

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

ANTI-WAR SENTIMENTS IN ANDHA YUG

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ABSTRACT

Can war be the solution of quarrels among humans for property, kingdom and honour? Is war necessary to bring peace and prosperity in the world? Can war be termed as holy or unholy? Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* deals with an array of such questions. Needless to say, innumerable generations of India has grown up listening the story of the Mahabharata war fought in Kurukshetra as it is recorded in the eponymous epic. The epic seems to entrench a view insidiously that wars and slaughter can be holy and participating in carnage is only one's karma. *Andha Yug* can be seen as an eye-opener in this regard. The play takes its readers to the eighteenth day of the war and a couple of decades following it. The readers are made to rethink about the outcome of the 'holy' war. The play poses certain questions exposing the sham belief that wars destroy evil. The events of *Andha Yug* can easily be compared to the partition of Indian subcontinent and post-partition wars between India and Pakistan. Neither the Kurukshetra war nor the partition of India brought peace. Wars merely increase the feelings of disillusionment and hatred among people. Through *Andha Yug*, Dharamvir Bharati attempts to present a war as a war, not as holy or religious or the harbinger of peace.

Keywords: War, honour, destruction, karma, suicide, meaninglessness, neutral, code, moral, blind, existence.

KY PUBLICATIONS

The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the two great Indian epics, have always been closely associated with the consciousness of traditions, folk tales, ethical codes and societal norms of Indian subcontinent. Being full of parables and moral lessons related to the spiritual, social and psychological lives of people, they have continuously remained important sources of inspiration for poets, novelists, and playwrights. They are even adapted into television serials by notable directors, e.g. B.R. Chopra and Ramanand Sagar. And some more eminent filmmakers adapted them for silver screen

with their more changed versions, e.g. Parkash Jha's *Rajneeti* and Mani Ratnam's *Raavan*. Besides inspiring so many annual festivals and dramatic performances, these epics are widely used for the syllabi of lower and higher education across the country.

Much longer than the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* represents the Indian political, social and cultural scenario more closely. Over the last hundred years, the *Mahabharata* is translated into several foreign and Indian languages. Moreover, its smaller incidents and anecdotes have inspired many

literary creations of small and large scale. *Andha Yug*, a play by Dharamvir Bharati, is one of such literary creation inspired from the *Mahabharata*.

Published in 1953, *Andha Yug* is a very significant post-Independence play. It is considered to be a landmark in the history of Indian drama. When dramatized for the first time on the stage, it was immediately hailed as a classic play of highest order. Written just few years after the Partition, it meditates upon the difficult phase of the holocaust which destroyed the lives of millions of people. The play brings the fact into light that the real independence, peace and prosperity cannot be achieved by the means of war or division. Wars cannot resolve effectively the basic existential problems of human lives.

Along with many other languages, *Andha Yug* is translated into English abundantly by various authors. Among these translations, Alok Bhalla's translation of the play seems the best one. Bhalla masterfully captures various dimensions of the argument depicted in the play. Further, he beautifully retains its epic grandeur, and poetic simplicity blended with supreme elegance.

As mentioned earlier, the moral and political issues depicted in *Andha Yug* are relevant even in the twenty-first century. This technocratic age is perhaps the eponymous age of blindness surrounded in the sinister forces of terrorism, corruption, religious fundamentalism, and bloodshed over the issues of community, caste and honour.

The play has a prologue, five acts, an interlude and an epilogue. The prologue begins with an 'Invocation' addressed to Narayana, Saraswati and Vyasa. It is followed by the 'Proclamation' explaining how *Vishnu Purana* mentions the age of darkness that will follow 'the great war,' the strong reason behind the decline of prosperity, dharma and honour from the earth.

In the first act, 'The Kaurava Kingdom,' Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Vidura along with all the citizens of Hastinapur apprehensively wait for Sanjaya who is neutral in the war for what happened in the battlefield in the eighteenth day. Dhritarashtra, though somewhat reluctantly, acknowledges that because of his too much

indulgence his sons have brought destruction to their clan. Gandhari shows deep dissatisfaction towards the ethical concepts of the world. Meanwhile, Vidura unsuccessfully tries to pacify them.

The second act, 'The Making of the Beast,' concentrates on the character of Ashwatthama, one of the three survivors from the Kaurava side, the other two being Kritavarma and Kripacharya. He is enraged because Duryodhana gets shamefully defeated in the war. Victory in the war matters the most to Ashwatthama because of his father's unlawful murder in the same war. He behaves like a beast justifying his actions reasoning that even persons like Yudhishtira chose the side of untruth by speaking half-truths to get advantage in the war. Blinded by anger, he attacks Sanjaya and a Mendicant. Kripacharya and Kritavarma save the former but the latter is strangled to death by Ashwatthama.

'The Half-Truth of Ashwatthama,' the third act, details how from the fight of an owl and a crow Ashwatthama gets the idea to destroy the Pandava army while the soldiers are sleeping. Duryodhana gives his consent to make Ashwatthama the new commander. Meanwhile, Yuyutsu, the only Kaurava who sided with the Pandavas considering their side virtuous, is humiliated in Hastinapur by the citizens and his mother for fighting against his own relatives. Vidura, again unsuccessfully, tries to console Yuyutsu.

The next section, 'Interlude: Feathers, Wheels and Bandages,' explores the ideas of honour, Karma and blindness chosen willingly. This part does not affect the main narrative but as the Mendicant comments it is there to understand the "inner contradictions" of some of the characters who appear as specters in this section (Bharati 90).

The fourth act, 'Gandhari's Curse,' chronicles the destruction of Pandava camp by furious trio of Ashwatthama, Kripacharya and Kritavarma. Gandhari along with Dhritarashtra, Sanjaya and Vidura visits Kurukshetra. Greatly disturbed at the sight of the corpses of his sons and relatives, especially after seeing the carcass of the half-eaten Duryodhana, Gandhari alleges that Krishna is responsible for the war and curses him

with an ordinary death following the destruction of his clan. Krishna accepts the curse and thus making Gandhari even more remorseful.

The fifth act, 'Victory and a Series of Suicides,' is an account of the suicides of Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and some others. Krishna also goes to the forest even after knowing that he would be killed by a hunter in that forest. The suicide of Pandava brothers and Draupadi is hinted upon as Yudhishtira, disillusioned after war and disappointed by the disrespectful behavior of his brothers, decides to go on a pilgrimage on the higher crests of Himalayas.

In 'Epilogue: Death of the Lord,' another invocation is devoted to the Christ-like sacrificial death of Krishna. Sanjaya and Ashwatthama witness Krishna's death by Jara who is reincarnation of wrongfully killed Mendicant. In the end, Chorus comments that with the death of the Lord began the age of darkness that will be full of half-truth and some more great wars.

The author of *Andha Yug* warns the readers against an age of darkness. He wants them to improve themselves because improvement of their souls is the only way out from the encroaching darkness and evil. He implies that there are at least two ways of improvement: the first is learning through one's own experience and the other is learning through others' experience. At the very beginning of the play, the playwright asserts that the story is meant to enlighten its audience. And that enlightenment or improvement is to be achieved through learning from others' experiences in their lives. The story warns us against several types of blindness: spiritual blindness barring the soul from contentment, deliberate blindness causing people not to accept the reality, and many others produced out of the feelings of indulging affection, anger, contempt and jealousy. In 'Proclamation,' the playwright remarks:

This is the story of the blind—

Or of enlightenment

through the life of the blind. (Bharati 26)

Moreover, the concept of honour and dharma is mentioned frequently throughout the play. Vidura reminds Dhritarashtra that all, especially Krishna, forewarned him about the violation of the code of

honour. Gandhari considers these concepts as useless and manipulative. Even the narrator begins the play in the following manner:

Both sides in the war

violated

the code of honour...

the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas. (Bharati 27)

The same violation is perhaps the sole reason behind the end of the *dwapara yug* and the defeat of "whatever is good and gentle and beautiful" (Bharati 27). What makes this concept weak and manipulative is the fact that it remains vague and unspecified from the beginning to the end of the play. Everyone seems to revere it and want to abide by it. However, it is either manipulated by cunning people suiting their own ends or abandoned by people finding it useless. Immensely disappointed Gandhari comments:

I had seen the ways of the world

and knew

that dharma

duty and honour

were illusions.

When the time of reckoning arrives

wisdom and honour

are always useless. (Bharati 37)

She is of the view that hypocrisy directs all these precepts:

Morality, honour, selflessness

and surrender to Krishna

are mere disguises

—masks that cover our blindness. (Bharati 37)

Gandhari fails to notice her own cynicism and double-standard approach regarding this issue. She wants to abandon whatever that is not useful to her sons and whatever comes between their victory in the war. This may be the reason that everybody seeks the usability of these moral codes. Throughout the war, these unspecified codes are brazenly distorted through the use of clever words. Krishna, Sanjaya, Yudhishtira, Ashwatthama and everyone else use words to compensate for the broken code of honour. Moreover, the code of honour seems only the construct of words. Humans seem to mould this code of honour to suit their subjectivity along

with the needs and demands of the times in they are living. In this case, Dhritarashtra frankly admits the reality of his attitudes in his life:

I had spun an illusory world
of dreams and desires and passions
out of the depths of that darkness.
My love, my hate, my law, my dharma
had evolved out of my peculiar world.
(Bharati 33-34)

Similarly, the greatest message of the *Mahabharata* is unnervingly confusing. It tells the mortals to act, to perform their karma and to do righteous deeds. In act 2, the lonely Mendicant recites the words of Krishna to Arjuna that were included in *Bhagawad Gita*:

Truth resides
in the acts
we perform.
What man does
at each moment
becomes his future
for ages and ages....
The meaning of man's existence
lies in the actions he performs
not in the refusal to act. (Bharati 58-59)

But there is intense chaos because there is no distinct demarcation between right and wrong. It is said that action should be inspired from one's dharma and the call of conscience. What if somebody considers that his/her karma is not doing any karma at all? The two guards are addressed as mental slaves because they refrain themselves from any real action. If this be so, then Arjuna is worse than a mere mental slave. The guards are not directed mindlessly in their passivity while Arjuna brushes aside his own opinions and kills thousands of people at the instigation of Krishna. Perhaps the very refusal is his karma that he abandons in the favour of Krishna's karma of making him kill the so-called evil-doers.

Unfortunately, the concept of karma is capable of justifying almost any heinous crime or evil that is possible in this world. Countries can wage wars considering it their karma. People will rob, torment and kill one another claiming it to be their karma. They can easily assert that souls are immortal and they are damaging merely the physical

aspects of a person. Murders can be justified in the name of sending people to supreme soul of Krishna after freeing them from this illusory world created by Maya. This is how Ashwatthama defends himself that he sees no sin in killing others. He formulates his own dharma:

From now on
my only dharma is:
'kill, kill, kill
and kill again!'
Let that be
the final purpose
of my existence! (Bharati 54)

Not only Ashwatthama who refuses to take the responsibility of his actions, there are certain other characters who blame others for their own actions. Nobody contemplates their own motives for taking part in the war. There arise so many questions when we find no person ready to take the responsibility of the atrocities occurred in the war. How the war started in the first place? Is it simply happened while no one wanted it to happen? Is the war the only option to restore dharma and honour? Do Pandavas participate in the war only for the sake of righteousness? Do the Kauravas get involved in the war just to claim their right on the throne? Or they desperately want to teach the Pandvas for being somewhat superior in everything and being favoured by the elders of the Hastinapur. And perhaps Pandavas want to check the level of their powers. Still, they blame each other for their ruin. They do not mention their own sadistic inclinations, but curse Krishna for not stopping the war. They are doing their karma to much extent willingly, yet assert that others urged them and so they are not responsible for the havoc that accompanied the war. It is easy for Gandhari not to analyze her own role and to curse Krishna saying, "If you wanted/you could have stopped the war" (Bharati 122).

It is quite easy to blame a word (i.e. God) for the foul actions of humans. The major character with considerable supernatural powers in *Andha Yug* is Krishna. His thoughts and opinions are verbalized for only once. Rest of the time, he is merely reported by various characters, namely Sanjaya, the Mendicant, Vidura, Yuyutsu etc. If the mythic structure of the play inspired from its originating

epic is overlooked, Krishna seems perfectly human. His humanitarian attempts to avoid the war fail and he reluctantly finds himself with one of the warring sides. They use his name to veneer their own hatred and insensitivity. The Kauravas continually evade accepting their own complicity in evil while they continue to dismiss Krishna as a war-loving, capricious and manipulative god. Bhalla, in his introductory preface to his own translated version *Andha Yug*, comments on the attitude of the Kauravas taking Ashwatthama as leverage:

Ashwatthama embodies what the Kauravas have stood for all along—ambition instead of peace, power instead of companionship, avoidance of responsibility instead of justice, contempt for everything instead of hope for the well being of all things. (Bhalla 11)

There is only one shadowy appearance of Krishna and only once he directly speaks for himself in the whole play. If we judge him by his talk to Gandhari, he seems benevolent, loving, sincere, sensitive and caring. He not only accepts the wrongfully inflicted curse by Gandhari but also takes responsibility of all the good and evil deeds, the only person to take some kind of responsibility for his own and others' actions. Although when the Chorus says that "the wars that gods promote" (Bharati 44), we are enticed to agree with Shakespeare's immortal lines that appear in *King Lear* (Act 4, Scene 1, lines 36-37), "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, /they kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare 77). But we have to be courageous enough to take the responsibility of our own actions. We cannot expect some imaginary creatures all the time to take this burden for us.

Although every character in the play shows some awareness of the futility of human actions, desires, and motives, but the two old guards seems highly aware of this futility. They know that they are guarding nothing valuable and indeed nothing is valuable in this world. Still they march up and down the desolate corridors of the Hastinapur palace all their lives. Chorus mistakenly calls them "the two old guards with the mentality of slaves" perhaps misdirected from their own statements acknowledging that they have no opinions and faith and subsequently they make no choices (Bharati

161). This cannot be true because they have opinions because they think and comment upon the conditions belonging to their rulers and other people. Moreover, they made choices though they are slave. They choose to stay slave, whether it is mental slavery of not changing their attitude to life or physical slavery of not leaving the place where they lead purposeless and meaningless lives.

The old guards could have opted to rebel against the authorities for making them march endlessly day after day in the dark corridors. Strangely, they stick to their mundane job. They can be interpreted as the most stoic and enlightened persons who impart the spiritual message that eventually we have to accept the commonality and ordinariness of our lives. Life is meaningless and trying to find meaning and purpose in it is a meaningless project. Contrary to them, people with purpose, honour and faith are tormented by the very possession of these phenomena: Some of them like Yuyutsu think that they lived their lives for a wrong purpose, the likes of Yudhishtira feels betrayed as they find their desired destination agonizing and the so called detached and neutral like Sanjaya and Krishna are never at peace. Aware of this meaninglessness, the two guards continue to live with a stoic attitude, while others who realized their existential meaninglessness in the hard way attempt suicide. The guards use a very important existential refrain throughout the play:

All our actions
are meaningless.
Our faith
our decisions
our courage
our lives
are meaningless
utterly meaningless. (Bharati 29)

The burden of existence is not that easy to endure. In Act 3, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, the eponymous character expresses his qualm about living in this world, "To be, or not to be? That is the question..." (Shakespeare 59). Everything humans do in their lives is essentially meaningless. Whether they live for hundred years or twenty years, the end is inevitable. Nothing is permanent. So-called footprints of name and fame produced by mighty or

good deeds do not last forever. Cosmic reality belittles everything that is earthly or humanly for that matter. The play under consideration explores the same unsavory truth. Life seems a curse to most of the characters in *Andha Yug*. They are either dissatisfied with the present situation of their lives or compelled to choose death after realizing the futility of their lives. At a point in the play, Ashwatthama thinks aloud:

Should I commit suicide?
At least I shall be released
From this impotent existence.
Even if I were to burn
in the fires of hell
I would not
have to endure
so much torment. (Bharati 53)

When considered deeply, *Andha Yug* is essentially an anti-war play. It undoubtedly deals with other themes such as spiritual blindness and subsequent degeneration before the advent of mythic Kali yug, dehumanization during a holocaust, blurred boundaries between right and wrong in critical times, meaninglessness of life, justification of violence in the name of religion etc. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the anti-war sentiments occupy the central place in the play.

In addition to the massacre in battles, there is a massive collateral damage of the great Mahabharata war. The ecological balance gets imbalanced because of the use of lethal weapons in the war. Future generation gets affected for centuries. Innumerable innocent citizens supporting the soldiers from outside the battlefield are killed. Vidura's description of one of such killings is the best example of this mindless and blind slaughter:

When children, old men, and servants
ran out in terror
Kritavarma's arrows
cut them down.
Frightened elephants
trumpeted wildly
smashed the tents
and trampled the women
sleeping inside
to death. (Bharati 99)

Directed by the feelings of hatred, jealousy and contempt, humans are allured to think that war can bring solutions to their material-cum-existential problems. The playwright strongly gives his message that wars provide no solutions, temporary or permanent. Ironically, they create some more problems. *Andha Yug* borrows some of the incidents from one of the great epics, the *Mahabharata*. It takes readers into the middle of the eighteenth day of the great Kurukshetra war supposed to annihilate adharma from the world. A plethora of events have already been passed that led to the war. They are not included because the playwright seems to highlight the conclusion of the war. What happened after the victory of 'dharma/virtue'? Do the remaining humans get into the state of lived-happily-ever-after?

In reality, the new rulers lose their peace and sensitivity after this large-scale slaughter. Yudhishtira is the most representative of the disillusionment even after getting the desperately-desired victory. He finds that it was nothing more than a kind of self-destruction:

And what is
victory then?
Is that not also
a long and slow act
of suicide? (Bharati 143)

He finds himself dejected, spiritless and helpless. He is disappointed to observe his brothers behaving ignorantly and foolishly. Some of them have become arrogant and intellectually dull and some other are "grown old and weary" prematurely (Bharati 127). The statement by chorus regarding the war beautifully sums up the whole anti-war argument using the character of Yudhishtira:

Day by day Yudhishtira grew increasingly dejected.

slowly he lost faith in everything
hope in everything
and in the ever-increasing darkness
understood that his *victory in war was hollow*. (Bharati 127)

It can be easily inferred from the growing decadent state of the new rulers that the end of the war is not a happy one for even those are victorious in it. It is not just the character of Yudhishtira that

represents the hollowness of the result of war, all other characters equally represent its grim outcomes to more or less extent. Gandhari, who loses ninety-nine of her sons, can be even stronger character to represent the havoc that a war wreaks upon the participants and their relatives. To cite Gandhari in the context of after-war scenario of Hastinapur:

Suicide
violence
adharma
and family strife
have grown
a hundredfold
all the cities and forests. (Bharati 140)

Therefore, a war cannot be justified in the name of religion, gods, truth or honour. Nobody can claim that war is necessary, in some incomprehensible divine way, to maintain peace, dharma and prosperity in the world. The attempts to destroy 'evil' or 'vice' from the surface of the earth are illogical and nonsensical as virtue and vice are intricately entwined in human nature. There exists no pure form of any of them. *Andha Yug* asserts this point of view unequivocally.

The Kurukshetra war, occurred to settle down the dispute of the succession of the throne of Hastinapur, can be compared to the partition of Indian subcontinent in the summer of 1947. There was a similar kind of genocidal civil war in the country between the two major religious sects of the country. Does that division or murder of about a million people brought peace and prosperity in India? The answer is simple that people were killed and peace became a mirage never to be achieved in the future ages. Besides continual blame-game, the fact that precious human lives were butchered brutally remains unpalatable yet true. In his heart-rending novel about partition, *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh remarks:

Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured....
(Singh 1)

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