

## Chapter II

### **Assessing the Image of Shakuni in the *Mahabharata***

Like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* is also a great Indian epic. It introduced one more battle, the battle of Mahabharata, in the history of India. In the epic Mahabharata, written by Vedvyasa, Shakuni is a pivotal negative character. Shakuni was the son of Subala, the king of Gandhara. At present Gandhara that is known as Kandhar, is in Afghanistan. At the time of his birth, Sakuni was named as Saubala which means son of Subala. Later he was known as Shakuni. In Sanskrit, Shakuni literally means a 'bird'. He was also known as Gandhararaja (king of Gandhara) because after the death of his father he became the king of Gandhara. In the Hindu epic Mahabharata, he was an evil character and a villain. Radheya said to Duryodhana, "Do not try to demean yourself by these crooked thoughts so typical of your uncle Shakuni." (Subramaniam 117) He was the main cause behind the battle of Kurukshetra. He was the brother of Gandhari, wife of the blind king Dhritrashtra. So Shakuni was the maternal uncle of Duryodhana.

Shakuni was very intelligent as well as a devious character. It is said that he was the mastermind behind the game of dice and the Great War caused by this game. He was a controversial character.

In contrast to his sister's nobility and transparency, he was skilled in every form of deceit and manipulation. He exulted in exploiting his victims' gullibility. Short-statured and dark-complexioned, his eyes looked around his areas of vulnerability in other human beings. He believed in scoring his points through strategy rather than

confrontation. Weapon of warfare, he thought, were of those who were incapable of using their brains in defeating their enemies. (Kumar 37)

But many other writers and scholars believe that he was not quite as insidious as he is considered to be. He was a devotee of Lord Shiva. He loved his sister Gandhari very much. In some stories, it is said that Gandhari was manglik. So to avoid the negative consequences of the marriage of a manglik with non- manglik, Firstly, she was married to a goat.

According to legend, Gandhari was manglik. In Hindu astrology, a manglik is a person whose horoscope contains Mars in a certain house, which is considered unfavourable and inauspicious, especially for marriages. It is believed that the marriage between a manglik and a non-manglik would give rise to disastrous effect, failure of marriage or even death of one partner. A manglik marrying another manglik, however, would cancel out the ill effect arising out of marriage. (Vishawanathan, Shakuni: A Villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

The marriage of a manglik with a tree, idol or a sacrificial animal is called 'kumbh-vivaah'.

There is yet another belief that the consequences of a single manglik marriage resolved by conducting a ceremony called 'kumbh-vivaah', this is, getting the manglik "married" to banana tree, a peepal (sacred fig) tree, a silver or gold idol of Lord Vishnu or, rarely, to a sacrificial animal. (Vishawanathan, Shakuni: A Villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

After sacrificing the goat with which she was married, she was again married with Dharitrashttra, the blind prince of Hastinapur. It is said that Dharitrashttra was non-manglik. The Gandhari's family members thought that the ill-omen was over then. In the another version of *Mahabharata*, it is written that Dhritrashttra knew about this incident much after his marriage. And he became very angry. Because then he was the second husband of Gandhari. Devdutt Pattanaik, in his book *Jaya: An Illustration on Mahabharata*, writes that Dharitrashttra wanted to punish Gandhari's family because he thought that they were liar because they did not tell him about her first marriage. So, he put them in prison and decided to starve them. He started to give a fistful of rice to them. But Gandhari's father started to give all the food to his youngest son, Shakuni. Because he thought that he was very intelligent and cunning and he would survive to avenge their death. In physical appearance, he is characterized as short man with twisted legs. It is said that his father twisted his legs to make him remembered to take revenge.

As punishment, he decided to put Gandhari's family in prison, including king Subala. He decided to gradually starve them to death and so, each of them was given only one fistful of rice to eat every day. Knowing that they would not live long on this diet, Gandhari's father asked his youngest son, Shakuni, to consume all the food given to them, so that at least he would survive to avenge their death. In order to make sure that he would forever remember to take revenge, his father twisted his leg – that gave him the permanent limp that typically characterizes Shakuni. (Vishawanathan, Shakuni: A Villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

In other version of the Mahabharata, the reason of Shakuni's revenge was described differently. Although he wanted see the downfall of Hastinapur but the force of revenge was different from the above mentioned reason. According to the folklores, the military campaign of

Hastinapur attacked on Gandhara. In this battle, the king of Gandhara, Achala Suvala was killed. All male members of his family were imprisoned, saying that they were indulging in adharma. Shakuni and his one hundred brothers were also imprisoned. Shakuni was the youngest of them. Each of them was fed with one grain of rice each day. The family decided to give the grains of rice to Shakuni because he was the youngest and he was the most cunning. So they thought if he survives he would be able to take revenge of their death. There was injustice to them so the father of Shakuni, king Subala bent his knees in front of Dharitrashttra.

When Subala was at the stage of his demise, he requested to his son-in-law, Dharitrashttra to free Shakuni. Subala also said him to take care of Shakuni and promised that in return Shakuni would protect his sons. So Dharitrashttra took pity on his father-in-law and freed Shakuni. So Shakuni survived. It is sure that he wrecked vengeance on the Kuru dynasty by spreading the poison of hatred for Pandvas in the mind of Duryodhana and other Kauravas.

In some other versions of Mahabharata, it is written that his dice which he has used as an instrument to take revenge was made up of the thigh bones and backbones of his dead father's body. That dice had magical abilities as his father's soul resided within it. By using it he was being able to defeat Pandavas in the Game of Dice because his father helped him to win all games that he played.

It is believed that he used the thigh bones and backbone of his father's body to create the dice, using which he was able to defeat the Pandavas in the elaborate Game of Dice that followed in the years ahead. This set of dice, it is said, had magical abilities, as his father's soul resided within them. They would help him

win all games of dice he ever played during his lifetime. (Vishawanathan, Shakuni: A Villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

Shakuni's dice which covers many pages in Mahabharata, plays a vital role. According to above mentioned story, it was made up thigh and back bones of his dead father. But this story did not find any place in the Mahabharata. These sub-plots are later recreated differently by many writers. But the dice of Shakuni was really made up ivory. "In reality, Shakuni's dice was made up of ivory and reason why it is considered as magical because Shakuni was an illusionist, who created an illusion in front of the Pandavas, that he won and they lose." (Verma, 6 Lesser Known Facts About Shakuni of Mahabharata)

Shakuni took care of his nephews Kauravas as his father promised to Dharitrashttra. He lived with all of them and showed special care and affection towards Duryodhana. And after sometimes, he became their trusted confidante. He used their trust to sow hate and wicked thoughts about Pandvas in them. Because he knew it very well that Kauravas were jealous and would not stand a chance against their powerful and skilled cousin. So he instigated them to fight against Pandavas which was the downfall of them. Later his wish of revenge was fulfilled.

He was one of the most intriguing characters of the *Mahabhrata*. He is portrayed as a mastermind behind everything what happened later with Kauravas. In some stories, it is said that he wanted to take revenge of the misfortunes of his sister because of Bheeshma. So, his real enemy was Bheeshma not Pandavas because he brought the proposal and insisted on Gandhari's marriage to blind prince. He had no anger towards his nephews and Pandavas . He was angry with Bhishma and wanted to end the whole Kuru line in the same way the Kurus had his line

years before. So he incited hatred between Kauravas and Pandavas. The envy of the five Pandavas was fire burning in Duryodhana's life which gave Shakuni a chance to take revenge.

The force of revenge was so intense in him that he stayed at Hastinapur till his death. He did not take care of his two sons, his family and his own citizens.

“ However, the fact remains that he had two sons-Uluka and Vrikaasur. Ulook or Uluka wanted to take his father back to Gandhara before Pandavas came from Agyatvas but, Shakuni did not go back as he wanted to sit and initiate the Kurukshetra war.” ( Verma 2)

In the *Mahabharata* there is not any mention about the ill-treatment with Shakuni's family by Kurus. In the “Adi-Parva” of the *Mahabharata*, it is described that Bheeshma chose two girls Madri, daughter of king of Madra Desha and Gandhari, daughter of Subala, the King of Gandhara as wives for his nephews, Pandu and Dhritrashtra. He told Vidura about those princesses and the benefits of these marriages to their kingdom.

These two princesses seem to be fit enough to be the queens of our young men. No other king is equal to us in status. Only these two kings are endowed with a good heritage. The daughters of these two kings can become the brides of the Kuru princes. (Subramaniam 27)

Bheeshma heard from the Brahmanas that Gandhari worshipped Lord Shiva and had obtained from the god the boon that she would have a century of sons. So Bheeshma sent messenger to the king of Gandhara. King Subala at first hesitated because the bridegroom was

blind, but after taking in to consideration the blood of Kurus, their fame and behaviour, he happily accepted the proposal.

Bheeshma sent word to Gandhara king. He get demurred at first, the prince Dharitrsashtra was blind. But Gandhari, the daughter of the king, assured him that she had no objection to marry the Kuru prince. Her next action was a great deed of self denial. She was convinced that she should be better than his lord in anything. She therefore got a piece of silk and bound up her eyes, refusing to see the world which her husband could not see. The king, Subala, sent his daughter to Hastinapur with his son Shakuni. The marriage was celebrated in the capital city and Shakuni returned to Gandhara after the wedding of his sister. (Subramaniam 24)

The character of Shakuni is deconstructed in the folklores. And the stories in which he is shown as forced by revenge are folklores. In *Mahabharata*, Shakuni has not been given due concern. Without any reason he was created as an evil and negative character. No one is good or evil. The goodness and badness of a person has a reason behind it. Every evil person is a victim of circumstances. So Shakuni's revenge also has a reason which is described in other versions of Mahabharata and in folktales.

According to these versions, Shakuni was unhappy with his sister's marriage with a blind man. He was very angry with Bheeshma because he brought the proposal of marriage. Shakuni thought that marriage of his sister with a blind man is an insult and humiliation of his kingdom. He swore to avenge this misfortune and insult of his sister. So he started to destroy Bheeshma's clan slowly. He achieved his aim by poisoning the mind of his nephews.

Shakuni was not an evil character because he was very disturbed by his sister's condition. Whatever he has done is because of his love for his sister. She voluntarily blindfolded herself. It does not go down to well with Shakuni. He constantly advised her sister to take off her blindfold and she Bheeshma's destruction but she refused. So whatever he has done is the expression of his anger. Because he was very angry to see the injustice that Gandhari has to go through by leading her whole life with blindfold.

Shakuni's character is controversial. In *The Mahabharata* by Shiv K. Kmar, it is written that Shakuni did not live his whole life in Hastinapur. He came to Hastinapur to spend some time with his sister. But during that time, he mixed poison of hatred in the heart of Kauravas. He advised Duryodhana to mix poison in Bheema's food. Bheema was very powerful, so Duryodhana was jealous of him. He was also the mastermind in the plan of the wax palace. "In planning these plots, he was assisted by Shakuni, who had come to Hastinapur to spend some time with his sister, Gandhari. But ever since his arrival, he introduced into the palace an element of intrigue." (Kumar 37) He wanted that his nephews could get the throne. So he planned to kill Pandavas. "So if the Pandava brother could somehow be eliminated, Duryodhana could rule unchallenged." (Kumar 37) "So when Shakuni came up with an ingenious plan to wipe out the entire Pandava family—the five brothers and their mother Kunti—Duryodhana was deeply excited." (Kumar 37) The entire plot of death trap in the palace of lac was hatched by Shakuni and Duryodhana. Vidura says, "The plot was hatched by the king, his son and Shakuni." (Subramaniam 83)

Duryodhana was a good-natured person for his friends and people. But his jealousy of the five Pandavas was intense. This fire of jealousy in his heart gave Shakuni a Chance.



Duryadhana told Shakuni, “Unless or until I see the destruction of Pandavas I cannot be happy. I must get the better of them. Uncle, you say you love me. If you do really love me, then think out a plan which will make me master of the world.” (Subramaniam 176) After thinking a while Shakuni devised a plan.

I shall make all that immense wealth yours. Not a drop of blood will be shed. Nor will any blame be attached to your name. Shed off this depression and listen to me... Yudhishtira had one terrible weakness. He loves gambling, but he does not know who to play. We will use this to serve our ends. I am extremely clever at throwing the dice. There no one in this world who can play against me and win. I will do what will please you, by using this skill of mine. You must invite him to a game of dice. I will make him gamble away his entire kingdom. You must tell your father and get his permission. It will then be like taking a toy from the hand of a child. I can do it for you easily. Get your father’s consent. (Subramaniam 177)

Shakuni refused Duryodhana to get supremacy over Pandvas by spilling blood. “Spilling of blood is utterly futile when human ingenuity can yield much better results.” (Kumar 86) Shakuni was waiting for a right time for taking revenge. Shakuni and Duroyadha were very happy with that plan. So he thought that that was the right time. He trapped Duryodhana in his words. “Well, it was written my horoscope that I would come into your life to steer you through every crisis.... You see, I am also a believer of sorts. My Narayana is the six in the game of dice and it has never forsaken me.” (Kumar 85). Vidura who was a very wise man, knew that Shakuni’s intention was not good. “He could immediately fathom Shakuni’s real motivation.

From the day Shakuni arrived in Hastinapur, Vidura had hunch that he was up to no good.”  
(Kumar 87)

Shakuni was the mastermind of the game of dice or the game of Chance. It is mentioned that his dice was made up of the bones of his father. So he was undefeatable in that game because his father’s soul resided in the dice. His father’s soul helped him to win. This is not mentioned in the *Mahabharat*. It is said that this story of his father soul was made up later other writers. According to the *Mahabharata*, Shakuni’s dice was made up of ivory. The event of the game of dice was most important in the *Mahabharta*. And the magic what the dice did also very important.

Shakuni incited Yudhishtira, who was not ready, to play the game. Shakuni said, “This is, after all, a game which I am suggesting. It is not as though all one’s belongings are at stake! I said this game is as good as any other to while away the time.”(Subramaniam 181-182) He sneered at him by saying that “Poor Yudhishtira had just acquired wealth after the great Rajsuya. He does not want to part with it. After all it is new to him. Let him keep it.” (Subramaniam182) So Yudhishtira was become ready to play. When he lost his weath, kingdom and his four brothers then Shakuni said him to stake their wife, Draupadi. “You still carry a rare jewel in your hand—the milk bathed Draupadi whom Arjuna won at the svayamvara. It would be our last round and, who knows, destiny might swing in favour this time.” ( Kumar 90) But this time also Yudhishtira lost and Shakuni won. “Duryodhana came to Shakuni and embraced him lovingly.... Indeed, this the happiest day in my life. I owe it entirely to you, my dear uncle.” (Subramaniam 185) According to a version, Shakuni was an illusionist and so he created an illusion during the game, making everyone who was present there that he won the

game. No soul resided in his dice. When Duryodhana said that now Draupadi is our slave and he ordered his brother, Dussasana to take Draupadi to the assembly. Dussasana started to disrobe her. Everyone was silent and amazed. Then Vidura spoke, “O Duryodhana, you are provoking the gods, who will never forgive you for what you have said and done today. As for your uncle Shakuni, he will surely end up in *naraka*. That is where he belongs.” ( Kumar 91) Draupadi prayed to Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna gave her reams of cloth. So, she could not be disrobed. When Draupadi came to know that Lord Krishna had saved her then she thanked her. She cursed that Kuru line would be ended. She vowed that she would not tie her hair till Dussasana was killed and her hair was washed in his blood. Pandavas also vowed that they would kill the kauravas in order to avenge the disrespect and humiliation of Draupadi. The path of the battle of Mahabharata was clear after this incident. So, we found Shakuni was the mastermind of the game of dice.

Shakuni instigated Pandavas for battle by many more ways. When Pandavas were in the in Vanvaas, then Shakuni made a plan that Pandavas would be cursed if a sage will go to them. Because they had nothing to give anyone to eat. So he requested to sage Durvasa to visit Pandavas. But this time Draupadi saved them. She prayed to Lord Krishna and Krishna saved them.

Shakuni continued to hatch plans because his main motto was the revenge. He advised Duryodhana to become friend Shalya, Pandu’s Brother-in-law because he was more powerful.

... he advised Duryodhana to befriend King Shalya, Pandu's brother-in-law (brother of Madri, who was the mother of Nakula and Sahadeva). Shalya had the unique gift of becoming much stronger while faced with aggression. A skilled

archer and strong mace fighter, he was a warrior who was looked up to with fear and respect by both allies and foes. Shakuni asked Duryodhana to trick Shalya by hosting a feast for him and his huge army. Shalya, who mistook Duryodhana for Yudhishtira, was impressed by his hospitality and offered his services to him during the war. When he realized he was tricked, he visited Yudhishtira and apologized to him, also promising that he would try his best to demoralize Karna's spirits (he was asked to become Karna's charioteer) during the course of war. (Vishawnathan, Shakuni: A villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

Shalaya killed many soldiers of Pandavas army. But on the eighteenth day of war, he was killed by Yudhishtira. His death was a great loss to Kauravas.

The Plan to kill Abhimanyu was also of Shakuni, the young and valiant son of Arjuna and Subhadra. He was the husband of Uttara, the princess of Matsya. He was only sixteen years old. Shakuni went to Duryodhana and said: "It is impossible to kill this young man. It is not possible to stop his progress. He has got to be killed. Let us kill him together." ( Subramaniam 585) So they formed seven tired chakravyuha. No one could break this formation except Arjuna, Krishna and Pradyumna. They sent Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna away from and trapped Abhimanyu in the Chakravyuha. He fought fearlessly and brilliantly. Kauravas committed a sin because six warriors together attacked on him which was against the rule of battle. Shakuni stabbed him and he fell on the ground on the thirteenth day of war and died.

Shakuni and his Uluku were fighting brilliantly but on the eighteenth day of war, Nakula killed Uluku. He has taken an oath to kill Shakuni's son on the day of the game of dice. Shakuni

did not bear the death of his son. He fought for a while and then he tried to run away. Sahadeva stopped him and said:

Why are you trying to run away? If it had not been for you, this war would never have happened. Only if you had not entered Hastinapur, Duryodhana would never have lost his princely nature and become a cheat. You were so happy when you played a game of dice with my brother. I swore that I would kill you. You laughed at all of us when we took the oaths. But now under your eyes, all our oaths have been fulfilled.... It only needs your death to make us all true to our oaths. Come and fight with me. (Subramaniam 747)

According to some versions of the *Mahabharata*, Sahadev knew his aim so he said that now you have achieved what you wanted.

Sahadeva faced Shakuni on the battlefield. Being the wisest of the Pandavas, Sahadeva knew exactly what the latter's motive was, and the actual reason why he waged war against the Pandavas – in order to seek revenge. Sahadeva told Shakuni that he should stop fighting, since he had already achieved what he wanted to. He asked him to go back to his kingdom, Gandhara, and rule, instead of participating in this meaningless violence and killing. (Vishawnathan, Shakuni: a villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

Now Shakuni told Sahadeva about his story of revenge and why he wanted to take revenge. He told him about the torture of his and his family by Dharitashtra and Bheeshma. He admitted that he made plan to poison Bheema, the Lac House incident and to kill Abhimanyu.

At that moment, Shakuni felt deep remorse and a genuine repentance for all that had transpired in the recent past. He suddenly felt like opening out to this young man standing in front of him – to talk to him, like an elder does to a younger member in a family. He recounted to Sahadeva all his childhood events; how his whole family had been tortured at the hands of Dhritarashtra; and how his sister had suffered marrying a blind King. He admitted to having poisoned Bheema; planning the Lakshagraha incident; chalking out a strategy to kill Abhimanyu and so on. He also confessed to all the other crimes he had committed in this lifetime and told the young man that he could no more bear to live on; carrying this load of remorse and guilt for all the evil deeds he had done in this lifetime. ( Vishawnathan, Shakuni: a villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

So Shakuni told Shahadeva:

... he could no more bear to live on; carrying this load of remorse and guilt for all the evil deeds he had done in this lifetime. Shakuni finally revealed his good side – something that no one ever imagined existed! He told Sahadeva that the only thing left for him to do would be to sacrifice his life on this very battlefield. He further stated that it would be an honour for him to shed his mortal coil in a battlefield as great as Kurukshetra; in a place where such great Maharathis (mighty warriors) had fought and been martyred. ( Vishawnathan, Shakuni: A Villain or a Victim of Circumstances)

Now all hopes of Duryodhana were died with the death of Shakuni. On last day of battle, he was killed by Shahadeva. But at the time of his death, he was at peace, because his aim

of taking revenge on Kuru dynasty was fulfilled. In the *Mahabharata*, the death of Shakuni is marked the end of evil. It is said that after the death of Shakuni Ambhi Kumar became the king of Gandhara. And after sometime, Chandragupta Maurya attacked Gandhara and killed Ambhi Kumar.

Shakuni possessed many evil qualities but he had some good qualities also. Kuravar community of Kollam district of Kerala was influenced by his good qualities. So they dedicated an old shrine in Pavithreswaram to him. They placed a throne in the temple and it is said that that was the throne of Gandhara used by Shakuni. And it is believed that at the place of that temple Shakuni got *Moksha*. And they worship him as Lord Shakuni.

So Shakuni is a controversial character. Instead of the original text of the *Mahabharata*, there are many Parody writings which present him differently. He was considered as a stereotype of a backstabber and wicked person. He was the mastermind behind the battle of Kurukshetra. He devised many plan to incite hatred between Kauravas and Pandavas. But in reality, no one is good or evil. Circumstances and perspectives make man evil. Evilness of a person has a reason behind itself. Shakuni was also a victim of circumstances. His whole story was a story of revenge. He was a vastly misunderstood character. He was not a villain. Whatever he had was the reply of ill-treatment and torture by Kurus to him and his family. Revenge presents in the blood of a person.

There are also some good qualities of his character. He loved his sister very much. A person who had a loving heart and pity for someone cannot do wrong to anyone without any reason. He wanted to take revenge of the plight of his sister and in this process of taking revenge, he lost his own life.

To portray him as a wicked character, he was delineated as a short-statured with twisted legs. But in reality, he was not a villain. Circumstances created cunningness and feeling of revenge in him. He was a victim of circumstances and perspectives.



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