
UNIT 2 “THE DICING” FROM THE *BOOK OF THE ASSEMBLY HALL*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The present unit will help us to critically analyse the epic under study - the *Mahabharata*. It will acquaint us with the major themes of the epic in general and the episode of ‘The Dicing’ in particular. Here, questions of *Dharma*, the law and its relevance in the lives of the characters will be explored at some length. A discussion on some unexplored aspects of *Duryodhana’s* character will also be undertaken. We will then be in a position to also decipher the workings of power and wealth. Importantly, the character of *Draupadi* and the significance of events that follow the dicing game will be evaluated in detail. This will help us see the place and condition of women in ancient times. These and other related questions will be explored. In the next section we will get a brief idea of the background of ‘*The Dicing*’ which is the prescribed text under study. If you have not read the text, please do so immediately.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We are made aware in the beginning of the “Book of the Assembly Hall” that the *Pandavas* have risen to great power and a “celestial” assembly hall has been built by *Maya*, a ‘*Danava*’ to reciprocate the good acts of *Arjuna* who rescued him. Despite all attempts of the *Kauravas* to cause harm to the *Pandavas*, the latter shine in the splendour of newly acquired wealth.”The Dicing” from the “Book of the Assembly Hall” (*Sabha Parva*) shows us that *Duryodhana* has been overpowered and tricked by the marvels of *Yudhisthira’s* palace. Let us look at the causes of *Duryodhana’s* misery next.

2.2 DURYODHANA’S MISERY AND THE GRANDEUR OF THE PANDAVAS

Duryodhana having witnessed the exuberance of *Yudhishthira*’s ‘*Maya*’ palace at the *Rajasuya* sacrifice is in acute distress and despair that is incurable. He recounts the tale to his maternal uncle *Sakuni* who in turn tries to pacify his nephew but in vain. For in trying to pacify *Duryodhana*, *Sakuni* reiterates the power and luck of the *Pandavas*. *Sakuni* says:

You must harbor no resentment against Yudhishthira, for the Pandavas have always enjoyed good luck. In the past you have often made attempts on them with many wiles, and the tiger like men escaped because of their luck. They won Draupadi for their wife, and Drupada with his sons for their ally, and the heroic Vasudeva for their helper in the winning of the earth. They won undiminished wealth as their father’s portion, king of the earth, and it grew through their energy. Why lament about that? Dhanamjaya, by sating the Fire, won the bow Gandiva, the two inexhaustible quivers, and celestial weapons. With that superb bow and the might of his own arms he subjugated the kings—why lament about it? He freed the Danava Maya from the forest fire and had him build that hall—why lament about it? (9)



The Pandavas lose the game of dice and Draupadi is presented in court,
[wikipedia.org]

Note that in the above passage *Sakuni* concedes that the *Pandavas* have displayed the will to work hard and tirelessly—they received their father’s portion but with their contribution “it grew through their energy”. This has brought them appreciation and wealth. Importantly, they have won all things mentioned by *Sakuni* with effort, including *Draupadi*—who is actually not a thing but a person. However, *Draupadi* in the text is clubbed time and again with objects and things that can be either won or lost!

Sakuni’s assessment of the *Pandavas*’ has an opposite effect on *Duryodhana* as it further accentuates his suffering. The palace of illusion ‘*Maya*’ in fact becomes a source of yearning for *Duryodhana*. It sows the seeds of revenge in him. The palace of illusion reminds *Duryodhana* of his humiliation at

Yudhisthira's palace at *Indraprastha*. The incident at the palace of 'Maya' where *Duryodhana* is mocked at by the *Pandavas* adds fuel to fire. *Vaisampayana* narrates the episode thus:

Mighty Bhimasena saw him that way, as did Arjun and the twins, and they burst out laughing. A choleric man, he (Duryodhana) did not suffer their mockery; to save his face he did not look at them. Once more he pulled up his robe, as though crossing a pool, to ascend firm land, again those people all laughed at him. He once tried a door, which appeared to be open, and hurt his forehead; another time, thinking the door was closed, he shrank from the doorway. (7)

These incidents leave *Duryodhana* in a state of utter despair and he is driven to thoughts of suicide. Says *Duryodhana* to *Sakuni*—

When I saw all that blazing fortune at the Pandava's, I fell prey to resentment and I am burning, though that is not my way. I shall enter the fire, or drink poison, or drown myself, for I shall not be able to live.

Duryodhana attaches significance to the fact that the five brothers united with several kings who act as their allies are invincible. He on the other hand views himself as alone—

All alone I am not capable of acquiring such a regal fortune; nor do I see any allies, and therefore I think of death.

The thought of death comes easy to *Duryodhana* even when *Sakuni* is quick to remind him of his own allies and wealth. The latter iterates:

You say you have no allies, King Bharata; that is not true, for your war like brothers are your allies. So is the grand archer Drona and his sagacious son, and the Suta's son Radhey and the warrior Gautama. So am I with my brothers and the heroic Saumadatti and together with all of us you must conquer the entire world" (9)

Duryodhana is barely convinced. You will notice that *Duryodhana* despairs because his own fame appears faded when compared to the dazzle of the court at *Indraprastha*. In itself, *Duryodhana's* wealth or power has not diminished. While his rivals may have prospered *Duryodhana* has not met with any misfortune. It is only when he sees his own palace and kingdom in relative worth vis-à-vis the *Pandavas* that he becomes insecure and dejected. Thus, he asserts "what man like me who sees their sovereignty over earth, with such wealth and such a sacrifice, would not burn with fever?" Still, his authority and power stands jeopardised in the face of an alternate centre of power, as he says "For what man of mettle in this world will have patience when he sees his rivals prosper and himself decline"? At the personal level, his life-long enmity with the *Pandavas* adds to his discomfiture; despite all his efforts to see their ruin he finds that they have emerged victorious and won many friends, favored by fortune as they were.

2.2.1 Sakuni's Reassurance and Conspiracy

Duryodhana receives assurance from *Sakuni* but the latter also admits that

"Dhanamjaya, Vasudeva, Bhimsena, Yudhisthira, Nakula and Sahadeva and the august Draupada cannot be defeated in battle by force, not even by

the hosts of the Gods. They are great warriors and archers, know their weapons and are battle crazy”. (9-10)

The *Pandavas*’s invincibility is aptly highlighted by *Sakuni*. Even the gods he claims cannot defeat the *Pandavas* in battle. However, *Duryodhana* must find a way of submitting them to his authority. *Sakuni* suggests that the formidable group of *Pandavas* be defeated in gambling—that is the *Achilles* heel of *Yudhishtira*. *Sakuni* proclaims himself to be undefeatable in gambling as he suggests:

The kaunteya loves to gamble but does not know how to play. If the lordly king is challenged, he will not be able to resist. And I am a shrewd gambler. I don’t have my match on earth or in all three worlds! Challenge the Kaunteya to a game of dice. With my skill with the dice, King, I am certain to take from him his kingdom and his radiant fortune, in your behalf, bull among men. Mention all this to the king, Duryodhana, and if your father permits, I shall certainly defeat him (10).

Interestingly, what cannot be done on the field will be achieved on the table and by one who is far from a warrior. In the game of minds then valour plays little part. The *Pandavas* sure are not known for wit or cunning. They could neither deceive nor play with strategy. That was *Sakuni*’s skill. *Duryodhana* too is rash and restless, known little for pragmatism or diplomacy. He is identified with valour as also ruthlessness. Here, however a different side of *Duryodhana*’s character comes to the fore. He displays an inferiority complex and appears diffident as also self-conscious. These attributes go against his grain as it were. Still, when *Sakuni* claims he can defeat the *Pandavas* in a game of dice, *Duryodhana* is thoughtful of his allies and friends as he says “*if they (the Pandavas) can be defeated without inconsiderateness to our friends and other great-spirited allies, then tell me, uncle*” (10). *Duryodhana* is cautious to not displease his allies and aware of the ties he must maintain with friends. Further, when *Sakuni* urges *Duryodhana* to speak to the king about permitting a challenge of the dice, *Duryodhana* goes on a back foot and is hesitant to speak to his father. He contrarily persuades *Sakuni* to take the task of presenting the matter to the king in “the right way”. See how he articulates his hesitation,

“No, you yourself must mention it in the right way to Dhrtarastra, the first of the Kurus, O Saubala. I shall not be able to bring up the matter” (10)

Why does *Duryodhana* feel incapacitated to speak to his father about permitting a game of Dice? Does he suspect it would betray his ill-intent? Contrarily, does *Duryodhana*’s conscience not allow him to justify his vicious plan? These questions surface in the reading of the text. In fact, we will note that such variations and doubts in the character of *Duryodhana* make him a more human and plausible character.

2.2.2 The Emotional Manipulation of *Dhrtarastra*

As we move further into the text we see *Sakuni* making a case for the game ceremony before *Dhrtarastra* dramatically. He exploits the king’s emotions by cashing in on the pain and suffering of *Duryodhana* who “looked pale and

yellow and wan...and (is) brooding”. *Dhrtarastra* unable to understand the cause, asks *Duryodhana*:

I do not see a cause for your grief, for this grand sovereignty entirely devolves on you, son, and your brothers and friends do not do you ill. You wear fine clothes, you eat hash of meat, purebred horses carry you—why are you yellow and wan? Costly beds and charming women, well-appointed houses and all the recreation you want—all this waits on your word, without a doubt, as though on the words of Gods. You are unassailable, yet seem sad? Why do you pine, my son?
(11)

Note how the wealth of the court is described as also the privileges the King enjoys—a pure breed horse to carry him and all kinds of recreation made available for him, including “charming women” who are clubbed with “costly beds” as if one is the extension of the other. That costly beds and charming women are spoken in one breadth tell us a lot about the place of women in that society where they were viewed as objects of possession and recreation. This will inform us a great deal about the events that would unfold later in the episode when *Draupadi* is dragged into the court.

To return to the case of *Duryodhana*, we find that he doubts the power he wields. The *Pandavas*’ aura continues to haunt him as he tells *Dhrtarastra*, “*I eat and dress like any miserable man*” and that “*my pleasure no longer satisfies me, now that I have seen the radiant fortune at Yudhishthira Kaunteya’s, which causes my pallor*”. Almost in a trance, *Duryodhana* seems to live the memory of his visit at *Indraprastha*. He savours the experience and describes what he saw (a second time) to *Dhrtarastra* who must imagine all that is being told to him—*Duryodhana* relives imaginatively the experience he narrates. Both go over in their minds the splendour of *Indraprastha*. *Duryodhana* sets the scene and describes it vividly in the following manner:

There are eighty-eight thousand snataka householders whom Yudhishthira supports, each of them with thirty slave girls. Ten thousand more eat daily the best food at Yudhishthira’s house from golden platters. The Kamboja send him hides of the kadall deer, black, dark, and red, and costly blankets, chariots, women, cows, horses by the hundreds and thousands, and three hundred times a hundred camel mares wander about there. The kings brought all manner of precious things to the son of Kunti at his superb ritual, O king, and in great plenty. Nowhere have I seen or heard of such an inflow of wealth as at the sacrifice of the sagacious son of Pandu! And as I have seen the limitless flood of wealth of my enemy, king, I find no shelter and brood incessantly, my lord.
(12)

Duryodhana’s description may be exaggerated and understandable as he, has been deeply influenced by the scene at *Indraprastha*. However, the exaggerated speech is also meant to persuade the blind *Dhrtarastra* who must make his judgement on the bases of what he hears. To add to the astonishment of *Dhrtarastra*, *Duryodhana* elaborates “And listen to me as I tell of a miracle there” and he continues with the saga till “it raised my hairs”. You will note that the evocative nature of *Duryodhana*’s speech makes a compelling scene. *Dhrtarastra* is almost convinced about the “sublime fortune” of the *Pandavas*. *Duryodhana* through his description has justified his wish, in fact, the necessity

to take prompt action and gain supremacy over the *Pandavas*. He says “*This man knows the dice, King, and he is able to take the fortune of the Pandava in a game. Pray allow it.*” (13)

Duryodhana who had earlier felt incapable of speaking the truth states it explicitly here. *Dhrtarastra* visibly moved but not yet vulnerable, decides to seek advice from “my wise councilor the Steward” who is “farsighted” and “will put first the Law and our ultimate benefit”. Note the difference between *Duryodhana*’s wish for instant gratification and *Dhrtarastra*’s emphasis on “ultimate benefit”. The latter’s is an appeal for broader humanism while the former speaks of individual uplift. Here, it is the Steward who is seen as the pronouncer of truth and in whose judgment the king places his faith. However, the idea is nipped in the bud when *Duryodhana* intervenes and says “the Steward will turn you down, if he comes in on this”. Even *Duryodhana* is aware that from the point of view of justice and the state’s welfare (which the Steward represents) the act of challenging the *Pandavas* to a game of dice could cost them dear. Still, *Duryodhana*’s urgency of tone conveys to his father the turmoil brewing in his mind. He gives the king no time to think and in fact plays the part of the victim, manipulating his father’s emotions. He says,

... when you are turned down, lordly king, I shall kill myself! Let there be no doubt! When I am dead, be happy with your Vidura, king. Surely, you shall have the pleasure of all earth: why bother about me? (13)

This reproach by *Duryodhana* moves the king whose affection gets the better of him as he acts contrary to his own wisdom. He orders the servants to have:

“the carpenters build me a big hall of a thousand pillars and a hundred doors, heart-fetching and beautiful, and do it at once! And when they have splattered it with gems and thrown out the dice everywhere, report to me quietly” (13)

Once the orders are given, *Dhrtarastra* turns into a person of steely resolve. He does not budge even when *Vidura* pleads with him to call the game off. The King proclaims:

My decision shall not be circumvented, Vidura, I tell you! I deem it supreme destiny that makes this befall. (13)

Note first that the King who was initially keen on taking *Vidura*’s advice now turns it down. This is because *Dhrtarastra* here speaks in the capacity of a king—his language carries the mark of authority. This is not the self-conscious man who sought *Vidura*’s advice in the privacy of his chambers. Secondly, *Dhrtarastra* seems to shift the onus of his decision on destiny entirely by suggesting that it is “*supreme destiny that makes this befall*”—where he as an individual is only a carrier of command not an active agent. The emphasis on destiny in the book is a significant motif that recurs time and again. Ironically however, *Dhrtarastra* while speaking to *Vidura* counters fate as well—

When I and the bull of the Bharatas Bhisma are near, no foul play ordained by fate can possibly occur.

As events in the book unfold it is revealed that, neither the King nor the supremo *Bhisma* can alter the course of events or keep in check the wrongdoing of

Duryodhana. They become helpless “mute spectators when the *Pandavas* are insulted. Does this suggest that destiny played a part in seeing the ruin of the *Bharata* clan? We may explore this area further (Refer to the discussion on Fate in Unit 1). A quick glance at the role of fate will show us how easily fortunes can be reversed in the blink of an eye. This we shall take up in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you think is the significance of the Palace of Illusion/ “Maya” Palace in the Mahabharata?

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- 2) Is Duryodhana’s manipulation of his father Dhrtarastra effective?

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2.3 REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

We find that in the first half of the chapter ‘*The Dicing*’, *Duryodhana* goes on narrating accounts of the vast influence and wealth of King *Kaunteya* (*Yudhisthira*), exemplified in instances such as the following—

“Chinese men I saw and Huns, Scythians, Orissans, the ones who live in the interior forest, Varneyas, Robber Huns, Black Folk and Himalayans—I cannot get over the many who came and were denied admission, yet paid tribute to him, of so many shapes and so numerous” (17)

Such descriptions cover the first part of the book and paint for us a picture of exuberance, plenitude and luxury that belong to the *Pandavas*. This is the peak of power for the *Pandavas*.

The latter half of the chapter on the other hand reveals to us a complete reversal of fortune. From riches the *Pandavas* are reduced to slaves. The detailed descriptions provided by *Duryodhana* create a dramatic effect and against these the fall of the *Pandavas* appears more shocking. Also it is worth noting that *Dhrtarastra* calls this a “family game of dice” and as we see later, the entire logic of a family game stands on its head. The ‘family’ game turns into a ‘fatal’ game as it augments the fight between the two warring groups, the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Still, *Janamajeya* the eager listener of the tale, we note, is full of questions and earnestly urges the narrator of this section *Vaisampayana* to explain in detail the sequence around the dicing event which as *Janamajaya* suggests “was the root of the destruction of the world”. The reversal in the case of the *Pandavas* is complete when *Yudhisthira* not only loses his riches, himself, his brothers and *Draupadi* as well. We will need to analyse the actual game of dice next.

2.4 THE GAME OF DICE

Yudhisthira is invited by *Vidura* to *Dhrtarastra*’s palace to “play and enjoy a family game” (28). *Yudhisthira*’s first reaction is, “At a dicing we surely shall quarrel”. *Vidura* is quick to agree and proclaims “I know that the game

will bring disaster”. Interestingly, both *Vidura* and *Yudhisthira*, considered wise men in the book, hold similar opinions on the consequence of the dice game. Yet, both agree to become part of it and not stall it. They are both bound by a sense of duty or *Dharma* towards King *Dhrtarastra*.

2.4.1 *Yudhisthira’s Dharma*

Yudhisthira is acutely aware of the danger involved in playing the game of dice, as he suggest,

“most dangerous gamblers have been collected, who are sure to play with wizard tricks” and yet he adds *“it is the King Dhrtarastra’s behest, so I will not refuse, sage, to go to the game. A son will always respect the father”* (29)

The reason for agreeing to the game has a moral provided to it—that a son should be ever-obedient.

2.4.2 *Losing the Kingdom, Brothers and Self in Gambling*

At the game, *Yudhisthira* loses everything bit by bit. It begins with his inexhaustible gold, “*regal chariot*”, a “*thousand must elephants*”, a “*hundred thousand slave girls and male slaves*”. He goes on to lose “*myriads of chariots, carts and horses*” along with “*My city, my country, the wealth of all my people*” till he is left with nothing but his brothers and wife. Then too he stakes and loses all including himself in the game. At each turn we are told “*Sakuni* decided, tricked and cried ‘*Won*’” (33). The *Pandavas* turns into the slaves of the *Kauravas* and this invites the wrath of the elders but no one dares to chide *Duryodhana* or put an end to the game. Even when *Vidura* tells *Dhrtarastra*

This man (Duryodhana) drunk with playing dice, does not look about him, like the mead-drinker, and in starting a feud with great warriors he does not reckon his downfall (36)

- the King ignores his advice.

2.4.3 *Losing Draupadi*

At *Sakuni*’s insinuation

Yet there is your precious queen and one throw is yet unwon. Stake Krsna of Pancala, and win yourself back with her

Yudhisthira stakes her and loses the game. At this moment *Dhrtarastra* is “*exhilarated*” than saddened while “*Bhisma, Drona, Krpa and others broke out in sweat*”. The King is thrilled by the *Kauravas*’ winning spree and is blinded by power like his son *Duryodhana* who with deep satisfaction orders his steward to bring *Draupadi* to the court—

The beloved wife whom the Pandavas honor, let her sweep the house and run on our errands—what a joy to watch—with the serving wretches! (35)

Vidura again makes *Duryodhana* aware that

... the incredible happens through people like you, you don’t know it, nitwit, you are tied in a noose! You hang over a chasm and do not grasp it, you dumb deer to anger tigers!

Constantly, *Vidura* underpins the fact that in the clash between the two groups – the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* — the latter are far more powerful and that *Duryodhana* is a “dumb deer” before, the *Pandavas* who are described as “angry tigers”. *Vidura* we are told, is a wise sage who can see the future and thus, his words carry an air of ominous finality. He further asserts,

*For this to be sure spells the end of the Kurus, a grisly end, the
perdition of all* (36)

However, *Duryodhana* maddened with rage and revenge instructs the steward to bring *Draupadi* to the court. The next section deals with the scene when *Draupadi* is dragged into the *Assembly Hall* where *Yudhishthira* is engaged in the fatal game of dice.

2.5 THE CASE OF DRAUPADI

It is worth noting that the assembly to which *Draupadi* is dragged is meant for men to engage in political activities as also entertainment. Both these spheres are exclusive to men. Here, women seldom enter. When *Draupadi* is brought to this space dominated entirely by men, she is the only woman in the hall with all men watching the show as it were. In her fiery speech, after attempt has been made to disrobe her, she claims,

*What greater humiliation than that I, a woman of virtue and beauty,
now must invade the men's hall? What is left of the law of the kings?
From of old, we have heard, they do not bring law-minded into their
hall* (58)

This reveals to us her precarious position. She says as she is dragged in the court by *Duhsasana*,

*... in the hall are men who have studied the books, all follow the
rites and are like unto Indras. They are all my gurus or act for them:
before their eyes I cannot stand thus* (50)

When the steward enters the chambers of *Draupadi* his bold words “to your chores I must lead you” irks and shocks her. She gives voice to her anger thus – “how dare you speak so, an usher, to me?” Next, she questions the judgement of *Yudhishthira* in “What son of a king would hazard his wife?” *Draupadi* raises a significant question regarding *Yudhishthira*’s right on her when he had lost himself. “Go to the game” she sends the steward back “and ask in the assembly ‘Bharata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?’” On *Yudhishthira*’s word sent by a messenger, *Draupadi* comes to the hall,

*... in her one garment knotted below, weeping and in her courses,
she went to the hall, the Pancala princess and stood before her father-
in-law* (37-8)

2.5.1 Humiliation of *Draupadi*

The scene where *Draupadi* is being dragged into the court by *Duhsasana* is appalling. *Duhsasana* speaks to her in a brazen manner thus:

*All right now, come Pancali, you're won!
Look upon Duryodhanas, without shame!
You shall now love the Kurus, long-lotus-eyed one,
You've been won under law, come along to the hall!* (39)

The foul language of *Duhsasana* and *Karna*, the lewd gestures of *Duryodhana* point towards the malice they bear towards *Draupadi*. When *Draupadi* tells *Duhsasana*,

... it is now my month! This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,
- *Duhsasana* shrewdly puts in with authority –
Sure you be in your month, *Yajnasena*’s daughter
Or wear a lone cloth, or go without one!
You’ve been won at the game and been made a slave,
and one lechers with slaves as the fancy befalls (50)

What is the significance of referring to *Draupadi* menstruating time and again in the scene? At one level it could have been used by the writer to evoke deeper sympathy for the woman and her plight, however, at another it signifies her reproductive worth as a woman. The entire discourse of woman as the “*jag-janani*” (the giver of birth to the world) gets established here. The scene becomes more dramatic for this reason as the two attributes of woman as mother and slave get starkly presented here. The symbol of motherhood contrasts with the idea of the slave. Thus we find:

Duhsasana, stroking her, led her and brought her,
That *Krsna* of deep black hair, to the hall,
As though unprotected amidst her protectors,
And tossed her as wind tosses a plantain tree. (39)

Draupadi with “her hair disheveled, her half skirt drooping, shaken about by *Duhsasana*, ashamed and burning with indignation” is brought before the gathering of men. Continuing with *Drapaudi*’s humiliation, let us look at the questions she poses next.

2.5.2 The Legal Point and *Draupadi*’s Questions

Draupadi poses two questions before the audience—one, whether *Yudhisthira* who has lost his freedom, by losing the game of dice, has, any moral or legal right to stake *Draupadi*. *Duhsasana* comments, “the King, son of *Dharma*, abides by the Law, and the Law is subtle, for the wise to find out” (50). The topic is again broached by *Bhisma* who has seen *Draupadi* brought in a pitiable state in the court. He says—

As the law is subtle, my dear, I fail
To resolve your riddle the proper way:
A man without property cannot stake another’s—
But given that wives are the husband’s chattels?
Yudhisthira may give up all earth
With her riches before he’d give up the truth.
The *Pandava* said, “I have been won”
Therefore I cannot resolve this doubt. (51-2)

This riddle remains unresolved as none can say with certainty what the Law says in this case. However, *Bhisma*’s statement “given that wives are the husband’s chattels” speaks volume about the status of women in that age and the commonly held views on them. The statement reveals to us notions that were accepted as true and considered to be the ‘given’ in normative life. *Karna* in this scene too argues that “*Draupadi* is part of all he (*Yudhisthira*) owns” and thus she has been won. Note how *Draupadi* is seen as an object here owned by the man or in her case men. *Karna* questions her character in suggesting that:

Or if you think that it was against the law to bring her into the hall clad in one piece of clothing, listen to what I have to say in reply to that. The gods have laid down that a woman shall have one husband, scion of Kuru. She submits to many men and assuredly is a whore! Thus there is, I think, nothing strange about taking her into the hall, or to have her in one piece of clothing, or for that matter naked! She, the Pandavas' wealth, and the Pandavas themselves have all been won by Saubala here according the law. (55)

Several points require notice here. One, that *Draupadi* has no right over her 'self' and that she is the *Pandavas'* possession. She is derecognised as a human being merely because she is a woman tied in matrimony. Two, aspersion is cast on *Draupadi's* character as *Karna* views her as a "whore" since she "submits to many men" who may be her husband(s) by law. It is the female sexuality that is at target here. If *Draupadi* can be made available to five men why can't others in the gathering likewise 'enjoy' her?—this seems to be *Karna's* suggestion. She cannot be considered a respectful-virtuous woman because she exercises her right to be with several men. This makes her a "whore" in *Karna's* views and therefore, the men have all the right to bring her "for that matter naked" into the assembly hall. The point is taken forward and *Duhsasana*

... forcibly laid hold of Draupadi's robe, O king, and in the midst of the assembly began to undress her (55)

The scene evokes both shock and pathos in the reader who connects with the misery of *Draupadi*. Note that the narrator's tone too is full of sorrow when he exclaims "O King" in the quote above. Whether the scene also becomes a form of titillation for the audience hearing the tale (first *Janamajeya* and then the ascetics) is an unexplored area.

Draupadi is molested and disrobed before the assembly of men—all her gurus, sages or relatives-in-law—yet none put a stop to it. Does it depict their helplessness? Were they bound by the Law too? Were they too appalled to react? In any case the story reaches a point when human agency fails to resolve a quandary, stands incapacitated before the law. In such a scenario the epic turns to *dues ex machina*—divine intervention—that saves *Draupadi* from the trauma of being stripped naked in public. Her humiliation and suffering finds release in the 'godly' act —

But when her skirt was being stripped off, lord of the people, another similar skirt appeared every time. A terrible roar went up from all the kings, a shout of approval as they watched that greatest wonder on earth ... A pile of clothes was heaped up in the middle of the hall, when Duhsasana, tired and ashamed, at last desisted and sat down. The gods among men in the hall raised the hair-raising cry of "Fie!" as they watched the sons of Kunti. (55-6)

Draupadi was thus, saved by the agency of god. However, the second question that *Draupadi* raises before the men in the assembly hall is of great significance. She asks:

How can I, wife of the Pandus, sister of Dhrstadyumna Parsata and friend of Vasudeva, enter the hall of the Kings? Is the wife of the King Dharma whose birth marches his, a slave or free? Speak Kauravas. I shall abide by your answer. For this foul man, disgrace

of the Kauravas, is molesting me, and I cannot bear it any longer.
(59)

**“The Dicing” from the
Book of the Assembly Hall**

Draupadi’s question is relevant in our times for it may be asked if a woman equal to a man becomes his possession in marriage that he can buy and sell or stake and lose? Was *Draupadi Yudhisthira’s* to lose? Did he have that kind of right over her? Even *Bhisma* cannot answer her question. He says “*I cannot answer the question decisively, because the matter is subtle and mysterious as well as grave*”. The complexity of *Draupadi’s* question dawns on the people in the assembly as none can say that *Yudhisthira* owned her. The issue is as tortuous in our context where patriarchy has a strong grip on social relations between men and women. *Karna* gives his view on the subject based on accepted knowledge system of the time: “*there are three who own no property, a student, a slave, a dependent woman*” (61). The point of significance here is the place women occupied in ancient literature—how they were looked at from male-centred viewpoint. This throws light on our ancient value system as well. In so far as *Draupadi* is concerned in this scene she voices her anger before the gathering thus:

I on whom the assembled kings set eye in the arena at my Bridegroom Choice, but never before or after, I am now brought into the hall! ...I whom the Pandavas did not suffer to be touched by the wind in my house before, they now allow to be touched by this miscreant. The Kurus allow —methinks that time is out of joint—their innocent daughter and daughter-in-law to be molested! (59)

Draupadi reveals to the gathered assembly the truth of their action, that they have been mute spectators and thus, accomplices in the violent treatment meted out to her. The *Kurus* and the sages she asserts, have failed to follow the law for they allowed her molestation. The significance of the speech should not be lost to us in our present context.

While *Yudhisthira* is troubled and confused, *Bhima* the “wolf-Belly” flies in rage at the entire act. He “*looked and watched how she was dragged, in her courses, with upper cloth drooping, who so little deserved it, in desperate pain*”. *Bhima*, angry with his own brother *Yudhisthira* for staking *Draupadi* and using her as a pawn in the game, gives voice to his anger thus:

There are a lot of whores in the country of gamblers, Yudhisthira, but they never throw them, for they have pity Even for women of that stripe. The tribute that the king of the Kasis brought and all our vast wealth, the gems that the other Kings of the earth brought in, the mounts and prizes, the armor and weaponry, the kingdom, yourself and we have all been staked and lost to others. This I didn’t mind much, for you are the master of all we possess. But you went too far, I think, when you staked Draupadi. She did not deserve this! After she had won Pandavas As a girl, she is now because of you plagued by Kauravas... (53)

The angle of law is again brought to bear upon the events. In his anger, *Bhima* calls *Duhsasana* “*mean and cruel*” and threatens to burn off his arms at which point *Arjuna* reminds *Bhima*:

Never before have you said words like these, Bhimasena! Surely your respect for the law has been destroyed by our harsh enemies! Don’t

fall in with the enemy's plans, obey your highest law: no one may overreach his eldest brother by law. The king was challenged by his foes, and remembering the baronial law, he played at the enemy's wish. That is our great glory!" (53)

Clearly, *Arjuna* is more poised and detached than *Bhima*. For all his love for *Draupadi*, his sense of duty gets the better of him. It appears that the law in fact dehumanises him as he is unable to pledge support to his wife in this moment of crisis. *Bhima* alone speaks with passion. Again the question of law takes centre-stage. The baronial law of not refusing the enemy if challenged is being posed here to explain *Yudhisthira*'s action.

2.5.3 The King's Offering of Three Boons to *Draupadi*

Finally, the scene is made more dramatic by the "horrible sound" of jackals, donkeys and grisly birds. The ghastly omens make *Dhrtarastra* wary of the danger looming over the *Kauravas*. To settle the matter amicably, *Dhrtarastra* gives three boons to *Draupadi*. She asks for the freedom of *Yudhisthira* first and with the second boon she frees all her husband(s). The third boon she refuses to take saying that "my husbands...will find the good things, king, with their own good acts". *Draupadi* is able to accomplish what none could. She as *Karna* points out

has become the salvation of the Pandavas! When they were sinking, boatless and drowning, in the plumbless ocean, the Pancali became the Pandavas' boat, to set them ashore (65)

Thus, *Draupadi* ironically saves the *Pandavas* who were meant to save and protect her and who failed miserably at that. Nonetheless, *Dhrtarastra* gives back to the *Pandavas* all that they had lost in the game of dice and they leave for their home, *Indraprastha*.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Do you think it wrong of *Yudhisthira* to have staked *Draupadi* in the game of dice? Give a reasoned answer.

- 2) Attempt a sketch of the position of women in the Mahabharata from your reading of *The Dicing*.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have covered the various facets of 'The Dicing' sequence which appears in the *Book of The Assembly Hall*. We have been able to locate clear indicators that led to the game of dicing. Specific motives of *Sakuni* and *Duryodhana* to defeat the *Pandavas* also came to the fore. The unit has considered areas of fate and fortune governing the lives of individuals. The predicament of *Draupadi* has been extensively dealt with here. As we may have noticed, the question of law receives focus in the discussion.

2.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read Section 2.2 carefully and write the answer in your own words.
- 2) Read Section 2.2.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read Section 2.5
- 2) Read Section 2.4 and 2.5 and then organize your thoughts in your own words and write the answer.



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