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Interrogating the Polar Nature of Curses and Boons in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract:

The Mahabharata is filled with intricate stories revolving around boons and curses. Boons and curses have largely been read as occurrences with polar outcomes in most of the studies. My analysis of the phenomena, however, does not support the dominant discourse about the nature of boons and curses. My objective during the paper will be to examine the nature of the two narrative devices in the epic and establish a thinning line between the two phenomena. In doing so, it will shed light on the metamorphosis of some boons into curses and vice versa. In addition, it will explore the parameters and pre-requisites for such reversals.

Keywords: Challenging, Interrogating, Reinterpreting, Intrinsic (polar) nature of Boons and Curses.

Introduction:

Mahabharata is a story of a 'dharma-yudha', a war that is fought to preserve 'dharma'. Various characters in the epic like Yudhishtira, Karna, Krishna, and Draupadi repeatedly stress on preserving their 'dharma'. Dharma has several layers of meanings attached to it; it refers to a universal dharma as well as the individual dharma. It is constantly emphasized that the good and the righteous will win in the end. The operation of boons and curses in the epic narrative is a significant dimension that leads to the predestined end.

I intend to reflect on the nature of boons and curses in the *Mahabharata* during the course of this paper. The epic is an encyclopaedia of boons and curses. Most of them are concentrated in the first book of the epic, *Adi Parva*. Boons and curses, within the epic, are unfailing utterances by powerful beings (primarily gods and sages) to the ones at their mercy. It is the might of the spoken word, the efficacy of which depends upon the powers the agent inherently has (divine power as in case of the gods) or has acquired through asceticism and

ritual sacrifices (ascetic power as in case of the sages), that brings about the sudden changes in the life of the individual who has been bestowed with a boon or who has been punished with a curse. Boons and curses are generally thought to be occurrences with polar outcomes. Boons are indicative of a better future whereas curses invoke unpleasant tidings.

My analysis of the epic, however, does not support the popular understanding about the oppositional nature of boons and curses. One of the objectives of the paper is to highlight a blurring line between the two occurrences. There are several instances in the epic where one can witness metamorphosis of a curse into a boon and vice versa. However, in no way, do I claim that the reversal happens at all times. This paper aims to explore the parameters and pre-requisites for such a metamorphosis.

Boons and curses, without any doubt, are intricately linked in the world of the *Mahabharata*. Dr. P.V. Ramankutty observes that the two phenomena are related to a belief in magical occurrences and the potency of the spoken word in the epic world. He argues that boons and curses are polar categories and his analysis on the subject stems from this understanding. In this respect, I would disagree with him and surmise that boon is not a promise of good fortune at all times. This has been seen in several cases. Some examples to illustrate this point are: Durvasa's boon to Kunti, Lord Vyas's boon to Gandhari and Lord Shiva's boon to Draupadi. In each of these cases, even though the intent of the agent of the boon is pure, these have effects similar to a curse.

Similarly, curse may not always have the intended effect. It may not always bring hostile outcome. It can be modified to minimise the impact of the utterance. Through guilt as displayed by the one cursed and genuine plea for forgiveness, the agent of the curse has been seen as modifying the curse by a "verbal subterfuge" (50) as Julian Woods puts it and thereby reducing its impact. Vashistha's curse to the eight vasus and its consequent modification is a case in point. Granting a boon to the same person (in case of Dyu) or another person (in case of Kunti and Pandu) to diminish the effect of the curse is seen as a practice in the epic.

The paper, therefore, endeavours to address, if not resolve, some basic questions related to curses in the epic with specific attention to the ideas like intention, purpose (forgiveness, punishment) and fate. Who has the power to curse? What is the role of intention in cursing? When will the curse be effective? Does it have an independent existence of its own or is it an instrument of fate? Can all curses be reversed? What are the conditions for the reversal of a curse? What is greater- forgiveness or punishment for the sin?

Similar concerns related to the boons will also be reflected upon. How are the boons earned? Are boons complete opposite of curses or are they mere extensions of them? What are the conditions for a boon to be effective? When would a boon turn into a curse?

Since, *Mahabharata* has a great number of boons and curses, discussing all of them would be outside the scope of this paper. Therefore, I will concentrate on selected curses and boons to understand their intrinsic nature: Sringeri's curse to Parikshit, Devyani's curse to Kacha, Kacha's curse to Devyani, Shukracharya's curse to Yayati, Vasishtha's curse to Vasus, Shakti's (Vasishtha's son) curse to Kalmashpada, Vyasa's boon to Gandhari, Durvasa's boon to Kunti, Sage Parashar's boon to Satyawati, Shiva's boon to Draupadi, Indra's boon to Karna, Shantanu's boon to Bhishma, Vyasa's boon to the maid-servant.

I

Not everyone in the epic world had the power to curse or bestow boons. Julian Woods rightly observes in his book, *The Phenomenon of Boon and Curse in the Mahabharata* that the sages, the Tridevas (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), Indra and a wronged being (human or beast) can curse. Similarly, boons can be bestowed by gods, sages, humans, asuras, yakshas. Boons and curses can be granted with one's ascetic power, divine power, magical power, sacrificial power, and truth power (Woods, 50). Thus, sages with their ascetic power and/or magical power, gods with their divine power, humans and beasts with their sacrificial and truth power could curse as well as grant boons.

Any discussion around the agent of the curse would be incomplete without taking into consideration the intention of the curse giver and the victim and the purpose of the curse. The intention of the agent of the curse plays a vital role in the efficacy of the curse. There should be no ill-will behind the curse. It shouldn't be a result of how the individual feels about a certain event. Curses should emanate out of a sense of duty to penalise the wrongdoer. Kacha, Brihaspati's son when cursed by Devyani for not marrying her, highlights the significance of intention in this regard. He says, "O Devyani, I have told you what should be the conduct of Rishis. I, therefore, do not deserve your curse. But notwithstanding all this, you have cursed me out of desire and not from a sense of duty. Therefore, your desire shall not be fulfilled. No Rishi's son will ever accept your hand." (Adi Parva, 239). In this instance, when Devyani curses Kacha, "If you refuse to make me your wife, solicited by me as I do, O Kacha, your knowledge will bear no fruits" (Adi Parva, 239), it is not out of any of the powers one requires to curse. She does it with a sense of revenge because of rejection at the hands of

Kacha. Hence, Kacha despite being cursed does not feel guilt, pain or remorse. In fact, out of his truth power, he curses her back. Thus, his curse holds more effect than Devyani's.

The purpose of the curse in most cases is punishment. The intention of the agent then is essentially connected to the purpose of the curse, the former superseding the latter. If the intention is pure, the curse has more chances of being effective. However, if the intention is driven by self-interest and/or the curse does not come from any of the powers mentioned earlier, the curse would be ineffective. Hence, if the purpose is punishment and the intention is impure, it would impact the efficacy of the curse.

The epic presents two contrasting perspectives about reacting to individual actions (unpleasant actions which invite wrath): forgiving or punishing the sinner. Right from the beginning, several sages like Sage Shamika (Sringi's father), Shukracharya, Vasishtha dwell on the value of forgiveness as opposed to the wish to punish the sinner. However, the alternate view which lays stress on justified punishment is not absent. Shukracharya's words to his daughter, Devyani point out that forgiveness must be practised even in instances where there is just cause for anger, "He who subdues his anger, he who does not regard bad words of others, he who is not angry, even when there is a cause, certainly acquires the four objects for which we live (namely Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha)" (Adi Parva, 243). Aurva, the last Bhrgu, talks about justified anger, "The man who having power to punish sin, does not do so, knowing that a sin has been committed, is himself defiled by that sin." (Adi Parva, 505) Clearly, Shukracharya's statement and Aurva's statement about the action of the agent when there is a "just cause" are diametrically opposite to each other which highlight the presence of contradictions in the epic.

Because of the presence of conflicting views on the subject, it becomes crucial to investigate the circumstances when cursing becomes compulsive on the part of the one who has the power to curse. One needs to dig deeper in the text to see the situations when forgiveness is supreme for both the sinner and the agent. The curse on King Parikshit can be taken as an example in this context.

Sage Shamika emphasises on the virtue of forgiveness when his son, Sringi curses King Parikshit. He says that his son's action is unjust and unrighteous because (a) What Parikshit did was out of innocence and desperation of thirst and hunger; (b) Kings are protectors of their people and hence some of their actions must be forgiven (Adi Parva, 127). Sringi curses the king in anger without really considering what led to his actions. It appears,

then, that the intention of the sinner is equally important. Whether his/her actions were intended to be cruel or he/she acted in ignorance must be one of the most significant factors that need to be considered by the one who has the power to curse. But, because out of a sense of pride Sringeri does not take the curse back, he is not ready to forgive Parikshit, does the curse come into force? Despite the fact that Sringeri does not take into consideration the events that led to Parikshit's unpleasant action towards sage Shamika, the curse does take effect and Parikshit dies because of snake bite.

Two, questions arise here. If the curse itself was unrighteous on Sringeri's part, why does the curse take effect? What is the impact of this sort of injustice on the part of the one who holds the power to curse?

The answer to the first question (why does the curse take effect) lies in the story following the curse on Parikshit. Here, fate comes into the picture. When sage Kashyapa learns that Parikshit is cursed, he starts his journey to reverse it which tells us that the curse can be reversed. He meets Takshaka (the snake king who would kill Parikshit) on his way. Takshaka tells Kashyapa that the curse on Parikshit cannot be reversed because Parikshit's life was anyway coming to an end due to fate and not just because of the curse. Kashyapa through his ascetic power sees the truth in Takshaka's statement and resolves to leave the task he had undertaken to accomplish and return because he could reverse the curse but couldn't change the fate (Adi Parva, 131-132). So, probably Parikshit dies because of his fate and not because of the curse. In this case, the curse was just an instrument in the hands of fate.

But, is that always the case? That is, is curse nothing but an instrument of fate, helping fate to accomplish its task? Or does it have the power to change someone's fate? In the first case, where curse is an instrument of fate, the latter is more powerful and the curse cannot be reversed. In the other situation where curse has power to change one's fate, it is curse which holds more power than what fate had in store for the individual.

If sage Vasishtha was able to remove the effects of the curse from the King Kalmashpada, it appears that curse does not just act as an instrument of fate in this case. Because had that been the case, he would not have been able to remove it very much like sage Kashyapa. So, the first possibility is that the curse is not necessarily the instrument of fate always. It does have an existence of its own. If it has an independent existence, it certainly has the power to change one's fate. Then, the power of the curse seems greater than

the fate itself. There is yet another possibility. All curses without any exception (even a mother's curse) could be reversed by Brahma. Hence, it is likely that the degree of ascetic merit of a sage determines whether the curse could be reversed or not.

The second question related to the impact of cursing injudiciously has been discussed in the epic several times. It is said that the one who curses loses a significant part of one's ascetic merits. So, there is a much emphasis on the virtue of forgiveness. Krishnamoorthy Aithal interestingly explicates the whole process of cursing using accounting terminology, "Because the seers have the power to curse, it must not be assumed that they routinely exercise this power. It takes long penances and austerities to acquire this power and whenever they use it in a fit of anger the account of their merit shows a debit entry so they have to perform more austerities to have credit entries made to balance/ replenish their store of virtue and learning. What this shows is that the poet has gone into every detail of the subject, including the curse's effect on those who utter it." (140)

To sum up the section on curses, the intention of the sinner in the moment of the unpleasant act he/she commits, his/her accumulated deeds (good or bad) during the lifetime (present as well as of the previous lifetime) and fate are some crucial factors which are responsible for the cursed life of an individual. An example which takes into account all the three factors- intention, deeds and fate- is the curse on the eighth Vasu, Dyu. The seven Vasus helped Dyu, the eighth Vasu to steal Vasishtha's divine cow, Nandini. The sage cursed all of them to be reborn as mortals. But, when they expressed their guilt and apologised for their actions, Vasishtha reduced the magnitude of the curse. The seven who had merely helped their brother would be freed from their curse within a year of their birth. However, the eighth Vasu, who was the main culprit would have to live on earth for long. While reducing the magnitude of their curse, he (being of the most magnanimous character) also added that Dyu would be a great warrior and he would remain childless (this being a blessing because he wouldn't be caught in the earthly affairs for long). Here, their intention was an important deciding factor in determining the magnitude of punishment based on their individual deeds. Hence, Ganga was able to release seven Vasus from their cursed lives but was unable to do the same for her eighth son, who was later named Devavrat/Bhishma. Fate had it for Bhishma to live a long cursed life because of his actions.

As a mortal, in order that his father could lead a happy married life, he took a series of vows that he would not claim the throne; he would never marry and remain celibate; and he

would serve the throne as its protector. Because of his terrible vow, he earned the name Bhishma and a boon from his father that he would be able to die at will. His father knew about his curse and wanted to free him from the further cursed existence due to his terrible vows which would deny him his rights as an heir to the kingdom and force him to lead a lonely life without a family.

The curse to Dyu that he would lead a long life on Earth along with further revisions in the curse that he would be a great warrior and that he would remain childless precede the vow of celibacy he takes. Since, Bhishma does not remember anything about his previous life, the vow he takes is significant. His actions are guided by the curse. He takes the vow and fulfils the effect of the curse as a result of it. Despite being granted a boon by his father to die at will, he doesn't wish to leave the earthly life. He keeps adding the load of responsibilities of the well-being of every generation of the Kuru family on his shoulders. His fate through the curse ties him to the earthly world.

II

Boons are bestowed by gods and seers when they are pleased because of some actions (where the boon is granted unsolicited) or severe austerities of the one seeking the boon(s). I have selected three boons to throw light on from the first category. The first one is the boon Kunti receives from Sage Durvasa because of her devotion towards the sage. He gives her a mantra through which she could invoke any god to father a child. Durvasa had the divine sight and he could see what would be in store for Kunti as King Pandu's wife. Pandu would be cursed by sage Kindama in future. During one of his hunting expeditions, he shot the sage and his wife with a single arrow when they were mating disguised as deers. The angry sage cursed Pandu because he had broken a fundamental law of hunting which is killing mating animals. The curse delivered here harps on meeting a similar fate when he would be filled with desire for his wives. As a result of which he would not be able to father his children. With his divine vision, Durvasa compensates for that curse well in advance through the boon he grants to Kunti. Even if the curse on Pandu could not be reversed, fate had children for him in store as a result of several boons and curses. Shiva had cursed the five Indras to be born on Earth to atone for their vanity. Draupadi had been granted a boon to have five husbands with all five qualities she desired (moral, valiant, good looking, knowledgeable, kind) in the five Pandavas, Shiva's boon to Indra (Goddess Lakshmi as the common wife of

the five Indras), Durvasa's boon to Kunti and Kindama's curse to Pandu are all linked to one another.

The second boon is Vyasa's boon to the maid-servant of Vichitravirya's elder Queen, Ambika. When Satyawati summoned her son, Vyasa to perform Niyoga with her daughters-in-law, he keeps the condition that he would shower the childless queens with sons but they will have to bear his ugliness. Ambika and Ambalika are cursed with imperfect children because of this conditional curse. The curses delivered on the two wives of the deceased Vichitravirya are homeopathic (Woods) in nature as they exaggerate the unwelcome gestures that the queens offered to the revered sage. Dhritarashtra, a blind boy is born to Ambika who closed her eyes at the sight of the sage and Pandu, a pale and sickly child is born to Ambalika who turned pale at the sight of the sage. Ambika was asked to be present for the Niyoga the second time. She deceitfully sends her maid servant in her place because of the revulsion. Being lower in the power hierarchy, the maid-servant could not have refused the commands of the queen. She has to disguise herself as the queen to accept sage Vyasa in the queen's bedchamber. Unlike Ambika who is disgusted at the sight of a presumably ugly sage, the maid-servant receives him without any judgement. As a result of which she receives two boons from him. He frees her from her low existence. He also tells her that her son would be the wisest man on Earth. The boons she earns are linked to the curse on God of Dharma by Sage Mandavya. The boons, in this case, act as an extension of the curse. Furthermore, it implies that curses and boons are delivered on several occasions to propel one's fate. This episode also acts as a reminder of the hurt ego of the sage based on which he chose to curse or bestow boon on the people who were at his mercy.

The third example includes Sage Parashar's boons to Satyawati in lieu of sexual favours he expects from her. He frees her from the permanent odour that emanates from her body and showers her with a permanently fragrant body. He also grants another boon which restores her virginity after their encounter. However, all of this, she gets because he wanted a son from her. She did not have a choice to refuse him. Out of fear of being cursed by the rishi, she consents to their union (Adi Parva, 318). To compensate for the force on the unwed girl, he restored her virginity through his powers. The question arises, at what cost did she get the boon of a fragrant body? By surrendering to the whims of a powerful sage? How is it even a real boon?

III

The previous example clearly blurs the line between a boon and a curse. Other examples of boons that fall in this group are Durvasa's boon to Kunti, Lord Shiva's boon to Draupadi and Gandhari, Indra's boon to Karna. Kunti's boon becomes a curse for her when she tests the efficacy of the boon prior to marriage and the Sun-God refuses to return without accomplishing the purpose for which he had been called. Giving birth to Karna, she had to forsake him and give him a cursed existence where he would constantly battle for his identity and fight against his own brothers and ultimately receive death through the arrows of his younger brother, Arjuna. Draupadi who had been performing austerities (in her previous birth) to attain a husband is given the boon of five husbands because of which she had to undergo suffering on the personal, marital as well as societal level. She was constantly insulted as being the wife to five men and hence, unchaste. The boon turned into a curse for her. Gandhari despite being blessed with hundred sons has to lead a terrible life of pain and loss because none of them could survive the atrocities of the war. Her boon did not really bring happiness to her.

Indra, in the guise of a Brahman, requests Karna for his armour and earrings knowing fully well that his son, Arjuna would be no match for Karna's valour. To protect his son, Indra deceives Karna. But, to show his own magnanimity, Indra gives his powerful weapon, Shakti to Karna for his sacrifice which Karna hopes to use against Arjuna during the battle, though not without a condition. He could kill anyone with it but he could use it just once after which it would return to Indra, "Among the celestials, the asuras, the gandharvas, the nagas, and the rakshasas, whoever you desire to conquer, he will certainly be killed with this weapon" (Adi Parva, 331). Karna wanted to use this weapon on Arjuna but he is forced into using it against Ghatotkacha. Is it really a boon when he has to give up his life-guard and at the same time face double deception at Indra's hands?

Curses that seem more like boons are Urvashi's curse to Arjuna and Shukracharya's curse to Sharmishtha. Arjuna is cursed to be a eunuch for a year by the heavenly nymph, Urvashi for rejecting her advances. But, the curse works in Arjuna's favour because he could choose the year of his physical transformation. When the Pandavas disguise themselves during the thirteenth year of their exile, he uses the curse as a boon and plays the role of Brihannala, the dance teacher for Virata's daughter, Uttara.

The King of the Danavas at the command of Shukracharya gave away his daughter, Sharmishtha as a maid to Devyani, Shukracharya's daughter as a wedding gift. For Sharmishtha, this was no less than a cursed existence. But, eventually it turned out to be a silent boon for her as Yayati (the King, Devyani's husband) was attracted to her and secretly married her. It was her son, Puru and not Devyani's, who became Yayati's heir. In that sense, it was a blessing in disguise for her.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, in most of these cases, it can be seen that the lines between curses and boons are blurred. Boons and curses are not strictly compartmentalised categories. They are extensions of each other. They are the two sides of the same coin. Curses are annulled or modified or compensated with boons to get away with the intended effect of the curse. The only condition when the annulment or modification in the curse would be impossible is when the curse is an instrument of fate. Boons, if used unwisely, turn into curses. S. Krishnamoorthy Aithal notes, "Once granted a favour, the recipients have to use it carefully and try not to test its efficacy for idle curiosity which could have catastrophic consequences (135)." Another factor that Aithal highlights in his essay is regarding the language of the boons solicited. He says, "Gods can, of course, read the hearts and minds of the devotees, but they prefer the devotees themselves to articulate their desire. A slip of the tongue or any such mistake on the part of the devotees can have detrimental effect." The boon of five husbands to Draupadi falls in this category.

Previous research on the *Mahabharata* highlights the absence of absolutes in the epic world. Pandavas are not righteous at all times nor are Kauravas unrighteous throughout. This is not a world that can be understood in terms of black and white. Modern retellings of the epic offer alternative perspectives and exemplify a world devoid of absolutes. This paper has made a humble attempt to emphasize the same by a discussion on the two seemingly opposite categories, curses and boons.

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