

The Customs of Hastinapur:

A re-reading through an understanding of the Mahabharata

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In Peter Brook's Mahabharata, the lake questions Yudhishtira- "What can cover the earth completely?" Yudhishtira replies: 'Darkness'. It was during the research of this very film that script writer Jean- Claude Carriere travelled to India several times making notes, which later emerged in the form of his book, *In Search of the Mahabharata*. Jean- Claude introduced several new questions to the original scene where the lake questions Yudhishtira- many of them from his reading of Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander*. He reveals the same in fact in the book and then in the same page goes on to tackle the question of darkness again by saying that while the circle of light is large, it is encompassed everywhere by Krishna's dark arms - highlighting the fact that darkness is not only omnipresent, it is part of light too.

Hindi language poet Srikant Verma's poem *हस्तिनापुर का रिवाज* (The Customs of Hastinapur) is part of his book of poetry titled *Maghadh*- a political and philosophical satire on the State, the illusion of democracy and the power games played out throughout history. The poem is set in the mythical land of Hastinapur. Erstwhile kingdom of the Kuru dynasty mentioned in the epic *Mahabharata*, it is supposedly the land of prosperity, righteousness and *Dharma*. In present day context, this land is situated in the Meerut district in the state of Uttar Pradesh (India) and holds almost no similarity to the mythical land that Verma keeps alluding to. And yet Verma manages to give this kingdom a strange identity through his poem. The picture he paints, reminds you of Krishna's dark arms encircling the once luminous Hastinapur-the land even the gods were supposed to envy. While the comparison to the erstwhile kingdom of Hastinapur is unmistakable, Verma's Hastinapur is rooted in modern day ignorance, subjugation of popular will, lack of consciousness and the stealthy but sure presence of a new thought process that is making its way through the corridors of power.

One is of course keenly aware of the fact that Verma's series *Maghadh* written in the early 1980s is one of the highlights of the Nayi Kavita Movement (new thought movement in Hindi literature) that blazed through regional language poetry originating in the late fifties to the early sixties. The process of new thought, of a consciousness different from one heard or felt before runs through the intestines of these poems, but



more so in *हस्तिनापुर का रिवाज* where this trend of new thought is equated with day to day living.

An initial reading of the poem marks out the title as strange sounding since it is rather obvious that Verma isn't talking about day to day customs but actually about *Dharma*- the one word that defines right and wrong in Hinduism. Verma belongs to the group of poets who began a new trend in Hindi poetry by choosing subjects that weren't classical or religious. Their writing was unsentimental and never apologetic about its crudeness or lack of ornamentation. As such his reference to a religious centric *Dharma* in this poem comes as a surprise. A slightly deeper reading of the poem however acquaints us with the fact that presented here is the poet's own understanding of the original concept of *Dharma* in contrast to the religious flavour it has seemingly acquired over the years.

One forgets that in the Sanskrit epics, where the phrase *Dharma* first occurs, the stress is on tradition rather than religion. As such *The Customs of Hastinapur* is a subtle sarcasm aimed at making people understand that our day to day values and the way in which we enact them in our lives has as much meaning if not more than what religion would have us understand. By repeating the refrain of *Dharma* Verma makes it commonplace, everyday and thus irreplaceable.

While gentle satire and imagined mythology blends into almost all of the poems in this series- in *हस्तिनापुर का रिवाज* Verma gives it an essence of shadow play. He talks of men and women- puppet like creatures dancing to another's strings, of good and evil blended somehow, of listeners and non-listeners grappling in the same deafening silence of ignorance.

The poem reveals the poet to be an intuitive, silent observer, who subtly portrays his disdain as well as amusement at the hollowness of power games that are played out in the highest corridors of government functioning. Verma who was himself part of the bureaucracy once upon a time, weaves the government functioning with that of the Mahabharata's political strategization to bring forth an extremely evocative comparison.

In that sense and more Verma can be likened to the character of Sanjaya in the *Mahabharata*. As the battle of Mahabharata unfolds between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Sanjaya serves as narrator to the blind king Dritarashtra. He is blessed with special powers of observation and understanding, and is privy to the entire *Gita* which unfolds as lord Krishna narrates to Arjuna the holy script while on the battlefield itself. Interestingly though, Sanjaya does not inflict his own opinions during the narration, though he consoles the blind king when his sons are killed one by one in the battle field.

By contrast Srikant Verma is the narrator who complains of being in a land where no one listens- *Those who hear/ are either deaf/ or have been appointed/ to turn a deaf ear.*



It is as if Hastinapur is a land blindfolded to the on goings around them. Rather ironically perhaps Verma reminds the readers as well as those who inhabit this land, of *Dharma*.

Listen or not then

People of Hastinapur! Beware!

From its original meaning which one might roughly paraphrase as ‘a pillar of the establishment’, with the emphasis on *Dharma* as the correct social order, there has been a shift over time. The word now mostly denotes ‘righteousness, moral values (only)’. One gathers that the rather fluid nature of Hinduism as a religion, allowing different interpretations might be primarily responsible for this rather obvious change from the original. However, Verma’s interpretation of the word, as well as its usage is double edged. He is well aware of the popular connotation derived from the *Gita* whereby Krishna asks Arjuna to abide by his *Dharma*, which in this case is doing the right thing.

I say again

Without Dharma there can be nothing

As such Verma’s skilful play of words in fact meets both ends and makes for a far richer interpretation, in terms of what is expected and what needs to be done from the people of Hastinapur. The emphasis here is unmistakably on the people and their actions and not on vague notions of righteousness.

In Hastinapur

An enemy is being raised: Thought-

And remember

these days it spreads like plague

Nandalal Bose (1882- 1966), one of the finest Indian painters often drew upon mythology for his creations. One of Bose’s well known paintings is titled *Gandhari*(c.1907) from the character of Dhritarashtra’s wife who was on a self imposed blindness, since her husband was naturally blind. This submissive portrayal of an otherwise intelligent and wise woman who chooses to be blind even when she could be the force that led her husband to enlightenment- is reminiscence of Verma’s portrayal of the people of Hastinapur. These are the people whom he accuses of being dismissive of the signs that time has revealed in terms of incidences and experiences. Incidentally *Time* or *Kaal*, is a major player in the *Mahabharata*. Very like the concept of *Dharma*, the concept of *Kaal* is its inevitable-ness. Nothing escapes the hand of *Kaal* and one is reminded of it



again and again in the epic. Echoes of the same are to be found in Verma's lines in the poem too, *Beware!* he says.

He follows up this warning time and again, by his reminder of *Dharma* and its need in our daily lives. This pristine concept of the eternal law of the cosmos, inherent in the very nature of all things, is sacrosanct and inevitable in Verma's logic of how the universe works. But Verma's *Dharma* is concerned with the interpretation found in the old Sanskrit texts and are linked with the concept of actions being formative as opposed to *adharma* for the doer in another life.

I say again

Without dharma, there can be nothing-

but no one

listens to me

On the battlefield when Arjuna asks questions about his illusions, Krishna tells him of another consciousness beyond that of the mind which each man must be aware of- that of *dharma*. The need to wake up and be aware of that consciousness is everything. This because in the real battle field there are no warriors or arrows and each man must fight alone. Beyond a point, Verma's contemplation on Hastinapur is the same. He asks each man to fight his own battle against that of blind subjugation of what is expected. In the same vein he warns of thought as that plague which has spread across this city of illusions and will eventually overcome them all. It is both weapon and its use, in a city full of those who are blind and deaf- where no reason is cultivated nor pondered upon. Verma subtly reminds us that enveloped in the darkness of people's blind imitation, is the pristine white light of purity that emerges from within and spreads across nook and corner.

Beyond the epic and the poem, Srikant Verma is a man rooted in realism. His stint with the bureaucracy made him aware of the weapons for battle on ground zero -they had readied him for the pitfalls and hence the call for awakening.

Verma's poem becomes that subtle reminder that in life, the integral aspects of day to day living are often guided, enriched or resurrected by day to day thinking and in that history almost always repeats itself.

* All lines from *The Customs of Hastinapur* are from Rahul Soni's translation of *Magadh* Like elsewhere in the series where he mentions places like Magadh, Ujjaini, Kosala and Nalanda, in this poem Hastinapur too fulfils an allegorical function -essentially referring to present-day decay apparent in our modern societies.



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