

# The Untragic Indian Stories

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## The Problem

One of the problems I encountered while teaching European literary genres such as 'tragedy', 'comedy', and 'theatre of absurd' to Indian students of English Literature was the tendency of these terms to transgress the boundaries of their specific cultural contexts. Like many signifiers, 'tragedy' too gets emboldened to signify much more than a theatrical genre with more or less an identifiable set of attributes. Surprisingly, I have often heard students calling *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* a tragedy. In this paper, I seek to distinguish two separate worldviews, one of which would necessitate the birth of tragedy and the other which would obviate its genesis. The Indian protagonist, this paper claims, as found in the classical Indian epics, mythological narratives, and theatrical genres up to the medieval period, is characteristically one without hamartia. The Indian narratives that would showcase the suffering of its principal characters would nonetheless end with the resolution of all entanglements, or at least with a sense of hope; therefore, they would be called *sukhant natak* or happy-ending plays.

Let me begin by recounting the saga of *Satyabadi Harishchandra*, a famous episode from the *Mahabharata*, adapted to many theatrical renditions and film versions across multiple languages in India. For the study, I refer to an Odia version presented in a theatrical form called Pala<sup>1</sup>, which I had the good fortune of watching in my childhood. The glory of Harishchandra as a truthful and munificent king traverse the three realms. One day, the king sees a strange dream in which a sage, resplendent with a divine halo, begs for his kingdom as a donation. Without hesitation, Harishchandra utters, "So be it". As he attends his court the following day, the sage, none other

than Viswamitra, approaches the court and reproaches the king for not keeping true to his words. Harishchandra recollects the promise made in his dream and, realizing that he was the same sage, promptly renounces all his wealth and dominions in his favor and proceeds to leave along with his wife and son. However, Viswamitra reminds him that his donation (*dan*) is incomplete without a surplus gift (*dakshina*). Dispossessed of all his belongings in just a moment, Harishchandra has nothing more to offer to the implacable sage. Thus, he has no option but to sell himself, along with his wife Sabya and son Rohit to the highest bidders to obtain the sum for *dakshina*.

Let's flash forward several episodes in which his family undergoes a series of misfortune despite their adherence to the path of truth and virtue. Now, at the end of the play, the former king Harishchandra is seen as an apathetic but honest guard of a funeral ground encountering his longestranged, destitute wife, Sabya. The meeting, however, is far from joyous, as the occasion of Sabya's advent is to give a funeral to their son Rohit, who succumbed to an untimely death by a venomous snake bite. Even at this moment of abject misery, Harishchandra must stay loyal to his master and demand the requisite fee for the funeral service, in the absence of which the service would be denied. The melancholic mother tears a piece of her shabby cloth to cover the corpse of Rohit and, begging alms from strangers somehow manages to deposit the funeral fee.

For me, this particular episode is a formidable touchstone of rendering the aesthetic experiences of pathos (*karuna*) and valour (*vir*) upon the stage in Indian theatrical tradition. A king fallen from grace, setting fire to the funeral pyre of his son, having exacted the price for this service from his wife, does paint a bleak picture. My eyes were moistened, and so were those of the spectators who encountered this scene, even though the tale was unfamiliar to none. Had the play ended

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here, one might be tempted to qualify it as a tragedy. Harishchandra might seem like an ideal tragic hero, a virtuous king born in a noble family. His act of donating his kingdom, and auctioning off his wife and son might appear as hamartia comparable to King Lear's. The death of his son would amount to what A C Bradley terms as "tragic waste". However, this is not where the play comes to an end. Miraculously, Indra, the king of gods, appears in corporeal form, and Harishchandra is applauded for being victorious in an arduous test of his truthfulness and honesty. His son, lying on the pile of wood, is brought back to life. His kingdom is restored, and his family is united. It is conveyed that all this was a giant simulation or illusion (*maya*). Eventually, poetic justice is served, and virtue is rewarded. If this play is considered a prototype of Indian classical theatre, the following assumptions can be made.

The characteristic Indian hero treads the path of righteousness. The virtue of a hero, however, would not go unchallenged. The hero would be tested through a series of trials, often involving superhuman suffering. Thus, the misery that would befall the heroes would be the consequence of their actions. However, by the end of the play/tale, the hero would be miraculously rescued from the imminent catastrophe. All that was lost to them would be restored. The glory of the heroes would increase manifold, and now, without a shred of doubt regarding their character. The heroes would continue leading their lives with a renewed gusto and a firm conviction in the righteousness of the universe. The aforementioned characteristics could be observed in various Indian plays, and they would not be tragedies. To understand how different tragedy is from this kind of theatre, it is essential to understand the worldview that emanates tragedy as its natural by-product.

### The Tragic Worldview

Aristotle was the first major aesthete who defined tragedy as a genre in literature. Based upon the study of extant Greek plays by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus, the Greek philosopher Aristotle defined tragedy to be a mimetic art that evokes the twin feelings of "pity" and "fear", leading to the catharsis of these emotions. Composed in the 4th century BCE, nearly a century after the reign of the famed dramatists mentioned above, Aristotle's *Poetics* theorized for the first time the different artistic creations in a sort of defence against the charges levied by his guru Plato, who famously sought to banish all poets from the ideal republic. Here, I present S. H. Butcher's English translation of this oft-quoted definition:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude in language embellished

with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle)

This definition has moved beyond its contextual specificity and becomes a criterion for the evaluation of serious works in European literature in genres beyond dramatic arts. It's apparent here that tragedy aims at the proper catharsis (translated as purgation) of the emotions of pity and fear. Eva Schaper states, "Catharsis is the telos of tragedy, the end towards which the formal artifact is functionally directed" (131). Even though the term and its meaning have garnered a spirited debate in the field of literary studies, for our discussion, two significant dimensions of catharsis need to be mentioned. According to Schaper, one meaning of Catharsis is purgation, which owes its origin to the "medical context of healing and curing through expulsion and evacuation of harmful elements" while the other meaning is purification, which has "a religious context of cleansing the spirit and sublimating the emotions to prepare for or to achieve a state of exaltation" (132). In the medico-psychological context, it could be assumed that the dramatist, like an adept physician, seeks to heal the audiences from the excesses of pity and fear. Thus, as an art form, tragedy provides a mimetic exposure to the suffering of a great hero—like a vaccine, which is but a controlled dose of the same virus that one seeks to prevent—to immunize the audience from their own pitiful and frightful situations in real life. Pity and fear are regarded as baser emotions in this interpretation.

The religious-sublimating dimension foregrounds the soul's need to achieve a state of exaltation by cleansing the spirit. According to Leon Golden, "catharsis is [one of the processes] of moral purification by which excesses and deficiencies in the emotions of pity and fear are eliminated and the proper mean in them is achieved" (27). The mean or the balance could be understood as the state of proper equilibrium of these emotions, necessary for a serene and composed mind. As tragic tales foreground the hero's suffering by eliminating the humorous and the ludicrous phenomena, tragedy has also been regarded as a "chemically pure" art in opposition to the "whole truth" by Aldous Huxley.

The suffering of the hero, virtuous, albeit with a tiny error or flaw (hamartia), is a chief feature of a tragic tale. The hamartia in heroes' characters leads to their peripetia or reversal of fortune. As the audience sympathizes with the heroes, they pity their gradual downfall, ending with a tragic catastrophe. When they empathize with such characters or put themselves in the shoes of Oedipus, for instance, they fear the befall of similar situations upon their selves. However, tragedy is not a sadistic experience

that compels the audience to derive pleasure, if it could be so called, from the suffering of the hero. According to Terry Eagleton, in complete identification with the characters, the audience sees their own undeserved yet anticipated downfall and vicariously experiences the pleasures of pain inflicted upon their selves. The element of self-annihilation is thus a driving force behind the success in the reception of tragic tales.

The tragic tales, however, are not pathetic per se. That is to say, the unmerited punishment the hero undergoes, hugely disproportionate to one's sins, does not paint a nihilistic picture of the universe. In his famous essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man", Arthur Miller repudiates this claim and states that tragedy "points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies" (Miller).

As is evidenced by his statement, the heroism of the tragic hero is in pointing the "heroic finger" against a force that is too powerful to be subdued by an ordinary man. According to him, "the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity". The destruction of the hero is inevitable, whether it's death, as in the case of Antigone and Agamemnon, or mutilation, as in the case of Oedipus. This heroic death is tragic yet necessary. The sacrificial death of a person either of one's own volition or due to one error in their character is writ large in European literary oeuvre. Its evidence can be found in countless tales, narratives, mythological stories, epics, poems, and, of course, the theatrical genre connoted by tragedy.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* begins with the fall of Satan from Paradise and ends with the fall of the first human beings from Eden. No wonder the epic saga begins with the phrase:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden (Milton)

Milton's ambivalent take on Satan's fall undoubtedly endows him with a heroic demeanor. But, the fall of Adam and Eve is not only the cause of human mortality but also of the gradual proliferation of humankind upon earth. Had it not been for the fall, humanity would not have come into existence as Adam and Eve would have enjoyed perpetual bliss in the garden of Eden, blessed with prelapsarian innocence. The cause of the fall, regarded as

the original sin, could be deemed as hamartia, which was the flouting of a commandment by God. As the original sin engenders humankind, each person is burdened with that sin's legacy. In this worldview, human character is flawed by its very genesis, and thus, each individual is liable to commit errors.

In a study of Shakespeare's tragedies, A C Bradley talks about the nature of the Shakespearean tragic universe which is relevant to this discussion. Shakespeare's tragic universe is seen as moral, which would avenge the flouting of each norm with a vehemence. At the end of the play, the tragic universe will undoubtedly punish those who would commit vile acts knowingly, like Claudius in Hamlet and Iago in *Othello*. But it wouldn't stop at that. It would also punish those who deviated from the path of morality, like Hamlet himself, who would let his procrastination distract him from his goal, and Macbeth, who would let his ambition overshadow his loyalty. The tragic waste is caused by the loss of those personages who had much talent and grit but had to perish eventually. It is this worldview that made tragedy possible as a theatrical genre. However, tragic characters could be found in other genres as well.

### The Indian Worldview

Contrasted against the tragic worldview in European literature of antiquity, the Indian narratives showcase a moral universe that would remain patient for a long time, would test the enduring capacity of the hero, but would not allow the ultimate perishing of the virtuous hero. A Sanskrit verse succinctly encapsulates the idea that pervades the lion's share of Indian narratives of antiquity is "*satya meva jayate*", which can be translated as "Truth alone triumphs". The "Truth" is not to be equated with factual or objective truths, the kind of statements that could be verified. In *Vivekachudamani*, Sri Shankaracharya equates Truth with Brahman in the famous verse "*brahma satya jagat mithya*." Truth is identified as Brahman, the ultimate reality, the supreme consciousness that can be discerned only through penance and perseverance. Thus, *Satyabadi Harishchandra* is not just a character who utters truthful words but is one whose every act bears the stamp of a firm moral conviction concerning its righteousness. Harishchandra does not abdicate his throne to fulfill his promise in his consciousness. He held on to a promise made in a dream, a virtual reality in the realm of his unconsciousness. The appearance of the sage in his real court was thus a point where the dream and reality commingled. When Harishchandra denies the permission to perform the last rites of his son, he performs the duty assigned to him, despite knowing very

well the misery that his wife underwent. This adherence to the path of Truth ultimately made him triumphant. But the triumph did not come easy to him, nor did it come halfway through his suffering. The victory comes at the end to set everything right. This worldview believes that the universe's power rewards virtue at the end of the trial. But the trial is inevitable.

The narrative arc of the journey of the suffering hero to the end of his enduring capacity can be witnessed in the twin epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Rama fulfills his father's order and abdicates the throne in favor of Bharata. But when Bharata and the people of Ajodhya ask him to return to the throne, he bluntly refuses. Thus, the exile of Rama is not an act performed reluctantly by political compulsions, but a chosen path in the pursuit of Truth. It is true that he would have to abandon his royal robes and have to content himself with food gathered in the jungle. He would lose his wife, Sita, and find his own life in peril on several occasions, along with that of his brother. Still, eventually, he would free Sita from the captivity of Ravana and return home with his brother Laxman. All that was lost to him would be duly restored. In *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas roam for years in different kingdoms yet receive their righteous due, albeit through a devastating war. The episode of the Mahabharata that stands out as an exemplary scene concerning the triumph of Truth is that of the assembly hall. When the Pandavas lose their kingdom, wealth, and even their beings in the game of dice, they put Draupadi at stake. She is pulled forcibly to the royal court in a humiliating condition despite her sensitive condition and unwillingness. She had no stake in the game of dice, and she argues that the Pandavas had no right to put her on stake. Yet, Dussasana attempts the disrobing of Draupadi in front of the elders of Kauravas, and her mighty husbands. In that particular moment, destitute of all hopes, she leaves herself absolutely to the mercy of god; miraculously, Lord Krishna appears and bestows her with an endless supply of cloth. In the very conformity of Draupadi to the final power of that celestial being, which would no matter what, safeguard its subjects, lies the robust optimism of Indian stories, that would not allow tragedy.

Indian theatre upholds this convention, and therefore they are called *Sukhant Nataka* (happy-ending plays). When we compare the classical Sanskrit plays with extant Greek tragedies, the suffering of the hero produces radically different effects upon the mind of the reader. While the Greek tragedies would predominantly focus on "pity" and "fear", the Indian plays would showcase a variety of aesthetic experiences. Sage Bharata in *Natyashastra* mentions the eight rasas (aesthetic experiences) that can be relished by watching a performance which are: *shringara* (erotic), *hasya* (comic), *karuna* (pathetic), *raudra* (furious),

*vira* (valorous), *bhayanakah* (terrible), *bibhatsa* (loathsome) and *adbhuta* (marvelous). Abhinavagupta adds a ninth rasa, namely *Shanta rasa* (peace), which manifests itself not in overt actions on the stage but as a backdrop upon which all other *rasas* are exhibited. In the sixteenth century, two new *rasas* namely *bhakti* (devotion) and *vatsalya* (parental affection) were subsequently added, even though these claims are disputed by scholars and aesthetes. The idea of rasa itself needs a separate study and is beyond the purview of this paper. What matters here is the fact that a full-fledged Indian play is considered to be one in which all the eight *rasas* are employed to a greater or smaller degree, while the predominant rasa may be one or two. For example, in *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, the predominant rasa is *shringara rasa* for which Dushyant and Shakuntala are the *ālabhana vibhava* (the human determinants). However, the suffering of Shakuntala evokes *karuna rasa*, her defiant vindication represents *vira rasa*, the scene involving the miraculous discovery of the ring represents *adbhuta rasa*, and the rage of sage Durvasa evokes *raudra rasa*. The light-hearted banter between Shakuntala and her friends evokes *hasya rasa*. At the end of the play, the resolution of all problems would lead to a reconciliation between Dushyant and Shakuntala which would evoke *Shanta rasa*. The emotions of "pity" and "fear" could be equated with "*karuna*" and "*bhayanakah*" rasa respectively. But, hardly any play in Indian classical theatre relied only on these two *rasas* to the exclusion of all other avenues of aesthetic engagement. The Indian classical plays, even when they show a suffering hero, provide ample scope for the audience to relish other aesthetic experiences. A critical analysis of the Greek plays would show that there, too, is some scope for other aesthetic experiences. For example, in the play *Antigone* by Sophocles, the entry scene of the petrified Sentry, who arrives reluctantly in front of King Creon bearing the bad news and fearing his punishment, provides much mirth and amusement. Similarly, Prince Haemon's passion for Antigone would evoke the aesthetic experience of longing for his beloved. Such episodes could be treated as examples of *hasya* and *shringara* rasa in the play, yet they are overshadowed by the foreboding of death and the denial of a chance for redemption. The gulf between tragedy and comedy was so wide, that Shakespeare's insertion of comic relief between tragic sequences and the invention of tragi-comedy as a theatrical genre in the seventeenth century—nearly two thousand years after his Greek predecessors—would lead to fierce debate among purists, notwithstanding their theatrical appeal (Dryden). The Greek audience, too, needed a comic respite. The task befell upon the comics who would act in interludes and farces staged separately after the plays or between two full-fledged plays. Thus, a theatrical experience that

was stretched out for an entire evening would comprise elements of pity, fear, and elements of ludicrous and comic, but separately.

### Resolution of Conflicts

The conflict of the plays, in either case, gets resolved. In the case of the tragic hero, the resolution of the dramatic conflict becomes the harbinger of doom. On the other hand, when the entanglements in the Indian play become straightened out, the hero, too, achieves a sort of deliverance. Yet, both these heroes, through their suffering become the bearer of knowledge. The secret of the universe is revealed to them so to speak. This revelation is called anagnorisis which is usually followed by peripetia or reversal of fortune. Peripetia in Greek tragedies is characterised by the speedy descent into catastrophe, the change in circumstances from a higher to a lower one, and a fall from grace. In the play *Oedipus, the King*, the protagonist is blithely unaware of his act of patricide cum regicide as well as his marriage with his own mother, Jocasta, both committed in ignorance. When he realises his mistakes, it's too late for amends. In an act of repentance, he blinds himself, and his wife-mother commits suicide. The same pattern is noticeable in *Antigone*. When Creon learns about his error in judgment, he rushes to set Antigone free. By the time he reaches the cave where Antigone is imprisoned, she has hanged herself, and his son Prince Haemon stabbed himself in agony. Hearing the news, Creon's wife, Euridice, too, follows the footsteps of Jocasta and kills herself.

In the Elizabethan tragedies, too, the hero's realization that is verbalized through a soliloquy comes after the dice have been cast. Othello learns about the loyalty of his wife, Desdemona, and the treachery of Iago only after suffocating his wife to death. Macbeth learns about the futility of life and its hollowness after the death of Lady Macbeth in pangs of conscience. Doctor Faustus would realize the frightful consequence of bartering his soul only at the end, and no supplication can free him from his deal with Mephistopheles. In stark contrast to the tragedies, the Indian hero's discovery of the workings of the universe comes as an end of suffering. After Shakuntala is evicted from the court, Dushyant recollects his relationship with Shakuntala after chancing upon his ring. He would beg forgiveness for his forgetfulness, and get united with his wife as well as his valiant son. In Bhasa's *Svapnavasavadattam*, King Udayana learns that his wife Vasavadatta is alive, and is residing close to him in the guise of Avantika. He too gets reunited with his wife despite being estranged for long. In the play *Mrcchakatika* by Sudraka, the courtesan Vasantasena, is presumed dead, yet she is nursed back to health. She arrives just in time

to save her lover Carudatta from sure jaws of death, by giving the required testimony. By doing so, she also saves the life of Carudatta's wife, who would have sacrificed herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. The three are deemed reconciled as a family and provided with ample wealth to spend their lives in prosperity. In all these cases, the anagnorisis, the revelation of a hitherto clandestine fact, or the discovery of some knowledge brings a sudden change in the fortune of the protagonists.

In the case of Harishchandra, the revelation comes as a direct visitation of the deities in their real form. He comes to know that his hardships were but a challenge that he had to overcome. The revelation or discovery comes almost at the end of the quest and emboldens the hero to continue on the path of righteousness, no matter what dire consequences one has to face. While the tragic hero is a penitent for his actions, with little or no scope for redemption, the hero in the Indian plays of antiquity is joyous and grateful.

### Conclusion

It is established thus that *sukhant nataka* and tragedies are two distinct genres emanating from two different worldviews. The tragic hero, exemplified in the Greek plays of antiquity, would challenge the status quo in a more or less amoral universe in order to demand their worth, and to course-correct the existing wrongs. In the process, they would perish eventually or suffer the loss of near and dear ones or self-mutilation. Their fall was inevitable for the greater good and, sometimes, caused by a tiny flaw in their own character, magnified by the caprices of fate. The punishment meted out to them was hugely disproportionate, yet warranted to some degree by their own actions. The protagonists in the classical Indian plays, endowed with a firm conviction in an essentially moral universe, held on to their natural virtue and were rescued at the penultimate moment from the imminent catastrophe. Their victory was inevitable to restore the faith in righteousness and propel the society at large, and the audience in particular, to tread the path of Truth. The optimism of the Indian hero springs from a belief that a supernatural force, a deity, a supra-consciousness, would come to their aid, if they truly deserve to be saved. The hero is released from the shackles of misery, and bestowed with their just rewards, sometimes through the advent of such a deity, and sometimes through a series of serendipitous coincidences. Coincidence is but a pseudonym of God. Let me draw curtains on this argument by reciting the famous Sanskrit verse that serves as a source of faith in a morally just universe, and the robust optimism of the hero in the Indian plays.

*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata  
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam srijāmyaham*  
(Bhagavad Gita 4.7)

*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśhāya cha duṣhkṛitām  
dharma-sansthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge*  
(Bhagavad Gita 4.8)

Whenever there is a decline in righteousness, o descendant of Bharata,  
And a rise in evil, I would manifest myself,

For deliverance of the virtuous, and destruction of the evil-doers,  
To establish dharma, I would come to be, era after era. [my translation]

The verse from the Bhagavad Gita, spoken by Lord Krishna, bears a divine promise that the almighty would come, in form or one incarnation or another, era after era, whenever need be, for the deliverance of the virtuous.

### Note

1. Pala is a discursive theatrical tradition in Odisha, that features five to six players, who perform mostly mythological, legendary, and historical narratives through singing, chanting, dancing, and gestural acting, with quotations emanating from a variety of erudite and popular sources.

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