

Analyzing the narrative structure to depict Indian history in television series ‘Bharat Ek Khoj’

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Abstract: Representation of history in film and television may have varied approaches and this difference of approach can be seen in the very use of word Discovery by Nehru in his title for the book ‘Discovery of India’ compared to Director Shyam Benegal’s use of the word Khoj in the title of his serial ‘Bharat ek Khoj’. Nehru himself writes that he “approached India via the west”. So where discovery is talking about the object found; Khoj on the other hand points towards the process of constantly finding. This paper seeks to Analyze the narrative strategy used to depict history of India in the serial Bharat ek Khoj as different from the nationalist orientalist history presented in the book by Nehru and thus try to identify a process of locating and seeking the different modes that narrate the constantly evolving and dynamic history of India from past to the present

Keywords: Representation of history, multiple narratives, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mythology, Folk traditions

I. Introduction

Every history approaches its past through the present, a statement which to a certain extent is visually exemplified in Bharat Ek Khoj by the image of the train approaching the Sanchi Stupa as it becomes in the literal sense present approaching the past. Here train may stand for the present and Sanchi Stupa Gateway, the past. This 53 part T.V series by Shyam Benegal; although based on the book by Jawahar lal Nehru- Discovery of India; is radically different from the book and in director’s own words is used only as a spring board to enter into the narrative of the serial.

Following the Docudrama genre the serial is a journey into the historical past of India where the narrative unfolds from the prehistoric caves sights at Bhimbetka and carried over till the Quit India movement during 1940’s. Bharat Ek Khoj through this history traces the social and cultural development that India has witnessed over centuries. Coming almost 44 years later than the book Discovery of India, the serial depicts History with hindsight by including earlier obscure periods and information, thus marking an evolution in History writing on India.

Discovery of India was written by Nehru in 1944 while he was imprisoned in the Ahmednagar fort. It was an attempt by Nehru to understand the historical past of India through his own perspective which was again influenced by his cosmopolitan family background, his education in England, and his social and cultural ambience in Allahabad. Discovery of India in the very literal sense seeks for an understanding of the present from the past as reflected throughout the book. When Nehru wrote this Book he had little reference material but whatever that he read was mostly derived from the Max Muller school of Orientalist historians and the Nationalist historians who concerned themselves with those ideas which were necessary to nationalist polemics but when nationalism began to articulate its anti colonial program it often redeployed the Orientalist construction of India’s glorious past in contrast to the deprived present. Discovery of India a Nationalist text projects the same ideological concerns and Nehru too looks at India essentially as stagnant.

It is this kind of Historical narrative that is changed in the serial Bharat ek Khoj which concentrates on positively re-evaluating the history of India without following the footsteps of western historical outlook of India. The serial reduces the apologetic narrative, used in “Discovery of India”, in every episode by projecting an evolution of social and cultural scenario tracing the moments of change, contesting and refusing the notions of Nehru about India.

This difference of approach can be seen in the very use of word Discovery by Nehru in his title for the book compared to Shyam Benegal’s use of the word Khoj in the title of his serial. Translation of Discovery would be Avishkar, which means to make known, or to reveal something. Khoj when translated becomes search which means to seek something or trying to find something. Nehru himself writes that he “approached India via the west”. So where discovery is talking about the object found; also reflects that for Nehru the book was only a means to discover his past, search on the other hand points towards the process of constantly finding. Translated into Bharat Ek Khoj, search would thus mean a process of locating and trying to seek the different modes that narrate the constantly evolving history of India.

The serial Bharat Ek Khoj takes multiple narrative structure to depict history. Although this theory is applicable to all the episodes, here the focus is on analyzing the narrative taking examples from the episodes of

Ramayan and Mahabharat, Buddha, Kalidas, Palava, Sultanate and Mughal period to gain a better understanding.

The paper contributes towards analyzing the narrative strands which weaving the pan Indian history highlighting and reflecting the continuity in social, cultural, political developments that took place during the various eras.

II. The Narrative Structure

Shyam Bengal in Bharat Ek Khoj narrates the history by involving the secularist history where Nehru's text is only a starting point; the main body of Bharat Ek Khoj is however derived from the 22 historians who are specialists in various periods of Indian history. Moreover it is not just Nehru's Discovery of India and the historians that Shyam Benegal refers to, but in the course of his narrative he includes the various ballades and Dramas, and also the various folk elements in the process of projecting history in Bharat Ek Khoj.

In every episode there is a beginning, a middle and end. In this sense the narrative has a definite course of direction whereas the book with no particular direction for describing the event, goes on describing other details too which might be related to its contemporary scenario not just in India but in West (America, Europe) also. Having said this how does the narrative in Bharat Ek Khoj thus unfold? In every episode we see Nehru (played by Roshan Seth) come and narrate a part of history that the episode would be dealing with from Discovery of India, it reflects the fact that Bharat Ek Khoj is based on Nehru's book and it is in this sense that the book is used only as the starting point for Bharat Ek Khoj where Nehru himself forms one of the narrators.

The views of the various secularist historians are presented as the voice over (the voice here is that of actor Om Puri) which is maintained as a device that refers to, adds on to, or reflects a difference of opinion from Nehru's text in Discovery of India, thus projecting the views of various historians as narrators within the form of voice over. Along with these are also writers- of ballades, drama and the folk stories- used to form the core of the narrative structure and finally Shyam Benegal himself becomes the narrator since it is he who has put all these narrations and other elements into the text to form the - Multiple Narrative Structure.

Although this theory is applicable to all the episodes, here the focus is on analyzing the narrative taking examples from the episodes of Ramayan and Mahabharat, Buddha, Kalidas, Palava, Sultanate and Mughal period to gain a better understanding.

2.1.1. Ramayan and Mahabharata

The episode of Ramayan starts with Valmiki writing the shloka and composing Ramayan the narrative then shifts to Bhasa's play Abhisheka natak which continues till the point where Rama decides to leave the palace for 14 years. In the next section the voice over narrator informs of the narrative shifting to Bhasa's Pratimataka when Ram Sita and Lakshman are shown in forest. During their stay Lakshman in an encounter with Surpankha cuts her nose. The incidence thus is narrated through Chau Dance, the narrative comes back to Bhasa's play and Surpankha complains about the incidence to Ravan who in an attempt to take revenge abducts Sita. The narrative again depicts the fight between the vulture king Garuda and Ravana on his way to Lanka by incorporating Chau dance. Ramayan at this point keeps oscillating between the Chau dance and Bhasa's Pratimataka where in the end the war between ram and Ravan too is shown through the Chau dance. The narrative finally ends when Ram and Lakshmana meet Ravan as he is about to die.

Mahabharat in the serial is taken from Vyasa's text and starts with the dice game when the Pandavas play opposite to the Kaurvas. Seated on simple platform in the middle of the court Pandavas are cheated by Shakuni in the game consequently losing their kingdom and freedom to the Kauravas. Duryodhan takes this as a chance to seek revenge for an insult made by Draupadi and sends for Draupadi to be brought to the court. The narrative here shows the Pandavini singer Teejan Bai who narrates the incidence of Draupadi being dragged to the court by Dushshasan. The narrative comes back to Vyasa's text where the court scene now resumes with Draupadi questioning Yudhishtira on his right to stake her leading to the Vastra Haran incidence which is again narrated by Tejanbai and extends to the point of Pandav's stay in exile in forest. The narrative now comes back to Vyasa's Mahabharat where Krishna is sent as a messenger on the behalf of Pandavas to the court of Dhritrashtra seeking back the kingdom which Duryodhan denies leading to the war which is narrated through Dharamvee Bharti's play Andhayuga within which Dushasana Vadha and Urubhangam are shown through Kathakali dance performance. Mahabharat ends with Shanti Parva in the serial.

In this manner of their narration and presentation Ramayan and Mahabharat episodes within the serial use the sets without any elaboration. Such as seen in Mahabharata episode of the dice game where the Kauravas and Pandavas are seated on a simple platform; making these two epics lack any grandeur. It is not just the grandeur but the super natural and Magical element too that are reduced in the serial as it comes forth. For example the scenes such as Draupadi Vastra Haran where Krishna helps Draupadi by giving her the endless mass of cloth or Dushasan Vadha where Bheema breaks open the chest of Dushasan , Urubhangam where Bheema kills by breaking Duryodhan's thigh, in Ramayan where Ravana fights the Vulture king or the final fight

between Rama and Ravana. It is at all these junctures that elements from folk and classical dance are used in the narrative and it is by the very use of these performing arts forms that the magical and supernatural element is reduced to a level that the epics remain theatrical – close to life and devoid of any spectacle.

Although historians trace the origins of Mahabharat and Ramayan to the earlier version of Jaya and Ramakatha, it is in the later forms after much addition to the original text that we finally have the versions of Mahabharat and Ramayan in the present times, where the codification of these texts finally happened at first millennium A.D. Most historians also mention these epics to be continually changing as epics of Ramayan and Mahabharat never have been frozen into a single literary text. They are a comment on the ongoing cultural development, reflecting various local histories and commentaries and expressing the aspiration and struggles of the communities that articulated them at different times and places reflecting the society and changing perspectives, which makes these epics a historical record over the years so compressed that separating them becomes difficult providing every version a validity and authenticity.

Above statements can be further understood- Mahabharat in Bharat ek khoj, as mentioned earlier, does not use just ancient text of Vyasa, but it also makes use of Dharamveer Bharti's Andha yuga which is a modern play. Besides these Teejan Bai's pandaviani is an oral folk recital of Mahabharat and Kathakali is the classical dance form. In the very same manner Ramayan also utilizes texts right from Valmiki to Bhasa, to the present day form of Chau dance.

Looking at the narrative in this manner it becomes clear that each element viewed separately would not give out any meaning but it is only when projected together with one image following the other in a manner that there is succession of images; does the meaning become relevant and clear. The episodes on Mahabharat and Ramayan when put together in Bharat ek Khoj reflect how through various centuries, ancient to modern, folk tradition to classical form, written tradition to oral traditions; have been continuously evolving, and having survived in all these forms, are thus transmitted culturally.

2.1.2 Sultanate Period

While depicting sultanate period, Bharata Ek Khoj traces the history from Mahmud of Ghazni to Allaudin Khilji using texts from writers and poets such as Amir Khusrov who wrote Miftah-ul-Futuh and Tarikh – u – Alai along with other writers such as Isami, Asif and Barani who's famous book is Tarikh – I – Firuz Shahi and Firdausi's Shahanama and accounts by Al Baruni.

Along with these are narratives from folk ballads to depict the history of this period such as Prithviraj Raso written by poet Chund- a heroic text about conflicts between Prithviraj Chauhan and Shahabuddin ghori; Padmavat, a Sufi allegory on the sack of Chittor by Allaudin Khilji, written by Malik Mohammad Jayasi. Historians unanimously agree how these stories are fictionalized at the end to give honorable death and reality made more bearable at least in the poetry although the initial events themselves cannot be rejected. Thus to give a historical validity to the text the device of the voice over narrator is utilized to reflect the difference between the historical evidences and the poetic glorification of this period.

2.1.3 Narrative variations in Ramayan, Mahabharat and Sultanate period episodes.

It would be interesting if we compare the narrative structure of Sultanate period with that of Ramayan and Mahabharat since here also Dramas and folk elements are used to narrate history, but then the purpose is very different for both. When Mahabharat and Ramayan use these elements into their narrative structure the very purpose depicts a historical continuity of a tradition through the changing times, Sultanate period on the other hand shows that these very changing times can use history to turn them into legends so that the history is retold in a manner to give dignity or glorify the rulers. The core of the story may be a Historical narrative it is only the last part that are changed to include the construction of heroes at a regional level and thus offering a comforting nostalgia at a personal level.

2.2 Mughal Period

Discovery of India traces the advent of Mughal dynasty in India from the historic win of Panipat between Babur and Ibrahim Lodhi. Seen from the time when Nehru had written Discovery of India in 1944, relying on limited historical references while imprisoned in Ahmednagar fort, the Panipat war might have been the most decisive war that led India into the hands of Babur; But reflecting on the evolution in historical narrations and viewpoints till date Bharat ek Khoj gives importance to the Battle of Khanua rather than the battle of Panipat.

Battle of Khanua was fought between the Rajput ruler Rana Sangram Singh and Babur. This battle took place in 1527 a year later than the battle of Panipat in 1526 and historians unanimously agree that the battle of Khanua is probably even more important than the battle of Panipat. While the battle of Panipat broke the unstable power of an Afgan Dynasty (Ibrahim Lodi); the battle of Khanua shattered India's most splendid chivalry, the powerful Rajput confederacy, which was making a bid for the mastery of "Hindustan" thus

deciding the issue in favour of Babur marking the most important stage in his conquest of "Hindustan" and making Agra rather than Kabul the capital of India.

In representation of this history *Bharat Ek Khoj* extends the use of multiple narrative present throughout the series by employing an additional narrative strategy in the episodes of Mughal period (for this article I am concentrating mainly on the period from Babur to Jahangir); The episode starts with Nehru (Roshan Seth) introducing Babur –the narration here utilizes the text as written in *Discovery of India* - while in the enactment of Babur's story we see him reminiscing the life of Fergana, the story moves forward revolving around the political strategies being discussed between Babur and his officials to conquer Hindustan leading to a battle scene of Panipat and later Khanua where the narrative shifts from the events and focuses on Babur himself who becomes the narrator of the text *Baburnama* and speaks directly to the viewers. The enactment of the battle runs parallel with Babur giving his own comments thus the narrative structure keeps moving back and forth from Babur to the battle.

Enacted almost in the manner of Bertolt Brecht's theatre where the actor would suddenly turn around to face the spectator establishing a direct communication and making the spectator realize that s/he is only watching a play (enactment) with no real implications, while giving an alienated experience to the spectator. But in *Bharat Ek Khoj* this technique is used not only to make spectator alienate from the narrative instead the very use of this technique or narrative strategy reinforces the fact that the text *Baburnama* is written by Babur himself and that he is narrating a very personal account, his own memoir to the viewer, thus strengthening the presence of Babur as one of the multiple narrators.

The same narrative strategy is used for the episode of Akbar where the characters themselves become narrators and face the viewers directly. While Babur was telling about his own personal experience, within the story of Akbar the characters such as Raja Man Singh, Raja Todar mal, historian Badayuni, all turn to viewer and speak about their feelings regarding Akbar and his interventions towards administration, religious discourse and expansion of empire, reminding at junctures that the text for *Akbarnama* (from where the narrative takes its main inspiration) was written by other historians and not Akbar himself, in this case by Abul Fazal.

While Nehru in *Discovery of India* shows his disappointment toward Akbar and his lack of interest in scientific knowledge he does not give any space or credit to the contributions made by Jehangir too, on the other hand *Bharat Ek Khoj* – through the intervention of a voice over narrator expresses the difference between Nehru's views as stated in the text of *Discovery of India*, from that of various contemporary historians - concentrates on reflecting the flourishing trade during this period where industry and trade saw an economic boom with the advent of various European trading companies stimulating the industrial demand for textiles during the reign of Jahangir.

2.3 Buddha, Kalidas and Palava Period narratives

In *Bharat Ek Khoj* the story of Buddha is narrated through *Buddhacharita* written by Ashvaghosha. While the episode on Kalidas is based on the play by Mohan Rakesh- *Ashadha ka ek din* it is a play which talks about hardships of Kalidasa's life combining these with his poetry itself, Comparing incidences of Kalidasas life with the narrations of his poetry such as *Shakuntalam* and *Meghdootam*. Thus the actors playing Kalidasa and his lover Mallika are also used to play the character of *Shakuntla* and *Dushyanta*. Using a voice over in the narrative *Bharat Ek Khoj* opposes Nehru's views as stated in *Discovery of India* that Kalidasa never saw the hardships of life.

Similar narrative is used to depict Palava period, a period which in *Discovery of India* is only a one line mention is shown as one of the main centers of the cultural development in south India. Narrated through the play *Mattavillas parahasana* written by Palava king Mahendra Verman, the play is a farce written with the object to ridicule the foibles and follies and the degeneracy that had set in amongst the different religious order during the time. The episode involves the performance of the play *Mattivillas Parihasana* where the narration from the interiors of a court shifts directly into the street of a town using the same actors. Thus the play does not remain only a theatrical performance done for the amusement of the king within his palace but becomes in a way an event from daily life in itself, directly reflecting, and commenting over the society of that time.

III. Supportive Narrative Elements

In the course of the narrative, *Bharat Ek Khoj* includes a lot of architectural motifs and paintings, which form the background settings against which the characters in the narrative move although these settings do not always reflect the period, which is being narrated. The present is seen as an extension of the past and an endeavor is made to synchronize the past and the present where the present forms are thus used in the reconstruction of the past.

The argument here is actually going in two directions. First, when there is no reference for the past then the present itself becomes a referent and the second argument is for the periods when there is ample reference available than in the reconstruction of this past, certain of symbol from that period can become a standard

referent for the whole in the course of narration making the objects become visual short hands such as parts of monument, particularities of dress and utterances, that are all used to evoke feelings of identification, which then become a mark of truthfulness or sincerity and authenticity of the period presented enabling a creation of a mood as being believable leading to an identification of the period. Thus their reconstruction can only be verisimilitude as they are a socio-historical text seen as continuation of a tradition of particular societies from which the work receives a borrowed continuity.

In Mahabharat and Ramayan the feel of past is given, by recreating the architecture from Shunga period. In the episode of Kalidasa, a poet in Gupta period, the images used are similar in their inspiration to the paintings done by Ravi Varma in 19th century. Instead the Gupta Vakataka images of Ajanta caves are used for the episode of Buddha depicting the 5th-6th century b.c., where Ajanta inspired females are dressed standing with pots in their hands against the pillared halls.

While this may be left as a statement that it is the director's choice, another dimension can be added to this statement. To the non specialized audience, the paintings of Ajanta, in the present times have come to represent the Indian mural paintings (in this case Buddhist). In the similar manner Ravi Varma's work also are mixed and synthesized with elements of tradition and modern which in turn have been significant in molding the Indian eye. His many conceptions of women and their proliferation into the collective consciousness via popular cinema and mass art have guaranteed an instant recognition amongst people. Thus the visual narration within Bharat ek Khoj takes inspiration from the classical art of Ajanta and popular art of Ravi Verma, reflecting a continuous link between past and present to form the narrative, where the meaning of the narrative is interlinked with the story and the visuals.

In a similar manner towards the end of the Pallava period the episode incorporates portrait images of saints from the Bhakti movement through the means of calendars and poster art seen in contemporary times. On the other hand Prithviraj Raso although depicts Sultanate period utilizes images from Rajput Miniatures. In a scene where Prithviraj Chauhan comes to meet Sanjukta who watches him along with her maid from her palace window wearing transparent odani and beautiful ornaments, immediately reminds us of the numerous Rajput miniature paintings. The Rajput and Mughal miniature paintings dealing with battle scenes are again used to depict the war between Prithiviraj and Shahbuddin Ghori rather than recreating the battle scene with actors.

Along with poet Chunda giving verbal narration these painting form a parallel visual narrative of the war. Thus relying on the power of these visuals to generate an instant recognition for the viewers who are more familiar with Rajasthani and Mughal miniature rather than concentrating on historical validation of Sultanate period art. Historical identity on the other hand is generated by using parts and motifs based on the actual monument of these periods which become symbols standing for the whole in a manner of giving the episodes a certain likeliness of that period.

IV. Conclusion

Bharat Ek Khoj utilizes the succession of these multiple narratives and visuals from various time periods to construct an argument which becomes irreversible. When a series of such images and narratives are connected into an inter referential network, the boundaries of these images disappear and their intertextuality emerges bringing an order in chaos to elements from different social, historical, cultural and literary system which are selected, and lifted out of contexts in which they fulfilled their specific functions. Having selected them and brought into Bharat Ek Khoj they are placed in a manner that they thus become an act of combination, an act of placing elements in an order, an order where the individual boundaries are decomposed to form a narrative structure, where the combination of all these histories and elements and the facts reached by them can be linked together in a manner that they complete one another. Where these elements brought together involve the study of the material in time and change thus tracing a continuity of tradition.

These reconstructions and representation of historical past as shown especially through Bharat Ek Khoj, while weaving the narrative strand of the pan Indian history highlighting and reflecting the continuity in social, cultural, political developments that took place during the various eras also deviates and negates from a grand representation and reconstruction of the nostalgic past glory otherwise used as moral/model inspiration for the present.

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