

Representing Issues of Lineage, Caste, and Gender Politics in the *Mahabharata*: Texts, Teaching, and Television Adaptations

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Abstract

The article explores the process of interpretation and reception of a literary classic: the *Mahabharata* in a digital classroom, where most of the students have come across episodes from the epic in television adaptations and popular culture. The theme of lineage and caste has been chosen to explore the fluidity of the norms in practice at the time of the composition of this epic. An attempt has been made to situate these representations against the shifting socio-economic and religious contexts, especially the later Bhagvata additions. Some characters and episodes from the epic are taken up for detailed examination, to explore how the text itself defies the readers' expectations of negotiation of identities based on caste, lineage and gender.

Keywords: Popular culture, caste, lineage, television adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, tradition, *Bhagvata*, Draupadi

Exploring an Epic During the Lockdown

Teaching practices evolved rapidly during the pandemic and lockdown months in Delhi to accommodate the online mode of learning, thus transforming pedagogy in unforeseen ways. The original version of this paper was written for a panel discussion on the *Mahabharata*, organized by Lady Shri Ram College on February 12, 2022 through the Zoom platform. During my interaction with students at LSR and JDM College (where I teach), I discovered the wide range of possibilities in research and discussion that these new forms were opening rapidly, facilitating

greater interaction between previously isolated groups and also bringing ever new perspectives to an ancient text. The use of Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp, remote access to (e)libraries and similar platforms have made the process of accessing and exchanging texts, critical essays, videos, podcasts, and content across platforms and geographical sites very quick and convenient. In 2020-21, I also mentored a student research project online, along with two other faculty members, on the 'Select Versions of the *Mahabharata* and their Variations'. The findings brought home the sheer range of narratives with significant divergences.

Multiple Reconstructions of the Past Through the Centuries

The readings are made even more complicated as one must take into account the dates of the composition of the epic and its recensions, and the wide spectrum of socio-economic contexts that have produced these versions. As S. Bhattacharji (1992) and Romila Thapar (2010) have suggested, the text was composed and recomposed as a written text between 400 BC to AD 400 and reformulated into a Bhagvata text by Bhrigu Brahmanas. According to Bhattacharji (1992, 481), the core epic *Jaya* (of around 10000 verses) was begun in the fourth century BC and completed possibly around the second century AD together with the first set of interpolation of the tales of ethical values: the Bhargava recension was begun soon after and was completed around the fourth century AD. The *Bhagavad Gita* was added at an early stage of these interpolations around the turn of the century, possibly as a response to the popularity of Buddhism and Jainism, especially where the concept of Dharma and dhamma was concerned. These historians and critics trace a transition from a clan-based society to a kingship based one across successive recensions. They term this phenomenon the Bhriguization of the epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) whereby the emphasis shifted to Krsna and Rama as avatars of Vishnu. Kingship was valourised, caste became the central organizing system replacing clan, so much so that caste mobility was criticized in stricter terms. Thapar has also examined the various forms of marriages that are seen in the epics, especially the incidence of polyandry. The power to pronounce curses was ascribed to Brahmins more often in the latter adaptations. The Shudras continued to denote the class that served the three upper castes. Their master could use their wealth. The Vaishyas achieved a relatively better status through foreign trade while the agro-pastoral economy employed Shudras and those

castes that were considered outside the four orders, like the mleccha, chandala, pulkasa, svapaka, and the nishada. This was spelt out as early as 1939 in one of D.D. Kosambi's earliest articles, titled 'The Emergence of National Characteristics Among Three Indo-European Peoples':

The most important function of the system was to prevent the worker, the Shudra, learning the use of weapons and learning to read and write. He had no share in the culture of his age and country... The Brahmin relieved the warrior caste of the need of constantly policing the state to prevent an armed uprising (by the lower orders) (as cited in Roy, 2008, p. 79).

All these developments impact our reading of what can be surmised to be later additions to the primary text or commentaries on the major events. At the same time, the instances that follow in this paper as part of my argument, actually problematize a straightforward model of caste regulation in the epic.

Television and Pre-Texts

None of this complexity is reflected in the television serial adaptations of N. Sharma et al., 1988 and Tewary et al., 2013 series. The popular medium offers a different trajectory of constructions of national identity and 'tradition': that much contested term. More often than not, any aspects of discrimination along lines of caste are white-washed or subsumed to privilege dynastic politics or individual heroism. As for example in Tewary, 2013, in the representation of the Dicing sequence, the issue of the status of a *dasa* or of Draupadi as a slave woman is not given much screen time. Instead, the whole episode seems to foreground "*naari ka sammaan*" or a woman's honour, without qualifying it along the caste/class context. The fact that the exchange of women slaves as gifts, along with cattle, precious gems and textiles was part of the ancient culture, as seen in long descriptions of such tributes at Yudhisthira's *Rajasuya Yagnya* (Buitenen & Fitzgerald, 1975, Book 2 Sabha Parva), is completely absent from the television adaptations. The complexities of the original text are bypassed by a selective representation of the narrative, perhaps to cater to the perceived taste of the audience of popular shows. In the classroom, especially a digital one, these details are often unearthed by students with surprise and interest when they encounter the written word. A large section of the students had not read the original text either

in Sanskrit or vernacular or even English translations. Television and oral transmission formed the primary pre-texts for them.

For a text that spans so many editions and changes across centuries, any exploration of the major themes and sub-texts of this grand epic can only be a work in progress. Some of the characters and situations in the plot of the text might seem like minor characters and fleeting references in terms of the overarching structure; however, they can be read as seminal to some important questions that the epic throws up with regard to lineage, gender, and caste identities.

Instances from the Text

Unusual births equal mixed caste identities in the *Mahabharata* for there are many instances of polyandrous encounters and births outside the pale of marriage.

Satyavati has an encounter with Rishi Parashara before she marries Shantanu, as a result of which Vyasa, the creator of the epic, is born to a fisherwoman and a sage, and blessed with the knowledge of sacred texts due to a boon from his father. Satyavati engages the services of her son for the *niyoga* conception of Dhritarastra and Pandu through Ambika and Ambalika, another example of an encounter outside marriage.

Vidura (meaning much knowledge), whose time of birth is literally shrouded in a mist, is born of a union between a maid and Rishi Vyasa, is not only a half-caste half-brother to the Kuru princes, but also among the wisest of men, renowned for stratagem. The representatives of *dharma* in the text are Vidura and Yudhisthira. Of these Vidura expresses the subtleties of the 'Law' or *dharma* through riddles, fables, a knowledge of portents and omens and wise counsel. Yudhisthira is the son of Dharmaraj and Kunti, but it is no surprise that he resembles Vidura the most because of their shared connection with the God Dharma. Kunti obeys her husband in getting herself three sons and her co-wife Madri two sons through the Gods. The text seems to celebrate these events that reflect a deviation from the strict caste laws and gender norms prescribed for married women by the *Manusmriti* as well as other texts of the later period of the re-composition of the *Mahabharata*.

The whole war and succession debate is premised on problematic primogeniture. The successor to the whole race after the war is Parikshit, the son not of Draupadi but of Abhimanyu, the son of Subhadra and

Arjuna (a marriage between cousins that falls under the *rakshasa* form of marriage according to the rules). He is still born, revived by Krishna, thus providing another example of a mystery and mixed birth.

Technically speaking, the successors of Shantanu are not really his sons. Even the Kaurava princes are born of a mound cut into pieces after Gandhari aborts the child after two years of labour. The whole community is regulated by the rules of the clan and kinship ties. And yet, the succession is through the mothers' line, not the paternal one.

Yuyutsu, a minor character, provides another example of the motif that merit or righteous action is not determined by birth but by the choices made by a character. Yuyutsu is the son of Dhritarastra and a vaishya maid. At the time of the Kurukshetra war, he chooses *dharma* over kinship ties and crosses over to join the Pandavas, when Yudhishthira offers a chance just before the battle ensues. His decision is validated in the epic as indicating moral courage when heroes like Bhishma and Drona find themselves tied to a narrower notion of duty. Rudrangshu Mukherjee (2021, pp. 6-7) reads great significance in the fact that unlike the patriarchs, Yuyutsu chooses *dharma* over gratitude and kinship obligations, which makes his decision continuous with Krsna's discourse to Arjuna about what constitutes true morality and the right course of action for a *Kshatriya* warrior.

Ekalavya, the son of the King of Nishadas, belongs outside of the mixed orders associated with outstation locations, hunting or fishing. Dronacharya's refusal to accept him as his student implies that the same rules apply to his exclusion and education as those applied to the Shudras. He behaves in accordance with the rules of *dharma* as against the Brahmin Dronacharya and the Kshatriya Arjuna, both of whom are motivated by self-interest, and ambition devoid of compassion. In the same *adhyaya* of the Adi Parva, Drona's unseemly partiality to both Aswatthama and Arjuna is revealed to the reader. Ekalavya's devotion to his preceptor is unconditional, even though he has not been taught by Dronacharya, technically speaking. Dronacharya fails to display non cruelty or *aanrishangsya*: a concept that was developed to parallel the Buddhist concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence). In most television adaptations, the character of Dronacharya is idealized and the theme of caste discrimination is underplayed. Drona is represented as acting out of a concern to protect Arjuna from Ekalavya's supremacy, Jarasandha's

enimity (as Ekalavya's father serves the Magadha king) and to prevent an alliance between Duryodhana and Ekalavya: none of these is mentioned in the *Adi Parva*.

Karna, the first-born son of Kunti, who is abandoned by her to a casteless existence, shares a lot in common with Ekalavya. Both tell the truth and are proud of their identity. Both challenge Arjuna and prove worthy rivals to him. In the case of both, their strength is taken away from them: the *kundal* and *kwach* from Karna, the right thumb from Ekalavya. Both are generous to a fault and are victimized by the prevailing caste norms.

Sutas were charioteers who followed Kings and often wrote martial poems in praise of their valour. At the beginning Karna is unaware of his caste identity but even after he finds out, he chooses his poor *suta* parents over Kunti. Even then, he grants her one wish out of generosity in the *Udyoga Parva* (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, Book 5, 1978). One of the ironic aspects of that encounter is that Karna knows what Kunti does not know. Krsna had told him about his parentage during his friendly overture, the chariot ride, and the seduction attempt. When Kunti addresses Karna, and the absentee father Surya also suddenly speaks up to support Kunti's declaration, Karna is strangely untouched. He feels nothing but bitterness. Nor in the account in the van Buitenen edition (1978, Book 5) is Kunti overly sentimental. Her primary loyalty is towards her other sons- the Pandavas. Again, the televised adaptations tend to show Kunti under a sentimental lens rather than the powerful and protective queen-mother that she was. The televised adaptations often underplay the leadership qualities of women in Indian epics as well as the shortcomings of the upper caste characters.

Reading the Critique within the Text: The Dicing Sequence and its Visual Representation

As some scholars suggest, these passages, whether in the original or *Bhagvat* era interpolations, offer a critique of the caste system and constitute a response to the spread of Buddhism and the idea that an understanding of *dhamma/dharma* resides in meritorious behaviour and not in birth, that became popular in a post-Ashokan world. That the *Mahabharata* made space for such a conception becomes significant.

In the Dicing sequence, the critique of *dasatva* or slavery intersects with issues of gender. Draupadi's questioning raises uncomfortable questions

about the nature of owning human labour. She does not question Duryodhana's right to treat a slave woman badly but only raises her voice as a free woman, a princess of Panchala, and the technical question: did Yudhisthira lose himself first before staking her? If a wife is a man's property/chattel, as argued by Karna, Bhishma and Duryodhana, and seemingly acquiesced to by Yudhisthira, then she was already lost in the nineteenth roll of the dice. In which case the twentieth play was not needed. Therefore, if she was not already traded off, Yudhisthira did not have any rights over her as a slave and the twentieth play was invalidated. Draupadi does not speak to favour fair treatment to all who are *dasas* or slaves but only as she puts it "for law minded women" (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, Book 2, 1975, p. 148) to be dragged into the Hall? Using every argument and rhetorical device in her arsenal, first physically resisting Dusahsana's assault, and then using tears, pleas, anger, and sarcasm with exaggerated respect shown to elders, she asks, "Is the wife of King Dharma, whose birth matches his, free or a slave?" (p. 148), thus giving voice to a woman's agency, and a woman's status in society, albeit based on caste and high birth.

Iravati Karve suggests that it was "foolish and terrible" (and downright dangerous) for Draupadi to speak like a "lady pundit" in a public assembly (Karve, 1991, p. 99). The text does not seem to support such an observation. For instance, Bhishma himself says within this text at this juncture that Draupadi though "has come to grief, still looks to the law" (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, Book 2, 1975, p. 148). He praises her for voicing the question, just as Vidura, by saying that bringing injustice to public notice, that raising one's voice against it is the highest *dharma*. Karna reminds the assembled men that "there are three who own no property: a student, a slave, a dependent woman. The wife of a slave is a masterless wench", available for consumption (p. 150).

Though the televised adaptations (both of Sharma, 1988 and Tewary, 2013) of the Dicing sequence are extremely popular and evocative, they fail to reflect the wisdom and power of Draupadi. The overall impression of the viewer is of her symbolically portraying the woman as victim. The media representations put the focus on Krsna in his divine aspect, who proves to be her saviour in the attempted disrobing sequence. In the K.M. Ganguli edition Krsna is credited with saving Draupadi from humiliation, but in the van Buitenen edition, it is her own virtue and power that generates the miracle of the endless single cloth that

covers and protects her. This can be read as an instance of a Bhargava interpolation which robs Draupadi of agency to an extent.

In all, the textual editions, in spite of these variations, construct Draupadi as a far more interesting and resourceful figure than the contemporary televised adaptations. The Draupadi of the text is often an ideal and patient wife, in comparison to the one seen on screen, where perhaps due to the generic influence of the soap opera she is often stereotyped. Draupadi is represented as a perpetually angry woman, egging on her husbands to wreak revenge and in need of correction by Krsna. It is of course a recurring theme that the dishonour heaped upon her became a cause of the great war, but the text does not resort to caricature and cliché in the way the visual medium sometimes does.

Brahmins

The relationship of the Kshatriyas with Brahmins sees many interesting nuances in the text. Duryodhana informs Dhritarastra how in Indraprastha, she joins her husbands in serving the 88,000 snataka householders whom Yudhishthira supports, each with thirty slave girls. The Pandavas and Draupadi serve the Brahmins before all others. Even when Yudhishthira wagers the wealth of all his people in the thirteenth throw of the dice, he excepts the Brahmins. Drupada rejects Dronacharya because he says, “no exalted King strikes up friendship with men, destitute of wealth and deprived of fortune” (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, 1973, *Adi Parva*, p. 268). On the other hand, it is the disguise of Brahmins that the Pandavas take up in the Lakshagriha episode.

Kunti plants a Nishada family in the house of lac in the place of herself and the Pandavas in order to fool the Kauravas into believing they have perished in the fire. The low caste family, who are the guests at her feast, fall innocent victims to a fire that becomes like a sacrificial fire for them. In this, they become akin to Ekalavya and remain as silent interrogators of the dominant caste discourse. These issues too are never foregrounded in the television adaptations.

The brahmins versus barons conflict is stirred up during Draupadi’s *swayamvara* or bridegroom choice, where the kings object that the finest of women, Draupadi was to be given away to a brahmin. Which is also why Karna withdraws from the fight with Arjuna, for he viewed brahminic power to be invincible (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, 1973, p. 356).

Caste Identity in the Virata Parva

In the *Virata Parva* (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, Book 4, 1978) too, the Pandavas display their resourcefulness. Since the challenge is to be invisible and unnoticeable, symbolically the caste and class identities they embrace underline the invisibility of the common people for those in power. The text, multi-generic and vast as it is, provides ample play across caste identities to problematise caste as an organizing category at times, just as the character of Arjuna as Brihanalla, makes for a fluid gender identity for the most masculine of heroes in the Virata parva.

Nakula and Sahadeva, choose to be the keeper of the stables and the cows respectively: as Granthika the horse groom and Tantipala the cow teller, they both assume Vaishya identities. Draupadi as Malini the *sairandhri* oversees hairdressing and other grooming essentials for Sudesna the Queen. As the queen's chamber maid, she ironically plays the role of a *dasi* that she so resisted in the dicing scene. Her attempted molestation and manhandling by Kichaka is also similar to the humiliation Draupadi had faced in the Assembly Hall. By making us feel sorry for Draupadi in each instance, the text foregrounds the vulnerability of serving women. Just as in the case of the assembly Hall, Yudhishthira counsels Sairandhri to behave as behoves a woman of her caste and calling. Sairandhris are identified as tribal women by Van Buitenen, while he also hints at it meaning a class of people born from the union of a dasyu with a half Shudra-half Vaishya woman. Manu describes the *sairandhras* as skilled in '*prasadhana*'/beauty care and as living in servitude though not a slave.

Arjuna's transformation into a eunuch transvestite with a braid, who lives un-regarded in the women's quarters as a dance teacher is the most dramatic, and is facilitated by Urvasi's curse. Living incognito like the common man and woman is a skill that these heroes have to learn before they win the war; even the proud Draupadi who could have lived in comfort like Subhadra chooses to undergo these tests and trials, and learns new skills, patience and courage along with her husbands. Yudhishthira has the dice thrown in his face by the King when he praises the valour of Brihannala/Brihanada, but he keeps quiet. Yudhishthira draws our attention to the inevitable persecution of an innocent man as "cruelty comes quick to the powerful" (van Buitenen & Fitzgerald, Book 4, p. 124).

While the characters have to suffer hardships due to their newly acquired

professional identities, we do not see any details of their encounters with their colleagues. Perhaps, caste discrimination is not the main concern being explored here even though identity and lineage is. Soon after the *agyaatvāsa incognito* period is over, they sit as kings in Virata's court, shedding humility along with the clothes donned before. The caste and class hierarchies are re-instated but the very expression of these conflicts forms a powerful sub-text.

That the *Mahabharata* offers opportunities for such role playing and identity exploration is in keeping with the literary greatness of the epic. The text upholds, much like Buddhist texts, that caste or high birth is no determinant of right action.

The television adaptations, on the other hand in their more monolithic constructions, posit a certain idea of a timeless and apolitical notion of tradition as homogenized that a close reading of the text itself belies considerably.

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