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Research Article




Recontextualizing the Narratives: Exploring Oppression and Genocides in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract

The inhuman acts of mass-killing and oppression are as old as the history of civilization. Many have been condemned while numerous still fail to make it to headlines. The very discrimination between what is condemned and what gets brushed under the carpet delineates an oppressive tendency based on factors such as race, ethnicity, caste and religion. The present paper aims to explore and interpret two episodes from the *Mahabharata* that deal with oppression and/or genocide. First is the popular episode of *Sarpasatra* where Janmejaya, son of Parikshit, embarks on the *sarpamedha yajna* to kill all the snakes in order to avenge the death of his father. The second is a lesser-known episode in the Astika Parva of the *Mahabharata* where Garuda, instructed by her

mother Vinata, selectively eats thousands of *nishada* to quell his hunger. At the heart of both the episodes are discrimination, dehumanization and an act of othering. Janmejaya sees the *nagas* as a threat and feels their annihilation is justified. When Vinata is telling his son Garuda about the dwelling place of the *nishada*, her conscience is convinced, her morality justifies the mass-murder of a race that was considered inferior in the social structure. Her warning to his son regarding how to avoid any sin by eating not eating a *brahmin* confirms that the prevalent morality sanctioned/endorsed this oppression favoring the oppressor against the oppressed. The *Mahabharata* as a grand-narrative not only subtly points out the inherent oppressive nature of the patriarchal morality, but also comes up with counter-narratives. There is a twist in the tale. A *brahmin* married to a *nishada* comes to the rescue of his wife pointing out the existence of alternate moralities as well as the intermingling of races. Similarly, the *sarpamedbha yagna* is intervened by Astika and the race of snakes is spared. While the emergence of a rescuer marks a major turning point and an effort in bringing home the lesson of inclusiveness and harmonious co-existence, it does not undo the damages already caused in the process.

Keywords: Genocide, Oppression, Dehumanization, Othering, Alternate Moralities, Caste and Class, Minority Groups, Sarpamedha, Narratives and Subtexts

Introduction

Narratives, in simple words, are a group of events linked together to form coherent stories that have a beginning, a middle, an end as well as a moral, most often than not. Narratives have served both as a way of recording history and as a means of communication across cultures. They have something of a shared value, something of a collective interest to a certain population which functions as a binding entity. Narratives help us translate “knowing into telling” (1), argues Hayden White. Myths, it can be said, are by large a grand narrative of the culture they originate from, a product of the collective human experience distilled into one unifying narrative that sings of glory as well as tyranny, of human resilience as well as its occasional defeat. The *Mahabharata* is one such grand-narrative. In a cursory reading of the *Mahabharata* one finds a frame story, supporting various stories within it that speak of the war between two groups of cousins over a piece of land. However, a more analytical reading brings one to the understanding that there is more to the text than a war of good versus evil, right versus wrong. While a lot has been communicated in the *Mahabharata* explicitly, a lot is still left to be read between the lines. Since the *Mahabharata* remained an oral epic for a long time which enabled its frame story to absorb large scale experiences of the masses as the story was told and retold the story by means of *shruti-smriti* tradition.

As one begins to read through the frame story of the war between two sets of cousins trying to maneuver each other one cannot help noticing the presence and representation of ethnic and tribal communities who are sucked into the war as the narrative progresses. Their presence, however, is always subordinated. While the characters like that of Eklavya, Hidimba, the Kiratas, Ulupi and Chitrangada play pivotal roles in the larger scheme of the narrative, they are toned down to the point where they function only to catalyze the glorification of the Pandavas, the heroes of the war. One finds a complete absence of ethnic dissent, at least not an explicit one. It is this absence that draws the attention of a curious reader towards what is implicit and hidden between

the lines. There, one finds the presence of subtle but prominent details that counter the more explicit and widely celebrated mainstream version of the narrative. There, one finds both dissent as well as religious crusades leading to genocides.

The United Nation's Genocide Convention defined genocide as any of five "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such" (2019, Article II). The acts included: killing members of the group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm, imposing living conditions intended to destroy the group, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children out of the group. To summarize, it is usually the presence of a definite intention that determines whether an event involving killing can be termed as genocide.

The *Sarpamedha* Sacrifice of Janmejaya

Sarpamedha is the episode where Janmejaya conducts a *sarpamedha yagna* to destroy all the snakes in order to avenge the death of his father Parikshit who was bitten by Takshak. He prays to God Agni to consume all the snakes. As a consequence, the snakes begin to fall into the fire until Astika intervenes and convinces Janmejaya to stop his yagna. The *Sarpamedha yagna* forms the frame story of the *Mahabharata* which provides the setting where the story of the *Mahabharata* is narrated. One learns that the enmity between the Aryans represented by the *Bharata* or *Puru* lineage and the *Nagas* is one of the crucial conflict grounds in the *Mahabharata*. The Astika Parva of the *Mahabharata* narrates the origin story of the Nagas. They are descended from Kadru and rishi Kashyap. They are shapeshifters believed to have possessed magical powers, viz, black magic. They are the collective 'Other' against the accepted descendants of the Puru dynasty in the *Mahabharata*. Romilla Thapar in her essay *Voices of Dissent* has talked about the interplay of the 'Self' and the 'Other' in the Indian context. Borrowing the term 'the Self' and 'the Other' from Edward Said, she describes "the Self" as the "established society" whereas "the Other" is automatically any person or group that either explicitly declares itself in disagreement with the established order or gets recognized as 'different' on the basis of factors such as beliefs, customs, habits or even physical features. The *Mahabharata* is essentially an account of the *Puru* dynasty, the Aryan settlement where the Nagas automatically identified as the Other. The *sarpamedha yagna* is not a precipitous action but a meticulously planned one. In section 18 of Astika Parva, Kadru curses her own sons the Nagas, and Prajapati approves the curse on the pretext that the snakes had greatly multiplied in number. These allusions in the *Mahabharata* can be understood today as a situation of inter-racial clash and a case of expansion of territory where the population of one group/community (in this case the nagas) was growing to a point where they had started moving out of their demarcated forest habitation posing a threat to the established civilization (the Purus). One account on the history of Nagas states:

Nagas are hill people who are estimated to number about 2.5 million (1.8 million in Nagaland, 0.6 million in Manipur and 0.1 million in Arunachal states) and living in the remote and mountainous country between the Indian state of Assam and Burma. (Minority Rights Group: Nagas, 2015)

An interesting fact about the narrative technique used in the *Mahabharata* is the use of jigsaw homogeneity, a phenomenon where every outcome is predestined so when all the separate episodes of a narrative are put together they form a meaningful whole like pieces of a puzzle. This

almost always absolves the chosen hero. In the *sarpa-yagna*, the killing of the Nagas is preceded by the curse of Kadru, their mother. It redeems Janmejaya from being labeled as the oppressor and makes him an indirect agent in the fulfillment of what is predestined. It emboldens the idea that the victim deserved and rightfully earned the fate they met. It serves as a sort of superficial poetic justice and distracts the reader from straight away interpreting the event as an act of oppression and genocide. The event of *sarpamedha yagna* is to be seen as a metaphor. The Nagas were already at a disadvantaged position because of their dehumanization as reptiles. In the linguistic structure, reptiles have all the negative connotations. The reptiles are commonly associated with negativity across cultures. They are seen as evil, harmful and perpetrators of sin. When Janmejaya embarks on his journey of ethnic cleansing against the snakes, his cause for it is the death of his father Parikshit at the hands of Takshaka. Janmejaya systematically plans to annihilate the race of snakes. He has employed a special task force to carry out his anti-snake mission from employing artists who will construct the sacrificial altar to appointing priests for reading the mantras and inviting bards for entertainment in the intervals between ritualistic ceremonies. He is giving out plenty of riches to everyone who is contributing to the mission, which is to say, he has allocated special funds from his treasury. His efforts are successful because thousands of snakes fall into the fire and die. It is finally Takshak's turn to be burnt into the fire. This is exactly when Astika intervenes. He is a Brahmin by identity. He not only manages to have a direct audience with the King but also convinces him to stop his ethnic cleansing mission. However, his entry as a savior happens way too late and a majority of the snakes who made no direct contribution to the death of Janmejaya's father are already killed by that time.

The Hungry Garuda Devouring the Nishads

The episode figures in the Astika Parva, a sub parva in the Adi Parva of the *Mahabharata*. Garuda is a bird of immense power and strength. When he sees her mother Vinata serving as a slave to her sister after having lost a wager, he asks his aunt for a solution to get her mother's freedom back. Kadru, his aunt, demands for *amrita*. Garuda, as an obedient and loving son, decides to undertake the task of bringing amrita to free his mother from the slavery of Kadru. Before embarking on the journey, Garuda tells his mother that he is hungry and must eat something before the expedition. Vinata, a loving mother, gives him a location where Nishadas have their homes. She lovingly instructs him to go to that location and quell his appetite by eating as many humans as he can. When one looks at this episode superficially, Vinata is only being a loving mother. She not only tells her son who to eat in order to quell his hunger but also warns him about who he should not eat in order to avoid committing a sin.

Vivek Deboroy in his footnotes has defined nishada people as hunters and fishermen. The text itself calls them "the ones who depend on diverse fish for living" (87). In the present times, the term refers to about twenty communities whose occupation revolves around rivers mainly fishing and boating. Even without getting into the communal details it is very apparent in the episodes that Vinata had selectively pointed out a community while warning against another. When his son mentioned his hunger before accomplishing the task of fetching amrita, her mother's instructions were clear and crisp:

The nishadas have their excellent homes in the remote part of the ocean. Eat thousands of nishadas and bring back the amrita. But never set your mind on killing a brahman.

Among all living beings, a brahman is like fire and is never to be killed. When he is angered, a brahman is like fire, the sun, poison or a sharp weapon. Among all beings, he is the one who obtains the first sacrifice, is supreme among the varnas and is a father and preceptor. (Bibek Debroy, 86)

There is no mention as to why the nishadas earned the privilege of becoming food to the hungry bird. One can only assume that it was their inferior and hence insignificant identity, at least in the opinion of Vinata. The text in the *Mahabharata* describes the conquest of Garuda over the village inhabited by nishadas as follows:

The powerful one soon descended hungrily on the nishadas, like a storm of dust that covered the sky. This dried up the ocean and shook the mountains that grew around. The king of birds opened his gigantic mouth and stopped the route of nishadas . . . the nishadas were blinded by the dust and in thousands entered the wide open mouth of the giant eater of snakes. (Bibek Debroy, 87)

The counter narrative in the plot enters when the great bird Garuda accidentally eats a Brahmin. The bird quickly realizes its error and requests the Brahmin to come out. The text makes an interesting statement via the bird: “A Brahmin will never be killed by me, even if he is always associated with those who commit sin.” (Bibek Debroy, 87) Of the numerous interpretations that can be made of this episode, there are two that make most sense here. The subordinate status of the nishad community and that the codes of sin and virtue were relatively flexible for the Brahmin community. The Brahmin in conversation with the bird says something that makes the reader ponder whether such a twist was deliberately introduced in the plot. The Brahmin wants his nishad wife to be allowed to accompany him out of the mouth of the bird. Garuda, the bird has to yield to the demand of the all-powerful Brahmin and the life of a nishad is saved. The incident also points out the mixing of race and instances of matrilineal societies where men could move in with the woman after marriage. The Brahmin was not only married outside of his caste/community but was also living in his wife’s community.

Conclusion

A few things that can be explicitly drawn from the above discussions are: the presence of intergroup rivalry leading to power struggle and genocides, intermixing of race as one of the solutions, and use of language as a means to create binaries and establish selective supremacy. The story of Kadru and Vinata shows us, metaphorically, the natural urge for power, supremacy and its consequences. When Kadru asked for a boon to be blessed with a thousand powerful sons, Vinata in an urge to be more powerful than her sister asks for two sons who are more powerful than Kadru’s thousand sons. When Kadru asked for so many powerful sons, her underlying motif was to gain social power indirectly through her sons. When some of her sons chose to defy her orders, she cursed them. Their refusal to comply with her demand is an act of dissent. They become the enemy, the Other. The curse leads to many twists and turns until Astika is born whose parents are Brahmin Jaratkaru and a naga woman also named Jaratakaru. The interracial origin of Astika comes up as the solution to the problem of intergroup rivalry. If this is to be seen as the frame structure, the second incident that occurs within this frame also suggests a similar solution. When the hungry Garuda is devouring the nishada, it is the presence of a Brahmin man married to a nishada woman who has the power to stop the mighty bird. If not all, at least one nishada is

spared with this intervention. The other prominent subtext that one cannot avoid paying attention to is the association of the 'other' people/community with the one who represents the accepted 'self' as a solution. The nishada woman is married to a man with upper-caste identity. Astika has a Brahmin father while intermixing does seem like a solution to bridge the gap and bring in the element of inclusiveness, one wonders if association with Brahmin men in particular as an antidote to these conflicts is deliberate and suggestive of their culturally accepted superiority. Is the narrative working as an indirect catalyst in further consolidating the binaries of the 'self' and the 'other' psychologically by associating a certain race with goodness, mercy and superiority?

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