

Ritual Enactments in a Hindi ‘Mythological’ Betab’s *Mahabharat* in Parsi Theatre

The performance of the mythological play, Mahabharat, in Hindi in 1913 by a Parsi theatre company marked a significant milestone in many ways. Analysing some of the “ritual enactments” specially introduced in the performance, this article seeks to develop a new understanding of the “mythological” genre. Against the backdrop of communities and identities being “imagined” into existence at the turn of the 20th century, the mythological, i.e., Mahabharat, served as a media to re-treat and even reinvent old traditions. Betab, the author of the play, intended to reinterpret the epic within a notion of Hinduism that was again an expression of nationalism. Betab’s was an ethically motivated agenda in which the national subject is identified principally with righteous women (Draupadi) and dalits.

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In 1913, the *Mahabharat* was performed by a Parsi theatre company for the first time. Pandit Narayan Prasad Betab, its playwright, was then an employee of the Parsi Alfred Theatrical Company, one of the three top companies of the day. Its manager and principal actor, Kavasji Palanji Khatau, had encouraged Betab not only to produce a ‘dharmik’ play but to write it in Hindi. Since the 1880s, Urdu had been the dominant language of the Parsi stage, and Betab himself had made his mark composing Urdu verse. His earlier plays were social melodramas, Shakespearean adaptations, and Indo-Islamic romances, and in these he mirrored his contemporaries writing for the Parsi theatre. At the age of 41, Betab was now at a turning point in his career. He worked on his text for several years, taking pains to purge it of the Urdu expressions that in his estimation had marred the *Ramayan*, written by a rival poet, Vinayak Prasad Talib, for the Victoria Theatrical Company.

I turn now to Betab’s autobiography, *Betab Charit*, for his own account:

Finally, after numerous difficulties, the moment we had been awaiting arrived. A date was fixed for the debut in the Sangam Theatre in Delhi. Just then, a well-wisher approached Seth Khatau and told him that the *Mahabharat* was never recited in an inhabited area. If it was, it led to inauspicious consequences. After the initial shock, I came to my senses and responded, ‘Seth ji, what people say is true. Wherever the *Mahabharat* is performed, that place becomes Kurukshetra, a field of battle. But if the preliminary rituals prescribed by the ‘rishis’ are scrupulously observed, there is none of that, in fact the outcome is beneficial and profitable. Thousands of rupees had already been invested in the production, and there was no way of getting that sum back except through the ritual. I explained the procedure to follow. The playhouse was first purified, and then a ‘havan’ ceremony was performed. A ritual feast was offered to the brahmins. Once the brahmins’ blessing was secured, Seth Khatau was not the man he had been the day before. Auspicious resolve made his fearful mind strong and firm. The gates of the Alfred Company were decorated with banners,

ribbons, and flowers, until the enclosure looked like a marriage canopy. The first performance was held on the night of January 29, 1913.¹

Betab’s experiment was a huge monetary triumph for the Parsi Alfred Company. His *Mahabharat* was performed three times a week for several years in towns across north India. Critics hailed it, declaring that Betab had “turned the stage around, produced a revolution in the theatre world, given notice to Urdu plays to vacate the stage, and performed valuable service for the spread of Hindi” (*Betab Charit*, p 79). The dharmik plays that soon followed, Betab’s own *Ramayan* in 1916 and Radheshyam Kathavachak’s *Vir Abhimanyu* for the New Alfred in the same year, cemented the lines of the new genre. Betab wrote many more mythologicals: five plays and six screenplays. Radheshyam produced ten plays of this type, and even the famed Urdu playwright, Agha Hashr Kashmiri, added six mythologicals to his oeuvre.

Despite the surge of popular enthusiasm, controversy too erupted, plaguing the production of Betab’s *Mahabharat* as it travelled across UP and then to Calcutta and Lahore. It is said that Khatau was fatally stricken by paralysis because of communal disturbances surrounding the play in Lahore in 1916. The debates took on epic proportions, confirming the popular wisdom that performing the *Mahabharat* in itself leads to violent conflict. A long list of objections to the play were published, with Betab responding to each one in print.²

Most of the controversy focused on Betab’s interpolation of a set of scenes in Act II that preach against the exclusionary treatment of dalits (using today’s term). Here, Betab inserted not one but three new low-caste characters, each of whom conveyed the same radical teaching: in the offering of ‘bhakti’, all ranks are equal in ritual status. Draupadi and Krishna become the defenders of dalits and expound the ‘nirgun’ form of worship. Against the opposition of Dron and Duryodhan, they argue for the rights of chamars to perform rituals, sing bhajans, and express

their faith. At the end of Act II, a powerful epiphany occurs when the goddess Ganga manifests to protect the chamars and their ritual items. Finally Dron abandons his stubborn defence of brahminical superiority and is ready to offer obeisance at the feet of Cheta Chamar.

I would like to bracket these two enactments of ritual – the preliminary rite of ensuring protection, and the chamars' offering of bhakti to the formless god – adding to them a third, namely the ritualised moment when the actors, particularly those who impersonate gods, freeze and offer the spectators darshan. In the Parsi theatre this is termed "tableau" (or 'tebla' in the Hindi and Urdu texts). Although homologous with the 'jhanki' of devotional dramatic forms such as the Ram Lila or Ras Lila, it has a different legacy. In Victorian melodrama, tableaux were used to end scenes at climactic moments of action, often weaving multiple strands of narrative within a single frame. Several examples occur in Betab's *Mahabharat*, e.g. the end of Act II scene IV, when Duryodhan rejects the treaty offered by Krishna. As Duryodhan lunges for Krishna, the doors and gates of the palace burst asunder, and thousands of Krishnas appear; Duryodhan is left speechless, stunned. Despite the differences between jhanki and tableau, spectators brought older viewing habits with them. They engaged with the frontal address of the gods as they displayed themselves, performing gestures of salutation or simply receiving and returning their gaze.

Work of the 'Mythological'

Through a reading of Betab's *Mahabharat* and its performance history, I wish to develop an understanding of the so-called "mythological", a genre located in both visual and performative media. I intend to establish that the mythological productions of the Parsi theatre played a role in the development of the genre in the cinema and suggest what that role might have been. It is well known that Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, the first major Indian filmmaker, chose the mythological as his primary vehicle. His early features, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Krishna Janm* (1918), were contemporaneous with the heyday of the mythological in the Parsi theatre. Yet the Parsi theatre's contribution to the narrative form of early cinema has not been adequately appreciated. Film scholars generally restrict their discussion of Parsi theatre influence to channelling the conventions of western melodrama, most visibly in the "feudal family romance".³

The definition of the mythological is apparently quite simple: it treats mythic and religious material. The assumption is always that this material is drawn from Hindu tradition. In Hindi, the genre is known as 'dharmik' or 'pauranik', although Betab's *Mahabharat* in its Dehati Pustak Bhandar edition bears a double rubric, 'dharmik pauranik natak'. Most commentators agree that purity of genre scarcely exists; nonetheless, the mythological is routinely contrasted with the "social" ('samajik'), "historical" ('aitihāsik'), and other lesser genres. "Devotionals" or "saint films" are usually considered a subgenre of the mythological.⁴

Because of its subject matter, the mythological is broadly understood as propagating Hinduism through its work of recirculating popular stories of divine beings and heroes. Observers have often linked it with revivalism, social conservatism, and communalism. Mythologicals have been identified with brahminism, and Sudhir Kakar even

proposed a caste system in which the mythological was the brahmin and the stunt film the shudra.⁵ The British are said to have favoured mythologicals because they reinforced the social order.⁶ On the other hand, secularists such as Asim Nehru distrusted mythic imagery and public uses of religion, holding them accountable for communal violence.⁷ According to Anuradha Kapur, Radheshyam chose the mythological as the genre best suited to champion his message of Hindutva.⁸

Lately, scholars of visual culture have begun to complicate these equations by situating the mythological in relation to technological innovations and viewing practices within colonial modernity. Ashish Rajadhyaksha credits Raja Ravi Varma with establishing the mythological genre through his use of naturalistic painting techniques and mass produced chromolithographs, which he developed to render "the past" in terms of contemporary experience.⁹ He notes that Varma's prints and Phalke's films not only relied upon new technologies; they were produced within new economic structures and consumed by an ascendant middle class whose identities were adapting to changed social and political conditions. Rajadhyaksha as well as Geeta Kapur have theorised extensively on the aesthetic tensions that arose within the popular arts as they confronted the use of western perspective in painting, or theatrical conventions such as the fourth wall created by the proscenium stage. They point to the persistence of "frontality", a way of placing images, icons, or actors inherited from the realm of ritual. They examine as well the representational dilemma of reconciling the timeless, mythic realm with the historical narrative of post-Enlightenment Europe.¹⁰

What was required of the mythological, in this line of thought, was to negotiate earlier forms, to rework the past to suit the demands of the present. This involved palpable embodiments of older materials, but reinterpreted in relation to the current moment. In Rajadhyaksha's words, gods and goddesses became "the expression of new desires and coherences".¹¹ Importantly, this work of refiguration entailed not only aesthetic strategies but engagement with the ideological. Throughout this period, in the turn toward Indian subject matter, the producers of these new forms of visuality claimed that cultural symbols, as well as Indian capital and industry, could be – and should be – 'swadeshi'. The call for swadeshi visual subjects as much as consumer goods became a cornerstone of nationalism.¹² Kajri Jain argues that it was, in fact, the new visual genres that brought the "imagined community" of the nation into being in India, because their reach was so much greater than that of print capitalism or those genres predicated upon literacy, highlighted by Benedict Anderson.¹³

My interest lies in underscoring the productive aspect of the mythological. How are the nation and its people imagined into being in the new contours of the genre? As I turn to Betab's *Mahabharat*, I am seeking the ways in which it constructs the newly visualised Indian national subject. I propose that the ritual enactments I have earlier described present sites for analysis, points at which prior forms are renegotiated within the terms of the present. These enactments may be examined as specific instants in the reinvention of tradition. What is the ideological thrust of these performances of ritual? What categories do they unravel, and what identities do they construct in their place? My purpose is to argue that the mythological, at least Betab's *Mahabharat*, is not meant to propagate Hinduism or Hindutva, but rather to reinterpret the epic within a notion of Hinduism as an expression of nationalism. Within this frame, Betab

advances an ethically motivated agenda in which the national subject is identified principally with righteous women and dalits, and only secondarily with the compromised warriors who purportedly are the epic's heroes.

Betab's Narrative Innovations

The structure of Betab's play is reducible to three elements: (i) the central story, (ii) the invented episodes, (iii) songs, dances, spectacles, and other "attractions". This is not the place to elaborate on the third category, but suffice it to say that songs and dances are often used at the beginning and end of scenes as punctuation devices. They frequently create an amorous or jubilant mood that is at odds with the main events, but perhaps for that very reason, these displays were enjoyed by the audience and were manipulated to focus their attention. As for the conformity of Betab's narrative to the Vyasa "original", Betab follows it rather faithfully, although in highly compressed fashion. Act I takes place in the palaces of the Pandavs and Kauravs, Act II moves briefly to the jungle and then to the battlefield, and in Act III, after several battle scenes, the drama ends in hell and heaven. The most fully developed scene is the 'sabha' in the gambling hall, placed at the end of Act I. The battle scenes are short and full of action.

Betab's procedure of selection is outlined in a preliminary scene, composed in the form of the conventional dialogue between the 'sutradhar' and his assistant, the 'nati'. Here the sutradhar notes that it would require at least 18 days to recount the 18 'parvas' of the *Mahabharat*. Therefore, the nati should instruct the players to leave aside the branches ('shakha') and only go along the main path ('marg'). The sutradhar goes on to foreground the kernel of the *Mahabharat*'s teaching, stressing its relevance for today's audience. Bharat was once full of great warriors, but now the people lie sleeping, heedless, and neglectful. Those who were brave have become cowards; the wise ones are ignorant. They have even forgotten of which father they are the offspring. All of this came about because they forsook 'dharm', 'karm', and 'sharm'. The didactic purpose of the *Mahabharat* in this time is thus set forth. Like a bridge across the sea, it will help India to cross the troubled waters: 'par utarne ke liye, jyon sagar par setu; aj mahabharat karen bharat ke hit hetu'.

In the swiftly moving narrative that Betab crafts, dharm and karm are shorn of their ambiguities and become simple matters. Draupadi insults Duryodhan when he falls into an illusory pond, calling him the son of a blind man, and her deed sets in motion a course of retribution, demonstrating the law of karm. Dhritarashtra knows that gambling is immoral, but he ignores dharm and acquiesces to the gambling match, bringing on destruction. To the age-old calculus of dharm and karm, Betab conjoins sharm, honour and modesty, most palpably demonstrated through the public humiliation of Draupadi. Dragged into the sabha by Dushasan, Draupadi's cries for aid fail to rouse the Pandavs, shamed though they are by her exposure. If the Pandavs through their errors incur the suffering that follows, it is nonetheless Duryodhan who is the essence of 'adharm'. His overweening jealousy, cruelty, hatred, and vindictiveness combine to create the classic villain.

Duryodhan's character comes into focus through two contrasts. His father, Dhritarashtra, although aware of dharm, is easily swayed and agrees with whatever position is presented to him. His constant repetition of the phrase, 'yahi to main bhi kahta

hun', expresses his vacillation and lack of spine, and he becomes a source of comedy and ridicule. The Pandav men for their part are rather shadowy figures, with the exception of Bhim in battle; they too set off Duryodhan's forceful nature. Draupadi, on the other hand, is a blazing presence dominating many scenes. Her impassioned resistance to Duryodhan is the complete opposite of western melodrama's damsel in distress. She is the lioness Panchali, a 'mahadevi'; "my entire body burns with the fire of insult, and my very pores emit sparks". Draupadi's character is cast in conformity with the righteous warrior woman, the 'virangana', who had become a popular icon of anti-colonial resistance since the rebellion of 1857 and the legendary deeds of the Rani of Jhansi.

In the newly invented episodes, occupying almost 50 per cent of the drama, Draupadi takes on three notable aspects: as mouthpiece of 'pativrat dharm', as spiritual sister of lord Krishna, and as champion of the chamars. Act I scene I begins with an interpolation featuring Krishna's two co-wives, Satyabhama and Rukmini. Each claims Krishna loves the other more, and they quarrel, matching verse for verse in snappy repartee in the 'lavani' style known as 'Phad'. When Draupadi enters, each co-wife seeks her support against the other, but Draupadi preaches 'pativrata', chaste obedience to one's husband and lord. Krishna enters and both co-wives accuse him of being fickle. Krishna refuses to take sides, asserting that their bickering is but an offering of love. This playful, erotic scene serves as a warm-up act. Krishna emerges as the romantic playboy rather than martial hero or divine being. Draupadi takes the high moral ground, preaching adherence to norms of modesty and self-effacement.

The beheading of Shishupal occurs in Act I scene II. Betab has included this rather minor incident in order to attach to it an episode of his own. When Krishna appears on stage with Shishupal's severed head on his staff, Draupadi notices that his finger is cut and bleeding. She tears off part of her sari to bind Krishna's wound, declaring him her dear brother. Her action suggests the ritual of 'raksha bandhan' or tying a 'rakhi'. Krishna declares lifelong loyalty to Draupadi, offering to repay each strand of the sari in future when she needs him. This debt is, of course, repaid in the gambling scene, Act I scene IV. When Dushasan attempts to disrobe Draupadi, she calls on Krishna, and he makes her garment endless. Their special relationship emerges again on the 10th day of the battle, when Draupadi despairs and is anxious for the survival of the Pandavs. Krishna appears to comfort her, saying that he feels whatever she feels as though there were wireless communication between their hearts.

Both Draupadi and Krishna take on a further dimension in five scenes nested within Act II. In the first, a character named Nanda Nai is introduced. This barber's daily task is to massage the feet of Duryodhan. Nanda Nai is a superlative devotee of lord Krishna. When two sadhus seeking a meal come to pay him their respects, he postpones his attendance upon Duryodhan, seeing 'sadhu seva' as a higher obligation. Krishna, bound by Nanda's devotion, disguises himself as Nanda and goes to Duryodhan in his place, thus sparing Nanda Duryodhan's wrath. As he transforms into a low-caste nai, Krishna declares that nothing is amiss; he would gladly become even a bhangi, if he had to.

The next scene, set in Duryodhan's bed chamber, begins with a comedy of mistaken identities. Krishna disguised as Nanda massages Duryodhan and departs. The real Nanda shows up, apologising until he realises that Krishna the supreme being has just attended upon Duryodhan. When Nanda praises the glories

of his 'ishtadev', Duryodhan denies Krishna's divinity and starts to beat Nanda. The scene ends with two miracles. First Vishnu's 'viman' comes down from heaven and rescues Nanda. The Kauravs express disgust that a shudra, a lowly nai, has been taken to heaven. Then Krishna as emissary of the Pandavs appears, but Duryodhan refuses to sign the treaty he offers. Duryodhan attacks Krishna, and Krishna reveals his cosmic form, exploding through the palace walls in myriad manifestations.

In this scene, the villainous Duryodhan refuses to accept both the exalted status of the lowly devotee Nanda and the revelation that Krishna is god. His obduracy continues into the final scene, where he confronts Cheta Chamar. The third scene dramatises an episode in which Draupadi figures prominently as the chamars' defender.

This scene focuses on a character named Seva, the son of Cheta Chamar, who wishes to take water from the high-caste well for his evening rituals. He is opposed by Shanta, the daughter of Dron. Dron of course is a brahmin and a notorious enforcer of brahminical privilege, as seen in the Ekalavya episode, which is not included in Betab's text. Shanta utters some nasty curses and threatens to send Seva packing, until Draupadi enters and sides with Seva. Draupadi presents a learned exposition on the accessibility of the formless god, arguing that to worship this being is not dependent upon birth. 'bhala, nirakar, nirlep aur ek ras ishvar ka bhajan karna kya kisi ki maurusi jagir hai'? Finally Shanta, won over to Draupadi's position, apologises for her mistake and leaves.

In the scene immediately following, Dron instructs his daughter Shanta to perform the evening 'arti'. Shanta, recently converted by Draupadi, rejects the idea of image worship in a lengthy song. Krishna, breaking through the wall, manifests as the four-armed god to his new devotee. Dron returns, and Dron and Krishna enter into a lengthy debate.

Krishna describes himself as formless and shapeless but visible to all who love him. He says that he has just come from the house of Seva, a chamar, where he ate 'khichri', proving that the devotion of dalits is accepted by god. Despite Krishna's exhortations, Dron is unconvinced and vows to catch the chamar, fearing a reversal of caste hierarchy if they are not stopped. "If bhangis and chamar begin to worship Vishnu in their homes, then are we brahmins going to sew the shoes?"

The last scene in the second act provides a climactic and spectacular conclusion to these debates. Tensions grow as Cheta Chamar enters with his group of followers, singing praise in the name of Ram and carrying ritual items for 'thakurpuja'. Duryodhan and Dron combine forces against them. Once more, there is a prolonged philosophical exchange, with Cheta arguing that bhakti is open to everyone, including women, shudras, and atishudras. Dron orders Cheta to throw his 'simhasan' into the river, but Cheta challenges him, saying that this act will only prove his devotion.

The simhasan refuses to sink, and while Cheta prays, inviting it to come to him, a huge wave arises. Upon it is seated a 'magar' (crocodile) and on the magar's back is the goddess Ganga, holding the simhasan. Dron once more enters into philosophical debate, this time with Ganga, asking the goddess to explain why she did not heed his prayer as a brahmin but instead responded to the chamar. Ganga states that his imperfect enlightenment was due to the errors of his ancestors and his faulty 'samskars'. Dron, now repentant, is ready to touch his head to Cheta's feet. But suddenly Ganga says no, it is not necessary. She reveals that Cheta is really a brahmin, a disciple of Ramanand, who was disguised

as a chamar as a test. She pierces Cheta's chest and the sacred thread is revealed. The scene ends on this tableau.

Mobilising Devotion, Challenging Caste

Readers may recognise that Cheta's story is actually that of the north Indian saint-poet Raidas or Ravidas (c 1450-1520), who was also a chamar. Many members of Betab's audience would surely have made this identification. Lower caste groups began to follow the nirgun bhakti of sants like Kabir and Raidas from the 15th century. In the early 20th century, "untouchable" groups in the Punjab and United Provinces turned towards heterodox devotionalism in large numbers. Mark Juergensmeyer has chronicled the coalescence of chamars in the Punjab around Ravi-das and the establishment of the Ad Dharm, founded in 1926 by Mangoo Ram as a breakaway faction from the Arya Samaj.¹⁴ Nandini Gooptu, considering urban untouchable migrants in UP, noted the rise of lay practitioners or 'bhagats', the adoption of surnames (Raidas or Ravidas), wearing of 'kanthis', constitution of caste panchayats named after gurus such as Ravidas, dedication of temples, and organisation of processions, bhajans, and study circles in Allahabad, Lucknow, Banaras, and Kanpur.¹⁵ "For the untouchable poor in the towns", she asserts, "the message of caste equality and the denial of ritual hierarchy in bhakti gave them a means to question the discriminations, disabilities and deprivation that they continued to face".¹⁶

The outlines of Raidas' career and his intimate tie to the chamar community circulated among Betab's spectators by means of both oral and written accounts. The life story of Raidas was contained in textual sources such as the *Bhaktamal* and subsequent hagiographies. These were disseminated through the agency of 'kathavachaks' or professional raconteurs.¹⁷ Raidas' autobiography was also preserved within his utterances or 'vani', which have come down in both Hindi and Punjabi (Sikh) traditions.¹⁸ The Raidas stories dramatise a series of contests between orthodox brahmins and chamar devotees, as do the scenes constructed by Betab. Caste conflict is at the heart of these narratives and, as Friedlander notes, this conflict is irreconcilable.

The brahmins in these tales can never accept the right of others to worship according to their own beliefs. Thus in the tests that resolve this conflict in heterodox hagiography there can only be one outcome: the humbling of the brahmins before the power of the devotee to manifest his direct connection to the divine.¹⁹

The display of miraculous powers, such as the summoning of the simhasan to the riverbank, is a central motif in these tales. So too is the special relationship between Raidas and the goddess Ganga, whereby Raidas asserts his power over the goddess through the intensity of his devotion, and she becomes his protector.²⁰ The hagiographies, like Betab's text, culminate in the revelation of the sacred thread within Raidas' chest, and they assert that Raidas was a Ramanandi, although this is questioned by scholars and present-day followers.²¹

Why has Betab grafted the Raidas story onto his *Mahabharat*? Clearly, this is a 'shakha', not part of the main 'marg'. Returning to the issue of genre, I would suggest that Betab's innovation lies in interweaving the saint or devotional genre with the mythological. Although usually seen as a subset of the mythological, the devotional has distinctive features, notably the narrative focus on a life story, numerous miracle sequences, and

an intense level of emotionality. These characteristics come to the fore in Betab's drama. Before Ganga's epiphany, as Cheta is releasing the simhasan, he weeps and laments piteously. He compares the separation from his 'puja samagri' to the loss of his parents, taking on the stance of a departing bride in a lengthy scene of 'bidai' or ritualised farewell. The pathos and melodrama are compounded by Dron and Duryodhan, who continue to oppose Cheta and threaten violence. The subsequent miracle is all the more exhilarating, and it undoubtedly constitutes the emotional climax of the play, if not its narrative peak.

In a discussion of the film *Sant Tukaram*, released in 1936, some 23 years after Betab's *Mahabharat*, Geeta Kapur notes that saint films "with their message of spiritual equality...are expressly adaptable to historical ends. We know of course that in the nationalist ethos the saints' lives were made to light the way to social justice".²² She goes on to make a very important point, namely, that devotional films should not be understood primarily in terms of realism, or for the mass appeal of the miracles they represent, but rather as socially symbolic narratives. In her view, the ideological canvas of earlier mythologicals, notably Phalke's films, was restricted. Phalke's goal was only "to figure forth the Hindu pantheon through the technical magic of the cinema".²³ *Tukaram* represented an advance in its expression of the desire for social emancipation, which she notes coincided with Gandhi's campaigns on behalf of Harijans in the 1930s.

I would argue that Betab was evoking the same desire for social emancipation in 1913. Gandhi was still in South Africa, and Ambedkar was about to leave for his studies at Columbia University. Neither had yet formulated campaigns against untouchability. What then were the ideological sources of Betab's project? Some hints are provided by Betab's own narrative of his life, beginning with his provincial north Indian upbringing. Born into a poor brahmabhatt family in present western Uttar Pradesh in 1872, he received no formal schooling but was immersed in oral genres such as 'sang and lavani' as a youth. After working for years making sweets, he undertook an apprenticeship at the Kaiser-i Hind Press in Delhi. His early poetic and dramatic training began when he joined the Jamadar theatre company from the Punjab. At the age of 31, he went to Bombay for the first time. He entered the service of the Parsi Theatrical Company there in 1903 and spent five years with the company. A good deal of the time was spent in touring the north, especially Lahore. In 1909 Betab joined the Parsi Alfred Company and left for Calcutta.

Betab was saturated with the oral traditions of 'qasba' culture – impromptu composition of lavani and sang, recitation of Urdu ghazals, popular Vaishnav beliefs and Braj Bhasha poetry, and strands of nirgun bhakti. His autobiography makes no mention of travel to Maharashtra, nor did he appear to have any knowledge of Marathi. It is unlikely that he had any exposure to early dalit literary and political currents in western India, such as the writings of Gopal Baba Valangkar or the activities of the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal and Antyaj Samaj.²⁴ His frequent visits to the Punjab, especially Lahore, were more likely the catalyst for what appears to be his conversion, around 1911, to Arya Samaj teachings. While his theatre company was resident in Karachi, Betab and a colleague established a home study circle where he expounded the *Satyarth Prakash* every afternoon. Embracing the ideal of self-reform, he and a few friends took a public vow to tell only the truth. This Betab exhibited by permanently adopting an ochre turban and shoulder-cloth, "the uniform of a holy warrior" (BC, p 67). Each day the small circle of truthsayers

evaluated their moral progress, and according to Betab, his own metamorphosis was the most dramatic. He had been an inveterate liar before, he tells us, but now he became so virtuous that pride in his truthfulness itself became a problem (BC pp 68-69).

Around the same time, Betab began casting his *Mahabharat* for the stage. It is possible that the text was suggested by his study of Dayanand Saraswati. Dayanand had found the key to the present degeneracy of Hinduism in the *Mahabharat* and traced the extinction of Vedic knowledge and religion to the great war.²⁵ He saw the fragmentation of India and its decline as a world power as direct consequences of that "time of destruction".²⁶ The *Mahabharat* thus explained the present state of Bharat, and could be used to redeem it.

Betab's play was clearly meant to be the instrument of his personal service to Hindi. Hindi, as has been ably demonstrated by Francesca Orsini, was vigorously promoted by the Arya Samaj as the national language, the 'arya bhasha'.²⁷ The claims evinced for Hindi were, of course, ideological. As Orsini notes, in this period they were often "embedded in a rhetoric of an all-inclusive religious community along devotional (Bhakti) lines".²⁸ Hindi's lineage, as narrated by the Nagari Pracharini Sabha, was identified with that of the Hindu nation: once united, it had declined in the past, and was now resurgent.²⁹ Although Betab was immersed in the world of Parsi theatre, with his *Mahabharat* he separated himself from Urdu literary culture. He teamed up with Khatau, "a true warrior" for the cause, eliminating the Urdu flavour that had left an undesirable taint on Talib's earlier mythological, the *Ramayan*.

After his encounter with the Arya Samaj, Betab's public persona shifted. He announced his new identity in print by adopting the pen-name "Arya Putra".³⁰ The nati addresses Betab's surrogate, the sutradhar, by this name in the preliminary scene in his *Mahabharat*. Betab published a number of his plays under the name "Arya Putra", and used it when he became editor of the journal *Shakespeare*. The first set of instalments of Betab's autobiography were published in *Arya-Kumar*, an Arya Samaj monthly, and were meant to inspire Arya youth.

In his choice of language, nonetheless, Betab held to a moderate position. Betab's language policy was famously articulated in the couplet from the beginning of his *Mahabharat*:

na theth hindi na khalis urdu zaban goya mili juli ho,

alag rahe dudh se na mishri dali dali dudh me ghuli ho.

Neither pure Hindi nor pristine Urdu, may the language be a mixture.

Let the sugar not stay separate from the milk, let each lump be perfectly dissolved.

Rather than adopting a vigilantly Sanskritised idiom, his own usage in the *Mahabharat* shows a variety of registers gauged to the status of the character and the level of discourse.

Betab's Arya Samaj leanings seem the most likely source for the vision of dalit emancipation voiced by Cheta Chamar. Dayanand championed education and merit, not birth, as the determinants of status, a position often repeated in Betab's text. According to Dayanand, a man from the lowest level of society could become a brahmin by virtue of his qualifications. In fact, Dayanand had a deep suspicion of brahminical authority and called brahmins "popes" in *Satyarth Prakash*.³¹ Arya teachings emphasised that study of the Vedas and sacred texts was not barred to outcastes and women but was open to all.³² In Betab's text, not only Krishna but Draupadi and Cheta assume the voice of the 'pracharak', the

preacher, who skillfully wields shastraic authority for the purpose of converting others. And the group of devotees who accompany Cheta in the final face-off with Dron, singing bhajans and carrying a flag inscribed with a Vedic mantra, appear to be modelled on the bhajan and kirtan mandals deployed by the Arya Samaj to proselytise for their beliefs.³³

Rituals Reconfigured

It is time now to re-examine the rituals described earlier, in relation to the expanded notion of the “mythological” as a refiguration of tradition. How do these enactments imagine the nation into being? How do they reposition those who perform the rituals, those who witness the ritual performances, and those whom the rituals are intended to benefit?

The first ritual, performed for the unveiling of the new play at its ‘muhurat’, purifies the performance space and offsets evil influences. These activities bear a resemblance to the ‘purvarang’ or preliminary ceremonies detailed in the *Natyashastra*. Such preliminaries were conventional practice in the Sanskrit theatre, as they were in traditional theatres like Kathakali that often treat *Mahabharat* themes. In the Parsi theatre, however, they were an anomaly. The ritual described by Betab, moreover, involves the feeding of Brahmins and the performance of ‘havan’, acts not generally associated with the concept of ‘purvarang’. Whereas the purvarang is to be carried out by members of the troupe, here outsiders appear to be required. Even more pointedly, it is Betab who designates himself the high priest, the one who identifies the correct rites and ensures their careful administration. The fact that the ceremony includes a havan is readily traced to Betab’s own Arya Samaj orientation.

At the rhetorical level, as an incident retold in Betab’s life story, the ritual frames the entire performance history of the play. In Betab’s account, the *Mahabharat* was the high point of his career, involving great peril and profit, but its effects would surely have been more damaging had the preliminary rituals not been performed. At the most pragmatic level, Betab remarks upon the salubrious effects of the ‘ashirvad’ pronounced by the brahmins upon his boss, Seth Khatau. Without this blessing, Khatau would not have had the courage to proceed with the performance.

Here we note the peculiar valence of the *Mahabharat* story itself. It is an apocalyptic tale of familial discord, leading to a great war and the end of a ‘yuga’. Whether viewed, performed, or simply owned as a text, the epic is understood as unleashing inauspicious energies. S M Pandit, a contemporary Indian artist specialising in mythic themes, averred that whenever he finished a painting of the battlefield at Kurukshetra, riots or violence broke out somewhere in India.³⁴ It is significant in this regard that an immense ritual sacrifice, the ‘sarpasattra’ or snake sacrifice, frames the entire account of the *Mahabharat* in the telling by Vyasa, foreshadowing its wider themes.³⁵

This ritual is thus a remade purvarang, crafted with Arya Samaj elements by Betab, the Arya Putra as sutradhar. It serves to contain the subsequent performance, bracketing it as auspicious. The field of protection is large: it includes not only those who may witness the play, read the text, or perform it, but all within the social order. The beneficiaries, in other words, are the inhabitants of Bharat, the nation. I would further note that, in the context of the Parsi theatre, the ritual flattens the distinctions within the performance space, enabling it to be entered by all communities on an equal footing. It offsets the pollution that potentially

accrued when ‘mlecchas’ – the eclectic theatrical community comprised of Parsis, Muslims, Christians, as well as Hindus of all ranks – impersonated the gods.

The enactment of ‘nirgun’ bhakti by the chamars, nested within the heart of the play, goes even further toward imagining the nation as an inclusive and integrated community. Former divisions based on birth into a particular caste, even gender difference, are negated in a religious community bound together in devotion to a common lord. Betab focuses his campaign against untouchability by taking up the issue of ritual entitlement. It is the chamars’ ritual status, their qualification to carry out ritual observances and thereby approach the divine, which is at the heart of these scenes. Though phrased in terms of spiritual equality, this message is predicated on rejection of an entire social set-up, and not just in symbolic terms. The intertextual depth afforded through the legend of Raidas, the sant of the chamars who contested brahminical authority many centuries ago, enables the identification of a powerful counter-stream within Indian literature and history.

The formlessness of the deity advocated by Draupadi, Seva, and Cheta is a critical element here. Aniconic worship recognises no properties, names, or distinctions. Social divisions are obliterated along with divine qualities. It is telling that in Betab’s text, lord Krishna himself embraces this understanding and becomes the mouthpiece of ‘nirgun bhakti’, even though in other scenes he functions as the devious strategist or amorous cowherd. Through miraculous appearances aided by advanced stage technology, he takes on different manifestations during the course of the play. But he reconciles these in his speech to Shanta, wherein he notes that it is love that creates his form or shape; in himself, he fundamentally lacks these qualities. The concept of bhakti that emerges through the chamars’ rituals, then, is of an immersion in the divine available to all. This bhakti empowers the believer, regardless of his or her station, and gives to its adherents a collective strength so great that even oppressive force can be neutralised or removed. The ritual, that is to say, mobilises a very Gandhian notion of nationhood, and one that spoke most eloquently to the disadvantaged and dispossessed.

Finally, I argued that the frontal display of characters in a freeze-frame or tableau evokes the rite of darshan or mutual gazing between the iconic manifestation of the deity and the spectator. As with the modified purvarang or the chamars’ bhakti, my contention is that this ritual moment does not implant religious modes of viewing within the secular theatre so much as it exploits pre-existing resources to construct an expanded sense of community. The vision offered in a moment of stasis on stage creates an aura around the image, enabling a privileged perception that could be viewed as an act of grace on the part of the believer. We know that a special relationship was established between audiences and actors playing the roles of gods, in the Parsi theatre, in the early cinematic mythologicals, and in the replay of the epics on Indian television. Together with this communion, and the ritual gestures of obeisance that accompanied it, went a conviction that the actors were in fact inhabited by the gods, they were ‘svarupas’, of the same form as the beings whose roles they played.³⁶ But the flip side of this was that the actors had to be god-like, not only in their perfect appearance and correct social standing (Hindu, brahmin, etc) but also in their behaviour off-stage. These expectations made possible the transfer of the notion of darshan from the temple to the stage, but they also complicated the reception of mythologicals, and collided with the emerging

notion of the “star”, the uniquely desirable actor or actress who also had an individual personality and life story. Insofar as darshan in the theatre assumed transformation of actor into god, it was a project only partially realisable.

I would like to append to this notion of darshan another ritual, that of ‘nazar’, as practised in the secular courtly milieu. Where darshan depended on transformation, nazar primarily involved a transaction: the proffering of coins, luxury goods, or artworks, to a patron or overlord as an expression of service and submission. Once the patron acknowledged the supplicant through acceptance of the nazar, the relationship changed to one of protection on the part of the patron, and obligation on the part of the offerant. If the box-office purchase of a ticket can be read as the equivalent in the market economy of offering nazar, we might understand the mutual gaze between actor and spectator as signifying mutual recognition, acknowledgement, and desire, absent the notion of immanence implied by darshan. This concept is useful because it allows for greater agency on the part of the actor. The commercial theatre required that actors please their audiences and earn their praise, and even as actors recount with pride the medals, garlands, and offerings heaped upon them, we know that they had to work hard to gain this respect.

The significant change, in both cases, is that actors in the Parsi theatre made themselves available to all spectators, regardless of caste, class, gender, or religion. The privileged relationship between actor and viewer, rooted in long-standing conventions of frontality, was shorn of distinctively religious or hierarchical obligations. Moments of iconicity may indeed have worked at cross-purposes with the aesthetic of realism, as persuasively argued by Anuradha Kapur.³⁷ Nevertheless, the ritual gaze bound all the spectators within a common field of vision. Tableaux ultimately created moments of communitas, overriding categories, distinctions, and differences. That the resulting community was, in essence, the nation is the place where I rest my argument. For these rituals, re-enacted in the Parsi theatre mythological genre, were performed to redraw a set of boundaries. 

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Notes

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- 1 Narayan Prasad Betab, *Betab Charit* (Rashtriya Natya Vidyalaya, New Delhi, 2002 (1937)), 74 (hereafter BC). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Vidyavati Lakshmanrao Namra, *Hindi Rangmanch aur Pandit Narayanprasad Betab* (Vishvaavidyalay Prakashan, Varanasi, 1972), 205 ff Namra, one of Betab’s daughters, was his personal assistant during the last 10 years of his life.
- 3 M Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998), pp 30-31; 64. See also Rosie Thomas, ‘Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia’ in Raminder Kaur and Ajay J Sinha (eds), *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens* (Sage, New Delhi, 2005), p 40.
- 4 Geeta Kapur, ‘Mythic Material in Indian Cinema’, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, pp 14-15 (July-December 1987), p 81.

- 5 Prasad, citing Kakar in ‘The Ties That Bind’ (1980), p 135.
- 6 Prasad, citing Baskaran (ed), *The Evans Report on Indian Cinema 1921* (nd), p 4.
- 7 Raminder Kaur, *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2003, pp 18-19.
- 8 Anuradha Kapur, ‘The Representation of Gods and Heroes in the Parsi Mythological Drama’ in V Dalmia and H von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 1995, p 402.
- 9 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, ‘The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology’, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, pp 14-15 (July-December 1987), p 63.
- 10 See discussion in Prasad, 18-19. Also, Kajri Jain, ‘Figures of Locality and Tradition: Commercial Cinema and the Networks of Visual Print Capitalism in Maharashtra’ in *Bollyworld*, p 76.
- 11 Rajadhyaksha, p 59.
- 12 Rajadhyaksha, p 60, Phalke, as is well known, justified his choice of the mythological on the grounds of its being swadeshi.
- 13 Jain, pp 70-71.
- 14 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-Century Punjab*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, pp 115-23.
- 15 Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth Century India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp 147-51.
- 16 Gooptu, p 151.
- 17 Peter Friedlander, ‘The Struggle for Salvation in the Hagiographies of Ravidas’ in Julie Leslie (ed), *Myth and Mythmaking*, Curzon, Surrey, UK, 1996, pp 106-23.
- 18 Winand M Callewaert and Peter G Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, Manohar, Delhi, 1992, pp 11-34.
- 19 Friedlander, p 111.
- 20 Friedlander, pp 113-14.
- 21 John Stratton Hawley rejects the association with Ramanand as “improbable”. He also notes that chamar communities today generally disavow both the Ramanandi assignment and Raidas’ birth as a brahmin. *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005, pp 189, 25, 155-56.
- 22 G Kapur, p 81.
- 23 G Kapur, p 83.
- 24 Philip Constable, ‘Early Dalit Literature and Culture in Late 19th – and Early 20th Century Western India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 31:2, (1997), pp 317-38.
- 25 “The war of the Mahabharata was the cause of the apathy towards the Vedas. This apathy leading to a worldwide ignorance, the intellect of the people became muddled”. *The Light of Truth*, English translation of Svami Dayananda’s *Satyartha Prakash*, translated by Ganga Prasad Upadhyaya, Kala Press, Allahabad, 1960, p 385.
- 26 “But the war of the Mahabharata gave such a big shock to this country, that even now it could not recover its former position. When brother kills brother, destruction is inevitable. ‘Vinasha kale viparita buddhih’ (*Vridhachanakya*, XVI, p 17). A poet says that when the time of destruction comes, mind is upset and people begin to do just the wrong thing...When men of great learning, princes, kings, sages, saints, were killed in the Great War or died, the teaching and preaching of the Vedic literature and the Vedic religion became extinct...The whole of India was split up into small pieces”, *The Light of Truth*, p 392.
- 27 Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, pp 135-57.
- 28 Orsini, p 126.
- 29 Orsini, p 131.
- 30 Namra, p 165.
- 31 Kenneth W Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, p 49.
- 32 Jones, p 33.
- 33 Jones, p 126.
- 34 Kajri Jain, ‘The Efficacious Image: Pictures and Power in Indian Mass Culture’, *Polygraph* 12 (2000), p 159.
- 35 Christopher Minkowski, ‘Snakes, Satras, and the Mahabharata’ in Arvind Sharma (ed), *Essays on the Mahabharata* (Brill: Leiden, 1991), pp 384-400.
- 36 Philip Lutgendorf, ‘Ramayan – The Video’, *The Drama Review*, 34:2, Summer 1990, p 162.
- 37 See A Kapur, pp 407-12, for a detailed discussion of this point.