

# Religion, Art and Politics



Ananda Mitra, *Television and Popular Culture in India: A Study of Mahabharat*, Sage Publications, 1993.

For those who think they have seen in the chase last week of O.J. Simpson on Los Angeles freeways as the "ultimate" TV experience of the century haven't been to India during last few years. The epic events of screening of Mahabharat and Ramayana on Doordarshan (Indian national television) not only created history in the simple power to pull millions to their TV sets, but transformed in some very basic sense the very idea of making (and showing) history on television.

The Sunday morning serialization (there goes the holy time) of Mahabharat was more than a "religious soap opera," it presented the country with a finite symbiosis of several contemporary tendencies. Mahabharat, as a narrative of narratives has defied "picturization" as such. Emerged and nurtured in a predominantly oral culture, the epic was embodied in the lives of the people for centuries. Then, the technology of print and the advent of a different rationality made it into a book, a text, a single, overarching narrative with all

meanings of Indian cultures formulated therein. Thereafter comes the technology of film (some of the earliest Indian films presented epics on celluloid) and transforms the open imagination of the oral and the experiential culture into a fixed, tangible commodity that is exchanged, preserved and enjoyed. This is also the emergence of the new "popular culture" in India, dominated by the technologies of television, film, advertising and other gadgets of amusement.

Ananda Mitra's book catalogs all these changes. Written in scholarly and "heavy" language the book may seem to repel early enthusiasts. But if you manage to get over the roadblocks of big names and convoluted concepts, this is an intriguing document of cultural India. Its strengths are in documenting the facts and processes around production and reception of the great serial called Mahabharat. Its weaknesses are in the simplicity of author's views toward Mahabharat or its philosophy.

Perhaps an embodiment of the complexity of Indian thought and its ambiguities, Mahabharat is not simply a story between good and evil, between right and wrong or between dharma and adharma. It is a multifaceted narrative that defines these terms and therefore defeats the simple and pure notions of good and evil or just and unjust. The fact that the television series showed a watered down narrative from a sea of complexity is an indication of how the Indian culture is overtaken by the rationality of those who attempt to sell and those who compete to buy the product. The phenomenon speaks instantly of the damage caused by the so called "popular culture" produced by technologies alien to the soil as well as

the insidiousness of naive believers who are running away from the richness of their own environment.

In absence of the fertile imagination that gripped the artists and devotees in the past in producing images in a image-loving culture, the "popular culture" provides cheap substitutes for that imagination. Thus, we have film actors' images with appropriate make-up mistaken for historical figures. It is not a discovery for Indians to see Shivaji, Tukaram, Tipu Sultan or even Akbar only through the images of actors who performed these roles on film (and recently, on television). In a culture that worships images in place of forces or spirits, it becomes dangerously easy to embrace the first appealing image and forget about what it is or where it came from.

Mahabharat, apart from the obvious merchandising of religion and culture, caused this phenomenon. Like Amar Chitra Katha and historical films before it, the television serial has further robbed the culture of its ingenuity in imagination and thought.

Mitra is rather weak on his feet to take on these issues, fundamental and crucial as they may be, for any "critique" of Indian "popular culture." He does well importing theories and concepts from elsewhere to focus on innocuous topics such as "public and private space" of Indians with television, their "habits of TV reception," or their social interaction in the wake of television. Since politics is everything because of Western "cultural studies," politics is revolving around harmless and mushy concepts without any relationships to the wars of existence, struggles for freedom or the tyranny of religious fascists.

That brings us to the relation-

ship of these "religious soap operas" to the political turmoil in India. There is little doubt (and several people have said it before as well as are studying it now) that the excessive emphasis on these religious dramas (Mahabharat and Ramayan) about Hinduism (proper, so to speak), have helped fuel passions about the newly synthesized "Hindu" identity in Indian social life. The opportunists on the fanatical Right needed some ladders with which to climb the mountain of religious hatred and no doubt they used the re-awakening of consciousness caused by televised Hinduism to fortify the house of religious rage.

If we need to understand Indian (or for that matter any other) "popular culture," we must investigate and act on this relationship between the rise of fanaticism and the nature of technology and narratives in cultures. Although Mitra is treading this ground very cautiously and ineffectively, such an effort will make his good book much better. And, we will all sigh a relief that "cultural studies" would bring politics back into culture.

*For Rushdie, Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech, New York: Braziller, 1994.*

This is a book which satisfies and disturbs, soothes and saddens at the same time. It is a collection of letters, poems, articles and essays by 100 Arab and Muslim writers written in French, in response to the 1989 fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. It has been said that these responses were expressed in different places by Arab and Muslim writers, but brought together in one edition in France, partially because these writers feel closer to French than they do toward the English speaking

world. In the United States the translated edition has been published by George Braziller, otherwise an ordinary act, but praiseworthy and courageous in the wake of risks faced by others associated with Rushdie.

The book will calm fears in some circles here to convince us that Arab writers have the same convictions in favor of the freedom of expression and that they were not, contrary to the media machine in this country, complicit in the whole Rushdie affair. The book provides a wide range of responses that affirm faith in the freedom of expression of a writer, in turn acknowledging that such support is required for the activities of all of these writers. Unlike what we in the West like to think, all Muslim and Arab writers are not barbaric, but that their pain in reading *The Satanic Verses* cannot be separated from their need to secure freedom for all writers, Muslim or not.

It is rather sad that the rest of the world, especially the West put greater burden of proving support to Rushdie on writers in the Arab world. Those of us who think as if we were the only custodians of the right to free expression forget the fact that free expression injures some people to the point of numbness, to a terrifying stage of retreat from the world of religious insults, cultural injury and intentional harm to collective pride.

Nevertheless, given the "comforting aspect" of this event, that the expression of Muslim and Arab writers had existed all along, even before 1993 (when this collection was published in France), it becomes clear that the emotions of these writers are mature, complex and multidimensional. Responses range from outright support of Rushdie and equally strong condemnation of Khomeini to an unequivocal support of Rushdie with a sensitive

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acknowledgment that his book caused some deep wounds in the Muslim world. It is this latter focus of response that seems to be lost in the Western world. The threshold of tolerance is developed culturally and perhaps nationally. There are some boundaries that one cannot cross in the West (in varying degrees throughout the West, to be sure), while expressing freely. At that point, we don't issue a fatwa calling for death, but we do and have done equally irrational things in history. Injury to identity is not permissible in a civil society; when it occurs, there are grounds for struggle.

The book presents some writers slightly familiar to the Western audiences. There is the Libyan poet Adonis, Syrian academic Aziz Al-Azmeh, Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, Egyptian writer Andre Chedid, Palestinian poet Mahmood Darwish, Algerian feminist writer Assia Dejebar, Lebanese author Elias Houry, Palestinian author Edward S. Said, Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih and others. There is also a letter from 127 artists and intellectuals from Iran. This book is not simply a document on Rushdie affair, it provides a window to complex and rich thought on free expression and tolerance.

—Shekhar Deshpande