

## Intertextuality in *Bharat Ek Khoj*

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### Abstract

Shyam Benegal's adaptation of 'The Discovery of India' into the Doordarshan series 'Bharat Ek Khoj', is a presentation of social and cultural history of India. Benegal uses The Discovery of India as the main text upon which he has based the structure of his show. But he also uses another texts and elements in his attempt to form a single story which traces continuity in the tradition of India. He has made use of multiple narratives technique to present his story of India which is though Nehruvian in its approach but more of a complete history of India. Nehru "approached India via the west" while Benegal has looked at it from his lens which is essentially Indian. This research paper attempts to deal with the multiple narratives, texts and other artistic elements that the serial 'Bharat Ek Khoj' has used to achieve the goal its makers had.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Epic, Television, Multiple narratives, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mythology, Folk traditions

### INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural fabric of India, or in fact, that of any culture in the world consists of a number of stories and legends. These stories present the soul and spirit of any culture in the most creative manner. When Shyam Benegal adapted *The Discovery of India*, he gave an example of his great cinematic art. He made us re-live the history of our country from the Indus Valley Civilization to the pre-Independence era. Benegal dramatized the history of India by taking the structure for his series from *The Discovery of India*, but he just not stucked to this text for all of the narrative. He took stories from the literature of different languages, folklores from different cultures and dance performances from many parts of the country. Along with these the academic history has also been used to fill in the gaps in the narrative at various places. Thus, intertextuality is a very prevalent feature of *Bharat Ek Khoj*, the adaptation of Nehru's book by Benegal. Then, other than the academic, literary, cultural and artistic

references, any audio-visual piece of art can also be taken as a kind of technical intertextuality as it makes use of various technical and mechanical elements like picture, colour, motion and sound and we find the use of many audio-visual elements in the series. Benegal makes use of poems, songs, shlokas and ballads, he also lets various dance forms from various parts of the country narrate several parts of the narrative.

*Bharat Ek Khoj* vastly uses literary texts from various languages and literatures. In this context Julia Kristeva is reminded. While using the term 'intertextuality' for the first time in her book "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966) she presents her opinion that: "A text is a permutation of texts on Intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another." The term signifies the multiple ways in which a single literary text is made up of various other texts. Thus, any text is an "intertext" in which there is an intersection of innumerable other texts. Therefore, rightly, there has been a really long discussion over the question of originality of a piece of art in the past. If we see deeply we can see all texts to be intertextual in a broader sense. In this context we can also refer to Michael Bakhtin who is of the belief that every utterance is interdependent and interrelated with what has already been said within a socio-political textual environment. When it comes to the films, they too build a self-conscious intertextual relationship with the previously available texts and disclosures and it becomes more apparent in the adapted works.

The director plays with the original story to create a new narrative. He takes the subject and plot of his stories from the available resources around. These resources can be the socio-cultural traditions, popular or prevalent beliefs, literature, history, political and economic system, fables, legends and mythology. These are the sources which have contributed in the making of the popular 53-episode television series by Shyam Benegal. The director did take the structure of the series from his primary source that is Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, but he makes it his own by his treatment of the various other sources other than this book.

Many times it seems that intertextuality is inevitable in arts. The Greek theorists like Plato and Aristotle talk about the theory of imitation. Then the Roman theorists like Quintilian discuss that imitation is not repetition rather it is an act of highlighting in which the translator himself declares the imitation by reading or writing. In *Bharat Ek Khoj* too we find the similar kind of treatment by the director. At various places there are references or a direct use of many literary and artistic pieces in the series. But Benegal is remarkable in his treatment of these references in his work. He does not leave it for us to trace these references and uses but he in a very responsible way gives this duty to his third person narrator. In the voice of Om Puri we get to know about the sources every here and there and it sets the context for the audience in the course of narration. This research paper is an attempt to discover the use and relevance of the additional texts and artistic pieces other than the main text, which make this series a complete presentation of the Indian history. It is these additional pieces which make this series original in a way and gives the director authority over his work.

Shyam Benegal had a team of academic historians who helped him take the narrative forward and also in filling up all the gaps that the director found in the main text. The forty plus team of historians led by Shama Zaidi did the work very well. *Bharat Ek Khoj* presents the Indian history before us by making it a complete package of a number of stories from various places, art forms and literature of India and makes them to form a single story. Along with the academic history in the show we also come across many other texts as well. Not only this, but several episodes of the series have plots written by the various script writers which present

narrative spun in the context of the subject of the respective episode. This research paper is an endeavour to trace some of these additional texts and narratives and their relevance in the series.

The makers of *Bharat Ek Khoj* have kept it essentially Nehruvian in its approach but Benegal has also let the director inside him take full liberty in dealing with the subjects. It can be seen at several instances in the serial. His Duryodhna is unorthodoxically human whose jealousy led to the great war of the Mahabharata. He is shown as a sympathetic character who has grace in accepting his mistakes at the last hour of his life and instructs his son to not to carry on the legacy of hate after him. He has also kept the character of Alauddin Khilji more humane. At the same time Benegal tries to fill the gaps in the history of Nehru when he makes episodes on the history of the south India. However, the serial also has its own lapses. It does not focus much on the role of Congress in the freedom struggle.

From the titles of the book and the series also we can derive the difference in the approach of Nehru in writing the book and that of Benegal in the making of the serial. Benegal uses the term 'Khoj' in the title of the series while the book makes use of 'Discovery'. By the term khoj one can mean to seek or try to find something, but the word discovery can be translated into 'avishkar', i.e, to make known or to reveal something. Benegal in his 'khoj' tries to find out the Bharata that Nehru has revealed through his book, which is a subjective account of the author's understanding of the country.

The narrative technique of *Bharat Ek Khoj* is quite remarkable. While *Discovery of India* is a subjective account of Jawaharlal Nehru of this country, the show has used multiple narrative structures to depict the history of India. He takes up Nehru's text only as a starting point and then takes his work to another level by adding several elements to it. When in the beginning of every episode Roshan Seth in the role of Nehru appears on the screen, it reminds the audience of the fact that the show is based on Nehru's book.

In the course of the narration the show makes use a lot of architectural motifs and paintings. These motifs and paintings form the background settings of the show against which the characters in the narrative move. However, these settings do not always reflect the period which is being narrated, but they not only inform the audience about the rich art and culture of India but also add aesthetic and cinematic value to the show. The use of these elements also depends on the availability of the reference materials. When the director has ample reference available in order to reconstruct the past, he uses the art as a standard referent. The screen narrates itself in the present tense and therefore the present in the show becomes an extension of the past. When the director does not find a reference for the past, the present itself is made referent. By using the modern art and dance forms the director makes the narrative relevant and relatable even in the modern time. The parts of monuments, the specific kind of costumes and the particular utterances are used to evoke feelings of identification in the audience to the period shown on the screen. It also brings the element of authenticity to the show. This reconstruction of the past in this way is an indication that they are a socio-historical text which can be seen as continuation of a tradition of the Indian society. The tradition of a particular society can find continuation in that of some other society at a different time altogether. For example, in the Mahabharat and the Ramayan episodes the architecture from Shunga period has been recreated. In the Kalidasa episode, who was a Gupta poet, the images used are not different from the paintings done by Raja Ravi Varma who was there in the 19th century. Here the narrative is interlinked with the story and the visuals on the screen. The director might have

used this technique for the narration of the story in the show because of them being easily recognizable by the audience. When the parts and motifs based on the actual monument of the particular periods are used during the narration of those periods, it gives the episode a certain likeliness of that particular period. It in a way forms a historical identity for the episodes. *Bharat Ek Khoj* in this way makes use of the multiple narratives and visuals from different time periods and connects the narratives through an inter referential network. All of these therefore lose their boundaries and intertextuality takes form. They become different parts of a single story which are linked together to be complete with each other. And at the same time they bring a kind of order to the narrative. They also symbolize continuity in the tradition of this vast country.

Every episode of *Bharat Ek Khoj* opens and ends with verses from the Nasadiya Sukta from the Rig Veda. The series makes direct use of the two great epics of India- *the Mahabharata and the Ramayana*. Benegal has dedicated two episodes to the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. Both of the episodes have been made with utmost creativity. These episodes are also great examples of intertextuality. The first part of the Mahabharata-episode opens with the fiery Pandavani performance by the contemporary artist from Chattisgarh, Tejan Bai. Holding an Ektara in her hands Tejan Bai describes the dialogue between the Pandava king Pandu and his wife Kunti. She keeps reappearing on the screen recreating the different episodes from the *Mahabharata*. We come to witness a dramatic representation of the time of the Mahabharata in the two episodes. Gambling was a common game in the post-Vedic times. The dramatic narrative in the Episode 5 of the show describes the royal bout of dice. The Director takes up the narrative of the episode from Vyasa's text. The eldest Pandava prince Yudhishtira plays the game against the Kaurava prince Duryodhana and loses. Yudhishtira forfeits his money, jewellery, land, kingdom, weapons, horses and even his four brothers and himself. Eventually when he has nothing left he forfeits his wife Draupadi. The disrobement of Draupadi is again presented in the Pandavani performance of Tejan Bai who here narrates the incidence of Draupadi being dragged to the court by Dushshasan. The opening scene of the part 2 (Episode 6) of the Mahabharata presents an enchanting Kathakali performance of Dusshasana-vadh where Bhima drinks blood from Dusshasana's entrails and anoints Draupadi's hair with his blood and then ties them as per the oath of Draupadi. Shyam Benegal chooses to state the historical facts and the social condition of the time by stating the Mahabharata story.

By choosing to state the stories in the form of the folk songs and the classical dance forms Shyam Benegal also focuses on the relevance of these in the Indian culture and tradition. The Mahabharata has been a store house of stories for ages and it has inspired a number of literary pieces in almost every language in India. The '*Urubhangam*' of Bhasa is one of the oldest plays based on the Mahabharata. This play was written immediately following the Mauryan era and it focuses on the killing of Duryodhana. The '*Andha Yug*' of Dr. Dharamvir Bharati is a comparatively recent play and its treatment of the Mahabharata story is very realistic. The Director uses this play in the episode and gives us a Duryodhana who is a human rather than a mythological figure. When he is about to die we see his hostility melting into remorse. He accepts his end as the result of his discontent. The Mahabharata is a text which has seen a number of changes in the years to come. The Shanti Parva of the text was added to it in the Christian era. It deals with the laws of monarchy. In Shanti Parva, Bhishma in his dying moments instructs Yudhishtira on statecraft, the duties of a monarch and on the liberation of the soul. Thus, the episode ends with the enactment of the Shanti Parva. Since the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are not like any other text for the Indians, as it is concerned with their religious sentiments, still the treatment of these texts by the Director is very unorthodox and

experimental. In this way Shyam Benegal seems to be quite bold as a director. And then at the same time he keeps the presentation of the great epic quite simple. The two episodes on the Mahabharata use the set without any elaboration. In the opening scene of the dice game the Kauravas and Pandavas are shown seated on a simple platform. The scene lacks any grandeur which is usually not the case with other makings of the Mahabharata anywhere on the screen. In various scenes Benegal has chosen to use folk elements and classical dance performances rather than using magical or supernatural elements. His portrayal of the major characters of the narrative is human in its approach. Thus, the epic basically remains theatrical, which is close to life and is devoid of any spectacle.

The similar kind of treatment can be seen in the Ramayana episode as well. The great epic the *Ramayana* had been written by the sage Valmiki. The Ramayana episode of the Bharat Ek Khoj opens with Valmiki's utterance of the world's first verse when he gets outraged by the sudden forest-carnage:

*O hunter, don't dare break the love-chain, by killing the male-dove immersed with its consort in the conjugal bliss.*

(Bharat Ek Khoj episode 7. Doordarshan)

But soon the episode shifts from Valmiki's Ramayana to another art forms narrating the story of Ram. Here we witness the *Ramkatha* singers from the north enthusiastically praising the virtues of Ram who is being shown as a human and not a god. He is the *Maryada-Purushottam*- someone of infinite purity, self- control, sincerity, affection and boundless love. We witness the enactment of Bhasa's play '*Abhishek*' where Sita is playfully trying out a *valkal-vastra* (arboreal skin) and accosting Ram on his impending *Abhishek* (coronation). The part 2 of the Ramayana (Episode 8) again opens with the praise of the two brothers ram and Lakshmana in the *Ramkatha* of the north Indian artists. Further in the episode the battle between the man and the demons is shown through the Kathakali performance. Soon the narrative is seen taken forward in the voice of Om Puri. We are informed through the commentary in the voice of Om Puri that the rakshas might have made Ravana their king since he was a Brahmin and that his being a scholar indicates the 'Aryanization' of the forest-dwellers or rakshas. The war with them was inevitable. Countless demons were killed in the war and the forest was secured for the sages. There are many tales of the killing of the demons in the Epic. The story of Surpnakha is one such story in which her nose and ears were cut off by Lakshmana. On the provocation of his sister Surpnakha, Ravana decides to punish Ram by abducting his wife Sita. Here, there is the enactment of the Act 5 of the play '*Pratima*' of the Sanskrit writer Bhasa. The narrative at this point keeps oscillating between the Chau Dance and *Pratimanatak*. In a sage's disguise Ravana meets Rama in his Panchvati cottage where he gets warm hospitality. It is the death anniversary of Ram's father and he asks for suggestions about the rituals from Ravana. Ravana convinces Rama to go away and capture the Swarna Mriga (Himalayan golden deer) and forcefully and openly abducts Sita. The resistance offered by Jatayu, the super-bird and Rama's devotee, and his consequent fight to death comes alive in the Seraikela Chhau style with masks and musical support by flute and Dhamsa (big drum). The *Ramkatha* of the north-Indian artists takes on the narrative from here. The non-Aryans consisted of not only the demons but also the 'vanaras'. The fight between the two rival vanara-kings Vali and Sugriv is again enacted in Seraikela Chhau dance supported by the Ramkatha singing. Ram poses as the representative of the Ayodhya-king Bharata and fights for Sugriv. Then Ram enlists the support of Hanuman to explore Lanka. The burning of Lanka by Hanuman is depicted in a vivid Kathakali performance and the fight between Ram and Ravana is shown by the Seraikela Chhau dance performance. By giving references to or by the direct

use of many literary and artistic pieces in the series the director not only adds literary and artistic value to the narrative but at the same time he does not leave it for the audience to trace these references and uses but he in a very responsible way gives this duty to his third person narrator. On the use of the voice of Om Puri Shyam Benegal had said in an interview with Prasar Bharti: “I developed two viewpoints — one is that of Nehru (narrated by Roshan Seth) and the other is a counter viewpoint (narrated by Om Puri), which is a contemporary voice that fills blanks or brings in different perspectives.”.

Similarly in the Classical age episode the makers of the show deals with the Gupta age. In this context Kalidasa has been referred to a great deal. Kalidas lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Ujjain. Sudrak was a contemporary of Kalidasa who is known for his famous play *Mrichchakatikam* (The Clay Cart). The episode gives us a dramatic representation of this play. The story of Chharudutta and Vasantsena is full of ‘shringar rasa’. Then Benegal has dedicated two full episodes to Kalidasa. The Episode 18 presents the dramatic version of Mohan Rakesh’s play ‘*Ashadh Ka Ek Din*’. The play is a modern work of literature. The title of the play has been derived from the second verse of Kalidasa, ‘Meghadoota’. The play is a portrayal of the personal prices that Kalidas and Mallika pay in order for him to become great. The episode also gives a dramatic representation of Kalidasa’s famous play ‘*Abhijananaam Shakuntalam*’ which has been presented blending dialogues with full-throated natya-sangeet (dramatic songs). These songs are inspired by the Marathi musical *Shaakuntal* by Kirloskar. The songs are sung with gusto by the protagonists to take the drama further. *Ashadha Ka Ek Din* is a play which deals with the hardships of Kalidasa’s life. The Director combines the narration of the play with the poetry of Kalidasa himself. He compares incidences of Kalidasa’s life with the narrations of his poetry such as *Shakuntalam* and *Meghdootam*. And then, the actors playing Kalidasa and his lover Mallika are also the ones playing the character of Shakuntla and Dushyanta. Using a voice over in the narrative of Baharat ek Khoj the Director opposes Nehru’s views as stated in Discovery of India that Kalidasa never saw the hardships of life. The Episode 19 also continues with the story of ‘*Abhijananaam Shakuntalam*’ opening with Shakuntala wrapped in thoughts of King Dushyanta. The story becomes the story of Kalidasa himself as the narratives of ‘*Asadh Ka Ek Din*’ and ‘*Abhijananaam Shakuntalam*’ becomes one.

The Episode 20 of *Bharat Ek Khoj* shows us the narration of Harshvardhan’s biography. The Katha Vachan (story-telling) by Banabhatta mesmerizes his avid listeners. In the Episode 44 titled Indigo Revolt, the drama in the episode dramatizes a compelling Bengali play ‘*Neel Darpan*’ (The Indigo Mirror) by Deenabandhu Mitra. In the Episode 49 named ‘And Gandhi Came’ we are reminded of the famous novel by Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*. The novel has only one chapter under the heading ‘And Gandhi Came’ which has been used to set the narrative in the Gandhi episode. The narrative of the story from *Kanthapura* continues in the episode 50 as well.

An additional narrative strategy has been used in the episodes of Mughal period. The episode starts with Nehru (Roshan seth) introducing Babur where the narration utilizes the text as written in Discovery of India. Then there is the enactment of Babur’s story where we see him reminiscing the life of Fergana. Here Babur himself becomes the narrator of the text *Baburnama* and speaks directly to the viewers. The enactment of the battle scene running parallel with Babur giving his own comments is quite interesting to watch. It has been enacted almost in the manner of Bertolt Bercht’s theatre where the actor would suddenly turn around to face the spectator establishing a direct communication. In this way the narrative on the screen makes the spectator realize that they are only watching a play (enactment) with no real implications, while giving an alienated experience to them. This technique it is also conveyed

to the audience that the text *Baburnama* is written by Babur himself. The same narrative strategy is used for the episode of Akbar. In this episode the characters themselves become narrators by facing the audience directly. While Babur had his own personal experience to share with the audience, in the story of Akbar the other characters like Raja Man Singh, Raja Todar mal, historian Badayuni, all turn directly to the audience and state their feelings about Akbar. While doing this the director makes use of the biography of Akbar '*Akbarnama*' which was written by Abul Fazal.

Thus, *Bharat Ek Khoj* itself becomes a vast text in which a variety of intertexts have been intermingled in order to give it a definite form. The story of India cannot be complete without the stories from each part of this vast country. The diverse culture of this country gives it the scope to have expression in diverse ways. *Bharat Ek Khoj* is an attempt to present a social and cultural history of India. All the elements whether they are the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, literary texts from different literature, various dance forms from different regions of the country, the folk songs and ballads, monuments and paintings have been placed in the show in such a manner that they become an act of combination, an act of placing these elements in an order, all these can be linked together in a manner that they complete each other and ultimately form a single story which traces a continuity in the tradition of India.

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