

Dharma, Complicit Narrator and Decent Meaning Formation: A Subversive Reading of The Mahabharata

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Abstract

The paper takes up the objectives of developing a critical methodology for the researchers in literature keeping the mythical and legendary as an overarching framework. It seeks to bust the notion that myths cannot be treated as independent literary narratives without religious undertones and separate the religious from the philosophical and ontological. In the context of the greatest epic of the world that stretches to 100000 verses in its original rendition, the paper treats the supernatural elements and characters with miraculous attributes as mortals and tries to see through the elite-subaltern game as an authorial compromise and construct. It is intriguing to observe the ideological premise of justice, ethics and the often-cited *Dharma* in the text as nothing but a tricky excuse by both the author and his most preferred character, not out of love but fear. I would thus problematize the very concept of godhood and ethics in order to enable the reader to investigate the characters by their human potential rather than getting swayed by claims of the supernatural. The paper intends to make the critical observation disinterested and detached rather than getting influenced by a few characters situating a body of thought to be moral, judicious and ethical. My whole endeavour here is to clinically investigate the highly personalized, tendentious, cynical and partisan values floated by Krishna, Bhishma, Drona and Bidura in the text leading to a final acceptance of the result as a vindication of what they predicted and what *Dharma* is, defeating what the modern critical narratives term to be the *writerly* text positions; innumerable and infinite, erasable meanings that the text with its discursive nature has tried to narrativise.

Keywords: *Dharma, Mahabharata*, Narrative, Ethics and Values.

Declaration

This article doesn't intend to hurt the sentiments of anyone or any religion; neither does it have any cynical view of the institution of religion. It is purely a literary analysis of a grand narrative with only a few instances cited; that of the famous epic, *The Mahabharata*. It may also be remembered that certain

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characters who appear to have figured like gods are perceived by the author to be purely human from a conceptual point of view (since they are engaged in human affairs) without endangering their otherwise revered status in different contexts. The views expressed in the article are personal and are derived from a critique of the mythical construct that has often been treated to be final and absolute. In other words, this essay perceives the epic as a text of literature and not scripture.

Conceptualising *Dharma*

The Gita brilliantly explores human potential and prepares everyone to live, perform and seek salvation in the worldly instead of the divine. This Hindu scripture is unique and unparalleled because of its critique of destiny and laziness, doesn't prescribe rituals as medium to heaven or *Moksha* but labour and toil in the life given to us. Thus, this secular yet extremely sacrosanct discourse of the earthly and mundane stands apart. The instances from the story of Raja Harishchandra (sacrifice at a human level), Rama (worldly king who stands as the supreme example of an ideal king and justice) and Karna (selfless sacrifice of oneself) testify the principles charted for human glory.

The Anthropological critic Northrop Frye in his critical essay talks about the need to rob the myth of its miraculous, supernatural elements and only then could it be understood as literature (Frye 1957) because literature has to be understood in human terms and not in terms of gods or their authoritative irrationality. Shelley had rightly stated this in his consistent emphasis on Nature and its powers to be superior much above any personal god (Shelley).

The objectives spelt out in our literature curriculum emphasize on the view that our students need to examine the texts in their contexts and cultural space. The relevance of any classic is put to further test by its individual and universal taste in catering to contemporary questions of existential value. Albert Camus while analyzing *Karamazov Brothers* by Fyodor Dostoevsky in the essay *Rejection of Salvation* talks about Ivan Karamazov's rational search and the inability to search for God. He says God is denied by Ivan, and is rather looked at as an equal. (836-841). There is no other reason for Ivan to question god except his compassion for the poor. Ivan puts forth this idea of mortality and questions the eternal salvation which Christianity promises to offer. But if there is no eternity and there lies the mortality on the face of human life then there is no heaven and

heavenly bread. And it is unjust to continue with a sort of faith during hard times. Faith in divine power is not going to end suffering. Instead, it is the action that helps one to come up with a solution. Camus also talks about truth, the kind of truth that Ivan defines. According to Ivan truth is always unacceptable and always unjust; so there is an unending struggle between truth and justice. Ivan does not say that there is no truth. He says that truth does exist but it can only be unacceptable. Why? Because it is unjust. The struggle between truth and justice is begun here for the first time and it will never end.

The Hindu Concept of *Moksha*, speaks of a state of supreme consciousness and oneness with the absolute, that of carrying the entire cosmos in self. But there is a struggle one envisages in the very vital body overpowered by the sense of the ego, the self that holds on to its unique identity which subsequently turns towards the metaphysical. It is directed towards uniting the supreme consciousness and the 'other' to attain *Moksha*. There is an urge for transcendence of soul, space, time and human conscious. *The Upanishad*, which is a basic philosophical text of Hinduism, defines *Moksha* as a state of total self-realisation and oneness with *Brahma*, the supreme divine. This *Brahma* is believed to reside in each and every individual. And one can only achieve *Brahma* by the process of self-realisation and only then there is the attainment of *Moksha*. *Aham Brahma* (I am the divine and I see the divine in everything) in Hindu thought lays emphasis on the cosmos in itself being divine. So, all creatures are a manifestation of God and the entire world is divine.

This reminds us of the Hindu concept of *Banaprastha* (leaving towards the forest) after an active life called *Grihastha* (worldly life) without any fear of death. It is an ultimate desire of being alone, not being possessive of the mundane world and approving of an immaterial life. But it is not a divorce of the body or denial of the life of senses. It is an aftermath of life in Nature of creation, life in the eternal cycle. Blake, Nietzsche and Lawrence seem to have led this argument of a preservation of life against an assertion of a state of life devoid of the senses. The old civilisations made a treaty with life. The new questioned their active physical life and pursued the mechanical path of a corrupt divinity.

In American Literature of the Nineteenth Century, Fisher Samuelson and Reninger Vaid record (33-38) how *Vedanta* philosophy has been a strong thought current that reached New England by which writers like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were thoroughly influenced. 'Selfhood' as it has been portrayed in the Hindu scriptures of *Katha Upanishad*, *Bhagavad-Gita* when elaborated further

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gives a philosophical and spiritual doctrine of the self. *The Upanishad* states:

The self within you, the resplendent, immortal person is the internal self of all things and is the universal *Brahman*. The transcendentalists in America too emphasize similar concepts. Emerson in his essay, 'Plato, or the Philosopher' writes: "the 'ecstasy' of losing 'all being in one Being' finds its highest expression chiefly in the Indian scriptures in the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vishnu Purana*" (34).

His poem 'Brahma' echoes the same *Vedantic* rendition of selfhood,

I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.
The strong god pine for my abode,
And pin in vain the sacred seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (35)

Thoreau and Whitman also record strong impressions of the Hindu ethos in their writings. Evidently Lawrence who goes on exploring the pagan past from across the world would afford to lose sight of this. The *Upanishad* further expands the idea of *Brahma* as the ultimate reality, the very core of being and the source of our existence around. Lawrence is very much touched by this idea of ultimate reality and the supreme unconscious. He is not looking for mere 'truth' or 'faith' but something beyond it. He looks for certain infinity that the *Brahma* holds. *The New Testament* talks about the 'true' and 'faithful' that indicate rebirth. There is the truth of the living cosmos which is a vast entity just like *Brahma*. It is true that the universe has meaning only if we put the observer at the centre of it. And that centre holds the *Brahma*. It is possible to be capable of understanding the true essence of this universe when one is close to the living cosmos. The concept of *Shakti* in the Hindu principle of life is very significant. It is a complementary principle and not in binary opposition to the 'other' (*Shiva*). *Shiva* and *Shakti* are two halves that make a whole.

The Dharmic Context of *The Mahabharata*

The Bhagavad Gita which was later incorporated into *The Mahabharata* is an independent text that professes decent methods to live a worldly life rather than renouncing it. Spiritual life can be realized in the mundane and one can achieve true self-realization by performing meaningful actions. Its incorporation in the

text of literature has its limitations. The biggest of it is the application of a moral conduct in a selective and discriminatory manner to potential human beings. *The Mahabharata* needs to be approached in a secular, humane mode and not as sacrosanct or a final text lest it should lose its relevance and literary value. It has been written and rewritten in Indian cultural context as a continuous text. The deliberations of *The Gita* are time tested, and are certainly a means of proving life a different context, of a higher order. But its decontextualized, manipulative application in the epic is biased and nothing but an egotistical self-fulfillment. If the end of the war is known beforehand, if the discourse on *Dharma* is defined and its stake holders are fixed, then what is the utility of an unravelling of a famous text, a literary masterpiece? The beauty of any classic text lies in the delineation of its characters, their unsuspecting nature, the marvel of their creation, their inimitable traits. Since the popular epics are more comprehensible in popular mediums of the electronic media, we need to guard and sensitize the reception of it as multi-dimensional and varied. We cannot just be fed with one kind of meaning about such a narrative with deliberate diversions and systematic breaks. Even the history of critical theory speaks of the shift of analysis from mimetic (mere imitation) to expressive mode (Abrams 17). Under such a romantic-expressive methodological field, the overtly stated positivist notions like *Dharma*, justice, purity appear to be clearly blunted and ideologically constructed to suit a particular section of elite and power-hungry people. Since it is a vast text and the scope of this paper cannot accommodate in entirety what it actually intends to do, I shall use certain observations as pointers to a kind of analysis (though it may not be completely new) to remind the readers that truth, morality, *Dharma* and such notions are purely relative and should not be unquestionably accepted in a puerile way. Harbans Mukhia writes in his 'Between history and mythology' (*The Hindu*, 17 July 2014):

Mythology, fiction, poetry and paintings relate to a different genre of reality which could, for convenience, be grouped under culture, of which religion is also an important segment, even as the two are not synonymous. In that sense culture and mythology also acquire the characteristics of an objective reality that governs our attitudes and behaviour as social beings. Indeed, the reach of culture in any society is far more pervasive than that of historical facts. The study of mythology would be greatly enriched as a cultural phenomenon rather than as authentic history that is based on material evidence, without it suffering the ignominy of being false or inferior. (7)

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I do not subscribe to the inclusion of religion into the mythological narrative in this context though it is quite a succinct argument. Mukhia has established in bridging the gap and hierarchy between the immanence of a positivist historiography and mythological deification that would serve our purpose of developing a perspective.

I

Karna who learnt archery from the greatest teacher Parasurama, is a part of Nature since he was neither protected by his biased and hypocritical mother nor by a nepotistic, feudal, educational system. A society that doesn't respect and reward its competent, heroic, and quality human resource will decay. Teachers like Drona serve to be living examples of modern sycophancy and partiality. In this paper I do not wish to repeat the facts of historical wrongs done to Karna. Neither am I impressed by the Dalit versus Brahmin worldview propagated by a group of activists, thinkers, drawing their decontextualised conclusions from these heroes who are more of archetypal significance. Veteran litterateur Manoj Das rightly opines that to interpret ancient texts, myths, epics, scriptures by modern critical theories is flawed. I only intend to attempt a critical analysis based on my personal views and address the recurring fault we all are subject to; our attitude of expecting a good human being to be an absolute citadel of goodness (time and again we hear about Karna's fault of being at the side of a *Dharma* or being arrogant. But who are convinced of this other than the millions that blindly accept it as a religious prescription?) The most illogical response comes from them who would say that gods can dilute morals and dictate morals for a desired end. We expect absolute goodness from Karna irrespective of all kinds of deceptive policies of the opposite camp in the name of fixed, fossilized values and justice; so well crystallized as *Dharma* and *Adharma*.

Karna's power comes from his own effort and presence amidst natural powers (Shelleyan west wind and here in this case sun's rays can be taken to be analogous), devoid of any support from family, peer group and society whereas Arjuna's power is nothing but an illusion. He always got arms and his powers from different sources (his *tapasya* is a kind of begging out of which he accumulated his powers). We may also be reminded of how his power was taken away by Krishna at the end reminding him of his worthlessness. Still, we can experience the futile attempts by all forms of popular cultural narratives like cinema, live serials and day to day conversations echoing Arjuna's talent! This is

because we haven't understood the discursive nature of the text.

It is Duryodhana who accommodates and accepts him where as all the preachers of morality only profess but never practice what they state. None of them offered a welcoming hand to such a warrior who is an asset to the state. In this regard they strategically scheme to silence the greatest warrior who could alone defeat three '*lokas*'; heaven, earth and the region below it as the sun god says when he is born (Sarala Das). It is not only exploitation and partiality but incompetent state policy. Karna instead of Bhishma should have been the Chief Commander of the Kaurava army since he was loyal and true to the cause of Duryodhana. He and Ashwathama were never in a dual role play although his obsession to be ethically and morally upright (often one tends to perpetuate a sort of image; generosity at the cost of his life) took away the greater cause of restoring the throne to the worthy leadership of his friend. He voices his opinion against caste discrimination and fights for capability and quality to be the sole criteria. Just by quoting the word '*Dharma*' one can't establish it unless he/she practices it. No one on the Pandava's side, not even Yudhishthira, did follow the path of *Dharma* in action. Rather the word has been foregrounded as a textual method to divert our attention from their mischief and let them get away with their proposed end- that of destroying a powerful Hastinapur in the greater Indian subcontinent. The counter points that Duryodhana honours Karna only to use him for his purpose is unacceptable on two counts:

- I. There was no other radical, reformist courtier ready to approve of *Karna's* strength as supreme or accommodate him to feudal Hastina.
- II. Didn't Pandavas have a secret and unjustified support from someone who had all the miraculous powers from heaven to exercise? In fact, the text fails in giving any justification of an equally poised war since god's power and tips to one party is purely an attack on justice and truth. We consider *The Mahabharata* as literature and not scripture, so the exercise of supernatural power and deceptive means to kill the three commanders and Duryodhana is an example of an authoritative, prejudiced attitude.
- III. The kind of friendship they possess is adorable and worthy of emulation.

But people like Bhishma, Bidura, Drona, who have always been biased with their usual pampering attitude to the Pandavas (in fact they are autocratic by nature but democratic in their pseudo discourse) wanted to insult Duryodhana every now and then, entertained and pampered Arjuna

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knowing very well that Karna was the greatest archer and a glorious human being in the entire country then. If age and capability, charisma and humanity had become the yardstick to determine the king, then it is only Karna and not Yudhisthira who should have been the king. Why then did all those learned people keep quiet when he proved to be the best and greatest? How come did he get insulted everywhere despite being the asset and greatest resource of the state? What kind of future state policy was Bhishma floating for the future? Didn't he know that him Karna was only the disciple of Parasurama among all the Kshatriyas who is a promise for state security and an ideal promise for the young generation? Drona developed a complex seeing what Karna has learnt after being deprived of his guidance and could never get over that. Bhishma cunningly kept him away from the war during his commandship since he neither wanted to kill Pandavas nor could see their defeat in the hands of Karna. Bidura, by nature was servile and a conspirator; being an adviser and minister in the council of Dhritarashtra, he had breached trust by leaking secrets and sympathizing with the enemy camp. The three of them had time and again humiliated and tried to deprive the deserving princes like Duryodhana and Karna of what had been their legitimate rights. It is essential to cite one episode from Sarala Das's Odia *Mahabharat* (established as authentic and equivalent to Vyasa Deva's original) to describe about the strength of Karna and expose Arjuna's cowardice and mean qualities while he is pleading before his father Indra to steal the *Kabacha* and *Kundala*:

Amruta kundalaehashrabana re thiba (your ears will have life giving amrit)

Samara padileethuamrutajhariba (this lends you life even if you fall in battle)

Deba shastra mana bajiangehebachurna (even the weapon of gods will get destroyed)

Samara ehakukehinohibesamana (no one can be any match to you)

Jala SthalaAnala re nahinmrutyugati (you cannot die in land or water, not of fire) (*Sabha Parva* 132)

In another instance, Sun blesses Karna after his birth:

Jetebelaparjyantetu rathe basithibu (till you are on your chariot)

Trailokyajinantatuhihoibu re babu (you will win over earth, heaven and under earth) (*Adya Parva* 42)

And then how Arjuna's character reveals itself:

Boili mu ana bare karjyanahin prabhu (I don't want any other blessing)

Karna thuKundala Bajra chhouri ani debu (give me Karna's magic shield and blessed ear lobes)

Indra boile babu re sumaribujebe (Indra said, whenever you want and remind me)

Karna tharu ani debi tote, muhintebe (I shall get it for you from Karna) (*Sabha Parva* 132)

Sarala Das also cites in Karna Parva how the warrior defeated Yudhisthira squarely and could not be vanquished by Arjuna's arrows despite being away from his own chariot. This was a mystery that had perplexed everyone on the battlefield including Krishna. Krishna had then gone to heaven to seek the answer and had found out that there are three special arrows that are specifically designed to silence Karna when fired together (49-50). Karna's *Dharma* of choosing Duryodhana is the most selfless one and is the only convincing example of ethical practice in any narrative of the world. He reminds of Raja Harishchandra and human instinct of glory at heart. The event of giving away the kabachakundala is unparalleled in any imaginative writing of human civilization. Krishna's garrulous repetition of codes of *Dharma* in the epic is no match to this.

II

Durjyodhana had been always discriminated and looked down upon from his childhood. A naughty child is not a wicked or evil child. Dhritarashtra was always a victim of partiality and was used by the state to rule without due respect to him. By virtue of being the son of the king and the existing rule which allowed him to be the king, Durjyodhana justifiably deserves the throne. The authorial politics reaches its height during small episodes like Krishna staying with Bidura and affiliating with the constructed and deceiving idea that he comes from a lower caste background, feeds the cows sometimes in order to project himself as a common milk man, down trodden; in other words, a proletariat. In fact, all these people are neo colonialists, power hungry courtesans; shrewd enough to manufacture a false ideal before the public in order to 'behave good,'

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'look noble,' 'appear morally strong' (this is a very tactical and successful trait in human nature). But in the natural world 'to be true' is both graceful and ethical without compromising anyone's rights. It is ridiculous to find that every time Krishna schemes something or preaches anything from the stereotyped and partisan values constructed by a politicized authorial intervention, they all welcome, accept and implement the same as captives or get mesmerized by its identification with the supreme life force. Durjyodhana deserved to be the king by virtue of his personality, power and individuality. The Pandavas on the other hand were always prone to shrewd counseling, advice, tricks from everywhere and never had to make a decision of their own. A king should not be weak and dependent upon outside motives and methods that would destroy his/her own institution/state (*Mahabharata* war, being a brain child of Draupadi's nymphomaniac, blood-thirsty nature and Krishna's obsessive authoritative ambitions) as the misled and ego-centric Pandavas did. The Pandavas and their allies were never true to each other, there was no real friendship between them; so, they could never offer any good governance to people. As such they were not even sure about their relationship in term of marriage and always appeared servile to someone. Durjyodhana on the other hand knew how to value friendship and so did Karna. Both of them knew true *Dharma* and truly adhered to it. He was also a legitimate child and had one wife. The Pandavas on the other hand were not Kurus or legitimate children (the rule of right to throne depended on the father and not mother). To accept insult as a decoration is not humbleness or gentility but self-negation and a humiliation of the people and state that one rules. Durjyodhana's insult by Draupadi and Krishna in public (Indraprastha) and Karna's humiliation at the infamous *Swayamvara* are instances of shame to humanity and that of innocence; this is the actual inception of a *Dharma* in the text. After all, gods always scheme to belittle humans and desire to see them behave as slaves. Arjuna behaves as one and undoubtedly becomes a favourite.

Benedict Anderson's argument is that nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in our political life and separatists, competing appeals for nationhood are symptoms of political illegitimacy (Anderson 39). Some are 'good,' progressive and others 'bad' and reactionary. David Lloyd also attributes to the 'good,' 'bad,' or 'legitimate,' 'illegitimate' nationalisms (Lloyd 3). Leela Gandhi is of the view that a productive area of collaboration between Postcolonialism and Feminism presents itself in the possibility of a combined offensive against the aggressive myth of both imperial and nationalist masculinity (Gandhi 98).

The colonial encounter also has been read in terms of a struggle between competing masculinities.

When we look at the characters based on the above premise, it is clearly visible that Karna, Durjyodhana and even Bhishma appears to be the humiliated masculine figures in the narrative by shrewd males like Krishna and the Pandavas. It is clearly evident in how Krishna and Draupadi took the centre stage in the political affairs of Hastinapur, had a secret agenda to defeat and marginalize the Kurus who always claimed androgyny (we do not hear much about their wives) and make Hastinapura a Yadava colony planning for Subhadra's legacy to continue (it is crucial to notice how Abhimanyu who does not represent a Kuruvanshi gets his training at the hand of Krishna in Dwaraka nurturing a revenge in his heart by shrewd instigation). From such a perspective, just by using a campaign of establishing *Dharma* and *satya* one cannot convincingly justify a war that would bring the end of a whole race and nation. Krishna often identifies himself with Bidura by quoting his low status of birth in order to form another alternative discourse of power! This scheming and diplomatic political gimmick makes the text analogous to contemporary politics where we often see a section of the intelligentsia or political party cite its self-proclaimed ideology of secular-liberalism and brand the others as partisan and fanatic or fundamentalist and communal. It is a significant discourse in itself; that of theorizing certain prejudiced concepts as defense to all forms of hypocrisy (like the one that resulted in the perpetual alienation of Durjyodhana and Karna in the epic).

What constitutes *Dharma*? Both *Managovinda* (Durjyodhana) and *Mrutyunjaya* (Karna) question its stereotypes. Durjyodhana has the courage to brand Krishna as a *Mayaabi* (charmer) is never afraid of his tantrums unlike Bhishma, Drona, Bidura and Krupacharya who are more interested in eulogizing this messenger because of his powers than ever questioning his intent. This is certainly *Adharma*. We know Durjyodhana was the preferred disciple of Balarama (equally guilty of innocence) and the son of Lakshmi. It is also worthwhile to record that Durjyodhana married Bhanumati who was from Kalinga and its warriors were at his side during the war. Needless to say, Kalinga chose him by the standards of ethics in the true secular spirit. Even today we name our children as Durjyodhan and Dushasan in Odisha. In Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, monopoly of *Dharma* to feed one category doesn't take precedence. On coming to know of the death of the five Pandava sons, Duryodhana laments and curses Ashwatthama:

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Ki durjyogesha kale senapati kali (by misfortune I made you my general in the end)

Banshabudaibalakahatyadoshiheli (you wiped out my wards and future and made me murderer of little children) (*Aishika Parva* 5).

Durjyodhana is innocent, naïve, transparent, foolish to an extent yet heroic. He is not afraid of taking responsibility of his ego or fight for a cause. He alone refuses to recognize Krishna's theatrics as a series of miracles. Even when he knows that his defeat is imminent, he doesn't regret, neither gives precedence to what Krishna preaches. This as we know is called a display of character. No wonder, he is a king and not a slave to any god who expects complete surrender.

III

Draupadi is the weakest example of a woman of any substance. Critics who find her a victim of male supremacy only offer a simplistic study of her nature and identity. The author certainly puts her in many situations that are self-created and are the outcome of her over ambitious, ill cultured, rash, uncouth and bestial hypocrisy. There are many exemplary women in our myths, legends like Anasuya, Savitri, Shakuntala, Sita, Durgabati, Laxmi Bai, and so on who have asserted themselves with grace, stood for the essence and rights of women. In fact, Draupadi can never be an example for the question of female rights but rather belittles her species. Being casteist, impudent, ill-mannered and power hungry, she has always had the intention to insult Karna and Durjyodhana, sometimes on the grounds of caste, sometimes on that of heredity and so on. She drives away Kunti and Gandhari from her chamber citing her status as the queen of the state. She schemes along with some of the characters and is authoritative every now and then. Why didn't she refuse to marry all the brothers? Where were her rights then? She was free to choose. It was she who broke the norms of her own *Swayamvara* and always twisted the rule to suit to her convenience. She has never taken any responsibility for her act of impudence and ill manners. She has never been apologetic for insulting Karna and Durjyodhana in public. She cannot be the voice of a woman in plight. She actually appropriates the male language of power and runs after that power which is a male construct. She doesn't evolve her own language and is loyal to another male for making her decisions. In order to get back to the throne and because of a disturbed marital relationship she develops a complex against the charismatic males around; Karna and Durjyodhana. We shouldn't forget that

along with Krishna's master plan to wipe out a civilization and destroy all potential males, it is her obsessive love of bloodshed nurturing an unnatural desire (of smearing someone's blood in her hairs!) that resulted in this war. All the heroes of Duryodhana camp were killed by deceit but there has been no instance of her being ever repentant or feeling remorse. Both she and Krishna were always self-centered and tried to turn the narratives in their favour. Being nihilists, they only spoke of power, authority and excused themselves of larger goals and were self-serving till the end. This is demonic in nature. Didn't Krishna time and again claim his bishwarupa, godhood and give sufficient hints to her and the servile Pandavas about the result of the war? She categorically put her efforts in achieving that end. Draupadi and Bhima were blood thirsty, she having a very absurd obsession for the sensory taste of human blood. Bhima on the other hand was never human and nurtured a bestial interest to taste human blood. Both Bhima and Arjuna always spoke a language that was not dignified or decent enough in comparison to the Kuru greats. Draupadi enjoyed such rants. A woman who wants to bathe her body by human blood and a man who promises to drink it from the chest of another after amputating his opponent's arms do not fit into human civilization. It is primitive and atavistic. There is an inhuman desire for authoritative, autocratic self-projection and decimation of the earthly, the human, the glorious and anything that is romantic. Needless to say that Krishna's design of establishing truth and *Satyayuga* by a *Dharmyudha* is a deceptive betrayal of humanity since after *Dwapara yuga* we see the seeds of *Kaliyuga* spreading its arms!

Draupadi's illogical and ill-tempered mannerisms, actions and ambition motivate the plot to her advantage since she had the strength of Krishna more than her allegiance and respect for the Pandavas. Without any sense of accountability and responsibility for her most humiliating remarks against great characters like Karna and Durjyodhana, she flaunts her helplessness as a woman on the one hand and emasculates herself (she often speaks in a male language and appropriates the male-revenge motive) on the other. Is it not ironical that she questioned the birth of Karna and not the Pandavas who were illegitimate? Neither did she raise this issue with Kunti who is another culprit and still puts the garb of culture! It was only Kunti who had empowered Krishna to take control of the Pandavas which is the meanest form of interference in the internal matters of another state. The narrator too is enthusiastic in appreciating her beauty and significance in this *Dharma yudh* since his own birth, along with the Pandavas happened in mysterious circumstances and without social legitimacy.

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Probably all of them struggled to convince the world of their intention more as a psychological complex than genuine knowledge of *Dharma*, truth or noble act.

IV

The Establishment of *Dharmarajya* (ideal- ethical state)

What happened to the glorious *Dharma* and its benefits to the people after such bloodshed and irreparable destruction? The following questions and statements vindicate my position in the argument.

- I. In the name of such premeditated value system, four great warriors and human beings such as Karna, Durjyodhana, Bhishma and Drona, equipped with all special skills and weapons, had to lay their lives in the most deceptive method ever practiced in any warfare in human history.
- II. Why after *Dwapara*, *Kaliyuga* set in? That is enough to dismantle the hypocritical, parochial ideological construct of Krishna who for his conceited self-glorification did not bother sacrificing human glory and beauty. It is misanthropic what comes out of extreme jealousy and meanness. The inability to stand the charisma, nobility, the real godhood of Karna and the intolerance towards the innocence and physical power/beauty of Durjyodhana (both of them possessed a sort of manliness that impressed men and women alike) made Krishna (Draupadi was always under intense frustration due to an inevitable comparison in her mind between the heroism of these two and cowardice of her five husbands for which she always turned to Krishna) impatient to bring their downfall the way the pseudo secular parties rant against the honest patriotism of nationalists branding them to be right wing or fascists in modern times.
- III. Gandhari's curse upon Krishna attests the pomposity of his conceptualization of *Dharma* and proves instead that unauthorized interference, bias, subjective opinions and irrational obsession with a singular individual's methodical strategy in spreading large scale human tragedy is unjust, unethical and calls for adequate and timely punishment and accountability.
- IV. The use of the concept *Dharma* has been patently diluted in the text owing to its enactment as an external device rather than an ingrained human quality or condition. Terming Yudhisthira as Dharmaraj and using such an

objectified value (unlike the Dostoevskyan realization of it), the characters who represent it dictate instead of fortifying the tremendous effect *Dharma* actually could have inspired in the hearts of people.

- V. The author who conceptualizes such great characters cannot absolve responsibility from judiciously balancing the plot, especially when the values professed have had diverse impact over the periods in human history. Characters like Bhishma, Drona, Shikhandi, Bhima, Dhruvadyumna, Jayadratha, JaraSabar (Eklavya), Arjuna and even Durjodhana (at least coming to know of the death of the five brothers, even if it was an illusion) fulfil the promises they had made at different occasions. But what happened to the author's other charismatic character *Karna*? Was it the design to keep him struggling throughout life and die with his unfulfilled yet deserving desire? The artistic failure of the narrator is evident in getting Arjuna spared at the hand of the most perfect character in the epic. Also, Arjuna who burnt the forest of *Khandav* without leniency resulting a total destruction of its flora, fauna (Takshaka being just a representative figure of the same) didn't get punished while Krishna went on choosing just one person to be fit enough to hear out his discourse! The author could have put Karna on the pedestal of victory (physically) instead of a coward and loser like Arjuna who is kept alive in immature Bollywood dialogue writers' imagination and socio-political narratives as the greatest archer. Did the author forget that Karna lived only with one aim, and after his selfish mother made him swear that he must spare her sons, he had only the ambition and promise to defeat Arjuna and make his friend smile once? This is a serious failure of the plot.
- VI. Krishna had posed as the '*Shanti-duta*' (messenger of peace) to Hastinapura yet he refused the hospitality of Dhruvashtra, had his usual manoeuvres with *Bidura* and used a language that is threatening, provoking Durjodhana to become his usual self; that of an egoist yet true. Krishna tries to bring Karna to his camp and implants a sense of surrender among the Kuru seniors, particularly Drona, demoralizing his opponents. The use of the word *Shanti* calls for a serious question here.
- VII. Time and again Bhishma humiliated Karna while speaking of ethical codes, justice and Hastinapura's welfare. This is an irony that human nature finds it hard to overcome its sense of entitlement, partisan nature (he like Drona, Krupacharya, Bidura wanted to pamper and protect Arjuna) for which he

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neither revealed the identity of Karna as the eldest Pandava and future King nor allowed him to fight under his leadership. Was he really a well-wisher of his kingdom? Needless to say, he had also stated that he will not kill the Pandavas.

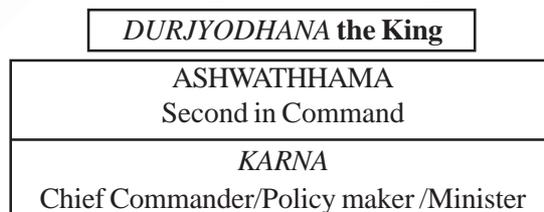
V

The New Subaltern

In the epic discussed above, we may perceive a domain of possible research into the claims of deprivation and exploitation beyond the usual notions of caste and rank politics. We have heard of the Ekalavyas, the Nagas or Hidimbs as damned and exploited or, in other words, the subaltern in the text. But what I find ironically put and pertinent to perceive is that both Karna and Durjyodhana actually lead the subaltern movement in the whole discourse. Dhritarashtra's blindness is a metaphoric marginalization (he was always mistreated and never got his due as a full-fledged king). Bhishma, the patriarchal elite (symbolic of policy making, defence and police force) had always tried to pamper and patronize the powerful, shrewd and other elites like the Pandavas and Krishna (we know that he belongs to the higher caste though keeps an affiliation with a backward caste and is always vocal about it for his political interest and mass support). Krishna is successful in his deals with the other elites like Drona (controls the educational system discriminating at will yet keeping his own revenge against Drupada intact) and Bidura (the political advisor who should not be sympathized as downtrodden since he enjoys a royal portfolio yet keeps repeating his identity as 'dasiputra' (born to a lower caste) and victimhood but complicit with the powerful Krishna, Pandavas thereby deceiving his own king) in order to defeat an emotional yet worthy Durjyodhana who is both innocent and a philanthropist by heart if not visible in his action due to always being in a disturbed state of mind.

The following diagram would explain the reality of the state politics in *The Mahabharata*.

**Before the War
Vision of a powerful Hastinapura**



**After the War
No Adviser or Teacher to guide**

But instead, we get back a kingdom without dreams, heroism, glory and resources:

INCOMPETENT KING with an INHUMAN QUEEN

Death and Devastation all around

Powerless Pandavas after Krishna's exit

The general public always needs great personalities in order to look upto their charisma and aspire to repeat the same qualities. But a sense of guilt all around with resigned contemplation of an exit from this world is what the Pandavas had in store for them devoid of anything to be inspired with.

VI

The Myth of the Mother

There are no mothers in the text of *The Mahabharata* but only some women in the shape of the idea of 'mother.' The thesis I want to place is that mothers like Satyabati, Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi do not anywhere take responsibility for failing in true motherhood, neither do they come forward to be accountable for their actions and their consequences. The irony is that of the ungraceful death of sons like Bhishma, Karna, Durjyodhana, Abhimanyu and the Pandava off springs who sacrifice themselves while knowing very well about their mothers' self-serving cause; in other words, the mothers happened to further the truth of male charisma over female myopia. Both Karna initially and Yudhishthira finally realize the futile claims of their mother and hollowness of her affection. This exposes the fragility of the binary established by a section of feminists of the mother-woman being body, feeling, semiotic and so on. But these women stand rather the other way; to be rigid, cerebral, uncompromising and stoic. Gandhari time and again reminds us of a superficial mother not blessing his eldest son on the grounds of Dharma, the cliched term. Kunti's portrayal of a helpless woman is ridiculous. One who decides to throw away a child needs to own the responsibility of a murder and never speak of *Dharma*. She got plenty of occasions

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to stop the irrational humiliation of his eldest son later in life, rather chose to steal away his strength before the war. It is unfortunate that we have been taught to place her as an ideal woman. Whatever the reason, a woman with multiple husbands need not play it as taboo when it is destined to be for a cause. In case of Draupadi, it is rather extended to a more illogical reason. A word from Kunti could be altered as she didn't mean a woman to be divided between five. Krishna's interference in such a matter (again in the name of *Dharma*), Draupadi's consent and Pandav brothers' silence ask for a serious introspection on the part of the author. Did he suppress the intention of the Pandavas' lecherous fantasy, Draupadi's promiscuity and Krishna's motive of clinging close to her in the politics of language? What was wrong then if society or even Karna called Draupadi with names? The same arrogant woman had questioned his birth but when it concerns her, she plays the victim card of a woman! This could never settle the debate on her image as a woman and mother.

VII

Poetic injustice and Dharmic hypocrisy

The textual politics of the text of *The Mahabharata* amounts to infinite number of cheap and shrewd moves on the part of the *Pandavas* influenced blindly by their counsel. Quoting *Dharma* as a spiritual defence in favour of cowardly killing of all great warriors of the Kaurava camp, stripping their biggest and most gracious hero of all his special powers from nature, large scale killing of the competent and worthy, the narrator kept innumerable readers over generations in a state of discontent and unconvinced of his plot, means and the outcome of such a text. This calls for a serious investigation into the breach of trust on the part of the writer/writers (several narrators/authors of the many *Mahabharatas*) for poetic injustice. The narrative could have been slightly balanced by having a just war with the death of a few *Pandavas*. It is simply unacceptable to see Karna always subject to humiliation, deceit, rivalry, curse, loneliness and finally a death without real warfare. Why couldn't the writer think of this one issue—that Arjuna, who could never defeat or kill any of the heroes in the other camp by his art of archery in spite of begging and accumulating scores of weapons, still got immortalized as a great warrior? Why should generations of people be trained erroneously with such prejudiced views? Abhimanyu died in the war because he was half aware of its craft and as such was an impudent and ill managed child, trapped and trained so by his uncle. The entry of children and

demons into the war decided by Krishna, killing all the shining stars by his master plan has been categorically used as a blind acceptance of any hypocrisy and means as upholder of *Dharma* and order. Is it the writer or the coterie of readers and their interpretation with specific affiliation and fear that define the text? This is political impropriety and jingoism stretched to its limit. How can the *dharmic* and judicious divide the human from the demon, from the tribe while deliberately putting false shades of philanthropy?

What is disturbing is that the adolescents and young children get a totally damaging impression that Karna and the others died, got punished because of their arrogance, pride, uncompromising stance and support of Durjyodhana, an *adharmi* (unethical) king. This is an extremely political construct. It needs to be dismantled without any debate. It is like the way we look at some historical figures as defined by a school of thought that keeps quiet about the invaders and their barbarous acts whereas brands a great hero like Shivaji or the colour of our saints, saffron in poor light. Durjyodhana is in fact one such nationalist and victim of elitist forces to mow him down.

Apart from getting pampered by the prejudiced Bhishma, Drona, Bidura, Krupacharya, and others, the Pandavas were constantly gifted by saints, supernatural powers; Jakshas, Kinnaras, gods and their fathers like Yamraj, Pawan, Hanuman, Indra and Ashwini Kumar. The worst of all, the Kaurava Commander in Chief, minister, counsels and spies secretly supported the defeat of Hastinapura. This is a heinous betrayal of trust. They constructed a language (embedded with a slave like loyalty to Krishna) of premeditated morality that was authoritative in order to exercise an unconditional control of the Kaurava sons. Pandavas were actually the insurgent groups who believed in bloodshed, violence and disturbed the autonomy of a strong, united India. The proof of this is clearly evident in the way every now and then Bhima, Arjuna and Draupadi would vow to kill the Kaurava brothers, drink their blood, kill Karna and fill the land of Dhrutrashtra with darkness. Krishna first killed Sishupala and was instrumental in killing Jarasandha by deceit much before the war in the name of cleansing the world. At the same time, Bhima appropriates the 'demonic' and 'bestial' in order to gain power over both the tribal as well as the mainland. Being jealous and intolerant of Dhrutrashtra as the king, they plotted the downfall of the Kaurava king that resulted in the disintegration of India, took outside the support of the Yadava king just the way an Indian king Jaichandra invited outside support to defeat Prithviraj. Then the support came from a god turned human

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being with all his miracles and schemes! How is it then a war of the equals?

They were so insensitive and cruel that they did not even have the slightest sense of guilt while begging the special strength of Kaurava heroes (Sikhandi standing in place of Arjuna and Kunti begging for the life of Yudhishthira and other brothers), especially from a hero who throughout his life had been studying and learning the art of archery, compassion, sacrifice, morality and warfare all alone, struggling with the deep anguish and extreme pain of abandonment from his merciless mother who wanted to murder him at birth. This was way too far from being a Dharmayudha. But we have heard that the Pandavas ultimately perished and sank into perennial abyss of crime and poverty of soul because of their perpetual subservience and lack of individuality.

Concluding Observations

In Kiratarjuniyam, Bharavi (6th century A. D.), a great writer of India has narrated how during the exile of the Pandavas, Yudhishthira sent a spy to enquire about the way Durjyodhana was dispensing his duty as a king and was shocked to know that he had been a benevolent, compassionate and humane ruler without any trace of exploitation or ill-intent. In fact, Durjyodhana by heart was always an extremely spontaneous and true individual. He hated every form of dominance and patronizing attitude. In Bhishma Parva Sarala Das narrates how he gave away his crown to Arjuna by the help of which the Pandavas got a reprieve from Bhishma's arrows (135). It is another matter that Bhishma himself had already surreptitiously passed information of how Durjyodhana and the others would die and the way the Pandavas should execute it. He wanted to build up a kingdom on the principle of unity, internal strength and good governance. He despised the obsessive patronizing attitude of advisers like Bhishma, Bidura and Drona who, governed by their own contradictions and stereotyped, fossilized values wanted to stigmatize him as wicked, evil and wayward. On the other hand, he wanted to cleanse the partisan, pseudo-moral values of these veterans. It is a situation comparable to the politics played by the pseudo-secular voices in India in contemporary times that readily compromise national security dividing people under the guise of caste, religion and birth.

In recent times people have been disappointed with elite values and have chosen to move in the direction of a strong leadership and national integrity. Durjyodhana symbolizes such a leader; innocent at heart and undiplomatic in

policies yet with a promise of authority and responsibility. His affiliation with Karna as defence counsel fits adequately to lift the kingdom to greater heights. They are nationalists and patriots trying to bring a stable administration against the divisive politics of Krishna (who secretly nourishes a very authoritative, casteist, elitist motive yet claims to represent the deprived mass to further his political advantages).

Karna quite responsibly takes up diverse roles; an abandoned child having an essential element of nature (sun), a self-made child of the lower caste learning the art of his skill and knowledge, honing it under Parasurama by austerity, the king of Anga, a compassionate, philanthropic individual and as a *Kshatriya* protecting the land, people of his kingdom in the battlefield. When one would put to test the character of Karna versus Krishna, one could easily find out how the latter appears to appropriate a diplomacy without physical charisma or noble intention. He is just a schemer who does not approve of any difference of opinion with him. Durjyodhana too is a victim of such exclusion and partisan behaviour. The course of the war appropriately proved to be a failure of Krishna because of his obsessive use of the word *Dharma* without his own loyalty to it. The fundamental trait of *Dharma* is to be true to oneself, one's real nature, as it has been in the case of Durjyodhana, Karna, or even Bhishma and some others. It is Krishna who had always a veil between what he preached and what he did, thereby not being true to his nature. The war resulting in whole scale bloodshed and anarchy instead of Durjyodhana's proven leadership of thirteen years stands for the proof of the opposite camp's hatred of human potential. It speaks of the mechanism in which we have witnessed how a few people in powerful political positions often chant certain fixed ideological constructions in order to perpetuate their own agenda. There is a blunder in our interpretation due to our confusion in equating the Hindu god Krishna with that of a character in the epic. The one is on people's faith, a god of eternal love in people's imagination. The other is symbolic, a claim he himself makes, of being a god, of being the incarnation of the good, and justifying mischief for a *Dharma* rashtra. Mahatma Gandhi used to cite and stress on 'means' to be of prime significance than the end. How can a god behave in a way Machiavelli would justify the end over means in his seminal text *The Prince*. If he is the same god in the text, then we have to debate over his stoicism and lack of interest in the natural human feelings, agony and anguish. He even loses patience and runs to attack Bhishma as if he suffered from a kind of frustration in finding human competence intolerable. Does it justify godhood in anyway? In other words, we can very well see how lesser

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individuals like Bhishma, Drona, Bidura, Krupacharya and Krishna were always intimidated by a strong, ethical, generous and courageous human beings like Karna. The Pandavas were of course too petty to compete with him.

The projected text of *The Mahabharata* is only a fragile construct. Its subtext is significant and continuously disrupts in order to decipher contradictory forces that either could have been suppressed or deliberately made to be seen in a poor light. The narrator time and again enters the text with binary values. Durjyodhana's anger is a natural reaction out of disgust and is nothing short of the plight of any existentialist fiction. He is the loneliest character sporting an ego that is very much human and extremely vulnerable when it comes to friendship, power or politics. The adoption of all sorts of nasty means in order to capture the throne citing ethics and nobler interest (though we have never heard of the common citizens' opinion in such matter) and killing all heroes of the Kaurava camp with deceit is not innocent writing but a decent textual gap, site of authorial helplessness, prejudice providing scope for the writerly text to emerge. The superficiality of a just government is finally exposed when the Pandavas could not rule amidst devastation, failed from establishing the *Dharma Rajya*. Krishna died as a witness to the end of his clan and the myth of *Dharma* was shattered. Kaliyuga follows and Krishna's discourse could not alter the course of time.

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