

THE ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE MAHABHARATA: THE DEFILEMENT OF KHANDAVA AND DRAUPADI

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ABSTRACT

The *Mahabharata* is a multi-layered text which can be read and interpreted from myriad perspectives. The epic betrays serious environmental concerns which carries deep philosophical intent and is relevant in the present-day context when human intervention is causing serious threats to the natural eco-space. The twin episodes of the burning down of the Khandava forest and the disrobing of Draupadi have been explored in order to unravel the deeper environmental issues latent within them. In the case of the former, the message is rather explicit whereas in the latter it assumes metaphorical dimensions. The idea of the essential and the underlying oneness of all life forms constitute an important message of the *Bhagvada Gita* which has been very neatly woven into the body of the entire epic narrative. The present article seeks to explore these ideas vis-à-vis the twin episodes under consideration.

KEYWORDS: *Mahabharata, Environment, Nature, Khandava, Draupadi*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian socio-cultural fabric has a deeply embedded consciousness of environmental sustainability which can be found across several ancient texts. The Hindu scriptural tradition is replete with examples of such texts which embody a very serious and a consciously cultivated environmental philosophy that conceives of the entire universe as throbbing with a life force that helps sustain us. The current age is testimony to what environmental degradation entails for the entire human race. As the anthropogenic activities continue to adversely affect the environment, it is perhaps necessary to delve into our rich past and learn the environmental philosophy that was envisaged by our ancestors. The *Mahabharata* is one such text which is not only a narrative of the epic battle between two branches of the Kuru clan but a multilayered account of all things that are of concern to humans. Nature, and by extension the natural environment by which is meant the larger component comprising both biotic and abiotic elements that inhabit the bio-space, also emerges as a concern within the text of the epic. The environmental issues and in particular, the environmental philosophy entailed within the epic have begun to be unearthed in recent days with attempts being made to see nature as not something separate but an extension of our own selves. The centrality of religion to environment has been pointed out by Knut A. Jacobsen in his entry on “India” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (vol 1):

Environmentally concerned individuals have attempted to mobilize against the recent environmental degradation by bringing attention to traditional religious concepts and views, and highlighting texts of the religious traditions of India in which humans are perceived as an integral part of nature, protectors of nature or worshippers of her. As a response to the challenge of environmentalism, Indians have brought attention to the celebration of the sacredness of nature in the Vedic

tradition and to responsibility for the welfare of the whole world (*lokasamgraha*) implied in the concept of *dharma*. (Jacobsen 827)

For the purpose of this article I have chosen two important episodes as the focus of my study. The first episode is the burning down of the Khandava forest and the second one is the disrobing of Draupadi. Dileep Jhaveri, in his essay titled “Mahabharat and Environment” has singled out these two issues as central to the narrative of the epic:

An insulted woman and defiled earth are at the centre of the narrative. Thus the contemporary issues of Feminism and Environment are cardinal in Mahabharat. (Jhaveri 163)

Both the incidents are acts of extreme outrage and violation that set in motion a chain of events leading to the final act of cataclysm. Jhaveri’s observation is once again worth quoting in this regard:

The disgrace of menstruating Draupadi (to remain barren in future) is as revolting and tragic and poignant as disgracing the fertile earth that is most holy to the Adivasi poet. For him the aim is not retribution but the demonstration of equivalence of both the acts of decadent civilization. (Like enslaved Draupadi the earth too is abandoned by the Creator). (Jhaveri 164)

The Khandava-daha Parva occurs in the last section of the Adi Parva which is the first of the eighteen Parvas of the Mahabharata. The burning down of an entire forest has serious implications both for the narrative and for the environment. It seems as if the destruction caused to the natural order triggers off a larger and more heinous chain of events that cause the destruction of the entire Kuru race. It is also quite interesting to note that the very act of narration of the epic begins inside the forest of Naimisha. Naimisha, as it were turns into a space that is both natural and theatrical within whose folds the oral narration takes place. Nature, in fact was very closely associated with the oral traditions of the past as most of the act of oral narration was done in open natural spaces, under the trees where humans could live in close communion with the environment.

The Khandava forest is densely populated with wild animals of various species and several attempts have been made in the past by Agni to consume it. Agni, here is not just a god but a metaphor for those forces of urbanization that build their pillars on the ruins and debris of the natural world. The primitive world, as represented by the forest dwellers of Khandava, has always resisted and put up a brave fight against all attempts at annihilation. This picture is true even today and the basic environmental lesson that is embedded within the Khandava episode is that the ruthless forces of expansionism have always profited at the cost of environment. Commenting on the conflict between the forces of nature and expansionism that gets dramatized in this episode, Jhaveri contends that what gets destroyed is not just a forest but “a vaster ecological balance of cultures, history and mythology.” (Jhaveri 163)

There is a self contained, peaceful, sylvan civilization in harmony with Nature. It is ruthlessly invaded by expansionist, urban, technologically advanced power, violent in nature. Khandav Van is set afire by Arjun and Krishna Vasudev as coveted by Agni...In their audacity to challenge the supremacy of Indra his son Arjun and Krishna Vasudev, as the incarnation of Vishnu who is Indra's younger brother, destroy not only the forest but a vaster ecological balance of cultures, history and mythology. Vyas describes in unsparingly vivid details and with intense sensitivity the carnage and the futile efforts to frustrate it. There is a deep, seething anger terminating into profound, paralytic pathos. Incensed and with revulsion at the senseless atrocity and repeatedly benumbed with sadness for the life destroyed, it is not easy to read

the text without breaking down repeatedly. Henceforth unconcealed irony will accompany in addressing Arjun as Anagh—pious, without sin, and Krishna Vasudev as Veer Mahatma—brave and noble soul. (Jhaveri 163)

The Mahabharata presents a rather gory picture of the conflagration of Khandava. Agni had tried to consume it for seven times but was unsuccessful on account of the attempts made by the forest dwellers to protect themselves. The urge and the instinct for survival are common to both human and non-human forms of life. The elephants and the snakes had launched a concerted effort to scatter water on the flames to protect themselves (Mhb, Adi Parva, Section CCXXV, 438). Having thus faced disappointment, Indra approaches the supreme Brahman who then advises him to seek the assistance of Nara and Narayana, reincarnated as Arjuna and Krishna. The forest had also been protected by the intervention of Indra who happens to be the friend of the Naga Takshaka who lives in the forest and whose friendship might be a reminder of “an earlier historic pact of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between the force of urbanizers and power of primitives” (Jhaveri 163). As Krishna and Arjuna enter or rather barge into the forest armed with their weapons in their chariots, there begins “a great slaughter, on all sides, of the creatures dwelling in Khandava” (Mhb, Adi Parva, Section CCXXVIII, 441).

The epic narrative portrays a heart wrenching picture of the destruction of the Khandava, something that very closely parallels with the current incident of the burning of the Amazon forest. When we talk about a forest, we are talking not just about plants and trees but also about the hundreds and thousands of animal species which inhabit the natural world of the forest. In most cases these dense forests are either free of human habitation or are very sparsely populated with humans. The Khandava forest is not only a home to the animals but also to the Danavas, Rakshashas, Nagas and Pisachas—all of whom could be different variants of primitives dwelling within the natural habitat. Such a wilful and forceful destruction of an entire biospace thriving with a rich variety of life forms is quite rare in the literature of the ancient world. It is rather ironical that this very outrage to the natural environment is caused within a narrative that teaches harmony with and respect for nature.

The Hindu scriptures do not endow humans with the omnipotence to dominate over nature and other species. Unlike the anthropocentric model of the Christian faith, Hindu religion offers a different reading and approach towards the place assigned to humans within the natural order. It is the ultimate power of divinity that creates, maintains and destroys all forms of animate and inanimate objects. The following utterance of Krishna from the Bhagvada Gita attests to such a worldview:

This entire universe is pervaded by me in my unmanifest form. All entities are in me, but I do not reside in them. Nor yet are all entities in me. Behold my divine power. Supporting all entities and producing all entities, myself doth not (yet) reside in (those) entities. As the great and ubiquitous atmosphere always occupieth space, understand that all entities reside in me in the same way...Through me, the overlooker, primal nature produceth the (universe of) mobiles and immobiles. For the reason, O son of Kunti, the universe passeth through its rounds (of birth and destruction) (Mhb, Bhishma Parva, Section XXXIII, 74)

It is thus quite evident that the Supreme Being is the most important entity within the Hindu cosmology and it is his desire that wills everything thereby denying humans the kind of supremacy which they tend to ascribe to themselves. Moreover the Hindu concept of rebirth also enjoins the fact that one is to be born millions of times in different life forms before one attains salvation or moksha. Besides this, God himself is known or believed to have incarnated by taking various life forms—both human and non-human. This kind of a belief perpetuates kindness and respect for non-human

forms of life whose evidence can be found in the widespread practice of the worship of trees, plants and animals within the Hindu religious system.

The current crisis in terms of environmental degradation can to some extent be countered by putting into practice the theoretical premise of the environmental philosophy that is enunciated in the Mahabharata. Although the very defiance of such a philosophy takes place within this very epic, as has been already pointed out, and quite ironically the agents of destruction of Khandava happen to be the two characters who are at the centre of the articulations of the Bhagvada Gita i.e. Krishna and Arjuna. However, this very epic also forbids the forceful plucking of flowers. In the Vana Parva, there is an episode of Bheema's meeting with Hanuman where the latter counsels him not to pluck the flowers of the Saugandhika wood by force. Hanuman says:

O foremost of the Kurus, this way will lead thee to the Saugandhika wood. (Proceeding in this direction), thou wilt behold the gardens of Kuvera, guarded by Yakshas and Rakshasas. Do thou not pluck the flowers (there) personally by thy own force; for the gods deserve regard specially from mortals. O best of the Bharata race, the gods confer their favour (upon men), (being propitiated) by offerings, and homas, and reverential salutations, and recitation of mantras, and veneration, O Bharata. Do thou not, therefore, act with rashness, O child; and do thou not deviate from the duties of thy order (Mhb, Vana Parva, Section CXLIX, 307).

In fact the very naming of one of the parvas of the Mahabharata as Vana Parva reflects upon the centrality of nature and the natural environment in the epic. It is quite interesting to note that in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the period of exile is spent in the forest in close communion with nature as if to suggest that it is only through a return to nature that one can rediscover one's self. The forest becomes the space for serious philosophical deliberations and many of life's mysteries become comprehensible during the stay in the woods. The forest is juxtaposed against the court as a counter to the artificiality and the hypocrisy of an urbanized life.

The next episode which is the focus of this article is the scene of Draupadi's disrobing. Apparently, this episode has nothing to do with environment per se but a little bit of metaphorical thinking might help us to reconstruct this episode in terms which has serious environmental implications underlying it. The Samkhya school of thought within Hinduism is built upon a binary concept of the Purusha and the Prakriti where Purusha denotes consciousness or spirit and Parkriti denotes matter. A gendered reading of this dualism will construct the Purusha as the masculine principle and Prakriti as the feminine principle. Now if we apply this binary system of thought to the episode under consideration, we might consider Draupadi as the representative of Parkriti (which is also the vernacular for nature) and the men as the representative of Purusha. In fact according to the Rigveda, the entire creation is said to have descended from a universal soul which is designated as Purusha. In the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature (vol 2), Knut A. Jacobsen makes the following observation with regard to Prakriti:

Hindu theologians inherited the concept of prakriti as the material cause of the world from the Samkhya and yoga systems of religious thought. The principles of matter (prakriti) and consciousness (purusha) were transformed into cosmological and divine principles. Prakriti as the material cause of the world was understood as dependent on the divine principle and was personified as a goddess. In Hinduism ultimate reality is often seen as bipolar, as the union of a male and female divine principle. The dualism of matter and consciousness of Samkhya and yoga was transferred to the divine couple. Only some of the attributes of prakriti were transferred to nature as a goddess. Most important were the attributes

of being productive, diverse and interdependent. By being personified, consciousness was also transferred to prakriti. According to one Hindu sacred story, at the beginning of creation the highest God divided himself into two, a male and a female half. The female half, called prakriti, divided herself further into other goddesses. Women are also said to be incarnations of this divine prakriti. In all the modern languages of India derived from Sanskrit, women are called prakriti or seen as symbols of prakriti. (Jacobsen1300)

This concept of Prakriti as goddess is also the underlying philosophy of the modern concept of feminist environmentalism whereby women are perceived as the very embodiments and the repositories of nature. The marriage of Draupadi to the five Pandavas can also symbolically stand for the union of Prakriti with the Pancha Tattvas (the five gross elements) i.e. the earth, water, fire, air, and akasha. The staking of the menstruating Draupadi and her forceful dragging in a court full of men stands for the utmost humiliation caused to a woman and by extension to nature i.e. Prakriti. The entire assembly fails to answer the question put forward by Draupadi. She has asked whether Yudhisthira had any right to stake her after having lost himself. The echo of her ancient question can be heard in the clamorous voices of the environmentalists and nature lovers raised in the modern times. If the men here stand for the forces of acquisitiveness and mindless cultivation of materialism (for that is what the Rajsuya sacrifice stands for), then Draupadi's question acquires serious implications in terms of the exploitation and the plundering of natural resources for the sake of modernization. What right do men (and by extension the forces of materialism) have to stake nature for their selfish ends. Draupadi's question then no longer remains a personal interrogation but gets elevated into a larger questioning of environmental degradation that is perpetuated in the name of development. The dice game is not just a game but a metaphor for political power play which is being enacted upon the body of a woman (which can also be read as the body of Prakriti i.e. nature). The woman in this case stands for nature and her questions fail to elicit any answer thereby suggesting that there can never be any justification of the destruction caused to the environment. This idea, though remote, is very subtly built into this particular episode of the Mahabharata. The menstruating condition of Draupadi in this episode assumes symbolic significance in terms of her parallel and association with nature. Menstruation occupies an important place in the reproductive cycle of a woman since it is the time when women ovulate. If this particular biological phenomenon is transplanted on to nature, then one can see its parallel in the blooming of the natural flora and fauna. So the transgression caused to a menstruating woman can also be reconstructed in terms of the violent disruption of nature that is in full blossom. The consequences of both these acts therefore are quite expectedly tumultuous which cause a tremendous upheaval in the established order. In the Mahabharata, the outcome is a war that destroys an entire race and leaves behind an empty world populated by the war widows and it takes little to imagine the calamitous effects such acts of destruction can cause to the natural environment. Any attempt to interfere with the processes of nature is bound to claim a huge price.

It is the Mahabharata which preaches detachment in its famous message of the Bhagavad Gita in the Bhishma Parva. Krishna says:

When one is no longer attached to the objects of the senses, nor to actions, and when one renounces all resolves, then one is said to have risen to devotion. (Mhb, Bhishma Parva, Section XXX, 67)

This message of the Bhagavad Gita has significant implications in terms of environmental philosophy through its articulation of the idea of self-restraint and detachment which gives rise to the larger notion of non-violence to all forms of life. Ahimsa is a philosophy that has occupied a central position in the history of Indian thought and its political

appropriation by Mahatma Gandhi into a tool of non violent resistance against the colonizers during the nationalist movement is well known. The idea of the ultimate oneness of all life forms, in their being the manifestation of the Supreme Being as propounded in the Bhagavada Gita forges the concept of ahimsa. Krishna says:

He who hath devoted his self to abstraction casting an equal eye everywhere beholdeth his self in all creatures and all creatures in his self. Unto him who beholdeth me in everything and beholdeth everything in me. I am never lost and he also is never lost to me. He who worshippeth me as abiding in all creatures, holding yet that all is one, is a devotee, and whatever mode of life he may lead, he liveth in me. That devotee, O Arjuna, who casteth an equal eye everywhere, regarding all things as his own self and the happiness and misery of others as his own, is deemed to be the best. (Mhb, Bhishma Parva, Section XXX, 68-69)

This particular ideology forms the philosophical basis of the concept of deep ecology as invented by Arne Naess in his 1973 article titled, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” In his dismissal of the human-centred value system, Naess argues in favour of the intrinsic value of all life forms irrespective of their utility to humans. He says:

Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations... The total-field model dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept — except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication. (Naess95)

The Mahabharata then remains at the heart of such modern articulations on environment even though it represents such outrageous acts such as the destruction of the natural order in the Khaadava-daha episode and the symbolic violation of Prakriti through the disgrace caused to Draupadi, it also enjoins the message of the oneness of all life forms and the need to respect and preserve the environment. The environmental philosophy embedded within the two episodes as selected for this study points towards the dangers which are inherent within any mindless act of destruction caused to nature and can be seen as a warning against such acts, any repetition of which is bound to cause losses of an irreversible nature. The Kuru clan has to pay a huge price for the defilement caused to Khandava and to Draupadi—both of which have been wrought in the forward march towards progress but what it ironically entails is the destruction of the very universe that it had sought to advance. This irony exposes the hollowness of all such attempts and is best countered by the idea of the peaceful coexistence of all life forms within a non-hierarchical worldview where all are treated as equals having an intrinsic value of their own.

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