

Defending the Sacred in an Age of Atrocities: *On Translating Andha Yug*

My decision to translate Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* (1953) was the result of whimsy of course, but whimsy in the service of practical reason, and, given the present condition of the country, in the aid of political sanity too. In 2001, I spent a semester teaching a course on contemporary Indian theatre, with the help of English translations which were mostly bad. Strangely enough, *Andha Yug*, which was so literally translated as to seem like a long poem without any distinguishable theatrical or moral voices at all, and so thoughtlessly edited as to confuse any good logician, became the focus of rather disturbing discussions about the politics of revenge, the impotence of grief, the meaning of *karuna* (compassion), the failure of a morally responsible will to intervene in acts of violation, and the responsibility of the gods in leading us to moral dereliction and decay.¹ Nearly every student pitied Gandhari, and there was unanimous condemnation of Krishna. Krishna made them uncomfortable. He should have behaved more like a dissembling politician pretending to fulfill our needs and wishes, rights and demands so as to win our votes, instead of acting like a god on behalf of morality and justice. Gandhari, they felt, was right in making Ashwatthama the invincible instrument of her revenge against the Pandavas. She had a greater moral claim to our sympathy than Krishna, whose omnipotence should have alerted him to his responsibilities and, thereby, helped the Pandavas and the Kauravas evade a catastrophic war by transforming them into moral visionaries.

My students, I must insist, were not more ethically obtuse than any of us. After all, most of us demand that gods behave like highly paid *karam-charis* (lower-caste workers) or nongovernment officers, look after our social and physical hygiene, be alert to all our psychological anxieties, and protest on our behalf against caste, gender, or class wrongs, instead of bearing witness to the causes of grief, or marking out places of evil in our souls, and, sometimes, even singing praises for acts which are *just* so as to save that fragile thing called hope. Maybe, if we are more charitable, we think that God is no more than a junior judge in the lower court, where "arid disputes"² are sorted out, instead of being the very form and idea of

the Good, which finds its earthly incarnation in acts of knowledge, work, and love when they are performed with the full absorbedness of the soul.

Talking to my students about the moral issues raised by *Andha Yug*, I recalled what the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who had corresponded with Mahatma Gandhi about the ethics of nonviolent resistance against a ruthless enemy,³ had rightly said when he asserted that thinking about God was unavoidable in times of atrocities. Without invoking an absolute notion of the good or the just, all our truth-seeking impulses, especially when our very existence as a people is threatened, can only flounder and fall into nothingness. Thinking about what could be absolute and unconditional for human survival during the years of the Holocaust in Germany, years which coincided with the holocaust during the Partition of India, Buber felt, as perhaps Dharamvir Bharati did, that no other “word of human speech is so misused, so defiled, so desecrated” as the word *God*. Yet, Buber insisted, as I think Bharati does in the play, that in times of extreme violence the word *God* needs to be defended with passion, for our sense of ourselves as human beings depends upon it. Buber’s case for holding on to the word *God* is moving and eloquent:

Yes, it [*God*] is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated. Just for this reason I may not abandon it. Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word...it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. The races of man with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their finger marks and their blood. Where might I find a word like it to describe the highest! If I took the purest, most sparkling concept from the inner treasure-chamber of the philosophers...I could not capture the presence of Him whom generations of men have honored and degraded with their awesome living and dying. I do indeed mean Him whom hell-tormented and heaven-storming generations of men mean. Certainly, they draw caricatures and write “God” underneath; they murder one another and say “in God’s name.” But when all the madness and delusion fall to dust, when they stand over against Him in the loneliest darkness and no longer say “He, He,” but rather sigh “Thou,” shout “Thou”...and when they then add “God,” is it not the real God whom they all implore, the One Living God, the God of the children of man? Is it not He who *hears* them? And just for this reason is not the word “God,” the word of appeal, the word which has become a *name*, consecrated in all human tongues for all time? We must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to “God” for authorization. But we must not give up. How understandable it is that some suggest that we should remain silent about the “last things” for a time in order that the misused words may be redeemed! But they are not to be redeemed *thus*. We cannot cleanse the word “God” and we cannot make it whole; but, defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care.⁴

Buber's God is the difficult and demanding Judaic God who is utterly remote, totally transcendent, yet ever watchful over human affairs. His presence, Buber insists, is essential for the survival of the soul in the conditions of extremity in which much of the twentieth century was lived.

In contrast, Bharati's Krishna, though equally firm and ruthless in his moral judgements, is a more humanly cherished figure, with whom the self can always conduct a dialogue. Because Krishna's presence does not produce fear and trembling, he can be chastised and cursed, loved and worshipped, abandoned and killed. Indeed, it is not surprising that, in the play, an ordinary man can set himself up as Krishna's brother and, acting as the keeper of Krishna's faith, chastise him for violations of the law. Balarama can, thus, tell Krishna:

Say what you like, Krishna
but what Bhima did today
violated dharma.
His attack
was an act
of betrayal.
.....
The Pandavas are related to us
but are the Kauravas our enemies?
I would have confronted Bhima today
but you stopped me.
I have known you since childhood.
You have always been
an unprincipled rogue!⁵

It is interesting to note that here, as elsewhere in the play, Krishna is neither seen nor heard. The Kaurava soldiers, who overhear Balarama, are delighted by his enraged condemnation of Krishna because it echoes their own blinding rage at their defeat. Indeed, what alienates the Kauravas from our sympathy throughout the Mahabharata is their inability to imagine the infinite variety of ways in which the Good manifests itself in the ordinary world and which may be the reality of Krishna. Like many Kaurava souls, we are tempted into believing that ambition, mockery, and the palaces of glass are more worthy of all our efforts than accepting the grace of thinking about and seeking the Good. Like the Kauravas, we invariably refuse to hear the voice of God, and blame him when our ambitions are not fulfilled; we refuse, like the Kauravas in the play, to gaze inwards and find within the sources of grievous wrong.

Yet, while teaching *Andha Yug*, my sympathies were with my students, who responded with such rage against Krishna in the play because, after all,

it is easier to ask what God ought to do for us than to consider what we can do for God so that he searches for us.⁶ Unlike Buber's God, who is "elsewhere" and, thus, remote from the most contingent of human concerns and immune from our commonest judgements, Krishna is a more complex figure to deal with. His very human presence makes us demand that his actions and judgements support our present and relative interests or suit our contemporary style of functioning, and when he fails to endorse our ordinary desires, we turn away from him as if he is the reason for our guilty actions and the cause of our sorrows.

The existing translations also misdirected the attention of my students. The texts captured the shrill voices of pain effectively, but erased the difficult cadences of speech and muted the voices of moral anxiety of characters like Vidura, Sanjaya, and Yuyutsu, drowning them in the clash of armor and steel. Our moral difficulties were compounded by the fact that the two crucial scenes in which Krishna made his presence felt through small, gentle, and loving things, like the feather of a peacock or the sound of a flute or the music of bells ringing in the midst of desolation, were allowed to pass by as of little consequence so that we could get on with the real business of listening to the voices of the defeated shouting for revenge.

Given the intensity of the moral anxieties *Andha Yug* evoked, it was obvious that the play—written soon after the carnage of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, which nearly erased a form of life and civilization, and being read once again in our *rakshas* (demonic) times of hysterical unreason—still had the power to make us realize how close we live to the borders of nightmares.

Unfortunately, however, existing translations were not so finely inflected as to help us understand whether the play was about our anguish at finding ourselves in a terrible world where we could only lament and curse, or whether it invited us to hear, in its difficult notes of tragedy, our own complicity in evil. For a majority of my students, it was the gods who made the lives of Gandhari, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, and Ashwatthama so bitter; this suggested that the translations had failed to guide their moral attention along the pilgrim path of truth, a path that Vidura never abandons in the play, even in the midst of carnage. The translations, it was apparent, had not been undertaken after a critical analysis of the play. Not surprisingly, therefore, my students had failed to notice that the decisive events in the play, which had opened an abyss before the Kauravas, had nothing to do with supernatural forces seeking victims for their perverse delight. In Act One, for instance, Vidura reminds Dhritarashtra that, years before the war, his councillors had warned the Kauravas about the fate of kingdoms that refuse to abide by the laws of truth:

DHRITARASHTRA Vidura
for the first time
in my life
I am afraid.

VIDURA Afraid?
The fear you experience today
had gripped others years ago.

DHRITARASHTRA Why didn't you warn me then?

VIDURA Bhishma did.
So did Dronacharya.
Indeed, in this very court
Krishna advised you:
 "Do not violate the code of honor.
 If you violate the code of honor
 it will coil around the Kaurava clan
 like a wounded python
 and crush it like a dry twig."

.....

Yet from the very first day
it was obvious that the Kaurava might
—the final arbiter of truth—
was weak and vulnerable.

Over the past seventeen days
you have received news
of the death
—one by one—
of the entire Kaurava clan.

Vidura is right in insisting that virtue is not a utilitarian service which can be called in to help when we are in trouble and forgotten about at other times. A moral life demands perpetual attention. And those, like Dhritarashtra, who fail to understand this cannot hope to escape the consequences. In the balance of things, then, it is right that, at the end of all the carnage which he had failed to prevent, Dhritarashtra is consumed by a relentless forest fire, a manifestation of the desolation and the affliction of his soul.

The existing translations of *Andha Yug* had erased the distinctions in moral perceptions that were carefully structured in the original Hindi text. They had also failed to separate the different levels of ethical awareness available to all human beings, so as to show why some characters, even those like Gandhari, whose suffering saturates us with pity, deserve their fate because they were actually responsible for the breakdown of the moral order and their own ruin with it. The original version of the play in Hindi clarifies repeatedly, sometimes through Vidura's moral commentary and

at other times through choric interventions, why it was neither Krishna's hardness of heart, nor his political cunning, nor his amoral opportunism which made him insist that Karna and Duryodhana be killed ruthlessly. It also explains why he curses Ashwatthama to wander through the endless wastes of time.

Karna, for instance, chooses to live with the Kauravas out of his mistaken notions of gratitude, faithfulness, and duty. He realizes, too late, that he had relied merely on armed might to protect him. It was not surprising, therefore, that when the forces of the Kauravas crumble, he finds himself standing in the mud beside his broken chariot, helpless, disabled, and unarmed. What more can he teach us? As he shouts for fairness in frustrated rage, we are required to understand that power without the imagination of mercy can only lead to humiliation. Why should he continue to live after that? And why should not Krishna condone all means available to destroy him? The sacred, after all, is not required to make sentimental compromises when it comes to restoring the just balance of the world in which we live. In the face of an annihilating power, the sacred may use all the available ruthlessness that it can muster up in order to survive. We may, in our mistaken and fallen world, accuse the sacred of hard-heartedness. But, how else will we sometimes learn that there are limits of *adharma* and *atyachar* beyond which we may not go without inviting the wrath of the sacred?

Similarly, in Bharati's play, Duryodhana has to experience the shame of fear before his death for he had not understood it sufficiently when he had Draupadi stripped in court. There can be no consolation for him as he slides behind some watery reeds trying to hide from his fate, and is then crushed to death by Bhima—the coarse and brutal face of justice that sometimes must be revealed. That is why the description of his defeat in the battlefield in Act Three, given to us quite appropriately by Ashwatthama, whose understanding of the moral issues of the war is deficient, fills us with terror, but does not touch us with pity. This is how Ashwatthama describes Duryodhana's death to Kripacharya—his voice marked with uncomprehending rage and contempt for the Pandavas:

The Pandava sense of honor
was on display today
when Bhima
violating all the codes of war
threw Duryodhana down
smashed his thighs
broke his arms and his neck.

And then
with his foot on Duryodhana's head
Bhima stood on him with all his weight
and roared like a wild beast!

The veins on Duryodhana's head
swelled and suddenly burst.
He screamed in pain.
His broken legs jerked.
He opened his eyes
and looked at his people.

After we hear this account, we must, if we don't want our souls to corrode by seeming to relish such violence, stand beside Gandhari in Act Four as she weeps over Duryodhana's death. But we must not, for the sake of our rational well-being, approve when she curses Krishna for her son's death and asserts that Duryodhana's victory would have been the triumph of *dharma*.

Duryodhana's miserable fate should, instead, remind us that he had erased the pledge to a minimum ethicality we must all make in our daily lives, so that we do not act with crass stupidity in our encounters with the world. Till the end, Duryodhana fails to see that he himself is responsible for the extreme perversion of life that war represents. There was justice in the fact that he dies unconsolated, cursing Krishna. Words of repentance from him would only have added another untruth to the world. His fanaticism has to be isolated and identified as the cause of suffering. "Thus it is," as Simone Weil says, "that those whom destiny lends might perish for having relied too much upon it."⁷

Duryodhana and Karna are, however, only a part of the argument, the moral imagery of the play, and not the primary concern of its theatrical narrative. The action of the play takes place on the last night of the Mahabharata war and is centered on the plight of a few bewildered survivors of the Kaurava clan—Gandhari, Dhritarashtra, Ashwatthama, and a handful of others. The ramparts are in ruins, the city is burning, and Kurukshetra is covered with corpses and vultures. The ordinary foot soldiers of the Kaurava army are cynical about those who control the affairs of state. They are more concerned about their immediate physical survival than about questions of law or virtue. Besides, they know that dynasties change and fall, and that it is more prudent for people like themselves to stand by the rampart walls and wait for the next ruler who needs their services and is willing to pay for them.

GUARD 1	Honor!
GUARD 2	Disbelief!
GUARD 1	Sorrow at the death of one's sons!
GUARD 2	The future that is waiting to be born!
GUARD 1	All these grace the lives of kings!

GUARD 2 And the one they worship as their Lord
takes responsibility for all of them!

GUARD 1 But what about the lives
the two of us have spent
in these desolate corridors?

GUARD 2 Who shall take
responsibility for us?

GUARD 1 We did not violate honor
because we did not have any.

GUARD 2 We were never tormented by disbelief
because we never had any faith.

GUARD 1 We never experienced any sorrow.

GUARD 2 Nor felt any pain.

GUARD 1 We spent our desolate lives
in these desolate corridors.

GUARD 2 Because we were only slaves.

GUARD 1 We merely followed the orders of a blind king.

GUARD 2 We had no opinions of our own.
We made no choices.

GUARD 1 That is why
from the beginning
we have paced these desolate corridors
from right to left
and then from left to right
without any meaning
without any purpose.

GUARD 2 Even after death
we shall pace
the desolate corridors
of death's kingdom
from right to left
and then from left to right.

The other survivors, the ones who have invested the war with heroic arguments, are overwhelmed by grief and rage. They have lived for so long in *tamas* (suffocating darkness) that they fail to notice how close they are to annihilation. Morally blind, they cannot turn away from egotism, give up their fascination with power, recognize that others too have suffered, and stop longing for overwhelming vengeance which will redeem them. Ashwatthama, for instance, blinded by his passion for revenge, says:

I shall live
like a blind and ruthless beast
and may
Dharmaraj's prophecy come true!

Let both my hands
turn into claws!
Let these eyes
sharp like the teeth of a carnivore
tear the body
of anyone they see!

From now on
my only dharma is:
"Kill, kill, kill
and kill again!"

Let that be
the final purpose
of my existence!

We sympathize with the assumption of the remaining members of the Kaurava clan that a battlefield is the harshest of places anywhere, and that the only choices which matter there are strategic ones which can ensure survival or victory. That is why the survivors quibble about violations of the laws of war. They think that Krishna should act as a referee, and they curse him when, as the upholder of *dharma*, he judges them. Since they lose the war, they think it is futile to talk about right or wrong. For them, *dharma* is not that radical ethicality which a critically alert reason always recognizes, and which could enable them to escape the sorrows and passions of profane time. They continue to debase the idea of *dharma*, continue to mutilate it, by thinking of it as nothing more than all that satisfies their personal desires in an utterly contingent world. It is not surprising, then, that for the Kaurava survivors, still thirsting for revenge on the last night of the war, Ashwatthama is the only savior left. Indeed, Ashwatthama embodies what the Kauravas have stood for all along—ambition instead of peace, power instead of companionship, avoidance of responsibility instead of justice, contempt for everything instead of hope for the well-being of all things. One of the terrible ironies of the play is that Gandhari, refusing to understand what kind of monster Ashwatthama really is, removes the blindfold from her eyes so as to bless him with her visionary sight and give to his body the adamantite polish of precious stones. All her accumulated grace is wasted as, immediately afterwards, Krishna curses Ashwatthama and transforms his body into a putrid thing. It falls upon Sanjaya, the prophetic narrator, and Vidura to describe Ashwatthama's physical decay to Gandhari as follows:

SANJAYA

No, no!
He is hideous.
His body is covered
with boils and open sores.

.....

VIDURA

For the sin of infanticide
Krishna has cursed him
with immortality
and condemned him
to live forever and ever.

Cut and slashed by the Lord's disc
his body shall fester forever.
Soiled bandages shall staunch
the blood that shall flow
from his wounds forever and ever.

Lacerated, defiled, filthy, and corrupted
he shall wander
through thick and deep forests
forever and ever.

His body shall be covered with boils
his skin shall fester with pus and scabs
and spittle and phlegm and bile
and he shall live forever and ever.

Excruciating pain will rip
through each limb.

Every bone in his body
will be corroded by suffering
but the Lord shall not let him die.

He will become an abomination
but he shall live forever and ever.

At the end of the play, as he tries to hide from human gaze, Ashwatthama becomes the dramatic correlative of the exhaustion of the ethical. His broken presence signifies that moment in the chronology of a civilization when, in complete despair, it ceases to believe that it has a future. That is why Ashwatthama can contemplate genocide, decide that everyone and everything on earth can be annihilated, and justify his decision to erase all traces of life as the inevitable consequence of the history he has lived. When he releases the "unthinkable" weapon, the *brahmastra*, he is the monster each one of us can become when, afraid of losing our selfhood, we dismiss Krishna as a rumor or an opinion, and deny that the ethical must always have a sanctuary in human time.

Yet, throughout the play, as indeed in the Mahabharata, whenever we fear that life is now so accursed that we shall never again see the ordinary world, the Kauravas are given another chance to acknowledge their complicity in evil and turn towards the ethical. Indeed, just as in the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita lies at the heart of the story (I am not concerned about whether it is an interpolation) in *Andha Yug*. Krishna's presence, suddenly and unexpectedly, breaks into the narrative of pain—the soft sounds of a flute drift across the battlefield, a peacock feather floats down the ramparts, as if to remind the Kauravas that the sensuous world they, like all human beings, had once longed for still lies just outside the present circle of suffering and needs the grace of justice and truth. And then, as Gandhari, in her utter mistakenness, curses him for having caused the war, Krishna, like a calm *satyagrahi*,⁸ accepts the curse in the hope of bringing the cycle of violence and revenge to an end. It is terrible to watch her remorse as she realizes the enormity of her fault. She suddenly understands that she has lost the last of the honorable choices it was still possible for the Kauravas to make, and that, henceforth, she can expect no mercy for herself or her clan.

That Krishna, given the chronologies of violence that follow the Mahabharata war, fails to ensure peace is not the fault of the good that he represents, or of the compassionate forms of life he pleads for. In Bharati's play, Krishna is the man of justice and truth we can all become. He is "the advocate of all created things and their finest embodiment."⁹

If I am right, then the primary concern of *Andha Yug* is to reveal that the ethical and the sacred that Krishna represents are always available to human beings even in the most atrocious of times. That is why he is at the center of the play and his abiding presence frames each act of the narrative, during which the surviving Kauravas repeatedly refuse to acknowledge his righteousness and so slide further into moral and spiritual desolation. It is this aspect of Krishna's presence, which so clearly informs the thematic, the poetic, and the structural patterns of the original Hindi play, that is either distorted or ignored in the other English translations.

Andha Yug is a tragedy that happens because the Kauravas, in their greed, stupidity, and blindness, so disfigure and deny Krishna as to blot out from their social and political vision every possibility of creating cities of virtue and hope. The previous English translations, on the other hand, make the anguish of Ashwatthama and the sorrow of Gandhari the primary concern of the play. We are so overwhelmed by the knowledge of their suffering that we sympathize with them as victims of forces beyond their control and understanding. Krishna, thus, emerges as a capricious and manipulative god who kills us for his sport—a sentiment that may appeal to our present nausea with everything ethical or sacred, but is surely contrary to Dharamvir Bharati's intention, and, perhaps, not altogether encouraging for those who still dream of making good civil societies.

In my translation, I have tried to restore the sacred and the ethical back to the text. I want to ensure that my English translation does not become

vulnerable to existentialist anxieties, but retains the play’s essential tension between the nightmare of self-enchantment, which the story of the Kauravas represents, and the ever-present possibility of finding an opening out of *tamas* into a redemptive ethicality. My English translation, I hope, shall clearly mark out the fact that the stories of Gandhari and Ashwatthama are nearly always, and in every act, not only countered by different levels of ethical awareness, but are also framed by two different kinds of choric voices. I should like to call the first frame, with which the play actually opens and which is sung as we watch dispirited soldiers drag themselves off the battlefield, “the chorus of sacred memorialization.” This choric beginning is made out of fragments taken from Book IV, Chapter xxiv, of the Vishnu Purana and is meant to be sung in Sanskrit. It asserts that the sacred, which had once manifested itself in the ordinary and the profane world, can always reveal itself in historical time again—that even a battlefield can be the site of hierophany. It should, I think, be possible to convey the sonority of the Puranic song to the English reader by having the English translation follow each separate phrase or *shloka* in Sanskrit.

I should like to call the second chorus that frames the main narrative “the chorus of ethical lament.” This chorus does two things. It provides a link between the different episodes of the story, and at the same time, it voices its moral dismay over the fact that the characters, in their perversity of self-hood, refuse to pay heed to the song of the sacred just heard, and slide further and further towards the blank silence of nonbeing and nothingness, towards *Andha Yug*. These frames of sacrality and ethicality, however, ensure that, despite human folly, life shall always be granted a ground of mercy below which it will never fall. We are, I think, supposed to remember this even as we watch the story of Gandhari’s curse and Ashwatthama’s damnation come to an end with the final choric song:

That day the world descended into the age of darkness,
which has no end, and repeats itself over and over again.

.....

The age of darkness has seeped into our very souls.

.....

And yet it is also true
that like a small seed
buried somewhere
in the mind of man
there is courage
and a longing for freedom
and the imagination to create something new.

That seed is buried
without exception
in each of us
and it grows from day to day
in our lives
as duty
as honor
as freedom
as virtuous conduct.

It is this small seed
that makes us fear
half-truths
and great wars
and always
saves
the future of mankind
from blind doubt
slavery
and defeat.

NOTES

1. Andha Yug was first translated by Paul Jacob as *The Blind Age*. It was published in *Enact*, no. 65, May 1972.

2. W.H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," *Collected Shorter Poems* (New York: Random House, 1964), 169.

3. For Buber's letters to Gandhi see *Pointing the Way*, trans. Maurice Friedman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 126–47.

4. Quoted by Iris Murdoch in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), 420–21.

5. The English translations from the play, here and elsewhere, are mine.

6. The idea is taken from Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

7. "The 'Iliad,' Poem of Might," *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (1957; rpt.: London: Arc, 1987), 34.

8. I use this word lest we forget the play was written soon after the genocidal days of the Partition, when we had abused Gandhi. Literally, *satya* means "truth" and *agraha* means "firmness." Gandhi used the term *satyagraha* in his campaign of nonviolent resistance in India and South Africa, translating it as "truth-force."

9. The phrase is taken from Walter Benjamin's "The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 104.



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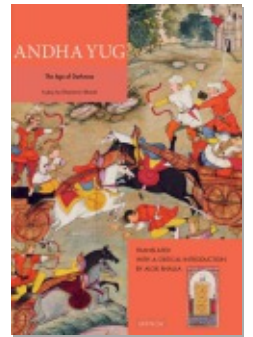
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Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness

Dharamvir Bharati

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Andha Yug

T H E A G E O F D A R K N E S S

Andha Yug would never have been written if it had been in my power not to write it! I was in a dilemma when the idea of writing the play rose within me. It made me a little afraid. I knew that if I set out to write it, I would never be able to turn back!

But, then, there is something called addiction—in accepting the challenge of a roaring sea, fighting the high waves with one's bare hands, plunging down to immeasurable depths, and, then, after facing all the dangers, resurfacing with a few grains of faith, illumination, truth, and dignity—and this addiction is mingled with such deep agony and so much joy that one can never give it up. *Andha Yug* was written to satisfy that addiction.

After reaching a certain stage, one is no longer afraid. Frustration, dejection, bloodshed, vengeance, disease, deformity, blindness—instead of hesitating, one faces them because hidden beneath are rare grains of truth! One would not perish if one confronted them! “Let the world perish, not I!”

But no, why should the world perish either? Since I have shared its sufferings, how can the truth I have discovered be mine alone? A time comes when the superficial distinction between the “self” and “others” is erased. They are no longer separate.

This is the “whole” truth. I have “personally” discovered it, but its dignity lies in its being widely shared once again.

Note to the Director _____

I have tried to find answers to the problem raised in this verse play (*drishya kavya*) by seeking help from the last half of the Mahabharata. The main plot of the story is well known; only a few events have been invented—a few characters and a few incidents. Classical aesthetic theories sanction such interpolations. The two guards, who comment on the events throughout, are a bit like the ordinary citizens who form the chorus in Greek plays; but they are also important symbolic figures. According to the Bhagavata Purana, the name of the man who killed Lord Krishna is Jara, but I have imagined him as the incarnation of the old mendicant.

The entire plot is divided into five acts with an interlude. There can be an interval after the interlude. The stage design is not complicated: there is a permanent curtain at the back, and two more curtains in addition. The proscenium curtain is raised at the beginning of each act and is not dropped

till the end of the act. Scene changes in the course of each act are indicated by the lifting and dropping of the curtain in the middle of the stage. The curtains in the middle and at the back are not to be painted. The stage must be as bare as possible. Lighting should be restrained but imaginative.

The choric songs are arranged between the acts in a style borrowed from the traditions of Indian folk theatre. The chorus is either used to give information about events that are not shown on stage or to underline the poignancy of the action. Sometimes, it also clarifies the symbolic importance of the events. There should be two choric voices—of a woman and a man—and the choric verses should be divided between them, especially when the rhythm or tone changes. Instrumental music accompanying the chorus should be kept to a minimum.

The dialogue is written in free verse. The interlude has sections that are written in poetic prose, which has also been used elsewhere in the play. In a long play it is important to change the rhythm to avoid monotony. The exception is the dialogue between the two guards, which has the same rhythm from the beginning to the end. It is not necessary, however, for the speeches of the other characters to follow a specific rhythm and meter. A character should adopt the rhythms that would express his changing emotions and feelings. A lyric may require a consistency of rhythm and tone, which a play may not. Indeed, there are times when there is a rapid change in tone and rhythm in keeping with changing feelings. This is especially so in the case of *Sanjaya*, where the changes are sudden.

When *Andha Yug* was first presented, the actors faced a peculiar difficulty. They either read their dialogues as if they were written as rhythmic poetry or read them as prose pieces. The solution lies somewhere in the middle. The emphasis should be on conveying the meaning rather than on meter, but the poetic rhythms should also be heard. It is true that this play represents the beginning of the tradition of verse plays, but the radio production of *Andha Yug* by Shree Gopal Das succeeded in obtaining a harmony among poetic rhythm, dramatic narrative, and meaning; indeed, its use of volume, undertones, overtones, overlapping tones, tenor, et cetera, revealed the boundless possibilities, not only for the performance of this play, but also for the entire range of new poetry.

Basically, this verse play is designed for the stage. The published text has kept that in mind. The radio production not only helped its cast, but also helped me in polishing its language. The published text has also kept in mind the structures of folk plays so that it can be adapted for open-air performances. Imaginative directors can also create symbolic stage designs.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ASHWATTHAMA	Son of Dronacharya; a Kaurava warrior
BALARAMA	Older brother of Krishna; a master teacher of the warrior arts to the Pandavas and the Kauravas; chooses not to fight in the war
DHRITARASHTRA	Blind king of the Kauravas; father of Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers; husband of Gandhari
GANDHARI	Wife of the blind king, Dhritarashtra; mother of Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers; voluntarily blind-folded herself when she married
KRIPACHARYA	Ashwatthama's uncle; a master teacher of the warrior arts to the Pandavas and the Kauravas; fights on the side of the Kauravas
KRISHNA	An incarnation (avatara) of the Godhead Vishnu; assists the Pandavas as counselor and as Arjuna's charioteer
KRITAVARMA	Born into the same Yadava clan as Krishna but fights against him, on the side of the Kauravas
MENDICANT	Character who appears as an astrologer, as Vyasa, and as the hunter Jara
SANJAYA	Charioteer of Dhritarashtra; given supernatural vision by Vyasa to describe everything that happens in the war to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari
VIDURA	Sage and half-brother of Dhritarashtra
VYASA	Sage and author of the Mahabharata; father of Pandu, Dhritarashtra, and Vidura; bestows divine vision on Sanjaya and is capable of influencing events
YUDHISHTHIRA	Oldest of the Pandavas; son of Kunti by the God Dharma
YUYUTSU	Illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra by a slave girl; the only Kaurava to take the Pandavas' side in the war
CHORUS	
GUARD 1	
GUARD 2	
MUTE SOLDIER	
NARRATOR	

PROLOGUE

Invocation

*Narayanam namaskritya naram chaiv narrottamam
daveem sarasawteem vaysaam tato jayamudeeyaret.*

Proclamation

This play is concerned
with the age of darkness
which in the Vishnu Purana
is described thus:

*“Tataschanudinamalpala haras
vavachchedada-dharama-arth-ayorjagatas-samakshayo bhavishyati.”*

...And then in the future
day by day
there will be a decline
in prosperity and dharma
and the whole earth shall slowly perish.

“Tatascharth evabhijan hetu.”

The one who has wealth
shall rule.

“Kapatavesha dharanameva mahatva hetu.”

The one who wears
a false mask
shall be honored.

*“Evam chati lubdhak raja
sahaas-shailanam-antaradroneeh praja samsriyashyanti.”*

The one who is greedy
shall be king.

And weary of misrule
the people
shall hide in dark caves
and wait
for their days of misery
to end.

Hide
in real caves
or in the caverns of their souls.

A dancer performs as if he is trying to hide in a dark cave and then makes his exit.

In those dark ages
which came into being
at the end of the great war
all thoughts and deeds of men
were corrupt and perverse.

Yes, there were still frail threads
of honor which held men together
but good and evil were so intricately knotted
that only Krishna had the courage to unravel them.

Krishna alone was dispassionate and detached.
Krishna alone
could be the savior
of their future.

All the others were blind
self-absorbed
depressed and confused
lost in the dark caverns
of their souls.

This is the story of the blind—
or of enlightenment
through the life of the blind.

ACT ONE

The Kaurava Kingdom

The trumpet blows thrice.

NARRATOR Both sides in the war
violated
the code of honor
smashed it
ripped it into shreds
and scattered it—
the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas.

When will this bloodshed end?

This is a strange war
in which both sides
are doomed to fail.

Blindness rules this age
not reason
and blindness shall prevail
in the end.

**Blind fear and blind love
blind power and blind justice
shall prevail in the end.**

Whatever is good and gentle and beautiful
shall be defeated in the end—
and thus the Dvapara Yug shall pass.

The curtain rises.

This is the last evening of the great war.

A profound sadness lies over everything.

In the desolate corridors of this palace
of the Kauravas
two old guards pace up and down
up and down.



*The stage is empty. One guard enters from the left, and another from the right.
They carry spears and shields and pace up and down the stage.*

GUARD 1 We are tired
 very tired.
 Yet we march up and down
 guarding these desolate corridors.

GUARD 2 In these desolate corridors
 richly inlaid with jewels
 Kaurava queens
 once wandered gracefully
 like the fragrant breeze.

 Today
 they are widows.

GUARD 1 We are tired
 very tired.

 We are not warriors.
 We have shown no courage.
 We have not fought
 in this grim war
 that lasted
 seventeen days.

 These our spears
 these our shields
 rest unused
 a burden
 on our shoulders.

 We are just guards
 but there is nothing
 here to defend.

GUARD 2 There is nothing here
 to defend.

 This is the kingdom
 of an old and blind ruler
 whose children
 in their blindness
 declared a bitter war.

 They thought honor
 was a rotten whore
 who had infected everyone.

 For seventeen days
 we have defended
 the honor

of a blind
and sick kingdom.

GUARD 1

And now
we are tired
very tired.

All our actions
are meaningless.
Our faith
our decisions
our courage
our lives
are meaningless
utterly meaningless...

GUARD 2

Meaningless
utterly meaningless...

And now
weary of defending
this meaningless life—
these desolate corridors—
we are tired
very tired.

They fall silent and continue to pace up and down. The lights suddenly grow dim. The sound of an approaching storm is heard. One guard strains his ears to listen. The other shades his eyes and looks at the sky.

GUARD 1

Did you hear
that terrifying
sound?

GUARD 2

Why has it suddenly
become so dark?
Can you
see anything?

GUARD 1

How far can the subjects
of a blind king see?

I can't see a thing.
Perhaps it's a thunderstorm.

Frightened, Guard 2 moves up close to Guard 1.

GUARD 2

No, it's not a thunderstorm!

**Look, there are thousands and thousands
of vultures**

with their wings
outspread!

The sound of flapping wings becomes louder as the stage grows darker.

GUARD 1 The sky above the city
 of the Kauravas
 is overcast with vultures!

GUARD 2 Hide
 hide
 take cover
 under your shield!
 The vultures are ravenous!
 They feed on the dead!

The stage suddenly brightens.

GUARD 1 Look, they are flying
 towards Kurukshetra.

The sound of beating wings grows fainter.

GUARD 2 Death has flown over us.

GUARD 1 A bad omen
 a dreadful omen.
 Who knows
 what will happen
 to the city
 tomorrow?

Vidura enters from the left.

GUARD 1 Who goes there?

VIDURA It is I
 Vidura.
 Did Dhritarashtra
 see that terrifying sight?

GUARD 1 How could he?
 He is blind.
 Has he ever
 been able
 to see
 anything
 thus far?

VIDURA I must meet with him.
 All the omens are bad.

Who knows what news
Sanjaya will bring today.

The guards exit. Vidura stands deep in thought.

CHORUS Is there still no news from Kurukshetra?
Has the ragged Kaurava army won or lost?

That cloud of hungry vultures will soon
descend upon the corpses and devour them.

In the deathly silence of the court
Gandhari—pale with anxiety—
sits with her head bowed.

Dhritarashtra waits in silence
for Sanjaya to bring him news.

The curtain rises to reveal an inner room of the palace. Gandhari is seated on a low stool covered by a mat. Dhritarashtra is seated on a small throne. Vidura walks up to them.

DHRITARASHTRA Is that you, Sanjaya?

VIDURA No.
It is Vidura, Maharaj.

The whole city
is worried today.

The few who have
survived—ten or twenty—
are waiting
anxiously
for Sanjaya to arrive.

Waits for Dhritarashtra to say something.

Maharaj
why don't you
say something?
Even Gandhari
is silent?

DHRITARASHTRA Vidura
for the first time
in my life
I am afraid.

VIDURA Afraid?
The fear you experience today
had gripped others years ago.

DHRITARASHTRA Why didn't you warn me then?

VIDURA Bhisma did.
So did Dronacharya.
Indeed, in this very court
Krishna advised you:
 "Do not violate the code of honor.
 If you violate the code of honor
 it will coil around the Kaurava clan
 like a wounded python
 and crush it like a dry twig."

DHRITARASHTRA Vidura
try to understand.
I was born blind.
How could I have discerned the real world
or recognized its social codes?

VIDURA You could have.
Just as you
accepted the world
in spite of your blindness.

DHRITARASHTRA But I had created that world
out of the darkest recesses of my own being.

My senses were limited by my blindness.
They defined
the boundary of my material world.

I had spun an illusory world
of dreams and desires and passions
out of the depths of that darkness.
 My love, my hate, my law, my dharma
 had evolved out of my peculiar world.
 My ethics had no other frame of reference.
 My sons were the flesh of my flesh
 they were the final arbiters of truth for me.
 My love for them was my law
 my code of honor.

VIDURA Yet from the very first day
it was obvious that the Kaurava might
—the final arbiter of truth—
was weak and vulnerable.

Over the past seventeen days
you have received news

of the death
—one by one—
of the entire Kaurava clan.

DHRITARASHTRA

The news did not mean much to me.

I was born blind.

All I can do is listen.

Sanjaya describes the world in words
but I still can't visualize anything—
can't see the events his words create.

I can't picture how blood spurted
from Dushasana's shattered chest—

how cruel Bhima collected it
in his cupped hands
and raised them to his lips.

GANDHARI

Covering her ears.

Maharaj
don't repeat that!
I can't bear it.

Everyone falls silent.

DHRITARASHTRA

Today
I realized
that there is a truth
that lies beyond the boundaries
of my selfhood.
I realized that only today.

I feel as if a dam has suddenly burst
and the violent sea
with its poison-tongued waves
has crashed through the defenses
of my narrow well-bounded world
filled every corner of my being
with its deafening roar
and swept away everything—
all my personal beliefs
my blind faith.

VIDURA

Knowledge acquired
through suffering
and defeat
will give you courage
to endure suffering.

DHRITARASHTRA No, Vidura.
 What I have
 learnt today
 terrifies me.
 For the first time
 in my life
 I am afraid.

VIDURA Where there is fear
 there is imperfect knowledge.
 As Krishna said:
 “In order to know
 the truth
 surrender your
 heart and mind
 to me.
 Released from fear
 you will
 find me.
 You must have faith.”

GANDHARI *Agitated.*
 I don’t have faith!
 Perhaps others do.
 I don’t.
 “Surrender your
 heart and mind
 to me”!
 Did he
 who lost his head completely
 when he was struck
 by Pitama’s arrows
 say that?
 Did he
 who violated
 the code of honor
 over and over again
 say that?

DHRITARASHTRA Calm down, Gandhari
 calm down.
 Do not blame anyone.
 I was blind...

GANDHARI

But I was not blind.
I had seen the ways of the world
and knew
that dharma
duty and honor
were illusions.

When the time of reckoning arrives
wisdom and honor
are always useless.

There is a dark abyss in each of us
where a ferocious beast
—a blind beast
who is the master
of all we know and do—
resides and has his home.

Morality, honor, selflessness,
and surrender to Krishna
are mere disguises
—masks that cover our blindness.
They are like sightless eyes cut out of rags
and stitched on the faces of puppets.

That is why
sick of all this hypocrisy
I chose to live
with my eyes blindfolded.

VIDURA

You have become cynical
Gandhari!
Grief over the death
of your sons
has embittered you!
Didn't you tell
Duryodhana...

GANDHARI

I told Duryodhana:
“O Fool, where there is dharma
there is victory.”

There was no dharma on either side.
Each was inspired by blind self-interest.

And the one you call Lord
changed the code of honor
to suit his own ends.

He is a fraud!

DHRITARASHTRA Calm down, Gandhari.

VIDURA This is the bitter voice
of despair.

 Forgive her, O Lord!
Accept her bitter lack of faith
as an offering!

 If you receive only those who have faith
who will bless those
who have none?

 Forgive her, O Lord!
Grief over the death
of her sons
has made this mother
bitter!

GANDHARI Do not call me mother!
Even the one you call your Lord
calls me mother—
a word that pierces
my soul like a red-hot iron.

 Over the last seventeen days
all my sons have been killed
one by one.

 With my own hands
I removed the bangles
on the wrists
of their wives
and wiped the lines of sindhur
with the end of my garment.

*Voices off-stage shout, "Victory to Duryodhana! Victory to Gandhari!
May Dhritarashtra the ruler of men be blessed!"*

DHRITARASHTRA Go, Vidura
see if Sanjaya has returned.

GANDHARI He has won!
My son, Duryodhana, has won!
Didn't I tell you
he would certainly be
victorious today?

Guard 1 enters.

GUARD 1 A mendicant, Maharaj
an old mendicant.

An old mendicant enters.

VIDURA A mendicant
with a broad forehead
white hair
long limbs?

MENDICANT I am that future
which today
in this city of the Kauravas
has proved to be false.

 I used to chart the paths of stars
calculate their speed, map their positions
read the destiny of men
in the unwritten book of fate.

 I am an astrologer
from a distant land.

DHRITARASHTRA I think I remember you.
You had said:
 “War is inevitable
 and the Kauravas shall be victorious.”

MENDICANT Yes, I am that man.

 Today, all my knowledge
has proved to be false.

 Suddenly, a man intervened.
He was stronger and swifter than
the changing constellations.

 When Arjuna stood
despondent in the battlefield
he said to Arjuna:
 “I am omniscient.
 Do what I tell you.
 Truth shall prevail.
 I am the truth.
 Do not be afraid.”

VIDURA He is the Lord!

GANDHARI No! Impossible!

VIDURA He is the beginning
and the end of all history.
He determines the course
of all the celestial stars.

MENDICANT

I did not know then
that he was the Lord.

But that day
I suddenly understood
as if in a flash of revelation
that when a man
surrenders his selfhood
and challenges history
he can change the course
of the stars.

The lines of fate
are not carved in stone.
They can be drawn and redrawn
at every moment of time
by the will of man.

GANDHARI

Guard, give him a handful of coins.

Guard 1 exits.

You had said:
“Duryodhana shall be victorious!”

MENDICANT

I am a false prophet and
at this moment my words
have no value.

Many false prophecies
broken dreams
half-truths
lie scattered
in every nook and corner
of the city of the Kauravas.

It is unfortunate that Gandhari
fondly nurtures each one of them.

Guard 1 returns with a bag of coins.

Victory to Duryodhana!
Victory to Gandhari!

The old mendicant exits.

GANDHARI

Victory shall be ours.
I am confident.
Victory shall be ours.

My hopes may be false
or blind

but Duryodhana
shall be victorious.

He shall be victorious!

Guard 2 enters and lights the lamps.

VIDURA The sun has set.

DHRITARASHTRA But
Sanjaya has not yet returned.

All the soldiers
must have gone back
to their camps.

I want to know—
who won
who lost?

VIDURA Maharaj!
Do not despair.
Sanjaya shall bring you good news.

Gandhari, go and rest now.

The city gates, like vigilant eyes
are open, and wait
for Sanjaya's chariot to arrive.

*Vidura exits to one side, and Dhritarashtra and Gandhari exit to the other.
The two guards once again begin to march across the stage.*

GUARD 1 Honor!

GUARD 2 Disbelief!

GUARD 1 Sorrow at the death of one's sons!

GUARD 2 The future that is waiting to be born!

GUARD 1 All these
grace the lives of kings!

GUARD 2 And the one they worship as their Lord
takes responsibility for all of them!

GUARD 1 But what about the lives
the two of us have spent
in these desolate corridors?

GUARD 2 Who shall take
responsibility for us?

GUARD 1 We did not violate honor
because we did not have any.

GUARD 2 We were never tormented by disbelief
because we never had any faith.

GUARD 1 We never experienced any sorrow.

GUARD 2 Nor felt any pain.

GUARD 1 We spent our desolate lives
in these desolate corridors.

GUARD 2 Because we were only slaves.

GUARD 1 We merely followed the orders of a blind king.

GUARD 2 We had no opinions of our own.
We made no choices.

GUARD 1 That is why
from the beginning
we have paced these desolate corridors
from right to left
and then from left to right
without any meaning
without any purpose.

GUARD 2 Even after death
we shall pace
the desolate corridors
of death's kingdom
from right to left
and then from left to right.

They continue to pace up and down. The stage slowly grows dark.

CHORUS Under the shadow of defeat
this city has slowly lost its sense of honor.

Under the shadow of defeat and fear and doubt
false hope hobbles down the desolate streets
like a shriveled old beggar
pleading with his hands outstretched
for some charity, for some mercy.

There are still two fading embers left in the ruined city.
A blind and self-deceiving king
shuffling in the void of his own circle of darkness
and a bewildered
heartbroken Gandhari
still clinging to hope with blind desperation.

And the prophetic Sanjaya
—immortal and detached—

who sees all and knows all
who fears not the wars that Gods promote
who is free from doubts and confusions
who can dare to confront the king with the truth—
even that Sanjaya
is ensnared by the dark night of delusions
and stands lost
on this path of thorns and stones.

ACT TWO

The Making of a Beast

CHORUS Even Sanjaya
 —that rational sculptor of words—
 is bewildered in this forest
 of doubt and confusion.

 His responsibility is great
 his words are few
 his listeners are blind.

 But at this moment of danger
 only he can tell the truth.

 And yet even Sanjaya
 —ensnared by this night of delusions—
 stands distracted
 on this path of thorns and stones.

The curtain rises. We see a path through a forest. A soldier, who has laid his weapons aside, lies on the ground with his face covered. Sanjaya enters.

SANJAYA I have lost my way
 on this path of thorns and stones.
 How far is Hastinapur?
 Will I ever reach it?

 What will I tell them?

 There is no dearth of words
 but what shall I tell them?

 Oh, why am I still alive
 after this shameful defeat?

 How shall I tell them?

 Even today
 there is no dearth of words.

 I used to carry
 the news of the war to them
 describe each event as it happened.

But today
the experience of our final defeat
has changed the very nature of truth.

And today
how shall I use the same words
to carry the burden
of this defeat?

The soldier suddenly wakes up and calls, "Sanjaya."

Who called me?
Was it a ghost
or the voice of my own fears?

KRITAVARMA

Don't be afraid.
It's me, Kritavarma.

So, you are still alive, Sanjaya?
Did the Pandava soldiers
let you go?

SANJAYA

Yes, I am still alive.
The earth for miles around is strewn
with the corpses of Kaurava soldiers
slaughtered by Arjuna.
The Kaurava army is scattered;
all its heroes are dead.

Only I am alive.

When Satyaki raised his sword
to strike me down
—oh, how I wish he had killed me—
Vyasa told him:
"Sanjaya cannot die.
He is immortal."

Unwittingly

Vyasa cursed me:

"You will survive
disasters, floods, revolutions,
and wars of annihilation
so that you can tell the truth."

But
how can I tell
the truth to the blind?

It was an utterly new experience
to feel the cold edge of Satyaki's sword
and know that death was so close.

It was a moment of supreme terror.
I felt as if someone had slashed
through all the experiences of my soul
as swiftly as an arrow
slices through a lotus stem.

How can I
after my humiliating experience
tell them the whole truth?

KRITAVARMA Be brave, Sanjaya,
for only you can
tell them
about Duryodhana's defeat.

SANJAYA What shall I tell them?

That the bravest of warriors
stood next to his shattered chariot
barefoot
disarmed
bloodstained
defeated?

That
when he saw me
he lowered his head
and cried?

How shall I tell them?
How shall I tell them that?

Sanjaya exits.

KRITAVARMA Even Sanjaya has left.

Many days ago
Vidura had prophesied
defeat.

Today we are defeated.

A voice calls from offstage, "Ashwatthama." Kritavarma listens. Kripacharya enters, continuing to call Ashwatthama's name.

That sounded like the voice
of old Kripacharya.

KRIPACHARYA Yes, I am alive.
Did Ashwatthama escape?

KRITAVARMA Yes.
Only three of us
are alive today.

When Duryodhana
got off his chariot
and bowed his head in defeat
Ashwatthama saw him.

He turned away
smashed his bow
in despair
and disappeared
into the forest.

*They both exit, calling out to Ashwatthama. Their voices grow fainter. Darkness.
Then light falls on Ashwatthama, who sits with his broken bow in his hand.*

ASHWATTHAMA

This is my bow
the bow of Ashwatthama
which Duryodhana himself
had strung.

Today
I smashed it
in despair
when I saw him
disarmed and helpless
with tears in his eyes.

My bow
is a crushed snake
terrified
and helpless
like my mind.

How shall I
now gather courage
to avenge
my father's
heartless murder?

In this forest
even in this fearful forest
I cannot forget
how Guru Dronacharya
threw his weapons down
on the battlefield
when he heard Yudhishtira
announce triumphantly:
"Ashwatthama is dead!"

He had so much faith
in Yudhishtira's truthfulness.

Seeing him unarmed
that cowardly sinner
Dhristadyumna
cut him to pieces
with his sword.

I can never forget that.

My father was invincible.

Yudhishtira's half-truth
killed him.

That day
Yudhishtira's half-truth
ruthlessly slaughtered
all that was good
or gentle
in me.

Honored as Dharmaraj
he added:

“The man or the beast.”

Since Yudhishtira could not
distinguish between
man and beast
I decided to turn myself
into a blind, ruthless beast.

But even today
I am lost
in a dark cave—
the blind cave
of defeat.

Listen, Duryodhana!

Listen, Dronacharya!

I, Ashwatthama
your Ashwatthama
—foul as the spittle
stale as the phlegm
left in the mouth
of a dying man—
I, Ashwatthama
am the only one
alive today.

Thumps his breast triumphantly.



Should I commit suicide?
At least I shall be released
from this impotent existence.

Even if I were to burn
in the fires of hell
I would not
have to endure
so much torment.

A voice from offstage calls, "Ashwatthama."

But no
I shall live
like a blind and ruthless beast
and may
Dharmaraj's prophecy come true!

Let both my hands
turn into claws!
Let these eyes
sharp like the teeth of a carnivore
tear the body
of anyone they see!

From now on
my only dharma is:
"Kill, kill, kill
and kill again!"

Let that be
the final purpose
of my existence!

He hears footsteps.

Someone is coming this way.
Maybe it's a Pandava soldier.

He is alone and unarmed.

I shall hide
take him by surprise and
break his neck with these
hungry claws
as I broke my bow.

Ashwatthama hides. Sanjaya enters.

SANJAYA I must go on living.
 I must.
 I must go on living.

Truth, I know, is bitter.
Yet I must tell the truth
even the bitterest of truths.

I must tell the truth.
I must tell the truth
and nothing but the truth.
That is the ultimate meaning
of my—ah!

Ashwatthama attacks Sanjaya from behind and tries to strangle him.

ASHWATTHAMA With these
 hungry claws
 I shall strangle Yudhishtira
 who cried:
 “Ashwatthama is dead.”

Kritavarma and Kripacharya enter.

KRITAVARMA *Screams.*

 Let go, Ashwatthama!
 It's Sanjaya
 not a Pandava.

ASHWATTHAMA Only kill
 and kill, and kill...

KRIPACHARYA Kritavarma, hold him down.
 Hold him down.
 What kind of soldier are you
 Ashwatthama?

 Kill an enemy instead.

 Sanjaya cannot be killed.
 He took no
 side in the war.
 He was neutral.

ASHWATTHAMA Neutral?
 The word “neutral”
 is meaningless.

 I am no soldier.
 I am a beast
 a wild and ferocious beast.

 Whoever is not with me
 is against me!

KRITAVARMA You are insane.

Sanjaya,
you must leave at once.

SANJAYA

No, do not spare me,
I beg you.

Kill me, Ashwatthama
release me
from the torment
of telling the truth
to the blind.

It is better to be killed
than to suffer
this anguish.

Kill me, Ashwatthama
and release me from
this torture.

Ashwatthama looks helplessly at Kripacharya and rests his head on Kripacharya's shoulder.

ASHWATTHAMA

What should I do?

I don't think
it is a sin to kill.
I am now
obsessed with killing.

I long to break the neck
of anyone I meet.

Tell me what I should do.
Tell me.

KRIPACHARYA

Calm down, calm down!
There is—

KRITAVARMA

There is a lot to be done.
Duryodhana is still alive.
Let us go and look for him.

KRIPACHARYA

Sanjaya
do you know
where he is?

SANJAYA

Whispers.

Yes.
With his extraordinary powers
he has stilled the waters of a lake.
And there

unknown to the Pandavas
he sits strangely still
on the floor
of that enchanted lake.

KRIPACHARYA Bless you, Ashwatthama.
Guide us to that lake, Sanjaya.
Let us find out
what he wants us
to do.

KRITAVARMA Who is that
old man
coming this way?

KRIPACHARYA Let us go
before someone
sees us.

ASHWATTHAMA *As he exits.*
I feel helpless
I have broken my vow.

They all exit. The stage is empty for a while. The old mendicant enters.

MENDICANT I have wandered far
from Hastinapur
very far.
I am old
and cannot see clearly
but I thought
I saw some people here
a moment ago.
I wonder if I still
have the coins
Gandhari gave me
when I predicted:
“This is inevitable
that is inevitable
and this will come to pass
and that will come to pass.”
But today
this hour of defeat
has only proved
how unpredictable
the future is.

Truth resides
in the acts
we perform.
What man does
at each moment
becomes his future
for ages and ages.

Sighs.

That is why
Krishna said to Arjuna:
“Lift up your bow, Arjuna.
Fight without fear.

The meaning of a man’s existence
lies in the actions he performs
not in his refusal to act.”

He sees a broken bow lying on the ground and bends down to pick it up.

Who left his bow here?
Has some other Arjuna
begun to doubt?

Ashwatthama enters.

ASHWATTHAMA That bow
is mine.

MENDICANT Who are you?
Victory to Ashwatthama!

ASHWATTHAMA Victory?
Do not mock me, old man.
This bow was as useless
as your knowledge
of astrology.

I just saw Duryodhana
whose head
was once adorned
by a crown of jewels.

Today, that head
lies covered
by a shroud
of dirty water.

You had prophesied:
“Duryodhana shall be victorious.”

MENDICANT

But Duryodhana shall be victorious!
I still predict that.
I am old
and tired
but I still prophesy:
“Duryodhana shall never
be defeated.”

This will be the truth
of the age
about to be born.

The future
I had once prophesied
turned out to be false.

Now I shall go and tell Duryodhana:
“The future is never independent
of the present moment.”

There is still time, Duryodhana
there is still time.
Each moment
can transform
history and time.

He walks towards the exit slowly.

ASHWATTHAMA

What should I do now?
What should I do?

I am trapped in present time
and condemned
to seek vengeance!
Yudhishtira's half-truth
has murdered my future.

And yet
I shall live.

If my damnation
has been already foretold
then nothing matters.

If the future
is indifferent
it is my enemy.

He follows the old mendicant.

You are a false prophet!
You are an old fraud!

Today
you shall not escape
these hungry claws.

Stop, stop
you old fraud!

Gnashing his teeth, he runs after the old mendicant, grabs him by his neck and drags him offstage.

Kill, kill, kill.
It is my dharma
to kill.

Offstage, sounds of a man being strangled and Ashwatthama laughing hysterically. Silence. The lights dim. Then Sanjaya is lit by a spotlight. Kripacharya and Kritavarma are dragging Ashwatthama away from the old mendicant.

KRIPACHARYA What have you done
 Ashwatthama?
 What have you done?

ASHWATTHAMA I do not know
 what I have done.
 Have I done something?

KRITAVARMA There is something
 terrifying
 about Ashwatthama.

Kripacharya forces Ashwatthama to sit down, loosens his cummerbund, and wipes his forehead.

KRIPACHARYA Sit down.
 Relax.
 You have done nothing.
 It was only a terrifying
 nightmare.

ASHWATTHAMA What should I do?
 I don't think
 it is a sin to kill.
 I am now
 obsessed with killing.

 As I struggled with him
 I felt strangely calm.
 I was no longer
 a snarling beast.
 I felt utterly detached.

KRIPACHARYA

To Ashwatthama.

Close your eyes for a while.
Sleep.
Duryodhana has ordered us
to rest today.
We shall see
what the Pandavas
do tomorrow
and then decide.

Come, turn over
and rest for some time.

To Kritavarma.

He is asleep.

KRITAVARMA

Mockingly.

Asleep?!
We call ourselves soldiers!

Did we survive
this war
so that
we could hide
in ambush
and kill
old and unarmed men?

KRIPACHARYA

Calm down.
Have you forgotten
the heroic deeds
of the brave warriors
in this war?

Drona was old
and unarmed
but did
Dhristadyumna
spare his life?

Did we
take pity
on Abhimanyu
when he was alone
and trapped
by seven valiant heroes?

ASHWATTHAMA

I did not kill him!
I was blind with rage.
I wanted to annihilate
the future which has been
prophesied.

Believe me
I do not know how
the old man was killed.

KRIPACHARYA

Go to sleep now.
You too, Kritavarma.
I shall keep watch
through the night.

He begins to pace up and down.

CHORUS

Like the floodwaters of the Ganga
—which sweep the shores and recede
leaving behind disfigured corpses—
the swift and changing tides of history
have swept Ashwatthama away and flung him
on the endless shores of desolate time.

This is a night of lost souls
this is a night of despairing souls
this is a night of shattered souls.

This is a night of intoxication
for the victorious Pandavas.
This is a night of concealment
for the defeated Duryodhana.

This is a night of pride
when heads are held high.
This is a night of shame
when hands lie paralyzed.

ACT THREE

The Half-Truth of Ashwatthama

NARRATOR

When Sanjaya's chariot
reached the city gates
it was dusk.

People asked each other:

“When will the vanquished
Kaurava army return?”

They listened
to Sanjaya's account
of the war
till the sun rose again.

His painful story
turned Gandhari
into stone.
Her face
pale with sorrow
seemed lifeless.

As the sun
rose in the sky
the city
slowly stirred
to life.

A rabble
of brahmins
women
doctors
widows
dwarfs
old men
and
the wounded
crawled back
into the city
on broken chariots
and shattered carts.

Eighteen days ago
the soldiers had left
in a riot
of colorful flags
their feet
trampling the earth
their shouts
shattering the sky.

Now
they limp back
in defeat
and disgrace.

The curtain rises. The guards are on duty. Dhritarashtra enters with Vidura, leaning on Vidura's shoulder.

DHRITARASHTRA I am blind
but with these hands
I felt the wounds
of the soldiers.

Every cut
every stab
seemed like a fatal blow
against my kingdom.

VIDURA Maharaj
why dwell upon
such thoughts?

DHRITARASHTRA For no real reason
except that
today I felt
as if those wounds of war
Sanjaya had described so often
had been inflicted on my body.

Meanwhile, a soldier, whose tongue has been cut out and who has lost his hearing, crawls onto the stage. He grabs Vidura's feet to draw attention to himself. He cups his hands and begs for water.

VIDURA *Startled.*

What? Oh no!
Guard, give him some water.

DHRITARASHTRA Who is it, Vidura?

VIDURA A thirsty soldier, Maharaj.

The soldier makes incomprehensible noises.

DHRITARASHTRA What is he saying?

VIDURA He says:
 "Victory to Dhritarashtra."

 His tongue has been cut out.
 He cannot speak.

DHRITARASHTRA Today,
 except for the mute,
 who will say:
 "Victory to Duryodhana"?

Guard 1 brings water. The mute soldier begins to gasp for breath.

GUARD 1 *Touching the soldier's forehead.*

 He has a fever.

DHRITARASHTRA Give him water
 and tell him to rest.

The soldier crawls to the back of the stage, lies down, and shuts his eyes.

 Get him
 some clothes from Gandhari.

GUARD 1 Gandhari has not
 appeared in public today
 to give alms to the poor.

VIDURA There are no tears
 in her eyes today
 no sorrow
 no anger.
 She sits on the steps
 still as a statue
 carved out of stone.

There is commotion offstage.

DHRITARASHTRA Guard
 go and see
 what the noise is about.

Exit Guard 1.

VIDURA Maharaj
 please go and console
 Gandhari.

DHRITARASHTRA I shall.
 Even Sanjaya is not with her.
 Who knows what news he will

bring today
of the last battle
between Bhima and Duryodhana.

VIDURA Maharaj
 this way.

Dhritarashtra exits with Guard 2.

What noise is that?

Guard 1 returns.

GUARD 1 Terror
 and panic
 have suddenly
 gripped the city.

VIDURA Why?

GUARD 1 An enemy soldier
 a giant of a man
 fully armed
 has slipped into the city
 with our defeated army.
 The people are terrified.
 They think
 he will ransack their homes.

Guard 2 returns.

VIDURA Rubbish!
 These are merely rumors.
 Don't believe them.
 I shall go and see for myself.
 Guard the palace
 during my absence.

Vidura exits.

GUARD 2 Did you see the soldier
 with your own eyes?

GUARD 1 He is a sorcerer
 a shapeshifter
 who can take any form
 at will.

When the guards
locked the city gates
he changed into
a vulture

flew over
the locked gates
and began to prey
upon the bodies of children
sleeping on open terraces.

GUARD 2 Quick!
Lock the western gate
at once.

GUARD 1 *Terrified.*
Look!

GUARD 2 What is it?

GUARD 1 He's coming!

GUARD 2 Quick
take cover, here!

*Both guards hide in the shadows at the back. An ordinary-looking soldier enters.
It is Yuyutsu.*

YUYUTSU To be frightened
is not as great
a cause of agony
as to be
the object of fear.

Such is my fate
today.

This is the palace
of my father and mother.
Yet I am apprehensive.
Will they greet me
with a spear
dipped in poison?

GUARD 1 That is Yuyutsu
Dhritarashtra's son
who fought
on Yudhishtira's side
in the war.

YUYUTSU What is my crime?
That I was on the side of truth?
No other warrior—
neither Drona nor Bhishma—
dared to oppose Duryodhana.

Only I had the courage
to declare:

“I will not fight
on the side of untruth.
I may be a Kaurava
but truth is higher
than my clan!”

GUARD 2

It is Yuyutsu!
He seems to have returned
with the defeated army.

YUYUTSU

If only
I had turned a blind eye
to Duryodhana’s wiles!
My family
would not have
received me
with such cold contempt.
My mother would have
greeted me
with open arms
despite the disgrace
of defeat.

Vidura enters.

VIDURA

Yuyutsu!
I have been
searching for you
for a long time
my son!
I am glad you have returned.

Guard
go and inform Gandhari
that Yuyutsu is here.

Guard 2 exits.

The slaughter of her sons
has left her inconsolable.
Your arrival
may comfort her.

YUYUTSU

I do not know
if she would
even want
to see my face.

VIDURA Do not say that.
In this evil episode
you are the only one
of the Kaurava clan
who has held his head high
with pride.

YUYUTSU *Laughs bitterly.*

That is why
the moment they saw me
the people of the city
shut their doors in fear.

They said:
 “He is a sorcerer
 a giant
 a child-eater
 a vulture!”

VIDURA Do not pay
too much attention to them
Yuyutsu.

Whenever someone
turns away
from well-worn traditions
and seeks to find
his own path
the ignorant
the cowardly
the simpleminded
always treat him
with contempt.

Gandhari enters with Guard 2. Yuyutsu touches her feet. Gandhari stands still.

VIDURA Gandhari!
This is Yuyutsu.
He is touching your feet.
Give him your blessings.

GANDHARI *After a moment's silence.*

Vidura
ask him
if he is well.

Vidura and Yuyutsu remain silent.

Son
I hope
those strong arms of yours
are not tired
from slaughtering
your relatives
are they?

Silence.

After the splendor
of the Pandava camp
this city of yours
must seem
drab to you?

Silence.

Why are you silent?
He must be tired, Vidura.
Make a bed of flowers for him.
He is no defeated Duryodhana
who must sleep
on the muddy floor
of some silent lake.

Silence.

Vidura
why is he silent?
Is it because
I am the mother
of his enemies?

Turns to go.

Guard
let us go back.

VIDURA

Gandhari!
This does not become you!

Gandhari keeps walking. Guard 2 follows her.

YUYUTSU

Why did my mother do that
Vidura?
Why did she do that?

He sits down with his head lowered in his hands.

It would have been better
if I had

accepted
the untruth.

VIDURA That would have been
no solution
to the problem!
If you had accepted
the untruth
your soul
would have been
scarred irredeemably.

YUYUTSU As if my mother's curse
and the people's hate
will save me
from damnation!
In the final analysis
whether you uphold truth
or untruth
you are damned.
Vidura
what did I gain?
What did I gain?

VIDURA Be calm, Yuyutsu.
Endure it all.
Great suffering
must be endured
with grace.

The sound of a man gasping for breath has been audible for some time and becomes louder.

GUARD 1 What noise is that?
Perhaps
that soldier who cannot speak
is nearing his end.

Guard 1 fetches water.

VIDURA Give him some water
Yuyutsu.
Treat him with kindness
give comfort to the dying
and endure suffering
without bitterness.

Yuyutsu goes up to the soldier.

YUYUTSU

Here
rest your head
in my lap.
Come
open your mouth.
Yes, that's right.
Open your eyes
and look at me.

The soldier opens his eyes and is about to drink water when he shrieks. He crawls away in terror and tries to escape.

GUARD 1

What happened?

YUYUTSU

It is my fault.
He was in the cavalry
of the Kaurava army.
My fire-tipped arrows
burnt
his knees
to cinders.

How can he now
accept mercy
from one
who destroyed his life?

I have changed so much
that if I now offer love
no one will accept it.

Vyasa told me:
"Where there is Krishna
there is victory."

Yes
Krishna is victorious
but I am damned.
I am
cursed by my mother
reviled as a murderer
and hated by everyone.

VIDURA

Today
in this hour of defeat
I do not know
where righteousness ends
and falsehood begins.

Everyone has lost
his bearings today.
The axle is broken
and the wheel spins
without a center.

Are you there, O Lord?
Are you there?

Suddenly, there is a frightening scream from offstage.

YUYUTSU What was that, Vidura?

VIDURA Guard, go and see.

Guard 1 exits and then returns immediately.

GUARD 1 Sanjaya
has brought the news that...

VIDURA/
YUYUTSU What?!

GUARD 1 That...in the final combat...
Duryodhana...
has been defeated...

Vidura and Yuyutsu rush out. The sound of weeping becomes louder. A voice shouts, "Duryodhana has been defeated!" The curtain at the back rises. We see Pandava soldiers celebrating their victory. The scene fades. Then we see a forest path. Kritavarma and Kripacharya rush in carrying bows and arrows.

KRITAVARMA Find somewhere to hide,
Kripacharya.
Elated by their victory
the Pandava soldiers
are returning
to their camp.
The air resounds
with the sound
of conch shells.

KRIPACHARYA Wait.
Pick up your bow.
Someone is coming this way.

KRITAVARMA Don't shoot!
It's Ashwatthama.
He had gone in disguise
to see the final battle
between Duryodhana and Bhima.

Ashwatthama enters.

ASHWATTHAMA Duryodhana
was killed by treachery.

KRIPACHARYA *To Kritavarma.*

Hide!
Enraged with the Pandavas
Balarama is coming this way.

KRITAVARMA *Looking towards the wings.*

Krishna
is with him.

KRIPACHARYA Listen
listen carefully.

BALARAMA *From offstage.*

No!
No!
No!
Say what you like, Krishna
but what Bhima did today
violated dharma.
His attack
was an act
of betrayal.

KRIPACHARYA I wonder what
Krishna is trying
to explain.

BALARAMA The Pandavas are related to us
but are the Kauravas our enemies?
I would have confronted Bhima today
but you stopped me.
I have known you since childhood.
You have always been
an unprincipled rogue!

Kripacharya puts down his bow.

KRIPACHARYA They are walking away.

BALARAMA Krishna
you can do what you like.

You can go to Hastinapur
and console Gandhari.

But let me tell you
that despite your holiness
and your cunning
the Pandavas
who are celebrating
their victory
with conch shells
will also be destroyed
by adharma.

ASHWATTHAMA By adharma—
they will also be destroyed
by adharma.

KRIPACHARYA Son
what is troubling you?

ASHWATTHAMA They will also
be destroyed by adharma.

I have decided.
I have decided
to kill them.
I, Ashwatthama
will kill them
because they are vile.

KRITAVARMA *Mockingly.*

Just as you killed
the old mendicant?

ASHWATTHAMA *Irritated.*

Yes.
I will not rest
till I have destroyed
the entire Pandava clan.

KRITAVARMA But Ashwatthama
the Pandavas are not old men.
They are not unarmed.
They are not alone.

This unrighteous war
is over.

But since you are
burning with courage
go spread your adharma
somewhere else.

ASHWATTHAMA Don't mock me
 Kritavarma!
 I am ready to do even that.

 But since you sympathize with
 the Pandavas
 I must kill you first.
 Come, pick up your sword.

KRIPACHARYA Ashwatthama
 have you gone mad?
 Have you no sense of honor left in you?
 Put away your sword.

ASHWATTHAMA **Did you hear that, Father?**
 I am the only one
 who seeks revenge.

Dhristadyumna violated dharma
 when he killed you.
 Bhima violated dharma
 when he killed Duryodhana.
 Yet I
 poor, orphaned Ashwatthama
 must alone carry
 the burden of honor and dharma.

KRIPACHARYA Come
 sit next to me, son.
 We are with you.
 We too desire revenge
 but not through treachery.
 Find some other way.

ASHWATTHAMA Some other way?!
 Have the Pandavas left us
 any other options?

 The Pandava sense of honor
 was on display today
 when Bhima
 violating all the codes of war
 threw Duryodhana down
 smashed his thighs
 broke his arms and his neck.

 And then
 with his foot on Duryodhana's head
 Bhima stood on him with all his weight
 and roared like a wild beast!

The veins on Duryodhana's head
swelled and suddenly burst.
He screamed in pain.
His broken legs jerked.
He opened his eyes
and looked at his people.

KRIPACHARYA

Enough, Ashwatthama.
Perhaps your way
is now the only one left.

ASHWATTHAMA

Come
let us swear allegiance.
Do not delay.
Duryodhana may still
be alive.

Proclaim me the commander
of the army
in his presence.

I will find a way
to wreak vengeance.

KRIPACHARYA

Let's go.
Come, Kritavarma.

KRITAVARMA

No.
Leave me out of this.
You go.

Kripacharya and Ashwatthama exit.

KRITAVARMA

Have they left?
I am not a coward.
I too am pained
by Duryodhana's murder.

But what a grotesque spectacle this is!

A defeated Duryodhana
who does not have an unbroken
bone in his body
anointing
a madman as the commander
of an army of two—
old Kripacharya and cowardly Kritavarma!

Such is the plight
of the invincible Kauravas!

Let it be, Kritavarma.
Do not say anything more.
Having chosen to support
Duryodhana
stand by him
till your last breath.

Kripacharya enters.

Back so soon
Kripacharya?

KRIPACHARYA I couldn't bear to look
at that terrible sight anymore!

Two grim vultures
were watching Duryodhana
from the hollow of a tree.
Jackals and wolves
circled him
hiding behind one bush
or the other
 waiting
 watching with hungry eyes
 hungry eyes
 and drooling tongues.

KRITAVARMA *Sarcastically.*

Then how was Ashwatthama
anointed as the commander?

KRIPACHARYA Duryodhana said:
 “You are a brahmin
 Kripacharya.
 There is no water here.
 Anoint the brave Ashwatthama
 as the commander
 with your own sweat.

 I can't lift my arms
 to bless him.
 My shoulders
 are broken.”

I helped him
lift his lifeless arm
to bless Ashwatthama
but instead of blessing him
he screamed in agony.

Ashwatthama enters.

ASHWATTHAMA

But he will live.
He assured me:

“Ashwatthama
till you
bring me news
of your revenge
I shall refuse to die
even if the wild beasts
tear me from limb to limb.”

Did you hear that, Kritavarma?
By tomorrow
my vengeance will be complete.
I shall carry it out
even if no one follows me.

KRITAVARMA

Yawns.

I'll follow you—
Senapati.

ASHWATTHAMA

In a strange voice.

Go to sleep
my soldiers.
Tomorrow
Senapati Ashwatthama
will tell you
what to do.

Kripacharya and Kritavarma go to sleep. Ashwatthama picks up his bow and keeps watch.

How still the forest is
only I am awake
even the shadows
of the tamarind
the banyan
the peepul
are asleep...

Slowly the stage darkens. Somewhere in the forest a jackal howls. Other animals take up the cry. The stage is now dark. Only Ashwatthama can still be seen pacing up and down. Suddenly the harsh cawing of a crow is heard. A dancer, dressed in black and wearing the mask of a crow, enters. The dancer is lit by a bluish light. He spreads his wings and circles the stage twice, kneels, tilts his head to one side, and goes to sleep.

Then an owl hoots. A dancer, dressed in white and wearing the mask of an owl, enters from the right. His hands are like the claws of an owl. The moment he sees the crow, he stops. He flaps his wings excitedly and sharpens his claws.

A spotlight shows Ashwatthama watching the dance of war between the crow and the owl. He seems to be mesmerized.

The crow stirs and opens his eyes. He sees the owl and goes back to sleep. The owl watches the crow nervously, and prods him to make sure that he is really asleep. Then he attacks him. Both fight ferociously. The noise and the screams are terrible. For some time, both are in darkness. Then the lights come on. The owl's claws are red with blood. A few crow feathers float across the stage. The owl picks up the feathers and performs in frenzy the tandava—dance of death.

The light on Ashwatthama becomes brighter. He breaks out of his trance and begins to laugh loudly. The owl stops dancing and looks at him nervously. The owl throws the black feathers of the crow at Ashwatthama and rushes offstage. Ashwatthama picks up the feathers and shouts in excitement.

ASHWATTHAMA Got it!
 Got it!
 I have got it!

The stage is now fully lit. Ashwatthama dances around the stage in great excitement. He holds the blood-covered feathers in his hands. Startled, Kritavarma and Kripacharya wake up. Kripacharya draws his sword.

KRIPACHARYA What have you found?

ASHWATTHAMA I have found the truth!
 Ashwatthama
 the beast
 has found the truth!

KRITAVARMA These bloody and tattered feathers?!

ASHWATTHAMA Yes
 bloody and tattered
 like Yudhishthira's
 half-truth!

KRIPACHARYA Where are you going?

ASHWATTHAMA To the Pandava camp.
 They must be unarmed and asleep.
 The victorious Pandavas!

Ashwatthama fastens his cummerbund.

KRIPACHARYA Now?

ASHWATTHAMA Now!
 At once!

They are alone.
Krishna has gone to Hastinapur
to console Gandhari.
When will we get
a better chance?

KRITAVARMA Is that the Senapati's order?

ASHWATTHAMA *Without having heard Kritavarma.*

Did he say:
"The man or the beast...?"

Like a beast
I will crush
Dhristadyumna
with my feet—
like a mad beast
trampling on a lotus flower.

I will not even spare
Uttara
who is carrying Abhimanyu's son
and the future
of the entire Pandava clan
in her womb!

KRIPACHARYA No, no, no
I will not let you do that!

ASHWATTHAMA I will do it!
I will do it alone.
Even if you do not help me
I will do it!
I will!

With his head bowed, Kritavarma follows Ashwatthama.

KRIPACHARYA Stop!
Ashwatthama
Think for a moment...

*Ashwatthama exits without listening to him. Kripacharya follows him, calling,
"Ashwatthama...Ashwatthama...Ashwatthama..." Kripacharya's voice slowly fades.
The stage is filled with the clatter of three chariot wheels and the thunder of horses.*

I N T E R L U D E

Feathers, Wheels, and Bandages

The old mendicant enters. The stage is lit by a ghostly light, casting a weblike pattern over everything.

MENDICANT

I am the old mendicant
murdered by Ashwatthama.
I was a false prophet
now I am only a sad specter.

Life is an eternal river.
Death grabbed my arm
and dragged me to its shore.

Uninvolved
detached
I now stand upon the shore
and realize
that
this age
is a blind ocean
bounded on all sides
by mountains
and caves
and high cliffs.
Terrible storms
thunder down the mountains
and churn the ocean waters
into a raging whirlpool.

Life in this age
is not a smooth-flowing river
but a dark and tormented ocean
that seethes and surges
like a pit of snakes
in which thousands of serpents
blindly twist and turn
coil and uncoil
creep and curl
and crawl over each other.

Similarly a thousand
streams and rivulets
slither and slide
towards the ocean
like blind snakes.

In this age
life is like
a blind and turbulent ocean.

White snakeskins
float on the surface of the sea.

White bandages
cover Gandhari's eyes
and bind the wounds of soldiers.

With my visionary powers
I shall stop the flow
of this narrative
and still
the characters in their places
assign them a function
a purpose
so that I can
rip them open
and understand
their inner contradictions.

Here are
the characters
raised by my visionary powers.

They appear
as specters.

Yuyutsu, Vidura, and Sanjaya walk onto the stage as if they are in a trance. They walk mechanically and form a line behind the old mendicant. One by one, they come forward, speak, and fall back in line again.

YUYUTSU'S SPECTER I am Yuyutsu.

I am like a firm wheel
that was fixed to a chariot
throughout the war.
But now I feel
as if I had spun
on the wrong axle
and have lost my bearings.

SANJAYA'S SPECTER

I am Sanjaya.

Exiled from the world of action
nailed to the axle
between two great wheels
I am only a small
useless
decorative wheel
which turns
when the great wheels turn
but which neither touches the ground
nor forces the chariot forward.

My greatest misfortune is
that I can never
stop spinning on that axle.

VIDURA'S SPECTER

I am Vidura
a devout and righteous
follower of Krishna.

In an age when everything is
so strangely complicated
my faith is simple and unassuming.

But now my voice is full of doubt
for it seems that my Lord
is like a useless axle
which has lost its wheels
and cannot turn by itself.

But it is a sin to doubt
and I do not want to sin.

There is a sound of bells offstage. A peacock feather floats across the stage. The old mendicant picks it up.

MENDICANT

What is this?
A peacock feather?
It must have fallen off
Krishna's crown
when he was returning from Hastinapur
after trying to console Gandhari.

He stops to listen to the sounds offstage.

Yes, they are the bells of his chariot.
Should I try to stop him
just as I have stopped the flow of this story?

He fails to break the spell of Krishna's presence.

No, I cannot stop him.
He is the embodiment of time
as it flows in its stately dignity.

The sound of another chariot speeding by is heard.

Yes, there is another chariot
which even Krishna cannot stop.
It is the chariot of my murderer
Ashwatthama.

His hatred can never be appeased.
It is terrifying like the blood-soaked feather
of a black crow!
Can a small peacock feather
defeat it?

Will Krishna be able to squash
this black serpent of hate
which has raised its head once more?

The sounds of chariot wheels grow louder.

The chariots are speeding away
and I can only watch helplessly.
I can no longer stop
the flow of this story.

Krishna's chariot has been left behind
in the surrounding darkness.

Look!
Ashwatthama's chariot
has reached the Pandava camp!

The sounds of chariot wheels stop.

But wait
who is that giantlike being
standing in the dark
like a wall of black granite
before Ashwatthama?

He covers his eyes in fear. A terrifying roar is heard offstage. The lights dim and the stage grows dark.

ACT FOUR

Gandhari's Curse

CHORUS

It was Shankara
Ashwatthama saw
terrifying and enormous
standing before the gate
of the Pandava camp
threatening annihilation.

It was Shankara
Ashwatthama saw
thousands of venomous snakes
encircling his arms
like amulets.

Wrathful
he stood
before the Pandava camp
threatening complete annihilation.

“Defeat me
before you enter!”
He roared in a voice
more dreadful than thunder.

Ashwatthama attacked him at once
with swords, arrows, spears, and clubs.

Who else
could have withstood
Ashwatthama's rage
his superhuman violence?

Shankara's body
endured
each blow
absorbed every thrust
till Ashwatthama
exhausted
accepted defeat

sank to his knees
and begged for
mercy.

ASHWATTHAMA

From offstage.

O Shankara
whose braided hair burns wild
like flames around cauldron fires
bless me!

O Shankara
whose tresses stream and swirl
like storm-entangled whirlpools
bless me!

O Shankara
whose anointed forehead shines and shimmers
in the silver light of the new moon
bless me!

O Shankara
whose radiant face glows with splendor
and makes every moment of mine a delight
bless me!

CHORUS

Easy to please
easy to appease
Shiva raised his hand
and blessed him.

“Ashwatthama
you will be victorious.

The Pandavas have lost
their sense of righteousness.

Because I loved Krishna
I protected them
gave them victory
renewed their confidence.
But they have violated
the dharma of war
and opened
the doors for their destruction.”

Easy to please
easy to appease
Shiva raised his hand
and blessed him.

When the curtain rises, we see Gandhari seated. Vidura and Sanjaya, who are standing, are in the midst of a conversation.

GANDHARI What happened next
 Sanjaya?
 Tell me
 what happened after that?

SANJAYA *Speaks mechanically.*

 Blessed by Shiva
 that brave warrior
 reached Dhristadyumna's tent
 with the speed of lightning
 dragged him off his bed
 knelt on his chest
 and wrung his neck
 till his eyeballs popped out
 like stones from unripe mangoes
 and blood oozed
 out of the empty sockets.

GANDHARI He blinded him first!
 That was kind of Ashwatthama!

SANJAYA Speaking each word with great difficulty
 Dhristadyumna pleaded:
 "At least kill me with a sword."

 Ashwatthama shouted:
 "No!
 You are a coward
 and deserve to die like an animal.
 You killed Drona when he was unarmed.
 This is my revenge."

 Then he kicked him
 again and again
 till he died.

VIDURA Enough!
 Stop it.

GANDHARI No, go on!
 What happened next?

SANJAYA Hearing the commotion
 the Pandava soldiers woke up.
 Still rubbing their eyes
 they staggered out of their tents
 only to be slaughtered

by Ashwatthama's
poison-tipped arrows.

When Shatanik couldn't find a weapon
he picked up a chariot wheel
and attacked him.

Ashwatthama
cut off his legs.

Shikhandi was
sleeping at a distance.
Ashwatthama's arrow split his head in two
drilled through the sandalwood cot
and buried itself in the ground.

GANDHARI What happened next?

VIDURA Your heart is made of stone, Gandhari!

GANDHARI Diamonds are quarried
out of stone mines!
Do not interrupt, Vidura.
Go on, Sanjaya.

VIDURA Listen to me
not to Sanjaya.

The vengeance
was terrible.

Kripacharya and Kritavarma
waited outside the tents.
When children, old men, and servants
ran out in terror
Kritavarma's arrows
cut them down.

Frightened elephants
trumpeted wildly
smashed the tents
and trampled the women
sleeping inside
to death.

And then
our two heroes
set the Pandava camp
on fire.

GANDHARI I wish I had seen that
with my own eyes!

Ashwatthama must have been
surrounded
by a halo of light!

SANJAYA

Roaring like a lion
Ashwatthama ran
like a thing possessed
through fire and smoke
through blood, guts, and bones
wounded horses and broken chariots
corpses and severed heads
slashed limbs and shattered ribs.

Dripping with blood
his sword
seemed like an extension
of his hand.

GANDHARI

Stop, Sanjaya
stop.

I beg of you!
With your visionary powers
give me a glimpse
of that Ashwatthama!

SANJAYA

It's a horrible sight!
He was cruel.
He was dreadful.

GANDHARI

But he was heroic!
Ashwatthama achieved
what a hundred sons of mine
could not!
What Drona could not!
Bhishma could not!

SANJAYA

Vyasa granted me this boon
for the limited duration
of the war.
I do not know
when that power
will be snatched away from me!

GANDHARI

That is why
I demand it now.

Krishna
who is unjust
will never spare
him after this!

SANJAYA

I shall try.

May the strength
of all my good deeds
in the past
grant you a vision
of Ashwatthama!

He concentrates on his prayers.

May all the walls disappear
may all the veils of maya be lifted
and the vision be clear!

May the distances vanish
and all that lies beyond
the visible horizon
appear before us!

The curtain at the back of the stage rises and the foreground becomes dark.

It is dark.

This is the place
where Duryodhana
lay dying
till yesterday.

Who are those
two armed soldiers?
Kritavarma and Kripacharya?

A voice from backstage calls, "Maharaj Duryodhana! Maharaj Duryodhana!"

KRIPACHARYA

Kritavarma
shoot a fire-tipped arrow
so we can see in the dark.

KRITAVARMA

Looks towards the wings.

There is Duryodhana.
I am sure
some wild beast
has dragged his half-dead body
under that bush.

KRIPACHARYA

He is still alive!
He wants to tell us something.

KRITAVARMA

I can't understand
what he is trying to say.
The blood
oozing from his mouth

has coagulated
and formed a thick black clot
around his lips.
It must have also choked his throat.

KRIPACHARYA *Speaking slowly and loudly to Duryodhana.*

Maharaj
Ashwatthama
the new general of our army
has completely destroyed
the Pandava camp.
There is not a soldier left alive.

KRITAVARMA
Maharaj's face
is glowing
with joy.

KRIPACHARYA His eyes are open!

KRITAVARMA Whom are they looking for?
Ashwatthama?

KRIPACHARYA Maharaj
Ashwatthama has gone
to fetch his brahmastra
and his talisman.
As soon as he returns
the three of us
shall seek refuge
in the thick forest.

KRITAVARMA Tears are flowing down his eyes!

The light falls on Gandhari and Sanjaya.

SANJAYA Why don't you
remove the blindfold?

Look, Ashwatthama is coming
this way!

GANDHARI No, no, no!
I shall not be able to watch
Duryodhana die.

Let my eyes remain blindfolded
Sanjaya.

Let them be blindfolded.
But continue to describe
what is happening there.

VIDURA I cannot see anything!

SANJAYA I can see
Ashwatthama coming this way.
His head is bowed
and he is silent.

KRIPACHARYA Maharaj
Ashwatthama is here.

Since you cannot
lift your hand
open your eyes
and bless him.

ASHWATTHAMA No, Maharaj.
No.
I am still not worthy of it.

I have avenged
the sinful murder of my father
by Dhristadyumna.
But I shall have to avenge
your murder.

Yet another task
remains unfinished.

Uttara is still safe.
She will give birth to a son
heir to the Pandava dynasty.

But, Maharaj
I shall complete my task.

When you meet Drona
in the kingdom beyond the sun
tell him—

KRITAVARMA Whom are you talking to
Ashwatthama?
Maharaj is dead.

Mournful music plays in the background. Kripacharya covers his face and falls to the ground in grief. Gandhari screams and faints.

ASHWATTHAMA Who screamed?

Gandhari
I promise
that just as Krishna destroyed
all the sons

born of your womb
I will destroy
the child
in Uttara's womb.

I will not let that child
be born.

Let Krishna
try to protect him
with his yogic powers.

The curtain at the back falls.

GANDHARI Sanjaya
 Sanjaya
 take off my blindfold.
 I want to gaze upon Ashwatthama
 and transform his body
 into a bright diamond.

There, Sanjaya
I have taken off this blindfold
and flung it away.

Where is Ashwatthama?

SANJAYA Something strange has happened.
 Suddenly a curtain has fallen
 before my visionary eyes.

GANDHARI Quick!
 Show me
 before these eyes
 are blinded with tears.

SANJAYA May these surrounding walls
 vanish!
 Let these walls vanish!

Gandhari, Gandhari!
Something has happened
to my visionary power!

Wall!
Walls!
There are walls everywhere!
I cannot open my eyes.

Trying to show the truth
to the blind
must I too become blind?

VIDURA Sanjaya
can't you see
the forest or Duryodhana or...

SANJAYA No, Vidura
only walls
and walls and more walls!

VIDURA It is as if
the time
for everything to end
has come.

Gandhari sits still.

SANJAYA Vyasa
why did you
grant me vision
for such a short time?

From today
I shall never
be satisfied
by the sight
of this limited world.

My soul shall forever
long to break its limits
and merge with the infinite.

VIDURA Come, Gandhari.
It is time to leave Hastinapur
and perform
the holy rites for your family.

Sanjaya
inform all our kinsmen
and our dependents
that we shall
leave the battlefield today.

SANJAYA *As he exits.*

For eighteen days
this terrible
but exhilarating war
gave me visionary powers
and then
deprived me of them.

Yuyutsu enters.

VIDURA Come, Gandhari.
Let us go.
Call Dhritarashtra.
Yuyutsu
you come with us too.

YUYUTSU How can these hands
which have shed blood
make ritual offerings
for the dead?

They were my brothers
my kinsmen.

Tell me, Krishna
how can I make
ritual offerings
with these hands?

Everyone exits. The stage grows dark. Then the curtain at the back rises.

CHORUS They have left.
 The Kaurava city is desolate.
They have left.
 The diamond throne is empty.

They have left.

 The solitary streets
 the city squares
 the homes
 the courtyards
 the gold-domed palaces
 have been taken over
 by wild beasts.

They have left.

 The Kaurava city is desolate.

They have left.

 Their widows in chariots
 lead the procession.
 Dhritarashtra, Yuyutsu
 Sanjaya, Vidura, and Gandhari
 slowly shuffle after them.

They have left
to perform the last rites
for Gandhari's
dead sons.

Dhritarashtra, Yuyutsu, Vidura, Sanjaya, and Gandhari enter.

DHRITARASHTRA My body is old
and broken.
I cannot walk
any farther.

VIDURA Sanjaya
stop for a moment.

YUYUTSU Whose chariots are those
beyond the bushes
racing past at such speed?

SANJAYA The one
over there is Kripacharya's.

VIDURA And the other
is Kritavarma's.

GANDHARI Sanjaya
is Ashwatthama there too?

VIDURA Yes
Ashwatthama is there too.

DHRITARASHTRA Let him go.

GANDHARI No, stop him.

SANJAYA Stop, Ashwatthama
stop!
I am Sanjaya.
Maharaj Dhritarashtra
and Gandhari
are with me
so are Vidura and Yu—

DHRITARASHTRA Sanjaya
do not utter Yuyutsu's name.
Ashwatthama in his rage
will not spare his life.

 How will I live
if I lose him too?

GANDHARI Especially when the son
is Yuyutsu.

 Hide, Yuyutsu
and save your life.
Now

you are the only protector
of your blind father and old mother.

Come, Sanjaya
let us go.

Gandhari exits with Sanjaya.

YUYUTSU I will endure these taunts
 and live.
 But for whom?
 For whom?

DHRITARASHTRA Son
 you were conceived in blindness.
 It defined the boundary of your existence.

 You tried to escape the enclosing circle
 and live in a circle of light.

YUYUTSU Was that a sin?

Gandhari and Sanjaya return.

DHRITARASHTRA Have you returned, Sanjaya?

SANJAYA Ashwatthama
 is completely transformed.

 He is no longer
 a brave soldier
 but the incarnation of fear.

 He trembles so much
 that the reins of the chariot
 slip out of his hands.

The sound of a conch shell is heard.

GANDHARI He has gone mad.
 He says
 he will cover himself
 with leaves
 and live in a forest.

 He is terrified
 of Krishna.

Suddenly, there is an explosion in the distance. A flash of lightning bursts from the back of the stage.

SANJAYA Krishna and the Pandavas
 are coming this way
 in search of Ashwatthama.

GANDHARI Krishna will not be able
to kill Ashwatthama.

For with my glance
I had bestowed
upon his body
the hardness of a diamond.

Another explosion is heard in the distance.

VIDURA It seems the Lord
has tracked him down.

DHRITARASHTRA Sanjaya
can you see anything?

SANJAYA Vyasa has taken away
my visionary powers.

YUYUTSU The sky is lit
by Arjuna's fiery arrows.

VIDURA All the trees and bushes
have been reduced to ash.

Two smoldering arrows fall on the stage.

DHRITARASHTRA Sanjaya
let us go far away
from this battlefield.

GANDHARI Krishna
if you dare to harm
Ashwatthama...

Smoldering arrows continue to fall on the stage.

VIDURA Let us go, Gandhari.
It is not safe here.
Fire-tipped arrows
are falling all around.

They exit. The stage is empty for a few minutes. Then there is the sound of conch shells mingled with loud explosions. A flash of lightning. Suddenly, Ashwatthama runs onto the stage. An arrow has pierced his neck. He pulls it out. Blood gushes from the wound. Arrows whiz past him. He staggers, but regains his balance. His face glows with anger.

ASHWATTHAMA Arjuna
defend yourself.

Defend yourself.

I wanted to
cover myself with leaves
and live in a forest.

But Krishna's
insatiable hunger for war
will not be satisfied
till all the Pandavas
have been killed.

So be it.

Here is the brahmastra.

Arjuna
remember all your
past deeds.

Not even a hundred million Krishnas
can counter the brahmastra.

Listen all you Gods
in the sky above
who are watching
this fight
you are my witnesses.
Arjuna has compelled me
to fight.

There
I have released the brahmastra!

He releases the brahmastra. Lightning, brighter than the sun, flashes across the stage. There is a roar followed by complete darkness.

VYASA *Speaking from above the stage.*

What have you done, Ashwatthama?!
You depraved man!
What have you done?!

ASHWATTHAMA Who is inviting his own death?

How dare you stop me
from seeking revenge!

VYASA I am Vyasa.

Oh you vile man
do you even know
the consequences
of using the brahmastra?

For centuries to come
nothing will grow on earth.
Newborn children
shall be deformed.

Men shall become grotesque.

All the wisdom men gathered
in the Satya, Treta, and Dvapara Yugs
shall be lost forever.

Serpents shall hiss
from every ear of corn
and rivers shall flow
with molten fire.

ASHWATTHAMA

Let the world
be reduced to ash, Vyasa!
Let there be a cataclysm!

Let me see
if Krishna has the power to save it.

VYASA

You are a monster!

Even before Krishna could say anything
Arjuna released
his brahmastra
towards the sky.

Soon the two weapons
shall collide in the sky.

The sun shall be extinguished.
The earth shall become
a wasteland
of ash and stones!

Sound of a loud explosion offstage. A flash of lightning is followed by complete darkness.

ASHWATTHAMA

What could I have done?

Arjuna left me no other choice.

I was alone.

And Krishna
who respects no law
was determined to kill me
with the help of the Pandavas.

Sounds of terrifying screams offstage.

VYASA Listen, Arjuna.
I am Vyasa.
 Recall your brahmastra.

Ashwatthama
do not let your cowardice
reduce the earth to a wasteland
of ash and stones.

Recall your brahmastra
surrender your talismanic gem
and retire into some forest hermitage.

ASHWATTHAMA Vyasa, I am powerless!

I only know how to release
the brahmastra.

My father did not teach me
how to recall it.

VYASA The sun shall be extinguished!
The earth shall become a wasteland
of ash and stones!

ASHWATTHAMA Then listen to me, Vyasa.
Listen, Krishna.

The weapon
aimed at Uttara's womb
shall find its target.

It cannot be recalled!

Sound of a terrifying explosion offstage.

VYASA You are a beast!
You are a beast!
You are a beast!

ASHWATTHAMA *Laughs wildly.*

I was not born a beast.
Yudhishtira made me one.

The front of the stage is now fully lit. The lamentations of the widows of the Pandava soldiers become louder. Gandhari and Sanjaya enter.

GANDHARI Keep walking, Sanjaya!
Who is wailing?
Can you hear them?

SANJAYA Ashwatthama's brahmastra
has destroyed the child
in Uttara's womb.

GANDHARI He will fulfill his vow.
He will!

SANJAYA *After a pause.*

But, Gandhari
Krishna will
never forgive him.

GANDHARI Do not stop, Sanjaya.

Krishna will never
be able to kill him.

Even if Krishna's disc
slices me into shreds
even then
I shall go to the place
where Duryodhana lies
in the sleep of death.

Let us go, Sanjaya.

Gandhari and Sanjaya exit. Dhritarashtra and Yuyutsu enter.

DHRITARASHTRA Son
let me grant you
my share of life
for you must live.

If Ashwatthama's brahmastra
has destroyed the child
in Uttara's womb
then who knows
Yudhishtira may leave
the kingdom to you.

YUYUTSU *Laughing bitterly.*

And so
Ashwatthama's bestial act
may restore my lost inheritance.

No, Maharaj.
No.
Is my life not miserable enough?!

Shouts of victory from the Pandava camp can be heard. Vidura enters.

DHRITARASHTRA Who is rejoicing?

VIDURA Krishna
has saved the child
in Uttara's womb!

DHRITARASHTRA *After a moment's silence.*
How, Vidura?

VIDURA Krishna said:
 "Let the brahmastra
 fall where it will.
 I shall exchange my life
 for Uttara's stillborn child."

DHRITARASHTRA And did Krishna
spare Ashwatthama's life?

VIDURA Yes, he spared him!
But after cursing him
for infanticide
and forcing him
to surrender
his talismanic gem...

 His talismanic gem
in exchange for his life
under the shadow of a curse forever.

 And then
depressed
head bowed in defeat
Ashwatthama left.

YUYUTSU I dread to think
what Gandhari
will do when she hears
of Ashwatthama's defeat.

DHRITARASHTRA You go ahead
and find her.
I shall follow
as fast as I can.

Vidura exits quickly. Dhritarashtra and Yuyutsu slowly follow. After a pause, Sanjaya, Vidura, and Gandhari enter.

SANJAYA This is the place.
This is the very spot where
Duryodhana fell.

Here is his golden helmet.
This is his club.
And there lies his armor.

Gandhari removes her blindfold, touches each object, cradles the armor, and begins to mourn.

VIDURA Endure this
 with courage, Gandhari.
 Armor can offer
 no real protection.

 Only virtuous actions
 which man performs
 by his own free will
 can be his protection
 his safety.

Gandhari suddenly looks offstage and utters a cry of surprise.

GANDHARI Who is that man
 sitting in silence
 next to the bush?
 Is he alive?

VIDURA Gandhari
 do not look at him!

GANDHARI He looks like Ashwatthama!

SANJAYA No, no!
 He is hideous.
 His body is covered
 with boils and open sores.

 He smells worse
 than a diseased dog!

GANDHARI He is going away.
 Who is he, Vidura?
 Stop him!

VIDURA He is Ashwatthama, Gandhari.
 Let him go.

 For the sin of infanticide
 Krishna has cursed him
 with immortality
 and condemned him
 to live forever and ever.

Cut and slashed by the Lord's disc
his body shall fester forever.
Soiled bandages shall staunch
the blood that shall flow
from his wounds forever and ever.

Lacerated, defiled, filthy, and corrupted
he shall wander
through thick and deep forests
forever and ever.

His body shall be covered with boils
his skin shall fester with pus and scabs
and spittle and phlegm and bile
and he shall live forever and ever.

Excruciating pain will rip
through each limb.

Every bone in his body
will be corroded by suffering
but the Lord shall not let him die.

**He will become an abomination
but he shall live forever and ever.**

GANDHARI

Stop him, Sanjaya!
For his sake
I will challenge
Krishna today.

SANJAYA

He has gone.
Perhaps he had come
to pay his last respects
to these bones of Duryodhana.

GANDHARI

These bones?
Are they all
that remain
of my son?

VIDURA

Gandhari
be courageous.

GANDHARI

In a heart-rending voice.

So
these bones
are all that remain
of my son!

What have you done, Krishna?
What have you done?

Hear me now!
You will have to hear me today!

Hear me, Gandhari
who has sacrificed everything
who has lived a virtuous life
who has lived a life of penance
and has earned the right
to tell you this:
 If you wanted
 you could have stopped the war.

I did not give birth
to this pile of bones.

You incited Bhima's adharma
but you inflicted
a vile curse on Ashwatthama
who had committed no crime!

 You used your divine power
 for unjust ends.

If my sacrifice has any meaning
if my penance has any sanction in dharma
then listen, Krishna, to what I have to say:

 You may be a god
 you may be omnipotent
 whatever you are
 whoever you are
 I curse you
 and I curse
 all your friends and kinsmen.
 They shall attack and kill each other.
 They shall eat each other
 like rabid dogs.

 And many years later
 after you have witnessed
 their destruction
 you will return to this forest
 only to be killed
 like a wild animal
 by an ordinary hunter!

Gentle sounds of a flute can be heard floating across the stage. The shadow of Krishna falls upon the rear wall of the stage.

KRISHNA

Mother.
I may be a god.
I may be omnipotent.
But I am also your son
and you are my mother.

I said to Arjuna:
“I take upon my shoulders
the responsibility
of all your good and evil deeds.”

In this terrible war of eighteen days
I am the only one who died a million times.
Every time a soldier was struck down
every time a soldier fell to the ground
it was I who was struck down
it was I who was wounded
it was I who fell to the ground.

It is I who shall flow
in the pus
in the blood
in the spittle
that will ooze
out of Ashwatthama’s body
from age to age
forever and ever.

If I am life
then, Mother
I am also death.

I accept your curse, Mother!

GANDHARI

O Krishna
what have you done!

Begins to weep loudly.

I did not weep like this
for my hundred sons.

O Krishna
as a mother
deep and profound
is my affection for you.

You could have refused
to accept my curse!

Had you done so
would I have grieved?

I was bitter
heartbroken and forlorn.

I had lost all my sons!

KRISHNA

No, Mother
do not say that.

I am alive
I may be a god
I may be omnipotent
but I am your son
and you are my mother.

GANDHARI

Weeping.

Oh, what have I done, Vidura?
What have I done?

The lights begin to dim.

CHORUS

From the moment Krishna
accepted Gandhari's curse
the stars began to grow dim.

The word "honor"
which had gathered meaning over ages
lost all value for the living.

Disenchanted poets
forgot to measure and scan their lines.

Everyone heard the curse
but no one had the courage
to speak to Gandhari.

Its corrosive shadow
spread from age to age
and stained every heart
and every soul
with sorrow.

ACT FIVE

Victory and a Series of Suicides

CHORUS

Days and weeks
months and years passed by.

Scorched earth
slowly turned
green and fertile again.

Yudhishtira had finally won
his throne and his kingdom
but the old city of the Kauravas
never did regain its days of glory.

The Pandavas were victorious
but their confidence was shattered.

Krishna was their guardian, their counselor
—the shaping spirit of their days—
but he himself was under a curse.

And so the Pandavas
who had founded their kingdom
on the ruins of war
began their confused and inauspicious reign
without the customary rites of virtue.

Bhima was proud by nature
and intellectually dull.

Arjuna had grown old and weary
before his time.

Nakula was ignorant
and Sahadeva was retarded from birth.

Yudhishtira
his brow marked deep with sorrow
was the only one
who saw the future
as a nightmare.

Yudhishtira
was the only one

who understood
that when Krishna
—still under the shadow of the curse—
met with a violent death as prophesied
the days they had sown together
in the battlefield
would yield a harvest of such bitterness
that all the wisdom of past ages
would be covered with dust and darkness.

His head resting on his knees
lost in his own dark thoughts
Yudhishtira often sat
on the stone steps of the palace
and stared with vacant eyes
at the encroaching darkness.

The curtain rises. Two old guards stand at the back of the stage. Yudhishtira is sitting in the foreground.

YUDHISHTHIRA

What is the cause of my sorrow?

Though I won the war
a ferocious war
full of treachery
and bloodshed
and slaughter
I am alone
and defeated.

Those I had fought for
my kinsmen, my brothers, my family
are either ignorant or foolish
insolent or weary.

Behind the throne I won
stretches a long and unbroken
tradition of blindness and stupidity.

The people are still cast
in the ugly mold of the old regime.

I tremble
as I watch the encroaching darkness
and hear the sinister steps
of the coming age.

And yet
I must continue to live on
and wear in my crown

the jewel plucked
from the forehead of that murderer
Ashwatthama.

O Duryodhana
my brother
you are more fortunate than I am
for having left this world
before me.

I am alone
and defeated.

I sit here
and listen
to the sinister steps
of the coming age.

Whom can I warn?

My brothers
are either ignorant or foolish
insolent or weary.

The sound of loud and vulgar laughter is heard offstage.

Perhaps
Bhima has insulted
someone again.

Bhima's wild laughter breaks in once again.

That is an example
of my family's grim humor.

In a few years
the surrounding darkness
shall swallow them all.

But who is enthralled
by Bhima's
insolent wit?

Sounds of applause and laughter offstage. Vidura and Kripacharya enter in great agitation.

VIDURA

Maharaj
Bhima has become intolerable.
Who will stop his impudence?

YUDHISHTHIRA

What has he done this time, Vidura?

VIDURA What he does every day.
 He has humiliated Yuyutsu
 once again.

KRIPACHARYA Encouraged
 the crowd mocks Yuyutsu
 for having lost his voice.

YUDHISHTHIRA I wonder
 what has happened
 to Yuyutsu's voice.
 He cannot speak a word.

VIDURA Over the years
 he has endured
 the hatred
 of his family
 and the insults
 of the people of this city.
 He was a devout worshipper
 of Krishna
 whose own life is now
 under the shadow
 of Gandhari's curse.

KRIPACHARYA You gave Yuyutsu refuge.
 But
 Yuyutsu lost his power of speech
 the day
 Gandhari and blind Dhritarashtra
 retired to the forest ashram
 unable to bear
 Bhima's angry taunts.

YUDHISHTHIRA He has suffered much.
 He alone dared to stand up
 against his family
 and risk his life.
 But in the end
 his faith was betrayed.
 Constantly abused
 he cannot even retaliate
 like that brute
 Ashwatthama.

Bhima roars again.

KRIPACHARYA

Maharaj
come and console
Yuyutsu yourself.

Exit Yudhishthira, Vidura, and Kripacharya. The old guards walk up to the front of the stage.

GUARD 1 Some went mad.

GUARD 2 Some were cursed.

GUARD 1 Yet we remained...

GUARD 2 as we always were.

GUARD 1 The ruler changed...

GUARD 2 ...but the conditions remained the same.

GUARD 1 The previous ruler was a better king.

GUARD 2 He was blind...

GUARD 1 ...but at least he knew how to rule.
This one is a saint and a philosopher.

GUARD 2 How can he rule?

GUARD 1 He does not know
what his people are like.

GUARD 2 Knowledge and morality...

GUARD 1 what can we do with them?

GUARD 2 Grind them?

GUARD 1 Or eat them?

GUARD 2 Wear them?

GUARD 1 Or lie on them?

GUARD 2 If only we had enough grain...

GUARD 1 ...clear instructions...

GUARD 2 ...a strong leader...

GUARD 1 ...and orders we could blindly follow...

GUARD 2 ...to wage war
or live in peace.

GUARD 1 He does not know
what his people are like.

Yuyutsu enters. The guards fall silent and retreat to their earlier positions. Yuyutsu makes incoherent attempts to speak, and then exits in great agitation. A few moments later, Vidura and Kripacharya enter.

VIDURA Have you seen Yuyutsu?

One of the guards points in the direction Yuyutsu has exited.

KRIPACHARYA His life is unfortunate.

He wanders through the city streets
aimlessly.

VIDURA Has he not been
abused enough
in the palace?

Must he also wander
through the city streets
so that the people
can insult him?

KRIPACHARYA Look!
Over there!

He is being followed
by a large crowd
of ragged children
and lame, deformed, mutilated
beggars.

They are taunting him!
Abusing him!

VIDURA Oh no!
Someone has thrown
a stone at him!

Worried, he goes to help Yuyutsu.

KRIPACHARYA Under Yudhishtira's reign
this is the fate of Yuyutsu
who upheld dharma!

Vidura enters, supporting Yuyutsu. Yuyutsu's face is bleeding. Vidura wipes the blood from Yuyutsu's face with the hem of his robe. The mute soldier follows them. He throws a stone at Yuyutsu and manages to make a sound like wild laughter.

VIDURA Guard
who let this beggar in here?

Yuyutsu, come with me.

The mute soldier indicates through gestures: "He broke my legs. Why should I not seek revenge?"

KRIPACHARYA Yuyutsu broke only your legs
 but today I shall break
 every bone in your body
 till you are dead.

Kripacharya grabs a spear from one of the guards and rushes towards the mute soldier, who turns and hobbles away. Yuyutsu restrains Kripacharya, then snatches the spear from his hand and plunges it into his own heart. Yuyutsu staggers offstage. His terrifying scream is heard from the wings. Vidura runs after him.

VIDURA *Speaking from offstage.*

 Maharaj
 Yuyutsu has committed suicide.

 Help, Kripacharya!

Kripacharya exits. The two old guards come forward.

GUARD 1 In war or in peace...
GUARD 2 there is always bloodshed.
GUARD 1 If there are weapons...
GUARD 2 they will be used.
GUARD 1 Till now
 these weapons...
GUARD 2 were raised
 against our enemies.
GUARD 1 Now they will be used
 against us.
GUARD 2 Our weapons
 which were useless till now...
GUARD 1 have at last served
GUARD 2 some purpose today!

Sounds of Bhima's wild laughter offstage. Kripacharya enters.

KRIPACHARYA The brothers of Yudhishtira
 are either foolish or ignorant
 insolent or arrogant.

 They even laugh at death!

 They cannot decipher
 what Yuyutsu wrote today

with his own blood
on this war-torn land.

His suicide shall leave its mark
on our entire civilization—
its philosophy, dharma, art,
society, and politics.

From now on
man shall work towards
his own destruction.

Vidura enters.

VIDURA

It is sometimes possible
for one who slaughters his own people
or murders his mother or his beloved
or kills women and children
to find his way to salvation.

But the one who kills himself
wanders like a haunted spirit
in realms of darkness
forever and ever.

KRIPACHARYA

And that shall be
the fate of Yuyutsu.

Today
in this magnificent palace of Yudhishtira
I can hear the ominous footsteps
of a future age.

I only agreed to stay here
all these years
to teach Parikshit
the art of war.

But Yudhishtira's kingdom
is decadent
and cowardly.
It is bent upon its own
destruction.

I must leave
Hastinapur at once.

That would be the wisest thing to do.

Self-destruction
is a fatal disease

which spreads
like an epidemic.

VIDURA But you are a brahmin...

KRIPACHARYA No! No!

I was a soldier once.

I can no longer live
in Yudhishtira's kingdom.

It is bent upon
its own annihilation.

VIDURA In Yudhishtira's kingdom
people will commit suicide.
Brahmins will seek protection.

O Lord
what kind of peace
have you given us?!

What will happen
when Dhritarashtra
in his forest ashram
learns of Yuyutsu's death?

Yudhishtira enters.

YUDHISHTHIRA There is still some life
left in Yuyutsu.

VIDURA If he is still alive
send him to my hut.
I shall protect him
nurse him.

It shall be a small recompense
for all he has suffered
in Krishna's cause...

Yudhishtira and Vidura exit. The lights become dim.

GUARD 1 Why has it suddenly become dark?

GUARD 2 There are clouds of smoke over the forest!

GUARD 1 The forest is ablaze!

*The guards exit. The entire stage is slowly filled with the glow of the forest fire.
Sanjaya and Dhritarashtra are surrounded by flames.*

DHRITARASHTRA Let it be, Sanjaya.

You shall not be able
to save me today.

I am old and feeble.
How far can I run
from the fire?

SANJAYA

There is a shelter
not far from here.
Let us go there, Maharaj.

Turns to look back.

Oh, Gandhari has collapsed!

Hurry, Gandhari!
Hurry!

DHRITARASHTRA

Sanjaya
all this effort
is now futile.

Leave me here.

I am old and blind.

All my life
I have wandered
in darkness.

Now I feel
as if the flames
have surrounded me
in a circle of light
and I am free.

All my life
I refused to see
the truth.

Let me feel the truth today
and wear it
on these aged bones
like a garland
of glowing embers.

SANJAYA

The fire is spreading.

Oh no
Gandhari is
surrounded by the flames!

I am helpless!
I cannot save them both.

Gandhari enters. She is badly burnt.

GANDHARI

Please leave,
Sanjaya.

All this
is the result
of my curse
on Krishna.

Suicide
violence
adharma
and family strife
have grown
a hundredfold
and infected
all the cities and forests.

Sanjaya
tell Krishna:

I was the first victim
of my own curse.

The voice of Kunti calls from the wings, "Gandhari."

DHRITARASHTRA

Oh no!
Kunti has been left behind
in the forest!
Let us turn back,
Gandhari.

SANJAYA

Maharaj
Maharaj
the fire is fierce.
Its countless flames
must have consumed
Kunti by now.

Maharaj
you are safe here.
Do not go.

GANDHARI

Sanjaya
let those who have
spent their lives
wandering in darkness
at last die
in the fatal light
of this fire.

*She takes Dhritarashtra by the hand and turns to walk towards the burning forest.
Sanjaya watches them helplessly.*

SANJAYA Oh no!
 A banyan tree
 in a blaze of fire
 has fallen on them.

 Now
 I am the only one
 left alive.

 I am alone
 utterly alone.

 My life is meaningless.

 Why am I alive?
 Why should I
 continue to live?

*A burning branch falls on his foot. In agony, he clutches his foot and sits down.
The curtain falls.*

CHORUS Thus the reign of the Pandava kingdom came to an end.

 Day by day Yudhishtira grew increasingly dejected.

 Slowly he lost faith in everything
 hope in everything
 and in the ever-increasing darkness
 understood that his victory in war was hollow.

The two old guards enter. Yudhishtira's crown is stuck on the spear of Guard 1.

GUARD 1 This is the crown
 of the mighty king.

GUARD 2 Wear it!
 He put it aside...

GUARD 1 when he saw signs of evil
 in the city of Hastinapur.

GUARD 2 Quick
 Maharaj Yudhishtira
 is coming this way.

Yudhishtira and Vidura enter.

VIDURA These are signs
 of evil.

 They carry
 the prophecy...

YUDHISHTHIRA Of Krishna's death!

I know.

Messengers from all over
have brought me news
of increasing strife
amidst the Yadava clan.

VIDURA Send Arjuna
at once to Dwarkapuri.

YUDHISHTHIRA Vidura
what shall I do?

Dhritarashtra, Gandhari
and Kunti were burnt to ash
in that terrible fire.

Yuyutsu's wounds reopened
when he performed the last rites for them.
He has finally succeeded
in committing suicide.
I could not save his life.

Have I alone
been condemned
to witness Lord Krishna's death?

No, no!
Let me go!
Let my body
slowly decay
on some Himalayan slope.

VIDURA Maharaj
that too would be suicide.

Even the height of those slopes
will not redeem
such a sinful
and cowardly act.

For to seek
a slow death
on some Himalayan peak
would still be suicide.

YUDHISHTHIRA And what is
victory then?
Is that not also

a long and slow act
of suicide?

No, there is no other path
left open to me.

They continue talking as they exit. The old guards come forward.

GUARD 1 Every day there is a new omen
of evil times to come.

GUARD 2 Yesterday
it rained
rocks and stones.

GUARD 1 Today
you can see
dark and headless corpses
dance in the sun.

GUARD 2 I have heard
that the destruction of Krishna
—the one whom they call Lord—
is at hand.

GUARD 1 It is said
that Yamaraj
—in black and yellow robes—
walks through the streets
of Dwarkapuri
at midnight.

GUARD 2 And that renowned archers
rain arrows on him.
But
whirling like a cyclonic storm
he suddenly vanishes.

GUARD 1 And that
the one they call
Lord...

GUARD 2 the one who was
supposed to bear
the burden of their well-being
on his shoulders...

GUARD 1 shall soon
abandon them
here on earth
without a path
without a goal...

GUARD 2 and return
 to his own abode.

GUARD 1 Impoverished and abandoned
 what shall they do now?

GUARD 2 Compared to them
 the two of us
 are better off!

GUARD 1 We have not faced grief...

GUARD 2 nor endured pain.

GUARD 1 We are now...

GUARD 2 as we always were!

EPILOGUE

Death of the Lord

Invocation

You are the word, O Lord!
You are the meaning of meaning.

You are our refuge, O Lord!
You are our consolation.

Those who cry out to you, O Lord
never cry in vain!

We sing in your praise, O Lord!
We sing in praise of your devotees, O Lord
devotees who have sung in your praise
from generation to generation
about the mysteries of your acts
the mysteries of your creation.

Grant this lonely pilgrim
in search of faith, O Lord
a few words, a few thoughts, a few images
to sing in sorrow at your sacrificial death!

CHORUS

It was a radiant forest
by the shore of the sea.
Sun-kissed waves crashed against the sands
sea-washed breezes swept through the palm trees
the fragrance of tulsi filled the forest air with sweetness.

Under the shade of a peepul tree
Lord Krishna sat on the cool earth
calm, silent, still, and at peace.

His body, dark as the clouds
seemed a little tired, a little weary
the last petal on a lotus
in a garland of flowers.

Shadows of peepul leaves
played on his gracious forehead.

Heavy with sleep
his eyelids drooped
like the half-open petals
of a blue lotus.

He leaned against the tree
placed his left foot
shaped like a deer's face
on his right thigh
and with a sigh whispered:
"A strange age has passed."

Lights go up. Ashwatthama enters, looking like a terrifying beast.

ASHWATTHAMA

That song of praise is false.
Those words of homage are false.

Krishna acted
as I did in the Pandava camp.

The one who dreams
and the one who is intoxicated
are the same.

He slaughtered
all his kinsmen
who were drunk.

I recently saw
with my own eyes
countless
dark and bloodstained bodies
of Yadava soldiers
scattered on the glittering sands
of the ocean shore.

They had been killed
by Krishna himself.

He acted
as I did that night.

The only difference was
that I killed my enemies
while he slaughtered
his own kinsmen.

He sits there
under the ashwatha tree
powerless, dejected, and tired.

I shall ask him
why my body
is tormented
by the pain of infinite hells
while his lotuslike body
has not been corroded
by a thousand wounds
and a thousand sores.

Ashwatthama exits. Sanjaya enters, dragging himself onto the stage.

SANJAYA I had once told you, O Lord:
 even if
 I did not have arms
 I would still embrace you

 even if
 I did not have eyes
 I would still gaze upon you

 even if
 I did not have legs
 I would still
 find you!

But today, O Lord
my pride is shattered.

All my life I upheld my faith
in the absolute Truth.

I refused to act.

Slowly I lost my divine vision.

And that day
in the forest inferno
even my legs were
badly singed.

A hunter enters and crouches behind a bush. He takes aim with his bow and arrow.

CHORUS *Singing softly.*

 In the distance
 under the shadow
 of a thorny bush
 a hunter crouches.

 Mistaking
 Krishna's foot for a deer

he draws his bowstring
and takes aim.

SANJAYA

Suddenly noticing the hunter.

Stop! Stop!
Oh! He cannot hear me.

A divine radiance
shall soon be extinguished
from our world.

I have dragged myself across
hundreds of miles
but I will never reach
that ashwatha tree.

The hunter releases his arrow. Lightning flashes. Three sharp notes of a flute are heard. Ashwatthama laughs wildly. Sanjaya screams and faints. Darkness.

CHORUS

The stars went out
darkness covered the earth
and that forest of fear
became even more terrifying.

The moment Krishna was killed
Dvapara Yug came to an end
and on this godforsaken earth
Kali Yug took its first step.

And that forest of fear
became even more terrifying.

Ashwatthama enters.

ASHWATTHAMA

I was the only witness
to Krishna's death.

I hid behind the palm trees.
Their leaves
sharper than a sword's edge
cut into my putrefied flesh.
But I held my breath
and stood there transfixed
without uttering a sound.

Deeply aggrieved.

When the arrow pierced him
I was surprised to see
his foot blister
as my body does—

the same dark blood
flow out of his foot
as from my festering wounds.

Listen
Krishna
you are my enemy.

But tell me:
when you died
did you give
this brute Ashwatthama
sanctuary at your feet?

Did your blood
atone for me?

When poison
oozes out of a boil
the body ceases to feel pain.

In the same way
I now feel relief
from past suffering.

Is this experience
the beginning of faith?

Is this experience
faith?

YUYUTSU

Speaking offstage.

Whose voice do I hear
in these dark times?

Who has discovered
faith once more?

That brute
Ashwatthama?

Laughs loudly.

Faith is a worn-out coin.
Has Ashwatthama found it now?

I discovered it was false
and counterfeit
a long time ago
and threw it away
on a garbage heap.

SANJAYA

That is Yuyutsu's voice!
He is doomed to wander
like a blind soul
in this vast universe.

Yuyutsu enters. He gropes his way, like a blind spirit, to the front of the stage.

YUYUTSU

I have heard the news
of my damnation:
"You took your own life.
You are doomed
to wander aimlessly
through dark worlds."

Is there a place darker than the earth?

I was born to a blind king.

For a few years
I was deluded
by my faith
in Krishna's false dharma.

But
I committed suicide
and broke the adamant
doors of death
only to find myself
once again
in the caves of darkness.

I too have come to witness
the epiphany of Krishna's death.

Alive
he failed
to kindle faith in us.

Now he has enacted
the drama of his death
to enslave us.

I think
he was a coward
and an imposter.

He was also impotent
for he could neither save Parikshit
nor save me.

He has returned
to his own kingdom.

In this blind age
whenever the future
is threatened
by a brahmastra
a venomous snake
shall bite Parikshit
and many a Yuyutsu
shall be driven to suicide.

Who will come to their rescue?
Will you, Ashwatthama?

You are immortal
are you not?

ASHWATTHAMA

But I am that monstrous half-truth
reduced to a wild beast
who hates everything.

YUYUTSU

And you, Sanjaya?
You are a believer.

SANJAYA

But I am the upholder
of the absolute Truth.

I remain neutral.

I can neither kill
nor save.

Far removed
from the field of action
I have slowly forgotten
the meaning
of existence.

YUYUTSU

That is why
I proclaim boldly
that our fate is linked
not to the death of Krishna
but to the future of mankind!
To the survival of Parikshit!

How will he be saved?
That is my concern.

How can he be saved?
I ask as one
who has suffered contempt
for Krishna's sake
all his life.

Is there no one left
who has faith enough
to give me an answer?

The old mendicant, with a bow in his hand, enters.

MENDICANT

I am still here
to give you an answer.

YUYUTSU

Who are you?
I cannot see you clearly.

MENDICANT

Now I am an old hunter.
My name is Jara.
It was the arrow from my bow
that killed Krishna.

Earlier
I was the old astrologer.
Ashwatthama killed me.

To free my soul
from this spectral world
Krishna said to me:
“It is now time
for Gandhari’s curse
to be fulfilled.
Pick up your bow
and shoot the arrow.”

I was filled with dread.
But he reassured me:
“Ashwatthama committed a sin
by killing you.

I shall atone for it
through my suffering.

My death shall free you
from this spectral world.”

ASHWATTHAMA

The sin was mine.
I killed you.

But the hands that killed you
were not mine.
The heart that killed you
was not mine.

The blindness of this age
flowed through my veins.

In my madness
I sought revenge.
In my ignorance
I sought vengeance.

The one whom you call Lord
was my enemy
but he took
even my sufferings
upon himself.

My body is still covered
with wounds
but I feel no pain.
I am condemned
yet free!

YUYUTSU

Perhaps
his death has atoned
for the crimes of murderers
and set them free.

After Krishna's
cowardly murder
who will save man
in dark times?

ASHWATTHAMA

Cowardly murder?

He was my enemy.

Yet I know that
when he died
a peaceful radiance
spread over his face—
a divinity
and a grace.

MENDICANT

At the last moment of his life
the Lord said to me:

“O aged hunter
death does not exist.
Death is only a transition
from one state to another.

I took upon myself
the burdens of everyone.

Now all those who live
must assume these burdens.

Till now I made sure
that human life endured.
But in this blind age
a part of me
will always be
degraded
mutilated
or destroyed
like Sanjaya or Yuyutsu or Ashwatthama—
because I have taken their sins upon myself.”

He added:

“Yet there will be others
many others
who shall have
faith in me
and with that faith
in their hearts
find their way
past every difficulty.
They shall build a new life
on the ruins of the old.

Honorable in their conduct
imaginative in their actions
fearless
courageous
affectionate
joyful
they shall find me
present
again and again
in every moment
of their lives.”

ASHWATTHAMA

Given this new meaning of Krishna’s presence
can the life
of a crude and coarse man—
however disfigured or barbaric
ferocious or faithless—
be redeemed?

MENDICANT

Yes! Certainly!

He is the future.
You hold him in your hands.

Whenever you like
you can destroy him.

Whenever you like
you can make him
a radiant presence
in your life.

SANJAYA But
I am deformed
and paralyzed.

ASHWATTHAMA And
I have become a beast.

YUYUTSU And
I am the blind spirit
of a man who killed himself.

*The old mendicant steps forward. The other characters slowly step back. The curtain
in the middle lowers. The only light is on the old mendicant.*

MENDICANT They are dejected
and blind
and paralyzed
and monstrous
and the darkness
grows deeper and deeper.

Will someone
who is not blind
who is not deformed
listen to me
and be the savior
of the future of man?

I am Jara
the old hunter.
I was the instrument
of his metamorphosis.

I heard the last
dying words
of the Lord.

With raised hands
I repeat them
again and again.

Listen to me!

Is there anyone
who will listen to me?

Is there anyone
who will listen to me?

As the lights begin to dim, the Chorus steps forward.

CHORUS

That day the world descended into the age of darkness
which has no end, and repeats itself over and over again.
Every moment the Lord dies somewhere or the other
every moment the darkness grows deeper and deeper.

The age of darkness has seeped into our very souls.

There is darkness, and there is Ashwatthama, and there
is Sanjaya
and there are the two old guards with the mentality of
slaves
and there is blind doubt, and a shameful sense of defeat.

And yet it is also true
that like a small seed
buried somewhere
in the mind of man
there is courage
and a longing for freedom
and the imagination to create something new.

That seed is buried
without exception
in each of us
and it grows from day to day
in our lives
as duty
as honor
as freedom
as virtuous conduct.

It is this small seed
that makes us fear
half-truths
and great wars
and always
saves
the future of mankind
from blind doubt
slavery
and defeat.

Curtain falls.