

**INTERPRETING DHARMA:  
READING MAHABHARATA AS A SOCIAL TEXT**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**Certificate**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**Interpreting Dharma: Reading Mahabharata as a Social Text**” submitted by **Deepti Mehrotra**, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067, India, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. To the best of our knowledge this is an original work.

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*To my parents,*

*Dr. N.N. Mehrotra and Mrs. Nisha Mehrotra,*

*For my earliest memories of Mahabharata*

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## Acknowledgements

I would foremost thank my supervisor Dr. A. Bimol Akoijam for his invaluable suggestions and constant help at every juncture. His interdisciplinary approach facilitated my understanding to a great extent. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Anuradha Shah of Delhi University for being kind enough to meet a total stranger like me, and introduce me to the nuances of 'Dharma'. I also owe to Dr. Savyasachi of Jamia Millia Islamia University, who made me believe in my ideas and ensured that I would evolve as a person in the course of this work. I am also indebted to Prof. Avijit Pathak and Prof. Susan Vishwanathan of Jawaharlal Nehru University for their valuable inputs and appreciation. I would also thank my Kathak Guru, Sri Munna Shukla ji, for telling us many motivating stories from Mahabharata.

Apart from them, I would like to thank all the people, my friends and my loved ones with whom I constantly engaged in strenuous discussions on my topic, which helped me learn a lot.

Finally, I can never thank enough my parents for introducing me to Mahabharata as a child, for inculcating the values and wisdom with which I could attempt a work like this. I would thank my mother Nisha Mehrotra, for her independent interpretation and ideas on various characters and situations in Mahabharata. She taught me the values of being a humanist. This work could not have been possible without my father, Dr. N. N. Mehrotra, who apart from his precious comments and suggestions took the pain to help edit my work. I would never have been able to do a work like this without the constant love, support and encouragement of my parents.

However, I take full responsibility for even the smallest mistake in my work. I am just beginning and I hope to these mistakes will serve as great lessons for me.

Deepti Mehrotra

## Preface

As a female social science researcher trying to look at my field and coming from the field, my subjectivity is bound to condition my reflexivity. Like every Hindu, I was also exposed to this field of Mahabharata from childhood, and my knowledge of the situations and characters is conditioned by its numerous didactic stories. This undoubtedly played a role in the formation of an unconscious self, which led to a kind of social awareness. It does give me a unique position which is beyond my conscious self of a social science researcher, and is both debilitating and liberating.

Due to my lack of expertise in Sanskrit language, I took help of the English translation of Mahabharata by K. M. Ganguli and the work of Chaturvedi Badrinath. I have not used the conventions of Sanskrit translation into English by using the proper phonetics. Many scholars traditionally use daunting diacritical marks to distinguish between long and short vowels in Sanskrit. I have dispensed with such format because of my inexperience in this field. It is something that I intend to learn in future under the tutelage of a Sanskrit scholar. It would also help me to have my own translation and interpretation.

So my understanding is fractured and incomplete; it is in fact, just the beginning for me. It was just like creating a Frankenstein Monster for me in the form of this gargantuan task which lay ahead. For days I would be lost in the questions of morality and futility of war and violence, the suffocation of a patriarchal system, and subjugation of women, the dilemma of fighting with the loved ones, the inequalities and injustices in society, the 'Adharma' that has gripped the society in every sphere, etc. I have lost many nights of sleep thinking over my 'dharma' and other's 'dharma' at various points in life and contested it. While reading, I was Yudhisthira, Draupadi, Duryodhana, Karna, etc, but I realized that I was all of them together in myself at some point or other in my life. Thus the feeling of universality and timelessness of this great work showed upon me.

I am almost beginning to drown in this vast ocean. But I know I am still on the surface for there are many layers underneath which are so difficult to penetrate and require

constant motivation and hard work. I have no qualms in admitting that I have barely read the Mahabharata once and that it is not sufficient. The vast amount of work done on the epic facilitated my critical understanding and helped me analyze its various nuances. I have just begun my journey on this road, for which I would quote my favorite lines from the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost-

“I shall be telling this with a sigh,  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in wood, and I,  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

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### **Dramatis Personae**

Abhimanyu	Son of Arjuna and Subhadra
Adhiratha	Adoptive father of Karna
Arjuna	Son of Pandu and Kunti, fathered by God Indra
Ashwatthama	Son of Dronacharya
Bhangasvana	The King, who is transformed into a woman and would not want to become a man again.
Bharadwaja	A sage in conversation with sage Bhrigu, quoted often by Bhishma in Shantiparva
Bharata	Son of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, who gave the name to the dynasty from whom the Pandavas and Kauravas are descended
Bhima	Son of Pandu and Kunti, fathered by Lord Vayu
Bhishma	Son of Shantanu and Ganga, great uncle of the Pandavas
Bhrigu	A sage in conversation with sage Bharadwaja, quoted often by Bhishma in Shantiparva
Dharma	God Dharma, father of Yudhishtira
Dharmavyadha	A meatseller, in conversation with sage Kaushika on the true meaning of 'dharma'
Dhritarashtra	Father of Kauravas, husband of Gandhari, brother of Pandu; fathered by Vyasa by levirate (with Ambika)
Draupadi	Daughter of Drupada, wife of the Pandavas
Drishtadyumna	Son of Drupada, brother of Draupadi
Dronacharya	Teacher of the Pandavas and Kauravas
Drupada	King of Panchala, father of Draupadi, Drishtadyumna and Sikhandi
Duhshasana	Second son of Dhritarashtra
Duryodhana	Eldest son and heir of Dhritarashtra; also called Suyodhana



Gandhari	Princess of Gandhara, wife of Dhritarashtra, mother of Kauravas
Ganga	River Ganges, mother of Bhishma
Ghatotkacha	Son of Bhima from Hidimva
Hidimva	Wife of Bhima; a rakshasi; mother of Ghatotkacha
Janaka	The King of Mithila, in conversation with the ascetic woman scholar Sulabha
Janamajeya	Great grandson of Arjuna, at whose snake-sacrifice Mahabharata is recited
Karna	Son of Kunti by the Sun God, adopted by the charioteer Adhiratha and Radha
Kauravas	Any descendent of Kuru, but specifically the children of Dhritarashtra
Kaushika	An arrogant Brahmana sage who meets a householder woman and a meatseller to learn the true meaning of 'dharma'
Kripacharya	Teacher of Kauravas and Pandavas
Krishna	Son of the Vrishni King Vasudeva by Devaki; brother of Subhadra, Arjuna's second wife
Kubera	Lord of wealth
Kunti	Pandu's wife, mother of Pandavas, Yudhishtira, Arjuna and Bhima
Kuru	Ancestor of the Bharatas, eponym of the Kauravas
Madri	Pandu's second wife, who bore Nakula and Sahadeva by the God Ashwins; she cremated herself (sati) with Pandu, entrusting her children to Kunti
Manki	A sage
Markandeya	A sage
Nakula	Son of Pandu from Madri, fathered by the Ashwins

Pandavas	The five sons of Pandu
Pandu	Father of Pandavas; husband of Kunti, brother of Dhritarashtra, fathered by Vyasa by levirate (with Ambalika)
Parashurama	A Brahamana; teacher of Karna
Parikshit	Son of Abhimanyu and Uttara; grandson of Arjuna; father of Janamajeya
Prajapati	Another name of Lord Shiva
Radha	Foster mother of Karna
Sahadeva	Youngest of the Pandavas, son of Pandu and Madri; fathered by the Ashwins
Samjaya	Charioteer and confidante of Dhritarashtra, who narrates him the entire war
Satyabhama	Krishna's wife
Shakuni	Son of Gandhara King Subala, brother of Gandhari
Shantanu	Great-grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas; grandfather of Pandu and Dhritarashtra; father of Bhishma (with Ganga); husband of Satyawati
Shikhandi	Daughter of Drupada, later becomes a man; ally of Pandavas in the war
Subhadra	Daughter of Vasudeva and sister of Krishna; wife of Arjuna
Uma	Wife of Lord Shiva
Vidura	Advisor to Dhritarashtra and his half-brother; fathered by Vyasa (with a maid)
Vikarna	A son of Dhritarashtra
Vyasa	Epithet of Krishna Dvaipayana, legendary author of the Mahabharata: premarital son of Satyawati; by levirate, father of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura
Yudhishtira	Eldest son of Kunti, fathered by Dharma; also called Dharmaraja and Ajatshatru

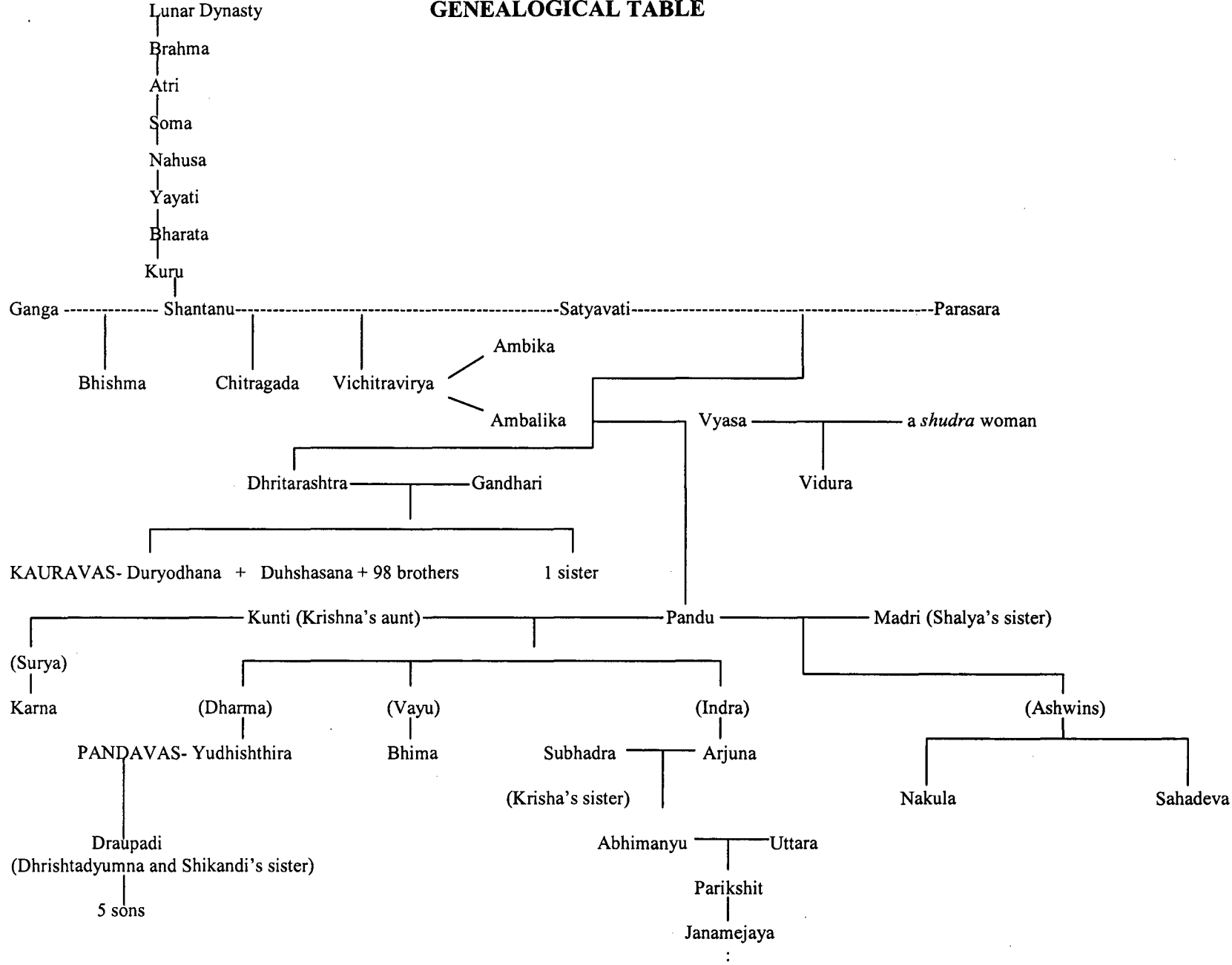
## Parvas in Mahabharata

1. **Adi parva**- Introduction of characters, including birth and lineage; narrated by Sauti to the assembled Rishis (priests) at Naimisharanya; includes the original recital of Mahabharata at the Snake-sacrifice of Janmajeya by Vaisampayana.
2. **Sabha parva**- The demon Maya constructs Mayasabha for Pandavas; the Rajasuya Sacrifice; dicing and exile of the Pandavas.
3. **Vana parva**- Adventures of Pandavas in the forest.
4. **Virata parva**- Pandavas 13th incognito year of exile in King Virata's kingdom.
5. **Udyoga parva**- Preparation for war; failed effort for truce between Pandavas and Kauravas; declaration of war.
6. **Bhishma parva**- Battle begins; first ten days, until Bhishma (Commander of Kuru army) falls; the Bhagavad-Gita occurs at the start of this part.
7. **Drona parva**- Next five days of war, until Drona (next General of Kuru army) and other major characters are slain.
8. **Karna parva**- Last two days, with Karna as the Commander, until his death.
9. **Shalya parva**- Last day of war where Shalya falls after half a day; end of battle including death of Duryodhana.
10. **Sauptika parva**- Aswatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma destroy Pandava's sons and remaining army.
11. **Stri parva**- Reuniting of Pandava's with king Dhritarashtra after battle; Gandhari, Kunti and the women lament the dead.
12. **Shanti parva**- Anointing of Yudhishtira as the King; Bhishma's sermons on all fields of life and knowledge.
13. **Anushasana parva**- Final instructions by Bhishma.
14. **Ashwamedha parva**- The royal ceremony of Ashwamedha conducted by Yudhishtira; world conquest by Arjuna.
15. **Ashramavasika parva**- Retirement of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti and Vidura into the woods and their subsequent deaths after three years.
16. **Mausala parva**- The infighting between the Yadavas and their subsequent destruction after 36 years of the war; death of Krishna.

17. **Mahaprasthanika parva-** The journey of the Pandavas across the country; their progression to the Himalayas; fall of everyone except Yudhishtira.
18. **Svargarohana parva-** Yudhishtira's final test and progress to Heaven and subsequent return of all to their original divine form. Completion of story.
19. **Harivamsha parva-** Life of Krishna which is not covered in the above 18 parvas.

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# GENEALOGICAL TABLE



## Introduction

“The wisdom of this work, like unto an instrument of applying collyrium, hath opened the eyes of the inquisitive world blinded by the darkness of ignorance” (Adiparva; Ganguli 2003: 8).

It is difficult to study a text as great in size and depth as Mahabharata. Its expanse, range, and diversity of topics give a new dimension to every reader and also every time one approaches it. Vyasa says in the opening Adiparva, “...Whatever is spoken about Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha may be seen elsewhere, but whatever is not contained in this, is not to be found anywhere” (Adiparva; Ganguli 2003: 109). While, mostly the epic was misunderstood for a religious work earlier, the innovative research in the past few decades has widened the lens. Scholars are now more interested in looking for answers for specific questions that beset all humans that live in this complex world. Mahabharata has grown from a culturally specific text applicable to only Indian context, to reflecting on human relationships and dilemmas that the individuals face in the world of everyday life.

It has constantly overgrown in stature to be known as ‘itihasa’<sup>1</sup> (history), which has an integral role to play in shaping of the society. In terms of epic’s historicity there is a shift through three hypothetical stages, from “transcript to script to scripture” (McGrath 2004: 9). With an overwhelming size of about 8,800 verses (Fitzgerald 1984: 150), its eminence is dominating. “One can say that it is probably the longest poem ever written: roughly 200,000 lines, most of them of sixteen syllables each...It was composed in the Sanskrit language, in northern India over a period probably extending from 400 B.C. to A.D. 200”

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<sup>1</sup>The usage of the term ‘history’ is not in a modern, objective, empirical sense, which excludes the alternative constructions of the past-legends, myths, and epics. It includes them. This study’s latent argument is that in a country like India, there is an awareness of selfhood and past through its myths, folklores, shared and transmitted memories which are as legitimate as the modern, colonial, absolutist notion of ‘history’ as the only way to understand our past. For a greater detail on this concept see, Ashis Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” *History and Theory* 34. 2(1995): 44-66; and Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments* (New Delhi: OUP, 1994).

(Ingalls 1988: xiii). It is believed that the primary composition of the text was simply called 'Bharata'. The whole epic becomes 'Maha-Bharata' because it tells the colossal and potent history of a large joint Hindu family which goes through a series of conflicting social conditions. It is the story of how they are conjoined and disjoined at the same time, of how they are put together by genealogy but thrown apart by social and personal issues.

Moreover, for Indians, Lord Ganesha as the scribe<sup>2</sup> of the Mahabharata has a religious significance, and has reassured its divine approval for the good of the mankind. Much so for its multifarious significance on human life (especially Indian), it is called the 'Fifth Veda' by the famous scholar of Mahabharata, James Fitzgerald<sup>3</sup>.

"The Mahabharata has played a major role in educating Indian people, in structuring and informing their imagination and sensibilities in fundamental ways for the past 1500 years or more, alongside the Tripataka of the Buddhists and the Ramayana and several smaller *corpora* of sacred texts. The Mahabharata gave them grand heroes and villains, thrilling stories, and profound crises; it schooled them in cosmology, philosophy, theology, and ethics, and through it all it legitimized and inculcated ethical and political patterns fundamentally important to 'Hindu' civilization, patterns which has been cogently criticized and strongly challenged from within and without Aryan Brahmanism" (Fitzgerald 1984:151; Italics original).

Its significance is seen in the number of ways it has captured the reality of Indian society, through oral tradition, television, drama and poetry and cultural symbols for social movements, etc. It has become a self-didactic spiritual and cultural reality for the Indian society<sup>4</sup>. In this case it is indeed intriguing to find out if the text remained available and

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<sup>2</sup> For a detail on Ganesha as the Scribe see, Jay Mazo, ed., *Mahabharata retold by C Rajagopalachari*, accessed March 16, 2010, International Gita Society, <http://www.gita-society.com/pdf2011/mahabharata.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> "The awesome size, grandeur, and complexity of the Great Bharata do arouse some of the same feelings of transcendence that the size, claimed comprehensiveness, and apparent agelessness of the Veda do. As a written text and as a new 'Veda', it was obvious that the Great Bharata was a Veda only metaphorically. The Great Bharata was a very different sort of text from the Veda in many more ways than the two were substantially similar. But the Great Bharata was intended to function in Indian culture in the same imposing and authoritative way the ancient Vedas had..." For detailed view on this point see James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The Mahabharata's Presentation of Itself", in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (The Netherlands: F.J. Brill, Leiden), 159-160

<sup>4</sup> However, it is interesting to note that Mahabharata has also been regarded as an inauspicious text in spite of the text's own internal attempt to neutralize its presentations of evil and grotesque violence through the instructional *shanti* which is predominantly dealt with in the Shantiparva and Anushasanaparva of the text. Mahabharata has been misread to teaching violence and war, where it only uses evil and war as a means to spread the message of peace and social order, and most importantly Dharma. Scholars suggest that due to

permeable for so long because it was needed to serve as a locus for exploring crises in Indian society<sup>5</sup>.

The colossal expanse of the epic poem and its intended significance for posterity has been described in the Adiparva, when Vyasa says,

“O divine Brahma, by me a poem hath been composed which is greatly respected. The mystery of the Veda, and what other subjects have been explained by me; the various rituals of the Upanishads with the Angas; the compilation of the Puranas and history formed by me and named after the three divisions of time, past, present, and future; the determination of the nature of decay, fear, disease, existence, and non-existence, a description of creeds and of the various modes of life; rule for the four castes, and the import of all the Puranas; an account of asceticism and of the duties of a religious student; the dimensions of the sun and moon, the planets, constellations, and stars, together with the duration of the four ages; the Rik, Sama and Yajur Vedas; also the Adhyatma; the sciences called Nyaya, Orthoephy and Treatment of diseases; charity and PasupataDharma; birth celestial and human, for particular purposes; also a description of places of pilgrimage and other holy places of rivers, mountains, forests, the ocean, of heavenly cities and the kalpas; the art of war; the different kinds of nations and languages: the nature of the manners of the people; and the all-pervading spirit; all these have been represented. But, after all, no writer of this work is to be found on earth” (Ganguli 2003: Adiparva, 7).

Obviously, in an epic of such diverse character every scholar has found a different constituent to discuss. There is a compelling presence and evolution of the concept of Dharma in the epic, which has helped relegate it to the status of Dharmasastra in Indian philosophy. The whole text is replete with the form, the meaning and the limit of Dharma.

“After all while the *itihasa* proclaims its all encompassing nature, it also emphasizes that it is primarily concerned with *Dharma* alone when it states poignantly in the Svargarohanaparvan: With uplifted arms one laments that the people are unable to understand the important principle that *Artha* and *Kama* are rooted in Dharma”(Rukmini 2005: xvii).

It is important to understand this statement because human social life manifests itself in form of behavior while the ideas become latent. The entire Mahabharata focuses on the

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the emergence of Bhakti cult, Bhagwad Gita became more popular than Mahabharata, while ironically in a moment of truth, it propels to fight war as a duty. Generally Ramayana is preferred to Mahabharata as a text on social duty. While Ramayana presents an idealistic position, Mahabharata takes an existentialist position.

<sup>5</sup> In this work, I have used the word Indian as a homogeneous entity and synonymous with Hindu. I understand it is problematic at many levels. But I am not delving into the aspect of heterogeneity of Indian Society in this work, for it would complicate my work and deviate me from my major concern on ‘Dharma’.



fact that ideas developed on the lines of Dharma guard and guide the actions, be it the physical and material (Artha) or the cognitive and emotional (Kama).

The various meanings of Dharma that Mahabharata encompasses could be because of many reasons; 1) there are many schools of Indian philosophy<sup>6</sup> and thought which are diverse in nature to the extent that they become contradictory too, 2) the time span of solidification of the text comprised many centuries during which the Indian civilization witnessed a number of foreign invasions. It changed the socio-politico-economic structure of the society and influenced its thought to a great extent, 3) the indigenous social changes, like the birth of Buddhism, Jainism, etc which were co-opted with the first two factors. As it stands before us, Mahabharata contains the permutation and combination of these factors combined with the knowledge of the Vedas and the Upanishads.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Mahabharata becomes intimidating to any particular philosophy or epistemology. “The entire body of the epic material is historical in so far as it constitutes the past unfolding of a public discourse, a discourse that is formative of, as well as formed by, social behaviors and self-understandings, that is formative of, as well as formed by, textual traditions, and that is obstreperously multi-vocal” (Gitomer 1992: 223).

This study is therefore an effort to understand those discourses that Mahabharata exposed through the concept of Dharma. Mahabharata delves deeply into all the tensions in the concept of Dharma which are displayed through the characters, and which exist as conflicts in every society. Apart from the varied meanings of Dharma, Mahabharata also deals with the eternal duality between human initiative and destiny. Every social action in a society can be explained on either of these terms. In a society like India, where the laws of Karma and rebirth are an integral aspect to understand its structures and functions, the

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<sup>6</sup> There are basically two categories in Indian philosophy 1) Astika- which uphold Vedas as the ultimate and eternal knowledge source. It comprises of six schools of thought; Mimamsa, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Yoga, Samkhya and Vedanta, and 2) Nastika- which don't uphold Vedas as the ultimate knowledge source. It comprises of three schools- Buddhism, Jainism and Carvaka.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed understanding of the relationship of the epic with the other ancient Sanskrit literature see E.W. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1993)

conceptual understanding defining the dilemma between human initiative and destiny becomes more important. The text weaves many such structural issues into its conceptual domain. Thus, it becomes useful to understand many such social categories like gender, race, Varna Vyavastha, and problems such as poverty, inequality etc in Indian Society. In Mahabarata, we see such unique synthesis of various aspects of the social as well as individual life that it becomes one of the most important sources to understand the functioning of Indian Society.

Thus, an epic like Mahabharata becomes a normative sacred text prescribing the desirability and non-desirability of social action. In social sciences, both on the level of individual and on the level of society, action is embedded in judgments. These judgments take place both on the subjective as well as objective level. As a part of society, existing externally to an individual these actions are determined by mores and norms, through cultural symbols and images; and on the level of individual they exist as lived realities between the relationships. The prototypes created by the society are lived through these relationships in the inter-subjective world of the people, where they both create social reality and are constrained by such pre-existing social and cultural structures created by their predecessors. In this process, they seek justification from these codified symbols and images of the texts. Thus, the text constantly helps reproduce social categories and social action. There is an archetypal 'man', 'woman', 'husband', 'wife', 'brother', and several such categories which are defined by the epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. These epics simultaneously become a representative of the Indian culture and they determine it too.

More importantly there is a potent oral tradition in India, where the individuals seek expression of central and collective meaning through the values and symbolic characters. Narrative as a prominent tool has been used as a way of thinking and understanding complex situations, as an inquiry into the nature of reality. While the twentieth century West has wrenched philosophy, history, and other human concerns out of the integrated narrative structures to form the discourse of isolated social sciences, the preferred medium of instruction and transmission of psychological, metaphysical, and social

thought in India continues to be the story (Kakar 1989: 1). Almost every existential reality is explained and simplified with the correlation of the story and its values to it. Interestingly, even Mahabharata, which is mostly in the dialogical form, contemplates on every situational reality by quoting an elaborate story which forms the sub-text of the epic. The belief is widespread that stories, recorded in the culture's epic and scriptures or transmitted orally in their more local versions, reflect the answers of the forefathers to the dilemmas of existence and contain the distillate of their experiences with the world. They are constantly produced and reproduced to form a guide to the causal structure of the reality (ibid, 2).

This is the primary reason to select a text, which covers in practicality, a large magnitude of problems and situations that reverberate in every existing society. Mahabharata raises issues of macro level like, governance, administration, groups, communities, religious laws, social mores, war (and thus violence and non-violence), economic system, and micro level like family, kinship, marriage, gender, social identity, sexual relationships, food, water, and ritual acts etc. The uniqueness of Mahabharata lies in its ability to connect the macro and the micro by understanding the relationship between the society and the individual. It is done through the philosophical and metaphysical concepts of Dharma, Artha (material wealth), Kama (sexual and sensual energy), Moksha (salvation), Sukha (pleasure), Dukha (pain), etc.

Conjecturing on the concepts that build the psycho somatic foundation of an individual and the society is the main concern of the epic. It believes that there is a higher level of reality beyond the shared, verifiable, empirical reality of our world, our bodies and our emotions.

“Moreover, since the ultimate reality can only be apprehended experientially, its hue, flavor and ramifications for ordinary life are best conveyed to the uninitiated mass of people in the culture through story- myth, fable, parable, and tale- thus further elevating the prestige of the narrative form” (ibid, 3).

The purpose of this study is to understand the concept of 'Dharma' which is explicated in these narratives. There is an attempt to comprehend how this massive Dharmasastra explores the various possibilities of Dharma in its times, and predicts for times much

ahead of it. Mahabharata conceptualizes, interprets and exemplifies the meaning of the most complicated and multivalent concept of Indian philosophy. To understand the origin and development of Dharma requires a separate and indeed colossal study. So I have not excavated here its roots nor traced its growth separately as a concept, but tried to focus on the way it meanders in the epic, touching every crevice and corner of social condition. The first chapter deals extensively with the rich plurality in the episteme of Dharma. It tries to unravel every social and individual underpinning of the concept. I have tried to focus on the meta-ethical value of Dharma in the Hindu Society, which is important to understand the value-orientation that it provides. It deals with the various meanings of Dharma, their function in society, the tension it produces in the various roles a situation demands, and its' supposed universality.

The second chapter tries to explore the nature of the peculiar social arrangement in Indian society, which is referred to as Caste System in today's world, but as Varna Vyavastha originally and in the epic.<sup>8</sup> As a unique system of social classification, Varna Vyavastha not only produced the scathing inequalities which increased through ages, it also produced a major identity crisis for the oppressed classes. Without going into the theoretical development of the concept, the focus of this chapter is to find out how Mahabharata's idea of a constructive Varna Vyavastha degenerated into a rigid system which created those moments of oppression and identity crisis.

The third chapter streamlines to a very significant aspect of social life, i.e. 'gender'. Every social situation and role varies with each gender. So each gender has a Dharma, which coincides with the situation, and produces a stipulated action. I have tried to discuss how the construction of gender is shaped and affected by Dharma. Mahabharata has many potent female and male characters who constantly jostle with the formation of their gender identity and its consonance with the other identities in the fray. The chapter discusses several characters who portray different meanings of Dharma in different situations. It helps us understand the social construction of gender in Indian society. I

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<sup>8</sup> I have used the Indian concept of Varna Vyavastha throughout the work to keep its original meaning intact. For other concepts too, primarily only Indian concepts have used as their semantic equivalents are either not present or inappropriate and misleading.

conclude my study with an analysis of how Mahabharata as a rich literary and oral tradition enriches the social thought and action of Indian society.

To read and analyze a text of Mahabharata's stature is indeed difficult. So it is difficult to choose a theoretical framework which would justify a text which presents itself at so many levels. The idea of this study is to discern and appreciate the text as it is, by using the hermeneutical understanding of its basic concept Dharma. It is to study the interpretation of this concept articulated through human expressions in a narrative form. Interpretation involves an indirect or mediated understanding that can only be attained by placing human expressions in their historical context.

Understanding is not only a process of reconstructing the state of mind of the author, but also of articulating what is expressed in the work. It is important to understand that the text is also situated in a social context, and the text in turn reproduces the social context not only for its current readers, but also for the coming generations. In a process of oral and written transmission, in a society like India, both the text and the context keep evolving, which forms a hermeneutic circle. This is due to the fact that historical understanding, unlike understanding in the natural sciences and mathematics, is not timeless, but is shaped by the 'historical process of self-reflection'. It is for this reason a hermeneutic understanding of the epic-history gives us a constant scope for reflexivity, which is unlike positivistic approach (Manheim 1965: 62).

The concept of Dharma is located as the fundamental episteme in Mahabharata. It could also be understood as "Interrogative hermeneutics" (nothing to do with the artificiality of being critical) wherein methodically articulated texts, with their context, and the questions and answers raised and answered in the texts with their context, comprise an answer to a question that has to be understood if the texts and the context are to be understood. In Mahabharata this leads to a plethora of views, questions and controversies. What is needed is the question that guides us through this text<sup>9</sup>. Understanding Dharma is

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<sup>9</sup> This concept has been developed by Algis Mickunas, *The Thirteenth Hermeneutic: Destruction and the Borrowed Power*, (Ohio University), accessed December 27, 2010, [http:// www. gebser.org /publications/Integrative Exploration Files/Mickunas.Thirteenth.pdf](http://www.gebser.org/publications/Integrative%20Exploration%20Files/Mickunas.Thirteenth.pdf)

our question to guide us in this study. I will try to examine the various social categories from the point of view of the cultural meanings associated with their institutionalized manifestations.

Though there is a general preeminence of the fact that empirical fieldwork tradition is necessary for a proper understanding of the Indian society and basing it on a text would be partial and incomplete. M. N. Srinivas is strongly associated with the fieldwork tradition of Social Anthropology in India, who also believed that understanding any aspect of Indian society through the study of Sanskrit texts is fraught with many risks (Srinivas 1962: 120-135). It would present only a sectional view of the social reality and weaken actual observation of social behavior. However, Veena Das comments that, “the central place accorded to observation in anthropological research and the development of a positivist approach has had certain undesirable consequences as it has been accompanied by a studied refusal to discuss the epistemological issues about the basis of knowledge and the nature of truth” (Das 1977: 1-2). It is often assumed, however, that experiential reality based on the direct confrontation between the individual and the event is the basis of true knowledge about the society.

This draws us to the debate between objectivity and subjectivity. What is explicitly perceived as an objective reality is the solidification of the subjective consciousness of individuals. It is built through the natural domain of everyday interpersonal experience. The relative neglect of these problems has led to the conception of the external world in anthropological writings, as a pre-existing model. One of the misconceptions associated with this obsession of social reality in terms of concreteness is the shift from the study of ideas to observable behavior. But negligence of the thought behind the action is fraught with many risks. “For example, in the field of religion, ritual behavior was studied, but not religious thought” (ibid, 2). The fact that any idea or thought cannot be concretely observed does not reduce its importance for anthropological research. This can only be recorded by studying the thought process behind the conceptualization of any idea. Thus, the understanding of Dharma with all its ambiguities becomes important in a society like India where it is used in people’s everyday life, but its consciousness is what defines their

actions. “The ambiguities of most important social categories are related to the fact that social life, as Durkheim emphasized, is neither given nor assumed, but is a creation of the human mind” (ibid, 3). Manheim (1952: 197-8) also suggested that there is a continuum between thought and existence and any complete understanding of a concept would subsume both.

It is here that we understand the notable difference between the epistemological progression of the West and the East, with India as an ideal prototype of the East. While West was preoccupied with the idea of modernity (beginning with Enlightenment) as the sole emancipator of humankind from the Dark Age of tradition (and non-reason), the East never witnessed a disjunction between the two. It was primarily for this reason that the birth of Sociology took place to study the modern society as differentiated from Anthropology which was to study the ‘other’ societies which were still bound by the chains of tradition. This represented an inherent separation of mind and matter, of thought and behavior in the Western thought.

However, Indian thought never experienced this disconnectedness, and understood individual and society as a whole comprising both. Indian philosophy never believed in the dichotomy of thought and behavior. It is for this reason that Nandy thinks that,

“... [N]o modern western historian could do justice to the *puranic* texts, for the modern West had lost access to certain forms of consciousness that were necessary for a more open, creative reading of the texts. If traditional India did not have access to the Enlightenment’s idea of modern history, Europe also lacked access to the Indian traditions of constructing the past” (Nandy 1995: 59).

However, India did get access to the ideas of Enlightenment through the process of British colonization. It was this encounter with the modern concept of ‘reason’ by some social reformists like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar that a redefinition of the social and cultural symbols took place. This continued throughout the period of colonization, with nationalists like Rabindranath Tagore and M.K. Gandhi trying to reinterpret Bhagwad Gita and other ancient Sanskrit texts to highlight their teachings and symbolic values. Similarly, there had been a constant engagement with the

traditional past of India, which led to the reproduction of values, symbols and images, and kept it alive.

The study of Mahabharata becomes very important because a mere study of facts which are observable is improper. It is essential to record and analyze people's ideas about the systems in which they operate.

“However, it is still not very clear whether the principal aim of cultural analysis is simply to present the native ordering of the material world, or whether its proponents intend to construct explanatory models which would have as their subject matter the type of orderliness which people impose on the world they live” (ibid, 4).

The concept of Dharma would refer to the way in which people were trying to impose social order. To record these models which are constructed for the understanding is difficult though. But, according to Das, “one can take the finished products of collective consciousness such as the corpus of myths and extract the principles underlying the conceptual orders envisaged in these myths” (ibid, 4). Since in Indian society the literary and oral traditions coalesce, it is important to understand these epics as the manifestation of both thought and behavior. This ascertains the importance of using a massive text like Mahabharata to understand the value behind the use of Dharma in Indian society.

Thus, Mahabharata, as an epic focuses on the social-ethical condition of mankind epitomized in different characters, a conglomerate of human virtues and vices, a current of living force, a microcosm of races, cultures and cults hovering on the brink of the apocalyptic dissolution and disenchantment. By understanding Dharma in Mahabharata, we see the existential tension of ambivalence between duty and personal gain, human choice and destiny and most importantly the self reflexive essence of social action. This study seeks to find the connection between the microcosmic social identities with the macrocosmic realities.

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## **Dharma: The Quintessence of Mahabharata**

“With uplifted arms I am crying aloud, but no one hears me;  
From Dharma flow wealth and pleasure.  
Then why is dharma not pursued”  
(Swargarohana Parva; Ganguli 2003: 4128).

### **What is Dharma?**

There has been no other concept wider in interpretation and deeper in understanding in the Hindu scriptures and civilization as Dharma. This chapter does not map out the entire detailed origin and development of the concept, as that is another vast ocean. It would rather focus on a general meaning which would facilitate the location of Mahabharata as a Dharmasastra with a focus on its meta-ethical value in the Hindu Society. It is important to understand the value-orientation that dharma provides for the Hindu people which enables them to apply it to the minutest facets of their lives. The historical journey of the concept of Dharma through Samhitas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, Dharmasutras, Dharmasastras and the epics has been very eventful in terms of both theory and practice. This study focuses on the role of this Great epic in understanding the meaning of Dharma. It is with this intent the study tries to explain a concept which still fills my mind with more questions than I have answers for.

Dharma has been the guiding concept of the Indian Society for a proper living or code of conduct. It is supposed to have a Proto Indo-Iranian root, but is basically believed to have originated in the Sanskrit word ‘Dhr’ which means ‘to hold or sustain’ (Prasad 2008: 3). An organic and transcendental concept, it was very important as it implied a natural order of things which would create a balance in society. According to Jaimini, the author of Mimansasutra, Dharma is a salutary practice which urges one to action (Mahony 1987: 329). It is effectively exploring the ways in which human beings are required to live their lives. It also involves the knowledge of regulating the personal and social lives of people, from their birth till death in forms of various rites and rituals.

To sum it up,

“It is the essential foundation of some things or of things in general, and thus signifies ‘truth’; it is that which is established, customary, proper, and therefore means ‘traditional’ or ‘ceremonial’; it is one’s duty, responsibility, imperative, and thereby ‘moral obligation’; it is that which is right, meritorious, and accordingly ‘ethical’; and it is that which is required, precepted, or permitted through religious authority, and thus ‘legal’”(Kane 1990:3).

The idea of Dharma, thus, unites a social and cosmic reference. The large contours of Dharma would not mean that they essentially coincide at all points of time. They are contextual and relative and sometimes also conflicting.

Dharma is also the most important of the four ‘Purusharthas’ in the life of a Hindu, viz. Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, who ideally passes through the four stages or ‘Ashramas’ in his life viz. Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa. The four Purusharthas are designed to be the sum total of what a gross and ideal human life should comprise; and it is for the collective well-being of the individual as well as the society. These Purusharthas are, though not coterminous with the Ashramas in the same order, there is a defined sense of which one/s are more appropriate for which Ashramas. While Artha (material wealth) and Kama (sensual pleasures) are primarily designed for the ‘Grihastha’ (householder’s) stage primarily, Moksha (liberation from rebirth) is aimed for the last two stages in a man’s life.

However, Dharma remains the quintessential component pervading the entire life of a man, throughout his all four Ashramas, guiding him to choose the correct path by doing the correct action. Kane also defines the most prominent meaning of Dharma to be, “the privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the castes, as a person in a particular stage of life” (ibid, 1). In a way it is the lens through which the other three Purusharthas are to be seen and fulfilled. Dharma in this and all other contexts is not only relative but also selective according to one’s Varna, age, class, gender and occupation.

Though, all the four Purusharthas are equally important for a well-balanced life, Dharmasastras mention the situation of conflict between them. “Those who are wise say that Dharma is the highest; material prosperity and wealth middling; and the fulfillment

of sexual desire inferior in comparison to these two” (Vatsyayana and Doniger 2003: 3). This view has been echoed in the texts written after Mahabharata too, “Dharma is better than Artha, and Artha is better than Kama. But Artha should always be first practiced by the king for the livelihood of men is to be obtained from it only” (Banerji 1999: 6).

This implies the order of precedence for these Purusharthas. If a person is to attain Moksha in life, then out of the first three Purusharthas, Dharma is the highest goal. It precedes Artha so that in making money Dharma must never be compromised, but earning a living should take precedence over other sensual pleasures (Kama). While discussing Dharmasastra, S.C. Banerji also mentions the precedence of Dharmasastra over Arthasastra (Written by Kautilya and is the oldest, most comprehensive and authoritative work on economics, politics and statecraft), and also contains certain matters which are common to Dharmasastra (ibid, 6). However, none of them would have meaning without the other three and at every twist and turn of Mahabharata they give rise to various questions of various levels.

The other meanings that Dharma denotes are righteousness, ethics, justice, law (civil/criminal), religion etc. These and many more aspects of social life are covered under the vast canvas of Dharma. Such an explanation of Dharma is nevertheless, too wide and too stretched, for it involves not only multiplicity in theory but also in practice. However, I shall try to explain here the various sources and meanings of Dharma. The most important source of Dharma for Hindus is Dharmasastra or Smritisashtra which contain all the literature written for the understanding of various aspects of human life.

As mentioned in Dharmasastra, there are three principal sources of dharma: Sruti- that which is ‘heard’ and refers to the Veda or the Vedic literature which are the liturgical and praise hymns of the earliest Hindu tradition; Smriti- that which is ‘remembered’ and refers to the Dharmasastra texts as well as other Sanskrit texts such as Manusmriti, Puranas, Epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana; Acara, that which is ‘practiced’ and refers to the norms and standards established by the educated people who know and live according to the first two sources of Dharma. However, in Manusmriti and Yajnavalkya Smriti, another important source, Atmatusti is mentioned, which refers to the individual’s

conscience (Davis 2007: 279-96). These sources are not separate categories and mutually exclusive, but form a dialectic that helps negotiate in a particular situation and make a suitable decision. The most important purpose of these Dharmasastra is to negotiate between the existing and changing social order, and human consciousness.

Another challenge that Dharma posits is between Svadharma and Sadharma Dharma. In Hinduism, Svadharma is one's own right, duty or nature; one's own role in social and cosmic order. Svadharma is relative to one's caste and stage of life (Varnashramadharma), and to one's situation (Apaddharma). Svadharma is often in conflict with Sadharana Dharma, universal dharma or Sanatana Dharma, absolute or eternal Dharma (Bowker 1997). Throughout one's life the dilemma between the two makes the decision difficult where they contradict each other. We see this conflict most in Mahabharata and it will be discussed at length, ahead in the chapter.

Further there is 'Pravritti-dharma' as contrary to 'Nivritti-dharma'. While the former discusses the matters and attitude of and for 'this world', the latter does it for those 'beyond this world', or the 'spiritual' and 'transcendental'. This is relevant to understand not only the central plot of Mahabharata but the central essence of the great epic. The vacillations between these two modes of thought decide the predicament of the characters in the epic. These concepts will be better understood when discussed in the work ahead.

One of the most vital misunderstandings of Dharma is it being translated as 'religion'. It is for this reason that I deem it necessary to deliberate upon it. Often, in trying to find a comparable word in two languages, the blunder of negating the cultural context is committed, thus changing the semantics of the concept. Emile Durkheim defined religion in a comprehensive way as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, and all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1915: 62). This would demand the presence of a certain God, certain commandments to follow and certain ecclesiastical laws to regulate thought and action in relationship to this.

However, Dharma has no such meaning or connotation. The presence of God is also non-essential for it. Furthermore, religion has to be separated from the secular 'state' and 'governance' while Dharma is omnipresent and omnipotent. It contains both the secular and non-secular: the society, the economy, the religion, the polity, the jurisprudence, everything is subsumed under Dharma. Dharma describes a code of conduct: it teaches both religious and secular matters (Banerji 1999: 1). Thus, to talk about Dharma as 'religion' and more importantly 'Hindu religion' would be a great mistake.

Lastly, while discussing the concept of Dharma, it becomes imperative to understand the concept of 'Adharma'. It refers to everything that is not according to the prescribed, or the 'Dharma' of a particular action. Fundamentally Dharma and Adharma were the direct results of following, or not following, the self-evident commands of the Vedas. Adharma was defined as 'not-good' in the context of Vedas and was differentiated in the use of rational means as the source of knowledge. Thus, outside the purview of Vedas, it may mean 'non-dharma' without any connotation of 'unethical' or 'bad' attached to it. Even Mahabharata moves out of the sphere of Vedas, which were considered by some to be ritualistic, narrow and sectarian (Badrinath 2007: 80). We shall see throughout this work how Mahabharata makes that attempt.

### **Dharma in Mahabharata**

Ancient Indian literature is replete with texts and treatises which are rich repositories of knowledge and wisdom for the society. Some of this literature not only focused on the essentials of human and social conditions but also contained eternal values that would regulate them. India is known to have produced epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, which in actuality are of poetic nature. Yet the kind of subject matter they deal with, and the symbols and images they portray make them an integral part of the Hindu Society even now. The Mahabharata is also counted as one of the most exhaustive and authentic source of Dharma for Hindus. It is known as a 'Smriti' text. S.C. Bannerjee writes,

"Both these works, the Mahabharata to a much greater extent than Ramayana, are considered to be the sources of Dharma...The Mahabharata has been widely cited as an authority in many Smriti works. The epic contains Smriti topics which fall under all the heads of Dharmasastra matters viz. Achara, Prayaschitta, Vyavahara, Rajadharma" (Banerji 1999: 7).

A concise explanation of these four categories of Dharmasastra which are contained in detail in Mahabharata is needed here. The way Mahabharata covers all of them will become explicit with the progress of the work.

**Achara-** It constitutes rules governing obligations and proper conduct for all the Varnas and Ashramas in a persons' life. The main focus is on customary laws or community norms through various rites and rituals (ibid, 77-89).

**Prayaschitta-** Here 'prayas' means penance and 'chitta' denotes 'nischaya' or certain knowledge (ibid, 90). It denotes an act or rite...intended for the destruction of sin arising due to any act of omission or commission (Vol. IV; Kane, 1990: 40).

**Vyavahara-** It denotes legal procedure. "When the ramifications of right conduct, that are together called Dharma and that can be established with efforts, have been violated, the dispute which springs from what is sought to be proved is Vyavahara" (Vol. III; Kane, 1990: 247).

**Rajadharma-** This comprises laws related to proper administration and governance of the society (Banerji 1999: 92).

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the way Mahabharata, throws light on the multivalent concept of Dharma. It is not without a reason that scholars from around the world have been intimidated by the range and depth of the topics which Mahabharata deals with. From a superficial glance it looks like a story of war and revenge. It deals with the human and social condition in such a compelling way that it is difficult to overlook its importance on the meanings of Dharma under each situation the characters are put through.

The scope and expanse of Dharma is seen intermixing, overlapping and at times conflicting. This is in tune with the nature and scope that has been discussed in the other Dharmasastra. As a matter of fact, the diversity of human conditions does pose as many questions as there are variations to the meaning of Dharma. The multiplicity and vagueness troubled the son of Lord Dharma himself. Dharmaraja Yudhishtira in the epic

says, “Whether we know or do not know dharma, whether it is knowable or not, dharma is finer than the finest edge of a sword and more substantial than a mountain. On first sight, it appears clear and solid like a town; on a close logical look, it vanishes from the view” (Badrinath 2007: 78).

Thus, Dharma becomes the bedrock of the social structure with its many institutions. Mahabharata dwells on the issue of Dharma not only at the individual level in the social structure, but also at the social level. It also emphasizes on the relationship between the individual and society, and foregrounds the conditions on which this relationship can be harmonious and mutually inclusive. To establish this, Mahabharata spends considerable time in each of the areas that constitute human life in order to understand its workings in relation to one’s self and to the other. It takes us through the Purusharthas of Artha, Kama and Moksha with the frame of Dharma.

It is the story of one large Hindu joint family jostling with the issues of material gains, of the pain of having and not having, of the urge to take what is legitimate and sometimes beyond that. It deals with the idea of revenge and war, the ultimate route to fulfillment, with the tension of violence and the suffering induced by it. There is a looming question of identity crisis through the social arrangement called Varna Vyavastha. The strain of representing a gender and its desires, the pain of rejection and humiliation is replete. So is the urgency to dispense justice through good administration and governance. Taking us through the spectacle of human situations, it elucidates on Achara, Prayaschitta, Vyavahara and Rajadharma. In each of these areas, which cover every intimate part of human life and condition, Dharma is shown to be the natural sovereign, to whom each one of them must be subject if human existence is to come into its full worth.

Some of the vital social questions that Mahabharata raises and attempts to answer revolve around the fundamentals of a society. The poem deals not only with the power struggles between two princes of a family but also with various branches of learning and on various levels. Interwoven are the issues on philosophy, ethics, morality, statecraft etc. They are on the level of the individual, the society and the transcendental and metaphysical. There are questions of pleasure and pain, the relationship between the self

and the other, the limit to wealth and poverty, the extent of violence and suffering, the basis of social order and values, the question of universal and relative, according to time and place. Thus Mahabharata becomes a record of 'human existentialism' and not of 'idealism' of Ramayana. As some like Iravati Karve would emphasize in her work, "The Mahabharata is a record of human beings with weaknesses. The entire Ramayana, on the other hand, is in praise of an ideal man" (Karve 2007: 74).

There is a different Dharma for the same person in different situations. As a King, Yudhisthira has a Dharma for his kingdom, but he also has a Dharma for his wife, for his Varna status and most importantly for himself. Thus, the Varnashramadharmas, Svadharma and Sadharana dharma churn to give rise to knowledge on Acara, Prayascitta, Vyavahara and Rajadharma. One situation and role in a person's life conflicts with the other role, and this is the dilemma that is solved through the entire Santiparva and the subsequent parvas of the text. It becomes a process of self-discovery and learning for a king, a householder and a scholar. Mahabharata is concerned with the,

"Discrimination between what is acceptable and unacceptable, appropriate and inappropriate, and desirable and undesirable, in Brahma's world spawns an aspiration for the ideal. Morals, ethics, laws, commandments, and statutes are created to establish 'perfection' in life. Thus a culture comes into being. Culture is based on value judgments, on ideas of higher/lower, better/worse, beautiful/ugly, right/wrong, sacred/profane, appropriate/inappropriate, auspicious/inauspicious. Only the part of the paradigm that is desirable is accepted within society; the rest is rejected" (Pattanaik 2003: 41).

Mahabharata delves into all these aspects of Dharma and its role in creating that desirable perfect society. It is put succinctly in the text: "What he does not find agreeable when done by the others to him, that he should not do unto others. He must know that what is unhappy for him cannot be happy for others" (Badrinath 2007: 88).

Though there is always the looming question of relativity and the larger notion of cosmic justice through the Karmic laws of Hinduism, but the teachings attempt to train every person into the domain of Dharma. Each stage of a person's life becomes the learning stage for the next one, discussed in the west as the concept of Socialization. Similarly, the four Purusharthas also become integral in a person's life as is dealt with in the entire epic. Scholars differ in the way they arrange the first three, but it is generally agreed that Moksha is the last goal to be desired. The first three (Dharma, Artha and Kama)



constitute a triad differing in kind from the fourth. In the entire Mahabharata one sees the coalescence of Dharma and Moksha. It is made explicit through the ingenious synthesis of the need for action without necessarily trapping oneself in the cycle of rebirth. Mahabharata explains how one can attain Moksha in the world without being an anathema to the social order. Renunciation is not the abnegation of actions, but detachment from the fruits, by simply sticking to one's Dharma.

### **The Purusharthas**

I will focus on these four Purusharthas, and their relevance in the Hindu life. The 'trivarga' of Dharma, Artha and Kama form a system which works in coherence with each other. Mahabharata offers their definition, their scope and their limits. Why is Artha necessary for human happiness and dignity? What is the limit of Artha for sustaining self, family and kingdom, and what are the just ways to gain it? How does crossing the limit affect the social relationships and how can it lead to self-destruction? So understanding the value of Artha becomes one of the important goals of Mahabharata. The war of Mahabharata, and the events leading to it, if narrowed down to the most basic reason, is based on Artha and the struggle for it. But Artha has to be rightfully gained, "True wealth, individual and social, is that wealth which creates: nurturing, cherishing, providing amply, enriching, increasing, enhancing all living beings; which supports, sustains, brings together, and in bringing together, upholds all living beings; and secures for all living beings freedom from violence, from fear" (ibid, 89).

These ideals that were propounded in Mahabharata centuries ago find resonance in the latest models of development. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen<sup>1</sup>, a noted welfare economist propounded the 'capabilities approach' which was well grounded in our ancient thought. One of the highlighting points of his approach was a balance of materialistic and non-materialistic factors in evaluating human welfare. These values upheld in the Mahabharata are the true foundations of Artha conditioned by Dharma. Mahabharata also deals with the attitude with which one holds on to the material pleasures. It says, "Neither

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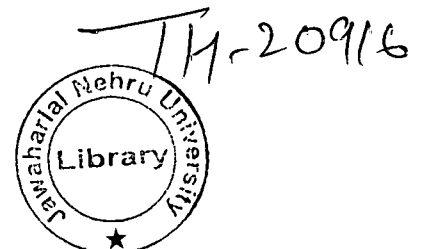
<sup>1</sup> He developed this approach in his Nobel winning work, Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: OUP, 1999)

is bondage in wealth, nor is freedom in Moksha. Whether it is the one or the other will depend upon one's attitude towards having and not-having" (Badrinath 2007: 272).

Here, it is important to understand that the Purusharthas are not an 'end' in themselves. They are the 'means' to live a life of fulfillment and balance. It is important to understand how Mahabharata deals with both the facets of Artha; that is, having and not having. On the one hand, the background of the whole story deals with the setup of a royal family, living in ostentatious palaces, wearing expensive costumes and using extravagant facilities; on the other hand, the long exiles have balanced it with the drab, desolate and somber lifestyle of a commoner. What is interesting is that the former is the preferred lifestyle and the latter comes as a punishment lifestyle. However, it may be done as a desperate attempt to indicate the notion of change and balance in life. The fact that nothing remains constant and one should not be affected by the change in life is the key to fulfillment. This is one of the greatest messages of Mahabharata, and its more famous component, Bhagwad Gita.

Thus, Mahabharata proposes both viewpoints, "that all good things of life flow from money" and "that acquisition of money is the main source of all disorder and violence, personal and collective" (ibid, 272). Both these points are very well elaborated in the entire epic. To carry out all the duties (Dharma) in one's life, Artha becomes an inevitable necessity. Bhima speaks vociferously on this issue on account of Yudhisthira renouncing the throne after winning the war, "Why should we dwell in this austere wilderness and miss out on Dharma, Artha and Kama?...Why cover yourself in some tatters of Dharma, king, and throw away Artha, which is the (material) basis for (the pursuit of) Dharma and Kama" (Das 2009: 75)? However, irrational amassing of wealth for never ending personal desires is against Dharma. This not only creates imbalances in society but also perpetrates many social injustices. Therefore, Dharma disciplines the pursuit of pleasure and wealth, and thus provides a balance to human life. In practice this implies that one maximizes one's pleasures as long as it does not diminish another's.

There also have been questions on how Dharma can be practiced at all in the conditions of extreme deprivation, when one is thinking of where to get the next meal from? Bhima



argues again, “One who is destitute of wealth cannot practice Dharma” (ibid, 75). This is a very important argument if one has to understand the practicality of Dharma. Choosing pragmatism, Yudhishtira at the end of all encouragement and chiding from his brothers and wife opts for war, to get what he deserves fairly. He quips, “...in times of trouble one’s duty alters. When one’s livelihood is disrupted and one is totally poverty stricken, one should wish for other means to carry out one’s prescribed duties...which means that in dire situations one may perform normally improper acts” (ibid, 78). However, the limits of these improper acts have to be analyzed. This also opens to us a whole new debate of poverty as being one of the reasons why people turn to crime in society, which creates social disorder.

King Nahusha in a conversation with Yudhishtira, explains his pain, “While poor I did many cruel deeds. Poverty is a curse...A man who is poor cannot fulfill his obligations properly...Dharma and Kama are the two limbs only of Artha: it is by gaining wealth that they are obtained too” (Badrinath 2007: 273). The Mahabharata thus advocates its opinion through these important characters in such important situations in their lives. One can think of how the socially inclusive policies by the government to create employment and wealth are and should be based on this basic premise laid down in our ancient texts. But to say it advocates the philosophy of capitalism would be too farfetched, as Dharma is always attached to gaining Artha.

After the war too, Yudhishtira is smitten with pangs of suffering and pain. Watching his kinsmen and people dead, and his entire kingdom turn into a burial ground is very difficult for him. He deeply rues the irreversible and irreplaceable loss of his men. After the delusive win, he decides to renounce the throne and live the life of a mendicant. This is his way to repentance, and he remains unstirred by constant persuasion by his brothers, wife, even Lord Krishna. It is only after a long and profound discourse by their grandfather Bhishma that he finally gives up the idea.

Understanding the importance of wealth for a dignified life like King Nahusha, Bhima also explains to Yudhishtira, how his conception of dharma by renouncing everything is inappropriate. Known for his physical strength and valor, Bhima in Shantiparva rises to

the occasion and displays his wise side. He says, "...undoubtedly Dharma requires money. Always, Dharma is a factor in wealth; but wealth is to be grasped for securing the ends of Dharma" (ibid, 275). Another pertinent aspect of this persuasion was the 'Kshatriya Dharma' of Yudhishtira. As described in the beginning of this chapter, every Varna, as a part of his Varnashramadharmas has to perform in a certain way and Yudhishtira encounters this role crisis often in the story (the dice game, Draupadi's insult, before war, after war) This will be discussed later in the chapter.

Thus, without being explicitly didactic, Mahabharata tells us how Artha is responsible for Dharma, and for social order. Moreover, Dharma is not only a matter of personal well-being. It is also a matter of social and political health, and the epic is deeply concerned with 'the Dharma of the king' and his officials. Dharma is supposed to uphold a certain cosmic balance and it is expected to help us to balance the plural ends of life-desire, material well-being, and righteousness. It is this one-sided, fragmented importance attached to any one of the human attributes that, the Mahabharata shows, is the source of all violence, to one's self in the first place, and then to the society (ibid, 276).

A little mentioned subject but very important to this discussion is the Mayasabha, Pandavas extraordinary palace that was built by the demon Maya. Draupadi insisted on the grandiose and ostentatious palace for them which turned out to be a curse and a reason for their downfall. In making the palace on that land (Khandava forest), they committed the great sin of deliberately burning innumerable creatures in the forest fire. It was not only against their Varnashramadharmas of being a Kshatriya who are praised for their chivalry; it was also against their Sadharna Dharma of being a human being.

However, it is often explained in two ways, 1) that Lord Agni, dressed as a Brahmana, came asking for this; and so they could not refuse a Brahmana, 2) that it was the destiny of those creatures to be consumed by Lord Agni in that fire, lit by the great Pandavas, as their way to redemption. But the 'Mayasabha' constructed on the land of such massacre turned out to be their doom. This is where Mahabharata posits the multivalent nature of dharma. To me, the future turn of events makes its point clear. It thus becomes a great teacher not by preaching empty principles but by engaging with such social situations

which would subtly prove its point. So, an imbalance between Artha and Dharma, leads to no good for anyone and this is what this 'Mayasabha' proved to be in the story. Bhishma wisely sums it up in the Shantiparva, "The wealth earned through deceit is destroyed by Dharma" (ibid, 278).

This message is voiced primarily through Yudhishtira's dilemma. For him, before and after the war situation is filled with inconvenience and discomfort. His predicament is painful and upsetting. The root of all problems for him is unbound desires, the quest to want more in life which has no end. He does not want to go through the harsh reality of a war with his kinsmen to get a share of wealth and land, and is ready to forego his own fair share of material wealth and status. Moreover, he has fair reasons and arguments,

"On acquiring wealth, men want to acquire a kingdom, having acquired a kingdom, they want to become gods; and then among gods they want to become Indra...Even if one becomes wealthy, one may not become a king or god; if one does become a god, and among gods Indra, one would remain dissatisfied still" (ibid, 281).

It is a well known fact that human desires have no end, and often desire to earn more wealth or a better status, gives rise to ignoble character in people, which upsets the social order. Since the idea of an equal world is utopian we would assume that some people will always remain greedy. Robert Merton<sup>2</sup> used the concept of 'relative deprivation' to understand this situation which gives rise to deviance in society. The need for more, when compared to other, develops the situation of envy and relative deprivation in people. This is dangerous not only for the personal health but also social health. In Mahabharata, like in every society, most characters are smitten by this envious relative deprivation.

Yudhishtira is one character who constantly fights it off with his belief in Dharma. John Rawls echoes Yudhishtira's concern,

"Envy is collectively disadvantageous; the individual who envies another is prepared to do things that makes them both worse off, if only the discrepancy between them is sufficiently reduced...However, Sometimes the circumstances evoking envy are so compelling that given human beings as they are, no one can reasonably be asked to overcome his rancorous

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<sup>2</sup> In his work Robert Merton, *Social Structure and Anomie* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1993)

feelings...A person's lesser position ...may be so great as to wound his self-respect...cause a loss of self-esteem" (Rawls 1971: 532-34).

Thus, there is a deep relationship between envy and inequality. More than that Yudhishtira's concern is that of self-contentment. If every person becomes like him, there would be a more just and humane world. In a well-ordered society one ought to design social institutions and policies which will help mitigate envy and thus social inequalities (ibid, 534). It is rightfully said that one person's greed is other person's envy. Mahabharata, through Yudhishtira, strikes at the very root of it all: desires of the frail humankind.

Artha also becomes very important for a Hindu because of the importance of charity. It is the dharma of individuals in Grihastha Ashram to indulge in acts of benevolence in society by helping the poor and needy. The basic principle of socialism is laid down there, when it asks the capable to earn and help those incapable and unfortunate.

"It may be noted that, according to Mahabharata, when a Brahmana has more corn than what is necessary for three years, he should perform a sacrifice with that wealth. Thus, anti-hoarding advice is clearly socialistic in outlook. These rules are designed to avoid unhealthy surfeit of wealth in one hand, while others languish in need" (Banerji 1999: 304).

The King, all the more is expected to take care of his subjects as his own children. However, the large hearted Dharmaraja Yudhishtira expresses his vexation if greed overpowers and stops men from doing so. Mahabharata explains through the story of Manki what does balance in life do to the health of the individual and more so of the society. Thus, Mahabharata talks about both the context and rationality of having and not having money on both the levels (individual and society). It moreover suggests the proper action in both situations and also their counterparts. So, neither of them become wrong totality. Their fulfillment is possible only within the wholeness of human attributes- in neither their neglect, nor in their idolatry (Badrinath 2007: 289)

The Mahabharata in its entirety presents itself as a microcosm of the society, with every social institution discussed in detail and the way it affects the individual and vice versa. One of its fundamental concerns was to understand the motive of human action, which had its roots in the desire to get pleasure and happiness. So while it deliberates on the

importance of Artha in life, it also talks in great detail about human desires and pleasures. It unveils the many layers in which these desires persist in human beings, the extent they can go to achieve or avenge them, and the repercussions of untamed desires.

Kama loosely translates into sensual and sexual gratification, love, pleasure, desire for the aesthetic enjoyment such as dance, drama, music, painting, etc. Thus, Kama becomes integral to the balance in life, as a vital form of life energy. Hence it gains prominence in the life goals and becomes one of the important Purusharthas. However, it remains behind the other three Purusharthas in the order of attainment and fulfillment, but, it nevertheless remains very significant. Mahabharata gives us the widest and the simplest definition, “Whatever is agreeable to one is ‘pleasure’, whatever is disagreeable is ‘pain’...Pleasure is of two kinds: physical and mental. All human tendencies are towards pleasure. Indeed, dharma, artha, and kama, the three ends of life have no other aim but pleasure” (ibid, 227).

Like all great philosophers in the world, but much before them, Vyasa was keen to understand the nature and role of desire in the working of human relationships. Moreover, for him it was important to present it in the form of a realistic story; the psycho-somatic link, where the mind becomes a powerful source to determine the human action. Therefore, he makes Mahabharata a treatise which synthesizes mind with culture and social form. Kama is one of the many aspects of the overpowering mind or consciousness. But Kama is also regulated by Dharma, and this is the focal point of the epic. While it stresses on a balance in Artha, it also proposes the same for Kama. When governed by righteous action and intent, the fulfillment of kama is considered to be healthy and acceptable part of life. Bhima in Vanaparva cites the importance of pleasure,

“The joy that one feels in consequences of contact with objects of touch or of possession of wealth is what is called pleasure...The joy that arises from the five senses, the intellect and the heart, being directed to the objects proper to each is called pleasure, and is one of the best fruits of our actions” (Vanaparva; Ganguli 2003: 567-569).

For those devoid of righteousness (Dharma) in pleasure he says, “He, who is misled by pleasure of covetousness, beholds not the nature of virtue, deserves to be slain by all, and becomes wretched here and here-after” (ibid, 568).

Kama is also the God of love, sexual desire and pleasure; and from Adiparva, Kama is known to seduce people to form relationships. Interestingly, being blinded by the lust for pleasure and not acting sensibly has given rise to the questions of legitimacy and ownership in this story. That forms the crux of Mahabharata. Whether it is the union of human with human or human with divine, both have had multiple consequences for the immediate family and for the whole society. Bhima says that Kama “pervades every living form” in the very beginning when he justifies Hidimva’s lust for him (Adiparva; Ganguli: 274). Even the otherwise reticent twin brothers Nakula and Sahadeva say, “Exercising self-control, and keeping Dharma foremost in the mind, let one earn wealth that is combined with Dharma; and, maintaining the harmony between the two, fulfill one’s erotic impulse” (Badrinath 2007: 315).

Starting from Adiparva, the whole epic is replete with cases where both men and women lose themselves blindly to their carnal desires, only to realize later, its effects on themselves and their whole community. We understand this through the deer’s admonition to Pandu in Adiparva. The deer contends that Pandu should not have shot him when he was engaged in the delicate act of mating, “You who understands the pleasures of women, and the truths of scriptures and Dharma and Artha; such an unholy act is unbecoming of a god-like person like yourself” (Dhand 2008: 31).

Thus, it makes clear that Artha and Kama are pursuits natural to human condition; tempered with the study of scriptures and Dharma, they should indulged in with refinement, consideration and taste. Mahabharata does not treat Kama as a tabooed topic, especially for women. At many places it emphasizes, “All men of this world desire women: likewise women desire men. This is evident and everybody in the world is a witness to it” (Badrinath 2007: 307). Moreover, the pursuit of Kama as a Purushartha is the only means by which a man can free himself from the debt of his ancestors, by procreating (Das 1982, 196-97). To perform the ‘Pitra-rina’ is one of the most important dharma in Grihastha Ashrama. Thus, it becomes as intrinsic in the scheme of things as the other two Purusharthas.



Though, the pleasurable experiences are a part of one's subjective consciousness, and in any capacity human beings tend to maximize their pleasure quotient, Mahabharata shows the way in which it can be regulated. The foremost principle that it lays down is that the inevitability of change or transition. Thus, not attaching too much importance to a phase or to a particular object of desire or experience is the only way to strive for harmony. This sounds utopian, but attaching 'dharma' to all goals in life would only make life livable and balanced.

### **Varnashramadharma**

Mahabharata also talks about the concept of Varnashramadharma in great detail throughout the text, which is also crucial to the understanding of Indian society. This concept mainly deals with the duties of different Varnas and Ashramas. Without going into the complicated topic of origin and development of the concept of Varna, I would here focus on majorly as it has been described in Mahabharata.

The social structure of the Indian society has been since long divided into four kinds people, viz. Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra. Some say that the division is on the basis of some divine classification, or racial features, or occupations. Mahabharata talks about the functional view of Varnashrama system, though there are major contradictions involved in the actual functionality of the concept. This means that there is a huge difference in the theory and practice of the concept of Varnashramadharma. The text will display these ambiguities through different characters and their opinions.

Though the knowledge on origin of Varna Vyavastha comes late in the text in Shantiparva through Bhishma, the reference to the Dharma of each Varna starts much ahead. If Bhishma's explanation in Shantiparva can be assumed to be the ideology propagated by Mahabharata on Varnashramadharma, then Mahabharata follows a 'functional' approach. This approach is reiterated in the entire epic and I will try to explain it. However, Mahabharata also opines very contradictory views through the semi-divine, and very important character of Krishna. So like on every other topic,

Mahabharata leaves us with ambiguity. It gives us with a wide variety of explanations to choose from and adds to its central nature of incongruity. We shall see how.

In the long sermon on Dharma in the post-war crisis faced by Yudhishtira, Bhishma also explains the origin of the concept of Varna Vyavastha. Through a conversation between Rishi Bhrigu and Bharadwaj, Bhishma explains Mahabharata's views. Interestingly, it must be emphasized that Rishi Bhrigu is deified and is equated with Brahma. The text says he 'resembles' Brahma. Apart from the divine authorship of this epic, this is one amongst the many instances where it seeks to legitimize its views through divine justifications. This definitely is one of the many ways this text reaches to the metaphysical plane. It corroborates the transcendence of text and signifies how tradition for a society becomes a sort of transcendental reality for it; especially for the Hindu society where tradition has shaped every facet of cultural production and change.

The Varna Vyavastha, which has transformed into an obsessive and oppressive Caste System in the present age, needs to actually refer back to the tradition that Dharmasastra and epics like Mahabharata conceived. Thus, it is important to understand that "the Mahabharata showed the Adharma of a natural and perfectly rational division of callings turning into a social system of 'castes' determined by one's birth, and they into 'superior' and 'inferior', 'upper' and 'lower'...turning Varna Dharma into the Adharma of Varna" (ibid, 370). The kind of structural importance that this issue has in the Indian Society needs a little more detailing, but only after understanding how Mahabharata actually envisioned it.

Rishi Bhrigu explains to Bharadwaj the origin of the earth and the four elements and of all the other living and non-living creatures. While discussing human beings, he states the divine origin of the four Varnas. Accordingly, Brahamans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras were created and were of different 'Varna' (colour), viz. white, red, yellow and black respectively. But Bharadwaj is quick to point out the fact that none of these 'Varnas' exist in pure forms, as there has been intermixing of the same. He also comments, "Lust, wrath, fear, cupidity, grief, anxiety, hunger, toil, possess and prevail all over men. How can men be distinguished by the possession of attributes? The bodies of

all men emit sweat, urine, faeces, phlegm, bile and blood. How then can men be distributed into classes” (Shantiparva; Ganguli 2003: 2862)? This gets a valid answer from the great sage Bhrigu where he explains how the four classes got separated eventually because of their ‘actions’. They were all born equal, ‘Brahmanas’, from Brahma, but in consequence of their acts, got distributed into different orders. “The respective disciplines, naturally interrelated, were to be, together, the foundation of social progress and social wealth, *loka-yatra* and *loka-samgraha*. In that sense it was collective discipline of *dharma*” (Badrinath 2007: 375).

It is this ‘functional’ aspect of Varna Vyavastha that Mahabharata focused on inherently. However, what is functional has to be at the same time ethical. Hence, the ethical discipline, common to all social functions; and the specific discipline for each calling was devised. Both separately and in terms of a conflict between the two have been explained in the Mahabharata. This is explained through innumerable stories in the epic which I will discuss ahead to show their significance in the context.

When Rishi Bhrigu mentions that the ‘Brahmanas’ fell away from their own order, he doesn’t mean it in a structural way. He makes it coherent how they remain undifferentiated for every other thing, “All the four orders, therefore, have the right to the performance of all pious duties and sacrifices” (Shantiparva; Ganguli 2003: 2862). Mahabharata clearly asserts its opinion when Bharadwaj asks, “How does one ‘become’ a Brahmana” (ibid, 2863)? It is important to note here that the question itself specifies how does one ‘become’ a Brahmana and is not ‘born’ one. Their Varnashramadharmas defines them to be of a certain kind as explained,

“He is called a Brahmana, in whom are truth, gifts, abstention from injury to others, compassion, shame, benevolence, and penance. He who is engaged in the profession of battle, who studies the Vedas, who makes gifts (to Brahmanas), and takes wealth (from those he protects) is called a Kshatriya. He who takes pleasure in eating every kind of food, who is engaged in doing every kind of work, who is impure in behavior, who does not study the Vedas, and whose conduct is unclean, is a Shudra...If these characteristics be observable in Shudra, if they be not found in a Brahmana, then such a Shudra is no Shudra, and such a Brahmana is no Brahmana” (ibid, 2863).

Mahabharata is replete with stories of mighty Brahmins being humbled by the people of the other Varnas. They reflect on the ethical component of the Varna Vyavastha while

not negating its functional importance. The purpose is to snub the overbearance and the feeling of superiority of one Varna over another.

One of the most potent elaborations on Dharma, especially for a Brahman, is in Vanaparva. It starts with the befouling of a great sage Kaushika by a she-crane while he is sitting under a tree in deep meditation. His angered glance results in the bird's death and in the subsequent quest of Kaushika to find out the meaning of Dharma. Interestingly that happens from people assumed 'below' him in the structural hierarchy of Varna Vyavastha. Mahabharata repudiates and rejects any such attempt.

The sage Kaushika, in one of his eleemosynary reaches the house of a woman, attending to her husband who has come home after a long day at work. The woman makes the Brahmana wait and thus, commits a great sin of sorts. However, some sort of clairvoyance makes her aware of the death of the bird by Brahman's' angered gaze. She confronts the Brahmana and renders some very important opinions on the conduct of Brahmanas, and their belief in their superiority over everything.

“The Gods know him for a Brahmana who hath cast off his anger and passion, who always speaks the truth, gratifies his preceptor, and who, though injured himself, never returns the injury. The Gods know him for a Brahmana who has his senses under control, who is virtuous and pure, and devoted to the study of Vedas, and who has mastery over anger and lust”(Vanaparva; Ganguli 2003: 855).

Though she understands the position of a Brahmana, as a reflection of God himself, she also understands the fact that the position comes not by birth but by virtuous actions. She is quick to add, “I think, however, O holy one, that you do not know what virtue in reality is” (ibid, 855). However, aware of her own position as regular householder, she also apologizes if her words disrespected the great Brahmana.

There are two aspects to this behavior of the 'chaste woman' which I must discuss before moving ahead. The emphasis on 'chaste woman' is because this story is narrated by Markandeya to Yudhishtira when he asks the duties of a 'chaste woman'. So this serves two purposes in the narrative. One is the social construction of gender, and the other is the position of women in the Varna Vyavastha. Both these issues will be dealt in detail in the third chapter on 'Gender in Mahabharata'. Though, in this context it is more

important to understand the action of this woman towards the Brahmana. Bound by the Dharma of being someone's wife, her foremost duty (Pativrata Dharma) is towards her husband. However, being in the Grihastha Ashrama, her Svadharma is to tend to the waiting Brahmana first. The choice she makes is the choice Mahabharata wants her to make in that position as it justifies her 'chastity'. Yet, if it is the foremost duty of a regular householder woman to put her husband and his needs above everything, then it is the duty of the Brahmana to be patient and understanding. Thus, Mahabharata shows that how her act was selfless irrespectively, and this is why she had the merit to guide the Brahmana.

The Brahmana, humbled by her, and duly valuing her views, heeds her request to go further in his conquest to Mithila and meet a meatseller named Dharmavyadha. The fowler completes our understanding of Varna Vyavastha. He not only focuses on the ethical part but also explains the functional part of it. Being born into a butcher's family, it is Svadharma to carry forward the family occupation, as a part of the Varna Vyavastha. However, being human, he has a Sadharana dharma of not only conducting himself virtuously but also harmoniously in the society. "Order in culture was maintained by the establishment of *Varna-ashrama-dharma*, whereby every man was supposed to do his duty (Dharma), which is defined by his station in society (Varna), and stage in life (Ashrama)...When Dharma is upheld perfectly, the rhythm of nature is predictable and no accidents occur in culture" (Pattanaik 2003: 43).

It is here that Mahabharata explicitly asserts its opinion on what we understand as the 'Occupational' theory of Varna Vyavastha based on the concept of 'division of labor'. Every human being is born in this world in a family, with some socio-economic and political background. It is each person's Dharma to be thoroughly functional in their stipulated role that the Varna provides them. "Division of labor is a fundamental theory of social organization and it is highly essential for the proper development of a social order. A security in order to progress, must classify its people according to the well understood natural tendencies" (Jayapalan 2001: 26). However, this is just the ascriptive aspect of Varna Vyavastha. What Mahabharata focuses on is that the achieved aspect is what truly justifies one's Varna.

This is explained in the example of the meatseller. Being a meatseller, he is not the stipulated one to impart knowledge to the Brahmana. Yet his conduct is worthy of what he says,

“O best of Brahmanas, I carefully serve the superior and the old, speak the truth, never envy others, and give to the best of my powers. I live upon what remains after serving the Gods, guests and those dependent upon me. I never speak ill of anything, small or great...One should avoid falsehood in speech and do good without solicitation. One should never cast off virtue from lust, from wrath or from malice. One should never return wrong for wrong, but should act honestly by those that have wronged him” (Vanaparva; Ganguli 2003: 857).

The long discourse from the erudite meatseller contains the very substance of Dharma. It is also here that Mahabharata reiterates the Karmic theory<sup>3</sup> of birth and rebirth which governs the Varna Vyavastha. Though, the Brahmana is born into a family and profession which lowly, he believes only good conduct can help him redeem his guilt of killing. He adds, “The deity takes away life, the executioner acts only as a secondary agent” (ibid, 860). The animals and birds for execution are just part of one big Karmic system of birth and death operated by the great Gods. “Every *Karma*, individual or collective, starts its own logic; and once set up the logic of karma must work itself out” (Badrinath 2007: 9).

There are many an instances where Mahabharata focuses on the parity of all the Varnas. However, the converse is also true and I will try to examine here both the cases. The foremost example is the case of the author of Mahabharata itself, Vyasa, and his son, Vidura. While the former is the son from the union of a fisherman’s daughter Satyawati and a Sage Parashara, the latter is between Vyasa and a servant maid. Even Samjaya, Dhritarashtra’s charioteer and confidante is a ‘Suta’. Technically all of them represent the lowest Varna, Shudra, but what they actually represent in the society is much more. Vyasa is credited to not only have authored Mahabharata but also compiled Vedas, Puranas, etc. ‘Varna’ wise too, he is dark, the color of Shudras, and so he gets the name Krishna Dvaipayana. Even Samjaya, is a ‘Suta’, but he plays a very important role of Dhritarashtra’s advisor and confidante. Through his insight he narrates the whole war to Dhritarashtra, not only literally but also allegorically, displaying wisdom.

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<sup>3</sup> It means that one’s conduct and actions in one’s life, decide one’s next birth. One keeps getting born onto this Earth and various forms till his past life’s wrongs are not completely punished in the subsequent births. It is rare that one come clean on all his past lives and is not reborn. Thus, one attains ‘moksha’ (salvation).

These important figures in our ancient literature and society have lowly origins. However, they represent the most wise, knowledgeable and enlightened characters in our history. The Mahabharata even says in the voice of the sage Parashara to King Janaka, “It is certain that the Shudra is not a lowly being. Those who are truly learned in the Veda and the Shastra regard the Shudra verily as the Prajapati, the creator and the protector of life. But, dear King, I see the Shudra as Vishnu, the main protector of the world and the source of it nourishing” (ibid, 385). There are other characters too that belong to the Shudra Varna, and yet they are very important in Mahabharata. The important point is that though Mahabharata does not deny the possibility of a Varna Vyavastha based on functional division of labor as it helps in social order, it does abhor any symbolic or substantive inequality relegated to each.

The reverse of this is also seen in Mahabharata, and through the divine, Krishna. His ideas place Brahmanas on the highest pedestal of the Varna Vyavastha and show prejudice and revulsion against the lower Varnas. He says, “Whether the brahmanas are of evil or of good character, whether they are crude or cultured, they should never be insulted, because they are like fire concealed under the ash...From their very birth they are the abiding symbol of Dharma and it is I who reside on the earth in the form of the brahmana” (ibid, 381). The staunchest statement of repugnance comes when he says,

“There are fourteen areas of knowledge, the four Veda, their six accessories, the mimamsa, the nyaya, the dharmasastras and the purana...were created for the good of the three worlds, the shudras must not touch them, for all things that come in contact with the shudras are polluted...The dog, the shudra, and the Chandala are impure” (ibid, 384).

Deriving legitimacy from the divine, the society definitely held more importance to this viewpoint. However it could be through the later interpolations in Mahabharata, where due to prevalence of Bhakti-cult, Krishna was deified in the text. Thus, it may be assumed that these views are later additions and originally Mahabharata did not emphasize on them. However, in practicality, through the characters of Karna and Eklavya, and even Vidura, the Mahabharata has not justified its stance on the Varna Vyavastha completely. This would be elaborated upon in the Chapter on ‘Varna Vyavastha and Social Identity’.

## **Violence and Karma**

Apart from the above mentioned issues, Mahabharata also deals with many other meanings of Dharma. A large part of Mahabharata deals with the question of (himsa) violence and (ahimsa) non-violence. Dharma is concerned with violence at three stages viz. the reason for violence, the conduct of violence and the aftermath of violence. Mahabharata is known best for the war that happened between the two units of the same family over some very basic issues. However, the question that it raises is not just violence and Dharma; it is also of ethics and justice. There is also a deep concern about tussle between human initiative and karmic destiny. The whole Mahabharata revolves around the dichotomy between destiny and free will.

The causality of action has the justification of human impotence in the face of power and glory of God. But the argument is not as simple as that of agency and structure as dharma is both of them in due place and time. "Since the Mahabharata shows that everything in life is relational, everything concerning man is discussed relationally, and in that, in pair of opposites" (Badrinath 2003: 114). So for every act of violence or non-violence there is a divine or Karmic explanation. And non-violence is discussed with every kind of violence around. Truth is discussed when there is a great deal of falsehood and lies. Similarly, it is on the war ground that the biggest and the most famous treatise on dharmic human action is spelt out in the form of Bhagwad Gita, direct from the mouth of God.

The whole Mahabharata is based on people exacting revenge through means of deception and violence. It is just not Mahabharata; the entire history of the whole world, every nation, every society, every people is filled with violence. As if violence has been the only mode of catharsis of humankind, which in fact could be true if examined carefully. That is to say, violence is inherent in life as its natural condition. Similarly, the characters in Mahabharata also choose willingly or are made to choose by destiny (ultimately both are same). However, Mahabharata shows how fleeting the moment of catharsis is for both the gainer and the loser. This is the logic of its principle of Ahimsa, "Ahimsa is the highest Dharma...highest austerity...highest truth; and it is through them, ahimsa and



truth, that Dharma is advanced” (ibid, 116). As nature maintains balance through the consumption of the weak by the stronger. Similarly, human beings also live like this. Moreover, “Nothing is ever absolutely good not anything ever absolutely bad, and that the same act is good or harmful depending on place, time, and the character of the person involved” (ibid, 127).

Some like Israel Selvanayagam also argue that there was a Post-Vedic development of the concept of killing as a Sacrifice or Yajna and explains the justification of violence through war in Mahabharata. There is an uncompromising insistence in Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras on the regular performance of Vedic sacrifice. Although they take non-violence as a virtue in individual life, they do not apply it to killing in sacrifice. The observance of Varnashramadharmas and duties thereof are also related to it. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, despite their encyclopedic and complex nature (due to a long process of interpolation and redaction), share the concerns of the Mimamsas and the lawgivers in reviving sacrifice.

Both the epics, especially Mahabharata, betray a process of Brahmanization, mutually elevating the position of the Kshatriyas. It is interesting to note that both the epics start in sacrifice and end in sacrifice. This picture may permit us to view them as an allegorical representation of the decline and revival (exile and return) of the Vedic Dharma and sacrifice... Apart from affirming the Vedic authority and the duty of performing sacrifice regularly, the Mahabharata tries to interpret the duties of Kshatriyas on the battlefield as their distinctive sacrifice (Selvanayagam 1996: 66-67).

There is also a sense of a cycle of Kala and Desh (time and place) in Mahabharata. In one of the gruesome acts of violence, Ashwatthama kills the five sons of Pandavas. Here we see how life comes a full circle. The king of Pancala, Drupada, wronged Drona by insulting him. In revenge, Drona wrongs Drupada by taking half his kingdom. Drupada is related to the Pandavas as his daughter is married to them. So in the great war of Kurukshetra, Drupada is Pandavas’ ally. To claim revenge from Drona, and also because he is on the opponents’ side, Dharmaraja Yudhishtira tricks their guru Drona into being killed by Drupada’s son, Drishtadyumna. Ashwatthama, the son of Drona, furious at the

Adharmic murder of his father, swipes off the entire progeny of Pandavas. In the end, he is cursed by Krishna to wander for three thousand years on the earth in a condition that would not be worth living.

There is no forgiveness, compassion or sense of achievement, having lost everything and everyone in family. The question is again of everyone being the part of a grand karmic event which consumes all. The Gods in heaven also don't seem to have the utmost power. When the carnage is finally over, we find Vyasa telling Gandhari that, "the work of the deities could not but be accomplished. It was for this purpose that they all descended to the surface of the Earth as portions of gods...the deities in came in human form, and returned to heaven when they had accomplished their splendid purposes" (Woods 2005:106). Julian Woods believes that the Gods themselves are bound by even a higher cosmic Destiny, since this is linked with the cyclical time (Kala) that governs the creation and destruction of the universe as a whole. In other words, a cosmic cycle begins with a creative emergence (sarga) and ends with a return to quiescence (pralaya) (ibid, 106).

This also finds resonance with cyclical theories of Social Change in Sociology. Unlike the theories of social evolution, where the evolution of society and culture is seen as progressing into something new and unique, cyclical theories argue that the events and stages of society and history generally repeat themselves in cycle. The theory of human historical motivation based on the ancient spiritual ideas of the Vedas is also one of them. Developed by P. R. Sarkar (1967) and later expanded by scholars like Ravi Batra (2007), laws of social cycle essentially understand the nature of society with the episteme of Varna. Here people (Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) are of different physical and psychological inclination, who find fulfillment in different things in life.

What it highlights is that every epoch or era, has a period of origin, which is dominated by a certain kind of people, then there is the period of progress during which it reaches its zenith, and then the downfall begins. However, the most relevant cycle for the Earth itself is that of historical time (and of course the epic is considered as 'itihasa' or 'history'). The sense of temporal inevitability is reinforced by the belief that each cycle of cosmic

existence is the same as all the others and occurs over and over again across an eternity of time (Woods 2005:107).

This takes us deeper into the dilemma between human action and destiny. This was the sole purpose of Bhagwad Gita, and even the entire Mahabharata is pivoted on it. Every action is not only predestined, but also has a rationale which is beyond human understanding. Vyasa says,

“Some authorities in the science of action point to human initiative (purusakara) as the cause of events. However, other learned scholars say that it is a matter of destiny (daiva), while the materialists say that natural conditions (svabhava) are responsible. But yet others maintain that human initiative, action (karma) and destiny are nothing but the naturally occurring product of previous mental states. These three factors are inseparable, without distinction” (ibid, 104).

Every major character in Mahabharata has a preordained role to play. For example, Duryodhana was born for the destruction of the world, Karna was ordained for the purpose of provoking a war, Dhristadyumna was born to kill Drona, Draupadi was responsible for the death of the Kshatriyas. Even the divine Vishnu’s human form Krishna is destined to die a sad death, because of his many strategic and manipulative actions.

However, there is also a compelling case of societies and individuals being capable of choosing their course of life by actions of Dharma. There is always a choice between moral commitment and the pursuit of unbridled self-interest. It is this which drives Yudhishtira to the larger debate between ‘Pravritti’ and ‘Nivritti’ Dharma. While his ‘Sadharna dharma’ coerces him to take the path of ‘Nivritti’ to avoid the massacre of an entire race, his ‘Svadharna’ urges him to take the call of the moment, and plunge into the mode of action to bring justice to all.

“Ethics in pravritti dharma are of necessity situational rather than categorical; there are no deontological obligations incumbent on all beings. In the act of ascertaining one’s duty, one must weigh in balance one’s numerous obligations, the ‘sasvatan’, as well as those of sex, varna, ashrama, and seniority. Thus one arrives at one’s ‘svadharna’, one’s own peculiar and distinctive dharma. The personal, individual is somewhat neglected in the ‘pravritti dharma” (Dhand 2008: 31).

Against this, ‘Nivritti’ Dharma is vitally premised on the Upanishadic views of existence. The world (samsara) is seen as a place of suffering and anxiety that are perpetuated by

one's actions (Karma, both of a moral and ritual nature). One's participation in this realm of pleasurable distraction is endlessly rehearsed through rebirth. Thus, the only goal of human life should be to emancipate oneself from this cycle of birth and rebirth, to achieve permanent peace and happiness (Moksha) (ibid, 33).

It is important that how does one become the perpetrator of an act and realize that one is just a cog in the wheel. The inner and outer battles are traced in the entire Mahabharata and also in the Bhagvad Gita. The false picture we have of ourselves is due to the superiority of the self-centered 'Ahamkara' (ego of the Prakriti) over the 'Atman' (Purusa). Krishna suggests here that our precious ego is nothing but a mental fiction and a case of mistaken identity. The epic thus operates, on two levels or with two perspectives. In terms of mundane tasks and responsibilities of daily life, particularly with respect to the responsibilities of the king, the human being may be regarded as enjoying a modicum of autonomy and freedom to chart his or her own course. From the higher perspective of the 'Sattvastha', however, who sees the unity of all life, this so-called 'freedom' is based on the primary misconception of the ego-sense "I". Mahabharata offers a solution to us not to abandon all social and ritual duties and retire to the forest, but to act decisively. The self-determination of the epic is thus the victory of the rational element over the emotional proclivities of desire and aversion for the object of the senses, marked by enhanced self-sufficiency and control. We are only 'free' to the extent we can resist patterns of behavior contrary to the path of Dharma (Woods: 2005, 111-12).

### **Rajadharma**

In Mahabharata and the other Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras, Dharma is also necessary for the foundation of law and governance. Since it implies the right action, in this case it also signifies justness, equality and equity. Injustice, tyranny and anarchy are the violations of Dharma in every right, and constitute Adharma which is destructive, not only of self but also the others. There is a Dharma that defines all social relations and the entire Mahabharata is pivoted on that, though everything is relational to Desh and Kala. So while some principles remain universal, there are some which are particular to time and place. The most basic of all is the relation between the individual and the society.

Mahabharata describes the sources of law, its proper interpretation and conduct, and the possibility of change. T.M.P. Mahadevan writes, “It is true that ultimate reality is eternal and changeless. But there can be no ultimacy about socio-religious institutions and customs. These latter will have necessarily to change when the conditions of life and climate of thought change” (Mahadevan 1951: 320).

Mahabharata deals with these and many more questions on Dharma of a ruler towards himself and his subjects. The concept of power (Bala) is at its roots; its sources, and the purpose of its exercise, its limits, and its legitimacy and when does it digress to become Adharma are also implicit. It is also concerned with the Adharma of any kind of exploitation or oppression and injustice.

The longest discourse on Rajadharma comes in Shantiparva, when after the war Yudhishtira seeks the path of Nivritti. After being requested and chided by his brothers and wife and many sages, Krishna suggests for the wisdom of their grandfather Bhishma. Bhishma explains to him the duties and responsibilities of ruling a kingdom. He explains to him not only the basics to rule just and fair, but also every nuance of managing a kingdom. Right from basic governance, to espionage, to external affairs, to crime and punishment, there is a long and vivid description on the Dharma of a king.

“Governance is the name of the limits set to keep people from the confusion of anarchy and to protect the material conditions of life. It is governance which establishes this world upon truth, truth secures dharma; and dharma is established in those who have true knowledge of things. There is no other justification for the king to exist than to protect people in every way. For protection is the first foundation of all social order. It is from the fear of governance that people do not consume each other; it is upon governance that all order is based” (Badrinath 2007: 423).

Mahabharata does not deny that fact that human beings by nature are erroneous and it takes fear of an external source to avoid any act of adharma. It is also the foremost duty of the king to ensure and nurture a healthy social order by protecting the weak from being oppressed by the strong. However, it also spells clearly against the king and his men becoming agents of oppression. “Let the king protect his subjects from their fear of him; from their fear of others...When the king wipes the tears of the poor, the dispossessed, and the old, and creates happiness among the people thereby, such conduct on his part is called king’s Dharma” (ibid, 426).

## **Is Dharma Universal?**

The Mahabharata delves into the minutest aspects of Dharma in a person's life. It talks about human relations in every form, with self, with other, and with the divine. But there is a limitation on speaking about the Great Epic in a general sense, as its volume and range is bound to give rise to contradictions. One of the major reasons for such contradictions is also assigned to the numerous interpolations and redactions. J. A. B van Buitenan writes, "...the text is so dismally intractable. Its sheer size is really forbidding" (Buitenan 1973: xxxi). Moreover, right from the very beginning till its end, Mahabharata promotes the concept of relativity. Every action and reaction is bound by 'Desh' and 'Kala'. This also gives rise to many tensions in understanding Dharma. Wendy Doniger argues that this epic and indeed most of Hindu thinking has three identifiable strands of Dharma, viz. Svadharma, Sadharana dharma and the ethics of ascetic traditions, which she regards as amoral or morally neutral (Doniger 1980: 5).

Their meanings have already been discussed above. We have seen through many cases in Mahabharata that there are so many dichotomies in their situations; especially through the principle protagonist and antagonist (if we may say so), Yudhishtira and Duryodhana. Here the emphasis is on moral qualities such as truthfulness, tolerance, forgiveness, restraint, kindness, charity and honesty. Such attributes are consistently displayed by Yudhishtira throughout the narrative passages whilst Duryodhana, 'the dark contrast to Yudhishtira', displays the opposite qualities with equal consistency. In this the epic narrative takes on the role of a moral treatise using its principal characters to depict the virtues and vices it seeks to advocate and proscribe (Sutton 2005: 93).

It is in Yudhishtira's character one sees the definition of paragon of virtue, who is always vacillating between Svadharma and Sadharna Dharma. Some scholars believe that all Duryodhana always did was follow his Svadharma of being a Kshatriya. But Yudhishtira stands in opposition to him and even the divine Krishna, an ardent advocator of Dharma does so. Even his wife, brothers and Bhishma tell him so. Throughout the Mahabharata, Yudhishtira is constantly tormented by this ethical tension. The finality is achieved when Lord Dharma, Yudhishtira's father in form of a

dog follows him to the path of salvation. His brothers and wife all have long collapsed, but the dog (Lord Dharma) only follows him to his destination. He is astounded to see Duryodhana basking in the luxuries of heaven while his brothers and wife, and Karna are languishing in hell. Duryodhana lived the life of a true warrior Kshatriya, dying on the field of war and thus, deserves heaven. Mahabharata deepens the conflict of Dharma here. Mahabharata achieves the motto of highlighting that both Svadharma (Duryodhana) and Sadharana Dharma (Yudhishtira) reach heaven; one has to be just true to the path they choose.

This brings us again to the most important question in universality of dharma. When one person's Dharma is another person's suffering, how can it be considered righteous? While the Pravritti marga (way) coaxes Yudhishtira to indulge in action which will have far reaching consequences, the Nivritti marga is against his Svadharma. In the situation, his Nivritti Dharma is not a solution, just evasion. Greg Bailey explains this,

“The whole discourse of dharma reflected in the Mahabharata is one of disagreement, hesitation, conflict, inconsistency and strident affirmation. If the substantial affirmation of dharma for different situations and different goals is a defining feature of the treatment of dharma in the Shantiparvan and the Anushasanaparvan, so is its questioning there and elsewhere in the epic” (Bailey 2005: 64).

One of the most scathing examples of this duality arises when the question of Draupadi being legitimately won by the Kauravas arises. The whole thrust of the argument is obliquely centered on the figure of Yudhishtira. Although it is Draupadi's immediate plight which brings out the conflicting arguments and exposes problems of short-term distress arising from Yudhishtira's rigid adherence to an undefined Dharma. Moreover the entire courtroom filled with people of great knowledge and wisdom, remain silent. Vidura declares that the question of whether an action is Dharmic or not arises in part because of the difficulty in understanding which notion of Dharma is being brought into play at that point. So we can decide with no certainty whether they refer to a multiplicity of Dharma (many meanings of Dharma) or whether they refer to individual Dharma (one universal meaning of Dharma) comprising one much larger whole called Dharma (ibid, 68).

Mahabharata does not follow one singular or unitary meaning of Dharma as life itself. What is shown through different characters in different situations is that life is complex and this complexity pervades everything. Dharma is a set of obligations to which one is born into. If one desires to live in the world, one has no choice but to acknowledge these obligations. Yudhishtira does not argue for Dharma always, he simply asserts it; repudiating any doubt of it, claiming that studying the Veda and a focus on Dharma makes a person venerable.

The alternative to Dharma is individual whim, which for him is far too arbitrary. Through him Mahabharata is trying to tell when actions lose rationale and become mere obligation. But it is important to understand his viewpoint. His statement that, 'I act because I must' has a deeper meaning. He does not follow Dharma because of any hope of reward that might come. He acts from a sense of what he has to do as a standard of conduct, because society needs standards. While at the individual's level moral rules may well be inviolate injunctions that a person must follow unquestioningly, at society's level they are justified by social utility. However, Bailey (2005) argues that most characters seem comfortable standing within their own Svadharma, unable to relate it to the larger whole of which each Svadharma is a part. The epic always wants to impress upon us that only a few people are capable of understanding Dharma as comprising the larger whole of the individual Dharmas.

I believe that all human beings are vulnerable to the looming 'Kala', as Barbara Stoller Miller points out in her introduction to Bhagvad Gita, "Time cooks all beings" (Miller 1986: 3). However, human initiative matters even though there is much beyond one's control. Relativity as the ultimate condition of life must never paralyze understanding and decision making. The utmost good of all is in what sustains, enhances, ennobles, unites, creates happiness and nurtures, is just and fair, without oppressing, degrading or uprooting anyone, and which secures for everyone freedom from fear.

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## Varna Vyavastha and Social Identity: Varnashrama dharma in Mahabharata

“All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”- John Dalberg Acton<sup>1</sup>

### What is social identity?

Every human being lives on the premise of who they are, which is derived from their identification or allegiance to a particular group. It comes from the basic need to ‘belong’ to some category which defines and gives meanings to their actions. In a society, social relationships are based on social interactions, which is basically a sum of how we perceive and make sense of each other. This is fundamental to all social interactions and to the construction of every society and culture. ‘Social identity’, then refers to that part of an individual’s consciousness which one derives from being the member of a particular group. It is different from personal identity (although not mutually exclusive), which is based on personal characteristics and individual relationships.

Each one of us belongs to a number of such groups, which sometimes coincide, sometimes contradict, but play the most important role in the formulation of an individual’s identity. By birth we become the part of many groups, like family, caste (Varna, Jati and race all put together), gender, and class, etc. As we grow up, there are many more that we seek membership to and become a part of. We also often tend to make comparisons with the out-group (the in-group being the membership group). For long, Anthropologists like Barth (1969) and Cohen (1986) have also tried to examine the cultural expressions of identity, its meanings, and how it is maintained at group boundaries. Social Psychologists like Tajfel (1981), have also identified social identity as a powerful ingredient in the development of in-group bias (like Brahmans towards Brahmans) and inter-group conflict (like between Brahmans and Kshatriyas).

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<sup>1</sup> John Dalberg Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 364

Eventually, because of intergroup power struggles, it forms a hierarchical structure in the society, creating inequality and injustice. Most importantly, all these categories of social organization influence the conception of our 'self' which then influences our actions. But the multiple categories often give rise to a complex 'self' which is guided by a number of factors, both macro and micro. Tajfel (1981) placed key emphasis on the psychological motivations that leads this 'self' to endorse or disavow an existing group membership. Thus, these cognitive underpinnings of social identity affect the portrayal of 'self'. It also decides its limitations and boundaries and correctness of action, etc.

It is important to understand how the various social categories contradict each other and bring about a hierarchy in society? How does the society negotiate the many identities formed in these categories? How does the society deal with the many inequalities that perpetrate ultimately because of the hierarchy? These are some of the questions that I have tried to answer in this chapter. In Mahabharata, where we have explained every category, through the concept of Dharma, I would try to explain the social identity too, through the episteme of Dharma. Dharma as we had understood is the most essential component that guides the relationship between an individual and society. It foregrounds the conditions in which this relationship can be harmonious and mutually inclusive.

This chapter will focus on the identity crisis due to the complex social arrangement in Indian society, called 'Varna Vyavastha'. The two most complicated concepts meet and give rise to tumultuous situations in Mahabharata; one is 'Dharma' which in itself is multivalent as we have seen in the first chapter, and second is 'Varna Vyavastha' which was primarily a fourfold division of society, but became multifold by the time of Mahabharata.

Dharma is needed to guide social action and to create a perfectly desirable and moral society. However, Mahabharata shows how this 'ideal' world is not possible primarily due to three reasons, one, human beings are innately prone to Adharma<sup>2</sup>; two, Dharma

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<sup>2</sup> Here 'Adharma' means all actions undesirable, unacceptable, unlawful, and against Dharma. What I mean here is that all human beings are innately prone to deviate from the correct path, to bring maximum benefit to self. In this deviation, they often hurt the Dharma that is prescribed. This is why they need a mechanism

has so many meanings that it would be difficult to choose one over the other in life situations and this vagueness gives rise to errors; three, the cosmic time and space will consume all beings. So every human's destiny is prewritten and humans are mere cogs in the wheel. So, amidst all these factors, how is the social identity of an individual supposed to express? Karna, Eklavya and Vidura, are some of the many characters in Mahabharata, who deal with existential situations fraught with multiple Dharmas. All their life they jostle with the question of identity and social action, because they belong to the lowest of the hierarchy in the Varna Vyavastha. The membership to their 'Varna' shapes their idea of who they are, what they can achieve, what is expected and what is accepted from them. Here, I would like to discuss the difference between the 'personal identity' and 'social identity' that I mentioned before. Although, their social identity as a part of their Varna, decides their Varnashramadharma, their personal identity creates moments of conflict for them. The concept of Varnashramadharma has already been dealt with in the first chapter, so here I would use it as a base to explain the crisis of social identity in the characters mentioned above.

#### **'Vasana' in Varnashramadharma**

I would use the concept of 'Vasana' employed by Bharat Jhunjhunwala<sup>3</sup> to explain this complex situation in hand, which would make us understand, how both the identities coalesced in the original concept of 'Varna Vyavastha', but got differentiated eventually. It is to understand how a social organization which was created to help individuals fulfill their innate desires and qualities gradually grew into a malign hierarchical social institution. The fourfold categorization that has been discussed in Mahabharata and stated before is- Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. I have discussed in the preceding chapter how Mahabharata proposes a 'functional' view of the Varna Vyavastha. Each

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of checks and controls which will bring about order in the society, which would otherwise become anarchical. So 'dharma' is necessary for every society to maintain social order.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on this concept see his work Bharat Jhunjhunwala, *Varna Vyavastha: Governance Through Caste System* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1999)

Varna has inherent qualities, which makes them better at a certain skill. 'Vasana'<sup>4</sup> is that dominant inherent desire which determines each Varna and distinguishes it from the other. "The Vasana have been classified in four categories- bhoga (physical pleasures), vitta (wealth), satta (power), and swadhyaya (self-knowledge). These desires determine the varna of the individual – Sudra, Vaishya, Kshatriya and Brahmin respectively" (Jhunjhunwala 1999: 30). So, certain occupations were considered apt for the realization of those Vasanas.

It was based on the inherent functional quality of each individual, that he was suitable for the requisite Varna. Thus the idea of differential norms at the heart of the system of Varnaashramadharma (and so at odds with views of equality before law) is but the logical expression of the fact that men have different natures and abilities, and their social duties correspond to this fact. This is seen, for example, in the Hindu way of expressing occupational category; one does not say,

"He is a carpenter", but rather, "He is for carpentering". The social role, with its accompanying status, is an expression of what one is. To go against or to neglect one's dharma is never merely to disregard the teachings of one's forefathers or to cease doing the things the way the group specifies, it is to go against the grain of one's nature. Further, since the universe is a vast congeries or a symphony of dharmas, this is to be out of step with the universe and invite disaster. The idea of dharma unites a social and cosmic reference" (Creel 1972: 156).

It was understood that a child born to the parents practicing a certain occupation would likely to have the 'Vasana' of his parents, and thus, also inherit the requisite skills for the same. However, the horizontal movement of an individual from one occupation was allowed but discouraged. This was done in spirit to maintain a kind of predictable social order. Even Mahabharata strongly advocates that it is the innate quality of a person that determines his Varna, not birth. If a Brahmana (who is born Brahmana) displays the qualities of a Shudra, then he is a Shudra and vice versa. So they are not rigid and static qualities. In fact, they are fluid and very amenable to change.

If we understand this in terms of social identity too, it would be easier for an individual to identify himself with a particular group that his family is already known to and accepts.

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<sup>4</sup> "The term 'vasana' is used in the sense of all desires, including that of self knowledge. It does not have any negative connotations such as those of irresistible sex desire as the term has come to denote. It is used here in a value free technical sense." (ibid, p 30)

Moreover, it creates a kind of institutionalized check on occupation- based groups upon one another, which was in spirit a potentially positive idea. However, in the condition when the individual's desire and quality contradicts with that of his expected Vasana, there is a moment of tension. It was also believed that an individual would be best suited to his Vasana, and if he encounters another one, it would be a moment of dilemma for him. "That the children inherit the vasana of their parents is a crucial assumption on which Varna Vyavastha stood. If this assumption did not hold, as it often does not today, then the system of equivalence of vasana-occupation or varna-jati fails" (Jhunjhunwala 1999: 33). We see these dilemma moments throughout Mahabharata displayed through various characters, be it Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Karna, Eklavya, etc.

This dilemma becomes their predicament. But as rigidity crept into the system, as also seen in Mahabharata in a few cases, it turned out to be a birth-based degenerate social institution. Jhunjhunwala believes that the "situation continuously degenerated and regenerated at various points of time. In degenerate periods, all occupations not only acquired lower Vasana but also permitted their members to pursue them" (ibid, 33). This resulted in mixing of Varnas and springing of thousands of 'Jatis'. As the society changed and developed complexity, the groups in the higher rung of that period appropriated the power and exploited the poor in the name of Varna Vyavastha. So a system of social integration turned upside down to become a divisive system of social disintegration.

Here I would come back to concept of Dharma. Each Varna was prescribed a Dharma as a part of one's Varnashramadharma, which was also in sync with their Vasana. So the Dharma of a Brahmana with the inclination to 'Swadhyaya' (knowledge), was to impart knowledge, Kshatriya with 'Satta' (power) Vasana became the guardians of people by becoming kings and providing security to people, Vaishya with 'Vitta' (wealth) Vasana, became the creators of wealth for society, and Shudras got to serve the people to attain their 'Bhoga' (physical pleasures) Vasana. This system not only decided what and how they would do but also the limitations of their acts. It would ensure the proper conduct of each individual in their respective Varnashramadharma. With the motive of social balance it was, "a social arrangement whereby the four Varna can co-exist, each

positively pursuing his own Vasana and assisting others in pursuing theirs. This is the central objective of Varna Vyavastha” (ibid, 44-45).

This Varnashramadharma co-existed with the many other meanings of Dharma as discussed previously like, Svadharma, Sadharna Dharma, Pravritti Dharma, Nivritti Dharma, Apaddharma, etc. This would create conflicting situations at times which would inhibit an individual’s natural Vasana to accommodate his Varnashramadharma, or vice versa. While Eklavya and Karna gave up their natural Vasana (Eklavya more than Karna) to avoid the conflict, Yudhishtira had to give up his natural Vasana to be true to his Varnashramadharma. Thus, all these characters went through periods of turmoil being unable to carve out a perfect social identity.

Since Mahabharata acknowledges the existence of more than thousands of Jatis by then, it tells us how complex the society already was. It also reflected on how the hierarchization had created power struggle between the Varnas, so much so that the lowest of the order, Shudras came to be totally exploited and alienated while the upper two Varnas, Brahmanas and Kshtariyas fought for supremacy. The result was the continuous suppression of the lower Varna by the higher Varna, where every important and powerful position and skill was appropriated by them.

### **Eklavya- the devoted Nisadha**

One of the most poignant yet disturbing stories of Mahabharata, which is vividly remembered even today in many contexts, is that of Ekalavya. In his character, we find the portrayal of many roles, albeit all true to his Dharma. His Varna makes him a peculiar case study for the understanding of Varna Vyavastha and the notion of social justice in the Indian Society. His discipline, devotion and reverence for his ‘Guru’<sup>5</sup>, makes him the prototype of a perfect devout disciple. Ekalavya belongs to the ‘Nisadha’ group, which is

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<sup>5</sup> I have deliberately used the term ‘guru’ instead of a teacher, because the concept of a guru does not have an exact translation in English. Moreover, the ‘teacher’ would be a semantic injustice to the venerated concept of ‘guru’ in Indian thought. While teacher denotes a person qualified in a particular subject or a skill who imparts knowledge; a ‘guru’ is not only a subject expert, but also a mentor, a guide, who imparts both physical and metaphysical and spiritual knowledge.

one of the lowest Varnas in the society. He intends to learn archery from the best Guru Dronacharya (the guru of Kauravas and Pandavas), but is denied, because of his Varna. It was clear that in the system of Varna Vyavastha the lower Varnas were denied the study of Veda, and weaponry etc, which were reserved for the upper two Varnas (Brahmana and Kshatriya). It was even more unacceptable to be on par with the Kauravas and the Pandavas who were of the royal Kshatriya family.

Ekalavya, meanwhile, determined to take only Dronacharya as his 'Guru' and makes a clay figure of him in the forest and practices his art with due sincerity and deference. His true devotion makes him the best archer in the world; even surpassing Arjuna who was until then deemed the best. One day his skill is displayed to the Pandavas, and surprises them. Pandava's barking dog is shot at with arrows in the mouth in a way that it doesn't hurt him, but stops his barking. Dronacharya had promised Arjuna that he would teach him everything so that none is ever superior to him. But on seeing Ekalavya's feat, they are left spellbound. On inquiring they get to know that Dronacharya is his Guru too, and this makes Arjuna fill with jealousy. Dronacharya, however, is unaware of his devoted pupil, and meets him on being informed of this skill. To keep his promise to Arjuna, Dronacharya demands his 'Guru dakshina' (fee) from Ekalavya. He cleverly asks him his thumb, so he can never shoot again. Unrelenting, Ekalavya gives his Guru his fee, and Arjuna's supremacy is restored.

For a long time this episode has been etched in the history of Indian society as a cruel episode of social injustice, which was perpetrated ages ago and continues even now in the name of Caste System. It could be understood in many ways. Prima facie, it looks as just another act of social oppression by a person of the higher Varna and position, which will be the discussed ahead. But scholars have understood and interpreted in various ways. One of the possible understandings of the events by Simon Brodbeck<sup>6</sup> makes it a part of the larger scheme of events. There is also a parallel drawn with Karna, who is also one of

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<sup>6</sup> For a lengthy discussion on the eventful introduction of Ekalavya in the Mahabharata see, Simon Brodbeck, "Ekalavya and Mahabharata," *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 10.1 (2006), 1-34

the recipients of this oppressive Varna Vyavastha. Brodbeck (2006) uses the structure of the text to understand the various linked and mirrored events.

It starts with the loop of promises that have to be kept in the series of events. Drona (Dronacharya) is first introduced as Drupada's childhood friend, who promised to share everything with Drona. But as they grow up, Drupada becomes a powerful and rich king, while Drona is just a poor fellow, who wishes to reclaim his friend's promise to him. Drupada, not only denies his promise but also insults him for being a pauper and unworthy of his friendship. This, in turn, leads to Drona performing an extraordinary feat to get noticed by the royal Kauravas and Pandavas, and is anointed the official guru for them by Bhishma. He promises Drupada and himself to avenge his insult. He teaches Arjuna to be the best and uses him to defeat Drupada and take half of his kingdom. In turn, he promises Arjuna that none will ever be superior to him and to keep his promise he asks Ekalavya his thumb. This is the first loop of promises that Brodbeck (2006) uses to understand the act of cutting Ekalavya's thumb. From Ekalavya's point, he himself promises anything his guru asks for, so if he does not cut his thumb, he will become a liar and a dishonest pupil. So the string of events come a full circle of promises to be kept.

However, he later turns to understanding more important and more intricate loops in the story which act on many levels. It also urges us to understand the complication of the Varna Vyavastha and I will focus my attention on this now. If we use the above discussed concept of 'Vasana' here to justify the Varna Vyavastha, then it might be commented that being born in a 'Nisadha' tribe, Ekalavya is bound to inherit the features of the society. 'Nisadha' was primarily a tribal and sort of barbaric group, which was distinct from the civilized royal society and was marked by a moral superiority of the latter over the former (Brodbeck 2006: 3). This does not encourage the intermixing of these two groups, lest it creates an imbalance in the social order. However, I do not agree with this proposition entirely. The concept of 'Vasana' could be used initially when such social arrangement was created to give maximum benefit to an individual and which would ensure social harmony in society. But, as society grew complex and Mahabharata gives due evidence to this fact that it did, this concept would become problematic.



Allocating of 'Vasana' to a child is presumptuous. While, the child is bound to grow in close ideological supervision of his family, so much so that the structure becomes more important than the agency; it is indeed important to understand the fact that every human being is inherently born with different qualities and s/he also encounters a lot of other factors when s/he grows up which either enhance or limit her/his thinking. So, a person might be assumed to born with a certain 'Vasana' but as s/he grows, the 'Vasana' evolves and changes. But the membership to a certain Varna, limits his choices of avocations, which in turn creates the problem of social identity.

This structural and moral superiority of the higher Varnas, to which the Pandavas and the Guru belong, is important. While Ekalavya is much superior to the Pandavas in skill, he must forego his skill to make balance of heroism towards the Pandavas only. It is noticeable, that this balance is time and again shifted to the Pandavas (especially Arjuna) through an external agency. After they complete their education at the Gurukul (Residential School) of Drona, a display of their skill is arranged. The two equals in fighting clubs, Duryodhana and Bhima, are made to stop by Drona himself, so that his favorite pupil, Arjuna can display his extraordinary skills. Then, Karna, who can surpass Arjuna, is stopped on the grounds of his Varna again. Even in the 'Swayamvara'<sup>7</sup>, Karna is debased on account of him being a 'Suta's' son, even though he proves his mettle, and Arjuna wins again. So, while Mahabharata propagates the theory of a non-rigid, non-hierarchical Varna Vyavastha, in practice it strays too often.

Drona displays a conflict of roles too. While he is a guru, his Dharma is to impart knowledge equally to one and all. But, there is a twin reason to his acts. It is not only his duty to be loyal to his keepers, i.e. the Kuru Kingdom, but also his need. Similarly, to avenge the insult met out to him by Drupada, he needs resources, both human and material. He gets both in the Kuru Kingdom. What is intriguing though, is that while he fails to perform his Dharma to impart knowledge without any prejudice, his pupil (Ekalavya) does not fail to perform his. Moreover, as a Guru his foremost Dharma is to guide his disciples. Arjuna is deeply jealous at many places. He is not only extremely

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<sup>7</sup> Swayamvara refers to a kind of marriage practice in ancient India where a girl of marriageable age, would choose a husband from a list of suitors. 'Swayam' means 'self' and vara means 'bride- groom'.

jealous of Ekalavya when he gets to know he was under the tutelage of Dronacharya, but also gets jealous of Ashwatthama (Drona's son), thinking that he would teach him the best as he is his son.

Just to ensure the above discussed personal reasons, Drona does not correct Arjuna on his mistake, while commits another by fulfilling Arjuna's desire, and restoring his supremacy at all times. It is like a child wanting a candy, and rather than telling him he is unworthy of it, he is bought one every time he demands one. Moreover, Arjuna is neither a kid, nor expected to behave in such manner owing to his good upbringing. It is not understandable why the Mahabharata chooses to reinstate the false, inflated ego of Arjuna against all odds. But, if we consider that there is a larger Karmic cosmic reason for each of their acts, then all discussion becomes not only futile but also problematic, as often the teleological notion of Karma is assumed to be. My concern with the issues is with the deontological ethics of the actions here, which would emphasize on a person's Dharma or duty to be responsible for it. The understanding of actions on the basis of a larger, unseen destiny is largely inconsequential in nature. Mahabharata's stance is interesting as it does focus on the following of Dharma throughout. But it is indeed, the subtle nature of Dharma that tricks the individual in making choices which they make.

Ekalavya's merit is surpassed by Arjuna's position. He thus, becomes the representative of the people whose chances are foregone for the higher Varna people. In a system of Varna Vyavastha, Mahabharata explained, every individual had equal opportunity to everything. Here, let us understand the logic of Varna Vyavastha. We are told that Ekalavya belongs to the 'Nisadha' tribe, whose society functions on different principles of existence. They don't follow any of the austere disciplined lifestyle. Moreover, their barbaric ways allows them to kill anything, to eat anything, etc. This does not allow them to learn the science of weaponry and other Vedas, which requires strict moral and behavioral purity. Basically their social system differs from the one that has produced the concept of Varna Vyavastha and thus the upper Varnas hegemonized the value system. But the original concept does not in any way denote any moral superiority of the latter on the former.

Ekalavya's detailed life has not been discussed in Mahabharata, so we are unaware of his code of conduct before he comes into picture. However, if we use his behavior towards his Guru Drona, his determination to learn, and his unselfish act of cutting his thumb at the desire of his Guru, as a precedent to his general behavior, then the analysis may differ. Mahabharata suggests that only the conduct of person makes him worthy of a Varna, even though he may be born into one. This takes us to the other dimension of this story, which is the relationship between a 'Guru' and a 'Shishya' (disciple). Even though he belongs to a specific Varna, and has not been brought up in the strict observance of the Kshatriya norms, this should not come in the way of his merit and his perfect conduct. Being a guru, Drona's Dharma is to accept him and teach him all skills. Even though he denies him all this, asking Ekalavya's thumb is a heinous act, and perhaps for this reason Drona's end in Mahabharata is mediated through one of his disciples by a heinous trick. It is a sort of denouement for Drona.

#### **Karna- The case of mistaken identity**

While Ekalavya's story is "celebrated by 'dalits', members of communities formerly known (to others) as 'untouchable', by whom he is revered as a martyred forefather" (ibid, 2), Karna's story exemplifies their struggle at every point of life. If we consider the most important junctures in a person's life, Karna is the archetypal struggler. Since he is born to Kunti before marriage, his birth is a curse for all, and therefore kept as a "secret of Gods" (ibid, 16). He is then saved and nurtured by a Suta and his wife, and thus grows up to be of a lower Varna; though his personality, conduct and gold armor defy his lower Varna status. Further, for his education he also wishes the tutelage of Drona, but is denied on the same grounds as Ekalavya. Instead, he goes disguised as a Brahmana to Parashurama, since he only teaches Brahmanas. He teaches him everything and makes him the best warrior. However, on learning his true identity, he curses Karna. His third curse comes from a Brahmana, whose cow he kills in one of his expeditions. His fourth curse comes from mother Earth, when he tries to save a child, but hurts her.

In trying to show his skill as superior to Arjuna, while they are displaying their newly learnt skills at the Ashrama of Drona, he is derided for his low birth. However,

anticipating a potential strong ally, Duryodhana offers him a kingdom and anoints him the king, thus making him a Kshatriya and legitimate to fight Arjuna. Here, fate helps Arjuna, and the duel is avoided. Later, at the crucial point of marriage, he is again insulted by Draupadi on account of his lower Varna. One of the most crucial ethical dilemmas that he faces is when he is told of his true parentage and Varna by both human and divine agency (Kunti and Krishna). Undeterred, he follows his dharma towards his 'Suta' parents, and Duryodhana, who gave him unconditional love and support. Further, like Ekalavya had to mutilate himself to reinstate Arjuna's supremacy, Karna also mutilates himself by cutting off the armor from his body, on being asked by Lord Indra. In the war, all the curses upon Karna turn out to be true and he dies a tragic death.

While, we are introduced to only a small part of Ekalavya's life in Mahabharata, Karna's whole life from birth to death is compelling. His whole story is also a potent example of hierarchical Varna Vyavastha, the injustices of which always put Karna in a crisis of social identity. We are often reminded of the brilliant code of conduct of these low Varna characters, throughout Mahabharata. Even though Karna does not strictly come under the category of a 'Suta', but if it is assumed that the socialization of Karna is thoroughly in a lower Varna atmosphere, he also displays much humility (though he often falters because of his inflated ego).

Other characters like Ekalavya, Vidura and his mother, Samjaya (Dhritarashtra's charioteer) and even the Fowler who guides the Brahmana, are all of low births, but display extraordinary conduct. While their counterparts of the higher Varna often stray from their paths of morality. This is what Mahabharata preaches often, that the justification of one's Varna is one's behavior, and these individuals of lower Varna often display behavior of a true Brahmana or a Kshatriya.

Here, when we are studying the case of Karna, some things have to be specified. Though, he makes a befitting example of a quintessential tragic figure, he displays immense prowess in warfare, and his generosity is humbling. The only thing that contradicts his character is his overbearing pride which stems from his insecurity resulting from an identity crisis. Karna's actions throughout the epic are the best example of when the

psyche of a person who is torn with meaningless and anxiety over his position meets the rigid structure of society. Aditya Adarkar uses Paul Tillich's concept of 'the Anxiety of Meaninglessness' to understand Karna's position. Taking an existentialist perspective, he defines Karna's status anxiety with that of emptiness and meaninglessness (Adarkar 2005: 120-21). While Karna grows up to a 'Sutaputra', a ridiculing epithet that attaches to him at every point of his life, he displays the 'Vasana' or 'Svabhava' of a Kshatriya. It is not only through his skill in warfare, but also his display of mental strength and conduct that makes him worthy of a Kshatriya. It is this strength that makes Parashurama suspicious of him being a Kshatriya. His bright visage, lit with gold earrings and armor is what makes Duryodhana comment, "How could a doe give birth to a tiger that shines like a sun" (Badrinath 2007: 154). His skill in warfare is also shown and appreciated by one and all, till his identity becomes an impediment for him to realize his true potential. Be it shooting the eye of the bird, or surpassing Arjuna in the display of skills in front of everyone, or shooting the fish's eye for Draupadi, he is no less than the celebrated and legitimate son of Kunti, Arjuna. Thus, we are constantly assured of Karna's Kshatriya 'Svabhava' (natural tendency).

Karna faces three very important tests of mental strength too, which he passes by sticking to his Dharma. It is known to the divine that Pandavas, with Arjuna at the helm of affairs can never win the war with Karna as their opponent. The first move to reduce his strength is to separate his immortal gold armor and earrings from his bosom. This is done by Arjuna's father, Indra, who disguised as a Brahmana approaches Karna when he is praying. Karna's generosity is well known by both the human and divine. So, Karna, even knowing Indra through his disguise, cuts off his armor and earrings and gives it to Indra. To acknowledge his Dharmic act, even the Gods shower flowers on him, and Indra, pleased by his selfless deed presents him with a fine weapon. He passes the first test, which is truly rewarded by all. In another try, Krishna comes to meet him before war, and reveals his true identity to him. However, Karna chooses to follow his conscience rather than be disloyal. He chooses to be loyal to those human beings (his parents and Duryodhana) who have, without any coercion, bestowed kindness upon him.

This is despite the fact he knows they are not his biological parents and that Duryodhana's side will lose.

Karna even makes a request to Krishna, which shows he is aware of the truth, but his loyalty will not allow him to switch sides. He asks Krishna to keep his identity a secret from all, since if it was disclosed, the 'law-spirited Yudhishtira' would give everything to him, and he in turn would give it to Duryodhana, who is not fit to rule the kingdom. Aditya Adarkar says that, "Krisha's offer to Karna is not really a negotiation to stop the war. Instead, it is a test, and a test that Karna passes" (Adarkar 2005: 120). Further, even Kunti asks him the same, corroborated by his father, Surya (Sun God), but he politely declines her too.

His predicament brings us again to the dilemma between human initiative and destiny. The war is fixed to mark the end of the Dwapara Yuga and the beginning of Kali Yuga<sup>8</sup>, the winning side is fixed, and everything else is also predestined. Although, throughout the poem, we are made aware of his prowess and greatness; yet right from the start of Mahabharata we are repeatedly told of how Karna is soon to die. In the organization of the narrative there is never any prospect of his continuing life. This forecast is intrinsic to the history of Karna. "But in Karna's story, we find a hero who seems to be looking for a meaning that can be generated by and from human choice. That is to say, meaning that does not come from a high, but a humanistic, existential meaning; a meaning that derives its affective weight from human choices made freely and thus genuinely" (ibid, 122).

The dilemma that Karna faces brings us to more important question about Dharma. How is Dharma to be followed when the Varna Vyavastha, a social arrangement to maximize the benefit of all human beings, turns upside down and becomes impediment at every stage of life? How is Dharma to be followed when everything is tricked or connived? How is Dharma to be followed if truth is not supreme? How can an individual be courageous in front of a world in which Dharma seems to have collapsed? After all, Dharma is in many ways what seems to give the world, especially the world of human

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<sup>8</sup> In Hindu Philosophy, there are four cyclical epochs or 'Yugas' which are marked by a special characteristic. They are Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga and Kali Yuga. Mahabharata war was fought at the end of Dwapara Yuga and marked the beginning of Kali Yuga.

actions, meaning. If Dharma is taken away or proven ambiguous, what are humans left with? Alternatively, if Dharma is merely an individual's conscience, then how can it be universal and transcendent (ibid, 124)?

Moreover, as emphasized earlier, the Mahabharata jostles between the consequentialist ethics and deontological ethics in the entire text. Amartya Sen characterizes the Bhagvad Gita as a debate between a consequentialist ethics (championed by Arjuna) and a deontological ethics (championed by Krishna's duty argument). But these positions are exactly reversed in the Karna scene: Here Krishna presents a consequentialist ethics, (Karna! Think of the consequences of becoming a Pandava), while Karna stands firm on a deontological ethics of faith. Because of the choice he makes, and many such instances, Mahabharata promotes a dual logic. "It raises complex scenarios that evoke insights similar to those found in contemporary psychological and social analyses of moral life" (Sen 2000: 7-8).

This status anxiety also shows another side of his character. It often makes him boastful and self-promoting, and also disrespectful. This is often stated as one of the reasons for his downfall. Bhishma chides him, "Although Karna always boasts, saying 'I shall slay the Pandavas', he doesn't possess even a small part of the Pandavas' great soul" (Badrinath 2007: 156). When he enters the courtyard, where Arjuna is displaying his skill, he approaches with an inflated ego, not requesting, but in a sort of commanding voice, "Partha (Arjuna)! Whatever you have done, I shall do better" (ibid, 153).

It is to be realized here that knowledge should bring humility, not arrogance. This arrogance in Karna's nature is ignoble. This coarse behavior is not witnessed in even Ekalavya who is much more secured about his identity. Karna is also the one who incites the disrobing of Draupadi after the Pandavas lose the dice match. His intrusion is not only unwanted, but also highly despicable. While he is not a legitimate person to speak in the hall, when the parties in question are cousins to each other, and the other superior people are present. Even if he had a right to speak, commanding to disrobe Draupadi was disrespectful. While some think that it is a revenge for when Draupadi called him a 'Sutaputra' (son of a Suta) and refused to take him as her husband, it is not true. "The

rejection by Draupadi was not included in the Critical Edition of the epic because according to the editor, V. S. Sukthankar, it is from a 'late and inferior or conflated manuscripts" (ibid, 373).

If these aspects of his character are considered, they could support his downfall. His characteristic weakness can be seen again and again in the story. "To be rash was a Kshatriya characteristic, but the unwritten rule that one must never be small-minded was broken often by Karna. This failure was due to the peculiar turn his life had taken. He had acquired the skills of the Kshatriyas but could not master their value-frame" (Karve 2008: 126). This point emphasizes the importance of socialization in a particular Varna, which makes individuals of different Varna, different from each other.

Iravati Karve digs deep into Karna's psyche, and astutely observes that even though he had the friendship of Duryodhana, a kingdom to boast of and martial prowess, in reality he was never taken as a kshatriya. His friendship with Duryodhana never brought him a higher social rank nor did it enable him to reach equality with the Kshatriyas. In spite of the declaration of friendship, Duryodhana never offered a girl from the Kaurava family as a bride to Karna. As Karna himself said in Udyogaparva, not only he but his children also had married into Suta families. The very circumstances which led to this friendship were such that a relationship of equality could never be established. Karna always remained a trusted and close retainer (ibid, 128). In fact, Duryodhana knew that the only thing that could ensure his victory was to have a warrior who could surpass Arjuna, the best warrior in the world, after Karna.

Moreover, never in his entire life Karna was a representative of the Suta Jati he belonged to. He was not even fighting on the behalf of a Suta class nor was he fighting for the idea that Kshatriyahood should be awarded to one who is a valiant warrior. This was not a class war; he was struggling on behalf of his own individual self. Nonetheless, we need to understand the social organization called Varna Vyavastha, to complete the analysis of Karna's life.

"Karna has power, but he lacks status, much like Achilles. He dramatizes, metaphorically, the vivid competition that exists in classical Indian society between the Brahmin, who has status,



and the kshatriya, who hold power. It is no coincidence that his ultimate destruction comes about through the curses of two Brahmins and that when Indra receives the earrings from Karna – a crucial moment in Karna’s downfall – he is disguised as a Brahmin. The life of Karna, thus, dramatizes contention between the two varnas” (McGrath 2004: 4).

There has been a lot discussed about the tension between the two upper Varnas displayed in the Mahabharata. However, I will focus here on the structural rigidity and injustices that arose from this malady. There is a need to discuss the root cause of Karna’s identity crisis, which stemmed from the inequalities amongst the four Varnas, and the numerous Jatis that arose with time. It overstepped the objective of the Varna Vyavastha to improve social integration, and promoted social disintegration instead. The premise to be discussed here is how Varna came to occupy such an integral part of one’s identity that it refused to see basic social justice. It would be important to make distinction between the conceptualized Varna Vyavastha, and the prevalent Jati Vyavastha which in its current form is known as the Caste System of India.

To introduce modern debate on Caste System to understand the Varna Vyavastha then would be incorrect. The modern idea of ‘social equality’ is contrary to the idea of Varna Vyavastha which was based on the concept of ‘social equity’. The idea of Varna Vyavastha was to encourage the individual’s innate capacity or tendency so that he could perform best in the vocation that suits one’s temperament. It was designed with a utilitarian perspective, which changed not only in form and but also in meaning with time.

As we have seen, the power struggles resulting from the diversification of this Vyavastha led to its degeneration into a system which fixed the occupation of the person on his birth, so much so that it can never be changed. If there was any attempt to change it, it was challenged by the upper Varnas, who were threatened to lose their power and positions to the lower Varnas. This led to further solidification of identities with Jatis and deepened the crisis. It even led to concepts like ‘untouchability’ which grew into such a menace in the Indian society that a constitutional reform and stringent measures were required to stop its practice.

Every human being is born with equal rights is the basic premise of social justice. This is also what is theoretically propagated in Mahabharata, when Bharadwaja asks Rishi Bhrigu that how people can be different when they have same basic biological qualities. In a utopian world, a classless society can be envisioned, but a real world is always inspired by what Nietzsche calls 'will to power'<sup>9</sup>. Whenever any structural arrangement is created in a society there is always a threat of potential hierarchy. As a part of social evolution, whichever class gets to appropriate power, even at the expense of others, it does so and results in creating a hierarchy. It is difficult to let go of the chance to appropriate power. This is only the most natural of characteristics of every individual and society. The power resides in the position and status, which leads to corruption. This is what happened in the Indian Varna Vyavastha, where the upper two Varnas struggled for power, at the expense of the lower Varnas, and that in turn led to the emergence of inequalities in Varna Vyavastha. It is unknown for how long could the originally conceptualized Varna Vyavastha retain its shape in letter and spirit. But as we understand events in Mahabharata, we know that the distortion had begun already.

The idea to promote natural instincts should not have been hindered by the structural arrangement as in Karna and Ekalavya's case. Mahabharata's utilitarianism focused on the belief and assumption that cooperation is pursued for the purpose of securing mutual advantage, but as Martha Nussbaum notices that in the ideal world it was not possible. In an arrangement like Varna Vyavastha, there was a great difficulty in dealing with issues of basic justice and substantial freedom because in that situation there were great asymmetries of power between the Varnas.

That a person should be able to achieve a position by merit and not by birth alone becomes important here. Yet, definition of merit is not absolute or fixed. It depends on the way the society defines it, and we have to understand how the merit was defined in the original conception of Varna Vyavastha. In today's world, the option of affirmative action has come to equalize the system, but the idea of common good cannot be borrowed from any western category. It is forced Indians to think about 'their' idea of common

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<sup>9</sup> In the much debated work by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968)

good. For the philosopher John Rawls, a good action is related in some way in uplifting the worst off in a society. While, for Amartya Sen, it would lessen inequality, by providing everyone equal opportunities. The key point here is that there is no natural order of merit that is independent of one's value system (Nussbaum 2006).

Karna's character represents the existentialist identity of every person trapped in the vicious structure of the Varna Vyavastha. "His life, alienated from its own sources, participating in duty yet longing for home and identity, seeking a future but destroyed by the casual violence of the present, rewrites the history of oppression, displacement and dispossession" (Tripathi 2006: 11). His whole life epitomizes the struggle against the socially constructed self at every stage. The whole Mahabharata in the end becomes just a struggle to understand the meaning of Dharma in one's life. When Karna is killed, as a result of the curses on him, he pleads again for Dharma. But, Krishna is quick to remind him of his many Adharmic acts, like inciting to disrobe Draupadi, killing Abhimanyu, etc. However, his ill-understood and wronged life is witnessed by everyone, including Yudhishthira, but only after his death.

He is one character who achieves posthumously what he wanted to achieve in his lifetime. Thus dies, "a wronged hero, wronged by teachers, brothers and mother, and more heroic than other wronged heroes" (Gandhi 1999: 4). Therefore it is of little surprise that Karna is writ large in the central Mahabharata trope of the great battle as the great sacrifice. His life reflects the Sadharana Dharma of truth, commitment, generosity and friendship. The Mahabharata is not content simply in pointing out the weaknesses of human beings. It criticizes the flaws of society and raises the question that whether a person's social position should be defined by birth or by some other criteria, such as accomplishment of some sort. Karna's identity crisis and Ekalavya's selflessness challenge the Varna Vyavastha of Indian Society.

It is important to understand that Mahabharata focused on the flaws of the Varna Vyavastha through these episodes of injustices. In spirit, of course, it always promoted the idea of an equitable social arrangement which would maximize human efforts according to everyone's specified vocation and specialization. Mahabharata was

concerned with dispelling the darkness that surrounded the Earth by the end of the Dwapara Yuga. This darkness was the degeneration of social institutions and misrepresentation of social systems. The task of Mahabharata was to present a thought, in the form of a treatise on Dharma which could guide people in the coming generations to engage in constructive rebuilding of the social institutions for which they were intended. It was a same kind of renaissance that was started in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century British rule India, where people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, etc envisioned and worked towards.

The Mahabharata was a breakthrough in the same way, centuries ago, to engage the common man with the Dharma of various social institutions. It broke the barrier that was created by the Brahmanical hegemony of the Vedas. This was represented by choosing the Suta class to carry forward the tradition and teachings of Mahabharata. Over the centuries, however, the disjunction between the true spirit of Mahabharata and the societal adaptation of it deepened. So, there is a need to revisit the inherent constructive social ideas and bridge this gap. A dedicated and consistent engagement with the thought could be one of the better ways to achieve the much needed social order in the caste torn Indian Society.

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### **Gender in Mahabharata: The subtle nature of Dharma**

“We have never heard of such an act (as this one of Draupadi), performed by any of the women noted in this world for their beauty. When the sons of both Pandu and Dhritarashtra were excited with wrath, Draupadi became unto the sons of Pandu as their salvation” (Sabhaparva; Ganguli 2003: 498).

When Mahabharata talks about Dharma in various social categories and situations in society, it also highlights a very primal and fundamental aspect of social life, and that is ‘Gender’. The human society comprises of males and females, and their interrelationship in various ways gives rise to the complex structure that we call society. Mahabharata has twofold importance in this respect; it not only plays a very significant role in the social construction of gender in the Indian Society, but also explains its role vis a vis the other social institutions. “The Mahabharata is one of the definitive cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since” (Brodbeck & Black 2007: 10-11). The epic not only discusses gender in terms of the social roles of men, women, other gendered identities, but also in terms of the artistic employment of symbols, tropes, and metaphors. However, they may or may not have direct connection to males and females and pre-existing masculinities and femininities outside the text.

There have been numerous studies done on particular characters of Mahabharata, but there aren’t many comprehensive works that deal with a) the social construction of gender in the Indian epics and their symbolic value on the Indian Society, b) ‘gender’ as a category in relation to the other social institutions. Mostly the works have focused on an either/or situation, of dealing either with masculinity or femininity in mutual exclusion. What I am attempting here is a mutually inclusive study so that either gender is not understood in a social vacuum. Neither is this chapter a tribute to the fashionable feminist movement nor does it celebrate masculinity. It is just trying to understand the Dharma of each gender in Mahabharata which has helped its social construction in the Indian

society. Dharma here deals not only with how does a particular gender should act, but also how does it become that gender to act in a particular manner. This is the primary question that I will try to focus on. But first it is important to understand the meaning of 'gender' in the current context.

### **What is gender?**

Although the use of the term 'gender' is quite old, but its contemporary connotations are quite new. It is often understood as a socially constructed identity as contrary to the 'sex' of a person which is the biological identity. Gender is determined by a set of characters, which vary from each society and culture. Some like Gayle Rubin believe in the difference between the biological category of 'sex' and the sociological category of 'gender', where she calls the 'sex/gender system' as the "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into a product of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied (Rubin 1996: 106).

Since the writings of the feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, the word gender has frequently been used in tandem with the word 'sex' in a similar oppositional relationship as that between 'culture' and 'nature', as in where something is naturally given and something is socially created. So 'gender' is what makes someone masculine or feminine rather being just a male or a female. Kate Millet has argued that gender distinctions not only pertain to different kinds of behavior for men and women, but also could be seen as cultural differences: "male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different" (Millet 1972: 31).

Many like Jacques Lacan (1977) focused more on the symbolic and linguistic implications of anatomical differences between the sexes associating masculinity with the symbol of 'phallus', rather than with the physical penis. For Lacan, masculinity is not a physical identity merely, but a cultural one too. Scholars like Michel Foucault (1979) in his seminal work 'The History of Sexuality', challenged the notion of sex as a biological fact, claiming that sex does not have an existence prior to its conceptualization in discourse. He concludes that sex is not easily reduced to a biological category and thus

should be viewed essentially as a social practice. Thus, both 'sex' and 'gender' for him are cultural categories which are constantly getting constructed. They are a process which each human being is going through; they are constantly defined and redefined and so performed and reperformed. As Judith Butler (1993) would suggest that these gender gets culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts. These stylized bodily acts, in their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential ontological core known as 'gender'.

Categorizing males and females into socially constructed roles creates binaries in which individuals constantly have to make choices to fall into either of them. Around the world, different communities interpret biological differences between men and women to create a set of social expectations that define the 'appropriateness' of their behavior. It is not only restricted to mere social behaviors, but also expands into political, religious, economic and even health behaviors. The functions of a grand epic like Mahabharata is accomplished by portraying specific patterns of behavior which are registered both consciously and unconsciously by the society till a corresponding situation arises in life. Recalling the divinized characters and the values of the story, people often recognize the pattern as it applies to their own predicament, thus enhancing their feeling of conscious mastery and expanding the borders of their observing ego.

However, there is no doubt that men and women are constructed differently and biologically respond to different things. This in fact, also alters and affects their psychological make-up and thus, behavior. Thus, from the beginning of human race, the development of their gender has also worked around their basic biological roles and limitations. Although the specific nature and degree of these differences vary in each society, yet there has been a general favoring towards men. This has created wide social inequalities and thus originated the debate around gender equality.

Here, I will not go too much into the differences between 'gender' and 'sex' or even attempt a detailed theoretical understanding of both from various points of views. My motive is to just understand how Mahabharata can be used as a text to critically analyze the construction of both the genders. I am concerned with its social and cultural

representations through various symbols, images and values. Since 'gender' adds to the complexity of the structure and function of society, or it may be said that its one of the most fundamental differentiations present in society, it requires foremost attention and scholarship. Gender requires as much understanding as other social categories, and more so as an identity that is always fragile, conditional and debatable. Mahabharata is filled with males and females of different kinds, and as such it is a huge compendium of masculinities and femininities to explore. It will be impossible to cover each and every character and situation. However, I will try to not let any such character go unnoticed, who has a major or minor role to play in defining the Dharma of 'gender'.

### **Gender in Mahabharata**

If Mahabharata is considered as 'itihasa' or a part of the historical reality of India, it is inherent that its production is indelibly connected to real social and political events that took place in ancient India. Since we are not discussing 'gender' in a social vacuum, it becomes inevitable to understand its position and value in tandem with the political, economic and religious structures. However, the size of the text and its composition over a long period of time saw various ideologies surge and die. This led to many structural and functional changes in the various social institutions and made it difficult to make a linear correlation between the text and one ideology.

Thus, while discussing gender as it intersects with social factors such as Dharma, Varna, marriage practices, family relations and soteriological paths, it is important to understand that the world of Mahabharata is a literary world, and not a direct reflection or representation of the ever-evasive 'reality' of ancient India. According to Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (2007: 14), gender roles in narrative literature are not merely reflections of or instructions for the real world; they are always also artistic and metaphorical literary devices, and sometimes gendered symbolism in the text gives added meaning at a textual level without necessarily referring to a social reality.

Moreover, in composition of a text, not only is the gender constructed according to expected and accepted norms, even inanimate objects are anthropomorphized. The way



they are gendered, speaks about an inherent quality being sought in them, or allotted to them. This draws us to the old debate of 'Purusa' and 'Prakriti' mentioned in Samkhya<sup>1</sup> philosophy of Indian thought. While the masculine word 'Purusa' refers to consciousness, feminine word 'Prakriti' represents primordial nature. Even though both exist in each gender, certain characteristics are predominantly designated to each. In West, the 'nature-culture' debate<sup>2</sup> is sometimes used analogously to the 'Purusa- Prakriti' debate in Samkhya philosophy. But both are not only epistemologically different but also ontologically on separate planes. However, it cannot be discussed in detail here. It is important to understand that the universe comprising of both physical and metaphysical entities is categorized into each gender not only for syntactical ease of a language, but also the semantics of language in a culture. Thus the symbolism is woven semantically around it. Mahabharata uses many such symbols which have persisted over generations. One of the most prominent examples is 'Earth' as 'Mother Earth', which becomes 'Bharat Mata', and needs to be protected by the king.

If we delve into this gendered symbolism deeply, we will understand how intricately every role is designed and woven into the normative context of the society. There are notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'fidel' and 'infidel', 'right' and 'wrong', etc, not only for each Varna, or each Ashrama, but also each gender. An example of the symbolic allegory from the Mahabharata, which charts out the qualities for the right conduct of women, is by Goddess Uma<sup>3</sup>, who is laying down the principles of a 'Pativrata'<sup>4</sup> woman,

“[O]ne who does not cast her eyes upon the Moon or the Sun (both are male in Hindu cosmology) or a tree that has a masculine name. Devotion to her lord (husband) is a woman's merit; it is her penance; it is her eternal Heaven. Merit, penances, and Heaven become hers who looks upon her husband as her all in all, and who endowed with chastity, seeks to devote herself to her lord in all the things. The husband is the God which women have. The husband is their friend. The husband is their high refuge. Women have no refuge that can compare with their husband, and no God that can compare with him. The husband's grace and Heaven, are equal in the estimation of a woman; or, if unequal, the inequality is very trivial. O Maheshwara, I do not

<sup>1</sup> Indian Philosophy has two basic strands: Astika (Orthodox) and Nastika (Unorthodox). Astika comprises six branches viz. 1)Mimansa, 2)Samkhya, 3)Yoga, 4)Vaisesika, 5)Nyaya, 6)Vedanta and Nastika comprises three branches viz. 1)Jainism, 2)Budhism, 3)Carvaka.

<sup>2</sup> For a detail on this perspective, see Sherry Ortner, "Is female to male as nature is to culture," in *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (California: Stanford University Press, 1974)

<sup>3</sup> Goddess Uma is the wife of Lord Shiva.

<sup>4</sup> There is no English equivalent to the word 'Pativrata'. It basically connotes a woman who is totally devoted to her husband.

desire Heaven itself if thou are not satisfied with me. If the husband that is poor or diseased or distressed were to command the wife to accomplish anything that is improper or unrighteous or that may lead to destruction of life itself, the wife should without any hesitation accomplish it” (Anushasanaparva, Ganguli 2003: 3783).

This passage gives us a deep insight into the kind of femininity the Mahabharata wants the females to cultivate. There are a few points which need to be highlighted here. The foremost of them is that since the time of Mahabharata, and much before that the image construction of women was done in a particular way. Here we see, her road to all things good, just, right, and fulfilling is through her husband. In short, her Dharmic goals can only be actualized by being rightfully the wife of a man. This further explains the necessity of the institution of marriage to corroborate the virtuosity of the woman.

As reverse of this, there are many Dharmic roles that a man cannot perform without his wife. Right from the Vedic time, wives and children are understood not as separate entities in themselves, but as adjuncts, who enable and facilitate the religious life of a male householder. ‘Pravritti Dharma’ prolongs this tendency into classical Hinduism. The paternalist bent of Vedic religion is taken to its logical extension, so that the lives of women are tied inextricably with that of their husbands past, present or future. An extensive theology is articulated, enjoining the devotion of women to their husbands. These trends coalesce in the evolution of the ideology of the Pativrata woman. Thus the Pativrata woman is the dominant paradigm for ideal female behavior in Pravritti Dharma (Dhand 2008: 32).

Though, this is predominantly the modicum of action for all women, there are cases where females have had relationships (human and divine) beyond their marriage. The case of Kunti, Madri, Ambalika and Ambika, etc, are instances of what is sociologically known as the practice of ‘Niyoga’. Though this also is bound by some sanctions and regulations, it is permitted by the society. We will see its functional nuances later in the chapter. However, ‘the right conduct’ for the wife, repeated over and over again in Mahabharata forms a crucial part of our cultural tradition and builds a part of the Hindu woman’s ‘ideology of the superego’ (Kakar 1989: 67). This has been carried forward by the cultural reproduction of the text and its characters.

Nevertheless, it becomes very important to understand the reasons why the gendered roles and identities are portrayed in a particular manner. In the journey of the various characters it shows that there is not a monolithic 'Stri Dharma' (Dharma of a woman) for all women in all situations, rather there are expectations for codes of conduct depending on one's life situation. So a wife, a mother, a widow, a queen, or a friend, has different obligations and expectations. Several of its sections also draw similarity in style and content from its contemporary treatise on Dharmasastra, 'Manusmriti'. Much of the text, with its emphasis on marriage, family obligations, sexual relations, and daily rituals; as well as sections specifically pertaining to the rights of women and rules of conduct between men and women, supply fertile ground for their examination separately.

The study of the Sanskrit works right from the Vedic period reveals that women enjoyed an exalted status in earliest times, sometimes even excelling men. They not only had freedom to education, religious observance, but also in political matters. However, with time, the structure of the society changed, and it moved from the pastoral to the agriculture, with men becoming more involved in money making jobs. With the development of industries and specialization of work, men came to dominate the public sphere, while women got more involved with the domestic sphere. Capturing the public sphere, men got control over economy, polity and religion and thus became more influential. This was the reason for the gradual domination of the females. Also, frequent clashes with the aborigines and encounters with the foreign invaders, some of which included women in their booty, and forcibly enslaved them, made wary of womenfolk. People grew up in the tradition embodied in the Bhagvad Gita, "O Krishna, the family being overpowered by Adharma, the family women become unchaste. O Varshneya, the family women being adulterous, the mixture of castes arises" (Banerji 1999: 200). Though this is regressive in thought, it could be one of the reasons why the law-makers formulated a network of rules and regulations for the women to be hedged in.

Uma Chakravarti argues in this context that this model of declining status of women after Vedic times has been predominantly used by the academia to study the women of ancient India. First discussed by A.S. Altekar in his work, "The Position of women in Hindu Civilization" became the focal point of gender studies in India. According to her,

“Altekar’s picture of the idyllic condition of women in the Vedic Age...is a picture which now pervades the collective consciousness of the upper castes in India and has virtually crippled the emergence of a more analytically rigorous study of gender relations in ancient India” (Chakravarti 1999: 80). Indeed, a number of female characters in Mahabharata too, have assumed ‘Altekarian paradigm’, reading the depiction of women in the text as chronicling their declining status in ancient India. Pradip Bhattacharya, for example, claims to see an, “abrupt decline in the status of woman takes place as Draupadi replaces Kunti as the central female character in the epic” (Bhattacharya 1995: 73). Thus, we should try to understand how gender plays itself out in the characters symbolically and substantively throughout the story.

Mahabharata’s characters are treated as personifications of the normative paradigm for both men and women. While we focus more on the female gender, playing out as the weaker one, we must not forget that masculinity and femininity is a relational identity and should not be understood in isolation. If the ‘Pativrata’ is the text’s prototype of femininity, it is complemented by the advocacy of a masculinity which characterized by virility and fearlessness. The Mahabharata describes the importance of masculinity and procreation, characterizing an ideal male as a married householder who has many ‘sons’. He not only holds the primary responsibility of protecting his family, but is also responsible for feeding and nurturing them. Similarly, a King becomes the protector and nurturer of the whole kingdom. So while the Dharma of a wife takes a certain course, a man too follows certain code of conducts.

Thus, each gender has a specific role according to its Dharma, and Mahabharata charts it out in various situations to show its functionality. This is how the ideal male is constantly pushed to perform in a certain manner (often heroically), failing which they lose respect. In fact, most of the prominent female characters too reinforce this model. Unable to fit into the prototype role of chivalry and protection men are often called ‘eunuch’ throughout the text. The strong connection between masculinity and fighting is, thus a major highlight of Mahabharata. Since, a battlefield is the highest ground to prove one’s masculinity, the war in Mahabharata becomes not only immanent but the zenith of masculinity.

While Mahabharata focuses on the males delivering high on the bravery and chivalry quotient, females are most of the time displayed as their restrictive counterparts who complement and balance them at every step. Another very important characteristic is the use of hyperbolic adjectives to describe the physical beauty of women in the text. While males are depicted through adjectives and metaphors of strength and courage, the entire text describes the exotic beauty of Shakuntala, Draupadi, Damayanti and Satyabhama. Even adjectival phrases are used throughout to describe the specific parts of their body; like Draupadi is described in Adiparva, “Of eyes like lotus-petals, and of faultless features endued with youth and intelligence, she is extremely beautiful. And the slender-waisted Draupadi of every feature perfectly faultless, and whose body emits a fragrance like unto that of the blue lotus for two full miles around” (Ganguli 2003: 316). Even King Dushyanta falls in love with Shakuntala because of her exquisite beauty, and so is Nala smitten by Damayanti’s faultless features. While we are told later in the text of their inner beauty and chastity too, it is worth noticing how the leading ladies of the grand epic are endowed with such impeccable physical features. It is just not a literary device used by Vyasa to embellish his text to make it appealing but the foremost quality that the society sought in women and expected to use it as a model for all. There is no doubt how the concept of faultless beauty of a woman became so integral to her identity, and continues to be so even today.

Even then, Mahabharata’s portrayals of mainstream female norms are repeatedly questioned, challenged and subverted by the speech and behavior of characters who do not conform to these conducts, and even by the characters who usually do. Similarly male characters too are not always able to fulfill all their roles. Be it Yudhishtira’s dilemmas, Arjuna as an effeminate dancer, or Pandu and other character’s inability to procreate and protect their family signifies essential insufficiency human beings possess in various situations which might be outside the purview of their stipulated Dharma. Draupadi is both an outspoken critic and a wise ‘Pativrata’; both active and passive, as an articulate speaker and a symbolic listener.

Similarly, one of the most vibrant examples of a female outweighing a male, in knowledge and wisdom is Sulabha’s debate with King Janaka. Here she proves that male

and female is a just a biological difference, which appears on the surface; the inner 'self' of a person is, however, not gendered. She testifies that both are capable of the same, it is just the ability to recognize one's true calling. Mahabharata's uniqueness lies in such conflicting portrayals of both genders, which are also observed in the society. One of the advantages of using a hermeneutical perspective of gender to understand female and male characters is that it allows us to avoid conceptualizing 'women' and 'men' as absolute categories. Instead it focuses on the different interacting models of male and female behavior and the different methods by which these various ideals are expressed. In fact, part of the depth of these particular characters is that they negotiate between contrasting gender norms, thus appearing realistic.

There are, however, many instances where the Dharma of both the genders is tried, tested and even fails to uphold. It is filled with humiliation of women with many misogynist maxims like, when King Dushyanta accuses Shakuntala and calls all women 'liars', or when Narada warns Yudhishthira against trusting women with secrets, or Bhishma telling Yudhishthira that women will only be sexually faithful if restrained by men (Brodbeck & Black 2007: 18). Though, some detailed examples of such incidents will be discussed through the female characters, especially Draupadi, later in the chapter.

Yet, it is important here to understand how the text itself brings forth a gender hierarchy into being. The author, the first narrator and the second narrator, all are male. This particular arrangement might seem to reinscribe social and gender hierarchies, as the text brings attention to the authority of the narrators and transformative possibilities for listeners. Even in the sub-stories with the text of Mahabharata, the internal listeners are usually men. If women are present, like Draupadi and Gandhari, who figure as prominent listeners, are mostly not the primary listeners, and they are also not primarily mentioned. Mostly it can be just logically inferred that they are present. The dialogues which frame Mahabharata's subsidiary discourses highlight the characters who hear them and the effects that this hearing has upon them. It also gives us a social context for the transmission of knowledge. More so, the dialogical nature of the text makes it such that even the speeches of women, are retold by male narrators again and again. So the

authenticity of the narration can be questioned in this superimposition of various narratorial identities.

To explicate the above points, I will try to discuss the major characters and how Dharma defines their gender. This will focus on Hidimva's loyalty, Draupadi's courage, Sulabha's wisdom, Kunti's piety, Gandhari's faith and Dhritarashtra's chagrin, Yudhishtira's integrity, Arjuna's puissance and Bhima's honesty. While, none of this will be discussed in exclusion, it is important to understand the role each character's Dharma is playing in creating symbols of prototypic males and females for the society. These characters are engraved so deep in the psyche of the society that it has conditioned generations of masculinities and femininities. Right from their literal existence, to regional folk adaptations, to popular television and drama portrayals, they continue to maintain their significance of upholding the archetypal male and female. It is a collectively inherited unconscious idea which is universally present in individual psyches. They exist in society in forms of stereotypes and even epitomes of each gender.

### **Hidimva's loyalty**

Hidimva is a 'Rakshasi', the sister of Hidimbasura, the head 'Rakshasa' of Varanavata, where the Pandavas and their mother live in hiding from Duryodhana and his sinister designs. Hidimva falls in love with Bhima, and gets married to him after Bhima kills her brother Hidimbasura in a gory fight. Here we see the extant of gender prototyping. Being a Rakshasi, Hidimva changes her form to a faultless beautiful maiden to gain the attention of Bhima and the Pandavas. She is struck by shafts of 'Kama' on seeing his physical appearance. He is described as a "person of hue like heated gold and mighty arms, of broad shoulders as a lion..." (Adiparva; Ganguli: 2003, 272). It is important to understand a typical female attracted to a typical male. Simon Brodbeck says that, "Indeed, through the violent self-assertion a Kshatriya man becomes worthy of delightful female company..." (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 17) There is indeed a focus on the physical might and valor of a male and the beauty and charm of a female. Hidimva has to change her form into a celestial goddess wearing resplendent ornaments, to seek the company of the person she loves. Even though she changes her form later and returns to

her true self, it is only to fulfill her larger purpose that she is introduced in the text. She is to give birth to the mighty Ghatotkacha, who has a major role to play in the war later.

However, it is the preeminence of the notions of physical beauty that are not only appalling but also pitiable. Being from another Varna, and not conforming to the standards of beauty, she is returned into oblivion for the rest of the story. As a wife, she fulfills her Dharma of complete devotion and service to not only her husband but also his family. She is not recognized for her contribution, rather marginalized for being an ugly 'Rakshasi'. There is no wonder why not only Hindu society, but also many other societies stress so much on the physical features of each gender. Uma Narain (2003) in her article, "Resurrecting the Mother in 'Mata Hidimva'" suspects that she remains largely invisible in the Mahabharata and her character displays perfect motherhood despite issues of race, caste and religion intertwined with overarching patriarchal power play.

### **Kunti's piety**

Kunti, Ambika and Ambalika, are female characters who play a major role in the schema of events. While Kunti's exclusivity in begetting children from a 'Mantra' (Chant) is the highlight of her character, Ambika and Ambalika face the irony of their predicament. It is through them we are informed of the interesting tradition of 'Niyoga' in Hindu Society. There is undoubtedly a stipulated Dharma which has to be followed in such an act. It has very significant connotations for the position of women in society. In the incident of Vichitravirya being unable to produce an heir to the kingdom, his mother Satyawati reveals the secret of her first son Vyasa, who is also the author of this epic. There is twin concern for this revelation. The major reason is to give the kingdom of Bharata an heir to run the family name; and second is to introduce the tradition of 'Niyoga' in the cosmogony of the text.

Vyasa, with some strict instructions for both the ladies, impregnates them, though with much consequences. Only a person with some larger than life (or text) authority, can decide the future course of events in such a way, that one of his progeny is born blind, and the other one pale. Although, already having bore sons (Dhritarashtra and Pandu),



Satyavati urges Vyasa for another chance with the elder queen, where she is smartly replaced with a 'Dasi' (maid servant). The product of this perfect union is the fountainhead of wisdom in Mahabharata, Vidura. Despite his great self, he is never treated at par with his other half-brothers, Dhritarashtra and Pandu, because of his low Varna status. It is curious that Vidura's parentage here should occasion such moment when Vyasa's own background would raise eyebrows. He is the product of Brahmana Parashara and Satyavati- Satyavati who is the abandoned daughter of a Kshatriya and a fish and the adopted daughter of a fisherman, a Shudra. Her son's claim to pristine Brahmanahood, is therefore suspicious. As Bruce Sullivan observes, "That (the union between Satyavati and Parashara), in which the customary distinctions between Varnas was no observed, should produce in Vyasa the epic's most respected Brahmana, its most authoritative teacher of the Veda and a paradigm of Brahmanahood, is striking indeed" (Sullivan 1999: 53).

Moreover, the 'Dasi' excelled because she was free from all desire and aversion, acting simply on the premise of duty. This is the insistent and fundamentally subversive pedagogy of the Mahabharata, which goes no small way to explaining why so many of the most loquacious spokespeople of Dharma are humble characters. It surely reinforces the perspective that while ritual action and social hierarchies have their place in the orderly functioning of the society, moral character always outweighs them. "Niyoga, then, might be seen as a metaphor for the Mahabharata as a whole, in that it represents a disruption of the ideal order. It is through the disorder that ensues that there emerge opportunities for the perfection of true virtue" (Dhand 2004: 23).

In another striking example of 'Niyoga', even Kunti, under unwarranted circumstances, is required to beget children from other sources. Unlike her mother-in-laws, she can choose to cohabit with Gods, through a divine boon. With great sense she chooses her three cohabiters, and even helps the other queen Madri to choose one. This incident will help us better analyze the Dharma of each gender in the tradition of 'Niyoga'. The incidents of 'Niyoga' have important bearing on the course of events in Mahabharata. The concept of 'Niyoga', not only had very strict rules and regulations, it also was systematic social arrangement to beget children in the event of some stipulated conditions. It was the

custom of levirate marriage, a special provision in the sexual ethics of ancient India. It allowed for a woman to obtain children through the instrument of other man, if her husband was deceased, infertile or otherwise incapacitated.

However, it was to be distinguished from general sexual licentiousness and generally comes under the 'Apaddharama' (law of distress). It is not only a violation of a woman's chastity but also fidelity. But it is interesting to note how the social sanction allows this otherwise grave violation. While Kunti cannot legitimately accept her son before marriage, she is forced to use the same device to procure sons after marriage. This is done only after her husband prods her for a long time, and literally joins his hands to beg for a son.

It is ironical that in a society, which decides the legitimacy of children only on the basis of marriage, this is an important custom. It also decides on the sexual fulfillment and the importance for the need of procreation. How can a simple act of sexual intercourse have many implications? While it is clearly specified that the practice of 'Niyoga' does not intend any pleasure out of it, it does make it necessary for a woman to forcefully cohabit outside her marriage. Most commonly, the men chosen are brothers or other relatives of the husband, accomplished Brahmanas, however, are highly sought after for their reputed mental and spiritual Tejas (splendor) and Tapas (ascetic accomplishments). In either case, the practice of Niyoga is designed to realize a socially recognized need to produce children within the same patriline, perhaps out of concerns for inheritance and property issues (ibid, 7).

Though, the women themselves have very little say in any part of the process. They function as passive instruments and affinal kin, and are primarily viewed as the means for the patriarchal family to achieve its own ends. The woman becomes a 'child-producing machine' (Bhattacharya 1991), with a womb into which the family plants its seed for the protection of its own lineage. Niyoga performed under these circumstances, where which women have no share in decision making and are given no choice, appears to excite terror and misery in the women involved. However, Niyoga is generally understood in relation to men, as formalized in the Vedic tradition in the institution of the 'three debts' that all

men owe, to gods gurus, and ancestors. There is, however, some indulgence for the maternal desires of widowed women. The brother in this case has a duty to give an heir to his dead brother, but also has a duty to allow the woman, his brother's wife, to fulfill her own duty to produce a child. In these cases, 'Niyoga' is practiced at the initiative of the widow herself and appears not to be a frightening or repulsive act.

The figure of Kunti is of much interest to understand the Dharma of a woman in the situation here. Being a devout and chaste wife, she is undeterred by Pandu's repeated requests for Niyoga. She says, "You yourself will father on me heroic sons according to Dharma...For not even in my thoughts shall I go to any man but you in my season" (Dhand 2004: 9). To every narrative and reason Pandu offers, Kunti offers another deft possibility of her not succumbing to his demands. It is interesting to see how vehemently she counter argues every situational and reasonable statement. The women of Mahabharata never being shy of stern hardships for a higher cause, Kunti proposes similar course of conduct for herself. However, in the end all seems futile as they all succumb to their Pativrata Dharma of following their husband. Pandu's final assertion, "Those who know Dharma know, princess, that whatever a husband tells his wife, whether righteous or unrighteous, she must do it" (ibid, 9).

Thus, Pandu presses the entire patriarchal establishment of ancient India into the service of his argument, alternately cajoling and bullying Kunti. He eventually begs her, "I raise my folded hands to my head, looking to you for a favor. Following my directive...you must give birth to virtuous sons by a Brahmana of superior austerities. Through your doing, I may walk the path of those who have sons" (ibid, 10). Thus, there is the major issue of a man being unable to fulfill his Dharma of begetting a son to fulfill the 'Pitara-rina'<sup>5</sup>, without which there is no salvation for him. Begetting a son is also a proof of masculinity in our societal construct, and having the status of an impotent is a huge blot on it. However, it can only be realized by evoking the feminine quality of 'maternity'.

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<sup>5</sup> There are basically three rinas (debts) that a Hindu male has to fulfill in his lifetime, 1)Pitra rina-To father by producing a son and continuing the lineage, 2)Dev Rina- To Gods by performing Yajna (sacrifice), 3) Rishi rina- To the 'guru' by studying.

It is even witnessed that when Yudhishtira and everyone else gets to know about Karna, the child born to Kunti before marriage, he makes scathing remarks at his mother, “Your secret has destroyed all of us-the Kurus and the Panchalas are no more. Draupadi’s sons and Abhimanyu are dead. If you had told us at that time that Karna belonged to us there would have been no war” (Karve 2008: 55). This ends in another misogynist curse on the entire womankind, “Henceforth they shall be incapable of keeping a secret” (ibid, 55).

There could be two interpretations to this. If Yudhishtira meant this actually, then it is a curse uncalled for, because the reason Kunti hides this secret from the world is because having a child without wedlock is seen contemptuously for a woman. A woman is expected to be a virgin during the time of her marriage, and the only person she can lose her virginity with is her husband. It is for this very reason that ‘Surya’ (Sun god), with his powers returns her virginity to her, so that this secret remains a divine secret, till time exposes it. So not out of choice, but societal pressures, she gives up her first child and regains virginity.

It is important to understand the taboo attached to the concept of pregnancy without marriage, especially in the Indian society. However, the same woman can cohabit with another person, even without her willingness just to obtain an heir in a patriarchal set up through traditions like Niyoga. Karve (2008) believes that this particular curse by Yudhishtira could also be a later interpolation. Yudhishtira being the ‘Dharmaraja’, and following the code of conducts always is not expected to pronounce something so sarcastic and scornful for his own mother. Nonetheless, it does not belittle the problem of taboo of virginity in our society. In a surprising state of events, even till this date, this concept is not only very prevalent but also very expected. What Sun did to Kunti by returning her virginity back to her magically, surgeons do it now at the behest of young girls who want to regain their virginity before entering into marital life. The societal pressures to conform to the normative standards of being from a particular gender often act as motives for people’s actions.

A very serious issue here is that there is a marked absence of daughters during the entire course of events. Everyone, for various reasons demands only for ‘heroic sons’. Right

from Vyasa, to Bhishma, to Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura, to their children, to the King Parikshit and Janmajeya, there are sons everywhere. For a hundred sons, there is just one daughter to Dhritarashtra. No doubt the text was written by a male, through males, about males, and featuring Kshatriya heroism primarily. It is only pockets of female characters that are placed here and there as passive instruments to run the story. This traditional ritual of begetting only a male child has plagued the Indian society even to this date. The notion of fulfillment through only a male child has had serious consequences on the gender ratio, but also on the comparative care of the girl child.

However, ironically, where only a male child is needed, the symbol of womb is consistent throughout Mahabharata both literally and metaphorically. Right from Satyawati's son Vyasa, to Ambika and Ambalika's wombs, to Gandhari and Kunti's wombs, to Uttara's womb, a woman is the only protector of an entire lineage. In a patriarchal set up, her womb is just a symbolic keeper of the lineage, without having a more substantive role to play.

“In the Mahabharata's royal patriline, too, the paradigmatic person- the protective Kshatriya king- is male, as are his origins and ends: he may have female relatives, but his cultural 'who's who' is largely male, and his main task is to obtain an heir...the text's patrilineal, androcentric concerns are self-selected by its authorial culture” (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 165).

### **Gandhari's faith**

Even Gandhari is just a passive recipient of a larger cosmic design. She is not only unaware of her husband's blindness but also suffers a major setback during her 'womb' (pregnancy) days. A Pativrata to the core, she makes this the only Dharma of her life. The divinized and complicated Vyasa is the creator of the story or just a writer of a larger cosmic will is bewildering. He impregnates Ambika and Ambalika, but of little faults of theirs, pronounces curses which make their children blind and pale, respectively. Similarly, his boon to Gandhari for a hundred sons becomes not any less than a curse, when her unusually prolonged pregnancy deliberately results in Duryodhana being born later than Yudhishtira. By agreeing to not seeing any pleasure, as her husband, her act of selflessness raises her to a higher pedestal. However, Karve (2008), in a soul wrenching conversation unearths the unspoken between the blind husband-wife after the war. She

could have not blindfolded herself and tried to become her husband's eyes and identity.

Dhritarashtra says,

“Through love for our children- blind love though it was- we came close. Until that time you never felt that I belonged to you. We Kuru men have done great injustices to women. And we have paid in full for them too. In Amba's wrath Bhishma was burned. I am still burning in yours. My children too have been destroyed in it. Kunti also was married to a deficient man. But at least she fulfilled the role of a faithful, if not a very beloved wife during her husband's life. After his death, she constantly guarded the welfare of her children. Every person gets entangled in a mesh of injustices. I wronged you, Pandu wronged Kunti. And whose wrong doing was it that Pandu and I should lead such fruitless lives” (Karve 2008: 37)?

These lines connote more than what is said. Though it is explicit that females are being wronged by males, there is also a sense of seeking forgiveness for one's acts. Mahabharata often tells us through the life situation of its characters that for everyone life goes a full circle. As the life of every human undergoes challenges and changes, so does every society. There is also a confession in Dhritarashtra's tone, where he mentions that both his and brother's life remained unfulfilled, because it could not steer exactly according to the norms of masculinity for Kshatriya men. While Dhritarashtra's blindness is his, Pandu's curse was his.

### **Sulabha's wisdom**

There are other female characters who have indeed been the torchbearers for what we would now understand as the 'empowered gender'. The householder woman whom sage Kaushika meets, and the great sage Sulabha, who encounters King Janaka, are worth discussing in the Dharma of gender. When Yudhishtira asks Markandeya about the virtue of women, apart from general comments on the character of women, he narrates the story of a chaste woman householder, whose merit lies in complete devotion to her husband. What is worth noticing is that Mahabharata realizes how difficult it is for woman to keep in accordance with her Dharma in all times. Mahabharata surely does recognize women's endeavors in every step of not only her life, but also in the life of her entire family. Right from bearing the biological pain of motherhood to the societal pressures of chastity, it is an arduous life for a woman.

Even in all circumstances, this incident shows how the woman upholds the devotion to her husband as the highest goal of her life. In a patriarchal setup, since her utmost Pativrata Dharma is the only door to Moksha, she has to follow it always. Through the power of chastity the commoner gains merit to even enlighten a venerable Brahmana with all the knowledge. But, I will not overlook the great importance a husband and a father also holds. If it is with great difficulty that a woman brings forth the children, it is equally strenuous to nurture and nourish them, to uphold Dharma at all times. Mahabharata, indeed, recognizes the complementary role each gender plays to help realize other's Dharma. It shows how every human being is organically connected to a system which works best when each follows their Dharma. Thus, the inequality between the two genders ceases to exist in the larger harmony of the system if both follow their Dharma without any feeling of superiority over each other.

This idea is partly augmented by Sulabha's debate with King Janaka, which completely rebuffs the gender hierarchy. Sulabha is a single woman and an intellectual renunciant who roams around the earth in search of knowledge. In an encounter with the philosopher King Janaka, she reveals what I would prefer to call the gender ideology of not only Mahabharata, but our ancient scriptures. Much before the westerners could conceptualize and promote the concept of gender equality, Sulabha, presents the most potent justification in a debate with Janaka. She wins the argument, only to make Janaka and the entire man world realize of their greatest mistake of underestimating a scholar's might which is not determined by gender or Varna or any category. She says,

“Only those that regard the soul to be identical with the body, and that think the several orders and modes of life to be really different from one another, are open to the error of supposing an intermingling to be possible. My body is different from thine. But my soul is not different from thy soul. When I am able to realize this, I have not the slightest doubt that my understanding is not really staying in thine though I have entered into thee by Yoga” (Shantiparva; Ganguli: 3144).

The Sulabha-Janaka debate is one of the many debates or dialogical episodes in the Mahabharata, which form the basic narrative structure of the text. This particular incident could be a debate between different schools of Hindu philosophy. It could be seen as a debate regarding the relative superiority of action and renunciation as paths to liberation (Moksha) from the cycle of rebirth. Here, it is basically about gender; specifically

whether a woman can be autonomous, can be a man's intellectual equal or superior, and can attain emancipation independently, without the essential of entering into the Grihastha Ashrama. While the ascetic route to renunciation was prevalent and allowed for males, it was not for females. This episode raises the question of the independent renunciation, of a female ascetic.

“The figure of Sulabha, however, shows that the Mahabharata, like the Hindu thought in general, is by no means unified on this issue. The equation of women with action is not a necessary one. It is possible and desirable for a Hindu woman to attain emancipation by renunciation. The *Atman* (Self/Spirit) is gendered neuter in Sanskrit, and is the same in all beings. The premise is basic to Sulabha's sophisticated argument regarding the irrelevance of gender to emancipation or to the particular path taken by the individual” (Vanita 2003: 81).

Ruth Vanita (2003) thinks that perhaps the most famous and studied debate is the one that takes place between Gargi and Yajnavalkya, in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. While it ended with Gargi being snubbed by Yajnavalkya, on the pretext that her head will fall off if she says anything more; Sulabha shuts Janaka up by her eloquent reasoning. She also believes that feminist study of women's agency and resistance in the epics has not focused on single women but on angry protests of wives, such as Draupadi's protest against her husband Yudhishtira's gambling her away, or Sita's protest against her husband Rama's unjust treatment to her after she is saved from Ravana. Less attention has been paid to women's participation in intellectual and philosophical conversation, even though both Draupadi and Sita do so. Moreover, within mainstream Hindu tradition, Saraswati (the goddess of learning and wisdom), has just been a symbolic figure in the educational institutions, while her role hasn't been studied. However, what Mahabharata presents to us in form of the householder lady who enlightens the Brahmana, or Sulabha, or Draupadi, are women in different situations, but they are capable of understanding Dharma in general and also for their selective gender.

We have discussed the ways in which gender is constructed in the discourses in Mahabharata. Largely, it is constructed as a social category, critically jostling between the debates of action and emancipation, of active and passive, etc. Although there is very clear demarcation for Dharma for each gender, there are also major deviations from the norm. Gender, in Mahabharata, as in society, is typically constructed around multiple factors like laws, social edicts, social ideologies, social conventions, social myths etc.



While the Dharma of these is reflected in the epic, its literary nature reinforced through stories becomes the primary instrument in shaping and conditioning gender. The deft elaboration of stories presents the gender norms as objective realities, focusing on qualities as if they had always existed and never been questioned. There is also an image of womanhood that emerges from these mythic narratives and stereotypes. However, Mahabharata's position remains largely ambivalent in this case too, as it presents a bifurcated image of womanhood, struggling between beatific virtue and appalling evil (mostly through revenge).

Arti Dhand (2004) discusses the importance of construction of myths in the social construction of gender. Quoting Mieke Bal, she mentions, "Myths are narrativizations of ideology" (Dhand 2004: 127-128). They are constructed to support the biases and prejudices of society and have in common with other stories the latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events they treat. Mahabharata is, indeed, a great didactic work, replete with innumerable stories which involve a negotiation of male and female roles. The various aspects of gender, including sexuality are moralized through these narratives in the epic. These narratives also become a tool to reinforce and perpetuate the larger socio-cultural biases about gender. We have seen through examples of many characters above that how each gender's sexuality is bound by a Dharmic regulation. Be it through the Niyoga tradition or otherwise, the ordering and disciplining machinations of society served to rein the sexuality of especially women. It would be pertinent to discuss some cases of borderline gender or alternate sexuality in Mahabharata. The curious case of Sikhandi/ Sikhandini, Arjuna's effeminization in King Virata's reign are important. But first let's discuss one of the most intriguing female characters of our society, Draupadi.

### **Draupadi's courage**

Draupadi has perhaps been one of the most complex and enigmatic characters of Hindu mythology that has caught the interests of scholars of every kind, including the feminists. The understanding and portrayal of Draupadi has ranged from a stereotypical 'Pativrata', who passively accepts the situations of her life, to a wise and outspoken lady who

questions her struggles of life, and tries to find a solution worthy of her family and her self-respect. She has been pitied upon, praised and criticized for her demeanor and behavior. But according to me, she is the most wholesome representation of a woman in a society, constantly in flux. Her destiny brings her to five husbands and a large extended royal family which confronts each other at all points. In her entire life, she displays every possible feature of a human being, ranging from love, affection, care, anger, jealousy, prejudice, revenge, faith, wisdom, etc.

Being the one of the most intriguing and perplexing character, she has not only been the anti-prototype of a linear representation of woman, but also a major challenge to the normative structures and values. Draupadi has been the character most written about in all forms of prose, poetry and drama, played in dance and theatre, and is widely discussed in issues of feminism in India. She is unique in epic's main story in being not only the incarnation of a deity (Sri), but also having at least one known prior human life with antecedent 'Karma' that affects her in this life...an overanxious maiden who pressed 'Siva' five times to grant her a husband, with the result that the God destined her to have five husbands (Hiltebeitel 2007: 114). This not only provides us with a unique situation of polyandry in the Hindu mythology and society, but also about their unique sexual arrangement. Studded with divinity, she has the boon to regain her virginity after intercourse with each brother.

This brings us back to the much debated importance of virginity in a woman's life (while there is no such condition for Arjuna, who has three more wives). She does not get into this polyandrous situation out of her own will (but because of her fate). Moreover, she is only the most virtuous incarnation of a goddess for a purpose in Mahabharata. So even if Kunti regaining her virginity becomes understandable due to the taboos of society, Draupadi's case is just plain intriguing. In a patriarchal set up, deflowering a virgin is taken not only as a sign of masculinity, but also gives more pleasure to the man. Is it just to reinstate the masculine ego that Draupadi regains her virginity every time? There is no explicit rationale for Vyasa's whimsical setting of women's virginites in the epic. Moreover, since polyandry was not a popular social arrangement, was this a unique way to justify the polyandry and keep it as close as monogamy? However, none of it is clear.

While Mahabharata does make it explicit through Yudhishtira's question to Bhishma (ironically a lifelong celibate), an intense question on sexuality. "In the act of coition, who derives greater pleasure- man or woman" (ibid, 116)? To which he narrates the story of a King Bhangasvana, who through some act of divine, becomes a female. On being asked by Indra, to go back to his previous state, he rejects and answers, "At the union of a man and a woman, the woman gets more pleasure. Hence, I select being a woman" (Dange 2003: 161). Also, throughout the epic, whether the courtroom humiliation of Draupadi, or Jayadratha kidnapping her, or Kichaka's sexual advances at her, there is no question on Draupadi's virtuosity, unlike Ramayana. Indeed, when Jamison writes, "The Brahmanas and the Mahabharata present a series of female types, both positive and negative, but the Adulterous Wife is not in this gallery of archetypes" (Hiltebeitel 2007: 116).

Draupadi becomes important as she puts up against the most barbaric and inhuman act in Mahabharata; her public disrobing being consistent with the moral paradigm of a patriarchal society. Not only does she win her own situational battle, she saves her husbands from an impending doom of becoming Duryodhana's slaves. The episode is much studied, right from the entire process of Yudhishtira losing his entire kingdom, himself and his brothers and finally Draupadi, to her being brought to the courtroom, to her question against injustice of her own husband and the senior members of fraternity, to her being disrobed and re-robed, to gaining freedom for all. This is where in Mahabharata, the concept of 'Dharma' has been most discussed and debated upon, and is finally understood as being 'subtle'. Here, various meanings of Dharma coincide and confront to not only define the role of everyone present there, but also justifying their actions. Their 'Svadharna', 'Sadharana Dharma', 'Apaddharma', 'Varnashramadharna', coincide and confront.

The situation has demanded much discussion, though nothing has been conclusive ever and it takes refuge in the 'subtle' labyrinths of Dharma. I will try to discuss this debate in the current context. This will help us understand the Dharma of each gender (as a husband and wife to each other), more so in the time of crisis, and in relation to the other roles that each of them play. Here we see, Draupadi coming out of the chassis of a

'Pativrata' woman, to question not just her husband's act, but all the wise elders who by being silent spectators, become a party to it. We also understand how Yudhishtira's character is build around the Dharma of this situation. Most scholars fail to connect both genders displayed by the various characters in the courtroom scene. It is only when we analyze them together do we understand their Dharma.

To understand the gambling match, we have to consider the situation and nature of Dharma of the Dharmaraja. Despite Vidura's warning, and knowing Shakuni's (Kaurava's maternal uncle) dubious nature, Yudhishtira accepts the challenge. There are a few reasons for this, which Yudhishtira cites, "the Kshatriya Dharma of accepting challenges, the Kula Dharma of obeying one's uncle (Dhritarashtra, who was a father figure after Pandu), and the inexorability of Dhatri (the 'Placer') and Daiva (the business of gods)" (Brodbeck 2007: 153). Nevertheless, his implicit weaknesses become explicit during the play. There appears to be a latent desire that motivated him for his impulsive act. Mehendale comments, "The compulsion for playing the game was Yudhishtira's own urge to play; he lost, because his confidence was misplaced". Mehendale also highlights Yudhishtira's account to Bhima: he wanted Duryodhana's half of the kingdom; when Shakuni's superiority became clear, instead of cutting his losses, he became angry" (Mehendale 1985: 154).

Clearly, there also was an inherent need to win, and being a male multiplies the effect winning on one's masculine stature. Getting angry and irrational on being unable to win is also typical male. However, one does not accept a flawless character in the real world. This is perhaps, Yudhishtira's weakness; the only time he acts purely masculine, is when he loses. Other times, when before the war and after the war, when he shirks his responsibility (against his Varnashramadharma and Rajadharma) he is termed a weakling, even a 'eunuch' by his own wife. While it does not justify him staking himself, his brothers and more so his wife, it does indicate the duality of existence that each character encounters in Mahabharata. Thus, gender becomes as much a process, than a product. We should, nonetheless, understand the Dharma of the situation clearly.

After having lost himself, Yudhishtira loses his wife, Draupadi. But the question that Draupadi's courage and wisdom brings forth is, "What prince is there who plays staking his wife...Whom he has lost first, himself or me" (Sabhaparva; Ganguli 2003: 488)? Their grandfather, Bhishma begins, that a person who has lost himself in the game is no longer free to stake what no longer belongs to him. Since Yudhishtira did lose himself first, he was not competent to stake Draupadi. In that case, she is free. However, a wife belongs to her husband, in the sense that a wife is expected to act upon a husband's order, which means that even if he is not free, she is legally his wife and he is allowed to stake her. This is where he takes refuge in the subtlety of Dharma, "As Dharma is subtle, my dear, I fail to resolve your question in the proper way" (ibid, 495).

Dharma is, indeed, complex and illusive, and it also gets accentuated through various expressions in various characters. Bhishma, the wise one is ambiguous, and so are Vidura and the other venerable members of the assembly<sup>6</sup>. However, Vikarna (Duryodhana's younger brother) is sensitive to the question; after contemplating on the various meanings of Dharma, states what Bhishma hesitates to express. Beyond the fact, that a woman is a husband's subject, it is also true, that in her own individual capacity she is innocent. Moreover, if it is the Dharma of a woman to follow the husband, it is Dharma of the husband to provide security to his wife at all costs. Also, as the entire hall is filled with Kshatriyas and Brahmanas, it is their Dharma to act chivalrous and respect women's dignity, especially when she is menstruating. This, indeed, compounds Draupadi's vulnerability.

Her status is also complicated because she is a member of the family for Duryodhana, and daughter-in-law for the elders. We also need to delve upon Draupadi's question in detail. If according to her the King is crazed by the game, there is much possibility that Yudhishtira's psychological state is unstable. Alf Hildebeitel recognizes the philosophical import of the question, "Whom did you lose first, 'self' or me?" is a

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<sup>6</sup> Vidura though raises a point here by "mentioning sage Kashyapa on the immorality of remaining silent when there is evil afoot" (Badrinath 2007: 40). However, Vidura's predicament is peculiar to his status in the Kingdom. Though venerated for his wisdom, he still is below in the hierarchy to make any decisive statements in such moments of crisis, when others 'above' him are also present.

question about the nature of the 'self'. Here he adds to Yudhishtira's state of being, "Yudhishtira did not stir, as if he had lost consciousness, and made no reply...whether good or ill" (Hiltebeitel 2002: 243). While, the elders exhibited an almost inhuman treatment to Draupadi, Mehendale ridicules Yudhishtira for his choice of Dharma, "His attitude...was unbecoming of him; and since Draupadi was not only insulted with abuses, she was also a victim of molestation, his attitude must be judged unpardonable...; improper...; he should have told Duhshasana he was in the Assembly of civilized Kshatriyas and not in the den of hooligans" (Mehendale 1985: 194).

There have been numerous takes on Draupadi's questions. While most take it as a sign of her courage and integrity, Iravati Karve (2008) thinks she embarrassed herself further by trying to show off her intelligence, rather than begging for her freedom. Her point is that in a patriarchal society a married woman's very existence and identity depended on her husband; to lose one's husband was akin to suicide. Obviously both alternatives were bad, but becoming a slave to Kauravas was a worse fate than becoming widow. Even if we recount to the patriarchal perspective, women like Sulabha, or even Kunti, and through many such examples, Mahabharata has tried to show how even then they enjoyed a considerable individuality outside the archetypal Pativrata Dharma. Draupadi's question not only raised the issue of Dharma as a concept of general human justice, but also as a legal concept, on which none was clear. Moreover, she raised the question that who has the authority to decide Dharma?

"The sabha is the epic's ultimate setting for constructing, deconstructing, and rethinking authority" (Hiltebeitel 2002: 240). While the court is set to ponder over the conflicting meanings of Dharma, Bhima, the only one out of the five, gets furious over the scathing insult. However, Arjuna is quick to remind him that Yudhishtira has kept his Kshatriya Dharma of meeting a challenge, while Bhima 'oversteps' his 'highest Dharma' of not overstepping his eldest brother. Interestingly, all Dharmas<sup>7</sup> coincide on one side to suit perfectly the patriarchal setup, while all the other Dharmas, cry out loud (but lose) for justice against a woman.

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<sup>7</sup> Here it refers to all the meanings of Dharma which makes it in practicality a plural term "Dharmas".

Though everyone is aware of their respective Dharma (including Draupadi) and she attests to the fact that 'Dharma is subtle', yet the Dharma is also what subjugates her in the sarcastic words of Karna: "There are three who own no property: a slave, a student and a woman, are nonindependent. You are the wife of a slave, his wealth, dear- without a master, the wealth of a slave, and slave (yourself)" (ibid, 259). There are resonations with Manusmriti amongst the other Dharmasastras, where women were as a class, non independent. Draupadi challenges this 'ownership of women', speaking about and perhaps for, women as a class.

"It is clear that in all this talk about betting her, Draupadi's question is a philosophical one about the nature of the self, compounded by legal issues of mastery, lordship, property, ownership, and slavery in the hierarchical context of marriage, and symbolized around the figure of the ultimate lord, master and owner, the king" (ibid, 261).

Hiltebeitel (2002) feels that since the text makes it explicit that Draupadi is their savior, and also the fact that Yudhishtira has also lost his self-consciousness, Draupadi is speaking for both of them through her questions. So in a moment of self-abnegation, she emancipates herself and all her husbands.

It would be useful to discuss Lakshmi Bandlamudi's work in this reference. For her, construction of gender is an ongoing social work that all of us participate in knowingly or unknowingly. The term 'gender' signifies a social relationship, and if the nature of such relationships organizes the life story, then such narratives are called 'gendered self'. She uses Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding for the emergence of 'self' (I-for-myself, I-for-others and others-for-me) in this case. Very often 'I-for-others' dominates, which the gendered self resents and struggles to establish the 'I-for-myself' and 'others-for-me' (Bandlamudi 2010: 74).

The story becomes of the socially expected roles and the contestation and redefinition of the roles. Here Draupadi, along with her husbands is trying to negotiate that particular 'self' which is lost in betting. In order to assert her selfhood, she has to bargain with a number of social factors and to do so she has to travel through various social spaces and historical times which culminate in the form of that particular event. The gendered self

cannot speak about herself without discussing how she is spoken to, as the construction of gender is the product and process of both representation and self-representation.

This construction exemplifies in the specific dialogical structure of Mahabharata, which indicates that the hermeneutic of gender is plural. Gender is constructed not only through the binary roles of male and female, but also through a series of multiple roles within both male and female repertoires. The dialogical, gendered self is a multiple self, with a variety of momentary roles to choose from (Patton 2007: 98). We will discuss this later when the question of borderline gender or gender bending is considered in the cases of Arjuna and Sikhandi.

For a general understanding, the attempted disrobing of Draupadi is a clear insult to womanhood, and this affront upsets the cosmic balance of Dharma. The appearance of 'Sari' (a woman's dress) endlessly also has many interpretations. If Pune Critical Edition<sup>8</sup> is to be believed, it was an act of cosmic justice to a woman. Krishna's role is seen as a much later interpolation to the incident. To personally choose from between the two is also a daunting task. Whereas, the appearance of Krishna has become an uncontested reality in its own might, due to powerful religious and social representations, the version of 'cosmic balance' helps nature to protect the Dharma of a chaste woman. It also helps build Draupadi's character, by becoming her own agency, her own Dharma. This Dharma itself protects her dignity rather than any intervention by Krishna. Krishna's presence can have two interpretations. The more probable and plausible one is that he is the reigning God in Mahabharata, who lives amongst the humans (especially Draupadi and the Pandavas). His might gives him unmatched powers and foresight to protect them at all times.

The other and most accepted interpretation of the situation is his surreal relationship with Draupadi. "In the epics, as far as I know, the only case of such a relationship is that of Krishna and Draupadi, which confirms not only its uniqueness (compared to other

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<sup>8</sup> This is so in all the texts before the Pune Critical Edition. Alf Hiltebeitel calls it "a kind of Genghiz Khan Effect in which a rampant breeding of variants has made it impossible to trace earlier generations (Hiltebeitel 2007: 128)



Dharmasastras) but also the singularity with which the Mahabharata brings it to life” (Hiltebeitel 2007: 127). The first time their “Sakhi-Sakha” relationship is made explicit in the text is in this courtroom scene. “They do not bring virtuous women into the hall. This ancient eternal law is lost among the Kauravas. How can I, wife of the Pandavas, sister of Parsata, a good woman, and friend of Vasudeva, enter the hall of Kings? Is the wife of Dharmaraja, whose birth matches his, a slave or not a slave” (ibid, 128)? There is a suggestion here that only an ‘intimate friend’ could touch her ‘Sari’ in her husband’s presence. This refers to the singularity of their relationship which is steeped in ‘Bhakti’ (devotion). God here rewards her true devotion and faith as her last resort when her husbands become blind to her plight. Her predicament does not end there, as she faces with her husbands, the impending doom of slavery.

However, her insistence on Dharma is exemplified and supported by howls of jackals, braying of donkeys, shrieking of grisly birds and many such ominous sounds. Ironically, none of the people who could see, but a blind man, Dhritarashtra, sees the potential danger of committing a great sin against a virtuous woman. Thus, he grants her boons, from which she buys her husband’s and her own freedom. Though Draupadi’s birth was a part of the schema to wipe off the Kshatriyas from the earth, here she manages to be their savior.

In another incident of the performance of a ritual situation of the Asvamedha yajna<sup>9</sup>, Draupadi’s humiliation is saved by Krishna. In the ritual of Asvamedha yajna, if one were following the old ritual texts, as the queen or chief wife (Mahisi) of the King, Draupadi would be lying down and exposing herself sexually to the horse after it has been suffocated. This ‘sexually jolting’ ritual scene is described, “When bulls among priests had made the horse agree (i.e. killed) according to rule, they caused the wise daughter of Drupada to lie down beside it for three minutes” (ibid, 131). Here too, Krishna’s friendship with Draupadi comes explicitly into play to save his ‘Sakhi’. Krishna plays the role of a chivalrous friend in both the ritually defined scenes: one in a development from the dice match as an extended narrative sequel to ‘Rajasuya’, and the other in an underplayed portrayal of the role of the Mahisi in exposing herself sexually to

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<sup>9</sup> It’s a kind of Sacrifice, which is done with the Horse and proves the might of a King.

the sacrificed horse in the Asvamedha. It is interesting to note that there is an explicit use of female sexuality to highlight the ritual significance of the event. Here the sacrificer's wife becomes kind of 'sacrificed' who plays the role of mediator between men and God. The revealing sexuality is problematic, because it indicates how little control a woman has on her own sexuality (including 'Niyoga' as discussed above) in a patriarchal setup.

It is just not the female sexuality which is determined and controlled in a patriarchal society. The role construction around the gender is also important. As discussed above, in an epic like Mahabharata, it is mostly dialogical. The character of Draupadi also takes various turns throughout the epic in this dialogical framework. She portrays the role of a self-confident, critical of her husbands, rhetorically skilled, which is in stark contrast with her being a chaste 'Pativrata' dotting on her husbands with unfailing faith. This interplay and sometimes even clash of different levels of gender relationship can be only understood and justified when gender is construed as mutually dependent and relational.

"Thus, we are dealing here not with a binary opposition based on fixed attributes or intrinsic, essential properties ascribed to each sex, but with a hierarchical structure in which attributes depend on the relationships between different actors, and this means that they can change according to context and situation" (Malinar 2007:79).

I will try to analyze Draupadi and Yudhishtira's complicated relationship throughout their eventful life with this framework. There is a constant negotiation of their social relationship which becomes problematic every time (dice match, post match and exile, post war, etc) because they are deprived of their chance to perform their inherited social roles, in their true normative paradigm. The Dharma of being a King and a Queen, above a husband and a wife is interesting and problematic at the same time. In the social structure depicted in the Mahabharata, gender relationships are defined by marriage or other kinship ties, which in turn reflect the status of the partners in the social hierarchy. Moreover, as Judith Butler (1993) would explain it, they have to be constantly represented and performed, since it is observed and commented upon by others, of every Varna, class, and kinship group or gender.

The task of representation was challenging for the aristocracy, as they were charged with representing society (in the pre-modern sense), not only as an ordered whole, but also as

legitimate and beneficial. During crisis situations, their ideal relationship is jeopardized since royal status has been lost and its representation becomes a problem. Draupadi's question in the courtroom, her angry conversations with Yudhishtira in their exile, and her prodding after the war, all negotiate her relationship with herself and her husbands and the society. In the Aranyakaparva, after dice match, she carries over the self-assertive side of herself in the exile. She wants Yudhishtira the 'hero' of the epic, her husband, whose being a male, a king, and a Kshatriya compounds the problem of inaction for her. Her revengeful lament grows into a complaint, when she repeats the question eight times, "Why doesn't your anger grow... There is no Kshatriya without manyu (anger or wrath)..." (Malinar 2007: 82)?

Her logic is that this is a situation a warrior and a king should not tolerate, if he still claims the title 'king' and wants to be regarded as one. Again when the war is over, Draupadi severely upbraids Yudhishtira, now for wanting to abandon the kingdom he has just won, which would make their suffering meaningless. He is like a eunuch, she says, like a Kshatriya without 'danda'; he is like a madman whom his brothers, were they not crazy themselves from following him, should bound with the heretics; or he should be treated with drugs (Hiltebeitel 2002: 271). It can be seen that he is again failing to live to the social expectation of a social role. In this case, Yudhishtira is the one is facing the identity crisis the most (other people being very clear about their Dharma). "According to the very logic of her position in the gender relationship, as a Pativrata it is not only her duty to support and propel her husband, but she also has to take care that her man does not go astray or fail to live up the social standards" (Malinar 2007: 85). In consequence, he never actually faces Draupadi's words, appearance and emotions. He deflects and escapes her arguments by shifting to a different context always. This does not necessarily highlight his weaknesses or escapism, but their mutual dependence which determines the Dharma of their situation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Important studies on the symbolic aspects of the construction of sovereignty in the Mahabharata have been made by Alf Hiltebeitel (1976). Draupadi as an incarnation of goddess 'Sri' is an important symbol for the symbolic and mythological background of epic stories. As a queen Draupadi represents the goddess whose presence is necessary for making the king prosper. The possible relationships between Sri and King (to be together or not) demonstrates the two ends of ideal kingship.

It is this reason that in regular times, she has commanded so much respect and obedience from her husbands. In a dialogue with Satyabhama, she clearly delineates the Dharma of a 'Pativrata' wife. According to that, in any relationship between two people (especially husband and wife), there has to be fair balance of power. This also works for her mother-in-law, and the rest of the family members, relatives and servants, etc. This is a perspective that many feminists might not suggest: being Pativrata is a two-way street. Only a self-righteous, truthful, patient and devoted wife can expect the fruits of her actions in equal standard from her husbands. Draupadi is aware of her power, which Satyabhama mentions as obedience of her husbands to her. The model behavior of Draupadi, her Dharma, is her only charm. The Mahabharata does not speak with a single voice when it comes to 'women' or 'gender ideology'. It is clear that Draupadi's speech lends support to Butler's (1993) idea of gender as performative, when Satyabhama asks about instruments to make husbands obedient, Draupadi answers by narrating of a series of acts. By answering in this way, Draupadi emerges as a 'culturally intelligible subject' within a rule-bound discourse which is polyphonic in nature.

### **Yudhishtira's integrity, Arjuna's puissance and Bhima's honesty: Understanding masculinity**

Though Mahabharata does create a notion of mutual dependence of gender; yet masculinity and its symbolic correlates are highly charged and contested themes in the epic. They permeate the Dharma that undergirds the Mahabharata and constitutes some of its most poignant preoccupations in a way that femininity does not. It is an epic about male heroism (implied in the Kshatriya Dharma), male heirs and their masculine overtones which have to be proven time and again to suit their expectations. There are numerous cases (most of which have been discussed) where they deal with the taunting phrase, "Show you are a man!" In that way masculinity is charged with symbolic overtones more vulnerable to their identity. Yudhishtira deals with this question throughout, while Arjuna encounters this gender bending more explicitly by playing a transsexual for a year in exile in the Kingdom of Virata. Another very striking case is that of Amba/Shikhandi, who undergoes explicit 'sex' change through her ascetism.

Though, sexual characteristics and gender are shown flexible amongst both, the deities (Siva being the quintessential Ardhanareswara) and humans; but Dharma, structures and orders the actions and behaviors of each gender in the society around a firm conception. It is certainly based upon clear distinctions and eternal stability of each. Any deviation not only invites public rebuke, but also self-identity crisis.

“If gender is one of the foundational pillars upon which the elaborate edifice of Dharma rests in Mahabharata, interesting possibilities emerge when we see these seemingly stable categories subverted, challenged and transgressed. It is in liminal states such as transsexuality that the boundaries of the symbolic binaries of gender are thrown most starkly into relief, and it is here where Law and the Symbolic Order must weigh in on what is acceptable, what must be modified, and what must be denied” (Custodi 2007: 211).

Although expressed in numerous examples, I choose these two examples, as they present the challenge on their selfhood and subjectivity in a very intense way.

The notion of ‘phallus’ can be used to understand the manifestations of the challenged gendered self. The symbol of ‘phallus’ is one of the most important identity markers in the construction of masculinity. So, disparaging references to oneself or another as impotent or eunuch are among the most common forms of insults in the epic. As Lacan suggests, being a man and fulfilling the masculine roles of a protective King, chivalrous Warrior, and a virile husband is intimately wound up with possessing the phallus. Here in the case of Arjuna as ‘Brihannada’, it is not made explicit whether Arjuna is simply cross-dressing or has undergone some physiological change as well. Hildebeitel comments on this, “The epic descriptions leave it amusingly imprecise and ambiguous whether Arjuna is physiologically a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, or simply a transvestite” (Hildebeitel 2002: 154). Arjuna’s effeminization is striking indeed. We are left to wonder how can the most virile of heroes latent self can reflect transsexuality? Custodi questions it, “Is his hypermasculinity- his famous martial prowess and well-known philandering-overcompensation for his latent effeminacy? Is this a weakness in a staunchly patriarchal culture, a subtle subversion of it, or a testament to its subtlety and elasticity” (Custodi 2007: 212).

We are left to assume what Hildebeitel would call as the Pandavas and Draupadi’s ‘deepest symbolism’ (1980: 153) depicted through their characters in exile. He discusses

Madeline Biardeau's work in this regard which has dealt with these character's divine forms and meanings. In this context, he claims that Arjuna is "inescapably the foremost representative of Siva (androgynous)", whereas Draupadi in her 'Sairandhari' disguise evokes the cult of Shakti and Kali who are associated with destruction. So Draupadi is not only a manifestation of 'Sri-Lakshmi', the auspicious goddess of the constructive form and good fortune, she also represents the destructive forms of the Goddess in her totality (ibid, 153-54). This highlights her as a woman having both sides to her, a complete form, and a goddess. To me their gender bending has the indication of complementarity. Moreover, the repeated attacks on Draupadi are enhanced by the fact that the insults are overtly sexual and thus raise questions about the masculinity of her husbands, which is problematic for both.<sup>11</sup>

Especially during the year in disguise, not only physical sexual characteristics are put into question, but psychological and behavioral too; Draupadi wears the proverbial pants while Arjuna wears the skirt. The more direct explanation could be what Goldman (1993: 380) discusses when he explains the curse on Arjuna by Urvasi. She curses him to lose his manhood, but Indra (Arjuna's father) intervenes on his son's behalf and sets the term of the curse for one year. I would surmise that the gender bending in the case of these characters not only reinforces the concept of mutual dependence of gender, but also signifies the fluidity that exists in it. Mahabharata has unique ways to focus on the complementarity inherent in 'Purusa' and 'Prakriti' which works together as a system. There is a dynamicity involved in the creation and representation of the gender that is very appealing. Commenting on the variation in the masculinities which is guided by Dharma, Daniel Ingalls suggests that,

"The value of the Mahabharata to the Indian readers, the joy that they have taken in it, derives not only from its encyclopedic character, and not so much from the garbled accounts of politics and metaphysics in the 12<sup>th</sup> Book, but from a series of moral problems to which there are usually three answers given: the answer of Bhima, which is the answer of materialism, egoism, brute force; the answer of Yudhishtira, which is the answer of piety, of social virtue and tradition; and the answer of Arjuna, which falls between the two, and so reveals the finest moral qualities of man: courage, energy, pity, self-discipline" (Ingalls 1957: 43).

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<sup>11</sup> See Sally J. M. Sutherland, "Sita and Draupadi: aggressive behavior and female role-models in the Sanskrit Epics" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109.1 (1989) 63-79

Another overt and complicated example of gender bending is presented in the character of Amba/Sikhandi/Sikhandini, which takes two births for completion. This character again reinforces the need for a male heir to carry forward a patriline. Sikhandini is born to Drupada (Drupadi's father), in response to severe penance before Lord Siva. At her birth it is predicted that the child would be born a female but would turn into a male later. However, the desire for a son makes him give out the information that the child born was a son instead of a daughter. She/he grows up to be adept in all forms of arts and archery etc, and is married to a girl of another kingdom. On being found fraud, she/he leaves home to go to forest and perform severe penance.

Yaksa grants her his own masculinity in turn for her femininity as a temporary arrangement to solve the looming crisis (the king's daughter she marries plans to invade their kingdom for this fraud). However, Lord Kubera comes to the forest and finds out the 'sinful' act done by the Yaksa by giving away his 'identity', and curses him to be a woman forever and Sikhandini to be a man until she dies. Sikhandi's birth however took place to kill Bhishma (to take revenge from him). Since, he was invincible; the only way to kill him was to be a woman, as he would not raise arms on a woman. Even though it happens, it is certainly not clear why Sikhandini had to change her sex, if what pushed Bhishma to be unarmed in front of her was being a woman! Neither is there any mention of fruition to Sikhandini/Sikhandi's marriage in the epic. While Yaksha and Sikhandini's gender exchange is indicative of a cosmic balance that needs to be maintained, her changed sexuality offers less rationale. Unlike Arjuna, her masculinity is also confirmed clearly.

As ironical this may be, it makes sense. An upward movement is easier than downward in gender, as in caste. If a man wants to become a woman, for devotional reasons, or, as the story of Bhangasvana suggests (mentioned above), because women derive greater pleasure from sex; he can forsake the privileges of manhood and do so, for it is her who, at least in the scheme of the social hierarchy, loses. Similarly, I am skeptical that a woman could be cursed to manhood the same way that both Arjuna and Yaksha are cursed to femininity. "A woman who wants to become a man, on the other hand, constitutes a direct challenge to the social and political status quo, and sexual transformation thus must

be allayed, undermined, inauthenticated, made only temporary, or outright denied” (Custodi 2007: 217).

If we understand Amba/Sikhandi’s sub-story in this epic in this context, there is an interweaving of themes surrounding the construction and deconstruction of masculinity, its juxtaposition to femininity, and the entire paraphernalia of transformation of the identity and self. Amba’s shuttlecock situation in her life indicates the objectification of female sexuality in the hands of men, which leaves her in sexual and social frustration to exact revenge. Even if so, wouldn’t it have been appropriate for Sikhandini to retain her sexuality to confront Bhishma as a powerful female both physically and in essence.

Bhishma also comes up as the reigning patriarch of the epic which is highly ironic considering he abdicated everything in life. His position and status to understand the role of Dharma throughout the epic is very important, which is continually contradicting and undermining itself. He expounds upon the Dharma of kingship as the kingdom that he watched over vanished, the Dharma of fraternal relations as the family of two brothers ruthlessly kill one another, the Dharma of relations between the sexes as dies at the hand of a woman upon whom he had affected a travesty. Here too, the phallus becomes important to retain the patriarchal norms, as Sikhandi has to gain the symbolic ‘phallus’ to defeat Bhishma.

So, no matter how recurrent certain themes of femininity, motherhood, or female sexuality may be in the epic, and throughout all these episodes of transsexuality and the Mahabharata in general, it really focuses more on the male relations and power struggles. However, Lacan (1977) reminds us that an essential component in the performance of masculinity is woman as spectator and as the ‘other’. There are some feminists like Luce Irigaray (1985) who condemn this differentiation of sex only on the basis of the ‘phallus’. There is a feminine paradigm of duality and contact. Like Julia Kristeva (1984) has articulated a feminine Semiotic to contrast and complement Lacan’s masculine Symbolic. However, even till now there is a crucial symbolic significance of the ‘phallus’. There is no doubt that both male and female sexual organs have their equal ontological status and functional value and both complement each other. It is for this reason perhaps, the



androgynous Siva, the most powerful god of Hindu religion, is represented as 'lingam' with Parvati's 'yoni'.

### **Dharma of gender**

The Dharma of gender is rooted in the idea of complementarity and represented through a variety of straight and borderline gender cases in Mahabharata. It does not leave us with any finality though, and leaves us to explore the possibilities of understanding the fluid concept of gender. These images and natural peculiarities offer multiple perspectives on social construction as an objective process, but considered subjectively by the individuals in it.

My personal belief also leans towards the dynamic process of social construction of gender. Whenever we see this process through the window of Mahabharata, we always tend to remember the fairly large amount of time this epic took to take a proper form during which the Indian society did not only experience foreign thoughts coming with foreign invasion, but local thoughts also undergoing drastic ideological changes. Moreover, as a part of evolution, at any given time a society best tries to adapt to the situation in hand. When we look back centuries in historical time to find out the roots of the present behavioral patterns, we unconsciously tend to use the lens of the present. Modern liberal ideology pushes strongly for gender equality in terms of economic and social position and also of conjugal roles, as an import from the West. Nicholas Sutton observes that,

“The problem for the modern apologist of religious traditions in such societies is that one must either reaffirm the orthodox view of scripture, and thereby risk marginalization and rejection by the mainstream culture, or else seek to reinterpret the tradition and bring it into closer harmony with contemporary perspectives” (Sutton 2000: 241).

It is important to understand that the Indian thought, is deeply rooted in the concept of a 'whole', where the components of society, nature and the metaphysical world, live together to maintain a systemic harmony. There are no binaries available in the conceptualization of Dharma models for any social category. It was with this thought that the gender distinction was initiated, but like all categories, this one too was inflicted with hierarchization of everything in society.

Mahabharata, also clearly indicates at many junctures at the incoherence between the understanding and depiction of characters. This is a major problem with Mahabharata, which it encounters with every subject that it deals with. But, may be that is the beauty of the text, there is no finality. It is like a constant tussle between the values that we learn in being a part of society, but bend sometimes to suit the existential situation. Nonetheless, there is no denial of the whole text being written in a Patriarchal society, by males, and for a hyperbolic male heroism. The Dharma of each gender is contextualized in this background, and over the centuries it has changed its forms and functions but remains largely unchanged as an ontological reality.

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## Conclusion

“The irresistible course of Time affects all mortals. All Earthly things, ripened by Time, suffer destruction” (Shantiparva; Ganguli 2003: 2568).

To understand Mahabharata is a daunting task, because not only it represents everything that is finite, but also what is infinite and beyond, in terms of time, space and being. This is the classical ethereal timelessness in the epic, which makes it rich source of knowledge for generations, and for all subjects. In Mahabharata, old stories are used as guiding examples to solve the situation for the characters in the epic. This has evolved and continued in the generations where Mahabharata's main text with all its riveting stories show that the situations one feels in today's world are not unique. It has been confronted and resolved time and again, with relatively insignificant differences of time, place and protagonists. The numerous stories in the Mahabharata strongly suggest that the rich material has much more to tell us about the epic's role in the development of the history of social and religious ideas in the early Hindu tradition.

In Hindu tradition, there are considered four Yugas, in the order of Satya, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. They were marked by the predominance of certain essential qualities and each Yuga is within this cycle of four ages. The cycles are said to repeat like the seasons, waxing and waning, within a greater time-cycle of the creation and destruction of the universe. According to Mahabharata itself, and Hindu tradition too, the Mahabharata war was fought at the very end of the Dwapara Yuga, and it marked the entry into Kali Yuga (Karve 2008: 162). This cyclical change not only involved a physical destruction of human beings (which we see in Mahabharata war), but also a change in the socio-economic, political and ritual action. There was an evident rise in Adharma towards the end of the Dwapara Yuga. This Adharma was due to not following the prescriptive norms in each social situation and thus creating anarchical moments in society. It led to the total disrespect of the established social order, social institutions, and social harmony. This crisis of Dharma in all beings and society led to the creation of Mahabharata. For the

same reason Mahabharata distinctly discussed each and every aspect of social and individual life which was suffering the setback of non conformity with the stipulated Dharma. Thus, Mahabharata suggested the path of Dharma for the optimization of human efforts in each social relationship and situation.

Certain social systems discussed in Mahabharata like Patriarchy and Varna Vyavastha have formed the backbone of the Indian society, while there are many other issues that persist in not only Indian society, but in almost all societies. It focuses on the powerful reality of a war that whether people involved should participate in it or withdraw from the war and all its consequences (which is partly a hyperbolic representation of all human action) (Fitzgerald 2007: 166). The war itself is premised on the feud between a large joint Hindu family to appropriate power and authority over the people. There are also micro realities of familial adjustments, power struggle in a patriarchal household and the position of women, power struggle between the ruling classes (Brahmana and Kshatriya), and between the ruling and the ruled classes, dilemmas in administration and statecraft, and the Dharma of the individual stuck in these various macro social systems.

These realities have continued up to the present day. The feuding family, the doom of war, the power struggles of a patriarchal society, the rigid Varna Vyavastha as an evolved and complex Caste System, and everything else exists in various scales in the Indian society from then to the present. Some of the concepts like War and its repercussions has been a sad reality for almost all societies across the world at some point or another. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the two worst wars of the history of mankind, and also witnessed numerous civil wars, genocide, the consequences of which echo even today.

Mahabharata also discusses war, but only as a means of action to achieve the end of restoring or achieving a new social order. It also presents and focuses on the moral counterweight 'Shanti' (peace) to the grotesque reality of war, where the new King gets extensive instructions on numerous aspects of kingship and society and philosophy, theology, and ethics for the beginning of the new age. In a society going through a massive crisis of Dharma, while the cyclical destruction of the race represents the physical cleansing of society; the induction of the King into the Dharmic era represents

the moral cleansing. The King is just a representative of the change the society is expected to go through. As the head of the family, his kingdom, it is the foremost Dharma of the King to follow the norms to usher in a new Yuga.

However, today there is again a crisis of Dharma, both at macro and micro levels. If we talk about the Indian Society, there is undoubtedly a sharp rise in the social disorder at all the levels. The Adharma of Caste System is eating into the social harmony, the patriarchal mindset has led to the fall in the girl sex ratio, the government and administration is suffering a complete state of anarchy, there is a visible predicament to the structure of the family and power struggles in it, the Hindu religion with a striding current of fundamentalism is on the verge of total misrepresentation. In a nutshell, there is a total crisis of Dharma in socio-economic-political and religious field in the Indian Society. It can easily be universalized in various scales. This is why there is much need to revisit the Indian thought, to regulate the behavior. However, as Mahabharata says, Dharma is always relative and always has temporal and spatial limitations. Thus, no social action is correct in absolute terms, it is always to be performed and understood in a context. As we have discussed the variations and interpretations of Dharma in the first chapter.

It was for this reason that Mahabharata was chosen as a text to understand the anomalies from the lens of Dharma. Dharma forms not only a major epistemological reality in the Indian society, but it is also the basis of all socially valid actions. This expectability and acceptability of action draws various sources. The amalgamation of the oral and the written tradition in the Hindu tradition, together with the importance of thought and behavior both makes Mahabharata a rich source of such knowledge. With this purpose the two most poignant aspects of society are attempted in this study, viz. that of Gender and Varna Vyavastha. The scholarship has shown that Mahabharata can be used to study many subjects and many social institutions and categories. So it becomes difficult to choose the area of study and also the lens to study it. Moreover, all the topics are equally good and unique. The issue of Gender and Varna Vyavastha are chosen, because they are very fundamental to our social reality.

In a patriarchal household, the relationship between a man and a woman and their relationship with the society, both are important. This relationship is conditioned on Dharma, a code of conduct, and some prototypes and stereotypes. They are infused into the society through socialization by its culture. The importance of these epic texts lies in the timeless quality of the precedents set by it, which gauge the human condition well. Over time they evolve and adapt to the socio-economic-politico-religious changes, but their essence never dies. So the power struggles, the inequity in the relationship continues to exist in a patriarchal Indian society even today. The cultural image of a 'Pativrata', passive, hardworking wife, with complete devotion to her husband has stuck with the Indian woman. So have the notions of physical beauty, the polite and servile demeanor, the efficiency to handle the domestic sphere, etc have continued as the standards of perfection.

Similarly, the masculine, rough, virile, chivalrous image has stuck with the males. They are still recognized as the head of the family, the main decision maker, the caretaker, the provider of security and safety of the family. The male of the family is also expected to control the household with the utmost power and authority. Although, in some cases, the view of the woman of the family is taken and considered, yet the ultimate sanctioning authority lies with the male. With these controls, the reproduction of woman, the vocation of woman if any, the choice of children and the number of children, and the opinion of the male in almost every matter, is far more superior to that of the woman.

However, as discussed, Mahabharata does not give us only a lopsided view of the patriarchy. It talks about the mutual dependence of both the genders and how they complement each other in all aspects. This is where Dharma guides both the male and female, and prepares them to follow the stipulated path to optimize the relationship between them and the society. But it does not consider the male superiority over the female as overtly problematic, which has continued as valid stereotypical hierarchical structures even today. However, it also does not talk overtly about the suppression of women. Mahabharata proposes Dharma for both, which is complementing, not conflicting. Some of these aspects have been dealt with in the topic of Gender. Although there can indeed be a separate body of work to study this, here it is done only in relation to the central topic of Dharma.

The other issue of Varna Vyavastha is so fundamental to the Indian Society, that it is a matter of debate in all fields. The Varna Vyavastha which has molded into a degenerative Caste System decides the Dharma of each in the socio-economic-politico-religious field. That Dharma became the backbone of the smooth functioning of the society and to ensure social order. The centuries of misappropriation of power by the upper Varnas led to a total rupture of the system. Texts like Mahabharata, presented the intrinsic functional thought of the Varna Vyavastha to optimize human behavior. But in practice, even Mahabharata lacks the deheirarchization which it proposes as thought.

There is however a need to understand the motive of this disparity. Mahabharata talks of the culmination of war, needed to rid the earth of the increasing Adharma. This hierarchy and exploitation resulting from Varna Vyavastha was one such Adharmic practice, which is shunned in the after-war sermon by Bhishma to Yudhishtira in Shantiparva. It is here he clearly charts out the reason for the creation of Varna Vyavastha as a flexible structural mechanism to ensure social order. When Caste System in today's world is reproduced through the symbolic representation of injustice to Karna and Ekalavya, it is incomplete and partial understanding.

Mahabharata never justifies the acts of oppression on the lower Varnas. Although there is a marked absence of the representation of the lower Varnas, except for the 'Sutas' (bards), who recite the epic poem and carry forward its tradition and a few other characters. This is because Mahabharata is primarily a story of struggle between the upper Varnas. Mahabharata plays a very important role in using Suta's role as bards in the story. The lower classes, like Sutas were earlier disconnected from the frozen tradition of Vedas which was appropriated by the upper Varnas. Mahabharata, bridges the gap between the disadvantaged folk and the privileged upper class. The Suta's narrations of the text brought the teachings on Dharma to the common man.

This is a very important contribution of Mahabharata in simplifying the classical Sanskrit literature and its values for the masses. Mahabharata does not overtly propose any injustice by the upper Varna towards the lower Varna as a form of practice. The Shantiparva, which is a mini treatise on each topic of the society, and which is often assumed as the representative of Mahabharata's thought distinctly negates the

hierarchization of Varna Vyavastha. It is this spirit that was not evoked after the period of Mahabharata, and the power struggle between the upper two Varnas subsumed all the privileges. Before the Western concept of social equality and justice came into existence, Mahabharata talks about it in thought and spirit.

Thus, the issues of Gender and Varnashramadharma become such elemental parts of ontological reality in the Indian society that only the concept of Dharma can be best suited to explain them. For this reason the first chapter tried to lay the foundation of Dharma through which these realities could be examined. The basic concern is with the function of Dharma as a comprehensive concept of social regulation in relation to patterns of ethics in the Hindu Society. Therefore it is very important to understand the function of Dharma in Hindu life, both as a concept and an ingredient in the social processes.

It contains the inherent notion that,

“One’s role in the world (his Dharma) is an expression of his nature (his Dharma). The term *svadharma*, contains precisely this duality, generally being translated as the self’s duties (or the duties of the individual) but also meaning the nature of the self which the duties express. Dharma as the social duties rests upon and expresses a view of innate nature or constitution to which one’s role or function corresponds. The dimension of duty or pattern is implemented in the scheme of Varna-Ashrama-Dharma, the duties appropriate to one’s group (Varna), and one’s period of life (Ashrama)” (Creel 1972: 156).

With this idea in mind, this work proposed to delve into what Veena Das (1977) claimed as the ‘unification of thought and behavior’, which is extremely crucial to understanding the functioning of the Indian Society. The work is of paramount significance and is of obvious choice for scholars around the world to take a nuanced look at the social and everyday world of the Hindu people.

Its universality, vitality, significance and timelessness have generated a renewed interest of scholarship in the past few decades. Mahabharata is regularly studied right from the field of theology, ethics, philosophy, economics, sociology, political science, Indology, linguistics, dramatics, etc. There is a constant interest in studying all its Parvas (chapters), all its topics and characters, both inclusively and exclusively. The significance of Mahabharata in the rich oral tradition and various regional adoptions are also widely



studied. There are conducted conferences and seminars all across the world to discuss and celebrate the large canvas of the text and its thought.

The recent one month long ‘Jaya Utsav’ (Festival) to discuss the enormity and profundity of Mahabharata, was organized by the IGNCA (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts). It saw the convergence of all disciplines and a review of the current range and relevance of Mahabharata. The overwhelming confluence of oral and the written tradition was a eulogy to the eminence of Mahabharata and its role in the society. It was the celebration of the dynamic, everlasting tradition of Mahabharata, not only in the Indian perspective but also focusing on the universal themes it talks about. “The highest literature transcends regionalism and through it, when we are properly attuned, we realize the essential oneness of human family. The Mahabharata is of this class” (Rajagopalachari, 3).

There is also a pan national character in Mahabharata which is seen to emerge in various parts of India. The regional adaptations for the world in different forms of dramatics, poetry, television, etc also make is a part of the popular culture. This popular culture constantly reproduces the values, symbols and images for the people. This cultural reproduction is vital to understand the thought and behavior of the society. With this intent, there is a need to study such works of epics not only from a religious perspective which contain divinized characters, but also from a social perspective as they are built deep into the psyche of a Hindu and gets reflected in his social action and relationships. In a society like India which is characterized by its unique emphasis on a pantheistic relation between god, nature and society, such text would be of immense relevance.

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## **Glossary of Important Terms**

<b>Adharma</b>	Injustice; improper conduct; negation of Dharma
<b>Ahamkara</b>	The individual will; ego
<b>Ahimsa</b>	The practice of not harming; non-violence
<b>Apaddharma</b>	Law of distress; appropriate behavior in times of extremity
<b>Artha</b>	Material wealth; profit; purpose
<b>Arthasastra</b>	A treatise on 'Artha' and society, written by Chanakya
<b>Aryan</b>	A race in ancient northern India
<b>Ashrama</b>	Mode or Stage of life
<b>Ashwamedha</b>	The royal ritual of the horse-sacrifice
<b>Atman</b>	Self; oneself; soul
<b>Bala</b>	Force; power
<b>Bhagvad Gita</b>	A long discourse by Krishna to Arjuna, delivered at the beginning of the war, on the battlefield, to resolve Arjuna's moral dilemma: to fight or not to fight?
<b>Bhakti</b>	Devotion; loyalty; reverential service
<b>Brahma</b>	God; the creator of the entire universe
<b>Brahmacharya</b>	First of the four Ashramas, which is the student stage of a person's life, till first 25 years of life
<b>Brahmana</b>	One of the four Varnas create by Lord Brahma; comprising teachers and priests
<b>Chandala</b>	A lower Varna who deals with the disposal of corpses and such tasks
<b>Daiva</b>	'Of the gods'; fate; also a kind of 8 marriages mentioned in Mahabharata
<b>Danda</b>	Punishment; the rod of the royal rule

Dasi	Maid servant
Desha	Place; country
Dharma	Proper conduct in life
Dharmaraja	Righteous king; who protects Dharma
Dharmasastra	Ancient Sanskrit texts said to be the source books on 'dharma'
Dharmasutra	They are the first four texts of Dharmasastras, and also contain knowledge on 'Dharma'
Dukha	Suffering and sorrow
Grihastha	The second of the four Ashramas (25-50 years), which is a person's householder stage
Guru	Guide; mentor
Gurukul	A residential school
Himsa	Violence or harm
Hindu	Belonging to Hindu religion or culture (a wide term)
Jati	A sub-category of intermixed Varnas that originated after Vedic Era
Jnana	Knowledge
Kala	Time; name of the God of time
Kama	Desire; Passion; name of the God of love and desire
Karma	Action; the residual power of previous actions which results in subsequent events and births
Kshatriya	Second of the Varnas; comprises warriors and aristocrats
Kshatriyadharm	The appropriate dharma of Kshatriya
Loka-samgraha	Social wealth
Loka-yata	Atheistic; materialistic philosophy
Mahabharata	An epic poem written by Krishna Dvaipayana Vaisampayana
Mahisi	Queen; chief wife

Manas	Mind
Manusmriti	A Dharmasastra text written by Manu
Manyu	Self-assertion; anger
Maya	Magic; illusion
Mayasabha	Palace created by the demon Maya for Pandavas
Mimansasutra	An important ancient text written by Rishi Jaimini
Moksha	Salvation; freedom from future rebirth
Mokshadharm	Conduct proper for the achievement for Moksha
Nastika	Unorthodox; Unbeliever of Vedas
Nisadha	Offspring of the marriage of a Brahmana with a Vaishya woman
Nivritti	‘Turning back’; ideological stance of indifference to and renunciation of worldly values
Niyoga	The practice whereby a wife or a widow is legitimately impregnated by someone other than her husband, typically the husband’s brother or a Brahmana
Pandita	Female scholar
Pativrata	A woman devoted to her husband
Pitra-rina	Debt to father, ancestors
Prakriti	The substrate of all psycho-physical phenomenality; matter (including mental matter); nature; (when plural) constituents
Pralaya	Dissolution; the reabsorption of the universe at the end of a cycle of time
Pravritti	‘Turning forth’; ideological stance embracing the maintenance and development of society, family, economy and environment
Puranas	Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious texts containing many stories
Purusa	‘Person’; the soul; the principle of subjectivity
Purushartha	Aims of life (namely Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha)

Puruskara	Autonomous human action
Rajadharma	Royal duty; proper code of governance
Rajasuya	Royal consecration ritual
Rakshasa	A type of cannibal monster (male)
Rakshasi	Female cannibal
Ramayana	An epic poem written by Maharishi Valmiki
Sabha	Court; assembly hall
Sadharana dharma	One's duty as a human being; based on conscience
Sairandhari	Chambermaid
Sakhi/Sakha	Friend/ Companion
Samanya dharma	Similar to Sadharma dharma
Samhita	Some post-Vedic texts like Bhrigu Samhita
Samkhya	'Enumeration'; a metaphysically dualistic philosophy notable for its enumeration of the constituents (tattvas) of the phenomenal realm
Samsara	The phenomenal realm of repeated embodiment
Samskara	Rite of passage
Sanyasa	Fourth and last Ashrama; in the last lap of life trying to attain Moksha
Sastra	A type of didactic text
Sattva	'Beingness'; goodness; in Samkhya philosophy, one of the three gunas
Sattvastha	The condition experiencing love and joy
Shudra	The fourth Varna; comprising service class
Sloka	A type of meter used in Mahabharata
Stridharma	The appropriate duty and behavior of women

Suta	A low Varna court factotum often associated with recounting narratives or driving chariots
Svabhava	Way of being; inherent nature
Svadharmā	One's own duty or appropriate behavior relating to one's position
Swayamvara	A type of marriage (in which a bride ceremonially chooses or is won by her partner)
Upanishads	Didactic Hindu Philosophical texts revolving around the nature of prana or life energy; e.g. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad
Vaishya	The third Varna; comprising merchants, trader and agriculturists, etc
Vanaprastha	The third Ashrama in one's life (50-75 years), characterized by moving to Vana (Forest); as a preparatory stage for the Sanyasa Ashrama
Varna Vyavastha	A social structural arrangement which originated in the Vedic period; comprised 4 classes- Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra
Varna	Any of the four classes: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra
Varnaashramadharmā	Specific duties according to Varna and Ashrama
Varnadharmā	Specific duties according to Varna
Veda	Didactic Hindu Philosophical texts; 4 in number- Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva
Vishesh dharmā	Similar to Svadharmā
Yajna	Vedic Sacrifice
Yajnavalkya Smṛiti	A Dharmasastra text written by Yajnavalkya
Yaksha	A type of semi-divine chthonic being, often associated with a particular locality
Yakshi	A female Yaksha
Yoni	Womb; female organs; origin
Yuga	A fairly large time-period; an epoch

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