An Immersion into the Mahabharata – Part 6

Posted on May 10, 2016 by Raghu Ananthanarayanan

How does one imagine the new, or is it a vision that comes to a mind that is neither projecting itself nor meekly following another? Is there an intent that we are born with? These were questions that came up often during the Mahabharata Immersion. So it came as no surprise to us when the last group came up with an innovative possibility. They were exploring *arjuna,* and started the process with a very new idea: kunti goes to karNa and tells him of his birth, begs his forgiveness and seeks his generosity, “Spare my children, your brothers.” she asks. In our exploration, karNA says “I will first have a conversation with arjuna and draupadi.”

What did it take for *kunti* to finally own up to her abandoned son? Did she think of him ever? What is her intention? Is it to stop the war or secure victory for the sons she has always

owned up? None of these questions could be explored or answered. The actors who attempted to step over the threshold of the known were quickly pulled back to the unresolved and unbearable hurts of the past. *karNa* seeks a restoration not of his status but of self that has called out in despair for someone to affirm it and honour it. The child of *soorya* has remained in the shadows for all his life. No compensation can suffice. His pain is unbearable, now that he knows who he is. *karNa* is unable to let a new conversation begin. *arjuna* tries to envision a new possibility, but *karNa* is deaf to it, and soon recriminations and counter recriminations fly unhindered! “I have to let go all my cherished ideas about myself, my world view, as much as you have to step outside of your refuge.” *arjuna* begins. *draupadi* adds her bit, “I too must look at you without the hate I have held for you.” she adds. But the air is soon poisoned by the demands for the impossible, a turn back of the years, a drawing out of the pain of discrimination and denial.

The group was completely stunned, as were the actors. The deeply buried hurts and years of repressed yearning to be seen, affirmed, and appreciated, came bursting forth. The ‘old’ was insistent in its demand that its residues must be attended to, the unresolved must be acknowledged and the disowned must be embraced. One of the protagonists who works with the problem of trafficking and prostitution shared his context, how incredibly difficult it is to help the women, scarred by years of abuse, to let go of the old identity. Neither her family nor the community will really create a new space, nor can she look at herself without her own judgement (internalized from society no doubt). The *trishanku swargam* of the *kota* with its own unique culture of celebrations and compensations seemed a better world. karNa finally preferred the love of duryOdhana to the possibility of an ending of the war and the beginning of a new life as the eldest pAndava!

As India tries to come to grips with its greatest affliction, namely discrimination based on birth, can we look at this insight? The dalit, who has been wounded by stigma, has to be acknowledged and embraced as a human being with grace and dignity. Reservations and conversions to another religion do not wipe away her tears, they do not alter the psyche and make it whole. The ‘failure’ of the last group to find a new conversation was a huge eye opener for us.