

# MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE

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# MAHABHARATA MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING : CHALLENGING IDEOLOGY

KIRAN BUDKULEY

Myths have always fascinated the creative mind of writers and challenged their critical faculty. This preoccupation with myth—whether to create a new one or to reconstruct the old—can be gauged by understanding the relation between the authorial intent behind myths and their functionality as cultural documents within a continually ‘shifting’ societal reality. In creating a new myth, an author puts his/her own intention to work through the myth visualised, whereas in the case of re-construction of extant myths, the palpable functions embodied within the original myth are questioned, challenged, substituted, negated, reversed or re-focused.

Generally, seen as “*a traditional story in a pre-literate society, dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors and heroes that serve as types in a primitive view of the world*”<sup>1</sup>, myth is also the creation of an evolved, literate culture constituted many a time of ‘fictions or half-truths forming part of the ideology of a society: a notion based more on tradition or conveniences than fact.’<sup>2</sup> It is in this latter sense that myths continue to inspire/provoke the contemporary writer’s creative impulse and pose for him/her the challenge of analysing, questioning, countering or subverting their apparent and/or concealed ideology by re-working or re-visioning the myth/s in question.

The Mahabharata is among the most potent and consistent of all bodies of mythologia that have affected the imagination and resourcefulness of the Indian writer's creativity. The reasons are obvious: these myths have been in circulation for over 5000 years across the length and breadth of the country; they have withstood innumerable interpolations and revisions; they have made inroads into almost all major languages of the world and into the vast bhasha literatures of India; they have percolated down the oral tradition to capture the imagination of generations of ordinary, illiterate Indians as being inviolate and unquestionable paradigms of beliefs and ideals. Above all, recited / narrated religiously in homes and outside, they have an aura of sacredness and so of authority in the social psyche.

Therefore, it is easy to understand why contemporary writers from all walks of life and practically all major languages of India have been drawn irresistibly to espouse these myths in various modes of themes and techniques. Often, such an espousal involves the use of innovative strategies of mutation of the tale befitting the changed socio-political context as in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* or of the resourceful re-structuring of a select myth, as in Uday Bhemre's Konkani play *Karnaparva* offering perceptions—different from those held by traditional thinking but—relevant in the contemporary societal and cultural scenario. It is a commonly held belief that every theme and issue of human relevance has been already taken up by the megamyth that is the Mahabharata. Hence, the scope as also the variety of thematic transmutations and/or of ideological re-directions emerging out of this imposing corpus of myths is formidable. So is the critical challenge to analyse/elucidate them. The present paper attempts to meet this challenge.

Nonetheless, to arrive at a rational analysis of this phenomenon, it is essential to have a workable definition of the term 'myth' in place, along with some of its prominent functions spelt out by scholarly critics. William Righter points out that most definitions of the term "exist at a very high level of generality", and have "the multiple nature of the subject built into them", but that "There is usually agreement on the factor of narrative."<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine). Warren and Wellek<sup>4</sup> also opine that, "myth is narrative, irrational... story-telling of origins and destinies,

*the explanations... of why the world is and why we do as we do*". Interestingly, they also emphasise, "*its pedagogic images of nature and destiny of man*" understandably woven into these awe-inspiring narratives so as to disseminate desired notions/beliefs/ideals in the social psyche.

In the case of larger-than-life myths like those of the Mahabharata, it is easy to see why such 'pedagogic images' are uncritically accepted and how they eventually grow to be the societal norm. For one, the sheer extent, intensity and the reiteration of the myths projecting these images is enormous in form, content as well as frequency of narrative, portrayal or performance. Secondly, as Sri Aurobindo has observed, along with the Ramayana, the *Mahabharata has been spoken of as the fifth Veda. It has been said of both these poems that they are not only great poems but dharmashastras, ... and their effect and hold on the mind and the life of people have been so great that they have been described as the Bible of the Indian people.*<sup>5</sup> (emphasis mine). Hence, these pedagogic images are almost immune from any critique or query.

As such, in the course of time, this epic poem whether in the original Sanskrit or re-written in the regional languages, brought to the masses by *Kathkas*—rhapsodists, reciters, exegetes—"*became one of the chief instruments of popular education and culture, moulded the thought, character, aesthetic and religious mind of the people and gave even to the illiterate some sufficient tincture of philosophy, ethics, social and political ideas...*"<sup>6</sup> among other things. Little wonder then that, it has captured the mind and the soul of the nation like no other work in the written or oral tradition could do. In it generations have found venerable ideals and indispensable notions of '*dharma*'. Naturally, a certain halo of inviolate glory has come to shroud much of its precepts and perceptions. Thus, this citadel of 'pedagogic images' could have almost been impervious to challenge.

Yet, fortunately, the Mahabharata has never been the sacrosanct religious text, in the strictest sense of the term, in being closely guarded and zealously secured against any changes or even interpolations into the original narrative. Thanks to the daring resourcefulness of the contemporary writers, as Kanishka Chaudhary has rightly observed, "The Mahabharata has not existed merely as a

closed text. It has undergone numerous forms of revisions. Its meanings have been constantly re-interpreted and revised.”<sup>7</sup> Jaidev endorses and explicates this view through his observation that, “The reason why the *Mahabharata* and other myths have been an obsession with a considerable number of our novelists and playwrights, is that these still occupy our collective unconscious and affect us through their ideology.”<sup>8</sup>

Here, it is necessary to specify the term ‘ideology’ in the present context. The Random House Dictionary<sup>9</sup> defines it as, ‘*the body of doctrine, myth, etc. with reference to some political and cultural plan along with the devices for putting it into operation*’ or as, ‘*visionary or impractical theorising*’. Other relevant definitions are as: ‘*The body of ideas reflecting the needs and aspirations of an individual, group or culture*’, and ‘*a set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic, or other system*’. Terry Eagleton defines it as: ‘*The way in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in... not simply the deeply entrenched often unconscious beliefs held, but rather... more particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving, believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power.*’<sup>10</sup>

The above definitions demonstrate how and why ideology—as doctrine/s with a politico-cultural plan and inherent operational strategies—secured against a perfectly patterned mythology grows to be closed and authoritarian with time. Yoked to the supposedly ‘*inviolable*’ position of the myth, the locus standi of the ideology can also go unchallenged even though it may have grown out of tune ‘*with the needs and aspirations*’ of the group/culture for which it was meant in the first place. Moreover, its inherent capacity for ‘*visionary and impractical theorising,*’ often serves the vested interests to hold the gullible and the uncritical minds under their sway and secure their own positions of power whether in domestic or societal institutions/hierarchies by commanding unquestioned compliance with authority and perpetuation of regime.

To oppose and/or expose such authoritarian and discriminatory ideology is to break its spell upon the popular mind and thereby, render it ineffectual. For this, it becomes necessary for the writer to identify

the supportive mythic structures and, in re-narrating them, to reconstruct their irrational, uncritical pedagogic images so as to demythify the ideology. This, to a large extent, releases the suppressed historicity and thereby helps contextualise the subtle discourse underlying the ideological strait-jacket and helps replace the vision of abstract mythopoeia with the perceptions of the palpable reality. This, in turn, exposes/counters the discriminatory power structures vested in the polarity of centre and the margins, as also those rooted in preferential gender bias. In other words, this subverts the dominance of the partisan and/or prejudicial patriarchal/elitist hierarchies by setting the collective unconscious of the social psyche free from the intellectual bondage of generations together.

The most exemplary display of such strategies of resistance can be effected when the myths in question have assumed awesome proportions of ideological hold on society. That explains why the *Mahabharata* is the most challenged of the 'revered texts'. Whenever its myths have been found wanting to function in tune with the practical needs of an evolving society or to satisfy rational queries, they have been accosted by an intellectually alert and critical mind. Particularly, if the superimposed ideology or interpolation in question is the creation of vested interests, the functionality of the myth in question has been found suspect and it has been duly subverted. Several contemporary re-renderings show just how the functionality of the original myth is put on the mat.

Talking of the functionality of myths, Peter Calvecorossi maintains that they justify '*a particular view of a particular society*'. When this view does not coincide with the lived reality of the society in question, it has got to be altered. According to Durkheim, '*the function of myth is to bind a society, create a structure governed by rules and habits*', whereas for Sorel, it is '*to direct energies and inspire action ... only by embodying a dynamic vision of the movement of life, the more potent because not rational, and therefore not subject to criticism and refutation... compounded of images that... affect men... as a ferment of the soul...*' (emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup> With the passage of time and the shift in ethos these functions tend to become impositions of obsolete norms born of irrational and sterile vision, more so because they

abhor being questioned. This could portend a dangerous outcome for the social psyche if they are not refuted and allowed to go unchallenged by reason.

This applies very much to the Mahabharata because, as maintained earlier, if there is any single organised corpus of mythology that has held unparalleled sway over the collective psyche of India for centuries, nay, for several millennia, it is undoubtedly the Mahabharata. In this sense, this corpus closely fulfils Harry Shaw's assessment of the functions of myth that, '*A myth usually attempts to explain a phenomenon or strange occurrence without regard to scientific fact or so-called common sense*', and of its appeal '*to emotion rather than to reason*'.<sup>12</sup> Woven around the fulcrum of the 'war among the Kurus', it is not only the story of the Bharatas, the epic of an early event which had become a natural tradition '*but on a vast scale the epic of the soul and religious and social mind and political ideas and culture and life of India*'.<sup>13</sup>

Herein lies the latent danger that can come to a society through a mythology that is so deeply entrenched in the collective psyche of a nation and that continues to affect the public mind for generations to come. It contains all those propensities which have driven censure on myths from eminent critics like Roland Barthes. He perceptively explains how, '*Myth does not deny things, its function on the contrary is to speak of them; quite simply it purifies them and makes them innocent, fixes them in nature and eternity, gives them a clarity which is not of explanation but of statement...it abolishes the complexity of human nature; gives it elemental simplicity...*'.<sup>14</sup>

It is in this latter sense that the Mahabharata myths, such as those relating to Ekalavya's *gurudakshina* to Dronacharya, Karna's dubious status as *sutaputra*, the heartlessly glorified burning of the *Khandavaprastha*, the tragic sacrifice of Ghatotkacha during the Kuru War, the sensationalism of Draupadi *vastraharana*, etc. have provoked inquiry. They have egged the writer on to expose the in-built pedagogic images of the meek peripheral *shishya* complying with an awfully unjust demand; of the marginalised hero denied his due on the unjust basis of birth of the humbled, dislocated peripheral tribes making room for the coloniser; of the alienated progeny exploited to preserve patriarchy; of invention of miracles to explain away the compromise of womanly



dignity. In the light of these willy-nilly vehicles of ideology, select texts help uncover the strategies of iconoclasm and conformity used to address the challenge of re-visioning images and issues to counter ideology from contemporarily relevant perspectives.

Shashi Tharoor seems to be speaking for a host of fellow writers when he confesses that '*The Mahabharata struck me as a work of such contemporary resonances that it helped crystallise my own inchoate ideas about issues.*'<sup>15</sup> This observation underscores the universal relevance of the central issues within the epic, despite its constricting ideological trappings. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor oscillates between a tongue-in-cheek parody of character and event and a poignant nostalgia for timeless values, to steer clear of the temptation for conformity on the one hand and the compulsion for iconoclasm on the other. Operating with the history-fiction interface, Tharoor subsumes the relevant characters and themes of the epic into his narrative so as to allegorise the contemporary times, events and predicaments. This mythic transmutation within a contemporary context offers an insightful vision for contemporary India. As his Yuddhishtira says, '*Derive your standards from the world around you and not from a heritage whose relevance must be constantly tested. Reject equally the sterility of ideologies and the passionate prescriptions of those who think themselves infallible. Uphold decency, worship humanity, affirm the basic values of our people—those which do not change—leave the rest alone. Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one Dharma...*'<sup>16</sup>.

Almost echoing Tharoor's view of the epic, S. L. Bhyrappa opines that: '*The Mahabharata is like the Himalayas and that every artist views it from his own point of view and portrays it in his own way.*'<sup>17</sup> Admitting that in writing his magnum opus *Parva*, '*his basic intention was not to re-write the Mahabharata but to seek answers to some of the haunting questions in life, such as Death, Sexuality and human relationships*', he has only underscored the timeless potential of the epic<sup>18</sup> to provide the panoramic stage to seek answers to moral and psychological issues. Yet distrusting the ideology bound to an irrational mythologia therein, he has carefully contextualised his kaleidoscopic narrative with years of painstaking research and field work. Tempering it with fiction he has historicised the myth and so subverted some of the most cherished notions guarded under the inviolate umbrella term *dharma*. His

commentator, touchstone as well as interpreter of this *dharma* is none other than the wise, benevolent but wily Krishna, imbued with an impressive practicality and denuded of all *irrational divinity* which tradition had bestowed on him. In releasing his Krishna from the bonds of irrational idealism and superhuman capacity, Bhyrappa has succeeded in creating a human, fallible, rational and therefore reliable inner voice for the reader to depend on and believe in.

To counter the ideology of patriarchal and hierarchical dominance of the privileged sections over the peripheral elements—such as women, domestics, subaltern tribes—at the hands of a centralised authority—arbitrarily and selectively invested into institutions, norms and individuals—the novelist has often carved out insightful fictional scenes in tune with the likely lived reality of the times. These revolve around the minor characters such as Ekalavya, Hidimba, Hiranyawati, Satyaki, Kamsa's nurse and draw attention to major issues such as the importance of subcultures, the crisis of identity, the ethicality and the justice of *niyoga*, the convenient view of paternity taken by the vested interests, the notion of patrilineal inheritance, the ugly custom of bride price, the status of *swayamwara* among the royal clans of Aryavarta and so on.

In fact, in one of the most pivotal of post-war scenes ever invented the novelist creates an imaginary encounter between Draupadi and Kunti after the annihilation of the Kuru clan on the backdrop of the fictive celebration of child birth in a working class family. This pitting of personalities and scenes draws attention to the unjust and ironical impositions on women to function as child-bearing contraptions whenever the lineage of the 'clan' is in peril, irrespective of the woman's physical, emotional and psychological condition at the given moment. The novelist offers a thought-provoking perspective on these issues—buried in the mythology coated *itihasa* of the epic—and provides a rational re-interpretation of the revered/unquestioned *dharma* fed with tokenism by Yuddhishtir but met with the bold revolutionary stance of Krishna.

A far cry from the iconoclasm of *Parva* is the conformist attitude of Vi.Sa.Khandekar who professes that the main myth is sacrosanct and so his *Yayati* does not pick on the entire epic. He re-works this minor episode into an independent novel. While conforming to the

high values upheld by the major characters, he opines that these noble characters are to be untouched and that fundamentally changing them would be improper. However, he brooks no such conformity with the minor episodes/character and believes that altering them or their tales drastically would not tantamount to creative sacrilege.

Confessing that he invented much of the plot of *Yayati* and created characters, Khandekar has admitted to having written this work 'with an inspiration from *Yayati's* character. The decade from 1942-52 was demonstrative of a strange metamorphosis in India as also in the world. Material progress and ethical fall went hand in hand... Ordinary man had become like *Yayati*. Blind quest for enjoyment became his creed.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, he was in search of lost ideals and felt a select myth could provide the scope to project them in the garb of a newly invented fiction. So he revisits the myth to uphold traditional values and propagates conformation so as to fulfil his authorial obligation in the contemporary fall of man.

Along with Khandekar's *Yayati*, a mention must be made of a much later play by Girish Karnad also titled *Yayati* which subverts this myth of self-centred gratification of senses to pose eternal questions linked to human destiny, will and relevance of life itself. Like Khandekar, Karnad also takes liberties with the myth to create potentially new characters but bends the plot to reveal the pathos in the life of Puru's wife after he has exchanged his own youth with his father's old age. Where, Khandekar has used the device of a happy end to drive his vision home, Karnad has shaken the reader/spectator's very faith in justice and humanity for the same purpose.

In the same decade as Khandekar, Dharamveer Bharati was also re-visioning a select episode of the epic. His play *Andha Yug* focuses exclusively on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the war and destiny of the survivors vis-à-vis Krishna's character in absentia embodying Dharma. Puppet-like characters failing to understand their predicament and the nature of Truth symbolise the blind generation of sceptical/homicidal/inhuman/passive/suicidal victims of the war ethos and pathos. Highly significant is Bharati's confession of the undeniable '*intoxication to take up the challenge of the howling ocean of darkness... exposing oneself to all kinds of perils to salvage and bring to earth a few grains of life, truth, restraint...*'<sup>20</sup>

It highlights the mental trauma and excitement of the author who dares—perhaps inevitably—to pick up the gauntlet of re-working the grand vision of the timeless epic.

Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi* has been another attempt to subvert in no uncertain terms the patriarchal excesses committed on a defenceless female. Treated as no better than an object or at best as a chattel slave, Madhavi's fate is to be negotiated or decided by no lesser arbitrators than the powerful agents of patriarchy. Selecting a marginalised tale of womanly woe, Sahni exposes the inhuman practices of reification of the female subtly concealed under the seemingly harmless, ethical, even noble cause of repaying *gurudakshina* by a *shisya*. Suppressed under the unequal burden of male ego and unlimited masculine ambition for sexual, political, as well as spiritual power, Madhavi becomes an emblem of victimisation but also the icon of resistance. Rented out as a blessed womb capable of procreating *chakravartis* and bartered like a beast for celestial and earthly gains by furiously self-centred males, the saga of Madhavi is handled by Sahni with sympathy and understanding, but also with respect. In the end she develops the courage and self-respect to refuse the man whose egotistic promise to his guru is instrumental in her ruthless exploitation as a specialised child-bearing machine.

Ravindra Kelekar's *Mahabharat : Ek Anusarjan*, and P. Lal's *The Mahabharat of Vyas* belong together in being the re-renderings of Vyasa's epic. Kelekar's professed transcreation confesses to be faithful to Bhandarkar's authenticated version of the original story. But that is about all. The lucid and confessedly '*cleansed and scrubbed*'<sup>21</sup> tale, told in a simple prose narrative, brooks no irrational or divine aspect of the theme or character to go without comment. Admitting that the epic is an encyclopaedia of multiple strands of religious and philosophical thought in our tradition, he strives to explicate them in a rational way. Several schools of thought that find a place in the epic have been touched upon by him in his introduction, while "*pragyaavad*" and "*karmayog*" have been elaborately dwelt upon in the appendices. At every relevant stage he discusses episodes/ ideologies

which are extraneous to the verified version, even when he does not include them as authentic. This helps the unsuspecting reader to gauge the inroads made by superfluous ideologies and thereby to reject them out of hand.

Wherever Kelekar suspects interpolation, he reverts to what he believes to be the authentic version, elucidating with great care and evidence why the left-out version is unacceptable and unlikely to be authoritative. Rational analysis/argument is always used by him in preferring one interpretation over another, particularly when the temptation to go with one for emotional reason is great. For instance, Karna's so-called insult by Draupadi for being *sutaputra*, is something several modern fiction writers like Shivaji Savant have exploited for its dramatic potential. But Kelekar prefers rational interpretation to meaty drama.

With great precision he shows how such an insult is unlikely considering that Karna's name figures among those of the fallen Kshatriyas who cannot lift the bow. Again, referring to the objection, raised in the epic by the Kshatriyas, to Arjuna—concealed as a Brahmin—being garlanded by Draupadi and its refutation by Dhristadhyumna—saying that there was no pre-condition of caste laid when the *swayamwara* was announced—Kelekar goes on to show with adequate evidence how Karna's insult was unlikely in the circumstances. This may disappoint our self-righteous preference to see the subaltern marginalised but obviously Kelekar lays greater emphasis on rational fact-finding within mythic narratives rather than on dramatic appeal of a sensational event.

The above discussion will help to illustrate how even rational re-narration can act as a device of critical questioning which can steer the reader clear of the irrational make believe or the superstitious hearsay. This requires undaunted iconoclasm backed by thought, argument and evidence offered by years of diligent study. For instance, several divine interventions or miraculous occurrences such as the one in the *vastraharana* episode or the manifestation of Krishna's divine form on the battlefield reciting the Gita are firmly cast aside by Kelekar as untenable in his own revision. So also are

the dramatised narratives in the original epic pertaining to class, tribe and gender discrimination critiqued by Kelekar whenever he is convinced that they are coloured by interpolated discourse that brooks no rational support.

P. Lal's *The Mahabharata of Vyas* too has been described by Shashi Tharoor as a transcreation and has been heartily acknowledged as a reliable and beautiful re-rendering of the epic. In his lucid and enticing narrative, the author has scrupulously separated the grain from the husk and his guiding principle has been the relevance of the re-told version to our own life and times. In what could be conceived as the highest tribute to Lal's creativity acumen, his comment that, '*the essential Mahabharata is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the twentieth century. No epic, no work of art, is sacred by itself if it does not have meaning for me now; it is nothing, it is dead,*'<sup>22</sup> is quoted by Tharoor as an epigraph to his own novel. Lal's comment by itself as also its significant employment by Tharoor, are sufficient evidences in themselves of the iconoclasm employed by Lal to defeat irrelevant ideology with which the epic is replete.

An interesting re-construct of a chosen incident from the epic is Uday Bhembre's Konkani play *Karnaparva*. It focuses on the celebrated strategy of Krishna of sending Kunti to Karna on the eve of the war claiming to be his natural mother and pleading with the great warrior to return with honour to the side of the Pandavas assured of the glory of the throne and Draupadi as future consort. Bhembre upholds the traditional stance of Karna of refusing this opportunistic offer. But he adds an unexpected twist to the tale. He weaves the fiction of Kunti not being Karna's mother at all and highlights her heroic sacrifice 'to mother' him only to avert the war. The play creates in the character of Krishna a sympathetic confidante who alone knows the truth. The play seems to emphasise the undesirability of fratricidal war and throws into relief the all-out effort of a selfless Kunti to put her immaculate reputation at stake by gallantly embracing a *sutputra* and with him even the stigma of unwed motherhood towards a larger end.

Another fictional re-construct centred on the unfortunate, peripheral character of Karna is Shivaji Savant's Marathi novel *Mrityunjay*. In re-interpreting this character, the novelist has retold the entire story so as to instil a grandeur and nobility into this victim of

fate and discrimination. Thereby, the novelist's poignant re-construct of the hero's saga renders a tragic dimension to the predicament of this alienated hero. Savant has tactfully employed a kaleidoscopic narration infusing multiple psychological view points in the retold tale so as to offer a wide perspective to the reader. In support of his chosen defence of the protagonist, the novelist has provided minute factual details from the epic and created some intense fictional scenes to help pin on the sympathetic implications without undermining fully the traditionally inviolate status of the epic.

Further, the author has thrown issues of legitimacy of birth, social stigma of unwed mothers, oppressive aspects of the institution of marriage, self-respect of the underdog as also the notions of justice and righteousness into focus, stressing all through the narrative the peripheral—almost pariah like—position of his protagonist. In projecting such an alienated predicament, the novelist has been able to puncture the myth of calibre and high birth and expose the pliant position of values. Yet his iconoclasm is able to retain the essential iota of conformity to the basic values of life represented in the original epic by the characters of Krishna, Bhishma, and Kunti.

In hindsight, it can be said that Savant manages the difficult balancing act between iconoclasm and conformity rather well without exposing the seams of his creative prowess. In so doing, this resourceful writer holds up for scrutiny the dilemma of the contemporary creative writer: how a sacred text such as the Mahabharata can brook all kinds of creative tinkering and yet remain almost intact and integral at the core. In managing this tightrope walk gracefully, he has passed through the horns of the dilemma proving a point to blinkered conservative puritans.

Iravati Karve, the well-known Marathi scholar, has provided in her reputed study<sup>23</sup> a tree diagram showing the branching out of the epic since ancient times. But the trend of bold re-readings so common today is clearly traceable to Bhasa's Sanskrit play of the classical era, namely, *Urubhanga*. Bhasa's trend of questioning the ethical correctness of action, however exigent, is continued by generations of non-conformist writers who have dared to come out with their own reading of a questionable act or unacceptable thinking. Each of these readings see the reality in

the light of contemporary perceptions, identify incongruent thinking, provide space to the marginal and place in perspective this great myth often as a re-constructed historical text. Could one justify the enormity of these several endeavours down the ages?

Perhaps, if we agree with Tharoor's Yuddhishtir. He has the last word when he says, *'India is eternal... But the dharma appropriate for it at different stages of its evolution has varied... If there is one thing that is true today, it is that there are no classical varieties valid for all times... for too many generations now we have allowed ourselves to believe India has all the answers, if only it applied them correctly. Now I realise we don't even know all the questions... No more certitudes... Accept doubt and diversity. Let each man live by his own code of conduct, so as long he has one.'*<sup>24</sup> Herein, then, lies the explanation for the perennial questioning and the justification for the constant re-working of the Mahabharata mythology. On the one hand, the irreverent iconoclasm exploding mythic paradigms breaks the shackles of ideological conditioning for good. Thereby, it gives voice to the long-suppressed aspirations of the vast majority across the margins clamouring silently for truth and ethics. In so doing, it empowers the deprived and the marginal to live by their own 'code of conduct'. On the other hand, the conformist compliance with the status quo encoded in the stream of mythology, helps sustain the stray individual's faith in human values embodied in the epic.

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