

HS 250: Introduction to the Indian Epics: The Mahabharata

Mid-Semester Examination

23.09.2023, 9-11am

IIT Guwahati

Duration: 2 hours

Marks: 30

I Read the following passage carefully and choose the right option (s) to the questions that follow. Please note, for some questions, more than one option may be correct. If your answers are partially right/you choose some but not all of the right options, you will be given $\frac{1}{2}$ mark. Clearly mention the question number and the lettered option in your answer script. (7)

--Janamejaya asks to hear how Dharma came to be cursed, and Vaisampayana narrates the story. --The seer Mandavya was once performing austerities when fleeing thieves concealed themselves in his hermitage. Pursuing them there, the king's men suspected Mandavya of complicity in their crime, and on the king's order he was impaled on a stake along with them; however, he did not die. Learning that he was a seer, the king freed him, but it proved impossible to pull out the stake, which was cut off and left within him. Mandavya now approached Dharma and asked him what sin he had committed to merit such a punishment, and Dharma replied that as a child he had speared insects with reeds. Mandavya decreed that henceforth guilt should not attach to children younger than fourteen, and cursed Dharma to be born from a Sudra womb. (39)

1. Why do you think the king's men suspected Mandavya of being complicit in the crime?
 - (a) Because Mandavya is a thief
 - (b) Because Mandavya is a seer
 - ☒ (c) Because Mandavya did nothing to defend himself
 - ☒ (d) Because Mandavya was performing austerities and remained silent
2. In the outermost frame of this narrative, who is telling the story to whom?
 - ☒ (a) Vaisampayana to Janamejaya
 - ☒ (b) Vyasa to Vaisampayana
 - ☒ (c) Ugrasravas to Saunaka
 - (d) Vaisampayana to Ugrasravas
3. Why did the king free Mandavya?
 - (a) Because he knew Mandavya was innocent
 - ☒ (b) Because Mandavya is a seer
 - (c) Because Mandavya is guilty
 - (d) Because Mandavya committed good deeds in his previous life
4. What does the freeing of Mandavya suggest?
 - (a) Dharma depends on birth
 - ☒ (b) Dharma depends on spiritual merit
 - (c) Dharma is random

- (d) Dharma is impartial; no matter who commits a crime, he/she is punished.
5. When Dharma tells Mandavya he was punished because he impaled insects as a child, it suggests
- ☒ (a) Dharma is related to karma
 - ☐ (b) Dharma is correlated to one's birth or *varna*
 - ☒ (c) There can be exceptions to dharma when one is a child
 - ☐ (d) Dharma does not make exceptions for someone who cannot distinguish between good and evil.
6. What is the significance of Mandavya's curse?
- ☐ (a) Dharma is low-born
 - ☒ (b) No one should be punished for what he/she did as a child
 - ☒ (c) Dharma ends up being based on birth/*varna*
 - ☒ (d) Dharma should be based on the deeds one has committed
7. Who do you think Dharma is reborn as and why?
- ☐ (a) Yudhishthira to add to his glory
 - ☒ (b) Vidura to ennoble his birth
 - ☐ (c) Karna because he was so generous
 - ☐ (d) Ekalavya because he was so devoted to his guru

II. Answer the following questions in brief (200 words):

1. What are Bhishma's oaths and why does he make them? Although Bhishma is blessed for the oaths he made, do you think his oaths were a politically wise decision that benefited Hastinapura? If not, why not? Look at the short-term and long term consequences of his oaths. (5)
2. Although Vyasa is the ultimate author of the *Mahabharata*, what are the challenges to his authorship, and how does Vyasa succeed (if at all you think he succeeded), to restore his authorial control over the *Mahabharata*? (5)
3. From what we know of Draupadi's character in the section of the *Mahabharata* that we have discussed so far, does she conform to dharmic notions of Kshatriya womanhood? Or she does she in anyway challenge or exceed what defines a woman's dharma? Pay attention to Draupadi's disrobing and Draupadi and Vikarna's questions during the game of dice. (100 words) (3)

III Answer any one of the following questions:

(400 words) (10)

1. What do you understand by the term dharma from your reading of *Mahabharata*? Is dharma based on *varna* or the deeds one commits or both? Provide readings of at least two instances from the section of the *itihasa* discussed so far in class where there are competing and contradictory notions of dharma.
2. What do the Pandavas learn from their experience during their exile in the forest? Look at any two of the stories that are narrated to them by the seers they meet. What do the Pandavas learn from them? Is there something greater than dharma?