

A vexed moral authority

Nor is it purely a Kshatriya view of the universe that is depicted. Bhishma's discourses portray varying Brahmin views as well.

In establishing Bhishma as the supreme moral figure McGrath, despite his splendid efforts, "doth protest too much," becoming repetitive in the latter half of the book. Was Bhishma "an icon of justice"? He spoke of it profusely. Did he exemplify it consistently in action?

*Between the idea
And the reality...
Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response...
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow.*

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Dawn/ann

A very fine point is made in analysing the presence of violent death in the epic. Akbar perceptively called it Razmnama — the Book of War. As in the Greek epics, its depiction is devoid of bodily pain. Death is the truth Bhishma encounters willingly... A review

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McGrath's is the only book-length study of how Bhishma (the terrific) comes to be regarded as the supreme moral authority. So much so that Krishna has him, from his death-bed, lecture Yudhishtira for a period of two months on various aspects of *dharma*, speaking as both prince and priest, instead of doing so himself. The *adharna*-centred eleven books are more than balanced by the two tomes on *dharma*.

To McGrath, morality in the Mahabharata (MB) is fourfold — a behavioural value-system; varying according to conventions; transcendent (the Gita) and personal. This last is also the most vexed. This "terrific" *pitamaha* (grandfather) is celibate and does not continue the lineage. Ambivalence characterises him, torn between duty to the throne and affection for the Pandavas and their rightful claim. McGrath argues that Bhishma's understanding of right conduct stems not from tradition and *shastras* but from the epiphany he experienced during Krishna's peace embassy. His authority stems from the fact that he is the sole true Kuru. This, however, overlooks the existence of his paternal uncle Bahlka.

Following Russell Blackford, McGrath sees Bhishma's authority in three dimensions — "objective moral" (the Pandavas' right to rule); "inescapable practical" (loyalty as an employee of Duryodhana) and "transcendent" (gladly falling to Arjuna's arrows). He lends the epic the overtone of normative action and it's his expression in speech that influences the audience so powerfully even today.

The beauty of the MB is that everyone believes he has a right to act as he does. It is the wide variation in these views that, McGrath argues fascinatingly, produces the clash between *adharna* and *adharna*, not *dharma* and *adharna*. But would that not mean that Bhishma's "objective moral authority" favouring the Pandavas is *adharna*? McGrath makes the very striking point that the MB is about *adharna* as it deals with the onset of the "impoverished" Kali Yuga when *dharma* stands on just one foot. Thus, only a fourth of all action and speech are dharmic. All characters are, therefore, compromised. For Bhishma "Kinship is the absolute, not ethics." That is why this is such an existential poem and in that rests its tragic appeal.

The conundrum of Bhishma keeping Karna out of the war for ten days (like Achilles sulking in his tents) is not reconciled with his duty to Duryodhana.

Similarly, Karna, despite his much-vaunted loyalty to Duryodhana, does not capture Yudhishtira after trouncing him. With both the sense of personal honour supersedes loyalty. Both are displaced eldest sons, a leitmotif in the epic. One parent of both is divine. Yet, of them only Bhishma is "the egotistical sublime."

McGrath remarks on the curious absence of any reference to Harappan culture (Shiva?) and very few to Shramanic tradition which ran alongside. Romila Thapar suggests that the former was a matrilineal society. The matriline begins with Satyavati having her mixed-caste son Vyasa continue Shantanu's line. It is visible in her overwhelming influence over Bhishma and of Kunti, her nephew Krishna and Draupadi over the Pandavas. The MB portrays a Yadava take-over with the great-grandsons of Kunti and her nephew Krishna ruling Hastinapura and Indraprastha. McGrath argues, "it is his (Bhishma's) role to advance this Yadava coup." A late Buddhist text lists Gujarat as one of the *pancha-dravida* lands. Some of the stories Bhishma tells are similar to Buddhist *jatakas*.

McGrath is the first to point out by concealing Karna's identity Kunti is culpable for the partition that culminates in war. Kunti's causation of the "bheda" is structural, while Draupadi's is temporal, constantly goading her husbands towards the holocaust. Their influence is far more pervasive than those of Kryseis and Briseis in the *Iliad* to whom McGrath compares them.

Seven crises are identified in Bhishma's story, which bring about his fall — the abduction of Amba; his appointing Drona as royal tutor knowing his deadly animosity against Drupada; his advice favouring partition; his offering the supreme honour to Krishna in the *rajasuya yagya*; his aloofness in the dice game; his silence about Karna's birth; and his acceptance of marshal-ship in Kurukshetra. Even the code of war he prescribes is violated during his marshal-ship. Bhishma is at the very core of the collapse of order in the narrative.

McGrath alone has pointed out that Bhishma's reluctance to fight his guru prefigures Arjuna's predicament. Both events occur at Kurukshetra, which is also the scene of the philosophical discourses of Bhishma and Krishna, both eighth sons. McGrath argues that the theophany to which Krishna exposes Bhishma in Dhritarashtra's court engenders a detachment whereby he can fight against those his heart favours and accept death. Bhishma never loses control whereas Krishna loses his composure and attacks him. He is the only character who is truly detached from his own



Kevin McGrath

self, even revealing how he can be slain.

The special death that Bhishma, Drona and Vidura undergo, suggests McGrath, is a result of the theophany experienced during Krishna's embassy. Vidura, however, dies not in the Mausala Parva as stated but in the *Ashramavasika Parva*. McGrath feels that Bhishma "is the truest practitioner of Krishna's Gita teaching... able to practise vairagya" in action, unconcerned about the fruits of his acts. Bhishma alone sings paeans to Krishna. His is a profound moral understanding of the cosmos, symbolised by the *hamsa* (swooses) who appear when he falls.

McGrath asserts that Bhishma's discourses on governance form the template of the Gupta imperial rule, being quite different from the type of kingship modelled by Yudhishtira where power is shared (with brothers and Krishna) and revenge is sought for justice. What Bhishma depicts at very great length is a codified system of judgment that we find in the *dharmashastras* and Kautilya. Though common in late bronze age cultures (Hittite, Assyrian, Judaic), nowhere is it as encyclopaedic.

In the process he speaks in multifarious voices (McGrath counts as many as 280!) revealing a massive store of oral tradition replete with moral tales of incredible variety, always without emotion, despite the intense anguish he has suffered far longer than anyone else. Despite that lifelong suffering he has not deviated from his principles. This sets him on a moral pedestal because of which his authority extends well beyond the poem into all audiences.

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multiplicity of metaphors transmutes bloodshed into poetic beauty making death aesthetically appealing to the audience. Death is the truth Bhishma encounters willingly. This dwelling upon the fine margin of transition from one state of existence to another constitutes the unique splendour of the MB. Very sensitively McGrath refers to the World War poets who shrouded carnage in beauty and sadness instead of horror. He turns our attention to Anandavardhana's assertion that the purpose of the MB is to generate disillusionment with worldly life for leading to peace and liberation. Hence, the predominant presence of death. "Kurukshetra, the site of so much deadly and lethal violence, is the source and ground of generation for the lovely aesthetics and moral semantics of this work."

The concluding section is a fascinating analysis of how the redactors arranged the poem to secure moral influence. PL Vaidya is mistaken in asserting that the recitations by Vyasa's pupils retained the same contents with different wording. The content of Jaimini's version (two *parvas* found so far) is vastly different. In the many passages Bhishma's discourses share with Bhrigu's Manusmriti the Bhargava hand is clear. Bhrigu's name occurs 135 times. Indeed, the MB begins with tales of Bhrigu's lineage. Through Bhishma's defeat of the Bhargava superhero Parashurama were the editors projecting him as their dharma-icon? Even the Gita is embedded in the Bhishma Parva. McGrath likens their work to that of Lonnrot with the Finnish Kalevala, of Virgil with the Aeneid and of Wagner with The Ring cycle.

McGrath is the only scholar besides Andre Couture to bring to bear insights from the Harivansha on the MB. He points out its use of the word *lekha*, "signs" or "writing" (114.27) indicating that much after the epic's composition its written form became authoritative instead of oral performance. That is why the merit

accruing from listening to the MB includes gifting a copy of it.

McGrath does not clarify how Duryodhana displays magus or shaman-like characteristics. Nor is it that the Dhartarashtras have no cult status. Temples to Duryodhana (and Karna), Shakuni and Gandhari exist in Garhwal, Kerala and Bangalore. It is not correct that Bhishma is not worshipped anywhere. Allahabad has a temple to him in Daraganj. Narkatari Temple with a "Bhishma Kund" at Kurukshetra commemorates him.

Spot Light
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