



## RE-TELLING OF MAHABHARATA AND RAMAYANA IN SHYAM BENEGAL'S BHARAT EK KHOJ

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### Abstract

When Shyam Benegal adapted 'Discovery of India' for his very ambitious plan of the Doordarshan series 'Bharat Ek Khoj', he gave a new interpretation to the Indian history. A pioneer in the field of adaptations of the literary texts in television and cinema, Benegal approaches the Mahabharata and the Ramayana episodes in an unorthodox and unconventional way. He devotes two episodes each to these great Indian Epics. He does many experiments with the narrative technique and also in the presentation of the stories in the four episodes. These are some of the most critically acclaimed episodes of the adapted series. This research paper proposes to examine the different aspects of Benegal's art of adaptation with reference to these chapters. It also plans to discuss the relevance of this retelling of these stories in the modern time.

**Keywords:** adaptation, epic, television, cinema, Nehru, Benegal

### Introduction

The socio-cultural fabric of India, or in fact, that of any culture in the world consists of a number of stories and legends. These stories present the soul and spirit of any culture in the most creative manner. The two great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the store-houses of many myths and legends from which we have been deriving stories since ages. When India was suffering a great deal on the question of sense of nationalism in the hearts of its people during the post-Emergency years, it is no wonder that the then Government of India found these stories as the mediums of bringing the people of India together. Hence, in the 1980s we witness the three classics of the Indian television- B. R. Chopra's '*Mahabharat*', Ramanand sagar's '*Ramayan*' and Shyam Benegal's '*Bharat Ek Khoj*'.

Whatever may be the purpose behind, these DD National series remain the classic examples of adaptation on the Indian television ever. While *Mahabharat* was based on the original story by Vyasa, *Ramayan* is primarily based on Valmiki's *Ramayan* and Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*. Shyam Benegal chose to base this most ambitious plan of his career on Nehru's *The Discovery of India*.

The stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are being narrated to us since our childhood whether from our grandparents or we have read them in various text forms at schools, colleges and universities with different variation according to the time and our age. Their interpretations too have kept varying from time to time and person to person.

When Benegal adapted *The Discovery of India*, he gave an example of his great cinematic art. He made us re-live the history of our country from the Indus Valley Civilization to pre-Independence. He explains the reason behind choosing Nehru's text in his interview with William Van Der Heide:

"... that massive fifty-three hour history of India I made called *Bharat Ek Khoj* [The Discovery of India, 1988] based on Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, which gave us our history, creating a picture we cannot only live with but grow with. History as taught to us ..., before we became independent, was Euro-centric, where we were looking at ourselves as the 'others'. It's an extraordinary situation. It's like Aborigines having to look at their history through the eyes of the white man in Australia, and seeing themselves as 'other'..." "So *Bharat Ek Khoj* set out to change that" and that *The Discovery of India* was the "first attempt at writing a history of India from an Indo-centric point of view."

### Adaptation

The term 'adaptation', derived from the Latin 'Adaptare', means 'to make fit'. It is a new representation of something which already exists according to one's necessity and interpretation while maintaining the soul of the primary object. Cinema and television are the most popular mediums of entertainment. They are being called the 'liveliest art' forms due to various genuine reasons. Adaptation of literature provides a kind of 'afterlife' to it. Adaptation of the literary texts as an art form started developing in the early twentieth century when the writers, specially the novelists started introducing a cinematic imagination in their works. In the West, the novels after 1922, after James Joyce's *Ulysses*, show it to a very large extent. Joyce in 1909 unsuccessfully attempted to open the first movie theatre. The various movements in the twentieth century, like Symbolism, Imagism, Expressionism, Futurism etc. influenced the novelists of that time and they developed this cinematic art in their works. The stream of consciousness technique too contributed to this field. But then a number of early twentieth century

writers like Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence did not like the cinematization of the literary text though the works of many of them have been received by the critics as "cinematic". Then there were writers like Joseph Conrad and Leo Tolstoy who supported it.

In the Indian cinema and television, we see the adaptations from the very beginning. *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first Indian film was an adaptation. It was based on the legend of King Harishchandra which is narrated in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Since then many adaptations have been made in the Indian cinema and television. In the 1970s and 1980s Shyam Benegal revived the tradition of adapting stories from literature and ancient myths and legends. Several of his movies have been adaptation of the literary texts. His '*Kalyug*' [The Machine Age, 1980] was based on the Mahabharata. '*Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*' [The Seventh Horse of the Sun, 1992] is an adaptation of the novel of the same name by Dharamveer Bharti, it won him the 1993 National Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi. Benegal played a critical role in adapting fiction for television in the 1980s. His '*Katha Sagar*' (1986) was a collection of stories by Maupassant, Rabindranath Tagore, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, O. Henry etc.

### The Adaptation of the Two Epics in the Series

The series has devoted two-two episodes to each of the two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These are some of the best critically acclaimed episodes in the whole 53-episode series. Benegal's approach is more theatrical rather than cinematic. The reason behind may be the limited time, place and money or he might have some other reason. However, Benegal has succeeded in his duty as the director.

The serial adopts multiple narrative structures to depict the history of India. Nehru's text acts just as a starting point and then the main body of the episodes has been derived from the team of the academic historians, the production team had. An actor (Roshan Seth) who is playing Nehru, acts as the 'sutradhar' (commentator/guide). He comes and narrates a part of the history which is going to be dealt with in the particular episode. Various plays

from the literature of different languages, ballads, folklores etc. have been used to narrate the story. Om Puri gives voice to the views of the historians. It not only adds on to the details of the narrative but also reflects a difference of opinion from Nehru. By using the ballads, plays and the folklores, the director himself becomes the narrator.

The *Mahabharata* episode in the show has not been treated in the traditional way that it has been explored by the other creators of this great epic. The episode begins with the folksong of the Pandavani singer Teejan Bai. She narrates the story of birth of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Then the episode also uses Maharishi Vyasa's text when it describes the dice game (dyut) between the Kauravas and the Pandavas in which the cheating by the Kauravas make Yudhishtir loose all of his belongings along with his brothers and wife. The director does not make the episode with grandeur but rather keeps it simple. The episode uses the sets without any elaboration. Teejan Bai again narrates the incidence of Draupadi's being dragged to the court by Dushasan. The narrative keeps shifting between Vyasa's text and the folk songs of Teejan Bai.

The *Mahabharata* episodes also include the dramatisation of Dharamveer Bharti's '*Andhayug*' and Bhasa's play '*Urubhangam*'. Some part of the narrative has also been presented through the Kathakali dance performance. The *Mahabharata* appears to be a giant tree here and other texts, songs and dances used in these episodes are its branches.

Jawaharlal Nehru is of the opinion that the *Mahabharata* was written as an attempt to emphasize the fundamental unity of India. He believes that the great civil war which has been described in the *Mahabharata* might have taken place about the fourteenth century BC and that this war was for the overlordship of India. For him it is a rich storehouse which is full of a varied, abundant and bubbling life. In his book Nehru has dedicated a relevant length to the discussion of the *Mahabharata*. In his eyes the *Mahabharata* is "one of the outstanding books of the world". He comments:

*It is a colossal work, an encyclopaedia of tradition and legend, and political and social institutions of ancient India. (The Discovery of India, pg.106)*

In the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan* episodes the architecture from Shunga period has been recreated. By doing this the director establishes an intersection between the different periods and in this way he lets us understand how these stories are an integral part of the Indian tradition and find expression in different time frame as well.

The *Ramayana* episode begins with Valmiki's uttering of the shloka and composing *Ramayana*. This episode uses Bhasa's play '*Abhisheka-natak: The Coronation*' till the point of Rama's leaving for the forest on his 14 years exile. Then it shifts to Bhasa's another play '*Pratima-natak: The States*'. The cutting of Surpnakha's nose by Lakshmana has been depicted through the Chhau dance performance. The narrative, then, comes back to Bhasa's play and, then, again the fight between the Garuda-Raj and Ravana is shown through the Chhau dance. The war between Rama and Ravana too has been shown through the Chhau dance. In this way the narrative keeps shifting between the two. But soon the episode shifts from Valmiki's *Ramayana* to another art forms narrating the story of Ram. Here we witness the *Ramkatha* singers from the north enthusiastically praising the virtues of Ram who is being shown as a human and not a god. He is the *Maryada-Purushottam*- someone of infinite purity, self- control, sincerity, affection and boundless love. During the enactment of Bhasa's play '*Abhishek*' Sita is playfully trying out a *valkal-vastra* (arboreal skin) and accosting Ram on his impending *Abhishek* (coronation).

The part 2 of the *Ramayana* (Episode 8) again opens with the praise of the two brothers Ram and Lakshmana in the *Ramkatha* of the north Indian artists. Further in the episode the battle between the man and the demons is shown through the Kathakali performance. Soon the narrative is seen taken forward in the voice of Om Puri. We are informed through the commentary in his voice that the rakshas might have made Ravana their king since

he was a Brahmin and that his being a scholar indicates the 'Aryanization' of the forest-dwellers or rakshas. The war with them was inevitable. Countless demons were killed in the war and the forest was secured for the sages. There are many tales of the killing of the demons in the Epic. The story of Surpnakha is one such story in which her nose and ears were cut off by Lakshmana. On the provocation of his sister Surpnakha, Ravana decides to punish Ram by abducting his wife Sita. Here, there is the enactment of the Act 5 of the play 'Pratima' of the Sanskrit writer Bhasa. The narrative at this point keeps oscillating between the Chau Dance and *Pratimanatak*. In a sage's disguise Ravana meets Rama in his Panchvati cottage where he gets warm hospitality. It is the death anniversary of Ram's father and he asks for suggestions about the rituals from Ravana. Ravana convinces Rama to go away and capture the Swarna Mriga (Himalayan golden deer) and forcefully and openly abducts Sita. The resistance offered by Jatayu, the super-bird and Rama's devotee, and his consequent fight to death comes alive in the Seraikela Chhau style with masks and musical support by flute and Dhamsa (big drum). The *Ramkatha* of the north-Indian artists takes on the narrative from here. The non-Aryans consisted of not only the demons but also the 'vanaras'. The fight between the two rival vanara-kings Vali and Sugriv is again enacted in Seraikela Chhau dance supported by the Ramkatha singing. Ram poses as the representative of the Ayodhya-king Bharata and fights for Sugriv. Then Ram enlists the support of Hanuman to explore Lanka. The burning of Lanka by Hanuman is depicted in a vivid Kathakali performance and the fight between Ram and Ravana is shown by the Seraikela Chhau dance performance. By giving references to or by the direct use of many literary and artistic pieces in the series the director not only adds literary and artistic value to the narrative but at the same time he does not leave it for the audience to trace these references and uses but he in a very responsible way gives this duty to his third person narrator.

These episodes reflect the brilliance of Benegal as a director and an artist. With the help of all of these art forms, written, oral and visual, he keeps the narrative alive and engrossing. In between

all of these performances, the character of Nehru keeps coming and commenting. The comments from Om Puri too keep coming. Here we can relate Benegal's art to Bertolt Brecht's concept of 'V-effect' (The *Verfremdungseffekt*; roughly 'alienation effect'). He seems to agree with Brecht's view that 'theatre should appeal not to the spectator's feelings, but to his reason. Along with the entertainment, it should be didactic and must prove the social change'. The director makes it sure that several important things, like the social-structure of the time, the condition of women etc. are being narrated in the course of the narration of the stories.

After narration, it is the art of characterisation in these episodes which catch our attention. Benegal is very unorthodoxical in his approach here. He undoubtedly differs from the traditional view of Duryodhana as the villain in the *Mahabharata*. Rather he depicts him as a sympathetic character who reflects immense grace in his last hours. He not only admits all his faults but also entrusts his son with the legacy of love and not hate. We find this description of Duryodhana very close to Iravati Karve's '*Yuganta*'. The portrayal of Rama too is very unorthodoxical. He appears to be more human than he was used to be portrayed before. It is quite fascinating here to see that Ram wants to learn the statecraft from Ravana. Nehru considers that the epic Ramayana and many of its legends contain enough grains of truth to abide by in the society. It teaches us truthfulness, keeping one's promises, heroism, and sacrifice. It may be difficult to stick to one's ideal but not insurmountable to achieve. Benegal has looked at the epic in the similar light that Nehru has. He has neither made Ram a God and nor Ravana a demon. Both of these major characters have been kept essentially human.

In the recent years when during the Covid-19 pandemic Doordarshan was telecasting its old classic serials on Ramayana and Mahabharata, people were also demanding the telecasting of Bharat Ek Khoj, but it did not happen so. The script-writer Shama zaidi says in this context: "Ramayana and Mahabharat of Ramanand Sagar and BR Chopra are poor depictions of history. When we were making Bharat Ek Khoj we knew it that this concept was unlikely to be repeated any time soon; so we wanted

to be as accurate as possible. I know Prasar Bharati under the current regime will never air Bharat Ek Khoj as it is inspired by Pandit Nehru's Discovery of India".

### **Conclusion**

The use of literature from different languages, different dance and music forms, and the folklores while keeping Nehru's text as the base is not just a co-incidence. Benegal deliberately chooses all of them to show the integrity of India as a nation. It is all of these things which make India the land it is. He very successfully fulfils government's propaganda for nation-building. But, above than anything, he presents an excellent example of adaptation. He recreates his own stories out of all the stories available to him. However, there has always been a question with the adaptation that during the process of adaptation, the originality is lost. The original text/s are always given primacy and therefore these questions are there. Linda Hutcheon rejects this view by stating: "one lesson is that to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative. Yet... disparaging, opinions on adaptations as a secondary mode-belated and therefore derivative... persists." It is not just a straight history of India that we get in these episodes but it is a cultural history of the country which Benegal presents before us.

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