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Dharma and Caste in the Mahabharata

Some episodic suggestions

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The Mahabharata is peopled by the 'higher' castes but there are important personages from the 'lower' castes whose presence gives a radical salience to 'dharma' as set out in the epic, to the point of even suggesting a subversion of the dominant ideology.

There is a scholarly consensus that below the apocalyptic events---covered in five of the 18 books--- that form the core of the epic, the idea of *dharma* serves as a principal theme. Many dimensions of the idea are explored through characters, sub-tales and events; even transgressions of *dharma* illuminate it. In comparison, the great book has very little to say explicitly about caste or *varna* in the sense that it does not address the question of inequality that the operation of the caste system inevitably engenders. It need hardly be emphasized that most of the main characters come from the two top castes and the language of the epic is Sanskrit, the language of these two castes. The second caste, *kshatriyas*, not surprisingly, dominates the epic. According to one calculation, there are as many as 175 references to *kshatriyadharma* in the epic (Hiltebeitel: 2014: 528). In contrast, the *vaisyadharma* and *sudradharma* receive nine and six references respectively (Hiltebeitel: 2014: 528).

The argument that this essay seeks to present through the narration of certain episodes and characters, is that the lower castes do make significant appearances in the epic and that those appearances are not unrelated to the epic's approach to *dharma*-in fact, those appearances give a radical salience to the question of *dharma*.

Vyasa

In a clearing within the Naimisa forest where a ritual event is in progress in the presence of a number of rishis, the bard, Ugrasrava, arrives. After proper formalities have been observed, the bard is asked where he is coming from. Ugrasrava replies that he is coming from the court of king Janamejaya, who was performing a snake sacrifice. He adds that the great sage Vyasa had graced the occasion and Janamejaya had requested Vyasa to narrate the events that had led to the great rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Vyasa then turned to his disciple, Vaisampayana, and asked him to narrate the story of the *Mahabharata* as he had heard it from Vyasa himself. At the urging of his audience, Ugrasrava repeats to the rishis what he had heard Vaisampayana say. In so doing he identifies Vyasa as the *proktaa* (proclaimer) of the *Mahabharata* (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhyaya* 1: *slokas*:1-17)

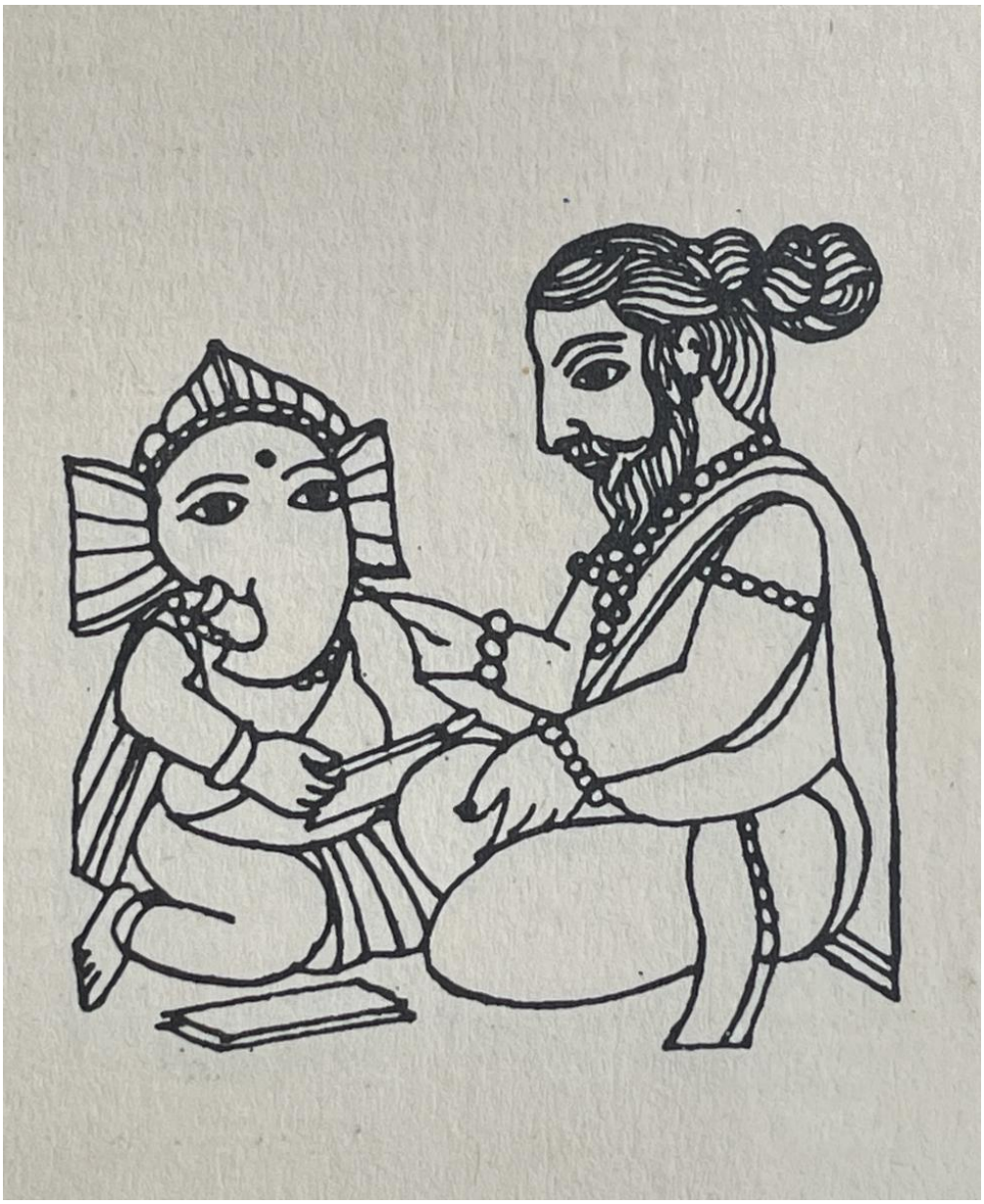
Vyasa is not only the author of the epic but he is also one of its pivotal characters. He refers to himself not in the first person singular but by his own proper name. Thus, "Vyasa arrived…" and so on. According to one calculation, he makes as many as 42 appearances in the *Mahabharata* and out of these 38 are absolutely critical (Hiltebeitel: 2001: 46) In some cases, without Vyasa's intervention as a character the narrative or the story would come to a standstill. Let us take two notable examples.

After Vichitravirya's death, the Kuru line, much to Satyavati's despair, is defunct. She consults with Bhishma about *niyogapratha* (siring by proxy). Bhishma advises her to invite a brahmin to impregnate the wives (widows) of Vichitravirya, Ambika and Ambalika. Satyavati then, smilingly and somewhat shyly, reveals to Bhishma that she has another son, Vyasa, and also tells Bhishma the extraordinary circumstances of Vyasa's birth. Satyavati and Bhishma decide that it would be only proper to invite Vyasa to carry forward the dynasty. Following this conversation, Vyasa arrives and responds to his mother's appeal to sleep with Ambika and Ambalika. Thus are born Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura and the Kuru lineage is preserved (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhyaya*: 99; *slokas* 1-36). It is needless to add that without this act on Vyasa's part the story would not have advanced, at least not in the same direction.

> More significantly, Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata* … and the progenitor of the Kuru dynasty, does not belong to either of the two upper castes.

Again, once when Vyasa had arrived tired and hungry, Gandhari had looked after him. Satisfied with her care, Vyasa had a granted her a boon. Gandhari had wanted one hundred sons. Gandhari suffered a two-year pregnancy that she terminated with a self-induced abortion when she heard that Kunti had given birth to a son. What that abortion produced was a mound of flesh as solid as iron. At

this point Vyasa appears, and since his boon cannot go wrong, he divides the mass of flesh into 101 pieces and puts them into pots. These pieces are transformed into 101 embryos and become the 101 children of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, i.e. the Kauravas, one of the parties in the great war (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhyaya*: 109: *slokas*: 8-24). Vyasa thus makes possible the birth of Duryodhona and his brothers and creates conditions for the great rivalry between the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu.



1. Vyasa telling the Mahabharata to Ganesha | Badri Narayan (c) Orient Blackswan 1985

It is important at this point to establish the identity of Vyasa through the circumstances of his birth. Vyasa is the offspring of a sexual encounter between the sage Parasar, who seduced a fisherman's daughter named Satyavati. The encounter takes place on a boat under cover of a fog magically created by Parasar; Vyasa is born on an island and is thus called Dwaipayana. Through Parasar's blessings, Satyavati retains her virginity and loses her "fishy" smell and becomes full of fragrance. Vyasa is born full-grown and takes leave of his mother with the words, "Remembered, I will appear when things are to be done" (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhyaya*: 58: *slokas*:120-127). He keeps his word when his mother remembers him at a very critical juncture in the story, and the Kuru dynasty is carried forward.

> Vyasa's origins, notwithstanding, he is acknowledged as the repository of *dharma* and the leading authority on the Vedas.

More significantly, Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata* (referred to as the fifth Veda) and the progenitor of the Kuru dynasty, does not belong to either of the two upper castes. His mother is a fisherman's daughter. His complexion is dark-as Satyavati tells Bhishma while describing Vyasa's birth. He is thus called Krishna. His full name was Krishna Dwaipayana-one part of his name denoting his complexion and the other the location of his birth. Vyasa's dark complexion only strengthens the conclusion that he does not belong to the upper echelons of the caste hierarchy. Will it be pushing it too far to suggest that, given his dark complexion, Vyasa is *anarya* (the "other")? There is an element of consistency in Vyasa being dark skinned, for so was Satyavati who in the epic is referred to as *kali* (Mbh:*Adi parva*:*adhyaya*:99: *sloka*:23).

Vyasa's origins, notwithstanding, he is acknowledged as the repository of *dharma* and the leading authority on the Vedas. This brief recapitulation of Vyasa's birth and some aspects of his life would strongly suggest that in the *Mahabharata* origins have nothing to do with *dharma* and its pursuit, nor with the knowledge of the Vedas. This drives a formidable wedge into notions of orthodoxy and taboo associated with the Brahminical order. The latter appears to be inclined towards being inclusive rather than being prohibitive for sections of the people.

Ekalavya

Authorial intentions are well-nigh impossible to determine. Ever since the famous post-modernist declamation about the author being dead, the search for authorial intentions has even been considered a worthless intellectual exercise. These difficulties and warnings are especially true for a text like the *Mahabharata* which may not have had one author and could have had innumerable overlapping and separate intentions. Without in any way underestimating the relevant difficulties, the question of intentionality cannot be set aside in a discussion concerning the Ekalavya episode. There are at least two reasons for this. First, he is a very minor character who flits in and out of the narrative. Second, his appearance in no way adds to the main storyline. The *Mahabharata* story would not have been incomplete without the Ekalavya incident. The very fact that the Ekalavya episode is introduced, in however passing a manner, would suggest that the author was trying to convey something. I would go so far as to suggest that through a minor character, and what is done to him, something very significant is being said.

Briefly stated one day, during the period when the brahmin-warrior, Dronacharya, is engaged in training the Kaurava and Pandava princes in the art of warfare, Ekalavya, the son of a *nishada* king, Hiranyadhanu, appears before Drona as a supplicant. The use of the word *nishada* (Singh: 2017:378) would indicate that Ekalavya belonged not to any one of the main castes but was a hunter or a tribal and a forest dweller. Ekalavya wanted to be Drona's student. Drona turned him down because, as a *nishad's* son, he could not be taught alongside *kshatriya* princes. Thus rejected, Ekalavya made his own dejected way to the forest where he made for himself a statue of Drona and in the presence of the statue began to teach himself archery. In his mind, Ekalavya had accepted Drona as his guru and was determined to make himself a skilled archer.

> In the Ekalavya episode and the circumstances surrounding it, all the expectations and duties of the traditional order of society are overturned and the world is turned upside down.

One day, the Kauravas and Pandavas were out hunting in the forest and one of their hunting dogs came upon Ekalavya and barked at him; Ekalavya silenced the dog by shooting seven arrows so as to form a muzzle around the mouth. The Pandavas, amazed by this incident, sought out Ekalavya, who introduced himself with his parental identity and as a *shishya* of Drona. The Pandavas returned to Hastinapura and reported to Drona what had happened. Arjuna made a particular point of telling Drona that Ekalavya appeared to be superior to him in archery. After some thought, Drona proceeded with Arjuna to seek out Ekalavya, who on meeting his guru offered him due respect. Drona then told Ekalavya, "Warrior! If you are my *shishya*, then please pay me the wages for my lessons." Delighted to hear this, Ekalavya, said, "Please tell me what I can offer you. There is nothing that I cannot offer to you, my gurudev." Drona then asked for the right thumb of Ekalavya, who willingly obliged by cutting off his right thumb to give to Drona. Ekalavya thus lost his matchless skill (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhyaya*: 118: *slokas*: 40-68.). It is undeniable that this was an act of gratuitous and appalling cruelty on Drona's part in which, as we shall see later, Arjuna was fully implicated since it eliminated a potential rival.



2. Eklavya praying to a statue of Drona | Badri Narayan (c) Orient Blackswan

What is often not noted is the fact that in the *slokas* immediately preceding the Ekalavya episode, some facets of Drona's character are described. Most of them do not bring out Drona in a good light. On the contrary, the verses suggest that Drona was not a straightforward person but was, in fact, disingenuous. He created conditions whereby he could teach his son Ashwatthama certain skills without Arjuna learning them. Arjuna discovered this, and devoted himself to the service of his guru, who was so pleased that he declared he would make Arjuna incomparable as an archer (Mbh: *adi parva*: *adhyaya*:118: *slokas*:25-36). Later, when the Pandavas came across Ekalavya, Arjuna complained to Drona that in spite of his assurance, the disciple Ekalavya had proved to be superior. (Mbh: *adi parva*: *adhaya*: 118: *sloka*: 57) It was this comment that provoked Drona to ask for Ekalavya's thumb. Once the latter had made that extreme sacrifice, Arjuna was satisfied and had no cause to complain (Mbh: *adi parva*: *adhyaya*:118: *sloka*:69).

> I would suggest that the epic is suggesting [in the Eklavya episode] that ethical conduct-the pursuit and the practice of *dharma*-has nothing to do with birth.

In the Ekalavya episode and the circumstances surrounding it, all the expectations and duties of the traditional order of society are overturned and the world is turned upside down. Members of the highest rank behave in the lowest manner and a member of the lowest order upholds the highest codes of ethical conduct. According to the ethics of the traditional order - call it *dharma* - a brahmin is expected to uphold the highest code of honour and the warrior the code of valour. But in this episode, we see a brahmin violating one of the principal tenets of *dharma* - non-cruelty (*aanrishangsya*); and a warrior instead of taking on a rival in a battle of arms actually delighting in eliminating a rival through the worst possible means. In contrast, a *nishada*, a forest dweller, who is outside the caste/*varna* hierarchy upholds the highest standards of the prevalent moral ethic-namely tribute to a teacher. Further, the incident brings out Drona's underhand ways.

It is important to comprehend what the epic is trying to convey through this episode. I would suggest that the epic is suggesting that ethical conduct-the pursuit and the practice of *dharma*-has nothing to do with birth. A brahmin and a warrior can both behave in a manner that does not befit their status and standing in society. In fact, they can behave according to the most abominable of standards. A *nishada*-someone not belonging to the traditional ordering of society-can actually uphold honour. The epic is forcing readers to think that *dharma* is not a hidebound and rigid doctrine whose pursuit and practice are confined to the two highest *varnas*. Anyone, even a *nishada* can uphold *dharma*; a brahmin and a warrior can fall from the standards of their assigned *dharma*. This is a very radical suggestion in the epic.

Yuyutsu

The onset of the battle of Kurukshetra is delayed by Arjuna expressing his pangs of conscience to Krishna, who removes Arjuna's doubts through a long discourse that has come to be celebrated as the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* is an exposition of many aspects of life and piety, but most importantly it is an elucidation of *dharma*. But this is not the only pause before the battle begins. There is another one which is no less a moment of *dharma*. Just before the battle is to begin, Yudhishthira shouts across to the Kaurava troops: "Whoever receives us, I will for my assistance receive him." Only one person, Yuyutsu, crosses over, and replies to Yudhishthira, "You sinless king! If you receive me, I will fight alongside you." Yudhishthira receives him with the words, "The preservation of the line of Dhritarashtra is seen in you." (Mbh: *Bhishma parva*:*adhyaya*:25: *slokas*: 89-93). This is probably Yuyutsu's only appearance in the epic. Who is this Yuyutsu? He is Dhritarashtra's son born of a young *vaishya* girl who looked after Dhritarashtra when Gandhari was pregnant (Mbh:*adi parva*: *adyhaya*: 109: *sloka*: 41). The caste of the mother is clearly mentioned and Yuyutsu is described as being very intelligent.



3. Arjuna and Krishna heading to the battlefield | Badri Narayan (c) Orient Blackswan

It is a significant moment not only for the upholding of the principles of *dharma* but also as an act of moral courage. Both Bhishma and Drona acknowledge that *dharma* is on the side of the Pandavas, but they fight for the Kauravas, in fact, they lead the Kaurava troops. Both tell Yudhishthira and his brothers before the battle begins, "Human beings are the slaves to *artha* (power/wealth), but *artha* is no one's slave." They admit that the Kauravas have enslaved them through *artha* and that they were talking and behaving like eunuchs by fighting on the Kaurava side. (Mbh: *Bhishma parva*: *adhyaya*: 25: *slokas* 36-37; and 51-52). The same pressure of gratitude could have acted on Yuyutsu --- and more forcefully since he was a mere maid's son --- but Vyasa makes him, and no one else at that critical conjuncture, stand up for *dharma*.

Vidura

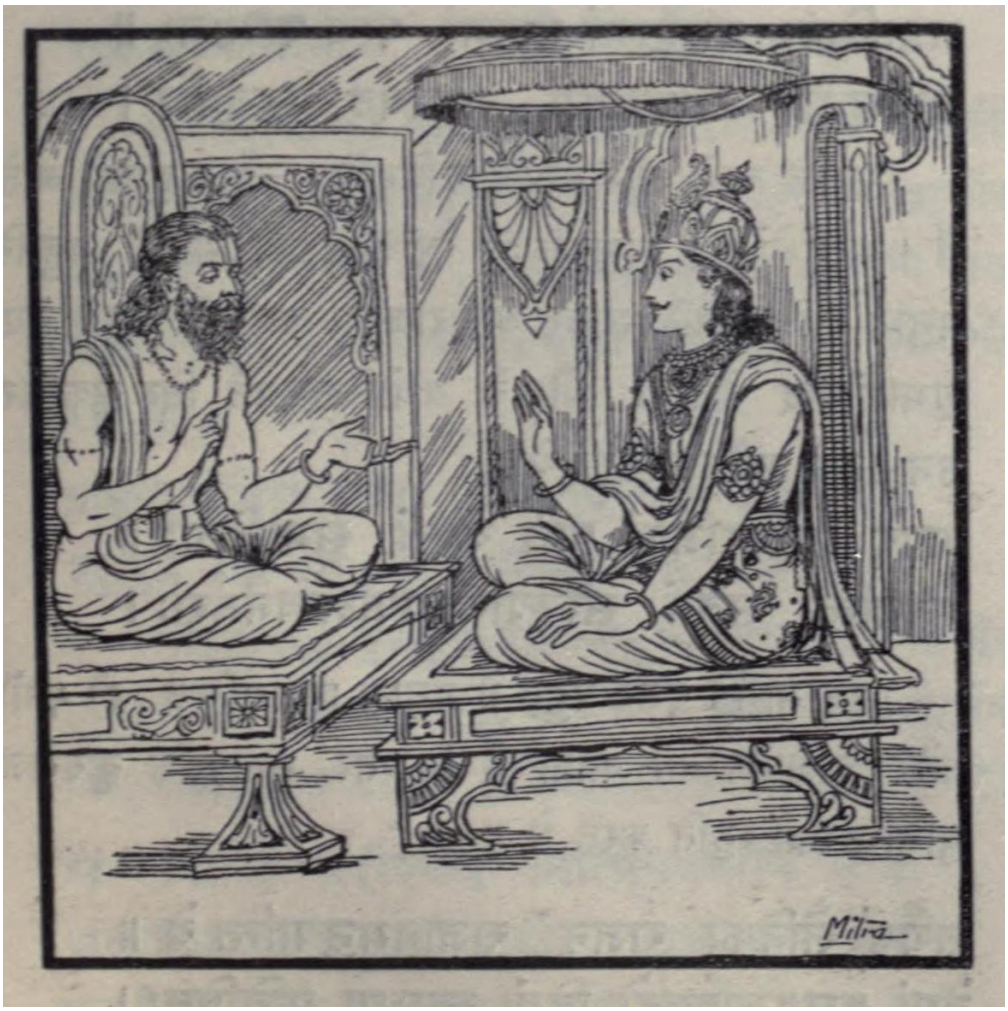
Vidura is Vyasa's son born out of a sexual encounter with a *sudra* maid. As mentioned earlier, when the Kuru line was in danger of coming to an end, Satyavati, in consultation with Bhishma, remembered her son Vyasa, who true to his promise appeared immediately. He heard his mother's request and agreed to carry out what she wanted: to impregnate the two wives (widows) of Vichitravirya, Ambika and Ambalika. The first, when she came to Vyasa, was horrified by his appearance and kept her eyes closed during intercourse. Thus was born the blind son Dhritarashtra. The second turned yellow in fear on seeing Vyasa and thus was born Pandu,

who was born with a yellowish pallor and was always unwell. Satyavati wanted a third try. But this time, Ambika did not go herself but sent her maid dressed up as a queen. The maid did not recoil in horror; on the contrary, she welcomed Vyasa who was totally satisfied sexually and by her care. As a parting blessing, Vyasa told the maid that she would no longer remain a maid and that the son who would be born to her would be *dharmic* and the wisest among the wise of the world (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adyhaya*: 99-100: *slokas*: 20-51; and 2-31).

In the epic, Vidura is the embodiment of *dharma*, but he does not belong to an upper caste. His father is Vyasa, a half-caste, and his mother a *sudra* maid. The god Dharma, under a curse, had to come to earth as a human and Dharma was born as Vidura (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhhaya*: 100: *sloka*: 33). The latter is thus Dharma and the principal practitioner of *dharma* throughout the tumultuous events of the epic. There are no transgressions on his part in word or deed. He never takes up the cause of violence and cruelty even as he watches events unfold. At the moment of his death-an extraordinarily poignant moment in the epic-his life or his spirit passes into the life and consciousness of Yudhishthira, the son of Dharma. (Mbh: *Ashramavasik parva*: *adhyaya*: 29 *slokas*: 24-26). At this point, Yudhishthira remembered that both Vidura and he were, through the circumstances of their birth, associated with Dharma (Mbh: *Ashramabasik parva*: *adhaya*: 29: *sloka*: 28). A *kshatriya* king is thus pervaded by the spirit, the wisdom and the practice of *dharma* by a son of a *sudra* maid. More importantly, in the epic, Dharma, as deity, and *dharma* as practice knew of no caste barriers and caste taboos.

> The pursuit of *dharma* is not restricted to the language of the higher castes, and therefore that pursuit is also not restricted to those who speak the language of the Gods.

There is another significant interaction between Vidura and Yudhishthira where language can be said to act a sign. This is when the Pandavas are persuaded to leave Hastinapura with Kunti for their first exile-the *jatugriha* episode-during which Duryodhona planned to have them burnt alive. Vidura walks with the Pandavas and when he is bidding them adieu, he speaks to Yudhishthira in the language of the *mlechhas* (according to the epic) to pass on a life-saving message. Presumably, they conversed in one of the local spoken dialects, which is generically termed Prakrit. The *Mahabharata* notes that since Vidura and Yudhishthira were intelligent and learned they knew both Sanskrit and *mlechha bhasha* (Mbh: *Adi parva*: *adhyaya*: 139: *slokas*: 19-21). This is the only intrusion of the language of the *mlechhas* (language of the common people) in an epic written entirely in Sanskrit-what Sheldon Pollock calls the language of the Gods (Pollock:2006) or *daivi vak*.



4. Vidura with Yudhishthira | University of Toronto collection (Wikimedia)

What is most significant, in the context of the argument this essay is trying to present, is that the conversationalists-Vidura and Yudhishthira-are Dharma in human form: one is Dharma himself and the other is the son of Dharma. Language is not erected as a barrier to prevent access to *dharma*, its practice and its pursuit. Moreover, having knowledge of Sanskrit and the language of the *mlechhas* is described as the sign of intelligence and learning. The pursuit of *dharma* is not restricted to the language of the higher castes, and therefore that pursuit is also not restricted to those who speak the language of the Gods.

Some tentative conclusions

My submission is that through these episodes the *Mahabharata* is trying to say and do something beyond the narratively obvious. I do not want to set aside or even underestimate the warning that intentions, in life and in texts, are perpetually elusive. (Anscombe:1957). However, it is difficult to accept the idea that these episodes-especially those of Ekalavya and Yuyutsu which are not really necessary for the narrative to move forward-were made part of the epic without authorial intention. Through them, Vyasa (or whoever) was seeking to convey something important to the readers/listeners. What do these incidents convey?

> The epic seems to be suggesting that birth and caste are no barriers to the advocacy and the practice of *dharma* and the upholding of honour.

None of the individuals who are the focus of the incidents presented above belong to the dominant castes. They are either half-castes (Vyasa, Yuyutsu and Vidura) or of a lower caste (Ekalavya, a *nishada*). Vyasa, his origins notwithstanding, is an authority on the Vedas, the author of the great epic in Sanskrit in which he himself is an important character and the arbiter on many matters concerning *dharma*. Vidura is Vyasa's son and his mother is a *sudra*. (Where his parentage places him in the caste hierarchy is a

complicated question.) Yet he is the very embodiment of *dharma*. Yuyutsu, a half-caste, performs, in spite of his fleeting appearance, it can be said without any undue exaggeration, the only act of *dharma* and honour in Kurukshetra. His action serves also to highlight the absence of moral courage in individuals like Bhishma and Drona, both from the two top castes, who declare themselves to be slaves to power and wealth (*artha*). In the case of Ekalavya, an individual belonging to the lowest caste is depicted as an upholder of honour due to a guru, and the latter (Drona, a brahmin) and his favourite disciple (Arjuna, a *kshatriya*) carry out, and rejoice in an act of gratuitous cruelty.

The epic seems to be suggesting that birth and caste are no barriers to the advocacy and the practice of *dharma* and the upholding of honour. Nor are they a hindrance to composing and being the *proktaa* of a Sanskrit epic. In the context of language, it is worth underlining that, according to the epic, since both Vidura and Yudhishthira were intelligent and learned, they knew both Sanskrit and Prakrit. Moreover, the epic draws an unqualified spiritual affinity between Vidura (born of a half-caste and a sudra) and Yudhishthira (a *kshatriya* king). Here again caste is not seen as any kind of obstacle.

According to Sheldon Pollock, "The Mahabharata offers perhaps the most sustained study in world literature of the undecidability of conflicting moral claims - what the text itself repeatedly calls the 'subtlety' of the moral order…" (Pollock: 2006: 554). Perhaps the text through these passing episodes is making a more radical statement: maybe the text wants the readers/listeners to consider the possibility that caste/birth is irrelevant to the pursuit and the practice of *dharma* and that the embodiment of Dharma need not belong to the higher castes. If *artha* is slave to none, as the epic says, *dharma* too is slave to none.

The *Mahabharata* affirms the dominant ideology of Brahminical religion but that affirmation is not unqualified. Through the episodes discussed above it opens up the argumentative space in which the dominant ideology can be contested, even subverted. It is entirely possible that because the epic opened up this discursive space that an influential ninth-century thinker, Anandavardhana, cited by Pollock, thought that the epic addressed the collapse of social value. In the words of the ninth-century thinker, "[The *Mahabharata's*] purpose as a whole is the production of despair with social life" (Pollock: 2006:554).

As a parting provocation may I submit that the epic is doing more than the above? By suggesting that the pursuit of *dharma* could be free from the shackles of the orthodoxy of the caste system, the epic is formulating a response to the message of the Buddha and thereby fulfilling its own post-Ashoka aspirations. It is suggesting, *sotto voce*, that the pursuit of a moral code by the half-caste, the son of a *sudra*, and a *nishada* is possible within the Brahminical religion which has space within it for difference and dissent and even for subverting orthodoxy. The pursuit of *dharma* and living a life of *dhamma* as promulgated by the Buddha could co-exist and even be complementary. Nothing in *dharma*-a subtle art-is frozen: its pursuit and its wisdom are open-ended.

The characters of Vyasa and Vidura indicate this fluidity of the narrative. Their status is indeterminate. They are human and divine at the same time; they are familiar with courts and palaces and at home in forest hermitages. They inhabit sacred and secular spaces with equal ease. Vyasa predicts and watches-one could say as an author he creates-the apocalypse at Kurukshetra, but prevents another during the encounter between Arjuna and Ashwatthama at the end of the Sauptik *parva*. Vidura has the ability to transmit his spirit into the body and soul of Yudhishthira. As inhabitants of diverse worlds, Vyasa and Vidura can be described as liminal characters in that they inhabit situations/positions that are on both sides of the limit between the spiritual and the material, the human and the divine and so on. The epic asks us to willingly believe that both sides of the limit are conceivable; and even habitable by a character. In an analogous manner the *Mahabharata* sets out the operations of the dominant ideology but through some telling episodes invites readers to cross the limits of that ideology and to think beyond that ideology to the point of subverting it.

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