



ISSN: 3049-2017

IJMH 2026; 3(5): 34-37

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www.themultijournal.com

Received: 24-08-2026

Accepted: 14-09-2026

Publish : 15-09-2026

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A Re-visit to the Gambling Episode of Mahābhārata

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Abstract

Gambling episode is one of the most moving episodes in the whole of the Mahābhārata. It is depicted in the Sabhāparva where in Draupadī is treated with inhuman cruelty by rude creatures in the guise of human beings. It was during her prime period of fame she received most devastating insults and became a subject of rage and revenge. Except Vikarṇa and Vidura none of the so called heroes assembled in the palace of Hastinapura utter a word in favour of Draupadī who was undergoing through a most humiliating situation. No woman even Gāndhārī or Kuntī come forward as a helping hand to Draupadi while she was dragging from harem to assembly hall. The decision of Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the invitation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra to engage in suhrdyūtaḥ- a friendly play of dice with Kaurava-s is bit surprising because Yudhiṣṭhira was none other than Dharmaputra, the son of Dharma and he knew quite well that the play of dice is against the codes of Dharma and its outcome will be misfortunes and tragedies. Thus this episode is pregnant with several contradictions and uncertainties. The present paper is an attempt to re - read the gambling episode under the light of modern feminist and socio cultural perspectives.

Key words:

Mahābhārata, Dyūtaḥ, Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī, Kaurava-s, Pāṇḍavā-s, Duryodhana, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, play of dice, Hastinapura, Chastity, Gāndhārī, Kuntī, Duḥśāsana, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Silence, Feminine Expression, Vidura, symbolic, Distress, Atrocities, Moral Indignation, Male misdeeds, Agony, Rage, Moral courage.

After the initial hardships and sufferings of vāraṇāvata incident Pāṇḍavā-s regained power and fame by their marriage with Draupadī. They became the rulers of Indraprastha and conquered the world. Yudhiṣṭhira became the emperor and Draupadī the empress. During this prime position Yudhiṣṭhira along with others visits Hastinapura on their invitation and get into the trap of Kaurava-s by playing dice. The decision of Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the invitation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra to engage in suhrdyūtaḥ- a friendly play of dice with Kaurava-s is bit surprising because Yudhiṣṭhira was none other than Dharmaputra, the son of Dharma and he knew quite well that the play of dice is against the codes of Dharma and its outcome will be misfortunes and tragedies. Dyūtaḥ was one among the seven vices of kings and Yudhiṣṭhira was well aware of it. In his dialogue with Vidura he goes on detesting dyūtaḥ every now and then. With regard to the play of dice which was staged by śakuni, the following points are noteworthy:

- Vidura who visits Yudhiṣṭhira with the invitation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra was aware that it is an act of deceit from the part of Kaurava-s to snatch the wealth and royal fortunes of the Pāṇḍavā-s. Being a well-wisher of Pāṇḍavā-s and knowing the cruel designs of the Kaurava-s in the light of previous conspiracies, Vidura did not advise Dharmaputra to refrain from suhrdyūtaḥ.
- Vidura gives sufficient hints to Dharmaputra about the presence of professional experts at Hastinapura in foul play. Still Yudhiṣṭhira did not withdraw himself from the dice game voluntarily.

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- Yudhiṣṭhira consulted none while accepting the invitation for dice at Hastinapura while any child would have understood the evil motive behind the almost sudden and inopportune invitation for the play of dice at Hastinapura. The malafide intention of Duryodhana was as clear as day light and the invitation came soon after the return of the Kaurava-s from Indraprastha.
- The other Pāṇḍavā-s could not perceive any threat in dice game and did not made any effort to stop Yudhiṣṭhira.
- The most important factor is that Draupadī also maintained silence on the matter. Not even once she spoke her opinion about the play of dice before it starting.
- Kuntī and Gāndhārī also kept mum on the situation.
- After Pāṇḍavā-s arrival in Hastinapura neither Bhīṣma nor Droṇa and other elders chose to have a word of advice towards Pāṇḍavā-s against participating in the deceitful play of dice.
- The game of dice was to be held between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana. But Duryodhana appointed śakuni to play on his behalf. śakuni was a tremendous player and also known for his wickedness. Yudhiṣṭhira had the chance to withdraw himself as Duryodhana was not playing himself. But he did not refrain from it.

Murder of Chastity

So the stage was set for the murder of chastity at Hastinapura. The game with śakuni began and Yudhiṣṭhira started losing the game one by one. He staked every material wealth that he held as an emperor including the Kingdom. It was another chance for him to withdraw from the game as he lost everything. But śakuni insisted him to stake his brothers and himself. Yudhiṣṭhira did so without perceiving its consequences. Dharmaputra continuously got defeated and he along with brothers becomes the servant or logically fell as captives of Duryodhana. Even under this shattering condition nobody in the great assembly hall intervened and stopped the game. Gāndhārī and Kuntī

Dharmaputra failed utterly in the game and lost everything including himself and he was about to withdraw from the game. Then the tricky Duryodhana and śakuni reminded him that he has not lost everything and has Draupadī as his property. They prompted him to stake Draupadī and regain the wealth that he has lost earlier. Yudhiṣṭhira fell in their trap and staked Draupadī too. Whatever the reason may be, he staked Draupadī and lost the game as usual. Thus the life of royal queen turned into a pawn because of the male shownistic mindset of her husband. Draupadī got stunned after hearing that she was staked in the game and became a slave for Duryodhana.

Duryodhana sends message to Draupadī to come out from the harem and present her at the court. But the furious

Draupadī refuses to present herself in the court and questioned Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake her as he himself lost. Duryodhana got infuriated with Draupadī's behaviour and commanded his younger brother Duḥśāsana to bring her into the court. Meanwhile Yudhiṣṭhira also send a message to Draupadī, discreetly to come to court. Still Draupadī refused to come to the court and stated that she is in her menstrual period and cannot present in the simple attire that she was wearing. Duḥśāsana refused to listen to all those excuses and grabs her hair and dragged her into the court. The situation is marked conspicuous by the absence of . No elder women came to denown Duḥśāsana. He roared in anger as Draupadī was running from one place to another in the harem. Finally Duḥśāsana seized Draupadī by her long hair and dragged her into the court. The epic author tells us that she was piteously entreating Duḥśāsana to free her since she was in her season.

In the open assembly the atrocities continued. Draupadī had been dragged to the assembly hall while she was attired in one piece of cloth and at a time when her season had come. Duḥśāsana was telling her that she had been won by the Kaurava-s and urged her to accept the Kuru-s as her lords. He then seized Draupadī on her long blue and wavy hair. The tragedy enhances when Draupadī tells Duḥśāsana not to take her into the assembly hall since she was in her season and attired only in one cloth. The reply given by Duḥśāsana to Draupadī is quite characteristic of his callousness.

रजस्वला वा भव याज्ञसेनि
एकाम्बरा वाप्यथवा विवस्त्रा।
द्यूते जिता चासि कृतासि दासी
दासीषु वासश्च यथोपजोषम् ॥ १

("O Yāñāsenī, whether thy season hath come or not, whether thou art attired in one piece of cloth or entirely naked, when thou hast been won at dice and made our slave, thou art to live amongst our serving women as thou pleasest.")

While Draupadī was being dragged her hair had become disheveled and attire half loosened. Draupadī again pleads to Duḥśāsana that she cannot stand before the elders in the assembly in such a state. Her words fall flat because they were the words of a woman. The entire assembly of males including her husbands does not come to the help of a hapless lady. It is symbolic that the elders on their part, simply looked on silently when a woman was being insulted before their very eyes. The distress of a woman does not move them. Duḥśāsana was then dragging her more forcefully repeatedly calling her 'slave, slave' and he was virtually laughing aloud to add the ferocity of the situation. Karṇa then adds his own share. He also laughed aloud. śakuni was uplauding Duḥśāsana for his brave act. The tragedy is at its pinnacle when Karṇa

has replied to Vikarṇa's good words in a manner shown below:

एको भर्ता स्त्रिया देवैः विहितः कुरुनन्दन
इयं त्वनेकवशगा बन्धकीति विनिश्चिता।
अस्याः सभामानयनं न चित्रमिति मे मतिः
एकाम्बरधरत्वं वाप्यथवापि विवस्त्रता ॥ २

(O son of the Kuru race, the gods have ordained only one husband for one woman. This Draupadī, however, hath many husbands. Therefore, certain it is that she is an unchaste woman. To bring her, therefore, into this assembly attired though she is in one piece of cloth- even to uncover is not at all an act that may cause surprise.)

Draupadī repeatedly questions the legality or the right of Yudhiṣṭhira to place her at stake; in an emotional appeal to the elders present at the court. What was pitiful is that none of the elders like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra etc. have intervened at this crucial situation also. When the commotion was over Bhishma tells that Yudhistira was the sole authority to do what is proper on draupadi in the harem. The other Pāṇḍavā-s were under the captive of Duryodhana and could not do anything. However Bhīma got aroused and blames Yudhiṣṭhira for creating such situation. In order to provoke Bhīma further, Duryodhana bares and pats his thigh looking into Draupadī's eyes. In rage Bhīma vows in front of the entire assembly that he would break that thigh of Duryodhana.

Only Vikarṇa, a brother of Duryodhana, showed the courage to answer the question of Draupadī. He gives his opinion that Draupadī is not won rightfully as Yudhiṣṭhira lost himself first before staking her. Besides Draupadī is the common wife of all Pāṇḍavā-s and so Yudhiṣṭhira alone has no right to take decision on her. Here Karṇa interferes and counter the arguments of Vikarṇa. He offended Vikarṇa indignantly by saying that when Yudhiṣṭhira lost all his possessions he lost Draupadī also. Karṇa publicly called Draupadī as bandhakī, means prostitute, for being the wife of five men. He spoke in support of Duryodhana's act and ditching Draupadī. Here Karṇa strongly argued that Draupadī had been won by śakuni in the game and approved as a stake by the Pāṇḍavā-s. Besides, the gods have ordained only one husband to a woman. But as Draupadī has many husbands and according to śāstrā-s of the age, she can be considered a characterless woman. So bringing her in a court of men is not a surprising act whether she is attired or naked.

Culture of Silence

The support from Karṇa and the unquestioning attitude of the assembly have taken Duryodhana to the top of aggressiveness. He ordered Duḥśāsana to disrobe Draupadī. Except Vidura the other elders and preceptors kept their studied silence despite seeing the terrible actions on the part of Kaurava-s. The great Pāṇḍavā-s also could

not do anything and became mere spectators. On analysis of the situation the following points appeared to be significant:

- The intelligentsia of the country as usual was succumbed to the will of the royal authority and nobody including Bhīṣma and Droṇa had the courage to question it. It seems that all the males in the assembly hall were, in a way, enjoying the scene of a helpless woman being robbed of her modesty.
- No elder woman of the harem comes forward with a helping hand. There are moments even the powerful are at a loss to understand subtle ways of code of ethics. This was evident in the case of Pāṇḍavā-s, who despite their prowess remained as mute spectators in front of the sordid drama that was held in front of them wherein the heroine was their own consort.
- The description of the situation where the attack on Draupadī is described leaves out an eloquent message. Yudhiṣṭhira the so called propagator of righteousness failed to provide justice to his own wife. His words and deeds during the play of dice when he was staking his own brothers and duly wedded wife in a most arbitrary manner are sorrowful scenes in the epic where the weakness and lack of character, intelligence and integrity on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira come to the fore.

Absence of Gāndhārī and Kuntī

It is surprising to note that the presence of Gāndhārī was nowhere felt indirectly or directly when the atrocity determining the destiny of Hastinapura was taking place. Gāndhārī's silence in the Sabhāparva before and after the attack on Draupadī is so eloquent that it will speak several volumes. The heinous episode in which Draupadī is virtually dragged by Duḥśāsana from the harem to the open assembly of Hastinapura took everybody by shock and surprise. As a woman she did not play her part. The mother in her never ventures to rebuke and block her sons from committing the crime. The wife in her miserably failed to awaken the decency and responsibility in her lord Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king of Hastinapura. She had to play a part at the time of crucial happenings affecting the future of the empire and the queen in her virtually kept mum. Gāndhārī's silence on this context becomes all the more pregnant with suggestivity since the whole episode had been meticulously schemed, engineered and executed by none other than her own brother.

The epic author also does not mention the presence of Kuntī in the harem of Hastinapura in that particular occasion. The silence of Kuntī in Sabhāparva when Draupadī was cruelly assaulted is all the more significant. The epic author does not tell us what Kuntī did when Draupadī was being dragged from harem to the assembly-hall at Hastinapura by Duḥśāsana. All circumstantial evidence lead to the fact that Kuntī was very much present

in the harem when Duḥśāsana, under the command of Duryodhana, stormed into the harem to take Draupadī by force. The epic tells us that Draupadī ran to the aged kuru women for help in the harem lamenting loudly when Duḥśāsana came into the inner quarters. Again it is significant that Draupadī did not approach either Kuntī or Gāndhārī, for help in such a helpless situation. The silence left behind the epic author in this context is pregnant with many a possible interpretation.

The following points with regard to the silence of Kuntī at the time of assault on Draupadī are noteworthy:

On several occasions Kuntī declares that the most poignant event of her life is the assault on Draupadī.³

In the *Udyoga Parva* Kuntī chastises her sons for standing helpless, despite their heroism, at the time of one of the most crucial occurrences in their life namely the assault on their own wife.⁴

In *Asramavasikaparva Parva* Kuntī unexpectedly make a queer statement to her sons to the effect that she fell unconscious at the crucial moment when the attack on Draupadī was being mounted.⁵

Kuntī also frequently makes mention of the unpardonable silence on the part of the elders of Hastinapura except Vidura on the occasion when Draupadī (clad in only a single garment), was being forcefully dragged into the court-hall by Duḥśāsana.⁶

Had the presence of Kuntī and Gāndhārī in the harem been mentioned it would have led to the description of their sorrows and lamentations. That would certainly have shifted the focus from Draupadī to Gāndhārī and Kuntī. The epic author perhaps did not want to produce a creative defect by shifting the focus from Draupadī to others.

The epic says that after the heinous crime committed on Draupadī there were fearful omens foreboding great misfortunes to the country. The epic tells that seeing the fearful omens Gāndhārī and Vidura told everything in great affliction to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king.⁷ Everybody was beginning to panic after these omens. But nobody panicked when Draupadī, the wedded wife of Hastinapura was being insulted and disgracefully mistreated.

A L Basham observes that 'Draupadī was powerful enough even to chastise her husbands';⁸ Yet she was never consulted before the invitation to play of dice at Hastinapura was accepted. It was she who redeemed her husbands from slavery by means of the two boons offered to her by Dhṛtarāṣṭra; Yet again, without consulting her, Yudhiṣṭhira, in a feat of unpardonable and thoughtless infatuation for dice, staked everything to Duryodhna and accepted once again, twelve years stay in forest as refugees and one year life incognito.

The questions rose by Draupadī in the court hall are very significant on which discussion continued through ages. But the elders and preceptors keep quiet without answering her questions. It symbolizes that women are

under the control of men and if they dare to question the atrocities against them, it was invariably ignored. In the introduction of the text *Moral Dilemmas of Mahābhārata*, Bimal Krishna Matilal points out that: 'if Draupadī's questions were properly answered it would have required a paradigm shift in India's social thought.'⁹ Draupadī sounded not only for her right but for entire womanhood. Unfortunately not only from the side of men but from the side of women also no one was there to support Draupadī. As Jasbir Jain opines-'Draupadī's arguments in Vyāsa's Mahābhārata are a clear indication both of the analytical and intellectual skills of Draupadī in particular and women in general. In direct contrast to the image of an obedient, docile body or a silent sufferer, she brings her own perception to the attention of the assembly.'¹⁰

End Note

- 1 *Sabha.p.* 67.3 *Mahābhārata* -Sanskrit Text with English Translation of M.N Dutt, Edited by Dr. Ishvar Chandara Sharma & Dr.O.N Bimali, Parimal Publications, Delhi, 3rd Edition, 2013.
- 2 *Sabha.p.* 68.35,36)
3. *Udyoga.P.*90.57,85,86,87; 137.17-19; *Asrama.P.*17.9-13
4. *Udyoga.P.*90.87; 137.19
5. *Asrama.aP.*17.13
6. *Udyoga.P.* 90.50-52; *Ēsrama.P.*17.12
7. *Sabha. P.* 68.71
8. Basham A. L. *The Wonder That Was India*, Sidwick & Jackson, London, 2004 (3rded.).p. 179.
9. Matilal Krishna Bimal ., *Moral Dilemmas of Mahābhārata*, Indian Institute of Advanced study & Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1961, p.3
10. Jain, Jasbir., *Indegeneous Roots of Feminism*, Sage publication Pvt ltd . NewDelhi. 2011 p.38

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