**Reading strategies for the *Mahabharata***

**through the methodology of ‘stri-shudra’ness**

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**Introduction**

The discussion of *Mahabharata*’s genre has not died down, after more than a hundred years of scholarship, and scholars are still seeking to account for the various aspects of the text under one umbrella term to understand its agenda better.[[1]](#endnote-1) One of the factors responsible for such ongoing discussions has been the diversity of topics covered in the *Mahabharata*, of course, but also the *Mahabharata’s* various claims about itself. As is well-known, the *Mahabharata* claims to be an itihasa, purana, Upanishad, Veda, and kavya, with aims to address all of the *purusharthas* of human life—dharma, artha, kama and moksha. [[2]](#endnote-2) In addition, traditional scholars too have made claims about the genre of the *Mahabharata* (MBh), studying it as a *smriti* and commenting upon it (Kumarilla Bhatta), as a bhakti or Krishna-text and dharmashastra (Madhva) and as a foundational text of the Pancharatra philosophical thought (Ramanuja).[[3]](#endnote-3) Some of the claims about its genre, found within the MBh today, are accolades and praises heaped on the text by its narrators, considered to be later additions to the text. But that the MBh is a *kavya* is Vyasa’s own claim, occurring in a conversation with Brahma in the Adi Parva.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, this story is found only in the Southern recension of the *Mahabharata*. So, then, if we are to seek out Vyasa’s own claim about the *Mahabharata* that is more widely present, it appears we will find it only in the much later *Bhagavata Purana,* also composed by Vyasa, wherein he states that he composed the *Mahabharata* for stri-shudras and the friends-of-brahmins.[[5]](#endnote-5)

It is time to consider Vyasa’s claim about the *Mahabharata* in the *Bhagavata* with some seriousness because all the other claims upon the genre of the *Mahabharata* appear to fall short in some way. Take for example, the MBh as itihasa-purana. Itihasa-puranas capture the lives of people of various bygone eras. But this is too simplistic a definition to account for the discussions of dharma or ethical aspects in the MBh.[[6]](#endnote-6) To view the text as an Upanishad serves well for certain parts of the MBh more than others. For instance, the Sulabha-Janaka samvada or the *Bhagavad-Gita*.[[7]](#endnote-7) It suits the moksha discussions or guru-disciple dialogues and the teachings of Bhishma but not the plotline and story surrounding the two sets of cousins. As kavya, “it is the delight of the learned for being embellished with elegant expressions, conversations human and divine, and a variety of poetical measures” (Ganguli, 3). The poetic aspects, as the text rightly understands, is not for everyone. It is for the learned. So, describing the MBh as a kavya covers only some aspects of the text and excludes its non-poetic parts, which makes up for a large portion.

The *Mahabharata* is comparable to the Veda in so far as an encyclopedic range is concerned. The approach of both these texts towards ethics is also similar; their positions are mostly the same and they are both somewhat open-ended and non-dogmatic at times, perhaps then requiring the help of a learned person.[[8]](#endnote-8) The MBh is claimed to be fifth Veda,[[9]](#endnote-9) yet it is declared to be only ‘adorned’ with the Veda.[[10]](#endnote-10) The MBh is evidently much more than the Veda in so far as it is a continuation of the stories of gods and humans that begin in the Vedas, thus deserving a reference to its weight being greater than that of the Vedas.[[11]](#endnote-11) The *Mahabharata’s* description as a fifth Veda, though not inaccurate, does not fully capture the text’s agenda. In fact, a knowledge of the Vedas could well be a prerequisite to understand the *Mahabharata’s* agenda. It’s description as the fifth Veda is relevant more because as a stri-shudra text, (as described later in the *Bhagavata*), it aims to offer access to women and shudras because they do not have access to the original Vedas. The justification for this restricted access is revealed in the fears the text expresses in the Adi Parva:

By the aid of history and the Puranas, the Veda may be expounded; *but the Veda is afraid of one of little information lest he should harm it*…Tapa is innocent, study is harmless, the ordinance of *the Vedas prescribed for all the tribes are harmless*, the acquisition of wealth by exertion is harmless; *but when they are abused in their practices it is then that they become sources of evil* (Ganguli, 15, emphasis mine).

To view the *Mahabharata* entirely as a dharmashastra or ethical text also proves inadequate because there are several points at which the text complicates ethics to the point of leaving us with no ethics. This could be read as a limitation of dharma or of humans, requiring a learned person’s contextualization, explanation, and commentary on the subtle and unknowable ways of dharma and why it should be followed, nevertheless. Either way, the MBh is clearly more than a collection of some ethical lessons, it’s range spans multiple lives, the workings of karma and five generations—a vision only a seer could possess and convey. However, I do believe that the *Mahabharata’s* definition as a dharmashastra comes closest to capturing its agenda. More on this later.

Since we are no longer looking for a ‘pure’ and original version of the MBh, or one that cares for history when it clearly does not or, one that is also free of interpolations when it is clearly not, I suppose the time is ripe to consider with some seriousness the afterlife of the MBh in the form of *Bhagavata* and Vyasa’s own claim in it about the genre and agenda of the MBh as—a stri-shudra text.[[12]](#endnote-12)

**A Stri-Shudra text**

In the *Bhagavata*, the verse that states that the MBhis a stri-shudra text reads thus: “Out of compassion, the great sage thought it wise that this would enable men to achieve the ultimate goal of life. Thus, he compiled the great historical narration called the Mahabharata for women, laborers and friends of the twice-born” (*Bhagavata,* 1.25, ed. Jay Mazo). The verse wherein Vyasa speaks about the MBh reads thus: “I have also revealed the purport of the Vedas through the *Mahabharata*, in which *even women, the Sudras and* *others can find their respective duties* and other things explained.” (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1. 28, Gita Press, page 14, emphasis mine). [[13]](#endnote-13) Thus, the emphasis on women and shudras is affirmed doubly, i.e., by Vyasa and by other narrators.

The attempt in this essay will be to aim for a stree-shudra reading as at least one valid way of reading large parts of the *Mahabharata,* given how the great number backstories and frame stories produce a complex narrative. Specifically, I will choose the Draupadi vastraapaharana episode and Shakuntala’s story for analyzing how women are addressed and read the story of the ungrateful brahmin and Bhishma’s discourse on the bandits to understand how shudra-ness is addressed. Can the stri-shudra reading be achieved consistently in all the stories of the MBhis a question I must postpone for now due to lack of space. My argument, limited to these four stories, will be that the MBh is a stri-shudra text not simply because it tells us stories about women and shudras or because women and shudras were allowed to listen in on the MBh during its performances, but because the text allows stri-shudra perspectives to emerge alongside the perspectives of others and offers stri-shudras a fair representation.[[14]](#endnote-14) Vyasa is evidently addressing the question of access, but how he is doing that, is also this paper’s concern.

Stri-shudraness as authorial intention when taken seriously inaugurates a whole gamut of questions, categories, and methods. Therefore, I view it as a methodology. Reading through the methodology of stri-shudra-ness is advantageous and makes up for the inadequacies of the other approaches. To begin with, stri-shudra-ness as author’s agenda reveals why ethical lessons must be included in the MBh and why they must be as complex as they are. Stri-shudra-ness as author’s agenda tells us why the text must be in kavya form, i.e., in story or poetic form—because the audience is not learned or is engaged in service-oriented duties, which require skill-related mental exertions and limited finesse in linguistic abilities. As a stri-shudra text, the MBh *has* to be a *fifth Veda*—a text that is more than the Veda and yet simultaneously similar and different to it—because it has to address the problem of access and the differential capabilities of listeners.

Viewing the MBh through a methodology of stri-shudra-ness allows us to move beyond the category of gender or simplistic applications of it. It shifts the focus from gender relations and questions about the position of women to *how* women have been addressed in the text, the ethical lessons they learn or teach and how they have been provided access to the Veda. It removes the emphasis we might otherwise place solely upon gender relations to a more holistic understanding of the rights and duties of everyone in society and their relational selfhoods, making apparent the context we must view women within—i.e., the four castes, the ascetics, the dharmic and adharmic spectrum.

Viewing the MBh through the methodology of stri-shudra-ness allows us to move beyond the category of caste. We realize that the text is speaking tangentially to the categories of ‘caste system’ and ‘brahminical.’ What we see instead is a time of transition where a mixing of castes has occurred and there are good and bad brahmins as well as good and bad shudras. The methodology of stri-shudra-ness allows us to see the dual tasks performed by the text. It points out painstakingly that, one, brahmins do not always practice self-control or display good conduct and shudras are not always indulging in enjoyments and violent conduct. This point about shudras is made in the *Bhagavad Gita*, wherein Krishna says that those who worship him are not shudras (??). For the MBh, shudras are those who are unnecessarily violent and do not care for the care-ethic put in place by dharma or the Vedic sacrifice.

Because we work with categories such as the ‘caste system’ and the ‘brahminical,’ a textual claim about women, shudras and friends-of-brahmins appears confusing. Our current scholarly categories orient us towards perceiving a hegemonic barring of access to women and shudras and nothing beyond it. When in fact, the friends-of-brahmins or the fallen brahmins are a category that questions these homogenizing and monolithic categories. Also, prima facie, the stories of the MBh do not all appear to be favoring stri-shudras and require much effort at reconstruction and an adjustment of our reading lenses. This apparent lack of consistency is likely to drive scholars today to wonder exactly why the *Bhagavata* hails the MBh as a text written for the stri-shudras and might even prompt scholars to suggest that the *Bhagavata* too is driven by brahminical agendas.

Reading the MBh through stri-shudra-ness has not been considered as a methodological possibility, although many readings have suggested that the MBh is pro-women in ways that many other Hindu texts are not, and that it’s understanding of conduct-over-birth has anti-casteist possibilities, supportive of shudras. Yet, a consistent reading of this sort has been elusive. To the best of my knowledge, no one has asked: how is the MBh a stri-shudra text? I think a consistent reading of MBhthrough stri-shudra-ness has been elusive most likely because our understanding of caste and gender in Hindu thought has been lacking clarity. Our understandings of gender are ambiguous at best or too particularized, our theories of caste inadequate. This is also the reason why we do not pay attention to Vyasa’s agenda which states that “women, the Sudras and others *can find their respective duties*”explained (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1. 28, emphasis mine)*.* That is, varnashramadharma, which is the very content explored by the dharmashastras is also on Vyasa’s agenda. They form the very bones upon which Vyasa likely chose his stories from bygone eras. So, then we must read stri-shudra-ness in the MBh in relation to the duties of women and shudras. Thus, the dharmashastras come closest to capturing the agenda of MBh in comparison with the *Mahabharata’s* other descriptions such as the itihasa-purana, kavya, Veda and Upanishad.

Dharmashastras are known to the MBh and precede it. There are mentions of Manu the law-giver and quotations from him; scholars have dated the two texts closely.[[15]](#endnote-15) When read in conjunction with the dharmashastras, the women characters of MBh each appear to illustrate one important aspect of streedharma or women’s duties already explicated in the dharmashastras, particularly the *Manusmriti*. Or, they clarify the reason for the four varnas, reminding readers of the qualities of each and their rights and duties. Perhaps this is why Vyasa assures Ganesha that he was going to compose a ‘convoluted text’—something that was based on the dharmashsastras but also invoked stories of yore. This ‘convoluted text’ required Ganesha, the scribe, to spend some amount of time understanding its full import.[[16]](#endnote-16) The convoluted is also knotty because dharma is not straightforward and when addressing the stri-shudras’ dharma, it is even more so, thus eluding quick decisions about how one must act or svadharma.[[17]](#endnote-17)

I employ the dharmashastra framework to read each story as making one significant point about the general edifice of dharma or specifically varnaashrama dharma to complicate it and rescue it from dwindling into simplistic readings, which remove us from understanding dharma as subtle. For the Mbh authors, the entire edifice of dharma does not need to be questioned or destroyed when new elements such as the mixing of castes or a disintegration of dharma occurs, for it contains valuable ethical lessons enshrined in the list of virtues first expressed in the Chandogya Upanishad 3.17.4— self-restraint, nonviolence, uprightness, and truth-telling. Hence, a complication of simplistic and non-subtle views of dharma is attempted with each story. Also, clarifications and examples are offered.

The MBh also shows considerable compassion towards women and shudras. For example, Yudhisthira says to Markandeya that he has seen nothing more difficult than the very terrible dharma of women (MBh 3.196.8).[[18]](#endnote-18) This approach is not found in the *Manusmriti*.This is the reason why neither the dharmashastric approach nor the stri-shudra methodology alone will suffice. A combination is necessary.

Once a comparative approach between the MBh and the dharamashastras and Manusmriti, in particular, seemed like a valid possibility, I arrived at reading female characters of the MBh in the following way: the story of Draupadi shows that women must serve their husbands but are not slaves to them; they cannot own property of their own, but they are not the property of men. Women have their streedhana and in return for their duties, they must be guarded and honored by men ably because that is the duty of men, a failure of which can result in the harassment that occurred to Draupadi. The story of Shakuntala shows that women are truth-speakers and able witnesses, when exposed to the world and when of noble birth. The story of Madhavi shows how daughters/putrikas too could deliver their parents from hell, a point that Manu too makes. Madhavi also assists in fulfilling her father’s obligations as king to give and never refuse to the brahmin, Galava. She also delivers her father from hell to heaven quite literally by giving a portion of her merit so that her father can continue to stay in heaven long after his own merit has run out. If serving family members was the duty of women, then Madhavi fulfils this to the fullest extent. Madhavi is also a great example of a female ascetic—a category that does not exist within the *Manusmriti*. The story of Amba shows the downside of abducting princesses and engaging in a challenging fight, a practice allowed for kshatriyas, but justifiably ranked low in the eight kinds of marriages that Manu lists. The story of Kunti, Ambika and Ambalika demonstrate the downside of niyoga by offering women’s experience of it; niyoga is a practice that was abolished in later times according to the dharma texts. And so on.

Specifically in this essay, I read Draupadi’s story as an illustration of Manu’s points on differentiating women and slaves in terms of rules regarding owning and disseminating different kinds of property. I believe Rocher’s essay on the dasadasi is useful in this endeavor. I read Shakuntala’s story as an illustration of Manu’s points on women’s role as witnesses and the credibility of women’s testimonies. Shakuntala must be read as telling the truth and therefore illustrating the exceptions Manu makes regarding certain women. Shakuntala’s qualification as a woman whose testimony must be accepted is also ensured through a discussion of her lineage.[[19]](#endnote-19) She argues she has better lineage than Dushyanta, being the offspring of a heavenly being. The divine voice, speaking on her behalf is also a textual motif that occurs repeatedly in the *Mahabharata* and stops injustice from occurring. From the text’s perspective, this is possible, thanks to the remaining purity of the dwapara yuga. Or, because Shakuntala’s story is more ancient than the dwapara yuga, not written down first in the MBh but recounted in it.

To make my point about how the MBh favors shudras, I attend to the story of the ungrateful brahmin, Gautama in the *Shanti Parva*. Draupadi’s vastrapaharana scene is also instructive in this regard. Yet other stories strive to show how hunters, butchers, housewives and bandits equal renunciants and brahmins (as in the stories narrated by Bhishma) through their karma yoga alone, notwithstanding their occupational violence.

**Draupadi-Vastraapaharana:**

Before I ask questions about the clarifications Vyasa is offering regarding dharma through this story, I would like to explore his representation of Draupadi. Draupadi has a magical birth and is evidently virtuous in Vyasa’s portrayal, but she is also someone adhering to dharma in her actions. For instance, in saying that she must not appear at the sabha when menstruating, Draupadi is not thinking of herself; she is concerned that the elders and everybody present have to bear the negative consequences of speaking with a menstruating woman, which is considered impure.[[20]](#endnote-20) In thinking of others, she is being caring and inclusive of others. She is a pativrata—she repeatedly says and not in a sentimental way.

By this she means that she is dutiful, contributing to society and not a freeloader. As someone who is performing her duties, she is asking about her rights. That is, she is to be protected and honored by the men of her family. In thinking of dharma, invoking it and thinking of others, which in her case is also *rajadharma* (protection of the weak), Draupadi emerges as a feminist, and not just a strong woman. In feminist thought, a strong woman is a woman who behaves like a man, lacking empathy and working only for herself. Feminists, however, are women who have a concern for the larger good of the society and will mobilize others for it. Draupadi’s awareness of her rights makes her a feminist.[[21]](#endnote-21) In posing her question to the king’s sabha, Draupadi is setting a precedent about how women’s cases should be handled. She does the same later in Virata’s court as well. She is posing her problem as an instance of the problem of all women, the solution as a solution for all women. Her concern with precedents and the historical and political awareness she displays also shows she cares for all women. This concern is also evident from what she says when she first discovers she has been staked and lost: ‘No one has ever placed their wife in a stake...’In speaking against Duryodhana, she is challenging authority; speaking truth to power.[[22]](#endnote-22) When she is dragged into the court and no one speaks against it, she calls out their silence as complicity with a crime.

Draupadi is also kind; she is not shooting the messenger, the suta. Duryodhana, in sharp contrast is nasty to him, calling him a person “of little intelligence” and mocking him for being scared (Ganguli, 127). Vaishampayana, the narrator is praising the suta as intelligent, describing him as “himself much distressed” when conveying messages to Draupadi (ibid). This reveals Vyasa’s representation of a shudra as well, we will return to discussion this shortly. Draupadi cares and is concerned for everyone weak, even those lower in rank to her do not meet her ire in terribly distressing situations.

When Karna says: “Draupadi is included in all the possessions (of Yudhishthira),” Draupadi’s response is that she is the wedded wife of king Yudhishthira the just, hailing from the same dynasty to which the king belonged: “Tell me now if I am a serving-maid or otherwise.” She is pointing that she is of the same varna and clan—as the king’s and asking how a wife becomes a possession or servant. When Duryodhana demands a verdict, suggesting that if she is freed from slavery, then Yudhisthira would become a liar, in an attempt to trap her, Draupadi does not engage, she has already stated that dharma is subtle.[[23]](#endnote-23) Dharma cannot be reduced to truth-speaking alone.[[24]](#endnote-24) When Karna cites the dharmashastras: “the slave, the son, and the wife are always dependent. They cannot earn wealth, for whatever they earn belongeth to their master. Thou art the wife of a slave incapable of possessing anything on his own account” (Ganguli, 138). Draupadi, being well-versed in the dharmashastras knows that being dependent (asvatantra) or surrendering their earnings to the husband/master does not make one a slave. Being dependent does not make them non-autonomous individuals with no rights. Earning for or serving are simply the duties of stri-shudras. They are autonomous though performing their service-oriented duties. Karna is wrongly citing the dharmashatras or *Manusmriti*. Draupadi does not engage when there is no logical consistency.[[25]](#endnote-25) In effect, Draupadi is saying that quoting dharmashastras or Manu in part or out of context is unacceptable. She is thus teaching everyone streedharma and shudradharma.

Draupadi is also not a dasi because of the dharmashastric rule about *streedhana* (women’s wealth), which cannot be touched by anyone, unless there is an emergency, and in which case too, the permission of the wife is mandatory. Draupadi has already made it clear that her stridhana is quite large. Also, there are verses in Manu (8.413, 8.414) that state that kshatriyas and vaishyas can never be subjected to dasya—this is probably why she mentions her clan once right at the beginning of her entrance into the court. There is also evidence in the MBh that women move back to their parental home when situations so necessitate (e.g., Damayanti).[[26]](#endnote-26)

Karna mocks her thus: “It is well-known that women, especially that are slaves, are not censurable if they proceed with freedom in electing husbands…Thy husbands that are slaves cannot continue to be thy lords any longer.” This still does not answer Draupadi’s question as to when she was lost. Before or after Yudhisthira wagered himself--‘whom did you lose first, yourself or me’ (MBh 2.60.7). But nowhere in the dharmashastras is it mentioned that dasas or dasis do not wed and live as they please. While it is likely that some of them had adopted such practices, just as some ‘bad’ brahmins too had mistresses, marriage is a *samskara* valid for the shudras and it is the only *samskara* that they have, as pointed out by Rocher (2012). While Karna is confusing stridharma and shudradharma, Draupadi is distinguishing them as different and asserting that she is no dasi. Married women identifying with the streedharmic fold, offer services to their spouses, *not to everyone*. Shudras and dasas and dasis too are paid for their services. Draupadi’s distinguishing of the stridharma and shudradharma elevates both dharmas, clarifying their nature. In this way, she champions the cause of those misunderstood. By placing checks against their exploitation, Draupadi is showing how exactly to be pro-stri-shudra simultaneously.

In this context, I find Rocher’s (2012) essay on the “dasadasi” informative and crucial background knowledge. Based on Manu 8.413 and 8.414, Rocher concludes that “…even in the śāstras, the status of a dāsa was associated with Śūdras.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Dasas have autonomy, a dasa is not a slave. According to Rocher, dasas are shudras.[[28]](#endnote-28) Manu prescribes that the son of a shudra wife of a twice-born is also entitled to a share in the property. In other injunctions, Manu says that the entire property of Shudra father goes to his son. This can be taken to suggest that shudras or dasas owned property. In addition, both sons and daughters of shudras were eligible for maintenance. Furthermore, if the father is a Śūdra, his son from a *dāsī*/*dāsadāsī* is recognized as a full-fledged son and stands to inherit his father’s property equally. The dasi in this case is usually not married to the shudra father. Rocher shows that the term dasa is often not referring to a slave but is a synonym for a shudra with the two terms used interchangeably through evidence from commentators and nibandhakaras. And the term dasi has been used to refer to an unmarried female of the shudra caste. Rocher’s point is that the dasadasi is a dasi married to a dasa. Rocher’s findings ties in well with the general claim of some historians that slavery of the kind found in other civilizations is not to be found in the Indian past.

In sum, although there is an injunction wherein whatever a dasa (servant), son or wife earns belong to the master, father, or husband respectively because he has taken care of them until they are able to earn and when they are unable to, other verses in Manu allow for varied arrangements of wealth ownership and management. Nowhere is the loss of autonomy mentioned even when a person in extreme troubles has sold themselves. Even when Harishchandra is sold to a chandala by Vishwamitra, he lives off a salary working in the graveyard.[[29]](#endnote-29) That salary is paid toward the debt owed to Vishwamitra, of course. Thus, dasas were paid workers or servants in the service sector—unorganized sectors perhaps, but they were paid.

Draupadi has a proper understanding of dharmashastra, while others are misquoting or being bookish and literal, as shown by Black (2020). For Draupadi, dharma is social justice and the well-being of everyone, and it is a constantly evolving and is a non-static entity that one must arrive at, after much deliberation; it cannot be separated from *kala*, *desha* and *patra*. Thus, in a single scene, Vyasa appears to be driving home both the points he seeks to make through the entirety of MBh: just because the stri-shudras offer services, they are not unworthy of respect.[[30]](#endnote-30) To the contrary, they have their own rights as well, which must be respected, failure of which destroys dharma and attracts the wrath of the gods. The ill omens heard at the sabha foretelling war evidence this. While Arti Dhand suggests that we are not hearing *women’s* perspectives in the MBh and that they might just be spouting the opinions of male writers of the MBh (2008: 15), I am not quite sure this is the case, since Draupadi can be read in the above ways. Similarly, Uma Chakravarthi’s readings that Draupadi only invokes her privileges and overlooks the dasis, is, I believe, an inadequate reading of the scene. Draupadī, Śakuntalā, and Sulabhā offer counter-perspectives towards the text’s misogynist views, says Black (2020), but I do not think that the text is misogynistic; some of its characters however, are.

If Bhishma and Karna invoke streedharmic rules from Manu to show that Draupadi is ‘dependent’ (asvatantra) (2.63.1), Draupadi invokes the same Manu to show that protecting and honoring her is their dharma. Draupadi’s invocation of herself as a beautiful woman might be viewed as problematic, but her beauty could be viewed as a result of practicing virtue. After all, the MBh mentions that harsh speech results in loss of beauty in one’s next life (??).

**Shakuntala:**

The *Mahabharata’s* portrayal of Shakuntala showcases her scholarship, virtue, and grit. The specific clarification regarding dharma that the story offers is about women’s speech. It is twofold actually. One is with regard to the injunction that wives must not speak harshly, and another is to do with their ability to be truth-speakers and a credible witnesses. Shakuntala’s ‘sweet speech’ is mentioned thrice and as early as her welcome of Dushyanta.[[31]](#endnote-31) Then, Vyasa represents Shakuntala’s beauty as deriving from not just physicality but also “her ascetic penances, and her humility.” Her virtue shines through when at Dushyanta’s proposal of marriage, Shakuntala suggests they wait for her father Kanva to return, demonstrating that *brahma vivaha*, wherein fathers give away daughters as gifts, is the recommended type of marriage.[[32]](#endnote-32) But when Dushyanta suggests the Gandharva type of marriage, citing Manu on the eight types of marriages, Shakuntala agrees on the condition that it is dharma. In doing so, she places the responsibility of truth-telling on Dushyanta. As a contractual form of marriage, that is, one that is not a gift, Shakuntala is eligible to place a condition. And that she does by asking for their son to be the heir apparent. When Dushyanta agrees, she weds him. This instance shows that Shakuntala, having grown up in Kanva’s ashram is well-versed in the dharmashastras. In my understanding of dharma as derived from the Vedic ritual as proper give-take, one of the senses of dharma is a proper transaction. To that end, Shakuntala ably manages to pull off a transaction all on her own. As a kshatriya, Shakuntala would have likely chosen her groom in a svayamvara under normal circumstances, something that Dushyanta too has suggested earlier when he says that she is independent when it comes to marriage. The word Dushyanta uses is, ‘svatantra,’ the same one that Manu uses. However, as we can see in this and numerous other stories, kshatriya women always chose their husbands.[[33]](#endnote-33) In other words, streedharma, although listed as if common to all women in the dharmashastras, was different for women of different castes. This is a clarification that the MBh is offering.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Having grown up in a forest, Shakuntala’s knowledge of the world is limited and text-bookish. Hence, Kanva emphasizes that she is innocent of the ways of the world before sending her to meet Dushyanta—this is best brought out in Kalidasa’s version of the story in his play, *Abhijanana Shakuntalam*. In the MBh, the reference is to Kanva’s disciples accompanying her and dropping her off at Dushyanta’s court. But to my mind, in answering Dushyanta’s question about her parentage, Shakuntala’s answer that she overheard the story of her birth once from Kanva showcases her innocence. Women who know the world and women who do not—is a distinction that Manu invokes often. For example, he first declares the general rule that women cannot conduct business transactions and then states the exception, wherein if they have been exposed or trained in these matters, they *can* handle businesses. He concludes that if women can handle the responsibility, they can become heirs and managers of parental property. Similarly, Manu first declares that women must not give evidence in court. He denies them the ability to be witnesses, but then he introduces several caveats. For instance, in cases of violence, women could be considered credible witnesses. Having shown that Shakuntala is innocent of the way of the world, ideally, she cannot make for a good witness. But there is another clause that Manu mentions, which Vyasa brings into play, that of noble birth. This is Vyasa’s way, I believe, of educating us in the nuances of dharma. Neither he nor Manu have the intent to simply declare women unfit witnesses.

In the court, when Dushyanta refuses to acknowledge their marriage, Shakuntala declares “The sun, the moon, the wind, the fire, the space, the earth, the water, the heart, the controller of life and death, the day, the night, the two transitions of the day, and Dharma—they all know a man’s conduct” (Mbh, Adi Parva, 74.24-26). These are her witnesses. Shakuntala is invoking the idea that gods watch over us and protect us from making mistakes, which finds mention in the Vedas. Shakuntala says Dushyanta is uttering unrta, she fights him at the level of rta and not satya, because satya is closer to verbal truth, while rta refers to a larger truth.

When their dialogue dissolves into a he said-she said narrative, she invokes the same inner sense, *antar-atma* or *sakshi* that Dushyanta had invoked to understand his feelings for her before proposing marriage. This inner sense or *antahkarana* is an invitation to discuss one of the crucial sources of dharma in the dharma texts, *atma*-*tushti*. According to this source, a follower of dharma can rely on his senses to guide him on occasion. Dushyanta had declared himself to be man of self-control who does not desire women indiscriminately yet had felt an unmistakable attraction towards Shakuntala. He had inferred from this that she too must be a kshatriya, i.e., from his inner sense. This aspect is explicated in Kalidasa’s play more than in the MBh.

Shakuntala then speaks of wifehood and motherhood. Describing wifehood in detail, she concludes that “even in moments of anger, no man shall do ill to his wife.”[[35]](#endnote-35) This is likely deriving from a dharmashastric injunction that forbids men from abandoning noble wives and makes them liable to punishment.[[36]](#endnote-36) It appears that Vyasa seeks to educate us that women have enormous respect with the *grihastha ashrama*, they are required for performing sacrifices and bearing children who enable attaining *moksha*/heaven. But Shakuntala’s verse on wives being husbands’ best friends, emphasizes not just the duty-based relationship that marriage is often envisaged as, but also the joy it promises. Shakuntala is thus fighting her case by citing the dharmashastras, just like Draupadi. Becoming righteously angry, like Draupadi, she continues her appeals but finally curses Dushyanta as well. She is no innocent woman anymore.

When Dushyanta accuses her of being a woman of low origin, she reminds him of her high birth, her mother is a heavenly being. High birth in Manu and the MBh is the result of good deeds, it is not great in itself.[[37]](#endnote-37) Shakuntala urges Dushyanta to not abandon truth and when he does not relent, rejects him. Shakuntala is not merely speaking truth, but like Draupadi, she too is speaking truth to power. She directly cites from the *Manusmriti*, asking Dushyanta to accept their son, because offspring bring great joy. She declares that with or without Dushyanta’s acceptance of their son, he will be the heir and king—by the power of words once uttered. Thus, Shakuntala is her own witness. She speaks the truth. She needs no one else. Yet, a divine voice booms through, telling Dushyanta to not insult Shakuntala and that she has been telling the truth.

Do not insult Shakuntala. This boy is yours and her son. Bring him up well, and he will hereafter be known as Bharata. Your wife Shakuntala bears great love for you. See her in that light and honour her. It is acknowledged in the light of Dharma, Dushyanta, that women in their goodness have no parallel (MBh, Adi Parva, 74.110-12).

The word, honour stands out. For, after all, it is Manu who has declared that where women are honored, there the gods reside (MS 3.55–3.56). Dushyanta’s earlier statement that women are liars, which he accuses Shakuntala with, is replaced by “women in their goodness have no parallel” (MBh, Adiparva, 74.110-12.). Dushyanta then admits, of course, that he was lying and seeks her forgiveness. He admits he lied only so his court knew why he chose to marry her, i.e., because of her brilliance and impeccable conduct and not out of lust. Finally, all is well with the king and queen.

When Dushyanta calls Shakuntala a false ascetic and refuses to remember her, Shakuntala is grief-stricken and feels great wrath, but she gathers herself and continues to remind her husband of their marriage and his promises. Only when he remains unconvinced, she abuses and curses him right back. Later, Dushyanta forgives her harsh speech. I believe this is engineered in order to bring into focus the dharmashastric injunction that women who speak hurtful words may be abandoned (even though unfaithful women may not be if they have no intention of poisoning and killing the husband!). It is likely that harsh speech was conceived as some sort of violence, parallel to emotional abuse in modern terms. In effect, Shakuntala’s story emphasizes how wives should not speak harshly as a rule, yet the context of their righteous anger is revealed. This is the reason why Dushyanta has to forgive Shakuntala’s harsh speech. Otherwise, this forgiveness appears quite misplaced on Dushyanta’s part, as pointed by Black (2020).

**The Story of the Ungrateful Brahmin:**

When Yudhisthira wants to hear about the ungrateful man who attacks a friend, Bhishma tells him “The Story of the Ungrateful Brahmin.” At first, he tells a cryptic version of the story and then Yudhisthira asks Bhishma what qualities a good friend would possess. After Bhishma explains these, Yudhisthira insists upon listening to the details of the cryptic story hitherto narrated. Then, Bhishma narrates a longer version. The gist of the story is that there is a Gautama (his gotra) brahmin who is ignorant of the Veda and has stopped his daily practices. He has wandered from the central lands into a northern village of barbarian hunters in search of alms, wherein a wealthy man gives him a house and a widowed woman as wife. Staying there for a long time, the brahmin learns weapons and hunting, and becomes a violent man like his hosts. When a learned brahmin from his village visits and chides Gautama for being a fallen brahmin, Gautama pledges to reform himself.[[38]](#endnote-38) He travels far, comes to a majestic banyan tree, and takes shelter beneath it and then, Naadijangha or ‘King Dharma,’ returns to the tree, which was his home. The hungry Gautama plans to kill the bird, but the crane welcomes him as a guest and offers sumptuous hospitality. Gautama tells the crane that he is poor and wanted to find riches. The crane directs Gautama to go to his wealthy friend, Virupaksha, the lord of the rakshasas. Gautama travels to Meruvraja, Virupaksha’s city, where he was announced as a friend of Naadijangha. Virupaksha honors Gautama despite misgivings about Gautama’s status and includes him in the scheduled feeding of a thousand pious brahmins who were given diamond studded plates of gold and other presents and gems. The brahmins could take whatever dishes they wished; no rakshasa would attack them. Gautama takes so much gold he is exhausted when he returns to the banyan tree. The crane welcomes him back and feedd him, but Gautama, worrying about his long journey back to the village, decides to kill the crane to have food on his way. Gautama kills and butchers Naadijangha that night while the bird slept trustingly, and then sets out to return to the barbarian village. Virupaksha, missing his friend’s visits and fearing that the fallen brahmin might have done the bird harm sends his son to investigate, the truth being discovered, and Gautama is dragged before Virupaksha. All the rakshasas are grief-stricken, and the king orders that Gautama be executed as an ingrate and eaten. The ingrate was executed, but no being—no rakshasa, no barbarians, not even a carrion-eating animal—would eat him. Bhishma comments that ingratitude has no expiation. Virupaksha has Naadijangha cremated with proper rituals. Surabhi, mother of all cows, appears over the pyre and drips milk on the body, which revives the king of the cranes. Indra arrives and explains that the crane had died because Brahma had cursed him for failing to pay court. Naadijangha then worships Indra and requests that his ‘dear friend Gautama’ be revived too. Indra complies, and the crane embraces the ingrate and sends him home with his gold. Naadijangha pays court to Brahma after these events, and Gautama goes home, produces two evil sons, and is cursed by the Gods to end up in hell. Bhishma encourages Yudhisthira never to be ungrateful or injurious toward his friends.

This story is evidently addressing the friends-of-brahmins or the fallen brahmin. The representation of the brahmin in this story is not positive. Bhishma’s discourse on a worthy friend could well be read as listing all the qualities that Gautama lacks. The list is full of virtues such as nonviolence, loyalty, non-flattery and so on. Equally, Gautama is condemned because he gave up the Veda, became violent, married low and became a meat-eater. Further, he killed a friend who had helped him, remorselessly—an act a true brahmin would have been incapable of doing. In the longer version of the story that Bhishma narrates, other details emerge: the brahmin receives wealth, a house, cloth, and a widowed woman as wife from a barbarian. Recall here that Manu forbids brahmins from receiving gifts from a number of kinds of people, thieves, drunkards, oil-pressors, shudras and other violent people. A brahmin could receive uncooked food or grain from a shudra only when in dire need (MS 4.223). Gautama even lent a hand in the affairs of the barbarian and stayed at his home in winter months. He mastered archery and became very violent and merciless. The good brahmin who visited him was, in sharp contrast, in rags, recited the Veda every day and was celibate, not receiving any food from shudras. In this way, the distinction between the good and bad brahmin is set up.

A short while later, the rakshasa comes across as someone with better ethics than Gautama. Although Virupaksha does not give up his violence, he engages in gifting and performing sacrifices and protects the brahmins for a day. He wonders what merit there would be in feeding and giving to a brahmin “who is a brahmin by birth alone…” (MBh 12(85)164–166,Fitzgerald, 598). Thus, conduct and birth are distinguished. This indeed is also the clarification regarding the subtle nature of dharma that the story offers. The bird cites Brihaspati (smriti) that there are four ways that riches come: inheritance, fate, work, and friends. This and other implicit references to the dharmashastras shows that these texts were understood as sources of virtues and knowledge. This story shows that a brahmin too can be bad. In conclusion, the story refers to a separation of the two castes—a brahmin is someone non-violent while a shudra is violent—each is liable to perform his/her duties, however, a mixing of castes is not recommended because it corrupts the finesse and purity each has achieved in their occupation which makes them best-suited for it in the first place. It is also significant that the story does not chide the shudra or the barbarian in anyway. It could be said that the shudra is following dharma by helping the brahmin albeit in the ways he knows. The story places the responsibility of the brahmin’s duties on the brahmin alone.The shudra in the story is, after all, following his duties. The shudra’s duties interfere with the aim of *moksha* indeed but are otherwise valid duties set out by authoritative sources. Thus, though the story is addressing the question of access in a different way—i.e., it is addressing fallen brahmins who have voluntarily given up the access they had by stopping the performance of daily purificatory practices—it is important to read this story for how it indirectly addresses shudra-ness and what it does to the category of the brahminical.

**The Bandit story:[[39]](#endnote-39)**

Yudhisthira’s query regarding the administration of bandits and thugs results in Bhishma’s narration of Kapavya’s story. The story demonstrates a unique approach to governance and reveals extraordinary inclusivism. In Bhishma’s narration, the bandit, ruler of the nishadas, is brave, intelligent, learned, non-violent, protector of dharma and worshipper of brahmins and elders. His father was a kshatriya and his mother, a nishada.[[40]](#endnote-40) He protected the dharma of kshatriyas. Elsewhere in the MBh, the conduct of the kshatriya and bandit are pitted against each other. While the kshatriya uses violence only when necessary, the bandit uses it indiscriminately. But Kapavya knew about the dharma for all beings, he worshipped his aged and blind parents. He protected the brahmanas who resided in the forest and passed through it. He was a hunter, however. Bandits who were pitiless though somewhat self-aware made him their leader. Kapavya instructed them to never kill women, children, cattle, and ascetics and those frightened or were not fighting. He instructed them to desist from mindless violence and damaging public property. He educated them that the ‘rod’ of punishment was installed to ensure the prevalence of virtue and was not for inflicting death. All of them honored Kapavya’s instructions, obtained a livelihood and abandoned their wicked ways. Bhishma ends the story with a *phalashruti* verse: if someone regularly recounts this conduct of Kapavya, they will never be afflicted by any fear from residents of the forest, or from beings. There will never be any fear from mortals or immortals, from the virtuous or the wicked. There is a focus on rehabilitation and transformation in this story. Exceptions to the bandits’ evil nature are noted, their struggle for survival is acknowledged and inclusive perspectives accommodating acute cultural diversity and difference are practiced. However, elsewhere in the MBh (1407.79), when bandits cause confusion, all the varnas must take up weapons and there is no sin in it.

Equally significant to this discussion is Dyumatasena’s declaration that executing thieves is inappropriate since nonviolence is the highest principle (MBh 12.259). Dyumatasena warns that slaying a bandit, means killing the innocent as well, i.e., his wife, parents, and children. He points out that occasionally, a wicked person may have imbibed good conduct from someone virtuous, as might a bandit. Yet other stories such as the *Vyadhagita* strive to show how hunters, butchers, merchants, housewives and bandits equal renunciants and brahmins through their karma yoga (performance of duties) alone, notwithstanding the violent professions they are engaged in. Are these women and shudras exceptions to the rule? It does not appear so. Kapavya’s story shows that although the son of bandit, Kapavya is not evil and Bhishma is in effect urging Yudhisthira to be alert to the fact that a bandit’s son may not be of evil disposition, as a policy matter. Kings passed judgments in their courts on a case-by-case basis, hence this advice is not unseemly.[[41]](#endnote-41)

**Conclusion:**

While many readings of the MBh seek to show that the text is liberating for women or to certain others and portrays them in better ways than the more conservative dharmashastras, it is my understanding that the *Mahabharata* stories do not really deviate from the dharmashastras or Manu’s injunctions. They only clarify the application of those injunctions, sensitize us to the context and alert us to the original intent behind those injunctions. The stories of MBh may not appear as radical as we would like them to in favoring stri-shudras because the text’s logic is arranged in a slow and methodical manner. Each story complicates dharma in only one way. Each story offers only one clarification about the nature of dharma. Or, it problematizes one assumed aspect about dharma from the perspective of the stri or the shudra.

The MBh adds layers to the existing edifice of dharma, without toppling it altogether or seeking to reinvent the wheel. Stridharma, varnadharma and all other dharmas are recognized as smritis, one source of dharma, but as inferior to the eternal dharma taught in the Vedas through the ritual sacrifice or *yagnya*. This is a point that several dharmashastras also make. We can this see in numerous stories that these dharmas (stridharma and varna-ashrama-dharma) can be changed to a certain extent to suit changing times and needs. Dharma, in the MBh, is a combination of eternal principles and evolutionary cultural processes in the form of customary practice. It is constantly evolving and is anything but static. This also means that the Vedas and knowledge of sadharana dharmas are, pre-requisite knowledge to understand the complications being introduced by the MBh. The kind of reading offered here has the potential to show that the dharmashastras are no conservative texts, as is often believed, but are also stri-shudra texts to an extent, allowing for exceptions in stri-shudra conduct.

What I did not expect to find in this research was that the MBh and the dharmashastras concurred with each other on numerous points. Given that the MBh is considered a stri-shudra text, I had believed that the MBh will surpass or even oppose the dharmashastric tradition. However, this is not true. The MBh likely extends Manu’s injunctions to new scenarios by pitting different kinds of dharma against one another. If the MBh is viewed as at least possessing strong female characters who exercised choice, then by implication of its close following of the *Manusmriti*, the *Manusmriti* too should be viewed as a pro-women text. The only difference between them would be that one is a pedagogical text, while the other is an epic with well-rounded characters. It’s possible *we* need to adjust our lens a lot more to see how the MBh is a pro stri-shudra text.

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1. Hiltebeitel’s latest book *Freud’s Mahabharata*, out as recently as 2018, is a testimony to such undertakings by scholars. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “What is here on dharma, artha, kama, moksha and exists elsewhere, but what is not in here does not exist anywhere" (MBh 1.56.33). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. These readings have basis in verses such as this: “The study of the Bharata is an act of piety. He that readeth even one foot, with belief, hath his sins entirely purged away. Herein Devas, Devarshis, and immaculate Brahmarshis of good deeds, have been spoken of; and likewise Yakshas and great Uragas (Nagas). Herein also hath been described the eternal Vasudeva possessing the six attributes. He is the true and just, the pure and holy, the eternal Brahma, the supreme soul, the true constant light, whose divine deeds wise and learned recount; from whom hath proceeded the non-existent and existent-non-existent universe with principles of generation and progression, and birth, death, and re-birth. That also hath been treated of which is called Adhyatma (the superintending spirit of nature) that partaketh of the attributes of the five elements. That also hath been described who is *purusha* being above such epithets as 'undisplayed' and the like; also that which the foremost *yatis* exempt from the common destiny and endued with the power of meditation and *Tapas* behold dwelling in their hearts as a reflected image in the mirror.” (Ganguli, 15). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Vyasa to Brahma: “O divine Brahma, by me a poem hath been composed which is greatly respected. The mystery of the Veda, and what other subjects have been explained by me; the various rituals of the Upanishads with the Angas; the compilation of the Puranas and history formed by me and named after the three divisions of time, past, present, and future; the determination of the nature of decay, fear, disease, existence, and non-existence, a description of creeds and of the various modes of life; rule for the four castes, and the import of all the Puranas; an account of asceticism and of the duties of a religious student; the dimensions of the sun and moon, the planets, constellations, and stars, together with the duration of the four ages; the Rik, Sama and Yajur Vedas; also the Adhyatma; the sciences called Nyaya, Orthoephy and Treatment of diseases; charity and Pasupatadharma; birth celestial and human, for particular purposes; also a description of places of pilgrimage and other holy places of rivers, mountains,, forests, the ocean, of heavenly cities and the *kalpas*; the art of war; the different kinds of nations and languages: the nature of the manners of the people; and the all-pervading spirit;--all these have been represented. But, after all, no writer of this work is to be found on earth.” (Ganguli, 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Stri-shudras are grouped together because of their service-oriented jobs and because of the violence involved in their work. Shudras who take on the work of tanning, hunting, oil-pressing and so on. Women cook; recall here Manu verse on the five hells we attai because of the five kinds of violence we unleash in the kitchen—cooking, cutting, boiling in hot oil and so on. ‘Friends-of-brahmins’ refers to the fallen brahmins. They are typically those stopped chanting the gayatri. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “The *Great Bharata* was an *itihasa savaiyakhya,* a chronicle of events which examined and explained those events in accompanying or interposed or appended elaborations (MBhl. l.48a)” (Fitzgerald, 1991, 165). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Taking these facts for his subject, Dwaipayana composed a holy *Upanishad* that has been published to the world by learned and sacred bards in the Puranas composed by them” (Ganguli, 14). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In any case, recitation by a learned person appears to be recommended by the MBh: “The learned man who recites to others this Veda of Vyasa reapeth advantage. It may without doubt destroy even the sin of killing the embryo and the like” (Ganguli, 15). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “His account began with one of the most important actors in the events described in the *MBh,* Vyasa, and presented, among others, the facts that he was the son of the rsi ParaSara, that he performed the *rsi's* activity of dividing the Veda, and that he taught the Vedas to his pupils, the *Great Bharata* being the fifth (MBh1.57.1- 75) (Fitzgerald, 1991, 162). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “…is adorned with matters from the Vedas, which the seer Vaisampayana correctly and satisfyingly proclaimed during janamejaya's sacrificial session at Dvaipayana's command” (MBh1.1.19, l5-18) (Fitzgerald, 1991, 162). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. "In former days, having placed the four Vedas on one side and the Bharata on the other, these were weighed in the balance by the celestials assembled for that purpose. And as the latter weighed heavier than the four Vedas with their mysteries, from that period it hath been called in the world Mahabharata (the great Bharata). Being esteemed superior both in substance and gravity of import it is denominated Mahabharata on account of such substance and gravity of import. He that knoweth its meaning is saved from all his sins” (Ganguli, 15). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. To look for an original version of the *Mahabharata* was the project of some colonial and early western and Indological scholarship. E W Hopkins (1885), for instance, calls the MBh “rubbish” on numerous occasions, overlooking the problems involved in the oral preservation of text as massive as the MBh. That the MBh was preserved orally is attested by one of its early verses: “Learned men display their knowledge of the *samhita*s by commenting on this collection. Some are skilled in explaining it, others in *remembering* it” (Debroy, trans. 2015, 26, emphasis mine). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Here are related verses, also relevant to our pursuit: “Seeing that the women, the Sudras and the fallen Brahmanas, Ksatriyas and Vaisyas were debarred even from hearing the Vedas and did not know how to perform acts that are conducive to good, the sage (Vedavyasa) was good enough to compose the Mahabharata epic in order that women and others too might attain blessedness through the same. (25) Even though Vyasa ever remained whole-heartedly engaged in doing good to living creatures, his heart was not satisfied with it, O Brahmanas! (26) Feeling uneasy at heart, the sage, who knew the secret of Dharma (righteousness), sat reflecting in a secluded spot on the holy bank of the Saraswati, and said to himself thus:— (27) "Observing the vow of celibacy I reverently studied the Vedas, served the elders and worshipped the sacrificial fires and honestly followed their precepts. (28) I have also revealed the purport of the Vedas through the *Mahabharata*, in which *even women, the Sudras and* *others can find their respective duties* and other things explained” (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1. 28, Gita Press, page 14, emphasis mine). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I am retaining the term shudra for now because the texts studied use the term. I am aware it is considered an inappropriate term in the anti-castiest movements in India but to use a term such as dalit or ‘lower-caste’ in the context of the text would also be problematic and anachronistic. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Hopkins and Buhler have studied the commonalities and differences between the *Manusmriti* and the MBh closely. Hopkins point out that the MBh has several mentions of ‘Manu said so’ or ‘Manu, son of the Self -existent’ and he often heads the list of dharmashastrakaras. He shows that many MBh verses contain the gist of Manava verses and a small portion of the verses are accredited to Manu. Manu’s mention in the MBh is various, Manu suryaputra, Manu, the husband of Sarasvati, Manu, son of Brahma, Manu Prajapati, Seven Manus and so on. There are Manu quotations in the MBh not found in the *Manusmriti* and occasionally what’s attributed to Manu is actually found in other dharmashastras. According to Hopkins, verified and unverified quotations in total amount to 35 verses. Among recent scholars, Olivelle (2003) is of the opinion that Manusmriti precedes the MBh. For an essay on dating the two, see Bronkhorst (2012). Bühler (1886: lxxx) has “succeeded in identifying upwards of 260 verses or portions of verses, not attributed to Manu, with ślokas of the Manu-smṛti. This number ... corresponds to about one-tenth of the bulk of the latter work ...” (Bronkhorst, 2012, 136). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. “Sauti the bard commented that because of these knotty verses, "even the omniscient Ganesa would ponder for a moment, and all the while Vyasa created many more verses." As a result, he said, “even today, no one is able to penetrate that closely woven mass of verses because of the profundity of their hidden meaning.” (Sullivan, 1999, 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Adluri (2010) offers a different explanation of why the Ganesha story was introduced in the Southern recension of MBh. His reading does not necessarily contradict my reading nor mine his, I think. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Similarly, Vidura says men who hate women are guilty of one of the seven dharmas of cruelty (MBh 5.43.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Except perhaps in the fact that female sanyasinis are present in the MBh and not in the dharmashastras, and the Gandharva marriage is considered the best type of marriage for kshatriyas in the Shakuntala story in MBh, whereas *Manusmriti* does not say so, several injunctions are common between the MBh and the *Manusmriti*. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. “I cannot stay before them in this state,” says Draupadi (Ganguli, 128). The MS(4.57) states that men should not carry on a conversation with a menstruating woman. This is also stated by the *Taittirya*. Why menstruation is impure is a discussion we have to postpone. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Vidura rightly recognizes that Draupadi is asking a question about her rights when she asks who was lost first in the wager: “The afflicted person asketh the assembly about their rights, as sanctioned by morality” (Ganguli, 133). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. She says: “This is truly an unworthy act. But no one here rebuketh thee. Assuredly, all these are of the same mind with thee” (Ganguli, 128). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Duryodhana says: “let them thereby make king Yudhishthira the just a liar. Thou shalt then be freed from the condition of slavery” (Ganguli, 136). Draupadi has previously declared: “Those only that are possessed of great clearness of vision can ascertain it” (Ganguli, 128). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. As is shown by this verse in the *Manusmriti*: “Say what is true, say what is sweet, but do not say what is true but not sweet, nor say what is sweet but not true. This is the perennial wisdom.” (MS 4:138). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Bhishma agrees with Draupadī that a man without property cannot stake property, but he also asserts that ‘a woman is always subservient to her husband’ (2.60.40). Bhīṣma concludes: ‘therefore I can-not address your question (*praśna*)’ (2.60.42). Draupadi is dissatisfied by Bhishma’s stance. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It may be of interest to note that in the Andhra MBh, Draupadi is considered to have been Indraseni, Damayanti’s daughter in an earlier life. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Manu says that under no circumstances should Kṣatriyas or Vaiśyas be subjected to dāsya. The status of and the activities connected with dāsya must be reserved for the Śūdra (Manu 8.413 and 8.414). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. McGrath (2009, 33) too concurs with Rocher. He suggests that although dasa and dasi are sometimes translated as slave, they “refer to a client system of kinship and do not denote a chattel or property relation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. This is ascertainable in the *Markandeya Purana* version of Harischandra’s story. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. In this context, it is worthwhile to remember that the Buddhist Jataka Tales have a version of the MBh, wherein the dasi-putra, Vidura is projected as dharmically superior. But against the background of the reading, I provide here, this interpretation appears somewhat unimaginative since the MBh is itself doing that. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Debroy’s translation to ascertain this (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Dushyanta says the following: “One is certainly one's own friend, and one certainly may depend upon one's own self. Therefore, according to the ordinance, thou canst certainly bestow thyself. There are, in all, eight kinds of marriages. These are *Brahma*, *Daiva*, *Arsha*, *Prajapatya*, *Asura*, *Gandharva*, *Rakshasa*, and *Paisacha*, the eighth. Manu, the son of the self-create, hath spoken of the appropriateness of all these forms according to their order. Know, O faultless one, that the first four of these are fit for Brahmanas, and the first six for Kshatriyas. As regards kings, even the *Rakshasa* form is permissible. The *Asura* form is permitted to Vaisyas and Sudras. Of the first five the three are proper, the other two being improper. The *Paisacha* and the *Asura* forms should never be practised. These are the institutes of religion, and one should act according to them. The *Gandharva* and the *Rakshasa* form are consistent with the practices of Kshatriyas. Thou needst not entertain the least fear. There is not the least doubt that either according to any one of these last-mentioned forms, or according to a union of both of them, our wedding may take place. O thou of the fairest complexion, full of desire I am, thou also in a similar mood mayst become my wife according to the Gandharva form” (Ganguli, 156). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Krishna abducting Rukmini is largely Krishna showing to Rukmini’s brother Rukmi that forcing a kshatriya woman to forego svayamvara is unacceptable and against dharma. To build political alliances, there were other routes such as marriage by abduction, which required proof of strength and courage and willingness to fight whoever obstructed the abduction. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Why then should the dharmashastras categorize women at all? It does so because although some of their rights and duties vary women are assigned to service-oriented jobs. I also believe that menstruation and the pain involved in childbirth as well as the violence involved in cooking is responsible for this categorization. I offer an expansive understanding of violence and pain in my upcoming book, which argues this at length.Prima facie, across castes, women’s duties are divided in the following way, I think. Brahmin women cook, clean pooja utensils, prepare prasadam, accompany spouse for sacrifices, if necessary, study the epics and puranas perhaps, have a routine of their own pooja, do childcare, care for the spouse and elderly, care for the disciples of her spouse, manage household finances and could work to earn money if circumstances so necessitate. Kshatriya women train for battle, study the dharmashastras, do not necessarily cook, do not always do childcare directly, manage household finances, care for the spouse and elderly, be helpful in forming political alliances through marriage, learn the arts. Vaishya women cook, clean, study the epics and puranas perhaps, do childcare, care for the spouse and elderly and assist the spouse in family business ventures. The shudra wife would do childcare, care for the spouse and elderly, and take up service-oriented jobs if necessary. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. This is Shakuntala’s speech, which itself reads like a note on streedharma: “She is a true wife who hath borne a son. She is a true wife whose heart is devoted to her lord. She is a true wife who knoweth none but her lord. The wife is a man's half. The wife is the first of friends. The wife is the root of religion, profit, and desire. The wife is the root of salvation. They that have wives can perform religious acts. They that have wives can lead domestic lives. They that have wives have the means to be cheerful. They that have wives can achieve good fortune. Sweet-speeched wives are friends on occasions of joy. They are as fathers on occasions of religious acts. They are

    mothers in sickness and woe. Even in the deep woods to a traveller a wife is his refreshment and solace.

    He that hath a wife is trusted by all. A wife, therefore, is one's most valuable possession. Even when the

    husband leaving this world goeth into the region of Yama, it is the devoted wife that accompanies him thither. A wife going before waits for the husband. But if the husband goeth before, the chaste wife followeth close. For these reasons, O king, doth marriage exist. The husband enjoyth the companionship of the wife both in this and in the other worlds. It hath been said by learned persons that one is himself born as one's son. Therefore, a man whose wife hath borne a son should look upon her as his mother. Beholding the face of the son one hath begotten upon his wife, like his own face in a mirror, one feeleth as happy as a virtuous man, on attaining to heaven. Men scorched by mental grief, or suffering under bodily pain, feel as much refreshed in the companionship of their wives as a perspiring person in a cool bath. No man, even in anger, should ever do anything that is disagreeable to his wife, seeing that happiness, joy, and virtue—everything dependeth on the wife. A wife is the sacred field in which the husband is born himself. Even *Rishis* cannot create creatures without women” (Ganguli, 159). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Apasthamba Dharmasutra. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, however, Krishna views Arjuna’s noble birth as inadequate. He tells Arjuna that noble birth alone is not enough and being calm in the face of both good and bad occurrences and being unattached to the results of action while continuing to perform duties is what is important. That is, that the cultivation of *antahkarana* is facilitated by noble birth and is a privilege is acknowledged by the MBh. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. This is paraphrased from Fitzgerald’s translation of this story (2004, 591). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. This is paraphrased from Debroy’s (2015) translation of MBh 1461(133). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Such a mixing of castes is recalled differently for the Bahlikas, also bandits. Among the Bahlikas, “one first becomes a brahmana and then becomes a kshatriya. Thereafter, one becomes a vaishya, a shudra, a Bahlika, and finally a barber” (Debroy, 2015, MBh Chapter 1180(30)). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Perhaps this attention to specificity is what Ramanujan (1989) has in mind when he describes Indian ethics as context-specific. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)