

## ASCETIC POWER AND THE BIRTH OF MAJOR CHARACTERS AS DEPICTED IN THE ĀDI-PARVAN OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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Myths often contain accounts of creation or the miraculous birth of ancient heroes. They narrate sacred history about how, through the deeds of supernatural beings, a 'reality' came into existence. As a result of the intervention of supernatural beings, a man himself is what he is today, a moral, sexed and cultural being.<sup>1</sup>

It is mentioned in the *Ādi-parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* that many of the characters originated by having some connection either with an ascetic or his power. An attempt is made in this article to study the ascetic power and its relationship to the birth of the major characters in the *Mahābhārata*. Particular attention is drawn to the modes of conception and their implications.

### Asceticism in the Hindu Tradition

In India, ascetic practices were in existence from the earliest times. The adoration and the adoption of the ascetic life among the Indians, rest on their desire to escape from the bondage of *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth or the cycle of successive existence in which all created beings are involved and are subjected to suffering and misery. The Sanskrit term for asceticism is *tapas* from the root *tap*, 'to be hot', or 'to burn'. Thus the word *tapas* signifies 'warmth' or 'heat'. The feelings or sensations experienced as a result of heat is usually painful, especially the pain or suffering which is voluntary and self inflicted from a religious motive. Thus the term *tapas* is particularly applied to religious penance, austerity and devotion.<sup>2</sup> Several kinds of ascetics are designated by various names; however,

<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963), pp. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> A.S. Geden, "Asceticism (Hindu)," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. II, edited by James Hastings, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), p. 87.

There were several self-mortifications to which the Hindu ascetic subjected himself while he was practising *tapas*. Most prominent among them was the 'arrow' or 'spike-bed'. It is in imitation of the sufferings of Bhīṣma, the leader of the kurus in the *Mahābhārata*. His body was pierced in the fight by Arjuna with so many arrows and he lay thus supported for forty-eight days and nights before his death. Another form of self-torture was to raise one or both arms above the head and to hold them there until they cannot be drawn down again. Others undertook prolonged fastings, or observe vows of silence for years. Apart from this, the ascetics practised *yoga* by restraining and disciplining of the body to secure union of the soul with the Supreme. For further details, see A.S. Geden, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

these designation are sometimes used interchangeably. The most common terms for Hindu ascetics include *sādhu*, a 'good' or 'pious' man, a saint or a sage; *sanyāsin*, one who has 'cast off' his home and possessions; *yogin*, one who is endeavouring by restraint and discipline of the body to secure the union of the soul with the Supreme; *yati*, one who controls; *muni* or *mauni*, one who is contemplative; *ṛṣi*, meaning 'flow' of their influence or 'push', since they possessed irresistible power; and *siddhi*, one who has attained 'perfection'.

Asceticism in India has been sanctioned by religion based on the example of the greatest saints, and gods themselves who endured self-inflicted tortures for thousands of years in order to attain supernatural power. The world was created and sustained by the *tapas* of Brahmā. Śiva, as a naked *sanyāsin*, had performed great austerities of unimaginable severity for thousands of years. He is the patron of the ascetics and by his grace and by the virtue of *tapas*, the ascetics hope to attain all their desires. It is by *tapas* that the ascetics acquire their almost divine qualities, and even ordinary mortals may obtain *siddhis*, spiritual enlightenment and final liberation from the bondage of *samsāra*. According to *Manu* (X1,239ff), "whatever is hard to be traversed, whatever is hard to be attained, whatever is hard to be reached, whatever is hard to be performed, all may be accomplished by austerities . . ." In Hindu tradition there are several legends where the gods trembled in awe of the ascetics' growing powers and send their divine nymph (*apsaras*) to tempt them.<sup>3</sup>

In the doctrine of *varnāśramadharmā*, asceticism was made an integral part of the orthodox Hindu life and one has to purify himself in his old age with austerities. Originally the right and privilege of asceticism were accorded only to the brāhmaṇas and then extended to all the twice-born (*dvija*) and later all restrictions were removed and permission was given to men of every position and creed. Theoretically there are four *āśramas* or stages in the life of a Hindu and one is expected to spend sometime in each but it is doubtful if the progression was ever generally observed. During the stage of *brahmacarya* ('religious living'), the novice usually lived at the house of his *guru* whom he obeyed implicitly. He has to study the scriptures, practise penances; take care of sacrificial fire and do household work. This stage would last for twelve years and it was obligatory that he learns the essential of the *Vedas* and be able to perform the domestic sacrifices. The stage of *Gṛihasthya* ('married householder') begins with marriage and its duties include the begetting of children, performing daily sacrifices and discharging of his responsibilities as a member of the society. Having discharged his duties as a householder, he retires and lives in the forest and this stage is known as *vānaprasthya* (forest-departure or dweller). Here, he devotes

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

himself to meditation, strictly observes all ceremonies and practises austerities and penances for preparing to final renunciation of all worldly ties. The final stage is *śanyāsa* ('renunciation') where he renounces all his possessions and subsists on food obtained by begging. His contact with others and his speech are reduced to the minimum. He tries to put all his action in the Divine and making it actionless action. He thinks of the body as a temporary shack and through meditation his body dissolves into its material element so his soul slowly dissolves and integrates into the Universal Spirit.<sup>4</sup> One who observes the *varnāśramadharmā* in progression is known as the follower of the *sāmānyadharmā* and there are exceptions where some of the ascetics are gifted and are born as *yogins*. They are designated as the followers of the *viśeṣadharmā* like Vyāsa, the author of the great epic *Mahābhārata*.

A few sages used their ascetic power for good, and their very presence removed disease or drought,<sup>5</sup> while some were associated with acts of creation. Numerous incidents of such utilization of ascetic power are to be found in the *Mahābhārata*, where the births of the major characters are closely associated with the ascetics or their power which they had acquired by practising *tapas*. The creative qualities resulting from *tapas* empower the ascetic to create unilaterally without having any fertilizing agents. The ascetics are endowed with the power of bestowing boons besides being noted, too, for their relentless curses by which the mortals and even the celestial gods are affected. Mortals who are devoid of their creative power due to the curse inflicted upon them seek redemption through the boon granted also by the ascetics to invoke the gods to give them offspring. The following discussion delves into the various types of conceptions and its association with the ascetic power as depicted in the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*.

### Unilateral Creations

In Hindu mythology we can find more unilateral male creations than that of unilateral female creations. It is said that the male seed is fertile in itself, especially the seed of a great ascetic who has kept it within him for a long period of time and, as such, his seed is never shed in vain. He brings forth a child everytime when he sheds his seed and no matter where he sheds it. It is evident from the Upanisadic tradition that the man's seed is basically the source of life and according to the *Dharmaśāstras* (*Manu* 9.35), the seed remains more important than the womb. The seed shed by a powerful male, who had undergone great austerities, may fall into any of a number of womb's substitutes (a pot, the earth, a river, or some-

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, Vol. 1 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968) pp. 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> About the legend of R̥ṣyaśṅga, see *MbB.* 111: 110. 17-36; 111. 1-22; 112. 1-18; 113. 1-25.

one's mouth) that can produce an embryo.<sup>6</sup> An ascetic, who accumulates a store of semen within himself, shines whitely and can be recognised by his luminosity. He has a beautiful voice, an agreeable odour of the body, tremendous energy and gigantic will-power. The belief that ascetic power (*tapas*) derives from the retention of semen is rooted deep in Hindu tradition and literature.<sup>7</sup>

In the *Mahābhārata* there are several instances of unilateral male creations:

There is a story about the son of Gautama who was called the Saradvat. He was born with arrows and excelled in the art of weaponry and because of his austerities Indra himself was afraid of him; Indra sent out a divine nymph (*apsaras*) to stop his austerities. When Saradvat Gautama saw her alone in the forest, clad in a single piece of cloth his bow and arrow slipped from his hand and the very sight of her shook him all over with emotions. Though he mustered sufficient patience to control his temptation, his mental agitation caused an unconscious emission of his seed. The sage left the hermitage and the celestial maid, but his seed fell upon a reed-stalk and split into two parts and from the two halves a pair of twins were born to Saradvat Gautama. They were later named Kṛpa and Kṛpī by king Śaṃtanu.<sup>8</sup>

A similar *motif* can be found in another story relating to the birth of Droṇa:

There lived a great sage named Bharadvāja who was strictly observing his vows. One day he went with many other sages to the river Gāṅgā to perform ablutions. There he saw an *apsaras* Ghṛtāci rising from the water after her ablutions were over. She was gently walking on the bank and a sudden breeze blew off her cloth. Seeing her cloth disordered, the sage was smitten with burning desire, whereupon his seed burst forth and the sage immediately held it in a vessel called *droṇa*. Right in that vessel a son was born to the sage and was called Droṇa.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>W.D. O'Flaherty, *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), pp. 39-40.

<sup>7</sup>Audrey Cantlie, "Aspects of Hindu Asceticism" in *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism* (ed.) Ioan Lewis (London: Academic Press, 1977), pp. 247-248; and

Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, 1953) p. 662 and p. 690.

<sup>8</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, (7) 120. 1-15. References are to J.A.B. van Buitenen's translation of the *Mahābhārata* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, (7) 121. 1-5.

The spilling of seed is one of the recurrent motifs in Indian mythology. *Tapas* is equated with sexual heat and hence it has the power of creative qualities. Thus sweat of a man of chastity is compared to seed. The idea of creative *tapas* itself originated from the early Vedic belief in the efficacy of the heat generated by the priest during the ritual and sweating appears throughout the *Vedas* as a product of yogic activity. Śiva wanders naked doing *tapas*, and when he sheds a drop of sweat from his forehead the earth nourishes it and brings forth a child from it.<sup>10</sup>

Although in human terms asceticism is opposed to sexuality and fertility, in mythological terms *tapas* is itself a powerful creative force, a generative power of ascetic heat.<sup>11</sup> The experiments of the *yogins* have led them to the discovery that sex energy is the very energy that man can utilize for the conquest of his own self. The sexually powerful man, if he controls himself can attain any form of power, even conquer the celestial worlds. The *Upanisads* say that one may realize the self by practising *tapas* in the forest, free from passion. Sexual excitement represents a threat against which the ascetic must constantly be on guard.<sup>12</sup> It is because of *tapas* that the ascetic is endowed with supernatural powers, and when a mortal performs great feats of asceticism, the gods become uneasy and send their divine nymphs to tempt the ascetic so that he would shed his seed and lose his power.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the seed spilled by a powerful ascetic is not shed in vain: Likewise, Kṛpa and Droṇa were born unilaterally from the seed spilled by great ascetics even without any fertilizing agents. In both of these creations, the earth and a pot acted as womb's substitutes. Since they were the sons of great ascetics, they became eminent teachers of the science of arms for the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas.

### Creation through the Union of Immortals

The ascetics, apart from creating unilaterally, are also responsible for other types of creations. Since they are endowed with great powers, they grant boons to ordinary mortal beings. These boons help them in times of distress. An example of this can be seen in the case of king Pāṇḍu: One day while Pāṇḍu was roaming in the woods he killed a son of a seer named Kindama, who has been consorting

<sup>10</sup>W.D. O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>12</sup>A. Daniélou, *Hindu Polytheism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 220.

<sup>13</sup>Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works*, (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, 1953), pp. 667-678.

with his wife in the form of a deer. Pāṇḍu was cursed that he would meet the same fate when he approaches his wife lustfully. In order to beget the *Mahābbā-rata* heroes, he allowed his wife to invoke male gods to beget sons by proxy—an instance of the union of the mortal woman with an immortal being. Kuntī was able to invoke the celestial gods through a boon granted by an ascetic Durvāsas for extending great hospitality when he visited her adoptive father Kuntibhoja. Durvāsas, through his spiritual foresight, anticipated the future distress and granted her a boon by which she could summon any of the celestial gods to give her children. Kuntī was in her maidenhood when she received the formula of invocation and out of curiosity, she wanted to test the efficacy of the *mantra*. She summoned the Sun God whom she planted a child in her. Immediately a son was born with natural armour and earring. Out of fear she abandoned the child into the river and was saved by Adhiratha, a *suta* caste and named him Vasuṣena (born with wealth). Indra came to him in disguise as a brahmin and begged for his natural armour and earrings which he cut off from the body and gave him. Hence he came to be called Karṇa (the cutter or peeler of his own cover).<sup>14</sup>

With the help of the same boon, Kuntī invoked the God of Justice-Dharma to beget an offspring. Through this spiritual union Yudhiṣṭhira was born and he became the greatest of the upholder of Law. In the same manner Bhīma was born through the Wind God-Vāyu whose prowess was terrifying. Pāṇḍu instructed his wife, Kuntī, to observe an auspicious vow for one full year while he himself stood on one leg from morning to evening and practised other severe austerities with mind in supreme concentration for gratifying the lord of the celestial-Indra. Finally Indra was satisfied and at the request of Pāṇḍu, Kuntī invoked Indra and begot a son named Arjuna, who would retrieve the fortunes of the Kuru race and spread their fame far and wide. Kuntī helped Mādri to beget two sons — Nakula and Sahādeva — of unsurpassing beauty through the Aśvins. One notable feature in the birth of the five Pāṇḍavas is that the disembodied voice which spoke about their characters and their future accomplishments.<sup>15</sup>

Pāṇḍu's decision to allow his wife beget children through the celestial gods is justified because according to one tradition, a childless man cannot enter heaven even if he has done great austerities. Men are born on earth with four debts, which are to be paid to the ancestors, Gods, seers and men. With sacrifices one pleases the Gods, with study and austerities the seers, with sons and *śrāddhas* the ancestors and with benevolence, men. Pāṇḍu had freed himself from the debts to the seers, Gods and men but not from his debt to the ancestors. Pāṇḍu lacking himself the power of creation due to a curse, persuaded his wife Kuntī to conceive a son from

<sup>14</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 104.1–20.

<sup>15</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 114.1–40; *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 115.1–20.

one of superior austerities.<sup>16</sup> Then the boon of ascetic Durvāsas helped Kuntī to conceive sons by invoking the immortals. The basic reason is to ensure progeny, particularly sons. It is believed that sons are responsible for the ceremonies upon which the peace of their dead depend. Even Vasīṣṭha, the blessed seer, at the request of king Kalmāṣapāda, brought forth a son Aśmaka through the queen to pay his debt to the dynasty of Ikṣvāku and for the furtherance of his lineage.<sup>17</sup> Likewise the curse pronounced upon Pāṇḍu by an ascetic enabled his wife Kuntī to obtain godly sons through a boon, also granted by an ascetic.

### Blood as a Seed Substitute

However, in the case of the birth of Kauravas, the situation is completely reversed:

“One day Gāndhārī entertained Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana with respectful attention when he came to her abode, exhausted with hunger and fatigue. Gratified with Gāndhārī’s hospitality, the sage gave her the boon she asked for, that is, she should have a century of sons equal to her lord in strength and accomplishments.”<sup>18</sup>

Gāndhārī conceived and was carrying her pregnancy for two years without delivering any child. She was unhappy after hearing that Kuntī had given birth to a son, splendid like the morning sun. With hard effort she aborted her pregnancy and a mass of flesh came out of her womb. When she was about to throw it away, kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, knowing everything by his spiritual powers, promptly appeared there. He instructed her to bring hundred pots full of clarified butter and placed them at a concealed spot. Meanwhile he asked her to sprinkle water over the ball of flesh. In course of time the ball of flesh divided into hundred and one pieces, each about the size of the thumb and these parts were deposited in those pots. After two years these pots broke open and in a month’s time a hundred sons and a girl were born, Duryodhana being the first and Duḥsalā, a girl as the hundred and oneth.<sup>19</sup> As soon as Duryodhana was born he began to cry like an ass. Hear-

<sup>16</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7)111.1–15.

<sup>17</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(11) 168.10–15.

<sup>18</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 106.5–10.

<sup>19</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 106.10–25; The story relating to the birth of a girl, Duḥsalā, is found in P.C. Roy’s English translation of the *Mahābhārata* section CXVI pp. 260–261: While Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana began to divide the ball of flesh into parts, Gāndhārī desired to have one daughter over and above the hundred sons. Sensing her affection through his spiritual insight, he divided in a manner to create one part in excess through which a girl, Duḥsalā was born.

ing this inauspicious sound, asses, vultures, jackals and crows responded to his cry. Violent wind began to blow, and there were fires in various directions. The king summoned Bhīṣma, Vidura and the brāhmaṇas, and he was told that these frightful omens' at the birth of the eldest son were the signs indicating that he would be the exterminator of his race.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in this case, eventhough Gāndhārī received a boon to procure sons from Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, she aborted it while she was pregnant. The outflow of menstrual blood in the form of mass of flesh itself is potent and has creative qualities by the interference of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana. Blood appears in a woman either in the form of menstrual or uterine blood (*rajas, puṣpa*). Female (uterine) blood unites with man's semen in order to produce a child. Blood often appears as a metaphor for male semen or as a seed substitute. This is evident from Śiva, who produces a son from the blood of Viṣṇu. Blood, especially menstrual blood, is considered to be inauspicious and is the source of a number of demons.<sup>21</sup> In another myth, a girl was born to the sixty-four *yoginīs* from a drop of their menstrual blood which was fertilized by the shadow of a hawk. This child turned out to be not only a girl but a great eater of men.<sup>22</sup> Thus the birth of Kauravas from the aborted menstrual blood and the inauspicious sounds during the birth of Duryodhana suggest that the characters born from it would have the qualities of demons.

### Conclusion

Thus it would seem that the origin of characters in the *Mahābhārata* is in some way or other connected with ascetics or their power. Not only do they have the power of creating unilaterally, but they are also responsible for the creation of the other characters. Even the great sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, the author of the epic, himself was the product of an ascetic, Parāśara when he was united with Satyawatī on an island in the river Yamunā.<sup>23</sup> Vyāsa was in turn, responsible of the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu by impregnating the widows of Citrāngada and Vicitravīrya through the injunction of the system of levirate.<sup>24</sup> Ascetic power is manifested in bestowing boons and inflicting curses. Kuntī, through the boon obtained from a sage Durvāsas, was able to invoke gods to give her children because

<sup>20</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(17) 107.25–35.

<sup>21</sup>W.D. O'Flaherty, *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>Verrier Elwin, *Myths of Middle India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 420.

<sup>23</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(6) 57.55–70.

<sup>24</sup>*MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 100.1–30.



her husband Pāṇḍu, through the curse of an ascetic Kindama, was unable to obtain children. Likewise Gāndhārī was able to get hundred and one children through a boon granted to her by Vyāsa. Vidura was born through Vyāsa from the womb of a serf as Dharma incarnate as a result of curse pronounced by the great-spirited hermit, Māṇḍavya.<sup>25</sup> Through the sacrifice of two brahmanic seers, Yājña and Upayājña, the famous Dhṛṣṭadyumna was born from the fire and Draupadī came from the middle of an altar.<sup>26</sup> Thus we can safely infer that the origin of the main characters in the *Mahābhārata* is associated with the power of asceticism. It is, therefore, no wonder that the services of the ascetics were often solicited by the kings to give them children for perpetuating their lineage and perform sacrifices for their ancestors.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.* 1(7) 101.1–25.

<sup>26</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(11) 155.1–50.

<sup>27</sup> *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(11) 168.10–15; *MbB. Ādi P.*, 1(7) 98.20–30.

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