



## REVISITING THE MAHABHARATA: ARUN KOLATKAR'S SARPA SATRA

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### Article Info:

Article Received:06/08/2013

Revised on: 21/08/2013

Accepted on: 22/08/2013

### ABSTRACT

*The present paper is an attempt to examine Arun Kolatkar's revisit to the epic The Mahabharata in his poem Sarpa Satra (2004). Kolatkar's poem demythifies two myths: the 'Khandava Forest' in which the incineration of Khandava Forest was carried out by Krishna and Arjuna with their divine weapons and also the 'Snake Sacrifice' where king Janamejaya decides to avenge the assassination of his father Parikshita by the snake Takshaka by performing the Snake Sacrifice, which would drive all the snakes in the world and kill them in the sacrificial fire called Sarpa Satra. The poet questions the moral authority of the ruler whose irrational action becomes 'cause for concern indeed for the future of the country in question'. Such a ruler who brings the betterment of the country in danger is fit either for punishment or banishment. The poet further exposes the rampant corruption, mindless violence in the form of commercial riots and a swarm of disruptive activities that go non-stop in all parts of India. The burning of the Khandava Forest by Lord Krishna and Arjuna leads to a severe ecological loss: '--nothing was left, not a trace of that great sanctuary---' (p. 43). For Kolatkar, Aastika turns out to be 'the last vestige of humanity' as he can bring about harmony between the rulers and the ruled. Kolatkar sees in the practice of snake sacrifice the threat of the extinction of the entire Naga species which is nothing but the satirical mimicry of the institution of the yajna. In Janmejaya's 'swift and terrible' vengeance and in his resolve to exterminate all Naga people, one can hear the disturbing echoes of the ruthless machinery of the modern State. Takshaka has been shown as a 'scheming' terrorist, who has 'all the cunning of its kind to get past/the complex shield of the defences'. (p. 19) In Janmejaya's mindless sacrificial fire, Kolatkar witnesses the possibility of the ultimate human annihilation. The poet's revisit to these myths from The Mahabharata helps him expose the stark and naked realities of follies and foibles, avarice and animus, trickery and stratagem, duplicity and diplomacy, lust and lechery, selfishness and sacrifice, retribution and retreat, temptations and machinations, conspiracies and candidness of the present.*

**Keywords:** mythification and demythification, sacrifice, duplicity and diplomacy, corruption and commercial riots, environmental concern, racial discrimination, terrorism.

As P. Lal himself remarks, "The essential of 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 doesn't have meaning for me now, it is dead." (*Littcrit* (June/Dec.1990). Therefore, Arun Kolatkar, being the poet of the modern sensibility, exploits the myths from the Mahabharata in his poem, *Sarpa Satra* (2004) like 'Snake Sacrifice' where king Janamejaya decides to avenge the assassination of his father Parikshit by the snake Takshaka by performing the Snake Sacrifice, which would drive all the snakes in the world and kill them in the sacrificial fire that was sarpasatra and the other one is 'Khandava Forest' where the incineration of Khandava Forest was carried out by Krishna and Arjuna with their divine weapons. Kolatkar retells these myths in terms of mythification and demythification. The poet intends to make the past sacred on the one hand to show the stark and naked realities full of follies and foibles, avarice and animus, trickery and stratagem, duplicity and diplomacy, lust and lechery, selfishness and sacrifice, retribution and retreat, temptations and machinations, conspiracies and candidness of the present on the other. His *Sarpa Satra* has a parallel Marathi version in his Marathi collection, *Bhijki Vahi*. It is closely relevant to the contemporary scenario like corruption and commercial exploitation, environmental and cultural decay, restless urban life and racial discrimination, mal-position of duties and opportunistic modern poets, misuse of weapons and religion, massacre and injured minds of the common people, terrorism and crime, and the loss of the moral ethical human values.

Kolatkar's is verily a path breaking approach. He adopts it only to retrieve the traditional concept of myth to meet the modern challenges and to resolve postmodern ambivalence.

#### Political Concern:

Kolatkar reflects the devastation of the political system and the degradation of Indian politics with demeaning acts of ruling class in multiple mirrors with a split consciousness through demythification. Jaratkaru says:

And, if the person voicing such sentiments should happen to be the king of a sizeable country, it should be cause for concern indeed for the future of the country in question. (p. 29)

and

---how morally unjustifiable his position is, or how politically incorrect. (p.28)

He further says that one, may be the king in the past or the political leader in the present, who brings the betterment of the country in danger is fit either for punishment or banishment:

The alternative, of course, is to depose him.

Or leave the country. (p. 29)

The irresponsible behavior of the kings like Janamejaya in the Mahabharata who forgot their duties resembles the nowadays duplicity of the present diplomacy.

kings return to their capitals, reminding themselves that they also have kingdoms to govern. (p.81)

#### Corruption and Commercial Riots:

This poem makes sad commentary on the deterioration of ethical moral values in the country as reflected in rampant corruption, mindless violence in the form of commercial riots and a swarm of disruptive activities that go non-stop in all the parts of India. Everyone makes use of a position of trust for dishonest gain:

who will bag the contract for constructing the sacrificial township? (p. 32)

The conduct of so-called intellectual circles is spoiling the fair image of the country. They have lost their moral sense:

-people we thought of until, oh, the day before yesterday

as living volcanoes of conscience  
 ready to blow their tops  
 at the first sign  
 of any wrongdoing in the land. (p. 33)

They are 'worried about just one thing/how to wangle a job themselves' and very cautious to be neutral to spoil the party of their high command:

But all these who should have realized this  
 are on the payroll of Janamejaya  
 and will do nothing to spoil his party. (p.60)

When the showy and festive party of sacrifice comes to an end, 'the officiating priests/honoured guests, vedic wizards/ and other' (79) collect the wealth as an exchange value in excess:

bearing wealth beyond measure-  
 cartloads of gold,  
 herds of cattle with golden horns. (p. 79)

The sacrificial ceremony is over. The kings think of how to refill a blank economic gap:

what new taxes to levy  
 to refill the coffers. (p. 81)

**Environmental Concern:**

The basic human attitudes towards both human and non-human environment such as forest, savages, land, animals and plants are reflected in the poem of Kolatkar. The characters of the myth like the great warrior Arjuna, Lord Krishna and Janamejaya are ego-conscious rather than eco-conscious. Especially the ego-consciousness destroys everything as:

By the time these two were done,  
 it was all gone,  
 everything. (p. 44)

and

---nothing was left, not a trace  
 of that great sanctuary--- (p. 43)

Although Arun Kolatkar is mainly concerned with the fall in moral standards, he hints at the

subtle connection between deforestation and dehumanization. As Joanna Macy observes that "all life forms affect and sustain each other in a web of radical interdependence."<sup>3</sup> The process of destroying or removing a Khandava forest ecosystem has led to the loss of habitat of species with the decline of human civilization:  
 not one green leaf,  
 not a single blade of grass  
 was left behind. (p. 42)

Arjuna performed his act of heroism that he burnt down one of the largest rain forests in the land (p. 41)

After observing the condition of the environment, Kolatkar bewails:

It contained five thousand  
 different kinds of butterflies alone  
 and a golden squirrel found nowhere else. (p. 43)

and

it contained a wealth  
 of medicinal plants  
 that were not found anywhere else. (p. 43)

He further says,

Not just the trees, birds, insects, and animals (p. 44)

but the "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it"<sup>4</sup> as we find:

people as well.  
 Simple folk,  
 children of the forest  
 who had lived there happily  
 for generations,  
 since time began.  
 They've gone without a trace. (p. 44)

And even gone with their language, rare art and medicinal knowledge

With their language  
 their songs-----  
 ---the secrets of their shamans

with their special flutes. (p. 44)

As we know, the effects of air pollution are diverse and numerous. Air pollution can have serious consequences for the health of human beings, and also severely affects ecosystems. Kolatkar voices his concern for the adverse effects of it through the dangerous substances of the snake burn:

the sickening smell of burning  
snakeflesh  
-strong enough to make you gag-  
continues to spread throughout the  
land. (p. 61)

and

--the source  
of this unholy river of dirty smoke  
that has poisoned the whole  
atmosphere in this land. (p.71)

and the result of it is

the sky above the city  
that lies just beyond the horizon  
is always red these days. (p. 70)

It is true, N. Leena opines, "all organisms such as plants, animals, micro-organisms and human beings as well as the physical surroundings interact with each other and maintain a balance in nature."<sup>5</sup>

**Racial Discrimination:**

The conflict between the human race and the Naga people is presented in the poem. It is the conflict due to both revenge and racial discrimination. Such racialism may affect one's opportunity of job or career though one deserves it. For example, Somashravas whose 'own mother is a snake woman', should not allow such little thing between himself and his career as the mantra mutterer:

Should he allow a little thing like that  
to stand between himself  
and the highest pinnacle of success  
-----?  
34) (p.

So Somashravas, as anyone can commonly aspire to, hides his race.

Jaratkaru requests Aastika to stop this sacrifice. Though his mother is a snake woman, he is able to do this as Jaratkaru says,

You are your father's son.  
A man.  
You belong to the human  
race. (p. 74)

Though discrimination begins early, Aastika as 'the last vestige of humanity' can bring about harmony between the rulers and the ruled.

you'll find a way  
to put a stop  
to that festival of hatred. (p.  
75)

**Misuse of weapons:**

David R. Kingsley rightly says, "The Hindu religious tradition presents us with one of the richest and most diverse assemblies of divine beings to be found anywhere."<sup>6</sup> In Mahabharata, Vyasa presents Arjuna and Krishna as the superheroes. But how Kolatkar presents them in his poem, *Sarpa Satra* is worth observing.

Arjuna, the great superhero, a wizard in archery received the divine weapons:

-a divine bow,  
two inexhaustible quivers- (p. 41)

The very misuse caused severe personal loss to Takshaka:

For although his son got away  
-a miraculous escape-  
his wife was not so lucky  
and fell prey to a shaft  
that came from the magical quiver  
of the valiant Arjuna (p. 49)

But nothing is said 'what happened to him':  
what came over him!  
Just went berserk... (p. 41)

Krishna, his crosscousin 'had also acquired divine weapons of his own:

A chakra called  
Sudarshan  
and gada called Kaumodaki.

(p. 42)

They misused these divine weapons. 'And it was these two together/that did this thing/burn down the Khandava forest.'

as the two of them  
thundered around the burning forest  
in their divine chariots. (p. 45)

As 'the chakra slices/every single honeybee',  
'and returns to the tip/for fresh instructions'.

Kolatkars asks 'Why did they do it?' He wonders why Vyasa's superheroes misused the weapons they got. As we find that Arjuna performed 'the first act of heroism/as soon as he got the new toys in his hands'. The poet tries to show that these weapons did not remain a sudden pleasurable excitement in their hands, but:

Maybe just the fact  
that now they had all these fantastic  
weapons  
went to their heads. (p. 45)

The poet continues his guess. They might just want 'to test their powers' or 'a clear title to the land/unchallenged' or they might have decided 'that nothing go out' of this burning forest alive.

**Mal-position of Duty:**

Though the pleasant duty of Agni is sacred one, the dirty job is imposed upon him as 'of a common/assassin, butcher or a mass murderer' (p. 59):

...to employ him  
to exterminate an entire species  
systematically. (p. 59)

So most of the innocent youths become the victims of the selfish people and they are driven into the destructive force instead of a constructive one.

**Religious Concern:**

Kolatkars throws light on the institution of religion and the constitution of the ruler. The ruler has to do his duties according to the constitution while the role of the institution of religion is to bring about constructive change in

the mind of the ruler like Janamejaya in particular and in the minds of the other people in general:

But what do the people  
around Janamejaya,  
his cronies and councilors, do? (p. 30)

As 'they encourage him instead/they applaud and encourage him'.

But I mean all the great  
Sages as well.  
Yes, they actually encourage him. (p. 31)

The mentors in spirituality and philosophy who are renowned for profound wisdom make innovative practices like snake sacrifice for the convenience of the ruler which are absolutely against the religious principle:

and invent a yajnya  
-a complete innovation-  
called the Snake Sacrifice  
just for his convenience. (p.31)

The wrong practice is settled instead of true preaching of the religious principle and spread all over as the important issue of the nation:

And, once that is settled,  
the sort of thing that quickly balloons  
into a question of national importance.  
(p. 32)

Jaratkaru referred to Marutta who never did such type of sacrifice with the help of the vedic blessings:

He never dignified his slaughter  
with the high-sounding name  
of sacrifice  
nor carried it out with the full blessings  
of vedic event managers. (p. 55)

So, the practice of snake sacrifice or annihilation of the entire Naga species is nothing but the satirical mimicry of the institution of the religion like yajna:

This snake sacrifice,  
this mockery, this grotesque parody  
of the institution of yajnya. (p. 60)

and

It's all sorcery: mantras do it all.

.....

Is this a yajnya

or some kind of a snakecharmer's  
convention! (p.57)

**Massacre/ Injured Minds:**

Jaratkaru speaks to her son, Aastika about  
the senseless massacre of the Naga people by  
Arjuna and Krishna:

Cut down brutally

during the senseless massacre that  
took place. ( p. 40)

Further she says him that they got injured by  
this incident and even they wanted to forget it:

In fact we've all been trying to forget it,  
erase the incident from our memories.  
(p. 40)

But they were unable to forget the incident that  
affected their minds rather as Jaratkaru says  
that she has, no doubt, lost her ability to think  
properly:

Her own but the incident of the  
All these things that are happening  
have no doubt affected  
my ability to think straight. (p. 67)

**Terrorism:**

The violence made against any organized  
life is terrorism which Janamejaya undertakes  
against the race of Naga people:

My vengeance will be swift and terrible  
I will not rest  
until I've exterminated them all. (p.  
21)

And he will get peace of mind

by wiping out the whole species  
from the face of the earth.  
(p. 27)

While Takshaka stands for the essential and  
distinguishing attribute of the killer who always  
remains in the scheming, cunning and disguised  
form:

who had had himself smuggled in,  
disguised as a tiny worm a fruit bowl

and had grown before the unbelieving  
eyes

of all the kings men who fled in terror.  
(p. 20)

And

all the cunning of its kind to get past  
the complex shield of the defenses.  
(p.19)

The killer who deserves the harshest  
punishment has also an extremist role to play  
and ferocious masks to show behind which  
there is fear:

It only shows what cowards  
all terrorists are  
behind their snarling ferocious masks.  
(p. 39)

This mythical guise of Takshaka helps the poet  
to capture imaginatively all the terrorist  
activities that we find today.

**Opportunistic poet:**

Now-a-days majority of poets  
conveniently exploit subjects in their poetry for  
business purpose. Such poets are nothing but  
opportunists. Even the poet like Vyasa looks  
upon the event not to miss it:

like the great Vyasa himself  
looks upon the event,  
essentially,  
as a not-to-be-missed opportunity. (p.  
35)

No poet writes against the flow right from the  
ancient time:

But what did you expect of  
an old man  
who saw it as no part of his business.  
(p. 36)

**Lust and Lechery:**

While talking about the duties of the ruler,  
Jaratkaru reveals the sexual mud clinging to  
Takshaka's image:

...spending a night  
in the arms of a Puluvan girl.  
(p. 49)

The very tendency keeps the ruler like Takshaka away from his moral duty.

**Objections:**

Jaratkaru as the central narrator of the poem takes some objections against the happenings in the myths of the Mahabharata. Where was Takshaka when Arjuna and Krishna were killing his wife and son in the Khandava Forest?

And where, you may well ask,  
was Takshaka  
when all this was happening? (p. 49)

Those who have been declared themselves as leaders must take the responsibility of the common people by all means.

If Arjuna has made a crime, then why he is not given the punishment? 'Why did you wait/for his grandson to grow up/to give him a taste of your terrible poison?'

Why did you not make Arjuna  
pay for his crime  
while he was yet alive? (p. 51)

If the gods are not invited for the pleasing religious deed like yajnya or the snake sacrifice, then 'surely this sacrifice is not pleasing/in the sight of the gods',

How could it be  
When they haven't even been  
invited for it. (p. 58)

One must make the team Janamejaya remember that 'our whole earth is resting, balanced precariously, on the hood of a snake called Shesha'. If they take the action of killing entire Naga race, then 'surely, will be The End' of all,

once the earth goes burst,  
what speck of dust  
do you intend to rule on, Mr. king? (p. 63)

So the ruler must to assure the safety and security of the common people without which the power of the so called ruler is not possible.

All these objections taken by Jaratkaru can be applied to the political, religious condition and

the human tendency of every section of the modern world.

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