



Vision Through Blindness: The Politics of Moral Persistence in Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*

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Abstract: *Andha Yug* was originally written in 1953 by Dharamvir Bharati in Hindi. It is one of the most important plays of post-independence India. It begins on the evening of the eighteenth day of the Mahabharata war and raises pertinent moral and political issues associated with the epic. Right from the beginning, it is emphasised that *Andha Yug* is concerned with the age of darkness, a time when there is a decline in dharma and loss of morality and duty. *Andha Yug* tries to depict the sufferings of the people involved in the war in a profound manner. This paper shall endeavour to shed light on how *Andha Yug* examines blindness – both literal and metaphorical. Some characters are blind by physical sight, while some turn a blind eye to all truth and morality. The characters are not only unjust and biased in turning a blind eye to all the adharma that is happening, but they also participate in unlawful events. The play questions everyone's conduct according to dharma and no one is spared. This paper shall also attempt to examine how the play puts focus on the politics of moral persistence, and shows us why there is no honour in vengeance and the need to persist with dharma, even in the most atrocious of times.

Keywords: Dharma, Duty, Truth, Morality, Righteousness, Blindness.

Penned by Dharamvir Bharati in the Hindi language in 1953, *Andha Yug* emerged as a seminal work in the theatrical landscape of post-independence India. The narrative unfolds on the twilight of the Mahabharata's eighteenth day, delving into the profound moral and political quandaries woven into the fabric of the epic. *Andha Yug* is a testament to an era shrouded in obscurity, marked by a precipitous decline in dharma and the loss of morality and duty. The play masterfully portrays the deep-seated anguish endured by those entangled in the throes of war. It presents characters who are visually impaired, alongside those who willfully choose to ignore the essence of truth and ethical conduct. *Andha Yug* casts a critical eye on the actions of all, measured against the yardstick of dharma, sparing none from scrutiny.

The prologue states, “The one who has wealth shall rule, the one who wears a false mask shall be honoured, the one who is greedy shall be king, and weary of misrule, the people shall hide in dark caves and wait for their days of misery to end” (Bharati 5). It was a time when all thoughts and deeds of men were corrupt and perverse. The people in power were blind, self-absorbed, depressed, and confused, lost in the dark caverns of their souls. Right from the beginning of *Andha Yug*, we can see Dharamvir Bharati putting emphasis on darkness and blindness. Dhritrashtra, the king of Hastinapur, was blind by birth. But more than the physical blindness, he was blinded by his excessive love for his son Duryodhana and his greed for the throne of Hastinapur. Due to this excessive love and greed, Dhritrashtra forgot all the moral codes and remained silent when Duryodhana was doing all kinds of adharma. He forgot that he is not only the father of Duryodhana, but he is also the father of all his subjects as he was the king. He remained silent when Duryodhana tried to burn down the Pandavas in the house of Lacquer, and also when his daughter-in-law Draupadi was humiliated and disrobed in front of many so-called virtuous men.

On the eve of the eighteenth day of the Mahabharata war, when everyone in the Kaurava kingdom was anxiously waiting for Sanjaya to arrive with the news of the war, Vidura told Dhritrashtra that the fear being experienced by him had gripped others years ago. Everyone warned him then, including Bhishma and Dronacharya. Krishna too advised him:

Do not violate the code of honour.
if you violate the code of honour
it will coil around the Kaurava clan
like a wounded python
and crush it like a dry twig. (Bharati 12)

Blinded by the love for his son, Dhritrashtra did not listen, not even to Lord Krishna, when he came for settlement of peace. He was denied even a needlepoint of territory when he asked for just five villages for the five Pandavas. He let the war happen and made next to no efforts to stop the war. Being the king, he had the power to stop the war, but he failed to do so and chose to turn a blind eye to all the wrong doings. It has been truly said that all wisdom dies when ruin comes. When asked later, he always used his physical blindness as an excuse for his helplessness. He says to Vidura, “I was born blind. How could I have discerned the real world or recognised its social codes? ... My senses were limited by my blindness. ... My love, my hate, my law, my dharma had evolved out of my peculiar world.” (Bharati 12). For Dhritrashtra, his sons were the final arbiters of truth for him and he wanted to retain the throne through Duryodhana, the evil incarnate, who himself was blinded by the lust for power and revenge. More than the physical blindness, it was Dhritrashtra’s moral blindness that weakened his position as a king. Dharma and virtue are not services which can be called in for help in times of trouble and forgotten about at other times. “A moral life demands perpetual attention, throughout the life. And those, like Dhritrashtra, who fail to understand this, cannot hope to escape the consequences” (Bhalla xv).

Dhritrashtra's wife and Duryodhana's mother, Gandhari, willingly adopted blindfold since her husband was blind. It was a great act of devotion to her husband. But the grief over the death of her sons had embittered and blinded her to such an extent that she could not think beyond the death of her sons. She called Krishna a fraud and blamed him for everything that was happening. According to her, Krishna was the one who violated the code of honour over and over again and made amends to the code of honour as and when he liked. At one point, she enjoyed when Sanjaya was telling her how Ashwatthama destroyed the Pandava camp and mercilessly slaughtered the sons of Draupadi by mistaking them for the Pandavas. Devdutt Pattanaik in his essay "Tears of Gandhari" writes: "Who creates heroes and villains? Is it you, Vyasa, storyteller? Did you judge who is right and who is wrong, who is innocent and who is not? What is your measuring scale? Where did you get it from? The pain of a villain's mother is as deep as a hero's mother." No matter what, the hundred sons were after all her own sons, and every mother weeps for her children.

Moreover, *Andha Yug* shows us that Pandavas were also fallible and they were not completely devoid of any failings of dharma. It was also not as if all the Kauravas were evil and had no morality in them. No one was completely moral or immoral. *Andha Yug* shatters this idea that the Mahabharata war was waged between the good and the bad. *Andha Yug* starts with the narrator saying: "Both sides in the war violated the code of honour, smashed it, ripped it into shreds and scattered it – the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas" (Bharati 7). During the dicing episode, we could see that the Pandavas were not the brave and righteous men that we assume them to be – Gambling is seen as a vice according to the laws of dharma, but Yudhisthira could not say no to it when he was challenged by Duryodhana as there was his pride and manhood attached to it. 'Dharmraj' Yudhisthira staked his brothers and his wife even when he had lost himself already. He allowed Draupadi to be humiliated and disrobed in front of his eyes. During the Mahabharata war, it was his half-truth of 'the man or the beast' that became the reason for Guru Dronacharya's unlawful murder by Dhristadyumna. Since he was the 'Dharmraj', Guru Dronacharya never expected him to lie and was devastated when he heard of Ashwatthama's death.

Andha Yug shows us that no one, not even Lord Krishna was free from violating dharma. Lord Krishna saved Arjuna multiple times from dying during the war and played numerous tactics to ensure Pandavas' win at any cost. Krishna was the one who signalled Bhima to hit Duryodhana below his waist, which also led to Balrama calling him an 'unprincipled rogue'. Pitamah Bhishma was the mightiest warrior on the Earth, trained by the great Parshuram himself. He certainly had the power to stop at least the disrobing of Draupadi, if not the war. But he chose to remain silent due to his pledge to the throne of Hastinapur. But the question still remains: does dharma allows a woman to be disrobed in the face of fulfilling one's oath? Is an oath more important than a woman's honour? He had no answers when Draupadi questioned him right after the disrobing episode. Bimal Krishna Matilal says, "Truth-telling may be morally admirable and hence certainly a religious virtue, but not under all conditions. One of the certain marks of morally superior action is its non-self-regarding character" (5). The same goes for oaths as well. One cannot just think of his oath when a woman's

honour is at stake. One must act, and more so when he has the power to do so. Similarly, Guru Dronacharya and Kulguru Kripacharya too did not make any effort to save Draupadi from the humiliation. Not only did these great men turn a blind eye to all these sequences of events, but they also participated in the war fighting for the side of adharma.

Ashwatthama was blinded completely and turned into a beast due to his thirst for revenge. He was completely overpowered by the pursuit of vengeance. His father Dronacharya was killed by Dhristadyumna when he was unarmed. Even 'Dharmraj' Yudhisthira resorted to saying a half-truth for the sake of victory. Both these incidents made Ashwatthama so mad that codes of honour and dharma meant nothing to him anymore. He mercilessly destroyed the Pandava camp and killed the sons of Draupadi, mistaking them for Pandavas. He then released the Brahmastra in the direction of Uttara's womb. Krishna saved Uttara's child by exchanging his life with the child's. Krishna then cursed Ashwatthama with immortality for the sin of infanticide and forced him to surrender his talismanic gem. His wounds would never heal and death would never come to him. This cycle of violence and revenge does not stop here. In a tempest of sorrow, Gandhari's words thundered forth a dire malediction upon Krishna, "Witness, O Krishna, the fall of your lineage, the extinguishing of your bloodline. May your end come solitary and wild, as prey falls to the predator." And to this, Krishna, the serene harbinger, stood in silence. He bore the storm of her wrath with the calm of the ocean's depths. No curse did he cast in return, no thunder did he summon. For he knew, as the roots of a tree drink deep from the earth, so too must the seeds of vengeance be quenched. His progeny would meet their fates, as foretold by the grieving queen, and he, too, would embrace his destiny. For the ceaseless cycle of conflict must one day find its rest, and if the price be the silence of his own kin, then so shall it be – a solemn decree for the dawn of peace.

Yuyutsu, one of the hundred sons of Gandhari and Dhritrashtra, showed the courage to fight for the side he thought was right. Very steadfast in his understanding of dharma, Yuyutsu was the only warrior to oppose Duryodhana. He believed that truth is higher than his clan, but he too was left in a moral quandary at the end of the war. He was seen as a sorcerer, a giant, a child eater and a vulture by the people of the Kaurava kingdom. Gandhari received him with cold contempt and refused to talk to him and a dying Kaurava soldier refused to drink water from his hands. He says with grief, "It would have been better if I had accepted the untruth." In the interlude, his spectre introduces his inner contradictions:

I am like a firm wheel
That was fixed to a chariot throughout the war.
But now I feel as if I had spun
On the wrong axle and have lost my bearings. (Bharati 56)

Similarly, Vidura and Sanjaya also face inner contradictions even though they were following the path of righteousness. Vidura was a devout and righteous follower of Krishna, and perhaps, the most balanced

character in the war of Mahabharata. But even his simple and unassuming faith is shaken by the end of the war and he starts questioning himself. Sanjaya is a person who has the divine blessing of Vyasa to see the war without taking part in it. But, by the end of the war, this blessing turns into a curse for him. He feels that he is spun between the axle of two great wheels – the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and his greatest misfortune is that he cannot stop spinning on that axle. At the end of the day, no one is the real winner- war can only bring ruin and nothing else. No war can be waged without the violation of dharma. It destroyed both the clans, and hence we see the need to follow the path of righteousness, even in the worst of times. Had the Pandavas been given their rightful share of land and had Draupadi not been violated, who knows, the war could not have happened at all.

According to Devdutt Pattanaik, dharma transcends the valour of heroes and the sacrifices of martyrs. It is the essence that elevates humanity to the divine. It is the power to deny the primal beast within, to forsake the savage law that might makes right – a rule for beasts, not beings of reason. When humans embrace this law, they fall from dharma into adharma. The lust for control breeds greed, an endless thirst for power and land; it births the compulsion to conquer, even in the roll of dice; it fuels the reckless gamble of kin and spouse. True dharma whispers, it does not shout; it bestows, never takes; it supports the fallen; it cherishes, never subjugates. Gandhari's lineage perished, for they would not yield an inch of earth. Draupadi's offspring were lost, for she withheld forgiveness. Until we learn to share, until we learn to pardon, until we cease to cloak our avarice in excuses, conflict will rage, and heroes shall find no solace.

The need to persist with morality has been summed up beautifully by Devdutt Pattanaik. *Andha Yug* is an additional improvisation on the story of Mahabharata, which evaluates everyone including the supreme Lord Krishna. It shows us that both sides were wrong, both violated dharma and hence, there was no real winner at the end. It shows us how the morally blind people on both sides smashed the code of honour and how everyone had to suffer the pain and agony, including the common people and soldiers, whose voices are never heard because the people in power are full of hatred, self-centeredness, treachery, unending darkness and blindness. It further tells us that the ethical and the sacred path of righteousness is always available to human beings, even in the most atrocious of times. It just requires courage to follow it. The play ends with a beautiful line – “A small seed is buried in the mind of man, and it grows from day to day in our lives – as duty, as honour, as freedom, as virtuous conduct. It is this small seed that makes us fear half-truths and great wars and always saves the future of mankind from blind doubt, slavery and defeat” (Bharati 110). This is what *Andha Yug* seeks to teach, and does it very well.

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