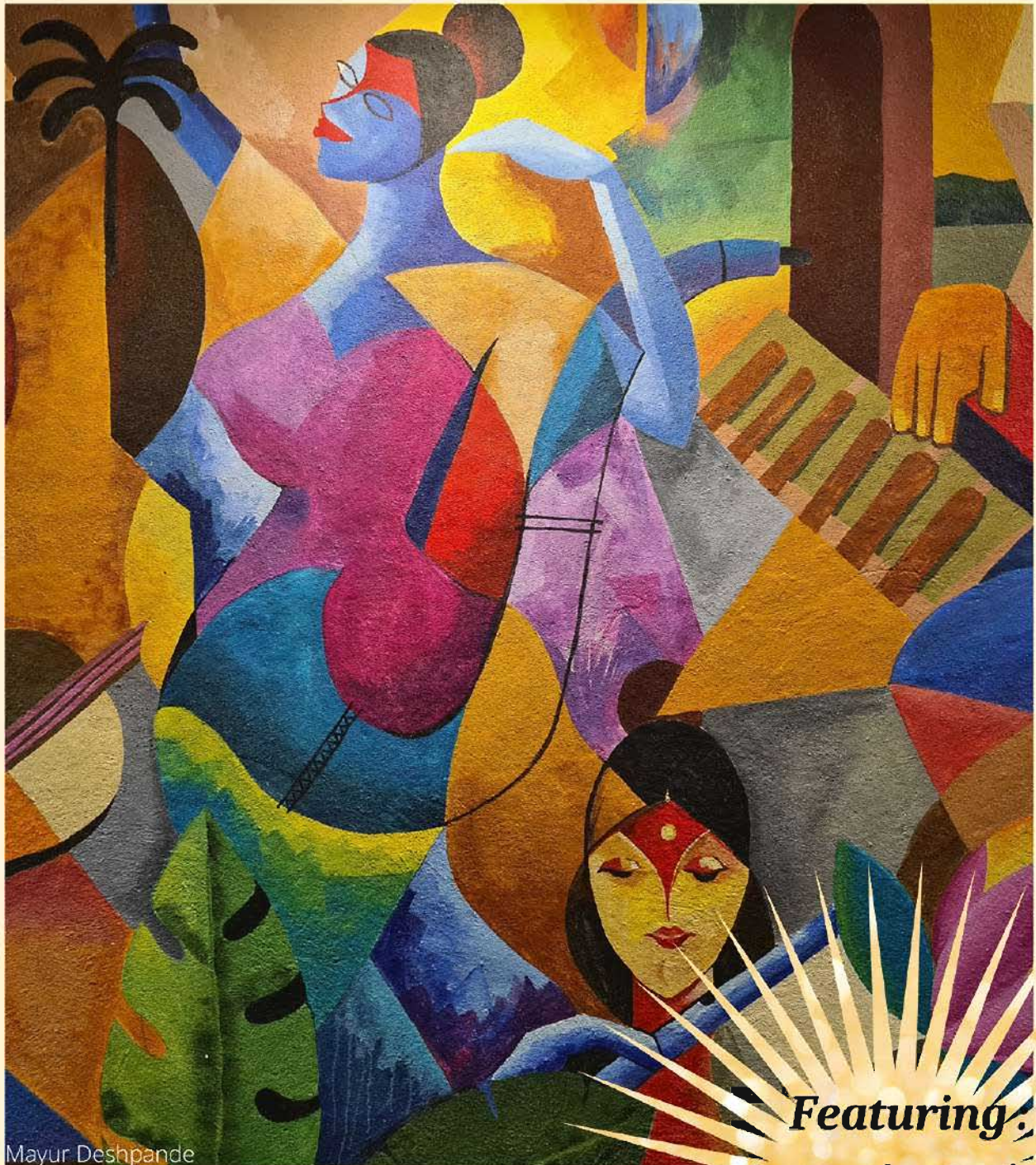


# SOCIOLOGUE

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Mayur Deshpande

**Negotiations between  
the old and the new**

**Featuring:**

**Interview with**

**Mr. Feisal Alkazi**

**Mr. Feisal Alkazi**

An e-Magazine by the Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College

Volume 1, 2020-2021

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# FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Dr. Rashi Bhargava  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College

Greetings!

We, at the Department of Sociology, started *Sociologue: Aao Baat Karein* as a newsletter in the year 2015 with an aim to initiate a dialogue from a sociological perspective, hence the name, *Sociologue*. The newsletter was a step towards realising the vision of the department which is to help students develop sociological imagination, an ability to distinguish commonsensical understanding from sociological understanding of not only oneself but also of the world around us and unravel interconnections between different spheres of social life.

Our attempt, over the last five years and ten issues, has been to critically engage with different aspects of our social world, dismantle the taken-for-granted realities and question and critique mainstream perspectives and discourses to renew our understanding by bringing forth the voices that have been muted, ignored and suppressed for long. We begin with an assumption that there are multiple realities, fluid identities and an ever changing social world which cannot be understood only by focusing our attention to the extraordinary but also by diverting our gaze towards mundane and the banal and the negotiations within the everyday. We thus engaged with a new theme every year which included gender, sexuality, regional marginalisation as witnessed vis-a-vis the North East, caste and religious minorities, women and desire and education.

The editorial board of the newsletter is completely managed by the students with guidance from the faculty. It has been a fascinating journey so far. The idea, all along, was to go beyond the confines of the classroom and syllabus teaching to reach out to a wider group of people and converse with them through various mediums like opinion pieces, photographs, artworks, fiction, graphic depictions, poetry, etc. The process enabled the students to inculcate research aptitude, venture into new modes of inquiry, learn teamwork, develop management, organisational and public relations skills, and grasp the nuances of presenting their ideas and opinions in a coherent and creative manner. The rigour with which the students have worked on every single issue is a testimony of their sincerity, determination and enthusiasm to fulfill the promise of sociology in understanding and subsequently changing the world.

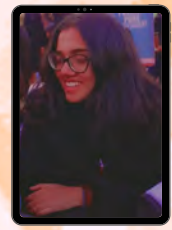
This year, we decided to expand this sociological endeavour of ours. It is a pleasure to inform our readers that from the year 2021, *Sociologue: Aao Baat Karein* will be published as an annual magazine with many new features. The theme of the first issue is *Kaleidoscope: Negotiations between the Old and the New*. More on this in the editorial.

We, at the department, hope that the work put together by us will make you question the normative, identify your discomforts, reflect upon your privileged/underprivileged positions and take a step towards addressing them. After all, speaking it out loud is the first step. So, *Aao Baat Karein!*

# EDITORS' NOTE



*I L Prathyusha Naidu*  
Third Year, Department of Sociology  
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*Nikita Sarma*  
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Remember the kaleidoscope? That childhood toy, consisting of a tube containing mirrors and pieces of coloured glass or paper, whose reflections produce changing patterns when the tube is rotated? It revealed bright, colourful new patterns with every turn. It was indeed a beautiful sight. Wondering why we're talking about it? Well, hold on to the thought.

We are born into a set of pre-existing ideas which have been passed on from generation to generation, and shape us throughout our lives. As children, we are taught how to behave and live in society - what is acceptable, and what is expected of us as individuals. We internalise this unreflectively, and live accordingly. We never pause to reflect on these, or question them and consider the possibility of a different way of looking at things. We are shaped, on the one hand, by these social and historical forces, and on the other hand by the experiences of our day-to-day lives. Our response to challenges and the choices we make every day are an outcome of the way we negotiate what we have learnt from the past and what we experience in the present. It is a process of constant learning and unlearning. This awareness, perhaps, could enable us to take the first step to question the given.

We use the kaleidoscope as a metaphor to understand this process. With every turn, we see a new pattern which is a reconfiguration of the one that existed before it. The old either rearranges itself, completely disintegrates, or stands in opposition to the new. This reflects an interplay of the old and the new.

Seen thus, a kaleidoscope is also a metaphor to understand different ways of perceiving reality and its changing nature. For the past one year, the department has been engaging with various aspects of social reality through this metaphor. We organized a series of webinars and film screenings and had the privilege of listening to and engaging in a dialogue with renowned experts from a wide range of fields: academics, journalism and literary studies, law and theatre. Each webinar constituted a turn of the kaleidoscope, revealing one dimension of the infinite dimensions of social reality. We looked at the death penalty and through it examined the nature of ethics and morality in society, the Criminal Justice System, the perceptions of crime and punishment, the complex structures of thoughts about justice, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and the predicament of being human. As students of Sociology, we engaged with what fieldwork means through the ideas of self-determination, genocide-ecocide, risk society and exhaustion, lies, deception and manufacturing consent and forgiveness. We looked at the challenges faced by widows in contemporary times, and examined issues of existence and meaning by looking at the shifts in the ways of engaging with a text such as The Mahabharata. Should it be viewed only as a religious scripture? Or could it also be viewed as a classical text with several layers of meaning? Through talks and discussions with eminent scholars and experts from across disciplines, we explored different dimensions and layers of the text, including the construction of the self and the other, and the representation of women. We invited students from across colleges to present papers on the Mahabharata at one of the webinars. We are proud to include in this issue two prize-winning papers presented there.

As we engaged with all these ideas through the year, we were struck by the vastness of social reality and felt the need to have a larger platform to engage with it. With this issue, we embark on a new journey and shift from the format of a bi-annual newsletter to an annual magazine, and continue our engagement with this theme.

In this issue, we look at different dimensions and complexities of beliefs, practices, arrangements and meanings of social reality through fiction, poems, reflections and more.

It is an attempt to create a space of expression where differences in perspectives are fostered.....*Aao baat karein!*

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# DEPARTMENT UPDATES

## AUGUST 2020 - MAY 2021

- 22 August 2020- Department Elections
- 23 September 2020- Film Screening and Discussion on *Exploring Gender*.
- 8 October 2020- Talk by Mr. Ashutosh Bhardwaj on *The Epic and The Text*.
- 16 October 2020- Screening of the play *Lorelei* and talk by Mrs. Radhika Alkazi and Ms. Maitreyi Misra.
- 20 October 2020- Talk by Mr. Feisal Alkazi on *Women in the Mahabharata: A Playwright's View*.
- 22 October 2020- An interactive book discussion by Ms. Nandini Guha of the book - *A Plate of White Marble*.
- 29 October 2020- Talk by Professor Savyasaachi on *Unlearning Fieldwork*.
- 9 November 2020- Talk by Professor Balaganapathi on *Text and Interpretation: Revisiting the Mahabharata* and Paper Presentations on *Text, Interpretation and Representation: Re-reading the Mahabharata*.
- 19 November 2020- Orientation for first year students.
- 19 November 2020- Talk & Discussion by Professor Akiko Kunihiro on *After Forgiveness in the Field: My Fieldwork with Hijras of Gujarat*.
- 3 December 2020- Department Elections for First Year Students.
- 2 February 2021- Freshers' Welcome
- 10 February 2021- Talk & Discussion on *Documentary Film Modes in Ethnographic Film* by Dr. Alison Kahn
- 10 March 2021- Talk & Discussion on *Providing PsychoSocial Support to Students to deal with Examination Stress and Anxiety*.
- 19 April 2021- Talk & Discussion on *Perspective Building National Webinar: Mentoring Socio-Emotional Well Being of Students Campus as a Space of Happiness*.

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*Photograph : Anmol Chugh*



# BANGAALI BHODROLOK: GAALI HAIN KYA?

Debarati Mitra  
(First Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College)



I have studied history ritualistically, never with a passion. Which is perhaps why I have seldom dwelled on the tragedy of the post-partition exodus of refugees from East Pakistan to West Bengal. A podcast by Dilip Mondal introduced me to the world of *Namashudras*- the lower caste people of Bengal.

The *Namashudras* met hostility from the beloved *Bhodrolok* of Bengal who were their upper-caste counterparts. Even the then ruling Congress Government betrayed the *namashudras* by shipping them off en-masse to Dandakaranya and the Andamans, under the farce of a resource crunch of the State for refugee rehabilitation. Interestingly, upper caste refugees successfully established squatter colonies in the heart of Calcutta, by leveraging their networks.

'*Bhodrolok*', the Bengali term, roughly translates to "gentle-folk" according to Dwaipayana Sen. My 19-year-old, *Rabindra Sangeet* and sweetmeat loving, fiercely baangali soul was crushed when I got to know about the not-so-glorious truth about the '*bhodrolok*'. I realized my belief of Bengal being a casteless State, and the left regime's tireless efforts towards achieving class equality in the State, is a whitewashing of history, which hid biased empowerment of the upper castes.

The people in the land of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay and Satyajit Ray surely have a penchant for books and plays- but is the underlying fact visible yet? All the three literary geniuses I named, belonged to wealthy or upper caste families. We never really came across any Dalit or Muslim writers and received first-hand information about these communities even though Muslims make up to 25% of the states' population. Professor Mandal says these writers were just "Dalit Empaths".

The yesteryears bear testimony to CPI(M)'s appropriation of the *Namashudra* community, to win against the Congress. The Dalits were promised homes, and post elections, those who opposed the State's Government's plan of action, faced police brutality and sexual abuse.

Being an upper caste woman in the metropolitan, I was spared from facing the gory truths of life that the lower castes still have to face. Naveen Bharti's study for Harvard using 2011 census data brought into limelight the segregation in Kolkata when he found several colonies in the metropolitan city housed only upper caste Bengali and no Dalits were allowed.

My bubble of privilege with a calculated pinch of ignorance cooked up the perfect recipe for the shock I received when professor Mondal's podcast posed two very simple questions: who makes the intelligentsia and administration of Bengal? How many Muslim or Dalit chief ministers has the state elected since '47?

Professor Mondal discussed how the '*bhodrolok*' have usurped the administration, the media houses and even the Bengali cultural industry. The mother of numerous patriots and literati of the nation, never allowed the voices of the minorities to come to prominence, and along with the veil of intellectuality, maintained the *Sujalang-Sufalang*\* image in front of the world.

The faulty representation on the popular media subjugated their will to come together and stand as a collective entity against the cause. We often call states like Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu or Uttar Pradesh casteist. What we don't realize is that we were able to vigil the wrongs against the lower castes because we heard their voice and saw their assertion.

The professor says media till date provides a top-down approach and talks merely about the solutions and never the problem itself. We need the bottom-up approach which was adopted by Joan P. Mencher. Like Dalit Studies, the upper castes should be brought under the microscope.

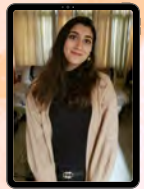
In Baangla, '*bhodro*' means polite, empathetic and morally upright. Four months back if someone had told me that the word *bhodrolok* is almost equivalent to a slur, I would have laughed it off. But today, I will surely be offended if I'm called the same. I, in my own small way, have tried to call them out. If you still have difficulty in believing me, look up the names of any five Bengalis excelling in their respective fields. I can bet you'd be astonished at the implications it highlights if viewed through the caste spectrum.

(\**Sujalang-sufalang* is used to denote the clean and upright image Bengal holds to the rest of the nation. And specifically these words are used because *Vande Mataram* was written by a *bhodrolok* too.)

# TECHNOLOGY AND US

Samiksha Bhatnagar

(Third Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College)



*"I wake up to the sound of a blaring alarm. I stiffly turn towards my phone and see that it's 7:45 am. I get out of my bed, do my morning routine, grab some coffee and sit at my desk. As I blankly stare at the screen, I see small circles with pictures popping up. I sit and stare half-heartedly, wondering, is this life? As the day passes by, I leave my desk, grab food, do my night routine and head to bed. Then, repeat."*

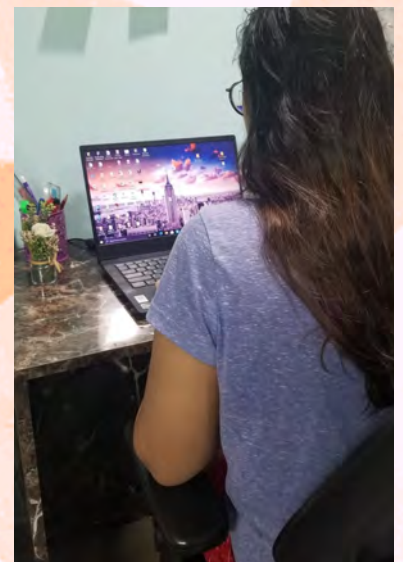
Close your eyes and try to recall. How did it feel when you woke up in the morning and had nowhere to go? How difficult was it when you couldn't meet your friends and peers? Do you remember that feeling of hollowness that accompanied you almost every day in the past year? Yes, that feeling.

Do you hear that? That sound? That's the sound of technology taking over our daily lives. During the pandemic, when we were locked down in our houses, technology gave us the platform to stay in touch with our loved ones where distance didn't matter, and connected us all over the world. However, little did we realize that over time, we have become dependent on it. We were caught unawares - we did not realize when technology began to take over our lives.

Daily tasks such as studying, going to work, getting groceries, continue to be performed via technology. There exist apps for almost everything. At first, technology appeared as a blessing in disguise: for me, it meant not having to dress up, having excuses to be messy, and not having to leave the bed at 8 am. It was all such great fun. However, within three months, the fun part began to lose meaning. There was no need to travel, no need to go to college to attend classes, or to run down to a store to get groceries. Everything, including simple cash transactions, was being done with the touch of a button. Our social lives also became fully digitalized. We have become so used to our "online" mode of life that it feels natural now. We appear to have forgotten how we were before we let technology take over our lives. We need to remind ourselves that having the ability to perform day-to-day activities without the assistance of technology is what made us feel alive and human. It made us who we are!

Now, it seems like we are allowing technology to take that away from us. Having the ability to access anything we need with the touch of a button may feel empowering, but this empowerment comes at a cost. It triggers the process of dehumanization. Let us accept that technology is always going to be there. Great advances in technology are being made. Research shows that soon artificial intelligence (AI) will be able to perform all human activities. If this is the case, then we must not let technology separate us from ourselves and the world. It is ironic that technology, a creation of mankind, can become the very cause of its destruction, like Frankenstein's monster.

How do we survive this? What do we do now? Do we decrease our dependence on technology and use it in a way that doesn't take away our sense of being human? Or do we continue to allow it to shape us and our lives? The choice is ours.



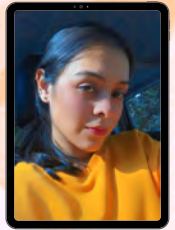


*Photograph : Anmol Chugh*

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# THE KALASH

Ananya Upadhayay  
(Second Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College)

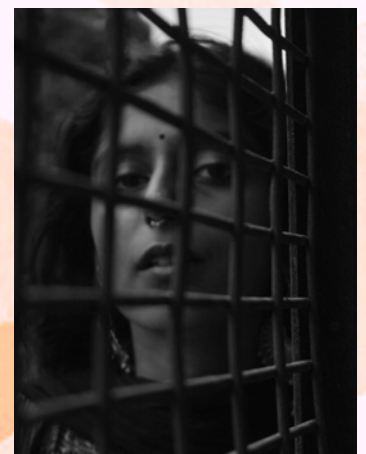


*Bhopal, 2016*

I could hear the generator's whirring and the excited chatter of my relatives as I eagerly made my way to my cousin's dressing room. She was to be married that evening. Midway, the kulfi walah's tempting stall called out to me, but I decided to not give into my temptations. Not just yet. I was curious, for I was chosen to be part of a ritual which, I was told, could only be performed by someone of great importance and someone who had charming looks. As I skipped past my relatives, who indulgently smiled at me, the anticipation of being that somebody brought butterflies in my stomach. I reached the bride's dressing room and was greeted by my badi mausi who asked me to get ready for the ritual. My youngest cousin Madhulika, who was 8 and I, 14, were shortly instructed to stand at the entrance of the banquet hall, holding kalashas over our heads, to welcome the baraatis, aka the groom's family and kin.

Not long after, we both found ourselves giggling and trotting hurriedly towards the gates of the hall. We fixed our dresses one last time. I, my black shimmery lehenga and Madhulika, her saffron chikankar lehenga and soon four kalashas, each one varying in size, yet fitting each other, were placed on our heads. The kalashas were heavy but we were told to keep still. I was grinning as I heard the blaring music and the beating of the ceremonial dhol. As the baraatis started to come in, we were asked to lower our gaze and stand still. I lowered my eyes and tried to stand as still as possible. I was determined to show how good I was.

However, to my dismay, soon I started to feel a little uncomfortable. The baraatis were all men (as women, I was told, did not accompany the baraat). One could tell most of them were drunk and could barely walk. Some would gaze wildly at me, my body or Madhulika's. A boy, around the age of 19 stumbled onto me, brushing his hand against my chest and danced away, as if nothing had happened. I found my excitement for this ritual plummeting. Now, I wanted to go home. I felt hollow on the inside. Soon after the baraatis were all in the banquet hall, a senior member of the groom's family came to us and dropped shagun into each of our kalash. He said to me ; "I am giving you less money because you are dressed in black and your sister more money because she is dressed in the traditionally appropriate red. Still, well done, girls" and with that, he left. I had a million questions in my mind. Who am I? What am I to the family? Everyone saw what was happening, how the drunk men behaved, yet no one said anything, no one came to protect me! Did they really care for me? Sure they did but..? I didn't like how I was looked at, it was humiliating. I felt violated. The kalashas were heavy. Even when I was no longer holding them, why did I still feel their weight?



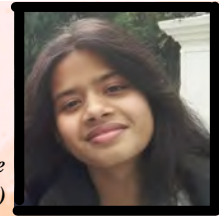
*Photograph : Rhea Kad*

\* *Kalash - a metal pot with a large base and small mouth, large enough to hold a coconut, usually used in Hindu rituals/ ceremonies.*

# VIRAL HAPPENINGS

Sushree Mukherjee

(First Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College)



Photograph : Anmol Chugh

For Rahim Jamil, 4th December, 2019 was just a normal day.

A Hyderabad restaurateur with a wife, widowed mother and three children, he hadn't been able to foretell - no one could - how the next year would change everyone's lives .

"Two plates of hara kebab for Singh ji! Would you like anything else?" Rahim asked Mr Singh, a regular at Shahi Tadka.

"No, thank you, Rahim bhai!" said Mr Singh, smiling.

"Thank you so much. I . . ."

"Abbu! Why're people fighting?" asked Sanaa, the youngest daughter. Aatifa, the eldest, elaborated on that.

"Abbu, it's all over the news. People fighting, protesting violently against some CAA bill . . ."

"It's nothing at all! It must be a useless protest by some extremists - it'll fizzle out!"

Rahim laughed.

Mr Singh looked worried. "Don't dismiss it, Rahim bhai! These are worrisome events."

Rahim laughed again. "These usually disappear in a day or two. Don't worry!"

Time changes perspectives quite easily.

"Abbu, when will this get over?" asked Sanaa, sitting on her father's lap. Rahim smiled, concealing his apprehension.

"These die out fast, Sanaa, and we'll soon go for ice-cream," he said.

On the other side of the room, Aatifa and Asim exchanged worried glances.

"I will have the chocolate flavour!" said Sanaa, excitedly.

Raghu was Rahim's friend, but some people had surrounded Raghu's ice-cream shop a week ago, questioned him, and left with him. He hadn't returned.

"May Allah preserve us," thought Rahim, glancing at his mother, who sat in her rocking chair.

"Will we really have to leave our home, Abbu?" asked Asim, Aatifa's twin brother.

Everything had turned grey - fights, protests and CAA . . .

"But Ammi, they are not wrong. From their perspective, it's . . ."

"Are you implying that I leave this place?"

Rahim looked shocked. "Ammi, how could you say this? I never meant that . . ."

Ammi silenced him. "I do not mean it that way. With this bill, I now have to prove my identity - which depends on flimsy documents. If I cannot, I will have to leave my home of sixty years. The place my parents talked of so fondly, where I grew up, playing with my sister. Where I got married and had you; where your father set up his shop, which is now successful beyond his wildest dreams. The place where you grew up, the place where I watch my grandchildren play - I have to leave behind all that?"

"Ammi, nothing will happen . . ."

"Don't," Ammi spoke softly. "Do not give me false assurances. If you cannot be truthful, do not try to calm me. I will prepare myself for whatever happens."

Rahim and his wife exchanged looks quietly.

"Tell me - when there are already so many problems, why go ahead with it?"

Stony silence was the only answer she received. Ammi looked at them levelly.

"I wonder what Allah has in store for us."

Within a few days, the world was shaken by the arrival of an unknown disease - a fever that spread fast and left millions dead. This was the Covid-19 pandemic that had left nothing but devastation in its wake.

The CAA and NRC bills were put on hiatus - prompting Rahim's mother to sigh in relief - a feeling that was shared by several people.

However, everyone realised that while one trouble had left, a deadlier one had arisen. The Covid-19 pandemic, far from a blessing in disguise, was actually much worse than the CAA bill.

"Strengthen us and help us in our darkest times, O Lord. Protect those near and dear to me," mumbled Ammi, her aged eyes looking out the window - where teeming streets were now filled with silence and similar prayers from millions.

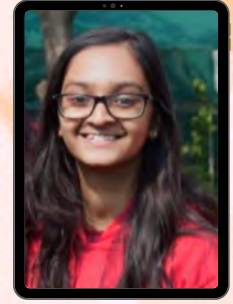
# A C A D E M I A



*Photograph : Rhea Kad*

**In this section, we present the winning papers of the online student paper presentation competition on *Text, Interpretation and Representation: Re-reading the Mahabharata* organised by the Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi held on 9th November 2020. The first prize went to Medhawi Rajgaria (B.A Hons. Economics, IV semester) of Maitreyi college and the second prize went to Nanao Rajkumari (B.A Hons.Sociology, IV semester) of Hindu college. The competition was preceded by a talk on *Text and Interpretation: Revisiting the Mahabharata* delivered by Professor Balaganapathi Deverakonda, Head of the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi.**

# The Subject of Dharma in Mahabharata – Multiple Lenses, One Study



*Author: Medhawi Rajgaria  
B.A (Hons.) Economics, IV semester  
Affiliation: Maitreyi College  
University of Delhi*

## **Abstract**

*A unique treasure of complex human intricacies, Mahabharata is an assemblage of infinite recesses where every indulgence reveals deeper meanings. Yet, there is one term-set that is often used to define the essence of the epic: Dharma-Adharma. It plays the role of a judgment parameter for all characters and provides a common pattern of study in their individual stories.*

*Does Dharma imply a law, a tradition, a measure of righteousness, or a chasmic form of wisdom?*

*The paper aims to explore the concept of Dharma through a character comparison analysis of three of the central characters of Mahabharata – Yudhishthira, Karna and Duryodhana.*

*The three characters represent varying approaches towards the subject of Dharma, yet there are common lines that run through their definitions of Dharma-Adharma. From a story of lifetime obedience towards law, to a story of lifetime obedience towards promise, to finally a story of lifetime obedience towards ambition; this interpretation aims to explore dynamic aspects of the discussion of Dharma in Mahabharata.*

**Keywords:** Mahabharat, Dharma, Adharma,

## **Introduction**

*|| Dharma eva hato hanti dharmo raksati  
raksitah || (Manusmriti, n.d., chapter 8:15)*

*~ Dharma when destroyed, destroys. Dharma when protected, protects. (Paraphrased)*

*Dharma – a word too familiar across the Indian subcontinent. Its scope is not limited to Hinduism alone; it encompasses the philosophical systems of religions including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism among others. However, the inference of this term is often understood to be a translation for *religion*. In contemporary times, this understanding has had prominent consequences, which have ultimately played an influential role in shaping the modern sentiment towards the institution of faith. Amidst a bustle of claims and contradictions, an important question arises - Has the subject of Dharma been laid open to the lens through which it deserves to be studied?*

*Chapter 56, verse 33 of the Adi Parva of Mahabharata says (Ramaswamy S. R., 2019) –  
|| Yadihasti tadanyatra yannehasti na tat kvacit ||*

~ That which exists in the Mahabharata exists everywhere else in the world; that which is not in the Mahabharata does not exist anywhere else. (Paraphrased)

Dharma is a central theme that runs through this ever-evolving yet ancient epic. It is therefore imperative that the topic of Dharma in Mahabharata is explored unboundedly.

The three crucial characters in concern – Yudhisthira, Karna and Duryodhana, have eminently strong personalities which give special identities to their independent narratives. However, when studied together as part of the collective story they make, these three narratives become radically inseparable. It is indeed an area of great interest – to explore essential traits of these characters through the perusal of their approach towards *Dharma*.

### Methods and Resources:

This study aims to indulge the observer into a dynamic analysis of the subject of Dharma through a character comparison approach. The three characters under consideration are –

- Yudhisthira – The eldest of the Pandavas; First king of Indraprastha
- Karna – First son of Kunti; Loyal friend to Duryodhana; King of Anga
- Duryodhana – The eldest of the Kauravas; Crown prince of Hastinapur



The paper focuses on simultaneously scrutinizing the viewpoints of the aforementioned characters towards three commonly understood aspects of Dharma:

- *Dharma* is Law
- Promise is *Dharma*
- Lie is *Adharma*

Thereafter, the final leg of the analysis is focused at exploring the perspectives of the three characters towards two narrational aspects of the epic:

- The role of lineage
- Approach towards death



The narrative reference has been inspired by previous works in the field of Indology and mythology, which includes books, articles, works of fiction, interpretations and translations, for which citations and references have been mentioned wherever suitable. The analysis has been influenced by literary works related to fictional and non-fictional interpretations of the story, characters and concepts. Some of these works include *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008), *My Gita* by Devdutt Pattanaik (2015), among others.

The conclusions drawn are independent of any inferential sources and are a result of free study.



## **Discussions and Analysis**

This paper is structured according to aforementioned divisions. Following is a character brief of the three characters under study which influences the sequential observations:

*Yudhisthira*, the eldest Pandava and the spiritual son of the God of death – Yama, who is often referred to as Dharmaraj (King of Dharma). He is regarded as a stringent follower as well as protector of the moral law. A deserving heir to the throne of Hastinapur, Yudhisthira's motivation behind kingship is shaped by welfare and service.

*Karna*, the spiritual son of the Sun God – Surya, is commonly credited as Daanveer (one who never steps back from donating). He is known for his unconditional loyalty towards his promise of friendship to Duryodhana. Abandoned by Kunti at birth, and nurtured as a charioteer's son

Karna is regarded as the figure who rebelled against societal discrimination for the right to become a warrior, ultimately unaware of his real rights. Karna's motivation behind warriorship can be seen to be societal acknowledgement and competition.

*Duryodhana*, the eldest of the 100 sons of the blind king of Hastinapur – Dhritarashtra. Influenced by his uncle Shakuni throughout his life, Duryodhana is defined by his overly ambitious approach, which ultimately sways him away from the moral code of conduct. His motivation for achieving the throne is said to be influenced by greed and false ambition.

Yudhisthira follows the rules of Dharma dedicatedly out of choice, whereas Karna, in spite of his respect for Dharma supports Duryodhana in his immoral ways, prioritizing his duty towards his 'promise' over his moral longings.

While Duryodhana right away abandons the moral law for his selfish needs, both Yudhisthira and Karna believe that they are following their situational Dharma.

## **Three aspects of Dharma**

### ***Dharma is Law***

A highly common understanding of Dharma is the obligation of law. The narrative highlights instances where the response of the three characters towards Dharma as law can be observed.

Yudhisthira, throughout the plot, can be seen as an orthodox believer of this rule. It is his faith in the law being Dharma that he declines to break the law of the dice game, even at the stake of his wife. Does Yudhisthira's belief help in protecting the moral dignity of a society based on the rules of Dharma?

Karna, on the other hand, often comes out as a figure who questions and subsequently dismantles the laws of the society that kill his potential and ability. He goes beyond the caste laws to learn the art of archery and stands high in front of Kshatriyas with the intent of proving himself as the best archer. Does Karna's refusal of societal laws kill the essence of Dharma?

Duryodhana frequently shows out his disregard for Dharma. In spite of being bound by laws, he takes advantage of Yudhisthira's obedience towards the law and makes use of Yudhisthira's beliefs for his own benefits. This can be observed in many events across the narrative, from the game of dice to the Mahabharata war. Does Duryodhana's approach towards Dharma being law turn out to be a threat for the society?

The eighteen day Mahabharata war is perhaps a suitable store of answers for the questions raised above. The war, often referred to as *Dharmayudhha* (moral war), was based on mutually decided war laws. However, over the course of the war, many laws were broken by both sides. Literal meanings of rules were taken advantage of, many of such instances being guided by Krishna himself – the pioneer for establishment of Dharma. Some of such instances include violation of the rules of duel, violation of the timings of the war, among many others. This brings up the point of the concept of Dharma being greater than obligation of law.

Yudhisthira's dedication towards law did make him suitable as a king who resolved to maintain order in the society, but the same dedication also played an important role in giving rise to a great war.

The society is dynamic and changes with time, which brings into concern the importance of laws being equally dynamic, so as to match the pace of the society. Law is a requirement for morality, but cannot be an inflexible translation for it.

### ***Promise is Dharma***

The most important aspect of the story of Karna is his uncompromising conformity to his promise. Even at the instance of getting to know his original lineage and his relationship with the Pandavas, he sticks to his promise of loyalty towards Duryodhana, with a firm belief of his promise being his Dharma.

*“Ask me not to abandon my brethren in battle who are destined to lose. May the Pandavas win, may they enthrone their Sovereign.”* (Tagore R., n.d. /2019)

The lines quoted above are extracted from a translation of 'Karna Kunti Sambad', one of the noted works of Rabindranath Tagore which revolves around the conversation between Karna and his biological mother Kunti before the war. The context highlights the point of Karna refusing to join his brothers in the war, even at the stake of victory. He prioritizes his promise over his moral longings, and holds back from revolting against Duryodhana's tortures.

Yudhisthira too, in this context, can be seen as a believer of the obligation of word of mouth, while Duryodhana can be observed as a character who refused to restrain himself by any obligations, accepting the backlash of being called a follower of *Adharma*.

Does strict obligation towards a promise made necessarily imply adherence to the values of Dharma? According to the *Bhishma Parva* of the Mahabharata, Lord Krishna comes down of Arjun's chariot to kill Bhishma with a chariot-wheel, when he notices Arjuna fighting halfheartedly against his grandfather. By doing so, Krishna breaks his vow of not touching weapons in the war, while also breaking the illusion of compulsory obligation towards words of mouth which no longer serve their purpose.

Another important observation here is that adherence to promise has been seen as a mark of honour commonly across Indian mythology, and specifically in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, this aspect of the Mahabharata highlights that fear (of loss of honour and prestige) plays an important role in shaping the faith behind promise being Dharma.

## **Lie is Adharma**

According to the *Drona parva* of the Mahabharata, Yudhisthira spoke a half lie on the 15th day of the Mahabharata war for Drona to be defeated by the Pandavas. When the invincible Drona stood high in front of the Pandava army, the only way left to defeat him was to break his morale by convincing him of the news of his dear son Aswathama's death. Inspired by Krishna, Yudhisthira went on to throw this illusion upon his teacher, which Drona fell for because of his faith in Yudhisthira's devotion towards truth.

*"Aswathama hatha iti narova kunjaro"*

~ Aswathama is dead, be it a man or an elephant (Paraphrased)

The above words are said to be pronounced by Yudhisthira in this context. The second part of the sentence was however murmured by him, in a voice low enough for Drona to not hear. By doing so, he saved himself from a literal violation of the doctrine of truth, but the actual validity of this escape has been a question for many.

According to some sources, the chariot of Yudhisthira, which had been raised a few inches above the ground throughout the war till then, came down to touch the ground, as a symbol of his first perfidy.

An important event in the story of Karna is the curse inflicted upon him by his teacher Parshurama, when the latter comes to know of Karna's lie regarding his caste. Karna, in his teenage years, had lied to Parshurama about him being a Brahmin so as to avail his training, when all other teachers had refused to accept him because of his foster father's lineage.

*"I curse you that when you are in desperate need of an astra, your memory will fail you."* (Adi Parva, chapter 9) (Ganguly K. M. (2012))

The line quoted above is taken from an abridged version of the Mahabharata, written by K.M Ganguly. It describes the curse that Karna received from Parshurama, as a punishment for his falsity. On the 17th day of the Mahabharat war, Karna is said to lose to Arjun as his mind failed to collect any of the war knowledge that he had learned in his entire life.

Duryodhana, who walked on the path of immorality throughout his life, can be observed as a character who never bothered to bind himself by the rules of truth and lie.

An important trend that can be noted in these instances is the consequence of being unfaithful to the doctrine of truth. Lie is seen as a sin in many incidences of the story, however an important observation is the role of intent. While the motivation behind Yudhisthira's half lie is a king's duty, the same for Karna is helplessness, whereas that for Duryodhana is self-interest.

## **Narrational Aspects**

### **The role of Lineage**

Lineage is a very important concept in the whole history and mythology of India. In the Mahabharata, a complex picture of descent rights can be observed. From Satyawati's desire of a royal lineage, to Dhritarashtra's obsession with his son's crown rights, to the Pandavas' fears regarding loss of lineage at the end of the war, the role of lineage has been eminently prominent.

Duryodhana's desire for the throne is shaped by the belief that he has the hierarchical right to achieve it, his father being the king of Hastinapur. He looks at his descent rights as the only sustaining factor in his life, without which he has no other motivation for existence. This perspective can be seen as the reason behind his unflinching ambitions, which break the boundaries of morality. The flow of his life can be seen as desirous ambitions giving rise to uncontrolled greed and rivalry, guided by the fear of losing. Duryodhana's viewpoint of the importance of lineage brings into light the negative angle of this system.

Yudhishthira's ambition for the throne is guided more by duty and welfare than self-interest. In spite of being the eldest son of King Pandu and a legitimate heir to the throne of Hastinapur, his detachment towards royal pleasure can be frequently observed. Yudhishthira represents a more neutral approach towards the concept of lineage, wherein the inference of his rights for him is not inspired by desire. Thus, his quest for becoming the king is seen as a quest for *Dharma*.

The story of Karna highlights an altogether different perspective for the topic of lineage. While he struggles to break free from the restrictions imposed upon him due to his foster-father's lineage throughout his life, his actual lineage is a potential plot turner for both Yudhishthira's and Duryodhana's stories. When Karna becomes aware of his actual descent, he spares no consideration for the possibility of his access to the throne of Hastinapur. Despite having lived the life of Anga's king, he maintains an indifferent attitude towards royal pleasure.

The study of the role of lineage in Mahabharata highlights dynamic aspects related to human orientations. While one attempts to understand the importance of this system, a greater realization turns out to be the actual irrelevance of its illusionary understanding.

It highlights that greed and pride are not worthy motivations behind the establishment of the essence of Dharma, and that influential power is defined more by ability and sincerity than by lineal rights.

### **Approach towards Death**

The topic of death is an integral part of the discussion of Mahabharata. As much as the epic throws light on a wiser approach towards life, it accentuates the importance of a wiser approach towards death.

In Hinduism, some very important aspects in the discussion of death are the concepts of afterlife, rebirth and *moksha*. While rebirth entraps a soul in the endless cycle of birth and death, *moksha* liberates it from this melancholy.

*"Arjuna, there are two paths, one of return and the other of no return. The wise, the connected, know the difference and choose the one of no return."* – Bhagavad Gita: chapter 8, verses 26 and 27 (paraphrased). (Pattanaik D. 2015)

The approach of the three characters of Mahabharata under consideration towards death reveals interesting insights into the topic.

Duryodhana's story of death can be seen as a reflection of his immoral life. Even at the moment of his death, his desire of the Pandavas' destruction does not leave him, and he dies a painful prolonged death shadowed by loneliness and dissatisfaction.

Karna's death is often seen as one of the most tragic incidents of Mahabharata. Deprived of his hard acquired skills and brought down to a charioteer's role of pulling out the stuck wheel of his chariot, Karna is killed in a weaponless state at the hands of his younger brother. His approach towards death however, has been seen as that of a warrior, who is not shadowed by the fear of death.

Yudhisthira's wise approach towards death can be observed in the *Mahaprasthanika* Parva of the Mahabharata. Even as he abandons the world on his final journey towards heaven, he refuses to abandon his known Dharma. With unflinching determination to climb his way up to heaven by Mount Sumeru, he refuses to accept Lord Indra's offer of a direct chariot lift, for the sake of a dog that accompanied him through his way. According to the script, the dog turns out to be the Lord of Dharma disguised in the beast's form, thus Yudhisthira passes the test that he was subjected to. An important observation which the epic aims to highlight here is the integrity of the sense of welfare and empathy in the understanding of Dharma. Even after abandoning the world, Yudhisthira does not abandon his sense of duty and service.

Further, in the *Svargarohana Parva* of the Mahabharata, the story of Yudhisthira's journey to heaven continues. As he encounters the illusion of finding the Kauravas in heaven and his brothers and wife in hell, he refuses to accept the pleasurable life of heaven which was resided by souls with immoral records. This way, the association of Yudhisthira with Dharma is vindicated.

By opening up the door to a broader perspective towards the event of death, the epic reveals the triviality of worldly desires. The fear of death is a fundamental concern that plagues the human mind. The epic of Mahabharata broadens the scope for human understanding by revealing a wiser possibility of overcoming this fear, which is integral for exploring the depth of subjects like *Dharma*.

## Conclusion

The study of the subject of Dharma in Mahabharata yields interesting observations. It breaks the boundaries of the definition of Dharma and highlights the imperativeness of looking at it beyond the shackles of rules, laws, promises, systems and institutions. An essential observation here is the importance of *intention and reason*. This paper highlights the importance of values including duty, welfare, empathy, discipline and justice in the understanding of Dharma. It emphasizes on the realization that Dharma as a subject is dynamic.

The incidents from the Mahabharata war where Krishna breaks the rules of law and that of promise highlight the lesson that actions committed for the greater good are always higher than those done for oneself.

An ancient prayer from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says –

|| *Asato ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya* ||

~ From the false lead me to truth, from the dark lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality.

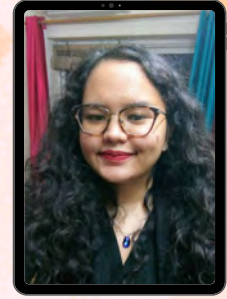
(Paraphrased) (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, n.d., chapter 1:3:28)

The subject of Dharma in Mahabharata focuses on the journeys highlighted by this *shloka*. It opens up a door to more in depth studies and highlights the human potential of exploring greater levels of wisdom and applying them for the purpose of welfare and service.

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# Women of Substance: The Mahabharata



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## **Abstract**

*The modern Hindu society has been socialised into believing the popular narrative that the Mahabharata supports and encourages a patriarchal system. Such a perspective has been crucial in shaping feminine and masculine gender roles in India. This paper has tried to emphasize the alternative view that women are the true leaders of this epic by analysing five female characters. There is Satyawati, a woman who succeeded in obliterating the caste hierarchy in India. Amba, who asserted her individuality where women were expected to be subservient. Gandhari, who should be recognised for her righteousness and not as a model of female propriety. Kunti, the modern archetype of a single mother. Finally, Draupadi, a pioneer of feminism and resistance. It has attempted to emphasise on the idea that women have always had the strength to subvert the male hegemony.*

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, patriarchal system, caste, female propriety, feminism, resistance

## **Introduction**

The Mahabharata and Ramayana are the defining cultural narratives in Hinduism and are often seen as responsible for the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in India. However, in pursuing its central moral inquiry into the nature of *dharma* or righteousness, the Mahabharata also holds up alternatives to social norms to the point of destabilizing convention. The Mahabharatian society was the age of pre-brahminical supremacy. Evident in many instances; Dronacharya, a Brahmin, had to give up his traditional ‘*adhyayan*’ (study) and ‘*adhyapan*’ (study and teaching) and become adept at the arts of the Kshatriyas, in order to earn his living as well as establish a status in society. It can also be suggested that the women in Mahabharata enjoyed quite a bit of freedom of thought and expression, though their activities were confined to the ‘*andarmahal*’ (ladies’ section of the palace). While Draupadi was admired and the men were blamed for stripping and sexually humiliating her in front of so many men, Sita in Ramayana was humiliated and suspected by her own husband although she had remained untouched by Ravana. Thus, Ramayana shows the typical brahminical morality that it is the victim of the sexual crime who is to be blamed, as she happens to be a woman and not the criminal since he is the man.

To explore the above mentioned point, this paper shall discuss five powerful women in the Mahabharata who asserted themselves in a patriarchal society. It is, however, important to not see them and analyse these characters through the theoretical perspectives of western feminism since different standards were valid in that age with a disparate understanding of 'repression' and 'subservience'. Yes, the epic is a story dominated by men but they appear indecisive and flounder at crucial moments, often needing the wisdom, support and courage of the women in their lives. These women of exceptional character, whose strengths have few parallels, even in the liberalised 21st century knew how to subvert the male hegemony, invert *de jure* power and convert it into *de facto* power in their own hands.

### **Satyavati**

There is firstly Satyavati, who was rejected by her father, King Uparichara Vasu, and forced out of the royal sphere as her mother was a Shudra although the historical social reality of India offers many instances of sons of royal personages, including her twin brother borne by Shudra women becoming kings. She is a woman worthy of recognition since the epic regards the matriarchal ascendancy she gained as justification for the unquestioned validity of her political decisions. Her story inverts the conventional power relationship as she became the arbiter of the fate of Hastinapur. The narrative is careful to mark the shaping intelligence that underwrote her progress.

She was adopted by a fisherman and lived a hardworking life by ferrying people across the river. It is through this that she met the two men who changed her life radically. The first was the great sage, Parashara, and the second, the king of Hastinapur, Shantanu. Both men were moved by Satyavati's beauty and desired her. The story of her compliance in both cases is one of the transformation of social and sexual subordination into far-reaching personal and political advantage.

When the great sage, Parashara, stepped into her boat, he was smitten by her beauty and begged for her love (Mahabharata, 1.57.57.). Her remarkable character emerges from this interaction as she resisted his advances with exceptional presence of mind. She harboured no illusions that the sage might wed her. Hence, she obtained assurances of regaining her virgin status and asked for a pleasant fragrance for her body since the odour of fish had given her the name '*Matsyagandha*' (Mahabharata, 1.57.61-63 & 1.57.64-65). Only after these practical aspects have been taken care of did she give in to the lust of the sage. She shows no higher caste hesitations in accepting her illegitimate son, Vyasa, produced from this union unlike her granddaughter-in-law, Kunti.

Satyavati's fragrance is what initially attracted King Shantanu who, unlike Parashara, wanted to make Satyavati his life companion. However, her father, the dasa king, insisted that Shantanu must promise to make Satyavati's son king of the Kuru dynasty (Mahabharata, 1.94.48-51). Shantanu could not make such a vow as he already had a son, Devrata, by his elder wife Ganga and as the elder son, he was the rightful heir to the throne. When Devrata finds his father distraught for this reason, he promises to dispel his father's gloom by making the now-infamous vow where he accepted 'brahmacharya' or celibacy till death so that his progeny might not stand in the way of his father's marriage to Satyavati. For this decision, he became Bhishma, the utterer of the terrible vow.



Her actions as the queen of Hastinapur demonstrate her independence. Rather than any male figure, it is she who made the decisions. She became the mother of two sons who unfortunately died before being made king and the younger son, Vichitravirya, left two young wives. Shantanu's line was faced with extinction and the resolution of this problem lay exclusively in her hands as the reigning queen of Hastinapur. However, none of these calamities affected Satyawati's calm judgement.

She decided to take the bold decision of initiating '*Niyoga*' for her daughters-in-law, a ritual where a holy man is appointed for helping to bear children (Mahabharata, 1.99.2) for which she called her son, Rishi Vyasa. This decision yet again revealed her courage, practical judgement, and absolute truthfulness, a combination of moral traits that is central to the epic's concept of right conduct.

To justify her actions, she argued that just like Vichitravirya and Bhishma are brothers because they share the same father, Bhishma and Vyasa too are brothers since they share the same mother (Mahabharata, 1.99.28-30). Thus, she extended dharma to a genetic principle that enshrined a mother's rights. This claim was astonishing because the epic was written in the age of patriarchal determinism and was also held up by the text as a validating principle of dharma. In this manner, Satyawati succeeded in countering general social conventions in her own ways.

### **Amba**

Another ignored character was Amba, the princess of Kashi whose life story exhibits a different kind of struggle in the epic. She, along with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika were abducted by Bhishma from their '*swyamvara*' on the orders of Satyawati to get them married to her son, Vichitravirya. Although no king in the court of Kashi had the power to oppose Bhishma, he was opposed by Salva, the King of Saubhala on the way who Amba had a secret affair with. Bhishma, in his attempt to fulfill Satyawati's orders, killed Salva and took the three sisters to Hastinapur.

The other narrative of this story states that while Amba's younger sisters were married to Vichitravirya, it was believed that she had rightfully been won by Bhishma. He, however, rejected her due to his vow of celibacy and returned to her lover, Salva, who renounced her. Given the turn of events, Amba was only left with one choice - death. However, she was not ready to let go of her humiliation so easily and decided to take revenge. She was now only left with the choice of death but due to her staunch self-respect, she broke the norms set by society and decided to extract revenge for the humiliation she had to face because of Bhishma.

She requested her grandfather, Srinjay Hotrovan to fight against Bhishma who appealed to his friend, Pashurama to teach Bhishma, his student a lesson. When this failed, Amba resiliently devoted the rest of her life to '*sadhna*' and was reborn as Shikhandi, Draupadi's elder brother, who was instrumental in Bhishma's death. While her role in the epic might seem trivial, her character succeeds in providing us with a critique of existing norms of the society.

## Gandhari

While Amba may seem insignificant, Gandhari is one of the three central female characters in the epic. The princess of Gandhar, is perceived as the archetype of a *'pativrata'* and the model of female propriety who stands for an impossible degree of devotion to her husband. She is venerated as it is believed that she blindfolded herself to express her empathy with her husband by not exceeding him in any manner and by sharing his dark life.

However, much has been written and said about Gandhari's willingness to be as sightless as her husband was. One opinion is that Gandhari's voluntary blindfolding was an act of protest and rebellion against the injustice done to her. The women of this period had no right to choose their life partners and *'swayamvaras'* were merely a mockery of women's freedom. By blinding herself, she was seemingly objecting to the injustice done to her by being forced to marry a handicapped husband who, she knew, was inferior to her in every respect. In this way, the queen withdrew herself from everybody and mocked all other sighted people of the world. This reveals her indomitable will, ability to stand alone, and to take swift and agonizing decisions unmindful of the consequences.

As an individual, Gandhari had an innate sense of justice and righteousness which led her to try changing the course of events that eventually steered her family into calamity. She was not insensitive to the schemes and plots hatched by her son, Duryodhana against the Pandavas. She even counselled her husband, Dhritarashtra, time and again, to not deprive the Pandavas of their legitimate and legal share of the kingdom.

In the *'Sabha Parva'*, she advised Dhritarashtra to stop the game of dice who paid no heed to her words of wisdom and caution. Once Draupadi is left humiliated, Gandhari reprimanded her husband in open court. She also emerged as the advocate of justice when she cursed her son, Dushasana, by saying that he would become immortal in the world because of the terrible insult he had meted out to Draupadi and through her to all the women of the world. She also tried to convince Dhritarashtra to do the 'right' thing and not be further blinded by his fondness for his son. His support for Duryodhana despite knowing his unrighteous desires and in his insatiate hunger for the kingdom will only lead to the destruction of the Kuru dynasty. She is again paid no heed but what is significant here is that a wife, a millennium ago, uncompromisingly told her husband that, enslaved by his love for his progeny, he had lost control over them.

Even more impressive is her analysis of the results of war that Duryodhana would lose because the mighty warriors he depended on—Bhishma, Drona, Kripa—may fight on his side being "*rajapindabhayat*" (borne on the Kaurava exchequer), and may even give up their lives in that process, but they would never harm the Pandavas because of their superiority in *dharmā*.

It is unjust to believe that she did not have a mother's heart. On the contrary, her love for her sons was so genuine that she dreaded visualising the day her sons will face punishment in the hands of justice which would ultimately triumph. Despite disapproving the immoral deeds of her sons she decided to break her

vow and opened her blindfold just once in her life to bestow a naked Duryodhana with an iron-body that could not be destroyed by any weapon. However, she earnestly believed that 'dharma' alone should prevail and could not give the blessing of victory to Duryodhana when he came to her before the Great War.

With the news of Duryodhana's death, Gandhari, and the whole royal court of Hastinapur was devastated by the catastrophe that transpired. The wailing sound of women described in '*Stree Parva*' is an overwhelming and horrific depiction of the devastation caused by war. The old and frail mother, Gandhari was surrounded by the corpses of her hundred sons. She grieved on the evil influence of her brother Shakuni on her sons and even repented for the fate of her blind husband. She then mourned for the death of her other sons. Her sorrow was deep and she was further left frustrated when she realised her son was killed by foul play, making her lose the conviction that the Pandavas were torch-bearers of *Dharma*. Gandhari's anger and disappointment knew no bounds and she did not hesitate to curse even the god, Krishna. At this juncture, even Vyasa begged her to compose herself who in the social relationship was her father-in-law and therefore to be greatly revered and obeyed without any questioning. Here Gandhari appears gloriously as goddess Durga- the most beautiful manifestation of the moral and spiritual power of womanhood. She eventually reigns herself in.

Thus, Gandhari with all her mental strength is a mixture of goodness and justice despite the injustice meted out to her. She is symbolic of the role of women and the sacrifices made in married life but is not a passive victim; rather she is strong, assertive and articulate.

### **Kunti**

In contrast to Gandhari, Kunti is the modern archetype of a single mother whom the epic declares as the incarnation of *siddhi*, fulfilment. Pritha received the name Kunti from her foster father, Kuntibhoja who then handed her over to sage Durvasa in her teenage years.

Pleased with her service towards him, Durvasa taught her a mantra that enabled her to invoke any god of her choice to beget children by them. Her curiosity led her to call Surya, the Sun God to test the mantra who threatened to consume the kingdom if denied. Her fear overpowered her but she stipulated that the son born from this union must be like his father and her virginity should be restored. In this she is remarkably akin to Satyawati but fearing the humiliation and shame her clan would have to face since she was an unwed mother, she abandoned her child.

She was eventually married to Pandu, the prince of Hastinapur only to find him being immediately married to the captivating Madri. However, she still insisted on accompanying her impotent husband into exile and is left horrified when her beloved husband insists her to get sons by others. It was in this encounter that Kunti's individuality shines forth (Mahabharata, Adi parva 120-12). She firmly refused to

be touched by another because she resolved to maintain an unsullied reputation. Therefore, she does not emulate Satyawati by acknowledging her pre-marital son. Pandu does enumerate that various categories of sons could be made the heir to the throne, including one born to the wife before marriage. However, Kunti realised that children born with the sanction of her husband had a more secure right to the throne in comparison to her illegitimate son. Pandu ordered her to obey his commands but made no impact on Kunti. Like Satyawati, Kunti shares the secret of her mantra only after Pandu has been brought to his knees. Thereafter, too, Kunti too had the last word where Pandu's desires are concerned.

Kunti's determination to protect her interests was visible when she refused Pandu's request to help Madri have more children. Even when Pandu died and Madri decided to commit Sati, Kunti shouldered the tremendous responsibility of bringing up five children in a hostile court, bereft of relatives and allies. Once Bhishma has provided a roof over her head, it was Kunti who guarded her children. It is she who got the Nishada woman and her five sons drunk in the House-of-Lac so that no evidence is left of the Pandavas' escape from the dwelling where Duryodhana had conspired to kill them.

In commanding Bhīma, her son, to marry Hidimba, a '*rakshasi*', Kunti exhibited incredible foresight as she seized this opportunity to cement an alliance for the friendless Pandavas (Mahabharata, 157.47-49). It is again Kunti who instructs her first grandchild, Ghatotkacha, born of this union, to ensure his loyalty that turns out useful since he saves Arjuna from Karna's weapon at the cost of his own life (Mahabharata, 157.74). Kunti could observe life closely and use the learning from her experiences to arrive at swift decisions that benefitted both society and her children. This sets her apart from all the characters in the epic.

Her decision to proceed to Panchala is another step in that direction, aiming at winning Draupadi to forge a princely alliance with the enemy of Hastinapur and challenge the Kauravas. In Panchala, she chose to stay in the hut of a potter as she brought up her sons from the lowest rungs of society to become rulers of the kingdom since it helped them truly understand their duty of pleasing their subjects. Kunti's awareness perceived that the only way to forge an unbreakable link among the five is not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives and have a common wife. Hence, it is believed that Kunti deliberately asked that whatever had been brought should be shared and enjoyed as usual. The Pandavas' acceptance of having Draupadi as their common wife shows the total respect and implicit obedience paid by the brothers to Kunti which is unparalleled in the epic (Mahabharata, 97.29 & 198.17). Also, by maneuvering Draupadi into having five husbands she effectively ensured that her daughter-in-law will never be able to point an accusing finger at her for having had sexual relations with persons other than her spouse.

Kunti then gave up her pride of place to Draupadi and retreated into the background. She only emerged from the shadows to intervene thrice. When her sons were exiled, she decided to stay back in Hastinapur as a constant reproach to Dhritarashtra about her sons' violated rights. Later, she reprimanded Yudhishtira, her eldest son, for abandoning his duty as king and mistakenly believing that espousing peace with the Kauravas was the proper dharma. Lastly, she acknowledged her first-born to secure the safety of her sons. Although she was rejected by Karna, she succeeded in obtaining his promise to not kill any Pandava but Arjuna and effectively weakened him from within.

## Draupadi

Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupada of Panchal, replaces Kunti as the central female interest in the epic with the *Sabha Parva*. She is a paragon of gender and resistance as she fights to avenge the wrongs inflicted on her. Her ability to overcome adversity in a venerable manner sets her apart from other women, making her the most complex and controversial female character in Hindu literature. If she was compassionate and generous, she respected herself enough to never compromise on her rights as an individual.

She took birth from the bright flames of fire and emerged as a full-grown youth from the fire- alter. Her beauty enthralled every man in her vicinity which is testified in the *swyamvara* hall where the kings were ready to take up arms against each other to stake claim on her.

Many scholars and feminists suggest that Draupadi is a victim of the polyandrous marriage heaped upon her by Patriarchy. However, if the text is interpreted from an alternative perspective then the polyandrous marriage was consensual. The problem arises when the epic is elucidated through contemporary experiences. There is an age-old belief that Draupadi's marital destiny was cemented by Kunti's mistaken utterance. However, Draupadi appeared cheerful when Kunti approached her and does not have the least anxiety about her impending marriage since she has known and accepted it (Mahabharata, 1.182.3). That she too wanted to marry them all and has explicit admiration for all the brothers, was further suggested by the immediate word about the Pandavas - '*amitaujasaam*', implying, Draupadi looked at them all with equal admiration and fascination. Such a prospect would be problematic for Patriarchy because she would not fit in their normative model of a 'woman'.

There is also evidence in the epic supporting this claim. In '*Adi Parva*', when Duryodhana is thinking of creating dissension among Pandavas, Karna says "She chose them as her lords when they were in adversity. Will she abandon them now that they are in prosperity? She can never be estranged from the Pandavas" (Mahabharata, 1.194.6-8). Secondly, in '*Vana Parva*', on the eve of her abduction by Jayadratha, Draupadi herself says "I have accepted as my husbands, five persons" (Mahabharata, 3.250.5-6c).

Draupadi existed in a time when a woman's role was to meekly serve her husband. The wife was the counterpart of her husband and both together became a complete person. However, Draupadi was anything but a conventional wife; she was smart, bold, and would often provoke her husbands into actions. She challenged the male ego in the same manner that stopped the women of her time from raising their voices against male atrocities. It was not just her beauty but her ability to balance it with the desirable traits of a wife that gained her devotion and affection everywhere she went. Unlike many women in her era, Draupadi had a vast knowledge of various subjects like righteousness, duties, and codes of conduct. Her words and opinions were well-respected and the Pandavas often looked up to Draupadi for guidance and approval.

While she was soft-spoken, she was the only known woman of her time to openly insult the Kuru elders and her husbands. This episode occurs during the fateful dice match between Yudhishtira and Duryodhana which sets the actions of the remainder of the epic into motion. Here, Draupadi is seen as a fully developed character, instead of the stereotypical figure whose qualities could match any heroine of the Indian literary tradition. Dressed in only one garment, she was dragged into the assembly since her husband had staked her as his last possession in the game of dice. She angrily addressed the court, demanding to know how they, who are supposedly learned in the proper ways of conduct, could silently look on while she was being humiliated. Her words were a challenge to the knowledge of right and wrong of the kings, (Mahabharata, Sabha parva 69.20) a step unimaginable for a woman of her time and setting. Thus, she emerges as a pioneer of feminism. Even when Dhritarashtra offers her three boons as a peace-offering, her only desire now rested in the fulfilment of her vow for vengeance and beginning of a desire for justice that is only quenched upon her enemy's blood running through her hair.

Although Draupadi was desperate for revenge, her distinction between right and wrong was rarely clouded. While she was not invincible, she could overcome adversity in a venerable manner that sets her apart. Through her unique qualities like steadfast devotion to duty, the spirit of self-sacrifice, fortitude; courage, capacity for hard work, presence of mind, perseverance, endurance, thirst for knowledge, wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong, strength to fight against injustice, and harshness as the occasion demanded made Draupadi a symbol of empowerment for women.

In conclusion, characteristics such as submission, suppression, obedience and silence in the women of the Mahabharata have been emphasized in popular lore and culture. Conversely, this paper makes an attempt to indicate that these women had a will of their own, took some control of their lives, defied norms and fought the patriarchal oppressions of Indian society. This makes them relevant even today and by the religious sanction of their stories many women can be encouraged to rise up for themselves.

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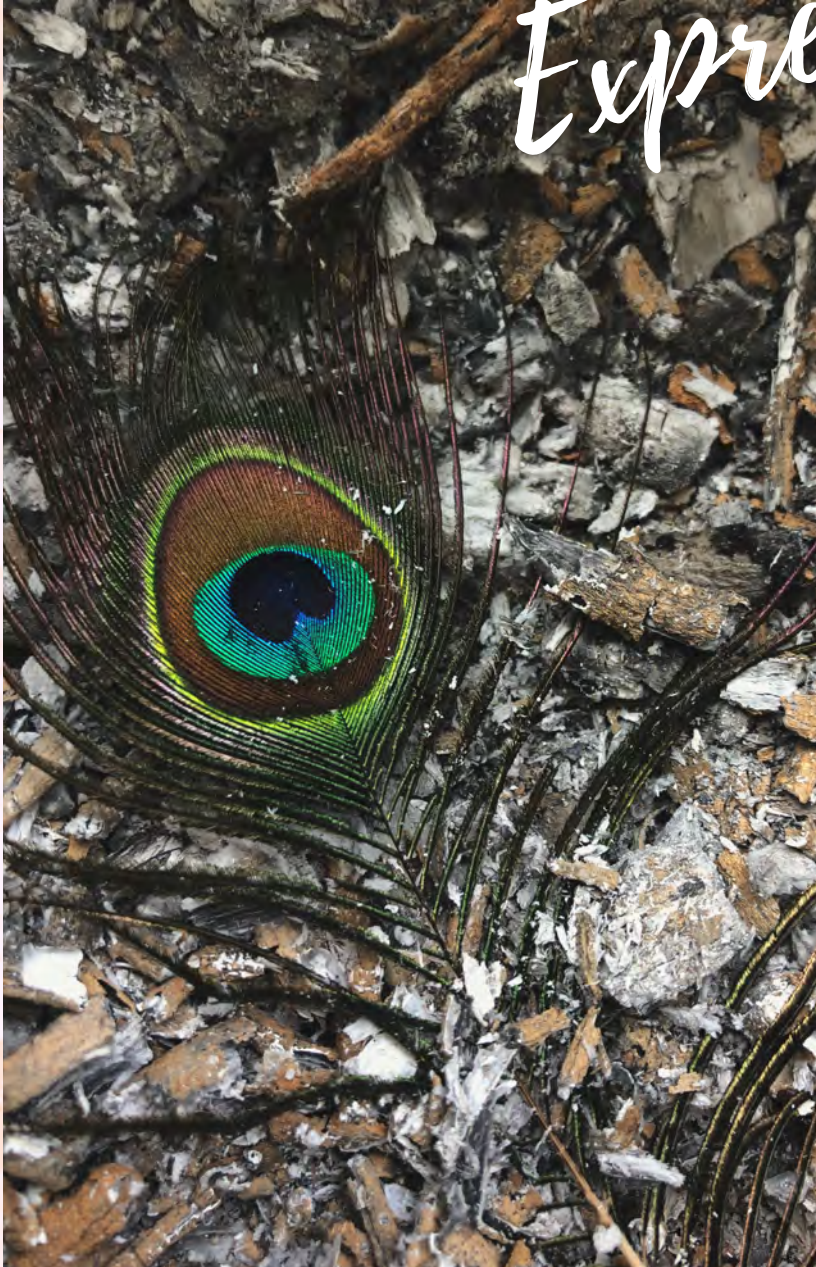
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# Expressions

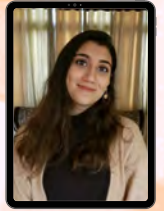


*Photograph : Rhea Kad*

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# THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF REALITY



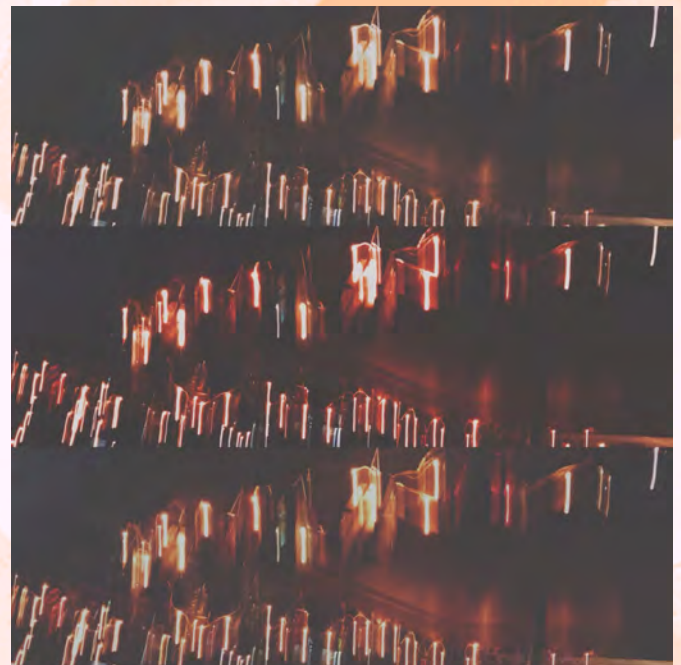
*Samiksha Bhatnagar*  
*(Third Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College)*

Is anything in the world definite?  
Abstract colours and perspectives  
Possibilities seem infinite.

What is real and what is not?  
Shifting patterns of reality  
New knowledge is always brought.

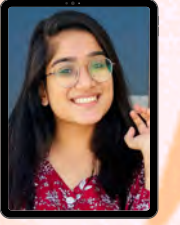
Who am I?  
I am defined by others  
It is them, who identify.

What is the actuality?  
I am what others make me  
This is the deeper reality.



*Photograph : Anmol Chugh*

# बदलाव ?



Nimisha Kukreja

(First Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College)

बदल गया है समय  
पर इंसान नहीं बदला  
मुश्किलें बदल गयी  
पर समाधान नहीं बदला

गूँजते हैं आज भी वही नारे  
झलकती हैं आज भी लोगों की सोच के बीच की वो दरारें  
आज भी लड़ता है इंसान, झगड़ता है इंसान  
अपने हक़ के लिए तो मरता भी है इंसान

पहले लड़ा वो लाठी उठा कर , आजादी के लिए  
आज लड़ रहा है सड़कों पर बैठ कर , आबादी के लिए  
पहले दिखता था उनकी आँखों में अत्यंत गुस्सा, होती थी हाथों में तलवार  
पर आज झलकता है उन्हीं आँखों में इंसाफ का इंतजार

कर रहा है आज सवाल वो सरकार से  
चुना था जिसे बहुत ऐतबार से  
जलता शहर , फैलता ज़हर आपको क्यों कुछ ना दिखाई दे ?  
मैं तो हूँ सरहद के अंदर फिर भी मेरा दर्द क्यों ना दिखाई दे ?

एक सवाल उस से भी है जो बना है बे-जुबान और बहरा  
सवाल है उस से और भी गहरा  
जिसे लगता है वो सुरक्षित है  
या फिर चुप रहने में ही उसका हित है

बदल गया है समय  
पर इंसान नहीं बदला  
मुश्किलें बदल गयी  
पर समाधान नहीं बदला

बदला तो है यह देश  
बनता ज़रा है अपने लोगों के लिए ही यह प्रदेश  
नहीं रहा अब वो जुनून  
नहीं मिल रहा लोगों को मतभेद करने के बाद भी सुकून

पहले देश था कुछ और न जाने आज क्यों बदल रहा है  
आज इंसान ना जाने क्यों इन मतभेदों की बेड़ियों से निकलने के लिए झूँझ रहा है ।

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*Photograph : Anmol Chugh*

# "Theatre is an arena to think"



**Mr. Feisal Alkazi**

*Théatro Diachroniká i.e, theatre through ages, finds a new meaning as Mr Feisal Alkazi presents us with a plethora of information about the colourful world of theatre. Mr. Alkazi is a veteran playwright, TV director, author, educationist, activist, theatre-director, and founder of Ruchika Theatre group, Delhi. He has, over the past 42 years, directed over 200 plays and carved out a niche for himself in the Indian theatre scene chiefly with the Ruchika Theatre Group, which is one of Delhi's leading theatre groups. Since its inception in 1972, it has regularly presented a season of at least three new productions every year. The focus has always been on plays of social relevance. Mr. Alkazi has also worked extensively in the area of children's theatre, regularly directing for schools across India and the Little Actors Club of the Ruchika Theatre group. He has directed over 100 children's plays. In 1987, he was awarded the Sanskriti Award for outstanding contribution to theatre.*

*We first came to know about Mr. Alkazi and his work through a screening of his play Lorelei, and later on, his talk on "Women in Mahabharata : A Playwright's View" in 'Kaleidoscope', a series organized by our department of Sociology. We were enthralled, and wanted to know more about the vibrant world of theatre. We are lucky to have had the opportunity to interview him for this first issue of our magazine. We present here excerpts from our conversation.*

**Prathyusha :** *How have you seen theatre evolve over the years with changing times, in terms of content and audience?*

**Feisal Alkazi :** I started directing when I was 17, in 1972. It was a very interesting time, as a lot of new things were being done in Indian theatre. My father Ebrahim Alkazi had been with the National School of Drama (NSD) for many years, and one of his biggest contributions, perhaps, was that he had really sought out Indian playwrights when he had first come to NSD in 1962. Back then, there was no tradition of contemporary Indian playwriting in Hindi or any other regional language. Within the first two or three years of his coming to NSD, he made sure to get some good translations going. Most people don't realize that the well-known and popular play *Tughlaq*, which a lot of us assume was originally written in Urdu since it is set in Delhi around the 13th or 14th century, was in fact a Kannada play written by Girish Karnad, which was translated into Urdu! Similarly, many playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, who headed the *Nai Kahani Movement* in Hindi literature, had already written review plays which were performed on the radio but not on the stage.

The first play that I did, for instance, was Mohan Rakesh's "*Ashad Ka Ek Din*" - in English, "*One Day in Aashad*" - which is about the life of Kalidas and a girl who inspires him, his muse: Malika. The second play that we did was a very powerful political satire called *Shuturmurg*, which would possibly be banned if performed today. For the first 10 years, we did two to three productions a year, and I was directing along with my colleague Arun Kukreja. We did most of the Indian plays that had been written, and worked through everything that was available - between translating from Kannada, Tamil, Marathi, and Bengali into Hindi or English, staging productions in Hindi and English alternately.

We then started looking at writings and poems, and started adapting those to theatre. Some of my most successful plays have been among these: Mahashweta Devi's "*Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*", a famous novel that was already a script, and Akira Kurosawa's iconic film, "*Rashomon*", adapted into a Japanese play. These ran for about 16 shows and then we got picked as the "Best Play of the Year" or "Best Actress of the Year", which gave us two or three more shows.

By the early 1980s, the audience had started increasing. At this time, Safdar Hashmi took the big step of moving theatre out of the auditorium and onto the footpath, popularizing street theatre. Different kinds of plays were written and, increasingly, groups across India stopped doing Western plays. So, you could say that theatre is the first place where translation occurred - novels, short stories and poetry were all translated later.

Today, the audience has changed. People are looking for different things: they want to see relevance. They know that the theatre is an arena to think, and not just to be entertained.

**Nikita :** *Most of your plays are on socially relevant topics. What role do you think theatre can play in bringing voices from the margin into the mainstream discourse?*

**Feisal Alkazi:** When we talk about voices from the margin, we have to think: who do these voices belong to? Theatre is about a live audience - it is about reaching the public, whoever the public may be. So, once you're answerable to your audience, it's important to think about what the content of your play will be. In this sense, theatre is contextual: what is the margin I talk about?

For instance, my play *Barbaad* - written by an American author, set in the Congo, Africa and adapted by us to India - depicts the story of a brothel. It is relevant, as it contains relevant issues about a woman's body, human trafficking, the role of the State, the role of protest, and the role of people who belong to the land. It is really a play about the marginalised. Similarly in *Noor*, the central character is a eunuch. Now, who is a eunuch? What is the role of a eunuch in society? Here, there is no question of the progeny, or the next generation. By looking at Mughal history, Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal through the lens of gender, the play brings the marginalised to the centre stage.

There are many ways to bring such marginalised voices into the spotlight. There are some wonderful novels, such as those by Bharti Mukherjee, that talk about the immigrant experience – the experience of people who go to the US or the UK and survive there as ethnic minorities. For instance, Punjabi labourers going to England after the Second World War, and after India's Independence, or more recently, the IT crowd that's increasingly going to the US; or even the Punjabi farmers in California, who don't even speak English. Where are their stories? These should be explored and documented, and put on stage.

**Prathyusha :** *What is the first hook that gets you started into writing a play? Is it a character, an image, or a theme?*

**Feisal Alkazi :** When I read a play and feel that I know how to stage it, I will never do it because I'm comfortable with it. For me, a play is a creative journey. My team and I try to do every play in a different way, and it is always a process based on discussion. I'll give you a beautiful example. I was reading a story by Vijay Dan Detha, a folklore writer from Rajasthan, called *Kenchuli* that really struck me. It was a beautiful tale written not in Hindi, but a dialect of Hindi. I didn't know how to go about staging it, but I knew I wanted one particular actress to play the protagonist. We worked on it first in English, and then did it in Hindi. The first rehearsal was just the actress and me. During our discussion, I asked her, "What is the story about?"

The story was an analogy and a metaphor about a young girl called Lachi who comes to a very traditional Rajasthani village and is married to a young man, but the thakur in the village has the first right over the new bride. The format of the story is that the thakur sends his sidekick, Bhoja, to say that he needs to meet the girl at night. She says okay, and asks him to come to a particular *khet* (field). She outwits him, and keeps on doing it again and again. Finally, it becomes too much and she decides that she doesn't have to live like this. She leaves her home, takes off all her clothes and disappears into the ether. It is a portrait of how we perceive women, and what we expect of them. On each day of rehearsals, I would add one actor or actress, and we would keep going. The cast was very small: three or four main characters and a chorus of four women - and everybody could sing.

We started to discuss what the story means to each member of the cast: the images it conjures, what it sounds like, how each of them sees it, and so on. I said, "Let's start with the song. Which song comes to mind?" One of them said, "Oh it's a song from my husband's village somewhere near Solan. It's a Himachali song and it goes somewhat like this..." Then someone said, "No, no wait. There's a very nice Gujarati wedding song too." At the beginning of the play, we devised a collage of four songs which were from different parts of India - from Himachal to Gujarat and Rajasthan - and decided we'd have the chorus of women.

We put the first scene together: women washing clothes, narrating the story of Lachi when they are gathered by the panghat (riverbank). We decided to do the play in an open theatre, and got permission to do it at the back of Triveni Kala Sangam, where the seating capacity was around 80 to 90 people. For the first scene, we got a truckful of mud and spread it around a tree, and used actual water - the actors were really washing clothes during the performance, with the whole audience getting sprayed with water! They were wearing big, heavy ghagras, hitting them on the ground and getting everyone wet, washing, talking and singing - that's how the play began.

I never start with a preconceived notion. Theatre is a realm of imagination and hence, we enter each play in a different way. It is not necessary that I begin with an image - I may start with music, or something else. I'm confident working with people and giving them space for lots of discussion and ideation. The result is always vibrant, new and exciting for the audience to watch and for us to perform.

**Nikita : You have directed so many plays - which of them is closest to your heart?**

**Feisal Alkazi :** There is a play about Rabindranath Tagore. Eighty percent of the lines are from his writings - mainly his poetry and his novels – and I wrote the remaining 20 per cent. It is a play about a very young Tagore - when he was eight or nine years old. He grew up in a big household (*Jora Shankho*) with 102 people, in Calcutta. His interactions with his mother were very limited. One of his elder brothers, Jyotirindranath, married Kadambari Devi (who was nine years old at the time). The play focuses on these two characters – Tagore and Kadambari Devi. They grow up together and she is his first audience as a writer. There's a beautiful scene when they're 15 or 16 years old, and he has spread out all their letters on stage, where they're sitting. As the story develops, the family feels that they're becoming too friendly with each other. She has not conceived a child and they say he must get married. So, he gets married at the age of 20 to Mrinalini Devi, who is 10 years old, and within four months of their marriage, Kadambari Devi commits suicide - bereft of a friend and companion. I believe this play was perfect, and many people said that it was like poetry on stage, visually and aurally.

Another play that is very close to me is "*The Jungle Book*", a production I did for NSD. This Jungle Book was very different from Rudyard Kipling's novel and the Disney movie. Kipling's Jungle Book is a coming of age story - a teenager learning to deal with life and moving out of his home into the world. By the end of our play, Mowgli says:

"I don't belong here, I don't belong there - I belong nowhere!" The entire audience would be weeping at this point, because it's such a moving dilemma. In our version, Mowgli doesn't know how to be with the people he actually belongs to - mankind. He doesn't know how to make that transition. This has been a favorite production of mine.

**Prathyusha : Do you ask actors to stick to a prescribed way of acting?**

**Feisal Alkazi :** I never demonstrate how to do a part to any actor. Even when there is a change of cast, I encourage the new actors to perform their roles according to their own interpretations, which are just as valid as their predecessor's or mine. I shall give an instance here: the Akbar from my play *Noor* had changed three years ago. The new actor asked if he could look at the earlier tapes for the role, and I refused. One shouldn't see someone else's tape. If one has the script, one works with that, and the actors evolve accordingly. It's a very creative process and a lot of fun. We don't only rely on words; we also rely on the visuals, the colour of the costumes, and the compositions - these are very important to understand what a play is about.

**Nikita : You have been known to work with children and students. What is the most exciting part of working with them?**

**Feisal Alkazi:** I love working with kids. I think they are very free and very creative. I run a children's group called the *Little Actor's Club*. During the lockdown, we made puppets from things at home. Hangers were twisted to give them a certain shape, combs were used as mouths and strainers from the kitchen as eyes! I have been working with kids every day for the last 40 years. Not much work could be done during the pandemic, but we did produce a huge play in December with school children.

Kids have their own imagination and it should be given free reign. I have written plays with them and beautiful works have come out of these. We take existing plays and do them as they are, and with children, I find this very easy and very rewarding. They love working with me, though they are a little scared the first time they meet me. Once they realise that they can have a fun equation with me, they get comfortable. One of the first things I share with them is that I eat three fried cockroaches for breakfast every day. They're shocked and think I'm totally crazy until someone says, "No sir! That can't be!" Many schools refer to me as Mr. Cockroach in front of the children too! If you connect with a child at his/her level, the child appreciates that. I listen very closely and carefully to what each child I work with says. I think that is the rule for working with anybody - you have to listen very carefully and not impose your ideas.

**Prathyusha :** *During the pandemic, Teesri Manzil brought theatre to people when people could not go to theatre. Can you tell us about your experience of using a digital platform for theatrical expression?*

**Feisal Alkazi:** It was wonderful. I am largely a very technology-resistant person. Last year, by April, we were all feeling very uncomfortable and trapped. Actors from ages 18 to 65 are used to coming to my house on the third floor, so Teesri Manzil is really a place where we rehearse - it's a performance space. When the lockdown started last year, after a while everyone realised that the pandemic was more than just a six-week lockdown, and we decided to do something on Zoom. One of the first pieces we decided to perform online was "*Lorelei*" in which my wife (Radhika Alkazi) performed. It was a huge hit, and was watched by people from Chennai and Mumbai too. We didn't know so many people would watch across India. This was when we thought of doing a series, where I would direct a piece every week. Every two or three weeks, we would also get someone to do an interactive session with our team and the audience. Typically, we did four to five rehearsals, with one rehearsal lasting for about two hours. We didn't master the script, but if someone watches the plays, it feels like the actors know every line by heart. On Zoom, we could parallelly run the script while the actors were performing.

We performed a beautiful Hindi story: Phanishwarnath Renu's "*Teesri Kasam*", about a nautanki dancer and a man with a bullock cart. We also did stories like Nirmal Verma's "*Zindagi Yaha aur Waha*" which required montages of Delhi's Connaught Place. We later performed Anton Chekov's "*Three Sisters*"- we managed to do this two-and-a-half-hour play online! The four acts of the play were performed over four weeks. It was great.

It was a rich experience, but at the same time, it was very exhausting. We had an audience ranging from 50 to 80 people for every event. We decided to create a Facebook page, and now nearly 23,000 people have watched. We went back to physical rehearsals after that, with some of them on zoom and some in real life. Now that we know we have to be at home for another three to four months, we are getting back to play readings from 30th April. Let's hope our Zoom audience comes back.

**Nikita :** *We read that you have also designed several costumes for your plays. What is the significance of costumes in the development of a character?*

**Feisal Alkazi :** Costumes play a huge role. I was very lucky to have my mother with me, who was a major costume designer for my father's plays. Costumes play a crucial role in exploring a character, and the fun is if it's a period play, the garment has to fit the personality of the character. I've had garments ranging from cravats to Bengali-style sarees with the *chabi ka guchha* (bunch of keys) hanging at the end, and they had to fit people who wear jeans and t-shirts all the time.

I've enjoyed working on costumes from day one. I also had to design 1,200 costumes for my sister's serial "*Raj se Swaraj*" and then 1,200 more for "*Mullah Naseeruddin*". It was a huge task. For "*The Tale of Two Cities*", 15 actors meant 150 garments. For school plays, I've designed all costumes personally, which amounts to more than a lakh outfits. It's a fascinating process. You learn about fabric, colour, using colour on stage, how it can denote so much about a scene... You also have to age garments sometimes, wearing them through the rehearsal and then ageing them down to make them appropriate. Costume-making is very challenging, and is always done with the cast. You get an idea of the character very clearly through their clothes. I really enjoy it.

**Prathyusha :** *How do you see cinema as distinct from theatre?*

**Feisal Alkazi :** Many actors wanting to act in films come to me for the basics - how to develop a character, how to work on your speech, movement, create different personas etc. Nowadays, we don't look for stars, we actually have actors in Bollywood. The age of Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan is past. My theatre work is very much in that direction too. I focus a lot on realism - how to create real and nuanced characters. The techniques I use for theatre have been utilized for other media too: people who work with me are often on stage, on radio, or in films. Theatre acts as a training ground for them. To know basic, realistic acting is very important. Even in commercial films, realism is always there in the larger frame, and the stage is wonderful training for this. I think it is great that we are such a cinema-literate country. The audience understands parallel stories and cutting between the scenes too. It is wonderful.

**Nikita :** *Since we are talking about different forms of art, could you please share with us your views on the relationship between art and politics?*

**Feisal Alkazi :** Everything you do in your life is political. There is no getting away from that at all. Even if I'm making a big commercial, I'm taking an ideology and working towards it. These big *shaadi* (wedding) scenes in Karan Johar movies have influenced real life weddings - it's a creation of films. The personal is political. All my theatre work is political too - not party politics, but politics in general.

Two days after the emergency was declared in 1975, we were doing a half-hour play called "*Strip-tease*". It focused on two men who have been forced into an unknown room by the police. A woman's hand is seen and she begins to give orders and handcuff them - all this while the men are saying, "*we are free, we can do what we want and go where we want, we don't know why we are here.*" Alok Nath and Sanjiv Bhargava were acting in this play. After the fourth show, the police arrived and ordered us to discontinue it. If we performed it today, we would surely be jailed.

I never point fingers because I think it is all the same – the government back then and the government today. Any government will try to clamp down on your freedom - that is the function of the government, we must understand this. Therefore, I never take the government's money because I know then that I am doing another type of play and am not being true to who I am as a person. The concept of how much the state can interfere in your life, even when you want to procreate, was shown by my play on the one-child policy in China. Just the question - where is the role of the dissident in society? What is their role? I think that is crucial. I'm not worried for India because I see your generation speaking up. Just never be despondent!

I did a play on *Anne Frank* the night the Jamia incident happened -15th December, 2019. People said that my play was showing them what was happening in our country, and it is the story of the world today. The way minorities are treated - we won't be able to repair it for the next hundred years. The world today needs that one line of Tagore's: "*Where the mind is without fear*". Art can provide a space that lets this happen. The writer, the playwright, the painter can foster that space. We are the conscience of the world. For me, this space is sacred. Today, if I put just one line, "where the mind is without fear" on a t-shirt, I might be jailed. We cannot say it, because there is fear. But we have to go on saying it, in our own different ways. Freedom is a dangerous thing for so many people out there, but it is crucial. We step on people's freedom all the time. Today, there are lakhs of people in our country who are taking up such issues. It's a breath of fresh air.

**Prathyusha :** *Could you recommend any books, movies, series or plays for our readers?*

**Feisal Alkazi:** In terms of series on OTT platforms, you should watch *Borgen*, *Heartland*, *Made in Heaven*, *Outlander*, *Marco Polo*, and *The Crown*. Movie recommendations would be *Article 15*, *Masaan*, *Death in the Gunj*. And for books, I would say read everything you can get your hands on, from around the world. You can also read my book - "*Enter Stage Right*", it covers one fascinating period of the cultural history of India, from 1942 to the late 1980s. It's an easy read and is from an insider's perspective.

*Interviewers: Nikita Sarma (Third Year, Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College) and  
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*Photograph : Anmol Chugh*

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# EDITORS' CHOICE

*Is time linear? Can we think of events and ideas, social, historical, economic or political only in a chronological manner? Or is it like a palimpsest? Let's take a moment to think about it. Our social reality has never been so simple, it is complex and acknowledging this allows us to think of the kaleidoscope as a useful metaphor to address these multiplicities in all its complexities. Thus, what matters most is the present but in its relation to past and future. Interpretation of time and space is often retrospective or goal oriented; humans with power and agency are constantly altering the past to fit their contemporary reality. To make sure one gets the desired result in the present, the history or the past itself becomes something one can (re-)create. The evidence of the real past remains only in the minds of those who have witnessed it, who themselves don't speak of it or fear to do so. For the rest everything is constructed..... for the rest everything is an Orwellian Dystopia and everyman a Winston Smith.*

“It wasn't just a question of somebody being killed. Do you realize that the past, starting from yesterday, has been actually abolished? If it survives anywhere, it's in a few solid objects with no words attached to them, like that lump of glass there. Already we know almost literally nothing about the Revolution and the years before the Revolution. Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. I *know*, of course, that the past is falsified, but it would never be possible for me to prove it, even when I did the falsification myself. After the thing is done, no evidence ever remains. The only evidence is inside my own mind, and I don't know with any certainty that any other human being shares my memories. Just in that one instance, in my whole life, I did possess actual concrete evidence *after* the event—years after it.”

**-1984 by George Orwell**



*Photograph : Anmol Chugh*

# WE RECOMMEND

## **MOVIES:**

1. Jojo Rabbit (2019) directed by Taika Waititi
2. Stereo (short film) (2017) directed by Ella Fields
3. Mama's Boy (short film) (2016) directed by Akshat Verma
4. Haider (2014) directed by Vishal Bharadwaj
5. The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2012) directed by Mira Nair
6. Tikli and Laxmi Bomb (2017) directed by Aditya Kriplani
7. Her (2013) directed by Spike Jonze
8. Court (2014) directed by Chaitanya Tamhane
9. Ankhon Dekhi (2013) directed by Rajat Kapoor
10. Hair Love (2019) directed by Matthew Cherry and Bruce W. Smith

Photograph : Anmol Chugh



## **BOOKS:**

1. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan
2. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus
3. *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* by Paro Anand
4. *Curfewed Nights* by Basharat Peer
5. *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah
6. *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang
7. *The Prisons We Broke* by Babytai Kamble
8. *Boy Erased: A Memoir* by Garrard Conley
9. *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk
10. *Enter Stage Right* by Feisal Alkazi

# IN THE NEWS

**ET THE ECONOMIC TIMES**

CAA Protests Highlights: Violence in UP, Karnataka; big demonstrations in Delhi and other cities

**The New York Times**

Gearing Up for the 'New Normal'

**DECCAN Chronicle**

Unusual tales from the Mahabharata

As Covid-19 Devastates India, Deaths Go Undercounted

**The Indian EXPRESS**  
The return of caste to Bengal

**WIRE**

Sedition Case Filed Against 2 Groups for Teaching Patna Street Kids About CAA, NRC

**THE NEW YORKER**

AS TECHNOLOGY GETS BETTER, WILL SOCIETY GET WORSE?



Photograph : Ritika Choudhary

**she the people**  
THE WOMEN'S COUNCIL

As a bride, should I just let go of Indian marriage rituals that offend women?

**THE HINDU**

An ode to the women in the Mahabharata

**THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS**  
#MeToo: Shameful that crime against women happening in land of Mahabharata, Ramayana, says court

**The New York Times**  
Opinion | After Covid, Your Health May Depend on Living With Germs

**INDIA TODAY**  
Bengal 2021: On the brink of a religio-political twist?

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