

Study Material

Module No: 1

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Topic: Dicing Game

Significance of the game of dice in the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata, the longest Sanskrit epic, is a story of two sets of paternal first cousin who became the bitter rivals with each other. The epic revolves around the struggle for the throne of Hastinapura. The two collateral branches of the family that participate in the struggle are the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The Kauravas were collectively the hundred sons of the blind king Dhritarashtra and the Pandavas were the five sons of Pandu. The five brothers named Yudhistira (eldest son), Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva were always obedient and dutiful. Draupadi was the common wife of the five Pandavas. The Kauravas behaved viciously and brutally towards the Pandavas in many ways. Their malice displayed itself when they took advantage of the eldest Pandava, Yudhistira in a game of dice.

Living in the new territory of Indraprastha, Yudhistira turns his poor land into a wealthy kingdom, and declares himself King of Kings. Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, is jealous and humiliated on his visit to the magnificent palace. He mistakes a glass floor for a pool, then later falls into a pool thinking it is glass. Draupadi and Bhima laugh at him. He returns home bent on devising their destruction.

Game of dice

Duryodhana follows the advice of his uncle, the cunning Sakuni, an infamous dice player, and invites Yudhistira to a game of dice. They know well that gambling is Yudhistira's one weakness. Vidura is sent to invite the Pandavas to visit Hastinapura and play a dice game there.

Yudhistira accepts the invitation. Both Dhritharashtra and Yudhistira ignore Vidura's warning to avoid the game which may result to a destructive consequence. Sakuni was confident that he could defeat Yudhistira easily and thus Duryodhana could fulfil his ill-motive of outdoing the Pandavas.

Before the dicing, a lot of discussions were there, but Yudhistira is obliged to play. But Sakuni comes in to play for Duryodhana. During the dicing event Yudhishtira stakes his wealth, Jewelry, Indprastha, and the belongings of his brothers one by one and loses one by one. Sakuni mocks and provokes Yudhistira at each stage and demands to stake. He thus loses his brothers Nakula, Sahadeva. The Sakuni mocks him that at best those are the stepbrothers he lost, but Arjuna and Bhima are not so and he won't bet them. This forces Yudhistira to stake Arjuna, and his liberty at the stake as demanded by Sakuni.

At this moment of his complete defeat including himself, Yudhistira is again mocked to stake Draupadi. Yudhistira stakes Draupadi and loses her also. There were strong reactions from the assembly when Yudhistira staked her. Draupadi questions the legality of staking her when she was forced and dragged in front of the assembly. There were favouring reactions to her questions. Interestingly, Vikarna, a younger brother of Duryodhana, reacts in support of Draupadi. He says courageously that Yudhistira is enticed to play the game deeply plotted by Duryodhana and Sakuni. And that a lost Yudhistira has not the right to stake Draupadi. The assembly supported him. But Karna silenced him, by saying that he is too young before the others in that hall.

Duryodhana in the open court chides Draupadi and invites her to sit on his thigh, patting and baring his thigh. He orders Dussasana to disrobe her in front of the court. Dussasana begins to execute the act. But Draupadi cannot be bared. She is endowed with the divine grace of being in new dress to whatever extent the clothes are pulled by

Dussasana .The strong Dussasana fails and becomes exhausted . The Assembly stands stunned at the miracle. Bhima sends shivering signals by oath that he will tear open the Dussasana's heart and drink the blood of him,and he shall break the thigh of the Duryodhana on which Draupadi was tauntingly invited to sit. The invincible Draupadi by the divine blessing made Dhritarashtra still more afraid of the Pandavas. He asks the pardon of Draupadi and releases all that was won on the dicing events.

Of course, dissatisfied at Dhritarashtra's act Sakuni and Duryodhana once again plead before Dhritarashtra for another dice game with Yudhistira. In the second spell of dicing event, Yudhistira is again defeated and is forced to go on exile for 12 years.The condition is that they should live in forests and pass the 13th year in disguise without being identified by anybody. If they are identified by anybody during the period of disguise ,they should repeat 12 years of exile in forest and the 13th year in disguise.

Thus losers in the deceitful act of gambling, and insulted by Kauravas, the Pandavas started for their exile in forest . Vidura told Yudhistira to allow mother Kunthi to stay back as she was old and weak. Yudhistira agreed .Draupadi, however , accompanied her husbands to the forest. Duryodhana became the de facto ruler of both Hastinapura and Indraprastha.

The Pandavas are not alone in the forest but are followed by many loyal Brahmins and servants.The gods give them an inexhaustible supply of food for all of them. The Pandavas reached Kamyak forest and decided to rest there for a while .Krishna came to help them. After inquiring about their well being, he advised Pandavas to be vigilant and not to lose heart. The ordeal they had to face was for their good. Good and bad experience are essential to get correct perspective and fulfillment of life. Suffering and sorrow bring requisite feeling of renunciation essential to

seek higher goal in life.

The future of the Pandavas was determined by the game of dice . The had to undergo plight and suffering due to their defeat in the game. Yudhistira's temptation brought about that unexpected consequence. His wife Draupadi and his younger brothers fell victims to the horrible experience .The tragic fact of the Kauravas was another consequence of the dice game.

Gambling is an immortal action. It most often favours the evils. The gamblers do not hesitate to adopt unfair means to win the game anyhow.A man with morality is likely to get defeated in gambling. The ultimate result of the game of dice id the bloody battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The war of Kurukshetra fought between them brings about ultimate downfall of the Kauravas. The victory of the Pandavas symbolizes the victory of the victorious over the evil.

The Game of Dice

The pivotal movement in Mahabharata is the game of dice. Several questions arise: why should a game be a part of a ceremony as solemn as Rajsuya Yagya? Even if there has to be a game why should it be a game of dice rather than a game of skill and valor? Further, why should the whole action turn on the outcome of this game of dice?. One reason could be that the game of dice represents the unforeseen challenges that a king must endure during his reign. India.

Significance of a Game or a Sport

A sport or a game can be seen on at least two levels. Creation in Hinduism is regarded as God's 'lila'. This 'lila' takes place both on the level of God and the level of man. Hence, we have Ramlila, Krishnalila and the like that are enactments or 'lilas' performed by human being of the lives or the earthly 'lilas' of Rama or Krishna¹. 'Lila' in English is translated as 'sport' but this is a very inadequate word. In any case, there is no element of frivolity associated with 'lila' that may be associated with sport though the 'lila' itself may be sportive. 'Lila' can be a game or a theatrical performance. The world is a sports field or a play. God creates out of sheer joy not because he wants to acquire or own what he creates. He also neither creates out of necessity nor because he has any duty to create. However, since the world is his creative field or 'lila', an unknown tale that unfolds, it enables man to accept or transcend personal as well as public tragedy by seeing it as God's mysterious play. Also, if this is God's 'lila' it is a make believe and unreal work in which man can only his role as it comes to him as the events group and regroup kaleidoscopically. Every time the equilibrium is disturbed, the universe regroup or readjusts unfolding unpredictable situations. Although the work is a 'lila', a sport or a play, and hence unreal it has a tremendous impact because man is both an actor and a witness in this cosmic play. Man parallels God's 'lila' by himself performing 'lila' through which several issues pertaining to human life can be explored and resolved for the moment.²

At another level, a sport or a game too can be seen as a make-believe arena or even a theater of war in which winning or losing becomes a life and death matter³. In Mahabharata, the game of dice is an attempt to settle an issue through play that can otherwise only get resolved through a decisive war. As Sakuni says,

The fortune over which you have been grieving after you saw it at Pandu's son Yudhishtira's, I shall take it from him, let the enemy be challenged ! I shall take no risk, nor fight a battle in front of armies; I shall throw the dice and, whole of body and wise, defeat the fools! Be sure, the dice are my bows and arrows, the heart of dice my string, the dicing rug, my chariot! 4 The Dicing (51.1)

Why a Game of Dice

Dicing is a part of the religious and cultural history of India. Gambling has two significance in religion. It is usually discouraged or prohibited. In Hinduism gamblers are associated with thieves, assassins and other depraved characters. They are dangerous characters utterly devoid of truth. Dhritrashtra himself knows the perils of dicing. He tells Duryodhana:

Enough of dicing, son of Gandhari, Vidura does not approve of it. Nor would he, in his great sagacity, tell us aught that is in bad faith that I think Vidura is speakingfor gambling is found to be divisive. At a breach the kingdom perishes, therefore avoid it, son. The Dicing (46.1)

Yudhishtira too knows the dangers. When Vidura goes to invite him to the game on behalf of Dhritrashtra, he says :

At a dicing, Steward, we surely shall quarrel.

Who, knowing this, will consent to a game? The Dicing (52.1)

Vidura is equally sure that the game will bring disaster. The most dangerous gamblers have been assembled by Dhritrashtra but, Yudhishtira feels compelled to accept :

It is the King Dhritrashtra's behest

So, I will not refuse, sage to go to the game

A son will always respect the father:

I shall, Vidura, do as thou tellest me.

I am not, unwilling to play Sakuni,

I were, would recklessly challenge

In that hall...Once challenged I will not refuse,

For so I have sworn for eternity. The Dicing (52.1)

Yudhishtira is well aware that he is going to his ruin:

Fate takes away our reason

As glare blinds the eye.
Man bound as with nooses
Obeys the Placer's sway. The Dicing (52.1)

Then why does Yudhishtira knowingly go to his doom? Perhaps because it is a part of the Rajasuya Yagya that Yudhishtira is performing and he feels he is honor bound to follow the rules and not because he has a weakness for gambling as Sakuni would have us believe. In any case up to this point there is no incident, which exhibits this weakness in Yudhishtira. The dice game follows the uncton and the chariot drive in the ritual. However, the question still remains why should a game and that too a game of dice be a part of the rituals of Rajasuya Yagya.

Dicing seems to have a special significance when connected with myths and rituals. Shiva and Parvati play dice and dicing is also a part of Deepawali the beginning of the financial year in Hindu Society. Dicing involves uncertainty, chance, the vagaries of fortune. The dice game is representative of the challenges that a king must endure during his reign. How is a king to seal with them?

Chance As An Essential Part of Creation

Chance appears to be an intrinsic part of the evolutionary development of the world. Random events seems to operate within an over-arching law-like framework. As Elizabeth A. Johnson has pointed out the mechanistic view of the world associated with Newtonian physics has been replaced by twentieth century science by a dynamic, open-ended view of the world in which some events are in principle unpredictable, although in retrospect they may make sense⁵. At the micro level of the atom and its subatomic particle quantum mechanics uncovers a realm where time, space and matter behave according to laws that have uncertainty built into them. For example, while it is possible to predict how long a certain mass of radioactive uranium will take to decompose, it is impossible to say which atom will decompose next and why. This may be because our scientific instruments are still not sophisticated enough but more likely because reality itself has an element of indeterminacy. At the macro level, a butterfly fluttering its wings in Beijing may set up an air current that may magnify into a storm in New to a storm in New York. While the effect of each such individual action can be predicted, the number of such initial conditions that will take place and the effect of their confluence cannot and hence the final outcome also cannot be predicted.

The evolutionary process too is still going on. It is a process of subtle interplay between chance and law. For example, the mutation of genes that give rise to new life forms. Natural selection then rewards the ones that adapt themselves to their environment. They not only survive but also reproduce. This process goes on and on with a hundred thousand variables, dead ends and breakthroughs⁶.

The emergence of human mind from matter shows the wondrous ability of matter to organize itself to bring forth the truly new from within itself. Or, as Sri Aurobindo would put it, from the inconscient which had the potential life in it, arose a rich diversity of physical systems and forms in a long complex sequence of self-ordering processes to the point that mind emerged from matter and then this mind seeks to understand the process of how it came to be. The evolutionary interpretation of the mind as emergent from within the process of matter itself organization leads to a holistic, non-dualistic idea of a human person. A human being is not composed of two distinct elements of body and mind but is a single entity whose physical structure supports the emergence of the mind.

Out of this apparent in science each potentiality is revealed in its turn, first organized matter concealing the indwelling Spirit, the Life emerging in the plant and associated in the animal with a growing Mind, the Mind itself evolved and organized in Man⁷.

As Elizabeth Johnson says,

Mind is not some extraneous element glued on to the brain at some stage of evolution. Consciousness is a power that emerges gradually in and through the increasing complexity of those intricately ramified and interlaced structures of the brain. We are the universe become conscious of itself. Therefore, material physical reality is richer in possibilities than we are accustomed to think.⁸

Thus, the laws of nature require the workings of chance if matter is explore its full range of possibilities and emerge towards richness and complexity. Without chance, the potentialities of the universe would go unactualized. This has implications for human consciousness and freedom. Just as the material world moves towards a larger consciousness and freedom. Just as the material world moves towards a larger evolutionary purpose so too the human consciousness evolves but is free to explore the conditions for the emergence of free and conscious human being as part of the universe. The 'Placer's sway', then, to use Yudhishtira's words is not the traditional one of omniscient

and omnipotent God who creates and sustains the world, laying down the natural law and miraculously intervening when the occasion requires. It is God.

Waiting upon the world, patiently acting through its natural processes including unpredictable, uncontrollable random events to bring about the emergence of the new while consistently urging the whole towards fullness of life.⁹

If this be the case, the question arises what is the nature of Krishna's intervention on behalf of Draupadi.

The Role of Krishna

Interestingly, Krishna is absent during the game of dice except of intervene on Draupadi's behalf. Although he has been an active participant up to that time. He stays for a while after the marriage of Draupadi to the Pandavas. He is present at the division of the kingdom and helps Arjuna clear up the forest tracts. He asks Maya to build the Pandavas a magnificent hall for the Pandavas. He aids Arjuna in abducting his own sister Saubhadra, stays for the marriage and even for their marriage and even for the birth of their son Abhimanyu. He advises Yudhishtira on the Rajasuya and sees to its successful completion through killing of Jarasandha and Sisupala. He then has to rush to because he has been attacked by Salva enraged by his brother Sisupala's death. Hence, the overt reason for his absence from the dice game. However, as Alf Hildebeitel has pointed out, Krishna's absence is necessary because otherwise the outcome would have been different¹⁰. Even if he had been present at Dwarka when the game was announced at Hastinapur he says, he would have come to Hastinapur to prevent it. As Narayana, or the Divine perhaps he can only be a witness to the unfolding of events as individuals exercise their freedom of choice and the universal order arranges and rearranges itself accordingly. The canvas of the dice game is the test of a king's ability to uphold dharma in the face of all unforeseen eventualities is Yudhishtira's field of action. However, he cannot allow Draupadi to suffer the final humiliation because she is his soulmate, sakhi, another aspect of himself, another Krishna and his consort Sri to his Vishnu or Narayana. Once, dharma is lost it has to be re-established and hence the war in which Krishna plays an active role of inspiring and motivating without actually taking up arms.

The Game of Dice and What is at Stake

Vidura goes with the invitation to Yudhishtira although he is opposed to it. Why is he asked to go and why does he do it? One, of course, because he is the king's counselor but also because he has a very special place in the society of Mahabharata. He is born of the union of a brahmin who is outside the material realm and a slave or a sudra who is outside the realm of society itself. Thus, he is truly a neutral party able to cross the boundaries of caste and hierarchies and yet not a part of baronial intrigues. Besides he is dharma himself while Yudhishtira is the son of dharma. That is, in this game of dice, the dharma has to be tested. That is why Sakuni can be unethical but not Yudhishtira.

The crossing of boundaries forms an interesting motif in Mahabharata¹¹. All the Pandavas are both human but also have divine origins, as does Bhishma. Draupadi is both Yagneseni and Sri the consort of Indra. Examples can be multiplied – Dhritadyumna and Ghatotkacha come to mind. Karna's position is particularly ambiguous. He like the Pandavas is the son of Kunti and a god, the Sun, but he is born before Kunti's marriage to Pandu. He is thus, not only both human and divine but also both a Pandava and not a Pandava.

Yudhishtira is beset by conflict in this crossing of boundaries¹². He is a kshatriya who aspires to be a brahmin, not wanting to deal with worldly desires or possessions. By the laws of primogeniture he has to take the reigns of kingship but he is a reluctant king who would rather not deal with the mundane world. He is not even sure that he is qualified to perform the rajasuya but Krishna assures him that he is because he is possessed of all royal virtues or gunas – truth, industry, non-envy, forbearance and firmness. He is the king of dharma. The one who rules is the one who serves. All these qualify him to be Supreme Ruler.

Krishna also points out to Yudhishtira that for him to become a universal sovereign, baronial agreement is necessary. For this, Jarasandha has to be defeated. He was the King of Magadha who was all powerful. He had defeated Krishna himself and had to be killed to smoothen Yudhishtira's path. It is interesting that Krishna prevaricates in order to convince Yudhishtira and Arjuna uses arguments similar to those of Duryodhana while convincing Dhritrashtra. Also, stratagem and deceit are used to kill Jarasandha who was valiant and noble. This parallels the deceit during the game of dice and during the war itself. Again, it is a question of crossing the boundaries between dharma and adharma.

Now, what is to be settled through the game of dice? The main issue is one of kingdom and

succession. The laws of primogeniture demand that the eldest must succeed. However, for several generations this has not been possible and now things have come to a point when the issue has to be resolved. The issue of succession between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is not a simple one of good over evil. Duryodhana certainly has as strong a case as Yudhishtira.

The issue of succession has been a long-standing one in this family. Santanu, father of Devavrata of Bhishma fell in love with Satyawati, a fisherman's daughter. He married her on the promise that her son would inherit the kingdom and to ensure that he took a vow that not only would he never stake his claim but also that he would not marry so that there would be no successors to him. Hence the law of primogeniture was violated. Then, Santanu had two sons, Citrangada and Vicitravirya of whom Citrangada the elder dies before getting married. Vicitravirya has two wives Amba and Ambalika but dies before having any children. Vyasa, Satyawati's illegitimate son from Parasara begets sons on the widows according to the rules of Niyoga. Dhritrashtra, the elder, is born blind and hence cannot succeed. Pandu, the younger therefore becomes the king once again violating primogeniture. He is however, under a curse that he will die at the moment of intercourse. Hence, sons are born to Kunti and Madri, the two wives through niyoga. Santanu himself was the younger son of Rstisena who had got himself installed as king over his elder brother Devapi. Devapi retired to the forest to practice austerities. Santanu was cursed with a drought of twelve years and he had to finally implore Devapi's help who acts as a priest and gets rain¹³. Thus, for four generations at least before Duryodhana the question of succession has not been settled. In the case of Duryodhana and the Yudhishtira the rule of primogeniture becomes even more difficult to employ. Duryodhana is the eldest son of Dhritrashtra who was elder to his brother Pandu and who should have been the king but for his blindness. Hence, Duryodhana's claim as being the eldest son of the rightful kind. However, his younger brother Yudhishtira the eldest son of the rightfully king. Hence, if the Kuru branch is taken as a whole, Yudhishtira is the eldest son. If the claims of Dhritrashtra and Pandu are examined separately, Duryodhana is the rightful heir. The claims being equally balanced leads to a division of the kingdom and Duryodhana's dissatisfaction. Thus, by this generation the skein has got so tangled that perhaps it can only be resolved through the roll of a dice. The game of dice, then, could have solved the succession but for Sakuni's unethical meddling which in a sense nullifies the game.

What does Yudhishtira stake? To begin with all his wealth because he knows that wealth is useless without power. Then, follows the city, the country and his people's property that are symbols of power because power is not worth fighting for as long as dharma remains. Finally go the brothers – Nakula and Sahdeva who represent wealth; and then Arjuna and Bhima who represent power¹⁴. Finally goes Yudhishtira, king Dharma himself causing transgression of 'lakshman rekha' requiring the cosmos to realign itself and so necessitating a war by which the balance can be restored and dharma reinstated. At a material level the aim of the game should have been over after winning Yudhishtira. Then, why does Sakuni challenge Yudhishtira to stake Draupadi? Perhaps once dharma is lost, honor too is lost. This is the lowest point to which the Kurus could fall. Also, Draupadi is seen as an embodiment of Sri, the consort of Lord Indra. Sri is the embodiment of sovereignty. Therefore, there cannot be any sovereignty without Sri. She has also been associated with pre-Aryan fertility goddesses who traditionally bestow wealth. However, her gift is not freely given. It has to be begged through ritual and sacrifice. Also, in order to get Sri, one has to give it away and then regain it through ritual. Yudhishtira literally gives his Sri away by gambling Draupadi. That is why it is Draupadi who frees Yudhishtira and his brothers through the two boons granted by Dhritrashtra.¹⁵

The game at this point remains inconclusive because the validity of the final and the most vital stake of Draupadi has been made ambiguous by her raising the question of dharma of whether Yudhishtira wagered her before losing himself after. Since no one can answer this question including Yudhishtira, Bhishma and Vidura the game can only be considered as interrupted. In any case, the question of succession and kingship has not been resolved. Yudhishtira feels compelled to return to the game when called upon to do so. There is the final stake that he loses and is compelled to go into the thirteen year exile.

The game of dice takes place between the Kauravas and the Pandavas two branches of the same tree. This is the first time that an actual conflict of succession has taken place in which two sides have staked their claim for which they are willing to fight to the finish. At a metaphysical level this can also be seen as conflict within a divided self. One portion of the self wins through stratagem and aggression – cheating and insulting Draupadi. However, this position is not reconcilable and hence one half of the divided self has to be banished, hence the exile of the Pandavas. Even this cannot resolve the crisis of the divided self. A true resolution can only be found by confronting the dilemma or the

ambiguity of succession and not by side stepping it. Hence, the game of dice cannot substitute the actual confrontation of war. The cheating at the game is played out in a larger arena in which every preconceived notion of ethics is wiped out – Yudhishtira cannot tell lies but he does; Krishna vows not to fight but takes up his arms against Bhishma; the dharmayudha degenerates into butchery and naked lust for power. In a way what Mahabharata shows is that all these presuppositions are childish, that all is lila. As Sri Aurobindo points out, “God’s lila in man moves always in a circle, from a Satyuga to Kaliyuga and through Kaliyuga to the Satyayuga from the age of gold to the age of iron and back again through the iron to the gold.... Bout the Kaliyuga is not merely evil, in it the necessary conditions are progressively built up for a new Satyayuga, another harmony, a more advanced perfection”¹⁶ .

1. See, Anuradha Kapur, “Actors, pilgrims, kings and gods; the Ramlila at Ramnagar,” Contributions to Indian Sociology (n.s.) 19, 1 (1985)pp.57-73.
2. Norvan Hmi, “Lila”.

William S.Sax, ed. The Gods at Play, New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1955, pp.13-14.

1. See “Play in where Life Lives”, Excerpt from Dr.Sheetan on Running, [http: www. geogesheehan. com/essays/essay 15. html](http://www.geogesheehan.com/essays/essay15.html).
2. All quotations of Mahabharata are taken from J.A.B. Van Buitenen, trans. and ed., Mahabharata. Chicago Press, 1971.
3. Elizabeth A.Johnson, “Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and chance,” Theological Studies, Vol.56 (1996), pp.3-18. Republished on [http: // www. aaas. org/ spp/ dspp/ EVOLUT/ JOHNSON. htm](http://www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/EVOLUT/JOHNSON.htm), p.2.

1. Ibid., pp.2-3

2. A Practical Guide to Integral Yoga : Extracts compiled from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1955 rpt.1998, p.190.

8. Elizabeth A.Johnson, p.3.

9 Ibid.,p.10.

10. All Hildebeitel, The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahabharata , Itheca & London: Cornell University Press, 1976, pp.87-88.

1. Todd London, Maureen Ferris, Melissa Buckner, and Teddy Wong. Seminar in Mahabharata : The Rajasurya, [http: // www. Rochester. edu/ College/ REL/ 310/ Weeks](http://www.Rochester.edu/College/REL/310/Weeks), p.1
 - o Ibid.
 - o J.A.B. Van Buitenen, Trans. and ed., Mahabharata, p.xviii.
 - o Todd London, Maureen Ferris, Melissa Buckner, and Teddy Wong, Seminar in Mahabharata : The Rajasurya, pp.4-5.
 - o Ibid.,pp.6-7.
 - o A Practical Guide to Integral Yoga,p.21.