolatkar was directly irreverential towards the established Indian English poets of the time, consciously steering clear of established artist networks as well as the networks of patronage they opened up once an artist in the circle was appointed to head state and/or national cultural institutions.<sup>293</sup> He was also famously reticent with engaging with the publishing industry.<sup>294</sup> Instead Kolatkar, Zecchini shows, considered his primary readership to

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<sup>291</sup> Kolatkar in *ibid.*, 63–64.

<sup>292</sup> Footnote no. 7 *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

be his circle of friends and drew his influences from a formidable cultural range.<sup>295</sup> In an

interview given to a little magazine Kolatkar recites a formidable list of influences:

Want me to give you a list? Whitman, Mardhekar, Manmohan, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Kafka, Baudelaire, Heine, Catullus, Villon, Dyaneshwar, Namdev, Janabai, Eknath, Tukaram, Wang Wei, Tu Fu, Han Shan, Ramjoshi, Honaji, Mandelstam, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Babel, Apollinaire, Breton, Brecht, Neruda, Ginsberg, Barthes, Duras, Joseph Heller, Enzensberger, Gunter Grass, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, Nabokov, Namdev Dhasal, Patte Bapurav, Rabelais, Apuleius, Rex Stout, Agatha Christie, Robert Sheckley, Harlan Ellison, Bhalchandra Nemade, Durrenmatt, Aarp, Cummings, Lewis Carrol, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Godse Bhatji, Morgenstern, Chakradhar, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Balwantbua, Kierkegaard, Lenny Bruce, Bahinabai Chaudhari, Kabir, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, Leiber and Stoller, Eisenstein, Truffaut, Woody Guthrie, Laurel and Hardy'.<sup>296</sup>

Kolatkar's influences, given in no particular order, range across different linguistic literary cultures (Marathi, French, Chinese, Russian, English, Latin American, American, British), time periods (contemporary, medieval/early modern, classical), genres and media (realism, Bhakti, Blues, Beat et al). Kolatkar performs a form of cosmopolitanism in which he adapts and draws from different local, national, and international forms, artists and times to feed his own poetry.

Despite shying away from the spotlight Kolatkar, did not lack recognition and literary awards, thereby accumulating cultural capital. He was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry for *Jejuri*, a state cultural award for *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* and the Sahitya Akademi

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<sup>295</sup> Kolatkar 1977b in *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>296</sup> Engblom 2001 in *ibid.*, 55–56.

award for *Kala Ghoda Poems*. He spoke at the World Poetry Festival in Bhopal, and also started getting mentions in international newspapers and literary journals. In 2010, his *Collected Poems in English* (edited by A.K. Mehrotra) were published posthumously by Bloodaxe Books, the first time Kolatkar was published by a foreign publisher. He was also anthologized in Mehrotra's *The Oxford India anthology of twelve modern Indian poets* (1992) and more recently in *60 Indian Poets* (2008) by Jeet Thayil. Following the efforts of A.K. Mehrotra, Vinay Dharwadker, and Amit Chaudhuri, who wrote the introduction for the new New York Review of Books edition of *Jejuri*, and two monographs, by Laetitia Zecchini (2014) and Anjali Narlekar (*Bombay Modern*, 2016), Kolatkar is emerging as a cult figure in modern Indian literature. *Sarpa Satra* is one of his long poems that has attracted academic notice, especially in the way that it re-situates Dharma by interrogating the *Mahabharata* narrative through a character on the margins.

### Sarpa Satra: A counter-history of the infra-ordinary

*Sarpa Satra* was written over 1980s and 90s. A longer version of the poem appears in Kolatkar's collection of 'Marathi poems *Bhijki Vahi*, first published in a Marathi little magazine.<sup>297</sup> Like most of Kolatkar's work, *Sarpa Satra* in English was published by an independent press, Pras Prakashan, run by his friend Ashok Shahane. In her study of Kolatkar's oeuvre, Zecchini points

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<sup>297</sup> Vinay Dharwadker argues that *Sarpa Satra* is not just a less lengthy version of its Marathi counterpart, but a completely parallel poem. Dharwadker, "Arun Kolatkar's Historical Imagination," 163.



to his modernism that was inextricably linked to a specific local, rooted cosmopolitanism, where Kolatkar constructed his own tradition of poetic influences as he foregrounds what she calls the ‘infra-ordinary’, drawing on George Perec’s use of the term ‘infra-ordinary’ as the opposite of the spectacular, gigantic, and apocalyptic event.<sup>298</sup> For his focus on the infra-ordinary Kolatkar draws heavily from the rich Bhakti and Beat poetry traditions. The direct appeal of Bhakti as well as the spoken English syncopation of Beat poetry heavily influences Kolatkar’s tone, including in *Sarpa Satra*.<sup>299</sup> Kolatkar focuses on the infra-ordinary by foregrounding two marginal characters from literal and figurative margins of the *Mahabharata* narrative, setting them up as counterfoils of sorts. Jaratkaru emerges as the moral centre of the poem as she re-tells the history of the Kuru-Naga antagonism to her son, using an irreverent tone to undercut the lofty royal, semi-divine and divine characters from the *Mahabharata* providing a counter-story, or within the narrative world of poem counter-history, to Vyasa’s version of events.

*Sarpa Satra* is divided into three sections— ‘Janamejaya’, ‘Jaratkaru/ Speaks to Her Son/ Aastika’ and ‘The Ritual Bath’. ‘Janamejaya’ is 57 lines long, while ‘The Ritual Bath’ is 72 lines long. ‘Jaratkaru/ Speaks to Her Son/ Aastika’ is the longest section in the poem.<sup>300</sup> As Vinay

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<sup>298</sup> Perec 1997 in Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*, 92–93.

<sup>299</sup> Zecchini shows that not only does Kolatkar translate Bhakti poetry using ‘Americanese’ but also considers himself as a latter-day follower of the Bhakti tradition Ibid., 77–90.

<sup>300</sup> It is further divided into three numbered sections. Section 1 is 177 lines long, section 2 is 231 lines long and section 3 is 357 lines long.

Dharwadker points out, the first section, titled ‘Janamejaya’ resembles a soliloquy, while ‘Jaratkaru/ Speaks to Her Son/ Aastika’ is a dramatic monologue, and ‘The Ritual Bath’ a rhetorical address directed towards a readership imagined as a quasi-theatrical audience, narrating the mundane end of the snake sacrifice.<sup>301</sup> Two things thus stand out from the outset. One, Kolatkar foregrounds Janamejaya (but only to an extent), and Jaratkaru— as I explain below, both characters from the literal and figurative margins of the *Mahabharata*. Two, he utilises a direct quasi-theatrical address in his poem. Drawing on Laetitia Zecchini’s argument that Kolatkar focuses on the infra-ordinary in his poetry, I argue that his focus on such marginal characters is a part of his wider attempt at foregrounding infra-ordinary lives. Jaratkaru is the moral centre of his poem and Janamejaya is his foil. Janamejaya’s monologue is self-righteous, devoid of any self-reflection, and portrays man drunk on power. Jaratkaru’s monologue stands in a stark contrast to Janamejaya’s. She is reflexive and at times sarcastic. Zecchini has argued that by reversing character valences Kolatkar challenges the Brahmanical notion of Dharma while obliquely criticizing the rise of right wing Hindu parties and contesting their hegemonization of the *Mahabharata* narrative.

In the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, Janamejaya, the Kuru king, is important only insofar as he commands Vaishampayana to narrate his genealogical history, specifically the fratricidal civil

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<sup>301</sup> Dharwadker, “Arun Kolatkar’s Historical Imagination,” 159, 161.

war fought between the former's ancestors in the middle of the grand sacrifice performed in order to carry out the genocide of the snake race as a revenge for the murder of Janamejaya's father Parikshit. The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is in fact structured as a series of question and answers between Janamejaya and Vaishampayana.<sup>302</sup> Janamejaya is a plot device who repeatedly and periodically prompts Vaishampayana's narrative. Jaratkaru is simply a female double of the ascetic by the same name. It has been ordained that the son of an ascetic named Jaratkaru will be the saviour of the snakes. However, Jaratkaru is extremely unwilling to marry and only does so at the exhortation of his ancestors, who need a descendant to perform ancestral rites.<sup>303</sup> One of the conditions that the ascetic Jaratkaru puts forth for marriage is that his wife should have the same name as him.

In the Sanskrit text, therefore, the two characters of Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra* are mere plot devices rather than actual characters. In the modern narratives they are all but forgotten—none of the texts in this study for instance mention either of the characters.<sup>304</sup> By foregrounding Jaratkaru and her counter-history and positing Vyasa as a mediator of history rather than *the* teller of a tale, Kolatkar implies that there exist different re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* narrative. He distinguishes between an event and its re-presentations through

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<sup>302</sup> Which are themselves being re-told to a gathering of *r̥ṣis* in the Naimisha forest by Ugrashravas.

<sup>303</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 5–9.

<sup>304</sup> The one exception is Adya Rangacharya's seminal and now canonical Kannada play *Kelu, Janamejaya!* [Listen, Janamejaya!] (1974)

different sources, emphasising the multiplicity of possible narratives as well as the unreliability of the 'established' narrative. His re-telling is one amongst a plethora of actual and potential *Mahabharata* re-tellings. Kolatkar positions Janamejaya at the beginning of his long poem. He is angry and extremely vindictive:

My vengeance will be swift and terrible.  
I will not rest  
until I've exterminated them all.

They'll discover  
that no hole is deep enough  
to hide from Janamejaya<sup>305</sup>

Jaratkaru's long monologue begins immediately after, throwing Janamejaya's comments in sharp relief—

What would your reaction be  
if someone were to come up to you  
and say,

My father died of snakebite.  
When? Oh, I was too young then.  
I don't even remember,

but I'm going to avenge his death  
by killing  
every single snake that lives;

yes,  
by wiping out the whole species  
from the face of the earth.

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<sup>305</sup> Kolatkar, *Sarpa Satra*, 21.

You'd naturally assume first  
that the man was joking.  
And after you realise he's not  
  
that he's completely serious,  
you may look at him closely, perhaps,  
trying to remember the name of a good shrink.<sup>306</sup>

Jaratkaru's voice is established as a voice of sanity that disputes the royal desire for vengeance by ordering a genocide. While Janamejaya's monologue shows a man who does not doubt the worth of his genocidal enterprise, Jaratkaru's monologue begins by firmly framing the idea as absurd by using sarcasm and an irreverent tone. As Jaratkaru goes on to remark caustically:

tell him about your own plan  
to cleanse the earth of all ants  
because one bit your mum.  
  
Or try to explain to him, perhaps,  
how impractical the whole idea is.  
point out the flaws in his logic.<sup>307</sup>

Jaratkaru's aim in her monologue is to articulate a counter-history to that of Janamejaya, and demands an honest account of violence at the same time. As she explains to her son—

...I think it's time you learnt.  
You should know  
what really happened— it's your right  
  
before venerable Vyasa gives  
his own spin  
to the whole of human history".<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 27–28.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 40.

Zecchini points out that as a part of memorializing this violence Jaratkaru's monologue is precise in her narration—she does not just talk about violence in the abstract or describe violent events generally. Jaratkaru focuses on specific instances and scenes of violence, making it a personal and immediate narrative.<sup>309</sup>

Kolatkar's focus is therefore on the consequences of 'epic' violence on infra-ordinary characters—those killed in their hundreds and thousands as collateral damage, often even bereft of any pity. He inverts the moral valences of the character, locating Dharma within human life rather than in concepts of cosmic and caste order that underpin Brahmanical hegemony.

Jaratkaru focuses specifically on the unexcusable acts of violence committed by characters usually considered the protagonists—the burning of the Khandiva mirrors the snake sacrifice. In the burning of the forest, what is striking is that Krishna is never mentioned by his name, much less recognized as a divine figure. "... He [Arjuna] was aided in this crime [massacre]// by another./ A crosscousin of his..."<sup>310</sup> As Zecchini notes,

if nothing is in its place in Kolatkar's poetic world, if the sacred, the divine, and the true faith seem to have deserted the world, it is because they are not to be found where they are expected.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Zecchini, "Dharma Reconsidered: The Inappropriate Poetry of Arun Kolatkar in *Sarpa Satra*," 134–35.

<sup>310</sup> Kolatkar, *Sarpa Satra*, 42.

<sup>311</sup> Zecchini, "Dharma Reconsidered: The Inappropriate Poetry of Arun Kolatkar in *Sarpa Satra*," 144.

In *Sarpa Satra*, Krishna is no longer the focus of the devotion/sacrality but rather an accomplice to murder. Rather, it is the Khandava forest becomes “God’s own laboratory on earth.”<sup>312</sup>

Jaratkaru’s narration also criticizes Janamejaya’s Brahmin collaborators—

—people we thought of  
until, oh, the day before yesterday  
as living volcanoes of conscience

ready to blow their tops  
at the first sign  
of any wrongdoing in the land

or whenever the mighty strayed  
from the path of justice—  
seem strangely silent<sup>313</sup>

The only way to stop them seems to be for the conscientious Aastika to stand up, not just to save his mother’s people but also

to make sure  
that the last vestige of humanity  
you are heir to,

your patrimony, yes,  
does not go up in smoke  
in this yajnya.<sup>314</sup>

Kolatkar thus reconfigures Dharma as a concern for human dignity, not just for others, but also for the self. Jaratkaru’s monologue argues that violence degrades the personhood of both its

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<sup>312</sup>Kolatkar, *Sarpa Satra*, 43.

<sup>313</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>314</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

perpetrators and collaborators. Framing this concern within the context of the *Mahabharata* narrative creates some confusion, perhaps intentionally, as to whether Kolatkar was referring to some particular historical instance, and if so, which one.

Zecchini and Dharwadker both agree that Kolatkar's writing is political. However they differ in their conclusion as to which specific instance(s) the commentary alludes to.

Dharwadker argues that:

the Nagas remind us of the Iraqi people; Takshaka reminds us of Saddam Hussein; Parikshit is reminiscent of George Bush (the father); and Janamejaya has a striking resemblance to George W. Bush (the son), who alleged publicly in 2002 that Saddam “tried to kill my Dad” and was determined from the outset to execute the dictator.<sup>315</sup>

Zecchini on the other hand connects *Sarpa Satra* to both international and national politics.

Pointing out that Kolatkar was working on the poem, along with his *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Bhijki Vahi*, during the 1980s and 90s, she argues that Kolatkar was concerned with international ethnic genocides (most notably in Rwanda and Bosnia) as well as national religious pogroms and the rise of the Hindu Right parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Shiv Sena. The rise of the Hindu Right parties, with their mostly upper-caste politicians and politics, as well as their attempt to homogenize and hegemonize Hindu narratives like the *Mahabharata*, was particularly significant for Kolatkar. Zecchini speculates that the constant threat of retribution

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<sup>315</sup> Dharwadker, “Arun Kolatkar’s Historical Imagination,” 162.



could be a factor in making Kolatkar reticent to express political views openly in public fora.<sup>316</sup>

I agree with Zecchini that Kolatkar's reticence in making explicit political commentary shows that he preferred to make a covert rather than overt commentary. It is also possible that Kolatkar did not mean to refer to any one political situation but rather comment on a type of political situation, trying in a typically modernist way to be both specific and general at the same time. Kolatkar's criticism of the Brahmanical power structure does not directly mention parties, necessarily negotiating between the need to make a political statement without being censored directly or indirectly.

## Conclusion

Modernist re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*, though spanning different genres, languages, cultural circuits, share some common concerns and reshape the narrative in order to formulate a critique of power and patriarchy, depict the noxious effects of Brahmanical and royal power, and interrogate the divine. The common concerns are shaped by a similar process of actively choosing anti-commercial literary affiliations and networks of circulation. In doing so, the writers have revolutionized their respective fields. In the case of Bharati and Karnad,

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<sup>316</sup> Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*, 186–95.

and perhaps now with Kolatkar, the once-revolutionary texts and authors have themselves become canonical—enshrined in the canon of Indian modernism. As such, they are still an important part of the contemporary cultural field, though a “restricted field” in Bourdieu’s terms.

Bharati’s *Andhā Yug* revolutionized both Hindi poetry and Indian theatre and circulates widely in print and performance in the original Hindi and in translation. Karnad’s *Yayati* reportedly revolutionized Kannada theatre, while *The Fire and the Rain*, written at the peak of his literary powers, exemplifies Indian playwriting at its most complex. Kolatkar’s *Sarpa Satra* is revolutionary in its focus on the infra-ordinary and its oblique, satirizing look at power.

In terms of networks of circulation, *Andhā Yug*’s circulation is sustained partly by the theatrical community in Delhi, including governmental institutions like SNA and NSD, as well as established, if perpetually poor, theatre companies like Asmita; and partly by its position in the syllabus of modern Hindi and modern Indian literature courses and the wealth of academic studies on the play in conjunction with other works of *Naī kavītā*, which ensure its continuing publication in Hindi by Vani Prakashan, and in English through a translation published by OUP. Karnad’s *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* are similarly sustained by the NSD in New Delhi as well as theatre companies in other Indian cities, and continued publication by Manohar

Grantha Mala, Radhakrishna Prakashan, and OUP. Kolatkar, in contrast, was earlier sustained by his coterie of poets and artist friends, who have acted as caretakers of his literary legacy.

The next chapter goes back to the restricted field of mass cultural production and looks at the production and circulation of the *Mahabharata* adapted into English by C. Rajagopalachari and Devdutt Pattanaik. Both, the chapter argues, use the *Mahabharata* to create zones of connection across socio-cultural boundaries.

# Chapter 3:

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## Storytellers in English:

Re-telling the Mahabharata

### Introduction

Browsing through the Full Circle bookstore in upscale Khan Market, I overheard an elderly woman ask the bookshop manager in clipped and polished English, “Do you have any books on Indian mythology for children in English?” My interest piqued, I approached her. Introducing myself and my project, I asked her if I could put a few questions to her. “Why are you looking for books on Indian mythology?” I asked first. It was for her grandson she said.

“But, why Indian mythology in particular?”

So that he should learn about the culture of his country, she replied.

“And why in English? Why not in Hindi?” I asked, and immediately recognising the North Indian bias in my sentence finished it awkwardly with, “or another Indian language, if that’s your mother tongue”.

We would love it if he read and spoke in Hindi, she said, suddenly animated, but he *refuses* to speak in Hindi to anyone apart from the staff.

Thanking her for her time, I retreated to think about what she had said. The lack of self-reflection in the role of adults in creating the class distinction between English and Hindi was neither unique nor surprising in the upper strata of the Indian middle classes.<sup>317</sup> What was interesting to me, however, was that throughout our conversation, the assumption had been that Hindu mythology— and not Christian, Muslim, Jain, Buddhist etc.— was the point of introduction to a specifically Indian culture for an English speaking audience even within India. This chapter looks at how two of the most authors of such introductory texts in English circulate in the cultural field and construct their English texts for their (imagined) reading audience.

Although it is only recently that Indian English general fiction authors and publishers have turned to Hindu mythology for source material (see Ch. 4), translations and re-tellings of mythological tales have been circulating in both general English market and children's literature for a long time. This chapter focuses on the production process, circulation, and aesthetics of two popular English re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*—C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* (1951) and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* (2010) — both of which translate the *Mahabharata* drawing on oral storytelling modes. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* is unique in the English book publishing market in India for the number of its copies sold and its wide

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<sup>317</sup> See chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion on how English becomes a marker of cultural capital and a qualifying marker for modern citizens.

circulation. It is acknowledged as an important influence by many of the re-tellings within this study. Girish Karnad, for instance, writes that he learnt about the source story for his play *The Fire and the Rain* from reading it in Rajaji's *Mahabharata*.<sup>318</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik and Shashi Tharoor also cite Rajagopalachari as a significant influence.<sup>319</sup> I argue in this chapter that Rajagopalachari appropriates the form of the oral, performative storytelling of *katha* traditions to printed prose in order to re-frame the *Mahabharata* for a modern Indian state, bridging a mythic past with the present, and re-articulating the narrative to present a modern, moral vision of national culture to his audience. Devdutt Pattanaik creates a new re-telling of the *Mahabharata* for the post-liberalisation Indian middle classes, bridging a putative 'main narrative' with its regional variants, and drawing upon varied fields of study to pose questions and interesting avenues of exploration for its readers. Pattanaik's works are meant to appeal to Indian executives in multinationals, producing, like Rajagopalachari before him, an imagined Indian culture for a new Indian audience.

It is hard to classify Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* or Pattanaik's *Jaya* within a specific literary genre. Ramanujan's delineation of the three modes of translation— iconic, indexical, and symbolic— seem to only help to an extent when it comes to *Mahabharata* translations into

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<sup>318</sup> Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain*, 1998, ix.

<sup>319</sup> Acknowledgements, Pattanaik, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, 347; Tharoor, "Introduction to the Silver Jubilee Edition of the Great Indian Novel," 1. Tharoor claims that the Rajaji's *Mahabharata* is the best selling book in the history of Indian English publishing, which might very well be true.

English. The oldest iconic translation of the *Mahabharata* into English is a translation published between 1883 and 1896, translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli and published by Pratap Chandra Roy.<sup>320</sup> Apart from this P. Lal translated the entire *Mahabharata* for the Writer's Workshop from 1968 to 1980.<sup>321</sup> J.A.B. van Buitenen started translating the modern critical edition published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in 1973. However, he famously passed away before finishing, publishing five volumes not in chronological order, the last one coming out in 1978. While the project remains largely unfinished, James Fitzgerald has taken over the translation project on the behalf of University of Chicago Press. The Clay Sanskrit Library too similarly published a few translated books of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* amongst other Sanskrit texts before the entire project abruptly wound up. Ramesh Menon and Jayashree Kumar were also editing a Complete Mahabharata edition for the Indian publisher Rupa. However, this is not really a translation of the Sanskrit text(s) but a re-working of the older Ganguli translation. The most recent, complete translation of the *Mahabharata* was produced by Bibek Debroy over 10 volumes and published by Penguin India.

The problem with iconic translations is the original text itself. On the one hand it is so extraordinarily long that most efforts are likely to suffer from resources fizzling out. On the other hand, there are too many Sanskrit texts to choose from. Ganguli for instance utilised

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<sup>320</sup> Ganguli, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa Translated into English Prose*.

<sup>321</sup> Lal, *The Mahābhārata: Translated from the Sanskrit of Vyasa*.

Nilakantha's edition of the Sanskrit text in his translation.<sup>322</sup> To get around the problem, most authors write an abridged version. John D. Smith in fact managed to negotiate the tension between abridging and translating by publishing an abridged translation of the critical edition in 2009 for Penguin Classics.<sup>323</sup> In fact, several sorts of abridged translation in English have been produced over the years including ones by C.V. Narasimhan (1961), Kamala Subramaniam (1965), William Buck (1973), R.K. Narayan (1987), Ramesh Menon (2004-6), and Namita Gokhale (2009).<sup>324</sup>

As I discuss in greater detail below, Rajagopalachari's is perhaps the most well-known of the abridged translation of the *Mahabharata* in English in post-Independent India, circulating further than any other translation or abridged translation. As a part of the new mythological wave in Indian English publishing that I discuss in Chapter 4, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya* has similarly emerged as the most popular recent re-telling of the *Mahabharata*. Both complicate Ramanujan's typology of translations. They are not iconic since they do not follow the form and structure of the Sanskrit original(s), but then neither, strictly speaking, do the other translations, abridged or otherwise. They are symbolic only to the extent that it could be argued that both *Jaya* and Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* say entirely 'new' things relative to

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<sup>322</sup> Ganguli, "The Mahabharata, Book 1: Adi Parva: Translator's Preface."

<sup>323</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*.

<sup>324</sup> Narasimhan, *The Mahabharata (An English Version Based on Selected Verses)*; Subramaniam, *Mahabharata*; Buck, *Mahabharata*; Narayan, *The Mahabharata*; Menon, *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering*; Gokhale, *The Puffin Mahabharata*.



the Sanskrit text(s). However, they do not become counter-texts. They seem to best fit the category of indexical translations, holding to a certain kind of textual fidelity. However, both selectively choose plot points and characters, practicing selective textual fidelity to the narrative allowing for the sense that this is *still* the authentic original but at the same time allowing for radical shifts of emphasis and meaning.

Instead of focussing primarily on notions of textual fidelity, analysing translation needs to foreground the conjuncture within which the text is produced and disseminated. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, in their edited collection *Post-colonial Translation*, seek to move away from the fetishisation of the ‘original’ text, arguing that the fetish is a product of European colonialism that seeks to re-produce the centre-periphery relationship between the European colonial powers and their colonies as well as the modern notion of the author as the ‘owner’ of a literary work.<sup>325</sup> They argue that the *process* of translation is always embedded within the politics of its time, as evidenced by the fact that the act of translating has different valencies and significances in different languages and literary cultures.<sup>326</sup> This chapter thus

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<sup>325</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi point out how the colonies are always seen as copies of the European original. The colonies are forever catching-up with the Western world when placed within this paradigm— whether be it in terms of modernity or development. The colonies are always developing, never developed; always modernising, never completely modern. Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, 2.

<sup>326</sup> “Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.” For the Spaniards, translation was always a matter of reducing the native language and culture to accessible objects for and subjects of divine and imperial intervention. For the Tagalogs, translation was a process less of internalizing colonial-Christian conventions than of evading their totalizing grip by repeatedly marking the differences between their language and interests and those of the Spaniards. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

maps and compares the context of production and circulation of Rajagopalachari *Mahabharata* and Pattanaik's *Jaya*, and the particular way in which these re-tellings re-articulate the *Mahabharata* narrative. It analyses three constructions— of the author and narrative persona, of the *Mahabharata* narrative as a historical archive for a secular, modern Indian nation, and of the text using the aesthetics of the *katha* and the business manual, respectively to educate its reading public.

The authorly persona of the storyteller is an important aspect of the books production and sale. The storyteller, Walter Benjamin writes,

has counsel—not for a few situations...but for many like the sages. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life.<sup>327</sup>

Rajaji arguably draws upon his public persona as a national leader who is also a teacher of his people to create his narrative persona in his *Mahabharata*. Similarly, Pattanaik has cultivated the persona of a mythologist and leadership consultant. Both these personae are crucial in the way the authors re-articulate the *Mahabharata* narrative and legitimize their re-articulation for their respective audiences. Rajaji's status as statesman and one of the architects of post-

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For French translators in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the idea was not so much to do with equivalence, but rather the aims of the translator. The translations became an interpretation of a work in a different language re-interpreted to suit the aims of the translator. For Germans, the function of translation was most often the improvement of the German language. Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, 19.

<sup>327</sup> Benjamin, "The Translator's Task," 378.

Independence India allows him to implicitly claim the position of simultaneous knowledge of the *Mahabharata* as well as the modern nation. Pattanaik represents himself as a figure with knowledge of both leadership strategies and myths, thus making him uniquely suited for re-articulating the *Mahabharata* in a way that it makes sense in the context of the new entrepreneurial middle-class in India.

Both books further re-inforce the discursive perception of the *Mahabharata* as an ‘imaginary history’ of the nation. As I noted in the introduction, Kaviraj argues that in colonial Bengal, history was not just a chronology of empirical historical facts, but was also deployed against a Euro-centric history that discursively— both implicitly and explicitly— sought to establish the superiority (often racial) of the colonisers over the colonised. History therefore was not confined only to the archives, but became the terrain of nationalist politics as it created a Bengali identity simply through the creation of a Bengali history— a process that would be re-created on a national scale with the *Mahabharata*.<sup>328</sup> Similarly, in pre-Independence India, Hindi writers tended to conflate the *paurāṇik* and the *aitihāsik*. *Paurāṇik* texts like *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* becoming reconstructions of India’s past.<sup>329</sup>

Rajagopalachari and Pattanaik reproduce the concept of the *Mahabharata* as a national,

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<sup>328</sup> Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, 122.

<sup>329</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 28.

historical archive in order to produce a moral allegory for their readers in their respective contexts.

Rajagopalachari and Pattanaik books are not novels nor are they marketed as such. Their concern is efficacy in providing a clear moral vision. This is similar to how calendar art is seen by their audiences, insofar as aesthetics is secondary to story-telling's efficacy. This does not mean that the two books neglect aesthetics altogether. As Kajri Jain points out, the act of choosing efficacy over aesthetics is predicated on acknowledging the aesthetics of the genre before deliberately ignoring them.<sup>330</sup> This chapter shows that both Rajagopalachari and Pattanaik deliberately eschew the flourishes of novelistic writing in their respective re-tellings in order to create an effective story-telling format. Rajaji utilizes tropes of story-telling already prevalent at the time of his Tamil re-telling to connect the mythic time of the *Mahabharata* narrative with the present. Pattanaik further adapts this approach to the manual, further connecting regional 'variants' to the putative 'main' narrative of his text as well as opening up spaces for inquiry and debate by making connection between pop psychology, sexuality, contemporary religion etc. His indexical re-telling helps negotiate the tensions between canonical and non-canonical and allows him to narrate episodes from Sanskrit texts, while also including regional and local narratives as variants. The texts seek to impart an education to

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<sup>330</sup> Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 182.

their readers as citizens of the modern Indian nation, while at the same time necessarily redistribute character motivations and plot emphasis, leading to flattened characters. For Rajagopalachari especially, flat characters are necessary to convey the moral vision of the work, while Pattanaik's narrative uses characters to flag up other *Mahabharata* narratives and re-tellings.

### **Rajagopalachari and *Mahabharata***

C. Rajagopalachari— fondly known as Rajaji— was one of the most well-known Congress politicians along with Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Azad. The son of a Brahmin village munsif (revenue collector), Rajaji was educated in an English medium school in Hosur (in modern-day Tamil Nadu). He was then sent to a college in Bangalore, and then to Madras Law College, before he started a career in law at the age of twenty-one. Unlike his father, who was said to be an orthodox scholar of Sanskrit scriptures, Rajaji got no formal religious education. He started his political career as a municipality member in Salem in 1911.<sup>331</sup> In 1919 he became a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and remained close to the Mahatma despite political differences later in their lives. Rajaji was known commonly as Gandhi's southern lieutenant. Over his long and illustrious political career, Rajaji served as Governor-General of West Bengal (1947-8), Governor-General of India (1948-50), Home Minister in Nehru's cabinet (1950-51) and Chief

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<sup>331</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 55.

Minister of Madras province and state (1937-9 and 1952-4, respectively). Despite an extremely illustrious political career, Rajaji writes in the preface to the fourth edition of his English *Mahabharata* that his re-tellings of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana “are the best service I have rendered to my people”.<sup>332</sup>

Rajaji first wrote his *Mahabharata* in a serialized form in Tamil for the magazine *Kalki* from 1<sup>st</sup> December 1943 to 8<sup>th</sup> May 1946, under the title ‘Viyāsar Virundu’ [Vyasa’s Feast].<sup>333</sup> This was a time when he found himself in “a double [political] wilderness”.<sup>334</sup> While he had followed the Congress leadership in resigning from the Chief Ministership of Madras province in protest against the Viceroy’s declaration of war on behalf of India without consulting Congress, he had come to disagree with the party line on some of the predominant issues of the time—Indian participation in the Second World War, and the issue of Pakistan. Opposing the Congress party leadership and the party line, Rajaji favoured both Indian participation in war and a plebiscite in Muslim majority states.<sup>335</sup> Finally in July 1942 at Gandhi’s suggestion as well as the passing of the Quit India Resolution, and following the threat of disciplinary action by the Tamilnad Congress Committee, Rajaji resigned from the Congress party and the Madras Legislative

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<sup>332</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 9.

<sup>333</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 85, 101. Rajaji is prolific in his writing. His books on religion include *Bhagavad-gita abridged and explained: setting forth the Hindu creed, discipline and ideals* (1949), *Vedanta: the basic culture of India* (1949), *Ramayana* (1957) among others.

<sup>334</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 9.

<sup>335</sup> Copley, *The Political Career of C. Rajagopalachari: 1937-1954: A Moralistic in Politics*, 171–234.

Assembly.<sup>336</sup> His differences with the Congress leadership made him a highly unpopular man in the public eye at the time. Re-telling the *Mahabharata* in Tamil at the time, Rajaji writes, was a source of solace during what was then the most trying time of his political career.<sup>337</sup>

By the time Rajaji wrote his Tamil *Mahabharata*, the image of the *Mahabharata* as an integral part of national literature was already well-established, as we have seen. Joanne P. Waghorne, in her study of Rajaji's *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* re-tellings entitled *Images of Dharma* (1985), notes that interest in re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as well as *katha* performances in India was renewed in the 1930 and 1940s, around the same time that Rajaji began writing and publishing his own re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*. Waghorne notes that

In the *Catalogue of the Adyar Library*...the entries listed under "Itihasa" show two distinct periods of interest in the epics. Many translations and critical and textual stories are dated from 1890 to 1910. A new series of interpretive work appears again in the mid-1930's to the 1944 date of publication of the catalogue.<sup>338</sup>

She also notes that V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, the celebrated public intellectual and scholar, delivered a series of famous lectures on the *Ramayana* in Madras, while the *Mahabharata* was often the topic of discussion in intellectual magazines like *Vedanta Kesari* (published by Madras Ramakrishna Mission) and *Modern Review* (published from Calcutta). Tagore too made an

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<sup>336</sup> He had already resigned from the Congress Working Committee, the top decision making body of the Congress on 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1942. *Ibid.*, 197, 194.

<sup>337</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 9. Unlike when he wrote *Ramayana* as a rejoinder to Periyar's anti-brahmin, Tamil political platform, see Richman, "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana."

<sup>338</sup> Asanga and Murti, *Catalogue of the Adyar Library: Western Section, Part I*, 1:83–85 in endnote no. 38, Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 130.

intervention in 1942 regarding the depiction of war in the *Mahabharata*.<sup>339</sup> Waghorne also notes that around the same time there was a rise in lawyers and public readers presenting their own interpretation of the epics, distinct from those by *pauranikas* within a religious setting. Thus lawyers and public readers became *kathakaras* or story-tellers in their own right.

Waghorne writes that these ‘secular’ storytellers, including Rajaji, appear to have considered themselves eminently suited to the task of re-interpreting the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* within a ‘modern’ context of the Indian nation.<sup>340</sup> In making the story contemporary for their audience, these modern story-tellers infused the story with their own particular constructions of middle-class moralism and nationalism. By the time Rajaji wrote his Tamil *Mahabharata*, the narrative was already used extensively as a historical archive for the colonised Indian nation, intertwining the narrative closely with nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments (see Chapter 2). The narrative persona Rajaji adopts is that of a teacher who carefully points out to the moral that the “story shows” and that the following story “is also instructive”.<sup>341</sup> Waghorne in fact argues that Rajaji’s story-voice in the narration of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* mirrors his political speeches which often appealed to the moral character of his audience.<sup>342</sup> Rajaji would then use this persona to re-articulate the

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<sup>339</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 117.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>341</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 180.

<sup>342</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 88–89.



*Mahabharata* as a suitable paradigm for understanding the present, and articulating his moral vision for the coherent structuring of the modern Indian nation.

C. Rajagopalachari's Tamil re-telling was translated into English and first published in 1951 by the Hindustan Times.<sup>343</sup> Publishing was taken over by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan [lit. the Institute of Indian Knowledge] from 1952. The Bhavan is a cultural and educational institute founded in 1938 by K.M. Munshi, the Congress Party leader from Gujarat, chairman of the Somnath Temple reconstruction trust, and co-founder (with Rajaji) of the right-wing Swatantra Party.<sup>344</sup> Since then, the book has gone through sixty-one editions, as of 2015 and claims to have sold 1.4 million copies.<sup>345</sup> The Bhavan published the *Mahabharata* as the first book in its 'Book University' series, whose aim was to publish "a series of books which ... would serve the purpose of providing higher education" and "emphasise... such literature as revealed the deeper impulses of India" as well as "the re-integration of Indian culture in the light of

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<sup>343</sup> Rajaji translated his *Mahabharata* with P. Seshadri and S. Krishnamurti, though he does not mention their method, or source texts. Preface to First Edition, Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 4.

<sup>344</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, 286; Katju, *Vishwa Hinu Parishad and Hindu Politics*, 20–21. While not explicitly Hindu nationalist, Munshi was part of Hindu nationalist faction within the Congress before leaving it. After the Swatantra Party experiment failed, Katju would go on to join Jan Sangh and have close links with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the religious arm of the Hindu right-wing organisation the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and part of the Sangh 'parivar'. The Bhavan has also published other works by Rajaji, including his re-telling of the *Ramayana*, among other works. Since 1938, the Bhavan Educational Trust has become a rather large organization. Apart from building a large publishing list, it also runs dozens if not hundreds of schools, colleges, and other educational institutions across India and the Middle East. In addition to this, it also runs cultural centres in the UK, US and Australia.

<sup>345</sup> Rajaji mentions that the second edition is a "carefully revised new edition", but the other editions are in all probability printed as is. Thus the number of editions is really the number of print runs for the book. Preface to Second Edition, Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 5.

modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.”<sup>346</sup> As Rajaji writes in his preface to the second edition,

If a foreigner reads this book— translation and epitome though it is— and closes it with a feeling that he has read a good and elevating work, he may be confident that he has grasped the spirit of India and can understand her people— high and low, rich and poor.<sup>347</sup>

The book was thus meant for consumption by an Indian public, mainly children and university students, and its intent was at least partly pedagogic. It is also meant however for a wider readership, both in India and abroad.

Despite Rajaji’s personal unease with popular cultural forms, his book has increasingly become available for mass readership and has been marketed commercially, while the support from publishers and universities further bolstered its popularity. Despite running into 330 pages, the book is a slim, tightly bound volume with no illustrations except the one on the cover and with page size only slightly bigger than A6 sheet of paper.<sup>348</sup> While the first edition was in brown hardback, the 1975 edition of the book has a flimsier cardboard for the cover, mostly yellow with a black and white drawing of Krishna delivering a speech to Arjuna. In contrast, its more recent editions published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are paperbacks with extremely colourful cover illustration.

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<sup>346</sup> “Kulapati’s Preface’ Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 1–2.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>348</sup> I.e. 10.5x15cm. The 1975 edition is 12.5x18cm. The 2010 edition is only a marginally smaller at 11.9x18cm, though it is thicker.

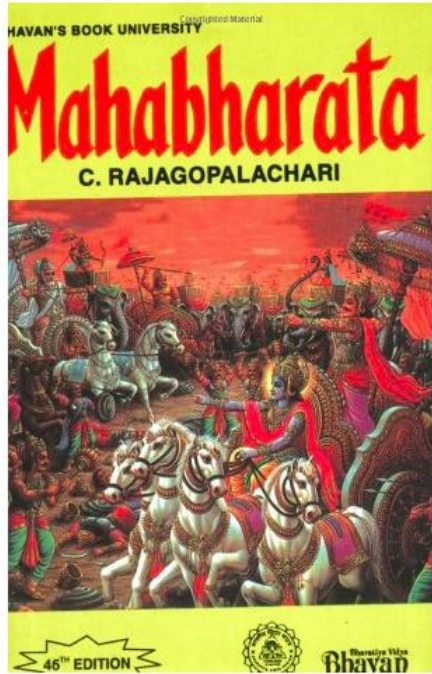


Figure 11: Cover of Rajaji's Mahabharata (46<sup>th</sup> ed.)

In figure 11, sandwiched between yellow bands is a colourful picture of Arjuna and Krishna on a chariot drawn by four white horses in the right foreground, battling with Bhishma in the left mid-ground on a battlefield strewn with corpses, while warriors look on from the left foreground corner and a line of war elephants in the background. The cover calls attention to itself but also focuses attention on the main characters— Arjuna, and Krishna. The use of increasingly colourful graphics drawing from calendar art and

low market price shows an attempt to market the book within the popular segment of the English book market. It should be no surprise then that the books are sold at extremely low prices for easy accessibility to the Indian readership. A 2015 edition on Amazon India costs 100 rupees. A kindle edition is free on the Amazon India Kindle Unlimited service.<sup>349</sup>

Despite its self-presentation as popular cultural product and Rajaji himself calling it his own *kālakṣepam* (a popular Tamil narrative storytelling form) in the Tamil version, Rajaji is also

<sup>349</sup> “Amazon India- Rajajagopalachari Mahabharata.” A PDF is freely available online as well, and is the first search result for “C. Rajagopalachari Mahabharata” at ‘C. Rajagopalachari’s Mahabharata’. Last accessed 08/07/2016

wary of being associated with the popular.<sup>350</sup> He consciously distances himself from it, writing disapprovingly in the preface to the first edition that

the stories [of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*] come to them [Indians] so embroidered with the garish fancies of the Kalakshepam and the cinema as to retain but little of the dignity and approach to truth of Vyasa or Valmiki.<sup>351</sup>

Even though Rajaji *Mahabharata* has never been awarded any literary award, over its long, fruitful, and continuing publishing life it has acquired a certain cultural prestige. The fact that the book was written by a political personality of Rajaji's stature gives it a certain cultural prestige, bolstered by the institutional support provided by the Bhavan, which has grown into a vast educational trust and ensures the continuing publication and circulation of the text. Even in today's Delhi, due to its inclusion in the reading lists for English honours courses in Delhi University, Christ University and Ambedkar University Delhi, the text further has cultural legitimacy and symbolic capital as an educational text, if not a literary one. Thus its circulation is simultaneously institutionalized and commercial, with steady sales each year.<sup>352</sup> Furthermore because Rajaji's *Mahabharata* has been so easily accessible generally and/or required reading on school and college syllabi, it often became the first point of engagement

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<sup>350</sup> Rajagopalachari in Kalki, May 10, 1946 in Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 90.

<sup>351</sup> "Preface to First Edition" Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 3.

<sup>352</sup> This is from the publicly available University reading lists at present. Drawing on personal experience, the book has been on the DU English honours syllabus for at least a decade, and Ambedkar University Delhi for around 2-3 years, as of 2016. Old syllabi are hard to trace online or offline, so I have been unable to date exactly how long the book has been on the DU syllabi. However, in a conversation with Kavita Sharma, former principal of Hindu College, she suggested that the *Mahabharata* was introduced to the DU English honours course in the early 1990s, so it is likely that Rajaji's re-telling was prescribed on the syllabus at the same time. The book in all probability enjoys a much larger circulation.

with the story in a textual form for many Indians in general, and Indian artists and scholars in particular.

Moreover, the book has also circulated widely internationally. Rajaji's *Mahabharata* represents Indian culture, or at least a facet of it, nationally *and* internationally. On the one hand it represents Indian culture to Indians, and on the other, represents Indian culture in the canons of World Literatures. According to the worldcat database, Rajaji's *Mahabharata* has been translated into at least five Indian languages—Hindi, Gujarati, Assamese, Kannada and Sindhi—and at least four international languages apart from English—Dutch, Finnish, Indonesian and Chinese.<sup>353</sup> Records of the English copies of Rajaji's *Mahabharata* can be found in the catalogues of public libraries in at least 27 countries, apart from India.<sup>354</sup>

Rajaji's *Mahabharata* has circulated and continues to circulate widely both nationally and internationally. It is possibly one of the few Indian English books that is marketed for easy access across different and vastly varied market segments, ranging from road-side bookstalls to a posh bookstores to Amazon India to school and college libraries. It owes its popularity not

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<sup>353</sup> There are records of four different publishers in Hindi, two in Tamil, and two in Gujarati, with one publisher each in the other languages. See "Worldcat Search: C. Rajagopalachari Mahabharata."

<sup>354</sup> These are UK, US, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Ireland, Germany Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, Slovenia, Sweden, Egypt, Lebanon, Poland, Israel, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Thailand, South Africa, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Chile, Australia and New Zealand. The worldcat online catalogue gives a rough idea of the world-wide circulation of the book, noting the languages the book was translated into and the different national libraries where these books are held. This might not give a complete picture of the book's circulation, but in the absence of published records it gives a useful partial snapshot. In a private conversation Paula Richman told me that a Japanese friend's first encounter with the Mahabharata narrative was through Rajaji's re-telling. The translation policy seems to have been strategic rather than programmatic.

just to its packaging but also its institutional support and institutionalization through education boards, which is itself part of a wider project of representing Indian culture.

### Creating zones of contact

In the moving history of our land, from time immemorial great minds have been formed and nourished and touched to heroic deeds by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In most Indian homes, children formerly learnt these immortal stories as they learnt their mother-tongue—at the mother’s knee; and the sweetness and sorrows of Sita and Draupadi, the heroic fortitude of Rama and Arjuna and the loving fidelity of Lakshmana and Hanuman became the stuff of their young philosophy of life.

The growing complexity of life has changed the simple pattern of early home life. Still, there are few in our land who do not know the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, though the stories come to them so embroidered with the garish fancies of the *Kalakshepam* and the cinema as to retain but little of the dignity and approach to truth of Vyasa or Valmiki. It occurred to me some years ago that I might employ some of the scanty leisure of a busy life in giving to our Tamil children in easy prose the story of the *Mahabharata* that we, more fortunate in this than they, heard in our homes as children. Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* is one of our noblest heritages, and it is my cherished belief that to hear it faithfully told is to love it and come under its elevating influence. It strengthens the soul and drives home—as nothing else does—the vanity of ambition and the evil and futility of anger and hatred.<sup>355</sup>

Rajaji constructs the act of re-telling the *Mahabharata* as an act of connecting the present with a living past. While he explicitly historicizes the *Mahabharata* by discussing possible dates when the narrative might have actually been composed, it’s the *Mahabharata* as a cultural and

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<sup>355</sup> Preface to the First edition, Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 3–4.

historical archive that seems more important to him. That is to say that for Rajaji, unlike the self professed Hindu Right, it is not important whether the plot events are historically situated. Rather, for him *Mahabharata* signifies a long, specifically *Indian* antiquity (represented by the “truth of Vyasa or Valmiki”) , as well as a cultural archive that accrued stories to its central narrative over that long life. This is in marked contrast with scholars like B. N. Narahari Achar, who have postulated historical dates for when the war in *Mahabharata* narrative could have occurred.<sup>356</sup> Rajaji thinks of the *Mahabharata* narrative as a sort of a vast library

The Mahabharata was composed many thousand years ago. But generations of gifted reciters have added to Vyasa’s original a great mass of material. All the floating literature that was thought to be worth preserving, historical, geographical, legendary, political, theological and philosophical, of nearly thirty centuries, found a place in it. In those days, when there was no printing, interpolation in a recognised classic seemed to correspond to inclusion in the national library<sup>357</sup>

Waghorne argues that in Rajaji’s *Mahabharata* this vision of the historical plane replaces otherworldly knowledge.<sup>358</sup> Instead of focussing on the spectacular and fantastic stories, Rajaji was more interested in drawing parallels between the narrative and his own context. For instance, at the beginning of the Pandavas’ exile in disguise episode Rajaji writes that “the political truths contained in this story of Ekachakra are noteworthy and suggestive” that a

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<sup>356</sup> Achar, “Planetarium Software and the Date of the Mahābhārata War.”

<sup>357</sup> Preface to Second Edition, Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 5.

<sup>358</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 15.

citizenry requires a “strong patriarch as a sovereign.”<sup>359</sup> He also compares the American-Japanese negotiations before the Pearl Harbour attack to the negotiations between the Kuru cousins before the *kurukshetra* war:

In December 1941, the Japanese were carrying on negotiations with the Americans and, immediately on the breakdown of those talks, took them unawares and attacked Pearl Harbor destroying their naval forces there. Drupada’s instruction to the brahmana [to act as a peace envoy to the sons of Dhritarashtra in order to retard their war preparations] would show that this was no new technique. And that, even in the old days, the same method was followed of carrying on negotiations and even sincerely working for peace, but simultaneously preparing, with unremitting vigor, for outbreak of war and carrying on peace talks with the object of creating dissension in the enemy's ranks. There is nothing new under the sun!<sup>360</sup>

Keeping in mind that Rajaji was writing at the cusp of Indian Independence during the Quit India movement, a little later in the text he writes,

Revolution is no new thing. This story shows that, even in the world of the gods, there was a revolution leading to Indra’s dethronement and Nahusha’s installation as king in his stead. The story of Nahusha’s fall is also instructive.<sup>361</sup>

Rajaji’s historical comparisons do not take place in a vacuum. The two examples given above illustrate how he uses his historical vision as a narrator. Exclaiming, “There is nothing new under the sun!” Rajaji emphasizes the similarities between events that took place in the mythical time of the *Mahabharata* and events taking place in his own time, creating a distinct antiquity on the one hand and an immediate present on the other and linking them.

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<sup>359</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 61.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.



Rajaji's burring of historical and mythological might seem odd— over the five prefaces that Rajaji writes for the *Mahabharata*, he calls *Mahabharata* 'itihasa' and a history once each, and mythology four times— but seems to have been common in India, albeit in a linguistic literary culture slightly at a remove from Rajaji's.<sup>362</sup> Lothspeich notes that the categories of *pauranik* (mythological) and *aitihāsik* (historical) in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hindi literature were often used together and/or interchangeably:

Those reimagining India's mythic past in the late colonial period were not especially bothered about fine distinctions between epic time and historical time. For many, it seems, mythological literature is set in the sacred space of absolute time; it is essentially true, though not necessarily factually accurate.<sup>363</sup>

While it is hard to say if Rajaji was directly influenced by Hindi literature and its genre categorization, we can assume that a similar blurring happened in Tamil literature too. In the *Catalogue of the Adyar Library* (run by Annie Besant's Theosophical Society and based in Madras), for instance, books under the section of Itihasa are exclusively translations or critical studies of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.<sup>364</sup> Blurring categories of history and mythology are not the same as deterministically dating the events of the *Mahabharata*, simply because in the case of the former there is a blurring of the two categories, whereas in the latter, there is a rejection of the category of the mythological. The blurring itself takes place, as I noted in the introduction, against the backdrop of nationalist recovery of the *Mahabharata* (and *Ramayana*)

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 3, 10, 11. History is mentioned on p. 3, and 'itihasa' on p. 10.

<sup>363</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 27.

<sup>364</sup> Asanga and Murti, *Catalogue of the Adyar Library: Western Section, Part I*, 1:83–85.

as cultural archives of a national history. Time, then, is no longer empty homogenous time, but simultaneously ‘messianic’— a term Walter Benjamin defines as immediate, urgent and facilitating non-linear connections across time<sup>365</sup>— and ‘epic’— which Bakhtin defines as

historically significant; one can distance it, look at it as if from afar (not from one’s own vantage point but from some point in the future), one can relate to the past in a familiar way (as if relating to “my” present). ...ignor[ing] the presentness of the present and the pastness of the past... removing ourselves from the zone of “my time”.<sup>366</sup>

The *Mahabharata* is thus no longer about mere ‘facts’, but operates within the realm of a deeper ‘truth’.

To convey this sense of a deeper, cultural and narrative truth, Rajaji assumes the role of a bard and teacher. Waghorne argues that the role of the bard is to act as the healer of divides, including healing temporal gaps.<sup>367</sup> She argues that Rajaji, like the figure of the Suta, recreates and re-establishes both cosmological and temporal order:

Instead of dealing with a political situation through a political medium, C.R., like the bard, dealt with the uncertain historical situation by removing it one step from daily life and placing it in a story—world in which history had already found fulfilment and order.<sup>368</sup>

To say that the world of the *Mahabharata* was already fulfilled and ordered might be simplifying the narrative, but to further nuance her argument, I would argue that Rajaji’s

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<sup>365</sup> Benjamin, “Frankfurt School: On the Concept of History by Walter Benjamin.”

<sup>366</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 14.

<sup>367</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 16.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

historical vision functions to actively link the contemporary national and international political events at the time of his writing with the *Mahabharata*, building on and strengthening, on the one hand, the reputation of the *Mahabharata* as a text imbued with political lessons, and rendering political events and foreign events understandable and relatable to his audience on the other hand.

Rajaji does not just seek to unify differing temporalities but different linguistic cultural zones within India.<sup>369</sup> In his preface to the text, K.M. Munshi, the founder of the Bhavan, writes that the literature published by the Book University is meant to re-represent— both artistically and politically— “the movements of mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.”<sup>370</sup> This literature, Rajaji avows, “transcends regionalism and through it, when we are properly attuned, we realise the oneness of the human family.”<sup>371</sup> Rajaji’s (as well as Munshi and his Bhavan’s) formulation of the nation recognises the vernaculars as important sites for the construction of the ‘national’.<sup>372</sup> The

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<sup>369</sup> Rajaji, of course, had been a vocal commentator on Partition (see for instance Copley, *The Political Career of C. Rajagopalachari: 1937-1954: A Moralistic in Politics.*) and along with Nehru would oppose linguistic division of states fearing that it would lead to the rise of linguistic nationalism. Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy*, 182–83.

<sup>370</sup> “Kulapati”’s Preface’ Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 2.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Rajaji’s train of thought is circular over here. Great literature is great because it transcends linguistic boundaries, and it transcends linguistic boundaries because it’s great. At the same time, he fails to recognise that the transcending in this particular case is being done in English.

<sup>372</sup> Munshi writes how the educational trust has plans to publish texts in “Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Malayalam”. “Kulapati”’s Preface’ *ibid.*, 1.

*Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* become zones where people from different regions of the country can come together and transcend regionalism:

Let us keep ever in our minds the fact that it is the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabahrata* that bind our vast numbers together as one people, despite caste, space and language that seemingly divide them.<sup>373</sup>

The *Mahabharata* in Rajaji's understanding therefore is a zone of contact that allows for the people of India to come together across time and space. His role as the *kathakara* is to re-articulate the *Mahabharata* as this interactive, transcendental zone by articulating a strong moral vision in a simple and accessible English register.

### Re-telling the story: narrative voice and linguistic register

Rajaji's text is composed of hundred and seven short stories over one hundred and six chapters and a preface. The book begins with the story of how Ganesha became the scribe to the poet Vyasa. The first twelve chapters introduce the main protagonists— the Kuru clan, Bhishma, Amba, Vidura, Kunti, Karna, Drona, Duryodhana, and the Pandavas. The rest of the narrative follows the Pandava cousins through their forced exile (Chapters 13-15), marriage (Chapter 16), rule over Indraprastha (Chapters 17-22), the Game of Dice episode and their fall (Chapters 23-26), their second forced exile (Chapters 27-47), the cataclysmic Kurukshetra war

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 11.

and its consequences (Chapters 48-103), ending with the death of all of the main protagonists (Chapters 104-6).

Rajaji was writing at a time when the BORI was still in the middle of collating the modern critical edition. While there were scholarly recensions that were popular in different parts of the country, Rajaji himself did not know how to read Sanskrit till much later in his life.<sup>374</sup> Thus, Rajaji did not translate directly from a Sanskrit text. His own access to the *Mahabharata* was already mediated through Tamil and English re-tellings, as well as Indian and Western Orientalists.<sup>375</sup> Yet, by eliding out most of the long didactic portions of the narrative, Rajaji claims to perform an editing act that restores the Sanskrit text to a putative original core. In the preface to the Second Edition he writes that:

Generations of gifted reciters have added to Vyasa's original a great mass of literature...Divested of these accretions, the Mahabharata is a noble poem possessing in a supreme degree the characteristics of a true epic, great and fateful movement, heroic characters and stately diction.<sup>376</sup>

Furthermore, in his prefaces to the later editions, Rajaji specifically states that his re-telling is a re-telling of Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, thus tying it closely with the supposed point of origin for the story.

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<sup>374</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 45.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>376</sup> Preface to Second Edition, Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 5.

Rajaji edits out most of the long didactic portions of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, distributing the narrative across short episodes that are rarely longer than two to three pages, with short, descriptive titles interspersed with his own comments.<sup>377</sup> The result of his editing process is to stabilize the famously instable narrative of the *Mahabharata* by introducing a linear narrative that focuses mainly on the Pandavas' lives. The chapters are usually named either descriptively with titles like "Bhishma's Vow", "Death of Pandu", "Draupadi's Swayamvara" etc., which announce the subject and content of the story, or with clear moralistic messages like "The Wicked are Never Satisfied", "Affliction is Nothing New", "Mere Learning is not Enough" etc. that clearly show the reader where the sympathies of the narrative lie and align the episodes with other didactic genres, such as animal fables. Thus the chapter "The Wicked are Never Satisfied", which narrates the episode where the sons of Dhritarashtra want to go and taunt the Pandavas in their exile, ends with the comment, "A heart full of hate can know no contentment. Hate is a cruel fire, which extorts the fuel, on which it lives and grows."<sup>378</sup>

Rajaji also 'purifies' the *katha* by expunging punning and witticisms common in popular *kathas* from the time.<sup>379</sup> Instead, he keeps to a plain, unadorned English register, eschewing emotional affect of melodrama, suspense or humour. The dialogues between heroic characters

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<sup>377</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 120.

<sup>378</sup> "C. Rajagopalachari's Mahabharata," 80.

<sup>379</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 95.

are often in an archaic register with characters often prefacing their address to a person with a declarative “O”, (“O sage”, “O Arjuna” etc), which is the customary English translation of the Sanskrit vocative. Rajaji’s consciously used what he considered the hallmark of an ‘epic’, “stately diction” thus removing the ‘taint’ of popular culture.<sup>380</sup> For instance, when discussing the plight of the Pandavas amongst themselves, the Yadavas Krishna, Balarama and Satyaki speak in a simple, if archaic, register:

BALARAMA and Krishna came with their retinue to the abode of the Pandavas in the forest. Deeply distressed by what he saw, Balarama said to Krishna: “O Krishna, it would seem that virtue and wickedness bear contrary fruit in this life. For see, the wicked Duryodhana is ruling his kingdom clad in silk and gold, while the virtuous Yudhishtira lives in the forest wearing the bark of trees. Seeing such unmerited prosperity and undeserved privation, men have lost their faith in God. The praise of virtue in the sastras seems mere mummery when we see the actual results of good and evil in this world....”

Satyaki, who was seated near, said: “O Balarama, this is no time for lamenting. Should we wait till Yudhishtira asks us to do our duty for the Pandavas? While you and Krishna and all other relations are living, why should the Pandavas waste their precious years in the forest? Let us collect our forces and attack Duryodhana...”<sup>381</sup>

In creating his moral vision, characters are necessarily flattened, and sometimes completely elided, to prevent them from clouding the moral vision of Rajaji’s text. Waghorne points out that Rajaji is not concerned with creating internal worlds for his characters.<sup>382</sup> His work is not a novel or a satire. This results in the exclusion of a considerable amount of ‘grey’

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<sup>380</sup> Preface to First Edition, Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 3–4.

<sup>381</sup> “Worldcat Search: C. Rajagopalachari Mahabharata,” 62.

<sup>382</sup> Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari*, 98.

areas from a famously problematic narrative where the heroes resort to tricks to kill their own cousins, and villains are brave and courageous. In Rajaji's narrative, instead, male, upper-caste protagonists are presented clearly as either heroes or villains, while marginalised female and lower-caste characters are either completely silenced and/or erased. True heroism becomes a code-word for upper-caste dharma ("Kshatriya dharma"), and villainy is defined by not following the tenets of this heroic code.<sup>383</sup>

Rajaji prefers to shape his characters along a simple good and evil dichotomy in order to make moral lessons visible through their actions. The Pandavas are clearly marked out as heroes, while Duryodhana and his allies are marked as villains with the adjective "wicked" twinned with Shakuni and Duryodhana's names.<sup>384</sup> For instance, Arjuna becomes an exemplar of truly heroic and noble conduct when he speaks to Prince Uttara:

It is in ordinary human nature to look with contempt on lower levels of conduct in ability. The rich scorn the poor; the beautiful, the plain; the strong, the weak. Brave men despise cowards. But, Arjuna was no ordinary man but a great soul and a true hero who felt that his duty as a strong, brave man was to help others to rise above their weakness. Knowing that nature had endowed him with courage and bravery at birth, and that he owed them to no special exertions on his part, he had the true humility of the really great...<sup>385</sup>

Heroism is thus the preserve of great men who do not abuse their power to oppress those weaker than them but help them "rise above their weakness". In contrast, Duryodhana and

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<sup>383</sup> "C. Rajagopalachari's Mahabharata," 127, 157.

<sup>384</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 40.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.



most of his allies are depicted clearly as evil. Rajaji introduces Duryodhana with the adjective “wicked” in his re-telling — the “wicked sons of Dhritarashtra”— even though he mentions that Duryodhana redeemed himself by showing courage in adversity.<sup>386</sup> Karna, the only truly ‘heroic’ character among Duryodhana’s allies, throws the wickedness of his friends in sharper relief, often reminding them outright that their actions do “not befit heroes of the Kuru race”.<sup>387</sup> When Duryodhana and his allies confer on how to so discord amongst the Pandava brothers, Karna advocates attacking them head on:

We should make a surprise attack on the Pandavas and Drupada before Krishna joins them with his Yadava army. We should take the heroic way out of our difficulty, as befits kshatriyas. Trickery will prove useless.<sup>388</sup>

It should be noted that only the human characters are subject to this moral vision. Divine characters, like the gods who impregnate Kunti and Madri, or even Krishna, are referred to respectfully, while being kept out of the narrative as much as possible. Even though the text begins with a benediction, a staple of Hindu religious literature, divine characters and/or their divinity are muted. Krishna for instance is a major presence in the narrative, but apart from a

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<sup>386</sup> Preface to Second Edition, *ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

few places, where he is referred to with the honorific Sri, he is kept within the mortal plane.

His sermon to Arjuna, the *Bhagavad Gita*, is summarised in one paragraph.<sup>389</sup>

Flattening the characters is needed in order to put forward a normative point of view on moral conduct. Since the main dilemma of the re-telling becomes the conflict between the protagonists and antagonists, it orients the story towards the Kurukshetra war, like with the Chopra *Mahabharat* and Kohli's *Mahāsamar*. Female and lower-caste characters in this scheme are marginalised within the narrative, either silenced or erased. For instance, while Draupadi's disrobing during the game of dice episode is present in the narrative, it is not the pivotal moment it is usually considered. In Rajaji's retelling, Draupadi is silenced, "fainting away" when Dushasana attempts to disrobe her.<sup>390</sup> This is in contrast to the *Mahābhārata*, where Draupadi's anger and legal question finally enables her to save herself and her husbands.<sup>391</sup>

Rajaji also tends to elide or gloss over sex and sexual violence.<sup>392</sup> For instance Parashara's rape of Satyavati becomes "a sage had conferred on her the boon that a divine perfume should emanate from her", whereas Kunti's rape by the Sun god is glossed over as "Kunti conceived by

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 206. Rajaji publishes *Bhagavad Gita: a handbook for students* as a separate work. According to the cover on the 2008 edition, it is in its 22<sup>nd</sup> edition has sold over 100,000 copies. It is successful, but nowhere near the Rajaji *Mahabharata*. "Amazon India- Rajaji's Bhagavad Gita." Accessed 20/07/2016

<sup>390</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 95.

<sup>391</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 153–54.

<sup>392</sup> Vasanthi Srinivasan, in her study of Rajaji, has argued that Rajaji does not shy away from discussions about or descriptions of sex in Srinivasan, *Gandhi's Conscience Keeper: C. Rajagopalachari and Indian Politics*, 206. I have found this to be completely untrue.

the grace of the Sun”.<sup>393</sup> Similarly, when Yavakrida (Yavakri from Chapter 2) rapes Raibhya’s daughter-in-law, he is described as:

so overwhelmed by her loveliness that he completely lost his sense and self-control and became as a ravening beast with lust. He accosted her and taking brutal advantage of her fear and shame and bewilderment, he dragged her to a lonely spot and violated her person.<sup>394</sup>

The daughter-in-law, silenced, functions solely as an object of sexual violence in the text. Caste and sexual violence are erased because they complicate the moral dichotomy of Rajaji’s protagonists. The violence they commit in the Kurukshetra war is a fight for a heroic order. Thus only characters that are not part of the central narrative of the Kuru line are chastised for committing caste and sexual violence. Even then the victims of violence are merely objects upon which violence plays out. While by reducing the narrative into opposing dichotomies Rajaji is able to produce an agile text that highlights his moral vision, this leads to different sorts of character flattening and the erasure of one of the main points of interest of the *Mahabharata*—the spaces it opens for moral, political, caste and gender debate. On the one hand, male upper-caste characters are flattened and simply divided into heroes and villains, and on the other hand marginal and marginalised characters are either erased or silenced.

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<sup>393</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 22, 41.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

Similarly, the episode of Ekalavya, which has come to symbolize Brahmanical oppression of lower castes, is completely erased.<sup>395</sup> In fact, Brahmin oppression of lower castes is only shown obliquely, with just a hint of satire in the chapter dedicated to Utanga towards the very end. Utanga, an old Brahmin friend of Krishna, has a boon from Krishna that he will always find water to quench his thirst. As he is thirsty in the desert, a low-caste *nishada* approaches him with water, which Utanga refuses because of his caste. But the *nishada* is really Indra in disguise, testing Utanga's "understanding", and whether he had "transcended externals."<sup>396</sup> Utanga's casteism is trivialized and presented as a lack of understanding. In another episode Rajaji uses the trope of Brahmin gaining wisdom from an enlightened low-caste man, who is a butcher by trade, to proclaim:

Man reaches perfection by the honest pursuit of whatever calling falls to his lot in life...The occupation may be one he is born to in society or it may have been forced on him by circumstances or he may have taken it up by choice. But what really matters is the spirit of sincerity and faithfulness with which he does his life's work. Vedavyasa emphasizes this great truth by making a scholarly brahmana, who did not know it, learn it from a butcher, who lived it in his humble and despised life.<sup>397</sup> [sic]

Caste in Rajaji's *Mahabharata* comes across as a mere external affectation rather than a lived reality.

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<sup>395</sup> Ekalavya was a Nishada prince, which is also the name for a Dalit sub-caste in present day India. For the use of Ekalavya as a figure of Dalit assertion in the face of Brahmanical oppression see Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*.

<sup>396</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 311.

<sup>397</sup> "C. Rajagopalachari's Mahabharata," 78.

The aim of Rajaji's *Mahabharata* is to create a zone of contact between a mythic Indian antiquity and the present, as well as between different regional linguistic cultures, where he can articulate a moral vision for the modern Indian nation. He utilizes flat characters to create stark dichotomies to re-inforce this moral vision, while also marginalizing and foreclosing upon voices and narratives that could problematize that vision. In contrast, the more recent *Jaya* seeks to embrace the dilemmas and moral complexities of the characters and stories in the *Mahabharata* and uses them to explore, explain, and advise on dilemmas, fears, tensions, and desires within individuals and groups. With its large casuistry, the *Mahabharata* becomes an ideal guide to Indian psychology and a perfect manual for Indian managerial psychology.

### **Pattanaik's *Jaya***

*Jaya* was published in 2010, nearly 60 years after the Rajaji *Mahabharata* was first published in English. While it appeared around the same time as the mythological wave in Indian English publishing I discuss in Chapter 4, its author had already been writing books and articles on mythology and publishing them widely in English and was already an established presence in the Indian English book market.<sup>398</sup> This section frames how Pattanaik created his authorly persona before showing how *Jaya* specifically has been marketed as a commercial cultural product by its extremely savvy author. *Jaya* differs significantly from Rajaji's *Mahabharata* by

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<sup>398</sup> Pattanaik runs a website where he archives all his articles. See [devdutt.com](http://devdutt.com), last accessed 8/7/2016

including non-Sanskritic re-tellings and structuring his book as a manual. Though the inclusion is still structured as a centre-periphery relationship, it transforms *Jaya* from another re-telling of the *Mahabharata* in English book market to a cultural and religious compendium that can create a dense multi-layered zone, connecting 'variant' re-tellings to their putative main narrative, which also opens up space for speculations and explorations about character motivations and symbolism by relying on a vast array of academic and popular sources. The idea of Dharma that emerges from this re-telling, is accordingly protean in that it critiques social norms on the one hand, but also stresses the role of the individual in creating a better society on the other.<sup>1</sup>

### Devdutt Pattanaik, the mythologist

Devdutt Pattanaik positions himself at the interstices of myth, corporate management, and Indian society, trying to make sense of the latter two in the light of the first. A statement on his homepage reads: "I help leverage the power of myth in business, management, and life."<sup>399</sup> Pattanaik has succeeded in transforming his interest in Hindu mythology into a professional career as a leadership consultant as well as an author, constructing a persona which can make

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<sup>399</sup> "Homepage Devdutt Pattanaik." Last accessed 08/07/2016

contemporary life adhere to Indian precepts found in mythological stories and adapt them in a contemporary, unabashedly commercial form.

Unlike Rajaji, who was a well-known national leader who had served as a Congress Chief Minister when he wrote his *Mahabharata*, Pattanaik was a fairly unknown physician working in the private healthcare industry in India when he started writing mythological re-tellings. His first book was *Shiva—an Introduction* (1997), followed by similarly introductory books on other Hindu deities—Vishnu, Devi, Hanuman and Lakshmi—over the next six years.<sup>400</sup>

Styling himself an “author, mythologist, and leadership consultant”, Pattanaik has since built up a formidable presence in book publishing, newspapers, television production, and management leadership circles, with an efficient social media strategy co-ordinated across platforms like Facebook and Twitter and his website (more on which below). He is a prolific writer, with twenty-one books on mythology and one novel, and around ten books for children. He publishes regularly in various news outlets, with columns in *The Economic Times*, *Mid-Day*, and *India Today*’s online blog *Daily O*, as well as the digital start-up *scroll.in*, the right-wing publication *Swarajya*, and *Mumbai Mirror*. In addition, his interviews also appear regularly both in established English newspapers like *The Hindu* and *Indian Express* and in newer digital platforms like *YouthkiAwaaz* [The voice of the Youth], *Firstpost*, *The Better Indian*, among

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<sup>400</sup> “About Devdutt Pattanaik.” Accessed 08/07/2016

others.<sup>401</sup> Pattanaik occasionally experiments with social media platforms to great effect. For instance, on 27<sup>th</sup> March, Pattanaik proceeded to retell the story of the *Mahabharata* in 36 tweets.<sup>402</sup>

Pattanaik is also a successful public speaker, most notably a TED talk, the NASSCOM India Leadership Forum 2013, and the Jaipur Literature Festival.<sup>403</sup> His bio page also points out that he was ‘Chief Belief Officer’ of Future Group and consults with Reliance Industries on “matters related to culture”. He was also a story consultant with STAR Plus for the 2014 *Mahabharata* television serial. Since then he has also presented his own show, *Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik* (The world of gods with Devdutt Pattanaik) on the newly launched television channel, Epic TV. In addition to all this, Pattanaik runs an extremely effective authorial website which disseminates his works, archives his numerous articles and talk videos, provides links to online bookstores for buying his books, and links to his Facebook and Twitter pages, both of which boast a healthy fan following.<sup>404</sup> On his website his articles appear under three topic sub-headings within ‘Applied Mythology’—Business, Queer, and Society. There are 200 articles

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid. Accessed 08/07/2016

<sup>402</sup> The entire 36 tweet stream is archived on Pattanaik’s website, see Pattanaik, “Mahabharata (Jaya) in 36 Tweets.” This was following a re-telling of the Mahabharata in 100 tweets by Meghna Pant for the #TwitterFictionFestival “@MeghnaPant Rewrites India’s Epic Poem Mahabharata in Just 100 Tweets.” Last accessed 08/07/2016. Pattanaik keeps a steady social media presence where he often shares his articles online and delivers pithy commentary on current affairs where they can be related to Hindu mythology.

<sup>403</sup> See “#JLF 2015: Coming Out: Tales They Don’t Tell”; “#JLF 2015: The Power of Myth”; “TED Talks- Devdutt Pattanaik”; “NASSCOM ILF 2013: Day 3 - Grandmaster Series: Storytelling: Transforming through Tales!”; “Devdutt Pattanaik - Business Sutra”; “Videos- Devdutt Pattanaik.” Last accessed 08/07/2016

<sup>404</sup> 46,000 followers on Twitter, and 73,825 followers on Facebook as of 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2016-Pattanaik, “@devduttmyth”; Pattanaik, “Devdutt Pattanaik.”



listed under Business, and 181 under Society, and only 14 under Queer. The articles in the Business section use mythology specifically as analogies for better business practices.<sup>405</sup> The articles under the queer section excavate stories of queer persons and relationships in Hindu mythology. The articles listed under the ‘Society’ section are a little more varied than those listed under ‘Business’ and try to explain current events within the world view set up by Hindu myths. It is also a space for Pattanaik to outline his own philosophy on Hindu myths as distinct from specific groups— right-wing Hindu nationalists, ‘Western’ Indology, and Indian Indology.<sup>406</sup>

*Jaya: an illustrated retelling* was published in 2010 by Penguin India and is listed as one of Pattanaik’s bestsellers on his bio page.<sup>407</sup> *Jaya* is made for commercial consumption, though in a very different way from Rajaji’s *Mahabharata*. For one, it is a physically much bigger book. It is a rather large paperback, unlike the pocket-size Rajaji book, which is always priced extremely cheaply at Rs50-150.<sup>408</sup> Pattanaik’s book, while not prohibitively expensive, is still priced

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<sup>405</sup> This often throws up outlandish phrases like “Vedic management” (in “Revisiting Vedic Management” an essay about efficiency and transparency in business and ritualistic transactions) and anachronistic analogies; for instance, in an article entitled “Recruiting leaders in the Mahabharata” (*Economic Times* date?), Pattanaik argues that the story of Pandu’s use of the system of *niyoga* to provide himself with heirs from immortal gods is an example of good people management; last accessed?

<sup>406</sup> These categories are defined with quite a broad brush, with little to no mention of, and engagement with, actual people or texts. Nor is Pattanaik consistent in his use of these terms: for instance he produced a checklist of Left- or Right-wing opinions towards mythology, while claiming in another article that there are four types of Indology— American, European, diasporic (from the Indian diaspora), and Indian. While Pattanaik acknowledges that his characterizations are by no means concrete, it is hard to tell who exactly they apply to, or if they apply at all to anyone. Pattanaik, “Four Types of Indology.” Last accessed 08/07/2016

<sup>407</sup> Along with *Myth = Mithya* (2006), *Business Sutra* (2013), and *The Pregnant King* (2008) “About Devdutt Pattanaik.” Last accessed 08/07/2016

<sup>408</sup> 22.5cmx18cmx3cm

significantly higher, at Rs. 499 on the Penguin website, and Rs. 336 on Amazon India. The Kindle edition is priced at a slightly cheaper Rs. 235.60.<sup>409</sup> While exact sales numbers are impossible to access, the Amazon India page for *Jaya* shows that it ranks at no. 184 on the Amazon Bestsellers list. The publishers and author are also seeking to capitalize on international publishing trends and the move by Indian English publishers into Hindi publishing, so in 2015, a Hindi translation by Anant Mittal was published by Popular Prakashan and Penguin India. In 2016 Penguin India released *The Jaya colouring book* seeking to capitalize on the recent wave of colouring book for adults.<sup>410</sup> The price for these books, like the English text, is neither exorbitant nor cheap. The paperback Hindi translation is priced at Rs. 194 and the colouring book at Rs. 174.<sup>411</sup>

### The text and the genre

Apart from his novel the *Pregnant King*, Pattanaik has not really entered the Indian English fiction market, proclaiming in an interview that, “we don’t read novels anymore, we read manuals.”<sup>412</sup> *Jaya* is structured in a way that is both reminiscent of the Rajaji *Mahabharata* and self-help manuals. But while Rajaji excised huge sections from the *Mahabharata* narrative and paid almost no attention to folktales or regional re-tellings, Pattanaik includes more

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<sup>409</sup> “Penguin India- Jaya”; “Amazon India- Jaya.” Last accessed 08/07/2016

<sup>410</sup> Dundoo, “Go Colour a Book.” Last accessed 08/07/2016

<sup>411</sup> “Amazon India- Jaya Colouring Book”; “Amazon India- Jay: Mahabharat Ka Sachitra Punarkathan.” Last accessed 8/07/2016. These prices change quite often since online booksellers like Amazon offer varying amount of discounts which are sometimes hidden.

<sup>412</sup> “Listen, This Is What Your Ancestors Are Telling You’ - Sunday Times.” Last accessed 8/07/2016

episodes from the Sanskrit as well as regional and vernacular re-tellings as ‘variants’ at the end of the episode in grey end-boxes. The multiplicity of variants allows Pattanaik the flexibility and ingenuity of framing and responding to the moral dilemmas in the *Mahabharata*, positioning himself in a long line of interpreters and mythographers. Like Rajaji’s narrative, *Jaya* also utilizes flat characters, but unlike Rajaji, it does not elide famous problematic characters like Ekalavya nor are the characters vehicles for delivering moral lessons. Rather they are used as a way for Pattanaik to collate variant re-tellings and opening up the narrative to avenues of speculation and exploration. This also creates a zone for mapping and connecting the regional variants to the putative main text. When Pattanaik refers to Dharma, he accordingly opens up spaces to an extent, to question social norms and modern man-made law, stressing instead on the role of the individual within the ambit of society.

lights in Mathura. He was as dark as the darkest night and as charming as the sun is to a lotus flower.

Yogamaya caused the whole city to sleep and advised Vasudeva to place the child in a basket and take it out of the city, across the river, to Gokul. Ignoring the piteous pleas of Devaki, Vasudeva did as he was told.

At Gokul, in the cattle sheds, he found Yashoda, Nanda's wife, sleeping with a newborn girl beside her. Instructed by Yogamaya, Vasudeva exchanged the babies and returned to Mathura with Yashoda's daughter.

The next day, Kansa strode into Devaki's chamber, and after a moment of surprise on finding a girl in her arms, picked up the eighth child of Devaki intent on dashing her head to the ground. But the child slipped out of his hands, flew into the sky, and transformed into a resplendent goddess with eight arms, each one bearing magnificent weapons and announced that the killer of Kansa was still alive. And that Kansa would die as foretold.

- Krishna is no ordinary character. He is God to the Hindus, Vishnu, who descends from Vaikuntha to establish dharma. He does so as Parashurama and Ram before him takes the form of Krishna.
- Krishna's entry into the Mahabharata at the time of Draupadi's swayamvara is significant; she embodies the world he is meant to protect. Krishna comes only after Draupadi rejects Karna and chooses instead a Brahman who turns out to be a Kshatriya in disguise. She ends up marrying not only this fraud, but also his four brothers. Krishna knows the consequences of her decision. These husbands will end up gambling her away. He therefore becomes a part of her life to protect her from a distance.
- The story of Krishna's life was first narrated by Vyasa's son, Suka, to Parikshit, seven days prior to Parikshit's death. This narration helped Parikshit come to terms with his life. It is retold by Ugrashrava, the narrator of the Mahabharata, in the Naimisha forest. This narration is called the Harivamsa, or the tale of the clan of Hari, Hari being another name for Vishnu and Krishna.
- Kansa struggles to overpower what fate has in store for him. According to one tradition, Kansa was a child of rape; his father was a Gandharva and not of true Yadu bloodline. By the law of Shvetaketu that made the Pandavas the son of Pandu, Kansa should have been treated as a Yadava. But he was not. He was considered illegitimate and ostracized by the people of Mathura and he ended up hating them. Since he was not treated as a Yadava, he refused to submit to the ancient Yadava tradition of never wearing the crown. His hatred for the Yadavas fuelled his ambition to be dictator of Mathura.
- In some traditions, Yashoda's daughter who Kansa tries to kill is reborn later as Devaki's youngest child, Subhadra. In other traditions, she is reborn as Draupadi.



Figure 12: The Grey Box at the end of the chapter. This chapter narrates Krishna's birth. Notice that the grey box narrates, in order, Krishna's position in contemporary Hinduism, Krishna's introduction in the Mahabharata, the story's narration in the Sanskrit corpus, a story explaining Kansa (to an extent), and a 'variant' story about the children Kansa has killed.

The text is divided into 18 sections or 'books'. Apart from the 18 books it also has two author's notes, one prologue, one epilogue and another note by the author at the end titled 'The Idea Called Dharma', followed by Acknowledgements and Bibliography. The 18 books are further sub-divided into varying number of short chapters. Each chapter's title encapsulates the main plot point in the chapter (e.g. "Gambling match", "Disrobing of Draupadi", "Gandhari's curse" et al), while the section headings indicate the broad plot movements of the story. The progression of the sections and the chapters contained within them is linear, as the progression of books headings indicates— (in order) Ancestors, Parents, Birth, Education, Castaway, Marriage, Friendship, Division, Coronation, Gambling, Exile, Hiding, Gathering, Perspective, War, Aftermath, Reconstruction, Renunciation. Much like Rajagopalachari and in Kohli's Hindi novels, Pattanaik wrestles the plot of the *Mahabharata* into a linear progression of plot events with chapters arranged in thematic clusters. The first eight books draw most of their plot from the *Ādiparva*, whereas the five war *parvas* are covered within three chapters.

The division into 18 books is significant because the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is usually accepted to span 18 *parvas*, or books. Thus, even though Pattanaik re-tells the story over 108 short chapters (excluding the author's note, prologues and epilogues), he consciously harks

back to the 18-book format of the Sanskrit text.<sup>413</sup> The Sanskrit narrative is also invoked by including the frame story of the *Mahābhārata* in the prologue, i.e., Janamejaya’s performance of the snake sacrifice and of the Mahabharata narrative as part of the same sacrifice. While Janamejaya is mostly forgotten in the rest of the book, the beginning of each of the eighteen books starts with a quote addressed to Janamejaya. This is not a quote from the Sanskrit text and dialogue between Janamejaya and Vaishampayana, but a hint at one of the major plot points from the respective ‘book’. For instance Book Six entitled ‘Marriage’ (which narrates the story of Draupadi’s *svayamvara*) has the quote on the title page— “*Janamejaya, in your family, a mother asked her sons to share a wife.*”<sup>414</sup> (Italicized in the original)

*Jaya* seeks to strike a balance between re-telling stories from the Sanskrit corpus, which includes the *Mahābhārata* but also the Puranas, and stories outside of the Sanskrit canon. The

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<sup>413</sup> The plot division amongst the 18 books is very different from the plot division of the 18 parvas of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. The narrative covered by the Adi Parva is covered selectively by *Jaya* in the first eight books, while also narrating Krishna’s life in the seventh book. The narrative from book 2 to 6 closely mirrors the Sanskrit narratives in the broad plot points but differs in the stories that it includes and the finer plot points. The second book, titled ‘Parents’ deals with the immediate ancestry of the Pandavas and their Kuru cousins, narrating the births and lives of Shantanu, his first wife Ganga, their son Bhishma, Shantanu’s second wife, Satyawati, the death of Shantanu and Satyawati’s son Vichitravirya, and the impregnation of his wives by Satyawati’s son by Parashara and composer of the *Mahabharata*, Veda Vyasa resulting in the births of the fathers and uncle of the main protagonists— Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidura. The third book titled ‘Birth’ deals with the birth of the Pandavas and sons of Dhritarashtra, and the death of Pandu. The fourth book, ‘Education’ deals with the adolescent princes, their budding rivalry as well as Ekalavya story and the introduction of Karna. The fifth book, ‘Castaway’ narrates the first breaking point of the rivalry between the royal cousins leading to the Pandava fleeing into exile to escape their cousins. The sixth book narrates their re-emergence and marriage to the Panchala princess Draupadi. Book 7 introduces Krishna and narrates his adventures, including his birth, his fight with his uncle Kamsa, and the migration of his people from Mathura to Dwarka. Book 9 narrates the rise of the Pandavas empire, and Book 10, their fall in the Game of Dice. Book 11 narrates the Pandavas exile, and book 12 narrates the one year of the exile in disguise. Book 13 narrates the build up to the war, while the entire book 14 deals with the Bhagavad Gita section from the Mahabharata and book 15 with the war itself. Books 16 to 18 narrate the aftermath of the war, reconstruction process and finally the death and ascendance of all the major protagonists to the divine plane.

<sup>414</sup> Pattanaik, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, 85.

central story, narrated in the main text of the chapters, is mostly derived from the Sanskrit canon, while the regional re-tellings, termed ‘variants’, are usually listed at the end of each chapter, performing their ‘alternative’ nature on the margins of the text proper.<sup>415</sup> The author’s personal intervention in the act of story-telling comes in the form of collation, selection, editing, and explanation.

Both *Jaya* and Rajaji’s *Mahabharata* hit the same narrative beats: they introduce the main protagonists and their ancestors, the burgeoning rivalry between the Kuru cousins leading to early attempts on Bhima’s life, the attempt at the lives of all the Pandavas and their mother forcing them into exile, their marriage to Draupadi, rise and fall from power, exile, war and its aftermath. However, *Jaya* include more stories from the Sanskrit narrative than Rajaji as well as stories that are not in the Sanskrit narratives. For instance, the first book titled ‘Ancestors’ covers the ancient lineage of the Kuru line starting from the birth of Chandra’s son to Budh’s marriage, Shakuntala, Bharata, Yayati and Madhavi. Here Pattnaik includes two figures who do not appear in the modern critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, i.e. Chandra and Budh, so as to foreground the Bharata lineage as lunar dynasty.<sup>416</sup> Similarly, compared to Rajaji, who only

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<sup>415</sup> As he puts it, this is “yet another retelling of the great epic. Inspired by both the Sanskrit classic as well as its regional and folk variants, it is firmly placed in the context of the Puranic worldview. No attempt has been made to rationalize it... The exile in the forest (Vana Parva), the song of Krishna (Bhagavad Gita) and Bhishma’s discourse (Shanti Parva and Anushasan Parva) have had to be summarized, so they remain true to the original only in spirit. The Ashwamedha Parva is based on Jaimini’s retelling, hence focuses more on the doctrine of devotion rather than the military campaign. Shaped by my own prejudices as well as the demands of the modern reader, restructured for the sake of coherence and brevity”; *Ibid.*, xiv–v.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–14.

narrates the Pandavas' slaying of Baka while fleeing from their cousins before Draupadi's Swayamvara, *Jaya* includes more episodes about the Pandavas experiences while in training with Drona and in exile, like the story of Hidimba and Hidimbi, the meeting a Gandharva king, and most significantly, the story of Ekalavya. Furthermore, Pattanaik occasionally includes stories that are not part of the Sanskrit narrative in the main text as a chapter. For instance the chapter 'Beheading Gaya' (41) is about a Gandharva called Gaya who seeks protection from Arjuna since Krishna wants to behead him. This leads to an impasse between Arjuna and Krishna which is resolved only when the gods intervene.<sup>417</sup> More often however, Pattanaik uses grey boxes at the end of each chapter to flag up regional variations on the episode narrated in the chapter, together with ethical/moral lessons and interpretive comments. For instance, in the end-box for this chapter, Pattanaik tells us that the story is from Yakshagana tradition of Karnataka and was written by Halemakki Rama in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and argues that the "story shows how even good intentions can disrupt the bonds of friendship and how people can exploit friendship to their own advantage".<sup>418</sup> In the previous chapter (on Arjuna's abduction of Subhadra), Pattanaik had mentioned that in Indonesia, Arjuna marries seven women besides Draupadi, the figure of the *navagunjara* in Oriya re-tellings, and Draupadi's relation with her co-wives in Tamil re-tellings. Pattanaik uses these variants to open up space to discuss the

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 120–22.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 122.



characters briefly before he moves on to the next narrative. For instance, the story of Arjuna marrying seven women opens up space for Pattanaik to speculate that it shows a different side of the character as compared to the one that appears in the *Mahābhārata*:

In Indonesia, Arjuna is said to have married seven women besides Draupadi. The most important among them were Sumbadra, sister of Krishna, who is subservient and gentle and Srikandi (Shikhandi?), sister of Draupadi, a saucy and skilled archer, who later participates in the battle at Kuru-kshetra and is responsible for killing Bhishma. The woman who later became Duryodhana's wife was also in love with him but Arjuna felt it would be inappropriate for him to marry the woman already promised to his cousin brother, a side of Arjuna not seen in the Sanskrit Mahabharata where Arjuna gets pleasure in claiming what Duryodhana hopes will be his.<sup>419</sup>

In another end-box he speculates on the symbolism of Krishna's dark colour, writing: "That Krishna had a dark complexion and an opposition to Vedic yagnas has led to speculation that he was perhaps a deity of non-Vedic animal-herding communities."<sup>420</sup> In yet another end-box, he speculates that the Hindi word for worshipping the idol, *pūjā*, might be derived from the Tamil word for flowers, *pu*, "suggesting that puja was a ritual of non-Vedic tribes, a people who were probably less nomadic and more rooted to the earth."<sup>421</sup>

*Jaya* hints at the psychological/cultural symbolism and/or alternative motivations of the characters. For instance, Pattanaik writes that

The Kauravas are villains in the epic only because they refuse to outgrow the animal desire to cling to territory and dominate like an alpha male. Krishna helps the Pandavas

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 168.

undergo the transformation, but as events unfold one realizes there is a huge gap between the intention and implementation.<sup>422</sup>

The Kauravas are villainous because they cannot outgrow their animalistic desire, as opposed to the Pandavas who have outgrown them. By framing Duryodhana's envy as animalistic desire, *Jaya* reframes his motivations as one founded in natural barbarism, and not inherent in the character itself.

Unlike Rajaji, Pattanaik does not erase a problematic episode like Ekalavya's. Erasing it would defeat the purpose of *Jaya* as a compendium of Sanskrit and popular *Mahabharata* narratives. Pattanaik instead reworks Arjun's inner reaction and characterisation so that he escapes direct blame. Whereas in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* Arjuna demands that Drona take action about Ekalavya; in *Jaya* Arjuna is "shaken by the cruelty of his teacher."<sup>423</sup> In the end-box, Pattanaik comments on the Sanskrit narrative writing that, "Vyasa portrays Arjuna as a highly insecure and competitive youth."<sup>424</sup>

Using the grey end-boxes, *Jaya* also creates a zone for bridging putative 'variants' to their 'main' narrative. Many of the "variants" that Pattanaik maps are from areas outside major urban centres, usually described as folktales or folklore qualified by location, typically with the

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>423</sup> Simon Brodbeck argues that Drona is honour bound to extract his terrible fee from Ekalavya because he gave his word to Arjuna that Arjuna would be the best archer in the world. Drona is compelled to keep his word because Arjuna in turn had promised Drona that Arjuna would avenge Drupada's insult to Drona. Brodbeck, "Ekalavya and 'Mahābhārata' 1.121-28." Pattanaik, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, 65.

<sup>424</sup> Pattanaik, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, 65.

name of the state that they hail from— “folktale from Gujarat”, “Punjabi folklore”, “Oriya Mahabharata”, “folk play from Maharashtra”, “Bhil Mahabharata”, “Tamil Mahabharata”, “one South Indian folktale”, “Dindigul”, Terukuttu in Tamil Nadu, Har-ki-Doon in Uttarakhand.<sup>425</sup>

This creates a dense map, or rather three. *Jaya* guides the reader providing a mainstream narrative in the text proper and including variants at the physical periphery of the chapter. It also plots variants onto the geography of India. And it also geographically plots locations from the narratives — “Barnawa, located in Meerut district, close to Hastina-puri, is identified as Varanavata, where the palace of wax was built for the Pandavas” or “Bairat, located in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan, has been identified as Viratnagar or Matsya”.<sup>426</sup>

*Jaya* also opens up a zone for creating connections between seemingly disparate academic fields in re-telling the *Mahabharata*. Utilizing works of Hindutva historians, *Jaya* tries to place the story within a putative historical context by trying to map the dates of the *Mahabharata*—

B.N. Narahari Achar has determined the date of the war using Planetarium software, beginning with Krishna’s journey to Hastina-puri and ending with Bhishma’s death. He concludes that Krishna left on 26 Sep 3067 BCE, reaching Hastina-puri on 28 Sep and leaving Karna on 9 Oct. A solar eclipse occurred with the new moon on 14 Oct, with Saturn at Rohini and Jupiter at Revati exactly as given in the epic. The war began on 22 Nov 3067 BCE. Bhishma expired on 17 Jan 3066 BCE (Magh Shukla Ashtami), the winter solstice occurring on 13 Jan 3066. It must be kept in mind that 5000 years ago, the date

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 111, 116, 184, 185, 202, 205, 280, 284.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 78, 202.

of the winter solstice was very different from what it is today; the current night sky is different from the one seen by our ancestors<sup>427</sup>

Unlike Hindutva historians, though, Pattanaik foregrounds scholarship as a realm of uncertainty. For example, when he mentions the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II to claim that “ancient Indians” believed that the Kurukshetra war took place in 3102 BCE, he goes on to say that there is no consensus among scholars about the dates of the war—whether the war happened at all is never considered a valid question.<sup>428</sup> Characteristically, details like where this research may be found, what the planetarium software is, how the temporal points were plotted into that software, are left unsaid, leaving the reader to rely on Pattnaik’s authority alone.

To create such a dense zone of connections, *Jaya* includes a vast repertoire of references ranging from religious practices, folklore, Sanskrit texts, rational science disciplines like history and anthropology, modern literature, to other, more suspect disciplines like astrology. Pattanaik makes vague ascriptions of authority— “Most people believe”, “Historians believe”, “Playwrights suggest”, “Anthropologists believe”, “Vedic scholars”, “astrologers revealed”, “Many scholars believe”, sages et al.<sup>429</sup> While Pattanaik never cites his source, it is the *discipline* quoted that lends authority to his arguments, blending scientific, literary, and religious

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., xv, 24, 45, 75, 80, 140, 296. Apart from “astrologers revealed” all of the ascriptions appear in the grey text boxes.

archives— historians, playwrights, anthropologists, vedic scholars, scholars, sages are all presented on the same level. While Pattanaik does not footnote his sources, he provides a Bibliography, and his Acknowledgements also act as a sort of bibliography of indirect influences, more often than not information is given with no specific source bolstering the author's as a master collator and modern-day *bricoleur*.

### Ethics, Characters and Individual transformation

While the combination of story-telling and ethical lessons at the core of *kathakar* traditions is common to Rajaji and Pattanaik, the nature of Pattanaik's ethical messages differs significantly from Rajaji's. Pattanaik stresses again and again for individual transformation and ethical choice and questions conventional/social ("man-made") morality, particularly in the realm of gender norms. In doing so, Pattanaik makes space for alternative sexualities, for women's and (to a lesser extent) subaltern subjectivities, and for individual choice.

The lessons presented at the end of the early chapter, either as the conclusion to the main text or in the grey end-box tend to be proleptic, prefiguring the cataclysmic Kurukshetra war. However, they also contain an interesting critique of contemporary social norms. In the second chapter, entitled 'Budh', he writes:

In time, the Chandra-vamsis would forget the gender ambiguity of both Budh and Ila. They would mock it when it would become manifest in Arjuna's brother-in-law,

Shikhandi. They would stop him from entering the battlefield. Such is the nature of man-made laws: ignorant of the past and insensitive of the present.<sup>430</sup>

Man-made laws do not constitute Dharma for Pattanaik. Instead, Dharma is the triumph of ‘civilisation’ over barbarism within the individual. Barbarism is typified by what Pattanaik calls ‘matsya nyaya’ defining it as the concept of might is right. It is the law of the jungle according to death because

The fear of death makes animals fight for their survival. Might becomes right as only the fit survive. With strength and cunning territories are established and pecking orders enforced. Thus, the law of the jungle comes into being. Animals have no choice but to subscribe to it. Humans, however, can choose to accept, exploit or reject this law.<sup>431</sup>

Humans, according to Pattanaik, have developed to transcend this law “where we can look beyond ourselves, include others, and make everyone feel wanted and safe.” Dharma stands in opposition to ‘matsya nyaya’. It is a hallmark of human beings because animals have not developed the cranial capacity for conceptualising such a world according to Pattanaik. Dharma is “a society where the mighty care for the meek, and where resources are made available to help even the unfit thrive”. Adharma is when the strong exploit the weak instead

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 346.

of helping them. “If dharma enables us to outgrow the beast in us, then adharma makes us worse than animals. If dharma takes us towards divinity, then adharma fuels the demonic”.<sup>432</sup>

Defined in this particular way, the Dharma-adharma polarities manifest themselves in different ways in Pattanaik’s text. Dharma-adharma comes to signify a light-dark polarity, with Pattanaik characterizing Gauri and Kali, forms of the female divine form in its controlled and uncontrolled states respectively, along the same axis.<sup>433</sup> He reinterprets passion as adharma, and control as dharma. For instance, Draupadi’s beauty threatens control—

Draupadi’s stunning beauty makes the best of men lose all good sense and constantly draws trouble. Even though she is innocent, her beauty arouses all men who end up wanting to hurt and humiliate her because she is chaste and unavailable<sup>434</sup>

Pattanaik argues that laws and men are needed, in order to control a woman’s desire and convert her into respectable wife—

Vyasa keeps asking what makes a woman a wife. It emerges that it is civilized society with its laws of marital fidelity that makes a woman a wife. But in the forest, there are no rules. Can a woman still be a wife? It is evident through the story of Jayadrata that neither society nor forest can make a woman a wife; it is only the desire and the discipline of man that can do so.<sup>435</sup>

Dharma for Pattanaik implies controlling and/or rejecting animalistic barbarism by practicing self-control.

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 163.

Pattanaik's interpretation of Dharma thus is a bricolage concept, much like the book itself. On the one hand, he seems to critique gender normativity of contemporary Indian society, but on the other hand, thinks of Dharma within Apollonian and Dionysian polarities.

## **Conclusion**

Both Rajaji *Mahabharata* and *Jaya* have been extremely popular books, relative to their time in circulation.. Rajaji's *Mahabharata* has been circulating for much longer as an easily accessible and available re-telling for school and college students. *Jaya* has benefitted from its author's burgeoning presence in different circuits of cultural production, his use of social media to build and connect with his readership, and established multinational publishers in the Indian English book market. The books occupy a very interesting position within the field of Indian English book production in that they are neither literary novelistic works nor can they be dismissed as low brow. They have accrued symbolic and cultural capital due to the authors and their publishers' stature in the publishing circuit and their popularity.

The authorly personae of the two authors are integral to creating cultural capital and informing the re-telling itself. Rajaji utilised his public persona as a politician, teacher and Brahmin to create a *Mahabharata* re-telling that could be considered as authoritative. On the one hand, he hailed from a traditional, upper-caste household that has relatively easy access to the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, if not the text directly. On the other hand, he was on the forefront of



making decisions that are moulding a country about to be granted its freedom. His position as one of the pre-eminent politicians of his time means that he was actively shaping the modern Indian state, while also shaping perceptions about the modern nation-state as well.

Pattanaik's appeal is specifically to the entrepreneurial and white-collar middle class that has emerged in India since the liberalisation of the economy. He draws upon his twin expertise in management consulting and mythology to create modern mythological analogies for the emergent middle-class, while at the same time subtly inserting a message of empathy and gender flexibility. While Rajaji's target audience was of school and college children, Pattanaik has replaced them with the emergent middle-class that can afford his book. Concomitantly, the persona of the political leader and *kathakar* are replaced by Pattanaik's persona of management consultant and mythographer-bricoleur.

The narrative vision of the two authors differs in significant ways. For Rajaji, the Mahabharata is a historical archive of Indian culture which can be recovered to illustrate moral lessons to his audience, creating a zone of connection across linguistic boundaries. He values the narrative for its possibilities as a moral text rather than as a historical document. Pattanaik's historical vision is somewhat more complex. It intervenes to explain ritual traditions and contemporary situations, locating the story in both local and national geographies, creating dense cross-hatches connecting the metropole to the margins

geographically and through the *Mahabharata*. Thus, while the *Mahabharata* remains a place for meeting across socio-cultural boundaries, the boundaries themselves seem to have shifted.

As we shall see in the next chapter, Indian English until very recently has often been seen as a modern, secular, upper-caste space. Rajaji and Pattanaik complicate this picture considerably, especially in the debates on modernity and tradition, secularism and religious chauvinism. They show that popular mythological narratives have existed in Indian English publishing for a long time, whose success can be based on an appropriation of folk forms and which circulate both nationally (in English and in translation) as well as internationally. Despite not being accepted as literary, these re-tellings make their way into university syllabi and upscale bookshops like the Full Circle in Khan Market. They present a site of significant cultural production where mythological narratives are deployed to articulate and engage with contemporary anxieties.

## Chapter 4:

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# The Expanding Worlds of Indian English Fiction

### Introduction

In the middle of UN agency offices, the Taj Man Singh Palace Hotel, government bungalows, and city clubs in New Delhi, lies Khan Market. Named after the venerated Pashtu freedom fighter, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, this up-scale market attracts city and foreign elite looking for a sanitized consumer experience, buying wares ranging from ethnic chic to high-end multi-national brands. Khan Market also has a couple of bookshops that attract a dedicated, if select, clientele— Full Circle and Bahrison. They mostly stock English books, catering to the anglicized tastes of its customers. Retellings of the *Mahabharata* dot the bookshops haphazardly in different sections— fiction, spiritual/religious, children's book, travelogue, non-fiction et al. If there is a science to organising books in bookstores, and I am told that there is, its arcane secrets are either lost to humankind, or need a lengthy and arduous initiation into a mysterious society.

*Mahabharata* retellings in Indian English fiction—as opposed to translations, abridged translations, and children's literature— are comparatively new. The first critically acclaimed

and commercially successful re-telling was Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*—even though there had already been multiple such works in various Indian languages (as I will discuss in the next chapter). Though *TGIN* it had a successful print run, re-telling myths in Indian English did not really catch on till Ashok Banker and, to a significantly lesser extent, Samit Basu started experimenting by re-telling mythic stories and/or motifs through genre fiction tropes like science fiction and fantasy in the early 2000s. Even then, Banker was a lone success for some time, before Amish Tripathi published his Shiva trilogy between 2010 and 2013. Authors like Chitra B. Divakaruni, Samhita Arni and Krishna Udayasankar were notable authors that were a part of the cultural moment when Amish's book started selling well, attracting attention to the rise of the mythological fiction in Indian English. Since then, mythological fiction has boomed in India with writers like Ashwin Sanghi, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane, Anuja Chandramouli, Usha Narayanan et al appearing on the bookshelves. Post-millennial Indian English fiction has expanded the repertoire of genres in the field, often experimenting with mythological stories and different genres. Not limiting themselves to just commercial fiction, Indian English publishers have also invested in producing graphic novels that span different genres—from commercial comic books to high art. Amruta Patil, has emerged as one of the leading graphic novelists who has made a name for herself for her unique art in the re-telling of the *Mahabharata*. These are significant moments in the field of

production in the Indian English book market, signifying a rapidly growing market.<sup>436</sup> The boom in Indian English literature asks new questions of scholars of the field that requires us to cast our nets wider, to include more than the postcolonial literary canon in our study of the field of Indian English literature.

Indian English literature is in a position where texts are at the intersection of national and international circuits of influence and reception.<sup>437</sup> Each text has to negotiate these circuits in its own ways, but there are certain trends that emerge in the use of source story, genre and position within the national field of Indian English literature production. The *Mahabharata*, already feted as a 'World Classic', is utilised by Indian English works at different times, in different genres to negotiate the national and international literature circuits of influence and reception. This chapter looks at three authors and texts by placing them within their cultural context—Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Krishna Udayasankar's *The Aryavarta*

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<sup>436</sup> Rob Francis writes that "in 2003, the Federation of Indian Publishers (FIP) estimated that the total book market was worth R7000 crores (=£ 1 bn then) and that with an accepted annual growth rate of 10 per cent, a value of R10,000 crores (£1.2 bn) would seem reasonable, and this figure was agreed by one member of FIP". Francis, "India Publishing Market Profile 2008," 1. However a recently released report by Nielsen Bookscan conducted in association with estimates the current worth of the book market to be around Rs. 261 Billion (Rs 26,100 crores), and expected to grow to Rs. 739 billion (Rs. 73,900 crores) by 2020 at an estimated 20 per cent rate of growth. At present, India's market is estimated to be the sixth biggest globally. PTI, "Indian Book Market to Touch Rs 739 Billion by 2020: Survey"; Mallya, "Nielsen Values Indian Publishing at \$3.9 Billion - Publishing Perspectives." Hindi and English publishing together is supposed to make up 50 per cent of this book market, followed by publishing in other languages. German Book Office, New Delhi, "India Book Market 2015."

<sup>437</sup> It is important to note here the various terms that have been used to describe English literature produced on or in India. Anglo-Indian refers to British writings on/in India, whereas Indo-Anglian literature was used in the 1940s to refer to literature produced in English by Indians. By the time Rushdie appears on the scene, the term in vogue has become Indian Writing in English (IWE). Indian English is the most current term, but also implicitly signifies a hybridity of language which is becoming normalized. To avoid confusion, I use the term Indian English to refer to Indian authors writing in English, irrespective of the terms that have been used over time.

*Chronicles* trilogy (2013-14), and Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* (2012)—using them as representative of their cultural moment in the use of myths in Indian English re-telling. They are all from different segments in the field of cultural production.

The chapter will explore how their context, networks of circulation and influence, both national and international, in the process of creating an Indian idiom in newly emerging genres or trends in Indian English literature. All of the authors are cosmopolitan, part of an Indian middle-class and writing for the same. They are all educated in English and products of elite educational institutions. However, they work in vastly differing modes, for differing audiences and with different intent, suggesting a broadening the cultural space of Indian English literature. Tharoor is part of a wave of well-educated Indian writers in the 1980s hailing from within India's elite, writing literary fiction for both national and international audiences. Udayasankar writes genre fiction for a new audience of Indian English readers who are based in India, but are exposed to global cultural products. Both the marketing techniques and aesthetics of the book borrow appropriate strategies and motifs from global cultural phenomena in books and movies. While Tharoor and Udayasankar are negotiating between different sets of national and international aesthetics textually, reflecting their readership, Patil does so both visually and textually. Patil's foray into graphic novel indicates a small but expanding niche within Indian English publishing, freeing the graphic narrative from the

confines of children's literature in India, marking the graphic novel as the space open for experimentation. Each writes in a different mode—Tharoor uses bathetic humour, Udayasankar, speculative fiction, and Patil the graphic novel and high art.

The chapter is organised into three sections, each focussing on a specific author. Each section is further organised into two sub-sections, the first locating the cultural product in its cultural context, and the second carrying out a close reading of the text(s). Though the questions driving each sections are the same, the cultural moments and fields of all three authors are so different that each has to be looked at separately from the other, with the conclusion bringing together the salient points of continuity and discontinuity between them. The chapter seeks to place the authors within their cultural context, utilising Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the field of cultural production and cultural capital to place the texts in relation to each other as well as within the broader trends in Indian English publishing at the time. It also looks at *where* the texts circulate, who are the intended audience, and how authors and publishers reach them, especially in the age of social media and digital marketing. Following from that, I carry out a close reading of the texts, mapping their cultural genealogy and analysing its effect on the framing of their respective re-tellings. I will focus on the form and structure of the narrative, as well as what Alex Woloch calls character systems. Woloch writes that "character-space marks the *intersection* of an implied human personality...with the definitively

circumscribed form of a narrative”.<sup>438</sup> Character-space lays the ground for character systems since it allows for theorizing the space a character takes up in the narrative. The character is no longer seen as a simple mimetic human being, but rather an inflected human being, a representation. The character-system is the arrangement of different character-spaces within the text. Instead of using the flatness or roundness of characters to valorise or castigate the authorial or narrative abilities, we analyse the character-system as one that requires flat and round characters.

The first section engages with *TGIN*, situating it within the broader historical context of the 1980s and the growth of Indian English publishing. I investigate how the parallel growth of postcolonial studies in Western academia and the historically dominant cultural role of English in India dovetail to create a dominant literary tradition that is viewed exclusively, and paradoxically, through the lens of national authenticity. This elides the fact that the ‘nation’ itself is a notion under construction in the text that privileges specifically elite ideals of eclecticism that are mediated through English, while delegitimising other constructions of nations, sub-nations or individuals in the text. The result on the re-telling is that the marginalised characters remain flat, marginalised, and at most symbolic.

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<sup>438</sup> Woloch, *The One vs the Many*, 13.



The second section looks at the new wave of mythological fiction, exploring how the book as a cultural product and the author's persona are created through social media and digital marketing. It then looks at the development of genres like science fiction, fantasy and speculative fiction in the West and in India, arguing that the best way to understand mythologicals is as an ongoing dialogue between different genres and the source story, rather than a well-defined form. The close reading of *Chronicles* thus maps the contours of this conversation in the trilogy, mapping how Udayasankar uses diverse historical (and pseudo-historical) archives to create a new story-world that reworks certain character valencies, but leaves others untouched.

The third section charts out the history of the commercial comic book in India, contrasting it with the recent rise in independent and experimental graphic novels. While the *Mahabharata* has been extensively adapted in the former, it has never appeared in the latter form. Thus, Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* is a unique adaptation in a graphic narrative because it does not have to follow commercial considerations that would necessitate *darśan* aesthetics, allowing her to experiment freely with visuals and texts. This enables Patil's project to recover the marginal stories from the *Mahabharata*, as well as marginal characters, allowing female characters like Ganga, Satyavati, Gandhari et al more space on the page, through differentiated iconic representation.

## The Great Indian Novel

*The Great Indian Novel* is a strange, hybrid novel in its conception, working along three different storylines: the allegorical vehicle, namely the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic poem, Indian history and the actual plot of the novel... What emerges is a rather artificial and abstract pastiche<sup>439</sup>

In the novel, Shashi Tharoor superimposes the central spine of the *Mahabharata* story— the intergenerational and internecine strife and war of the Kuru family— on to a national (and nationalist) history. In the process, he creates a palimpsest of texts and characters, deftly playing with genres, languages and registers, blurring history, mythology and memory. The text circulates widely nationally and internationally, accumulating both popular acclaim and cultural capital. The novel is often marked as a national allegory and the author accused of writing for audiences abroad. I argue that Tharoor is writing for both national and international (read: Western audiences), simultaneously disturbing the British and American canons of literature as well as articulating an idea of a tolerant Indian nation contrasting with the Hindu right discourse of the time. However, his articulation of India pushes marginal characters further into the margins.

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<sup>439</sup> Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, 90. It's a slightly odd criticism, since one would think that pastiche *is* artificial, if not abstract.

## Circulating at home and abroad

The 1980s saw the rise of the Hindu Right, the entry of the mythologicals in hitherto ‘secular’ spaces, like Doordarshan, and the Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*, all presenting very different interpretations of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>440</sup> At around the same time, it also saw Indian English literature becoming more visible on the ‘global’ English circuit aided by the entry of multinational English publishing companies like Penguin India and marked by Salman Rushdie winning two of the most prestigious literary prize of the English publishing world—the Booker Prize and the James Tait Memorial Prize—for *Midnight’s Children* (1981).<sup>441</sup> Appearing in the market at roughly the same time as novels like *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *A Suitable Boy* (1993), and *A Fine Balance* (1996), *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *TGIN* was published in the UK before it was published in India in 1989, and in US in 1991.<sup>442</sup> Almost from the beginning of its publishing life then it has circulated both at home, and abroad. The most notable difference in the different editions has been the covers. UK and US editions have somewhat orientalist covers, whereas the Indian covers stress the (quasi) presence of historical personages from modern political history—Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Indira Gandhi et al.

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<sup>440</sup> Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* was originally a play in French and English, first performed at the 39<sup>th</sup> Avignon Festival on July 7, 1985. The English play script was published in 1987. Stodder, “Review.” The play was adapted into a movie in 1990. Peter Brook recently returned to the *Mahabharata*, with a play adaptations entitled *Battlefield*.

<sup>441</sup> Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English,” 85–86.

<sup>442</sup> To the best of my knowledge there have been at least seven editions of *The Great Indian Novel* in total, with at least two hardback editions, the rest paperback. There are also translations available in French, Spanish, German, Italian and Malayalam.

Cultural capital—in the form of reviews in international journals and literary awards—came quickly for the novel. The book started getting noticed in the US press, with a mention and a moderately good reviews appearing in *The New York Times*, *LA Review of Books*, *Kirkus Review* et al.<sup>443</sup> As Orsini has argued reviews in literary publications consecrate works from the erstwhile colonies as ‘world literature’.<sup>444</sup> In 1990, *TGIN* won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Europe and South Asia.

For the Indian English market, consecration in the West not only gave the book cultural legitimacy, but also helped garner publicity at home. Industry sources estimate that upon first being released in 1989, Tharoor’s *TGIN* was a runaway success in a publishing market where five thousand copies sold makes a bestseller.<sup>445</sup> However since then *The Great Indian Novel* had largely out of view till very recently when it started becoming the focus of Indian English literary criticism in the West, and a recently released silver jubilee print edition.

Circulation in the West however left the English authors open to the attack that they wrote for the West, recreating a new cycle of anxiety of belonging.<sup>446</sup> English has enjoyed a tenuous position in literary production circuits in India. In the first few decades after Indian

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<sup>443</sup> Tharoor writes that “Of the more than a hundred and forty reviews *The Great Indian Novel* received on five continents, only three were largely negative.” Tharoor, *Bookless in Baghdad: Reflections of Writing and Writers*, 226. See also “THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL by Shashi Tharoor | Kirkus Reviews”; Times, “A Generation Writing in English Is Broadening the Fiction of India”; Gorra, “Lesser Gods and Tiny Heroes - NYTimes.com”; Graeber, “New & Noteworthy - NYTimes.com.” (mention only).

<sup>444</sup> Orsini, “India in the Mirror of World Fiction,” 83.

<sup>445</sup> Mahale, “A Few Questions.”

<sup>446</sup> Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English,” 90.

independence, English was a necessary evil—a mark of a colonised legacy that effaced ‘native’ traditions, but also indispensable in governing a multilingual country where the language of the national bureaucracies was already English. In the literary field, this contradiction morphs into a set of dilemmas and contradictory positions. It is the language of the elite, yet only a small number of Indians speak it.<sup>447</sup> At the same time, Indian English literary production far outstrips literary production in Indian languages when it comes to media visibility and cultural prestige. In spite of this, questions of authenticity continue to dog Indian English. Meenakshi Mukherjee, perhaps most famously, spoke about this as ‘The Anxiety of Indianness’, observing that the English author was always qualified as Indian, whereas a, say, Marathi author needed no such qualification, since it is automatically granted. Indian English authors were always at pains to prove their Indianness to a disparate audience.<sup>448</sup> Yet it became the language for creating an imagined community of the Indian nation. Rosemary M. George argues that English implied an intended audience situated in multiple locations, rather than a specific regional location, therefore further cementing its position as a link language. Furthermore, unlike Indian languages, English was ‘neutral’—eliding the explicit caste markers present in

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<sup>447</sup> George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 14.

<sup>448</sup> Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English,” 79.

Indian languages. This led to English becoming the language of choice in the construction of national literary anthologies.<sup>449</sup>

George points out that parallel to this literary outpouring, the Western academies also saw a the birth and growth of postcolonial studies with the publishing of Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*(1978), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.<sup>450</sup>

Coupled with the rise of postcolonial studies Indian English fiction became visible internationally. Indian English literary production of the 1980s also signalled "a major shift in the very understanding of western colonialism, non-western nationalisms, and the politics of culture that had been gathering momentum in several locations in the late 1970s."<sup>451</sup>

Concurrently, it also became representative of the nation in postcolonial theory and critique.

Within this paradigm they were judged according to how authentically they represented the postcolonial nation.<sup>452</sup> Frederic Jameson's argument that literature of the recently decolonised nations took the forms of national allegories tended towards being a self-fulfilling prophecy given that 'nation' was the primary, and sometimes only, measure of a text's worth.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 1–2, 20, 27.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>453</sup> Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." That is to say that in a supposedly global marketplace of literature in the Anglophone world, the nation becomes a significant mode for classifying, engaging with and critiquing literature

We see a convergence of two levels of circulation, national and international in a singular moment. On the one hand, the presence of these texts, as Mukherjee observes, challenged two assumptions—one, that “major novels that change the literary map of the world must necessarily engage with issues in western culture,” and two, that English was the sole power of the old and new colonial powers of “Britain and America”.<sup>454</sup> On the other hand, Indian English literary production in the 1980s focused on narrating the nation. Neelam Srivastava argues that the texts were set against the backdrop of an increasingly fragile Nehruvian consensus, beginning with the National Emergency imposed between 1975 and 1977, and “further threatened by the rise to prominence of an alternative national ideology, Hindutva, based on the supremacy of Hindu religion and culture.”<sup>455</sup> Mukherjee’s observation for *Midnight’s Children* rings true for *TGIN* too in that it too sought to construct “the idea of a nation—an India that is inclusive and tolerant— ...[and]...beset with an anxiety about the fragility of this concept of India”.<sup>456</sup> However the idea is constructed from a position of relative privilege, as Kanishka Chowdhury argues.

Tharoor's effort to answer the colonizer is dependent upon the material and discursive tools that are provided by the colonizer. The same ideological apparatus that provides

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<sup>454</sup> Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English,” 86.

<sup>455</sup> Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, 2. Books like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993) [and] Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1996)”

<sup>456</sup> Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English,” 87.

him with a voice is inevitably caught up in silencing those who are less fortunate than Tharoor<sup>457</sup>

In an article written for *Outlook* magazine William Dalrymple mentions “the St Stephen’s mafia and the Doon School diaspora,” in passing, referring at least partially to what has been sometimes called a Stephanian school of literature.<sup>458</sup> Many of the predominantly male Indian English authors were graduates of the St. Stephen’s college and/or similarly elite educational institutions of secondary and higher education. The notion of a school of literature tied with Stephen’s however, is greeted with ambivalence by the ‘Stephanians’ themselves. Tharoor and Makarand Paranjape, Stephanians both, point out that the common themes in texts produced by this group could be traced to a wider cultural ‘background’ that the authors shared.<sup>459</sup> While the location itself might not have been significant in itself, Sanjay Srivastava argues that elite educational institutions are important locations for the creation of the postcolonial citizen where citizenship is a form of cultural capital. Qualities such as secularism, rationalism and metropolitanism, mediated through English, define the ‘modern’ Indian citizen. The project of making the modern Indian citizen is inextricably linked with English.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Chowdhury, “Revisioning History: Shashi Tharoor’s Great Indian Novel,” 43.

<sup>458</sup> Dalrymple, “The Beatnik Before Christ.”

<sup>459</sup> Bhattacharjea, Chatterjee, and Tharoor, “Celebrate College, but Doubt the School,” 43; Paranjape, *Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English*, 135.

<sup>460</sup> Srivastava, *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School*, 7–10.



Writing in 1980s the politics of Indian English writers came into a direct conflict with the politics of the Hindu Right. Sanjay Srivastava argues that “[t]he ‘Hindu fundamentalists’ were attacked not merely because they raised the spectre of communal violence but also because they attempted to ‘steal’ the national identity agenda from its traditional custodians.”<sup>461</sup>

Tharoor’s *TGIN* constructs an idea of India in opposition to the Hindu fundamentalism, a point he has to expand upon often, just by dint of having adapted the *Mahabharata*—

During a literary reading in New Delhi in 1991 I was asked whether I was not worried about helping to revive the epic at a time when fanatics of various stripes were reasserting "Hindu pride" in aggressive and exclusionist terms.<sup>462</sup>

Tharoor defends his re-telling by claiming that his re-telling is not an “atavistic view of India”, but rather “an eclectic one, heir to centuries of Hindu, Muslim and British colonial rule.”<sup>463</sup> The *Mahabharata*, to him, “is a purely secular epic”.<sup>464</sup> In articulating his claims, Tharoor is echoing claims made by theatre of roots practitioners and the cultural bureaucrats of the 1980s.<sup>465</sup> This argument is not without its merits, but its practitioners do articulate a homogenizing idea of the *Mahabharata* and/or the nation and/or culture. The next section will look at how while on the one hand, Tharoor subverts postcolonial literature within his text by discursively examining the concept of development and through the satirical mode and code-

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>462</sup> Tharoor, “Introduction to the Silver Jubilee Edition of the Great Indian Novel,” 12.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 9. It is interesting to note that this argument echoes a similar argument made by the bureaucrats that commissioned the television *Mahabharat* (see Chapter 1), as well as the Theatre of Roots practitioners (see Chapter 2). Amit Chaudhuri makes a similar point

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>465</sup> See Chapters 1 and 2. The claims are also echoed by Amit Chaudhuri, who argues that the composition of *Meghnadbadhakabya* was a seminal point when the religious entered the space of culture. Chaudhuri, *Clearing a Space*, 111.

switching, on the other, his articulation is a construction that only touches upon 'elite' Indian cultures, and those too are mediated through English. He circulates at the intersection of international and national circuits but has a differing position in each circuit. Mirroring and enabling this process is the central male character of V.V. who on the one hand casts a jaundiced view on the status quo of Indian politics, but on the other, is a part of the same system that works to marginalise lower-caste and female characters on the margins.

### Satire and the *Mahabharata* narrative

[Tharoor's] appropriation of the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, in order to rewrite Indian history and to restore groups to their historical being is what Homi Bhabha would perhaps call "sly civility," where the "native refuses to satisfy the colonizer's narrative demand"<sup>466</sup>

*TGIN* seeks to subvert dominant neo-colonial discourse about India crystallized in the form of the term 'development' which mirrors 'history', in its conception as a linear teleology.

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country... India has yet to develop. Stuff and nonsense, of course...they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they could read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the Golden Age of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay...<sup>467</sup>

V.V.'s rumination on the word 'underdeveloped' positions the text against discourse of 'development'— where former colonies are always developing and the colonisers are always

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<sup>466</sup> Chowdhury, "Revisioning History: Shashi Tharoor's Great Indian Novel," 42.

<sup>467</sup> Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 17.

already developed, implying a teleological progression or advancement.<sup>468</sup> The narrator implodes the idea of teleological development by drawing attention to history. Being ‘developed’ is not the apex of achievement, but rather an apogee of a country’s cyclical trajectory. Tharoor writes in his introduction—

I am not seeking to romanticize a mythic past... [I am] deliberately provoking... readers to forget their usual view of an underdeveloped country as one devoid of everything the material world today generally values.<sup>469</sup>

The mode of this subversion, often ignored, is satire. One of the primary locations of staging satire in *TGIN* is language. In *TGIN* code-switching is a tool of ironic negotiation between (formerly) colonised and coloniser, where the former’s remaking of the latter’s language makes the latter the object of ridicule. For instance, in a scene narrated and dreamt by V.V., set in newly independent India, Drona inflicts Indian-English upon his friend-turned-foe Englishman, Richard Heaslop. In the dream sequence Drona adopts his “most *swadeshi* voice” which utilises Hindi words, enthusiastically (mis)uses present progressive tense, and completely butchers English names.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> The term, ‘development’ finds a wide currency in international and Indian reportage on the Indian nation and economy. Using Google Ngram viewer one sees a sudden and large spike in the use of the term developing countries in 1960s. “Google Ngram Viewer.” Accessed at 1040 hours, on 10-Jul-15. See appendix. It is also interesting to note that Tharoor at the time of writing was working with the UN.

<sup>469</sup> Tharoor, “Introduction to the Silver Jubilee Edition of the Great Indian Novel.”

<sup>470</sup> Drona’s register here is similar to the Indian English parodied in works like Nissim Ezekiel’s ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’ — “You are all knowing, friends,/ What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.” “Goodbye Party For Miss Pushpa T.S. Poem by Nissim Ezekiel - Poem Hunter.” However, to his peon, Drona is shown speaking in terse imperative Hindi, thus also hinting at how Hindi becomes the language of the central ministers.

'Now, let me see...[Drona says]...'What is it you are proposing, Sir Brewerley? "Special one-time grant in partial restitution for losses suffered to private property in performance of service-related functions." My my, what long sentence, Sir *Bewerlily*. *I must be learning how to write like this soon*. Otherwise *how I will manage...I am hardly thinking* this one-time payment recommended by Sir *Brewerley* is justified...I am *rather thinking* not...Never am I *hearing before of such a thing...I very much regret to be rejecting* your recommendations, Sir *Lewerbey*...<sup>471</sup> [Italicization mine to emphasize the 'Indianization' of English]

In 'reality' Drona uses a polished English register, though insists on using the now clichéd Indian greeting *namaste*.<sup>472</sup> Through the dream scene however Tharoor opens up the possibility of using the English language against the colonizer. Implicit in this however, is the idea that it is only effective as a subversive tool if the formerly colonized subject intentionally speaks like that.

The subversion of colonial and neo-colonial discourses and discursive figures requires a specific construction of an imagined community. Neelam Srivastava points out that

a defining characteristic of historical or 'historiographic' novels of the 1980s and 1990s, of which *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* are two examples, is that they consistently represent India as a locus of conflicting and multifarious narratives. This postmodern trope surfaces again and again, leaving the reader with a strong sense of a discrepancy between the imagined community constructed in the novels and statist narratives that tend to subsume all other forms of imagining the nation.<sup>473</sup>

Sneharika Roy argues for reframing *TGIN* within a 'relation identity' "linked not to a creation of the world but to conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among

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<sup>471</sup> Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 241–42.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 242–43.

<sup>473</sup> Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English*, 119.

cultures”.<sup>474</sup> In such a formulation, national identity is “contingent, protean, provisional... subject to rereadings and perennially under construction”.<sup>475</sup>

While valorizing a multiplicity of voices (often as a contention against more hegemonizing statist and/or right-wing narratives), *TGIN* constructs its own idea of India. As I mentioned above, the teleological model of development is exploded by V.V.’s insistence upon history. That history is teleological and not at the same time. On the one hand, he is clearly drawing a linear progression of Indian cultural histories—Indic epics, classical India, and Mughals. On the other, these are specific points in Indian history that either are taught in school history text books and/or have seen the production of cultural products that still circulate widely in post-Independence India. Tharoor is choosing specific cultures to become representative of post-Independence India.

A glance at the chapter titles of the novel show that intertextuality in *TGIN* is framed by textual connections with specific literary canons—Anglo-Indian, Indian English and Sanskrit. ‘Passages through India’ (alluding to Froster), ‘Bungle Book’ (alluding to Rudyard Kipling), ‘Midnight’s Parent’s’ (alluding to Rushdie), and ‘The Rigged Veda’ (alluding to the *Rig Veda*, regarded as the foundational Sanskrit text). Even the intertextuality with the Sanskrit

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<sup>474</sup> As opposed to a root identity is founded on a vision of a distant past as mythical origin. Glissant 1997 in Roy, “Postcolonial Epic Rewritings and the Poetics of Relation: A Glissantian Reading of Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” 63.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

*Mahabharata* is mediated through English. Tharoor writes in the introduction for the forthcoming silver jubilee edition of his novel, that retelling the *Mahabharata* “needed a style as varied in tone, form and scansion as the epic itself, with its numerous interpolations and digressions” and that

...in the area of style for instance, I frequently broke into light verse, and not merely for amusement; I was deliberately recalling the fact that many translators of the *Mahabharata*, defeated in their attempts to convey the special quality of the world's longest epic poem, have tried to combine prose and poetry in their renditions, with varying degrees of success.<sup>476</sup>

The high level of intertextuality shows erudition of the author and conscious self-positioning within ‘literary’ fiction by referring and alluding exclusively to high literary texts. It also shows that this erudition is mainly anglophile with connection to India. While on the one hand Tharoor’s idea of the nation does valorise multiplicity in a postmodern moment, but at the same time he constructs the idea of the nation that elides the various conflicts within the nation. The multiplicity of sources are mediated by English.

Roy notes that V.V. “capitalizes on historical coincidences and epic parallels” to yoke together the narratives of the *Mahabharata* and nationalist history in the novel’s plot.<sup>477</sup>

Characters and character space become nodal points in this process.

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<sup>476</sup> Tharoor, “Introduction to the Silver Jubilee Edition of the Great Indian Novel.”

<sup>477</sup> Roy, “Postcolonial Epic Rewritings and the Poetics of Relation: A Glissantian Reading of Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” 64.

Characters of *TGIN* can be grouped in three broad categories— one, minor characters with the same role in the *Mahabharata* and/or Indian history<sup>478</sup>; two, palimpsests of different characters from the mythic and historical narratives<sup>479</sup>; and three, purely symbolic palimpsests.<sup>480</sup>

Characters in the second category, mostly male, are the major plot drivers. Their character arcs switch constantly between the plotlines of history and mythology, mirroring iconic scenes from both, yoked together by a symbolic trait.<sup>481</sup> V.V. is arguably the most important character, organising the narrative as a sequence of personal history of Great Men.

V.V.'s position mirrors the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* Ved Vyasa in that both are central yet marginal figures. The *Mahabharata* and its main characters are both produced by Vyasa, yet he is silent during the narration of the story. In *TGIN*, the modern Vyasa, V.V. is the narrator, but

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<sup>478</sup> For instance Satyawati, Hyperion Helios (the Sun God), Madri, Kunti, Vichitravirya, Ambika, Ambalika, Chitrangada and Ashwatthama.

<sup>479</sup> V.V. (Ved Vyas-Rajaji), Gangaji (Bhishma-Gandhi), Dhritarashtra (Dhritarashtra-Nehru), Gandhari (Gandhari-Kamala Nehru), Pandu (Pandu-Bose), Vidur (Vidura-V.V.Menon/Patel), Priya Duryodhani (Duryodhana- Indira Gandhi), Mohammad Ali Karna (Karna-Jinnah), Yudhishtir (Yudhishtira- Morarji Desai- Law), Arjun (the warrior-journalism), Krishna (God-South Indian politician), Jayaprakash Drona (Drona- Jayaprakash Narayan), Amba (Amba/Shikhandin- Nathuram Godse). The female/queer characters have or push towards a tragic denouement.

<sup>480</sup> Colonel Rudyard, Kipling, Ganga Khan (Aga Khan), Sir Richard, Ronald Heaslop, Zaleel Shah Jhootha (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), Jarasandha Khan (Yahya Khan), Mohammad Rafi (Abul Kalam Azad and Mohammad Rafi), Bhim (Bhima, the military man), Nakul and Sahdev (the civil services— foreign and administrative), Lord Drewpad (King Dhruwad-Lord Mountbatten<sup>480</sup>) and most importantly perhaps, D. Mokrasia (Draupadi-democracy).

<sup>481</sup> For instance, Gangaji shares the story of the abduction of Princess of Kashi with the Kuru patriarch Bhishma, but apart from that follows the public life story of Mahatma Gandhi— his South Africa sojourn (which is hinted at), Harijan 'upliftment' (like washing one's own latrines), growing role in the struggle for Independence, *satyagraha* and finally assassination. Gangaji, Gandhi and Bhishma are linked by their preoccupation with 'Truth' as opposed to Yudhishtira and Desai who are obsessed with the finer points of 'Law' (Dharma). Priya Duryodhani and Duryodhana share their jealousy of their cousins and hunger for power, the latter a trait, it is implied, shared with Mrs Gandhi. The god Krishna's *joie de vivre* and amorality are transformed to the stubbornly regionalist politics of a South Indian Kaurava party functionary.

his position is that of a party elder put out to pasture. This positionality is the fulcrum of the text—the embittered insider who was close enough to the main characters to narrate history as memory, but at a slight remove as well to pass satirical and/or caustic judgement on events. V.V. as the narrator makes the satirical double vision of history and mythology possible.

V.V. is not spared from his own satirical vision, presented as a cantankerous old politician put out to pasture, acutely aware of his own irrelevance. However, the limits of the satirical allegory are such that while V.V. casts a jaundiced eye on colonial and postcolonial power-structures, he also pushes female/queer and lower caste characters further into the margins of the story.

I have portrayed a nation in struggle but omitted its struggles against itself, ignoring regionalists and autonomists and separatists and secessionists who even today are trying to tear the country apart...they are of no consequence in the story of India; they seek to diminish something that is far greater than they will ever comprehend.<sup>482</sup>

Ekalavya, the only lower caste character in the book is simply shown backing away from the horrific act of cutting his thumb— “I’m sorry, sir, but I cannot destroy my life and my mother’s to pay your fee”. Asking for the thumb introduces a moral dilemma for the upper-caste audience on three levels—within the anecdote (Yudhishtira asks Drona if he was serious about his demand, which he replies by telling his student to read the epics), within the novel

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<sup>482</sup> Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 411–12.



(Ganapathi is puzzled), and for the readers. The quick change achieves the same results in the allegory—Arjun is unchallenged— but blunts Ekalavya’s sacrifice rather than forcing the reader to confront its meaning.<sup>483</sup>

Female characters are similarly reduced to ciphers. Gandhari dies neglected by her husband, Georgina’s function is to become Dhritarashtra-Nehru’s object of lust in the violent days of Partition, likewise Madri for Pandu, and Priya Duryodhani’s lust for power overpowers her character.<sup>484</sup> Draupadi is flattened to contain her body and beauty. When Priya Duryodhani declares the Seige (analogous to Mrs. Gandhi’s declaration of Emergency and the effective suspension of democracy in India), the Game of Dice episode is played out in V.V.’s fevered imagination. Crimes against democracy are inscribed onto her body— not as a way to suggest that she suffers as an individual because of the breakdown of democratic rights and institutions, but rather that she suffers the breakdown directly in the form of domestic violence that the narrator cannot confront. She mirrors the articulation of Mother India, where the nation is inscribed on the female body, without giving that body any agency or voice of its own.

Can I look into the hurt in her eyes and claim it didn’t matter? Can I acknowledge the little cuts and bruises and burns I had spotted on her arms and hands and face at each visit to her home and dismiss them, as Kunti did, as minor kitchen mishaps? Can I admit the terrible suspicion that her own

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 216, 244, 186.

husbands were ill-treating her, exploiting her, neglecting her, even ignoring her...? Can I recall the sagging flesh that had begun to mask her inner beauty, the lines of pain that had begun to radiate from those crystal-clear eyes, the tiredness of the normally firm voice, and allow myself to pretend that I had noticed none of it, that none of these things, perhaps not even Draupadi herself, was real?<sup>485</sup>

Tharoor's *TGIN* circulates and speaks to two different levels of the cultural field—national and international. It subverts the dominant international literary field, but also articulates a dominant idea of the nation, in a disproportionately dominant cultural field. In doing so however, he refuses to engage with ideas, that while not Hindu right, do not cohere with his own liberal (self) image of India, a position that seems almost archaic with the expansion of genre fiction in Indian English publishing, and especially the wave of mythological fiction.

### **The Aryavarta Chronicles**

*The Aryavarta Chronicles* is a trilogy. This section will only analyse the first two books at present since they were the only ones published at the time of writing (the third one was released in India late last year). The first book, *Govinda* (2012), begins with the death of the Ghora Angirasa— the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights, a secretive sect of scientists—spurring a chain of events ushered by Govinda Shauri of Dwaraka that lead to the downfall of Jarasandha's empire and the rise of Dharma Yudhisthir's empire. The second book, *Kaurava* (2013), begins with the siege of Dwaraka and the Game of Dice episode, leading to the Pandava

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid., 374.

exile as Govinda Shauri recedes into the background. The novel ends with the Pandavas emerging from exile and Govinda Shauri spoiling for a war.

The mythological wave, along with the blooming of genre fiction, signified a change in the production and circulation of Indian English fiction. Conversation with sales executives in the publishing industry similarly shows that publishers are focusing on a huge segment of readership that had previously not been avid book readers, but were attracted to genre fiction.<sup>486</sup> If the literary wave of 1980s was possible due to publishers investing in native talent, post-millennial genre fiction has forced publishers to look at the native market. However, this did not mean that they were impervious or divorced from the effects of globalization. To the contrary, Indian English book publishers utilize production and marketing strategies made popular by 'global' cultural phenomena like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, albeit at a smaller scale. Cultural globalization also meant that authors deliberately take up popular genres, not necessary as an act of 'sly civility', but as an experiment with available source material and new tools to cater to the tastes of a new and merging market. This section maps the expansion of the book industry with relation to the mythological wave, followed by an exploration of the different but related genres of science fiction, fantasy, science fiction-fantasy and speculative fiction in the West and India and situate *Chronicles* relationally. Though *Chronicles* comes closest

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<sup>486</sup> Mahale, "A Few Questions."

to specific as a genre, I use the term mythological fiction to highlight the central role of the source story. The section will conclude by mapping *Chronicles'* experimentation with specific genre motifs and mythic archives, and their effect on the narrative and character structures of the re-telling.

### The wave of mythologicals

Liberalisation in the 1990s had a huge impact on the Indian English publishing industry. The devaluation of the Indian rupee at the beginning of the crisis led to a rise in the cost of importing books from abroad, leading publishers to invest more in Indian talent.<sup>487</sup> With the passage of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (1999) markets were further liberalised leading to two significant developments. One, the entry of multinational publishing firms like “Picador, Random House, Routledge, Pearson Education, Butterworths, HarperCollins, Scholastic and Cambridge University Press”, and two, the growth of bookshop chains like Crossword, Odyssey, Landmark, Oxford Bookstore and Om Books International.<sup>488</sup> Liberalisation of the market also meant that Indian consumers with the adequate consuming power could participate in cultural globalisation as well as economic globalisation, consuming cultural products like, the *Harry Potter* series (books and movies) and the *X-men* movie franchise.

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<sup>487</sup> Griffin, “The Changing Face of Indian Publishing | Forbes India Blog.”

<sup>488</sup> Singh, “English,” 57.

Distributed by Penguin in India, the Harry Potter sales, like elsewhere across the globe, were record-breaking, with *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* (2003) selling 120,000 copies within two weeks of their release.<sup>489</sup> Not only did this create and foster a readership in English, it also made fantasy a popular genre amongst the Indian audiences.<sup>490</sup>

The first wave of Indian English science fiction and fantasy (sff) starts appearing around 2003, with myth and mythic elements being utilised to different effects and varying degrees in the works of Ashok Banker and Samit Basu.<sup>491</sup> At the time, there were doubts about the experiment. Ashok Banker has spoken in interviews about how difficult it was for him to get accepted by an English publisher, “even [being mistaken] for a right-wing fundamentalist type”.<sup>492</sup> Despite their initial success, Banker and Basu moved away from mythological fantasy. Banker’s has branched into other genres and started working with other publishers and/or self-publishing. Only recently has he returned to the mythology with his *MBA* series (re-telling the *Mahabharata*) published by Westland publishers. It would be Amish Tripathi, a Mumbai based finance sector professional, who would force other English publishers to reconsider

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<sup>489</sup> Bhushan, “BBC NEWS | World | South Asia | India Falls under Harry Potter’s Spell.”

<sup>490</sup> Lebrecht, “How J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter Saved Reading - WSJ.”

<sup>491</sup> While Banker’s adaptation is about taking the central spine of the story and utilising different genre tropes, Basu comes up with a unique story line for his narrative and then layers it with multiple and variegated literary allusions, including to *Mahabharata* and *Harry Potter*. For a list see, Banerjee, “References in Samit Basu’s ‘The Simoquin Prophecies’ | Needlessly Messianic.” Since the *Gameworld* Trilogy, Basu has appeared in world anthologies of science fiction, written for the Virgin Comics storyline *Devi*, and published multiple well received science fiction short stories and novels.

<sup>492</sup> Parthasarthy, “A Bankable Storyteller - The Hindu.”

mythological genre fiction as profitable commercial fiction investment in the Indian book market, setting off a bigger second wave of mythological genre fiction in Indian English.

Amish's success—the way it happened and its scale—are unique in the Indian English publishing scene. He self-published the first volume in his Meluha trilogy, *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010). A graduate of one of the top business schools in India, Amish took charge of publicity and packaging of his book—a department that publishers usually keep the authors away from—leading to complete control of manufacturing an authorly persona that would be produced, re-produced and disseminated via social media. Drawing on a network of friends he commissioned a book cover that highlighted his novel well, produced a YouTube video, and published the first chapter online on his website to stoke consumer interest. In the initial run, distributed by Chennai-based Westland books, *Immortals of Meluha* sold 30,000 copies. By 2013, Amish had sold 350,000 copies—a number unheard of in the Indian English publishing industry.

Amish's marketing strategies are by no means innovative. Young adult fantasy series like *Harry Potter*, *The Inheritance Quartet*, *Percy Jackson*, *Twilight*, *Hunger Games* et al capitalize on social media for marketing and circulation.<sup>493</sup> Author/book websites and social media accounts are

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<sup>493</sup> Harry Potter book and movie series have their own respective websites, as does J.K. Rowling. On top of this there is Pottermore, a well-publicized social media website for Harry Potter where Rowling posts new stories from time to time. Similarly, *The Inheritance Cycle* can be found online on [alagaesia.com](http://alagaesia.com), with similar functionality as

deployed in framing the fantasy—introducing new readers to an unfamiliar world, constructing an author persona, and constructing the book as a cultural object.<sup>494</sup> Hachette hosts a website called [aryavartachronicles.com](http://aryavartachronicles.com) for Udayasankar’s text, providing an aggregated social platform to access the book and is easily accessible from different locations. The Home page hosts the summary of the latest book, *Kurukshetra*, while the Books sections gives the summary of the entire trilogy. The Downloads page allows users to download the high-quality book covers as posters, while “The World of Aryavarta” page contains the typical fantasy paratexts—a map of the story-world, and a character genealogy. The News & Reviews section provides media clippings on the author, while a Videos page hosts a book trailer and an author introduction for the first book in the series, *Govinda*.

The website also has links to the social media account of the author, which is where the authorial persona is constructed. The website does it to an extent with an author’s page listing an author bio and a personality questionnaire that lists her likes, dislikes, and eccentricities.

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aryavartachronicles.com. This leaves out fan community driven projects on wikis, fan fiction websites, fan community websites and Goodreads.

<sup>494</sup> I am not taking into account Goodreads which is also a very important place for contemporary reading, since it is a social media platform meant exclusively for the readers to review books. However, since that is a reader driven effort rather than a purely publisher or author driven construction, I will be leaving it out of my study. Though I should note briefly the bare statistics for the Goodreads pages for *Chronicles*. *Govinda* holds a 3.75 star rating (out of 5), with 836 ratings and 111 reviews. *Kaurava*, a 3.87 star rating with 383 ratings and 51 reviews; *Kurukshetra* a 3.99 star rating with 256 ratings and 39 reviews. The declining numbers of ratings and reviews given could be a result of length of time since release.

The short bio gives the author's 'background' in an impersonal brisk tone.<sup>495</sup> Questions about the author's personality allows the author's voice to emerge, humanising her. The author's Facebook page shares publicity for her talks and reviews of her books, some of which are shared from the Hachette India page. Twitter and Facebook become avenues for her to elicit reader feedback on her work and opinions on her work habits. She does not post exclusively about her own book, but also other people's works as well as sharing human-interest stories. The driving logic seems to be to present the author as someone immersed in her work and with a certain sensibility, without dehumanising her. The author is in dialogue with her social media thus establishing a community of social media users for herself that could also translate into a community of readers.

Social media and the book website also becomes a way to reinforce the real world presence and framing of the book. Notifications for talks at literature festival as well as videos and pictures from the event also frame the subject as an author, while links to positive reviews in newspapers furthers the image of the book as a well-circulating, well-regarded cultural product. The book itself is framed at multiple places in varying ways. For instance, a photo taken of the book in an airport bookshop is framed by the author's caption denoting her

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<sup>495</sup> 'Background', as I have found out, hailing from the Indian middle classes myself, is a coded way of determining a person's social status. 'Background' can mean either kinship relations and/or educational history, both of which work to situate person within the different strata of the Indian middle class.



surprise and pride at its presence but also hints at the possible readership of the book (middle-class travellers) and the book itself (an easy aeroplane read).

The mythological fiction in Indian English, while focussed on a domestic audience, remains geared towards the urban middle-class, catering to their hybrid taste pallet that could range from Marvels superhero movies, through Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987), to Rajnikanth movies. The next section will look at the different genre motifs present in *Chronicles*, and how that structures the story. I highlight the concept of 'mytho-history' as the structuring principle that Udayasankar uses to create her storyworld, allowing her to draw on different archives of influence. So while on the one hand, she is too eschews the aesthetics of the popular television series, conventional symbolism and character valencies, she also recreates filmic elements, symbols, and character motivations.

### Mythological fiction

Classifying *Chronicles* into a specific genre is difficult, and the difficulties in the process are representative of not just the texts themselves, but also the debates about sf, sff, fantasy and specific ranging in India and the West. These genres rely on continual innovation and perhaps even the ability to 'astound' resulting in a continuing process of classification and clarification.

Influential definitions of sf tend to be broad, perhaps in an attempt to avoid possibilities of foreclosure. Darko Suvin, defines sf as

a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment<sup>496</sup>

he further distinguishes sf from fantasy and myths, arguing that while both work through estrangement, they do not include cognition. Furthermore, he argues that sf shares the temporal horizons of naturalistic literature, while myth and folklore are located outside time.

On the other hand, the entry for 'Fantasy' on the online *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, begins by stating that, "There is no definition of SF that excludes fantasy, other than prescriptive definitions."<sup>497</sup> Instead, they define fantasy thus

First...all sf is fantasy...but not all fantasy is sf...[S]econd is that, because natural law is something we come to understand only gradually, over centuries, and which we continue to rewrite, the sf of one period regularly becomes the fantasy of the next. What we regard as natural or possible depends upon the consensus reality of a given culture; but the idea of consensus reality itself is an ideal, not an absolute: in practice there are as many realities as there are human consciousnesses. A reader who believes in astrology will allow certain fictions to be sf that an astronomer would exclude. Although the point is seldom made, it could be said that the particular consensus reality to which sf aspires is that of the scientific community.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 27.

<sup>497</sup> "Themes : Fantasy : SFE : Science Fiction Encyclopedia," Para 1.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, Para 4.

Thus sff, used to describe Basu's *Gameworld Trilogy*, is not really a genre, but the intersection between an overarching genre and a related genre. Specific has its origins in sf, used originally to refer to fiction that "extrapolate[ed] from known science and technology "to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action"". <sup>499</sup> However, since then specific has de-emphasized the role of extrapolation of science and technology. <sup>500</sup> Margaret Atwood writes that speculative fiction "invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a *what if* and then sets forth its axioms."<sup>501</sup>

The debate over these genres takes on new dimensions in the Indian context. Sami Ahmed Khan outlines two opposing sides in the debate—one argues that sf is a Western import to India and therefore imitative, whereas the other argues that sf is an ancient literary mode in Indian literature. <sup>502</sup> Khan himself disagrees with both points of view, pointing out that the first claim is nullified by the century-long presence of sf in Hindi, English and Bangla. <sup>503</sup> As for the second he seems to go back to Suvin's idea of cognitive estrangement. Suvin explains that cognition for him refers specifically to "post-Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific *method*". <sup>504</sup> Khan argues that since the literature in question pre-dates this method, it cannot be sf. He prefers instead to call the mix of Indian mythology, sf, and fantasy, specific.

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<sup>499</sup> Eshbach and Heinlein 1947 in "Themes : Speculative Fiction : SFE : Science Fiction Encyclopedia," Para 1.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, Para 2.

<sup>501</sup> Thomas, *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*, 3:3.

<sup>502</sup> Khan, "Science Fiction Feature Editorial: Sami Ahmad Khan," Para 5.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, Para 7.

<sup>504</sup> Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 64–65.

Emma D. Varughese, on the other hand, coins a new term for the meeting mythological with sf and fantasy as a subgenre within specific—Bharati fantasy. She argues that what is called ‘fantasy’ in the West, in the sense of otherworldliness— like the avatar cycle of the Hindu god Vishnu—would be ‘real’ for an Indian audience.<sup>505</sup> Not only does the oeuvre tread the line between fantasy, sf, sff, and specific but also historical fiction.<sup>506</sup>

There are multiple problems with such a classification however. Boddhisattva Chattopadhyay has pointed out that Varughese is making assumptions about a readership that may or may not read fantasy as historical fiction. If one were to presume that the readership is part of an Indian middle-class, regardless of political leanings will probably question ‘truth’ value of the works. Furthermore, “one could also talk about how a term such as “Bharati,” meaning “Indian,” but which has its own genealogy that is now normatively tied to Hindu nationalism”.<sup>507</sup> Unlike the B.R. Chopra TV serial, the Indian English mythological foregrounds the nature of its inventiveness. The reader is aware of the distance between an ‘original’, which some might hypothetically consider ‘real’, but not the English re-telling.

To clarify the issue of genre, one must clarify what genre is being used for. For publishers and booksellers genre is an important way of classifying their books to maximize sales.

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<sup>505</sup> Varughese, *Reading New India*, 124–25.

<sup>506</sup> Varughese, “Celebrate at Home: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English and the Reception of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ in Global and Domestic Literary Markets,” 2–3; Varughese, *Reading New India*, 123–36. In conversation Varughese has noted that she has modified her reading to include weird fiction instead of historical fiction.

<sup>507</sup> Chattopadhyay, “Strange Horizons Articles,” Section 4, para 9.

However, given the lack of comprehensible data about the publishing industry or its readership, such classifications tend to be arbitrary, contingent upon how the reader is imagined. Thus, *Chronicles* is classified as ‘General & Literary Fiction’ by Hachette India, separate from their sff list.<sup>508</sup> However, the Goodreads page lists the books under Mythology, Fantasy and Historical Fiction.<sup>509</sup>

Farah Mendelsohn writes that sf “is less a genre – a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion”, proposing that sf is a mode rather than a genre.<sup>510</sup> Paul Kincaid has chosen to characterize this ongoing discussion within the framework of Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’, arguing that the process of delimiting sf is an ongoing process that goes through several iterations.<sup>511</sup> This is not to cast the question of sf, fantasy, sff or specific as irrelevant, but to analyse texts, as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay proposes, within the historical matrices of influences and production, opening up the conversation to include both non-Anglocentric traditions and a dialectic between the local and universal.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> “HACHETTE.”

<sup>509</sup> “Goodreads | Govinda (The Aryavarta Chronicles, #1) by Krishna Udayasankar — Reviews, Discussion, Bookclubs, Lists.”

<sup>510</sup> Mendlesohn, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>511</sup> Kincaid, “On the Origins of Genre,” 47–48.

<sup>512</sup> Chattopadhyay, “Strange Horizons Articles,” Section 4, para 12.

*Chronicles* comes closest to speculative fiction since it “extrapolates from known science and technology “to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action””.

Udayasankar does not use iconicity and illusionism to compensate for the descent of gods like Parsi theatre, and film and television mythologicals. Instead, she places an emphasis on cognition and consensus reality utilizing a hybrid aesthetic, drawing on sf, fantasy, suspense, and action spectacle modes to varying extents.

Interestingly, Udayasankar builds the consensus reality for *Chronicles* through research by taking a step back in history, imagining a point in time when the events of the *Mahabharata* took place. She is not just extrapolating known science, technology, and politics from her own contemporary consensus reality, but also a supposedly historical and literary reality or perhaps ‘truth’. This leads to her drawing from eclectic sources from across the ideological spectrum—from Marxist historians, to Indologists and to various shades of Hindu right wing scholars—, but almost exclusively with Sanskrit texts and Sanskritic concepts.<sup>513</sup> She credits her understanding of the socio-political-economic context of the *Mahabharata* to M. B. Emeneau, B. A. van Nooten, and Janet Chawla; of Vedic and Upanishadic imagery to Hildebeitel and W.B. Archer; and of Early Indian history to Romila Thapar. Her “study” of the *Mahabharata*

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<sup>513</sup> Sanskrit discourse becomes a repository, if not a completely reliable one, of this ‘true’ archive. Everything else is an interpolation— listed in the ‘Alternate Mahabharatas’ are Bhil and the Indonesian Kakawain ‘version’ of the *Mahabharata*. Even when the characters are renamed, Udayasankar is consistent in using Sanskrit patronymics, even where they did not exist before or might be wrong (Kauravya instead of Kaurava for instance).

is mainly confined to English translations of the text— C. Rajagopalachari, K.M. Ganguli, J.A.B. van Buitenen, P. Lal and Ramesh Menon. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Krishnacharitra* and K.M. Munshi’s *Krishnavatara* structures her ‘rationalising’ approach to the story, introducing ways of rejecting “supernatural events, interpolations and ‘events that can be proved to be untrue in any other way’”.<sup>514</sup>

For instance, expanding on the organising feature of her literary world-building she writes,

To the gathered scholars at Naimisha, that story [*Jaya* or *Mahabharata*] was neither ancient nor mythological. It was itihasa, or history. *Jaya* was undeniably a tale of its time, and just as posterity elevated the great men of that time and saw them gods, so too was the story’s context adapted and its reality turned into metaphor. In order to go behind the metaphor, and to tell the tale as mytho-history rather than mythology, the essential question that came to my mind was: If Govinda and all the other characters of this grand narrative had walked the world as we know it today, bound by our language and constructions, our common perception of physics, psychology and politics, what might their story really have been? Surprisingly, at its core it may not have been very different from the one that took form millennia ago during the conclave of Naimisha<sup>515</sup>

Udayasankar is arguing for a cognitive estrangement to the mythic. The estrangement does not happen because of a “novum”, or a strange newness, or not real—she wants to do just the opposite, re-tell the story within the framework of present consensus reality. The estrangement from myths, such an integral part of popular culture, will happen by approaching it cognitively.

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<sup>514</sup> Udayasankar, *Govinda*, 450–51.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, v–vi.

Technology and technoculture are the fulcrums of her text. An important crux of the plot is the hoarding of technical and technological expertise amongst the Firewrights. The first novel begins after an unspecified apocalyptic event caused by the Firewrights leaves the kingdom of Matsya barren and divested of its former power. Since then smaller empires rise up driven by exploiting fugitive Firewrights. Thus the Firewright sect, bestowed with scientific knowledge become the source of power. The first book, *Govinda*, focuses on Govinda Shauri's machinations to break the control of emperors on the Firewrights and force the secretive sect itself to share their technical knowledge and its fruits. The iconic burning of the Khandav forest to clear the ground for the Pandava capital Indraprastha a genocide, is reworked in *Govinda* to become an act of creative destruction. The forest burning is a statement of power and military prowess—

Panchali noticed that these were not the usual arrows archers used— these were flint-tipped. The shaft of the arrow, too, was larger than usual, no doubt to give it greater thrust to reach its target. Her eyes narrowed as she realized that the metal itself looked different; it was a lot lighter and shinier than the dull iron that mostly used<sup>516</sup>

The burning of the forest is disclosed as Govinda's ploy to establish a power-base for Dharma, while at the same time forcing the Nagas to migrate and barter their knowledge for livelihood. A similar exercise takes place with doctors in Kashi— razing Kashi to the ground leads to doctors migrating and furthering the dissemination of medical knowledge. Technology,

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 213.



technological change, and the desire to disseminate knowledge widely become important plot points in the narrative.

The books also have some predominant fantasy motifs. Terry Pratchett writes that

during the fantasy boom in the late eighties, publishers would maybe get a box containing two or three runic alphabets, four maps of the major areas covered by the sweep of the narrative, a pronunciation guide to the names of the main characters and, at the bottom of the box, the manuscript<sup>517</sup>

While I cannot say if that is what Hachette India received, Udayasankar does provide a map of North India and a character genealogy in the book and on her website.<sup>518</sup> The map establishes the spatial realm of the narrative world in North India, christened 'Greater Aryavarta', while the genealogy introduces us to the already present sprawling cast of characters.

Udayasankar's use of sf and fantasy is supplemented by the use of suspense and action spectacle. The novels rely on strategically placed hooks to spur the reader on, along with a sense of mystery and big action set pieces.<sup>519</sup> Vivid book covers emphasise the suspense/action-thriller genre. The book covers are divided into backgrounds and extreme foregrounds, both of which show major motifs or locations in the narrative. Each book has a

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<sup>517</sup> Pratchett, *A Slip of the Keyboard: Collected Non-Fiction*, 88.

<sup>518</sup> A pronunciation guide to the characters' name would have been useful since the spellings are quite different from what are traditionally used. She also eschews the commonly used names, going for the secondary names instead. For instance Krishna is Govind Shauri.

<sup>519</sup> For instance, the prologue, titled '*adi*: The Beginning' ends with the following passage—

The princess never saw Parashara again. Not when her son was born, not even when he was sent away to his father to study and to learn of the great destiny that awaited him. She held on to no memory, nor to any regret, but an excited, uneasy hope simmered constantly in the depths of her heart... It would take decades, but she would have her revenge.

See Udayasankar, *Govinda*, 9.

weapon head on each cover's foreground—a bejewelled and sparkling dagger hilt in the first, an intricately carved arrow head in the second, and a sparkling, futuristic trident surrounded by vultures and corpses in the third. The backdrop of the first book, *Govinda*, shows a setting sun on a seaside city, presumably Dwaraka, silhouetting buildings vaguely reminiscent of Indian temple architecture found in the famous Jagannath and Akshardham Temples.<sup>520</sup> The second book, *Kaurava*'s cover shows ships at sea, with eagles circling overhead and the moon shining brightly in the background. *Kurukshetra*, the third book's shows a long rolling hills and fluttering flags in a deep black shadow as either the sun or the moon shine wanly on the destruction. The colours on the book covers are progressively darker. *Govinda*'s cover of the book has three words on the top "Honour. Desire. Vengeance" , while *Kaurava*'s cover says, "Nothing left to fight for is nothing left to lose..." , and *Kurukshetra*'s cover reads, "The epic as it has never been told." The book covers set the mood of the books as it were, indicating action and suspense while steadily growing darker as the narrative progresses towards the apocalyptic war. The first book begins with a murder, with massive geopolitical consequences, while the identity of the murderer is kept hidden from the reader for a long time. The second book starts with suspense and transitions quickly to action—

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<sup>520</sup> Mahati Gollamudi, Curatorial Researcher at the Freer-Sackler Galleries, the Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art, opines that the building on the cover in classic High Nagara Medieval Style of Architecture, further adding that the picture seems like an elongated and distorted side view of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho.

The inn came alive with excitement and fear...The men were trained killers and knew that their quarry was not to be taken lightly. They hemmed Govinda in from three sides, trying to put the crowded confines to good use by backing him further into his corner...The man in the middle advanced, swinging his axe hard in what he hoped would be a killing strike. His blade missed Govinda's ear by a hair's breadth, meeting the rock surface of the wall with a dull thud. The impact travelled up his arm, making him drop his weapon...Using the instant of surprise, Govinda rammed his elbow into the man's face, the impact breaking his adversary's nose even as he caught the man's left eye socket. Blood spattered on the walls and on a few of the inn's patrons as the assassin fell to the ground, writhing in pain.<sup>521</sup>

The new framework of human action coexists with the changes in character systems.

Udayasankar creates new and recreates older symbolic systems to structure her narrative, despite her arguing for a move away from metaphor. Two symbolic character structures prop up Udayasankar's narrative— the Firstborn-Firewrights (water and fire), and the four Krishnas.

The narrative is driven by the perpetual clash between the Firstborns and Firewrights— both quasi-Brahmanical sects. The Firstborn are of the lineage of Vasishtha Varuni and the Firewrights of Angirasa. Both these characters are part of the famous Seven Seer-Sages from Hindu mythology, descendants of the Gods of Ocean and Fire respectively. While the two orders are therefore opposed to each other, the main characters owe allegiance to both— like Krishna Dwaipayana, Govinda, and Sanjaya. Both orders pursue the same aims— a greater good. However, the definition of that greater good, the methods to achieve it and the beneficiaries differ. For the Firstborn, greater good is possible only by following Divine Order

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<sup>521</sup> Udayasankar, *Kaurava*, 14–15.

akin to the caste system. For most of the Firewrights, represented by Ghora Angirasa and Govinda, 'greater good' is a wide-ranging technological advancement of society.

The second narrative structure draws on Hildebeitel's analysis of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* and his identification of the four Krishnas as the main and symbolic agents of the *Mahabharata* narrative— Krishna Vasudeva, Krishna Draupadi, Krishna Dvaipayana Vyas, and Krishna Arjuna.<sup>522</sup> *Chronicles* is narrated through the points of view of these characters, with more emphasis on the first two. Udayasankar establishes the deep bond between Govinda and Panchali at the very beginning of the novel, and this bond grows and heavily influences plot narrative. Govinda's character trajectory moves him from the external to the internal, whereas Panchali's is an inverse parallel, her point of view moves from the internal to the external. Govinda builds the empire not so much for Dharma, but for Panchali, knowing that she would be a just ruler. Panchali's humiliation at the game of dice affects him deeply, leading him to withdraw from public life, and this withdrawal stops only when he learns that Panchali's life is in danger.

Udayasankar says that the concept of mythohistory is a way of changing the paradigm of the story-worlds to reimagine the narrative radically.<sup>523</sup> However, by basing her texts on

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<sup>522</sup> Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahabharata*, 61. Hildebeitel argues that the *sakhā-sakhī* relationship of Krishna and Draupadi cements the symbolic bond between the four Krishnas. See Hildebeitel, "Among Friends: Marriage, Women, and Some Little Birds," 135.

<sup>523</sup> Udayasankar, "Intros."

Sanskrit texts and their modern critiques, Udayasankar is also recreating similar paradigms in her narratives like the Draupadi-Krishna relationship, quasi-Brahmanical sects, and caste system. In some ways the marginal characters, or the reason for their marginality also disappears from the text—therefore, Ekalavya is absent from the narrative and Shikhandin, a famously queer character is a heterosexual man with a lover and a child. The interesting innovation in her writing comes when she posits a different view of specific characters. Pandavas are vain and self-righteous, while Yudhishtira is the insecure and gullible emperor. His counterpart, Duryodhan is re-imagined as Syoddhan, who is a good man with venal supporters.

*Chronicles* thus seeks to frame the *Mahabharata* in a contemporary sensibility, using that to speculate not about the future, but about the past. In some ways, this kind of speculation sits close to what Gyan Pandey has referred to as ‘Hindu history’ and Udayasankar does cite ‘Hindu historians’.<sup>524</sup> The narrative uses ‘Hindu history’ as a productive building block for the story-world, which when transformed into visuals on book covers also works well to market the books as cultural products that are mythic, but not stodgy, new, but not too new. However, newness can enter a re-telling at different levels. If for Udayasankar it comes in creating a new story-world and changing character accents, for Amruta Patil, it comes through experimenting

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<sup>524</sup> Pandey, “The Appeal of Hindu History.”

with the comic book art form and the *Mahabharata*, creating a new graphic *Mahabharata* narrative.

## **Adi Parva**

All too often, the Mahabharat is reduced to the sum total of two things— the fratricidal battle between the Kuru princes and the battlefield dialogue between the avatar, Krishna, and his protégé Arjun... The real scope of the Mahabharat, however, extends a good distance either side of these events...

Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* (2012), the first of two volumes. The second book *Sauptik: Sleeping Ones, Rise* is projected to come out in 2016. Patil's *Adi Parva* is a conscious effort to recover stories against 'dominant' narrative of the *Mahabharata*. She seeks to recover not just the little stories, but also the little humdrum moments. It consciously eschews popular iconographies of gods examined in Chapter 1, leading to experimentation with the visual medium, heavily influenced by eclectic sources, but mostly Western fine art. The section maps the comic book industry in Indian English and contrasts that with the growth of the graphic novel form, with Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* forming a significant moment as the first graphic novel that re-tells the *Mahabharata*.

## Comic Books and Graphic novels in the Indian English book market

The graphic novel is a relatively new form in global English publishing, though of course 'graphic narrative' has a long history in different cultures.<sup>525</sup> The graphic novel first became popular with the publication of seminal graphic novels like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-91), Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-1996) and Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* (1982-85) and *Watchmen* (1986-87). They heralded a shift away from the bronze age of comic books, consciously breaking narrative and aesthetic moulds of the traditional superhero comic books, inspiring an entire generation of comic book writers and artists, and more recently big budget superhero movies from Marvel and DC.

Comic books have been an intermittently successful commercial enterprise in India. They are also no strangers to Indian mythology (and history) retold in graphic art. Nandini Chandra charts the historical and aesthetic journey of the popular Amar Chitra Katha comics (ACK), from its inception in 1967 as a way of re-introducing Indian schoolchildren to Indian myth, to its decline in the 1990s in *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha (1967-2007)* (2008). In it, she argues that different artistes brought their regional and professional aesthetics into the

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<sup>525</sup> Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 9. Hillary Chute defines graphic narrative as "a book-length work in the medium of comics", preferring it over graphic novel since the latter implies an adherence to fiction which is never really followed. Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," 453. However, in this chapter I will refer to commercial comic art as comic books, and to independent comic art as graphic novels. This is the term in which the authors define themselves and since Patil especially sees herself as an artist and a writer, the term graphic novel seems particularly apt to describe her work.

making of the ACK comics, which was homogenised into the Raja Ravi Verma aesthetic under Anant Pai's editorial leadership.<sup>526</sup> ACK had a huge influence on the Indian publishing market, selling well in what continues to be a 'volume market', i.e., where profits are reaped through the volume of the copies sold.<sup>527</sup> Apart from ACK, there were also popular comic publishers like Indrajal Comics, Diamond Comics and Raj Comics which published the immensely popular Phantom series, Chacha Chaudhary series by Pran, and Anupam Sinha's *Super Commando Dhruv* respectively.<sup>528</sup>

ACK's slow demise in the 1990s left a large gap in the Indian comic book market, which has now been filled with new comic book publishers like Campfire comics has undertaken a similar project of introducing myths and history to an Indian audience. Unlike ACK it does not focus exclusively on Indian myths and history, and includes topics from 'World History' (like World War I), British literature and Greek myths. Its Indian myth themed titles include *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, *Ravana: Roar of the Demon King*, *Krishna: Defender of Dharma*, *The Offering: the Story of Ekalavya and Dronacharya* et. al..<sup>529</sup> Priced at an economical Rs. 195<sup>530</sup> the copies have a better and glossier finish than the older ACK comics, and the art is more in line with the modern age

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<sup>526</sup> Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007*, 4,5,87.

<sup>527</sup> 1 million copies were sold in 1981. Sales figures grew for a while, reaching a peak in 1986-87, before declining drastically to 28,000 copies by September 1992. Ibid., 222.

<sup>528</sup> Chatterjee, "Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels," 208. See Debroy, "The Graphic Novel in India: East Transforms West," 35-6 for a list of comic series by Indian publishers.

<sup>529</sup> Chatterjee, "Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels," 212; "Campfire." The genres listed on its home page include "Classics", "Heroes", "Mythology", "Originals", "History", "Junior Campfire", "Hindi Titles", "Campfire Best Sellers", "CBSE Recommended titles", "Kendriya Vidyalaya".

<sup>530</sup> Chatterjee, "Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels," 212.



of comic books published by Marvel, DC and Dark Horse. Like ACK however, Campfire's titles remain in the realm of children's literature, and heavily reliant on gift economy (i.e., adults buying them as gifts for children).<sup>531</sup>

The other big presence in commercial comic book publishing in India that often takes mythic stories are Liquid Comics. Established as Virgin Comics by Sir Richard Branson, Deepak Chopra and Shekhar Kapur, it entered into a distribution partnership with Gotham comics, which was already distributing the major American comic book publishers in India like Marvel, DC, Dark Horse et al. The aim of Virgin comics was to create a collaborative system of product creation that focused on re-telling Asian mythic narratives to a 'global' (read: American) audience. Its first stories included a series called *Devi* (2006), a story about how the female divine power manifested itself through re-incarnations and her modern mortal re-incarnation, Tara Mehta, written by Samit Basu, among others as well as *Ramayana 3392 AD* (2006-07) and *Ramayana Reloaded* (2008), which re-told the *Ramayana* in a post-apocalyptic world with futuristic weapons. The art is often of a good quality, as is the finished product; the former often in the modern Marvel/DC aesthetic, and the latter's production quality at the same level as Marvel or DC comics. However, the company itself has not been able to succeed financially. Chatterjee argues that perhaps one of the major faults in the Virgin comics model was the

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<sup>531</sup> Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007*; Chatterjee, "Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels," 212.

obsession with superheroes. She points out that Virgin was trying to recreate the Marvel/DC version of the superhero comic at a time when graphic novel like Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight* had completely revolutionised the genre, forcing a massive restructuring of the superhero comics. "While the comics were crammed with stunningly executed artwork," she writes, "the stories were convoluted, confusing or just plain pointless".

<sup>532</sup> Commercial publishing however seems to have taken little heed of this as she herself has pointed out. Smaller commercial publisher like Mumbai-based Vimanika have published 'reimaginings' of characters from Hindu mythos, often presented in Manichean plot lines. <sup>533</sup>

Aniruddho Chakraborty, publisher of Chariot Comics, a fledgling commercial comic book company, opines that this might be because despite the success of ACK and Campfire, comic books remain a niche market that still needs to expand its market base. The easiest way for publishers to do it while not going insolvent, is to focus on characters and themes they know are already widely current in the Indian popular culture.<sup>534</sup> Myths, especially those from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, provide content that is readily accessible to an audience that may or may not be familiar with comic books, and acts as a good point of introduction to the

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<sup>532</sup> Chatterjee, "Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels," 211.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 214. The one exception Chatterjee points to is a webcomic run by Meenakshi Krishnamoorthy, called 'Kinnari' which, while drawing on Indic myths (Jain and Buddhist myths as well as Hindu ones), does not rely on extensive knowledge of them. She does provide extensive footnotes explaining the myths. This however, is more by way of a side note since as a webcomic, the circulation and distribution networks for Kinnari is very different from that of commercial comic books.

<sup>534</sup> Chakraborty, Interview.

genre. Coupled with the continued reliance on gift economy—where commercial books are bought by older relatives to introduce children to history and myths,— there are significant restraints on the content and aesthetics publishers can use. That is why the rise of ‘independent’ graphic novelists is interesting.

When I say ‘independent’, I do not necessarily mean independent of all traditional publishing apparatus, though these exist too.<sup>535</sup> By ‘independent’, I refer to a comparative lack of editorial control where the writer works in isolation, and is more often than not, the artist as well. These novelists have been supported by the entry of established publishing houses like Penguin India and HarperCollins India into the graphic novel genre as well as newly established ideologically driven publishing houses and institutionally funded projects. The economic security afforded to an established publishing house with a profitable back and front lists, allows them to experiment in the authors and genres they choose to publish. Ideologically driven publishing houses are less concerned about the commercial cost, focusing on their message instead. Their published works therefore have a clearly articulated social message. Institutionally funded works are similarly unconcerned with revenue, often distributing texts free of cost. Thus “the first recognized Indian graphic novel is *The River of*

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<sup>535</sup> The most notable work inspired by Hindu myths that I have heard of is the *Kuru Chronicles*, drawn by Ari Jayaprakash, and launched at the 2012 Annual Indian Comic Con. 800 page long and drawn in what the artist calls “Dark Art” or “Indo Dark Art”, the book seems to have never really made an impact on the market. IndiaEndless, “Ari Jayaprakash Experiments With Kuru Chronicles | IndiaEndless.”

*Stories* (1994) by Orijit Sen” is about “the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the decade-long protest against the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project” published by Kalpavriksh, an environment action group.<sup>536</sup> The first Indian graphic novel to describe itself as such, Sarnath Bannerjee’s *Corridor* (2005) was published by Penguin India. Since then some notable works have emerged, such as the *Pao* (2012) anthology published by Penguin India and *Bhimayana* (2011) by Navayana Publishing the only Dalit publishing firm in English, among others. Much like their plain text counterparts, these novels also focus on social issues and lived realities in India, often seeking to question established hierarchies and discourses of power. These graphic novels have become a crucial place for experimenting with panel formats and narrative. Some of these are collaborations between folk artists and urban authors, like *Sita’s Ramayana* (2011) written by Samhita Arni, drawn by Moyna Chitrakar and published by Chennai-based Tara Books.

Amruta Patil is a unique development in this field. She belongs to the independent graphic novelist grouping, writing and drawing for her own text.<sup>537</sup> Yet she is the first in this particular trend of Indian graphic novels to re-imagine mythology, which hitherto had been almost exclusively in the domain of popular comic art. Published by HarperCollins India in, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* has many interesting continuities and discontinuities with both trends in Indian comic book/graphic novel publishing.

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<sup>536</sup> Varughese, *Reading New India*, 138; Chatterjee, “Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels,” 209; Kalpavriksh, “Books Out of Print Environment & Development.”

<sup>537</sup> In face the bio in her book refers to her as a writer and an artist, rather than a graphic novelist.

Firstly, the production quality of the book is of high quality. Popular comic books published and distributed by ACK, Campfire, or Graphics India, usually publish copies with a set number of pages. The production quality is good for the times though there is a marked contrast between ACK and the newer comic books company like Campfire and Graphics India. The latter have glossy cover pages and matte pages inside, utilizing a sharp design and colour pallet. *Adi Parva*, on the other hand, is a 276 pages long book in hardcover, with glossy finish inside. It is also more expensive than commercial comic books, selling at a before discount price of around Rs. 800, more than four times the price of a single-issue by Campfire (assuming a price of Rs. 195, though it varies with retailer discounts) and roughly sixteen times the price of ACK single-issue (priced at Rs. 45-50).

Secondly, unlike the publicity effort done for Krishna Udayasankar by Hachette India, which included a well co-ordinated social media strategy across different social media platforms and a series website, Amruta Patil seems to have been left to run her own social media marketing campaign, utilising her presence on Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook. The implied thinking seems to be that the author is responsible for building up an online audience. What is interesting that this may result in fostering a more personal relation for the readers with the author. Since the marketing seems to rely on traditional strategies like book launches, panel discussions to market the book in real life (IRL). This would further contribute to the

image of the author as the independent agent in the creation of their work. Unlike commercial production, but similar to other independent graphic novelists, the author's presence is strongly foregrounded, and a relationship with this authorly persona is a part of the circulation mechanism in this niche market. Bolstering this, Patil maintains a blog and podcast (on SoundCloud as @hathoric) that give the reader an insight into her creative processes, and a more general Facebook page for the author and the book, as well as a personal twitter account (@hathoric).

Thirdly, Patil's work, unlike that of Udayasankar's or Campfire publisher (for instance), is reviewed in *Biblio* one of the more respected literary reviews currently circulating in the English publishing market. Writing for the *Biblio*, Arshia Sattar, compares Patil's illustrations favourably with Western artists like Gauguin and Matisse as well as Indian artists like Amrita Sher-Gill, thus highlighting an intertextuality within high art, thus implicitly positioning Patil's work within that genealogy. "I hesitate to call them illustrations," she writes, "for they are so very much more than that...Not since Peter Brook's visually and emotionally lush production of the Mahabharata has this story come so alive for me..."<sup>538</sup>

Patil therefore sits in the sphere of Indian English field of cultural production that is less inclined towards the market, but is focussed towards accruing cultural capital. This might not

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<sup>538</sup> Sattar, "Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean via Amruta Patil."

necessarily be in terms of gaining recognition amongst her peers or institutional awards or patronage. Rather it is built through the mentions in book reviews and production quality of the work as mentioned above, as well as experimentation with line and colour, and intertextual references to fine art as I will argue below.

### Diegetic levels

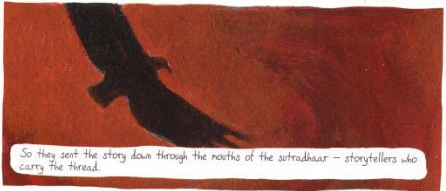
Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* has two diegetic levels, one of the *Adi Parva* storyline, and another, framing the narrative. The two are visually distinguished by the use of lines and colours, emphasizing the difference in tone and spatio-temporality of the story and the story-telling space. *Adi Parva* uses the first two chapters of the book to establish both diegetic spaces and levels.



A caution, a key: Trust the humble storyteller who knows how to unravel thread. Beware the braggart who embellishes and confuses. Stay with the story, even when it passes from threadbearer to threadbearer. Stay with the story.



There are some things your forefathers didn't want you to forget.



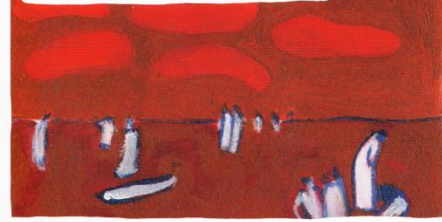
So they sent the story down through the mouths of the sutradhaar - storytellers who carry the thread.



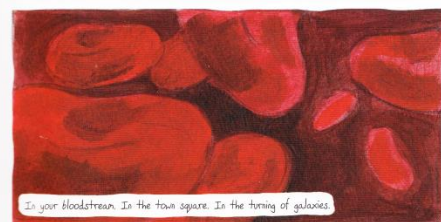
We are an unbroken lineage of storyteller nested within storyteller.



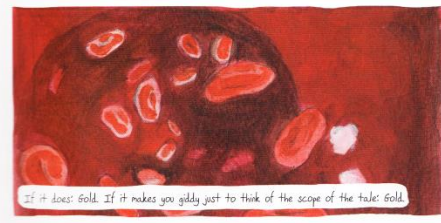
When I open my mouth, you can hear the echo of storytellers past.



To know if a tale is worth its weight in gold, check if it reveals itself threefold.



In your bloodstream. In the town square. In the turning of galaxies.



If it does: gold. If it makes you giddy just to think of the scope of the tale: gold.





*Figure 13: Pages 294-295 are pages 2-6 from Amruta Patil's Adi Parva*

The first chapter, entitled 'Sutradhar', seems to be set towards the end of the Kurukshetra war, with the panel opening on a vulture, following it for four more panels before panning out

to show figures in white which suddenly pans in to a full page panel revealing the white figures (with ultramarine outlines) as corpses and mourners. Various shades of blood red fill the background, page five especially looking like blood cells in a blood vessel. The white figures and the red background transform into blood platelets before we reach the last page of the chapter, a full-page panel. On the top left corner is the head and torso of a dead man, bleeding from his head. Patil firmly establishes blood at the centre of her narrative, visually. Throughout the chapter we see anchoring text bubbles from an unknown narrator, hand written, with no emphasis. The chapter is a product of Patil's 'reading' of Paul Gauguin's *La vision après le sermon (Jacob wrestling with the Angel)* inspiring her to experiment with different shades of red and contrasting them with ultramarine blues. Starting from near the end of the story, it establishes the visual and narrative motif of the blood. It also establishes the narrative style of the colour panels, long, lyrical text boxes at the edges of the picture, inviting the reader to read not just the text but also the picture.

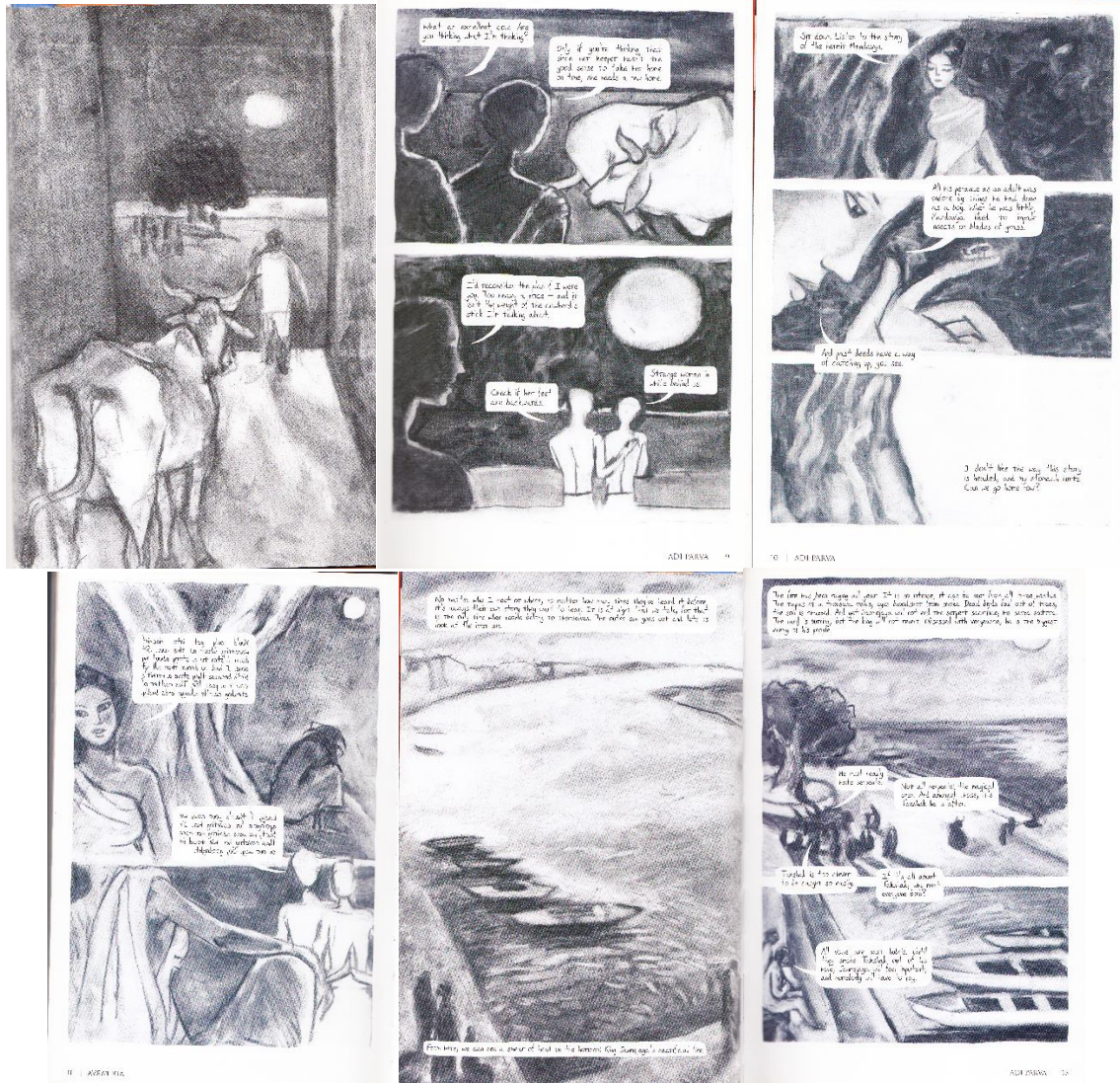


Figure 14: Pages 8-13 from Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*

The next chapter, titled 'Ferry-point', shown above, introduces the narrator and her spatial setting—the temporal setting remains indistinct, it could be a thousand years ago, or conversely, it could be now, but it is night. The establishing shot is a full page panel of a man standing in front of the cow. In the background, we see a tree with figures around it, and the

moon shining in the sky. A friend in the second panel, contemplating stealing the cow, and stopped when a woman joins them in the next panel, joins the man. She draws the men instead to listen to her as she sits beneath the tree and tells a story. The next panel is again full page, showing us that this scene is set on a shore with beached boats, and the narrative speech bubble telling us that King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice (where the *Mahabharata* is narrated) is underway in the distant horizon. Thus the novel establishes, through two establishing shots (rather than the usual, one), the two diegetic levels of the text—one alive, internal, filled with colour (though not colourful), story-world, and the other, external, smudged, mundane, and charcoal grey. The lines on both these levels are never strong black outlines common in American superhero comic books. Thick lines in the coloured panels are usually different shades of blue, ranging from the blue that verges on black to ultramarine.<sup>539</sup> In the black and white panels, Patil uses charcoal, thus blurring the lines and the figures—enacting out the night-time story telling by approximating poor visibility. Notwithstanding the blurred look, the figures throughout the comic are warm— no sharp edges or muscular definition—and have prominent eyes.

Patil's experimentation is highly influenced by Western fine art, with a few Indian influences too. In her acknowledgements Patil writes—

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<sup>539</sup> Patil, "Amruta Patil | Popping Blue Outline." . Patil says in a small podcast that she is interested in popping blue outlines of different French painters like Gauguin et al.

Dead men taught me to paint...— Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne, those anonymous hands at work in Rajasthani miniature painting workshops. Dead women flow in my veins as creative mothers: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Frida Kahlo, Amrita Sher-Gil<sup>540</sup>

Her podcasts reveals that Gauguin, Matisse, Pierre Bonnard and Paul Sérusier especially major influences. Apart from artistic influences, she also creates pastiche panels with allusion ranging from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and Henri Matisse's *Dance*, to the works of Vogue India photographer Prabhuda Dasgupta.<sup>541</sup> The central motif of her work, the churning of the ocean, also known as the *amrit-manthan*, is a palimpsest of visual motifs from Taschen's collection of Chinese propaganda posters and Egyptian iconography. In the image, Lakshmi emerges from the churning with Hathoric horns over her and the mythical snake Ananta transformed into a Chinese dragon.<sup>542</sup>

Patil adds another layer to her panels by painting on magazine pages, like in the figure below. Some magazine pages are cut up and joined together before being painted over selectively. Others are completely painted over, with the magazine icon peeping through the background. Still others are used as background in an ironic masking, where the background is photo-real, and the foreground has painted characters. The surface in a sense is flat—there is

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<sup>540</sup> Patil, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, 270. In contrast she only cites on cartoonist as an artistic influence, and her textual references are constrained to abridged translations of the *Mahabharata* in English.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 160, 78, 92. Patil highlights this reference in an interview, see *Chandigarh Literature Festival 2013 Amruta Patil in Conversation with Deepanjana Pal (Part 2)* and Patil, "Amruta Patil | Prabuddha Dasgupta."

<sup>542</sup> Patil, "Amruta Patil | Chinese Propaganda Posters."

no deeper signification in the palimpsest. On the other hand, the surface itself comes alive with hitherto unseen combinations coming together in representing a mythological narrative.



Figure 15: Page 57 from Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*. Note the ultramarine outline, and calendar art Krishna in the background.

Stringing these together is the panel unit. Patil's panelling across the novel is consistent in that she tries to avoid breaking up the page into panels wherever possible, preferring full-page panels spread over one or two pages instead with texts anchoring the picture. Panels are made to look as 'organic' as possible, either as polyptychs, or as continuity shots. This means that

these are either used for close-ups following a wide master shot, or for presenting dialogues between the different characters. The latter are presented either in profile within the same panel, or through over the shoulder shots.

Colour and panelling are important tools in the artists' repertoire. By separating the two diegetic levels visually, Patil is creating a clear delineation between the inner world of the story-telling that is playing out in her audience's minds and the outer, material world. The inner world is lush, colourful, focussed, and is anchored by a soothing narratorial voice depicted by lettering that looks handwritten, but does emphasize words. The external world, on the other hand is grey, smudged, out of focus, but also at the same time, more irreverent. The use of full-page panels, as well as the experimentation with line and colour, force the reader to read the visuals along with the text, controlling the pace of the narration, and creating dynamism within the picture as well as the panels.

To hold the text together the narrative, enacting the recovery of the small stories and moments— “mahabharatan equivalent of “huh?” and “why me?” and “who is she?”” — and read them with the ‘big’ stories, Patil creates the character of Ganga as the Sutradhara.<sup>543</sup> A silent and marginal presence in the *Mahabharata*, Ganga's narrative within the text is established as an alternative to the male dominated recital for a royal elite in Janamejaya's

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<sup>543</sup> Patil, “Umbilical.”

sacrifice. By opening up space for the minor tales, Patil sets her narrative up for a recursive visual and textual fractal.

The Kadru-Vinata story, a minor tale from the Sanskrit *Adiparva*, visually and textually mirrors the rivalry between the Kuru cousins. Patil draws an explicit line by titling the chapters narrating the Kadru-Vinata story and the birth of the Kuru cousin ‘Reptilian Mother/Avian mother’—

At the end of every story is the nub of a new beginning. The snakes versus birds rivalry of *Adi Parva* is no careless latter-day addition to Mahabharatan lore; it is a fitting abstract metaphor for the mortal rivalries that will come to pass later in the tale. The story of the Kuru princes is but an echo of much older conflicts in subtler realms and surreal landscapes. Like the multiverse it encodes, the nature of the Mahabharat is fractal recursive<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Patil, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, 260.



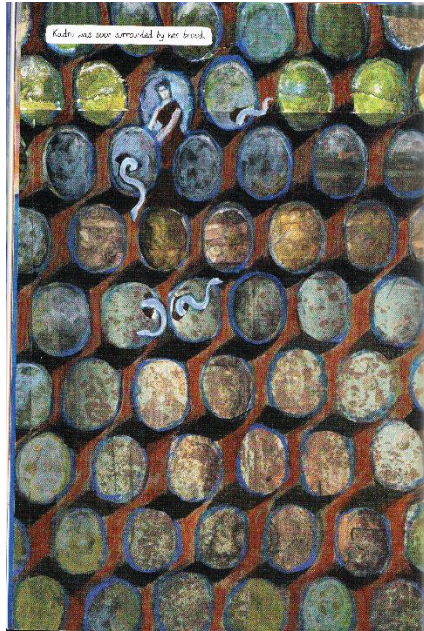


Figure 16: Page 46 from Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*. Text: "Kadru was soon surrounded by her brood"

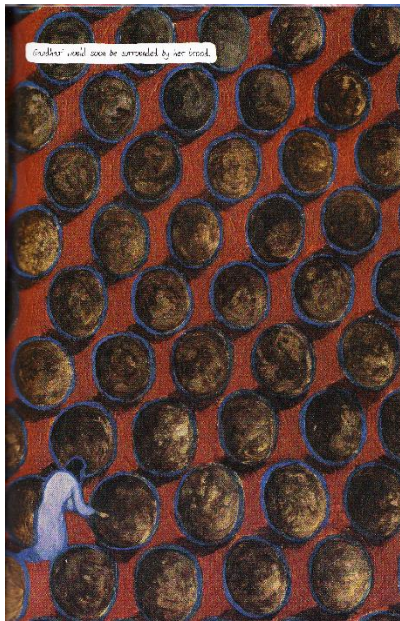


Figure 17: Page 247 from Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*. "Gandhari would soon be surrounded by her brood."

While the characters in the story itself are still relatively flat, we do get interesting vignettes when we see a roundness in the characters. In these vignettes, the women are no longer ciphers that forward the genealogical plot, but agents that interact within the plot, drawn to focus the reader's attention on the implications of the picture. Thus, Gandhari is in a traditional Afghanistani dress. Her decision to blind herself renders the page black-and-white. Young Satyavati appears in a striking dark colour, appearing in one of the single panel pages as if sprawled out on her boat, but on closer inspection, drawn like a female version of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man.

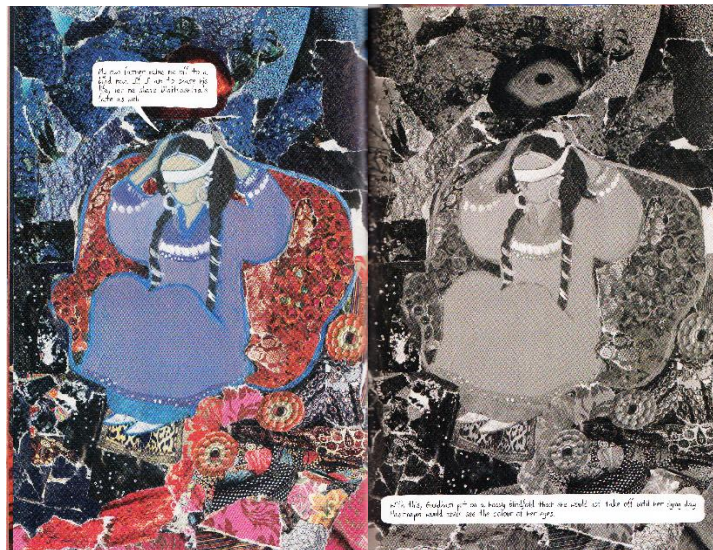


Figure 18: Pages 214-5 from Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*. Gandhari blindfolding herself

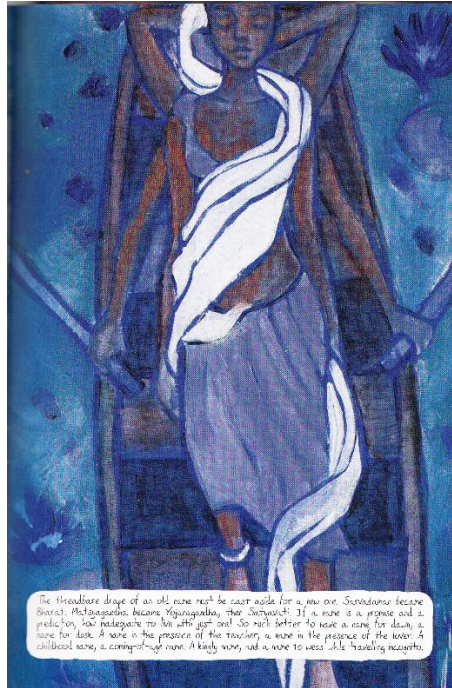


Figure 19: Page 173 from Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*. Satyavati

*Adi Parva* does not pretend to be an exhaustive re-telling of the *Mahabharata* but rather a strategic recovery of characters, especially female characters marginalised by *Mahabharata* retellings in comic art and television serials. To recover them also means to narrate from a different focal point, and with a different aesthetic than what has come to signify the norm. It does not seek to narrate a nation, like Tharoor, or a speculative story-world like Udayasankar, but an internal story-world that is vibrant, set against the mundane external world. Using both narrative and visual elements in tandem, it recovers the sense of the tale as a living cultural artefact by focussing on the mundane contexts of story-telling.

## Conclusion

The chapter maps the circulation and aesthetics of the *Mahabharata* re-tellings in Indian English fiction, by situating three texts within the wider contexts of their production, as a way of understanding, not just the texts but the larger cultural moment as well. All three are in different genre, and *Adi Parva* is in a different medium altogether. All of them circulate in the field of Indian English literary production today—their authors are invited to different literary festivals and book fairs within India and abroad, allowing a central location for the publishers to showcase the authors and their books.<sup>545</sup> Most of the Indian literary festivals especially usually have at least a few mythological authors in their list of speakers. The conversations here range from the authors' works, to the source story, to the economics of writing. All of the above authors have a good social media presence too, with active Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.<sup>546</sup> Authors are required to keep themselves in the public eye for longer than before, and greater effect—mostly to help publicize a book, but also building up an author persona and

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<sup>545</sup> There are two book fairs in New Delhi, and one each in Kolkata and Chennai. There's also annual literary festivals in Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kochi, Chennai, and Pune that have been occurring for a few years now, with more springing up. The Jaipur Literature Festival is often pegged as the high watermark however, attracting a large audience every year for a four to five day jamboree. German Book Office, New Delhi, "India Book Market 2015."

<sup>546</sup> As of 28<sup>th</sup> March 2016, Shashi Tharoor is probably the most followed Congress politician on Twitter with upwards of four million followers. His Facebook page has 524,370 likes. In comparison, Udayasankar and Patil might seem to have a paltry following, but for authors they pull respectable numbers. Udayasankar has 2,649 followers on Twitter, while Patil has 1,344. Their Facebook (author) pages have 1,274 and 437 likes each. It must be said though that Tharoor's popularity on social media stems from his position as a Congress MP, a former Minister and diplomat. His tweets and posts, unlike that of the other authors, are almost never about his literary works but about politics and current affairs of the nation.

a reading community that can be called upon with ease. Of the three, Udayasankar is the only one who seems to have regular interactions with people who post on her page.

While such activities are of course time consuming, it does bring out the lack of an active fandom culture for these novels. Fandom culture—spanning from commercial merchandise to fan driven fan-fiction websites—are more or less the motor on which the hugely profitable franchises like *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Twilight* run. Few of the fan-fictions from these texts gain a life of their own too. However, that aspect of sf and graphic novel culture seems to be missing here. There could be multiple reasons—lack of infrastructure, source material, or the narratives itself. Or one could also possible argue that in a sense, all re-tellings are fan-fictions.

*TGIN* continues to live in a state of limbo—literary fiction that is not quite canonical Indian English fiction — while its popularity is long since passed, even though it went through a brief revival for its silver jubilee edition. *Chronicle* on the other hand is one amongst a host of new and emerging writing that re-tells the *Mahabharata*. From the author's Facebook page it seems that the novels has its share of fans, but even an estimation of numbers is impossible. *Chronicle* and *Parva* show a willingness to use disparate archives—colonial, Hindu right and modern Indology— as useful influences, without dogmatically adhering to one or the other. The authors seem to write from a sense of cultural habitus with regards to the *Mahabharata*—they

know the story, and they vaguely know the story that their imagined readers. This allows them to estrange the readers from the story. Udayasankar then utilizes motifs from different genres to re-structure her story, while Patil utilizes visual motifs from fine art to experiment with colour and form. Udayasankar and Patil, more so than Tharoor, seek to recover characters and stories already on the margins, mostly of upper-caste/divine women. Tharoor's re-telling is not concerned with margins per se, but the satire is possible only because the narrator was always marginal in the story, even when in the middle of the narrative.

English remains at the centre for all these texts, the field within which all of these texts are placed relationally. The sensibilities within the linguistic culture remain the same to an extent— they are still urban, metropolitan and in conversation with the West. The definition of India, and through that, an Indian idiom continues to be a part of their quest. The next chapter's focus on Hindi throws up remarkable similarities in the way the book is marketed, as well as the author's use of social media to promote their own work. However, while the focus in these texts had been on world-building, the focus in the texts next chapter is on character motivations.

## Chapter 5:

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# The *Mahabharata* and *paurāṇik upanyās* in modern Hindi Literature

Narendra Kohli's *Mahāsamar* (1988-2000)

### Introduction

In January 2014, back in India for my fieldwork, I made my way to the annual Jaipur Literature Festival. Established in 2006 by Indian English authors William Dalrymple, Namita Gokhale, Shobhaa De and Hari Kunzru along with a few other friends, the festival has grown to be an extremely busy affair with the venue, Diggi Palace, often bursting at the seams. While the JLF initially catered almost exclusively to an English reading audience, by 2014 modern Indian languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam and Tamil were well represented, though perhaps its panels were not always well attended. I discovered that Kohli was going to talk at the JLF to the journalist Vartika Nanda. At the time I only had a slight inkling of Kohli's popularity and was thus unsure about what the event would be like. The only hint I had was that my uncle raved about his *Abhyuday* ([Dawn] 1975-1979) series which he had adapted from the *Ramayana*, though he was unaware of his *Mahabharata* series *Mahāsamar* ([‘The Great War’] 1988-2000). Thus I made my way to the British Airways Baithak at the Diggi Palace for the talk titled

‘Mahasamar’ and organised by *Rajasthan Patrika* in its Bhaskar Bhasha series. One of the bigger venues at the festival, the ‘Baithak’ was already three quarters full before the talk began, with more people streaming in till the end of the talk when I saw people sitting in the aisles inside and peeping in from the French windows. Speaking to the packed room, Vartika Nanda introduced Narendra Kohli’s *Mahāsamar* as particularly appropriate for the contemporary times of heavy electioneering, or election *mahāsamar*. She set the tone for the evening, seeking to interrogate analogies between the *Mahabharata*, contemporary electoral and gender politics—questions that were later echoed in the questions and answer session.

*Mahāsamar* sits at the intersection of these two distinct cultural worlds—of high literary fiction and popular culture. While sales figures are hard to come by in India’s notoriously reticent publishing industry, *Mahāsamar* is popular enough for the prestigious Hindi publisher Vani to release two new editions (including a silver jubilee one) and to plan to commissioning English translations of the entire series, promoted as a *mahākāvyaत्मक उपन्यास* (possibly translated as epic novel, but perhaps more accurately as a novel based on classics). Kohli’s popularity was clearly on display at the JLF panel. Though mythologicals have routinely been adapted into Hindi verse and drama, Hindi prose has not seen too many mythological adaptations written originally in Hindi. Narendra Kohli is an exception, garnering critical acclaim and commercial success at the same time.



Eschewing the staples of popular mythologicals— devotionality and action— Kohli instead creates a compelling *paurāṇik* narrative by suppressing the supernatural and foregrounding the male protagonists of the *Mahabharata*, focusing on their psyche and dramatizing their internal dilemmas. In adapting the *Mahabharata* into the novel form, Kohli relies on character motivations to move the action along. As a result, *Mahāsamar* is faithful to the broader narrative story beats of the *Mahabharata* but expands upon the underlying causes, motivations, and emotions.

Kohli's success and his dramatization of the characters' psyche makes his series a remarkable work, both within the *paurāṇik upanyās* genre and the *Mahabharata* re-tellings analysed in this thesis. As we have seen, the Chopra and Rajagopalachari *Mahabharatas* tend to focus on creating meaning on the surface, while the modernist interventions have either focused on the character's symbolic meanings and/or on carrying out interrogative re-readings of the *Mahabharata* by adapting smaller episodes and bringing minor characters centre-stage. The *Mahabharata* in Indian English fiction is more often than not a narrative vehicle for creating either an ironic history of India or new story worlds in new genres. Kohli instead draws upon the tradition of psychological realism within the *paurāṇik upanyās* to create his own narrative of the *Mahabharata*. However, unlike other *paurāṇik upanyās*, both those originally written in Hindi and those translated into it which focus on one character, as we

shall see, Kohli focuses on multiple characters— mostly the upper-caste male protagonists— to narrate almost the entire *Mahabharata*.

This chapter explores what makes Kohli's position within his cultural milieu so unique by tracing the genealogy of Hindi *paurāṇik* works. It situates Kohli's *Mahāsamar* within its specific networks of production and circulation and maps out how the book has been marketed and accrues cultural capital. Cover art becomes an important tool for the book to frame itself within its specific market segment as both mythological but not supernatural. Drawing on authorial interviews and essays, the chapter then looks at how *Mahāsamar* adapts the *Mahabharata* by holding the Kurukshetra war as the main narrative telos and constructing a chain of narrative causality backwards from that. In constructing this narrative chain, I argue, Kohli suppresses the supernatural so that each action is grounded in the mortal plane through complex processes of transmotivation— defined by Genette as a blend of inventing character motivation where none existed before, or suppressing character motivations present in other *Mahabharata* narratives (especially the Sanskrit narratives) and replacing them with different motivations.<sup>547</sup> This foregrounds the character's psyche and allows Kohli to utilize psycho-narration to dramatize the character's inner space. I also argue that this process does not necessarily mean that all characters are rounded characters with deep internal space. The

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<sup>547</sup> Genette, *Palmipests*, 8:324.

chapter shows how Kohli uses psycho-narration *selectively* to expand on the character-space and dilemmas of upper-caste male protagonists, while caricaturizing the antagonists and reducing the narrative space for female and lower-caste characters in not too dissimilar a fashion from colonial *paurāṇik* narratives.

### **Mapping the *paurāṇik upanyās* in Hindi literature**

In the colonial period, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were often utilised for anti-colonial propaganda due to censorship laws that prohibited explicit criticism of the Raj, thus forming a close link between the *Mahabharata*, Hindi, especially in the new standard form of Khari Boli and nationalism.<sup>548</sup> Pamela Lothspeich argues that the dramatic use of declamatory verse in forms like *prabandh-kāvya* and Parsi plays facilitated the rise of Khari Boli verse idiom and points out that these early-twentieth century poems and plays displayed strong novelizing tendencies in the form of “determined realism, individual subjectivities, and oblique commentaries on contemporary political conditions.”<sup>549</sup> More Hindi works were based on the *Mahabharata* than any other *paurāṇik* text like the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The narrative was used as a political allegory with the Raj symbolised by the evil sons of Dhritarashtra and the nationalists by the pious and wronged sons of Pandu.<sup>550</sup> The re-tellings

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<sup>548</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 2; Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*, 21, 44.

<sup>549</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 220, 221.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

spanned different genres, including *prabandh-kāvya* (narrative poetry, often heroic and patriotic in tone), Parsi theatre plays, and early Hindi films. These included *Jayadrath Vadh* [The killing of Jayadratha] (play n.d., and poem by Maithilisharan Gupta, 1910), Narayan Prasad Betab's *Mahābhārata* (1913, play), Radheshyam Kathavachak's *Vīr Abhimanyu* [Brave Abhimanyu] (1916, play), *Mahātmā Vidur* [The great soul Vidura] (1943, film).<sup>551</sup>

Colonial re-tellings tended to foreground the Manichean nature of the *Mahabharata* narrative to serve its anti-colonial politics.<sup>552</sup> However, after India gained independence, the need for this particular mode of Manichean division understandably decreased. As we have seen, Post-Independence re-tellings instead became more interested in investigating the idea of the Indian nation and/or the human condition—as in Dharamvir Bharati's play *Andhā Yug*, analysed in chapter 2. As Lothspeich puts it, “[a]fter World War II, some writers began to interpret the Mahabharata as a testament to the depressing inevitability and futility of war,”<sup>553</sup> and she marks out *Andhā Yug* (1954) and Bharati's long poem *Kanupriyā* (1959) as well as Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's *prabandh-kāvya Kurukṣetra* (1943) as examples of this literary turn. Hindi writers became more interested in interrogating abstract concepts like the modern nation and/or the human condition. Accepted characterisations of heroism and villainy

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<sup>551</sup> *Mahatma* was also a reference to Mahatma Gandhi. In the Chopra *Mahabharat* Vidura is also called Mahatma from time to time, especially by Draupadi during the Game of Dice episode. Chopra and Chopra, *Mahabharat*, Episode 47.

<sup>552</sup> Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire*, 5.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

started getting questioned and crucially marginal characters were drawn centre-stage.

Characters like Draupadi and Gandhari became more outspoken, while Karna and Ekalavya, characters marginalized in the story because of their caste became tragic heroes in works like Dinkar's *Raśmirathī* (1952) and Ramkumar Verma's long poem *Eklavya* (1958).

Prose re-workings remained few and far between. *Paurāṇik* prose in Hindi took the form of translations from Sanskrit or other modern Indian languages by religious publishers, particularly the Gita Press of Gorakhpur, the dominant disseminator of cheap *paurāṇik* translations into Hindi.<sup>554</sup> Between 1922 and 1955, Gita Press sold 27.8 million books, a number unmatched by any Hindi literary or educational publisher.<sup>555</sup> Other popular versions available in Hindi included Amritlal Nagar's abridged re-telling of the *Mahabharata* titled *Mahābhārat-kathā* (1988) and Gujarati nationalist leader and novelist K.M. Munshi's seven-novel series on the life of Krishna (which was originally written in English), which covers a lot of the *Mahabharata* story. Though written originally in English and published from 1962, the book was

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<sup>554</sup> Established in 1926 by Jay Dayal Goyandka and Hanuman Prasad Poddar with the tacit blessings of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the aims of the Press was to print and widely disseminate cheap copies of Hindi translations of Hindu texts. Horstmann, "Towards a Universal Dharma: Kalyāṇ and the Tracts of the Gītā Press"; Samanta, "The Visual Art of the Gita Press"; Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India*.

<sup>555</sup> Mukul, "Print Tradition." At present the Gita Press has approximately 70 retail outlets in India, including on railway platforms. In addition, most of the bookshops in Hindu pilgrimage sites that I have visited in North India (Omkareshwar and Makaleshwar in Madhya Pradesh; Trimbakeshwar and Bhimashankar in Maharashtra; Somnath in Gujarat et al) commonly stock religious books published by Gita Press. According to its website, it has sold 22.7 million copies of 'Puranas, Upanishads, Ancient Scriptures', including a six-volume *Mahabharata* edition in Hindi, a two-volume abridged (*saṅkṣipt*) *Mahabharata* edition in different Indian languages including Bangla, Hindi, Gujarati, and a selected summary of ideal (*ādarś*) characters in the *Mahabharata* in Gujarati, Kannada, Tamil. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, part of the *Mahabharata* but often sold separately, has sold 114.2 million copies so far. See n.a., "Online Hindu Spiritual Books, Hinduism Holy Books, Hindu Religious Books, Bhagwat Gita Books India."

widely translated, thanks mostly to the institutional backing of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, the cultural institute that Munshi founded and dedicated to disseminating Indian (read: Hindu) culture.

Though it took a while for original *paurāṇik* prose in Hindi to emerge, *paurāṇik* novels were regularly translated from other Indian languages into Hindi. Often these books and authors would garner with both popular success and intuitional consecration for the original work as well as in translation.<sup>556</sup> V.S. Khandekar's *Yayāti* (1965 [1959]) and Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityuñjay* (1974 [1967]), both translated from Marathi, took the Kuru ancestor Yayati and Karna as their respective protagonists. S.L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* (1979), originally written in Kannada, progresses in the form of reminiscences of the main characters at the cusp of war. Pratibha Ray's *Yājñasenī* (1984), translated from Oriya into Hindi as *Draupadī* (1987), tells the story of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective.<sup>557</sup> These novels show a move towards a determined psychological realism with a focus on individual characters.

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<sup>556</sup> All the above-mentioned authors have been awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award at one point or another. Khandekar won the Sahitya Akademi award for *Yayāti* in 1960 and the Jnanpith award in 1974. Shivaji Sawant was awarded the Moortidevi Award, an annual literary award presented by Bharatiya Jnanpith, for his *Mrityuñjay* in 1994. Pratibha Ray was awarded the Moortidevi Award in 1991 for *Yājñasenī*, the Padma Shri in 2007, and Jnanpith award in 2011. The Tamil and Telegu translations of *Parva* by Paavannan and Gangisetty Lakshminarayana respectively won the Sahitya Akademi Awards for Translation in the respective languages. Bhyrappa was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975, and the Padma Shri in 2016.

<sup>557</sup> I have put publication dates in the format of (First translated into Hindi [First published]).

When the Hindi *paurāṇik upanyās* first emerged in the 1970s, it also followed the form of faux-autobiographies. Philip Lutgendorf notes this trend briefly and without comment, writing that:

I am especially intrigued by the fact that several Hanumāyana narratives take the form of “autobiographies” (*ātmakathā*), in which Hanuman, with characteristic panache, embraces an introspective and individualistic literary genre that is relatively new to South Asia. It is interesting, in this context, to note the apparently recent proliferation of works containing the Hindi neologism for “autobiography” in their titles, offering first-person narratives of the lives of figures from Hindu legend; thus *Droṇ kī ātmakathā* and *Gāndhārī kī ātmakathā* by Manu Sharma (2002, 2004), and *Bhīṣma kī ātmakathā* by Lakshmipriya Acarya (2002)—all devoted to important characters in the Mahābhārata.<sup>558</sup>

Lutgendorf believes that the autobiography is one of the four genres that help express the modern self, with the novel, biography and history. To him, Manu Sharma’s works are a natural, but intriguing, extension of the *paurāṇik* stories into new forms and genres.

The *paurāṇik upanyās* is not as recent in Hindi as Lutgendorf seems to suggest, however, since Sharma’s *ātmakathā* series does not show the correct date of publication but often only the year of publication for the particular edition rather than the year the books were first published. Hanuman Prasad Sharma, better known as Manu Sharma was born 1937 in Akbarpur, Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh. His novels were initially published by the Pracārak Book Club of the Hindī Pracharak Sansthān [Hindi Disseminating Foundation], Varanasi. The

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<sup>558</sup> Lutgendorf, *Hanuman’s Tale: The Messages of the Divine Monkey*, 122. The text I accessed at the British Library however states that *Bhīṣma kī ātmakathā* is actually a Hindi translation from the original Oriya.

Pracārak Book Club claimed to be the first book club in India. The series was published under Pracārak Granthāvalī Pariyojnā [Collection dissemination project], a project started by the Sansthān to make Hindi classics cheaply available. The 1976 edition of *Droṇ kī ātmakathā* [Drona’s autobiography], for instance, was priced at a mere seven rupees. Apart from *Droṇ kī ātmakathā*, Sharma has written four other *ātmakathās*— eight volumes of *Kṛṣṇa kī ātmakathā* ([Krishna’s autobiography] 2009, 2015 [1992-?]), *Gāndhārī kī ātmakathā* ([Gandhari’s autobiography] 2009 [?]), *Karṇ ki ātmakathā* ([Karna’s autobiography] 2014[?]), and *Draupadī kī ātmakathā* ([Draupadi’s autobiography] before 1976?).<sup>559</sup> Sharma was awarded the Padma Shri in 2015 for his services in literature. To the extent that the publication information is reliable, Sharma seems to have been writing and publishing at the same time as Narendra Kohli, though Kohli never mentions him in interviews.<sup>560</sup> While it is unlikely that these authors are unaware of each other, they both follow the literary trend of reworking their *paurāṇik* adaptations through psychological, determined realism that had already emerged in Marathi, Kannada, and Oriya.

Born in undivided Punjab’s Sialkot in January, 1940, a Hindi professor at Delhi University for most of his career, Narendra Kohli started his literary career by writing literary criticism

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<sup>559</sup> The British Library has three volumes from Sharma’s *Kṛṣṇa kī ātmakathā* series, the first volume of which mentions 1992 as the year of publication, which may or may not be the year it was first published. The 1976 edition of *Droṇ kī ātmakathā* mentions that *Draupadī kī ātmakathā* (?) has been well-praised (“*bahupraśansit*”), signifying that *Draupadī kī ātmakathā* was published at least before 1976.

<sup>560</sup> See for instance Kohli, *Narendra Kohli Ne Kahā*.



and short stories before moving onto novels. His fictional writings were then mainly social realist or satirical and articulated a critique of contemporary social life.<sup>561</sup>

Kohli's first attempt at *paurāṇik upanyās* was a four-volume rewriting of the *Ramayana* (now published as a two-volume series) entitled *Abhyuday*, which used the *Ramayana* narrative to talk about the political realities emerging from the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.<sup>562</sup> In a collection of interviews published in 1997, Kohli gave two reasons for turning to *paurāṇik* material. First, a turn to the mythological was necessary in order to give a positive resolution to stories about everyday realities; second, he saw analogies between the *Ramayana* and the Bangladesh War and the massacre of Bangladeshi intelligentsia by the Pakistan military – in other words, the *paurāṇik* frame was a way of speaking indirectly about contemporary politics:

Newspapers reported that hit-lists were being made of Bangladeshi individuals to hunt and kill them. This affected me. Ravan also wants to kill sages. Sages are the intellectuals of their time and want to give intellectual direction to their society. Their death had the same meaning as the death of Bangladeshi intellectuals, that is, to deprive society of intellectual direction.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>561</sup> Kohli's first published fiction was a collection short stories in 1969 (*Parīṇati*, [Culmination]), which, his online page describes as "Stories that present the real life through an incisive look at life's lies and romance. This was followed by a collection of satirical pieces in 1970 titled *Ek aur lāl tikon* (Another red triangle). His first novel, *Punarārambh* ([Resumption], 1972) is the story of a woman living and raising a family in the patriarchal society of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Punjab, while his second novel *Atamk* (Terror, 1972) is about the terror of everyday life in post-Independence India.

<sup>562</sup> In chronological order, the novels are— *Dikṣā* [Initiation] (1975), *Avsar* [Opportunity] (1976), *Sangharṣ kī or* [Towards a struggle] and *Yuddh* [War] (two volumes, 1979).

<sup>563</sup> "Samācāratroṃ meṃ chapā ki bāṅglādeśī buddhijīvyoṃ kī sūcīyāṃ banā-banākar unkī hatyāeṃ kī gayīṃ. Us ghaṭnā ne mujhe prabhāvit kiyā. Rāvaṅ bhī ṛṣīyoṃ ko marnā cāhtā hai. Ṛṣi buddhijīvī haiṃ aur apne saṃaj ko bauddhik netritva denā cāhte haiṃ. Unkī hatyā kā arth vahī thā jo bāṅglādeś meṃ buddhijīvyoṃ ko mārne kā thā, arthāt saṃaj ko bauddhik netritva se vaṃcit karnā" Kohli, *Narendra Kohli Ne Kahā*, 85.

In the novels Ravana and his demon army stood for the demonic Other—the Pakistan Army and their supporters—while the intellectuals themselves became the sages from the Ramayana story, constantly harassed by demons and interrupted in their practices. In another interview Kohli remarked that “the biggest advantage of using ‘mythic’ or ‘Puranic story’ is that you can change the story extensively while maintaining the outer form.”<sup>564</sup> *Abhyuday* has since become extremely popular. In the biographical page of his author website, the descriptive note for the first novel in the series, *Dikṣā*, proclaims the popularity of the series in self-laudatory tones—

This novel (or rather novel series), published thirty years ago, has repeatedly proved its critical excellence and popularity. Multiple hardback, paperback and pocketbook editions have been published. Its appearance in different newspapers and prestigious magazines in excerpts or serially has proved its popularity. It has been translated into several Indian languages as well as English. Dozens of critics have gained accolades for working on it. And let us not get started with prizes. Its popularity would make any writer jealous.<sup>565</sup>

The *Ramayana* re-tellings were followed by re-telling of the Krishna-Sudama tale, before the author finally started working on *Mahāsamar*.

While *Abhyuday* was first published by Abhiruci Prakāśan and Parāg Prakāśan before Vani Prakashan took over publishing responsibilities, *Mahāsamar* was published by Vani from the

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<sup>564</sup> “‘mithak’ yā ‘purākathā’ meṃ sabse baṛā guṇ yahī hai ki use ulaṭ-pulaṭ kar sakte haiṃ uske svarūp ko banāye rakhte hue” Ibid., 59.

<sup>565</sup> Kohli, “Narendra Kohli Bio,” No. 13. “Tis varṣ pūrv prakāśit yah upanyās (athvā yah upanyās ṣṛṅkhalā) āj apnī utkrṣṭā tathā lokpriyatā ko pratyek mandaṇḍ par pramāṇit kar cukī hai. Uske anek saṅild, aṅild aur [pocketbook] sanskaraṇ prakāśit ho cuke haiṃ. Samācāratrom tathā pratiṣṭhit patrikāom meṃ khaṇḍ rūp se athvā dhāravāhik rūp meṃ prakāśit hokar lokpriyatā kā pratimān ban cukī hai. Vibhinn bhāratīya bhāśāom tathā angrezī meṃ uskā anuvād ho cukā hai. Uspar darjanom śodhkartāom ne śodh kar vibhinn viśvavidyālayom se upādhiyām prāpt kī haiṃ. Puraskārom ke viṣaya meṃ to kahnā hī kyā. Iske lokpriyatā kisī bhī lekhak ke liye īrṣyā kā viṣay ho saktī hai.”

start. By 2008 the first book in the series had gone into 8 editions, and by 2014 the same was true of the last book in the series (first published in 2000).<sup>566</sup> Over the years both Kohli and *Mahāsamar* have also slowly accumulated cultural capital. Firstly, Kohli is published by Vani Prakashan, one of the most prestigious Hindi publishing firms for literary fiction in India. Secondly, Kohli has been given several awards over the years. The first volume of the series, *Bandhan* (1988), was felicitated by the Hindi Akademi, Delhi with the ‘Vyas Samman’, a prestigious literary award for Hindi literature, in 2012. However, even though Kohli and his works have achieved both popular success and critical acclaim, this has not led to an expansion of *paurāṇik upanyās* in the Hindi literary circuit. Among the few titles published are Bachchan Singh’s novel *Suto vā Sutputro vā* (Vani Prakashan, 2005 [1998]) on Karna, and Rekha Aggarwal’s *Gāndhārī* (Hind Pocket Book published 2010).

But as mythologicals regained cultural prominence with a popular new television serial adaptation of the *Mahabharata* on the STAR Plus network in 2013 (see chapter 1) and a wave of mythological fiction in the Indian English fiction market (see chapter 4), a quiet but marked revival of mythological novels, or *paurāṇik upanyās*, also has been taking place in Hindi literature, with the two significant *paurāṇik* novel series written in Hindi receiving a renewed

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<sup>566</sup> By editions I mean print runs. Hindi publishing, and to some extent Indian English publishers like Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan tend to call print runs editions.

print run.<sup>567</sup> In 2010, Prabhat Prakashan started re-publishing hardcover editions of Manu Sharma’s 1980s *ātmakathā* series. Vani Prakashan, too, has continued to support and profit from Kohli’s popularity, and has brought out three new editions of Narendra Kohli’s eight-volume adaptation of the *Mahāsamar*—two hardback editions and one paperback edition, each priced and packaged differently for different market segments—ostensibly to celebrate 25 years since the first volume was published. This re-publication of the *Mahāsamar* series was preceded and accompanied by a marketing push that saw prominent appearances by Kohli on the literature festival circuit and the serialization of the sixth and seventh novels in *Rajasthan Patrika*, one of the most widely read daily newspapers in India.<sup>568</sup> The ongoing serialization of the work started appearing in *Rajasthan Patrika* from February 2014 and continues to be hosted online.<sup>569</sup> While I was in India for fieldwork, I saw Kohli speak in Delhi at the India Habitat Centre (IHC), the cultural hub located in the posh Lodi Gardens environs, at a Hindi literature festival organised by Vani Prakashan, and at the 2014 Jaipur Literature Festival. Additionally, Kohli also appeared at the Delhi World Book Fair in conversation with Anand Neelakanthan, the author of the popular re-workings of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in English, *Ajaya* (2015,

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<sup>567</sup> A *paurāṇik upanyās* is a novel that has as protagonists characters from the Hindu epics and Purāṇas; it may include a significant variation from the “original” story, and presupposes the reader/audience’s knowledge of the “original” and their appreciation for the variation (Ramanujan, ‘Three hundred *Rāmaayanas*’). The distance between mythic and novelistic discourses is one of the generative engines of the genre, which paurāṇik exploit in terms of narrative voice, presence/absence of psychologization, register of discourse (elevated, dramatic, everyday), and social vision – either consonant or critical of the status quo.

<sup>568</sup> According to the *Indian Readership Survey 2014*, *Rajasthan Patrika* and *Patrika* (the title used in all Indian states apart from Delhi and Rajasthan) together had the sixth highest readership of all Indian dailies, and the fourth highest amongst Hindi dailies, reaching a readership of 7,905,000 across 36 cities in 8 states in 2014.

<sup>569</sup> “Search Results - Mahasamar.”

2013) and *Asura* (2012) respectively. Narendra Kohli has also a steady presence online, with a website and Facebook page dedicated to his writings.<sup>570</sup> Aided by this steady presence, Kohli's publishers seem to have sought to utilize the wave of mythologicals that started appearing from the early 2010s in television and English book market. For instance, from 17 February 2014 to 26 August 2015 excerpts from the sixth and seventh volumes of *Mahāsamar* (*Pracchan* [Hidden] and *Pratyakṣ* [Evident] respectively) were published in *Rajasthan Patrika*, India's fourth-largest newspaper by circulation, no doubt creating a renewed buzz around the novel series and the author.<sup>571</sup> While the novels have already been translated into other Indian languages like Malayalam, an English translation was being planned when I visited the Vani Prakashan office in 2014. As of 2016, the first book in the series has been translated into English by Moez Michael and published under the title *Bondage* by Vani.

The marketing push for *Mahāsamar* saw Vani Prakashan utilize a more complex and layered strategy which targeted different markets rather than the one-product-fits-all strategy of the first edition. This is important because the way the publisher's market *paurāṇik upanyās* shows us where they are trying to position the product in the Hindi book market. When it was first published, the novel was only available in hardback, with a cover that showed no figures or shapes, just abstract smudges of blood red, blue and black over a white background (fig. 1).

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<sup>570</sup> “नरेन्द्र कोहली का साहित्य”; “Welcome.”

<sup>571</sup> n.a., “Search Results - Mahasamar.”

The series and author's names appear slightly off-centre on the cover, to the left, while the title of the novel is at the top, slightly towards the right. This edition was sold for two hundred and fifty rupees, not very expensive, but not cheap either. There was no sign of devotionality and no use of the popular iconography of the gods. The aesthetics of the painting are firmly situated in modern Indian art, making the cover decidedly non-political and non-religious. This is in stark contrast to Manu Sharma's *Kṛṣṇa ki ātmakathā* (1992 edition, accessed in the British Library), which is a paperback with a pink frame and a yellow rectangle in the middle with a peacock feather signifying Krishna drawn diagonally across the cover. From the aesthetics of the cover, the 1988 edition of the *Mahāsamar* seems to be geared towards an Indian middle class that engages frequently in the culture market acts of book buying and art appreciation. Popular devotionality is kept far away from the book.

The cheapest edition of the 2012 re-release of the series is in paperback, costs 400 Rupees, and has colourful pictures on the cover aiming to depict the central scene from the specific volume. Unlike the other editions, these covers participate in existing networks of popular iconography and stylize the titles (Figures 22). The paperback seems to be for readers who may not be familiar with Kohli or his work, emphasizing rather colourful graphics and popular iconography to draw the reader in. The images seem to mainly be drawn from the internet, showing an attempt, albeit uneven, at participating in the popular circulation of images

around the *Mahabharata*.<sup>572</sup> The cheaper of the two hardbacks costs 600 rupees. The cover is a sober black, with an abstract illustration covering most of the centre, and the author name and series and book title in a sombre title at the heading. The most expensive edition published is a collector's edition, with the author's face covering at least three quarters of the book, and the title, name etc. in a comparatively small font on the right-hand corner (Fig. 21).

Different parts of the book thus engage with different markets and fields. While the text is situated in the Hindi literary field and favours psychological realism, the cover engages with different visual regimes. By utilizing these visual regimes, the new editions of the *Mahāsamar* can appeal to a new audience, with its paperback meant for popular consumption, a bourgeois audience with its hardbacks, and old faithfuls and new conspicuous consumers with its collector's edition.

As we have seen, even though mythological adaptations and re-tellings are popular in Hindi poetry and drama as well as in translation, the *paurāṇik upanyās* has not been a prolific

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<sup>572</sup> The reason I say that the images are drawn from the internet is because the images seem to have a varied provenance with no unifying theme. For instance, Figures 22.a and b. are Raja Ravi Verma paintings, *Shantanu and Matsyagandha* and *Krishna's embassy to Duryodhana* respectively. Figure 22.b is especially incongruous since the scene depicted appears much later in the *Mahabharata* and *Mahāsamar* narratives. Figures 22.c, d, and g are available on the internet when searched with the keywords "Draupadi Swayamvar painting", "Draupadi vastraharan painting", and "Bhishma bed of arrows painting", though I have been unable to ascertain the original artist. Figure 22.e is probably newly commissioned, while fig. 22.f is an illustration from Ramnarayan Datta Shastri's Hindi translation of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* published by the Gita Press. Fig. 22.h is an extremely popular image from ISKCON calendar art that also appears in the opening credits of Chopra *Mahabharat*. Fig. 22.i is apparently a woodcut illustration from the Bengali *Mahabharata* commissioned by the Raja of Bardhaman housed in the Mukul Rey Archives at Shantiniketan. The only unifying theme in all the of the above is that the covers are freely available online.

genre in Hindi, either because poetry and drama have traditionally been considered better suited for mythological material in Hindi and because the domination of Gita Press translations in the market and the success and consecration of translated *paurāṇik upanyās* might have made it hard for original *paurāṇik upanyās* in Hindi to achieve the same level of popularity or critical acclaim. That Kohli and his adaptations have achieved both is remarkable. Marketed to both popular and middle-class sensibilities, *Mahāsamar* seems to have enjoyed a steady readership. By emphasizing the psyche of his characters and suppressing the supernatural, Kohli has been able to establish a niche for himself and his writing.



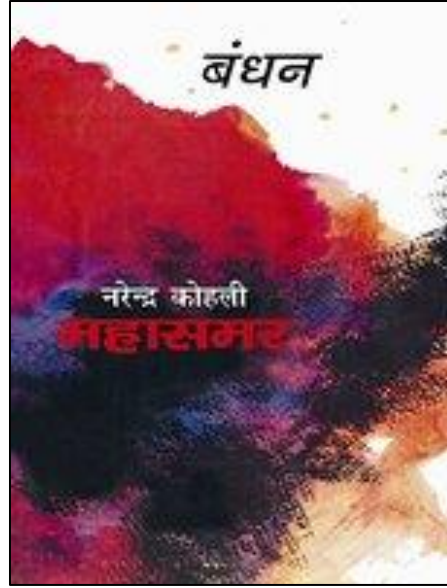


Figure 20: The cover for the original books. The cover and fonts remain unchanged for all the novels in the series.  
Cover by Gobind Prasad.

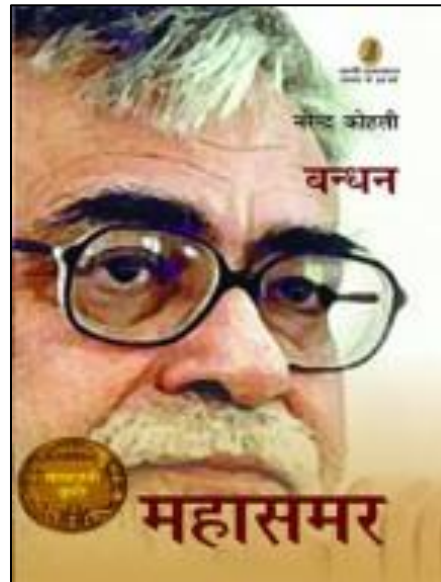


Figure 21: The cover for the deluxe edition. The cover and fonts remain unchanged for the entire series. All the books are in hardback. Priced at Rs. 900/- for a copy for each novel.



Figure 22: The cover art for the 2012 paperback editions. Top row (Fig. 22.a-d, arranged left-right from book 1 to 4): Bandhan, Adhikār, Karma, Dharma. Middle row (Fig. 22.e-h arranged left-right from book 5 to 8): Antrāl, Prachann, Prayakṣ, Nirbandh. Bottom row (Fig. 22.i): Ānuṣāṅgik (book 9). Priced at relatively affordable Rs.

399/-



Figure 23: The cover art for the 2012 hardback editions. Top row (Fig. 23.a-d, arranged left-right from book 1 to 4): Bandhan, Adhikār, Karma, Dharma. Middle row (Fig 23.e-h arranged left-right from book 5 to 8): Antrāl, Prachann, Prayaks, Nirbandh. Bottom row (Fig. 23.i): Ānuṣāṅgik (book 9). Priced at Rs. 600/-

## The Mahabharata in Mahāsamar

Kohli veers clear of the more experimental tendencies in the adaptation of the mythic narratives in high Hindi literature such as Bharati's *Andhā Yug*. Kohli's realistic mode of storytelling is in constant negotiation not only with specific *Mahabharata* narratives but with the idea of "Vyasa's *Mahābhārata*" as the original narrative.

Before reading the *Mahābhārata* in the original, I got to know it like the rest of us... a little bit from oral story-telling, a bit from literature based on the *Mahabharata* story, and a bit from the prevailing Zeitgeist. This [variety] is the reason I have found that just as every individual carries their own version of the story of Rama (*rāmakathā*), they carry their own version of the Pandava tale, which can be different from what Vyasa wrote.<sup>573</sup>

While recognising that there are many Mahabharatas in the 1997 collection of interviews, Kohli also asserts that both his *paurāṇik* adaptations, *Abhyuday* and *Mahāsamar*, are grounded in the 'original' Sanskrit texts composed by Valmiki and Vyasa.<sup>574</sup> In the companion book to his *Mahāsamar* series, *Jahāṃ hai dharma, vahīm hai jai* [Where there is truth, there is victory] (1995), re-published as *Ānuṣāṅgik* [Companion] in 2012, Kohli further expands on this stance, arguing that Vyasa and Vaishampayana (the narrator to Janamejaya) also mediated the events of the text in the first place—" [*Mahabharata*] is not just written history or a chronicle of events— it is

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<sup>573</sup> "Mahābhārat ko uske mūl rūp meṃ parne se pahle bhī usse merā paricaya ham sab kā hī hotā hai... Kuch śruti-paramparā se, kuch mahābhārat-kathā ādhṛt sāhityik kṛtiyoṃ ke mādhyam se, aur kuch sāmājīk mānyatā ke mādhyam se! Yahi kāraṇ hai ki maiṃ ne pāyā ki pratyek vyakti ke bhītar apnī-apnī rām-kathā ke samān apnī-apnī pāṇḍava-kathā bhī hai, jo vyās kī [kathā?] se bhinn bhī ho saktī hai"; Kohli, *Jahāṃ hai dharma, vahīm hai jai*, 7.

<sup>574</sup> Kohli, *Narendra Kohli Ne Kahā*, 87.

a poetic work, and Vyasa is its creator.”<sup>575</sup> Kohli argues that the *Mahabharata* was originally composed by Vyasa to celebrate the simple victory of good over evil, but when Vyasa’s pupil Vaishampayana had to narrate the story the context had changed drastically. Whereas Janamejaya wants the *Mahabharata* story to justify his genocide, Vaishampayana wants to stop it, thus creating a treatise that condemns genocide.<sup>576</sup> As the title for the series, *Mahāsamar* (‘The Great War’) suggests, the centre of the *Mahabharata* narrative for Kohli is the Kurukshetra war, from which he creates a causal narrative chain that goes back to Bhishma’s youth.<sup>577</sup> Each volume is titled according its main theme and its position within this plot progression: *Bandhan* ([Bondage] 1988) narrates the story of Devavrat/Bhishma and the ironic turns in his life as he gives up the throne to Hastinapura and vows lifelong celibacy to facilitate his father’s second marriage only to be saddled with the responsibility of ruling the Kuru kingdom and ensuring the continuation of his father’s lineage while the sons from his father’s second marriage prove incompetent and die before producing their own offspring. The novel sets up a stark contrast between Bhishma, who was trained for kingship, and his half-brothers, born of a poor Brahmin’s daughter, who are deeply insecure in their newfound position and are eminently unfit to rule Hastinapura. *Bandhan* shows that the seeds of the Kurukshetra war

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<sup>575</sup> “Ataḥ yaha itihās kā ālekh mātra nahīm hai, yaha ghaṭnaoṃ kā varṇan mātra nahīm hai— yaha ek kāvya hai, jiskī vedvyās ne racnā kī hai.” Kohli, *Jahāṃ hai dharmā, vahīm hai jai*, 12.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–15. Vaishampayana is Vyasa’s student. According to the *Mahābhārata* Vaishampayana is one of Vyasa’s five students who learns to narrate the story.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24. This is an interesting parallel to Kolatkar’s re-telling of the *Mahabharata* in *Sarpa Satra*. See Chapter 2.

were sowed by Shantanu due to his own lust and placing unworthy successors to his throne. The novel also prefigures the contrast between those able to rule and those temperamentally unfit to do so.

If *Bandhan* only pre-figures the contrast in abilities to rule, the second novel, *Adhikār* [Right] (1990), further expands upon it in the context of the Pandava princes and their cousins, the sons of Dhritarashtra, as the Kuru cousins struggle for the right to rule Hastinapura, which ends with Yudhishtira crowned as the crown prince. The third novel, *Karma* (1991), sees the battle-lines becoming clearer as Yudhishtira eases into his new role as Crown Prince, much to Duryodhana's chagrin. The latter retaliates by arranging for the death of the Pandavas and their mother in the episode of the burning of the house of lac. The Pandavas, fully aware of Duryodhana's responsibility, hide from Hastinapura before reappearing at Draupadi's *svayamvara*, where Arjuna wins the Panchala princess. They then march back to Hastinapura with Draupadi and, more importantly, the Panchala armies to claim a part of the Kuru kingdom for themselves. The novel ends with Bhishma finally learning the truth about Duryodhana's multiple attempts at murdering the Pandavas, laying bare the divisions in the Kuru household. *Dharma* (1993) starts from Yudhishtira's establishment of his rule in the Khandava forest, his gradually pacification of the area, stabilisation of his rule, and construction of an empire in his own right, which makes Duryodhana and his brothers even

more envious of their cousins and plot their downfall. The book ends with the infamous Game of Dice episode, Draupadi's humiliation, and the Pandavas's exile, all of which lead inexorably to war. The fifth book, *Antarāl* [Interval] (1995), takes up where the previous book left, with the Pandavas going into exile. The title of the book signifies an interval in the otherwise political and turbulent life of the Kuru family, as both Pandavas and Duryodhana and his brothers gather allies and prepare for the inevitable. The sixth book, *Pracchann* [Hidden] (1997), deals with the Pandavas's exile in disguise while Duryodhana tries to locate them. The book ends with Duryodhana attacking Virata's kingdom, where the Pandavas are living in disguise. Though Duryodhana is fended off, the Pandavas stand revealed and start making plans for gathering their allies at Upalavya. As Draupadi tells Bhima, "... the invitation [to Upalavya] is a declaration of war."<sup>578</sup> In *Pratyakṣ* [Revealed] (1998), the Pandavas reveal themselves to their cousins, Krishna goes to Hastinapura in an ultimately futile attempt for peace, and the war finally starts, with the book ending at Bhishma telling the Pandavas to remove him from the battlefield. The last book, *Nirbandh* (2000), brings the entire saga to an end. Just like the Chopra *Mahabharata*, the book series ends with Pandavas emerging victorious and ascending the Kuru throne.

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<sup>578</sup> Kohlī, *Pracchann*, 6:617. "... yah nimantraṇ yuddh kā udghoś hai."

Structuring the story with the war as the central event requires the conscious excision and amplification of different parts of the epic. Kohli thus suppresses the ‘sub-tales’, some of which, like the stories of Yayati, Parvasu and Arvasu, and Jaratkaru, other authors and texts mentioned elsewhere in the thesis instead expanded on. Instead, Kohli focuses exclusively instead on the *pāṇḍava-kathā* and the Kuru family. Kohli’s *Mahāsamar*, like the Chopra *Mahabharat* and *STARbharata*, spans Bhishma’s life, starting from Shantanu’s meeting with Satyawati through the Kurukshetra war, and ending with a relatively happy ending. The Yadava civil war that wipes out their city Dwarka, or the Pandavas’ weariness after the war are also left out of the narrative.<sup>579</sup>

In creating the chain of narrative causation for *Mahāsamar* Kohli carries out a complex process of transmotivation. He relies on muting or suppressing the marvellous and the divine and foregrounding the characters’ psyche—especially that of the upper-caste, male protagonists like Bhishma and the Pandavas—since their motives directly affect the action. While he enlarges the character-space of a few main characters, he pushes others further to the margins by suppressing their space as well as caricaturizing them. Let us look at each of these strategies in some more detail.

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<sup>579</sup> Unlike, say, *Andha Yug*, in which the fifth act focuses exclusively on those two themes.



## Suppressing the supernatural

Kohli expresses his firm strong repudiation of the supernatural by stating that “this [i.e., divine intervention] is the style of the *Puranas*; [but] one cannot provide answers to questions related to the narrative in this style.”<sup>580</sup> Saxena has argued that “Kohli has given new expression to the supernatural episodes so as to articulate a critique of his reality and satisfy the readers are satisfied without distorting ancient conceptions and ideas.”<sup>581</sup> Saxena is not wrong, as Kohli keeps to the main narrative points of the *Mahabharata* narrative. His particular innovation is in populating the back-story, creating, eliding, or rearticulating character motivations, in a process Genette calls transmotivation. Focusing on characters’ motivations, Kohli foregrounds their psyche and suppresses the supernatural through strategies that range from subtly changing plot points to shifting the supernatural into the subconscious. By suppressing or channelling the supernatural into the subconscious, Kohli focuses on the internal space in his characters and uses this space to create character motivations that push the plot forward.

So for example in *Bandhan* Kohli makes subtle changes to Bhishma’s descent, making his divine parenthood from the river goddess Ganga ambiguous. In the novel, Ganga is referred to

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<sup>580</sup> ‘yah paurāṇik-ciṃtan-vidhī hī hai; kathānak sambandhī praśnoṃ ke uttar, is śailī se nahīm diye jā sakte’; Kohli, *Jahāṃ hai dharma, vahīm hai jai*, 49–50.

<sup>581</sup> ‘Kohlī jī ne aise prasamgoṃ kī udbhāvnā kī jisse yathārth kī abhivyakti bhī ho sake, pāṭhak varg samtuṣṭ ho sake tathā usse prācīn paurāṇik mānyatāoṃ ke rūp meṃ bhī vikṛti utpann na ho’; Saxena, “Pracchann,” 177.

as a woman rather than a river. Her seven infanticides—which were committed to help divine beings escape their curse—are mentioned, but they simply baffle Devavrat.<sup>582</sup> Previous births, curses and divine (or semi-divine) spheres, all of which form a central part of the story of Bhishma’s birth, are left out of the story. Ganga’s separation from Shantanu is described prosaically as, “Pitā ko choṛkar mātā alag ho gayī thīm” [Mother had separated from father], thus completely doing away with supernatural plot devices common in the *Mahabharata* like sudden meetings, curses, boons et al. Their place is taken by psychological explanations.

By subtly changing the story, Kohli introduces the readers to a man who has lived like an orphan even though both his parents are alive:

Devavrat [i.e. Bhishma] was taken back to his childhood. His mother had left his father. How much the parting pained them, he did not know—but he could never forget the pain he had gone through himself. Every child has a mother and a father—his parents were alive, yet absent. Devavrat always found that neither his mother nor his father were easy people. His mother wanted Devavrat to live with his father so that he could be raised as the heir to the Puru lineage. And his father was so bewildered that he forgot that he had a son. Such was his pain at separating from his wife that he did not realise he was neglecting his only son... Devavrat’s infancy, childhood, adolescence—all his years were spent with different ascetics, living in the strict discipline of their

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<sup>582</sup> Kohli, *Bandhan*, 1:21. In the *Mahābhārata*, as well as the Chopra *Mahabharat* and *STARbharata*, eight Vasus — divine beings that attend on Indra and/or Vishnu in Hindu mythology— led by Bhishma in his divine incarnation, Dyaus, are cursed by the sage Vashishtha to be born in the world of men for stealing his wish-granting cow so that it could grant permanent youth to a mortal friend of Dyaus’ wife. The Vasus plead for his forgiveness upon which the sage limits his curse to one year for all except the leader, Dyaus. The Vasus then approach Ganga, requesting her to give birth to them. Ganga, taking pity on the Vasus appears before Shantanu, Bhishma’s father, who begs to wed her. Ganga weds him on the condition that if Shantanu ever questions or chides her for her actions, she would leave him immediately. Shantanu marries her, but when Ganga gives birth to his children, who unbeknownst to him are mortal incarnations of the divine Vasu, she drowns them. Shantanu stays quiet when this happens seven times, but on the eighth finally interjects. Ganga tells Shantanu about the Vasus’ curse and disappears with Devavrata, raising the child to be a capable king before returning him to his father. See Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 28–33.

hermitage. Though he did receive a lot of affection from these ascetics, it was tempered by their disciplinarian nature and mixed with a sense of duty. The all-encompassing, infinite love of his parents...<sup>583</sup>

Suppressing the supernatural aspects of the story of Bhishma's birth, Kohli instead expands on Bhishma's character, foregrounding the lack of parental affection and its effect on Bhishma, bringing out pathos in introducing the character. The ellipses are part of the original text, making the last line especially poignant, where the Bhishma wistfully falls into silence at the thought of the lack of parental love. The notion of Bhishma as a pitiable orphan is new and unique to *Mahāsamar* amongst the *Mahabharata* re-tellings examined in this study and provides a striking example of transmotivation. Kohli creates a retrospective causal chain of events that allows for a logical explanation of Bhishma's voluntary sacrifice of his birth right—the lack of parental love has transformed into indifference towards the family structure and disdain for materialism in life, thus making it exceedingly easy for him to abdicate the throne—as well as a pause the narrative to expound on the ills of growing up without parental love.<sup>584</sup>

When the supernatural cannot be avoided, it is shifted to the subconscious level. In the fifth book in the series, *Antarāl*, the Kirata-Arjuna episode starts on the material plane, and

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<sup>583</sup> 'Devavrat kī āmkhoṃ ke sāmne apnā śaisav ghūm gayā. Pitā ko choṛkar mātā alag ho gayī thīṃ. Is vilgāv ke kāraṇ un donoṃ meṃ se kisko kitnī pīṛā huī, yah Devavrat nahīm jānte—par svayam apnī pīṛa ko ve kabhī nahīm bhūl pāye. Pratyek bālak ke mātā-pitā donoṃ hote hai—unke mātā-pitā, hokar bhī nahīm the. Devavrat ne sadā yahī pāyā thā ki na māṃ sahaḥ thīṃ, na pitā. Māṃ cāhtī thī ki Devavrat pitā ke pās raheṃ, tāki purukul ke yogya unkā lālan-pālan ho. Aur pitā kuch itne udbhrānt the ki unheṃ dhyān hī nahīm thā ki unkā ek putra bhī hai. Patnī se vaṃcit hone kī pīṛa itnī prabal thī ki unhoṃne kabhī socā hī nahīm ki apne ekmātra putr ko ve kitnā vaṃcit kar rahe haiṃ... Devavrat ka śaisav, bālāvasthā, kiśorāvasthā, taruṇāi—vaya ye sāre khaṇḍ vibhinn ṛṣiyom ke sāth unke aśramom ke kaṭhor anuśāsan meṃ kaṭ gaye. Tapasvī gurūom ke kaṭhor anuśāsan se nibaddh kartavyamiṣrit sneh unheṃ bahut milā, kintu mātā-pitā kā sarvaḥsamśil vātsalya...'; Kohli, *Bandhan*, 1: 9–10.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:10.

then on a subconscious level.<sup>585</sup> Kirata bests Arjun in combat and leaves him unconscious.

When Arjun regains consciousness, he starts meditating, and it's in that meditative state that the supernatural starts playing out—

Arjun closed his eyes. His mind turned inwards. What was this strange journey?...The visible material plane disappeared and a new world emerged in front of him... Suddenly the same tribal Kirata came and stood in front of him...It was as if Kirata has transformed into the great God Shiva. Arjun wanted to go to him; but before he could move, the great God disappeared... Arjuna thought that he was on a strange journey. He was there, but his body wasn't... Suddenly, the god of waters, Varuna, surrounded by water and by marine animals appeared in front of him...his body shone like beryl. Kubera came from another direction with yakshas. His body was like gold. And after him came the son of the Sun, Yama... Yama said with affection, "Arjun! We, the guardians of the worlds, have come. Today, you became deserving of seeing us. I vow to you that in this world you will establish undying fame. I give you my weapon. Here, accept it."

Arjun's hands didn't rise. Neither did Yama extend any weapons; but Arjun felt that his weapon knowledge had increased. He had been given something. He had gained something.<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> The Kirata-Arjuna episode is one of the most famous episodes from the *Mahabharata*. In this episode Arjuna tries to appease the god Shiva during his enforced exile in order to gain the weapons that will help him defeat his cousins in the coming war. Shiva, pleased by Arjuna, approaches him as Kirata the hunter in order to test his devotion, engages him in an archery contest in which Arjuna is humbled, and eventually grants him his wish but also teaching him humility at the same time. Bharavi's Sanskrit *kāvya* on the episode, *Kirātārjunīya*, is one of the most celebrated works of Sanskrit literature. More recently, *Amar Chitra Katha* has published an entire number re-telling only this episode in the *Tales of Shiva* (1978).

'Arjun kī āmkhem mūṃd gayīm. Uskā man antarmukhī hotā calā gayā. Yah kaisī vicitra yātrā thī man kī?...Dṛṣya jagat adṛṣya ho gayā aur ek nayī sṛṣṭi sāmne thī... Sahsā uske sammukh vahī vancar kirāt ākar kharā ho gayā... Kirāt jaise svayam mahādev śiv meṃ pariṇat ho gayā. Arjun unkī or barnā cāhtā thā; kintu usse pahle hi mahādev adṛṣya ho gaye... Arjun ko lagā, vah kisī asādhāraṇ yātrā par cal paṛā hai. Vah thā, kintu uskā śārīr nahīm thā... Sahsā anek jal-jaṃtuom se ghire, jal ke devtā varuṇ ākar uske nikaṭ thahar gaye... Unkī aṃg-kaṃti vaidurya maṇi ke samān thī. Ek anya diśā se anek yakṣom ke sāth kuber āye. Unkā śārīr svarṇa ke samān thā. Unke paścāt suryaputra yamrāj āye... Yamrāj ne atyant sneh se kahā, "Fālgun! Ham sab lokpāl āye hai. Tum āj hamāreṃ darśanoṃ ke adhikārī ho gaye ho. Merā vacan hai ki saṃsār meṃ tumhārī akṣay kīrti sthāpit hogī. Maiṃ tumheṃ daṇḍāstra detā hūṃ. Lo, tum ise grahaṇ karo. Arjun ke hāth nahīm uṭhe. Nā hī yamrāj ne koī astra baṛāyā; kintu Arjun ko lagā ki uskā śāstra-jñāna kuch baṛ gayā hai. Usne kuch grahaṇ kiyā hai. Vah pahle se kuch adhik samridh huā hai'; Kohlī, *Antrāl*, 5:160–62.

Kohli deliberately eschews the popular devotional aesthetics and the supernatural of *paurāṇik* narratives and sublimates the episode it as psychic experience, foregrounding the character's psyche as the setting for the action. Shiva, a popular Hindu god, vanishes the instant he transforms into his real form. The *paurāṇik* mode, manifested through the appearance of the 'guardians of the world', is framed within Arjuna's sub-conscious.

Similarly, in most *Mahabharata* narratives Draupadi's honour is preserved *in spite of* Dushasana disrobing her because the piece of cloth that she is wearing magically lengthens to infinite proportions, and Dushasana has to give up partly out of amazement and fear at the supernatural occurrence and partly out of fatigue. In *Mahāsamar*, he is not stopped by the fantastic occurrence of Draupadi's cloth stretching indefinitely. He first hesitates because he is afraid of Bhima, and then stops completely when Draupadi takes Krishna's name, afraid not just of retaliation from the Pandavas but also of the powerful Yadav army led by Krishna:

Draupadi raised her blazing eyes to the skies. She could not expect anything (any help) from any of the assembly members. With a grievous cry she exclaimed, "I am the daughter-in-law of King Pandue, the wife of the brave Pandavas, the daughter of the hero of the Panchalas, Drupada, Dhristadyumna's sister, and a dear friend of Vasudev Krishna's ..."

Dushasana's hand stopped *as the words echoed in his head*, "I am a dear friend of Vasudev Krishna..."<sup>587</sup>

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<sup>587</sup> "Draupadi ne apnī prajvalit āmkhem ākās kī or uṭhām. Sabhā mem upasthit kisī vyakti se ab koī āsā nahīm thī. Uske mukh se ārt svar phuṭā, "Maiṃ mahārāj pāṇḍu kī putra-vadhu, vīr pāṇḍavom kī patnī, pāñcāl vīr drupad kī putrī, dhṛṣṭadyumn kī bahan aur vāsudev Kṛṣṇa kī sakhī hūṃ..."  
Duhśāsan kā hāth ṭhiṭhak gayā. Uske kānom me nirantar ek hī svar guṃj rahā thā... 'maiṃ vāsudev Kṛṣṇa kī sakhī hūṃ...'"; Kohli, *Dharma*, 4:410.

With another transformation of the divine into the subconscious, Krishna's words echo in Dushasana's head, bringing Draupadi's humiliation to an end in a crescendo of emotions.

The characters' psyche becomes the staging ground for much of the action— both in terms of narrative and spectacle— expanding upon, eliding, and transcreating internal motivations for external actions. Kohli's focus on the psyche and internal motives of the characters resonates with Sharma's *ātmakathās*, with the crucial difference that Kohli's narrative uses a third person narrator, allowing it to narrate different character psyches and external events and using a mix of consonant and dissonant psycho-narration.

## **Psycho-narration**

Psycho-narration, according to Dorrit Cohn who coins the term, is the narration of the characters' consciousness. She coined the terms because she found terms like 'omniscient description' too vague and 'internal analysis' misleading. She further classifies psycho-narration into two types—consonant and dissonant.<sup>588</sup> Consonant psycho-narration is when the narration is carried out by a figure in the text (what Gerard Genette terms a homodiegetic character), while dissonant psycho-narration is carried out by an omniscient authorial narrative voice (the heterodiegetic narrator in Genette).<sup>589</sup> While Cohn suggests these as two exclusive narrative types, Theo Damsteegt has pointed out that starting with Ajñeya Hindi

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<sup>588</sup> Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, 11.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 139; Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 84–85.

writers have carried out psycho-narration in their work. Ajñeya especially carries out both consonant and dissonant psycho-narration.<sup>590</sup> Kohli similarly uses both consonant and dissonant psycho-narration to expand on his character's psyche. His psycho-narration is dissonant insofar as he adopts a third-person omniscient narratorial voice to narrate external action as well as the internal thought processes of his characters. However, when he starts narrating the internal psyche of the character, the narrative voice fades into the background, as we saw with Bhishma above. Using psycho-narration and transmotation does not mean that all the characters are given narratorial space. Ironically, unlike modernist narrations that expand on the points of view of characters side-lined by the main *Mahabharata* text—antagonists as well as marginal lower-caste characters and marginalized female characters—the effect of this complex process of character transmotation is not to expand these characters but to continue flattening them. Kohli switches between different narratorial voices, using them to create and reinforce character valencies—dissonant psycho-narration, consonant psycho-narration, and omniscient narrator to differing effect. Dissonant psycho-narration is used to prefigure action, while consonant psycho-narration makes the narrative figure more sympathetic. The narrative switches to omniscient narration to narrate action, but also to caricaturize antagonists.

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<sup>590</sup> Damsteegt, *The Present Tense in Modern Hindi Fiction*, 60.

For instance, the Pandavas' foreboding of the Game of Dice and their surprise at the warm reception in Hastinapura is depicted through a dissonant psycho-narration of the characters' emotional states. The 39<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book, which encompasses the entire Game of Dice episode, begins with the sons of Dhritarashtra greeting their Pandava cousins with a warmth that surprises them:

The Pandava brothers were given a unique welcome to Hastinapura. Duryodhana and his brothers hugged the Pandavas like a child leaping towards his mother whom he hasn't seen her for a long time. Yudhishtira couldn't believe the reverence with which Duryodhana touched his feet... yet it was happening in front of his eyes...<sup>591</sup>

A short introductory sentence is followed immediately by the heterodiegetic narrator foregrounding Yudhishtira's thoughts as well as foreboding the action- "Yudhishtira felt that there was a battle raging all around him."<sup>592</sup>

However, when narrating Bhishma's reaction to Draupadi's disrobing, Kohli switches from dissonant to consonant psycho-narration, expanding the narrative space usually given to Bhishma at this point and making him more sympathetic a character by providing a motive for Bhishma's silence in the assembly hall:

Bhishma was furious: he wanted to draw his sword and separate their heads from their bodies... but his body failed him [...] Bhishma almost gave the order to release

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<sup>591</sup> 'Hastinapur ke dvār par pāṇḍavoṃ kā asādhāraṇ svāgat huā. Duryodhan aur uske bhāi is prakār pāṇḍavoṃ ke vakṣ se ā lage, jaise bahut samay se bichṛā śīśu, apnī māṃ ko dekhkar uskī or lapaktā hai. Duryodhan ne itnī bhakti se Yudhishtir ke caraṇ pakṛe ki Yudhishtir ko viśvās nahīm ho rahā thā ki aisā bhī sambhav hai... kintu pramāṇ unke sammukh thā...'; Kohlī, *Dharma*, 4:371-72.

<sup>592</sup> 'Yudhishtira ko lagā ki unke caroṃ or bhayaṃkar yuddh cal rahā hai'; *Ibid.*, 4:369.



Draupadi... but he was stopped by his reason [...] if he opposed this it could break the familial bonds in the family... individuals would be atomized, there would be social disorder [...] he is the family patriarch, and would remain so, but could he order Dhritarashtra? Could he order the King himself? Could he intervene in politics? If he did, what would happen to the vow he had made to Satyawati's father all those years ago?<sup>593</sup>

The passage begins by depicting Bhishma's state of mind through a heterodiegetic narrator, but as the passage progresses the heterodiegetic voice merges with the character's voice starting from "... if he opposed this." The narrator is not asking the questions of Bhishma, it Bhishma who is asking them of himself.

Drona also benefits from consonant psycho-narration in the Ekalavya episode, showing the debate raging in his mind before he orders Ekalavya to cut off his thumb:

Drona could not understand whether he should use Ekalavya against Drupada... but no! After wrecking vengeance on Drupada, Ekalavya would become a free agent. On this earth... and what about keeping faith with the Kurus? The dilemma in Drona's mind started resolving itself. His mind asserted itself... "Don't ever get swayed by compassion, Drona. Compassion is suicidal..." "...But look at his devotion..." Compassion retaliated.<sup>594</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> 'Bhīṣma ke man meṃ māno ek jvār uṭhā: khaḍag khīmc leṃ aur ek sire se inke sir dhaṛ se pṛthak karte cal jayem... kintu na to unke pairom ne sāth diyā, na hāthom ne[...] Bhīṣma ko lagā ki ve agle kṣaṇ Draupadī ko mukt karne ka ādeś de deṃge... kintu tabhī unke vivek ne unheṃ rok diyā [...] yadi Bhīṣma ne iskā virodh kiyā, to parivār meṃ kiśī ko kiśī par koī adhikār nahīm rahegā... pratyek vyakti svatantra hogā, samāj-ucchṛṃkhal ho jayegā[...] ve parivār ke mukhiyā to haiṃ, aur raheṃge, to kyā ve Dhṛtarāṣṭra ko ādeś deṃge? Raja ko ādeś deṃge? Ve rajnīti meṃ hastakṣep kareṃge? To us vacan kā kyā hogā, jo unhomne mātā Satyawatī ke pitā ko diyā thā?'; Ibid., 4:399, 401.

<sup>594</sup> "Droṇ ko samajh nahīm pā rahe the ki ve Eklavya kī śakti kā prayog Drupad ke viruddh kareṃ yā... par nahīm! Drupad se pratiśodh lene ke paścāt bhī Eklavya mukt rūp se vicaraṇ karegā. Is dhartī par... aur kauravom ke prati Droṇ kī niṣṭhā kā pramāṇ?... Droṇ ke man kā dvandva jaise mittā jā rahā thā. Unki buddhi prakhar hokar apnā ādhipatyā sthāpit kar rahī thī... "kabhi karuṇā k behkāve meṃ mat ānā Droṇ. Karuṇā ātmaghātī hotī hai..." "...Kintu uskā samarpaṇ to dekho..." Karuṇā ne pratiśodh kiyā" Kohli, *Adhikār*, 2:208.

The passage shows an interplay of dissonant and consonant psycho-narration. The first line is dissonant, but then the authorial narrator fades into the background before re-emerging in the last half of the third line creating two internal characters— the critical brain and compassion—to dramatize Drona’s dilemma. By dramatizing Drona’s psyche in this way, the narrative makes him appear more sympathetic as he wrestles between his loyalty to his students and masters, his compassion as a human, and his admiration for Ekalavya.

But Kohli can also use this narrative strategy to caricature the antagonists either by refusing to narrate their inner thought process and/or by carrying out a consonant psycho-narration of another character observing the antagonists. In the Game of Dice episode, the narrative portrays the sons of Dhritarashtra externally, enabling their reduction to demonic antagonists—“Duryodhana’s expression became cruel and hard.”<sup>595</sup> Vidura’s internal thought processes further caricatures Duryodhana as a ruffian and an animal:

Vidura was helpless. The kind of cruelty meted out to these simple, *dharma*-following Pandavas in front of such an assemblage of dharmic and prudent intellectuals and politicians was unprecedented. And all this was because of this ruffian, Duryodhana. It was as if a rutting bull had been let loose in the royal assembly and no one had the courage to control it. The entire assembly was silenced because of an evil, immoral and cruel lout. Hastinapura’s rule had become degraded. No one’s honour had been left untouched in the land.<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> ‘Duryodhan ki mukhākṛitī asādharaṇ rūp se krūr aur kuṭil ho uṭhī’; Kohli, *Dharma*, 4:407.

<sup>596</sup> ‘Vidur ko samajh meṃ nahīm ā rahā thā ki ve kyā kareṃ. Ek se baṛhkar ek dharmajnōa aur nītijnōa vidvānoṃ aur rajnetāoṃ kī sabhā meṃ in dharmaparayāṇ saral pāṇḍavoṃ par kaisā atyācār ho rahā thā, jo na kabhī sunne meṃ āyā thā, na dekhne meṃ. Aur yah sab thā is śohade Duryodhan ke kāraṇ. Ek khulā madmatt sāṅḍ durbal rājāoṃ kī pañcāyat meṃ ghus āyā thā aur kisī ko sāhas nahīm ho rahā thā ise nathe. Ek duṣṭ pāpī aur atyācārī guṇḍe ke kāraṇ

Reversing the use of animal metaphors in the Sanskrit texts, this passage *reduces* them to animals. Whereas the bull (*r̥ṣabha*) is a common honorific in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* meaning the best and excellent of any race,<sup>597</sup> Vidura’s internal monologue reverses the imagery in referring to Duryodhana. When Vidura likens Duryodhana to a bull, he thinks about a rutting bull—arrogant and destructive.<sup>598</sup>

Similarly, in the Ekalavya episode the narrative delves into Arjuna’s thoughts after Ekalavya has cut off his thumb, representing his revulsion at Drona’s actions:

Arjuna saw that a smile of success on his teacher’s face. It didn’t seem like he had just conducted a terrible test for a student and ruined that student’s entire hard work. On his face was the happiness and pride of successfully removing an obstacle from his path as he moved towards his goal...

Arjuna was surprised: why did the teacher have to demand Ekalavya’s thumb...<sup>599</sup>

Arjuna is surprised and slightly repulsed by the victorious look on Drona’s face. Within the passage, however, Drona is not caricatured in the same way that Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and Dushasana are. It is interesting however that the narrative carries Arjuna’s psycho-narration to describe Drona from outside in less sympathetic terms. By describing characters

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sārī rājyasabhā niṣprāṇ ho gāī thī. Hastināpur kā śāsan niḥsatva ho gayā thā. Sāre āryavart meṃ kiśī kā sammān, sammān nahīm rah gayā thā’; Ibid., 4:398.

<sup>597</sup> Monier-Williams, Leumann, and Cappeller, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, 226; “Monier-Williams Dictionary.”

<sup>598</sup> For instance, “bull among men” (*puruṣar̥ṣabha*, *naraṣabha*) and “bull among the Bharatas” (*bharatar̥ṣabha*). See Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata Translated: Books 2 and 3*, 2:34, 35, 40, 41, 44 et. al.

<sup>599</sup> “Arjun ne dekhā, guru ke cehre par vijay aur saphaltā kī muskān thī. Aisā nahīm lag rahā thā ki ve apne kiśī śiṣya kī itnī kathor parīkṣā le, uske jīvan kī sampurn sādhnā ko dhvast kar laut rahe haiṃ. Unke cehre par apne mārg meṃ āe vighnoṃ ko naṣṭ kar, apne gantavya kī or saphaltāpūrvak barhne kā ullās aur garv thā...

Arjun ko āścarya huā: guru ko Eklavya ka aṃguṭhā katvāne kī kyā āvaśyaktā thī...” Kohli, *Adhikār*, 2:210.

from the outside through other characters, Kohli withholds audience and narrative sympathy towards them.

Yet the victims in both the Ekalavya and Game of Dice episode— Ekalavya and Draupadi— do not benefit from consonant psycho-narration, unlike the male Kuru protagonists like Bhishma and the Pandavas.<sup>600</sup> In the Ekalavya episode, the narrator dwells on Ekalavya's psyche only briefly while he cuts off his thumb:

The question why his teacher was asking for his thumb did not enter Ekalavya's mind even for a second. For him, more than obeying his teacher's orders, this was the time his devotion was being tested.<sup>601</sup>

Even when the narrative dwells on Ekalavya's actions, then, it sublimates the violence enacted upon him within the rubric of devotion towards the teacher, or *guru-bhakti*.

Draupadi's psyche is plumbed only to externalise her despair as one by one the male Kuru elders refuse to stop her humiliation.

Draupadi was left thunderstruck. She could never have dreamt that *pitamah* [Bhishma] would avoid her cries for help like this and leave her unprotected in the face of the evil actions of the cruel sons of Dhritarashtra<sup>602</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> Arjuna's psychic experience, Bhishma's anguish at being an orphan, his anguish at seeing Draupadi's disrobing, or Vidura's intervention in the Game of Dice episode.

<sup>601</sup> "Eklavya ke man meṃ kṣaṇ-bhar ke lie bhī ya vicar nahīm āyā ki guru uskā aṃguṭhā kyom māṅg rahe haiṃ. Uske lie, guru ki ājñā kā pālan karne se baṛhkar yah, apne samarpaṇ ke parīkṣā kī ghaṛī thī." Kohli, *Adhikār*, 2:209.

<sup>602</sup> "Draupadī ke hṛday par jaise vajrapāt huā. Uskī kalpanā meṃ bhī nahīm thā ki pitāmah is prakār uskī pukār ko ṭāl jāeṅge, aur in krūr dhārtarāṣṭrom kī piśāc-līlā ke sammukh use asurakṣit choṛ denge... Oh Kṛṣṇa! Sakhā Kṛṣṇa! Kahām ho tum?" Kohli, *Dharma*, 4:404.

While her anger and sharpness remain undimmed as she replies to Dhritarashtra’s sons, the narrative never enters Draupadi’s psyche again. Her legal arguments are sharp and cogent, maintaining the image of Draupadi from the Sanskrit narrative as the only person in the Kuru royal assembly who is in the right—morally and legally. When Yudhishtira tells her that he has lost her and is helpless in protecting her, she replies, “Dharma is that which liberates us from our shackles... what dharma is this, that is binding you and preventing you from protecting your wife’s honour and body?”<sup>603</sup> In other words, she questions the nature of dharma that is binding her husband to act in contravention of his role as a husband. When Dhritarashtra tries to undercut her argument, she replies—

“The king of Dharma (Yudhishtira) is my husband... and he has complete right over me... in such a situation when he lost himself and became a slave, I was also won without being staked, as his material possession... But if this was the case, why would I need to be staked separately? I was won after being staked, this means that within the rules of the game of dice being played in this assembly, you recognised that the winner cannot be recognised and take the slave’s wife as part of the slave’s possessions,” Draupadi said with confidence.<sup>604</sup>

The legalistic point that she raised, like in all game of dice narratives, is left unanswered by the Kuru elders. However, while Draupadi’s unresolved question is usually the reason for Dhritarashtra to finally call an end to the game of dice, Kohli blunts this by re-framing the

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<sup>603</sup> ‘Dharma voh hotā hai, jo bandhan se mukt kare... yah kaun sā dharma hai, jo āpko bāṁdhe hue hai, aur apni patni ke sammān aur śarīr ki rakṣa se apko rok rahā hai?’; Ibid., 4:403.

<sup>604</sup> “‘Dharmaraj mere pati haiṁ... unheṁ mujh par purṇ adhikār hai... aisī sthiti meṁ jab svayam ko hār cuke the, dās ho gaye the, unke dhan ke rūp meṁ, maiṁ binā daṁv lagāye hī jīt lī gāī thī... kintu yadi aisā hotā, to mujhe daṁv par lagāne kī avaśyaktā hī kyā thī? Mujhe daṁv par lagākar jītā gayā, iskā arth hī yah hai ki is sabhā ne dyut kī maryādā ke antargat yah svīkār kiya ki dās ke dhan ke rūp meṁ patnī ko hastagat karne kā adhikār vijayī pakṣ ko nahīṁ hai’” Draupadī kā svar ātmabal se paripūrṇa thā’; Ibid., 4:405.

silence of the Kuru elders as one fraught with dilemma. While Draupadi remains outspoken in her own defence, it is not her questioning that leads to her relief but Gandhari's intervention.<sup>605</sup>

*Mahāsamar*'s use of psycho-narration therefore foregrounds characters and character motivations, but does so selectively, making the upper-caste male protagonists more sympathetic while withholding such sympathy from their antagonists. Through this strategy the narrative creates clear character valencies for its readers. However, this leads to a flattening of the narrative to a certain extent. Part of the pleasure of the *Mahabharata*, it could be argued, is that heroes often use subterfuge, while the villains can be quite heroic. Kohli uses psycho-narration *only* to expand on and dramatize the heroes' internal dilemmas, which become one of the main innovations of Kohli's re-telling. Otherwise, psycho-narration is used

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<sup>605</sup> Perhaps the most striking departure from the Sanskrit narrative is Gandhari's intervention. In the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, Dhritarashtra stops the game of dice when ill omens start appearing. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, 153. Kohli does away with these in his narrative, presenting Gandhari as the saviour who stops the game declaring, "Maimne Pāñcālī ko apne bhavan meṃ isliye nahīm ṭhaharāyā thā ki vah vahām asurakṣit rahe aur merā apnā putra use is prakār ghasītā le āye... Gandhār ke rājprāsād se maim to paṣubal se ghasīt kar hastināpur le hī gaī thī, ab kyā kurukul ki vadhuem bhī ghasītī jākar sabhāom meṃ lāī jāyemgī?" ["I did not ask for Panchali to stay in my palace so that she could be unprotected and my own son could drag her like this... I was brought to Hastinapur from the royal palace of Gandhara by brute force, will the women of Kurus be dragged like this into their assembly halls]. When Dhritarashtra tries to deny Gandhari's demand to end the fiasco by claiming that their son Duryodhana would not agree, she swiftly responds—"Āpke putra āpke niyantraṅ meṃ rahne cāhiye... duryodhan na māne to uskā tyāg kījiye. Vah apne śatruom se yuddh kare, rajnīti ke śaḍyantra race, kintu mujhe aisā putra nahīm cāhiye jo nāri ke sammān ki rakṣā na kar sake." ["Your son should remain under your control... if Duryodhana does not agree then disinherit him. He can wage wars with his enemies, hatch political plots, but I do not want a son who cannot protect a woman's honour"] Kohli, *Dharma*, 4:411. Gandhari's intervention, and not her reporting the evil portents, pushes Dhritarashtra into scrambling for a compromise, stopping the game and sending the Pandavas into exile. Draupadi's humiliation is re-figured as insult to the power of Gandhari as a parent rather than an assault on Draupadi's personhood. Gandhari's intervention is not so much out of a sense of justice or solidarity but an expression of her authority as a parent.

to caricature villains and to sublimate and/or depict the effects of violence, without really expanding on their psyche.

## Conclusion

Kohli's *Mahāsamar* seems to occupy a contradictory position. If we consider the entire Hindi literary field, it is one mythological among many, but within the specific genre of the *paurāṇik upanyās*, it is arguably the only Hindi work that has found both critical and popular success. Perhaps the reason it has been able to do this is because, like the TV *Mahabharatas* and storytellers like Rajaji and Pattanaik, Kohli has been able to convince his readers that the narrative itself is still relevant. His panel at JLF was especially rousing because the 2014 general elections were fast approaching, and the recent popular protests against corruption and sexual violence were still fresh in people's minds. The first question that an audience member asked Kohli was about which *Mahabharata* characters Kohli felt were analogous to the characters in the political news channels. A female journalist got up and half-asked and half-told Kohli in emotionally evocative language that, "Draupadi is still vulnerable today, does that mean that we are still waiting for Krishna?" Most of the time Kohli either did not directly answer the questions, or gave problematic answers. To the female journalist, for instance, he replied stating that everyone was unsafe, not just women. The audience's faith in the *Mahabharata*'s relevance in their public and private lives, I felt, remained unshaken.

By creating and/or re-creating motives for action that are grounded in the characters' psyche, Kohli makes his upper-caste, male characters more relatable to as humans. Bhishma, for instance, is transformed from the mortal re-incarnation of a divine being birthed by a river goddess to an orphan who has never felt love, and then to an old man who watches helplessly as his kin tear themselves and his kingdom apart. That is why it is important for Kohli to suppress the supernatural in order to bring his characters down to the mortal plane, as opposed to the Chopra *Mahabharat* which capitalizes on the characters' divine nature. Kohli compensates for the descent of his characters not through action, but through the dramatization of their internal thoughts, and in that process he re-contextualizes the story and its characters along modern sensibilities. At the same time, however, Kohli does not tinker with external plot events or character valencies. In fact, marginal characters are even further marginalised as more narrative space is given to the upper-caste male protagonists. If on the one hand character is the crux of Kohli's *Mahāsamar*, on the other hand this also limits his scope for innovation, making his narrative new, but not too new.



# Conclusion

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To proclaim that “Many Mahabharatas”, i.e. multiple re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*, exist is to state the obvious. By situating specific re-tellings within their fields and within the broader field of contemporary culture in India, the thesis tries to understand each time why *Mahabharata* was adapted in the first place, how that affected the respective cultural fields as well as the particular re-telling. The aim of this study has been to recover texts that are otherwise seemingly unconnected, to understand how the *Mahabharata* narrative is articulated differently, and how it continues to circulate. Analysing the conditions of possibility of each re-telling helps us understand the possibilities for further adaptations.

- (1) So first how do we understand the specific formal choices in each re-telling? (2) Do the re-tellings affect each other across different forms and languages, with each situated in its own cultural field and milieu, and if so how? (3) For instance, what is the relation of Hindi and English across different fields? (4) Also, how do we understand the relationship between texts produced at different times, but circulating simultaneously?

To start with the last question, the *Mahabharata* re-tellings analysed in this thesis are part of different waves in postcolonial Indian culture: a first literary wave with *Naī Kavītā*, Indian

English writing of the 1980s, the mythological wave in Indian English genre fiction et al or the advent of new cultural technologies, like television and social media. Chapter 1 shows that the Chopra *Mahabharat* was a part of the project to popularize a medium that had hitherto been used almost exclusively for educational purposes. Born out of the threat of competition in the face of cultural globalization and bureaucratic overzealousness, the TV *Mahabharat* went on to circulate widely, both in India and in overseas markets. In Chapter 2, *Mahabharata* becomes part of the larger modern Indian theatre project of articulating an authentically Indian theatrical idiom for Bharati and early Karnad, while for the later Karnad and Kolatkar, it is a part of their continuing attempts at creating an authentically Indian idiom for themselves. Chapter 3 shows how Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* is able to utilize existing tropes of storytelling and translate them into an extraordinarily popular English text. Modernist interventions, as well as Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* were born out of personal dilemmas and politics, as a way for the authors to negotiate with their own particular social realities. Pattanaik's *Jaya*, along with Tharoor, Udayasankar and Patil's texts from Chapter 4 show that the *Mahabharata* is instrumental in widening the horizons of Indian English publishing at two specific points in time— 1980s and 2010s. While Tharoor's novel is an attempt to negotiation both the political realities of a growing Hindu Right, and the economic realities of an emerging Indian English fiction on the world literary circuits, post-millennial mythological fiction, along

with Pattanaik's *Jaya*, like the Chopra *Mahabharat* are an attempt, albeit two decades later, to negotiate with the realities of cultural globalization and the popularity of genres like fantasy and graphic novel in the wake of global publishing phenomena like *Harry Potter* and Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). In chapter 5, Narendra Kohli's *Mahāsamar* similarly establishes itself within the niche of *paurāṇik upanyās* written in Hindi. Since the narrative is already known— if not well-known (my interlocutors would often point out that they, despite being devout Hindus, are not familiar with the finer details of the *Mahabharata* narrative)— it provides a readily available cultural vehicle that is already considered a framework for drawing lessons for contemporary life.

As to the relation between English and Hindi re-tellings, we know that the English/Hindi divide is very strong in contemporary India. But both in the field of theatre, of television, and of contemporary mythological fiction, the boundaries between English and Hindi (and other Indian languages) are easily crossed, either for reasons of cultural politics (as with Modern Indian Theatre) or for commercial reasons in order to maximise audiences and sales. So Modern Indian Theatre valued cultural production in Indian languages and undertook a lot of translations across them; in fact all of the canonised Indian playwrights are writers in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, and so on, and both Bharati's *Andhā Yug* and Karnad's plays became part of a national canon of modern theatre already in the 1960s and have remained so. (As

such, translations of their plays in English are part of the syllabus of Indian Literature courses in Indian Universities.) While Rajaji came out of a bilingual, Tamil-English environment, later Indian English fiction writers do not acknowledge Indian-language productions, even if it is hard to believe that they never watched the TV *Mahabharat*. If they refer to Indian-language sources, they seem to access them through English translation. So Amrita Patil mentions Bhyrappa's Kannada novel *Parva*, but in English translation. As a multimedia man, Devdutt Pattanaik inhabits both English and Hindi—his books are written in English but have been translated widely into Hindi, and he hosts a mythological information programme in Hindi called *Devlok*. B.R. Chopra drew upon a whole range of Hindi traditions in his TV serial, and Kohli picked up on an already existing tradition of *paurāṇik upanyās* in other Indian languages. Whereas the relationship between languages in contemporary India is largely framed as a competitive, zero-sum game where English's gain is Hindi's loss and vice versa, the popularity of *all* these re-tellings and genres and the ease with which they are translated in order to reach another audience/market, shows that the relationship between them can be mutually beneficial that increment the success of the product involved.

How do we understand the specific formal choices in each re-telling? And do the re-tellings affect each other across different forms and languages, with each situated in its own cultural field and milieu, and if so how? The content and form of each re-telling can vary

greatly, and is shaped by the authors and the cultural field they are situated in. If colonial re-tellings focused mainly on using the narrative as anti-colonial and nationalist propaganda, post-colonial re-tellings have tended to be more varied and critical in their intent. The Chopra *Mahabharat*'s primary aim, arguably, was to be profitable, but a vital artistic aim was to deliver social commentary by turning plot sequences like the Game of Dice into melodramatic set-pieces. The modernist interventions by Bharati, Karnad and Kolatkar depict the loss of faith and interrogate entrenched hierarchical systems by expanding on marginal characters, while Rajagopalachari and Pattanaik want to disseminate the story to an English-educated readership who may not engage with the story like the generations before them. Tharoor, Udayasankar, and Patil, are less concerned with *Mahabharata* as a parable (or rather, container of parables) for modern times, and more concerned with using the narrative as crucial and convenient allegorical vehicles and story-worlds to explore new genres. Kohli too, is concerned with creating moral parable but by expanding upon the characters' psyche, expanding character-space selectively to make specific characters more human(e). Characters— their construction, their articulations and/or motivations— are integral to the articulation of a moral vision in the re-tellings in Chapter 1, 2, 3 and 5. The re-tellings in Chapter 4— Tharoor, Udayasankar, and Patil— are a notable exception since their narrative

strategies focus more on the story-worlds of the characters rather than the characters themselves.

Audiences and producers of the different re-tellings often overlap. Each re-telling seeks to both engage with other re-tellings while also differentiating itself from them. This might not necessarily be in the form of overt inter-textuality, but rather through inter-referencing, common concerns, aesthetic strategies and/or common networks of circulation.

Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* is referenced by modern writers in their works, often because it was the first text where they would read the *Mahabharata*, a role that Pattanaik also adopts for authors like Patil. The Chopra *Mahabharat*, while immensely popular, has a comparatively smaller effect on modern re-tellings. However, in attempting to plot the entire *Mahabharata* narrative, the Chopra *Mahabharat* and Kohli's *Mahāsamar* follow a similar strategy of using Bhishma as the narrative anchor. With the re-published paperback editions, Kohli's *Mahāsamar* enters a visual field heavily influenced by calendar art and comic books, but also by the Chopra *Mahabharat*. *Mahāsamar*'s expansion of character space is mirrored in the way modernist writers in Hindi, Kannada and Marathi also seek to expand character space, but to vastly differing ends.

This thesis is not, and does not seek to be, a survey of *all* the *Mahabharata* re-tellings in Hindi and English. However, the study invariably raised some interesting questions that were

not appropriate within the remits of the thesis but could form the basis of further exploration. The circulation and popularity of the Chopra *Mahabharat* as well as the *STARbharata* in South Asia and South-East Asia suggests that the attraction to Hindu mythologicals and/or Indian TV serials exists beyond the Hindu diaspora. There are possible contingent networks of circulation for cultural products within Asia that are often ignored in popular media and academic studies. Dalit literature—both novels and pamphlets— also re-tell the *Mahabharata*, focusing specifically on the Ekalavya story which is used to articulate a caste history for Dalit. However these are often marginalized because of systemic casteism. Most of the cultural production in Dalit re-tellings of the *Mahabharata* takes place in small towns and is disseminated as pamphlets and novels by Dalit publishers in Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Dalit conferences.<sup>606</sup> While these texts rarely circulate widely in metropolitan centres like Delhi, they still have a wide readership, and are significant *Mahabharata* counter-narratives. Lastly, with the advent of social media as well as the growing popularity of genre fiction in English and the growing respect for genre fiction in Hindi, social media has become an important site for creating and reinforcing reading cultures in both languages through authors' Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and blogs. Some of this can be seen in this study as I include author websites and social media accounts within my field of study to analyse how authors like Pattanaik, Udayasankar and Tharoor create their authorial personae. This is a much more

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<sup>606</sup> Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, 43, 47.

common and widespread practice however, that could indicate how the Indian publishing industries have adapted to the digital age. My interest remains in what Appadurai termed ‘public culture’— “a zone of cultural debate... an arena where other types, forms and domains of culture are encountering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways.”<sup>607</sup> The *Mahabharata* has emerged as just one such zone where re-tellings can still travel across strong linguistic and social barriers, revealing other possible cultural zones, like TV serials, facilitated by a burgeoning digital culture.

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<sup>607</sup> Appadurai and Breckenridge, “Why Public Culture,” 6.



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