# Mahabharata Revisited: Myth, History, and Satire in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel

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**Abstract.**

*The Mahabharata*, an ancient repository of enduring myths, holds relevance across time and space. Serving as a guiding light, it has empowered generations to navigate their individual traumas. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, penned amidst a backdrop of political turbulence in 1989, unfolds as a captivating chronicle of personal ambitions, aspirations, and the ensuing frustrations, interlaced with biting satire. Drawing from prevalent *Mahabharata* myths, the novel intricately intertwines tales concerning India's postcolonial history, blending real-life figures from Indian history into mythological characters. Tharoor skillfully reimagines the epic's mythological narrative as India's historical saga, skillfully entwining history and myth. This deliberate fusion underscores the writer's intent to converge seemingly disparate elements. As it traces India's struggle for freedom and the post-emergency era, the novel humorously satirizes both Indian statesmen and the oppressive British crown.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata; Mythology-History Fusion; Postcolonial India; Satire.

## 1. Introduction

In the realm of literature, few works have achieved the ingenious blend of myth and history as Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel." Set amidst the tumultuous political climate of 1989, the novel masterfully interweaves the epic saga of the Mahabharata with India's postcolonial

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history. Tharoor's literary genius lies in his ability to reimagine the ancient myths as mirrors of India's contemporary realities, creating a tapestry of satire, social commentary, and political intrigue.

The novel's central characters, drawn from the *Mahabharata*, represent prominent figures in India's freedom struggle and the post-independence era. *Krishna*, the wise and enigmatic figure, becomes Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, while the ambitious *Duryodhana* is transformed into Vallabhbhai Patel, the iron-willed deputy prime minister. These parallels extend to lesser characters, creating a compelling narrative that seamlessly blends mythology and history.

Tharoor's satirical wit shines through as he pokes fun at the foibles and follies of Indian politicians. From the divisive politics of the freedom struggle to the power struggles and corruption of the post-independence period, Tharoor mercilessly exposes the contradictions and hypocrisies that plague Indian society.

The novel's historical setting provides a backdrop for Tharoor's exploration of universal themes such as ambition, betrayal, and the quest for power. He delves into the complexities of Indian identity, examining the tensions between tradition and modernity, regionalism and nationalism, and the challenges of building a united nation from a diverse social fabric.

Through its satirical lens, "The Great Indian Novel" offers a scathing critique of Indian politics, holding a mirror to the country's past and present. Yet, amidst the biting humor and social commentary, Tharoor also displays a deep love for India, celebrating its rich culture, resilience, and enduring spirit.

## 2.   Method

The researcher has embarked on an in-depth exploration of the text, meticulously examining individual words, phrases, and literary devices to unearth the profound meanings, symbols, and intentions embedded within the narrative. This rigorous approach, known as textual analysis, delves into the intricacies and nuances of the text, revealing its underlying significance. Furthermore, the researcher has consulted relevant secondary sources to gain a broader perspective on the text's context. By integrating textual analysis with contextual insights, the researcher aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the narrative's subtleties,

cultural references, and authorial decisions. This holistic approach ensures that the researcher's interpretations are grounded and insightful.

## 3.    Results and Discussion

When examining myths, it is often said that they represent recurring patterns that unconsciously imprint themselves on the collective human psyche (Jung). In the Indian context, myths have played a significant role in shaping identities since ancient times. When we think of evil in society, mythical figures like Ravan and Duryodhan come to mind; when we think of righteousness, mythical figures like Ram and Yudhishthir govern our mental psyche. Whether we are aware of it or not, myths provide us with the archetypes that we use in our daily lives (Frye). In the Indian context, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been vast repositories of archetypes. Myths provide us with a shared understanding of the world and help us to make sense of our experiences. They can also be used to teach moral lessons and to provide guidance in our lives. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are two of the most important epics in Indian literature, and they continue to influence Indian culture and society today. Ushering the importance of *Mahabharata*, Tharoor said: "What is here is nowhere else; what is not here, is nowhere….Few other works in world literature could make such an extravagant claim, but in doing so, the 2000-year-old Indian epic poem is not defending a closed structure: rather the Mahabharat has had so many accretions over the years in constant retellings that there is practically no subject it does not cover. Its characters and personages still march triumphantly in Indian minds, its myths and legends still inspire the Indian imagination, its events still speak to Indians with a contemporary resonance rare in many twentieth-century works" ( xii). Numerous writers have found inspiration in this age-old text, tapping into its diverse themes and characters to express their concerns about current issues, the declining state of governance, and other societal ills affecting both personal and political aspects of life.  This aspect is also evident in his words: "Fair enough: in an India of erupting caste and communal conflict, terrorist and secessionist strife, police 'encounters' and an alarming daily toll of human lives, an work that speaks of a 'time of destruction' cannot but be considered relevant. No wonder so many contemporary poets, dramatists and novelists, writing in every Indian language, have found inspiration in episodes of the Mahabharata" ( xiv).

Disregarding the impact of this monumental epic on the collective consciousness of the Indian people is a luxury one cannot afford. The influence of this great narrative runs deep, permeating the very fabric of the nation's psyche. It has become an integral part of the cultural and emotional tapestry, shaping the way individuals perceive themselves and their identity within the broader context of the nation. The epic's resonance extends beyond mere literary or historical realms, playing a pivotal role in defining the shared ethos and values that bind the diverse population of India together. Ignoring its influence means overlooking a crucial element that contributes to the unique and profound sense of national identity among the Indian people. P. Lal remarks: ""The epic of Vyasa is not a literary masterpiece out here, somewhere in the past, or tucked away in air-conditioned museums and libraries. Its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests, its legends and myths haunt and inspire the Indian imagination, its events are the disturbing warp and woof of our age…the essential Mahabharata is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the 20th century; whatever helps us understand and live better our own Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha [faith, wealth, pleasure and salvation]….No epic, no work of art, is sacred by itself; if it does not have meaning for me now, it is nothing, it is dead."

The Mahabharata, an epic tale of war and power, serves as the backdrop for Shashi Tharoor's satirical novel, "The Great Indian Novel." Tharoor masterfully weaves the intricate plot of the Mahabharata into the narrative of India's post-independence struggles, drawing parallels between the epic's characters and the political figures who shaped the nation's destiny.At the heart of Tharoor's novel lies the question of responsibility for India's troubled democracy. Just as the Mahabharata's great war resulted from the collective actions of its characters, Tharoor implicates various individuals, including the revered Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, in India's political shortcomings. With a mischievous blend of historical accuracy and literary license, Tharoor playfully incorporates titles, phrases, and characters from Western literature, creating a tapestry of allusions that enrich the novel's narrative. From Paul Scott's "The Jewel in the Crown" to Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms," Tharoor's literary references add depth and complexity to his exploration of India's political landscape. Despite the stereotypical portrayal of British and Indian characters, Tharoor's novel is a sharp and insightful commentary on India's political and social realities. His

pungent imagination and masterful storytelling combine to create a captivating and thought-provoking work of literature.

In Shashi Tharoor's satirical masterpiece, "The Great Indian Novel," the Mahabharata's epic narrative is interwoven with the intricate tapestry of Indian politics. V.V., our narrator, embodies Ved Vyasa, the legendary author of the Mahabharata, while Ganapathi reflects Lord Ganesh, the divine scribe. The novel masterfully blends historical figures and epic characters, satirizing both. King Shantanu's son, Ganga Datta, serves as a poignant representation of Mahatma Gandhi. Like his archetypal inspiration, Ganga Datta embodies selflessness, renouncing worldly comforts and embracing a spartan life for the nation's sake. His celibacy symbolizes his detachment from material pursuits, echoing Tharoor's belief that true passive resistance demands immense internal strength. Ganga Datta's simplicity and unwavering commitment to empowering marginalized communities set him apart from the power-hungry politicians of his era. Even representatives of the formidable British Empire acknowledge his charisma and influence. Heaslop, addressing the British Resident, articulates Ganga Datta's potency: "He's very able, there's no question about that. And the people seem to hold him in some regard." His commitment to non-violent resistance through hunger strikes, civil disobedience, and passive resistance profoundly impacts the narrative. These powerful tools are employed following the Bibigarh Massacre, a fictionalized mirror of the harrowing Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. Similarly, the Mango March against oppressive British policies reflects Gandhi's iconic Salt March of 1930. Throughout his life, Ganga Datta remains an integral, yet detached, figure in the political landscape. "Truth must be vindicated not by inflicting suffering on the opponent, but on oneself," he declares, underscoring his unwavering dedication to truth and sacrifice. He imparts these ideals on his followers, yet his teachings fail to resonate with Dhritarashtra, the eldest heir, and his descendants, who remain consumed by their ambition for the throne of Hastinapura.

Dhritarashtra and Pandu: In Tharoor's novel, Dhritarashtra's character is modeled after Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, an idealist educated in England. Tharoor depicts him living in a world of false assumptions, rendered blind due to his poor visionary skills. Tharoor contends that Nehru's idealism and gullible demeanor had significant consequences for India, such as the Kashmir conflict and poor judgment in involving India and Pakistan in the UNO. Nehru's

failure as a statesman, particularly in misunderstanding China and persisting with the Panchsheel Agreement without strengthening military arsenals, is criticized by historian S. Gopal. Gopal notes that India gained little from the agreement, while China secured what they wanted.

Tharoor attributes Dhritarashtra's blindness to Nehru's misguided decisions, pondering what might have been different if Nehru had seen the world clearly. Describing Dhritarashtra, Tharoor writes, "I have often wondered what might have happened had he been able to see the world around him as the rest of us can. Might India's history have been different today?" (Tharoor 41).

In contrast, Pandu, representing a more practical and down-to-earth approach, strives to rejuvenate the Kaurava Empire without a hidden motive for ruling Hastinapur. Tharoor likens Pandu's selfless love for his empire to the patriotism and sacrifices of Subash Chandra Bose, who, like Pandu, goes outside his country and sacrifices his life for freedom from the British. Tharoor writes, "Pandu believed in taking stock of reality, preferably with a clenched fist and eyes in the back of one's head" (Tharoor 106-107).

The ideological differences between Ganga Datta and Pandu mirror those between Gandhi and Bose, with Ganga Datta seeking non-violent means for freedom and Pandu believing in might. Bose's fate, like Pandu's, involves never returning to his country. Even in death, Bose's ashes return only after being forgotten by the power-hungry followers of Dhritarashtra, highlighting the haunting impact of his soul on the nation.

Priya Duryodhani: The writer boldly parallels Priya Duryodhani with former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, portraying her as a scheming character similar to the evil prince Duryodhan. Duryodhan's fear and insecurity upon the return of the Pandavas drive him to employ various deceitful tactics, such as poisoning Bhim and attempting to burn the Pandavas alive in Lakshagriha. The narrative draws a parallel to Indira Gandhi's political maneuvers, suggesting she, like her namesake, resorts to unscrupulous means to secure her position.

Following the death of Dhritarashtra, Shishu Pal, symbolizing Lal Bahadur Shastri in political history, becomes the Prime Minister. Tharoor characterizes Shastri as a well-meaning leader consigned to the footnotes of history. Shastri's tenure faces challenges, particularly after the 1965 war with Karnistan (Pakistan) and the subsequent peace treaty in Tashkent. His

mysterious death sparks controversial theories, hinting at a high-level conspiracy involving Duryodhani and the USSR's secret agency KGB. Duryodhani succeeds Shastri, bypassing the rightful heir Yudhishtir, who represents Morarji Desai. Despite Yudhishtir's virtues, he is sidelined during Duryodhani's reign, highlighting the political machinations within the Congress party.

Yudhishtir's eventual resurgence, alongside Jayaprakash Drona (depicting Jayaprakash Narayan) and others, occurs when Duryodhani lifts the infamous emergency of 1975 and calls for fresh elections. The narrative condemns Duryodhani's actions, including the detention of opposition leaders, misuse of governmental systems, and surveillance on the press, leading to public resentment. This discontent culminates in a resounding victory for the People's Front in the subsequent General Elections, illustrating the triumph of truth and the rejection of authoritarian rule. Yudhishtir's statement captures the essence of this shift: "The truth ultimately wins; the upholder of truth cannot be mortified and restrained in the chains for a long time." (Tharoor 493).

The Pandavas, representing the pillars of democracy, serve as the protectors of Draupadi Mokrasi, a symbol of democracy itself. Their marriage epitomizes the symbiotic relationship between democracy and its guardians. Yudhishtir embodies the Indian Judiciary, upholding the principles of justice and fairness. Bhim represents the Indian Army, a bastion of strength and defense against external threats. Arjun personifies the Press, the unflinching voice of truth and accountability. The twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, symbolize the Administrative and Diplomatic Services, deftly navigating the intricacies of governance and international relations. Under the astute mentorship of Guru Drona Jayaprakash, the Pandavas unite to dismantle the oppressive forces of Internal Siege, safeguarding Draupadi Mokrasi from further exploitation.

## 4. Conclusions

Hence, Tharoor's masterful storytelling in "The Great Indian Novel" achieves a remarkable fusion of myth and history. Throughout the narrative, the enduring relevance of Mahabharata's myths transcends time and place, guiding countless generations through their struggles. Tharoor's skillful utilization of these timeless myths intertwines them with the fabric of postcolonial India's history, blurring the boundaries between fact and legend.

Consequently, while traversing the novel's pages, the distinction between 'history' and 'mythology' becomes increasingly elusive. The narrative engenders a sense of studying Ved Vyas's Mahabharata while simultaneously unraveling the threads of contemporary Indian history. Tharoor's narrative prowess erases the perceived disparities between these realms, offering a captivating saga that resonates with both the timeless echoes of myth and the tangible imprints of history. In conclusion, Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel" is a masterful blend of history, mythology, and satire that explores the complexities of India's political journey. Through his creative reimagining of the Mahabharata, Tharoor challenges readers to confront the challenges and contradictions of Indian democracy, leaving a lasting impression that resonates long after the final page is turned.

## Acknowledgements

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