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Our Epics Shaped Patriarchy and Social Hierarchy in India

By: Nivedita Menon

'Dying Lineage' offers a valuable feminist perspective on the epics, showing their ability to absorb diverse beliefs and practices, disciplining them into Brahminism and facilitating the shift to a monarchical, stratified society.

Uma Chakravarti has for some years been best known as a feminist scholar of contemporary India, a fierce champion of democratic rights, and a film-maker, but her brilliant new book re-introduces her as a feminist historian of ancient India.

We have known this persona from her path-breaking essays (to mention only a few), “Beyond the Altkerian Paradigm” (1988) and “Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi” (1989) in which Chakravarti deconstructed the myth of the Golden Vedic Age produced in the 19th century, an era in which women were supposedly free and powerful. This argument was developed to counter colonial criticism of Hindu practices by claiming that women enjoyed a very high status during the Vedic period. It further asserted that there was a general decline in their status afterwards, which accelerated with the arrival of “Muslim invaders” who abducted and violated Hindu women. These circumstances, it was argued, led to the development of social evils such as purdah, sati, and female infanticide.

However, Chakravarti argued in those essays that there was enough evidence, even drawing exclusively on Brahmanical sources, to show that women of the upper castes did not have access to the public domain by the early centuries of the Common Era. Sati itself was associated with women of the ruling classes, and from long before the period termed as “Muslim invasions”, as shown by a 7th century account of Harsha’s early career. She stated firmly, “The structure of institutions ensured the subordination of women was complete in all essentials long before the Muslims as a religious community had come into being” (1988:47).

In a 1993 essay, Chakravarti used the iconic term “Brahmanical patriarchy” to describe the inter-relationships between caste, class, gender, and state in early India, which has by now become an almost self-evident way in feminist scholarship to indicate the imbrication of caste hierarchy, and violence with the patriarchal institution of the family.

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This is the scholarship that is the backdrop, as it were, of her new work. But Chakravarti makes a much more ambitious theoretical argument here. As she spells out in detail at the beginning of *The Dying Lineage*, the need is to go beyond the kind of feminist scholarship (valuable though this is) that studies how social formations are gendered. That is to say by now it is well established that changes in social formations result in changes in the systems of gender relations (or “gender regimes”, to use a term in Tanika Sarkar’s *Religion and Women in India: Gender, Faith and Politics, 1780s-1980s*). Once it is determined that a mode of production has shifted, feminist scholars try to relate production to reproduction through an analysis of marriage and kinship patterns, an important task that genders social and economic processes.

However, to quote Chakravarti, “The idea of transition ... continues to be determined by changes in agricultural developments, technological developments and the production of food, goods and services” (4). What she does in *The Dying Lineage* is to frame transition as “precipitated by new gender relations”, by “the putting into place of certain mechanisms of sexual governance, thereby making possible new production relations or new power relations” (4).

If this is the case, she asks,

Would it be possible to say that the emergence of the endogamous marriage system and a caste-based hierarchy of social groups ... were contingent upon an elaborate code of sexual governance, which made possible the emergence of a ‘claste’ society - i.e. a caste-cum-class society. In turn, claste society made possible a stable and enduring relationship between landowning/land-controlling groups on the one hand, and laboring groups on the other, kept apart as part of the *longue duree* structures through the reproduction of caste groups and of the production system, made possible through caste-based labour exploitation (4-5).

In this understanding, caste and sexual governance are interlinked and part of the infrastructure in South Asia. Changes in sexual governance often precede and prepare the way for radical changes in the economy.

This is the foundation of Chakravarti's reading of key narratives in the *Mahabharata*. The two feminist scholars she most prominently establishes as informing her work are Gerda Lerner and Kumkum Roy.

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Of course, the epics have been interpreted by feminists earlier. In the *Ramayana*, the presence of powerful women who must be killed, maimed, and humiliated has been remarked upon by feminists from Irawati Karve (1967) to Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1997, 2021) and Chakravarti herself. Surpanakha in the *Ramayana*, for example, has been read by many feminist scholars as a woman unashamed of her own sexual desire, who was never taught that she must be passive and submissive. She must learn that lesson brutally by having her nose cut off by Rama's brother Lakshmana. That these are women of communities we would today describe as Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi has also been noted.

In another earlier essay, “The Development of the Sita Myth” (1983), Chakravarti analyses Valmiki's *Ramayana* as a reconstruction of various stories that were circulating across South and Southeast Asia. She argues that this epic weaves these elements into a single narrative designed to establish a new norm—the Aryan, patriarchal, and patrilineal order of sexuality and property—over the region's diverse practices. Thus, the southern people of Lanka, where women were freer, have to be subjugated and taught proper codes of sexual conduct, the people of the forest (the Vanaras) are pacified into the Aryan king's loyal army, and the upper-caste woman Sita is instructed in the dangers that lie in wait on crossing the limits set by the Lakshman Rekha.

Turning her focus to the *Mahabharata* in *The Dying Lineage*, Chakravarti points out that “more than any other ancient Indian text, [it] reflects all the ambiguities and contradictions of a transitional moment in history” (6), from 400 BCE to 400 CE. The transition was from kin-clan based structures to a monarchical kingdom and stratified society. What one sees in the stories of the *Mahabharata* are a heterogeneous range of social practices, especially reproductive practices, which the text seeks to assimilate didactically into patriliney in order to ensure the legitimising and future survival of this yet-to-emerge order. But unlike the strict *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* is much more ambiguous and open towards multiple kinds of reproductive practices, which are not condemned even as, in Chakravarti's reading, the continuous attempt is to replace their legitimacy with patrilineal primogeniture.

The first text the book addresses is not a Brahminical one, but a Buddhist parable of origins, the *Agganna Sutta*, which sets up a view of human sexuality and reproduction that is based on mutual desire and consent. There is no overt indication of a gender hierarchy, no sexual division of labour. Chakravarti uses this text to highlight a contrast with Brahminical traditions. These traditions, as reflected in Vedic, later Vedic, and Shastric texts, ritualise cohabitation and reproduction, giving priests a growing role and increasing control over women, their sexuality, and their wombs.

The question Chakravarti asks is why, when “issues of reproduction, sexual desire and sexual conflict are at the heart of the narrative”, ... the great ethical questions highlighted in the epic do not address these themes.

In this trajectory, the *Mahabharata* is ambiguous in that it invokes alternative (polyandrous, non-patrilineal) sexual practices that were considered lawful “in the past”, unlike the relative stability of later Brahminical texts that obliterate the memory of these practices altogether. This is how Pandu urges Kunti to invoke her boon to bear sons from other partners than him. But even as he cites such practices “in the past”, he relates the story of Svetaketu, who ended these ancient ways of women taking their pleasure as it suited them, laying down strict rules of monogamy and sexual fidelity for women, as well as their duty to bear children by their husbands.

The stories of Renuka, beheaded by her son on his father's orders for experiencing desire at the sight of a king and his queen making love; of the Kashi princesses Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika abducted by Bhishma and what follows with each of them; and of Madhavi, who bears the sons for four different kings so that a young Brahmin boy who approached her father Yayati for help can pay his guru dakshina, are all related and analysed within this framework of women sacrificed and disciplined within a narrative framework of “dynasties that are in perpetual danger of becoming extinct” (147). Alongside, in each story appears a diversity of sexual practices which are explained away by taking recourse to the theory of apaddharma (the law of distress that permits exceptions to what is permissible under normal times).

The question Chakravarti asks is why, when “issues of reproduction, sexual desire and sexual conflict are at the heart of the narrative, and actually move the narrative forward in fundamental ways”, the great ethical questions highlighted in the epic do not address these themes. These ethical reflections are rather on worldly life (Janaka), the rationale for the state (Bhishma and Yudhishtira), and the Kshatriya duty to fight (Arjuna)—all of these expounded by the great male protagonists. The ethics of what is done to the women is never the subject of philosophical debate—they are merely pawns being moved around in the crisis of reproduction of kingly power.

But in the end, as Chakravarti puts it, “the reified wombs revolted and left behind ... a bloodied battlefield, the death of all Kshatriya/Kuru males of reproductive age, and the yuga itself came to an unholy and untimely end” (229). Chakravarti’s mode of argumentation travels on two parallel paths—she reads the *Mahabharata* as a narrative trying to discipline heterogeneous sexual practices into patriliney as well as one that raises ethical questions about women and their autonomy. She keeps pushing the limits of the latter ethical questions, even as she recognises the didactic purpose of the narrative.

This book began with a question—what if we saw changes in the organising of sexuality and reproduction as the motor force of changes in production. Through close analysis of selected narratives in the *Mahabharata*, Chakravarti explicates the idea of the “dying lineage”—its death is assumed only because of the premise that from now on the lineage will be determined by the father alone. And yet, almost every significant birth of a prince in the *Mahabharata* is from “other” men than the husband, whose name within the marriage as “the husband” is the only paternal connection between siblings. The real connection though, is the womb they shared. And the implications of this are something I would have liked this book to dwell more upon.

Her agency in my alternative reading is expressed in her decision to have sex with four men, after which her father holds a *swayamvara* for her, indicating that she remained a prize bride even after her promiscuity.

The story of Madhavi is worth looking at again in this connection. She is read by Chakravarti (and by other scholars she cites) as the woman treated as chattel, exploited by many men—her father and the Brahmin stranger to whom he gifts her, as well as by the four men (three of them kings, the fourth, the sage Vishwamitra) with whom she has sex and for whom she bears sons. She recovers her agency in this reading only by refusing to participate in the *swayamvara* organised by her father after all of this has come to pass. She then turns herself into a deer and goes into the forest to live peacefully.

What is interesting and unremarked upon is that when Galava the Brahmin scholar is discussing his predicament with Yayati, it is Madhavi who speaks up to say that she has a boon that restores her virginity when she chooses, and it is she who suggests that she can go to four kings to earn the 800 horses Galava needs (138). Moreover, the three kings and Vishwamitra the sage are eager to have sons born of this unknown woman and willing to pay a high price for the privilege because she is deemed to be capable of bearing *chakravarti* sons who will establish lineages.

It is not the kings who matter but Madhavi whose womb will bear sons who will be *chakravartis*. Her agency in my alternative reading is expressed in her decision to have sex with four men, after which her father holds a *swayamvara* for her, indicating that she remained a prize bride even after her promiscuity.

In the light of these key elements of the narrative, it seems to me that the story of Madhavi should be read as the *Mahabharata* struggling with existing powerful matrilineal practices that express the value of the womb. From here society has to move towards patriliney, which is yet to begin, to be inaugurated by all these sons born of polyandrous mothers.

Endowing legitimacy to new patriarchal norms necessary for the transformation of the social formation is quite patently a prime function of these narratives.

I suggest that assimilating, delegitimising, and ending these robust and dominant matrilineal traditions (as well as matrilineal kinship and support structures) of heterogeneous non-Aryan communities, while simultaneously giving them temporary recognition and value, is a common theme in the epics and Puranas as a whole. We may note that the key villain is often the maternal uncle—Sakuni in the *Mahabharata*, and Kamsa in the story of Krishna.

Kaikeyi’s loyal maid, Manthara, portrayed as the very epitome of sly evil, accompanied her from her natal home and represents the mother’s family. The establishment of patrilineal primogeniture—the eldest son of the ruler as the inheritor of the throne—as an inviolable principle is central to the story of both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, but the principle is not self-evident in both, and is

challenged in different ways. Mothers are generally noble but some mothers precipitate calamitous events through their bid to reject patrilineal primogeniture—as Kaikeyi does in the *Ramayana*. Endowing legitimacy to new patriarchal norms necessary for the transformation of the social formation is quite patently a prime function of these narratives.

The Dying Lineage is a fascinating and productive feminist scholarly exercise that enables us to see that the *Mahabharata* (and one could apply this analysis to the *Ramayana* too) is not an ur-text, of which there are multiple “versions”. Rather, these epics attempt to contain the countless deities, beliefs, and practices that exist outside their narratives. They seek to discipline these diverse traditions into Brahminism, paving the way for the transition to a monarchical and stratified “caste” society.

Nivedita Menon teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

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