

Problematics of Bhakti in Retellings of the Ancient Indian Epic of Mahabharata

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Abstract—*One of the oft used signifier within the creative renderings or retellings of Mahabharata has been the underlying bhakti strain within Mahabharata which is an important consideration in the understanding of the classic and thus acquires new dimensions in retellings of the same. Its relevance can be perceived in its presence in the modern retellings which make use of godhead Krishna and other divine entities to reinterpret and recreate the dominant discourse prevalent within the classical epic. These renderings use the allusion to bhakti to subvert the hegemonic patriarchal brahmanical discourse and establish a counter-narrative which exemplifies the evolving socio-economic values within the Indian society. This paper will attempt to reflect upon some of these retellings and decipher the function of bhakti in the overarching framework of such counter-narratives which reiterate the changing social dynamics, specifically in relation to the renderings based upon the marginalized characters within the epic and thereby elucidating the shifting perception of nature and function of god and religion in the modern Indian society.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asian myths are not static tales arrested in their own historicity, but are living traditions that continue to validate themselves through reinterpretations and recreations in various genres within literary and folk traditions in different languages. It is especially true for the ancient epic of Mahabharata which continues to provide allusions and material for the literary artists to revitalize and revalidate the stories from the Mahabharata, thus, creating hybrid narratives which may conform, distort or even oppose the existing meta-narrative of the epic. In doing so the authors of these literary texts make use of “pool of signifiers...that includes plots, characters, names geography, incidents and relationships” in the epic tradition to create new texts that have “a unique texture and a fresh context”

(Ramanujan, 158). Creative writers in India have oft made use of various elements and episodes within the epic to recreate anew the old stories and in the process changing the existing paradigm. Within such texts that are created a strong influence of bhakti is retained with the presence of the gods, demigods or even the godhead of Krishna who still continues to grip the imagination of the Indian audience. It is very interesting to note that while various western scholars on Mahabharata are constantly disregarding the bhakti tract in the epic as a mere interpolation on the core text Jaya, the Indian creative writers and audience still consider to imperative in any creative rendering of Mahabharata episode.

The presence of omnipotent divinity within the retellings becomes especially relevant when they are based upon the marginal characters. In the constantly shifting socio-political dynamics these marginal characters have acquired their own space within the tradition of Mahabharata retellings. Often victims of social injustices in the classical epic, these characters seem to appear in retelling in order to tell their own stories which are not given enough narrative space in the metanarrative of the ancient epic. Interestingly, the gods and demigods, representing element of the bhakti within the epic, continue to permeate within the retellings and influencing the narrative and characters. Godhead Krishna continues to figure within these stories and his divine intervention is many a times remarked upon, thus, establishing his divine nature within the text. His authority over the characters of Mahabharata is such that their fate is designed by his hand. This fate awarded to these marginal characters by the divinity within the classical epic oftentimes conflicts with emergent ideologies that continue to evolve through time and the ideas of the creative artist who recreate the characters in their work of art. It thus becomes inevitable that the divine must also walk in the world of the writers, restrained no more by the codified text. They are questioned, and must stand on trial to explain themselves in world inherently different than in which they existed before. The essay will attempt to investigate these ideas and elucidate as to how the divine is redefined and re-appropriated in the renderings based on the epic.

The retellings of the Mahabharata text are numerous and many are based upon the characters marginalized in the great epic. Karna is one such character that has fascinated the writers from as early as Bhasa, the great Sanskrit dramatist to the modern writers. One such writer who has been to successfully able to recreate Karna in the poetic form is Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, lyrically portraying in his poetic rendition various episodes in Karna's life. Karna's glory as a heroic character has been exemplified in his strength and valor as a warrior alongwith his noble and charitable acts which are not forgotten but rather enhanced by his

untimely death at the hands of his foe and brother Arjun through trickery. This act of deceit forever raises Karna within the poem as an undefeatable character whose fame and glory persists even after death. This notion is firmly established in the last dialogue of Krishna and Yudhishtira when he says

कहा, 'केशव ! बडा था त्रास मुझको,
नहीं था यह कभी विश्वास मुझको,
कि अर्जुन यह विपद भी हर सकेगा,
किसी दिन कर्ण रण में मर सकेगा ।'

Here Yudhishtira's fear of Karna being a better warrior than Arjun is clearly seen, but more important is Krishna's response to Yudhishtira when he claims

युधिष्ठिर! भूलिये, विकराल था वह,
विपक्षी था, हमारा काल था वह ।
अहा! वह शील में कितना विनत था ?
दया में, धर्म में कैसा निरत था !'

In Krishna's response we are able to perceive the changing character of the divine. Dinkar's Krishna, is benevolent towards the Karna and shows sympathy towards the central character of the poem. It is very interesting to note here the relationship between Krishna and Karna who lie on the opposing sides of the Kuru clan war. Krishna's perception of Karna is not maligned inspite of the caste conflict that arises when Dinkar persistently casts Karna as a member of the lower caste by the virtue of him being adopted in the suta family who were charioteers of the Kshatriya caste. It is important to note that Dinkar attempts throughout the poem to undermine Karna's caste as a kshatriya which he attains due to his birth mother Kunti being a kshatriya woman.

में जाती गोत्र से दीन, हीन,
राजाओं के सम्मुख मलीन,
जब रोज अनादर पाता था,
कह 'शूद्र' पुकारा जाता था ।
पत्थर की छाती फटी नहीं,
कुन्ती तब भी तो कटी नहीं ।

This deliberate exclusion of Karna from Kunti's caste comes directly from the introduction of the poem written by Dinkar himself where he claimed that though *Rasmirathi* that a human should not be known by their caste but rather through their own values as humans. This opinion persists throughout the poem and is further enhanced in each instance that Karna refuses to be judged by the standards of caste set by the society.

Here Krishna's presence plays a pivotal role when he looks at Karna as a warrior and not a kshatriya. Here the language used to by Krishna is of tremendous importance when he uses the words like "नरता का है भूषण महान" to describe Karna. In this acceptance the shifting ideas of God and their relation with the society can easily be observed as differing from the classical epic.

Iravati Karve, a renowned Mahabharata scholar in her critical text *Yuganta* asserted that the Krishna of Mahabharata is very different from the Krishna of the later bhakti period where he is not just a counsel and friend to Arjun but attains the identity of God. Her assertion is built upon the theory that most of the bhakti elements in the play are interpolations added later in the play and that Bhagvadgita was "guidance given to an equal and not a devotee"

The argument of Krishna being a godhead in Mahabharata is an oft debated issue in the academic circles but, the belief in his divinity is an unarguable fact for all hindus. This can be observed within the retellings where Krishna appears as a godly figure. It is no less true for *Rasmirathi* where the introduction of Krishna is followed by a lyrical and passionate affirmation of his divine status. Dinkar at the very introduction of Krishna establishes him as a god in the speech popularly known as 'Krishna ki Chetavani Thus, his acceptance of Karna inspite of his avowal as being a lower caste is a divine recognition of the fact that a person's ability rather than their caste is important. The humanist cause taken up by Krishna is different than the Kshatriya code which is claimed to have been followed by the Krishna in the classical epic. Thus, caste which had been the hierarchal structure guiding the Indian society is struck at its very root which had used divine origin of the different castes as a means of implementation of caste system from its inception.

It has often been claimed that the different castes as prescribed in the text of *Manusmriti* had been sanctioned by the Gods as they were born out of the different body parts of God in the sequence of their roles in society. The acceptance of this structure relied heavily on its divine origin. Dinkar uses the same divinity in order to systematically subvert the caste hierarchy. Herein lies the greatness of Dinkar's Krishna.

Dinkar introduction of Krishna as god establishes prefigures all his actions as being based on the goodwill of the people involved within the conflict. It also allows Karna to confront Krishna as a divine being rather than a mere war counsel of the pandavas. He exclaims upon the trickery of Krishna “स्वयं भगवान् मेरे शत्रु को ले चल रहे हैं,

अनेकों भाँति से गोविन्द मुझको छल रहे हैं।“

He further questions the concept of dharma of Krishna that has its very roots in deceit

“हुआ वध द्रोण का कल जिस तरह वह धर्म था क्या?

समर्थन-योग्य केशव के लिए वह कर्म था क्या ?”

The importance lies not only in the questions put forth by Karna which shake the very foundation of the ethical conduct of Pandavas and more importantly Krishna. But of more concern is the very ability to question the gods that is available to Karna. Here the relationship between Karna and Krishna changes. They are not mere warriors on opposing sides, but rather a devotee and deity. This changes the dynamics of the relationship which is not based in equality. Karna’s questioning of Krishna can also be viewed as a serious contemplation on the issue of dharma which puts him on the wrong side, on the side that is against the gods, in spite of him standing firm on his dharma and vow of charity. Always being wronged yet noble, but his nobility leads him to his death at the hands of his archenemy. Krishna’s recounting of his misdeeds to provoke Arjun to murder him when he stands weaponless in the ground does he receive his answer. But Krishna’s final homage to his acute sense of loyalty, charitable nature and unrestrained strength reveals his feeling for Karna.

He knowingly opposes god, a decision not born out of ignorance but of his understanding of dharma which does not allow him to leave his benefactor in spite of being aware of the greater danger that lay standing against the winning side which will be the side of god. The fact that Karna challenges god for his own dharma raises him and further solidifies his identity as a hero ennobles him in the eyes of all.

Dinkar has removed various plots and episodes wherein Karna is considered a violator of dharma as seen in the death of Abhimanyu and stripping of Draupadi for which he was the instigator.

This deliberate selection by Dinkar is an attempt to glorify Karna as a heroic and tragic figure. Kevin McGrath, a Sanskrit scholar in his recent text claimed Karna to be a Sanskrit hero. His analysis was based on the Critical Edition of Mahabharata and uses paradigms from Sanskrit literature to validate his claim. The same claim has been made by various other critics and its existence can also be seen in the oral epic tradition in various part of Indian where Karna is venerated as a godly figure for his valor and great strength. In this regard Dinkar includes another genre to the already existing corpus which includes texts like *Mrityunjaya* by Shivaji Sawant in Marathi. It is long standing tradition which goes back to the play *Karnabhara* attributed to Bhasa which is also very compassionate towards Karna. Recreating the scene of Karna's giving away of his armour and earrings to Indra, thereby illustrating his noble character. Each of these makes use of the epic plot and modulates the characters and story in order to decisively establish their position. What is especially relevant in case of Dinkar is his use of the Krishna to justify and enhance Karna's character. In order to do so he also re-appropriates the godly figure, that exemplifies the changing ethos of the time. The function of bhakti element in the poem is not to reiterate the old ideals that were established within the framework of the old epic, but rather to recreate new frameworks and counter-narratives that adhere to the newer sensibilities.

Dinkar is but one example of the various existing retellings that appropriate and redefine the figures of gods (especially Krishna) to put forth newer ideologies that have emerged in the society. This can be noticed especially in the case of retellings that often portray marginalized characters of the text. Other such examples are the works of fiction based on Draupadi such as Pribha Ray's Yjnaseni and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's Pallace of Illusion which show a greater friendship between Krishna and Krishnaa (another name for Draupadi) which often bleeds into that of devotee and god. This reaffirms their faith in Krishna who validates Draupadi's existence irrespective of her gender. In *Pallace* she is also given the gift of sight by Krishna to view the battlefield, therefore becoming the only one apart from Arjun to have seen the true form of the divine Krishna. The constraint of the essay does not allow for a detailed examination into these texts and thus must be undertaken in other separately. Such texts further illustrate the and validates that use of the god figures in the creative ventures to reaffirm the function of bhakti strain as not only a reiteration or replication of philosophies and ideals existing in Mahabharata, but as force that enhances the ideologies prevalent in the society in which the creative artist recreates these characters.

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