

# The Song of Arjuna and the Hegemony of the Yadavas

## SPOTLIGHT

Arjuna Pandava: The Double Hero  
in Epic Mahabharata

By KEVIN MCGRATH  
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McGrath's book is a fascinating slim volume that everyone interested in the Mahabharata will benefit from... A review by pradip bhattacharya

**HARVARD** professor and poet, Dr. Kevin McGrath's Mahabharata investigations began with *The Sanskrit Hero: Krishna* in 2001. In *Stri* (2009) he switched to its women. Then came *Jaya: performance in epic Mahabharata* in 2011, *Heroic Krishna* (2013), *Arjuna* (2016) and *Yudhishtira* (under publication). He follows the Harvard school of epic poetics (Milman Parry, Gregory Nagy and Albert Lord), concentrating on the text qua text and envisaging epic society as a Bronze Age Indo-Aryan pre-literate and pre-monetary culture.

Ruth Katz in her 1939 study on Arjuna found him to be triple-layered — hero, human, devotee. She rejected the idea that contradictions in his character are a result of layers of composition, accepting them as indicating the complexity of his nature. To McGrath, Arjuna is dual in nature, uniquely godly and humanly heroic, wherein lies the secret of his cult status. He discusses Achilles in a fascinating appendix, also a late Bronze Age hero attaining cult status through the same characteristic of bestriding two worlds, the mortal and the celestial. Though shrines to Bhima and Krishna exist, Arjuna alone lives for years in Swarga, interacts repeatedly with the Devas and Shiva, rides in Indra's chariot, and slaughters *rakshasas* the Devas cannot defeat. But what of Devavrata, with shrines in Allahabad and Kurukshetra, reared by celestial Ganga, taught by *deva-guru* Brihaspati and uniquely blessed with death-at-will? Dualistic patterns define Arjuna: with Krishna (as a duo), Karna (in opposition), Yudhishtira (wielding his *anda* of punishment), double deaths, unique ambisexuality and as Nara with Narayana. Even sexually, he is a charismatic male and eschew, like Ardhanarishvara Shiva, with his double in Shikhandi, born by Shiva's blessing. McGrath finds "strangely obscured" a similar dual pattern with Krishna and Balarama. The epic's appendix, Harivansha, develops this. The Arjuna-Krishna duo, one semi-divine, the other born of human parents, is an archaic Indo-European "twinning" archetype seen in Mitra-Varuna and in the Greek Castor-Pollux, Heracles-Iphicles. Vyasa tells Sanjaya that he will provide Vichitravirya with sons like Mitra and Varuna. Madri has twins by the Ashvinkumaras. Such "twinning" is also seen in Achilles-Patroklos and Achilles-Dionides. Krishna and Athena drive the chariots of Arjuna and Dionides and speak to them.

McGrath argues that doubling is typical of the poetic thought process of pre-literate and pre-monetary cultures. Such a literature operates by metaphor, barrier, poetry and syntax, while a literate society's favours metonymy, money, prose and grammar. "Polymorphic duality" or "twofold bivalence" lies at the core of the Arjuna narrative, reaching its acme in the *Gita* where he simultaneously experiences two worlds — the human and the cosmic. He is the sole liminal

figure in the epic. Though achieving enlightenment and engaging in desireless action, he is named "Bibhisatsu" for his terrifying violence. Repeatedly Krishna has to shake him out of depression. He forgets the *Gita* and has to be imparted the Anugita. McGrath proposes: "This kind of polarity is an aspect profoundly inherent to both the psychic and the narrative composition of heroic Arjuna." He suggests that there was a *psalmsa-katha* (Arjuna's name whenever weaponry is concerned) which was woven into the Mahabharata. But how can he argue that Arjuna is not a moral figure in the context of his repeated reluctance to kill his kin?

It is curious that this unique hero is never considered for kingship. Even more intriguing is Bhishma naming him not an *atishakti* (supreme warrior) or *nabharakti* (great warrior) but merely a *ratih* (chariot-warrior). Yet, it is Arjuna's grandson who is installed in Hastinapura, like him dying twice and being resurrected. Why were the sons of the elder brothers Yudhishtira (Yaudheya) and Bhima (Sarvaga) not considered, not his sole living son Babhruvahana, the only person who killed Arjuna?

The argument that Parikshit's investiture is "the victory of the matrilineal clan system—Panduvas over the patrilineal model—Draupadashritas—represents the triumph of the indigenous over the intrusive Indo-Aryan," is founded upon the premise that Arjuna's marriage to Subhadra "is a Dravidian type," being matrilineal, while patrilineal marriage is Indo-Aryan — a questionable proposition based upon the discarded Aryan invasion hypothesis. McGrath suggests that the *bheda*, division, between two lineage types represents two separate traditions of heroic poetry which were combined early in the 1st century CE. It is undeniable that the Yadava link is crucial. Arjuna, a half-Yadava, marries Kunti's Yadava niece, the death of his Yadava wife's son devastates him, not those of his two other sons: the Yadava Vajra is installed in Indraprastha and Parikshit-part-Yadava at Hastinapura. McGrath mistakenly calls Vajra, whose father is Aniruddha, Krishna's son (page 75, fn 10). McGrath is the first to call the Mahabharata, "the charter myth of the victorious



Yadava clan," and the *Gita* "a truly influential Yadava song," which invites discussion.

McGrath asserts that Arjuna alone, during his exile, has sexual relations with three females of whom only one is human (Chitraangada) "and with an apsara" (page 9). However, Subhadra is human too. Further, Arjuna rejects Urvashi in Swarga, abjuring his godly heritage from the libertine Indra for the human

value of regarding his ancestress as a mother. Similarly, Gilgamesh refused the advances of Ishtar and invited her wrath.

McGrath asserts that none of the Kauravas receive cult status except Duryodhana who has a temple in Uttarakhand. However, Karna is worshipped in Nerwar village in Uttarakhand. In Kerala's Kollam district there are temples to Duryodhana and Shakuni and a Girdhira temple exists in Mysore.

Arjuna's half-divine nature, his celestial arms, chariot and avatar-charioteer, makes him a hero in the ancient Indo-Aryan tradition. His speech to Sanjaya in the Udyoga Parva, is in irregular *tristubh* verse, the oldest in the epic, frequently mentioning chariots indicative of the Bronze Age (the chariot evolved c. 2000 BCE). With the spontaneous combustion of his chariot post-war, Arjuna begins to lose the superhuman qualities

characterising the old Bronze Age hero, becoming more and more mortal. McGrath does not explore his early pertinence vis-à-vis Ekalavya, nor his obsession with Jayadratha when Drona made the inviolable discus formation, nor his lack of vengefulness against the seven who jointly slew Abhimanyu. Arjuna is not alone in being so furious with Yudhishtira as to almost kill him. In the dice-game Bhima commands Sahadeva to bring fire to burn Yudhishtira's gaming hands. Nor does Arjuna alone overcome the moral dilemma of killing a *guru*. It is so with Yudhishtira too and he is guilt-ridden throughout expiating it through the vision of hell. Equally is he tormented by Karna's death, unlike Arjuna.

McGrath describes the *Gita* as departing from the pastoral Bronze Age Indo-Aryan culture and approaching the urban beliefs of Jainism and Buddhism with their stress on puja with *bhakti* instead of sacrificial offerings. Its doctrine of the hero emerges from the interaction of a warrior duo. We tend to forget that Buddha was a Kshatriya prince too.

Significantly, as the *Gita* prepares Arjuna for Kurukshetra, so does the Anugita precede his journey with the yajna-horse, during which he dies and lives again. Why McGrath describes Ulupi here as a "spiritual figure" is not clear. This time Arjuna neither has the divine chariot, nor Krishna as charioteer. He is Nara, man, without Narayana: the Divine. At least twice the Gandiva bow slips from his hand and he is knocked unconscious.

Krishna announcing that he is Bhishma among the *araha-rishis* is significant for the argument that the Bhishmavas inhabiting the area around Yadava Dvaraka reflected the Song of Arjuna (Jaya, the four war books), embedding it in the Mahabharata. McGrath proposes that Arjuna and Krishna's bows made of horn (as their names signify) connects with the Kushanas who settled at Mathura whence the Yadavas migrated to Dvaraka. The post-Kurukshetra books where Arjuna is merely a "meme," a pale copy of the earlier glorious figure, come from a poetic tradition far removed from the original heroic one, more concerned with evoking pity and fear than horripilation and heroism. Indeed, Krishna describes Arjuna as *bahusangramakarshitam*, "much enervated by battle," when he returns with the horse. Also, the picture of kingship after the Stri Parva is of an urban polity, not the earlier archaic form. The last words of Arjuna are, *kalah kalah*, "time, time," realising us of his cosmic vision of Krishna as Time. Krishna dies an ordinary death. Arjuna, weaponless, shrinks to the human and collapses silently, shorn of his memorable duality. In hell he mutters "I am

Arjuna" to Yudhishtira who ultimately sees him in Swarga, dazzlingly brilliant, adoring Krishna. (McGrath gives the reference here as XII.4.4 which should be XVII.4.4).

Krishna does not receive his discus from Mitra, as McGrath states, but from Agni. Krishna's bow is not *Srinivaya* (page 120) but *Shaanunga*. The origin of the "two Krishnas" is the ancient Nara-Narayana duo, Nara wielding a celestial bow and Narayana the Sudarshana discus, slaughtering the demons during the churning of the ocean for *amrita*. Here Nara is the human while Narayana is the Divine. The Khandava massacre is a doubling of the same scenario with the nature of the two reversed. The Vedic deities attacking them withdraw on hearing that they are that ancient duo. This epic duo replaces the Vedic Mitra-Varuna pair. In the Nara-Narayana myth Parashurama narrates in the Ulyoga Parva, Nara counters a king's attack with deadly reeds, while Narayana stays still. McGrath does not notice that this is reversed in the Mausala Parva where Krishna uses reeds to slaughter his kin.

McGrath suggests that this duo is Dravidian in origin, turning an archaic concept of divine twins and double heroes into an idea of conjoint deity-and-hero, "a perfect metaphor for how the preliterate and the literate aspects" of the Mahabharata were combined in early Gupta times. The world of the Shanti Parva "is of a historically later order of culture and society." However, it is wrong to assert that there is no reference to writing in the epic when explicit mention exists of the benefits accruing from gifting a copy of the Mahabharata.

A character sharing in the doubling of Arjuna and Krishna is Narada, incessantly moving through the celestial and earthly worlds, joining the past to the future through his speeches, knowing the done and the undone in the world, *loke veda krishakritam*. He also forms a duo with his sister's son Parvata. The first to use the term *oukara* (XII.325.83) and to interact with Nara and Narayana, he is virtually their first priest. Krishna declares that among the *deva-rishis* he is Narada. Like Krishna's theophany to Arjuna, Narayana's to Narada is *ishvaranpadbrite*, containing all forms. As such, opines McGrath, Narada is "thoroughly imbued with that indelible world of emergent Hinduism" representing "the poem's own internal oral tradition," as others recollect what he had said in the past. Vyasa, whom for some reason McGrath calls a "rajarsi," though he is no royal seer, and Narada shape the epic narrative "towards crisis and resolution." Ultimately, it is Narada who brings forth the *shanta rasa*, "calm of mind, all passion spent," telling Yudhishtira, troubled on seeing Duryodhana, "This is Swarga; there is no enmity here." To McGrath, "He is a fine exemplum of how preliterate Mahabharata poets once functioned, as they in their performances likewise drew upon what had been formerly heard."

McGrath asserts that there are three figures of a-temporal consciousness influencing the poem's movement: Krishna who conducts the political narrative, Vyasa the maker of the poem, and Narada who unconsciously draws upon the past and the future to perfect the narrative. The epic is entirely retrospection and recollection, a characteristic typical of Narada. McGrath is mistaken in stating that only Vaishampayana and Janamejaya are alive when the epic is being sung. Vyasa is there, permitting and overseeing the recitation. In the Jaininiya Ashvamedhaparva, he does so with Jainini. As at the beginning, so at the end we find the statement that Narada recites the Mahabharata to the Devas. For McGrath, through Narada's performance the poem becomes an imperishable, unmatched tradition and makes Arjuna the epitome of the ancient heroic warrior to be worshipped. McGrath's book is a fascinating slim volume that everyone interested in the Mahabharata will benefit from.

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