

Peter Brook's "Mahabharata": A View from India

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# Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*

## A View from India

Rustom Bharucha

*Peter Brook's Mahabharata exemplifies one of the most blatant (and accomplished) appropriations of Indian culture in recent years. Very different in tone from the Raj revivals, it nonetheless suggests the bad old days of the British Raj, not in its direct allusions to colonial history, but in its appropriation of non-western material within an orientalist framework of thought and action, which has been specifically designed for the international market.*

*There is a Mahabharata to be fought in India today, not just against cultural appropriations like Brook's production, but against systems of power that make such appropriations possible. We can begin by fighting this battle on our own soil, for our own territory.*

### I

The maestro is tired. He's mildly annoyed that there's no air-conditioner in the car, but his Indian friends don't seem to notice. They are used to the heat.

They take him to a remote village, but the maestro is not impressed by the dances performed specially for him by the villagers. "Not enough flair," he comments. Then he buys a mask after checking the price with his guide: "Is that what you would pay for it?" Reassured, he asks his favourite question: "What else are you going to show me?"

It is getting dark and everyone is tired—the maestro, his Indian hosts, and the driver who has spent eight hours at the wheel. When they reach another village, the maestro is guided to a rest house, which is actually no more than a room. He says, "Thank you very much," and shuts the door behind him.

The Indians are left staring at the door, wondering where they will sleep that night.

NOT much of a story, but it does reveal to me how much we in India have to learn about dealing with characters like the maestro. What is it that prevents us from asserting our own territory? Playing the host, without submitting to deference and exploitation?

At one level, perhaps, we all have something to gain from affiliating ourselves to the maestro. Who knows? he may even arrange a trip abroad for us especially if we transport a couple of tribal performers (truly 'indigenous' material). Let us not also forget that the maestro has important connections within India itself, people who embody power in the highest cultural and political offices. He is a guest of the government not only because he is supremely established in the 'west', but because of his deep affinities to the so-called third world (which he views synonymously with the Orient).

He loves the Orient not for its poverty (which he excludes from his consciousness), nor for the despotism of its leading families (whose 'excesses' have nothing to do with his art). Rather, he is drawn to the Orient for its secrets, its ineffable truths that are so sadly absent (so he feels) in his own culture.

Now he could admire the Orient at a safe distance, like Gordon Craig, and still earlier, the Schlegels, for whom the Orient was a

text. But this is difficult at a time when one has direct access to the artefacts of the Orient—rituals, ceremonies, performance techniques, costumes, masks, folk dances, poems, epics. Instead of viewing these artefacts within their own contexts, the maestro is more concerned with using them for his own purposes. He does this not by imitating them, but by converting them into raw material for his own intercultural experiments.

It doesn't matter to his friends in India what he does to this material, so long as he comes up with something that the western press can describe as "the greatest cultural event of the century". Through his intervention, India has once again asserted its position in the international world of culture (Attenborough's *Gandhi* being one of the biggest breakthroughs). The maestro's representation becomes the authorised model of "professionalism", "perfection", and even "magic" qualities in short supply back in India.

What is it that perpetuates this appropriation of our culture? Why do we invite this usurpation of our territory? When the maestro shuts the door in our face, why do we accept it? Why can't we knock on the door and ask him to share the room (if we happen to have some faith in intercultural exchange), or else, get him to leave?

### II

Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* exemplifies one of the most blatant (and accomplished) appropriations of Indian culture in recent years. Very different in tone from the Raj revivals, it nonetheless suggests the bad old days of the British Raj, not in its direct allusions to colonial history, but in its appropriation of non-western material within an orientalist framework of thought and action, which has been specifically designed for the international market.

It was the British who first made us aware in India of economic appropriation on a global scale. They took our raw materials from us, transported them to factories in Manchester and Lancashire, where they were transformed into commodities, which were then forcibly sold to us in India. Brook deals

in a different kind of appropriation: he does not merely take our commodities and textiles and transform them into costumes and props. He has taken one of our most significant texts and decontextualised it from its history in order to sell it to audiences in the west.

Though we may not be aware of it, our government has bought this appropriation of our culture through its official support of the production in Europe and America. It will continue to support the production in Japan as part of its promotion of 'festival culture' throughout the world. Eventually, we may even see the production in India itself—where else but on the banks of the Ganges? If this materialises, I hope some concessions will be made for the tickets, which cost over \$ 90 in New York (a sum of money that could support the average Indian family for an entire month, if not more).

One could dismiss this appropriation were it not for the scale of its operation and the magnitude of its effect. It has been hailed as "one of the theatrical events of this century" (*Sunday Times*, London) by a reviewer who, I assume, is both very old and omniscient. "Enthralled audiences" have watched this "landmark of our times," imagining it to be a truthful adaptation of "a classic Indian epic". Actually, the very association of the *Mahabharata* with western assumptions of the epic minimises its importance. The *Mahabharata* is not merely a great narrative poem; it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge for our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, ecology—in short, our *history* in all its detail and density.

Instead of confronting this history with his international group of actors in Paris (of whom Mallika Sarabhai is the only Indian participant), Brook has created a so-called 'story' of the *Mahabharata* in association with Jean-Claude Carrière, that reads like a rather contrived and overblown fairy-tale. At one level, there is not much one can do about stopping such adaptations. After all, there is no copyright on the *Mahabharata* (does it belong to India alone? or is it an Indian text that belongs to the world?) I am

not for a moment suggesting that westerners should be banned from touching our sacred texts. I am neither a fundamentalist nor an enthusiast of our very own Ramanand Sagar's serialisation of the *Ramayana* on Doordarshan every Sunday morning. Certainly, we are capable of misrepresenting the epics ourselves. All I wish to assert is that the *Mahabharata* must be seen on as many levels as possible within the Indian context, so that its meaning (or rather, multiple levels of meaning) can have some bearing on the lives of the Indian people for whom the *Mahabharata* was written, and who continue to derive their strength from it.

If Brook truly believes that the epic is universal, then his representation should not exclude or trivialise Indian culture, as I believe it does. One cannot agree with the premise that, "The *Mahabharata* is Indian but it is universal". The "but" is misleading. The *Mahabharata*, I would counter, is universal *because* it is Indian. One cannot separate the culture from the text.

Of course, one has to accept that Brook has not grown up with the epic in his childhood, unlike most Indians, who have internalised the *Mahabharata* through a torrent of feelings, emotions, thoughts, taboos, concepts, and fantasies. Inevitably, any western director of the *Mahabharata* needs to define his own attitude or configuration of attitudes to the epic. He needs to ask: What does this epic mean to me? But this question, I believe, can be responsibly addressed only after the meaning (or meanings) of the *Mahabharata* have been confronted within their own cultural context.

If this is not possible, if the context remains elusive or bizarre, then the director should not dramatise the epic. Rather, he should focus his attention on his own cultural artefacts, the epics of western civilisation like the *Illiad* or the *Odysey*, which he is more likely to understand. I should also add that if he represented these epics to audiences in the west, he would also be more accountable for his actions and interpretation. He would not be able to get away as he is likely to with his misrepresentation of "other" cultures.

### III

Brook, however, never once admits in his numerous interviews and comments on the *Mahabharata*, that the Indian context of the epic posed a problem. In fact, the context is never an issue for him. What matters is the 'flavour of India' that is suggested through the *mise en scene*. Now at one level, this might seem appropriately modest: a 'flavour', after all, does not seem so important as the 'substance'. But in actuality, nothing could be harder in the theatre than to represent the 'flavour' of another culture. If Brook had been sufficiently aware of the numerous metaphors of cooking that have been used in the *Natyasastra* and other aesthetic commentaries on the *rasa* (literally 'taste') of a performance, he might have used

the word with more caution.

'Flavour' is not some mystical aura that emanates from a culture. It is the outcome of a process wherein specific ingredients have been seasoned and blended with spices in particular combinations. The 'flavour' of Indian culture has a definite context. It is what differentiates a curry from a stew, and I'm not just alluding to the taste, but to the entire history of a people that shapes taste in particular ways.

When Brook says in the Foreword to his play that "we have tried to suggest the flavour of India without pretending to be what we are not", he is gracefully evading a confrontation of the historical context of Indian culture. No one wants Brook to resort to antiquarianism. We can accept that he is not attempting, in his words, "a reconstruction of Dravidian and Aryan India of 3000 years ago". But when, in the next line, he says, "We are not presuming to present the symbolism of Hindu philosophy", the qualification is more questionable.

What is the *Mahabharata* without Hindu philosophy? Apart from Krishna (whose pedestrian representation I will deal with later), Brook gives us vignettes of Ganesh, Siva, Hanuman; some bleak predictions about the end of the world; a scattering of references to *dharma*; and a five-minute encapsulation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It did not come as a surprise to me when the audience laughed on hearing Krishna's famous advice to Arjuna: "Act, but don't reflect on the fruits of the action". If the New York audience laughed, it is not because their own ideology of capitalism and self-interest had been called into question. Krishna's statement came out of the blue without any depth of meaning or resonance. What could they have been a moment of revelation was reduced to a banality.

The problem is that there is no framework of reference in Brook's production that provides a Hindu perspective of *action* in the larger, cosmic context. There is no clear sense of what the characters are compelled to do by virtue of their *swadharma*, or life task. Moreover, in the absence of any defined religious framework, it is only inevitable that the characters seem to share the Christian universe of their audience—a lapsed Christianity, perhaps, neither fervent nor cynical, but one which nevertheless continues to assume that there is a definite beginning and end to life. In this *Mahabharata*, there is no suggestion that the characters could have lived previous lives, or that they are capable of being reborn.

Another reason for the conceptual fuzziness of the production has to do with the absence of caste distinctions, without which the actions of the characters cannot be fully clarified. Indian characters do not merely act according to their feelings (which is what Brook's characters appear to do), but in accordance to how they are expected to act by virtue of their *dharma*, which in turn is determined by caste. We hear of *kshatriyas*

in Brook's production, and we see them fight, but we do not learn much about the ethos of their caste. Carrière needs to do much more than to retain the Indian world "*kshatriya*" to withstand, in his words, the "colonisation by vocabulary". He needs to evoke *kshatriya-dharma* through language, gesture, and sentiment in a way that transcends the image of the Pandavas and Kauravas as "warriors".

If the caste distinctions had been retained in the production, they would surely have enhanced the relationships that exist between characters. Krishna and Arjuna, who belong to the same caste, share an intimacy (not explored in the production) that Duryodhana and Karna can never hope to share. As a *suta*, the adopted son of a charioteer, Karna will always be dependent on Duryodhana's magnanimity. His friendship will always be conditioned by servility. I don't think that Brook's audience had a clue about the intensity of Karna's humiliation as a *suta*, because he was never differentiated from the Pandavas or the Kauravas on the level of caste. True, he does refer to himself as the "son of a driver", but the rupture in his ritual status, and his consequent rejection of this status, have no resonance beyond the obvious fact that he has been wronged.

My focus on caste distinctions may appear to be pedantic, but how can one not react when the audience laughs on seeing Yudhishthira entering the kingdom of heaven with a dog? To the average American, a dog is merely a pet; it is not associated with pollution. Its presence is not likely to desecrate a sacrificial offering or *puja*. But to the average Hindu, the significance of Yudhishthira's insistence on entering heaven with a dog, is profound. His humanity is totally lost in Brook's production because there is no context in which to place his seemingly sacrilegious demand.

At this point, I should stress that it is not impossible for Brook to suggest the Indian context of significant gestures and relationships. The *guru-shishya parampara*, for instance, is suggestively illuminated in the contrasting attitudes of Arjuna and Ekalavya to Drona. The scene 'works' because of the thought contained within it, at once deftly dramatised and sharply punctuated within the mainstream of the narrative. In Ekalavya's absence, the "story" could have gone on, but his presence is what provides the play with one of its few moments of meaningful exchange.

### IV

If Brook had been concerned with the context of the *Mahabharata*, he might not have attempted to summarise the entire 'story' within nine hours. For an epic that is fifteen times longer than the Bible, nine hours is really not that long; in fact, it is pitifully short. To attempt an encapsulation of the *Mahabharata* in its entirety is a *hubris* of sorts, but to limit that encapsulation to nine hours is the *reductio ad absurdum* of



theatrical adaptation.

In India, a Kathakali or Koodiyattam performance would need approximately nine hours to dramatise a single episode from the text. One does not expect Brook to imitate these traditional performances which require years of training and dedication. One has to respect his decision to work within his own idiom of theatre and acting. However, what one regrets is that Brook does not seem to have absorbed any of the fundamental principles underlying traditional narratives in India. He keeps a safe distance from them, resisting the vulnerability that arises from encountering another culture at close quarters.

Significantly, when Brook encountered the *Mahabharata* for the first time in a Kathakali performance, he admits that after the “unforgettable shock” of the dancer’s first appearance, he found himself moving away from the performance. The story being told was “something mythical and remote, from another culture, nothing to do with my life”. While appreciating the honesty of this response, I wish that Brook could have devoted more time to understanding the “hieratic gestures” of the performance, instead of settling for a more “ordinary” and “accessible” rendition of the same performance.

Brook’s inadequate confrontation of Indian tradition is characterised by short cuts. Instead of entering the ‘jungle’ of Vyasa’s text, with its labyrinthine paths and dense growth, he settles for a paraphrase. Accessibility is the determining principle of his adaptation. In this respect, Brook is greatly facilitated by Carrière, who conveniently assumes that the “inexhaustible richness” of the epic “defies all structural, thematic, historic or psychological analysis”. Perhaps, it is with this premise in mind that he has reduced the epic to a chronological sequence of episodes that are structurally linked to the well-made play tradition of Scribe and Sardou and the historical chronicles of nineteenth-century theatre. Vyasa’s epic has been systematised into three parts—*The Game of Dice*, *Exile in the Forest*, *The War*, his intricate structure of story-telling reduced to a line of action.

If Brook had given some importance to the cyclical nature of time that pervades the *Mahabharata*, he would have rejected the validity of dramatising the epic in a predominantly linear narrative. Nothing could be more foreign to the *Mahabharata* than linearity. This “foreignness” is not just a formal blunder, it distorts the very meaning of the narrative. Only at rare moments in the production does the past coalesce with the present, such as the time when Kunti is visited by the Sun when Karna first appears in the tournament. What one misses, however, is a sense of time that transcends chronology, time that stretches into infinity. Though Carrière pays tribute to Vyasa’s “immense poem, which flows with the majesty of a great river”, his own flow of words is more like a sputter, the rhythm

chopped with mechanical precision.

Time is truncated into blocks of action, acts and scenes that have definite beginnings and ends. The narrative always moves forward with predictable briskness, especially towards the end where the death of Abhimanyu is followed by the deaths of Ghatotkacha, Drona, Dushassana, Karna, and Duryodhana in quick succession, one scene for each death, all over in less than three hours. What is the point? I asked myself while watching this saga of action. The battle on Kurukshetra is not the fifth act of *Macbeth*. There are sentiments, lulls in the action, and the deepest tragic moments that need to be lingered over for the action to make any sense. Without pauses, intensifications of detail, and patterns of return, this *Mahabharata* means nothing. It is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

## V

After seeing the production, I was compelled to question whether the ‘story’ of the *Mahabharata* makes much sense outside of the conventions of story-telling to which it belongs. Can a story be separated from the ways in which it is told to its own people? We Indians are known for our circumlocutions. Whether we are describing a family quarrel or the plot of a Hindi film, we never seem to get to the point. Always, the elaboration is more important than the thrust of the narrative. Time never seems to matter—a story lasts for as long as there is a need for it. In this regard, the teller of the story is totally dependent on the participation of the listener, who is invariably vocal and deeply involved in the labyrinthine process of the story which he may already know.

Of course, the situation is different for Brook, who is telling the ‘story’ of the *Mahabharata* to a western audience for the first time. Consequently, one cannot expect any “shared experience” (to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase) that unites the actors and spectators within the world of the story. Perhaps, to counter this problem, Brook introduces the character of the Boy, who listens to the story as told by Vyasa from beginning till the end. Unfortunately, this child does not participate in the action at all—he merely asks questions in a rather uninflected, disinterested way: “Who are you? What’s that? Where have you been?” Sometimes, he is permitted a little levity, for instance, when he asks Ganesh how his mother managed to “do it alone”. More clumsily, he is given the privilege to ask the final questions to the dying Krishna: “Why all your tricks? And bad directions?” (Imagine a child saying that to a god.)

Nonetheless, the child survives Krishna and becomes the contemporary descendant of the Bharatas, “one of us”. More than as an emblem of survival, however, the Boy serves as Brook’s central narrative device by linking the various episodes through his questions. Brook uses the Boy to control the

receptivity of the audience. By lulling us with his innocent questions, to which he always receives paternalistic responses from Vyasa (Brook’s surrogate), the Boy disarms criticism and compels us to watch the play with naive wonder.

With such a strategic use of the Boy, it is not surprising that he has no life as a character. But how can one accept a lacklustre, two-dimensional portraiture of Krishna, who comes across as an elder statesman, doctrinaire and avuncular? We know that the Krishna of the *Mahabharata* does not belong to the *bhakti* tradition, but is it possible to imagine any Krishna without charisma, without flashes of divinity and danger?

In Carrière’s adaptation, almost all of Krishna’s “misdeeds” are summarised, but we never really see Krishna in action, attacking Bhishma “like a destructive comet”. When Shishupala insults him, he merely raises his voice, but his presence does not change. In fact, as played by Bruce Myers, there is little or no transformation in this most elusive of characters. This is particularly evident in the scene depicting Krishna’s death, where there is no evocation of the massacre of his clan, which he has willed himself. Without the massacre, there is no context in which to situate Krishna’s choice to end his life. In his final moments, we should no longer see a “god embellished in glory”, but as Buddhadeva Bose says, “a life-weary-being... who has assumed an explicit mortality as proof of his divine power”. The triviality of Krishna’s death (suicide?), caused by a stray arrow, has no poignance in Brook’s production, because we never feel anything for his Krishna. Myers illuminates neither the divinity nor the intense mortality of his character, leave alone their interpenetration.

Almost all of the characters in Brook’s *Mahabharata* are presented in outline, with their inner energies and fire missing. Brook seems to use the characters to tell *his* story, so that they rarely ignite and acquire lives of their own. Most of the characters are so undifferentiated that they almost blend into one another. The ones who stand out are those who assert their energies in solitary splendour. Amba, for instance, is given a thoroughly convincing performance by Helene Patarot in a characterisation driven by hate. In her own way, this French actress has delved into the *sthaibhava* of the role to create a revengeful state of being. “Hate keeps me young”: we see the very drive of this emotion in Amba’s second exit, as she sloshes her way through the river on stage, her heavy skirt dragging along, in pursuit of Bhishma.

Like Amba, the other characters who make a strong impression—Bhima, Karna, and the Sun—are played by actors, whose energies cut through the triteness of the text. For the most part, however, Brook has failed to provide his actors with modes of representing emotion that belong to the “epic”. Apart from some attempts to “distance” the

characters through third-person narratives, he settles for a heroic mode of acting that passes off as Shakespearean in the “deadly” tradition of British theatre. Most of the *Mahabharata* actors could have been playing Shakespearean roles: Abhimanyu is startlingly similar to Young Siward in his youthful courage; Duryodhana evokes Richard III in his machiavellian strategies and self-destruction (“I want to be discontented”); even Arjuna has a moment when he suggests Macduff’s grief on losing his son. Apart from “Shakespeareana”, Brook uses the colourful and extravagant pantomime tradition for “oriental” characters like Virata, Gudesna, and Kichaka; as for Satyawati’s father, he is straight from the *Pirates of Penzance*.

## VI

Apart from simplifying the epic characters, reducing them at times to the level of cartoons, Brook erases some characters altogether. The contemplative Vidura is cut, because as Carrière claims, “his effect on the plot is minor”. Very often, a character appears with no background whatsoever, and disappears in a few minutes without providing anything beyond “plot development”. One of the most enigmatic of such presences (or rather, absences) is Maya, who introduces himself as the “supreme architect”, who wishes to build a palace for the Pandavas—a “magic palace . . . where thoughts become real”. Instead of indulging in these trite phrases, Carrière should have given us some clue as to why Maya wants to favour the Pandavas with his skills.

The truth is that he is obliged to do so. Maya, an *asura* or demon, is one of the seven characters who escaped from the Khandava forest, after it was burned down by Agni with the active assistance of Arjuna and Krishna. Obligated to satisfy Agni’s “hunger”, these two heroes guard the forest on all sides, preventing every bird, animal, and Naga from escaping. Mayasabha, the “magic palace”, is built on the ashes of their unpardonable genocide.

How can one accept the erasure of this context from Maya’s representation? More critically, how can we begin to understand a major character like Kunti if we don’t know anything of her past oppression—the cursory way in which she is handed over by her own father to Kuntibhoja, so that she can look after the irascible sage Durvasa like a good hostess? And then, of course, she is married off to Pandu, who is doomed to be impotent. Instead of reflecting some attitude to the circumstances of her life, Brook seems to accept her lot with equanimity. I am not advocating an explicitly feminist reading of Kunti, though many women (both Indian and western) would legitimately demand one. I call into question the seeming neutrality of the entire representation that prevents Brooke and Carrière from taking a position in relation to the problems of the text.

In the opening sequence of the production, Vyasa claims that his “poetical history of mankind” is as “pure as glass, yet nothing is omitted”. His rhetoric reveals the aura of completion that pervades Brook’s production, an aura that gives the illusion of the epic speaking itself with minimal intervention. This view is substantiated by Carrière himself in his introduction to the play, when he emphasises the necessity of entering the “deepest places” of the characters “without interposing our concepts, our judgments or our twentieth-century analysis, insofar as this is possible”. What seems like a very graceful concern for the integrity of the epic is also an evasion of responsibility. Carrière assumes that a perception of the “deepest places” is possible without a critical consciousness. It is almost as if the *Mahabharata* lies beyond questioning, and that its ‘story’ can be told only through some mystical communion with the work itself.

Nothing could be further from the truth. If the *Mahabharata* is very much alive in India today, it is because it has always invited the most turbulent questions from its most ardent supporters. Take Iravati Karve, one of the most respected interpreters of the text, who is not reluctant to state categorically that “the sole aim of the burning of the Khandava forest was the acquisition of land and the liquidation of the Nagas”. If Carrière had been truly inspired by Karve’s *Yuganta* (which he acknowledges in his introduction), he would not have attempted to purify the *Mahabharata* of “concepts”, “judgments”, and “analysis”.

Actually, his very attempt to dramatise the *Mahabharata* without contemporary interventions is disingenuous, because the production does have a dominant theme. “That theme is threat”, says Carrière, “we live in a time of destruction”. There are countless references to this theme particularly towards the end of the play, when the pool on stage steadily reddens with blood. At one point, a nuclear calm descends on the earth after Aswatthama’s “sacred missile” infiltrates space and is countered through non-resistance. “Quick, lie on the ground, don’t move”, Krishna advises the Pandavas, “empty your minds, make a void. One mustn’t resist this weapon, not even in thought”.

It is unlikely that this attitude would receive the support of anti-nuclear activists, but at least, there is an attitude here that directs the text in a particular way. Unfortunately, there are no clearly discernible attitudes in Brook’s approach to Kunti, who merely suffers with a stoic calm. So does Gandhari, a monolith of endurance, whose passivity is rarely disturbed by flashes of inner resentment. Draupadi is permitted more anger by Brook, but once again, it is not sufficiently contextualised. The status of Draupadi, her birth through *yajna*-fire, her family and political affiliations, are never clarified in the production. She merely appears early in the play and is promptly

shared by the five brothers, because Kunti “can’t take back her word”. Draupadi, “the paragon of women”, accepts her situation in silence.

“*Nathyavati anathava*”: married, but like a widow. This terrible paradox in Draupadi’s life is a source of pain, but it also elicits the deepest questions from Draupadi herself. To whom does she belong? Her husband or to herself? To what extent is a wife the slave of her husband? What are the rights of slaves? Does Yudhishthira have more rights over Draupadi than her other husbands? Can the four brothers collectively disown Yudhishthira? The weight of these questions is ignored by Brook in his treatment of the assembly scene where Draupadi is humiliated. Significantly, when she entreats Bhishma, “Can one belong to someone who has lost himself?”, he responds quizzically, “I am troubled. The question is obscure.” This line gains a tremendous laugh, because not once are we made to feel that Draupadi has been seriously wronged.

Brook directs the scene with a fast pace, his eye on the “miracle”, when yards of cloth unfold from Draupadi’s robe in the tradition of stage tricks from pantomime. One never really senses the threat of rape in Dushasana’s handling of Draupadi, and consequently, Krishna’s intervention seems merely obligatory. In the original text, the nakedness of Draupadi is heightened through her dress, a single garment tied around the waist, which is the traditional garb of a woman in her period, a state of ritual pollution. Instead of heightening the outrage inflicted on her, Brook covers it up with facile theatricality. When Draupadi wails, “Where is dharma?”, it seems like pointless hysteria, a case of a woman not being able to shut up on time.

Draupadi’s lines do not resonate because of Mallika Sarabhai’s monotonous delivery. Though she obviously knows English better than many of the other actors, who are speaking it for the first time on stage in a bewildering range of accents, her own voice never comes through. She speaks as she has been directed to speak, unlike some of the African actors, whose rhythms resist the “simple, precise, restrained language” created by Carrière and translated by Brook. Sarabhai’s energy is somewhat muted, her gestures constrained within a realistic structure of acting. If she could have expressed herself through dance even for a few moments, her culture would have been embodied in the performance. But that’s obviously what Brook didn’t want, it would have become “too Indian”, destroying the balance of his intrinsically western order and taste.

## VII

What is the point of assembling an international group of actors if the expressive possibilities of their cultures are negated in the production? The caste includes actors from England, France, Turkey, Japan, Iran,

Poland, Italy, South Africa, Senegal, Indonesia, and India—an impressive representation, no doubt, the United Nations of Theatre. But what is the point if most of the actors' voices, rhythms and performance traditions have been homogenised within a western structure of action, where they have to speak a language unknown to most of them? Of course, this language has to be either English or French—how could one possibly imagine this *Mahabharata* in Sanskrit, or for that matter, in any non-western language?

For most of the actors, the enforced use of the English language is unfortunate. Their voices are reduced to accents, almost incomprehensible at times, which distract attention from their presence on stage. Many critics in New York complained about the unintelligibility of some of the actors. Brook associated their comments with a "form of conservatism" that "jealously protects values, European values, which in Europe are much freer" (interview with Glenn Loney, November 1987). Though there is some truth in this statement, I believe that it is Brook himself who is more seriously Eurocentric in his advocacy of a theatre, where the cultures of the world can be subsumed within his European structure and framework of values.

What cannot be denied is that Brook controls his disparate materials with total authority. He puts his stamp on all of them, whether it is a mask or a prop or an instrument. His eclecticism is perfectly disciplined, there is never an element out of place. He knows exactly what he wants, and he gets it. Once he places his mark on his materials, they no longer belong to their cultures. They become part of his world.

While I would situate this directorial method within the context of appropriation, there are many other scholars and artists who would view his work in a more harmonious and universal context. Richard Schechner, for instance, in an interview with Brook himself, has claimed that, "Of the intentionally intercultural productions I've seen, your *Mahabharata* is the finest example of something genuinely syncretic" (*The Drama Review*, Spring 1986). During a particular moment in the production, when Australian Aborigine *didjeridus* (long flutes) were played, Schechner states that, "The performance actualised (for him) the cultural layerings of India herself: Melanesian, Harappan, Vedic, Sanskritic, Hindu, Muslim, English, Contemporary." If only such insights were available to us in India, all we would need to do is to listen to flutes—not Krishna's, but the Australian Aborigine's—to realise our total heritage.

For me, the *didjeridus* was one more eclectic element in an orchestra that included a range of exotic instruments. Predictably, Brook was happy with Toshi Tsuchitori's score which "wasn't quite Indian, nor non-Indian, a kind of music that has the 'taste' of India" (interview with Georges Banu,

*Alternatives Theatrales*, July 24, 1985). In the same interview, Brook clarified the central problem of the production: "To tell the story we had to avoid evoking India too strongly so as not to lead us away from human identification, but also we had to nevertheless tell it as a story rooted in Indian earth" (my italics). This balance is definitely not found in the production. By avoiding a strong evocation of India to ensure "human" (read: western) identification, Brook could not "root" his story in "Indian earth". It had to float in some kind of make-believe India, somewhere between imagination and reality, neither here nor there.

## VIII

The space of the production provides an ideal site for Brook's ambivalences. Once again, there is an "empty space" (his eternal signature)—a patch of brown earth with a pond and small river, set against a large, dilapidated wall, almost Pompeii-like in its aura of antiquity. This "natural" vista is framed within the elaborate proscenium of the Majestic theatre, an 84-year old vaudeville and opera house, which was abandoned many years ago and then remodelled for the *Mahabharata*. Millions of dollars were spent not just to renovate the theatre, but to retain its omnipresence of decay. Chloe Oblensky's ambitious design extends to the entire auditorium, where artistically preserved disfigurements and patches of brick on the wall enhance the antique aura on stage.

Only the 'west' could afford to renovate a theatre and then spend more money to make it look old again. This is not the first time, of course, that Brook has displayed his affinities for ruins and abandoned theatres. Since 1974, he has based himself at the Theatre aux Bouffes du Nord in Paris, which is a reconstruction of a nineteenth-century "théâtre à l'italienne". Earlier still, he had staged his *Orghast* in front of the Royal Tombs of Darius and Artaxerxes I, facing the ancient ruins of Persepolis. (This "space" was made possible only through the royal patronage of the Shahbanou and her direct affiliation to the Shiraz Festival. Wherever Brook works, one can be sure that he receives the support of the political establishment.) For the *Mahabharata* in France, he once again worked in a natural landscape, a magnificent quarry in Balbon near Avignon. Just getting to this 'theatre' was something out of the ordinary. For many spectators, it felt like a pilgrimage.

Where does India fit into this scenario of remote landscapes and evocations of the past? Once again, it exists as a construct, a cluster of oriental images suggesting timelessness, mystery, and eternal wisdom. Brook may oppose cultural exoticism in theory, but his own work is exotic in its own right. From a press release of the *Mahabharata*, the selling of the Orient is apparent: "It unfolds in a swirl of colour—saris, gowns, and garments of saffron, crimson

and gold, umbrellas of rippling blue silk, red banners and snow-white robes. Heroes lose kingdoms, virgin princesses elope with gods." Even making allowances for the rhetoric of publicity, I believe that the production does live up to its expectations. It is not a victim, but the apotheosis of hype.

What do people remember of the *Mahabharata*, I wonder. Certainly, not the *Bhagavad Gita* (which is over even before one is aware of it), nor the characters (who tend to blend into one another after a while). Let us forget more profound matters like the meaning of the 'story' and the context to which it belongs. I believe that what keeps the production going are visual effects, sometimes blatantly magical, like the totally redundant levitation act in Virata's court, and more pertinently, the disappearance of Kichaka into a sack after he has been dismembered. There are more sensational effects like Drona pouring a pot of blood over his head, and the serpentine ring of fire that springs out of the earth. Sometimes, the visuals are surprising in their very literalness, for example, the iron ball that emerges from Gandhari's costume and the bed of arrows on which Bhishma lies. Decorating the entire *mise en scène*, of course, are explicit icons of Indian culture, now popularised through our cottage industries, like carpets, durries, mats, thalis, marigolds, divas, and incense.

In this visual feast of the Orient, India retains its 'glamour' and 'novelty'. For how long, one doesn't know. Already, the lure of the Raj is beginning to pall; it is no longer as lucrative for producers to finance another *Far Pavilions*. Interculturalists, who are always on the hunt for materials from the east, are beginning to turn away from India to discover new sources to feed their theories and visions. This *Mahabharata*, now hailed as "the theatrical event of the century", will be remembered as yet another landmark in Brook's career. But how many people will remember the *Mahabharata* itself? Has this glorious trivialisation of our epic brought western people closer to an understanding of India? Or has it not merely enhanced the distance that exists between us?

## IX

Unavoidably, the production raises the questions of ethics, not just the ethics of representation, which concerns the decontextualisation of an epic from its history and culture, but the ethics of dealing with people (notably Indians) in the process of creating the work itself.

Among the numerous directors, writers, and artists from the west, who have visited India in recent years, Peter Brook has probably left one of the most bitter memories among many of his Indian hosts and benefactors. Of course, he continues to have 'friends' (connections) in the highest places, many of whom have gushed about the French production of the *Mahabharata* (though their knowledge of the language, I



suspect, was questionable). But among the many Indians who helped Brook to see traditional performances, meet with gurus, arrange workshops with actors—none of whom received an invitation to Paris—there is a sad consensus of having been used by Brook, of being ‘ripped off’ as the Americans would say.

There are many stories which have circulated in Indian theatrical circles about how Brook promised to invite a sixteen-year old Chhau dancer to Paris, and then forgot about him; how he and his actors invariably failed to respect the ritualistic context of performances; how they were so concerned with their own schedules that they rarely found the time to interact with Indian people; and perhaps, most ignominiously, how they handled money in their deals with Indian artists.

Now there is nothing more powerful than money in the creation (or destruction) of relationships in the Indian theatre, especially at a time when traditional sources of patronage are disappearing and the government support of the arts is both meagre and dependent on official whims. Money has a very different value for an Indian theatre person than for Peter Brook and his company, whose production has been sponsored by numerous foundations (including Ford, Rockefeller, and Hinduja), corporations (like AT and T and Yves Saint Laurent International), charitable trusts (like the Eleanor Naylor Dana Charitable Trust), industries (Coca-Cola), television channels (Channel Four, London), and numerous government organisations, notably the French Ministry of Culture and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Other official Indian support came from Air India and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation.

In the context of this liberal funding, how can one possibly justify the incident in Kerala where a member of Brook’s company refused to pay a petty sum of money that had been agreed upon for a Theyyam performance. It appears that it did not meet the expectations of Brook’s actors. For another performance, the fee of Rs 900 for three days’ intensive work was regarded with suspicion: “What is the *real* charge; why is he demanding so much?” Nine hundred rupees was cheap for the work involved, but the attitude of Brook’s representative was even cheaper.

Most of the insults have been borne in silence. People talk about it only among themselves. There has been no formal protest against this kind of behaviour. One gets used to it after a while. And yet, when I heard a very intelligent, Marxist critic tell me about how he had been personally humiliated by Brook—he was shaking with rage as he told me his story—I was compelled to ask: “What did you do?” He replied: “Nothing. What to do? He’s our guest.” The old values, I fear, perpetuate our colonialism.

Significantly, the only major critique of Brook’s “cultural piracy”, as expressed by the Bengali director, Probir Guha, has appeared

in an “interview” entitled *The Aftermath* conducted by Phillip Zarrilli for *The Drama Review*. Actually, *The Aftermath* is more like an afterword insofar as it follows in a series of interviews with Brook conducted by a group of European and American admirers, including Richard Schechner, the editor of *The Drama Review*. At no point in these interviews are Brook’s premises on interculturalism and Indian culture seriously challenged. He is allowed to represent himself in a rather graceful and liberal exchange of ideas. Then, there is the *Aftermath* where we get to hear the ‘critical’ voice of the third world as it were, not just Guha’s but Zarrilli’s and Deborah Heff’s as well. Insofar as his voice is ‘free’ within the confines of the ‘interview’ (conducted in English), Guha speaks out against the colonial attitudes of Brook and his associates, their manipulations and fake generosity. But ultimately, one is left with the sense of Guha’s deprivation, of feeling left out: “I really expected at least one invitation to the *Mahabharata*. It’s nothing. I wouldn’t go because I don’t have the money. But I would feel honoured that he remembers me.”

‘Honoured’: there is true poignance in this word given the context of the relationship. At one level, it is part of our colonial residue, our hankering for some sanction from the

west, even after being exploited by it. But what is it that perpetuates this hankering for the west in India today? Perhaps, it is an absence of recognition and economic support that gives Indian artists like Guha the false hope that they can improve their lot by affiliating themselves to Festival India and ventures like the *Mahabharata*.

We need to be much less euphoric about intercultural exchange and guard our territory. By ‘territory’, I do not merely mean land, or technique, or knowledge, but *what is part of us*. There is no need to invite appropriations of our culture: they are neither uplifting for our morale nor particularly lucrative in the long run. Appropriations may not disappear overnight, but we can be more vigilant about them. If there is a need to exchange our culture for insights into another, then the door can be left open for negotiations based on mutual needs and respect. But if someone like the maestro is going to take our culture and, in the bargain, shut the door in our face, we must not be silent any longer.

There is a *Mahabharata* to be fought in India today, not just against cultural appropriations like Brook’s production, but against systems of power that make such appropriations possible. We can begin by fighting this battle on our own soil, for our own territory.

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