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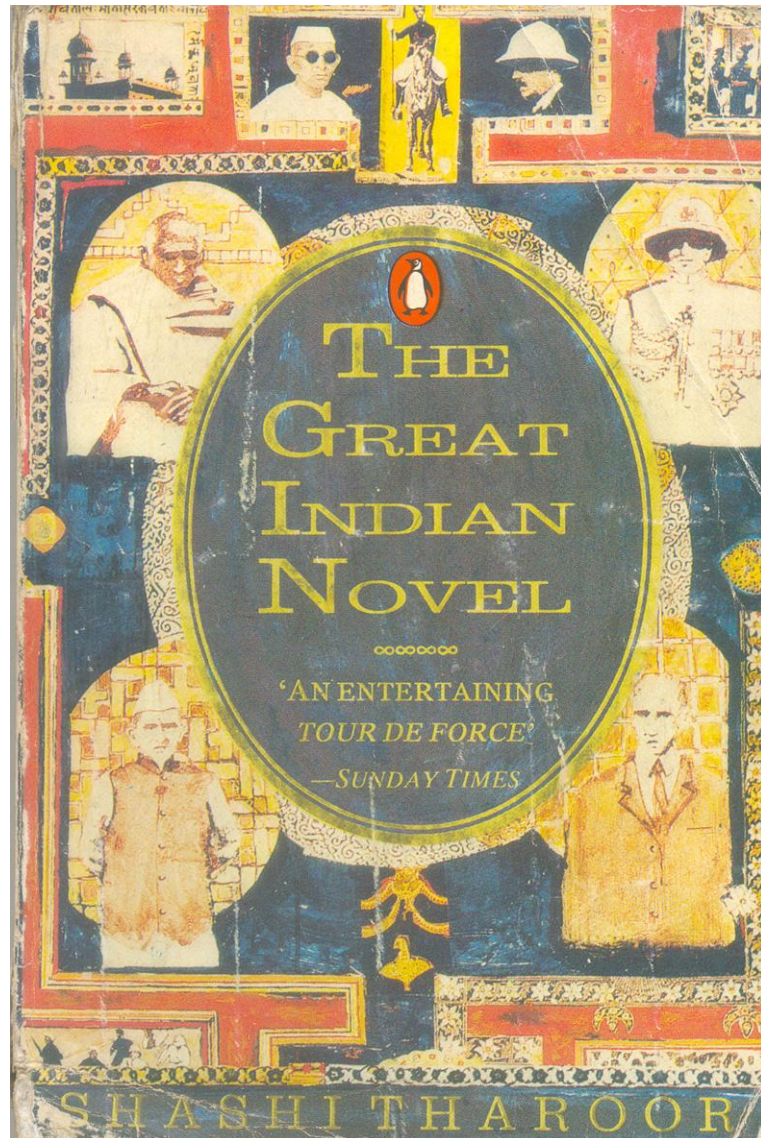
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Subtlety, Mockery and Dharma in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Introduction

“*The Great Indian Novel* is a literary *de force* undermining the age old Indian complacency displayed in accepting everything ancient and anything foreign. It is a strange vision of contemporary India retold in the garb of the ancient tale of story-telling”

-Ayyappa Paniker

Shashi Tharoor’s title, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), is perhaps derived from the concept of “The Great American Novel.” Philip Roth uses this concept and gives it as his title for his novel published in 1973 (*The Great American Novel*). While Philip Roth takes the American pastime, baseball, as his background, Shashi Tharoor’s novel distinctly relates to the ancient epic *The Mahabharata*. In Sanskrit, ‘Maha’, means ‘great’ and ‘Bharata’ means ‘India’. Thus, *Mahabharata* is *Great Indian Story*.

Shashi Tharoor established his name in Post-Modern English Literature with the publication of *The Great Indian Novel* in 1989. The story narrated in the novel is more or less a political commentary on the history of India since the advent of Gandhi. Characters in this political novel bear the names of characters from *Mahabharata*. Gandhi is Gangaji, Dhristarashtra is Jawaharlal Nehru, and Priya is Indira Priyadarshini. The story begins with Gandhi or Gangaji and moves to the days of Jawaharlal Nehru as the Prime Minister of India, and then to Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi. The novel ends with the days of National Emergency and the emergence of Janata Party, its grand alliance, success in the polls and its defeat later on.

The novel does not really focus on the historical events, but the emphasis is on the personalities that dominated the scene and guided the destiny of India during the period under description. It is a running commentary on the political events that took place, on the weaknesses of the leaders and the institutions of this nation, and on the general apathy of people in India. For those who were part of the generation that watched the events unfold, the novel is easy to understand and perhaps would even provide some enjoyment while reading it. It is hard to visualize how the readers of future generations would deal with this novel. It will certainly be part of any academic and scholastic pursuit in Indian writing in English.

It is difficult to read this novel without some understanding of the story narrated in *Mahabharata* and its characters. At times one wonders whether this artwork is a novel at all, since depiction of the political processes seem to overtake the story elements in many parts of this work. However, the characteristics of the individuals as they participated in the political processes are portrayed in an interesting manner. The novelist has his own opinions about these characters, which may be at variance with what people in general consider these characters to be.

India in an Advanced State of Decay

The Great Indian Novel is a modern English prose novel whereas Ved Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* is an epic poem in Sanskrit. The writer assumes a correlation between ancient Hastinapur and pre-independent India. He opposes the idea that India is an under-developed country, since those

who say so have no knowledge of history. If they read the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and about the golden ages of Mauryas, Guptas and Mughals, they would realize that India was once a seat of glory. He says,

‘I tell them that if they would only read the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.’

Over-developed, Advanced

The writer is not blind to the fact that India is at present in a state of moral degradation. At the same time, he takes pride in the fact that not only has India’s culture advanced, but also overdeveloped.

‘I tell them, that, in fact, everything in India is Over - developed, particularly the social Structure, the bureaucracy, the political process, the financial system, the university network and, for that matters the women.’

A close look at the novel

The protagonist of this novel is none other than Ved Vyasa who asks Brahma, the creator, to provide him with an assistant to write whatever he recites. Then Brahma selects Ganapathi with ‘elephantine head’, ‘broad forehead’, ‘enormous trunk’, ‘shrewd’, ‘intelligent eyes’ and is said to be a South Indian’. He starts writing the epic for Vyasa.

Mr. Veda Vyasa starts the story narrating his origin wherein he presents the class discriminations, which prevailed in the past. In the past, Brahmins, the travelling sages, journeyed a great deal in spite of the non-availability of proper transport system. They did not need hotel bookings. Any household felt honoured by a visit from a holy man with a sacred thread. Along with a lodging, he would be offered his host’s hospitality, food and bed with his host’s daughter. The duty of the host to his guest, ‘Atithi dharma’ produced a great saint and storyteller, Ved Vyasa. On one such occasion, Ved Vyasa was born out of seduction of Satyavati, an angler’s daughter by sage Parasharan.

The writer proceeds to introduce Ganga Datta, the son of Shanthanu and Ganga. Ganga leaves her son abruptly. Thus Ganga fails in her ‘dharma’ towards her son Ganga Datta. She leaves him to his fate. Soon after Ganga leaves him, Shanthanu is in search of a new wife. However, Satyavati’s father rejects the offer because already Shanthanu had a son as the heir to the throne.

So, Ganga Datta takes a vow of celibacy thereby providing an opportunity for his father to marry again. From then onwards he is named “Bhishma”, as he has taken a ‘terrible vow’ of celibacy. Though his father had failed in his parental dharma, Bhishma performs his filial duty by choosing to remain a life-long celibate.

The Role of the British and Their Laws of Matrimony

The British are introduced into the story to give an impression that the entire story happens in colonized India. At first Satyavati’s marriage is put to trial by the British and later the humble appeal of Ganga Datta is approved by the British Government. At this point Ganga Datta moves out as a man of universe with a loin-cloth to acquire fame. It is here that Bhishma is correlated to Mahatma Gandhi.

Later, Satyavati gives birth to Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. When they reach their teenage, Ganga speculates marriage prospects for them. He selects Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. He attends the swayamvara and wins the ladies. However, when Amba admits her love for Salva, he sends her back. When Salva rejects her, she comes to Ganga and asks him to marry. However, he could not accept her on account of his oath of celibacy. Ganga is therefore a man of firm decision and remains steady in his dharma. The writer also highlights him as a living legend as he is thorough with the Vedas, Tolstoy, the immutable laws of Manu and also the philosophy of Ruskin.

Gangaji

Gangaji, even performs his, ‘Dharma’ as a brother by searching brides for his three brothers even though he deprives himself of the marital pleasures. Gangaji’s personality is better expressed through this verse:

“Old Gangaji too is a good Hindu for to violate a
cow would negate his vow.”

One need not misconceive that on account of his celibacy, Bhishma is blind to the ancient custom of marriage. In the court of Raja, Gangaji speaks about different ways of marriage:

“In our heritage there are many ways in which a
Girl can be given away-our ancient texts tell us
that a daughter may be presented, finely adorned
and laden with dowry, to an invited guest.

Another way of giving a girl is through
the swayamvara ceremony. Girls were also given to
Brahmins as gifts but in all our sacred books the
greatest praise attaches to the marriage of a girl
seized by force from a royal assembly”.

Gangaji and Gandhiji

The character of Gangaji and Gandhiji are intertwined at various points that the reader has to make a distinction between the two. Gandhiji had a marginal 'Dharma' towards his family. Unlike Ganga, he got married but could not perform his 'Grihasthashram dharma' completely. He couldn't be a father to his children but has transcended his home and performed his 'Dharma' well towards his nation. Though he was unable to be a proper father to his two children, he became the father of the Indian nation.

Dharma in Two Levels

Here, one has to look at dharma at two levels. There are in Hindu Sastras two kinds of dharma: the lower imperative (Sadharan dharma) and the higher imperative (Visista dharma). A great man had chosen the latter to the exclusion of the former. To be the father of his own children is dharma of a lower order. To lead a nation and be its father is to prefer a higher destiny.

Gandhiji adores India and says:

“We are a land of traditions,” he declared, “tradition with which even the British have not dared to tamper”.

Gangaji can be better understood through the words of Amba:

“Be like you with your enemies, and your loincloths?”

After Gangaji's rejection of Amba the situation is typically politicized, which is evident through the words:

“Gangaji's fame had spread beyond the boundaries of Hastinapur, and no assassin in the whole of India was willing to accept her contract”.

Going back to *Mahabharata*, Vichitravirya dies childless and as customary Ved Vyasa was called on to rescue the barren Kshatriyas. Thus, the blind Dhritarashtra and Vidur were born.

Parallel Tracks of a Great Indian Story – Ancient and Modern

The superimposition of the political events of the twentieth century on the basic structure of *Mahabharata* is achieved by variation in stylistic levels and tones. The transformation of the ancient myth into contemporary politics sounds more successful and authentic than the transformation of contemporary politics into some kind of myth or the other. However, the

Gangaji-Gandhiji identification seems to break down at some crucial stages in the narrative. Hence K. Ayyappa Paniker says:

“It is rasabhasa rather than pure rasa that dominates. This makes the work a mock epic as was intended by Tharoor”.

In order to build up the gap between the old and the new, Ved Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* to some extent is related to the autobiographies of Rajaji, Nirad C. Choudhuri and Gandhiji.

Gangaji’s Dharma

After failing in his ‘Grihastha Dharma’, Gangaji starts transforming himself into a sage, an impersonal, man of action. The transformation of the ‘man’ into ‘humane’ can be clearly witnessed through the words of Churchill:

“Problem is, he is now going further. Preaching a lot of damn nonsense about equality and justice and what have you. And you tell me he cleans his own toilet, instead of letting his damn bhisti do it”.

Gangaji tries to eradicate class distinction. To some extent he even questions the ‘Varna dharma’. Britishers look down upon Hindustan & Hindustani, commenting on the peculiarities of grammatical gender in Hindustani.

“I mean is there any good reason why a table should be feminine and a bed masculine? D’you think it has to do with what you do on them”.

Gangaji starts threatening the Britishers by talking about ‘Swaraj’ ‘Self rule’ and ‘pan-Indian nationalism’. After the 1857 revolt or ‘mutiny,’ there is an optimistic lead, when Queen Victoria had thrown the doors of the ICS open to natives. The novelist brands this as an administrative alloy. Vidhur is an ICS officer. He waxes eloquently on the ‘Guru-Sishya-Dharma’. Through his words we realize the importance of Guru.

“The sastras say that the word of a guru is law to his disciples”.

The dharma of the students towards their teachers is emphasized. However much Gangaji is involved in the higher dharma of his obligation to the nation, he does not prefer his basic duty to his wards. He gets Dhritarashtra and Pandu married to suitable women. In contrast to Gangaji, Gandhiji is completely detached from his responsibilities towards his family. But he tries to fulfill political dharma in the midst of a simple life.

Disobedience as an Instrument of Dharma

We also get information about how Gangaji uses the strange weapon of 'disobedience' to show his obedience towards his country. It is later developed into a weapon to wage a moral war against the British.

“Mysterious ammunition of truth-force, the strength of unarmed slogan-chanting demonstrators, falling defenseless under the hail of police Lathis: the power of wave after wave of Khadi-clad men and women arms and voices raised, victory of non-violence over the organized violence of the state, the triumph of bare feet over hobnailed boots, the defeat of legislation by the awesome strength of silence?”.

Gangaji's Experiments with Celibacy – Sainly Sublimation of Sexual Urges

All aspects of Gangaji's life are discussed by the novelist including Gangaji's sex life - his celibate experiments prove the perfect self-control of Gangaji. Since the character is perfect in all facets, the novelist is satirical about the pseudo-educated Indians who criticize Gangaji. He considers this as an offshoot of the British educational system in India. Brahmacharya dharma is a concept that the Westerners cannot so easily understand. Western-educated Indians with their emphasis on sin cannot appreciate the sublimation of sexual impulses that the saints practice. Hence, Gangaji's celibate experiments are ridiculed. He is fully convinced of the fact that Gangaji needs our attention and praise since he lived a life of utter simplicity. Therefore, posterity should spare no efforts to glorify this great personality.

“We Indians cannot resist obliging the young to Carry our burdens for us. The schools and colleges, to mark the centenary as well, with more Speeches more ...for the little scrubbed children who had inherited the freedom Gangaji had fought so hard to achieve”.

By now Gangaji deserts his house and lives in a simple house built on a river bank, which he calls an Ashram (reference to Sabarmati) with his followers drawn from all castes including 'the children of God' (Harijan). This is done to cross the boundaries of class distinctions and untouchability. He gives an account of the terrible social and economic conditions of the peasants of Mothihari. This is the place where Gangaji for the first time actively champions the cause of the people through peaceful means exhibiting his human duty, i.e., manavata dharma. The potency of Satyagraha as a weapon to drive the British is eminently shown in the following lines:

“The Satyagraha comes to district, clamours for Justice, refuses an order to leave, makes his defiance public, and so shames the oppressors that they actually cooperate with him in exposing their own misdeeds.”

Gangaji now rises to the stature of a hero. The grand move of the noble freedom fighter is expressed thus:

“Ganga took the issue of freedom to the people as one of simple right and wrong, law versus conscience”.

The Motihari incident shows Gangaji’s religious and caste tolerance.

“In Motihari they flocked to him, irrespective of caste or religion. Untouchables, Muslims, Banias, all rubbing shoulders in his campaign”.

Gangaji also criticizes the unwanted imitation of westerners by Indians. He urges the Indians to follow a life style that is suited to their own needs and necessities. He asks Indians to have their own *svadharma* and makes them realize that, so long as it is valid, there is no need to give up their own dharma and follow somebody else’s which does not suit them.

“Mine is a dress, which is best suited to the Indian climate and which for its simplicity, art and cheapness, is not to be beaten on the face of the earth. Above all, it meets hygienic requirements far better than European attire. Had it not been, for a false pride and equally false notions of prestige, English men here would long ago have adopted the Indian costume.”

Time and again the novelist returns to the character of Gangaji.

Gangaji wins the hearts of millions of Indians. They throng his ashram to have glimpse of him.

“now of a few hundred , not of a thousand people. men, women, even some children, squeezed uncomplainingly against each other, waiting with patience instilled in them ever timeless centuries”.

The (A)Dharma of the Colonial Rulers

Thus, Gangaji becomes a living legend in his own times. The total lack of Dharma on the part of the British is shown through various incidents. The Jallianwallah Bagh incident is represented as Bibigarh Gardens massacre in the novel. The brutality of Rudyard in this massacre is described as:

“There was no warning, no megaphone reminder of the illegality of their congregation, no instruction to leave peacefully, nothing. Rudyard did not even command his men to fire into the air or at the feet of their targets. They fired at his orders into the chests and the faces and the wombs of the unarmed, unsuspecting crowd”.

The brutality of this incident makes them realize that arms and ammunition would not serve the purpose of driving away the British.

Gangaji is of the opinion that:

“There is no point in choosing a method at which your opponent is bound to be superior. We must fight with those weapons that are stronger than theirs - the weapons of morality and truth”.

After this massacre, the loyalists and constitutionalists are transformed into nationalists and revolutionaries. This also leads to a Nobel prize winning poet to return his knighthood (Rabindranath Tagore) who has performed his patriotic dharma by returning his knighthood.

Then starts the Quit India movement. People, irrespective of their religion, march forth to take revenge on Rudyard. A Punjabi mistakes Prof. Kipling to Rudyard and blows him into pieces, for which he is taken to gallows. This incident inspires Pandu. On watching the ghastly developments, Vidhur who is in ICS proposes to quit the service but is convinced by Dhritarashtra to stay on.

The Nehru Family: Family Dharma

The dharma of family life is highlighted by Tharoor through Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, an iconic representation of Nehru family. A man's expectation from wife is described thus:

“a dharmapatni is not expected to be useful. Her duty is to share the life of her husband its joys & triumphs and sorrows, to be by his side at all times.”

Gandhari and Dhritarashtra give birth to a daughter Priya Duryodhani who grows up to rule all India. Gandhari fails in her dharma to her husband as well as to her daughter. Gandhari of Mahabharata is blind-folded whereas Kamala is invalid.

Dhritarashtra is not loyal to his wife. He is a true politician with selfish motives. He guides his daughter not as a father but as a political trainer into a political manipulation. Dhritarashtra has taken his political career as the chief concern in his life. He has thus neglected his grihastha dharma and grooming his daughter as a politician shows his priorities. Thus, perpetuation of the dynastic rule is his dharma, his laukika (worldly) dharma is presented with lucidity.

Priya Duryodhani in *Mahabharata* has a small role to play whereas in *The Great Indian Novel* she is given utmost importance. She is successful in fulfilling her ‘Dharma’ towards her parents. She looks after her mother till her death and accepts and follows her father’s teachings, which he had taught her through letters. She is a self made woman, with firm conviction.

The Clash of Ideologies, Or the Clash of Civilizations?

Dhritarashtra takes an active role in politics. He sees the world not as it is, but as he wants it to be. He is a dreamer to convince everyone around him. In short, he becomes the central figure of the Kaurava Party (Congress Party). He is ever supported by Gangaji, who is the Party’s political and spiritual mentor. He is an idealist whereas Pandu is a practical person. The nature of Pandu is better expressed in this passage:

“Pandu believed in taking stock of reality,
Preferably with a clenched fist”.

Dhritarashtra believes in ideological flirtations, the passionate convictions, and grand sweeping gestures of principles. The agitation spread into East Bengal where it destroys the jute industry, where the conflict is between the working class and the management. Gangaji, assisted by Sarah More, fights against the capitalists by going on hunger strike. Gangaji says:

“Fasting is my business”.

The fast of Gangaji receives tremendous response from the masses, as the writer describes it. The people followed him like “a first of a restive volcano”, which reminds us of V.N. Bhushan’s poem “Ninth August 1942”, wherein he says:

“Limping forth like lava,

from a volcano's
burning heart. Brave awakened life
has entered the fields".

Gangaji's use of the fast makes our so-called weakness a weapon and attains momentous triumph. At last, he realizes that the only way to bring his principles to life is by being prepared to die for them which ultimately become the strength of the national movement.

At this juncture, the author correlates and criticizes the present day's 'relay fast' that is the weapon of today's politicians, where different people take it in turns to miss their meals in public. The sacred weapon has now become a politician's scourge.

Internal Cliques

Dhritarashtra is by Gangaji's side in the struggle for independence, which is not acceptable to Pandu. Though their principles vary, both of them work together for the Kaurava Party.

Dhritarashtra comes to the conclusion that the Indian Government could only fulfill its duty if it were a Government of India run by Indians for the welfare of Indians, which forms the definition of 'Democracy'.

Gangaji always remains an adviser, whereas Gandhiji turned out to be the controller of Indian politics to some extent. He always tried to dominate the political scene.

Gangaji is greatly impressed by Dhritarashtra and in no time the Party realizes that he is Gangaji's man. In the beginning, Pandu is considered to be the natural heir to Gangaji but he in turn indulges Dhritarashtra and relieves Pandu. Pandu takes the Party banners into the remotest villages and is considered a political activist. On the other hand, Dhritarashtra turns the lecture halls and meeting rooms of urban India and becomes a famous Indian leader after Gangaji. Pandu is always impatient of Dhritarashtra's oratorical certitude. Dhritarashtra has little time for Pandu's atavistic traditionalism. Thus, there is a growing rift between these two men.

In the conflict between Dhritarashtra and Pandu may be seen how dharma for which both of them are fighting adopts different means. Dhritarashtra, who all the time talks about democracy, is addressing the elite minority, while Pandu takes the message to the grass root level, which shows there is not one path of dharma, but paths of dharma.

Mass Awakening: Mango March

The mass awakening and civil disobedience seem to move the British at last, and they agree to talk to Indians. Gangaji is selected as the representative of India for a round table conference. As a result, the British resolve to continue to rule indefinitely for our own good because they believe that Indians can never agree amongst themselves.

The next step in freedom struggle is the ‘Great Mango March’ (Dandi March) against Clive’s rule of taxation. In this context, Pandu shows us how Gangaji politicizes the simple act of eating a mango. Finally, during this march, Gangaji announces Dhritarashtra as the leader in his absence.

In the course of the March, he criticizes the unscrupulous ways in which the famous politicians behave. He says that the people who follow them stand in the hot sun: get beaten up by the police and are sent to normal cells: whereas the famous leaders get their photos in newspapers, rest and are put in a comfortable cell with respect.

Hindu-Muslim Politics and Partition of India

Meanwhile, the Kaurava Party with its civil disobedience is successfully marching forward against the British rule. In this context, we must not forget that India is an odd mixture of different castes, creeds, religions, etc., the majority being Hindus. So the British think of the ‘divide and rule policy’. They provoke the Muslims against the nationalists. Thus, Ganga Muslim group is started under the leadership of Ganga Shah. Meanwhile Mohamad Ali Karna who was an active, talented lawyer is working with the Kaurava Party. When the members of the Kaurava Party criticize his family, he just leaves the Party and goes back to London where he keeps himself in touch with Indian politics. He gets out of the Kaurava Party not because he is a Muslim but because he finds in Gangaji too much of a Hindu. Karna even criticizes the title given to Gangaji. He says no one can ever be a “Mahaguru” but only can be “great learner”.

Later he is invited by Gangaji into the Muslim group. He is made its president. Now, he also launches a crusade against the Britishers, Karna’s group declares itself for the first time in favour of freedom from the British, ‘Independence without Hindu domination’, is Karna’s new slogan. Karna joins the Muslim group just because it is the only available political alternative, which at least enjoys certain prestige in the eyes of the British, and because it has the best potential. At this moment, we see two different parties with different norms working for the same cause, i.e., attaining freedom from British. The end is the same, but the paths are different.

Indira Priyadarshini (Indira Gandhi)

Priya Duryodhani, daughter of Dhritarashtra is a slight, frail girl, with a long thin tapering face, dark eyebrows, high-ridged nose, looking like a teacher when she is barely old enough to be enrolled at school. Dhritarashtra addresses all his letters from prison to Priya. She is deprived of her childhood pleasures and she spends most of her life beside her mother’s bed. Her father’s letters are her books of knowledge, which put her to action. She acts only according to the dictates of her own conscienceless mind. Here, Tharoor stresses the role of parents in moulding the life of children by saying:

“perhaps things might have been different had
Dhritarashtra taken her in hand , rather than his
Pen”.

Through these lines, the writer gives the importance of healthy husband-wife relationship, which has a greater impact on the health and psyche of their children.

The Hope of India and Indian Culture

Meanwhile, Kunti's five sons are kept under controlled instruction of guru Jayaprakash Drona. Through the words of Drona, the writer proves the greatness of Indian culture and traditions:

“While some of our historical-scientific claims (to have discovered the secret of nuclear fission in the fourth century A.D., for instance) are justly challenged by western scholars, no one questions in fact that our ancestors were the first to conceive of the zero. Before that mathematicians, from Arabs to the Chinese, left a blank space in their calculations, it took Indians to realize that even nothing can be something”.

The above lines emphasize the innate strength in Indian culture. The optimistic attitude of Indians is better expressed through a phrase. “Today's end is, after all, only tomorrows beginning”.

Political Developments in the Freedom Struggle

Gangaji's talk with the Viceroy paves the way for the establishment of a new political system wherein Indians will be elected as officers in the provinces, even if with limited powers. At this moment, Pandu declares himself to be a nominee against Dhritarashtra. Gangaji, being an elderly man of politics, sides with Dhritarashtra and nominates a Harijan. Though Pandu has won the election, he is unable to continue on power for a long time, because of internal clashes and also because he has lost Gangaji's support. He resigns and goes abroad.

Pandu is the founder of Swatantra sena (Azad Hind Pouz). In collaboration with the Japanese, he fights the battle and loses his life, when he is flying back to India in a plane crash.

Back in India, Karna's group, which could not win noticeable seats, thinks of asking the Kauravas for a coalition Government. However, the Muslims of the Kaurava group headed by Mohammad Rafi oppose the idea. During the Second World War the Viceroy thinks of involving the Indians, but the advisers protest on the count that they needn't be asked to fight because it is their duty being one of the King Emperor's subjects.

The Second World War and Indian Participation: Emergence of Karnistan as a Possibility

When the declaration of the war is made without consulting the elected Kaurava Ministries in the states, the Mahaguru's followers resign their offices collectively. Karna takes advantage of this political crisis when the Kauravas are busy with their 'Quit India Movement', and are put behind the bars. Jayaprakash Drona, declares one-man battle against the British. Mohammad Ali Karna throws a bribe of new political entity where they could rule unchallenged, a state carved out of India's Muslim majority area, which is called as 'Karnistan'. With an urge for Karnistan, Karna's group is involved in vandalistic activities like burning vehicles, gutting the homes, looting shops, etc. In order to put an end to all these, the Mahaguru thinks in terms of the unthinkable activity, i.e., the division of the Motherland. The conflict goes beyond control and the British label it as a "Civil War".

At this moment, the British decides to change the Viceroy. The man who is selected was Viscount Drewpad. He moves on to India with his wife Georgina. During the current political crisis, Gandhari dies and Priya is consoled by her father. At last Viscount Drewpad summons up the representatives of the three parties, Kauravas, Sikhs and Muslim groups and announces that the British Government is ready to transfer the power to the Indian Self-Government but he asks them to resolve the conflicts between the groups and come as one before 15 August, 1947.

The Kauravas have a difference of opinion regarding the partition of India. Gangaji is against it and is supported by Rafi. However, the other Kauravas led by Dhritarashtra feel that there is no other alternative. Gangaji's view is not accepted for the first time. He renounces politics. Karnistan is finally divided from Indian province in the maps by the Geographers. It involves shooting, hitting, wounding, raping, killing and looting. Gangaji sees mass violence and anguish across the land. The reality is a total repudiation of what he had conceived about the land. He feels helpless and looks old.

Gangaji's Nocturnal Experiments to Test and Strengthen Celibacy

It is at this stage that he turns to that unfortunate nocturnal experiment of celibacy with Sarah Behn, which arouses so much of controversy. However, it is explained by Gangaji as the latest experiment in self-perfection. Gangaji never tries to prove his celibacy whereas Gandhiji in order to test himself and his self-control frequently conducts nocturnal experiments with Behn.

Love Affairs at Higher Levels of Society and Politics

Meanwhile Dhritarashtra who is active in politics and has also become a close acquaintance of Drewpad, falls into an affair with Lady Drewpad.

"To put it in Dhritarashtra's words at the hour of darkness, as the world slumbers, India awakens to dawn of freedom".

Humour enables the writer to say many unpalatable things and get away with such statements. Ceremonial atmosphere on the eve of independence is compared to the cheers of the kind that greets the end of Ram Lila performance. When the demon has been slain and the giant

effigy of Ravana, the alien king who has crossed the sea to usurp India's innocence, is ceremonially set ablaze. The only man who does not participate in the celebrations is Gangaji. He only hears the cries of the helpless victims. Though he had preached brotherhood, love and comradeship in struggle, the strength of non-violence and the power of soul force, it is all in vain now. At last, Shikhandin who is waiting for an opportunity shoots Mahatma with her gun. It is not only the bullet that puts Gangaji to death bed, but also the violence of the country. Later the assassin is hanged.

Sanatana Dharma and Svadharm

Thus, Gangaji is shown to be a man of 'Sanathana Dharma' besides being a performer of 'Svadharm' even though he gives impotence to 'Varna dharm' on the basic criterion of its origin. He loves dharm and pays heavy price for it. Does it mean in the twentieth century - Kaliyuga, the iron-Age, the dharm of old value system has no place? Yuga dharm is different from age to age. Manipulators, and mountebanks have their field day; moral values as preached and practiced by Gangaji take a back seat. Gangaji himself becomes an anachronistic thing to be eliminated.

Post-Independence India – The Survival Struggle of a Premature Baby?

The novelist now turns his attention to the post independent India. People realize that the Indian politicians lack the patency, which the western rulers had.

Even after Drewpad leaves India on 26 Jan, 1950, his wife periodically visits Dhritarashtra which results in a pre-mature baby named Draupadi Mokras (a personification of India). Now India is in a process of regeneration. We are all in a state of continual disturbance and are in the process of building a life, a character and a transition that emerges and sustains us in each succeeding crisis, which is our Dharm. After independence there are changes.

Manimir – Kashmir

The major problem is related to a large, scenically beautiful and chronically under developed northern state of Manimir. As Manimir has Muslim inhabitants and is ruled by a non-muslim ruler, Indians and Karnistan claim it to be theirs. The Kaurava Party supports the Manimir National Congress of Sheikh Azharuddin against Mr. Singh's undemocratic rule. When India is in a dilemma to support Azhar or not, the defence ministry headed by Khushkismat Singh informs Mr. Prime Minister, that Karnistan has invaded Manimir by appointing some pathan tribesmen. Vidur, the principal secretary for integration moves on to Devpur (Jammu), the capital of Manimir and meets the Maharaj at an odd hour to convince him to sign the instrument of accession. As soon as the accession to India is announced, the first Kaurava –Karnistan war begins.

Apart from the destructibility of Karna's chosen instruments, there is one other important element in India's favour, Sheikh Azharuddin, Manimir National Congress leader, welcomes the

Indian troops and convinces the people against Karnistan and educates them with the prospects of democracy offered by the Indians.

The Karnistan's army is pushed back from Manimir, Dhritarashtra decides to appeal to the U.N. As is unexpected by the Prime Minister, the United Nations declares it as a "disputed territory". It is also over Manimir that Dhritarashtra first reveals the technique of political self-perpetuation. In the later years, he develops it into a fine art, when he is criticised openly within the Kaurava Party, he silences them promptly by offering his resignation.

Grooming Priya for a Later Day Leadership Role

As Gangaji and Pandu are dead, Karna has crossed new frontiers and Rafi is sidelined by the fact that much of his community had suddenly become foreigners. There is no alternative leader for the Party. As such, Dhritarashtra has his own way through. The Prime Minister's political career is keenly observed by his daughter Priya. Till Independence, the fight was against British rule, but, now in free India, the common man's struggle is against the Indian rule.

Jayaprakash Drona moves out with his six admirers for some constructive work i.e., Bhudan movement in rural areas which shakes the political balance of the Kaurava Party.

When Kanika Menon, the external affairs Minister meets the P.M., he expresses his doubts about the future of his reign. Kanika who leads the Home Rule League in London, practically expounds on how a ruler should be, which also incidentally reflects the character of Dhritarashtra in general, and Priya in particular

"It's never that easy to be a king; For Popularity's a tickle thing which might easily gobble us..."

Drona, with his land reforms, reaches the hearts of the Indian farmers. He voices protest against the P.M's idea of "New temples" instead of the old ones. Vidur helps him indirectly. Thus, when the situation is once again the same as before in India, Karna, the leader of Karnistan, dies.

Dhritarashtra along with Priya is successful in bringing about the modern industrial revolution.

"India was well on the way to becoming the seventh largest industrial power in the world, whatever that may mean, while 80 percent of her people continued to lack electricity and clean drinking water".

One cannot miss the sarcasm in the passage. It suggested how Dhritarashtra has failed in his dharma of providing basic amenities to the common people.

The Betrayal of the Nation by the Educated Classes

India starts providing educational facilities to the people. But education is not used for the uplift of the motherland. Ironically, the learned are moving abroad for selfish fulfillments.

Non-aligned Movement and the Chakar Aggression

The writer now turns his attention to the non-aligned movement of Kanika. For ideological reasons, they believe in the non-alignment movement, but they are unable to control the convictions or even the conduct of those who were to implement the policies of the movement. Under the eminent defence minister, India could regain from Portuguese some territories. Dhritarashtra learns a lesson from Kanika that there is something for which cannons are more effective than conferences. With this principle, India marches forward in war with Chakar for the possession of Tibia, which is in no time taken over successfully by Chakars.

The ill-fed, ill-clad soldiers suffer a lot but fame goes to the Defence Ministers and the politicians who merely give hypocritical speeches. After Chakars snatch off Tibia, criticism in the Party is vociferous and unrestrained. The military humiliation not only shattered Kanika's self-esteem, but it also bleeds his heart. Kanika resigns. With this, Dhritarashtra's reign ends and his spirit has completely evaporated.

Leadership Struggles within the Congress Party

As there is no man of truly national stature to succeed Dhritarashtra, the Kaurava Party decides to have a collective leadership, with the Working Committee effectively in command. They selected Shisupal as the Prime Minister. Karnistan underestimate Shisupal and attempts a second grab at Manimir. As our army learned a lot from the Chakar humiliation, they hit back at Karnistan very hard. When Shishupal signs the peace treaty, the jackals at home toss him to eternal sleep but Shisupal dies fulfilling his dharma for the nation. But the 'peace' that their nation has got is ironical.

“If a war had broken Dhritarashtra's heart, a Peace had broken his”.

Later, Priya Duryodhani was given a chance to become the P.M. because 'she was only a woman' and she would decorate the office, so that the Kaurava Working Committee can act accordingly. The phrase “only a woman” shows us the stature of woman in the post-independence India, particularly in the area of Indian Politics.

The diplomatic nature of the politicians is better expressed through the burning of the house, which is referred to as “Trojan House” by the same Prime Minister, who expresses her sorrow later.

The Pandavas start gaining importance in the Indian politics. In this context, Draupathi Mokraasi represents the Indian independence and the Pandavas are entrusted to be its protectors. Arjun moves from Delhi to Kerala where he meets D. Krishna Parthasarathi who becomes his

friend and promises to be his adviser later on. Priya's reign is aptly named as "The reign of terror" because it has destroyed the unity and morality of the Kaurava Party. In its fourth general elections, the Kaurava Party loses seats all over the country, but retains its power. So, Yudhistir questions the leadership of Priya, and so he is appointed as the Deputy P.M. He started functioning as the Chief executive. He also presides over the cabinet like the chairman of the Board.

Priya Comes to Power

Meanwhile, Priya's re-ascension is depicted. Determination had always been Priya's greatest asset. In no time, she grows up as a political giant. She ignores Yudhistir, which leads him to resign. Draupadi Mokrasia gradually becomes invalid. In order to attract the masses, Priya starts giving speeches about the immense sacrifices made by her father and family for the cause of national independence. She appeals to all "Progressive" and "like-minded" people outside the Kaurava Party to join her efforts. The first one to react to her call is Ashwathama who fights against Priya's purses to Ex-Maharajas and proposes the issue of nationalization of banks, which is readily accepted by the Prime Minister. The bill is passed.

In *Mahabharatha*, Aswathaman always remains subservient to Drona. Whereas in *The Great Indian Novel*, Aswathaman acts as an individual entity in politics. When Drona represents the Janata Party, he worked with Congress.

The President, who is a Muslim, signs the bill and makes an act. By now, Draupadi is lawfully ill. Tharoor's comparison of political giant to Frankenstein's monster is quite apt and logical. Like Shelley's Frankenstein, who tries to devour the Creator, Priya's rise is likened to it.

When a candidate is nominated by the Kaurava Working Committee for the post of President of India, Priya supports an independent candidate called Ekalavya. During this election, Priya proposes a secret ballot voting, which is accepted by all. The Kaurava Party breaks into two as Kaurava (R) (R standing for Real or ruling reward to Priya) and Kaurava (O) (O standing for official or old guard or obsolete). The manifesto for the next election is prepared by Priya with a slogan "Remove Poverty".

The War for Gelabi Desh

The novelist specifies the Gelabi Desh War, the war between East Karnistan who were Gelabians and west Karnistan. After a long period of military rule, Jarasandha Khan (personification of two parts, which can never be united even with similar characters) decides to call for elections and proposes to elect the leader based on the number of the followers. In this aspect, the East Karnistani population becomes suddenly the biggest asset. However, Zaleel Shah Jhoota opposes this proposal because autocrats like him are unable to tolerate the East Karnistan's domination. At this moment, Priya orders the Indian Army to strike the West Karnistan and gives back the east to the miserable millions. Now Priya is maternalized and is called "Ma Duryodhani".

Vyasa's Dreams

Ved Vyasa's dreams are the digressions from the main stream, which reveal to us the past in relation to the present. One of these dreams gives us the nature and origin of Jarasandha, who is the perfect fusion of inseparable halves. In this novel, Jarasandha, may be taken as a personification of East and West Karnistans, which are both inhabited by Muslims but are totally separated by the Indian Army with Bhim as a soldier, Arjun as a spy and Krishna as the thinker. Now Draupadi is shown to have moments of good health.

Though Priya promises extensively, the majority of our people continue to remain illiterate and also lie below the poverty line.

“Indians are under fed, under nourished, under-grown, under weight, under clad, under education, under active, under employed, under-valued and under foot”.

Retention of Political Power at Any Cost

When the situation turns worse than when it was under the British, more laws are made in the statute books empowering Priya to 'prohibit', 'prescribe', 'prolate', or 'prostitute' all the freedom that the national movement had fought for during the preceding years. Thus, Tharoor's title 'The reign of error' is quite apt for the rule of Priya.

Dharma even in *The Mahabharata* seems to mean differently at different times. Exigency rather than stable ethics seems to have been practiced even by Krishna before, during and after the great war. The *raja dharma* as it is known and practiced by the kings is to preserve, safeguard and perpetuate their power. Both Chanakya and Machiavelli have many pieces of advice to the princes to keep themselves in power. Machiavelli's "policy" and Chanakya's "niti" can be taken as the cornerstone of *raja dharma*. Priya's methods to sustain her in power are also derived from this dharma.

Emergence of People's Front

Drona emerges from his retreat and calls for a people's uprising against Priya. Arjun ignores politics and takes to non-political freelance journalism. Nakul takes over Vidur's post in National Civil Service. Sahadev enters Indian diplomatic service. Drona preaches new civil disobedience against the rule of the Prime Minister. In Drona's home state the chief minister resigns and the "President's rule" is imposed. Prime Minister is advised by a Bengali lawyer Shakuni Shankar Dey to arrest and imprison the agitators. Yudhistir starts working actively with Drona for Janata Morcha or People's Front. The siege is accompanied by the declaration of a twenty point socio-economic programme, which the Government seems determined to implement. This shows the mind of the Indians and illustrates both their resilience and their self-absorption in the circumstance.

Solution through Discourses, Not through Action

The novelist ironically says that important issues are worked out not in action but through discourses.

“United Nations is full of highly successful Indian officials...in any situation that calls for an instinctive awareness of the subjectivity of truth, the relativity of judgment and the impossibility of action”.

We wonder whether Shashi Tharoor includes himself in this category, as an employee of the United Nations.

The novelist turns philosophical: when he says:

“We’re just puppets on the string, to be thrown thrice over Fate’s dice”.

The life of the poor has become miserable. They are subject to random police harassment. They are forced out of their homes in the name of slum clearance campaign. They are all forced into compulsory vasectomies in pursuance of population control.

The Only Symbol of Genuine Indian Democracy – Periodic and Regular Elections

Suddenly Priya suspends the siege and calls for free general elections. She is very confident that she would sweep the polls. The novelist makes fun of the elections as ‘the great Indian tamasha’, which are conducted at irregular intervals and at various levels amid much fanfare. As usual ballot-boxes are stuffed, booths are captured, and the election officials, candidates, workers and voters are assaulted, kidnapped and at times shot. However, nothing stops the franchise. People feel that they have got a chance to choose in a free election, between ‘democracy’ and ‘dictatorship’ and also between ‘dharma’ and ‘adharma’. It is like the great battle of Kurukshetra, the only difference is that in the end it becomes a tragedy. However, this war is devoid of bloodshed. It is between good and evil. Various opposition factions get together in a People’s Front. At last, the results are announced and Priya is defeated by the Janata Front.

“If you begin an examination by avoiding the most difficult question it raises, it is that very question that will eventually guarantee your failure”.

Yudhistir is elected as the Prime Minister by Janatha Front. Now Draupadi is quite healthy and her skin is glowing with honour.

The new Prime Minister is ‘stiff, straight backed and humourless and drinks his own urine’. He also gives speeches for the uplift of the backward strata of the society. Priya is preparing plots against the Government. Drona is a flawed Mahaguru, because his goodness is not balanced by shrewdness. The Government finally falls.

On Dharma – Empty Word?

In the closing chapter of this novel, Tharoor talks extensively of dharma. It is a unique and untranslatable Sanskrit term. He says:

“India, the land where truth and honour , valour and dharma were worshiped as the cardinal principles of existence , is now a nation of weak, willed compromisers, of leaders unable to lead, Of rampant corruption and endemic faithlessness, it is now a land where dharma and duty have come to mean nothing”.

In order to be true to himself, the author, admits that he portrayed a nation in struggle, both against external and internal forces. The novelist sounds a pessimistic when he calls India a land of adulteration, black-marketing, corruption, communal strife, and dowry killings. But he does depict political life in a very realistic manner.

Tharoor presents a view that it is not the efforts of Gangaji that got India its freedom – it is the affair of Dhritharashtra with Lady Drewpad that brought us freedom. Therefore, it is not Gangaji’s sacrifice or dharma that bought India its independence but *kaama*, the third of the purusharthas. It is an attractive creative position, filled with sarcasm, satire and mockery, but not truth. This is a condemnable interpretation, to say the least, but the novelist has his own right to interpret. But, then, such an interpretation, if really intended by the author, minimizes the importance of the sacrifices of a few generations of Indian people during the colonial period.

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