



## Ethics of Exclusion: The Political Strategy of The Mahabharata

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**Abstract-**The *Mahabharata* is not merely an epic of dynastic conflict but a sophisticated exploration of ethics, social hierarchy, and political power in ancient Indian society. This paper examines the ethics of exclusion as a deliberate strategy within the epic, focusing on marginalized or subaltern characters such as Karna, Ekalavya, and Shikhandi. Karna's denial of royal status due to birth, Ekalavya's caste-based exclusion from education, and Shikhandi's marginalization because of gender identity exemplify how social hierarchies are enforced and contested. Through these narratives, the study argues that exclusion functions as both a political mechanism and an ethical dilemma, highlighting the tension between dharma, justice, and loyalty. The epic demonstrates that adherence to social norms often overrides individual merit, creating moral ambiguities that challenge the very concept of righteousness. By analyzing these paradigms, the paper establishes a thematic connection between ancient structures of exclusion and contemporary debates on caste, gender, and social justice. Ultimately, the *Mahabharata* provides a critical lens for understanding how power and ethics intersect, illustrating that exclusion is not merely incidental but a strategic instrument within hierarchical societies.

**Keywords-** Dharma, Ethics, Caste, Marginalisation, Karma, Patriarchal, Exclusion, Transgender, Epic

### I. INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata*, one of the most profound epics of ancient India, is not merely a narrative of dynastic conflict; it is a sophisticated exploration of ethics, politics, and social hierarchy within a stratified society<sup>1</sup>. Central to the epic is the theme of exclusion, which operates through the

interplay of caste, birth, and political power. Characters such as Karna, Ekalavya, and Shikhandi exemplify how marginalized or subaltern individuals navigate systemic oppression, ethical dilemmas, and societal restrictions<sup>2</sup>. Their experiences illuminate the mechanisms by which social hierarchies are maintained and contested, highlighting the moral ambiguities embedded in dharma (righteous duty)<sup>3</sup>.

The ethics of exclusion in the *Mahabharata* are not limited to mere denial of social or political power; they also shape personal choices, loyalty, and moral responsibility. Karna's unwavering allegiance to Duryodhana, despite the injustices he faces, and Ekalavya's tragic sacrifice for knowledge, reveal the profound ethical tensions inherent in a system where hierarchical norms often override merit. This paper argues that the *Mahabharata* presents a paradigmatic framework for understanding how ethics, power, and caste intersect, producing social exclusion and moral dilemmas. By analyzing these narratives, the study explores the broader implications of exclusion for social and political life, offering insights relevant to historical and contemporary contexts.

### KARNA: ETHICS OF EXCLUSION AND MORAL DILEMMAS

Karna, one of the central characters of the *Mahabharata*, exemplifies the complexities of birth-based exclusion within rigid hierarchical structures. Despite his unparalleled valor, skill, and loyalty, Karna is constantly denied recognition and social legitimacy due to his status as the son of a charioteer

<sup>1</sup> Ganguly, Kisari Mohan, tr. *The Mahabharata*, 1883-1896; reprint: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003, Book 1, pp. 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> Hildebeitel, Alf. *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*. University of Chicago Press, 1976, pp. 112-145.

<sup>3</sup> Matilal, Bimal Krishna. *Ethics and Politics in the Mahabharata*. Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 45-68.



family. This exclusion highlights how caste and birth determine access to political power, irrespective of individual merit<sup>4</sup>. Karna's life is marked by a profound ethical dilemma: his unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana conflicts with broader notions of dharma (moral righteousness)<sup>5</sup>. By supporting Duryodhana, Karna aligns himself with political expediency and friendship; however, this allegiance perpetuates injustice and fuels the dynastic conflict that leads to Kurukshetra.

The tension between personal ethics and societal expectations renders Karna a paradigmatic figure for understanding the Mahabharata's discourse on social exclusion. His struggles illuminate how marginalized individuals negotiate agency within entrenched power hierarchies, and the moral costs of navigating loyalty, honor, and duty. Karna's story, therefore, is not merely a narrative of personal tragedy but a reflection on systemic oppression, demonstrating how ethical dilemmas are inseparable from social and political inequalities.

#### EKALAVYA: CASTE, MERITOCRACY, AND THE ETHICS OF EXCLUSION

Ekalavya, a pivotal yet often overlooked character in the *Mahabharata*, epitomizes the systemic exclusion imposed by rigid caste hierarchies in ancient Indian society. Born into a marginalized community, Ekalavya's aspiration to become a warrior was thwarted by social norms that restricted access to formal education and martial training for non-Kshatriya individuals<sup>1</sup>. Despite his determination, when Ekalavya approaches Dronacharya, the royal guru, to request instruction, he is denied on the grounds of caste. Undeterred, Ekalavya demonstrates extraordinary self-discipline and mastery by practicing archery independently, even creating a clay image of Dronacharya as his teacher, thereby subverting traditional avenues of learning<sup>6</sup>.

This narrative reaches its ethical and political climax in the guru dakshina incident, where Dronacharya demands Ekalavya's right thumb as a token of obedience<sup>3</sup>. This act, ostensibly a form of ritual respect and loyalty, effectively obliterates Ekalavya's path to recognition, highlighting the

tension between meritocracy and entrenched social hierarchies. Ekalavya's sacrifice exposes the moral contradictions of a society that valorizes skill and accomplishment in theory but restricts it in practice due to caste-based exclusion<sup>7</sup>.

Ekalavya's story thus serves as a powerful critique of social injustice. It underscores how systemic hierarchies enforce exclusion while compelling marginalized individuals to navigate ethical dilemmas between personal ambition and obedience to societal authority<sup>5</sup>. In the broader context of the *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya's experience exemplifies how social norms and political power intersect to constrain agency, making him a paradigm of subaltern resistance and ethical tension in the epic<sup>8</sup>.

#### SHIKHANDI: GENDER, IDENTITY, AND THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF POWER

Among the many figures who embody the *Mahabharata's* ethical and social complexities, Shikhandi stands out as a profound representation of gendered exclusion and political instrumentalization. Born as Amba, Shikhandi's life narrative traverses multiple identities—woman, warrior, and ultimately a transgender being—challenging the epic's gendered moral order. Amba's initial humiliation at the hands of Bhishma, who abducts her and her sisters for a forced marriage alliance, leads to her rejection by both her intended groom and Bhishma himself. Denied agency within patriarchal norms, Amba renounces her identity, undergoes penance, and is reborn as Shikhandi, a warrior determined to avenge her humiliation.

Shikhandi's transformation is not merely a personal act of vengeance; it becomes a political instrument in the war at Kurukshetra. Arjuna uses Shikhandi as a shield against Bhishma, knowing that Bhishma, bound by his vow of chastity and social codes, would not fight someone who was once female<sup>3</sup>. This episode exposes how gender identity—constructed and manipulated within patriarchal logic—becomes a weapon of both exclusion and empowerment. While Shikhandi's role brings about Bhishma's fall, it also underscores the tragic reality of being used as a means to an end

<sup>4</sup> Hiltebeitel, .....op,cit, pp. 120-125.

<sup>5</sup> Matilal, Bimal Krishna. *Ethics and Politics in the Mahabharata*. Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 47-50.

<sup>6</sup> Hiltebeitel,.....op,citepp. 130-135.

<sup>7</sup> Karve, Iravati. *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. Orient Longman, 1968, pp. 60-65.

<sup>8</sup> Matilal, B.K., *Ethics and Politics*, pp. 60-65.



rather than being recognized as an autonomous moral agent<sup>9</sup>.

In ethical terms, Shikhandi represents the subversion of rigid gender hierarchies, but also the exploitation of difference for political gain. The epic uses Shikhandi's ambiguous identity to reveal how patriarchal and warrior ethics intertwine to sustain power structures. Shikhandi's existence questions the moral legitimacy of a social order that excludes and objectifies those who do not conform to its binary codes of masculinity and femininity<sup>10</sup>. Through this narrative, the *Mahabharata* not only reflects the deep anxieties surrounding gender and power but also compels readers to confront the ethical cost of exclusion in the pursuit of dharma and victory<sup>11</sup>.

#### ANALYSIS: EXCLUSION AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL HIERARCHY

The *Mahabharata*, often described as an epic of dharma, simultaneously exposes the dark architecture of exclusion that sustains political and social hierarchies. Exclusion—whether by birth, caste, or gender—operates as a systemic instrument that legitimizes power and ensures the dominance of certain groups over others<sup>12</sup>. The stories of Karna, Ekalavya, and Shikhandi illustrate how ethical ideals such as dharma and justice are frequently subordinated to social order and political expediency.

In Karna's case, birth-based exclusion denies him access to royal recognition and moral legitimacy, despite his proven valor. The denial of his rightful place within the Kshatriya hierarchy reveals the fragility of dharma when confronted with caste privilege. Similarly, Ekalavya's caste-based denial of education by Drona exposes how the gurukul system—ideally an ethical space for learning—served to maintain Brahminical

monopoly over knowledge and power<sup>13</sup>. In both narratives, the exclusion is rationalized as preserving dharma, thereby transforming morality into an ideology of domination.

Shikhandi's story, meanwhile, complicates the paradigm of exclusion through gender and social identity. Unlike Karna and Ekalavya, whose marginalization stems from caste and birth, Shikhandi's exclusion emerges from a transgression of gender norms. The instrumental use of Shikhandi in war reveals how even those who challenge norms are absorbed into patriarchal strategies of power, highlighting the ethical ambivalence of inclusion achieved through exploitation<sup>14</sup>.

From a moral standpoint, these stories reveal the tension between fairness and hierarchy, justice and obedience, inclusion and purity. The *Mahabharata* presents no easy resolutions; rather, it situates ethics within power relations, where dharma itself becomes a contested terrain<sup>15</sup>. Exclusion thus becomes not an accidental moral failure but a deliberate mechanism of control, ensuring that social order prevails over individual merit or moral truth.

In modern terms, this ethical paradox resonates with contemporary questions about social justice, caste discrimination, and gender identity. By presenting these ancient narratives of exclusion, the *Mahabharata* mirrors enduring structures of inequality that persist in contemporary societies, especially in the South Asian context<sup>16</sup>. The epic, therefore, functions both as a mirror and a critique

<sup>9</sup> Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin, 2009, pp. 283-287.

<sup>10</sup> Matilal, Bimal Krishna. *Ethics and Politics in the Mahabharata*. Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 68-71.

<sup>11</sup> Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Stree, 2003, pp. 45-50.

<sup>12</sup> Hildebeitel, Alf. *Op.cite*.....pp. 45-49.

<sup>13</sup> Sharma, Arvind. *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 103-108.

<sup>14</sup> Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin, 2009, pp. 284-288.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, Richard H. *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*. Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 54-57.

<sup>16</sup> Narayanan, Vasudha. "The Politics of Dharma: Ethics and Social Justice in the Mahabharata." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2010, pp. 113-122.



of civilization—showing that every assertion of dharma carries within it the shadow of exclusion<sup>17</sup>.

## II. CONCLUSION

The *Mahabharata* stands not merely as an epic of heroism and dharma, but as a moral chronicle of exclusion—a mirror to the ethical contradictions embedded in human society. Through the intertwined narratives of Karna, Ekalavya, and Shikhandi, the text exposes the persistent entanglement between ethics and power, where moral ideals are repeatedly compromised to preserve social hierarchy and political stability.

Karna's exclusion based on birth, Ekalavya's denial of knowledge due to caste, and Shikhandi's marginalization on the grounds of gender identity together reveal that the mechanisms of exclusion are not incidental but foundational to the epic's moral universe. The pursuit of *dharma*, often celebrated as the essence of the *Mahabharata*, is itself shown to be deeply political, legitimizing inequality in the guise of moral order. This inversion of justice—where righteousness serves hierarchy rather than humanity—marks the epic's central ethical tension.

within these tragic narratives lies the critical consciousness of resistance. Each marginalized figure, though constrained by social codes, challenges the system in subtle but transformative ways. Karna asserts his warrior identity despite stigma; Ekalavya redefines learning through self-discipline; Shikhandi weaponizes gender transgression into agency. Their stories turn exclusion into ethical critique, forcing readers to confront the question: *Can dharma exist where justice is denied?* In this sense, the *Mahabharata* transcends its mythological context and speaks to contemporary discourses on caste, gender, and social justice. The politics of exclusion it portrays continues to resonate in modern India's struggles over equality and dignity. Thus, the ethics of exclusion in the *Mahabharata* are not ancient relics, but living dilemmas, reminding us that every civilization must continually question the moral cost of its hierarchies.

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