

**REPRESENTATION OF VISUAL DISABILITY  
IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND ITS IMPACT  
ON MODERN LITERATURE AND SOCIETY**

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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## Introduction

For most disabled people, ignorance displayed by the social world colours our identity formation. Whether we, who are designated as 'different', do not see ourselves as poor, crippled, or disabled, these terms nevertheless describe an essential reality in a society tuned to the tyranny of normality and perfection.

Very few people accept the fact that disability is as much a social construct as other categories such as gender. In short, disability is conceived as a naturalised category. Society thus exhibits a structural amnesia about a particular category of people, who, because they do not fit into the hegemonic discourse of 'normality', are excluded, separated and socially disempowered. This social and cultural apartheid is sustained by the existence of a built environment which lacks amenities for the disabled and solely caters to the needs of the more 'complete' and able-bodied 'Other'. This social disregard coupled with experiences of social, economic and political subjugation deny the disabled a voice, a space, and even power, to disrupt these deeply entrenched normative ideals that deprive them their social presence and any semblance of identity. Disabled people, especially women, are encouraged to be childlike and apologetic towards the able-bodied society, which judges them as the beings that would struggle, as does much of contemporary academic discourse. Unfortunately such incipient stigmatisation against those who carry the insidious label of 'disability' with them results in an exclusion that creates both a sense of despair and distress, often leading to a suppression and non-recognition of the 'lack' that marks them initially as different.<sup>1</sup>

The attitudes and perspectives of non-disabled people toward people with disabilities can, and do, have a profound impact on our daily lives. Even for a disabled person who has never before heard the phrase "moral model" or "human rights model," the descriptions of the real-world attitudes upon which these phrases are based are intimately familiar and highly relevant to our lives. They are familiar because we confront them, for better or for worse, in the people we meet, including in our families. And they are relevant because when certain attitudes are pervasive throughout all society, they directly and pragmatically affect what services or human rights are – or are not – available to us.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Barnes, et al. *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction*. Polity Press, 1999. p. 14

<sup>2</sup> Donald D. Kirtley. *The Psychology of Blindness*. Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1964. p. 44

This holds as true in developing nations as it does in rich nations. Disabled people have unequal access to resources in their environment not only because they are disabled, or because their country is poor, but also because people and programmes following the moral, medical, or charity models (rather than the social or human rights models) may create barriers that prevent their equal participation in society.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident from the fact that the definition of blindness has not changed yet in dictionaries. The 1912 printing of the World Publishing Company's college edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* defines blind as follows: "without the power of sight; sightless; eyeless; lacking insight or understanding: done without adequate directions or knowledge; as, blind search. Reckless; unreasonable; not controlled by intelligence; as, blind destiny; Insensible; drunk; Illegible; indistinct. In architecture, false, walled up, as, a blind window."<sup>4</sup> The 1960 edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* says: "blind. Sightless. Lacking discernment; unable or unwilling to understand or judge; as, a blind choice. Apart from intelligent direction or control; as, blind chance. Insensible; as, a blind stupor; hence, drunk. For sightless persons; as, a blind asylum. Unintelligible; illegible; as, blind writing."<sup>5</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of blindness is "Want of sight or want of intellectual or moral perception, delusion, ignorance, folly, recklessness."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, according to definition of *Hindi Shabd Sagar* the definition of blindness is "Without intellectual, unknown, stupid, without wisdom."<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, one needs to record not only the pain and anguish of disabled lives, but also the resistance to the oppression inherent in living with a label which evokes and attaches a negative value to what it perceives as a 'lack' or 'deficit' as well as 'difference'<sup>8</sup> The normative culture both in India and the world over, carries existential and aesthetic anxieties about difference of any kind, be it caste, class, gender or disability. This is borne out by the people who have lived a peripheral existence on account of their deviation from the societal parameters that are considered normative leading to a creation of a living reality of acute 'marginalisation,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 50

<sup>4</sup> *New World Dictionary of the American Language*. World Publishing Company's college edition of Webster, 1912. p. 30

<sup>5</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. (Edition) 1960. p. 32

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, Vol 2, p. 285

<sup>7</sup> *Hindi Shabd Sagar*, p. 34

<sup>8</sup> Donald D. Kirtley. *The Psychology of Blindness*. Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1964. p. 66

discrimination and stigmatisation'.<sup>9</sup> The growing years of a disabled person are thus characterised by markers such as 'disabled', handicapped, crippled, differently-abled and special. The contradiction between the self and the other thus begins very early in life as they begin the process of contending with their disability and constantly comparing the appearance of their incomplete body with the 'perfect' bodies surrounding them.

Disability has often been considered as a symbolic representation of mythologically constructed perceptions such as it being a symbol of immorality, foolishness, destructive powers, etc. A scrutiny of Indian mythological literature in this direction shows that orthodoxy regarding visual disability is firmly rooted in the mindset, that it becomes impossible to obliterate the myths constructed by it, and that these prejudices are perpetually prevalent in our society.

In Indian mythological literature, it can be observed that characters with visual disability have been portrayed in various forms. First of all, it should be noted that the Hindu believes in the Karma theory, or that the present life is the result of one's past life's deeds or Karma. For instance, in *Jyotishvidya* (astrology) and *Jataka Katha*, three kinds of karma have been described. According to *Nitishataka shloka*, it is said that a person who is able to see with one eye (*kana*) cannot be a sage or a holy person because he or she is not pure. Thus, mythological sources have played an important role in perpetuating such perceptions about visual disability.

This work is an attempt to offer a scrutiny of some of these mythological sources. The scrutiny would involve mythological characters (their representation and their social status) and proverbial statements that serve to construct certain perceptions, viewpoints and attitudes towards visual disability. It would then make an attempt to show the impact of these mythologies on modern society, literature and culture. It is obvious that modern Indian literature derives a lot from mythological discourse. As a result, perceptions towards disability are perpetuated even in contemporary Indian literature. In subsequent sections, therefore, I would offer an analysis of selected contemporary writings from the perspective of their depiction of visual disability and trace the influence of mythological sources on them, as also their sociological influence in turn. The aim of this analysis would be to point out how misrepresentation of visual disability continues even in contemporary literature. By thus problematizing the mythological discourse and its legacy, I would be aiming towards offering an alternative perception towards visually challenged people, involving their status in society, their abilities, disabilities, and limitations.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Oliver. *DISABILITY: From Theory to Practice*. New York: Houndmills, 1996. p. 145



An interesting perspective on Indian attitudes to disability is seen in two forms of mythology: the traditional Hindu myths which still play an important role in shaping social norms and values, and the literature which has impact on popular culture and society. In Hindu mythology, the portrayal of people with disabilities is overwhelmingly negative, but also exhibits a strong gender bias in terms of the perceived capacities of disabled men and women. Disabled men in the Hindu myths are in some cases powerful and capable people. However, the visually disabled King Dhritarashtra and the orthopaedically impaired Shakuni side with the forces of evil in the Mahabharata war. Such images of powerful but evil and cruel disabled men have been reinforced by representations of historical figures such as Taimur Lang.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, women with disabilities in Hindu mythology are simply irrelevant. A prime example comes in a story from the Karthik Poomima, where Lord Vishnu refuses to marry the disfigured elder sister of Lakshmi, saying that there is no place for disabled people in heaven. The sister is instead married to a peepul tree.<sup>11</sup>

The study of disability in recent and earlier academic researches has mainly received attention in social sciences. Very few literary critics have come forward and paid attention to this area, and disability studies have not gained sufficient impetus among the researchers of marginalized literature either. From secondary education to the research level, we come across studies about class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on, but the study of disability, an equally important register of liminality, has not yet gained academic momentum. In the West, one can notice a body of writing that can be described as disability literary criticism. For instance, Jacques Derrida, in his book *Memoirs of Blindness*, has accepted that persons with impairment can be the starting point for elaborating “theory, ethics, novels and description.”<sup>12</sup> This body also includes writings of scholars such as Vicfinkelstein, Mike Oliver and Collin Barues. They believe that ‘impairment’ is there in a person because of his or her physical condition, but ‘disability’ is a social phenomenon. Similarly, Michel-Co, in his book *Psychology of Blindness*, holds the view that it is society that mainly constructs disability. In India, however, hardly any attention has been given towards the socio-psychological construction of disability. Researches in India are concentrated on the social conditions of disabled people, their rehabilitation and so

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<sup>10</sup> B.G. Gokhale. *Indian Thoughts throughout the Ages: A Study of Dominant Concepts*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961. pp. 27-28

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 42

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. p. 28

on. For example, J.N. Karna in his study of forty NGOs examines how they are working towards the rehabilitation of disabled people.

Thus, it is quite clear that the existing research in this area so far does not reflect on disability as a socially constructed identity like class and gender. As I described above, Indian scholars have been viewing disability merely as an impairment and are focussing on ways of coping with it. Although Western writers mentioned above have started analysing disability as a social construction, they too have not so far gone to the very root of the problem.

In my view, the root of the problem lies in the way disability has been represented. Since my focus is to be on disability in the Indian context, representation of disability in Indian mythology becomes significant, because it is mythology that forms a major part of Indian discourse. Besides, by taking up the issue of representation of disability, I am going to make a major departure from the existing trend in disability research. Whereas the existing research on disability is inclined more towards the socio-historical aspects of disability, my research is going to be more literature-specific.

As primary sources, I would begin with an analysis of significant parts of the *Atharva Veda*, the *Rig Veda*, Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the *Brahma Purana*, the *Deva Purana*, the *Jyotish Shastra* and the *Jatak Katha*. I would use these sources in order to point out various proverbial statements that project disability negatively or positively. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, contain not only proverbial statements but also characters who are actually disabled. These two epics, therefore, would help me to further analyse the projection of disability in Indian society. Finally, in order to show the impact of mythological discourse on modern Indian society and literature, I would take up Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yuga* (1953) and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989).

My technique would primarily be analytical. I would locate relevant portions from my primary sources and analyse them in the context of the construction, representation and projection of disability in Indian society. I have not been able to find translations of all my primary sources. In such cases, I have offered my own translation of the Sanskrit text. Since my objective is to alter the perception towards disability, I have used a deconstructionist method throughout my research.

The work is divided into five chapters including an introduction and the conclusion. Chapter I is "Discourse on Visual Disability in Major Indian Mythological Literature." This

chapter is a scrutiny of the discourses that existed in the Indian mythologies. It is primarily an examination of statements which were represented in scriptures and in the mythologies.

Chapter 2, “The *Mahabharata* and the Visual Disability Discourse”, is a study of the discourses about visual disability in the *Mahabharata*. This chapter examines the major visually disabled characters of *Mahabharata*.

Chapter 3 is titled “The Impact of the Mythological Representation of Visual Disability Discourse on Contemporary Literature and Society”. This chapter studies contemporary literary texts which derive their sources from Indian mythology. It is an effort to examine to what extent these works reflect stereotypical representation of visual disability and how this type of literary representation of visual disability has contributed to perpetuate mythologically constructed notions in contemporary literature too and what impact it has on society.

The final section, “Conclusion”, summarizes the argument of the dissertation. It particularly notes that the notion about visual disability in the contemporary socio-academic realm is a consequence of previously constructed mythological ideas.

## CHAPTER 1

### Discourse on Visual Disability in Major Indian Mythological Literature

The question as to why a person becomes blind was the subject of study of the Shastra givers. This problem was analyzed from various perspectives of religion, medicine, etc. and attempts were made to find out reasons for the loss of sight. Many incidences of a person losing sight due to accidents, concurrent conditions, punishments, etc. have been documented. I will present a description of these reasons attached while keeping in view all these factors.

The popular belief of this age was that a person suffers from various sorrows because of the bad deeds committed by him and it is due to these sins alone that he becomes handicapped by losing sight or turning lame etc.<sup>1</sup> The non-religious deeds (conduct) of the ruler along with those of the individual were also considered as reasons for the handicapping of the ruled. In *Mahabharata*, it has been said that due to the non-religious conduct of kings, physically challenged people like the blind etc are born.<sup>2</sup> It has also been said in the 'Aranyak Parva' of *Mahabharata* that a man becomes blind because of the sins of former life. The statement of Dhritrashtra where he says that "I still can't see through my eyes of wisdom as to what was that act of sin because of which I have turned blind"<sup>3</sup>, clearly highlights the belief that a man loses sight because of the sins committed by him in his former life. This belief still prevails in India. According to Manu also, a man becomes blind, deaf, etc. because of the sins of earlier life.<sup>4</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana* also says, while articulating the Karma Theory<sup>5</sup>, that a man becomes blind, one-eyed or an idiot because of the bad deeds committed by him.<sup>6</sup> Buddhist and Jain literature too state that the deeds of a man are the causes of his happiness or sorrow.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mahabharata*, Uddyog, 37, 40; *Brahmavaivarta Purana* Part 1, p. 176; part 2, p. 603; *Manusmriti*. 1, 52; *Milindpanho*, p. 52; *Saddharpundrik*, p. 91; *MahaVastu*, part 2, pp. 335-36; *Angutaranikaya*, part 2, pp. 89-90; *Jain*, part 2, p. 362; etc.

<sup>2</sup> *Mahabharata*, Aar. 198, 34-35

<sup>3</sup> Naasaudhiya Sampratipashyati Sma  
Kim Naam Kritvahamchakshu revam  
Jaatah Prithivyamiti Paarthiveshu  
Pravra jya Kaunteymathapi Rajyat (*Mahabharat*. Aar. 119, 11)

<sup>4</sup> *Manusmriti*. 11, 52

<sup>5</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Part 1, pp. 174-76; Ibid Part 2, p. 603.

<sup>6</sup> "Karmana Chaandhah Kanashcha Kutsitashcha Svakarmana" (*Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Part 1, p. 174);  
"Keshinmoorkhan Kechidandhah" (*Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Part 2, p. 603)

<sup>7</sup> *Milindpanho*. p. 52; *Saddharpundrik*. p. 91; *Maha Vastu*. Part 2, pp. 335-36; *Angutaranikaya*. Part 2, pp. 89-90; *VinayaVastu*. Part 1, p. 242; *Jain*. Part 1, pp. 53-54; Ibid, Part 2, pp. 363, 367, 430

In *Acharangasutta* and *Sutrakritang*, the reason for blindness of a person is said to be the repercussions of his bad deeds.<sup>8</sup> In *Saddharmapundarik*, it has been said that people are born as blind because of their wrongdoings of the earlier life.<sup>9</sup> *Mahavastu* also tells us that because of bad deeds, after suffering a lot of pains when people take birth in human species, they are born as blind, lunatic etc.<sup>10</sup> In texts like *Anguptarnikay*, *Sanyuktanikay* and so on also, description of human beings as suffering pains and sorrow and getting birth as blind, deaf, etc. are given.<sup>11</sup>

The literature also informs us as to committing what type of deeds makes a man blind. In the 'Taittiriya Samhita' of *Krishna Yajurveda* it has been said that when Advaryu performs Tarpana in the absence of fire (Agni), then he becomes blind.<sup>12</sup> According to *Mahabharata* and *Manusmriti*, a person who steals a lamp becomes blind.<sup>13</sup> According to *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, any one who lights lamps on earth becomes blind and is born blind till seven births.<sup>14</sup> The Puranakar again says that those sinners who throw a lamp, Mani, Shivlinga, Shaligram, etc. on the earth become handicapped, blind, lame, etc.<sup>15</sup> The other great sin was looking at other men's women with bad intentions. According to *Mahabharata*, those who stare other men's woman with bad intentions are born blind.<sup>16</sup>

According to *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, the one who looks at the lips, face, etc. of the other woman lustily, becomes blind.<sup>17</sup> According to the Puranakar, if the woman looks at her husband with bad intentions, then she is born as a blind woman.<sup>18</sup> The information of various other sins with respect to blindness of a person has also been given. According to *Markandeya Purana*, a person who castrates bullocks is first born as impotent, then after taking birth in the species of insects, Chandals and so on, becomes blind, deaf, etc.<sup>19</sup> According to *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, an idol thief becomes blind for seven lives.<sup>20</sup> The assassin of a Brahmin becomes blind

<sup>8</sup> *Jain*, Part 1, pp. 53-54; *ibid*, Part 2, pp. 363, 367, 430

<sup>9</sup> *Saddharmapundrik*, p. 91

<sup>10</sup> *MahaVastu*, Part 2, page 335-36

<sup>11</sup> *Anguttaranikaya*, Part 2, pp. 85, 89-90; Part 3, pp. 94-95; *Sanyuktanikaya*, Part 1, pp. 92-93

<sup>12</sup> *Krishna Yajurveda*, ('Taittiriya Samhita') 6.1.8; 6.2.9; 5.1.3

<sup>13</sup> "Deephartaam Bhavedandhastamogatirasuprabhah". *Mahabharata*. Translation 101. 5;

"Deephartaam Bhavedandha." *Manusmriti*. 11 (6)

<sup>14</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Part 1, pp. 119-20

<sup>15</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Part 2, p. 772

<sup>16</sup> "Pardareshou ye Mudhashchakshurasdhratam Prajujyate. Tenah Dusntasvabhaven Jatyandhaste Bhavanti". – *Mahabharata*. Translation 113, 49

<sup>17</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Part1, pp. 283-86; *ibid* Part 2 (Translation), p. 423

<sup>18</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Part 2, p. 733

<sup>19</sup> *Markandeya Purana*, 95, 34-35

<sup>20</sup> *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Part 2, p. 772

for four consecutive lives after taking birth in various bad species.<sup>21</sup> One who steals the gold of a Brahmin or God, after enduring lots of pain in Hell, becomes blind for three lives.<sup>22</sup> An unworthy person who touches a Brahmin or God, after taking birth in many perverted species, is born as an impotent, leprous, blind Brahmin.<sup>23</sup> One who puts down fire is born as a bird for seven births, as a patient for seven births, as poor for three births, as miser for seven births and as bald and blind for three lives.<sup>24</sup> According to Manu, if an unworthy Brahmin takes grants, then gold and grains taken in grant destroy age, land and cow destroy body, horse destroys eyes, clothes destroy skin, ghee destroys 'teja' and 'til' taken in grant destroys one's offspring.<sup>25</sup>

In Buddhist and Jain texts too, it has been said that doing some specific bad deeds makes a person blind. According to *Sankichcha Jataka*, the assassin of mother and father, after suffering many sorrows and taking birth in various perverted species, becomes blind.<sup>26</sup> According to *Saddharmapundarik*, one who misbehaves with the preachings of Sutranta, is born as blind.<sup>27</sup> In *Mahavastu*, it has been said that any one who misbehaves with the Bodhisattvas becomes blind, visionless, luckless, helpless, etc.<sup>28</sup> The Jain text *Sutrakritanga* states that speaking such things which convey true and false meanings at the same time, killing others, etc. are some acts committing which makes a man take birth after death at such places, where Asuras (demons) and wrong doers dwell. Later, such a man is born as blind, deaf or dumb.<sup>29</sup>

The evidence of various people who were born blind because of their sins, wrong doings, etc. are also described in the literature. The Chinese traveler Hiuen-Tsang, while giving details of the blindness of Prince Kunal, writes that he became blind because of his previous sins and he quotes two (anushruti) legends in this respect. According to one, the prince had blinded 100 deer in his last birth and that's why he became blind in this life. According to another, he had blinded an Arhat and because of that sin he became blind in this life.<sup>30</sup> The traveller, while giving the account of a snake (Mulichand) who used to serve as security to Buddha, writes that because of

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp. 771-772

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Part 1, p. 262

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Part 2, pp. 771-772

<sup>25</sup> "Hiranyamaurannam cha Bhoorgaushchapyoshatastanum. Ashvashchakshustvachem Vaaso Dhritam Tejastilah Prajah". *Manusmriti* 4, 189

<sup>26</sup> *Jataka*, Samhita 530, Part 5, pp. 268-69

<sup>27</sup> *Saddharmapundrik*, p. 267

<sup>28</sup> *Mahavastu*, Part 2, p. 335

<sup>29</sup> *Jain*, Part 2, pp. 367, 430

<sup>30</sup> Yuan, (Aon Yuan Chuang's Travels in India) Part1, pp. 245-246

the sins of his past life, this snake was born as blind.<sup>31</sup> In *Mahabharata* and *Sam Jataka* too, examples of people becoming blind due to bad deeds are given. The author in *Mahabharata* tells us in the 'Karna Parva' about a blind wild beast who had earned the power to destroy all through 'tapa' in his earlier life and that's why Brahma had made him blind.<sup>32</sup> Since wicked intentions were catalysts to sinful deeds, they also turned out to be reasons for blindness. While stating the reasons behind Dukulak and his wife being blind, the *Jatakakar* tells us that in his earlier life Dukulak was a Vaidya (Healer) and on the suggestion of his wife, he blinded one of the eyes of a patient. Because of that sin, both husband and wife lost sight in this life.<sup>33</sup>

The literature of this age also tells us about people getting blind because of the curses and anger of sages and seers, Gods, etc. The *Mahabharatakar* tells us that Dhritrashtra's blindness was because of the ills of his mother and the anger of Maharishi (the great sage).<sup>34</sup> In 'Adi Parva', he tells us that once Uttang has gone to the palace of king Paushya as guest. When he was given polluted grain, he became angry and cursed the king to turn blind.<sup>35</sup> In 'Adi Parva' itself again, the *Mahabharatakar* gives us an account of the blindness of Kshatriyas (Warrior Class) because of the curse of sage Aurva.<sup>36</sup> The *Mahabharatakar* also gives us information that Lord Shiva had destroyed the eyes of Bhaga, a God, after becoming angry with him.<sup>37</sup> In *Kathasaritsagar*, an account is given where a gang of bandits starts looting a town and its temple and when the citizens of the town pray to Lord Shiva for help, an enraged Lord Shiva destroys the sight of the bandits.<sup>38</sup> In *Kathasaritsagar* itself, the story of a minister is given who becomes blind because of the curse of the sage and the snake (Naga).<sup>39</sup>

Generosity was a great virtue in this period. The stories of Princes, Kings, Bodhisattvas and Arhats donating their eyes to those who needed them are described as tales of great pride in the Buddhist and Brahmin literature and foreigners' accounts. The *Ramayanakar* gives us information of Raja Alark's generous grant of his eyes to a Brahmin well versed in Vedas ("Netra Uddatyavimaho Dadau"), when the latter begged for the same.<sup>40</sup> The *Mahabharatakar*

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, Part 2, p. 134

<sup>32</sup> *Mahabharata*. Karna 49, 31, 40

<sup>33</sup> *Jataka Samhita*. 540, Part 6

<sup>34</sup> "Maaturdoshadrisheh Kopadandh Ev Vyajaayat". *Mahabharata*. Adi 61, 78

<sup>35</sup> "Yasmanmey Ashuchyanna Dadasi Tasmadandho bhavishyasiti". *Mahabharata*. Adi 3, 126

<sup>36</sup> *Mahabharata*. Adi, 169, 18-25; ibid. Adi 170, 19

<sup>37</sup> *Mahabharata*. Adi. 103, 9; ibid. Sauptik 18, 16, ibid. trans.131.1; ibid. Aar. 41,12

<sup>38</sup> *Kathasaritsagar*, Part 2, pp. 511-12

<sup>39</sup> *Kathasaritsagar*, Part 2, pp. 215-31

<sup>40</sup> *Ramayana*. Ayodhya 12, 5

informs us that the king of Kashi, Pratardan gained incomparable glory in this world and a supreme place in the other world after donating both his eyes to some Brahman.<sup>41</sup> In *Vessantar Jataka*, Prince Vessantar is described as a person who wishes to donate his eye to some needy person during his childhood and youth.<sup>42</sup> The story of donation of eyes to a needy by king Shivi has been described in *Milindapanho*, and *Avadanshatak*,<sup>43</sup> and in more detail in *Shivi Jataka* where the Jatakakar tells us that Shakra asks the king for one of his eyes in the disguise of a Brahmin and the king gives him both of his eyes.<sup>44</sup> The Chinese travellers Itsing and Fa-Hian also give us the information of donation of eyes by Buddha as Bodhisattva, for the welfare of humanity.<sup>45</sup> Fa-Hian writes, while giving account of this event that in the Gandhar territory ruled by Ashok's son Dharmavardhan, Bodhisattva donated his eyes for the welfare of living beings.<sup>46</sup>

In the literature, there are also accounts of the events where the sages and monks, who are oriented towards others' happiness, have made themselves blind on their own, when their eyes have proved to be barriers in their noble path. In *Kathasaritsagar*, one such event is described where a young monk blinds himself. According to the story, the young monk goes for alms to the house of a businessman. The wife of the businessman gets attracted by the eyes of the young monk. At this, the monk draws out his eyes and while keeping them on his palms tells her that if she is so pleased with them then she can keep them herself. The wife of the businessman got shocked at this but the generous, courageous monk said that this has enhanced the virtue of his monk-life and that's why she must not feel sorry with it.<sup>47</sup>

At many times people have lost their eyes in various accidents. Such accidents have happened many times due to poisonous trees or consumption of poisonous fruits while living amid forests or while traveling. The Mahabharatakar presents the details of a similar accident while narrating the story of the blindness of Upamanyu. Compelled by hunger Upamanyu eats leaves of the 'Aak' tree in forest. Since Aak leaves are saline, bitter, dry and thus sharp flavoured, Upamanyu lost his vision after eating them.<sup>48</sup> In *Bhagavatpurana* and *Mahabharata*

<sup>41</sup> *Mahabharata*. Shantiparva 226, 20

<sup>42</sup> *Jataka Samhita*, 547, Part 6, p. 493

<sup>43</sup> *Milindapanho*, pp. 93-95, *Avadanshatak*, p. 85

<sup>44</sup> *Jataka Samhita*, 499, Part 4

<sup>45</sup> Fa-Hian, in *The Travels of Fa-Hian*, pp. 12, 70; Siyuki, *The Buddhist Record of the Western World*, Part 1, pp. 17, 48, 69; Itsing in *A record of the Buddhist Religion as described in India and the Malaya Archipelago*, p. 196

<sup>46</sup> Fa-Hian, p. 12; Siyuki, Part 1, p. 17

<sup>47</sup> *Kathasaritsagar*. Part 1, pp. 246-52

<sup>48</sup> *Mahabharata*. Adiparva. 3, 52-78



while giving account of the accident in which sage Chyavan lost his sight, it has been said that because of harsh 'Tapa', a lot of sand had deposited on him which had concealed his body. In such condition Sukanya the daughter of king Sharyati, considering them as strange shining objects curiously pricks the eyes of the sage while not knowing the reality and thus the sage becomes blind.<sup>49</sup> In the *Supparak Jataka*, the Jatakakar while describing the incident in which Nihyamak Supparak lost his eyes tells us that Supparak used to do voyages through waters regularly with ships. In one of such voyage, he lost his sight due to the saline water of the sea.<sup>50</sup> In *Ubhatobhatta Jataka*, the Jatakakar while narrating the accident in which a greedy fisherman lost his eyes tells us that once he went to catch fish with his son. When the hook got struck with a stalk, he thought that it had struck a big fish. Driven by the greed to catch the big fish alone, he entered into water where after colliding with the stalk in haste both of his eyes came out and he lost sight.<sup>51</sup> In *Phonsakh Jataka*, an account is given where after getting his right eye blinded by a Yaksha, King Brahmadata sits beneath a tree. At that very time, a pointed bone falls from above on his left eye as a vulture was eating meat on the tree and he loses sight of his left eye too.<sup>52</sup> In *Divyavadan*, the incident of pecking of the eyes of a Shreshti's son by vulture ("Uchchangam Pakshi") has been described.<sup>53</sup> In *Sam Jataka*, while narrating the incident of eye-loss of Dukulak and his wife, the Jatakakar tells us that in a hole beneath the tree under which they were standing, a snake used to stay and because of his venomous breath, they became blind.<sup>54</sup> In *Parantap Jataka* too, information has been given about the blindness of a Purohit due to a snake's breath.<sup>55</sup> Because of catastrophes like fire, flood, etc., many times people managed to save their life only while losing their family, property and body parts. An accident like this has been described in 'Adi Parva'. The Mahabharatakar, while giving account of the living beings burning in the fire of Khandav forest writes that many of them got burned in fire, many lost their eyes and the bodies of many of them had torn down. Even in a situation like this, all of them were running.<sup>56</sup> But alongwith this it also gives evidence of people becoming handicapped, disfigured or blind and yet surviving after facing fire accidents.

<sup>49</sup> *Mahabharata*, Aar. 122, 1-27; Part 9, 3, 19

<sup>50</sup> *Jataka Samhita*. 463, Part 4

<sup>51</sup> *Jataka Samhita*. 139, Part 1

<sup>52</sup> *Jataka Samhita*. 353, Part 3

<sup>53</sup> *Divyavadanam*. p. 264

<sup>54</sup> *Jataka Samhita*. 540, Part 6

<sup>55</sup> *Jataka Samhita*. 416, Part 3

<sup>56</sup> *Mahabharata*. Adiparva 217, 5

We find instances of loss of vision while weeping in deep grief or making the adversary blind in case of enmity, greed or revenge, etc. also described. Such stories are described while detailing both the human and animal world, and through studying both of them, we can find the objective truth. In 'Aranyak Parva', the Mahabharatakar informs us about an instance when the grief ridden Brahmin parents of a boy lose their eyes while crying for their son.<sup>57</sup> In *Mahavastu*, the story of Mahaprajapati Gautami becoming blind while weeping after the renunciation of home by Gautama, has been given<sup>58</sup> and in *Vinayavastu* of Mulasarvastivadis, the parents of Shrona Kotikarna are told to have become blind while crying after their son Shrona has gone away.<sup>59</sup> The event of making Kunal, the son of Ashok, blind by his own step mother Tishyarakshita has been described in *Divyavadan*, *Brihalkalpabhashya* and the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang's accounts. Hiuen Tsang tells us about the conspiracy hatched by the wicked queen in which she manages to get Kunal blinded.<sup>60</sup> In *Brihatkalpabhashya*, the reason behind this is said to be the envy of Tishyarakshita, moved by which she gets Kunal blinded.<sup>61</sup> In *Divyavadan* the author tells us that the reason behind this was the feeling of enmity of the queen towards Kunal, moved by which, she sent a letter ordering Kunal's eyes to be pulled out of sockets, while managing to get the seal of the emperor on the letter.<sup>62</sup> The *Panchatantra*'s author narrates a story in which a character's wife asks the goddess, after pleasing her through worship, to tell her the method through which she can blind her husband.<sup>63</sup> The literature of this period gives accounts of not only humans who destroyed the vision of adversaries moved by the spirit of revenge but also of animals and birds following suit. Birds also used to make people blind because of the feeling of revenge. The Mahabharatakar gives details of one such account in 'Shanti Parva'. In the palace of the king Brahmadata of Kampilla city, lived a bird named Pujani, who used to bring sweet fruits to the prince daily. One day after returning she saw that the prince has killed one of her babies. To avenge that, Pujani ripped the eyes of the prince with both her claws.<sup>64</sup> In *Latukik Jataka* and *Panchatantra*, the story of angry birds' revenge has been

<sup>57</sup> *Mahabharata*. Aar. 205, 7-18; ibid Aar. 206, 30

<sup>58</sup> *Maha Vastu*. Part 3, p. 116

<sup>59</sup> *Vinaya Vastu*. Part 2, pp. 156-69

<sup>60</sup> Yuan in *Aun Yuan Chuang's Travels in India*, Part 1, pp. 245-46

<sup>61</sup> *Brahmalkalpa Bhashya* 1.32.75; *Jaina Aagam Sahitya Main Bharatiya Samaj*, pp. 57-58

<sup>62</sup> "Tasya Buddhirutpanna Idaanim Maya Asya Kunalasya Vairam Niryatitaryamatvya Kapatlekh Likhitastakshashilakanam Pauranam-kunalasya Nayanam Vinshayitavyamithi". *Divyavadana*, p. 264

<sup>63</sup> "Ath sa Brahmani Snavta Devyayatmagatya Snavanulepanmalyadhooopabalikriyadikam kritva Devim Pranamyaya Vyajigyapat Bhagvati Ken Prakaren Mam Bhartandha Bhavishyati". *Panchatantra*, p. 175

<sup>64</sup> *Mahabharata*. Shanti, 137, S-87

given in which the enraged birds avenge the death of their babies (According to *Panchatantra*, the eggs of a Chatak bird were destroyed while according to *Latukik Jataka*, the babies of a Lava bird get killed) by an elephant, through ripping his eyes, along with the help of their friends.<sup>65</sup> And in the Bharhut paintings, the artist has presented this story with great skill and liveliness.<sup>66</sup>

Apart from personal enmity, in political terms too, the warring countries used to plan about making the enemy's armies blind,<sup>67</sup> while framing schemes to destroy them. In the *Arthashastra*'s 'Parabhalghat Prayog' chapter, various methods to blind the enemy are given, for instance, the use of smoke of Kritkankdal, house Lizard, garden lizard, etc., which can destroy the vision of eyes and hence the king must use this to destroy vision of enemy's armies.<sup>68</sup> In the 'Bhaishajya Mantra Yoga' Chapter, Kautilya writes in this respect that if somebody applies the pancreas of a black cow, died on the 14<sup>th</sup> night of krishnapaksha, in the eye of an idol of the enemy made of Amaltaas tree's wood, the enemy will become blind.<sup>69</sup>

In many instances, moved by anger and greed, people blind their adversaries. In the *Kathasaritsagar*, a story is given in which a sage living on Kedar mountain was blinded by angry bandits, who also cut his hands and legs as he refused to give them any information with regard to the gold which the bandits have dug there, thinking that he was lying to them.<sup>70</sup> The story of Papkari, the brother of Prince Kalyankari is also described in the *Vinayavastu* of Dharmagupta and Mulasarvastivadis and painted in the first cave of Ajanta. In this story, Papakari is described to have blinded his brother in greed for money which he later takes away from the latter.<sup>71</sup>

Under the tyrannical monarchical system, many times the self styled conduct of monarchies and their ambitions have proved fatal. In *Dhonsaakh Jataka* the story of heinous, self styled conduct and ambitiousness of rulers is described. According to it, Prince Bodhi, son of Uden used to live in Sansumargiri where he once called an expert architect and asked him to make such a palace which would be one of its kind, not possessed by any ruler. When such a palace was built, the prince feared that the architect could make a similar palace for some other ruler, and hence got the eyes of the architect picked out of their sockets.<sup>72</sup> Such ambitions of the

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<sup>65</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 357, Part 3; *Panchatantra*, pp. 69-76

<sup>66</sup> Cunningham, *Bharhut Stupa*, p. 55; Barua, *Bharhut*, Part 2, p. 123; Falak 26, 5

<sup>67</sup> *Arthashastra* 14.1.10.-19

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> *Arthashastra* 14: 3: 69

<sup>70</sup> *Kathasaritsagar* Part 2, pp. 183-84

<sup>71</sup> Dieter Shillinlaugh, *Studies in Ajanta Painting*, pp. 81-85

<sup>72</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 353, Part 3

rulers, that they must possess a piece of art which none other has in his possession, proved to be a curse for the artisans who lost their skilled hands and eyes for the sake of these ambitions. The code prescribing capital punishment to those who destroy the eyes, hands, etc. of artisans<sup>73</sup> was left to dust uselessly, for when the adjudicates of justice themselves start committing crimes, then who can punish whom? The only good thing in this respect is that such incidents remained very scant in human history. If such punishments would have been given regularly to artisans building extra ordinary artifacts, no artisan would have created extraordinary pieces of art and the Indian past would have been deprived of the glorious prosperity in terms of artifacts. For serving specific purposes, the rulers used to blind their prisoners. The Jatakakar in *Dhonsakh Jataka* narrates how the king Brahmadata of Varanasi enslaved 1000 kings after defeating them and then attacked Taxila. When he could not defeat Taxila, he performs a special yagya, to get victory over the invincible state, after consulting his Purohit and in this yagya, he offered the eyes of those enslaved rulers as sacrifice. While giving account of the cruelty employed in getting their eyes pulled out, the Jatakakar tells us that first he called the slave kings separately one by one while keeping strong wrestlers behind the veil. Then the wrestlers would punch the victim king to unconsciousness and after that, their eyes would be pulled out. In this manner, the eyes of all 1000 kings were taken out.<sup>74</sup> Royal officials also used to commit such dreaded acts. According to a story of *Kathasaritsagar*, a king calls an expert to find money hidden beneath the earth and his minister, fearing that he might go away, blinds that person.<sup>75</sup>

Doctors also have expressed their views on reasons for blindness from two perspectives. One aspect blames faults, ills and shortcomings of the mother while the other one reveals various factors which cause the blindness of a person. The Mahabharatakar discusses the defects of the parents while stating the reasons of Dhritarashtra's birth as a blind.<sup>76</sup> The vedic seers also knew about defects of a mother during pregnancy as reasons behind blindness of the child. Special rules for conduct of women were laid down, violating which meant turning one's offspring blind. According to the 'Taittiriya Samhita' of *Yajurveda*, if a woman applies eye blackener, oil, etc. during the period of her menstruation cycle, her child will be born blind.<sup>77</sup> Supporting this conception, Sushruta writes that the celibate lady, detached from eight forms of intercourse must

<sup>73</sup> *Classical Accounts of India*. pp. 270-71, 455

<sup>74</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 353, Part 3

<sup>75</sup> *Kathasaritsagar* Part 2, Page 46

<sup>76</sup> "Maturdoshadrisheh kopadandha Ev Vyajayat". *Mahabharata*. Adi 61,78

<sup>77</sup> *Krishna Yajurveda*, Taittiriya Samhita, 2.5.1

from the very first of her ritukal (period) denounce sleeping in daytime, applying blackener in eyes, etc., as sleeping in daytime makes the offspring sleepy, applying blackener in eyes makes him blind while weeping makes him poor sighted.<sup>78</sup> And also the offspring becomes blind if the wish of the woman is suppressed while she is pregnant.<sup>79</sup> He again writes that the child remains blind if the 'Teja' does not reach the 'drishtibhag' (part concerned with vision which lies at the dwelling place of sense of vision in the womb of woman) in the fourth month of pregnancy.<sup>80</sup> Charak also says that ill timed birth or excessive smoking makes offsprings deaf, dumb, blind.<sup>81</sup> According to Kashyapa too, if the mother smokes during pregnancy, the offspring becomes blind, weak or limbless because of the sharpness of smoke.<sup>82</sup> In the *Vipakasutra* and *Aavashyakyakchurni*, Mrigadevi, the wife of a Kshatriya of Miggam city is said to have used saline and medicinal herbs for abortion and because of them, her son was born blind.<sup>83</sup>

Charaka, while expressing his views on other reasons of blindness writes that seeing extremely shiny or stunning bright forms, extremely small forms or seeing no forms at all destroy the vision of a person.<sup>84</sup> He also says that ill suited diet makes one blind.<sup>85</sup> While giving information about a person losing sight due to excessive use of 'basic' (salty) elements, in the 'Vimanasthan' of *Charak Samhita*, he writes that those races which regularly use pungent elements become blind, impotent, bald, white-haired, etc. He writes that the examples of such races are people of China and other eastern countries. That is why pungent things must not be used in large amounts.<sup>86</sup> Sushruta also informs us about the conception that a man becomes blind if bitten by a blind snake,<sup>87</sup> and also talks about 'Bhel Madyata-dosh'<sup>88</sup> (ills created by liquor).

Not only human, but reasons for the blindness of animals also have been thought over. Kautilya, while giving details about the appropriate time and place for the march of army writes

<sup>78</sup> *Sushrut Samhita*, Shari, 2, 25

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Shari, 3, 18

<sup>80</sup> *Sushrutsamhita*, Shari, 2, 35

<sup>81</sup> "Yatheritanam Doshanam Samyavapi Tasya Lakshanam Badhiryamandhyamukatvam Raktapittam Shirobhramam: Akale Chaṭipitashva Dhoomah Kuryadupadravan: Tatraishtam Sarpishah Paanam Naavanaanjanatarpanam". *Charaksamhita*, Sutra 5, 37-39

<sup>82</sup> *Kaashyapsamhita*, Khil, Chapter 10 ('Antarvtnichikitsadhyay') p. 294

<sup>83</sup> *Vipakasutra* 1, p. 9, *Aavashyak Churni* 2, pp. 166, 474

<sup>84</sup> "Rupanam Bhasvatam Drishtirvinashyati Hi Darshanat : Darshanatchatisukshmanam Sarvasashchapy darshanat". *Charaksamhita*, Shari 1, 121 (Vidya)

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, Sutra 26, 102

<sup>86</sup> "Ye Hvenam Gramnagamjanpadah Satatmupayujyute Na Aandhyashandhay Khaliyapalityabhajo Hridyapakartinashcha Bhavanti, Tadyatheprachyashchinashchah, Tasmad ksharam Natyupayujit". *Charaksamhita*, Vimana. 1, 17

<sup>87</sup> *Sushrut Samhita*, Kalpa, 4, 38

<sup>88</sup> *Bhel Samhita*, Sutra 19, 2

that one must not attack with an army of elephants in excessively hot season as elephants become leprous because of the water of sweat which could not come out properly during such weather. They also turn blind because of inability to drink properly which increases their internal heat.<sup>89</sup>

The position of planets also makes its impact on the water life, activities and body of a person. Varahmihir while expressing his views on this, writes in *Brihatsamhita* that a man becomes blind if the sun placed in centre (lagan) is being watched by a 'Papa griha' (Sun, Mars or Jupiter planet).<sup>90</sup> Idol science also throws light on the reasons associated with blindness of a person. In the *Matsya Purana*, while talking about the various problems suffered by the person who violates the rules related to idol-making, it has been said that an idol which does not possess eyes, i.e. whose eyes are not created, destroys the eyes of people.<sup>91</sup> Varahmihir writes in his *Brihatsamhita*, while giving views about Pratimalakshadam (symptom of the idol), that if the gaze of the idol is upwards, it makes its creator blind.<sup>92</sup> The shastra givers have given their views on various unlucky outcomes in dream-reading too. According to Vagbhatta, seeing solar or lunar eclipses in dreams causes eye diseases and seeing their fall causes blindness.<sup>93</sup>

I have discussed above the reasons for disability given in the literature of that period. Now I will discuss the condition of visually disabled people depicted in that period's literature, the negativity of religious scriptures in dealing with them, and the prevalence of such beliefs till today. The situation of the wealthy and the poor have always remained different. Differences have been made also on the basis of the form of blindness. Blind people have been classified in the literature into three types – those who are born blind, those who become blind after birth and those who live like blind due to specific reasons. Those who generously gave their eyes, for instance King Shivi, Alarka, Pratardan and others, became exception to the general boycott of the blind and have been praised by the Shastras. The same was the condition of the blind-born Dhritrashtra who was blessed with the respect of people and the Shashtras. Maharishi Chyavan too, who was blinded by Sukanya, was never deprived of the respect and devotion of society on any occasion. The incident of Dhritarashtra's wife Gandhari, who lived like a blind throughout

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<sup>89</sup> *Arthashastra* 9, 1, 45-48

<sup>90</sup> "Kshetreshvare Kshinabalemshake cha Matratshari Naashmupaiti Tajjam: Asambhavepyubdhavameti Tasmin: Vargadhyamuchchanshayujeeshdrishte". *Brihat Samhita* 95, 12

<sup>91</sup> "Anetra Netranashini". *Matsya Purana* 259, 18

<sup>92</sup> "Andhatvamurdhvadrishitaya Karoti". *Brihat Samhita* 57, 52

<sup>93</sup> "Suryachandramsoh Patdarshanam Drigvinshanam". *Ashtanga Hridaya*, p. 276

her life, while blind folding her eyes too became the subject of great praise as a woman committed to her husband. The conduct of detectives and others like them, who pretended to be blind for specific reasons, also came to be discussed under this category. Thus capacity, Varna, Karma (acts, conduct), property, etc. have created different categories among the blind related to upper and lower status, and keeping this in mind, I will present a study of their social, political, legal, religious conditions. But before above exercise, it would be appropriate to study the boycott and special patronage meted out by society, state, religion towards this category.

Seeing a blind on various occasions was considered as bad omen. Kautilya in *Arthashastra* writes that the 'Angaheenas' (Those who lack any limb, handicapped) must not come in the view of the path through which the king is supposed to pass.<sup>94</sup> In *Mahavastu*, Suddhodhan orders ministers to make such arrangements in the path of prince Siddharatha so that along with various handicapped, the blind people are also not seen on the road.<sup>95</sup> The *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, while describing the scenes of bad luck seen by Kartaveeryarjun while going to fight Parashuram, also mentions the sight of a blind.<sup>96</sup> These references show the prevalence of the conception among people that the sight of a blind person is bad omen. Doctors too have boycotted the blind while travelling for curing the patients or in case of receiving news of patients through messengers.<sup>97</sup> Sushruta clearly says, while referring to the blind, that it is not good for the doctor (vaidya) to meet the helpless, blind or enemy on his way.<sup>98</sup>

The Mahabharatakar considers the blind, along with the impotent and the leprous, not worthy of getting invitation in a Shraddha.<sup>99</sup> Manu and Vashistha too,<sup>100</sup> while referring to the blind in the list of Apankteya (those who can not sit and dine in queue with others) Brahmins, boycott them from Shraddha and Pitra rituals. Manu in this respect says, that a blind by merely sitting in the queue, destroys 'Punya' (result of good deeds) of the person offering food, which is equivalent to that of feeding ninety Brahmins.<sup>101</sup> Manu and the Mahabharatakar both, while boycotting the handicapped of various categories, also instruct to negate the presence of blinds while doing confidential discussions. They instruct that the king must keep this in mind that the

<sup>94</sup> *Arthashastra* 1.21.26

<sup>95</sup> *MahaVastu* Part 2, pp. 147, 149, 151, etc.

<sup>96</sup> *Brahmavaivartapurana* Part1, p. 399

<sup>97</sup> *CharakSamhita*, Indriya, 12, 15; Vidya, ibid 12, 21-23; *SushrutSamhita*, Sutra 29, 48, *AshtangaHridaya* p. 273-74

<sup>98</sup> "Neshyante Pantitashadinadhaparipavastatha". *Sushrutsamhita*, Sutra 29, 40

<sup>99</sup> *Mahabharata* Anu. 24.14

<sup>100</sup> *Mahabharata* 3, 161; *Vishisht Dharama Sutra* 54, 11, 19

<sup>101</sup> "Vikshando Navate ... Daturdashayate Phalam". *Manusmriti* 3, 177

blind do not come in the conference hall.<sup>102</sup> Proving the virtue of this, Manu says that since they can leak the secret, they are boycotted.<sup>103</sup>

The Shastras by giving instructions not to choose the handicapped as brides or grooms, have tried to ban their marriages too.<sup>104</sup> The *Brahmavaivartapurana*, while referring to the blind under the list of ineligible grooms says that if a father marries his daughter to such person, he gets the sin equal to that of assassination of a Brahmin.<sup>105</sup> This clearly shows the attempts to ban the marriages of the blind. In this context we see that today the belief remains the same for visually challenged persons. They are still considered unacceptable by families. We do not see marriage of visually challenged persons and it is difficult to sight them at marriage parties, though India has the largest number of visually challenged persons. Like the handicapped of various categories, visually challenged people too were deprived of inheriting paternal property. Kautilya, while referring to the blind along with the leprous, paralysed and lunatics and others, instructs that they will not be eligible for inheritance of property. They will have the right of getting allowance (food, clothes) only, which will be given to them at their family members' mercy.<sup>106</sup> Manu, Yagyavalkya, Narada, Bodhayan<sup>107</sup> also, while denying them share in inherited property, instruct that they will only be eligible for maintenance. We can say that dependency was forced upon visually challenged persons by not giving them their rights.

Jain and Buddhist religions consider this category as ineligible for Pravajya and Diksha. In *Sthanang* and *Nishithabhashya*, instructions are given for not giving Diksha to the blind (Adarshan).<sup>108</sup> In *Vinaypitak* and *Vinayavastu*, Diksha and Pravajya are denied to the blind along with many categories of the handicapped.<sup>109</sup>

However, taking in view the special problems faced by them in terms of expenses, conveyances, etc. in daily life, this category was given some concessions and special privileges. The *Mahabharata* instructs the common folk that if they meet blind, deaf or weak people on the road, they must first give way to them.<sup>110</sup> Bodhayan too gives instructions to first give way

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<sup>102</sup> *Mahabharata*. Shanti, 84,53; *Manusmriti* 7, 149

<sup>103</sup> *Manusmriti* 7, 150

<sup>104</sup> *Mahabharata*. Anu. 107,123, *Markandeya Purana* 31,77; *VishnuPurana* 3.10.17-18; *ibid* 3.10.22; *Sushrutsamhita*, Chiki. 24,115-24

<sup>105</sup> *Brahmavaivartapurana* Part 1, Page 146

<sup>106</sup> "Jadonmattandhakushthinashcha ... Grasachchadenmitare Palit Varyah". *Arthashastra* 3.5.30-32

<sup>107</sup> *Manusmriti*, 9,201-3; *Yagyavalkya smriti*, Vyavhar, 140-42; *Na* 13, 22; *Bodhayana Dharmasutra* 2.2.3.37-38

<sup>108</sup> *Sthanang Tika* 3.202; *Nishithbhashyachurni* 11.3503-7

<sup>109</sup> *Vinaya Pitaka* Part 4, pp. 129, 480-81; *VinayaVastu* Part 2, p. 107

<sup>110</sup> *Mahabharata*. Aar.133,1



to the blind, to old people and others.<sup>111</sup> The rulers are instructed not to charge taxes from them. Manu and Aapastamba, while giving instructions to the kings for not taking taxes from visually and other challenged categories<sup>112</sup>. These concessions could be seen in terms of continuity with the modern day concession like those of free travel ticket, health facilities, etc. given to the visually disabled. The provision of boycott along with special privileges shows the presence of two harsh perspectives of society towards this category, which played an important role in determining the situation of the visually challenged in specific contexts.

According to the procedures laid down in Shastras, the blind have been declared ineligible to become rulers due to their handicap.<sup>113</sup> This belief prevails in today's modern society also. But events described in Shastras bring two different evidences before us. At some places the blind loses his right to throne, while at some others he becomes the ruler. The actual state of this category could be known by studying the evidence related to both of these. The example of prince Dhritrashtra of the Kuru clan in *Mahabharata* presents two specific conditions of losing and gaining the right to rule by a blind. In the 'Adi Parva', the Mahabharatakar informs us that when Vyas tells that the child who is going to take birth would be blind, Satyawati says that the ruler of the Kuru clan must not be blind. Hence she demands another son from Vyas to be the future king, who would be the guardian of the race and brothers and enhancer of the father's family.<sup>114</sup> Thus despite being the elder brother, Dhritrashtra could not become ruler because of his blindness and Pandu became the king, though he was younger to Dhritrashtra.<sup>115</sup> After king Pandu, he gained the throne in special circumstances but here again, he was the representative only. In the 'Udyog Parva', the Mahabharatakar clearly says that Pandu went to the forest with his wives after giving his state as "heritage" to his brother. The people, as they used to live under Pandu, started living under Dhritrashtra in the same manner.<sup>116</sup> But despite this, the people were not ready to accept Dhritrashtra as the king. The statement of people that if Dhritrashtra could not get the kingdom earlier because of being blind, how can he become the

<sup>111</sup> Bodhayana, *DharmaSutra*. 2.3.6.30

<sup>112</sup> *Manusmriti* 8, 394; Aapastamba, *Dharmasutra* 2.10.26.16

<sup>113</sup> *Mahabharata*. Udyo. 147,17-29, *Gyatadharmakatangutra* pp. 516. 520, 532-33; *Vinayavastu*, Part 1, pp. 241-42

<sup>114</sup> Tasya Tadvachanam Shrutva Mata Putramathabravat

Nandhah Kumam Nripatiranurupastapodhanah

Gyativanshasya Goptaram Pitranam Vanshavardam

Dvitiyam Kuruvanshasya Rajanam Datumaharsi. – *Mahabharata*. Adi. 11-12

<sup>115</sup> *Mahabharata*. Adi 129, 5; ibid Adi. 100, 3-13; ibid Adi 129, 14-15; ibid Udyo. 145; 36; Udyo. 147-29

<sup>116</sup> *Mahabharata*. Udyo. 146, 4-8

king now,<sup>117</sup> reveals this fact. Anyway Dhritarashtra had enjoyed all pleasures of being a king while sitting on the Hastinapur throne and if we remove the other reasons of the war between the sons of Pandu and Kaurawas, then broadly it could be described as a war waged for inheritance of paternal property by sons of a blind father. Duryodhan says to his father that because of his blindness, he could not get the kingdom legally entitled to him and Pandu became the ruler. If Yudhishtir manages to get the kingdom of Pandu, who is the legal heir of the same, then after him, his son will become the king and then his son again and in this tradition, future generations will become inheritors of the right to rule.<sup>118</sup> This statement reveals the rage of the son of a blind man against the deprivation of his father of his legal right. Here, a rule different from normal conditions is applied. In general conditions the son of a blind person could inherit his father's property<sup>119</sup>, but the situation was different for inheriting a throne. After Dhritarashtra was denied his right to rule because of his blindness, his sons could not inherit his right. Thus, in contrast to the common people, the condition of blind people of the royal class was more pitiable as their offspring too could not gain their lost rights. Another important example related to the royal class described in *Mahabharata* and *Matsya Purana* is that of Shalya's king Dhumatvasen. Dhumatvasen became blind when his son Satyavan was still a child. After getting a chance, the enemy state attacked him and grabbed his kingdom after which he started living in the forest with his wife and son.<sup>120</sup> The ministers who were unsatisfied with the enemy king assassinated him and the people brought the blind king Dhumatvasen back to throne. The Mahabharatakar, while giving account of this incident, says that in the forest, the people tell the king – "O blind king! Your ministers have killed the one who has annexed your kingdom and now only you are the king of that palace again." After hearing this, king Dhumatvasen goes to regain his kingdom with forces.<sup>121</sup> The Mahabharatakar, while giving account of the decision of the people, says in clear cut words that the people said that they trust their king. Whether he can see or not, still he is

<sup>117</sup> "Pragyachakshushchakshuchdvaddhratarashthro Janeshwarah Rajyampraptvanpurvam Sa Katham Nripatirbhavet".  
*Mahabharata*. Adi. 129, 5

<sup>118</sup> *Mahabharata*. Adi. 129, 14-15

<sup>119</sup> *Arthashastra* 3.50. 30-33; *Manusmriti* 9, 202-3; *Yagyavalakysmriti*, Vyavhar, 140-42, etc

<sup>120</sup> *Mahabharata*. Aar. 278-7-10

<sup>121</sup> Aajgam Janah Sarvo Rajyarthay Nimantrane  
Vigyapyamas Tada Tava Prkratishashanam  
Vichakshushaste Nripate Yen Rajyam Purahritam  
Amatyaih Sa Hato Raja Bhavastaminpure Nrip  
Etachchchutva Yayau Raja Baecen Chaturangina  
Lebhe Cha Sakalam Rajyam Dharmarajanmahatmanah - *MatsyaPurana* 114. 16-18

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our king.<sup>122</sup> In comparison to the rule of a wicked king, the people preferred a blind king. Here, the ruler is not removed from the throne despite being blind as the enemy dismisses him. But the decision of people to bring him back is again very important. This shows that even if good rulers become blind, they are not removed and the people prefer to live under their rule. The example of king Shivi<sup>123</sup> described in Buddhist literature is also important from this perspective. The Jatakakar tells us that after becoming blind, king Shivi lives in the palace for some time, but after thinking why a blind must be attached to statecraft, entrusts his kingdom to his courtiers and decides to become ascetic. And when he is granted his vision back by sage Shakra, he comes back and starts ruling again.<sup>124</sup> Here again the king himself leaves the kingdom and is not removed by his courtiers or his people. Kunal the son of Mauryan emperor Ashok is also an important example of the blind in ruling class. This prince was blinded by his stepmother, but after his father's demise, he becomes the heir and handles the throne of Pataliputra.<sup>125</sup>

Another example is that of loss of vision for some time, and the Mahabharatakar gives an evidence of this under the story of king Poshya. After being cursed by sage Uttanga to become blind<sup>126</sup>, king Poshya requests the sage to free him from the curse and to this Uttanaga replies – “though he will become blind, he will be normal sometime later!”<sup>127</sup> As an old or ill ruler is not removed from the throne, in the same manner, kings who used to become blind for limited time were never removed.

These examples tell us that in specific conditions, violating the directions of Smriti, Puranas, etc., the blind have ascended the throne. It is also clear that if the ruler becomes blind after becoming king, he was not removed. In comparison with a tyrant, the public preferred a blind ruler with rightful conduct who would be a well wisher of people, as shows the example of Dhumatvasen. Thus the problem was mainly of inheritance and the blind<sup>128</sup> was declared ineligible for the throne, as is clear in the example of Dhritarashtra.

<sup>122</sup> Ekmattham Cha Sarvasya Janasyath Nripam Prati

Sachshurvapyam Chakshurva Sa No Raja Bhavatviti - *Mahabharata* Aar. 283. 5

<sup>123</sup> *Jataka* Part 4, pp. 403-10; *Milindpanho* pp. 93-95

<sup>124</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 499, part 4

<sup>125</sup> *Advanced History of India*, p. 110; *Prachin Bharat ka Itihas*, p. 301

<sup>126</sup> “Yasmanme Ashuchyanna Dadasi Tasmadandho Bhavishyasiti”. *Mahabharata* Adi. 3, 126

<sup>127</sup> *Mahabharata* Adi 3, 126-30

<sup>128</sup> The example of Ashok's son Kunal (whose coronation is debated) is an exception. If we believe the legends, then he regained his sight with the grace of Arhat Ghosh (Yuan, Part 1, pp. 245-46; Siyuki, Part 2, pp. 183-84). Thus he was not blind at all times.

But it is clear that the blind have ruled in conditions like this too and with efficiency and this is also supported by the *Arthashastra*. Kautilya says that efficient women, children, and lame and blind people have become successful rulers because of their influence and have often enjoyed the fruit of victory on earth.<sup>129</sup> In fact, after a blind had become the ruler, all boycotts became null and void for him as the friendship and sight of king is nowhere a bad omen. He is worthy of the highest position, a human form of God, who is to be worshipped everywhere.<sup>130</sup> Thus the condition used to change according to specific situations, which happens these days also. Not only this, visually challenged people have been appointed at various royal posts also because of their abilities, the details of which are given under the category of 'livelihood'.<sup>131</sup>

It would also be appropriate to see the status of the blind in various legal matters and also punishment which was awarded to anyone when he made a person blind. According to Kautilya, the blind are not eligible for testimony. This view prevails in these days also, though it should be remembered that it is nowhere written in the constitution today. According to Kautilya, a king, a Veda preacher, a Brahmin, a village head, the leprous, one who has many wounds on his body, a chandal, those who commit perverted acts, the blind, deaf, dumb, a haughty woman and royal employees cannot give testimony other than in their own categories.<sup>132</sup> While directing the Divya of the four Varnas, Yagyavalkya talks of libra (balance) for women, boys, the blind and challenged categories.<sup>133</sup> Narad too proposes the divya of libra for the blind, while rejecting the application of divya of water, fire or venom to them for their test.<sup>134</sup>

For the severe crime of blinding someone, the punishment prescribed by Shastras is almost the same. Kautilya says that if somebody breaks someone's neck or body part, or pierces his eye or gives such injuries which make it hard to speak, eat or walk, than he must be given medium degree punishment (Madhyam Sahas) and the expenditure on treatment must be borne by the criminal.<sup>135</sup> Manu too tells us of awarding Shashtra-suited punishment to a criminal in case of breaking or cutting of organs and prescribes that the expenditure on treatment must be met by

<sup>129</sup> Utsahavatascha Prabhavavanto Jitva Kritva Cha Striyo  
Balah Pangavondhashcha Prithivim Gigyuriti. - *Arthashastra* 9.1.9

<sup>130</sup> Altekar, *Prachin Bhartiya Shashan Paddhati*, pp. 46; 72-78

<sup>131</sup> *Mahabharata* Shantiparva 151, 51

<sup>132</sup> *Arthashastra* 3.11.29

<sup>133</sup> *Yagyavalkya smriti*, Vyavhar, 98

<sup>134</sup> *Naradsmriti* 1, 255; *ibid* Quot. 6,8

<sup>135</sup> *Arthashastra* 3.19.14

the guilty.<sup>136</sup> Yagyavalkya prescribes the punishment of 800 Panas to anyone who pierces both eyes of a person.<sup>137</sup> Otherwise, he prescribes medium degree punishment (Madhyam Sahas) in case of piercing of eye, or stopping somebody's walking, eating or speaking.<sup>138</sup> Thus the maximum punishment prescribed by rulers for such a crime at that time was of 800 Panas. But the accounts of foreign travellers and events described in literature tell a different story. Megasthenes and Nicholas Damanescshus tell us that the one guilty of destroying eyes or hands of an artist was awarded capital punishment.<sup>139</sup> Kautilya himself in the 'Ekangavadhaniskriya' tells that those criminals who had pierced both eyes of anybody were either blinded by medicines being applied in their eyes or otherwise were charged a fine of 800 panas.<sup>140</sup> The Chinese traveller HiuenTsang, while describing the punishment given to officials guilty of blinding prince Kunal, writes that such officials were deported from empire as punishment and they started living in a forest lying west of Kustan district, along with their families.<sup>141</sup> According to the details given by Siyuki, after getting the information about this incident from Kunal, Ashoka without any further enquiry awarded capital punishment to the queen.<sup>142</sup> The common people who were involved in this act were deported out of the empire. And from among the ministers who helped in this, some were demoted, some were deported, while some were given death sentence.<sup>143</sup> In the Buddhist text *Divyavadan* an angry Ashok is described as taking the decision to torture and award death penalty to Tishyarakshita for the act of blinding Kunal<sup>144</sup> but on the request of prince Kunal, he changes it and yet the queen and the officials could not remain forgiven as the author writes, "Yaavdragya Ashoken Tishyarakshita Amarshiten Jantugraham Praveshayitva Dagdha, Takshashilascha Paurah Praghatitah".<sup>145</sup> Thus during the reign of various rulers, changes came in the legal situations according to the needs. The Smritis measured blindness with money thus not understanding the graveness of this crime. The criminal darkening

<sup>136</sup> *Manusmriti* 8, 287

<sup>137</sup> *Yagyavalkyasmriti*. Vyavhar, 304

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 220

<sup>139</sup> *Classical Accounts of India*, pp. 270-72; 455

<sup>140</sup> "Dvinetrabhedinishcha Yoganjanenandhatvam, Ashtashato Va Dandah". *Arthashastra* 4.10.13

<sup>141</sup> Yuan. part 2, p. 295

<sup>142</sup> Siyuki Part 2, p. 183

<sup>143</sup> Siyuki Part 2, p. 184

<sup>144</sup> Katham Hi Dhanye Na Nimajjase Kshitau

Chindami Shirsham Parashu Praharaih

Tyamyaham Tvamati Papakarini

Madharmayuktam Shriyamatvavaniv – *Divyavadanam*, p. 270

<sup>145</sup> *Divyavadanam*. p. 270

the world of a person could get free after paying a fine of mere 800 panas. The Smritis also do not even mention anything about a lifelong maintenance allowance to the blind and his family by the assaulter. Here, the strong laws of the Mauryan period (capital punishment to the one guilty of destroying the eyes of an artisan) thus deserve special mention. The anger of Ashoka is related to the criminal causing harm to the ruling class, but it also makes it clear that the ruling class could take harsh steps in general cases too and in such situations the decision of king used to be supreme and he was not bound by ideas expressed in Smritis and Shastras.

Like other physically challenged people, the 'diksha' of blinds too was prohibited in Buddhist and Jain religions<sup>146</sup> and they were boycotted from 'God' and 'Pitra' related rituals in Hindu religion too.<sup>147</sup> But this does not mean that they received no position in these religions. As worshipper or 'grihastha' (house owner), they could lead their lives in any religion and in special circumstances they were 'dikshit' (incorporated into fold) too. Buddha gives his acceptance to the 'Diksha' and 'Pravajya' of blind along with various types of physically challenged people in *Vinaypitak*.<sup>148</sup> The example of Ashok's son Kunal could be presented as important evidence in this respect, who despite being blind, lives his life under the patronage of Buddhism. In the *Avimarakam* play of Bhaas, there is a clear reference to a naked and blind lady monk as 'Nagnandha Shramanika'<sup>149</sup>, which is a clear evidence of their incorporation into Monkhood. According to *Sivi Jataka*, King Sivi leads the life of an ascetic kingdom after becoming blind.<sup>150</sup> In Hindu religion too, blind sages and monks are described as living ascetic life. After getting blinded by Sukanya, no religion came to stop sage Chyavan from his 'Tapa' and he continued to maintain his 'ascetic way of life.'<sup>151</sup> The blind parents of Shrivankumar and Shyam have been described in *Ramayana* and Buddhist literature as leading a sacred way of life in the forest, with the help of their sons.<sup>152</sup> King Dhumatvasen also has been described in *Mahabharata* and *Matsyapurana* as living a sacred life with sages in the forest after becoming blind.<sup>153</sup> In 'Ashramvasik Parva' the Mahabharatakar gives us the details of Dhritarashtra's march to the

<sup>146</sup> *Vinayapitak* Part 4, pp. 480, 116; *ibid* part 5, p. 120; *Vinaya Vastu* part 2, p. 107; *Sthanang Tika* 3.202; *Nishithbhashyachurni* 11.350 3-7; *Jain Agam Sahitya main Bhartiya Samaj*. p. 384

<sup>147</sup> *JaiminiyaBrahmana* 6.1.41-42; *Mahabharata* Trans. 24, 13-14; *Manusmriti* 3, 177; *ibid* 3.161; *VishishtDharmasutra* 11, 19; *History of Dharmashastra* 3 p. 603, etc

<sup>148</sup> *Vinayapitaka* Part 4, p. 462

<sup>149</sup> *Avimarkam* 4, 22

<sup>150</sup> *JatakaSamhita* 499, Part 4

<sup>151</sup> *Mahabharata* Aar. 122, 1-27; *ibid* Virat 20, 7; Part 1.3.4.23

<sup>152</sup> *Ramayana* Ayodhya 57, 23-33; *ibid* 58, 1-44; *Jataka Samhita* 540, Part 6; *Mahavastu* Part 2, pp. 198-218

<sup>153</sup> *Mahabharata* Aar. 278, 7-10; *ibid* Aar, Chapter 283; *Matsya Purana* Chapter 208-209

forest where he leads his life as a Vaanprasthi (the third ashram of life) in the company of monks and sages and later dies after living in the sacred way.<sup>154</sup> For earning 'punyas' the blinds too could go to holy rivers, pilgrimage etc. like all common folk. The Mahabharatakar clearly tells us that the holy river Ganga fulfils all ambitions of even the blind and mentally challenged who seek her refuge.<sup>155</sup> The Brahmavaivartapurana tells us about a blind Brahmin, who got freed from his sins after feeding four lakh brahmins<sup>156</sup> and this shows that the blind used to perform various acts of 'punya' to seek penance. Not only this, in special circumstances they were even given the right to do 'tarpana'. The Mahabharatakar writes about the blind Dhritrashtra doing all religious rituals.<sup>157</sup> There was no ban on the visually challenged worshipping in temples, stupas etc. Hiuen-Tsang tells us that a Stupa was erected at the place where Kunal was blinded and the blind used to worship there and many blind people got their sight back by worshipping there.<sup>158</sup> Buddha has been described many times as doing obligations upon this category. Many Buddhist texts inform us about the blind getting sight after seeking the blessings of Buddha at the time of his entrance into cities.<sup>159</sup> Hiuen-Tsang and Fa-Hien give us details of incidents when Buddha meets 500 blind people while wandering in a forest.<sup>160</sup> The travellers have referred to areas where the blind lived with the names of 'recovered sight', 'sight regained', 'wood of obtained eyes' etc. According to the travellers' accounts, Buddha, moved by their painful calls granted them sight and they became monks after throwing their walking sticks. In *Mahavastu*, it has been written about Buddha's followers that they will never become blind and they will get blue, shining eyes.<sup>161</sup> Because blindness was considered a result of sin, religious rights were given to visually challenged people to get rid of their sins and get moksha, or through penance get their sight back for leading a happy life. This belief continues these days also in and visually challenged people are expected to do punya karma to get their sight back or achieve moksha.

<sup>154</sup> *Mahabharata* Ashram. Chapter 6; 8; 14-15, 39 & 48

<sup>155</sup> *Mahabharata* Anu. 27, 82

<sup>156</sup> *Brahmavaivartapurana* Part 2, pp. 771-72

<sup>157</sup> "Sa Pravishya Griham Raja Kritapurvahinkakriyah: Tarayitva ... Dvijanshresthanaharamakarottamam".  
*Mahabharata* Ashra. 9, 4

<sup>158</sup> Yuan. Part 1, pp. 245 -246

<sup>159</sup> *Mahavastu* Part 1, p. 257; *ibid* Part 3, pp. 244-245; *Lankavtarsutra*, p. 89; *Divyavadanam*, pp. 154-55; 229-30;  
*Buddhacharita*, p. 198, etc

<sup>160</sup> *Siyuki* Part 1, p. 27; Fa-Hien, pp. 32-33; Yuan, Part 1, pp. 398-99

<sup>161</sup> *Mahavastu* Part 2, p. 339

The first efforts to bear the responsibility of a blind, his care and maintenance and to make him lead a good life are made by the family. Thus the situation of this category amidst the family is the most important aspect of this study. The upbringing of the child is done by parents and all parents make this wish that their offspring must be all beautiful.<sup>162</sup> Parents and relatives get upset by the birth of a blind child. The Mahabharatakar informs us about the grief of Satyavati at the news of the birth of blind Dhritarashtra.<sup>163</sup> In *Vipak Sutra* and *Avashyakchurni*, it has been said that Mrigadevi, the wife of Kshatriya Vijay of Miggam city, after knowing about the birth of a blind child orders the maid to throw him out of the village.<sup>164</sup> This evidence of throwing away the child tells us that many times the family disowned such children in place of upbringing them. But this also does not mean that such children were not brought up by the family at all. The upbringing of Dhritrashtra was done with all royal care and affection. And after getting the news of his wife's statement from the maid, an angry Vijay compels her to nurture the child.<sup>165</sup> Thus, the attitude of parents played an important role in upbringing of such children.

The supreme duty of a son is supposed to be the service of parents and looking after them. The Mahabharatakar tells us the story of a Brahmin who went out of his house to study Vedas without the permission of his parents and became blind after this. Then he was told that he must go home and please his parents by serving them.<sup>166</sup> In the *Shyam Jataka*, Shakra suggests to Dukulak and Darika, who are leading an ascetic life, that they must give birth to a son as they will become blind.<sup>167</sup> These details are important evidence of the significance of son for blind parents. The stories of ideals of sons serving their blind parents have been described both in historical texts and in literary ones. The Ramayanakar presents the picture of an ideal son serving his blind mother and father, in the form of Shravanakumar.<sup>168</sup> Shravana was the only refuge of his blind parents, who considered him as their eyes and soul.<sup>169</sup> He served them in all forms, told them the stories of Shashtras and Puranas, fed them with fruits and edible roots, etc. Even at the site of his death, the helpless state of his parents troubled him. The ideal of care and service of

<sup>162</sup> *Yajurveda* 8, 29; Apastamba, *Grihasutra* 1.7.25.1

<sup>163</sup> *Mahabharata* Adi., chapter 100

<sup>164</sup> *Vipak Sutra* 1, p. 9; *Avashyakchurni*, p. 474; *Jain Satihya main Bharatiya Samaj*, p. 241

<sup>165</sup> Ibid

<sup>166</sup> *Mahabharata* Aar. 205, 7-8

<sup>167</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 540, Part 6

<sup>168</sup> *Ramayana*. Ayodhya 57; 23-33; *ibid*. Ayodhya 58, 1-44

<sup>169</sup> "Tvam Geetastvgtinam cha Chakshustvam Heen ChakShusham: Samasaktasvapi Prarah Kinchinau Nabhibhashase". *Ramayana*: Ayodhya 58, 8



the blind by the family has been presented as the story of the son through this and this also tells us that if seers and sages living in forests lost their sight, their sons or family members lived with them to look after them. This story of Shrivankumar given in *Ramayana* has also been described in the idol play of Bhaas and *Raghuvansa* of Kalidasa.<sup>170</sup> This story has been described in a very popular fashion in the form of 'Samyataka' in Buddhist literature too.<sup>171</sup> The story of Shriavan has been described in details in *Mahavastu* and *Shyam Jataka* where he is said to be living in the forest looking after his blind parents, who were leading an ascetic life there. The ruler too denounces his kingdom and pledges to serve the blind parents of Shyam in his place.<sup>172</sup> Hiuen-Tsang too has mentioned this story and has given details of the stupa which was built at the place where Shriavan was hit by the arrow of the king and later regained his life because of the divine powers of Indra and the might of 'Satya' and 'Dharma' (truth and righteousness).<sup>173</sup> This story was very dear to the artist too and he has presented this story with great skills in the art of Sanchi and Ajanta.<sup>174</sup> But the Shastras misinterpret the story of Shriavan Kumar's parents' blindness and relate it with other disability, by showing Shriavan Kumar carrying his parents on his shoulders. Blindness does not hamper anyone in walking and this myth still continues.

The *Mahabharata* and *Matsya Purana* give us the details of Satyavan and his wife Savitri's services to the former's father the king of Shalva, Dhumatvasen.<sup>175</sup> After becoming blind, he went to the forest with his wife and son. In the forest itself, Savitri chooses Satyavan as her husband and her father Ashvapati gives the respect to the blind king which the father of a groom is entitled to. The stay of son and daughter in law in the forest with him tells us about the care given to the blind by family members. When Yama tells Savitri to ask for blessings, the demand of the eyes of her father in law by her as first blessing<sup>176</sup> clearly shows dedication, deep love of the family and consciousness towards the needs of its blind members.

The Mahabharatakar tells us in the 'Karna Parva' about a tiger named Balak who used to look after his blind mother-father and other dependent family members.<sup>177</sup> In the 'Shanti Parva',

<sup>170</sup> *Pratima natak*. pp. 186-87; *Raghuvamsa* 9, 76-81

<sup>171</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 540, Part 6; *Mahavastu* Part 2, pp. 199-218

<sup>172</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 540, Part 6

<sup>173</sup> Yuan. Part 1, p. 217

<sup>174</sup> Marshal, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, Part 2, Falak 65.; Yajdani. *Ajanta* Part 3, pp. 1; 29-31; *Bharatiya Kala*, p. 204; *Studies in Ajanta Painting*, Chapter 5

<sup>175</sup> *Mahabharata* Aar. 278, 7-10; *ibid* 279, 15-20; *ibid* 281, 26-104; *ibid* 282, 1-40; *Matsyapurana* 208-214

<sup>176</sup> *Matsyapurana* 210, 23-24; *Mahabharata* Aar. 281, 26-27; *ibid* Aar 282, 1-40

<sup>177</sup> "Sundhau Cha Mata Pitrau Bibhartyanyanshchcasanshritan" *Mahabharata* Karna, 49, 35

in the story of a Nishad (a tribe which used to earn living through killing birds and hunting) named Kayavya,<sup>178</sup> the Mahabharatakar tells us that despite being a bandit, he used to serve and worship his blind parents. He used to feed them with various types of eatables like honey, meat, fruits, grains, etc.<sup>179</sup> That tigers and bandits serve their blind parents shows their dedication and sense of responsibility. Many examples of sons, from both the human and animal world serving blind parents, abound Buddhist literature. According to *Guttill Jataka*, the famous musician Guttill refuses to marry to serve his blind parents.<sup>180</sup> In *Mahavastu* and *Milindpanho*, a 'Ghatikar' (potter) is mentioned<sup>181</sup> who used to serve his blind parents. *Mahavastu* informs us that Buddha had also served blind parents in his earlier life.<sup>182</sup> *Asatmanta Jatak* tells us the story of a teacher living in Taxila whose 120 year-old mother was blind. The teacher used to bathe, feed and serve his mother with his own hands. Since neighbours used to criticize his acts, he goes to the forest and starts living in a thatched hut with his mother.<sup>183</sup> This story not only tells us about the looking after of blind mother by her son, but also tells that there was a section within society who disliked such things and ridiculed people who served blind people. The above mentioned section of critics would be, no doubt, boycotting blind people within their own families.

The care and support received by the blind are also shown in stories of animals and birds serving their blind parents. The Jatakakar in *Suka Jataka* tells us about an old, weak-visioned parrot living in the Himalayas, who was looked after by his son. The young parrot used to keep his father in the nest and feed him in the nest itself.<sup>184</sup> In *Rohantamigjatak*, Bodhisattva, born as a golden deer, is shown serving his blind old parents. After getting caught in the net of a hunter, he orders his siblings to go back to the parents to serve them, not caring for his own life. The narrator tells us that when the hunter came to know that the deer is the guardian to his parents, he freed the deer.<sup>185</sup> This feeling of a hunter towards a deer looking after his blind parents shows that the society used to respect people who served their parents and the blind. That is why those who were considered as cruel in society, were also shown giving respect to such ideal.

<sup>178</sup> *Mahabharata* Shantiparva 133, 1-7

<sup>179</sup> "Apyankeshatah Sena Ek Ev Jihaysati Sa Vriddhavandhapitrau Maharanyebhyapujayat Madhumansaisrulfalair-annairuchyavachairapi Satkritya Bhojyamas Samyakparichachar Cha". *Mahabharata*. Shanti 133, 6-7

<sup>180</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 243, Part 2

<sup>181</sup> *Milindpanho*, p. 161; *Mahavastu* Part 1, pp. 274-76

<sup>182</sup> *Mahavastu* Part 2, p. 12

<sup>183</sup> *JatakaSamhita* 61, Part 1

<sup>184</sup> *JatakaSamhita* 255. Part 2, p. 292

<sup>185</sup> *Jatakasamhita* 501, Part 4

Another story of serving a blind mother by a son from among the animals has been given in *Katha Matiposk Jatak*, *Mahavastu* and accounts of the Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang.<sup>186</sup> According to the story, the Bodhisattva born as a white elephant (Gandha hasti according to Hiuen-Tsang) used to serve his blind old mother with great dedication. When his friends did not give the fruits sent by him to his mother, he left the herd and went to live in Chandirangiri with his mother where he continued to look after her. He ate only after bathing and feeding her. The king of Kashi catches him and brings him to the town but when he is offered food, he refuses to eat and when asked, replies that his mother is sitting hungry in the forest and he will not eat till he feeds her. When the king comes to know that the elephant is the only caretaker of his blind mother, he sets him free. In the Bharhut art, two pictures from this story are painted. In the first, Bodhisattva is painted as collecting food for his mother and in the second, he is painted as ready to serve water to his mother.<sup>187</sup> This story not only presents evidence of looking after of blind parents by the sons, it also reveals the attitude of the ruling class towards this which was to allow him to serve his blind parents and showing respect to such ideal in this way.

The Shashtras attempted to stop the marriages of blind people by banning the selection of blind grooms and bride. But, many evidences are there which show that they could not deprive the blind of family life and ban such marriages. The Shashtras have themselves talked about the inheritance of property of a blind father by his son<sup>188</sup> and this is a clear evidence of marriage and family life of blind people. About the marriage of the blind Dhritarashtra, the Mahabharatakar says that earlier the father of Gandhari hesitated a bit after knowing about his blindness, but later, after taking into cognizance his clan, popularity and righteous conduct, he gave Gandhari to him.<sup>189</sup> The story of Kalyankari described in *Vinayvastu* tells us that after getting attracted towards blind Kalyankari, a princess decides to marry him. The father of princess became angry and the princess had to hide Kalyankari for some time. But because of the might of truth Kalyankari gets his vision and the king marries his daughter to him.<sup>190</sup> Thus we can say that parents chose blind bridegrooms for their daughters sometimes, but girls themselves were not usually allowed to choose blind bridegrooms. In Kalyankari's story we see that only after getting vision, is the princess allowed to marry him.

<sup>186</sup> *Jatakasamhita* 455, Part 4; *Mahavastu* Part 3, pp. 126-32; Yuan. Part 2, pp. 140-41

<sup>187</sup> Barua, *Bharhut*, Part 2, pp. 133-34

<sup>188</sup> *Arthashastra* 3.5.30-33; *Manusmriti* 9,201-3; *Yagyavalkyasmriti*, Vyavhar, 140-42, etc

<sup>189</sup> *Mahabharata* Adiparva 103, 9-15

<sup>190</sup> *Studies in Ajanta Painting*, pp. 82-83

Sometimes because of fear, a girl was married to such a groom, and the marriage of princess Sukanya with sage Chejavan, described in the *Bhagavat Purana* and *Mahabharata* is an example.<sup>191</sup> The Mahabharatakar tells us that “angry sage tells the king that he will forgive Sukanya only if she becomes his wife.”<sup>192</sup> The king terrified by the powers of the sage, marries off Sukanya to him. This story indicates that powerful people would force parents to get such marriages done. Sometimes such marriages happened due to bets also and the marriage of the ‘Christani’ daughter of Madhupur’s king, described in *Panchatantra*, with a blind man is one such example.<sup>193</sup> The bet of the king was that he will marry his daughter to anybody who after marriage will go somewhere else leaving the kingdom.<sup>194</sup> When a blind fulfils the terms, the king marries his daughter to him according to the bet. This is only a general example. Since in that age marriages were done on the bases of many bets, tests, etc. (Rama’s marriage with Sita after breaking the bow; the marriage of Arjuna with Draupadi after shooting the eye of fish etcetera.) It seems obvious that if a blind has fulfilled the conditions, he will become eligible for marriage.

There are such pairs too where both husband and wife were blind, for example the parents of Shravankumar and Shyam<sup>195</sup>. But in cases where only one of them is blind, the blind one could easily lead his life getting his partner’s help. The service to their husbands by Gandhari,<sup>196</sup> Sukanya<sup>197</sup> and Kanchanmala<sup>198</sup>, who were wives of Dhritrashtra, sage Chyavan and prince Kunal respectively, after the blindness of their husbands clearly strengthens this point. Committed wives backed their husbands with full devotion, because parents taught their girls to do so and scolded them at the opposite conduct.<sup>199</sup> But all wives were not so committed and some even cheated their blind husbands, taking advantage of their handicap.<sup>200</sup> They sometimes even conspired to kill them, so as to get free from them. The Panchatantrakar, while giving account of the post-marital life of Christani princess and the blind, tells us that to kill her husband with the

<sup>191</sup> *Mahabharata* Aar. 122; 1-27; part 9; 3.1-9

<sup>192</sup> “Tamev Pratigrihyaham Rajanduhitaram Tavaa Chamishyami Mahipal Satyametadbravimi Te”. *Mahabharata* Aar. 122, 23

<sup>193</sup> *Panchatantra*, pp. 252-54

<sup>194</sup> “Atha Tesham Tadavachanmakandarya Sa Raja Patahshabden Sarvatra Ghoshanamagyapayamas Aho Tristanim Rajkanyam yah kashchidudvaheyati sa Survarnam Lachamapnoti Deshtyagam Cha”. *Panchatantra*, p. 252

<sup>195</sup> *Ramayana* Ayodhya 57, 23-33; ibid 58, 1-44; *Jataka Samhita* 540, Part 6, *Mahavastu* Part 2, pp. 199-218

<sup>196</sup> *Mahabharata* Adiparva 103, 9-15

<sup>197</sup> Part 9, 3 10-23; *Mahabharata* Aar. 122, 1-27; ibid Virat 20, 7

<sup>198</sup> *Divyavadanam*, p. 266; Siyuki Part 2, p. 182-83

<sup>199</sup> Part 9, 3, 21

<sup>200</sup> *Panchatantra*, pp. 175, 252-54

help of Mantharak, the misguided Christani arranges to feed him a dead snake as fish.<sup>201</sup> The literature does not tell us much about the attitude of husbands in cases where wives were blind. In the story of Shrivankumar in *Ramayana*, after the death of Shrivankumar his father says “This ascetic mother of yours is blind, old, helpless and craving for her son. How can I look after her being blind myself.”<sup>202</sup> This statement and directives to husbands given in Smritis to look after physically challenged wives<sup>203</sup> suggest that husbands also used to look after such wives. But in the age of polygamy, it is doubtful how much assistance the husbands gave such wives.

The other members of the family too looked after the maintenance of blind people. Manu clearly tells the shareholder of a blind’s property that the one who takes his property must take care of his maintenance, because otherwise he is a pervert.<sup>204</sup> The other Shastras too have talked about the sustenance of blind people by family<sup>205</sup>. In *Mahabharata* Gandhari tells Krishna after the death of Kauravas –“King Dhritrashtra is blind by birth and old and all of his sons have died. Now you, along with the Pandavas are the only shelter-giver to him.”<sup>206</sup> Friends and other members of society too, from time to time helped the blind and gave them friendly treatment. In the *Kathasaritsagar*, an elephant is described as offering food and water to a blind guest and fanning him with his ears.<sup>207</sup> In *Panchatantra*, the friend of the blind Mantharak is described as accompanying him and arranging everything in his house.<sup>208</sup> The situation of the rich was different from that of common people. They could get everything by appointing servants. The Jatakakar tells us how a servant remained with king Shivi all the time for serving him after he became blind.<sup>209</sup> Getting attracted by his riches, a beautiful prostitute too followed him<sup>210</sup> and thus he lived a happy, contented life with all facilities, in contrast to a common blind person.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., pp. 253-54

<sup>202</sup> “Imamandham Cha Vriddham Cha Mataram Tetapapasvineem katham Putram Bharishyami Krianam Putragrdhineem”. *Ramayana Ayodhya* 58, 30

<sup>203</sup> Surapi Vyadhita Dhurta Vandyarthadhyapriyam Vada  
Stree Prasushchadhi Vettavya Purshdveshine Tatha  
Adhivinna Tu Bhartavya Mahadenonyaha bhavet

Yatra nukulyam Dampatyostrivargastra Vardhate – *Yagyavalkyasmriti*, Aachar 1, 73-74

<sup>204</sup> “Sarveshamapi Tu Nyayyam Datum Shaktya Manishina Grasachchadan Matyantam patitohyadadbhabet”.  
*Manusmriti* 9, 202

<sup>205</sup> *Arthashastra* 3.50.30-33; *Yagyavalkyasmriti*. Vyavhaar, 140-142; *Na.* 13, 22; *Bodhayanaadharmasutra* 2.2.3.37-38

<sup>206</sup> *Mahabharata* Shalya. 62, 63

<sup>207</sup> *Kathasaritsagar* Part 2, pp. 215-21

<sup>208</sup> *Panchatantra*, p. 253

<sup>209</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 499, Part 4

<sup>210</sup> *Shrangarshatkam* 56, Chaukh

The traditional Indian education pattern of learning through hearing the master's words and then reciting them became a very successful medium for the blind. The capacity to identify objects through touch<sup>211</sup> would also have helped them to get education. The literature, by giving examples of blind people engaged in various trades, provides us with proofs of commercial training to the blind. The information of higher education of Dhritarashtra is given in the 'Adiparva' of *Mahabharata*. Sage Vyas, while telling the qualities of Dhritarashtra to his mother Satyawati says – "This boy's strength would be equal to 10000 elephants, he would be superior in Rajarshis (Royal sages), extremely intelligent and gallant",<sup>212</sup> indicating the different types of training received by him. The Jatakakar in *Bhaddasal Jataka*<sup>213</sup> tells about councilor Mahali, who was blind and received education from the same person who had also taught Bandhul, the military commander of Kosala. This information tells us that the blind too used to go to the places of masters for receiving education like normal students.

As far as livelihood and occupation are concerned, like other categories of physically challenged people, the blind too were engaged in various services, both private and state run. The State used to employ them as secret agents. The *Mahabharata*kar talks about the blind among agents appointed by Bhishma to get information about the background of Shikhandi.<sup>214</sup> Kautilya gives the blind a determinate position in the secret services of the State. In the *Arthashastra*, he writes that the 'Samaharta' must appoint secret agents in the disguise of 'tapasvi', sage (Siddha), blind, etc. in the whole kingdom to find out whether the village headmen and folk are honest or dishonest<sup>215</sup> and they must also be appointed in the houses of ministers to keep them under surveillance.<sup>216</sup> Blind people were deputed in disguise for the purpose of mixing poison (Kalkut) to kill enemies too.<sup>217</sup> They also did the job of watchmen. The *Mahabharata*kar tells us that the guard of the 'Agnihotra' of the ashram of sage Bharadvaj was a blind Shudra, who forcefully caught Bharadvaj's son Yavakreet while he was entering the ashram after coming back from Raibhya's place and did not allow him to enter the ashram, and provided all details of the killing of Yavakreet by the demon to the sage after he came back to the Ashrama.<sup>218</sup>

<sup>211</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 463, Part 4

<sup>212</sup> *Mahabharata* Adiparva 100, 3-10

<sup>213</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 465, Part 4

<sup>214</sup> *Mahabharata* Udyo. 193, 58

<sup>215</sup> *Arthashastra* 4.4.3-4

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid* 1.12.9

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid* 14.1.2

<sup>218</sup> *Mahabharata* Aar. 137, 17-20; *ibid* Aar. 138, 1-8

Apart from watchmanship and espionage, they were also appointed in various state services. The Jatakakar tells us in the *Bhaddasat Jatak*, that the blind Mahali used to work as a counsellor for solving both physical and spiritual problems of the Lichchavis and they used to take his suggestion in all cases.<sup>219</sup> This information is important because in *Manusmriti* and *Mahabharata* directions have been given to vacate the place of secret conference of the blinds and other categories of handicapped people,<sup>220</sup> while here a blind is appointed a counsellor whose suggestion is sought in all secret and general conferences. The blind with special skills also worked as assistants of rulers and determined the price of various royal things, as in the case of the blind Supparak.<sup>221</sup> The Jatakakar tells us that by his touch he could know about the qualities and shortcoming of elephants, horses, pearls, precious stones, etc., on the basis of which their prices were set. But since the payment given by the king to him was insufficient, he left the job unsatisfied and went to Bharukachcha.<sup>222</sup> They earned their living as musicians too, entertaining both common and royal people. According to *Vinayavastu*, after becoming blind Kalyankari reaches the court of a king as musician where, influenced by his music, the princess becomes eager to marry him<sup>223</sup>. *Divyavadan* says that prince Kunal too, after becoming blind, reaches Pataliputra from Taxila begging alms through singing and playing the Veena.<sup>224</sup>

In the *Vinayavastu* of Dharmagupta and the Chinese translation of Kalyankari's story, Kalyankari is described as travelling with an old blind guide in the search of a gem<sup>225</sup>. The references of getting lost under the guidance of a blind guide are made in many instances in the literature.<sup>226</sup> This shows that ability of blind people as a guide was not accepted because Kalyankari could never reach his goal. It was believed that blind people will always guide people in the wrong path. This belief continues today also. The Chinese translation of the story of Kalyankari also tells us that after becoming blind, a royal employee appoints Kalyankari for the job of looking after birds in the garden,<sup>227</sup> indicating another possible profession for the blind.

<sup>219</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 465, Part 4

<sup>220</sup> *Mahabharata* Shantiparva; 84, 53; *Manusmriti* 7, 149

<sup>221</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 463, Part 4

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>223</sup> *Studies in Ajanta Painting*, p. 82

<sup>224</sup> "Kevalam Veenam Vadyati, Gayati cha; Tataa Bhaikshyam Labhate". *Divyavadanam*, p. 267

<sup>225</sup> *Studies In Ajanta Painting*, p. 82

<sup>226</sup> *Maitree* 7.9; *Munda* 1.2.8; *Ramayana* Kishki. 18.16; *Mahabharata* Udyog 67, 13-14; *Jain* part 2, pp. 241-42, 295; *Mahavastu* Part 3, p. 104, etc

<sup>227</sup> *Studies in Ajanta Painting*, p. 83

When the people appointed on royal posts became blind due to accidents, the state did not suspend them and the general people too gave them respect and used their services from time to time. In the *Parantap Jataka*, the king arranges for the maintenance of the Purohita after he becomes blind (actually, he pretends to be blind) and does not remove him from his post.<sup>228</sup> In the *Supparak Jataka*, the blind Supparak himself leaves the post of the head of Sailors after losing his sight, though the sailors do not remove him. Not only this, the groups of traders, while going to foreign countries, considered travelling with expert Supparak more safer than with other sailors, because despite his blindness, ships going with him returned safely.<sup>229</sup> The Jatakakar gives all credit of bringing back the group of traders safely to Bharukachcha, after defending them from various dangers to the navigation-skills of Supparak<sup>230</sup> who proves that a skilled person of specific expertise never lost his old occupation and livelihood even after losing sight, despite the fact that blindness created problems for him from time to time. These references are proof that the blind too were earning a livelihood after getting trained for specific purposes and they were neither removed from state high posts, nor from other state services.

There were also such blind people who had no one to depend on and who could not do work of any type. For the maintenance of such people, society and religion had established certain ideals. The responsibility of maintenance of helpless and disabled people was given to the state.<sup>231</sup> Common people would help the blind, from the perspective of gaining 'punya'. Many alm-houses, punya-shalas were constructed where the needy helpless could get food. On various occasions, yagyas, etc. too these people got grants and alms. The blind were getting maintenance under this plan of extending assistance to the helpless in general. But there are also some such examples, where special arrangements were made only for the blind. It would be appropriate to look at instances of such special assistance. In the tradition of rulers of the Kuru clan, the Mahabharatakar describes Dhritarashtra and Yudhisthira as those who provided maintenance to the blind along with the handicapped of other categories. Dhritarashtra sustained this category with food and clothes<sup>232</sup> while Yudhisthira arranged for their residence along with food and clothes.<sup>233</sup> The description of giving food to helpless orphans and the blind by Yudhisthir during

<sup>228</sup> *Jatakasamhita* 416, part 3

<sup>229</sup> *Jataka Samhita* 463, part 2

<sup>230</sup> Ibid

<sup>231</sup> *Mahabharata* Shantiparva 57, 19; Ibid Shantiparva 59, 54; *Panchatantra*, p. 72, etc.

<sup>232</sup> *Mahabharata* Udyog 30, 37-40

<sup>233</sup> Ibid Virat, 17, 21; ibid Shantiparva 42, 11



the 'Ashwamedha Yagya'<sup>234</sup> and during the celebration on 'Raivatak mountain'<sup>235</sup> are also clearly given by the Mahabharatakar. The Mahabharatakar while talking about the daily routine of common men gives us the information of various types of grants given by them to the helpless, agonized and blind people<sup>236</sup> and also says that the maintenance of the blind along with other helpless people is one part of the righteous conduct of women.<sup>237</sup> The need for providing maintenance to the helpless, blind, etc. through grant of grains according to one's capacity has been also given in *Markandeya Purana*.<sup>238</sup> The Mahavastukar gives us the reference of a common person making a blind beggar satisfied with food and water under the description of family of Dharpal.<sup>239</sup> In the *Kathasaritsagar*, the blind are also referred to along with dwarfs, hunched people, etc. who used to earn livelihood through begging and who were then taken home by the state and women of the royal class would look after them.<sup>240</sup> Religious institutions too sometimes made special arrangements for the maintenance of this category. Fa-Hien gives reference of a 'Vihar' where 500 blind people used to live who got sight because of the grace of Lord Buddha. They were then included in the fold and were totally dependent on that 'Vihar' for maintenance.<sup>241</sup> This reference is important from the point of view that it gives details of the 'Vihar' and 'blind forest' separately which could be considered as proof of the fact that sometimes the religious institutions constructed such blind-residences for people where special facilities were arranged keeping in view their specific problem.<sup>242</sup>

A study of the Shastras shows that like today, in those days also blind people had their skills despite all difficulty, and still they faced discrimination in society. We know that to improve the condition of them many new innovations have come up that reduce their difficulties and enhance their abilities. Many prejudices about visual disability do not exist in today's world for certain classes and societies but still discrimination against them which existed in those days continues today also and bring hindrances in the path of their development.

<sup>234</sup> *Mahabharata Aashva*. 92, 3-4

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid Aashva*, 58, 12

<sup>236</sup> "Daanam Cha Vividhakaram Dinandhakripaneshvapi". *Mahabharata Shantiparva* 292, 23

<sup>237</sup> *Mahabharata*. Trans. 134, 48

<sup>238</sup> *Markandeyapurana* 25, 20

<sup>239</sup> *Mahavastu Part 2*, pp. 76, 77

<sup>240</sup> *Kathasaritsagar Part 2*, pp. 116, 18

<sup>241</sup> *Siyuki Part 1*, p. 27; Fa-Hien. Pp. 32-32

<sup>242</sup> In *Rajtarangini*, a reference of an 'Andha-Matha' being constructed by Utpal Kayastha for the blind has been given (*Rajtarangini* 1, pp. 278-79), which confirms the ancient tradition of making 'Viharas' for the physically challenged by religious institutions.

## Chapter 2

### **The *Mahabharata* and the Visual Disability Discourse**

India has a considerable historical legacy of informal and semi-formal responses to the visually disabled by communities and individuals from ancient times. As has been discussed in the last chapter, documentary evidence shows visually disabled people playing various roles in their families and communities, sometimes with surprising independence. Top-down, charitable or restrictive responses predominate in epic and religious literature, with there being community provision for food and shelter to visually disabled people among other needy categories. The practices and motivations of philanthropists, and the worthiness or unworthiness of recipients, were critically discussed in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist mythologies. Our understanding of the formal community-based rehabilitation development in the 21st century could become more appropriate and effective by studying this 4000 years of cultural experience.<sup>1</sup> In this context, critical study of visually disabled characters in *The Mahabharata* becomes very important.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is an attempt to study the ancient Indian concept of kingship that has added dimensions to the visually disabled characters of *The Mahabharata*. This chapter will mainly examine the characters of Dhumatva Sen and his wife, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, and Upamanyu and will briefly review some evidence of informal and individual activities involved or directed toward visually disabled people in *The Mahabharata*.

*The Mahabharata* is a great epic poem of India that consists one hundred thousand stanzas of verse, divided into eighteen books or parvas. Originally composed in Sanskrit sometime between 400 BC and 400 AD, it is set in a legendary era that is thought to correspond to approximately the tenth century BC.<sup>3</sup> The main subject of *The Mahabharata* is a bloody war between two parties of the ruling family of the northern Indian kingdom of Kurujangala, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Their differences come to end with an eighteen-day battle and the destruction of nearly all those involved in the war, except the victors who are the five Pandava brothers – Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva – and a handful of others.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M Miles, "Including disabled children in Indian Schools 1790s-1890s", *Paedagogica Historica* 2001; 37: 291-315.

<sup>2</sup> M Miles, "Professional and family responses to mental retardation in East Bengal and Bangladesh 1770s-1990s", *International Journal of Educational Development* 1998; 18: 487-499.

<sup>3</sup> Arvind Sharma. *Essays on the Mahabharata*. (Ed) 35: New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

The epic poem's subject focuses on the Hindu concept of dharma or sacred duty. In essence, this epic story represents an extended exploration of the responsibilities set forth by the code of dharma. In addition to telling a heroic tale, *The Mahabharata* also contains a collection of writings on a broad spectrum of human learning that include ethics, law, philosophy, history, geography, genealogy, and religion. It also features a number of legends, moral stories, and local tales all woven into an elaborate narrative.<sup>5</sup> All across the world, the poem is largely known for several of these unusual tales and for *The Bhagavad Gita*, which encapsulates many of the basic tenets of Hinduism. In India, *The Mahabharata* is considered one of the finest works, and is widely read and studied. In addition, it continues to provide inspiration to new generations of Indian writers and artists, and is perceived as one of the nation's most valued classical work of literature. At the same time, discourse of *The Mahabharata* about visual disability also predominates in Indian culture and literature. Hence, to deconstruct the notion of visual disability it is very important to critically analyze a few visually disabled characters in the text.<sup>6</sup>

In Hindu religious traditions, Vyasa is heralded as the most important author of sacred texts. He is traditionally recognized with the arrangement of the Vedas into four texts, as well as the composition of the epic *Mahabharata*, many Puranas, and other works. Western scholars, however, regard the texts attributed to Vyasa as products of many contributors over centuries. Vyasa's authorship has accordingly been described as 'symbolic', and Vyasa himself as 'mythical'. However, according to Hindu beliefs, the status and authority of these texts are to some extent dependent on the status and authority of the author Vyasa. In the Hindu tradition, religious authority is often personal, embodied in the figure of the guru, and Vyasa stands at the head of the chain of teachers (*guru-parampara*) as the originator and authenticator of these teachings.<sup>7</sup> Vyasa's career is given due space in the epic *The Mahabharata*. Unlike the Puranas and other texts where he appears as a static expositor or interlocutor, Vyasa in *The Mahabharata* is an important and active participant. In fact, his authorship of *The Mahabharata* has a duality: not only is he the reputed composer of the text, but he is also the creator of the Bharata family on whom *The Mahabharata*'s story is centered. The epic presents itself as the "fifth Veda",<sup>8</sup> a new Veda for a new era with Vyasa as its *rishi*, the seer who revealed the composition to humanity.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> James Fitzgerald, "The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric: 1983" *A Fresh Look at the Mahabharata* 51: 611-630.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Thus, for the epic, the roles of Brahma who created, and the *rishi*-s who promulgated the four Vedas, are simultaneously performed by Vyasa himself, for the fifth Veda, *The Mahabharata*.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Vyasa has been identified with Narayana in the later Hindu tradition. In the Puranas, Vyasa has consistently been identified as an incarnation of Narayana Vishnu.<sup>10</sup> *The Mahabharata* also has explicit identifications of Vyasa as an incarnation of Narayana, but only two such citations are to be found. The first citation (12.334.9) with the reciter Vaisampayana poses the rhetorical question:

Know that Krisna Dvaipayana Vyasa is Narayana the Lord, for who other  
than the Lord could be the author of the Mahabharata O tiger among men,  
and who other than the Lord could enunciate truly the manifold dharmas?<sup>11</sup>

In this single verse, Vyasa's pupil declares that his master is Narayana Visnu incarnate and the composition of the epic is evidence enough for him. A few chapters later (12.337), Vyasa himself expounds upon his relationship to Narayana. Vyasa describes himself as born from Narayana's speech at the time of the creation. The passage goes on to foretell that Vyasa would divide the Veda and that his offspring, the Bharatas, would annihilate themselves in battle. Most significantly, however, this chapter asserts that Vyasa is an incarnation of Narayana Visnu.<sup>12</sup> Given the frequent identifications of Krsna as an incarnation of Narayana, it is surprising that Vyasa is rarely so identified. These two references to Vyasa as an incarnation of Narayana are both found in the *Narayaniya* section of the Santi Parvan.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars who have commented on Vyasa have consistently interpreted him as an incarnation of Narayana Visnu.<sup>14</sup> However, in doing so, much has been made of a very few citations in *The Mahabharata*. In fact, a thorough survey of Vyasa's actions in *The Mahabharata* reveals that there are many correspondences between Vyasa and Brahma, correspondences which are structurally integral to the epic narrative, and which probably also were represented in the epic earlier than the depiction of Vyasa as Narayana's incarnation.

All the characters which I am examining are from the ruling class. So it is very significant here to study the concept of kingship in ancient times. In India the divinity of kings,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. "India's Fifth Veda: The Mahabharata's Presentation of Itself." 1985 20: 125-140.

<sup>10</sup> *Kurma Purana*. 1.51.48-50; *Bhagavata Purana*.

<sup>11</sup> *Kurma Purana*. 6.8.19; *Devibhagavata Purana*.

<sup>12</sup> *Visnu Purana*: P. 3.3-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Mahabharata* 1.57.74 and 12.327

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

however small their domain may be, has always been accepted by the masses.<sup>15</sup> The bearer of authority inspires awe, fear or admiration. Wielding power and occupying a lonely post, the king is easily credited with special qualities:

They say that the king is a human being; but I consider you to be a god, whose behaviour, if it is in accordance with dharma (norms) and artha (political utility) is superhuman.<sup>16</sup>

Let me first briefly review the ideas connected by the ancient Indians themselves with the main term for the king: Rajan. From the exegetical discussions of the *Purvamimamsa* and the works on dharma it appears that the term was often understood in the sense of any member of the three highest classes who actually rules over or protects a country. Sometimes the application is explicitly limited to a *ksatriya*, a member of the second class.<sup>17</sup> The idea of protecting the people however was central, and also appears from such well-known synonyms as *nripa* – protector of men, *bhilpa* and *bhilpala* – protector or guardian of the earth; *gopa* – herdsman.<sup>18</sup> The phrase ‘herdsman of people’ (*gopa-janasya*) occurs as early as the times of the *Rigveda*:

The man who can protect men, who is valorous, restrained and powerful, and who is the punisher of the wicked is called *ksatriya*.<sup>19</sup>

The king was to be ever wakeful for the benefit of his people. He had even been created to be the protector of the classes and orders of society.<sup>20</sup> “It is said that the Creator created power (*balam*) for protecting weakness”<sup>21</sup> and “The *vaisya*, under the rule of the *ksatriya*, becomes possessed of cattle”<sup>22</sup>. Mercy for all creatures, protection of men, saving them from danger, relieving the distressed and the oppressed, all these are included in the *ksatriya* duties.<sup>23</sup> According to Manu’s dharma book, the second part of the name of a *ksatriya* should be a word implying protection, of a *vaisya* a word expressive of thriving, and of a *sudra* a term denoting service.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Mahabharata* the term for the member of the military class, *ksatriya*, is said to derive from two components, which together express the meaning: he saves from destruction

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<sup>15</sup> V. M. Apte, *Social and Religious Life in the grhya-sutras*, Bombay 1954, p. 52

<sup>16</sup> *Mahabharata* 13.152.16; *Manu-smṛiti* 9.315.

<sup>17</sup> P. V. Kane. *History of Dharmasastra*. III. Poona 1946

<sup>18</sup> *Mahabharata*. 3.63.79.

<sup>19</sup> *Rigveda*. 3.43.5.

<sup>20</sup> *Manu-Smṛiti*. 7.35 and 36.88.142.

<sup>21</sup> *Mahabharata*. 12.91.12.

<sup>22</sup> *Satpath Brahman*. 1.3.2.15.

<sup>23</sup> *Mahabharata*. 12.64.27. *Mbh.* 12, 64, 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Manu-Smṛiti*. 2.32

(*ksatad: yo vai trayaiti sa tasmāt ksatriyah smrtah*). A similar explication of the word already occurs in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*: nobility (*ksatram*) is life-breath (*pranah*); the breath of life protects (*trayate*) one from being hurt (*ksanitoh*).<sup>25</sup> “Behave like the sun which protects (*pati*) and destroys all creatures by its rays”; “protecting one’s subject is from of old *tapas* (asceticism, the word meaning primarily heat or warmth)”<sup>26</sup> are likewise authoritative opinions on kingship. All creatures live happily in the world if they are protected by kings like children are protected by their parents.<sup>27</sup>

The person who always protects the good and checks the wicked deserves to become a king and to govern the world. For if the king does not observe the duty of protection, ruin would befall everything, no property would be safe, unrighteousness would prevail, everything would be destroyed untimely, the Vedas and morality would disappear, sacrifices would no longer be celebrated, in short society itself would cease to exist.<sup>28</sup>

It may indeed be emphasized that this most important of the royal duties comprised furtherance of the moral and material welfare. The better the king, the greater – we might infer from the texts – his power to protect.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand the extreme view is pronounced by an authority on dharma<sup>30</sup> that on account of his majesty and because the protection of the world is entrusted to him the king is right in whatever he does.

It is only in harmony with this important function of the ruler that he is, in the idealizing style of primitive thought, depicted as physically strong.<sup>31</sup> He is able to protect by his own strength. He is like Indra courageous and energetic; the length and strength of his arms are renowned. The whole world is subject to the power of his arms.<sup>32</sup> Emphasis is also laid on his prowess, strength and valor, which set up a greater claim to honour than high birth.<sup>33</sup> Famous kings are described as exceeding all beings in strength, outshining all in lustre (*tejas*), transcending all in majesty.

<sup>25</sup> *Mahabharata*. 12.29.138; 59.126 and *Brhadaranyaka-upanisad*. 5.13.4.

<sup>26</sup> *Mahabharata*. 1.49.6.

<sup>27</sup> *Mahabharata*. 12.64.29; 65.2

<sup>28</sup> *Mahabharata*. 12.68.10.

<sup>29</sup> Kalidasa, *Raghuvamsa* 6, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Narada. 18.21.

<sup>31</sup> One might compare the literary portrait of Rama: *Ramayana* 1.1.8. “broad-shouldered, long-armed, having large jaws and folds in the neck.”

<sup>32</sup> *Mahabharata*. 12.63.24: “bahvayattam ksatriyair manavanam lokasrestham dharmam asevanaih”.

<sup>33</sup> *Sukraniti* 1, 363.

Kings are indeed said to protect the earth with the force of their two arms.<sup>34</sup> Various rulers are called *dirghabahu* – “of long arms”,<sup>35</sup> *mahabahu* – “of mighty arms, long-armed”<sup>36</sup> or *vipulamso mahabahur mahoraskah* – “broad-shouldered, long-armed, broad-chested”.<sup>37</sup> Remarkably enough the epithet *mahabahu* is also given to Visnu, the protector god, who is said to owe this title to the fact that he bears heaven and earth on his mighty arms<sup>38</sup>, and to one of the epic heroes the following words are attributed: “we have the disposal of the might of arms (*bdhubalinah*)”. In this connection mention may be made of the epithet *ksitibhrt* – ‘who supports the earth’. In many societies the belief is widespread that the welfare and prosperity of the community depend on harmony with the invisible powers. Indians shared with many other peoples the conviction that their rulers possessed supernatural power. One of the most striking characteristics of the Indian king is his role as a mediator. He is an intermediary between the powers of nature and society, and thus an essential factor for the well-being of the people. In this respect the Indian ruler was a worthy colleague of the kings and chiefs of many other peoples.

The king is according to many descriptions in the epics and other documents the source and origin of all important events in the country. If the king is good, he is a blessing, if he is bad he is a disaster for his subjects. The sins of a king may even be the cause of the fall of the empire: drought, hunger, diseases, and battles will afflict the population.<sup>39</sup> “As is the king so are his people”.<sup>40</sup> A good king should strive always to add to the prosperity of his people, bringing about a state of plenty and affluence.<sup>41</sup>

It is a well-known fact that war used to break out in this period very often. Hence, it was believed that the king should be physically powerful and healthy. Probably it was the reason a visually disabled person was hardly accepted as a ruler. As I have discussed in the first chapter, many social stigma and myth were acting against visually disabled people which also continued in the Mahabharata era. So in this context we will examine a few visually disabled characters of *The Mahabharata* such as Dhumatva Sen and his wife, Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari, and the young scholar Upamanyu.

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<sup>34</sup> *Vayu Purana*. 88.172

<sup>35</sup> *Mahabharata*. 3.64.54

<sup>36</sup> *Mahabharata*. 3.53.11; 66.11; *Markandeya Purana*. 74, 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Ramayana*. 1.1.9

<sup>38</sup> “bahubhyam rodasl bibhran mahabahur iti smrtah”. *Mahabharata*. 5.70.9

<sup>39</sup> *Jataka* 194 and 213.

<sup>40</sup> *Mahabharata* 11.8.32.

<sup>41</sup> Kalidasa, *Raghuvamsa* 8.6; 9.2; 17.41.

Dhumatva Sen was a very strong and virtuous king. Due to a god's anger Dhumatva Sen and his wife turned blind. As soon as the news reached his foes that Dhumatva Sen has turned blind, they attacked his kingdom and defeated him. Being visually disabled he was unfit to rule his kingdom now. A king should be the protector of his subjects and Dhumatva Sen, owing to his loss of eye-sight lost his kingdom too. Dhumatva Sen and his wife started living in a jungle with their son Satyavan<sup>42</sup> who was very protective of his parents. He ties a rope through his hut to trees of the jungles so that his parents can come out from their hut. The author has used a prevailing myth about visually disabled people, that they need such supports to move around, while in reality, visually disabled people are aware of their surroundings.<sup>43</sup>

One day Savitri comes to the forest. She sees Satyavan and falls in love with him. Savitri's father and her relatives tell her that Satyavan has a very short life which they have known from his father Dhumatva Sen, who never lied. Still, she decides to marry Satyavan and perform all the sacred rites with him. When the day came for Yamraj to take Satyavan with him, Savitri follows him. She asks for five boons from Yamraj. Yamraj grants her all the five boons and she saves Satyavan's life.<sup>44</sup> First Savitri asks for her father-in-law's eye-sight and then for his kingdom. In *The Mahabharata* there is a strong belief that a king should not be blind. That is why probably Vyasa departs from the story in the *Puranas* where Dhumatva Sen's ministers kill his enemies and people from his kingdom come to Dhumatva Sen to ask him to rule over them though he is blind, and no supernatural power cures Dhumatva Sen and his wife's blindness.

A better-known visually disabled figure in *The Mahabharata*, who influenced many events which happened either for good or bad, is Dhritarashtra. It is very important to study his character from the viewpoint of constructed myths about the effects of his visual disability. First, it would be very significant to assess the birth story of Dhritarashtra.

To trace his family tree, Shantanu's marriage with Satyawati needed the condition (laid by her father, the fisherman) be fulfilled that Shantanu's son with Satyawati be given preference over his son with Ganga for kingship of Bharata. Satanava thereupon made a vow renouncing his claim to the throne, and said: "If thou wilt give thy daughter unto my sire to be his queen, I, who is his heir, will never accept the throne, nor marry a wife, or be the father of children. If, then,

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<sup>42</sup> *Mahabharata*. 1.6.147

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 148

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 154



Satyavati will become the mother of a son, he will surely be chosen rajah.”<sup>45</sup> When he had spoken thus, the gods and Apsaras, the mist fairies, caused flowers to fall out of heaven upon the prince’s head, and a voice came down the wind, saying: “This one is Bhishma.”<sup>46</sup> So from that day the son of Ganga was called Bhishma, which signifies the Terrible, for the vow that he had taken was terrible indeed. Then was Satyavati given in marriage to the king, and she bore him two sons, who were named Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. In time Santanu sank under the burden of his years, and his soul departed from his body. Unto Bhishma was left the care of the queen-mother, Satyavati, and the two princes.<sup>47</sup>

When the days of mourning went past, Bhishma renounced the throne in accordance with his vow, and Chitrangada was proclaimed king. This youth was a haughty ruler, and his reign was brief. He waged war against the Gandharas of the hills for three years, and was slain in battle by their raja. Then Bhishma placed Vichitravirya on the throne, and, as he was but a boy, Bhishma ruled as regent for some years.<sup>48</sup>

At length the time came for the young king to marry, and Bhishma set out to find wives for him. It chanced that the King of Kasi (Benares) had three fair daughters whose *swayamvara* was being proclaimed. When Bhishma was told of this he at once entered his chariot and drove from Hastinapur to Kasi to discover if the girls were worthy of the monarch of Bharata. He found that they had great beauty and was well pleased. The great city was thronged with rajas who had gathered from far and near to woo the maidens, but Bhishma would not tarry until the day of the *swayamvara*. He immediately seized the king’s fair daughters and placed them in his chariot. Then he challenged the assembled rajas and sons of rajas in a voice like thunder, saying:

The sages have decreed that a king may give his daughter with many gifts unto one he has invited when she hath chosen him. Others may barter their daughters for two kine, and some may give them in exchange for gold. But maidens may also be taken captive. They may be married by consent, or forced to consent, or be obtained by sanction of their sires. Some are given wives as reward for performing sacrifices, a form approved by the sages. Kings ever favour the *swayamvara*, and obtain wives according to its rules. But learned men have

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 168

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 168

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 1.7 169

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

declared that the wife who is to be most highly esteemed is she who is taken captive after battle with the royal guests who attend a swayamvara. Hear and know, then, ye mighty rajahs, I will carry off these fair daughters of the king of Kasi, and I challenge all who are here to overcome me or else be overcome themselves by me in battle.<sup>49</sup>

The royal guests who were there accepted the challenge and Bhishma fought against them with great fury. Bows were bent and ten thousand arrows were discharged against him, but he broke their flight with innumerable darts from his own mighty bow. There was none who could overcome him; he fought and conquered all, until not a raja was left to contend against him.<sup>50</sup>

Thus did Bhishma, the terrible son of the ocean-going Ganga, take captive after battle the three fair daughters of the King of Kasi; and he drove away with them in his chariot towards Hastinapur. When he reached the royal palace he presented the maidens unto Queen Satyavati, who was well pleased, and at once gave many costly gifts to Bhishma. She decided that the captives should become the wives of her son, King Vichitravirya.<sup>51</sup> Amvika and Amvalika, became the wives of Vichitravirya, who loved them well; but his days were brief, and he wasted away with sickness until at length he died. No children were born to the king, and his two widows mourned for him. The heart of Queen Satyavati was stricken with grief because her two sons were dead, and there was left no heir to the throne of King Bharata.

It was the custom in those days that a kinsman should become the father of children to succeed the dead king. So Queen Satyavati spoke unto Bhishma,<sup>52</sup> saying: "Take thou the widows of my son and raise up sons who will be as sons of the king."<sup>53</sup> But Bhishma said: "That I cannot do, for have I not vowed never to be the sire of any children."<sup>54</sup> In her despair Satyavati then thought of her son Vyasa born to her in her first union with a rishi in a jungle. Vyasa immediately appeared before his mother and consented to do as was her desire. Vyasa was a mighty sage, but, by reason of his austerities in his lonely jungle dwelling, he had grown gaunt and repulsive so that women shrank from before him; fearsome was he, indeed, to look upon.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 170

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 172

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 174

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 175

Amvika closed her eyes with horror when she beheld the sage, and she had a son who was born blind. He was named Dhritarashtra. It denotes that by closing eyes Amvika disrespected Rishi Vyasa and because of the Rishi's anger Dhritarashtra was born blind. It is evident in the Shastras that Rishis should not be disgraced by any means. But by closing eyes Amvika incurred the curse of Rishi Vyasa:

He who was known as Dhritarashtra born of the seed of Krishna-Dwaipayana, and gifted with long arms and great energy, also a monarch, of the prophetic eye, became blind in consequence of the fault of his mother and the wrath of the Rishi.<sup>56</sup>

Even today when a blind child is born in the family his or her blindness is associated with sin. When the time came to select a king, Dhritarashtra was passed over because he was blind and so was Vidura because of his humble birth, and Pandu, "the pale one",<sup>57</sup> was set upon the throne.

After the death of Pandu, Dhritarashtra was caretaker to the throne. As it has been discussed in the first chapter, a blind king's son cannot inherit his father's throne. Many Shastras prescribe such norms. While a common blind person's son can inherit his Grand-father's property, in case of a royal family, the blind prince cannot claim his father's throne and his son is also not allowed to claim his Grand-father's throne. So Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra's eldest son could not become king in legal terms. Duryodhana was jealous of the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra divided the kingdom into parts and Duryodhana got half of the kingdom, which was illegal.

Dhritarashtra always abided by his son's wishes, moral or immoral. He never guided him and consented to the game of dicing, Draupadi's Vastra-Haran and in many other schemes which were made by Duryodhan to kill the Pandavas. These were the main causes of the great battle of *Mahabharata*. The author of *Mahabharata* seems to have characterized Dhritarashtra physically and therefore, morally and emotionally also blind. This myth about visually disabled people is prevailing in the society even today. Many literatures use Dhritarashtra's symbol today also to show moral and emotional blindness. To be concise, to show chaos in the society or to show failure of the ruling class that was inflicted with visually impaired eyes, with all the wisdom Dhritarashtra could not control war between Kauravas and Pandavas. It denotes that he was not a good administrator. This myth also exists in today's society.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 179

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 190

Gandhari blind-folds her eyes to follow her husband in his experience of blindness by her own choice. It is a well-known fact that in ancient times women who used to follow their husbands in their joy and sorrow were given great respect. At the same time, women were identified with their husbands' name and fame. Hence, Gandhari's blindness, in identification with Dhritarashtra's, did not face discrimination. In fact her praise was sung gloriously.

There are many characters in *Mahabharata* who have been shown to be temporarily blind. These temporarily blind characters have also contributed to the prevailing myths of society. For instance, we can analyse the character of Upamanyu who was the disciple of Rishi Ayoda-Dhaumya. He was asked by his Guru to go and look after kine. When he came back in the evening, his preceptor found him fat and asked the reason. Upamanyu told him that he begs and survives on that for the whole day. His preceptor told him not to eat anything without offering to his master first. Again he went on his duty and came plump. His preceptor asked him the reason. He told him that he begs a second time. His preceptor forbid him to do that.<sup>58</sup> Again he went on duty and came back healthy in the evening. When his preceptor asked the reason, he said that he drinks cow's milk. The preceptor forbid him to do that also. Again he went on his duty and came back plump in the evening. The preceptor asked him the reason again. He told him that he ate cattle hay. The preceptor forbid him to do that also. Again he went on duty. He was very hungry and ate leaves of a poisonous tree. It infected his eyes and he becomes blind. While looking for the way he falls in a pit.<sup>59</sup> When he did not return in the evening the preceptor and other disciples came looking for him in the forest. The preceptor called out for him. He answered from the pit and narrated what had happened to him. The preceptor asked him to pray for the restoration of his eye-sight. God Ashwani appeared and asked him to eat a cake. But Upamanyu told him that he cannot eat anything without offering to his preceptor. This time he followed his preceptor. God was pleased with him and his eye-sight was restored.<sup>60</sup>

The story of Upamanyu clearly mentions that after prayer and pleasing God his eye-sight was restored. This belief also prevails in society. That is why families of the visually disabled ask them to pray and please God for restoring their eye-sight. Most of the time, these visually disabled people are not cured. That is why most of the time they are not considered close to God. If they are considered close to God at all that is only due to supernatural power.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 1.1 5

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 6, 7

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 1.1 8

Above all, visual disability has been **considered** a curse and the result of sins. **Therefore**, visual disability is seen as a socio-religious **problem** more than one's physical or **medical** problem and for this reason the visually **disabled** are more or less deprived from many opportunities. So far as *The Mahabharata* is **concerned**, it is evident that due to visual **disability** Dhritarashtra was not accepted as king. **Apart from it**, visual disability has also been **associated** with the darkness of mind (immorality and **emotional blindness**) and with destruction. **This type** of association clearly indicates that blindness was **considered** a curse for society. It **denotes** a discriminatory attitude towards the visually **disabled** which continues today also. **However**, the condition of visually disabled people is gradually **changing** in many occupations. **But the socio-political** behaviour of people is still more or less the **same** as it was in ancient times.

### Chapter 3

#### **The Impact of the Mythological Representation of Visual Disability Discourse on Contemporary Literature and Society**

This chapter would be an attempt to review two literary works of the 20th-century: Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yuga* (1955) and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) to bring into focus how these two works have contributed in furtherance of already established mythologically constructed myths about visually disabled in Indian society and to point out how both authors of have used *Mahabharata* to demonstrate the chaos, destruction and failure of the ruling class. The former has used it to show chaos and destruction due to the aftermath of partition and the latter has used it to reveal the failure of Indian politicians who were participatory of ruling class of the time. Significantly, this chapter would also be an effort to look at the status of visually challenged people in contemporary Indian society and to bring into light how the mythological constructs have been affecting their surroundings, and how academic theories have done so little for them. The major source of the study in this regard will be recent interviews conducted in Delhi with the visually disabled and sighted women and men between June 2007 to November 2007 in various colleges of the Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia and institutions where they are achieving higher education and training in various fields.

Dharamvir Bharati's play *Andha Yuga* focuses on an important phase of modern Indian history, namely partition. As Jaidev Taneja points out, the play *Andha Yuga* has used the term "Andhayuga" six times and words like "Andha", "Andhapan" and "Andhata" etc. have been used fifty-six times.<sup>1</sup> In his play, Bharati has described the age of chaos as a "blind age" (*andha yuga*), while it could have also been referred to as "Dark Age" (*andhakar yuga*). This choice denotes that each and every immoral activity is designated as a symbol of blindness.

*Andha Yug* focuses on the last day of the Mahabharata war. The ramparts are in ruins, the city is burning and Kurukshetra is covered with corpses and vultures. The few bewildered survivors of the Kaurava clan are overcome with grief and rage. Longing for one last act of revenge, they refuse to condemn Ashwatthama when he releases the ultimate weapon, the *brahmastra*, which threatens to annihilate the world. Instead, they blame Krishna for having caused the war, and curse him.

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<sup>1</sup> Jaidev Taneja, *Andha Yug Paath Aur Pradarshan* (Hindi), 1998

The moral centre of the play lies in Krishna. He is the voice of compassion, an embodiment of all that is good and just in the world. Despite his failure to ensure peace, it is his presence throughout the play which reveals to us that the ethical and the sacred are always available to human beings even in the worst of times.

*Andha Yuga* is one of the most significant plays of modern India. Written immediately after the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the play is a profound meditation on the politics of violence and aggressive selfhood. The moral burden of the play is that every act of violence inevitably debases society as a whole. *Andha Yuga* captures the essential tension between the nightmare of self-entanglement, which the story of the Kauravas represents, and the ever-present possibility of finding a way out of the cycle of revenge into a redemptive ethicality. One of the most significant plays of post-Independence India, Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yuga* raises pertinent moral issues in the context of Partition-related atrocities.

The action of the play takes place on the last day of the Mahabharata war and is centered on a few bewildered survivors of the Kaurava clan. The figure of Krishna is central to the narrative. He represents the infinite variety of ways in which the good manifests itself in the ordinary world. He is the man of justice and truth. The Kauravas, however, are unable to imagine the truth about Krishna. This failure of imagination becomes the cause of their final undoing.

Partition occurs due to the failure of the ruling class. That is why the characters of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari play a very significant role in the play. As it has been discussed in the second chapter, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari's blindness does not only symbolize loss of eyesight in the physical sense but it also symbolizes emotional and moral blindness. In this play, Dharamvir Bharati uses these characters to show the chaos of the partition period, people of the immoral ruling class, who were responsible for the whole event.

In a nutshell, Dharamvir Bharati has made an attempt to define the whole period as 'blind age' and the people who participated either from ruling class or civil society as 'immoral' and therefore, 'blind'. That is why he uses words like, Andha, Andhapan many times and calls the whole Yuga blind. Thus, in Dharamvir Bharati's play we find continuation of the prevalent myth about visual disability of the *Mahabharata*, that blindness is synonymous with immorality.

*The Great Indian Novel* derives its sources from *Mahabharata*. Hence, in this perspective it becomes important to critically review this novel. We know that the novel was written in 1989 when the disability movement was very strong throughout the world.

The old is new again, Shashi Tharoor's narrator declared, and indeed his 1989 novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, illustrates this point in more respects than one, considering it in its totality. But what does not appear new in the novel is the representation of visual disability's mythological projection. The work is a giant palimpsest in which the sub-text still emerges clearly to the reader's eye. As the author willingly acknowledges in a preliminary disclaimer, the title of the novel does underline and give the key to the work:

The Great Indian Novel takes its title not from the author's estimate of its contents but in deference to its primary source of inspiration, the ancient epic the Mahabharata. In Sanskrit Maha means great and Bharata means India.<sup>2</sup>

Hence the Mahabharata is the great story of the Indian race, the Bharats, the ancestors of present-day Indians. The last word of the title also deserves a brief comment. If indeed the text can be read as belonging to the polymorphous genre of fiction, it is 'novel' also in so far as it offers new, and one may add contemporary, material about the story of India as told through the ancient epic. The visible text is that of Indian history from the birth of the nationalist movement under the British Raj to the situation of the country after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, that is, roughly speaking, the last century of Indian History. So it is essentially a vision of New (modern, colonial and post-colonial) India that comes to mind as the reader goes through the four hundred or so pages of the narrative, since the latter is done with even further hindsight.

In the opening chapter, aptly entitled "The Twice-Born Tale", the narrator claims his intention to have "The Song of Modern India" transcribed from his very words. Indeed, Ved Vyas, an old politician of the Indian National Congress dictates the whole story to Ganapathy a young scribe recommended by his friend Brahm under similar conditions to those imposed by Vyasa to Ganesh in the opening part of the ancient epic. This ploy is in itself the first instance of the whole frame of the novel.

Like the *Mahabharata*, it consists of eighteen books subdivided into one hundred and twenty three sections. Though formally it is written in prose, the narrator now and then – and usually at crucial moments in his narrative – switches to verse in the telling, as, for instance, when he reaches the part assigned to the Bhagavad Gita in the epic. Beside the formal resemblance with the ancient text, Ved Vyas's narrative follows very clearly and precisely the plotline and the major episodes of the epic, and thus to its very, ambivalent, conclusion. The first

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<sup>2</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, London: Viking, 1989.



ten books, just as in the original, leading to the fratricidal war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, present the struggle from independence and culminate with the lethal rivalry between Hindu politicians after the country achieved independence on a democratic basis.

The last eight books stage the ruinous consequences of the power struggle leading to a no-win, indeed to a detrimental situation for the country, a situation which is equated with the present state of India as the narrator ends his story (i.e. corresponding to the late 1980s). The eighteenth book shows the main protagonists of History reaching an ambivalent paradise (fame) under the leadership of dead Yudishtir just as in the epic itself.

When one looks at the unwinding of the plot in closer detail, it becomes clear that faithfulness to the original is achieved through a variety of devices ranging from mere modernisation of the epic, like, i.e. Ved Vyas's own family story (told as the seduction of a fisherman's daughter by a passing Brahmin sage compared to Ganga, the goddess of the river Ganges who married king Shantanu of Hastinapur), or again the great and crucial battle at the heart of the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita*, is transmuted into the struggle for power between Indira Gandhi's Congress and the moral, traditionally Hindu, Janata Front, itself emanating from the most conservative group of the Congress.

Such transmutations clearly belong to parody and highlight the mock epic character of the novel in a fairly banal albeit entertaining way, as does the identification of each historical character with a mythic counterpart. This is done in a significant way for the narrator's (and the author's) comment on the person concerned, since his/her role in the well-known mythical tale is reflected in his/her part played in the history of modern India.

Hence, Gandhi is assimilated to Bhishma (which apparently means 'of terrible resolve'), the only surviving son of the Goddess Ganga and Santanu, who renounced the throne of Hastinapur in advance to enable his father's second marriage, renouncing as well all sexual life to ensure the succession for his younger half brothers. Like his epic counterpart, he is depicted as wise, ascetic and charismatic. Also known as Mahaguru – great teacher – (as opposed to the historical Mahatma), he will undertake the education of his half brothers Dhritarashtra the blind king (here Jawaharlal Nehru) also wise and learned, but cut off from everyday life realities and toils by his blindness. Hence, blindness has not been taken by Tharoor as just lost of eye-sight but it also symbolizes darkness of mind as it is represented in the *Mahabharata* which is the original source of this novel.

Pandu (Subhas Chandra Bose) is much more passionate, practical and down to earth. The trio represent the Kaurava dynasty, in modern times the Indian National Congress, who are the legitimate heirs to the ancient kingdom of Hastinapur, symbolizing the whole of India. Bhishma arranges marriages for the two younger half brothers. It implies Dhritarashtra's blindness is reminded to readers again and again though Dhritarashtra was married to a beautiful woman. But for Gangaji due to Dhritarashtra's blindness this mattered least. This is another myth about visually disabled people that they cannot admire the external beauty of the person.

“For you, Dhritarashtra, the eldest, I have found a girl from a very good family of Allahabad. She is called Gandhari, and I am told she has lustrous black eyes. Not,” he added hastily, “that matters, of course. No, the main attraction of this lovely lady, from our point of view, is that she hails from a most productive line.”<sup>3</sup>

It is from the rivalry between the cousins that the great war for power over Hastinapur will eventually arise. Pandu has five sons: the Pandavas of the epic, Yudishthir, Bhim, Arjun and the twins, Nakul and Sahadev, are here equated respectively with Morarji Desai and the Army, the Press, the Administration and the Foreign Office. Unknown to Pandu, his first wife Kunti had previously had an illegitimate son who had disappeared Moses-like as soon as he was born to re-emerge as a golden boy with a crescent moon scar on his forehead: the Karna of the epic becomes Mohammed Ali Karna (that is M.A. Jinnah).

The blind king Dhritarashtra of the *Mahabharata* has one hundred sons, the Kauravas, by his wife Gandhari. His counterpart, the modern blind king of the Kauravas (in other words Nehru the leader of the Indian National Congress) has one single daughter Priya Duryodhani (it should be recalled that Nehru called his daughter ‘Priyadarshini’, the ‘dear looking one’) whose birth, similar to what happens in the epic for the birth of her namesake Duryodana, the eldest of the hundred, is greeted with sinister omens of violence foretelling hate and destruction to the country. In other words, we can say she has been represented as the immoral daughter of an immoral father who denotes immoral blindness.

*The Great Indian Novel* is easily deciphered by those who have a summary knowledge of the plot and main episodes of the epic, well-known to Indians educated and uneducated alike, thanks to the oral tradition of story-telling, and of recent Indian History. Indeed, so far, the ploy used by Tharoor can appear rather straightforward and unsophisticated. It is in fact much more

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 43

elaborate, since the novel has to integrate not only the rivalry for power among diverse but closely related Indian political factions and parties into the ancient frame of the epic, but also the struggle to free India from its colonial masters, without which the former would have been impossible. Thus borrowing exclusively from the *Mahabharata* would not have made the telling of Ved Vyas's story possible.

The foreign characters in the plot are then tackled through multicultural sources; to the west of the Indian antic myths, Tharoor adds the warp of colonial and postcolonial fiction which echoes throughout the first ten books of the novel. These echoes are much more distorted than the fairly clear-cut delineations between the Indian epic and the historical events depicted.

But the matter of the fact is that Shashi Tharoor follows the same tradition of *Mahabharata* about visual disability by continuing the same myth constructed by Ved Vyasa, that concerning Dhritarashtra's moral emotional blindness. It is evident from the fact that in Tharoor's novel *Dhritarashtra (Nehru)* now and then takes many decisions just because of his daughter Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) as Dhritarashtra has followed his son's wish in the *Mahabharata*. But there is a significant distinction between Tharoor's novel and *Mahabharata* that is, in Tharoor's novel *Dhritarashtra (Nehru)* inherits the throne while in *Mahabharata* he never gets his throne and rules as a caretaker. But he projects him as a failed ruler.

Tharoor has depicted Dhritarashtra (*Nehru*) as completely emotionally blind. When his wife Gandhari dies he is least bothered about her death. It is shown in the novel that Gandhari blind-folds her eyes like in the original *Mahabharata* for Dhritarashtra. But he is least bothered about her. He never writes letters to her and never cares for her. On her death bed also she waits for Nehru. She dies in the process but he is least bothered about her death. When he is reminded by his daughter that "mother is dead she was waiting for you" He says, "It doesn't matter."<sup>4</sup> Through this exaggerated representation of the marital relation of Kamala Nehru and Jawaharlal Nehru, Tharoor projects the popular belief of Indian society that the visually disabled are emotionally blind too. It is reminiscent of a very popular phrase in Hindi: "Andhe Ke Aage Rona Bekar Hai", that is "crying before a blind is meaningless". In a broader sense, it means that the blind are emotionless. Tharoor incorporates in this novel this belief very well while representing Gandhari's death.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 217

The subsequent "Midnight's Parents", stages the much debated relationship between Nehru (Dhritarashtra) and Edwina Mountbatten (Lady Georgina Drewpad) as the secret parents of Draupadi (an allegory of Indian Democracy). A caricature of democracy has been represented by Tharoor by showing it as a child of an illegitimate relationship between the blind king Dhritarashtra (Nehru) and Lady Georgina. Here again Tharoor degrades Dhritarashtra (Nehru) by projecting Nehru's immoral action on him. Jacques Derrida believes that blind people have been represented in literature as lecherous or having excessive sexual desire. In this fashion, Tharoor makes Dhritarashtra a lecherous character too.

This vivacious and ironic mixing of historical facts with literary allusions and distortions together with moral and philosophical comments from the narrator who is visibly endorsing the author's own judgment on the event highlighted as a specific episode in the plot, is revealing of the method used by Tharoor throughout the novel.

It is also combined with other well known literary figures of styles, such as allegory, caricature and evidently satire. Two allegories dominate the novel and are instrumental to the plot, Democracy and Dharma, showing once more the intended multicultural approach in a novel that so firmly asserts its Indian-ness. Democracy is embodied in Draupadi, the mythical heroine married equally and simultaneously to the five Pandavas (Yudhishtira then represents the judiciary, Bhim the army, Arjun the press, and the twins the civil and diplomatic services). Since Draupadi is the secret daughter of Lady Drewpad and Dhritarashtra, her very name appears to blend her Western and Eastern heritages. But to make things even clearer, albeit facile, Tharoor gives her as adoptive father a certain Mr. Mokras, thus enabling her tutor Prof. Jennings to describe her progress as a growing child.

Dharma, this most complex of Indian concepts, is also allegorised as an intermittent character throughout the novel. It, however, comes into its/her own in the last book entitled "The Path to Salvation", where each of the main characters gets his/her due under the perplexed eye of Yudhishtir who wonders about the justice of it all and is chided by Dharma, as a beautiful woman, precisely for that reason. When for the first time in his life, Yudhishtir who has always practised dharma and has therefore to be granted this ascent to Paradise and this vision, rejects it thus showing the necessity to shake off the shackles of constraining tradition, he sees to his astonishment that the resplendent deva beside him was "changing slowly back into a dog".

This apparently disrespectful treatment of Dharma by Tharoor's pen is not particular to allegorized concepts. His depiction of historical characters, albeit under cover of their mythical counterparts, is mostly caricature. But in the case of Pyla Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) the portrait is definitely more vitriolic:

She was a slight, frail girl [...] with a long thin tapering face like the kernel of a mango and dark eyebrows that nearly joined together over her high-ridged nose, giving her the look of a desiccated school teacher at an age when she was barely old enough to enroll at school. Her eyes shone from that pinched face like blazing gems on a fading backcloth, flashing, questioning, accusing, demanding in a manner that transcended mere words. Even at the age of twelve, overkill was already her problem. Pyla Duryodhani stepped into my room wearing an elegant shawl and an inelegant scowl [...], my desiccated grand daughter's schemes had misfired. Duryodhani's thin lips bared a chilling smile of contentment.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, when one keeps in mind the emblematic image of 'Mother India' depriving Pyla Duryodhani of all female attributes, insisting on her barrenness, definitely makes of her an unnatural, demonic, creature, a Frankenstein's monster that was assuredly growing out of control. Again it shows the failure of Nehru (Dhritarashtra) in controlling his daughter as a father which symbolizes his incapability as a king or father because of his blindness.

From the mere physical caricatures implying more or less profound individual psychological and moral distortions, the novel is driven to an extended social and political satire of Indian society during its colonial and post-colonial days. On the one hand, Tharoor makes his satire more effective by using a visually disabled character to show the failure of the ruling class which continues the already established prejudice, and fulfils the novel's purpose here. But, on the other hand, it becomes unbearable for the visually disabled community if they are projected in this manner in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is degrading for the whole community. It should be remembered that by this time the disabled community started recognizing themselves as a class or minority group. So Tharoor does not keep one minority group in his mind while satirizing the ruling class. It can be said that he somewhere encourages prevailing myths of the society. Literature plays a great role in constructing culture and society, and it is the duty of authors to de-construct existing myths about visual disability, and Tharoor fails to perform this duty.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 207

Most of the existing beliefs and values in Indian society related to disabled persons in the mainstream culture have clear links with traditional myths and religious scriptures. In spite of the other differences in the cultures, these beliefs and values are often very similar in different religions of India. For instance, in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* there are different references to disabled persons. The story of Shравan Kumar presents him as a dutiful son, who takes care of his blind parents, who are completely dependent upon him for all their care. Another disabled person in the story is Manthara, the hunchbacked maidservant of the queen Kaikeyi, who poisons the queen's heart against her step son. There is yet another episode linked to disability, in which Surpanakha, the beautiful sister of Ravana, is attracted to Ram and Lashman, and to refuse her persistent advances of love, Lakshman cuts her nose, rendering her disabled and implying that disabled women have no right for sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Jainism is another religion in the Indian subcontinent, based on concepts of non-violence and compassion towards all living creatures. The Jaina community in India recognized, probably in the fifth or sixth century BC, that people with visual disabilities or diseases become annoyed if their condition is publicly announced. Buddhism is another Indian religious tradition which also shares with Hinduism and Jainism beliefs in reincarnation and influence of deeds in the past lives on the present lives, the concept of Karma. Thus the cause of impairments is located in the sins in the past lives and disabilities are justified as punishments for those sins. For example, in Buddhist literature there is the story of Khujjutara, a hunchback servant in the king's palace:

... the unprecedented transformation from deformed maidservant to honored teacher of the Law was endorsed by the Buddha, who also sketched Khujjutara's history for his disciples' instruction. In an earlier birth she had mocked a deformed holy man at the royal court of Benares, imitating his stoop. She thus earned herself a 'corrective' or educational rebirth as a hunchback, so that progress of her soul should not be impeded.<sup>7</sup>

The above examples from different mythological beliefs present certain common features related to their views about disability like charity, need for care, imperfection, divine punishment, etc. There is another tradition common to many mythological beliefs which are related to impairments seen as signs of special skills or powers.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ramayana*. Ayodhya. 58, 8; Rajyabhishekh. 61, 9; Vanavasa. 71, 10.

<sup>7</sup> M. Miles, "Blind People Handling Their Own Fate. Disability on a Different Model: Glimpses of an Asian Heritage", 2000. <[www.independentliving.org/docs5/mmiles1.html](http://www.independentliving.org/docs5/mmiles1.html)>

Apart from the negative connotations about disabled persons in the traditional myths and different religious texts, often different cultures also present stereotypical views about the specific activities suitable for disabled persons. Many such stereotypes continue to influence the lives of disabled persons even today, thus creating specific expectations or limiting the life-choices available to them.

In all countries of the world, people with disabilities are the largest minority group. Historically, children and adults with disabilities have been neglected and their rights as citizens of a particular country are many times not taken into consideration. Due to the long history of neglect and marginalisation, participation of the disabled in community life has been minimal. Schools have not accepted them as children, employers have not hired them as adults and they have been subjected to a long history of isolation, segregation, deprivation, charity and even pity. The plight of the disabled in India is not different. Since the disabled as yet, do not occupy a rightful position in our country, they tend to be mostly ignored by society. Disability is not a personal quality but something that is created in relation between the disabled individual and the community. And on top of that Indian mythology plays a key role in constructing perceptions about visual disability. It is a great waste of resources when disabled persons are discriminated against and excluded from society.

Disability, as understood from the sociological perspective, is all the things that impose restrictions on the disabled people. This will include individual prejudice, stereotypes, societal attitudes and myths, segregated education, excluding work arrangements, barriers like inaccessible public buildings and unusable transport systems. Thus, it has been argued that 'disability' is mainly the 'social condition' imposed upon the disabled individual. The role of society in labeling a person as disabled has serious repercussions. The disabled face many social disadvantages such as feeling of inferiority, fear of social ridicule, lack of self confidence, limited sphere of social participation and inability to compete with the so-called physically normal people.<sup>8</sup>

The perception of any society throughout the world about blindness is more or less similar. As James H. Omgvig writes, "blindness is visible characteristic, and the blind as a group of people perceived as inferior. A simple fact of life is that society tends to lump those who are identifiably

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver, 1996.

different in some physical way into minority groups and treat them differently.”<sup>9</sup> According to him, visually challenged people are viewed as a different class by society, significantly, as a minority group. In his words, “this is simply a fact of life, and one with which we must cope”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the blind, generally are judged and considered not as individuals with individual talents and abilities, but by what the people with whom we are dealing think about blindness and the blind as a class. This circumstance changes visual disability into a social and attitudinal problem, not a physical one.

As it has been mentioned above Indian mythology has played an important role in constructing myths about visual disability. It is considered that blindness is a curse. A person who did a bad deed in his/her previous birth(s) pays through blindness in the present birth. The visually disabled are projected by society as either angelic or demonic characters. In both cases they are excluded from the human face of society. Very few social workers are ready to recognize them as a minority community and understand their problem.

One can find four categories of reactions of families towards their visually challenged members. The first category comprises families that completely abandon such children, influenced as they are by beliefs propagated by myths and religious notions. The second category includes families which are very protective about their visually disabled children. They give them proper education and fulfil all their needs, but don't have trust in them and don't want them to be independent. Warnings like, 'wherever you go, take someone along with you otherwise you might be in trouble' are common. These families, usually from the upper class, believe in doing charity for their children. They do not recognize them as normal human beings who have emotional feelings and who can grow as others. They believe in protecting their children who, they think, always need help and support, due to which these children never get confidence. The third category belongs to those families where visually disabled are considered as burdens, and though not totally discarded, these children are sent to special institutions by their families who seldom come to meet them. These children are deprived of their parental love. In the fourth category fall the few fortunate visually disabled who belong to upper and middle class families, usually from cities. Due to social awareness their parents are trained to understand the disability of the visually challenged and enable them to be independent. Fortunately, such parents are

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<sup>9</sup> James H. Omvig, *Freedom for the Blind: Secret is Empowerment*. 2002, p. 26

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26



supportive. They do not believe in the **constructed** myths about visual disability and try to enhance their visually disabled children's **capability** and try to inculcate confidence in them. The educated parents always help their children in **decision-making** and various difficulties at home. However, we have to keep in mind that such **families** are very few. We have to take some concrete action to ensure that the number of **such families** increases, which will be **immensely** beneficial for the visually disabled and social **progress** at large.

Rather than regale in one's **mythological** and religious past, which, as my study has shown, create myths about the visually **challenged**, leading to their projection in **charitable** or **uncharitable** light, or draw upon these very **mythic** beliefs and create contemporary **allegories** that carry forward the very insensitivities even **further**, the task of the intellectual today **should be** to see to it that society evolves more in the **direction** of the fourth category explained above. While blind people do not want victimization, **neither do they** aspire for segregated charity. They rather desire to be recognized as a minority group, with the capacity to and the right to **living** with dignity. In these times of ours when art and **theorizing** about art continuously talks about the rights of the Other, of the liminal, the deprived, **intellectual** exercises have not yet **adequately** directed themselves towards generating awareness for one marginal group that seems to **be left** out all such formulations, the disabled. Even lay **readers** of literature are now taught to **interpret** texts in terms of their problematic representations of **class**, gender, race, caste, **sexual orientation**, etc., while there is so little attempt to read the **representation** of disability in literature and culture and corollarily raise a resistant discourse in this field. **Rather than** succumbing to **mythological** constructions of the blind, raising these issues is the **unfulfilled** task that contemporary literary theory and practice must perform.

## Conclusion

When an individual becomes blind, he faces two major problems: first, he must learn the skills and techniques which will enable him to carry on as a normal, productive citizen in the community; and second, he must become aware of and learn to cope with public attitudes and misconceptions about blindness – attitudes and misconceptions which go to the very roots of our culture and permeate every aspect of social behavior and thinking.

The first of these problems is far easier to solve than the second. For it is no longer theory but established fact that, with proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business – and do it as well as his sighted neighbor. The blind can function as scientists, farmers, electricians, factory workers, and skilled technicians. They can perform as housewives, lawyers, teachers, or labourers. The skills of independent mobility, communication, and the activities of daily living are known, available, and acquirable. Likewise, the achievement of vocational competence poses no insurmountable barrier.

In other words, the real problem of blindness is not blindness itself – not the acquisition of skills or techniques or competence. The real problem is the lack of understanding and the misconceptions which is created by mythologies and religions. It is no accident that the word blind, carries with it connotations of inferiority and helplessness. The concept undoubtedly goes back to primitive times when existence was at an extremely elemental level. Eyesight and the power to see were equated with light, and light (whether daylight or firelight) meant security and safety. Blindness was equated with darkness, and darkness meant danger and evil. The blind person could not hunt effectively or dodge a spear. <sup>1</sup>

In our day, society and social values have changed. In civilized countries there is now no great premium on dodging a spear, and hunting has dwindled to the status of an occasional pastime. The blind are able to compete on terms of equality in the full current of active life. The primitive conditions of jungle and cave are gone, but the primitive attitudes about blindness remain. The blind are thought to live in a world of 'darkness', and darkness is equated with evil, stupidity, sin, and inferiority. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> B.L. Mellory, "Changing Beliefs about Disability in Developing Countries: Historical Factors and Socio-cultural Variables", in BL Mellory, RW Nicholls, JI Charlton, and K.Marfo eds. *Traditional and Changing Views of Disability in Developing Societies*, University of New Hampshire Press, 1994, p. 140

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 155

There are a number of reasons why it is extremely difficult to change social attitudes about blindness. For one thing, despite the fact that many achievements are being made by the blind and that a good deal of constructive publicity is being given to these achievements there are strong countercurrents of uninformed and regressive publicity and propaganda. One thing should be remembered that for mankind religion is an instrument which consists certain notions about certain things one is forced to believe or practice. That is why perhaps, in India despite of all achievements of the visually disabled, they are not given equal opportunities and are still treated on a charitable model or as curse for society. In earlier societies there were many reasons given for a person's visual disability. Mainly, it was seen as punishment meted by Gods for sins from previous births. Here it should be remembered that the visually disabled also believe in the same myth. Despite all difficulties, in the ancient times too, they played an important role in the State machinery and in other fields. But the perception about blindness is such that they are treated as second class citizens in society.

In the *Mahabharata* era, due to visual disability, Dhritarashtra was not accepted as king. Apart from it, visual disability has also been associated with the darkness of mind (immorality and emotional blindness) and with destruction. This type of association clearly indicates that blindness was considered as a curse for society. It denotes discriminatory attitude towards the visually disabled which continues today also. In contemporary literature, representation of visual disability has been made in the same manner. The symbol of blindness has been used quite often to show foolishness, immorality, destruction or chaos in society. This represents visual disability in negative terms. It becomes the duty of 21st-century intellectuals to recognize the capability of visually disabled people. They should start recognizing visually disabled people as a class and they should change their perspective and that should reflect through their literary works.

Culture is an amorphous term, used differently in different contexts. India being such a vast country, it is difficult to think in terms of a unified single culture that is prevalent everywhere. Indian society has always remained pluralistic with multiple traditions weaving a multi-coloured pattern. Waves of immigrants with different faiths and cultures contributed to the dominant Hindu view of disability, and also preserved their own unique heritage. It is important to note that these were living traditions with a history of dissents, protests and reforms, and efforts to adapt to the new realities.<sup>3</sup> In the resulting diversity, two factors, which were common

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<sup>3</sup> E.W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1993, p. 20

to all traditions and which survived many crises, are family and religion. These were the decisive factors that played a role in shaping the fate of the visually disabled community. Family, as a basic social unit, played its crucial role in supporting or not supporting its members and giving them a social identity. Like family, religion also pervaded all spheres of life, as a major force behind social decisions and activities. This scenario has not changed much in spite of global, economic and technological changes affecting the local communities. Understanding the socio-economic background of families, which comprise local communities and their religious practices, is essential for altering the condition of blind people at the grassroots level.<sup>4</sup>

Indians, in general, have an ambivalent attitude towards people with disability. In dealing with someone with a disability, people are caught in an avoid-help kind of a conflicting situation and feel anxious. Religious beliefs about disability only add to this confusion. There is a belief in divine punishment in all religions and people tend to accept the condition of disablement as something they deserved. This punishment is presumed to be meted out for their sinful acts, and one can overcome the resultant suffering by engaging in morally right behaviour. The other prevalent notion is that God inflicts suffering on good people to test their resilience and inner strength. In either case, one is expected to respect God's will. Those people who are more fortunate are exhorted by religious texts to show pity and compassion to those who are suffering. *Manu Smriti*, the ancient charter of social conduct, impelled people to spare a part of their material resources for their hapless fellow-beings, to support their daily living.<sup>5</sup> *Dharmashastra* called upon all householders to look after the weak and disabled, and those who did so, were ensured a place in heaven. Such care was to be shown without expectation of any returns.

Hindu scriptures have provided elaborate commentaries on why people suffer. The theory of Karma is propounded to explain all kinds of suffering. This theory implies that if one has committed misdeeds in previous births, one has to inevitably bear the consequences. Disability is held to be a punishment for the sins of previous births and one is called upon to accept it as divine retribution. This notion is frequently invoked to explain whatever happens in one's life.<sup>6</sup> Belief in the theory of Karma has very often led to a ready acceptance of physical disability, with little effort in the direction of improving life conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> C.A. Narasimhan and A.K. Mukherjee, *Disability: A Continuing Challenge*, New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1986, p. 14

<sup>5</sup> *Manusmriti*. 9. p. 202

<sup>6</sup> B.G. Gokhale, *Indian Thoughts throughout the Ages: A Study of Dominant Concepts*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961, p. 24

Though the meaning of the principle of **Karma** has a different connotations for different people in different contexts, the belief helps people in accepting their own (and others') suffering. The belief in Karma is so deeply ingrained in the minds of the people, that any effort to dismiss or dislodge it can be counterproductive. There are, indeed, many misconceptions about what this belief does to a person. It is argued that the acceptance of disability as Karma gives people some explanation for their suffering, which cannot be justified otherwise. However, this kind of explanation for disability is not justified, because specific reasons for one's disability are known in this scientific age.

Here, therefore, it would be very significant to elaborate the fact that being visually challenged is only a challenge and it does not disable a person in anyway. It is at times an inconvenience but does not disable one from leading a normal happy life. That is why it is necessary for society to change perceptions about visual disability. Hence, it is essential to deconstruct mythologically constructed notions about visual disability and instead of showing sympathy or charity, society should have empathy towards the visually challenged and should give them equal opportunities to participate in society. This will be helpful for the minority group that disabled people comprise to get integrated in our society.

Thus, blindness should not be misinterpreted. Even those working for the cause of eye donation and the concerned doctors should not present the visually challenged in a pathetic light, as if their lives are totally darkened by their physical disability, as it leaves a wrong impact on people's minds. Moreover, it is also the duty of the common man to convey the positive message that blind people are also leading happy lives like others to society, especially to children, so that they do not develop negative images in their minds. It is expected of us that we do not shun blind people. It should be one's responsibility to give them place in society and a space of their own, and realize that they, too, are the part of the same social and cultural surroundings.

Finally, it can be put forward from the above discussion that first and foremost, our society needs to come forward to integrate disabled people, as a whole, in the society and consider them an equal part of it rather than segregating them. Further, media, as one of the most important pillars of democracy, should bring to light such social issues so that the government of the country may be conscious about them and may provide resources to promote research in this area. It is necessary to realize that without changing myths about visual disability, it is difficult to change the social condition of visually challenged people.

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