

MAHĀBHĀRATA: A WAR FOR WHOSE THRONE?

ANMOLPREET KAUR

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Introduction

The world has witnessed conflicts over ownership of kingdoms over the ages. There have been numerous battles in the human history over a throne. The thirst for power and being the suzerain makes humans perpetrate evil deeds. In the Mahābhārata¹ (Mbh), one of the central arcs that push the narrative forward is a feverish rush for the rights to the throne of the Hāstinapura. Broadly, the Mbh contains a plethora of legends, *ākhyānas*, and *upākhyānas* teaching moral lessons. It is a political, moral, and a philosophical discourse. Amidst this, the family feud is the nucleus of the story.

This paper aims to explore who was the rightful successor of the throne of Hāstinapura. Scholars like Irawati Karve (1990) believe that Duryodhana could not claim the kingdom. B. K. Matilal (2002) contested the opinion and believed that Duryodhana had a natural right to the throne. Romila Thapar (2009) and Kevin McGrath (2018) stress that only Bhīṣma was the last *Puru* member, and thus he alone was the rightful heir to the kingdom. Opposed to them, Bibek Debroy (2015) holds that even though born by proxy, both Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana were the legitimate successors of the throne. The paper discusses the existing debate, and then attempts to reach a position regarding the throne rights in the Mbh.

The paper is divided into three sections to fulfill the above-stated objective. The first section discusses the concept of *nīyoga*, which is central while analyzing the various positions of the scholars. The second section describes the story of the Mbh. The section aims to describe the line of events in the epic. The third section is devoted to analyzing

¹ All references are from The Devanāgrī Edition of the Mahābhārata (Calcutta), translated by M.N. Dutt unless otherwise mentioned.

the debate over rights to the kingdom. Based upon these sections, we will reach a suitable conclusion.

I. The Custom of *Nīyoga*

*Nīyoga*² was the practice of obtaining progeny, primarily a son. English rendering of *nīyoga* is levirate which the Jews followed³ as well, whereby the dead husband's brother cohabits or marries the widow. A.L. Basham (2004) acknowledges that the practice was prevalent in ancient India, especially among *kṣatriyas*. Literally, *Nīyoga* implies 'appointment'. Banerji explains that it implies "...the appointment of a man to beget a son on the wife or widow of a sonless man" (1998: 114). According to T.S. Rukmani, "*Nīyoga* was an accepted social custom and was part of the *kṣatriyadharmā* from ancient times" (1989: 26). She stresses that *nīyoga* was accepted and allowed for *kṣatriyas* by Indian law-makers such as Gautama, Bauddhāyana, Viṣṇu, and Vasiṣṭha. Yajñavalkya also acknowledges *nīyoga*. Kauṭilya permitted even the Brahmanas to practice *nīyoga*. However, Āpastamba condemns the practice (ibid). The central law-maker, Manu, is ambiguous in the sense that he both endorses and disapproves of *nīyoga*. Mbh consents *nīyoga* as we find instances of the practice of this custom in the epic. However, according to Ravi Khangai (2015), in the Mbh, the custom of *nīyoga* is not merely a union of male and female for obtaining a son; *Nīyoga* in Mbh involves politics. This we shall explore in the coming pages.

Olivelle explains Manu's position regarding the condition of *nīyoga*, according to which the custom must be practiced "If the line is about to die out" (2004: 159). *Nīyoga* is centered around the argument of the 'need of a son' for the continuity of race or family. So, the custom is practiced to obtain a son. Sometimes, it is practiced when the husband dies, leaving no progeny (case of Ambikā and Ambālikā), and sometimes it is practiced because the husband is sterile or unable (impotent) to beget a child on his wife. In such

² Derived from *ni+* root *yuj*, 'appoint to, appoint as, or order to'.

³ See Khangai 2015. Levirate (Latin *-levir-* a husband's brother; akin, Greek *daer*). See *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, Delhi, pp. 861. 1979

a situation, the woman can approach the “brother-in-law or a relative from the husband's ancestry” (ibid).

Following Manu (IX.59), as interpreted by Kullūka, Banerji explains that if the husband is dead, then the woman must take due permission from the elders in the family before engaging in *nīyoga*. And if the husband is alive (as in the case of Kuntī), the woman must take his permission before practicing *nīyoga*. It is also to be noted that although we see that Manu abode the ritual, in IX.64-68, Manu prohibits the practice, saying “...good people denounce anyone who is senseless enough to appoint a woman to have children after her husband dies” (Olivelle 2004: 159).

Also, specific rules must be followed for the practice of *nīyoga*, and the woman must fulfill the ordinances of the practice. One such ordinance is that the woman must practice the ritual to obtain 'only one son' (Banerji 1998: 115): the ritual can be practiced “only once”⁴. Further, the woman and the begetter must observe the relationship of 'father and daughter-in-law' for the rest of their lives after performing the ritual (Olivelle 2004: 159). This implies that there should be no lust in the relationship post *nīyoga*. In the Mbh, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and the five sons of Pāṇḍu were born employing the ritual of *nīyoga*. For Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu, Satyavatī (mother of Vicitravīrya) made the arrangements, and Vyāsa begot the children on the widows of Vicitravīrya. The five sons of Pāṇḍu were born through *nīyoga* with Pāṇḍu's permission.

With this understanding of the concept of *nīyoga*, let us look at the story of the Mbh. The third section will discuss the question of throne succession with respect to *nīyoga*.

II. Storyline

Mbh is the story of the lunar dynasty. For the present paper, let us begin the story with the son of Bhārata- Śāntanu. King Pratipa installed Śāntanu as the next king and

⁴ When Manu says that the woman must seek union with her brother-in-law several times, it might seem confusing. However, the complete saying is that “...he should have sex with her once every time she is in season until she bears a child” (Olivelle 2004: 160). It clearly says that the union must be sought several times until a woman bears a child. Once she bears a child, they should not have any union and should maintain the relationship of father and daughter-in-law.

retired into the forest (Sambhava parvan 97.24: 293). Śāntanu developed a liking for hunting, and while roaming and hunting around the river Gaṅgā, he met a beautiful lady- the goddess Gaṅgā herself. Śāntanu desired to make Gaṅgā his wife. When he approached Gaṅgā for the same, Gaṅgā promised to marry Śāntanu only if he would never question her for any of her actions. If he did question her ever, she would leave him forever (ibid, 98.3-4: 294). Śāntanu was mesmerized with Gaṅgā's beauty, and so accepted all of Gaṅgā's conditions. Having promised to fulfill Gaṅgā's every conditions, Śāntanu married Gaṅgā and brought her to his kingdom.

Post-wedding, Gaṅgā gave birth to a son but soon drowned the infant in the river. Years passed, and Gaṅgā, one by one, drowned five more sons of Śāntanu in the waters. Śāntanu could never muster the courage to ask Gaṅgā the reason for her drowning the sons in the river. He feared losing Gaṅgā because if he questioned her, she would leave him as per her condition of marriage. However, after giving birth to the eighth son, when Gaṅgā was heading towards the river to drown the seventh son of Śāntanu, the latter stopped Gaṅgā and asked her the reason for drowning his sons. To this, Gaṅgā narrates the story of eight Vāsus whom ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha cursed for stealing ṛṣi's cow Nandini (ibid, 99: 295-98). The ṛṣi had cursed the eight Vāsus to be born on earth. The eight Vāsus requested goddess Gaṅgā to bear them in her womb and, once born, drown them in a river and free them from the painful earthly existence. The eighth Vāsu, the main culprit in stealing the cow, was born as Devavrata and was made to live life on earth. Śāntanu did not let Gaṅgā drown Devavrata in water. So, Devavrata (Bhīṣma) survived and had to suffer the pain of earthly existence. Gaṅgā then departed and took Devavrata with herself with a commitment to bring Devavrata back to Śāntanu at the age of sixteen.

Gaṅgā kept her promise and brought Devavrata back to Śāntanu at the stipulated time- when Devavrata turned sixteen. Away from Śāntanu, Gaṅgā made the arrangements for making Devavrata a great warrior skilled in the use of weapons. The young Devavrata was taught by ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha and was versed in the Vedas with their *Angas* (ibid, 100: 297-300). Fulfilling her duties towards her son, she leaves Devavrata with Śāntanu.

Śāntanu was joyous to have his son Devavrata with him. Witnessing the skills and sharpness of the mind of Devavrata, Śāntanu had made up his mind to announce Devavrata to be the next king of the Hāstinapura. However, destiny had other plans. Before Śāntanu could announce Devavrata to be the next king, Śāntanu fell in love with a fisherwoman-Satyavatī. She was a beautiful woman endowed with sharp features. Śāntanu aspired to marry her, and he met Satyavatī's father for the same. The fisherman agreed to bestow his daughter on king Śāntanu only on the pre-condition that the son born to Satyavatī shall alone be the heir to the throne (ibid, 100.56: 302). Śāntanu could not give the skilled Devavrata a backseat. However, Śāntanu was sorrowful for being unable to marry Satyavatī.

Soon, Devavrata noticed his father's melancholy and was informed of the reason for Śāntanu's sorrow. Learning about the matter, Devavrata went to the fisherman and pledged to relinquish all his rights to the throne. The fisherman posed another pre-condition for the wedding, speculating if the children of Devavrata contest with the children of Satyavatī's sons for the succession of the throne. Devavrata took another pledge and vowed to remain a celibate all his life to remove this doubt of the fisherman. Hearing such pledges being taken by Devavrata, the people and the gods witnessing the event uttered "Bhīṣma - Bhīṣma," which implies 'terrible' (ibid, 100.75-103: 304-6). From then onwards, Devavrata came to be known as Bhīṣma. It is for these pledges that Śāntanu gave Bhīṣma the boon to die at will as a reward. It is noteworthy that the fisherman gave weightage to the kingdom and unknowingly laid the foundation for future conflicts regarding the throne.

Satyavatī married Śāntanu and gave birth to two sons - Vicitravīrya and Citrāṅgadā (ibid, 101.1-3: 306). When Śāntanu died, the sons born from Satyavatī were young to rule the kingdom, so the eldest son of Śāntanu - that is, Bhīṣma acted as the caretaker of the kingdom. Later, Citrāṅgadā became the king of Hāstinapura. Soon Citrāṅgadā died on the battlefield, and the throne passed to Vicitravīrya (ibid, 101: 306-7). Bhīṣma made the arrangements to get his younger stepbrother married off and thus abducted the three princesses (Ambā, Ambikā, and Ambālikā) of the king of Kāśī (ibid,

102.3-4: 307). Bringing the three princesses of Kāśī to Hāstinapura by practicing the *rākṣasa* form of marriage⁵ (suited and typical for the kṣatriya caste)⁶, Bhīṣma informed his stepmother Satyavatī to make arrangements for the marriage of Vicitravīrya. One of the princesses-Ambā, expressed her desire to marry king Śālva. Discussing the matter, Bhīṣma and Satyavatī decided to let Ambā go to Śālva. The other two princesses were married to Vicitravīrya. Soon after the wedding, Vicitravīrya died of disease, leaving behind two childless young queens who could bear a child (ibid, 102.56-69: 311-2).

The death of Vicitravīrya led to the crisis as he died leaving behind no progeny. So the kingdom was in danger. Contemplating the issue, Satyavatī requested Bhīṣma to bestow progeny on the widows of Vicitravīrya for obtaining an heir to the throne, invoking the injunction of *nīyoga* (levirate). However, Bhīṣma refused to make the bid of his mother by reminding her of the vows which Bhīṣma had taken before the fisherman for the wedding of his father with Satyavatī (ibid, 103: 312-314). Bhīṣma gives an alternative and suggests calling a Brāhmaṇa for obtaining the progeny (ibid, 105.1-2: 317). Kantawala (1989) must be credited for highlighting that when Bhīṣma suggested inviting a Brāhmaṇa to procreate, he was referring to the Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra (15.3), whereby a Brāhmaṇa is added to the "list of appointees."⁷ This activity, where a Brāhmaṇa is appointed for procreating, is referred to by Kantawala as "the process of dharmasāstra-ization at work" (ibid).

Dismayed, Satyavatī then decides to disclose about a son born to her before her wedlock to Śāntanu. Before Satyavatī married Śāntanu, she had an encounter with Ṛṣi Parāśaraḥ. From the copulation of the two, a son was born named Vyāsa. Satyavatī tells

⁵ In *rākṣasa* marriage, the warrior abducts the bride and carries her away in his chariot.

⁶ In Indian tradition, marriage is one of the essential *samskaras*, which help people attain salvation/mokṣa. In the Dharmasāstra, eight types of marriages are described, which hold validity in the Indian tradition. The marriages described in the Manusmṛti (III.21) are *Brāhma*, *Daiva*, *Ārṣa*, *Prājāpatya*, *Āsura*, *Gāndharva*, *Rākṣasa*, and *Paiśāca*. Some forms are lawful for certain castes only. Manu says that the last four are lawful for a kṣatriya. Also, see Sambhava parvan (102.8-12: 308). See McGrath (2009: II,3 and IV,1). See Jamison (1996: 218-35).

⁷ Manu counts relatives and brother-in-law from her husband's ancestry as the appointees; he omits the Brāhmaṇas into the list.

Bhīṣma about her son Vyāsa, and they conjointly decided to call him for the purpose (Sambhava parvan 105.3-54: 317-21).

Vyāsa bestowed Dhṛtarāṣṭra on Ambikā and Pāṇḍu on Ambālikā. As Ambikā did not like the ṛṣi, she closed her eyes, so her son was born blind. Ambālikā could not bear the odor of the ṛṣi and turned pale, and so the son born to her was pale. Being requested by his mother, Vyāsa once again enters the room of Ambikā to bestow one more child, but Ambikā replaces herself with the maid. Vyāsa was impressed with the manners of the maid and bestowed a son on her, who was named Vidura (ibid, 106: 321-3).

Here, it can be said that the rules of levirate were not followed by Satyavatī as she requested Vyāsa twice to beget son on Ambikā (ibid, 106.23: 322). Ambikā probably did not desire to meet Vyāsa, and thus she replaced herself with her maidservant from whom Vidura was born (ibid, 106.24: 322). Substituting herself with the maidservant reflects that either she "did not like the practice" or "disliked the appointee" (Kantawala 1989: 93). The episode also shows the absence of a woman's consent.

Regarding this episode, Kantawala (1989) claims that "all the necessary conditions to allow *nīyoga* are not fulfilled in these cases" (ibid, 93). Kantawala quotes Manu (9.57), according to which an elder brother must never approach the wife of his younger brother. The elder brother must treat his younger brother's wife as his 'daughter-in-law'. According to this, the rule was violated by inviting the elder brother to beget children on widows. He also claims that due to loopholes in its practice, levirate "...came to be prohibited later with the changes in moral views governing the post-wedlock life" (ibid, 91). Banerji (1998) and Basham (2004) also explain that the practice was later shunned and was included among *kalivarjyas* in the kali age.

On the other hand, Banerji's assertion of the practice of appointing the elder brother is grounded in the Gautamadharmasūtra (18.4-8). According to Gautamadharmasūtra (18.4-8), "a woman whose husband is dead and who desires offspring may secure a son from her brother-in-law with the permission of elders, and in addition to him, the other Dharmaśāstra texts add a *sapinda* and a *sagotra* of the

husband" (1989: 92). Basham also highlights that for procreation, the 'close relative, usually the brother' or holy men, were appointed (2004: 176). However, both Gautamadharmasūtra and Basham did not specify whether the 'elder' brother was allowed to procreate or not. Banerji attempts to clarify the doubt by quoting Manu (IX.59) and explaining that the term *devara* in Sanskrit may stand for both – the elder brother and the husband's younger brother. And thereby answers the objection raised by Kantawala⁸.

Thus, it can be argued that Satyavatī did not violate any rule by inviting the elder brother to bestow progeny on the widows of her son. However, the ordinance stating that the ritual must be practiced once stands in question as Satyavatī requested Vyāsa to beget another son on Ambikā. However, the charge of practicing the ritual twice is invalid because Ambikā replaced herself with the maid and thus practiced the ritual once. Therefore, we conclude that the *nīyoga* was practiced by Satyavatī, Ambikā, Ambālikā, and Vyāsa with adherence to the ordinances laid, and there was no violation of the rules while performing the ritual.

Khangai highlights the politics at play in the practice of *nīyoga*. As per him, if the objective was to obtain an heir to the throne, then custom could have been practiced only once and on only one queen of Vicitravīrya. He argues that either of the widows could have been appointed for the ritual to obtain progeny. This objection can be addressed from the Mbh, where Śāntanu tells Bhīṣma that one son is equivalent to no son (Sambhava parvan 100.67-8: 303). Keeping this in mind, Satyavatī could have asked Vyāsa to beget a child on both the queens and thus justifies the practice of the custom on both the queens⁹. So, the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu is according to the norms of *nīyoga* and thus holds validity.

⁸ Kantawala (1989: 93) highlight that Satyavatī described Vyāsa as *devara* (cr. Ed. 1.100.2). *Devara* in Sanskrit stand for the elder and younger brother of the husband (Apte 1968: 260). But in Gujarati *diyara* stands for the younger brother of husband. However, Vyāsa was elder to Vicitravīrya. So, Kantawala says that "It is interesting to note the semantic change coupled with phonetic change in Gujarati of the vocable *devara*" (1989: 93).

⁹ There are other questions regarding the practice of *nīyoga* raised by Khangai. They are about the candidates for *nīyoga*. He argues why the son of Vāhlika (Somdatta) was not considered the candidate to

Having discussed the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu and the validity of their rights to the throne, let us move further in the story. After the birth of the sons, Bhīṣma married Dhṛtarāṣṭra to the princess of Gāndhāra- Gāndhārī at a suitable age (Sambhava parvan, 110: 327-9). After the marriage of Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī's brother Śakuni started living in Hāstīnāpura. Pāṇḍu was married to the daughter of king Kuntībhōja- Kuntī (Pṛthā) (ibid, 112: 331-2). Later, Bhīṣma married Pāṇḍu to Mādrī. Dhṛtarāṣṭra was the eldest, but since he was blind, he could not rule the kingdom and so his younger brother (Pāṇḍu) succeeded him (ibid, 109.25: 327). From here, the struggle to own the throne started. Pāṇḍu ruled the kingdom, but one day he killed a ṛṣi who had acquired the form of a deer. The ṛṣi Kindama (ibid, 118.29: 343) cursed Pāṇḍu that Pāṇḍu shall never be able to have progeny. Being cursed, Pāṇḍu decided to enter the woods with his two wives leaving Dhṛtarāṣṭra to rule the kingdom (ibid, 114.6: 335).

While living in the forest, Kuntī decides to share with her husband the secret *mantra* that she received from ṛṣi Durvasa as a reward for her services (ibid, 122.33-7: 355). Using the *mantra* with the consent of Pāṇḍu, Kuntī obtained three sons from three deities (Yudhiṣṭhira from Dharma, Bhīma from Vāyu, and Arjuna from Indra) (ibid, 123.1-53: 356-9). Pāṇḍu then tells Kuntī to share the *mantra* with co-wife Mādrī, and Mādrī obtained twins by calling Aśvins (ibid, 124: 361-3). The five brothers together came to be known as the Pāṇḍavas. At the same time, in Hāstīnāpura, Gāndhārī also conceived and delivered a ball of flesh, which turned into a hundred sons and a daughter. The hundred sons of Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra came to be known as Kauravas (ibid, 115: 336-40).

The children were young when Pāṇḍu died due to the curse, and Mādrī followed him on his funeral pyre (ibid, 125: 363-5). Now the three sons of Kuntī and two sons of Mādrī were Kuntī's responsibility. Kuntī then decided to go to the kingdom and get her sons their due share in the kingdom. Living in the kingdom, Śakuni poisoned the mind

procreate on the widows of Vicitravīrya. Although the debate spotlights the political aspects, it is not relevant for the present paper because the primary concern of the paper is to prove the validity of the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu for claiming the throne. For details, see Khangai 2015.

of young Duryodhana for his cousins (Pāṇḍavas), saying that if Duryodhana desired to rule without an enemy, he must get rid of the Pāṇḍavas. Consequently, Duryodhana developed a strong dislike for his cousins and made several attempts to kill the Pāṇḍavas (ibid, 127-139: 368-77 and Jatugriha parvan, 145-150: 425-35). As if the fate willed it so, the Pāṇḍavas always escaped the death traps of Duryodhana. Finally, Dhṛtarāṣṭra divided the kingdom and gave a barren portion of *Khāṇḍava prastha* to the Pāṇḍavas (ViduragamanaRajyalambha parvan, 207.24: 565). However, the Pāṇḍavas rose to glory and constructed a beautiful kingdom Indraprastha out of barren land with hard work (Digvijaya parvan, 25-32: 701-17).

Rājasūyayajña was organized to celebrate Yudhiṣṭhira as the suzerain (Rājasūyaparvan, 33-5: 717-23). The four brothers conquered the world and made their eldest brother Yudhiṣṭhira the suzerain. Seeing the glory and prosperity of Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana became envious and made plans to snatch away the fame and prosperity of his cousins. He persuaded Dhṛtarāṣṭra to make arrangements for the dice match whereby Duryodhana robbed Pāṇḍavas of their entire kingdom and wealth (Dyūta parvan, 47-55: 748-69). Pāṇḍavas had to enter the forest for twelve years and remain incognito for the thirteenth year (Anudyūta parvan, 76: 816-818). After completing the period of exile, Duryodhana refused to return Pāṇḍavas their share of the kingdom. This led to the deadly war among the cousins for the kingdom (Udyoga parvan).

The war was fought for eighteen days resulting in the death of the hundred Kauravas, the sons of Pāṇḍavas, guru Droṇa, *pitāmah* Bhīṣma, and various other kings, relatives, and friends from both the sides. The battle was fought for the kingdom- for the throne. Here, a question can be raised who the rightful heir to the throne is? Is it Duryodhana or Yudhiṣṭhira? Whose kingdom was it? Now, let us address this question in the next section.

III. Debate: The Throne rights

To know the rightful successor of the throne, let us analyze the positions of various scholars. When Matilal says that Duryodhana had a "natural right to the throne"

(2002: 110), he is partially correct. Matilal (2002) points out that Yudhiṣṭhira was born using the custom of *nīyoga*. With the permission of Pāṇḍu, Kuntī called the god Dharma, and with their copulation, Yudhiṣṭhira was born; therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira's biological father was the deity Dharma. Contrary to this, Duryodhana was born to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī naturally: Dhṛtarāṣṭra was the biological father of Duryodhana. Even though Yudhiṣṭhira was elder to Duryodhana, since Yudhiṣṭhira was born by proxy, Duryodhana's right to the throne became more natural. This explanation given by Matilal sounds legitimate. However, there is more to this discussion, as highlighted by Romila Thapar (2009), McGrath (2018), and Bibek Debroy (2015).

The first question to be addressed concerns the title 'Kaurava'. Since both Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas are born in the Kuru family, they both belong to the Kuru dynasty (lunar dynasty); thus, Debroy (2015) says that the title 'Kauravas' applies to both Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. He argues that the Pāṇḍavas are also Kauravas as, indirectly, Pāṇḍavas were born in the family of Kuru. Contesting Debroy, McGrath (2018) says that neither Pāṇḍavas nor the Dhṛtarāṣṭras are Kauravas except only Bhīṣma because they do not "...have any lineal connection with the eponymous Kuru" (2018: 12). McGrath (2018) raises the issue over the title 'Kaurava' and points out that Bhīṣma was the only 'genetically accurate Kaurava' and others are only 'nominally' Kauravas. According to McGrath (2018: 18), the Dhṛtarāṣṭras are from the nominal Kuru patriline, and the Pāṇḍavas are not Kauravas until they regain the kingdom and Throne of Hāstinapura, and also until all the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are dead. Till here, Debroy's position sounds more feasible than that of McGrath's. However, McGrath argues that the title 'Kaurava' is not for any 'genetic descent from king *kuru*': The title applies to the ruler of the northern region of India. We can say that Yudhiṣṭhira is *kururāja* only because he defeated Duryodhana. That is, 'Kauravas' is not a kinship term but a toponym for McGrath. Apart from this, Yudhiṣṭhira cannot have any lineal connection with Kuru. Against this background, McGrath (2016) claims that the contention is not between 'cousins.' Instead, the battle was fought between the two lineages, between two different kinds of beings; the battle was a clash between Dravidian (Pāṇḍavas) and Indo-Āryan

(sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra)¹⁰. Thus, none of the moieties are Kauravas. Now the question to be addressed is about the right to the throne.

Regarding the succession of the throne, Thapar argues that the only rightful successor of the throne was Bhīṣma; after him, there was no legitimate successor. Her point is in line with McGrath's that Bhīṣma was the only Kaurava. Thapar explains that the *Puru* clan continued till Bhīṣma only. After him, the children were born by proxy, having nominal affiliation only, no blood connection with the lineage as Vyāsa fathered them- outside the *kuru* family. So, neither Kauravas nor Pāṇḍavas were the legitimate successors of the throne according to the lineage rules. Thapar argues that Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu were not qualified for the candidature of kingship as both had physical disabilities (Dhṛtarāṣṭra was born blind, and Pāṇḍu was born pale and impotent). So, the succession to the throne was contested, and the contest of rightful authorities of kingship passed to the next generation, that is, between Kauravas (sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra) and Pāṇḍavas (sons of Pāṇḍu). However, neither of them is technically from the Kuru bloodline and had no right to kingship.

If we accept Matilal's explanation, then the argument of Thapar and McGrath holds validity because both the sons of Vicitravīrya were born by *nīyoga*, Vyāsa was the biological father of both the sons of Vicitravīrya (Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu). Therefore, just like Yudhiṣṭhira, neither Dhṛtarāṣṭra nor Pāṇḍu was the natural successor of the throne. With Thapar's argument, Duryodhana's natural right to the throne diminishes. Duryodhana could not claim the entire kingdom since his father was born by proxy, and if a father does not have the right to the kingdom, how can his son (natural or by proxy) claim it? If Duryodhana believed that the kingdom was his because of being born naturally to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, then Yudhiṣṭhira too would have the equal right since Yudhiṣṭhira's case is similar to Duryodhana's father. Thus, Thapar and McGrath's claim that neither Kauravas nor Pāṇḍavas were the legitimate successors of the throne seems

¹⁰ See Trautmann (1981) for details.

more plausible here than Matilal's view that Duryodhana had a natural right and Yudhiṣṭhira did not.

According to Irawati Karve (1990), Duryodhana could not claim the kingdom. She says that Mbh follows a trend regarding inheritance of the kingdom, according to which the eldest son of the king succeeded the crown: succession and inheritance thus moved linearly in the Mbh. She points out that Pāṇḍu was the crowned king, although Dhṛtarāṣṭra was the eldest son. Among the three brothers, since Dhṛtarāṣṭra was born blind and Vidura was a *dāsīpūtra*, the throne passed onto Pāṇḍu. Karve says, "though he [Duryodhana] was the eldest son of the eldest of the previous king [Vicitravīrya], he [Duryodhana] could not claim the kingdom because it had already passed into the hands of the younger son (Pāṇḍu) before he (Duryodhana) was born, and so it must continue in that line" (1990: 39). She points out that once the crown passes into a 'line,' it stays there. Therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira had the right to the kingdom as he was the eldest son of Pāṇḍu, the previous king (Pāṇḍu). However, Karve's position is contradictory because although the crown passed from elder Dhṛtarāṣṭra to younger Pāṇḍu, it came eventually went back to the elder Dhṛtarāṣṭra. When Pāṇḍu left for the forest, Dhṛtarāṣṭra became the king and ruled the kingdom. Therefore, Duryodhana (the eldest son of the previous king) had more right to claim the kingdom than Yudhiṣṭhira.

Even if we accept Karve's position, one must note that the eldest son of Pāṇḍu was Karṇa. Kuntī, before the beginning of the battle, acknowledges Karṇa as her eldest son born to her from deity Surya before her wedlock to Pāṇḍu. As per Karve's argument, it is not Yudhiṣṭhira but Karṇa who should become the rightful successor of the throne.

From the perspective of *nīyoga*, the custom of *nīyoga* was legally accepted as it was prescribed in the legal tradition (Manusmṛti). Brahmavaivartapurāṇa can support it, according to which Pāṇḍavas can be described as *Kṣetraja*, i.e., the "sons by order of the husband (4.115.110 ff.)" (Kantawala 2017: 65). Thus, a son born with the husband's permission cannot be rejected for candidature to the throne. The argument can be supported by Karve (1990) and Banerji's (1998) understanding of seed and the field: *bīja-kṣetra*. Banerji explains that "The son, begotten by a man on the wife of another, is

called *kṣetraja*; the woman being termed *kṣetra*, her husband *kṣetrin* or *kṣetrika* and the begetter is *bījīn*. In such a case, the son belongs to the *kṣetrin*” (1998: 115). According to this analogy, the woman is the field owned by a farmer- her husband. The farmer sow seeds (beget children). The husband (farmer) can allow his wife to invoke *nīyoga* and bear a child. Just as anything that grows on a farmer's farm belongs to him, even if others plant the seeds, the child born from one's wife belongs to him. Therefore, the child born by *nīyoga* must also be a legitimate candidate for the throne. This explanation supports Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Yudhiṣṭhira’s candidature as legitimate.

Conclusion

The broader philosophical problem that the above discussion touches upon is regarding identity vis-à-vis succession and inheritance. What kind of identity is considered legitimate in Mbh? Generally, it seen that relations determined by biological factors are given priority over relations based upon other factors, for example, friendship or acquaintance. However, within the framework of Mbh, it seen that the problem of identity is primarily seen in relation to ownership, succession, and inheritance of kingdom. When such is the case, that is, what is at stake is kingdom, inheritance, distribution of resources, biological factors are not given any ontological priority in comparison to other factors. We saw that to continue lineage and succession of throne, one of the possibilities that was considered legitimate was the practice of *nīyoga*.

We see from the above discussion that Matilal, Thapar, Debroy, Karve, and McGrath have seen the issue of kingship in isolation. We conclude that both Duryodhana and Yudhiṣṭhira had an equal right to the kingdom. Duryodhana was naturally born to Dhṛtarāṣṭra; Yudhiṣṭhira, although born by proxy, was the son of Pāṇḍu. This line of explanation also suggests that, in the Mbh, no ontological distinction is maintained between a child born from natural process or from *nīyoga* on the issue of succession to the throne: the rights of the child in both the cases are deemed identical.

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