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Dharma as Caste and Disability in the

Mahabharata

Abstract: *It is not very often that dharma is associated with caste. Although these two concepts are quite different, there seems to be a common thread that links them. In the Mahabharata, both of these concepts are found to be entwined more than we can think of. So much so that sometimes dharma appears to be synonymous with caste. However, it is also true that dharma is not as rigid as that of caste, especially for the higher castes. The mobility within the higher caste is there. However, the same privilege is not entitled to the characters of lower castes. This lack of privilege, opportunity and social mobility for people of low birth is due to the caste system, prevalent at the time of the Mahabharata. It seems the very caste system is rather presented in the garb of dharma in the Mahabharata to confuse those affected. This very system born and bred up in society has made some characters disabled. Although there are many characters in the Mahabharata disabled by the caste system, this paper critically analyses a few sets of characters, namely Drona – Ekalavya and Parasurama – Karna to find out if the medical model of disability and consequently the social model of disability can be applied to these characters who have been disabled by the caste system.*

Keywords: Dharma, caste, disability, social mobility.

Dharma as Caste and Disability in the *Mahabharata*

Mrinal Sarkar¹

In the Rig Veda varna system, society is much like a social organism where head, hands, thighs and feet make four Varnas – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisha and Sudra. However, this organism was primarily formed by people involved in occupations like rural, administration, trade and service. Therefore, one's varna is determined by one's choice of work in society. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna explains to Arjuna that the caste system was initially established by him, based on divisions in the quality of work. Later, these fluid groups become more rigid and resist any change or action within them. To each caste a sphere is given. Brahmins are given the ritual sphere, Kshatriyas are given the political sphere, Vaishyas are given the economic sphere, and the Sudras are placed below them to provide service to the three upper castes. Brahmins are considered to be the repository of knowledge and wisdom. A Brahmin must not be killed. One who kills a Brahmin commits a sin and therefore has no place in society. Drona is a Brahmin and more importantly, a teacher to the Pandavas and the Kurus. In the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the Pandavas face the problem of killing a man who is both a Brahmin and their teacher. The solution Krishna provides solves one of the problems, but the other remains. He says Drona being a Brahmin, chooses the path of power and wealth and thereby acts against his Dharma or Caste. The path of power and wealth is the way of the Kshatriyas. Drona being a Brahmin, should satisfy himself by remaining in the sphere of ritual and worship. But his greed for power and wealth takes him to the political sphere of the Kshatriyas, to the battlefield of Kurukshetra, and thus, Krishna opines, there is no sin to kill a Brahmin who does not act in his caste, and who transgresses the sphere of caste. Krishna provides one solution; however, one problem remains. Drona as Brahmin, who has not acted as one, perishes in the war of Kurukshetra, but the problem of Drona being a teacher remains. Very little is said about his role as a teacher. Drona has promised Arjuna to make him the greatest archer in the world because of his hard work, focus and determination. Now the very same qualities have been shown by a forest dweller Ekalavya. Only he outshines Arjuna in every way of archery. Drona is a Brahmin and he has taught archery to princes only, the upper castes to be precise. When Ekalavya, being eager to learn archery, approaches Drona, he refuses to accept him as a student because of his low birth. Drona dismisses him by saying that if he has faith in him, he can teach himself. Ekalavya withdraws to a forest in Hastinapura and starts practising, having kept the dummy of Drona with him all the time. One day Ekalavya is disturbed by the barking of a dog. Being annoyed, he shoots seven

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arrows at its mouth only to stop barking without harming it further. When Arjuna comes to know of it, he realises that this must be the feat of one greater than him. Arjuna then approaches Drona and asks about the promise that he once made to him about making him the greatest archer in the world. Clearly, the archery of Ekalavya has made Arjuna doubt his own capability. Being surprised Drona confronts Ekalavya and asks him who has taught him archery. At the same time, Drona, being aware that he himself had not taught him. Ekalavya says that Drona has inspired him to teach himself. Drona then asks Ekalavya for a fee for being his teacher. Now the question remains if Drona has taught Ekalavya archery. Is Ekalavya Drona's student? Earlier, we have seen Drona refusing to teach Ekalavya archery because of his low birth. Therefore, is it Drona's dharma to ask Ekalavya for a fee when he has refused to accept him as a student? Drona has assured Arjuna that he will make him the greatest archer in the world, but then he has seen Ekalavya having the skill to surpass Arjuna in archery. To keep his promise once made to Arjuna, Drona needs to make sure that Ekalavya's archery does not challenge Arjuna's. Therefore, he asks Ekalavya for a fee – his right thumb. Drona makes sure that Ekalavya's archery will never be as skilful as before. On the other hand, Drona's promise has made him transgress the sphere of politics and power. Being a teacher, his job should be teaching the skill of archery to students irrespective of caste, and certainly not deciding as to who becomes and remains the most skilled. This transgression goes against the Dharma of his caste, Brahmin. His role as a teacher, but only to the higher caste, is also not expected of a teacher. He explains to Arjuna that the only way for him to become the greatest archer and remain so is to make sure that no one surpasses him in archery. That is only possible if the challenger is made disabled in archery, removing the possibility of ever challenging Arjuna. Ekalavya is made disabled when Drona has made him cut his archery thumb, removing the challenge along the path of Arjuna becoming the greatest archer in the world.

To understand the disability of characters like Ekalavya, I need to talk very briefly about the medical model of disability first. The medical model of disability is a concept where disability is viewed as a problem inherent in an individual, caused by either physical or mental impairment or both. The disability is seen as a defect of the body or mind, which needs to be cured with surgery, rehabilitation and medication. Now considering the case of Ekalavya, the problem arises after surgery if we take his act of cutting off the thumb for a surgery. In this case, he is cured of an "abnormality" of being the greatest archer in the world, surpassing Arjuna, who himself has admitted the fact. The abnormality in Ekalavya is his skill in archery. Being born into a lower caste, he is not supposed to be a great archer, certainly not greater than Arjuna, as archery is the realm of the Kshatriyas. Ekalavya's dharma is to remain within the sphere of his caste and serve the upper caste. With his archery, Ekalavya has prepared himself to transgress into the political sphere of the Kshatriyas, the realm of power.

Disability activists resist these individualising and medicalizing approaches by reframing disability as a social restriction and oppression rather than simply a medical

problem. Emphasizing a social model rather than a medical model they call attention to the fact that much of the suffering of different bodies comes from social exclusion, isolation, and lack of opportunity, along with the often pernicious side effects of a medical industry bent on aggressive intervention to achieve “normal” bodies. (Davis 166)

After cutting off the thumb, Ekalavya becomes “normal” with impairment. Ekalavya could have been the greatest archer in the world. Along with that possibility, his identity has also been snatched away from him. The medical model of disability is primarily to cure abnormalities of the impaired body. Therefore, it is implied that any kind of impairment is abnormal. People are not always born with an impairment. More often, people become impaired with time. Ekalavya is one such character who is made to become impaired because of his low caste. Therefore, the focus of the Medical model of disability, being the individual body, is somehow misplaced. Society does play a role in making a person disabled. The process of how the impairment gets linked to disability takes place in society.

In 1983, Mike Oliver was the first to coin the term social model of disability to adopt the structural approach to understanding disability. The social model of disability is a historical and cultural phenomenon. The processes of making a person disabled entail oppression by a certain section of society. Ekalavya is oppressed when Drona refuses to teach him archery. Somehow, when the barrier of learning is removed, and his time comes to claim a public presence in society, he is made medically impaired and socially disabled. A disabling environment has made Ekalavya disabled, as being a low caste, he is not supposed to challenge the very might of Arjuna, a Kshatriya. In Ekalavya’s case social representation of a low caste is denied by making the individual's body disabled. The social model of disability identifies barriers in the built environment. In an environment of a casteist society, caste is the main barrier. Unlike disability, caste is rigid. Caste is something one is born with; one cannot become a particular caste as one becomes disabled with time. Besides being a problem in itself, caste is one of the contributing factors in disability. Sometimes, coming out of the social category and challenging the hierarchy is more important.

Coming out, then, for disabled people, is a process of redefinition of one’s personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the normate, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity. Having come out, the disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust, or as something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down. ... Coming out, in our analysis, involves a political commitment. (Cameron and Swain 76)

Although *Ekalavya* does not have much representation in the political sphere, there is one character who has in the *Mahabharata*. Even before entering the political realm, Ekalavya’s

representation is cut short like his archery thumb. Karna, on the other hand, finds his way in the political world of Kshatriyas when he participates in an archery tournament. Although he does not know if he is a Kshatriya at all, he is eager to challenge Arjuna in archery. The crowd begins to claim he is the one archer who is better than Arjuna. Ekalavya never had the public space to show his skill, and Karna also faced the biggest hurdle of dharma before claiming one. When Bhima realises that Karna is the son of Adiratha, a charioteer, he says the son of a charioteer is not a Kshatriya, and therefore cannot compete with someone belonging to a higher caste - a Kshatriya. At that time, a son must follow the footsteps of his father in what he does. Therefore, Karna's dharma is to become a charioteer, no matter how good he is at Archery.

Duryodhana stood up to declare, "Merit matters far more than birth. Karna is a Kshatriya by merit, and we should treat him as one." "No," countered Yudhishtira. "According to dharma, a man should follow in his father's footsteps. Karna's father is a charioteer. So he cannot be a Kshatriya." Karna wanted to say that he had only been brought up by a charioteer, not born into his family. (Debroy 95)

In the *Mahabharata*, it becomes clear one more time that knowledge is something that is always kept away from the lower caste. Earlier, Drona was reluctant to teach the art of archery to Ekalavya. There is one more character named Parasurama who vows to teach the art of warfare to Brahmins only. Parasurama was a Brahmin ascetic who had lost his father to the hunting of Kshatriya princes. After that, he vows vengeance upon his father and kills many Kshatriya kings before abandoning warfare and becoming a teacher. As far as dharma is concerned, Parasurama has not followed the path of dharma. His father was a Brahmin ascetic; he should have followed the footsteps of his father and remained an ascetic even after the death of his father. But he abandons his dharma and takes up arms to avenge his father. He transgresses into the political realm of the Kshatriyas by taking up arms and abandoning the sphere of worship which a Brahmin is supposed to be content with. Earlier, Drona is seen doing the same thing when he promises to make Arjuna the greatest archer in the world. Both Drona and Parasurama are Brahmins, and neither of them has acted in their caste. Unlike Karna, they have not been made to remain within their caste as well. P V Kane asks,

What, then, is dharma? In its traditional sense, dharma is essentially *varnasramadharm* "the privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the castes (*Varnas*) as a person in a particular stage of life (*Asrama*).” (217)

Pandavas are very much concerned about caste purity, and they are also very protective of caste boundaries. They consider it to be lower than Arjuna's position to fight Karna. Karna believes he belongs to the Suta caste. The same caste to which Krishna belongs. Vrisnis have the lineages of Yadavas, who belong to a low caste. Krishna is the chieftain of the Vrisnis; this fact will come to light

in Yudhisthira's Royal Consecration. Now, in the case of Krishna, he knows he is a Suta and he remains within the sphere of his caste and behaves accordingly when he drives Arjuna's chariot on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. However, he being chieftain and not a king, is not supposed to attend Yudhisthira's Royal Consecration, which is only meant for kings. Does that mean that he too has transgressed the realm of his caste at times? On the other hand, Karna is oblivious of his godly lineage. His father is the Sun God. Since he was brought up by Adiratha, he believes himself to be a Suta. He has neither claimed any other identity, nor disguised himself as a higher caste like Arjuna did in Draupadi's swayamvara, not even when Draupadi refuses to marry him because of his low birth. His caste has denied him a shot at Draupadi's swayamvara – a contest among the higher castes held to choose a husband for Princess Draupadi.

Krsna indicates that the ksatriyas of the present age can claim ksatriya purity only through their "authority" – that is, through verbal assertion backed by strength of arms. These, then, are the complex and polluted bloodlines of the *Mahabharata*'s ksatriya characters. In this context, Karna's manifest confusion about his varna, kula and dharma appears more transparent and honest than his brothers' arrogant and baseless claim to a pure lineage. (Greer 122)

Despite being righteous and true to his character until the very end, Karna remains "impure" because of his low birth. Karna is impure in another sense as well, as Karna is born with a congenital golden armour and earring. As long as Karna bears these, he remains invincible. Therefore, he was not born with a "normal" body. His body remains "abnormal" so long as it is invincible. As per the medical model of disability, all kinds of abnormality must be cured. However, the medical cure may prove to be fatal at times. In Karna's case, it is certainly so. In the *Mahabharata*, a relation is being established among pure lineage, pure body and normality. Karna is impure because he has neither a pure lineage nor a "normal" body. Despite being a greater archer than Arjuna, he has to lie low. Despite having all the qualities of being a kshatriya, he remains a Suta – an identity imposed upon him by society.

In the *Mahabharata*, it has been shown that Brahmins have always been the keepers of knowledge. And they have always been reluctant about sharing the knowledge with others especially with the lower caste. When Parasurama comes to know that Karna, disguised as a Brahmin, has come to learn the knowledge of Brahmastra from him, he curses him saying that at the time when he needs the weapon the most, he will not remember how to invoke it. Denial of knowledge has made him more desperate. In order to earn a weapon which can kill Arjuna, he has to sacrifice his invincibility. Like Ekalavya, Karna self-mutilates his body and gives his congenital armour and earring to Indra who appears before him disguised as a Brahmin. In the *Mahabharata*, it is evidently clear that characters belonging to the lower caste are absolutely debarred from transgressing into the sphere of another caste. However, the same cannot be held to characters belonging to a higher caste. In order to deny them, they

have been made physically impaired, and in cases of Ekalavya and Karna, the impairment is self-inflicted. The impairment is caused by social oppression. The disability that is the cause of the impairment is intrinsically linked to their being absolutely denied social mobility. Karna was made disabled because of his caste first.

Once the term “disability” is ring-fenced to mean forms of oppressive social reactions visited upon people with impairments, there is no need to deny that impairment and illness cause some restrictions of activity, or that in many situations both disability and impairment effects interact to place limits on activity. (Thomas 29)

Karna’s self-mutilation has made his body a “normal” body devoid of erstwhile godliness. Therefore, his body is made disabled against Arjun’s weapons. It becomes self-evident that disability is always pitted against a standard set by society. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna is the symbolic representation of the standard against which the rest of the characters are measured and sometimes rendered disabled. Both the bodies of Ekalavya and Arjuna have been made normal and thereby disabled. Although Ekalavya somehow removes the barrier of knowledge by learning archery on his own, in the case of Karna the barrier of knowledge causes his impairment. The knowledge of Brahmastra – an unfailing weapon never missing the target – which could have cemented his place in the world of Kshatriyas, is denied to him. Knowledge should be something free for all. In the *Mahabharata*, it is seen that Brahmins lay claim to the sphere of knowledge and they agree to share it with the higher castes only. Their claim to knowledge also goes against their dharma. In the *Mahabharata*, the rigidity of caste is found in the lower caste only; characters like Drona and Parasurama belonging to the higher caste, enjoy social mobility and transgression more often than not.

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