

Re-presenting *The Mahabharata*: Select Plays of Bhasa and their Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

Indian Literary tradition is rooted in Sanskrit and two finest manifestations comprising both are *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The two texts stand at the helm of Sanskrit and Indian literature and have, since times immemorial, stood as its flag bearers. So much so that Jonathan Culler marks *The Mahabharata* as the Foundational Narrative in the Oriental World. The Sanskrit Drama, on the other hand marks its presence with the plays of Bhasa, albeit the oldest treatise on Sanskrit drama, *Natyashastra*, precedes Bhasa. In his plays can be found the first signs of what contemporaneity calls Alternative Literature, literature dealing with re-renderings of the erstwhile Foundational Epics.

This research paper delves into the deviations that Bhasa incorporates in his plays that adapt *The Mahabharata*. An attempt has been made to assess how significant the deviations are in comparison to the primary text; and the implications thereof on the stature of the Indian Foundational Epic, as Culler calls *The Mahabharata*. The paper also strives to ascertain what the discovery of Bhasa's plays means to the corpus of 'unchallengeable' Primary Indian Texts. Finally, the Paper elaborates on the contemporary relevance of these alternative renderings in literature and life.

Keywords: Plays of Bhasa, *Mahabharata*, Alternative Literature, Re-renderings, Foundational Narratives.

Jonathan Culler, in his Presidential Address in a Seminar said that India has its Foundational Narratives in *The Mahabharata*. Foundational Narratives are stories that are fixed in time and space, within and without the text. These are narratives in which the representation of the story and its tenets do not change with changes in any of the aspects of plot and narration. Culler also referred to *The Bible* as the foundational narrative of the Western World. However, the basic premise behind Foundational Narratives is, ironically, that they are not to be treated as narratives as all, and be given a sacrosanct status, because, any narrative, in the domain of

narrative is subject to alternative representations. In relation to the idea of literature being an imitation of life, alternative representations, mandatorily deviate from the 'standard', if for nothing else then for narratorial compulsions.

In the contemporary times, there has been an increasing trait of authenticating the two major epics in Indian Literature: *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. Consequently, there has been a frantic search for the dates of *The Mahabharata* and authenticating the existence of *Ram Setu*. In tandem, the epics have lost their literary quality in favour of a being scriptural, or even more genuine, a historical document. By virtue of being 'authentic' they become, what Bakhtin calls the Epic, albeit structurally, "Frozen and unchangeable", a quality attributed to Foundational Narratives, by Culler. Any attempts to 'unfreeze' and re-interpret them, digressions, are vehemently resisted and even labeled as apocryphal. However, just as Gurdial Singh said for good literature in an interview, "good literature has survived not because of but in spite of critics", the same fits for literatures striving to de-historicize and de-sanctify these texts as mere constructs of literature. Alternative Literatures or Alternative representations, what such reinterpretations are called, have survived, and thrived in spite of the ever-strengthening conglomeration of supporters of 'authenticity' of these epics.

It is considered to be a 20th century phenomenon, when the movement of "alternativism" of epics raised its 'ugly' head, looking into the sacrosanct and historic events mentioned in the two epics as mere narratives with a moral purpose. Anand Neelakantan, with *Asura* and *Ajaya & The Rise of Kali*; Devdutt Patnaik's *Sita*; Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay*; and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy & Ram Trilogy* are prominent examples that made readers re-visit these epics from a completely different perspective.

It is however significant that while these demystifications and de-authentications of the two major Indian Epics are a recent phenomenon, the concept in itself is not as recent. Molla and Chandrabati's *Ramayana* are two very significant examples of re-rendering of *The Ramayana* from a female's perspective. Tulasidas' *Ramcharitamans* is another significant name that emerges, albeit it differs from other renditions in that it does not humanize and demystify but elevates Ram's stature to that of a God. Surprisingly, though, the notion of re-presentations in Indian Literature goes even earlier, to the beginning of the Common Era and the name associated with it is that of Bhasa. Bhasa, till the dawn of the twentieth century was a bard with some fleeting references. One such reference is found in the "Introductory Dialogue" of Kalidasa's *Malvkiagnimitram*:

Why do the spectators pass over the compositions of famous poets,
Like the honoured bards Bhasa, Saumilla, Kaviputra and others,
And do such honour to the work of Kalidasa, a modern poet? (2)

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Apart from this, there was no marked text or reference to him in the annals of Indian Literature. The text of *Swapnavasavadattam* was discovered by Pt Anandalvar in 1909 and relying on Rajashekhara's attribution of the play to Bhasa, in his work *Kavyamimansa*, 10 other anonymous texts, discovered in 1911, were compared and eventually, in all, 13 plays were attributed to Bhasa. There still remains a debate over his chronological placing with critics placing him either in 1st Century BC or 4nd Century AD. What, however, is consented upon is that he was a predecessor of Kalidasa and should have been aware of the rules of *The Natyashastra*. That his plays *Duta-Vakya* and *Bala-charita* are probably the only plays in Sanskrit that place Krishna as the protagonist highlight his deviation from the norm; and that no older Sanskrit play than his 13 plays survive today make him, aptly, the father of Sanskrit drama. The major works of Bhasa include his re-renderings of episodes from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. While *Pratima-nataka*, *Yagna-Phalam* and *Abhisheka-natka* are adaptations of *The Ramayana*; *Panch-ratra*, *Madhyama-vyayoga*, *Duta-Ghattotkacha*, *Duta-Vakya*, *Urubhanga*, *Karnabharam*, *Harivamsa* or *Bala-charita* are adaptations of *The Mahabharata*.

One of the most significant aspects in Bhasa's adaptations of *The Mahabharata* is the presence of tragic notes in *Karnabharam* and *Urubhanga*. The "Introduction" to *Karnabharam* begins with: "This one act play has a tragic note" (31). Though not a proper tragedy, like *Urubhanga*, the play deals with Indra, in the guise of a Brahmin, asking Karna to give his armour and earrings, and Karna parting with them gleefully, without any regret, even with prior knowledge of his impending doom. Karna says:

My prowess is a match for cruel death, and yet in the hour, in mighty fights, with charging warriors, elephants, steeds and cars, with limbs lopped off in the ruin dealt by blades on either side, there falls on my heart black misery. (35)

Karna's willingness to offer his armour and earrings, knowing well that without his impenetrable armour and the curse of Jamadagni, "Useless be thy weapons in the time of need" (36), make his stature heroic and the text replete with tragic implications. Though the text ends with Karna directing Salya to direct the cart towards Arjuna, the play has ample references highlighting that Karna was well aware of his destiny: "These steeds, swift as Garuda, born of splendid Kamboja stock, though they have no hope of returning from the war, shall protect me, albeit past protection" (36).

The references to "black misery" and "albeit past protection" reveal that Karna knew he would not return alive from the war, yet he gave his only hope of survival to a Brahman evokes, not only Karna's heroism, but also the notion of tragedy. What makes the entire play even more tragic is his willingness to part with his armour and earrings even without the Brahmin asking for

it: “Listen again. My body armour was borne with my limbs, nor god nor fiend can pierce it with their weapons. Yet will I gladly give it thee, with both the earrings, if it please thee” (38). These elements offer the play tragic proportions and even though not a tragedy proper, it is evidently a heroic tragedy of Karna.

Moreover, his pride that he satisfied Indra, the slayer of demons, and the reluctance at receiving the gift of the spear, *Vimala*, that the angel brings, also glorify the character of Karna. The entire play is an adaptation of the scene from *The Mahabharata* in *Aryanya Parva* where Karna gives his *kundala-kawach* to Indra disguised as a Brahmin. Warned by Suryadev, Karna offers his *Kundala-kawach* for an exchange of Indra’s spear. Indra obliges with the condition that Karna shall be able to use it only once and at a time of dire need.

The play, however, adapts the episode and introduces digressions. In *The Mahabharata*, Karna, recognizing Indra, disguised as a Brahmin, demands his spear in exchange. In *Karnabharam*, however, Karna does not demand any spear and it is Indra’s angel who comes to deliver the spear because, “...Indra is grateful to you [Karna] and regrets taking your armour and earrings. So, he sends this spear, named *Vimala*, an unfailing weapon to slay one of the *Pandavas*. Pray accept it” (39). The very title of the play is symbolic of the deviation from *The Mahabharata* as Karna emerges from being a uni-dimensional character siding with evil, against *dharma*, for friendship in *The Mahabharata*, to one successfully and selflessly carrying the “burden” of duty and promise, along with his friendship with Duryodhana, in *Karnabharam*. While *Karnabharam* evokes tragic notes, *Urubhangam* delves into the proper tragic genre ending with:

Duryodhana: ...Death has sent an aerial car, the wain of heroes, drawn by a thousand swans to fetch me. Here I come. [Expires.]
[They cover him with a cloth.] (58)

While Sanskrit Drama doesn’t consider the option of tragedies and Indian theatrical aesthetics, represented through *Natyashastra*, prominently claim that sad endings and tragedies are not a part of Indian theatre, Bhasa, in *Urubhangam*, prominently defies this deified concept. *Natyashastra*, the epitome and the ‘absolute’ treatise into *natya* opines, “There should be only a single main plot, the end should be happy and no scenes that are vulgar, fear-generating or inciting should be included” (<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/87092/11/6%20chapter%20%20-%20gadre.pdf>, 66). *Urubhangam*, on the other hand, is steeped in violence, death of the protagonist, on stage, in the end and male characters in the midst of war along with very clear “movements” of the mourners comprising Aswatthama and Baladeva. Following the norms of Sanskrit Dramaturgy, the entire battle of Bhima and Duryodhana is described in detail by two

soldiers with the action beginning after Bhima hits Duryodhana on his thighs at the behest of Krishna. However, the resemblance with the Sanskrit Dramaturgy ceases here and deviations abound come to the fore.

Foremost, the deviation from the Epic itself is evident. While in *The Mahabharata*, Duryodhana dies after Ashwathama raids the Pandava camp the next night, in *Urubhangam*, death of Duryodhana happens immediately after the duel and there are mourners around him comprising his parents, Dhritrashtra and Gandhari; his two wives and his son, among others. Moreover, the Duryodhana who dies in *Urubhangam* is unlike the dying Duryodhana of *The Mahabharata* and this distinction is pre-empted when Duryodhana is referred to as Suyodhana, in the “Prologue”:

Manager: Here is a picture crammed with soldiers and kings, horses and elephants slain in battle; the drawing seems confused. The combat of Bhima and Suyodhana begins. (45)

The reference to Duryodhana as Suyodhana is an explicit re-rendering of his character. The Hindi references to “*du*” and “*su*” are elaborately referential of badness and goodness respectively. While words prefixed with “*du*” carry a negative representation, those with “*su*” as prefix highlight positivity. Similar deviations have been used by Anand Neelakantan in his re-renderings of *The Mahabharata*, *Ajaya* and *The Rise of Kali*. Re-told from the perspective of Duryodhana, his name has been ‘modified’ to Suyodhana. Bhasa’s deviation, however, predates Neelakantan’s by centuries providing historical time frame to alternative perspectives in literature.

In consonance with this reference to Suyodhana, the delineation of his characters is a modification from *The Mahabharata*. While in *The Mahabharata*, Duryodhana, “...between his wounding and his death showed a much fiercer spirit” (43); in *Urubhangam*, “Duryodhana preaches reconciliation to his son and looks for death” (42). A dying Duryodhana is human and humane, acknowledging his flaws and preaching “morality” to a determined-to-take-revenge Asvatthama:

Duryodhana: Say not so. Kings have pride incarnate. For Pride’s sake I accepted war. Look you, my preceptor’s son, how Draupadi aforetime was dragged at the gambling match by tresses grasped and twisted in my hand; how young Abhimanyu, still a boy, was slain in battle, how the Pandavas on the pretext of dicing had to dwell in the forest with wild beasts; reflect on this, it is little that those chiefs have done to break my spirit. (58)

This humaneness and acknowledgement make the protagonist of Bhasa strikingly different from the Duryodhana constructed by Vyasa in his epic. Duryodhana, or Suyodhana as he is called in the play, is a flawed, yet virtuous character, accounting for typical Aristotelian heroes with a tragic flaw, yet not out-rightly villainous. This is also evident in what he offers to his son Durjaya:

Duryodhana: You must obey the Pandavas like myself. Follow the directions of the lady mother Kunti, Abhimanyu's mother and Draupadi you must honour like your own mother. (55)

It also needs to be acknowledged that this digression of a humane Duryodhana and a consequent re-rendering, bordering on 'sacrilege', is not an exception. Similar traits are found in one of his other plays, *Panchratra*, an adaptation of the cow stealing episode at king Virat's kingdom, which ends thus:

Duryodhana: Very well, I grant the Pandavas the realm they had before. For if troth be dead all men are done; as troth stands firm so do they. (139)

Duryodhana gleefully keeps his promise of returning the kingdom of the Pandavas if they are found within five nights. The deviation, or the "creative license" (<http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com/2008/01/bhasas-mahabharata-plays.html>), that Bhasa puts to use here assumes epic proportions given the fact that this act of Duryodhana takes away, in totality, the very root cause of the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the Mahabharata. With war not impending, the very "fixity" of the epic, as Culler sees it in his vision of his Foundational Narrative, melts into a fluid, susceptible to alterations.

Duryodhana's humaneness and his respect for relations comes to the fore when the news of Abhimanyu being captured reaches him. He says:

Charioteer, tell me, who has carried off Abhimanyu? I myself will set him free. For I began the family dissension with his kin, so in this the wise will lay the blame on me. Moreover, I hold him for my son, and afterwards of the Pandavas. And though there be a feud in the family the children are not to blame. (136)

However, *Panchratra* and *Urubhangam* do not set the tone of Duryodhana's virtue as against his epical villainy. His entire corpus of works based on *The Mahabharata* is a reflection of Duryodhana as human and humane. In *Dootavakyam* Duryodhana emerges as what he calls himself in *Urubhangam*: A king with inordinate pride. When Krishna arrives to meet the Kauravas for truce, Duryodhana says:

‘Kesava; yes, that’s the way to announce him. That’s the proper etiquette. Tell me princes, what is the proper thing to do with Kesava, who has come as an envoy? What do you say? - ‘he should be received with honour’? That is not my opinion. Prison, I think, is the best place for him. (6)

The dialogue follows Duryodhana’s reprimand to the Chamberlain for calling Krishna as, “Here is Narayana, the best of men...” (5). Duryodhana’s pride as the king becomes apparent when he deliberately degrades Krishna and also warns his courtiers against standing up for receiving him.

Reading his whole corpus of plays based on *The Mahabharata*, Duryodhana then emerges as human, full of pride but with an understanding of morality and righteousness, as he says in *Urubhangam*: “Thy husband fell in battle facing the foe. Why doest thou weep, warrior-lady?” (55). In spite of falling through use of unfair means by Bhima, at the behest of Krishna, he still does not blame the Pandavas, unlike Asvatthama and Baladeva, but acknowledges that he fought, fair, and lost to his enemy: “The beloved five score brothers vanquished the foe” (55).

Bhasa’s plays, then, do foreground a different Duryodhana than the popular perception that emerges from *The Mahabharata*. Duryodhana, or Suyodhana is a character created by Bhasa, to be proud of and someone to be emulated, not for his virtues, but for his being human: “Think of my glory with pride” (55).

Underneath the thematic “flouting” also lie several other digressional layers compromising the principles of *Natyashastra*. *Urubhangam* is held to be the sole representative of the *Utsrstikanka* as it is “...a one act play with a well-known plot, and it includes only human characters...” (Muni, LIII). It is further opined that, “Bhasa’s *Urubhanga* seems to be its solitary specimen” (ibid). The conception of *Urubhangam* fits into this category given that it is a One-Act play and, unlike *Dootavakyam* where Krishna is referred to as divine and godly, all the characters, including Baladeva, are humans. Moreover, the plot is derivative of one of the major episodes of *The Mahabharata*, the duel between Bhima and Duryodhana.

But the very categorization also makes the text deviant as *Utsrstikanka* “...will treat women’s lamentations and despondent utterances at a time when battle and violent fighting has ceased; it should include bewildered movements [of mourners], and it must be devoid of the grand, the energetic and the graceful styles and its plot should relate to one’s fall (lit. end of the rise)” (Muni, 371). On the contrary, *Urubhangam* is set in the midst of war and has a mace-fight, *gada-yudha* at its centre. Moreover, the lamentations do occur but the battle is far from over with Durjaya anointed as the king and Aswatthama pledging revenge the following night. Though there are three women lamenters, Gandhari and the two wives of Duryodhana, none is confused

and bewildered. The dialogues of the female characters bear testimony to the fact that the women characters are wanting in the emotions of sympathy and pity, and on the contrary, emit grace, much like the dying Duryadhana:

Gandhari: Suyodhana, my child, are you tired? (54)

Malavi: I am but a girl, your wedded wife, and so I weep. (55)

Pauravi: My mind is all made up where I shall go, and so I weep no more. (55)

On the contrary, it is Dhritrashtra, a male character, who is distraught and despondent:

Alas! Is this the king? In stature he was like a golden pillar, the sole overlord of kings in the world, and now my miserable son lies on the ground no better than the broken bolt of the door. (54)

The demeanor of Dhritrashtra follows the dictates in *Natyashastra*, albeit they are for women and not male characters. Moreover, the mourners, include Aswatthama and Baladeva, male characters.

It is critically accepted that *Urubhangam* and *Karnabharam* are the only two plays in Sanskrit Drama that have tragic aspects, much unlike the mainstream Sanskrit Drama. Ironical, it is, that the father of Sanskrit Drama is the progenitor, given that there is no older surviving Sanskrit play, corresponding to the canon of Alternative Literatures in India. The rebel that he was, is also evident in the fact that his plays, not only do not follow the ‘standard norms’ of the two great Indian epics, but also flout the tenets of the most significant treatise on *natya*, Bharatmuni’s *Natyashastra*. The deviations remind of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt’s article “History and Anecdote”, wherein he says, “The anecdotes would open history, or place it askew, so that literary texts could find new points of insertion. Perhaps texts would even shed their singular categorical identities...” (51). The two texts, specifically *Urubhangam*, then, become such wounds in the wall of traditional Sanskrit theatrical or *natya* tradition.

This distinction and creation of texts focussing on a particular character from a larger work have been in vogue in the 21st century and have caught the imagination of the readers by storm. However, Bhasa, undoubtedly emerges as the precursor and the pioneer in these literary trends. Taking into account that Bhasa is believed to have lived a couple of centuries on either side of the advent of Common Era, that *Natyashastra* was composed at least 200 years prior to Bhasa and that his texts are the first ones in Sanskrit drama to have survived making him the father of Sanskrit Drama, foregrounds the idea that the Original Register of Sanskrit Drama did have space for deviations such as found in the works of Bhasa.

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The idea of “standardization” and “historicizing” of texts like *The Mahabharata*, a contemporary mark of loyalty, though bordering on jingoism, has its own counters, “punctures” in the form of texts of the father of Sanskrit Drama. More than an allegation, it merely ascertains that *Bharatvarsa*, the place where *Natyashastra* intends to set the “finest” of plots dealing with celestial heroes, “[Scenes of] all the plays which have celestial heroes, and which [treat] a battle, capture and killing [of enemies] should be laid in Bharata-varsa” (99), has always been, what Nirad C. Chaudhary calls, “The Continent of Circe”. Bharata-varsa, as *Natyashastra* calls the landmass, has always been flexible and appreciative of ‘digressions’, the multiple points-of-view, a quality appreciated even by Prof Radhakrishnan in *The Hindu View of Life* when he says, “The Hindu thinker readily admits other points of view than his own and considers them to be just as worthy of attention” (7).

It is, hence, highly tragic, that a tradition that dates almost 2000 years has suddenly been declared as unwanted, confusing, and what not, by the traditionalists themselves. What makes matters worse is that while the façade, maintained by the traditionalists, is of adaptability, the behind the curtain reality is thuggish against this very quality. Bhasa’s plays, discovered in a temporal frame such as this, stand as an edifice against such rigidity and promote adaptability as the inherent strength of Indian literature and life alike.

Moreover, his plays interrogate *The Mahabharata* as merely a narrative, and hence, open to interpretations. The idea of incorporating “Voices” to characters, devoid in the original, is a sublime technique to highlight that these are merely works of literature, and not historical events, written with a specific purpose and consequently the characters are delineated along same lines. Salman Rushdie said in the “Introduction” to *Midnight’s Children*, concerning the actuality of his novel, “...my mother...immediately understood that it was 'just a story...'” (xii). The same outlook is absolutely essential for us to properly analyze and understand texts like *The Mahabharata* whose real didactic and aesthetic purpose loses its significance the moment it is placed in the genre of non-fiction, specifically history.

Moreover, if placing these epics in the domain of religious texts has to be persisted with, and otherwise too, there is an imminent need to re-generate and re-vitalize the culture in which Bhasa wrote his ‘digressions’ of *The Mahabharata* but which has been deracinated with time. This culture can be summed up in the words of Salman Rushdie that he spoke, in response to the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo Magazine Office in 2015:

This religious totalitarianism has caused a deadly mutation...I stand...to defend the art of satire, which has always been a force for liberty and against tyranny, dishonesty and stupidity. ‘Respect for religion’ has become a code phrase meaning

‘fear of religion.’ Religions, like all other ideas, deserve criticism, satire, and, yes, our fearless disrespect. (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/respect-religion-has-become-fear-religion-salman-rushdie-condemns-charlie-hebdo-attack-19947>)

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