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Studies in the Mahabharata

Indian Culture, Dharma and Spirituality
in the Great Epic

With Many Original Sanskrit Texts

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Karlsruhe

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Preface

The present title is based on my dissertation *Essential Features of Indian Culture and Spirituality, As Presented in the Mahābhārata*, submitted to the University of Pune in 1985. The text has been newly edited for the purpose of this book; several chapters were omitted and numerous passages have been rewritten. I have also given my own translations of all the Sanskrit quotations in the text.

In the Appendix, I have added a summary of the complete action in the Mahābhārata. Readers who are not familiar with the epic are recommended to read this summary at first. Moreover, I also present some of the more important original Sanskrit texts in full length.¹ In this way, the whole book is a new creation which aims at presenting the original content in a more interesting and accessible form.

Wilfried Huchzermeyer

¹ Whenever this is the case, English translations are marked “SKR” at the end and the respective footnote refers to the Appendix.

Introduction

The Mahabharata, although neither the greatest nor the richest masterpiece of the secular literature of India, is at the same time its most considerable and important body of poetry. Being so, it is the pivot on which the history of Sanskrit literature and incidentally the history of Aryan civilisation in India, must perforce turn.¹

Sri Aurobindo

Whether we realize it nor not, it remains a fact that we in India still stand under the spell of the Mahābhārata. There is many a different strand that is woven in the thread of our civilization, reaching back into hoary antiquity. Amidst the deepest of them there is more than one that is drawn originally from the ancient Bhāratavarṣa and the Sanskrit literature. And well in the centre of this vast pile of Sanskrit literature stands this monumental book of divine inspiration, unapproachable and far removed from possibilities of human competition.²

V.S. Sukthankar

Vyasa's epic is a mirror in which the Indian sees himself undeceived.³

P. Lal

With the Greeks the dominant passion was the conscious quest of ideal beauty: with the Indians it has invariably been the quest of ideal life.⁴

V.S. Sukthankar

The Mahābhārata is one of the most impressive creations of the Indian mind. If it cannot compare with the Upaniṣads in philosophic depth, with Kālidāsa's poetry in refinement and splendour, it yet has a quality of its own and is unequalled in its comprehensiveness, the mass of

¹ CWSA Vol. 1, *Early Cultural Writings, Vyasa and Valmiki*, 338

² *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, 32

³ *The Mahabharata of Vyasa*, 3

⁴ *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, 4

material offered and the variety of subjects discussed – ranging from history, philosophy and law to yoga, spirituality and psychology.

Indeed, the volume of knowledge expounded in this epic is so immense that most critics have rightly assumed that it can hardly be the product of a single brain howsoever gifted. Some great scholars of the Mahābhārata such as a modern translator of the text, J.A.B. van Buitenen, and India's great yogi-poet Sri Aurobindo, agree that the Mahābhārata was originally a smaller epic of about 24.000 verses, and that this nucleus was subsequently enhanced by an endless series of later additions made by authors who deemed Vyāsa's genial creation a fit vehicle for their own less inspired poetic expressions, philosophic ideas, dogmatic teachings and religious beliefs.

If this nucleus has had the power to attract such a mass of material which exceeds three to four times the volume of its original body, then this fact speaks for itself. Whilst some popular editions of the epic contain up to 100.000 stanzas, the Critical Edition prepared by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, confines itself to about 73,900 couplets, presented by the editors as the "constituted text" which does not claim to be the nucleus, but the most authentic text established on the basis of a comparison of all important recensions and manuscripts.

Even while the Critical Edition, which has been used for this study, presents an excellent tool for any scholar of the epic, we are still faced with the difficulty of separating – like the mythical swans of Indian poets – Vyāsa's milk from the water of the plagiarists. Only a poetic genius like Sri Aurobindo could confidently propose to disengage the nucleus on the basis of an analysis of the poetic quality of the verses.⁵ Unfortunately, he could not find time to work out this idea and provide the complete text as he believed it to be the original.

As for ourselves, we choose a different approach, focussing on texts which appear to have a high quality from the point of view of content. Approaching the epic with an open mind, we try to learn as much as possible about traditional Indian culture and spirituality, great personalities and important principles governing the life of those days. In fact, the Mahābhārata with its boundless wealth and manifold con-

⁵ CWSA Vol. 1, *Early Cultural Writings*, 339f

tent is an ideal field for such an approach. “Whatever is here on *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, is also found elsewhere. But what is not here, is found nowhere else,” says the epic on itself.⁶ Anyone who has gone through its complete text, will probably agree that this claim, though slightly exaggerated, has some truth in it.

⁶ Mbhr. 1.56.3 . All the references are to the Pune Critical Edition. *kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, *mokṣa* are in the Hindu tradition the four basic goals in human life (*puruṣārtha*), that is sensual fulfillment, material prosperity, right living and spiritual liberation.

Arjuna's Marriages

Arjuna is well-known as an excellent archer, champion fighter and close confidant of Kṛṣṇa, but a little less known as lover. Epic heroes are as a rule not subject to very strict moral laws, and so Arjuna too has some escapades, though of an innocent nature and not without discrimination. We perceive here even in seeming licence an element of culture, of high-mindedness. It is for this reason that a special chapter is devoted to this subject.

Arjuna had won Draupadī, the common wife of the five Pāṇḍavas, in a special competition of archery, which was arranged by king Drupada with the very purpose of attracting Arjuna whom he considered the ideal partner of his daughter. The Pāṇḍavas had come in disguise (they were still in hiding after the burning of the lacquer palace) and Arjuna won Draupadī as an unknown Brāhmin. The beautiful princess did not hesitate to give herself to the powerful competitor, but this unexpected turn of events provoked the kings and princes present at the *svayamvara* to attack king Drupada and the Pāṇḍavas – giving away this precious prize to an unidentified Brāhmin was too big a shame for the assembled *kṣatriya*-chieftains.

Arjuna and Bhīma repelled the attack in a quick battle, making sure that Draupadī was theirs for good. However, some intricate problem came up when the Pāṇḍavas returned ‘home’ to the potter’s hut in which they were staying with Kuntī. The Pāṇḍavas said joyfully to their mother, “look what we found!”, and she answered spontaneously, “now you share that together.”¹ Yudhiṣṭhira as the eldest brother was asked to resolve the problem. His decision was as noble as Arjuna’s reaction: he ruled that Arjuna should marry Draupadī since he had won her in the contest. But Arjuna considered this *adharma*. He proposed that Yudhiṣṭhira as the eldest brother should marry first, taking Draupadī for himself. Thus Arjuna shows considerable strength

¹ Mbhr. 1.182.1-2

of character in this scene by surrendering to the family law. Draupadī is a very attractive woman and his proposal is a real sacrifice.

But Yudhiṣṭhira does not want to claim her for himself alone, because it did not escape him that all of the brothers were deeply enchanted with Draupadī's beauty. He therefore makes a very wise decision that she would be their common wife. This is in fact the only way to save the unity of the family and at the same time a gesture of obedience to Kuntī's word. Even while one problem has been solved now, another has been created, because the father of the bride objects with persistence against this uncommon polyandrous alliance.

Finally, Vyāsa himself enters the scene, talking to Drupada in private and giving him some mythological background which justifies this whole development. Thus, he wins over the king for the marriage of his daughter to the five Pāṇḍavas. We are not concerned here with those mythological stories of the five Indras etc. nor do we consider it purposeful to examine various speculations on polyandrous precedents in the ancient Indian society. It appears more fruitful in the context of the Mahābhārata to draw attention to the spirit of sacrifice and brotherly love and unity which becomes evident in this scene. The epic is often setting examples, even some rare examples which ordinary humans will not be able to follow and are not expected to follow. If five well-built men can share one highly attractive woman, then it is certainly a psychological miracle, a great conquest of envy and jealousy.

Soon after the wedding Nārada, the messenger of the Gods, came to give the Pāṇḍavas the clue for the perfect functioning of the marriage. In this way the poet also assures the audience that everything is all right with the unusual marriage, as evidently it is sanctioned by the Gods. Nārada advises the brothers to lay down a rule so that there is no strife over Draupadī. He tells them the story of Sunda and Upasunda, two immensely powerful *asuras* who lived together in perfect harmony until Brahmā sent the *apsarā* Tilottamā on earth to estrange them. Promptly they fell into the trap, killing each other in their desire for Tilottamā.

To prevent a similar disaster among themselves, Nārada advises the Pāṇḍavas not to disturb each other when anyone of them is intimate with Draupadī. If anyone should enter the room and break this rule, the offender would have to stay in the forest like a hermit for twelve

months. In this way the Pāṇḍavas were able to live happily with Draupadī:

And Kṛṣṇā² attended to the wishes of all the five lion-like men of immeasurable energy, the sons of Prthā. As they took great delight in her, so she took great delight in her five heroic husbands, as does the river Sarasvatī in her elephants.³

The poet adds that they lived in accordance with the *dharma* and that all the Kurus prospered. In fact, nobody objected to the special type of marriage any more after Vyāsa's intervention except Karṇa, much later in a scene after the dice game, where he argues that a polyandrous liaison is unlawful and that Draupadī therefore does not deserve respectful treatment.⁴ This will be discussed in another chapter.

While the Pāṇḍavas were thus living in harmony together with Draupadī, a certain Brāhmin approached them one night with a problem. His cattle were being stolen by robbers and he pleaded for help. Arjuna was present to receive the visitor and was facing a great *dharma* conflict now: under the *kṣatriya* code he was obliged to help the Brāhmin, but his weapons happened to be in the chamber where Yudhiṣṭhira was alone with Draupadī. Under the special family rule he was not allowed to enter it. So whatever he would do now, he would break a rule and become guilty. He quickly ponders over this dilemma, weighing the respective consequences of his decision. Finally he concludes:

Either a great breach of *dharma* [by not helping the Brāhmin], or death in the forest [due to the dangers of exile]. But *dharma* has the greater priority, even if the body dies.⁵

Arjuna is somewhat dramatizing the situation in his inner arguments. Breaking the family rule would indeed result in a twelve months' exile in the forest, but we know from many other stories that there were

² Another name of Draupadī.

³ Mbhr. 1.205.2-3

⁴ Mbhr. 2.61.35-36

⁵ Mbhr. 1.205.15

good chances to survive such an exile. Anyhow, Arjuna decides that neglecting his *kṣatriya-dharma* would be the greater sin, as he had also to protect the reputation of Yudhiṣṭhira as king and head of the family. Thus, from his viewpoint, he makes an unselfish decision, accepting the possibility of his loss of life in the forest. He enters the chamber, collects the weapons and defeats the robbers. The thought that this action too might be dangerous, does not enter his mind, his superiority as a professionally trained champion fighter is beyond doubt.

When returning to his family, he finds Yudhiṣṭhira entirely undisturbed by the intrusion into the chamber. But Arjuna insists on being 'punished' according to the rule. Therefore, with his brother's consent he goes to the forest where he is supposed to live as a hermit for twelve months. As it is, he was to fulfil only one part of the vow, namely to stay in exile, but his life was not that of a hermit. This can be easily excused, for when the rule of conduct was made between the Pāṇḍavas, it was understood that any interference of one of the brothers with another brother would be actuated by a lack of self-discipline and not by an urge to protect the *dharma* as was the case with Arjuna, an occurrence that could not be foreseen.

So we observe Arjuna now spending his life happily in exile and having many experiences with women. Perhaps they provide an outlet for feelings which may not always have found full satisfaction under the special marriage-contract with Draupadī.

Ulūpī

The first woman whom he meets on his way is Ulūpī, a Nāga-princess of great sensuous beauty. While Arjuna is bathing in the Gaṅgā, she approaches him and pulls him deep into the river, into the palace of her snake father Kauravya. It is significant and noteworthy that before their union Arjuna makes offerings into the sacrificial fire in the palace. Even in this most spontaneous of his loves, the profane is preceded by the sacred. Ulūpī then asks him for his love. Once more Arjuna faces a *dharma* conflict: on the one hand he was supposed to live like a hermit; on the other hand there was a general social rule of ancient times which said that a woman approaching a man with sincere love

was to be satisfied.

Ulūpī resolves this intricate problem for Arjuna in a twofold way, displaying her high female intelligence: the status as a hermit, she points out, is to be understood only as renouncing all contact with Draupadī. Secondly, she herself, Ulūpī, would not be able to live without having tasted Arjuna’s love, so he has to save her:

Love me who love you, Pārtha, for this is the doctrine of the wise. If you don’t do so, I would certainly die. By giving life, o strong-armed man, observe the highest *dharma*. I am seeking refuge in you, best of men!⁶

Ulūpī appeals to Arjuna with all her heart to fulfil her as a woman by responding to her love, and he complies with her wishes, “looking to *dharma* as his cause.”⁷ But their meeting was only for one night, it was a very brief marriage. A son named Iravān was born of it. He became a valiant fighter and killed six of Śakuni’s brothers in the Great War.

To return to the story itself: it is interesting to note that here we have a love affair which is developed entirely on the background of *dharma*. Only when Ulūpī found the right arguments, bringing the meeting to a level where Arjuna could function in accordance with *dharma*, did she get what she wanted. It is the meeting of two lovers who in spite of strong emotions do not act hastily on impulse but first create an atmosphere in which their love can *legitimately* unfold itself.

Urvaśī

In contrast, it is very interesting to compare this episode with Arjuna’s meeting with Urvaśī in Indra’s heaven. This incident is not recorded in the established text of the Pune Critical Edition where she is merely mentioned as one of the dancers in the court.⁸ However, we will include the episode here, because it fits in well into this portrait of Arjuna as a lover of high standards and also forms part of the stock of pop-

⁶ Mbhr. 1.206.29-30

⁷ Mbhr. 1.206.33

⁸ Mbhr. 3.44.20

ular tales in the Mahābhārata.⁹

Arjuna had watched Urvaśī dancing at Indra’s court with some other attractive *apsarās* and she had caught his eyes during her performance. Having spent sleepless hours, she resolves to approach Arjuna in his room for love, but only to find him unwilling. He explains to her that his interest in her was due to her being the wife of Purūras, the ancient ancestor of the Kauravas. So for him she was like a mother, and that is what made him look at her. Urvaśī now tries the same tactics as Ulūpī, shifting the discussion to the level of *dharma*, reminding Arjuna that a man approached by a woman in love is supposed to oblige her. But this time Arjuna does not react. He cannot take her for pleasure, she remains a mother to him.

This prompts Urvaśī to curse him to become a eunuch. But Indra then modifies the curse in such a way that it will work only for the period of one year during the time when the Pāṇḍavas have to live in disguise. The curse thus turns out to be a hidden blessing. What is important in this episode is Arjuna’s refusal. His own sense of true *dharma* makes it impossible for him to yield to *kāma*, pleasure. This shows his strength of character and proves that he does use discrimination in his love affairs.

Citrāṅgadā

After his affectionate experience with Ulūpī Arjuna moves on to visit King Citravāhana of Maṅalūra. He quickly falls in love with his beautiful daughter Citrāṅgadā. There is no more question now of living the life of a hermit; perhaps Ulūpī had after all convinced him that this regulation meant only abstaining from contact with Draupadī.

Citrāṅgadā is the only child of her father, who made her a *putrikā*, that is to say the child from her would continue her father’s lineage, not her husband’s. Arjuna readily agrees to this condition and marries her. He stays on for a period of three months and later on becomes father of a boy named Babhruvāhana.

This brief episode has inspired Sri Aurobindo to write a poem titled *Chitrangada*, of which two passages will be rendered below because

⁹ See Vanaparvan, Chapters 45-46.

they bring out wonderfully Arjuna's character, his mission, his high destiny guessed by a woman who was happy to share his close company, if only for a short while.

One morning Citrāṅgadā rises early before Arjuna; the premonition of his impending departure throws a shadow on her love-relationship with him. For the moment he is giving her all his love, but shortly he will leave her – leave her with a void whereas he can easily fill his own:

In Manipur upon her orient hills
Chitrangada beheld intending dawn
Gaze coldly in. She understood the call.
The silence and imperfect pallor passed
Into her heart and in herself she grew
Prescient of grey realities. Rising,
She gazed afraid into the opening world.
Then Urjooon felt his mighty clasp a void
Empty of her he loved and, through the grey
Unwilling darkness that disclosed her face,
Sought out Chitrangada. "Why doest thou stand
In the grey light, like one from joy cast down,
O thou whose bliss is sure? Leave that grey space,
Come hither." So she came and leaning down,
With that strange sorrow in her eyes, replied:
"Great, doubtless, is thy love, thy very sleep
Impatient of this brief divorce. And yet
How easily that void will soon be filled:
For thou wilt run thy splendid fiery race
Through cities and through regions like a star.
Men's worship, women's hearts inevitably
Will turn to follow, as the planets move
Unbidden round the sun...¹⁰

Arjuna knows very well that it is quite true what Citrāṅgadā says in her mood of soul-stirring melancholy. No word of his can efface the

¹⁰ CWSA Vol. 1, *Collected Poems*, 311

Psychological, Philosophical and Legal Aspects of the Dice Game

“Please tell this in detail, Brāhmin, because this was the root of the destruction of the world, best of the twice-born.”¹

The dice game takes us into one of the most dramatic scenes in the Mahābhārata. It raises a number of intricate questions which deserve an in-depth study and elaborate analysis. We come across here some noble aspects of Indian culture, but at the same time also its very contradiction. We meet individuals in extreme situations of the most acute inner trial, and find even the wisest of the wise perplexed by a set of circumstances which is bewildering by its complexity, frustrating by its entanglement and fatal by its sheer force.

In the event of the dice game we experience in a major scene a density of action and subtlety of perception which seem to reveal the master hand of Vyāsa himself at work. The crisis of the Pāṇḍavas and their wife, the immensity of inner torture that they undergo, are described in a terse, almost cool language which nevertheless makes us breathless participants of a tremendous drama. We may say that the inner torment of Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna and Draupadī in this scene is even greater and more severe and devastating than Arjuna’s famous despair at the beginning of the war.

Apart from analysing these situations where souls struggle for their survival, fight for their inmost Truth, we will also try to provide new answers to a number of questions:

- 1) Why did Yudhiṣṭhira accept the challenge for the dice game? Was he really moved by his passion for the game?

¹ King Janamejaya to the bard Vaiśampāyana, Mbhr. 2.46.2

- 2) Why did he accept to play against Śakuni, a well-known master-wizard joining the game on Duryodhana's behalf?
- 3) Why was Yudhiṣṭhira so much in a haste to lose everything once the game started and his losing streak became obvious?
- 4) Why did Yudhiṣṭhira go so far as to stake even Draupadī, although it was clear that he would lose her as he lost everything else?
- 5) What were the exact implications of Draupadī's question to the assembly whether Yudhiṣṭhira had lost himself before he lost her?
- 6) Why did none of the elders present in the hall (Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa etc.) intervene on behalf of Draupadī when Duḥśāsana started molesting her?

These are some of the questions which we will deal with, closely following the text of the Critical Edition. All the while we will have the occasion to enter a real life scene enacted in ancient India – or at least realistically imagined by the poet – which provides us with a first-hand psychological experience of various interesting characters.

Preliminary Events

Once prince Duryodhana² stepped in the middle of the hall on a crystal slap, and wrongly assuming it was water, the bewildered prince raised his robe. Upset and downcast, he then roamed about the hall. Thereafter, beholding a pond with crystalline water, beautiful with crystalline lotuses, he thought it was land and fell into the water, fully dressed. When they saw him fallen into the water, the servants laughed a lot and gave him fresh clothes at the king's behest. After this had happened to him, the mighty Bhīmasena, Arjuna and the twins all of them burst into laughter. Being an irritable man, he could not bear their mockery and did not look at them to save his face.³

Duryodhana suffered three great disappointments in his life. The first was when the five Pāṇḍavas left the forest after their father's death

² Visiting the new hall, built by the architect Maya for Yudhiṣṭhira.

³ Mbhr. 2.43.3-8

and moved into the palaces of the Kuru house with their mother Kuntī. Like an admired and undisputed champion athlete who is suddenly relegated to third or fourth rank by the unexpected arrival of new sportsmen, so Duryodhana was bereft at that time of his sure status of not only the successor of the Kuru dynasty but also the leader among the young princes at the Court. He was one of those persons whose character does not allow them to prosper and be happy except under conditions where they are the one and only leader. To be eclipsed by another ‘star’, to be driven by others rather than driving oneself, to have rivals who divert the attention and admiration away from oneself – all this does not suit a Duryodhana who would prefer to die rather than accepting such conditions. Thus we find him fighting from the beginning, trying to kill Bhīma at first for having humiliated the Kaurava princes with various feats of strength, and then later attempting to burn the five brothers in the lacquer palace at Vāraṇāvata.

The second disappointment was when Arjuna won Draupadī at her *svayamvara* by his superior skill in archery. Duryodhana failed to string the bow⁴ and saw his close friend Karṇa defeated in the short battle which ensued with the unknown Brāhmins, actually the Pāṇḍavas in disguise. His worst enemies, believed to be dead beyond doubt, had staged a powerful comeback, won a most beautiful bride for themselves and secured a strong new ally, king Drupada.

The third great disappointment was Yudhiṣṭhira’s coronation as *samrāt*. For sure, this was a great event for the Kuru family whose members were given various functions at this occasion. “Duryodhana received all the presents of honour,” says the text.⁵ Even though Yudhiṣṭhira had generously assured the Kauravas, “all this wealth here is yours and so am I,” it can hardly have been a pleasing experience for Duryodhana to collect treasures on Yudhiṣṭhira’s behalf.⁶

And then came, on top of that, his embarrassing experience (recorded in the quotation above) while inspecting the palace built by Maya with many contraptions. Like a fool he stumbles into all the traps carefully laid out by the master architect, and everywhere sees

⁴ According to the Critical Edition (1.178.15), all competitors except Arjuna were unable to string the bow; other editions report of various near-misses.

⁵ Mbhr. 2.32.8

⁶ Mbhr. 2.32.2

laughing grimaces enjoying his ill luck. Duryodhana does not react with resignation, but he thinks of revenge. At this moment a seed was sown for a terrible and merciless battle where the end would justify the means whatever their nature. Henceforth, there could only be the defeat (and preferably death) of the Pāṇḍavas or his own, no compromise was conceivable.

While Duryodhana is returning home in the company of Śakuni, he is invaded by thoughts of burning hatred. He conveys his inner convulsions to his uncle at his enquiry:

I am outraged, burning day and night... When I saw all that blazing wealth at the Pāṇḍava's, I was seized by anger and I am burning, although usually that's not my state of mind. I will enter the fire or take poison or drown myself, because I won't be able to live on.⁷

We need not assume that Duryodhana was really playing with the thought of ending his life. This is just cunning talk meant to impress Śakuni with the need of doing something to support him. In fact, he expects Śakuni to approach Dhṛtarāṣṭra, informing him about his son's agony.

Śakuni's Role

Śakuni, brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife Gāndhārī, has generally a rather negative image, but here, in the established text of the Critical Edition, we get a slightly different picture and find him to be a rather cool-headed advisor trying to calm down the inflamed Duryodhana. He begins his answer to Duryodhana with the following counsel:

Duryodhana, you must not harbour any anger against Yudhiṣṭhira, for the Pāṇḍavas have always enjoyed good luck.⁸

In this whole passage Śakuni does not say anything which could further fan the fire of Duryodhana's hatred. He is rather trying to bring

⁷ Mbhr. 2.43.21; 26-27

⁸ Mbhr. 2.44.1

The Mahābhārata's Synthesis of Revenge and Forgiveness

The impulse of revenge is deeply rooted in human nature, it is a common reaction after defeat or injustice, whether objectively suffered or subjectively felt. Through it an imbalance is meant to be set right. This principle has been expressed in the Old Testament of the Bible with the maxim, “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”. Applying this principle can be relatively harmless in some cases, but it can also result in endless wars between individuals, clans or nations. Christ has therefore tried to establish a new principle in the New Testament by teaching mercy and forgiveness. This is expressed through the maxim, “if your enemy slaps you on the left cheek, turn to him the other cheek also.”

As revenge can lead to an endless cycle of negative action and reaction, forgiveness too can have negative consequences, for if your enemy knows you do not fight back, he may exploit the situation to his advantage and mercilessly abuse your kind-heartedness. It may mean that we withdraw into some inner life of moral righteousness while outwardly we leave the field to evil forces. It is this problem with which the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī were faced in their exile after the second dice game. Here Draupadī represents the standpoint of revenge, while Yudhiṣṭhira shows himself to be the perfect ‘Christian’.

In this chapter we will closely follow the exchange between the power woman and the meek exiled king. We may wonder whether in any other literature of the world of that period a similar discussion with such subtle points and observations would be conceivable.

Draupadī's Opening of the Debate

Draupadī begins her argument for revengeful action with a strong

invective against Duryodhana, against the ‘Gang of Four’ which brought about the down-fall of the Pāṇḍavas and was responsible for her humiliation:

You were used to comforts, unworthy of misery, and now this crooked Duryodhana with his gang has brought such suffering upon you, this rogue. None of the four crooks shed a tear when you were expelled to the woods, Bhārata, clad in deerskin: Duryodhana, Karṇa, the evil Śakuni, and that bad brother, the dreadful Duḥśāsana. But all the other Kurus, o best of the Kurus, were deeply shocked, with tears dropping from their eyes.⁹⁸

Draupadī points out to Yudhiṣṭhira the great difference in his lifestyle now and then. And all this happened to a man who was always *dharmaparah*, intent on the Law. Why do the righteous suffer while evil persons enjoy life? This question is already hinted at, but not yet openly formulated by Draupadī at this early stage of the discussion. While Yudhiṣṭhira has acquiesced with the situation, she tries hard to work up some anger in him. Obviously, this stay in the forest does not please her at all. She is a born princess and was quite at home in her role as a queen, much more so than Yudhiṣṭhira as a king. He always had a penchant for *śama*, for retirement and undisturbed contemplation. This provokes Draupadī a lot.

In the following passage⁹⁹ the one refrain of her speech is, *kasmānmanyurna vardhate*, “why doesn’t your anger grow, Yudhiṣṭhira?” In her opinion the absence of *manyu* in her husband is a great defect, for a *kṣatriya* should never accept defeat as final. He has to prepare for a new battle and conquer his enemies. She tries desperately to hammer this thought into his unwilling mind. She tries to raise his emotions by reminding him of the misery that his brothers have to suffer for his sake.

Bhīmasena I see unhappy, living in the forest, brooding – why doesn’t your anger grow now that the time is ripe?¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Mbhr. 3.28.7-9

⁹⁹ Mbhr. 3.28.19-37

¹⁰⁰ Mbhr. 3.28.19

Likewise, Draupadī reminds Yudhiṣṭhira of Arjuna who on his chariot “defeated Gods and men”, but is banished to the forest now as also the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. Seeing all of them and herself in misery, without being pricked by his conscience, is a sign, she says, that he is incapable of building up any force of reaction.

Anger and passion are qualities which in the system of the three *gunas* (*tamas*, *rajas*, *sattva*) belong to *rajas*, which is a higher level than *tamas*.¹⁰¹ If a completely tamasic person lacks anger altogether, he is like a stone or a wall and it would be a progress for him to be able to feel anger and do something. If on the other hand a man is capable of intense anger and yet not acting on impulse, but restraining himself, he is considered to be on a higher, sattvic level.

According to Draupadī’s comprehension Yudhiṣṭhira has fallen into *tamas*. His inaction is in her eyes a lack of response toward an intolerable situation. She tries to prod him into action, raising him to the level of *rajas*. The lack of *kṣatriya* spirit in him drives her mad. Therefore, she gives him a long lecture on the right conduct of a warrior:

There is no *kṣatriya* known in this world without anger, without authority; in you, a *kṣatriya*, I see now the opposite. A *kṣatriya* who does not show his power at a given moment, will be despised forever, Pārtha, by all creatures. Don’t ever show forbearance to your enemies, for through your power alone you can doubtlessly subdue them. All the same, the *kṣatriya* who does not give in at a moment when forgiveness is apposite is disliked by all creatures and perishes here and hereafter.¹⁰²

The three key terms in Draupadī’s lecture are *manyu*, *tejas* and *kṣamā*. *Manyu* is the capacity of the *kṣatriya* to respond to a challenge, to strike back at the enemy rather than remaining inactive in a spirit of defeatism. *Tejas* is the fiery energy or strength which the warrior brings out to retaliate. Draupadī emphasizes that this energy must be directed against the enemy at a right moment. *Kṣamā* is patience, forbearance, forgiveness, which can be a weakness as well as strength.

¹⁰¹ The following is the author’s commentary, Draupadī does not use these terms.

¹⁰² Mbhr. 3.28.34-37

Not to strike back at an aggressor is wrong *kṣamā*, while there are also moments when the *kṣatriya*, at a moment of unchallenged superiority, has to show clemency. This is a very convincing and practicable philosophy.

Prahlāda's Teaching

Draupadī further elaborates on these points by quoting a dialogue between Prahlāda and Bali Vairocana. Bali asked his grandfather Prahlāda:

kṣamā svicchreyasi tāta utāho teja ityuta /

What is better, father, forbearance or *tejas*?¹⁰³

The latter term is not easy to translate here. Its basic meanings are glow, lustre, light, power, strength, energy, courage. Apte's *Student's Dictionary* also lists the meaning, "strength of character, not bearing insult or ill-treatment with impunity". This is exactly what is meant here and what Draupadī expects of Yudhiṣṭhira.

Prahlāda's answer to Bali's question is very instructive and shows deep psychological experience. He first lists the disadvantages of a one-sided practice or attitude of *kṣamā*: A man who is always forgiving, says Prahlāda, is despised by his servants and disrespected by other humans. Since his servants know that he will not punish them, they will indulge in many vices and steal things from him, they may even openly abuse him and "demand his wife". If, however, such a forbearing person gives them the least punishment, they immediately rebel against him. Thus he lives a miserable life.

But if someone always punishes others and thinks of revenge, he will be hated by everyone, losing the good-will of even his friends. People will avoid him and shrink from his company. And as soon as they see a chance, they will hurt him. Prahlāda draws the conclusion:

tasmānnātyuṣṛjettejo na ca nityaṃ mṛdurbhavet //22

¹⁰³ Mbhr. 3.29.3

*kāle mṛduryo bhavati kāle bhavati dāruṇaḥ /
sa vai sukhamaṅvāpnoti loke ’muṣminnihaiva ca //23*

Therefore, one should neither always dominate with one’s power nor always be gentle. He who is gentle at the right time and severe at the right time, attains happiness in this world and hereafter.¹⁰⁴

In the next passage Prah̄lāda speaks with equal psychological insight on different cases which require punishment or forgiveness, respectively. A benefactor who has done some wrong should be forgiven due to his earlier merit, provided his wrongs are not too great. Also those should be forgiven who were not aware of doing wrong. But offenders who acted in full knowledge, are to be punished mercilessly even for a small wrong. Furthermore, the first offence of anyone should be forgiven, whereas the second is to be punished. An offender may also be forgiven in order to appease the public.

After having quoted Prah̄lāda, Draupadī returns to her proper subject, her desire to have Duryodhana and his people punished by the Pāṇḍavas. The insults of the Dhārtarāṣṭras were many, she points out, and therefore they do not deserve mercy. It is time now for *tejas*, the manifestation of power; it is time to retaliate in response to the injustice suffered.

Draupadī has held a long and passionate pleading for *manyu* and *tejas*. She does not mean that type of anger which is a man’s blind impulsive reaction to a painful provocation, but the effective retaliation of the *kṣatriya* who has been hit by the enemy and is determined not to let the adversary escape unpunished.

Yudhiṣṭhira’s Rebuttal

Yudhiṣṭhira in his response rejects Draupadī’s arguments, giving her in turn a long lecture on the evil consequences of anger. For him it is not a question of rising from *tamas* to *rajas*, but keeping his high station in *sattva*, the top *guṇa*, representing a wise, balanced state of mind, from which one should not fall into *rajas*. His basic message is,

¹⁰⁴ Mbhr. 3.29.22-23

the perdition of creatures is rooted in anger.¹⁰⁵

Only those who control their anger, attain well-being, while those who yield to anger go to Yama's realm. Neither the weak nor the strong persons should allow themselves to react with anger but they should both be forgiving, even in distress.

Victory is for the forgiving and the good, that is the belief of the righteous.¹⁰⁶

In order to maintain *tejas*, he says, anger (*krodha*) must be kept away. Falling prey to anger is even worse than falling from one's own law, *svadharma*.¹⁰⁷ Yudhiṣṭhira's arguments are well-formulated and quite in line with his meek nature. If he concludes that "a wise man should always forgive", he speaks out his very philosophy. We render in the following his complete sermon on *kṣamā* which, according to Yudhiṣṭhira, is a quotation from the sage Kaśyapa:

Forgiveness is *dharma*, forgiveness is sacrifice, forgiveness is Veda and learning. Those who know this, can always forgive. //36

Forgiveness is *brahman*, forgiveness is truth and the past and the future. Forgiveness is austerity and purity, it upholds the world. //37

Beyond the worlds of the knowers of *brahman* and beyond those of the *tapasvins* and ritual experts, the forgiving attain to their world. //38

Forgiveness is the power of the powerful, the *brahman* of the *tapasvins*, the Truth of the truthful, it is the giving and the glory. //39

How could someone like me, Kṛṣṇā, abandon this kind of forgiveness in which the *brahman*, truth, sacrifices and the world are established? Those who perform sacrifices, enjoy their worlds, the forgiving enjoy their other worlds. //40

The wise man should always forgive, for if he forgives everything, he becomes *brahman*. //41

This world is for the forgiving, and so is the other world. Here they

¹⁰⁵ Mbhr. 3.30.3

¹⁰⁶ Mbhr. 3.30.14

¹⁰⁷ Mbhr. 3.30.20-23

achieve honour, there they travel on the good path.¹⁰⁸ //42 SKR¹⁰⁹

What we get here, is the essence of Yudhiṣṭhira's life-philosophy. He completely rejects Draupadī's pleading for 'anger'. For him the true formula is *kṣamā dharmah*, forgiveness is the true law of being, and this formula is sacrosanct, there is nothing to be discussed about that. Draupadī's formula, "no *kṣatriya* without anger", has not impressed him, it does not enter his mind as it is not in accordance with his personal philosophy.

Draupadī's Criticism of *dharma*

In her rebuttal Draupadī reproaches Yudhiṣṭhira for not following the path of his father and grand-father, "your mind has drifted another way!"¹¹⁰ She almost seems to say (we allow ourselves this anachronism), "How is it that you have become a Christian abandoning the ancient law of the *kṣatriyas*?"

After this strong-worded attack on Yudhiṣṭhira's policy of forgiveness, Draupadī hits at another aspect of his nature, his absolute adherence to *dharma*:

In this world a man never obtains excellence through *dharma* and rectitude, through forgiveness, uprightness and gentleness, if this unbearable misfortune overtook you, Bhārata, which neither you nor your mighty brothers deserve.¹¹¹

The miserable state in which Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas find themselves seems to prove that Yudhiṣṭhira had followed a wrong inspiration in his action. But this argument is invalid from a philosophical point of view, for it presupposes that right action always entails comfortable living. Unlike Sītā in the Rāmāyaṇa, Draupadī is not able to reconcile with living an ascetic type of life in the forest. She is a woman in revolt, moved by the desire to return to her palace, playing

¹⁰⁸ Mbhr. 3.30.36-42

¹⁰⁹ Sanskrit text, see Appendix I, 5

¹¹⁰ Mbhr. 3.31.1

¹¹¹ Mbhr. 3.31.2-3

Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, Yavakṛita and the Brāhmin Saint

One of the greatest trials for saints and mystics all over the world has been sexual temptation. In Christianity the fall from chastity has mostly been described as a major sin or even perilous catastrophe in the life of a God-seeker. However, the Mahābhārata is much more lenient and considerate in this matter. We are shown different cases with different circumstances and occasionally even the Gods themselves send a beautiful *apsarā* to tempt the ascetic for certain reasons.

Definitely, the notion of ‘sin’ does not exist in the same way as in some religions. To enter sex life, to marry is not strictly banned for the men of God, but conceded as a balancing factor in some cases. This is also true for Ṛṣyaśṛṅga whose story is told in chapter 110 of the Vanaparvan.

I – Ṛṣyaśṛṅga

The unusual way of his birth is told at the beginning of the chapter. The ascetic Kāśyapa went to a lake to practice austerities and saw the beautiful *apsarā* Urvaśī. The stimulating sight caused in him an emission while he was bathing, and his semen was drunk with the water by a thirsty doe near-by. The doe was a daughter of the Gods and had incarnated on earth for some reason. Now it became pregnant and gave birth to a child destined to be a great saint, and through this birth the doe would be liberated.¹ Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was born of the doe and grew up in the forest. He wore an antelope horn on his head which explains his name. Besides his foster-father, the ṛṣi Vibhāṇḍaka, he never saw any human being, thus pursuing his spiritual practices without any distractions.

Now there was a king of Aṅga, Lomapāda, who had mistreated the Brāhmins in his country and was therefore deserted by them. As a

¹ This information about the background of the doe is not given in the Critical Edition.

down my mouth. Placing his mouth on mine, he sounded a sound that was very pleasant.⁴

R̥śyaśṛṅga's father Vibhāṇḍaka is aghast. After having kept his son in such extreme seclusion all the time, he has been found out by the 'demons' nonetheless:

They are Rākṣasas, son, roaming the earth in their wonderfully attractive forms. They are of incomparable beauty but very violent, and they always plot to prevent austerities.

Assuming lovely bodies, my son, they try to allure by various means. And those beings of dreadful deeds hurl the *munis* in the forest from their blessed regions.

A self-controlled *muni* aspiring for the worlds of the righteous, should avoid their company. They are vicious and they delight in causing obstruction to those practicing *tapas*.⁵

Vibhāṇḍaka sets out searching for the temptress. The latter cleverly uses the occasion to visit R̥śyaśṛṅga once more in his *āśrama*. The young ascetic is highly pleased to see her and proposes to go to her retreat before his father returns. They hurry to the floating hermitage which takes them to Aṅga. The king's effort proves to be fruitful: immediately the earth is flooded with rain. Subsequently, R̥śyaśṛṅga is married to Śāntā, the king's daughter.

The king knows that Vibhāṇḍaka would be full of anger when he returned to his hermitage and found that his son had left. He takes proper counter-measures by instructing the herdsmen at various cattle stations to treat Vibhāṇḍaka with utmost respect if they should meet him, telling him that all the lands and crops belonged to his son and that they were at his (Vibhāṇḍaka's) service. The ruse works. When Vibhāṇḍaka arrives at the king's court, his anger has already cooled down, and when Śāntā comes running to him to welcome her father-in-law, it finally subsides. He instructs R̥śyaśṛṅga to stay at the court until a son is born and then to return to the hermitage. This he does,

⁴ Mbhr. 3.112.12

⁵ Mbhr. 3.113.1-3

Appendix I Sanskrit Original Texts

1 – Draupadi in the Assembly Hall

sa tām parāmr̥śya sabhāsamīpamānīya kṛṣṇāmatikṛṣṇakeśīm //
duḥśāsano nāthavatīmanāthavaccakarṣa vāyuḥ kadalīmivārtām // 24
sā kṛṣyamānā namitāṅgayaṣṭiḥ śanairuvācādyā rajasvalāsmi /
ekaṁ ca vāso mama mandabuddhe sabhām netuṁ nārhasi māmanārya //
25

tato'bravītām prasabham nigṛhya keśeṣu kṛṣṇeṣu tadā sa kṛṣṇām /
kṛṣṇam ca jiṣṇuṁ ca hariṁ naram ca trāṇāya vikrośa nayāmi hi tvām // 26
rajasvalā vā bhava yājñaseni ekāmbarā vāpyatha vā vivastrā /
dyūte jitā cāsi kṛtāsi dāsī dāsīṣu kāmaśca yathopajoṣam // 27
prakīṛṇakeśī patitārdhavastrā duḥśāsanena vyavadhūyamānā /
hrīmatyamarṣeṇa ca dahyamānā śanairidam vākyamuvāca kṛṣṇā // 28
ime sabhāyāmupadiṣṭaśāstrāḥ kriyāvantaḥ sarva evendrakalpāḥ /
gurusthānā guravaścaiva sarve teṣāmagre notsahe sthātumevam // 29
nṛśāmsakarmanstvamanāryavṛtta mā mām vivastrām kṛdhi mā vikārṣiḥ /
na marṣayeyustava rājaputrāḥ sendrāpi devā yadi te sahāyāḥ // 30
dharme stitho dharmasutaśca rājā dharmasca sūkṣmo nipuṇopalabhyaḥ /
vācāpi bhartuḥ paramāṇumātraṁ necchāmi doṣaṁ svaguṇānvisiṛjya // 31
idaṁ tvanāryaṁ kuruvīramadhye rajasvalām yatparikarṣase mām /
na cāpi kaścitkurute'tra pūjām dhruvaṁ tavedaṁ matamanvapadyan // 32
dhigastu naṣṭaḥ khalu bhāratānām dharmastathā kṣatravidām ca vṛttam /
yatrābhyaṭītām kurudharmavelām prekṣanti sarve kuravaḥ sabhāyām // 33
droṇasya bhīṣmasya ca nāsti sattvaṁ dhruvaṁ tathaiṅvāsya mahātmano'pi/
rājñastathā hīmamadharmamugraṁ na lakṣyante kuruvṛddhamukhyāḥ //
34

tathā bruvantī karuṇaṁ sumadhyamā kaṭākṣeṇa bhartṛṅkupitānapaśyat /
sā paṇḍavāṅkopaparītadehānsamīpayāmāsa kaṭākṣapātaiḥ // 35