

## PREHISTORIC ORIGINS OF MAHABHARATA CHARACTERS

Mahabharata, our national epic, traditionally considered as history, is a compendium of narratives about human, superhuman and subhuman beings. Many of them ascribe to human characters of the epic, qualities or actions which are obviously beyond human reach. Obviously they belong, not to historic but to prehistoric times and are based on myths spoken down by countless generations. This Paper studies the narrative of Kuntī in this light. The conclusion is that though Mahabharata is created in historic time, its characters are prehistoric, whence an exact estimate of their chronology may not be possible.

### 0. Introduction

According to the first chapter of the Mahabharata, the sages expressed to Sauti their desire to listen to the 'sacred text of the *itihāsa* called *bhārata*. 'This wording very well expresses the sentiment of the authors, singers and the generations of Indian listeners towards the epic: sacred narrative; for that is what the word *itihāsa* denotes in the epic as can be seen from its plural number even in Sauti's response to this request. Like sacred narratives of other cultures in the world this one also starts with the origin of the universe and covers the lives of heavenly as well as human beings.

This therefore is no secular history even if the heavenly beings also live through the epic as human characters which nevertheless perform and pass through acts beyond the power or comprehension of human beings. It is through faith that generations of Indians have believed in their veracity. If, however, we have to cull history as we understand it in this age, we have to treat them as sacred narratives - that is, mythical stories - as they are, and try to get at the myths at their roots.

We are generally able to do this for the individual narratives mainly by picking out the 'heavenly' elements in them. They contain the myth which can be defined as the relation between a phenomenon in the universe and the heavenly or human being that early human society imagined as the spirit animating that phenomenon. The phenomenon can be an astral body, a medicinal or nutritious plant, a mighty river or mountain or even a catastrophe. The life history of the 'being' portrayed in the narrative is a complex mixture of human and other-than-human events which point towards the most impressive aspect of the phenomenon mythicised.

Since 1977, the author has in this way unraveled the myths at the root of a number of narratives in our national epics. This Paper considers the Mahabharata narrative of Kuntī, the virgin mother of the heroes of the epic.

### 1. Kuntī, the Virgin

The essential story of Kuntī is narrated in the *AdiParva* (ch. 110) and also in the *VanaParva* (Ch.303-308). The former is prelude to the marriage of Pāṇḍu with her, while the latter is a narration in connection with Indra's demand of Karṇa's dermis and earring.

Kuntī was the first female child of Shūra, father of Vasudeva of the Yadu clan, who gave her over to Kuntībhoja his paternal aunt's son, as per their earlier compact. Put in charge of the worship of gods and guests, Kuntī waited upon Durvāsa to his total satisfaction<sup>4</sup>. He then gave her a *mantra* by the invocation of which she could call for a god and obtain a son by his grace. She tried the mantra out of curiosity, invoked the sun-god<sup>5</sup> who could not allow the encounter to be wasted and bestowed a son on her while at the same time reestablishing her virginity. Kuntī, out of fear of her family members, dropped the baby son, into a stream from where he was taken out by Radha's husband and was brought up by the couple as a son by the name of Vasuṣeṇa<sup>6</sup>. Later through his deed of cutting off the dermis and earring he became Vaikartana Karṇa<sup>7</sup>.

This was the bride sought for the prince Pāṇḍu. He set out on a hunting spree during which he happened to direct an arrow at a stag that had united with his female. The stag spoke with human voice to inform him that he was sage Kindama, disgusted with humans and hence copulating with a deer<sup>8</sup>. He cursed Pāṇḍu that he too in erotic embrace with his beloved, would have to go to the world of the dead. Pāṇḍu became a hermit but had intense desire for a son, to satisfy which Kuntī invoked three more gods to get three sons from them. She refused to invoke the fourth time but allowed the co-wife to do so. She asked for twins and got them. Thus were born the five sons of Pāṇḍu, gifted by the gods<sup>9</sup>.

## **2. The Mythical Elements Explored**

The mythical elements are those that the laity accept as true on faith even if they militate against human experience or reason. In the story of Kuntī these are picked out easily. The endowment of a mantra with the power of calling forth a god, the sun-god presenting himself to a virgin, her conception with a son, and her retention of the primal virginity - all these are mythical elements.

We know that the world over mythical stories have in them characters based on the sun, moon, stars and other denizens of the skies. As the sun god is specifically involved here, we can justifiably look for a celestial virgin also. She is very much there in the sky : the constellation Virgo, *kanyā* in India.

The principal star of this constellation, Spica in Europe and *citrā* in India, is the second brightest star of the zodiac and therefore apt to attract attention of the earth's dwellers. Further she is located on the sun's path - the ecliptic- in the sky. This means that at some time in the year the sun will *cover* the celestial virgin. And after the passage of the sun, she is again the pristine virgin that she was.

But the social mores of the society that conceived of the virgin in the star look down upon a virgin that calls for a male (no matter if he is a god) who unites with her. The mythical story therefore included this aspect compelling the virgin mother to discard her newborn in the (celestial) 'horse stream' that would lead it to another (celestial) female Rādhā, wife of the charioteer Adhiratha<sup>10</sup>.

Just as the virgin of the mythical story is properly the star *citrā*, so we have Rādhā in the principal star of the nakṣatra (constellation) *anurādhā* (part of Scorpio) also lying on the ecliptic.

It also lies on the edge of the celestial river ākāshagaṅgā (Milky Way). So if citrā was mother to the child sired by the sun, anurādhā another ‘wife’ of the sun-god was the logical choice for the infant’s foster-mother.

Her husband in the story is named adhiratha: rider of a chariot. The Indian concept of the sun riding a chariot pulled by seven horses immediately allows us to equate Adhiratha with the sun and also gives a clue to the roots of Ashvanadi. The horse-river or the course of the horses (of the sun) obviously stands for the course of the sun or the ecliptic. Between the stars of *citrā* and *rādhā* there is no visible patch like that of the Milky Way. Hence the devious journey along Ashvanadi, Carmanvati, Yamuna and then to the Ganga, for the chest carrying the infant. Adhiratha the sun being made charioteer need not shock us - the god Krishna was charioteer for Arjuna, as we know!

### **3. Karṇa, the Virgin's Son**

Myths often posit the parent-child relationship between the brighter and the dimmer stars in a region of the sky, usually in one another’s vicinity. The Mahabharata text provides a clue to the identification of Karṇa in relation to Radha in the mythical stellar family. It is narrated that the sun-god, out of paternal love for Karṇa, tried to dissuade him from donating his dermis and earrings to the disguised brahmin approaching him. To this end, the sun describes Karṇa thus :

O resplendent (Karṇa), with the beautiful earrings you shine  
Like the moon among Vis’ākhā’s twins, in the clear skies.

The Vis’ākhā twins lie next to Anurādhā, less bright than the latter and thus qualify to be the child for her, floating down the heavenly Ganga. If we see the configuration of the stars in this region of the sky, it becomes obvious that the early society imagined an ear -*karṇa*- in some of them, whatever the later etymology in the epic may try to impose on it.

### **4. Kuntī, Mother of Five**

It is wellknown that different social groups made their own myths on the same physical phenomena including stellar constellations. Where like in the Indian society, largescale mingling of widely different groups has taken place and the epic mythologies were compiled from these variegated sources, various myths were available relating to one and the same star or star group, with their own stories. The epic poet’s skill lay in weaving them together without a blemish surfacing on the canvas of human emotions that they sought to portray.

That was how Kuntī the virgin mother, with virginity resurrected appears as mother superior of the five princes. For, by the side of the shining Spica (*citrā*) we have in the sky the subdued five-starred Corvus (crow of the Europeans, camel of the Arabs), *Hasta* the (five-fingered) hand of the Indians. Graphic imagination of the society conceiving animals in the constellations could see in its configuration, also the ear like in the Vis’ākhā’s or as the expansive ear of the elephant, by which name this *nakshatra* is known, in Maharashtra for example. This latter concept appears to be at the root of the names ‘Hastināpura’ and ‘Vāranāvata’, of the towns connected with the Kuru dynasty. It is likely that a ‘Karṇa’ being the son of Kuntī was also a myth formed from the *citrā*-*hasta* combination.

The code of conduct of the epic-poet's society demanded some retribution from a virgin mother. Therefore Kuntī had to have an unfruitful marital union. But to absolve the primal virgin of any sin as promised by the sun-god himself, the guilt was forced on her husband Pāṇḍu (the pale). Simple but keen astronomical observation was helpful in forming this myth, to be coupled with another recorded in the Brahmana literature.

The ecliptic which is the fixed path of the sun is removed from the somewhat irregular path of the moon by about a maximum of  $5\frac{1}{2}$  degrees on the north and south. Moon, the pale, 'covers' the stella within a large band of about  $28\frac{1}{2}$  degrees. The covering of Citrā by the moon is a striking sight but if this happens to occur on a full-moon-night when the sun is also there, an even more striking phenomenon, the total eclipse of the moon will occur. Total eclipse of course, means 'death', disappearance from the scene! The sun merely covers the virgin, the full moon, by comparison the pale -pāṇḍu -will suffer death by his union with the maiden, citrā, Kuntī.

And this curse has been visited on the lustrous prince for having aimed an arrow (*shara*, ray) at a deer form of a sage in the act of copulation. Now, this whole framework is a familiar one in Indian mythology:

- Prajāpati chasing Rohini in the form of a deer; and he in turn shot at by Pashupati;
- Mārīca the demon turned golden deer, shot at by Rama; obviously rooted in star formations around Orion or *mṛga*.

### **5. The Durvāsa Motif**

Another familiar and repeatedly occurring character of Indian mythology, that plays a key role in the Kuntī narrative, is that of the headstrong sage *Durvāsa* whose name would have the meaning of 'one who has dirty linen, one that stinks, one that has a vile abode' ! He is sucker of women, maidens like Kuntī or Shakuntala, or a wife of five in exile. In the case of Kuntī he is satisfied with her service in waiting upon him; in Shakuntala's case, he is furious at her inattention caused by her reverie. In the case of Draupadi, popular imagination would have us believe that, he landed at midnight and demanded dinner for himself and his flock.

But his life-style is best described in the Kuntī narrative. "He would say I will come in the morning, but then the great twice-born would arrive in the evening, or again in the night. Again he would arrive at odd times and oftentimes wouldn't arrive at all. And he would even ask for foods that were most difficult to obtain."

Kuntī however passed all his severe tests and was bestowed by him with the mantra that would grant her progeny through the gods who would fall for her and become her obedient servants. Kuntibhoja, father of Kuntī, was witness to all this and when at the end, he saw the twice-born disappear at the very spot, he was filled with amazement and saluted Kuntī with reverence<sup>12</sup>.

Immediately following the boon, as she was meditating on the powers and failings of the mantras, accidentally she saw the menses and maiden that she was, she was ashamed at menstruating.

This unabashed part of the narrative unveils the Durvāsa myth to us. He was the mythical embodiment of menses that is twice-born like the teeth born at puberty, dying at conception and reborn after delivery! He is erratic, unpredictable of arrival, difficult of satiation, vile of abode, emitter of stink and dirty of linen. Like Durvāsa dictating to Kuntībhoja, no one should offend him in bed or seat<sup>13</sup>! Innocent maidens are his target; he speeds away from pregnant ones like Shakuntala but enables virgins like Kuntī to be conceived, by gods on command

## **6. One Myth, Many Stories**

We have traced the origins of the story of Kuntī to the star named Virgin. It is however not necessary that only one story is constructed on any particular myth. In fact ‘one myth, many stories’ is almost a rule in this regard.

In the Mahabharata itself, the *kanyā* is connected with *matsya*, *mīna* or the Pisces (fish) to form *matsyakanyā*, another celebrated maiden deflowered by Parāshara, who gave birth to Vyāsa. The myth in this story is based on the fact that the diameter (*vyāsa*) of the earth's orbit around the sun can be formed by connecting the two signs (*rāshi*) of the zodiac.

We find similar stories of varied content in other cultures as well. It is difficult to say where they originated and how they were exchanged, if at all; or whether they arose independently in different lands. The basic similarities are however noteworthy, as they provide justification for regarding the epics as mythology and not history.

Among the Greeks, Parthenopaeus, son of Atlanta by the god Ares, was exposed after birth on Mount Parthenius, by his mother so that, she might still be thought a virgin<sup>15</sup>. In this story, not only is the mythical motif similar, but also the phonetic similarity of the names of characters is noteworthy. Kuntī is called *prthā*, and her son *pārtha*; the names of the Greek virgin's son and of the mount are similar in sound and their origin being in ‘parthenos’ (virgin), there is similarity of meaning also. Hera the Greek goddess was originally the queen of the sky, the celestial virgin, hence her epithet Parthenia<sup>16</sup>.

According to the well known Greek Astronomer Eratosthenes, Spica represents Isis, the thousand named goddess, clasping in her arms Horus, the infant sun-god of southern Egypt. And lastly, in the middle Ages, she was considered as Virgin Mary with the child Jesus; thus the expression, ‘Good Boy in Virgo’s lap’ in Shakespeare’s play Titus Andronicus.

## **7. Conclusion**

By carefully sifting the text of the epic itself, we are able to establish the myths behind the curious episodes concerning characters that are human for all appearances and therefore considered historical in this age of the secular rationalism. The myths are old, usually prehistoric; born in the imagination of men and women who saw ‘spirits’ rather than physical forces at play in the universe around. The characters were compiled by the poets’ genius into integrated ‘histories’. The poets were members of human societies in historical rather than prehistoric times, whence their compositions reflect partial social history of their times – which is all we can hope to recover from compendious epics.

## **Reference**

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