

The Vision of Darkness in Andha Yug

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Dharmavir Bharati (1926-97) the Hindi author was born in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. He studied there and participated in the anti-British Quit India movement. He earned a doctorate in Siddha saint literature in 1947, and then became a full-time journalist, editing the weekly DharmaYug from 1960 to 1989. His journal was a war correspondent in Bangladesh in 1971, made a tremendous impact. He was also a poet, novelist and essayist. His two novels, Gunahonka Devata (The God of Sins) and Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda (The Seventh Horse of the Sun) are classics of Hindi literature. He has published five one-act plays under the title Nadi Pyasi Thi (The River was Thirsty, 1954), often produced by schools, colleges and amateur groups.

He wrote only one full-length play Andha Yug (Blind Age, 1954), originally as radio drama, now recognized as a classic of modern Hindi theatre. "Set late in the Mahabharata, it concerns the eternal values of life that are damaged or broken and re-established again and again. Bharati was deeply perturbed about the perpetual problem of war becoming global and destroying humanity. Obviously reflecting nuclear conflict, his play also interrogated the received wisdom of Krishna's assurances. An epic drama in blank verse, it applied various forms such as folk theatre, Parsi theatre, Katha-gayan (singing of tales), and Western tragedy as required. The use of symbols and imagery provided a new dimension to the theme. It was a challenge to directors because the text's poetry and dramatic beauty is not easy to

convey. Thus the premiere had to wait till 1962, produced by Satyadev Dubey on Theatre Unit's rooftop stage in Bombay. Subsequently the National School of Drama performed it in 1963, directed by Alkazi, and revived it several times. Many directors in other languages, like Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay (Bengali, 1970) and Ratan Thiyam (Manipuri, 1993), also staged important versions." 1

His play, Andha Yug, translated into English by Alok Bhalla, deals with the epic theme of the conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas culminating into climax on the eighteenth day of Kurukshetra war. Although the theme is borrowed from the last part of Vyasa's Mahabharata, Dharmavir Bharati has accentuated it in such a way that it remains relevant even today. It was written immediately after the Partition of India, but it appeals to the reader even in the twenty-first century, which is vitiated by international terrorism and fundamentalism. Though the story of Kauravas and Pandavas is incidental to it, it achieves the universality of appeal by highlighting the metaphysical conflict between Good and Evil. It is on account of its universality that it becomes relevant in every age and nation.

The play begins with a prologue, which foreshadows the theme in advance. It says that the play is concerned with the age of darkness as described in Vishnu Purana in which there would be a decline in prosperity and dharma and the whole earth would slowly perish; the one, who has wealth, would rule; the one, who wears a

false mask, would be honoured; the one, who is greedy, would be a king; the people, weary of misrule, would hide in dark caves and wait for their days of misery to end. It says further that it was only Lord Krishna, who was dispassionate and detached, whereas all the others were blind and self-absorbed and that the play is the story of enlightenment through the life of the benighted and the blind.

The first act begins with the narrator commenting on the central event and its negative nature, "Both sides in the war/ violated/ the code of honour/ smashed it/ ripped it into shreds/and scattered it - / the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas" (P.27).² He comments further that it is a strange war in which both sides are doomed to fail; that blindness rules this age and not reason and that blind fear, blind love, blind power and blind justice shall prevail in the end. The Kurukshetra war is obviously an archetypal one as it suggests the metaphysical war between Good and Evil. Whereas the Kauravas represent Evil, the Pandavas represent Good. The war is necessitated by the blindness of the Kauravas and consequently the Pandavas have suffered countless sorrows. But in the war there has been a reversal of situation. So far Good was helpless against the force of Evil. But Good is slowly gaining victory over Evil. As a consequence of this unwanted war the common people feel that their whole life has become meaningless. For example, the two guards express their opinion, which voices that of the common people. They say that they are very tired but yet they have to march up and down guarding these desolate corridors. They are unhappy to learn that the Kaurava queens, who once wandered gracefully like the

fragrant breeze, have become widows now. They are sad to notice that the Kaurava Kingdom is ruled by an old and blind ruler and therefore all their actions are meaningless. Now the guards are surprised to see the Kaurava Kingdom is overcast with thousands and thousands of ravenous vultures, which are eager to feed on the dead. The guards consider them as a bad and dreadful omen. The shadow of the vultures indicates physical darkness symbolizing other kinds of darkness like ocular, psychological and one moral ones. King Dhritarashtra's blindness is indicative of ocular darkness. Queen Gandhaari's voluntary blindfolding of her eyes shows her extraordinary loyalty to her husband. But both of them, in addition to being physically blind (or blindfolded) are morally blind also because of their blind affection for and attachment to their children i.e. Kauravas. The different kinds of blindness unfold themselves as the play proceeds forward.

When Vidura comes to see King Dhritarashtra, the guard tells him that the king could not see the terrifying scene of war, as he is physically blind. He is waiting for the latest news bulletin to be brought by Sanjaya. But when Vidura meets the king, the latter confesses that he is afraid for the first time in his life. Vidura tells him,

Afraid?

The fear you experience today
Had gripped others years ago. (P.33)

Vidura reminds the king that the latter had been warned by Bhishma and Dronacharya and that Krishna had also advised him,

Do not violate the code of honour.
If you violate the code of honour
It will coil around the Kaurava clan

Like a wounded python
And crush it like a dry twig. (P.33)

But King Dhritarashtra had not bothered to listen to this advice. On the contrary his physical blindness was accentuated by the moral blindness caused by his filial attachment to his sons,

My sons were the flesh of my flesh
They were the final arbiters of truth
for me.
My love for them was my law
My code of honour. (P.34).

In other words, his attachment to his sons is an extension of his selfishness, which prevents him from understanding the world from a wider perspective. He has realized his mistake rather belatedly,

Today
I realized
That there is a truth
That lies beyond the boundaries
Of my selfhood.
I realized that only today. (P.35)

He feels terrified by what he has learnt today. Queen Gandhaari also feels that the ideals like dharma, duty and honour are mere illusions; that there is a ferocious beast in each man; that everyone is hypocritical and self-interested. She does not have any faith in Krishna. That is why she has blindfolded herself. In the seventeen days of war, all her sons except Duryodhana have been killed one by one. Now she desperately hopes that Duryodhana will be victorious in the war. Thus when both King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhaari are waiting for the latest news from Sanjaya, there comes a mendicant, who confesses that his prediction (that the Kauravas shall be victorious) has proved to be false due to the intervention of a stranger man like

Krishna. The same view is corroborated by the Guard 2, who says, "And the one they worship as their Lord takes the responsibility for all of them!" (P.43) But those, who have no faith in the moral order symbolized by Krishna, happen to be the blind King Dhritarashtra and his blindfolded Queen Gandhaari.

The second act begins with the chorus, which describes Sanjaya, the rational sculptor of words and his bewilderment in the forest of doubt and confusion. Then Sanjaya himself comes on the stage and expresses his sense of confusion, "I have lost my way on this path of thorns and stones" (P.47). Although several soldiers have died, Sanjaya has not died. He is very sad to be alive and witness the defeat of the Kauravas by the Pandavas,

Yes, I am still alive.
The earth for miles around is
strewn
With the corpses of Kaurava
soldiers
Slaughtered by Arjuna.
The Kaurava army is scattered;
All its heroes are dead. (P.48)

Sanjaya was about to be killed by Satyaki, but Vyasa had told the latter, "Sanjaya cannot die. He is immortal" (P.49). Sanjaya was cursed by Vyasa, "You will survive disasters, floods, revolutions, and wars of annihilation so that you can tell the truth" (P.49). Sanjaya is thus destined to tell or report the whole truth of the events like the modern news reporters of the various media. Speaking the bitter truth is indeed a very unpleasant job. He finds it humiliating to tell the whole truth about Duryodhana's death to King Dhritarashtra and his Queen. But Kritavarma exhorts him to be brave enough to tell the truth.

Kritavarma is sad to learn that that Duryodhana is defeated by the Pandavas and that only three of them are alive (i.e. Kritavarma, Kripacharya and Ashvatthama). Now the scene focuses on Ashvatthama and his psychology of revenge. He thinks that his father Dronacharya was cut to pieces by Dhristadyumna when Dronacharya threw down his weapons on the battlefield on hearing Yudhisthira announcing triumphantly the death of Ashvatthama, the elephant but giving an impression of the death of Ashvatthama, the man (and son of Dronacharya). Thus according to Ashvatthama, his father was killed by the Pandavas immorally and unjustly. Hence he decides to avenge the death of his father by becoming a metaphorical beast, “I decided to turn myself into a blind, ruthless beast” (P.52). He wants to be blind and ruthless like a beast and turn his hands into claws, and strangle Yudhisthira for lying and for being responsible for his father’s death. In his frenzy he mistakes Sanjaya for a Pandava and wishes to kill him, but Kripacharya prevents him from doing so by clarifying to him, “Sanjaya cannot be killed as he was neutral and took no sides in the war” (P.55).

Kritavarma says that Duryodhana is still alive and intends to look for him. Sanjaya tells them about the whereabouts of Duryodhana, “With his extraordinary powers he has stilled the waters of a lake. And there unknown to the Pandavas, he sits strangely still in the floor of the enchanted lake” (P.57).

Meanwhile the Mendicant is rather unhappy to learn that his prediction about the victory of Kauravas over the Pandavas has proved wrong. Ashvatthama is also terribly angry with him and finally kills

him blindly and indiscriminately. Kripacharya tries to pacify him. Ashvatthama confesses how he became a blind medium of revenge and does not know how he killed the Mendicant, “I did not kill him! I was blind with rage. I wanted to annihilate the future, which has been prophesied. Believe me I do not know the old man was killed” (P.63). Kripacharya suggests to them to sleep and rest for the night.

In the third act, the narrator says that King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhaari listen to the story of the defeat of Kauravas by the Pandavas narrated by Sanjaya. “His painful story turned Gandhaari into stone. Her face pale with sorrow seemed lifeless” (P.65). The Kaurava soldiers have been limping back to the city in defeat and disgrace. King Dhritarashtra is waiting to hear the news of the last battle between Bhima and Duryodhana. Meanwhile the Guard 1 tells Vidura that an enemy soldier has entered the city with their defeated army and that he is a sorcerer, a shape-changer, who can take any form at will” (P.69). That soldier is none other than Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra, who has fought on the side of truth and not on the side of Kauravas, though he belongs to their party. He expresses his views as follows:

What is my crime?

That I was on the side of truth?

No other warrior—

Neither Drona nor Bhishma—
dared to oppose Duryodhana.

Only I had the courage

To declare:

I will not fight

On the side of untruth.

I may be a Kaurava

But truth is higher

Than my clan! (P.71)

Obviously, Yuyutsu is one of the Kauravas, who retains his moral integrity, loyalty to truth and rational approach to life. He has transcended the selfishness, greed and vengeance indulged in by the Kauravas. He knows that even his mother Gandhaari may not like to see him. But Vidura appreciates his position and moral approach to life, "Do not say that. In this evil episode you are the only one of the Kaurava clan, who has held his head high with pride" (P.72). He asks Yuyutsu further not to bother about the people of the city, who look at him with contempt. When Yuyutsu meets his mother and bows down to her feet, she taunts him about his siding with the enemies and refuses to bless him. Yuyutsu is rather sad about his mother's undignified behaviour. He feels that "It would have been better if I had accepted the untruth" (P.75). He is so desperate that he thinks his siding with truth has earned his mother's curse and the people's hate and turned out to be a futile act in the final analysis. But Vidura consoles him by advising him, "Great suffering must be endured with grace" (P.75). Yuyutsu is sad to know that everybody hates him now. He thinks that he is damned but Krishna is victorious wherever he is.

Meanwhile the Guard 1 reports that Sanjaya has brought the news that Duryodhana has been defeated by Bhima in the final battle. The Pandavas are blowing the conch-shells and declaring their victory. But Balarama is enraged with the Pandavas because he thinks that Bhima violated dharma in defeating Duryodhana and Bhima's immoral action was abetted by the 'unprincipled rogue'

Krishna known for his holiness and cunning.

Kripacharya and Kritavarma also want to take revenge upon the Pandavas, but not through treachery. But Ashvatthama is terribly vindictive and wants to be declared as the Commander of the army in Duryodhana's presence. Accordingly Kripacharya is directed by Duryodhana to anoint Ashvatthama as the Senapati of the army. Now Ashvatthama decides to wreak vengeance the next morning and orders his soldiers to sleep that night. But he keeps watch by pacing up and down. It is at this time that he happens to see a dance of war between a crow and owl. Then the crow sleeps and the owl watches it nervously. The owl prods him to make sure that he is really asleep and then attacks him. After a ferocious fight between them, the owl kills the crow finally. Ashvatthama, who is watching the scene, breaks out of his trance, laughs confidently for having found the truth. He wants to rush to the Pandava camp, where the victorious Pandavas must be unarmed and sleeping and slaughter them mercilessly in the manner in which the owl has killed the crow. He fastens his cummerbund and wants to attack the Pandavas especially when Krishna has gone to Hastinapur to console Gandhaari. He says, "Like a beast I will crush Dhristadyumna with my feet – like a mad beast trampling on a lotus-flower. I will not even spare Uttara, who is carrying Abhimanyu's son and the future of the entire Pandava clan in her womb! (P.88) Kritavarma and Kripacharya try their best to dissuade him from the immoral and treacherous vengeance, but Ashvatthama turns a deaf ear to them.

Meanwhile the Mendicant's ghost appears on the stage and deplors the blindness of

the people and their inner contradictions. Yuyutsu's spectre deplores his stagnant life symbolized by a firm wheel fixed to a chariot. Sanjaya's spectre laments his uselessness as a decorative wheel. Vidura's spectre laments his faith in the Lord, who is like a useless axle, which has lost its wheels and cannot turn by itself. The spectral vision acts as a commentary on the overall blindness, darkness and meaninglessness of life. The Mendicant's ghost now happens to descry a peacock feather wafting in the air and understands that Lord Krishna is returning from Hastinapur after trying to console Gandhaari.

In the fourth act, Ashvatthama rushes to the Pandava camp to slaughter them vindictively and mercilessly, but happens to see Lord Shakra, the god of annihilation, standing guard at the gate and challenging him, "Defeat me before you enter" (P. 95). Ashvatthama attacks him vehemently but ultimately accepts his defeat and begs the Lord for mercy. Then Lord Shiva blesses him, "Ashvatthama, you will be victorious. The Pandavas have lost their sense of righteousness. Because I loved Krishna, I protected them, gave them victory, renewed their confidence. But they have violated the dharma of war and opened the doors for their destruction" (P.97). Thus blessed by Lord Shiva Ashvatthama reaches Dhristadyumna's tent with the speed of lightning and wrings his neck mercilessly. Then he proceeds to kill the Pandava soldiers and Shikhandi also. Likewise Kritavarma and Kripacharya also slaughter the children, old men and servants heartlessly. Queen Gandhaari feels happy to learn about Ashvatthama's heroic feat. Duryodhana is still alive and wants to tell something his

party men, but cannot. Kripacharya narrates to Duryodhana how Ashvatthama has slaughtered the important leaders of Pandava camp. Duryodhana dies after listening to it. Queen Gandhaari is so happy about Ashvatthama's vindictive heroism that she wants to remove her blindfold, gaze upon Ashvatthama and transform his body into a bright diamond. But ironically Sanjaya has lost his vision and therefore cannot show Ashvatthama to the Queen. That is because Vyasa has granted him vision only for a limited time of eighteen days.

Now the Kaurava city is desolate and the diamond throne is empty and the people have left to perform the last rites for Gandhaari's dead sons. When Yuyutsu meets his father Dhritarashtra, the latter cautions him against Ashvatthama's rage and advises him to hide somewhere. But by that time Sanjaya brings the news of the unexpected transformation of Ashvatthama from a hero into a fearful coward. He is hit by Arjuna's arrows. Because of his helplessness, Ashvatthama releases his Brahmastra at Arjuna, not knowing the dire consequences of it for the earth and mankind. Vyasa explains sadly, "For centuries to come nothing will grow on earth. Newborn children shall be deformed. Men shall become grotesque. All the wisdom men gathered in the satya, treta and dwapara Yugs shall be lost forever. Serpents shall hiss from every ear of corn and rivers shall flow with molten fire" (P.114). Then Vyasa requests Ashvatthama to recall his Brahmastra. But Ashvatthama pleads his inability and helplessness, "Vyasa, I am powerless! I only knew how to release the Brahmastra. My father did not teach me how to recall it" (P.115). Consequently Ashvatthama's

Brahmastra is about to destroy the child in Uttara's womb. But again a miracle happens. Krishna saves the child in Uttara's womb by exchanging his life for Uttara's stillborn child. Then Krishna forces Ashvatthama to surrender his talismanic gem in exchange for his life, under the shadow of a curse forever. Now Ashvatthama bows his head in defeat and leaves the place.

Queen Gandhaari removes her blindfold and wants to see Ashvatthama, but the latter goes away from there. As his body is covered with boils and open sores, he smells worse than a diseased dog! Vidura tells Gandhaari that Krishna has cursed Ashvatthama for the sin of infanticide, with immortality and condemned him to live forever and ever. Gandhaari mourns the death of her son, Duryodhana and is enraged with Krishna for his incitement of Bhima's adharma and his vile curse on Ashvatthama. She, therefore, curses him,

You may be a god
You may be omnipotent
Whatever you are
Whoever you are
I curse you
And I curse
All your friends and kinsmen.
They shall attack and kill each
other.
They shall eat each other
Like rabid dogs.
And many years later
After you have witnessed
Their destruction
You will return to this forest
Only to be killed
Like a wild animal
By an ordinary hunter! (P.122)

Krishna accepts Gandhaari's curse without any grudge and even explains his divine as well as human aspects,

I may be a god.
I may be omnipotent.
But I am also your son
And you are my mother.

...

If I am life
Then, Mother
I am also death.

I accept your curse, Mother!
(P.123)

The fifth act shows the victory of Pandavas and a series of suicides. Though Yudhishthira has won his throne and his kingdom, he is not really happy. He feels lonely and dejected. He is sad to know that his brothers are either ignorant or foolish; either insolent or weary. He trembles to watch the encroaching darkness and hears the sinister steps of the coming age. Yuyutsu, who upheld dharma, is taunted by Bhima and ill-treated by the beggars. He, therefore, commits suicide by plunging a spear into his own heart. Now Yudhishthira's kingdom has grown decadent.

On the contrary, the forest catches fire. Both Gandhaari and Dhritarashtra are consumed by the fire. Whereas the Kaurava dynasty is destroyed completely, the Pandava kingdom also comes to an end. Yudhishthira grows increasingly dejected day by day. Slowly he loses his faith in everything and realizes the hollowness of his victory in the war. He understands that his victory is also a long and slow act of suicide.

The chorus in The Epilogue describes Krishna's death.

He leaned against the tree

Placed his left foot
Shaped like a deer's face
On his right thigh
And with a sigh whispered:
'A strange age has passed' (P.148).

...
Mistaking
Krishna's foot for a deer
He draws his bowstring
And takes aim (P.150).

...
The stars went out
Darkness covered the earth
And that forest of fear
Became even more terrifying.
The moment Krishna was killed
Dvapara Yug came to an end
And on this god-forsaken earth

Kali Yug took its first step
And that forest of fear
Became even more terrifying (P.151).

The death of Krishna represents the beginning of the age of darkness. The chorus strikes an affirmative note that in spite of the overwhelming darkness of Kali Yug, there is a seed of light buried in the human mind and might grow into a big tree of high moral ideals,

And yet it is also true
That like a small seed
Buried somewhere
In the mind of man
There is courage
And longing for freedom

And the imagination to create something new (P.161).

The chorus iterates further that the seed, which is buried without exception in each one of us, will grow from day to day in our lives as duty, honour, freedom and virtuous conduct; makes us fear half-truths and great wars and always saves the future

of mankind from blind doubt, slavery and defeat.

Presenting even a small chunk of the great epic, the Mahabharata in the form of a play is not a joke. It requires a lot of intelligence on the part of the dramatist. He has to present his vision of life through the dramatic medium by showing a few bits of action on the stage, by highlighting the moral ideas through verse, by linking the events on the stage with the off-stage one through choric narration and comments. Thus the direct (on-stage) and indirect (off-stage) action is linked intelligently and the authorial comment and interpretation is articulated through the chorus. In his note to the directors, Dharmavir Bharati confesses, "The choric songs are arranged between the acts in a style borrowed from the traditions of Indian folk theatre. The chorus is either used to give information about events, which are not shown on stage or to underline the poignancy of the action. Sometimes, it also clarifies the symbolic importance of the events" (P.19). Although the chorus is borrowed from the Indian folk theatre, it easily resembles the chorus of Greek plays and captures the attention of the spectators.

Dharmavir Bharati has shown his dramatic talent in distributing the theme conveniently into on-stage and off-stage action. For example, Duryodhana and his battle with Bhima or the murder of the Old Mendicant by Ashvatthama, or the release of the Brahmastra by Ashvatthama, the killing of Krishna by the hunter and such other terrible events are not shown on the stage (or in the form of direct action), but are narrated as happening off-stage (in the form of indirect action). Similarly the eagle killing the crow and the cloud-like

gathering of eagles waiting to devour the dead bodies of Kauravas are shown symbolically on the stage, which holds mirror to Dharmavir Bharati's experimentation with the dramatic technique. Andha Yug easily attains the grandeur of a Greek tragedy and succeeds in conveying its universal message. It teaches the modern man the futility of indulging in selfishness, terrorism,

fundamentalism and such other evils and suggests an affirmative philosophy of life to be followed for the attainment of true happiness. It offers the moral lesson that Truth will be ultimately victorious, although un-Truth may enjoy some power temporarily. In other words the play is a dramatization of the formula, satyameva jayate.

References:

1. Lal, Anand, The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 53.
2. Bharati, Dharmavir, Andha Yug. Tr. Alok Bhalla. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 27. (All the subsequent page references are to this edition.)

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