

Search for Democratic Values in Mythology: Reinvigorating the Portrayal of Dhritarashtra in B.R. Chopra's *The Mahabharata*

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Abstract

The motive behind writing this paper is to reinvigorate the character of Dhritarashtra in B. R. Chopra's television series *The Mahabharata*; a mythological portrait, who besides possessing multiple lacunas in his personage holds laudable morals as well as significant lessons to the leaders of modern democratic world i.e. loopholes of a leader that must be avoided while managing affairs of the state. In the present context, while accounting transparency and fair politics, as per the researcher, it is extremely pertinent to revisit and analyze this mythological character in order to get familiar with hindrances that possibly appear in the path of a leader while performing righteous action. The aim of this paper is to bring forth the faults of a king that turns out to be perilous for the entire state of Hastinapur which consequentially cause prodigious extortion and devastation of his clan, kingdom and the entire army only because of his ambition, obstinacy and filial love. The caricature of the king also exerts values to the present generation of democratic set up i.e. while performing/safeguarding dharma, justice, democracy, one must pay frequent heed to his inward eye of consciousness to maintain a distance between duty and filial ties accordingly in order to curb the irreparable loss to his/her, honor, prestige, name, fame and humanity at large in case of compromising duty for the sake of filial love.

Keywords: dhritarashtra, democracy, hindrances, myth, consciousness, filial love.

Introduction

"Control of the mind is better and more difficult" (qtd. In AOAY 439).

Thayumanavar, one of the greatest Yogis from South India reiterates the wisdom of Lord Krishan when he writes the above line in a poem which is apt to describe the portrayal of Dhritrashtra who fails to regulate his conscience even after absolute awareness of his mind disposed towards unjust fantasy, deeds and emotions. This section focus on the background of the epic i.e. B. R. Chopra's *The Mahabharata* (1988), a world renowned and popular television series which is a magnum opus in the field of cinema based on the ancient Sanskrit Hindu epic which portrays variety of mythological characters in grandeur symbolising either good or evil. Dhritarashtra is one of the most prominent characters played by Girija Shankar, who besides his shortcomings possesses morality in his character and therefore, he becomes a relevant subject of discussion even in modern world which is ruled specifically under a democratic structure. The character of Dhritarashtra is significant because he teaches about the

precautionary measures that a leader/King must be aware of. Therefore this paper intends to study his character on the basis of select videos of the series available on *Youtube* and the character is analyzed in order to propagate the best possible ideas extracted from his character to guide the present generation of ruling class in different forms.

In an article published in *Financial Express* (2019),

"... Mahabharat is considered as gold-stranded in terms of popularity for TV series. It left maximum impact on a generation that got addicted to watching it religiously on Sunday morning prime-time. During the broadcasting of Mahabharat, and earlier Ramayan, streets across the country used to get empty and people would leave or stop their work to watch the episode... According to the Guardian report, Mahabharat TV series attracted up to 5 million viewers.... (Bhardwaj)"

Jack Hawley in *The Bhagwad Gita, A Walkthrough for Westerners* (2001) has rightly stated about the character of Dhritrashtra that,

He knew that his son Duryodhana's decision to go to war was wrong... The old man had felt pangs of conscience but had said nothing when his son had cheated Arjuna's family out of their rightful kingdom and then denied their request even for a trifling parcel of land that was rightful kingdom and then denied their request even for a trifling parcel of land that was rightfully theirs. The old man had maintained his curious silence when his son mortified Arjuna's wife and the whole family in public by having a henchman attempt to strip her of her clothes... All good judgment had been lost (3-4)

Doordarshan's (DD Bharti) repeat telecast, as informed by the Union minister Prakash Javdekar, this worldwide acclaimed TV series of 1988 has come up with a massive response by its admirers during the time of the pandemic Covid-19 in 2020. Meanwhile, it emerges a valuable source of awakening religious, spiritual, political and familial values (Sharma). This particular subject is chosen because minimal amount of research has been conducted in cinematic adaptation of the epic Mahabharat. As per the researcher's observation, of review of literature, it is apparent that very rare attempts of research have been made on cinematic adaptation of the epic Mahabharat so this study intends to select the character of Dhritrashtra from B. R. Chopra TV series in order to demonstrate morality of an unworthy figure.

Research Methodology

In order to come up with a concrete conclusion that mythological erratic figure of Dhritrashtra is also an epitome of morality for modern day leaders serving democracy, researcher uses observation method which is entirely qualitative in nature. To analyse the repercussions of all odd decisions of the faulty king, Franco Moretti's concept of network system is incorporated. Researcher has devoted enormous amount of time to watch the television series in detail with strong emphasis on the scenes focusing on Dhritrashtra himself which is available online on *YouTube* posted by *Pen Bhakti* channel. Montage, a Franco Moretti concept, is used to demonstrate the comprehensive indecisive nature of Dhritrashtra along with network system and photographic montage. Select videos are watched thrice with keen

observation to the dialogues as well as facial expressions of the character analyzed. Moretti's concept of montage is widely known in the field of Digital humanities which stands for analyzing vast amount of information through a distance. The basic fundamental reason to draw network system of Dhritrashtra and other affected portrayals; to project his constant failures in acknowledging his errands that are the consequential reasons for organising the entire canvas of devastation occurred in the plot due to human erratic behavior.

Discussion

Dhritrashtra is a character who receives malice and indignation of people since ages for bearing flawed and indecisive attitude. He appears a king who is ambitious, selfish and meek due to which he loses all his glory, one hundred sons, entire army and the kingdom of Hastinapur. The most contemptible act Dhritrashtra commits as a king is his approval for the treacherous game of dice in his court. He allows his son Duryodhan to take the game into a different direction without intervention and with his prolonged silence during the game. Draupadi, the daughter-in-law of the family of the king is brought into the court forcibly by Dushasan, holding her hair. He remains silent and does not intervene to save her modesty and the prestige of the entire Bharatvansh which is at stake along with Draupadi. Vidhur, the devoted counselor to the King, in his disheartening and loud voice tries to awaken the conscience of the king in order to crush criminality in the court. He says, "Sire, Your daughter-in-law's name was uttered with disrespect and yet, you have kept quiet? Sire, have the courage to forsake your son Duryodhan or else he'll put such a blemish on Kuru's dynasty that even river Ganga won't be able to wash it off" (Bhakti 31:43 – 32:07). But his voice does not reach to his ears. Duryodhan tries to control the entire polity in his hand to which Bheesham retaliates by arguing that he is not the king and has no right to make decisions. Dhritrashtra remains silent on the disrobing of his own daughter-in-law. When Lord Krishna safeguards her modesty with a miracle then Draupadi explodes in anguish, "Your younger brother Pandu's daughter-in-law pays her respect to you. You are fortunate that you are blind. Had you not been blind you would definitely be blinded by this spectacle". He escapes from

her wrath and says, "Don't tell me anything. Yudhishtir did not ask me before staking you. Nor Duryodhana ask me before winning you. Direct your question to Yudhishtir who violated tradition by staking you"(PB 23:04 – 23:55). The disrobing incident is extremely painful to watch on feminine grounds but meanwhile researcher extracts a moral from the conduct of Dhritarashtra i.e endless silence of the chair/authority/leader aggravates the intensity of injustice and henceforth it is pre requisite to distance oneself from filial ties while judging the offender.

Mahatma Vidhur, the loyal advisor and *Mahamantri* (Prime Minister) in Kuru's court frequently pleads the king to answer the questions of Draupadi otherwise according to him it is highly contemptible if the king remains silent and do not work for the establishment of *dharam*. He tries to awaken his conscious by stating that it is his *dharam* to answer all her questions and resolve the approaching fatal destiny of Hastinapur by punishing the culprits responsible for Draupadi's dishonor but he constantly maintains his unending silence and; henceforth, gives birth to the entire conflict between *Kaurav* and *Pandava*. When no one pays heed to the cries and agony of Draupadi, she curses everyone who is responsible behind her dishonor but Gandhari, the queen of Hastinapur interrupts Draupadi and appeals Dhritrashtra to intervene in this matter. He gets up from his throne to offer his sympathy towards Draupadi but to shelter his sons from her curse. This incident is very important in present context as it enables us that if one avoids the law and does not punish his/ her kith and kin for dishonoring a woman then his/her doomsday is surely close to destruction as it happens later with the Kuru clan. In other words, entertaining the wrongs of kith and kin germinates numerous problems ahead and therefore the strong remedy is to nip the evil in the bud.

In episode 48, feminine upsurge is seen when Draupadi after her disrobe throws countless questions regarding her honor and injustice done to her. In her dismay and helplessness, she says;

King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapur. A woman has been insulted in your court. A woman, whose body was untouched by the wind, Unseen by the sun. In her own house, in the presence of grandsire, father's friend Sage Drone and family sage Krip Acharya, an

attempt was made to disrobe her. What weakness compelled the Kuru clan to watch quietly the disrobing of their own daughter-in-law? (PB 4:37 – 5:24)

Gandhari intervenes to offer solace to the devastated soul of Draupadi. The king, Dhritarashtra, on the other hand, remains silent as a statue and is indescribably unwilling to punish his sons to do justice with Draupadi. He is also unable to do justice with the throne and completely fails to perform his job as a king. Gandhari tries to compel him to do something because he is blind but not deaf which according to her is suffice to sentence punishment to Duryodhan and Dushasan. He starts sobbing helplessly which appears sheer disgrace to a kingly man and his conduct. He says,

Yes, Gandhari is right. I cannot see. But I can hear and think. My ancestors Grandsire Bheeshama, Sages Drona and Kripa the Pandavas and Draupadi are witness to what I say. Neither the past not the future will forgive me. My dear Panchali, Come to me. Come to me, my daughter if you have forgiven me, ask me for a boon (11:40 – 13:20).

He consequentially returns everything to Pandavas what they have lost in the game of dice but he does nothing to do justice with Draupadi's for her dishonor. This situation tells the modern readers of the present time that a leader should not be entangled with personal emotions, ambition, love for personal relations etc., while dealing with justice or establishing *dharm* because justice, law, constitution is above relations. With punishment of Duryodhan and Dushasan, destruction of Hastinapur would have been diverted along with the bloodshed of the entire Kuru Clan but the King, instead proclaims,

Before you leave listen to what I say. An axe does not cut stone. It can cut only wood. An intelligent man does not seek revenge. So, it is best to forget what has happened today. In case you are reminded of this day and wish to avenge yourself, think of your blind elder father... If you do this it may help to calm your desire for revenge (15:45 – 16:40)

Dhritrashtra, in spite of sentencing punishment to his sons appears as a mightiest shield to protect them with his hue and cry demonstration before Pandavas. In episode 49, Gandhari, once again tries to poke the conscious of the

king regarding his disturbed psychosis due to his unexpected allowance of disrobing of his daughter-in-law in the court. But he seems very careless and says,

May be, my soul, too was blinded in those moments. May be I was frightened of Duryodhan. For the first time in my life I am happy that I am blind and I cannot see my daughter-in-law. If I could see, I would see nothing but hatred and contempt in her eyes (PB 14:40 – 15:26).

This isn't enough to count his odds; he allows another game of dice after knowing the hidden agenda of his son and treacherous Shakuni only because of his filial love that wishes the throne of Hastinapur for Duryodhan. This way he starts his immoral expedition from *dharam* to *adharam*. Bheesham Pitamah also tries to persuade the king to behave justly and says, "Has your love made you forget your duty?(19:44 – 19:55)"to which he reiterate that Pitamah is speaking as such only because he has no experience of love of an offspring and speaks shamefully, "You can say this Grandsire, because you don't know what filial love is. A tree lives for its fruit and a father for his son (19:57 – 20:09). Dhritrashtra starts blaming destiny for everything which has happened adversely in Hastinapur but Pitamah Bheesham aware him that his filial love is taking Hastinapur on the verge of destruction and it is not destined as he blames it to be. Later when Pandavas went on *vanwas* (exile) Vidhur, once again, tries to compel Dhritrashtra that the thirteenth day of thirteen year of exile is similar to the completion of full thirteen year so he should call Pandavas back and return Indraprasth to them so that the destruction of Hastinapur can be avoided and justice be done to Pandavas but instead of paying heed to his advice he sent him away from his court. The thing which is to be learnt here for modern leaders is that a leader who is deficit in decency to listen to the good counselors of him/her and to whatsoever bitter truth they speak may definitely leads his individuality, party, politics, constituency, righteousness into the dungeons of destruction. A leader must demolish blossoming of his garden of personal interest and emotions while dealing with justice or doing welfare of the state as well as the subjects.

In episode 51, Maharishi Vyas visits the king and tries to make Dhritrashtra understand that Pandavas are not going to forget the insult and injustice done to them and he himself is responsible for all this injustice. According to Vyas, Dhritrashtra is caught in the pool of filial love. King seems helpless as he is unable to do anything to his son Duryodhan. Maharishi says,

What would you do if he was not your son? What is the punishment of not obeying the king?... Even a son is a citizen. Law knows no relationships. Tell him Bheeshama is Kuru elder, while you live, he has no right in politics. If he doesn't understand, order him. This is your duty as a king. The tree of arrogance bears the fruit of destruction (PB 6:05 – 7:19).

In episode 56, Dhritrashtra lies in extreme trouble with internal conflicts of his mind. These conflicts spoils his sleep and cause horrible nightmares. In his dream, he finds himself responsible for all the odds and injustice done to Pandavas with his silence in the court but he consoles himself with his filial love. In the same dream he had conversation with his ancestor King Bharat who compels him to do justice to Pandavas. Dhritrashtra says,

I am the king Vichitravirya's eldest son. And Duryodhan is my eldest son. If he is worthy, then he has the first right to the throne after me. Besides,... Your era may have defined worthiness differently. I am not saying your decision was wrong. Only you and your era will decide that. But this is my era and it will decide whether my decision is right. So, forgive me because I am not answerable to you. If I am, then tell me why did you not take similar complaint to my ancestor Shantanu whose love for a woman made him deny his son Devavrat his just rights and gave them to a son who was as yet unborn (PB 16:15 – 17:48)

This dream is one of the finest examples of one's fight of conscious and sub-conscious mind between just and unjust. Consciously, the king allows Duryodhana to do everything without giving him punishment for his constant offenses whereas he knows exquisitely well that his son is doing injustice to Pandavas which causes frightful nightmares to him. This dream is fully didactic in nature as it teaches us that if a defender of justice deviates from the

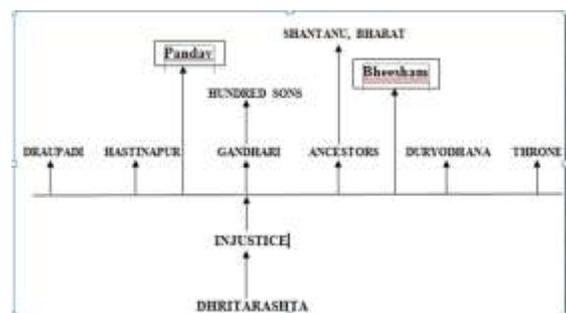
path of justice just because of personal interests, ambitions or filial love, then he/she is surely bound to experience an unbearable psychotic turmoil.

In episode 61, Dhritrashtra meets Pitamah Bheeshma and with flattered voice asserts that he himself is at his service to which Pitamah replied that it is Hastinapur that requires his service not him and he should do justice instead of flourishing his ambition and filial love which is causing destruction to the entire Kuru clan and Hastinapur. He persuades Dhritrashtra, "... My son, now the Pandavas' year of anonymity is over. Call them back and embrace them. And return Indraprasth to them" (-34:30 – 34:12). In the following episode Vidhur, as his constant earlier endeavors, once again, tries to awaken his king, "O king, a country does not exist because of the king. The king exists because of the country"(-35:41 – 35:35). Dhritrashtra again seems entangled with his filial love and is unable to understand the sayings of Vidhur, which is in his favour and welfare of the state too. He says,

... a king cannot be his son's father alone. All his subjects should be like his children, Sire. You are also an elder uncle of Pandavas. Yudhishtir is still you eldest son. Had brother Pandu not died you could never have dreamt of making Duryodhana the king. Therefore Sire listen to uncle. Before the ambassador makes the demands, call back and bless the Pandavas and return Indraprasth to them (PB 9:00 – 9:30).

After that even Gandhari tries to persuade him on right path. She asserts that her motherly affection for Duryodhana is not less than him but he must perform his duty with just hands and should return Indraprasth to them in order to avoid battle between Kauravas and Pandavas. She wonders whether he would do justice or injustice on the following day when a messenger of peace is about to visit his court but she persuades him not to forget to return Indraprasth to Pandavas. Later while having conversation with Sanjay, he again shows his filial love and says, "... Whatever ethics may say but this throne is mine. I am sitting on my throne. And my son Duryodhana will sit on it after me"(16:10 – 15:58). Dhritrashtra even imagines of his son's valor to kill Pandavas in a war but he knows he is left with nothing but a truce.

Vidhur once again tries to persuade his king on righteous path. He requests him to leave his filial love and think of the welfare of the state Hastinapur by returning Indraprasth to Pandavas. He states, "... Shun your ambition. Because it is your enemy. Never go to your enemy's house in the darkness. Never" (PB 26:12 – 25:56). In episode 68, Maharishi Vyas visits Dhritrashtra and utter a bitter truth i.e. Readiness of Dhritrashtra to see the vast destruction. He also aware him about the war and says, "*Adesh nai Rajan, paramarsh, hittoupdesh*, Do not allow the war at your door to enter... All right, O king! I shall grant you divine sight so that you may see the destruction" (PB 18:20 – 17:48). In episode 75, Dhritrashtra appears tricky and frightened with history that may question or inquire him about the initiation of war from his side. Sanjay tells him that there are numerous questions history is going to ask him such as, "The wax house, the division of the nation, the game of dice, Draupadi's disrobing..." (PB 21:37 – 21:50). Dhritrashtra says that he can divert those towards Shakuni and Karan but he cannot avoid being responsible for the initiation of war. Dhritrashtra, due to his filial love become the cause of destruction and injustice to innumerable people as well as things which the researcher has drawn in the following network



The following chart depicts how everyone tries to persuade Dhritrashtra on righteous path of justice but only because of his filial love and ambition towards the throne, he allows all odds to be executed in his court as well as kingdom with his everlasting silence. Thus, he is held responsible for injustice done with everyone as shown below:



The following montage demonstrates Dhritarashtra as a king who is always meek and appear always with frown on his face. He is largely responsible for the occurrence of the grand battle at Kurukshetra between Kauravas and Pandavas. When his well wishers counsel him to seek the righteous path; either he looks helpless or anguish on them. His expressions most of the times are anguish, resentment, indecisive and helpless as depicted in the montage below.



Figure 1 Focus on Infirm Dhritarashtra via Multiple Snapshots from Different Scenes

Findings

Researcher finds that the mythological figures as well as historical portraits of Mahabharat are of great importance as the caricatures enrich wisdom, philosophy and stupendous morality through different means. Dhritarashtra as a weak character who is drenched in his emotions of filial love causes the most deadly war between Kaurav and Pandav in the history of *Bharatvash* and entire humanity. What is most sticking and highly applicable to modern times is that the character showcases a picture of terrible end to those who are plunged in corruption because of greed and love for material wealth. To learn from him; leaders, politicians, democrats should destruct the castle of their filial love while performing their duties on chair so

that justice can be safeguarded and annihilation of innocents like Pandavas can be restrained in today's democratic world within the time bound. Unlike Dhritarashtra, a good leader is one who has the courage to hold the nerves through which the bond of filial love intervenes in professional duties as a political figure, judge, civil servant or any authority so to speak. The powerful wisdom of Vidhur, researcher finds, is a mouthpiece for modern democrats which is necessarily be fixed in their psyche i.e. the state is not the property of a leader rather it is a noble responsible for the service of the mankind. Dhritarashtra apparently shows that human emotions beyond limitations which increases prejudice that gradually push an individual decisive power towards grave injustice, indecision, and immoral actions.

Significance and Limitation

This study is highly relevant in the present context as the character of Dhritarashtra exerts didactic morals through his errands. Researcher comes up with a view after observing his cinematic character that one who aspires to become a leader should remain in complete oblivion regarding relational ties in order to crush the mistakes of his/her close ones which are detrimental to others. This paper intends to emphasise a notion that the welfare of a state in the hands of a leader is secure only if its leader is ready to sacrifice his/her filial love, interests, emotions, or greed and is ready to serve the state with unbiased approach. Justice is to be safeguarded and must be established at all costs without thinking about the relation with the person who violates the law. This paper on the whole of intends to probe a mythological character so that the learning that comes out the character of Dhritarashtra can reach to the modern leaders and they should remind mythology, mythological figures and their significance in present context especially in socio-political domain of life. The character of Dhritarashtra stands for 'Do's and Don'ts of a leader' to pass through the righteous path of justice, equality, fraternity and brotherhood.

The major limitation of this study is that it solely focuses on the cinematic portrayal of Dhritrashtra and his frequent errands. It is not a comparative study between the cinematic and textual (scriptural) portrayal rather the paper paves a way for such study to be executed in future. The

Qualitative analysis is strongly based of specific videos projecting the character with profound clarity.

Conclusion

In the modern world of democracy it is pertinent to look towards *The Mahabharat*, an ancient *Sanatan* scripture which demonstrates various characters that shows abundance of political lessons which are very important even at this crucial juncture of Covid-19. Dhritarashtra is one of the major characters in the epic who is one of the leading causes of the battle of Kurukshetra between *Kaurav* and *Pandav*. It is discerned out of his character that a leader in democratic set up must keep him/her away from personal interests, familial or filial love like Dhritarashtra possesses variously viz, greed for power, wealth, throne and dominance of Duryodhan in Hastinapur so that injustice can be curtailed. He has committed all these faults due to which he plunges Hastinapur at the door of its catastrophic fate. In adverse situations, a great heed must be paid to good counselors like Bheesham Pitahmah, Vidhur, Bhagwan Krishan, Sanjay (sarthi) otherwise the destruction of the self, family, peace, property and consciousness is firmly doable according to one's own *Karam*. At the end it is observed that the welfare of a state as well as its subjects is possible only if the leader is not selfish, greedy or inflicted with filial love like Dhritarashtra or credulous to flatterers like Shakuni and incredulous to well wishers.

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