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**The Complexities of *The Mahabharata*: Some Issues of
Interpretation**

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The Mahabharata by Veda Vyas is not an open-ended text with multiple beginnings and inconclusive ending exactly in the literal sense. It is true that it has been rewritten by many choosing certain portions in their own creative ways producing a multilogue. Many of them differ so much from the original source also. Some have gone so much away from the original that the new narratives are not at all representing the facts, rather often they are rejecting and reshaping them into altogether new narratives suiting their objectives. The various ideology groups have also tended to represent some textual parts or the sub-narratives of it quite differently and often conflicting or contradicting with the original source.

The text itself of *The Mahabharata* has several editions available in which there is a variation. Some incidents in one are curtailed or they are elaborated in others and the critics are divided over which one is authentic. Still the Bhandarkar edition is accepted by many as authentic.

The text itself states that Vyas himself told the story to his five disciples, Vaishampayan being one of them. Later, Vaishampayan narrated the story to King Janamejaya during the gathering for the Sarpsatra. This narrative of Vaishampayan is in question-answer form. Naturally, several things came to be added or elaborated by him. Later on, Sauti becomes the narrator of this Katha at Naimisharanya in the 'Yagna' organized by Shaunak. These three main versions are known as *Jaya*, *Bharata* and *Mahabharata* respectively.

Also, some begin it with the story of Manu, some with that of Astika and others with King Uparichar. It is believed that *Jaya* had 8,800 couplets. (Macdonal) Dr. C V Vaidya however states that there were 24,000 couplets. Sumantu, Jaimini, Pail, Shuk and Vaishampayan had their versions of the *Mahabharata*, but only Vaishampayan's version is available. The third version of that of Ugrashrava has 1,00,00 couplets.

Three editions of the Sauti version are available today: Nilkanth, Kumbhkonam and Bhandarkar editions. Of the three Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute edition is considered very authentic. Even in these three editions, the number of chapters and couplets therein also vary. In none, in fact, 1,00,000 couplets are available. They are 95,826, 98,585 and 98,286 couplets respectively in Neelkanth, Kumbhakonam and Bhandarkar editions.

More than all these, so many creative writers have made use of (adapted) the *Mahabharata* incidents, characters and other issues from it for constructing their fictional narratives. In recent times, different ideologies have developed their discourses to suit their agenda of driving their political worldviews and



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perspectives using the text of *Mahabharata*. The worst of all is that many, without reading the original source text, and without distinguishing between the original texts and their fictional narratives, have been talking of the fictional versions as if they are authentic *Mahabharat* versions. These versions are circulated in an organized manner thorough their publications and social media. Naturally, a lot of confusion has been generated in the country as well as the world about the *Mahabharata*, its characters, major happenings in it and thus on India and its culture and civilization. Many of these narratives are politically motivated and hence, systematically misused to create rifts in the Indian society. In this context, the duty of the scholars of literature in general and of the *Mahabharata*, in particular, become doubly important to examine these multiple interpretations of the *Mahabharata* in right perspective. I have made a humble effort to pick up some of the discourses prevalent in our society today and examine them in the light of the original text.

The issues like the place of women in the *Mahabharata* and that way in Indian culture then and now; the condition of the Varna System and the place of the Shudra in society; the hegemonic and exploitative Brahmins and Kshatriyas then tend to be significant to examine critically. The atmosphere of discrimination on the bases of caste and gender has been in discussion in debates in media, social media and academic discourses. I intend to take up these two discourses of discrimination against gender and caste in the *Mahabharata* as it is commonly understood by people in the contemporary world of propaganda.

At the very outset, as a researcher I must state that a researcher is supposed to be faithful to truth and truth only. He is also supposed to remove wrong perceptions with evidences by exposing the prevalent falsehood. We know this fundamental fact that *Mahabharata* narrates the prevalent corruption and degeneration among the ruling class in India then and the efforts of Krishna through the agency of Pandavas and others to cure it and re-establish the rule of justice and welfare in India. In other words, whatever is seen as objectionable is in it, is neither approved and never prescribed to the society. Rather, the people are prepared to stand against it. We see how did Krishna do it, which type of hurdles he faced and how successfully he overcame them in the *Mahabharata*.

One would notice that the early marriages of the girl child does not exist in *The Mahabharata*. Since most of the narratives are about the gentry (royal class), we see that almost all the women characters marry when they are matured. Also, they are allowed to take the decision of their marriage themselves. They also exercise this power given to them by the society. Rukmini's is an excellent example. She is being imposed a decision to marry Sishupala and is asked to choose him only. This is narrated as a violation of the code and



the right of a woman to marry according to her choice. Hence, Krishna at the request of her, intervenes taking every risk and protects her right as a woman to choose her husband. (Parva?)

Allowing no active participation of women in socio-politico-economical life has been a major issue with the feminists. In *The Mahabharata*, there are many examples where we see women participating in the crucial socio-politico-cultural life. They also participate in major decision-making and their decisions are honored also.

The women's discourses strongly criticize and oppose the violence against women in the name of the Sutee tradition. The incidents of Sutee do take place in *The Mahabharata* too, however, it is not narrated as a prevalent social tradition. Neither the woman who follows it is glorified nor the one who does not follow it is branded as less virtuous or less faithful to her husband. Satyawati, Ambalika, Ambika, Kunti, Uttara etc. are some of the prominent women who do not follow it. Thus, fortunately, *The Mahabharata* does not glorify it and that way put any socio-moral pressure on woman to die. It is also worth noting that the life of the widow used to go on normally. There are many widows in the text who lead a very normal life.

II

The Varna-Vyavastha is shown as existing in the text. However, movement across the Varnas is also permitted and acknowledged. Intervarna marriages also take place. Further, wherever the 'Rajadharma' or the role of the king is discussed, it is expected from him that the people of all varna are well taken care of. Narada in *Sabha Parva* asks several questions to Yudhishtira. These questions show the concerns of him, who represents the class of respectable individuals whose words need to be taken seriously by all, "art thou equal unto all men, and can every one approach thee without fear, as if thou wert their mother and father?"

(In regard to India, with its rich literary and critical traditions since ancient times, the case is slightly different from the other countries of the world. India has the traditions of public discourses on ancient epics like *The Ramayana*, *The Bhagvatpurana* and *The Mahabharata* etc. even today. Further, they were not mere recitations of the narratives by the bards (folk narrative traditions), but critical deliberations on the issues and characters forming the content of these texts also. Thus, these texts were very much known to Indians at grassroot levels also. Another important thing about them is that these texts do have elaborate depiction of a large number of women characters. Some have got mythical stature also and many are widely known in their deviated forms also. Even the worldly matters like marriage, sex, mannerism, self-esteem, identity, rights



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and duties as well as the social, political, intellectual and emotional aspects of their existence and are also depicted elaborately in them.

These traditions of public discourses on these texts with various critical perspectives on them, unfortunately, came to be disrupted during the medieval periods due to foreign invasions on India by barbaric invaders. The Indian society got engaged in its battle for survival and preservation of its ancient and rich literature and culture. Due to such a calamitous environment, the texts happened to remain confined to some communities, families, and individuals who studied them as a part of their social duty (i.e. 'profession' in today's terms) as a part of a cultural defense mechanism to protect and preserve them. Naturally, these narratives either went in to oblivion or got twisted due to ignorance and lack of verification in public.

Later on, in the 19th century, the European colonizers systematically tampered with these texts for their religio-political benefits and presented to the people the corrupted versions of these narratives and thus influenced the native Indians, particularly, the elite or the 'educated' dominant classes negatively in their perception of them. It generated such discourses out of them by perverting them that they succeeded in their mission of creating strong rifts within Indian society, affecting the privileged classes of people psychologically and intellectually. The end result was that the Indians started developing themselves wrong interpretations of these texts i.e. the characters and their contexts in them and developed an inferiority complex about themselves and whatever belonged to India as its legacy.

These 'intelligent' invaders constructed such versions of the ancient Indian texts for us that it also made it convenient for them to sustain their rule over us. They have been, to a very great extent successful also. Nevertheless, many individuals did study these texts closely and could draw other interpretations, aesthetic experiences and messages from them. The colonizers, however, did not allow such alternative discourses to flourish more and hence they were challenged on different fictitious grounds by them as well as by some Indian scholars also, finally creating a serious disruption of the intellectual environment of India.

Anyway, as far as women and their position and status in society are concerned, the ancient Indian literature provides many instances of their realities and also the attitudes and perspectives of the wise and matured individuals (writers of the texts and characters in these texts) on them. For instance, there are many women characters in *The Mahabharata* who give useful insight into their status in the society then and also their awareness about themselves and their aspirations as women and individuals. The pictures of women are not 'traditional' (as understood today) or stereotypical. Their stories highlight the issues like their self-esteem,



identity, their active role in love, marriage and sexual matters, their restoration to the same socio-cultural honour in spite of their abduction and humiliation by the evil forces.

III

The Mahabharata presents a good number of female characters who happen to have the qualities normally found in the strong female protagonists in the feminist works these days. Also, they are not portrayed just as the victims of the patriarchy as we find them being discussed in the feminist writings today. I would like to offer a few of them as case studies to examine what is stated in this paper. These characters are Satyawati, Amba, Gandhari and Draupadi.

Matsyagandha or Satyawati:

Satyavati was a daughter of the head of the fishermen called Dashraj, who belonged to the Nishad community, which is considered an underprivileged community today. The King of Hastinapur, Shantanu, feels attracted to her. To use other words, a mighty King of the biggest Empire has fallen in love with the daughter of a small community head. Yet the King does not send his soldiers to make the father bring his daughter to him. He could have easily done so, because he was also a part of his subjects. Rather he goes to seek the consent of her father for marrying her to him. Contrary to the common expectations of readers, the father of Satyawati has some terms and conditions for the marriage. He wants the King to promise him that only Satyawati's son and then her son's son would inherit the throne of Hastinapur, because he knew that Shantanu already had a son called Devavratt. The point to be noted is that an ordinary woman (comparatively much lower in status) is putting conditions for marriage to the King of the greatest Empire then and the marriage takes place only after the King's side accepts the conditions in the chapter 100 of the *Adi Parva*.

Later on, after the death of King Shantanu, her son becomes the King. The widow Satyawati then loses her sons also without their leaving any heir to the throne. At such a difficult time, she is capable of taking bold political decisions as a Queen. She does not become a helpless and pitiable woman. She first requests Bhishma to be the King himself and have a family, as it was not against the *dharma*. She also makes him free from the bond/oath. When he denies that, she requests him to father an heir to the widows of Vicitravirya, but he does not accept that too. She is now required to decide who should father an heir to any of the Queens of Vicitravirya, following the tradition of *Niyoga*. She chooses to invite Ved Vyas for that.



Actually, such a privilege is not available to women in a typical patriarchal society. As per the commonly perceived state of patriarchy, a widow becomes absolutely powerless to decide anything even for herself. However, here, Satyavati is independent, bold and capable of taking political decisions too. She knows how to take a crucial decision and how to do what she proposes to do, taking all concerned into confidence. She also knows how to do the essential things without violating the ethical or moral codes. Thus, she is a very powerful, sharp and independent minded lady.

Amba:

Amba is the princess of Kashya, the King of Kashi. She is won by Bhishma in her *swayamvar* for his step brother and King of Hastinapur, Vicitravirya. Later on, when Amba tells him that she had made up her mind to marry Salva with mutual consent of him, immediately, unlike a typical and arrogant patriarch, Bhishma makes her free from marrying Vicitravirya, because ethically, a woman can't be forced for marriage against her consent. The remarkable point is that Amba is able to convey her mind to the patriarch like the new woman of the contemporary times. She has her own choice regarding her marriage. Of course, later on, what happens is sad that Salva refuses to accept her as a wife now and she feels forlorn. She decides to take revenge on Bhishma, because she considers him only responsible for her plight. Anyway, she shows her fearlessness against Bhishma too. She is firm and determined in her love for Salva, though, sadly, he proves to be very weak and orthodox.

Gandhari

Gandhari is another powerful woman in *The Mahabharata*. After the 'vastraharan' incident, the most complex and potentially volcanic reality arises. Gandhari comes forward then and shows her power and wisdom to manage the unmanageable crisis and establish a sort of reconciliation between the two antagonized parties of the Pandavas and Kauravas. The potential fierce war is almost neutralized by her. Unfortunately, another game of dice takes place and the seed of conflict gets replanted. Otherwise, the possibility of a fierce war was already ruled out by Gandhari so well.

After her horrifying humiliation in the royal court of Dhritrashtra, Draupadi was very sad and angry both. None had courage to come forward and respond to her question to the court. Duryodhan and his allies were making fun of all the Pandavas and letting none to take their side in the court. Draupadi was feeling utter pain and humiliation. Anything was possible to happen. At that crucial time, Gandhari along with Vidura



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succeeds in convincing her husband and the King to return everything back to Draupadi and Pandavas. Thus, all the five Pandavas are made free from the bondage of slavery, their kingdom of Indraprastha along with all the wealth is also returned. What is very important to note is that she courageously goes against her sons, particularly Duryodhana and Dushashan, and his aids like her own brother, Shakuni, Karna and even her husband, Dhritrashtra. No one was otherwise coming forward to speak in favour of Pandavas and Draupadi. Gandhari courageously does it and lashes on the wrong doers. She undoes, for the time being, the injustice inflicted on Pandavas. None including Dhritrashtra is able to oppose her, even though he was never in favour of what he had to do. This shows her power. She restores everything and that shows her political sense and wisdom as well as her readiness to use them at the time of crises. Which woman would do it or has done in the history, mythology or literature i.e. this act of neutralizing all the conspiring forces and high enmity at one go? This is not a small achievement. It demands a lot of courage, willingness and wisdom on the part of individual. That is what she displays. It is an absolutely unorthodox role of a woman. Further, she is not at all helpless in the patriarchal framework. (Sabhaparva: 70). Even when Yudhisthira is summoned again for the game of dice, she is very angry and expresses her disappointment with all, particularly Duryodhana. (Sabhaparva: 75)

Later on, when Krishna comes to Hastinapur for negotiation, there is a heated discussion in the court. All try to convince Duryodhan to accept the proposal being offered by Krishna, but he listens to none in the court including his father, the King. At one point, he leaves the court insulting all. At that time, Dhritrashtra expresses his desire to call the politically intelligent Gandhari to talk to Duryodhan and bring him back in the court to have negotiations with Krishna. Gandhari does bring him back to the court and tells him what was wise for him. She uses many harsh words of rebuke also for him. It shows how shrewd she is. She very nicely tries to bring Duryodhan to the ground reality. She expresses her anger over him courageously and does not spare the King also. She tells Dhritrashtra that he has also been equally responsible for what has come to. This is the stature of Gandhari. She can take her husband and King also to task. Nobody tells her that she should not utter harsh words for her husband and King. Such a role of her is very unconventional. Thus, Ved Vyas has portrayed her boldness and farsightedness and wisdom. (*Udyogparva: CXLVIII*)



Draupadi

Draupadi is the most powerful woman character of *The Mahabharata*. One of her names is Yajnaseni, which represents her temperament. After her humiliation, she raises the question of the dignity and self-esteem of a woman i.e. whether she can be won or lost? She also raises the moral and ethical aspects of the issue. She, in spite of her being all alone, resists and fights with Dussasan and later with the court and makes everyone feel ashamed of what the Duryodhana and his allies had done. We also see that she doesn't tolerate nonsense of anyone be it Duryodhana, Dushashan, Karna, Jaydrath or Kichak at different points of time in the text. Even when Arjun marries and brings Subhadra as his wife, in spite of Subhadra's being the sister of Krishna, Draupadi does not approve of it. She takes it as her insult and is not willing to excuse Arjun. Arjun has to persuade and please her to accept Subhadra. Even Krishna has to talk to her to make her accept Subhadra, who, he says, would never take her place. Thus, she is full of life and her self-respect is always high in her life. She is one of the forces that keeps the Pandavas reminded of their commitment to 'dharma' and justice. Her untied hair keep on reminding them that they had to punish all the culprits.

Thus, she is not at all meek and passive as a woman. She does not approve of men who do not have manners to behave with women. She can raise her voice without being unnecessarily shy against anyone. She can raise her voice against Bhishma and other elders also by asking their stand on the crucial issue about her self-respect and high morality among the members of the royal family. She can be angry on her husbands also. She teaches a hard lesson to Kichak and Jayadrath. She encourages her husbands and sustains their commitment to 'dharma' and ethics. She also emerges as the true rescuer of the Pandavas from the worst condition of their slavery to Duryodhan for ever. Ved Vyas has drawn a really illustrious and inspiring character of Draupadi, rather than portraying her just a beautiful but passive woman neither doing anything, nor aspiring for anything great in life.

The Discourses on the Discrimination against the Caste in *The Mahabharata*:

Karna is being portrayed as the merit unacknowledged because he was from an underprivileged class. He is projected as a man of great merits but denied the deserving dignity and honour. One of the allegations is that he was denied education by renowned Gurus, as he belonged to the underprivileged class (a Sutaputra i.e. a son of a chariot driver. Hence, he had to seek education deceitfully from the great teacher Parshurama by hiding his caste). All these facts are either wrong or deliberate misrepresentation of the original textual facts.



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It is a fact that he was a great warrior, particularly an archer. In Indian culture, one is not great because he is having a lot of knowledge or he is a powerful warrior or he has any other merit attained with many efforts. In addition to having anything like knowledge, strength, power, wealth etc, that person must have commitment to some basic human values called Dharma also. If he does not side with those values or he violates them, he does not qualify to be a great and respected individual in the society.

Karna has been, right from his childhood, given to fundamental human weaknesses like jealousy, *moha*, *mada*, *matsara* etc. He was the adopted son of the charioteer of Bhishma, namely Adhiratha. Even in his childhood, he plays with the 105 princes of Hastinapur without being discriminated. He is also one of the students of Guru Drona along with these princes. Drona does not deny admission to him thinking of his caste (varna). None objected to his studying with the princes from Hastinapur and other Kingdoms. On the contrary, his behaviour has been questionable right from his childhood. Thus, what is an issue is not his caste but his conduct and tendencies. In the chapter 132 of *Adi Parva*, in the couplet 11, it is categorically mentioned that 'sutputrascha radheyo gurum dronmiyaat tadaa'. (The son of Suta and Radha (Karna) made Drona their preceptor'). Further it states, "The son of Suta (Karna) being jealous of Parth (Arjuna), always defied him and being supported by Duryodhana disregarded the Pandavas" (12/132).

In the Bhandarkar edition of the text of *The Mahabharata*, in Chapter 119, it is narrated that Karna, Shakuni and Duryodhana made many efforts to kill Pandavas (42/119, *Adi Parva*) In the Kolkata edition of Dutt, it occurs in 40/129). This is the fact before they had become students of Guru Drona, meaning he was very much like the other two villainous persons like Duryodhana and Shakuni. Excepting his giving away of the armour and earrings to Lord Indra, no other great quality of Karna is depicted with central focus. He never stops Duryodhana from doing any immoral thing. He rather loses no opportunity to humiliate Pandavas and also Draupadi, which is very bad and no hero is supposed to have this weakness of seeking sadist pleasure by inflicting atrocities on women. Karna does seek this sadistic/*pishachi* pleasure also. If caste was so much prevalent and deep rooted, why was he easily accepted as the King of Angadesh? Further, why even the Pandavas invite him as a respected King in the celebration of the Rajasuya Sacrifice. Also, why was he earlier allowed to participate in the Draupadi Swayamvar, if he was considered lower in status. In the Rajasuya Sacrifice event, Sisupala tells the assembly of the Kings of India that rather than Krishna, Yudhishtir should have invited Karna or Ekalavya for *Agrapuja*.



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Ekalavya's is another central character in the socio-politico-cultural discourses pertaining to the Subalterns in India. This incident is used as a proof of the so-called Brahmin hegemony in India in the ancient time. Furthermore, he is commonly taken as an ordinary tribal boy who had a lot of talents, but was denied access to education by the so-called higher classes, particularly, Brahmins. Guru Drona is represented as the representative of the hegemonic Brahmin class who denied admission to Ekalavya, just because he was not a prince, nor was he from the Kshatriya community. I want to submit that these are not the textual facts. If we look at the Chapter 132 of the *Adi Parva* (M N Dutt) and its couplet 31, it is narrated thus, "Thereupon, Ekalavya, the son of Hiraynadhenu, King of the Nishadas, came to Drona." It further narrates in couplet 32, "That learned man (Drona) in all the precepts of dharma (Drona, the Dharmagya) did not accept him as his pupil in archery, thinking that he was a Nishada and considering the interest of the princes." In K M Ganguly's translation, these things about Karna and Ekalavya occur in the chapter 134 of the *Adi Parva*.

In the chapter 37 of the *Sabha Parva*, again Ekalavya occurs. Sisupala is questioning the nomination of Krishna for the worship by Yudhishtira in these words, "The best of Kings, Rukmi and Ekalavya, and the king of Madra, Shalya are present, why Krishna has been worshipped." (14/37 Sabha Parva) Again in 15th and 16th couplet, it is stated by Sisupala thus, "this greatly powerful hero whose prowess is the pride among all kings, that Karna being present here, passing over him, why Krishna has been worshipped?" (15-6/37) (M N Dutt) Now, where is absence of recognition of those whom we today represent and call Shudras? Even in *The Ramayana*, the most favourite and trust worthy minister of the King Dashrath and later Shri Ram was Sumantra, who was also a Sutaputra. He is addressed as a Sutaputra in *Valmiki Ramayana*. And, importantly, such an address was not taken as humiliation.

When we examine the text of *The Mahabharata*, we further realize that Vyas was also the son of Satyavati, the daughter of the chief of fishermen. Satyavati's story occurs in chapter 100 of *Adi Parva*. (M N Dutt p. 302). We also see in the text the honour commanded by him all through. None is concerned about his caste. Had it been a stigma, he would not have commanded so much of honour? Moreover, how come that Vidura, who is the son of a maid servant of the Palace, becomes the Prime Minister of Hastinapur? How come that he **is also** allowed to seek his education along with both the Kuru princes, Dhritrashtra and Pandu? There is no discrimination on the bases of caste? Not just this, but Vidura's opinion on the eligibility of Dhritrashtra's coronation as the King is honoured quite seriously. When such things occur, truly speaking, what was seen, his birth or his merits? Did he become the Prime Minister of Hastinapur on merits or other thing? Why is Karna accepted as the King by all? Can anyone be accepted as Kshatriya, even if he is not



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born so? One doubts whether the caste system of high and low was very prominent? This itself tells us how much was the birth important. When Bhishma does not approve of a fight between Arjuna and Karna, it was because he did not approve of a Kshatriya killing a Suta in a combat with weapons, because it was immoral.

If one takes the case of the father of Satyawati, one can easily understand, how much both Shantanu and Devavratt (the King and the Crown Prince of Hastinapore) treated the so-called Shudra. They did not force him to marry his daughter to Shantanu. He was not punished for putting such a heavy conditions before the throne. Rather the powerful or the so-called higher class bows down before the so-called lower class of people. There is no grudge also later. Every word given to him is honored in sound and spirit of the utterance by Bhishma. He did not do her *harana*, as it was not an occasion of swayamvar.

Thus, the text of *The Mahabharata* has been twisted and misrepresented by the scholars of certain ideologies and created an atmosphere of conflict among the castes, whereas in reality the castes were there, but there was a movement across the castes and marriages across the castes. Also, there were Kings who belonged to different castes. One can't deny that the caste system later during the medieval periods got perverted and corrupted, leading to problems, but for that we cannot blame India of the ancient times and tell the world that such perversions were there and they are reflected in the ancient texts, because the ancient texts do not reflect such an environment.



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