

THE VANQUISHED HITS BACK: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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Abstract

Indian Epic, the Mahābhārata, developed over a long period of time is a fascinating text. Though it is centuries old, it still continues to inspire the creative writings. This proves the assertion of the epic that generations have sung it in the past, they are singing it in the present and they will continue to sing it in the future. There is a growing tribe of the young Indian writers like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi and Anand Neelakantan who are reinterpreting the epics and the Indian mythology in a novel way. In Anand's debt novel 'Asura, tale of the vanquished', Ravana is the hero. Similarly in his 'Ajaya, Epic of the Kaurava clan', Duryodhana is the hero and the Pandavas and their supporters like Krishna are portrayed in a darker light. The narration of the novel is lucid and author's tilt towards Duryodhana seems to be very convincing. Duryodhana stands out as brave, genuine and straight forward prince who falls victim to the conspiracy of his cousins. The proposed paper will explore the author's perspective about the epic.

Key words- Alternative, Conspiracy, Inspire, Perspective, Portrayal...

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Introduction-

Though legends attribute it to sage Vyasa, Indian Epic, the Mahabharata was not composed by one person at one time, but grew over a long period of time. The epic is a very complex text and appears to be a true reflection of human life. The finest characters in the epic have their flaws and the meanest have the spark of nobility. Probably the canvas of life can not be portrayed as black and white and have many gray sheds. In fact 'who is the real hero of the epic?' is debated time and again among the scholars engaged with the epic. The main contestants for the title of the 'Mahanayaka' (the super hero) of the epic are generally Bhishma, Krishna, Arjuna, Karna, Bhima or sometimes Yudhishtira. Hardly anyone familiar with the epic will consider Duryodhana as a hero. But that is what Anand Nilkanthan has done in his 'Ajaya, Epic of the Kaurava clan, Book I Roll of the dice'. (2013) He seems to be fascinated by the anti-heroes of the epic. In his debut novel 'Asura, the story of Ravana and his people', (2012) it is Ravana, who is the hero, and is victimized by the circumstances beyond his control. Similarly in his 'Roll of the dice' Duryodhana comes out as a principled prince who is victimized by the scheming, conspiring people around him.

What inspired the author to make Duryodhana as a hero of the novel is narrated by the author in the introduction. He saw nearly 100,000 people gathered during the festival at the Malanda temple in Poruvazhy village in Kerala state of India to pay homage to the deity of the temple who is none other than Duryodhana and there is a fascinating story attached to the temple. The legend goes that Duryodhana came to that village in search of the Pandavas in exile. As he was thirsty he asked old woman for water. The old woman was carrying toddy and impulsively she served him the same, the thirsty prince drank it. But now the old woman realized her mistake. She was from the untouchable Kurathi caste and by serving Toddy to a Kshatriya prince she had committed an offence. She was now afraid that she would be punished, but still confessed. To her surprise Duryodhana replied,

“Mother, there is no caste for hunger and thirst. Blessed are you for putting the interest of a thirsty man before your own safety” (Neelakantan p.6)

Duryodhana pleased with the untouchable woman's honesty and help also announced that a temple would be built, but will have no idol. He also gifted surrounding villages to the temple and said that Kurava untouchables would be the priest. To this day the family members of the woman are priests of the temple. Though there is no idol Duryodhana is a presiding deity of the temple and he is believed to be the protector of the weak and downtrodden. This legend of Duryodhana surviving in the deep south indicates how this Kaurava prince was perceived as a liberal and good human being by group of people. This incident made the author to take a fresh look at the epic and perceive Duryodhana from the different perspectives. The author says that his book is perhaps an answer to the question by the simple villager of Poruvazhy who asked “if our lord Duryodhana was an evil man, why did great men like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and the entire army of Krishna fight the war on his side?” (ibid p. 8)

The Mahabharata had been a source of inspiration of creative writings for centuries. Barring few rare examples like Bhasa (3-4th century CE) who wrote Sanskrit drama *Urubhanga* rarely any writer had portrayed Duryodhana as deserving sympathy. The epic in its growth incorporated many bardic songs that were in circulation among the people. As the Pandavas were victorious the songs praised the Pandavas. The simple folks believe that it is the Pandavas who are noble and Duryodhana is evil. The author writes,

“Bhima was the hero and Duryodhana the arrogant prince. That was what the bards kept singing about in their villages and they had no reason to disbelieve it. They were too naïve to know that bards sang in praise of anyone who paid them well. The truth was both malleable and for sale” (ibid. 256)

Neelakanthan's Duryodhana-With a determined purpose of swimming against the tide of the narration of the epic, the author creates a situation where Duryodhana stands as a victim. The first chapter opens with Bhima bullying Duryodhana and the frightened prince hiding under the bed. Bhima, not only challenges Duryodhana to come out but also taunts that he (Bhima) is not blind like Duryodhana's father. He (Bhima) will find him and thrash him. (ibid.19). Sometimes the author goes rather overboard as he makes Bhima to call Duryodhana as ‘Son of a blind fool’ (ibid. 21)

This opening scene gives an idea how Duryodhana grew. With constant fear of Bhima! As a result he developed a deep rooted hatred for him. Bhima's fear and desire to avenge himself seems to be occupying Duryodhana's mind forever. The author describes Bhima,

"Bhima stood a foot taller than the pale and wispy Suyodhana. Bhima took pleasure in being cruel to anyone he considered weak.....what he lacked in brains he more than made up in sheer physical prowess" (ibid.19)

Making Bhima to appear more villainous the author also portrays that Bhima took pleasure in making Sushala (Dushala) cry when her brothers were around (ibid. 19). The author appears to be deviated too much from the generally accepted text of the epic as Bhima is also portrayed as insulting Vidura for his caste. (ibid.22) Bhima's brutishness was apparent but it was Yudhishtira, who comes out as cunning and crafty and was disliked most by Duryodhana. Hypocrite Yudhishtira behaved as if he is the most obedient, god-fearing and innocent boy in the world, but his kicks were most vicious in the fights and his vile behavior was baffling for Duryodhana. (ibid.20)

To generate more sympathy for Duryodhana, the author portrays the love affair between him and Subhadra, the sister of Balarama and Krishna. (ibid.170). Though initially fascinated by Duryodhana and promised to him by Balarama, she later turns away from him and runs away with Arjuna. Though aggrieved, Duryodhana refuses to draw the state into conflict over his personal matter and refuses to declare war on Dwarka. (ibid.340)

Neelkantan's Duryodhana have sympathy for the poor Nishada boy Eklavya. Eklavya was caught stealing but instead of punishing, Duryodhana gives him mangos to eat. (ibid. 35)

Even during the class of Guru Drona, Duryodhana could not concentrate on the lesson but kept thinking about Eklavya and thought about knowing something more about the likes of him. (ibid.36). He is scolded for daydreaming in the class.

Drona did not like the probing questions of Duryodhana. As he could not answer them, he felt inadequate and reacted with viciousness, the viciousness that only teachers are capable of towards students they did not like. (ibid.62) He tries to break his spirit in different manner, by comparing him with the Pandavas and belittling him. He believes that for the greater good of the society, the rebellious spirit of Duryodhana should be crushed. (ibid.62)

"Drona beat Suyodhana at the slightest provocation and meted out insulting punishments. On the days when this did not move the stubborn prince to tears, he would use the ultimate punishment- call him and his brothers sons of Andha" (ibid.62)

Varna, a contested territory!- The author gives space to different viewpoints about the Varna system through the personification. Kripachraya, the Guru of the Kuru clan is portrayed as maverick Brahmin, who did not care for social norms. He redefines the caste system as he says,

“A Brahmin is one who has sought and found brahma; one who has found God within himself” (ibid.p.69)

He further describes that Kshatriya is one who had found the God in action, Vaishya is one who has found God in trade, by creating wealth and Shudra is one who has found God in love, by serving society. It has nothing to do with birth. (ibid.p.69)

The author explores the psychological effect of the caste system as Balarama says that people who follow the caste system and treats other people with cruelty are also victims of the system. They are in fact not cruel, but cowards and deserve understanding. He also advises young Karna not to associate any evil with a group. One should hate their sins but not the people. (ibid.p.106) Balarama shares his dream of India without discrimination and without hunger. He feels sad that the discriminatory Varna system had done great harm to the people as he says to Karna,

“You will see the proud race living like dogs under the meaningless taboos, bound by caste hierarchy” (ibid.p.107)

Bhishma is portrayed as liberal, who risks the opposition from the orthodox section and appoints Vidura as a Prime Minister of Hastinapur (ibid.p.23) with his learning he also manages to silence the opposition. He also approves of the Kunti and Gandhari attending the assembly. (ibid.p.26)

Kunti slowly increases her influence in the politics by supporting the orthodox elements.

The author also recasts Vyasa as a champion of the downtrodden and opposed to orthodoxy. He also supports Vidura’s appointment to the high post though Vidura was born to a maid. He speaks against the idea of dividing the society on caste, creed and dialects. (ibid.p. 26) Thus the author contemporizes the epic by interpolating the modern day issues and integrating them with the past legends.

Parshurama, the legendary Brahmin warrior is portrayed as a champion of the orthodox Brahminism who wants to establish the Brahmin hegemony and the Pandavas serves the purpose as they turns out to be receptive to Brahminical ideology. (ibid.p.173) Duryodhana, who wants to end the discriminations, becomes an eyesore of the orthodox section and they turn against him.

Vidura, though intelligent and dedicated to his duty is reminded of his low origin almost by everyone including Bhishma and he feels sad about it. Describing his feelings, the author writes,

“Vidura thought he was like a prize dog-intelligent and handsome, but a dog nevertheless. At such times, Vidura hated his job and his master with equal loathing” (ibid.p.81)

Vidura also reflects that though he was born to a Shudra mother, he could acquire some education but now as the society has become more and more conservative, it is difficult for any Shudra to acquire an education like him and also equally difficult is to get a government job. Everything now is caste based. (ibid.p.85)

Krishna comes as an upholder of the Chaturvarna and warmonger. When he sees that Karna disguised as a Brahmin going to Parshurama for learning warfare, Krishna thinks,

“Such upstarts will destroy society and country.....These emotional men and women, led by their senses and not by logic, bring disaster upon everyone. Society remains stable because there is a place for everyone and everything in chaturvarna.” (ibid.p.102)

He fails to understand that why the people like Kripa and Charvaka are against one of the most efficient system developed for stable society. In chaturvarna everybody knows their duty and are trained into it since childhood. If everybody starts doing what they liked, there will be a chaos. He says that why he feels that he is born in the world to preserve the order. He feels nice about himself thinking that he is Vishnu’s incarnation. He sees that to save the society from going to dogs and to uphold the Chaturvarna, war is necessary.

The author rushes to and forth in the narration and seems to making a prophesy as the Yavana in the novel thinks,

“Despite all its wonderful temples and great cities, India could not withstand an invading power for long if it continued to treat its men and women of all talent like dirt just for being born in the wrong caste” (ibid.p.221)

Eklavya- It is Eklavya, who occupies the large writing space in the epic. It was poverty and hunger that forces Eklavya into stealing. The author becomes philosophical as he writes,

“When poverty caught up with morality, the lines between the acceptable and unacceptable somehow vanished” (ibid.p.35)

The author seems to be taking a peep at the life of the subalterns and to give voice to their pain and deprivation introduces a character called Jara, an orphan boy (ibid.p.39) He follows Eklavya and his family consisting of Eklavya’s aunt and her children. Eklavya’s life is reconstructed by the author as he uses his imagination and creativity goes wild. Eklavya

in the generally accepted text of the epic (i.e. Critical edition of the Mahabharata prepared by BORI, Pune and translated into English by Bibek Debroy) occupies but few pages. But in the 'Roll of the Dice' we find a very vivid description of Eklavya's life. His poverty, his struggle, his hatred for the privileged and the discrimination that he suffers not only from the privileged oppressors but also from his own people is narrated by the author.

Eklavya is being depicted as abandoned by his father with his uncle. His uncle was caught stealing eggs and was beaten to death. The responsibility of feeding his aunt and her five children fell on Eklavya. Even though it was Eklavya who earned the food, he still faced discrimination from his aunt, who gave the better portion of the food to her children.

The orphan boy Jara trails the family and eats what is left out. The author at many places effectively explores the psychology of the deprived. Musing on his life, Eklavya thinks that there are many like them, living in the shadow of great civilization, meek before their superior while ferociously competitive and cruel to their fellow unfortunates. (ibid.p.39). To highlight the deprivation the orphan boy Jara is described as,

"He was even dirtier than they were and had bad teeth and festering sores on his legs. His ribs stood clearly outlined under his stretched and cracked black skin; while his belly button protruded from his bulging stomach like mushroom." (ibid.p.39)

The boy became an orphan when his father was also caught stealing and was thrashed to death. The boy was found crying near the dead body of his father. Eklavya's aunt took pity on him and he trailed them. Introducing Jara seems to an attempt of exploring the subaltern perspective of the epic. Eklavya hates the boy, who survives on the left over of the Nishadas and he hates his own life as well. After throwing away the mango seed that he had chewed and sucked clean he thinks,

'Our lives are like those mango seeds; chewed, sucked clean and spat out' (ibid.p.40)

Angry with his situation he feels good that the Naga insurgents who were mounting terrorist attack on the Hastinapur palace will kill many nobles. He also hopes that if the Nagas took over the things will be different. The Naga leader Takashka is cast in the mould of the modern day Naxalite leader. Jara, the poor orphan boy tells Vidura, the prime minister of Hastinapur about him,

"He comes to the forest and gives us food sometimes. He said he is going to kill all of you one day and this place will be for Nishadas and other forest dwellers like the Nagas and the Kiratas" (ibid.p.50)

When Eklavya goes to Drona to request him to teach him archery, Drona refuses and tells him,

“Now go back to the forest and live fulfilling life befitting your caste. Be a good Nishada and perhaps in the next life you will be born into a higher caste. Gradually, through many lives and by following your caste dharma diligently, you will become a Brahmin in one of your rebirths.” (ibid.p.115)

He further advises Eklavya that the God has ordained him to spend his life as a Nishada and he should accept what has been ordained. Thus the author takes a dig at the unjustified caste system that hypnotizes the lower castes by promising better life in the next birth and exploits them. A person without caste is further demeaned as the Guru advises Eklavya to abandon Jara, who is a casteless. Eklavya’s pent up anger against the injustice gets directed towards helpless Jara and he beats the poor boy mercilessly.

Eklavya gets kidnapped by the underground Naga insurgents who want him to join them to fight against the exploitations of the Brahminical society. (ibid.p.127) But he sees the mad violence of the Naga insurgents who kills the captured Brahmin and few villagers including women. The whole episode of fake people’s court and killing was witnessed by the Naga people including women and children. Disgusted and disillusioned, Eklavya runs away from them.

From the top of the tree, Eklavya observes Drona teaching wielding of the arms to the princes and acquires the skill by practicing it later. Eklavya later shows better archery skill than Arjuna and hope that now at least Drona will accept him as a pupil. But his dreams are shattered as Drona asks him to give his right thumb. (ibid.p.198)

Though Drona terminated the career of the poor Nishada boy, his conscious keeps pricking him and he struggles to justify his action.

Eklavya’s misery does not end here but his aunt and cousin were later trapped and burnt alive by the Pandavas to save their own lives. Disgusted, he finally joins the Naga rebels. (ibid.p.310)

Karna’s struggle- The author portrays Karna’s struggle and the hurdles he encounters when he wants to become an archer in spite of being brought up as a son of a charioteer. (ibid.p.57). Karna’s this desire creates difficulty for him as well as for parents causing Karna lot of pains. Dronacharya refuses to take him as his pupil due to his caste and also insults Vidura for recommending Suta as a pupil to royal Guru. (ibid.p.61).

Kripa however tells Karna to go to Guru Parshurama and to pretend as a Brahmin to learn the art of warfare. To hide his identity he also teaches him about how to behave like a Brahmin. (ibid.p.72)

Karna goes to Parshurama, hiding his identity he becomes an expert in use of weapons, but as the truth becomes known, he runs away and comes back to Hastinapur. He challenges Arjuna during the contest for the princess and was made king of Anga by Duryodhana.

Oppressed becoming oppressor- The author portrays Brahmin Guru Parshurama as someone who wants a complete Brahmin hegemony and Naga leader Takshaka as someone who wants to throw away the exploitative caste hierarchy. But his hunger for power makes him equally unsuitable to lead a nation. Due to hatred there is a possibility of oppressed becoming oppressors. Bhishma draws parallel as he says,

“Takshaka is nothing but a Naga Parashurama. He too wants a perfect world where the oppressed becomes the oppressor” (ibid.p.84)

He fears that if Takashaka wins, the hunted will be the Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya. He also says that Takshaka’s tyranny will be more oppressive because he has chosen deprived people like Nagas and Nishadas as his tools as he says,

“It is easier to fool and brainwash a poor Nishada or Naga, who had barely anything to eat and almost nothing to lose, by offering a brave new world” (ibid.p.85)

Narrating the systematic deprivation of the marginalized class, he says,

“Takshaka had chosen as his tools, are those we abandoned to starve long ago. We have appropriated their farmlands, driven them away from their forests, and chased them out of our royal footpaths, so now they have nowhere to go but into the embrace of the Naga leader” (ibid.p.85)

He further says that as our Brahmin teachers are not prepared to teach the lower caste, we are leaving lot of people ignorant and illiterate, who will be ready to die for Takashaka’s cause and thus we are building our funeral pyre. Takashaka comes out as a power hungry and bloodthirsty.

Twisting the notion of Dharma- In the chapter titled ‘House of Lac’ the author reconstructs the episode of Lac house burning. As the Pandavas were aware of the conspiracy to kill them, they and their mother Kunti deliberately traps the poor Nishada family (Aunt and cousin of Eklavya) with sweet words, invite them in the house, feed them with the sweets laced with the drugs, locks them inside and then sets the house on fire and escape. (ibid.p.300) Yudhishtira justifies his action as he tells Arjuna,

“.....these Untouchables lead miserable lives. We are doing them a great good by allowing them to die for a worthy cause. They will thus be born as Brahmins in the next life” (ibid)

Kunti also justifies their action by saying that nothing is considered wrong if it is for self-preservation. (ibid.p.301)

To create further confusion about the charred bodies, Kunti also invites the guards in the house to be burnt alive along with the Nishadas. When Arjuna raises objection, Yudhishtira justifies that it is their duty to protect the Pandavas and while laying down their lives they will be doing their duty as per scriptures. They will reach the paradise of Lord Vishnu and in fact they are helping their souls to leave this miserable world and reach Vaikunta. This is indicative of how the privileged sections use the scriptures to justify the exploitation and finds support in taking people's lives for their benefits. (ibid. p.302)

Priest Dhaumya also tries to put Arjuna's pricking conscious to rest as he tells him that they, (the Brahmins) will spread the story about the Nishadas that they were some celestial beings and were born as untouchables because of a curse, but their dying in the cause of dharma has now expiated their sins. (ibid.p.307)

When the Khandava forest was given to the Pandavas, Krishna and Arjuna burns the forest and mercilessly kills anybody who tries to escape. Here also Krishna justifies his action by saying the by killing the animals and birds he has given them Moksha. (ibid. p.355).The author gives the vivid description of the carnage at Khandava, where people including women and children killed along with the beasts and birds. (ibid. p.361)

Arjuna spared the life of Mayasura, who built a fine city of Indraprastha for the Pandavas. But once the city was built, Mayasura and his workers were dumped outside the city. Sad at this Mayasura curses the city (ibid. p.382)

Intoxicating Bhakti- Jara was beaten up by Eklavya till he bleeds. Abandoned and hungry, Jara joins the underworld of criminal don Durjay. He survives by robbing people as the author writes,

"Earlier, he was used to men beating him up if he asked for food. Now he had become the person beating others up" (ibid.p.216)

But once he witnesses a poor devotee of Krishna was burned alive along with his family by a criminal of his gang, he turns away from the crimes and becomes devotee himself, going around singing the devotional songs. (ibid.p.218)

Unhappy souls finding solace in Bhakti is narrated by the author through Jara. When he was beaten by the royal guards, he consoles himself as it is a test from the God (p.219). Describing Jara's state of mind, the author writes,

“With a passion that bordered on insanity, the Untouchable believed in Krishna’s infinite compassion and omnipotent power. Every moment was spent in his worship and every act was given as an offering.” (ibid.p.220)

Conclusion- Though the epic gives space to alternative view points; Portrayal of Duryodhana in such a bright light by the author is a very glaring deviation from the generally accepted text of the Mahabharata. Reconstructing the lives of the forest dwelling Nagas and Nishadas definitely helps to look at the epic from the perspectives of the subalterns. To make this dimension more sharp the author introduces the character Jara. The author also brilliantly explores the self hypnotizing effect the blind devotion that is preached by many Bhakti saints. It may provide you solace, but it kills one’s fighting spirit and makes us submissive to fate and thus have a potential to turn us into a self effacing fatalist. Author’s portrayal of the misuse of the concept like Dharma and Transmigration of soul by the vested interest is brilliant.

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