A hundred grains of rice: regional Mahābhārata stories in performance

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This article explores the subject of regional folk stories found in various vernacular expressions of the *Mahābhārata*. In particular, the non-canonical stories of Śaśirekha and Śakuni as found in several Telugu versions of the *Mahābhārata* story are taken up as exemplars to investigate the dynamic process by which regional folk stories transitioned from theatre to text, and from text to cinema. The Śaśirekha story for example, moves from Surabhi folk theatre to a multitude of *parinaya* texts and finally to the Telugu cinematic hit *Maya Bazaar* of 1957. By tracking these stories as they evolved into various forms of new media, this article elucidates the fluid, circulatory process by which folk elements enter a grand narrative like the *Mahābhārata*, penetrate the normative text and get recirculated back as new literary forms and performative genres. In this context, I also try to complicate the classical/folk dichotomy and question the permeability and mutually constitutive nature of such hermeneutical categories.

Introduction

Regional/vernacular literary transcreations of Sanskrit source texts (the *Mahābhārata* being just one of many examples) serve two important complimentary functions: 1) they allow canonical Sanskrit paradigms to enter the realm of vernacular discourse, and 2) they open up pathways for regional folklores and narrative innovations to recirculate into and transform the Sanskrit cosmopolitan discourse. In a more general sense, any act of translation creates a channel, a bi-directional conduit for multiform exchanges between two distinct cultural complexes. Regarding the *Mahābhārata*, this dialogic process has been going on for millennia, and in fact is most certainly how the discursive text evolved over time. However, the vernacular literary moment around 1000 CE offers us something strikingly new and significant. When Pampa in Kannada or Nannaya in Telugu inaugurated their literary traditions with vernacular *Mahābhārata*s, they were saying, for

the first time in Indian literary history, that this story is ours. And they said it in their own language, through mythic heroes now imbued with local flair.

Certainly, the story of the Kuru cousins and their great war was known in Andhra country prior to Nannaya's composition. The story lived in performance rather than text, and it is this performative mode which remains to this day the primary (if not sole) means by which people from every walk of life experience this popular story. Even in the evolution of the elusive Sanskrit Ur-text, the *Mahābhārata* grew through widespread oral storytelling. Various *sūtas* or peripatetic bards travelled the land, telling the story, adding to it, changing it and making it their own. It is said that Vyāsa's text grew from a heroic ballad called *Jaya* of 8,800 verses, into a larger text called the *Bhārata* with one lakh verses, and finally to the canonical *Mahābhārata* of 125,000 verses (Subba Rao 1980: 137). This process of expansion was surely the result of widespread, trans-regional recitation. In Andhra, it was the Harikathakas, scholar/musicians who could expand on the text through song, and Burrakathakas, who travelled around in small troupes as itinerant storytellers. But in all these instances the 'text' was always something seen and heard, and rarely if ever something written or read. The various frame narratives of the *Mahābhārata* captures this well, for Ugraśravas, the son of the *sūta* Lomaharṣaṇa recites the story to sages in the Naimiṣa forest, and later, when the story is committed to the letter, Vyāsa never writes the text, he only speaks it.

This is one critical factor that makes the epics, and particularly the discursively unwieldy *Mahābhārata*, different from the more refined and fully meditated *kāvya* productions of later court poets. In many ways, the *Mahābhārata* is an oral text, or better yet, a performative text. The creation of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*—that is a true and most 'authentic' version of the Sanskrit text—was undertaken post-independence so that scholars could conduct sound philological and comparative research. But as A. K. Ramanujan reminds us, a critical edition of a text like this 'may not be suitable for a reconstruction of the *Mahābhārata* at all', for 'any fixity, any reconstructed archetype, is a fiction, a label, a convenience' (Ramanujan 1999a: 541). In fact, I believe this search for a core text, an authentic version, may have lead us away from certain important verities of the text: its variability, flexibility and elusiveness over both time and space, all qualities which seem to make it all-the-more enchanting and enduring.

The dialogic process mentioned earlier, which we may crudely posit as the mutually constitutive exchange between classical and folk cultures, was a polarity recognised by ancient theorists in form of *mārga* vs. *deśi*, or more recently, as the so-called Great and Little traditions. The plurality of these various traditions, for there are multiple classical streams and an even more dazzling diversity of folk forms, urge us to view this incredibly complex process as polylogic rather than simply dialogic, and multi-directional rather than simply top down, high to low. It is this verbal folklore, the 'literature of the dialects' that constitute the 'wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literatures

rest' (Ramanujan 1999a: 534-5) which I wish to briefly explore in this article. In particular, the non-canonical stories of Gāndharī/Śakuni and Śaśirekhā/Abhimanyu offer fascinating opportunities to explore this polylogic process in action as these stories move from oral folklore to paintings, and from various theatrical incarnations to new literary forms and finally popular films.

The story of Śaśirekha

The popular story of the clandestine love affair between Abhimanyu and Śaśirekhā (also known as Vatsala in some versions), the daughter of Balarāma and Revatī, is particularly well known in Telugu country, although it also finds widespread expression in a variety of forms throughout many parts of central India, a wide swathe stretching from Maharashtra, through the Deccan to coastal Andhra, and up to Orissa.

The background of the story is a such: as per convention, the cousins Abhimanyu and Śaśirekhā were betrothed in their youth, but since the Pāṇḍavas were later stripped of their power and banished into exile, Balarāma desires to marry his daughter to Lakṣmaṇa Kumāra, son of his *priya-śiṣya* Duryodhana, and the most powerful of the Kuru princes. Of course, Abhi and Śaśi as they are affectionately known meet in secret, and with the magical and often comedic help of their mighty cousin Ghaṭotkaca, their marriage is fulfilled. From what I can gather there is no mention of Śaśirekhā or anything else related to this incident in Vyāsa's telling.

Tracking the source of such folk stories is almost impossible - akin to attempting to identify all the tributaries, streams and rivulets that contribute to a flowing river. And like these terrestrial formations, change is constant and the landscape of these stories never remains the same. In contrast, written texts, particularly from the colonial period with the advent of print technology, offer a greater sense of fixity, and perhaps even immutability. But as we well know, manuscripts and recension traditions remained fluid well into the twentieth century.

In 1909, *Śaśirekhā-pariṇayamu* was published by K. Lutchmana Mudaliar in Chenna Patnam (Chennai), a *padya-kāvyamu* (a 'poem in verse', sometimes referred to as a *khaṇḍa-kāvyamu*), and a text clearly written in the classical Telugu style. It was composed by Appappa Kavi, and written, as the cover page clearly states, by one Bhaṭṭa-rāja Kavi, thus clearly distinguishing the creative act of composition and the physical act of writing. Later in 1928, the famous Telugu publishers Vavilla Ramasvami Satstrulu & Sons printed another edition of the same text. Other *Śaśirekhā-pariṇayamus* by Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma and Chandragiri Chinnayya were also written during this period but I have been unable to trace them. In fact, the lyric wedding poem almost became a genre of its own during this time with a slew of *pariṇaya* texts being written and circulated in print, with subjects ranging from Pānchālī to Rukminī and Śakuntalā to Jāmbavatī. What appears to be clear is that these textual transcreations became the source materials for several new stage and film scripts. According to Indrajit Bandyopadhyay, Malladi's version 'became

the immediate inspiration of Telugu stage plays and cinemas. Kuchipudi and other dance dramas also incorporated the story in their cultural fold' (Bandyopadhyay 2011). So here we have a fine example of the truly circular nature of cultural transmission. It is not surprising then, that when one hears modern day *pravacana*-style elaborations of the *Mahābhārata*, the *pravacana-kāra* sometimes references the iconic pauranic films of the 50s and 60s.

The story of Śaśirekha in Indian film has a long, multi-lingual history. According to M. L. Narasimham it was made over ten times under various titles, including silent versions followed by talkies in Marathi, Tamil and Telugu. The earliest film avatar was *Surekha Haran* of 1921 produced by Maharashtra Film Company, Kolhapur, directed by Baburao Painter and starring V. Shantaram in one of his first roles where he played Krishna. The first talkie version entitled *Mayabazaar aka Surekha Haran*, was made by Nanubhai Vakil in Hindi in 1932, incidentally the same year that he made the first Gujarati talkie on the life of Narsinh Mehta. The next incarnation was *Vatsala Kalyanam* in Tamil, directed by R. Padmanabhan, closely followed in 1936 by the Telugu talkie *Sasirekha Parinayam*, directed by Chitrapu Narasimha Rao and starring the budding star Shantha Kumari. The film was produced by P. V. Dasu for Vel Pictures and employed the special skills of cinematographer K. Ramnoth 'whose trick photography contributed much to the film's success' (Narasimhan 2010). We will return to this point a bit later.

All these innovative iterations of the Śaśi story finally led to the landmark release of Vijaya Vauhini Productions' 1957 classic *Maya Bazaar*, hailed by critics and beloved by audiences as a landmark in Telugu cinema. The iconic film was produced by B. Nagi Reddy and Chakrapani, and directed by K. V. Reddy who is also credited with story adaptation. Exactly what he was adapting from however is not clear, perhaps a written text, theatrical version or his own imagination. As Randor Guy states, 'according to critics, the story is pure fiction, created by some enterprising Parsi drama company in Bombay as a play, which proved to be a hit' (Guy 2014). The primary scriptwriter in this case was the versatile Pingali Nagendra Rao who according to Narasimham 'took the central plot from the popular fictional episode and wrote [the] original story, dialogues and lyrics' (Narasimham 2015). As was common in those days, the film was concurrently shot in Tamil with many of the same cast members. The Telugu film brought together all the greats of the time with ANR as Abhimanyu, Savithri as Śaśirekha, SV Ranga Rao as Ghaṭotkaca, and of course NTR as Krishna, not to mention Relangi as Lakṣmaṇa Kumar and Suryakantham as Hidimbi; it was the proverbial all-star cast and everyone was perfectly suited to their role. In fact, Narasimham argues that it was this 'borrowing of star value from the social and folklore genres' that lead to the revival of mythologicals as a viable and popular film genre (Narasimham 2015). Perhaps this is true, for after the success of *Maya Bazaar*, Telugu filmmakers made a long series of such *pauraṇic* films, almost all of which garnered great popular appeal. One such film based on the *Mahābhārata* was Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam.

Tales of Śakuni and Gāndhāri

In this fascinating story, we learn of Gāndhārī's early life, her alleged first husband, and the torturous imprisonment of her siblings, which ultimately leads to Śakuni's deep anger towards the Kauravas. As one of the opening scenes depicts, Duryodhana taunts the Pāṇḍavas as being *kuṇḍakas*, literally 'sons of a woman by a man other than her husband while the husband is still alive' (Apte 1959: 58) while Bhīma retorts by calling the Kauravas the children of a widow, *vidhavarali biddalu*, or *golakas* in Sanskrit, *i.e.* a widow's bastards. Duryodhana is shocked by this and goes directly to Vyāsa to falsify the accusation. But in fact, the author/progenitor of the master text authenticates the folk story and validates its inclusion in the grand narrative.

Vyāsa goes on to narrate the backstory in which royal astrologers at the Gāndhāran court foresee that Gāndhārī's first husband is doomed to die soon after marriage. Here Vyāsa explicitly states that Gāndhārī is *vaidhavya-yogam*, literally 'bound for widowhood.' In order to overcome this prophecy King Subala has his daughter married to a goat first, just before betrothing her to Dhṛtarāṣṭhra. After learning of this truth, Duryodhana rushes to Gāndhāra, overtakes the capital and imprisons his grandfather along with his hundred uncles, with Śakuni at the head. To add insult to injury, Duryodhana deems that only one grain of rice be given to each brother per diem. The brothers very well know that they cannot all live on this meager offering, and so they pick Śakuni, the strongest and cleverest of them all, to eat all the rice and survive the imprisonment. As King Subala lies dying, he entreats Śakuni to seek revenge and wreak havoc on the Kuru clan. The vertebrae of his skeleton then turn into the famous magic dice that lead not to Duryodhana's victory over the Pāṇḍavas, but ultimately the great war that destroys all the Kauravas.

This story has several variations and can be found in several sources. Ramanujan mentions multiple uncited 'folk-*Mahābhāratas*' of the Śakuni story in which Subala, in order to select the cleverest of his sons, challenges them to thread a bone without a needle. Śakuni wins by using a grain of rice as bait to lead an ant through the hollow of the bone (Ramanujan 1999b: 183). As in many narrative variations, elements of the previously narrated version (*i.e.* the rice and the bones) are present here too, albeit in new and different configurations.

The tale of Gāndhārī's first marriage is also attested to in several sources, including Sārala's Oriya *Mahābhārata* in which she is wed to a *sāhāḍa* tree. In Devdatta Pattanaik's book *Vijaya* he describes Gāndhārī's first marriage to a goat, attributing the motif to Jaina sources but provides no citation. Padmanabha S. Jaini traces the story to one of the many Jaina *Pāṇḍava-purāṇas*, particularly a version composed around 1600 CE in western India (most likely Gujarat) by one Bhaṭṭāraka Vādicandra, in which Gāndhārī 'was frustrated by her blind husband's inability to give her children. She therefore copulated with a hundred goats, for, as the author observes, 'What will a woman desiring sons not do? (*śatacchāgais ca sā reme, kim kuryān na sutārthinī*)'. However, these goats were

slaughtered in a sacrifice (apparently for the birth of a son) by Dhṛitarāṣṭhra, and they were all reborn in heaven. Recalling Gāndhārī's love for them, they visited her (in human form?), and begat a hundred sons, the eldest of whom was Duryodhana' (Jaini 1984: 355). Although we did hear of a goat earlier, this Jaina account is markedly different from the other stories, even verging on the scandalous, but this is true of several reworked mythological motifs found in the Jaina *purāṇas*. What is interesting is that the Jains are often attributed with being the first to record these folk elements in writing, thereby incorporating them more explicitly in the fold of a textual tradition. The motivations and rationales for such inclusions however, are a topic of discussion for another day.

Folk themes

One important element of these folk stories is that they circulate orally in a variety of unfixed modalities, as bedtime stories, jokes, riddles, and a plethora of other forms in what has been generally called the *cāṭu* tradition, defined broadly in Sanskrit as pleasing words, sweet or coaxing speech, flattery, clear or distinct speech, and endearing words, whereas in Telugu it has come to mean pleasing or entertaining conversation, rambling talk, stray verses, a current epigram and even 'fugitive verses or couplets' (Apte 1959: 72, Brown 1903: 407).

We tend to view these folk elements as witty and humorous, sometimes crude, sometimes rude, but always entertaining. Lutgendorf comments on 'the popularity of narrative traditions that, although similarly imbued with myth and fantasy, express a decidedly more worldly, sensual, and entertainment-oriented ethos' and 'a strong current of (often irreverent) humor' (Lutgendorf 2006: 244). This is very true for *Maya Bazaar,* the iconic *vivāha-bhojanambu* scene being just one example in which Ghaṭotkaca infiltrates the palace kitchen, swallows up plates of food and gobbles down a stream of laddus!

Furthermore, folk versions of the *Mahābhārata* (or even vernacular translations in a classical idiom) seem to domesticize and localize the mythic narrative, bringing, as Pollock has described, the language of the gods into a world of men. In regard to Tikkana's substantial contribution to the Telugu *Mahābhārata*, Shulman and Narayana Rao observe 'the poet engaged in elaborating a series of tableaux drawn, as it were, directly from observed life—the life of medieval Telugu village chiefs, with their clans, their intense family networks and rivalries, and their heroic values' (Rao and Shulman 2002: 83). The tale of Śaśi and Abhi as depicted in the film *Maya Bazaar* for example, is a very domestic story, a family drama, devoid of gods and sages, but filled with humor, magic and love, particularly the affections between first cousins which is still a part of South Indian life. In this light the popularity of the Śaśi and Abhi love story is quite understandable, and no question of morality regarding an incestuous marriage ever arises. The tales of Gāndhārī and Śakuni are also kinship/kingship stories concerned with intimate family dynamics. Prasad goes as far as to claim: 'It is clear that in the 1950s, the

middle class was lured to this genre by recasting the entire *pouranic* metropolis and its inhabitants as a modern urban bourgeoisie.' Perhaps this is going to far, but the point is well taken.

To summarize, I have tried to highlight three key elements which constitute distinctive markers of the folk idiom: fluid orality, entertaining humor and localized domesticity. As these folk narratives moved from one genre to another, let us say from puppetry to cinema, many of these elements remained intact. According to Narasimham 2010, the hit song 'Vivaha Bhojanambu' was taken almost wholesale (lyric and all) from Surabhi Nataka Samajam's plays of the 1950's, which was further sourced from the 1940's Jānaki Sapadham Harikatha records of B. Nagaraja Kumari. She was in turn influenced by PV Das' 1936 *Sasirekha Parinayam* which was ultimately inspired by Charles Penrose's 1922 'The Laughing Policeman'. Decade after decade the song and its comedic tenor have carried through.

The Surabhi theatre group just mentioned is believed to have begun in the 1860s from Maharashtrian roots, even claiming origins as far back as Shivaji's court. It is said that the family of V. Govinda Rao selected the Sorugu village as a temporary retreat and effected its name change to Surabhi in 1885. Govinda Rao, a leather puppeteer, set up a traveling theatre group and named it after the village (Puthussery 2008: 22). Perhaps the itinerant nature of this influential theatre group explains the pan-Deccan quality of many of these stories. For although as Ramanujan states 'It is well known that folklore items, like many other sorts of items in cultural exchange, are autotelic, that is, they travel by themselves without any actual movement of populations'. (Ramanujan 1999a: 536), perhaps artists and actors are an exception to the rule. What's more important, and perhaps disheartening, is that while various theatre groups like Surabhi became the fount for new cinematic productions, they in turn suffered a decline in both patronage and popularity with the advent of cinema and its subsequently ubiquitous mass appeal.

One critical development that came with film was the advent of new technologies, *i.e.* new possibilities for visualizing and realizing theatrical elements unavailable in a typical stage setting. K. Ramnoth, the celebrated cinematographer of Das' 1936 *Maya Bazaar*, was lauded for his trick photography, especially in the Ghaṭotkaca scenes, which many believe led to the film's success. Later in 1943 he founded the Cine Technicians' Association of South India and gave lectures on the techniques used in early talkies (Guy 2006). The 1957 *Maya Bazaar* was also greatly appreciated for its spectacular cinematography. The Anglo-Indian cinematographer Marcus Bartley who made Madras his home, 'contributed immensely to the technological growth of Telugu cinema' (Narasimham 2015). Some of his innovations include the trademark moonlight effect created in the 'Lahiri Lahiri' song, the miniaturized island city of Dwaraka sequence, the fantastic gobbling up of laddus in 'Vivaha Bhojanambu' and the still unexplainable transition of Savithri from girl to woman in the waters of her reflecting pool. L Satyanand lauds Bartley's efforts, saying:

he was definitely ahead of [his] time. It is still a mystery how Marcus Bartley could morph Sasirekha through the ripples in the pond. It was an absolute masterpiece, considering the equipment in use, those days. In the absence of hi-def cameras, computer generated visual effects and high-end computers, the direction, cinematography and visual effects were efforts of sheer human genius (Bhattacharjee 2010).

These cinematic innovations certainly added to the appeal of these filmic translations but I turn now to an even deeper matrix, that of repetition and meta-narrative, as a fundamental mode for the dissemination and circulation of these stories.

Repetition

The idea of meta-narration, a story within a story, or a play within a play, is common to all forms of Indian literature, be it folk, classical or otherwise. There's a fine instance of this even in *Maya Bazaar* when at one point Ghaṭotkaca and Abhimanyu watch a play of Bhasmāsura's defeat at the hands of Mohini, who is of course their uncle Krishna in another avatāra! The entire *Mahābhārata* as we know it is a multi-layered meta-narrative, a story told by the *sūta* Ugrashravas who heard it from Vaiśampāyana who learned it from his guru Vyāsa. To me, this kind of narrative imbedding is one form of repetition. In addition, the improvisation on established themes seems to be an effective mechanism for folk stories to graft themselves onto larger narratives. To put it in another way, repetition is both an internally binding and an externally expedient hermeneutic to approach narrative frameworks, particularly in a text as grand and expansive as the *Mahābhārata*. Furthermore, the repetition of tropic elements within the normative text creates a sense of narrative cohesion and thematic uniformity. Tapping into these recurring tropes is therefore a convenient conduit for external components, the so-called 'folk elements', to smoothly enter a great text's narrative stream.

This is not a passive or unimaginative process, and in fact it is usually quite invigorating. As Bronner states 'there are many ways to repeat even a single work…The point is that these and other modes of replication are by definition innovative insofar as they engage or even activate an older work' (Bronner 2013: 522). The *Mahābhārata* is what it is largely because of its ability to take in so much from various places and spaces, and to truly be a great text of India. In the words of A. K. Ramanujan the 'central structuring principle of the epic is a certain kind of repetition', one that helps in 'amassing repetitive networks and density, to make the heroes' lives not singular but representative, tokens of a type' (Ramanujan 1999b: 169).

If we return now to the comment about the Kauravas being *golakas* and the Pandavas being *kuṇḍakas*, we see that there is no conventional human parentage in the Kuru *vaṁśa*

at all. Even Dhṛtarāṣṭhra and Pāṇḍu are the sons of widows, both born, after the untimely deaths of Vicitravīrya and Chitrāṅgada, to Vyāsa, himself born out of wedlock. In fact, almost every major character in the *Mahābhārata* is either semi-divine, magically born, or both! There are other repeated motifs in the two stories explored here. Duryodhana has ninety-nine brothers as does his uncle Śakuni. The mighty Ghaṭotkaca takes on Śaśirekha's guise to dupe Lakṣmaṇa Kumāra, almost like his own father Bhīma does in Virāṭa's court when he disguises himself as Draupadī to trick Kīcaka. Abhimanyu steals away Śaśirekha, repeating what happened a generation earlier when his own father Arjuna had kidnapped Subhadra. In both instances Balarāma was the one who made wedding arrangements, wanting to marry his sister and his daughter to Duryodhana and Lakṣmaṇa Kumāra respectively. Other examples abound but suffice it to reiterate that repetitive motivic storytelling is a hallmark of all Indian narrative traditions.

Concluding thoughts

In his analysis of Indian cinematic history, Madhav Prasad distinguishes between two fundamental genres: 'those that derive from pre-cinematic narrative or performative traditions and those that are internal to film history.' (Prasad 2011: 69). The former was of course more prevalent in the earlier history of film but Prasad goes on to highlight the first decade of Indian independence when a new type of cinema was coming into existence, one that was a product of *bricolage,* of mixing genres. He sees this as an effort to 're-fashion the mythological for modern times…to bring the characters closer home, to give them a contemporary habitation' by importing elements from the social genre into the mythological (Prasad 2011: 71), but as I have argued earlier, perhaps this kind of domesticisation and concomitant folklorisation were processes well under way even during the first vernacular moment at the turn of the first millennium, if not earlier. What does seem to be true, and this could just as easily be said of classical literature today, is that popular theatre waned in the wake of cinema's rise.

In another example of meta-narrative from *Maya Bazaar*, there is a lovely scene when Krishna and other members of the court at Dwaraka are entertained by a dance-drama troupe enacting the childhood of Krishna on a proscenium-style stage no less. Prasad's comments in this context are insightful and I quote them in full:

> The key elements, however, are domestic space and the theatrical performance. The latter was a standard feature of the Telugu social throughout the 1950s. Stage performances were abruptly introduced into the image track, often with little or no diegetic motivation. It was a way of acknowledging theatre, both maintaining the historical link with the stage and achieving distance from it. It was as if cinema could only free itself from the stage by placing the camera in the auditorium as spectator of theatrical performance. In the process the stage is redefined as a space for fantasy projections' (Prasad 2011: 75).

In my mind, the whole thing is a giant feedback loop. The cosmopolis, in this case Sanskrit court culture, absorbs both forms and elements from regional folk traditions, elevates them by couching them in the trappings of the language of the gods, which then return to the soil from whence they sprang to be refashioned into fresh and productive new formations. The process is of course incredibly complex, as well as being cyclical, such that stories and motifs are folded up within themselves. A text like the *Mahābhārata* is thus almost impossible to pin down, 'it's infinite subtlety, its incalculable calculus of consequences, its endless delicacy' (Ramanujan 1999b: 177) makes it alive and organic.

In conclusion, I believe the epics (as well as other genres of Indian literature, though perhaps to lesser extent) to be multiform intertextual modalities of storytelling. That is to say, they are texts in conversation with the world outside them as well the world within them, a world which is continually created and reconstituted every time the story is told. What is folk, authentic, or canonical is then only a matter of perspective rather than definition. And the same applies to translations, which not only pay homage to a source text but reinvigorate it as well. In this way translation is an act of revitalization and renewal, for the only way to truly retell an old story is to change it. All these changes flow into a great text, feed it, nourish it and sustain it, just like the hundred grains of rice that saved Śakuni. In the words of Bhembre 'The folk tradition identifies the re-creators with the characters of the *Mahābhārata* as if it is an episode from their own history. Re-creators and transcreators also show a tendency to use the *Mahābhārata* to describe characters from their own society and to comment upon them' (Bhembre 2005: 174). A story like the *Mahābhārata* is therefore a reflection of our society. Today, if you search for 'Shashirekha Pariṇayam' on Google you will find a popular 2009 Telugu romance film, and a TV serial of the same name. A search on 'Shakuni' will retrieve management advice from ancient India *ala* Chanakya. Who knows what the *Mahābhārata* will inspire in the next millennium! 📱

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