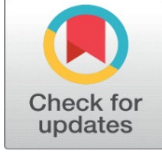
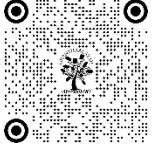


ŚAKUNI REIMAGINED: FOLK NARRATIVES AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF VILLAINY IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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ABSTRACT

The lasting allure of the Mahābhārata stems from its ability to evolve, enabling society to revisit and reinterpret its narrative over time. This reinvention also offers its so-called 'villains,' who are often relegated to the 'rogues' gallery, an opportunity for redemption. Śakuni, the cunning maternal uncle of the Kauravas, is one such character. While Vyāsa's epic paints him as a negative figure, folk interpretations offer alternative perspectives. In Saralā Das's Oriyā Mahābhārata, Śakuni is depicted not as the chief architect of the war, but rather as a victim of the political machinations within the Kaurava court. Likewise, sympathetic portrayals of Śakuni can be found in the Kalbelia traditions of Rajasthan and in the folk renditions from Kerala. This research employs narrative technique to challenge the vilification of Śakuni. Using psychoanalytical criticism and deconstruction, it seeks to explore lesser-known narratives and reconsider Śakuni's role, freeing him from filial blame and repositioning him in the epic's broader universe.

Keywords: Mahābhārata, Śakuni, Indian Epics, Indian Mythology, Oriyā Mahābhārata, Indian Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

Sanskrit rendition of the Mahābhārata, portrays Śakuni as a cunning and deceitful figure who orchestrated the Pandava's defeat in the game of dice through dishonest means. Using loaded dice that responded to his will, he caused the Pandavas to lose their wealth, kingdom, and ultimately, their own freedom. The most grievous loss, however, occurred when Draupadī, the shared wife of the Pandavas, was staked and lost in the game. Draupadī, disheveled and menstruating, was dragged into the Kaurava court, pleading for justice. Duḥśāśana, one of the Kaurava brothers, attempted to publicly strip her of her sari. However, her heartfelt prayers to Lord Kṛṣṇa were answered, and her sari became endlessly long, protecting her honor in the midst of the Kaurava court.

1.1. THE CULTURAL MARGINALIZATION OF ŚAKUNI AND DISABILITY

Sanskrit rendition of the Mahābhārata, depicts Śakuni as a deceitful figure, instrumental in the Pandava's downfall during the dice game. At his urging, Yudhiṣṭhira wagered Draupadī, leading to her loss and public humiliation. Śakuni had also previously misled the Kauravas, attempting to poison Bhīma and burn the Pandavas along with Kuntī, in the infamous 'House of Lac' (Lākshā Griha). He also devised the plan to exile the Pandavas for 12 years, followed by one year of incognito living. Knowing the Pandavas couldn't be defeated in battle, Śakuni counseled Duryodhana to rely on deceit,

exploiting Yudhiṣṭhira's adherence to Kshatriya chivalry, and manipulated the dice game to humiliate Draupadī, ultimately inciting Bhīma's vow to kill Duṣṣāsana, setting the stage for war.

However, other versions of the epic are more sympathetic towards Śakuni. In Saralā Das's Oriyā Mahābhārata from the 15th century, Śakuni is presented not as a villain but as a victim. According to Patnaik (2012), Śakuni was the traumatized son of Subala, King of Gāndhāra, who was imprisoned and starved to death by Duryodhana. Subala, before his death, extracted a promise from Śakuni to avenge their family's suffering (Patnaik 2-3). Duryodhana, angered by the belief that Gāndhārī's father had deceived him by marrying her to a tree before Dhṛtarāṣṭra to counter a planetary curse, took his revenge by torturing Subala and his sons (Patnaik 10). Satpathy and Nayak suggest that while Saralā Das introduced "startling changes" to the epic, he adhered to the core principles of the Sanskrit version, allowing for adaptation over time (Satpathy & Nayak 8). They argue that the dynamic nature of the Mahābhārata's retelling allows it to accommodate various interpretations and perspectives, leading to its continuous evolution (Satpathy & Nayak 11).

Chaturvedi (2019) examines the cultural and contextual marginalization of disabled individuals, highlighting how they are often defined by their disabilities and perceived as 'faulty' or 'damaged' (p. 67). He offers a critical analysis of the karmic framework of disability, arguing that it perpetuates ableism and imposes an unwarranted stigma on a natural physiological condition. Chaturvedi also draws attention to other characters in Indian epics who faced similar marginalization, such as Mantharā, the dwarf blamed for manipulating Queen Kaikeyi in the Rāmāyana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who was denied the throne due to his blindness, Kubjā, the hunchback whom Kṛṣṇa restored to 'normalcy,' and Alakshmi, Lakshmi's disabled sister who was rejected by Vishnu (Chaturvedi, 2019, p. 71). These narratives have influenced social discourse by associating disability with sinister, as demonstrated by depiction of Śakuni and other impaired figures. 'Karma' was closely tied to fate, casting disability as a form of retribution. Figures like Śakuni, the 'lame' uncle, and the sage Ashtāvakra, born with physical deformities due to a curse, exemplify this karmic association of disability with misfortune.

The association of disability with moral transgression, coupled with societal emphasis on physical fitness, deepens the divide between 'disabled' and 'non-disabled.' Chaturvedi contends impaired individuals must not be perceived through traditional norms that categorise those people as deficient or incomplete. He laments the lack of scholarly focus on the complex perspectives required to understand disability. According to Chaturvedi, "Karma is a cultural construct central to the Hindu belief system, reinforcing a moral order that casts disability in a negative light" (2019, p. 71). Śakuni, the limping uncle who became notorious in popular culture, remains etched in the memories of those who watched the 1980s television adaptation, where Goofy Paintal's portrayal heightened the negative physicality already emphasized in Vyāsa's Mahābhārata. Poruthiyil highlights Kantian reflective judgments as a way to prevent the misinterpretation of moral lessons from religious epics, warning against drawing unsubstantiated conclusions from texts like the Mahābhārata or Bhagavad Gita (2012, p. 78).

Bhembre, referencing manuscript 771 held at the National Library in Braga, Portugal, highlights the significance of keeping an open mind in discussions (2005, p. 173). These codices, authored in Konkani by Krishandas Sharma in the late 15th century, portray the characters of the Mahābhārata as fully human, complete even with imperfections. The oral traditions of the Konkan region similarly present the epic's characters as fallible and capable of change (Bhembre, 2005, p. 173). During festivals, the indigenous groups of this region come together to perform folk interpretations, including Gudulyā Kanni and Banvād. While these performances in-act main plot of the Mahābhārata's Sanskrit version, they are localized to reflect regional messages. The transcreators blend epic characters with local figures in these narratives. In one such version, Śakuni, depicted in a morally ambiguous role where he seeks an accomplice to set fire to the House of Lac. He is rejected by a penniless barber but accepted by a wealthy businessman of questionable ethics. Bhembre suggests that this invented story is a reflection of the society of the time, challenging the notion that poverty equates to dishonesty or wealth to integrity (2005, p. 174). He concludes that this tradition of rationalization through reinterpretation will likely continue in modern literature with even greater vigour (2005, p. 175).

In Gogoi's interpretation, Śakuni questions Duryodhana, asking about their deeply intertwined fates. He reminds Duryodhana that while the Kaurava leader is the eldest of a hundred living brothers, Śakuni is the youngest of a hundred ghosts (Gogoi, 2006, p. 111). Śakuni confronts Duryodhana's feigned courage, highlighting that the so called 'Kshatriya Dharma' and notions of justice are nothing more than empty rhetoric, intended to soothe their shared guilt. In one narrative, Kṛṣṇa confronts Śakuni, asking whom he seeks to see defeated in the Kurukshetra war. Kṛṣṇa questions Śakuni's betrayal, saying, "Living off the generosity of the Kauravas and being so close to Duryodhana, why resort to treachery?" (Gogoi, 2006, p. 145). Although Kṛṣṇa calls Śakuni heartless, he retorts by questioning what fault Kṛṣṇa finds

in his sense of duty, and how his desire for the Kauravas' downfall is any different from Kṛṣṇa's own intentions. When Shalya, the Kuru army commander, questions Śākuni of his plan, he responds, "What am I up to? Have you not heard me lament among a hundred corpses? When I cast the dice made from my father's bones, did you not understand?" (Gogoi, 2006, p. 147).

Śākuni's last words reflect profound irony and sorrow of his fate. As Sahadeva beheads him on the war front, he triumphantly proclaims that he has impoverished Duryodhana and brought Bharat to ruin. For Śākuni, death is his deliverance. As the blade strikes his heart, he exclaims "What a pleasure, ah! Pleasure, Pleasure!" (Gogoi, 2006, p. 148). This was his contentment of completing his mission, even at the cost of his own life. For Śākuni, remaining alive had been a greater torment than death, capturing the essence of a character long vilified and deeply misunderstood in the epic.

Frasca (1998) highlights the sacralisation of Śākuni's dice game (p. 9), particularly through its portrayal in Terukkūttu, a religious theatre form from Tamil Nadu that re-enacts scenes from the Tamil versions of the Mahābhārata. The dice game holds significant religious importance within Terukkūttu, where dance, music, and percussion help invoke sacred presences. Śākuni's "Dance of Possession" and moments of Āvesham (divine entrancement) throughout the performance further enhance its spiritual tone (Frasca, 1998, p. 9). The performance features Tamilized names, including Cakuni for Śākuni, Turiyotanan for Duryodhana, Tarumaraja for Yudhiṣṭhira, Piman for Bhīma, and Tiraupatai for Draupadī. Śākuni is portrayed humorously, suggesting that the dice game was meant as light-hearted fun rather than a serious wager. In the midst of the game, Śākuni triumphantly declares:

"For Śākuni, who lives by the belief
That injustice is protection,
And the unjust are victorious,
What fear is there?" (Frasca, 1998, p. 24).

Śākuni's joy seems to reflect his growing confidence in achieving his higher goal, beyond just securing Duryodhana's victory. As the play unfolds, Śākuni and the other characters engage in lively banter with the Kattiyankaran (jester and clown), linking the epic world to the contemporary audience (Frasca, 1998, p. 10). In this rendition, Śākuni is depicted as a more relatable figure, contrasting the cold, calculating character from the original epic. Similarly, in Telugu films like Daana Veera Shoora Karna and Maya Bazaar, Śākuni's exclusion and subsequent revenge through manipulation provide a more rounded portrayal of his character.

In Spake Śūrpanakhā, so Said Śākuni, a modern drama set in an airport, the infamous villains of Indian epics are reimagined. Śākuni, depicted as an angry young man disillusioned with society, is on the verge of committing an unimaginable act – a suicide bombing (Sengupta, 2001, p. 260). He encounters Śūrpanakhā, the notorious female antagonist from the Rāmāyana, portrayed as a young woman bearing the scars of rejection. In the play, they are referred to only as 'man' and 'woman,' symbolizing the universal pain of victimhood. Their contemporary clothing and language disguise their timeless roles as individuals disillusioned by a culture of violence, exploitation, and intimidation. Sengupta's Śākuni carries profound despair, stemming from the brutal rape and murder of his 13-year-old sister by authorities, as well as the loss and disappearance of his brothers in the battle. Caught between avenging his sister's death and the guilt of causing mass casualties at the airport, Śākuni finds himself trapped in a cycle of abuse spanning across generations. Śākuni laments, "I wanted revenge too... Hot... bloody... fanged revenge" (Sengupta, 2001, p. 262). He is deeply troubled by the betrayal of Bhishma, which results in Gāndhārī (his sister) being deceived into marrying Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Reflecting on her fate, he says:

"She wore a dark, thick bloody bandage over her eyes... kept it there all twenty-four hours, all her life. Blinded. Living in constant darkness... She, who was as free as the birds soaring over the hills... why did she choose... choose to shut out the sun?" (Sengupta, 2001, p. 265).

Singh (2009) notes that Sengupta's play brings to light the injustice endured by both Śūrpanakhā and Śākuni, showing how history has mistreated and misrepresented them, leaving their reputations tarnished and their legacy tainted (p. 166). Singh argues that rather than being malevolent figures, Śākuni and Śūrpanakhā are portrayed as victims of their circumstances, forced into roles where they are seen as creators of chaos. She comments that in Sengupta's modern retelling of the Mahābhārata, Śākuni is ultimately convinced by Śūrpanakhā to abandon his plan to detonate a bomb at the airport. This reinterpretation of the epic, which seeks to redeem two of the most maligned figures in Indic mythology, turns the text of 'Spake Śūrpanakhā so Said Śākuni', into a powerful commentary on exclusion. Singh (1993) further critiques the dominance of classicists and textual scholars in epic seminars, lamenting the lack of focus on non-

textual aspects and oral traditions (p. 174). She stresses that no version of the epic Mahābhārata is truly whole without recognizing the extensive and evolving body of oral traditions. In this regard, it is significant that the marginalized snake-charmer community in Rajasthan, the Kālbeliās, venerate Śakuni by naming their children after him. On the other hand it is disapproved by the other communities because of the negativity attached with Śakuni's persona. While 'Śakuni' is often used as a derogatory term in Northern India, the Kālbeliās demonstrate a relationship of reverence towards him.

Higgins (2006) discusses how questions of ritual authority, family loyalty, and community politics intersect in the veneration of deities, highlighting the divine presence at the Kodamdesar Bhairuji temple in Rajasthan, which holds spiritual significance for the Kālbeliā snake-charmers (p. 2). He recalls meeting Raju Nath Sapera and Śakuni Sapera, both members of the Kālbeliā community and devotees of Bhairava (Shiva). Śakuni Sapera familiarised Higgins with the community's traditions, which included attending the wedding of Raju's daughters in Kishangarh. Raised in a semi-nomadic snake-charming community, Śakuni and Raju later found upward mobility through a dance troupe that performed for hotels in Jaipur. This success, coupled with the practice of naming children after Śakuni—something typically discouraged in Northern India—highlights the distinctive cultural context of the Kālbeliās. Similarly, in Kerala, Śakuni is revered as a deity at the Pavithreswaram temple, dedicated to 'Mayamkottu Malancharuvu Śakuni Maladeva,' where local folklore says he once worshipped and prayed for deliverance.

Śakuni's Role in Postmodern Interpretations of the Mahābhārata

Mohanty (2005) suggests that the Mahābhārata is more than just a poetic narrative of grand themes, mythical heroes, and catastrophic wars that lead to a constructed peace. Instead, he interprets it as a broad reflection on the "postmodernist cultural framework of the post-Vedic period" (Mohanty 145), shaping regional cultures and bhasha literatures through to modern times. He argues that "the negativized rhetoric of postmodernism, summed up in the words – discontinuity, dispersal, dislocation, decentering, deconstruction and anti-totalization, are true of the Mahābhārata's cultural landscape and its enclosed matrices of life patterns" (Mohanty, 2005, p. 146). He highlights two contrasting forces within the epic: Śakuni, representing vengeance and destruction, and Kṛṣṇa, embodying enlightened leadership and principled pragmatism. While Kṛṣṇa advocates for harmony and structure, Śakuni symbolizes chaos and anarchy. Mohanty views both as the masterminds of the Mahābhārata, noting that while Śakuni is a vengeful and single-minded figure, Kṛṣṇa is a philosopher whose goal is to establish social and political order (Mohanty, 2005, p. 148).

Kaul and Gupta (2021) assess Śakuni's anticipated gain versus his ultimate loss, arguing that he is unfairly vilified. In terms of statesmanship and strategy, they find him comparable to Kṛṣṇa and Chānakya, as he, too, was not driven by greed (p. 186). Analyzing Śakuni from a managerial perspective, they reflect on his role in the fratricidal war, questioning, "when is the use of power and politics good and when is it bad? Should leaders be driven by the 'anticipated win' for themselves or by what they believe to be right" (Kaul & Gupta, 2021, p. 187)? The authors define power as the ability to influence others or events, categorizing it as positional, personal, or relational (Kaul & Gupta, 2021, p. 199). Śakuni's power originated from his role as a high-ranking advisor and the maternal uncle of the Kauravas, but his true strength lay in his relational power, as Duryodhana's trusted confidant and mentor. By manipulating Duryodhana's jealousy and hatred towards the Pandavas, Śakuni wielded enough influence to advance his destructive agenda. His personal power, on the other hand, came from his remarkable qualities—courage, determination, strategic brilliance, and unmatched skill in the game of dice. These abilities were ultimately used to bring about the Kauravas' downfall. Kaul and Gupta (2021) note that "politics is aimed at motivating others to work towards what we desire without using force or coercion," and Śakuni demonstrated this as a master strategist and manipulator (p. 201).

2. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the necessity for a more thorough examination of Śakuni's character, unjustly relegated to the 'Rogues gallery' of Indian mythology. Through the analysis of folk traditions, petite narratives, and regional interpretations, it becomes evident that Śakuni's true persona has been distorted and his villainous image unfairly emphasized, overshadowing his more nuanced and human dimensions. In many versions of the Mahābhārata, Śakuni emerges not as a one-dimensional villain, but as a victim of circumstances, manipulated by forces beyond his control, which have led to his marginalization in dominant narratives.

The reverence shown to Śakuni in communities like the Kālbeliās, where his name is passed down with respect, contrasts sharply with the mainstream portrayal of him as the cause of war and destruction. This divergence prompts a reevaluation of his character, encouraging us to investigate why, despite evidence of his victimhood and marginality,

Śakuni is still remembered primarily as a negative figure. The study of Mahābhārata traditions across regions—from India to places like Sri Lanka, South Africa, and the Javanese Kakawin Bharatayudha—offers a broader understanding of how Śakuni's story has evolved and been shaped by different cultural contexts.

In reassessing Śakuni, we must consider how the dominant discourse has often suppressed or sidelined alternative perspectives, which allowed the character to be scapegoated for the war of Dharma. As a crooked, disabled figure, Śakuni was an easy target for blame, his physical and moral traits intertwined to create an image that absolved others of responsibility. This study has highlighted how petite narratives, like those in Terukkūttu and Kathak performances, challenge this stereotype and suggest a more complex, humane portrayal of Śakuni—one that acknowledges his bravery, skills, and intelligence, even within the confines of the dominant discourse.

The Mahābhārata, in its inherent complexity, offers a space for these reconsiderations, as it transcends simplistic binaries and encourages a multifaceted understanding of its characters. Śakuni, once reduced to a villainous figure, deserves to be reevaluated as a human being shaped by trauma and circumstance, rather than merely a scapegoat for the war. In doing so, we move towards a more just and inclusive understanding of his role, reaffirming the epic's message that even the marginalized and downtrodden deserve to have their stories heard and their individualities acknowledged. It is time to reassess Śakuni's legacy and reimagine him as more than the archetypal villain, but as a figure whose complexities reflect the very richness of the Mahābhārata itself.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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