

The Digital Mythologies of *Mahabharata*: A Study of the Epic's Memetic Adaptations

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Abstract

The *Mahabharata*, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, has outlived its own time and place of composition. The epic has continued to dominate the popular literary discourse not due to its grandeur but due to its earnest compliance to the medium in which it is rendered. Its thrall is not due to its antiquity but due to its versatile ductility. Its vivid and contentious existence has now reinscribed itself into memes. It has traveled great cultural and linguistic distance, giving birth to many self-replicating portrayals and translations and now surviving as a primordial prototype for memes to habituate. Memes have opened up new avenues of expression which have resonated well with the *Mahabharata*.

This paper aims to identify and study the various strains through which the *Mahabharata* memes have been duplicated and replicated. The epic's attainments are now conveyed in a colloquial and vernacular manner. The *Mahabharata* is no longer an aesthetic artifact to be revered, but to be subverted and inverted so that it may facilitate memes. Its idiosyncrasies too provide enough meme fodder for their replication. Memes have altered the way cultural phenomena like the *Mahabharata* are perceived and deciphered. I propose to study how procreation of the *Mahabharata* through memes is facilitated by cultural, political, language discretions and affinities. This arbitrary exclusion and inclusion make memes breeding grounds of aesthetic-philosophical deliberations and negotiations, which can be a worthy subject for serious, scholarly discernment.

Keywords: The *Mahabharata*, Memes, Replication, Subversion, Duplication

With genesis in the "neo-Dadaist art which primarily focused on the use of modern materials, popular images, and absurdism, associated with neo-realism pop art, and assemblages" (Smith 12) and appropriated from Richard Dawkins' coined word *mimeme*, i.e. "for a unit of culture passed on by imitation" (Blackmore 6), memes have come a long way from being "categorized as assemblages, photomontages or collages, and then paintings, literature, and performance art (Smith 11). An internet meme is defined by Knobel and Lankshear as the rapid uptake and spread of a "particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural

'stuff' (10). Internet memes are usually subtitled photographs, humorous in content, and often with the intended purpose of mocking human conduct and actions. Verbal articulations are superimposed on farcical images for a comic effect, though a few images may have "heavier and progressively philosophical substance" (10).

This paper tries to analyze meme's preoccupation with the *Mahabharata*. Vast stores of information, like Mahabharata, are usually maintained in a variety of external media, although they depend on interaction with a human mind for their copying and development. Memes, like pen and paper, have emerged as the new "cultural artifact" (Distin 202). They ensure not only "the fecundity of the information that they carry" but also its preservation, replication, and longevity. They ensure the "continual development and the remarkable persistence of their content." Hence like Mahabharata, "memes and their effects can be found both internally, in human minds, and externally, in human culture" (Distin 202).

I

The *Mahabharata* has become enormously complex over time, and this complexity has been replicated by various agents of culture, from comics to memes. Replication is hence most efficient if it builds on what already exists rather than starting afresh each time:

The most successful sort of replication will be particulate: if the constituent parts of what is replicated were to blend, then the end product would be a conglomerate rather than an assembly. The units of an assembly must be "self-assertive": each maintains its own individuality within the assembly (Distin 42).

These self-assertive/integrative tendencies and the overall compromise of various units of the *Mahabharata* enables its "complex assemblies to be replicated with relative fidelity" through memes (43). It is perhaps the reason that a *Mahabharata* meme has a greater chance of penetrating the existing meme pool and lasting due to its fecundity and modern adaptability. The *Mahabharata* and its complex cultural information have been replicated and preserved from generation to generation. This constantly changing flux is quickly absorbed by the varying, replicating meme. There is no dearth of the mutations and combinations their alliance has led to.

Bringing the *Mahabharata* to meme is more than just "bringing old ways of thought to a fresh situation." It is to force their recombination to produce new ways of thought and new knowledge" (Distin 53). It comes across as mostly sarcastic parables, not imparting any religious messages but a lampoonist response to the prevalent social and moral views. Memes are not products of previous

careful study but an exercise in “mulling things over in one’s private thoughts” or result of a collision of “meandering trains of thought” (Distin 53). It is as if “existing elements of one’s knowledge, which had previously been inactive,” have been stimulated. Putting it in terms of memetics, the forced recombination of this existing knowledge will reveal much in terms of memes which is now relevant to the novel situation. Thus new memes may be acquired and replicated (54). The re-conceptualization or re-representation of the *Mahabharata* is a “thought experiment,” i.e. “the imagination is exercised in a controlled fashion in order to examine theoretical implications or to explore conceptual boundaries,” earlier done through novels and dramas and now through the “recombinative innovation of memes” (54).

The *Mahabharata*, too, has given meme the bequest of prolonged attention. The *Mahabharata* has a ‘cultural fitness’ which offers a ‘perception of appropriateness’ to memes. Memes’ success is not simply a “matter of their effects’ compatibility with the existing cultural environment” but also on their ability to be “anchored to reality” according to the “perceptual evidence” (62). Meme has found the receptive cultural environment of the *Mahabharata* assenting to its effects. Memes on the *Mahabharata* survive not only due to their spawning nature but also due to the “ancestral analogy” of the epic. Another aspect is the “transference of feelings,” i.e., the “mimetic transmission of emotion” or empathy one feels for the predicament of the Pandavas, as in Fig. 8 (62). They offer a “therapeutic release of thoughts and emotions” (62) through the ambience of the *Mahabharata*. Emotions might provoke selection but do not aid in the replication of a meme. Memetic success or failure is based not on the memes ability to incite empathy for a relevant experience or situation but also on one’s prior understanding and, at times, often admiration for the subject or information being shared, often disregarding the trustworthiness of the content and trusted facts and evidence:

Every individual differs in his or her susceptibility to adopting particular memes depending on genotype, development, individual experience, and social environment, and this susceptibility is not itself exclusively the product of past meme adoption (Distin 64).

Both the cultural influences and meme’s content assure its memetic success and replication rate. *Mahabharata*’s evangelical element has given it a duplication success. It tends to come across as part of a heritage that has to be preserved and reproduced. Some might possess strong political views which “entail the demand that they should be held by all” (65). Both Memes and

Mahabharata are a slave to dictates of human psychology and cultural novelty in order to stand a chance of being copied accurately or enduringly.

Even though religious doctrine survives mostly by incorporation of instructions, slavishly carried out, the *Mahabharata*, despite being a religious treatise, has spread epidemiologically. It has been evaluated, vivisected, recommended, and then passed on. The *Mahabharata* memes go 'viral' not due to the intrinsically great value of the epic but due to the ubiquitous quality of the epic to become all compatible with our times and culture. Its idiosyncrasies have not altered much between generations. Both the *Mahabharata* and Memes possess inherent selfishness to survive and replicate in all mediums and modes. Both tend to exploit their cultural environment to their advantage.

Dennett suggests that memes depend "at least indirectly on one or more of their vehicles 'spending at least a brief, pupal stage in a remarkable sort of meme nest: a human mind" (qtd. in Distin 78). It is in this gestating period that the *Mahabharata* swells and comes forth as a "meme vehicle" (78). It has become an "interactor" for memes to thrive on their novelty and replicate (78). The act to distinguish between a representation and the thing that it represents is hence rendered futile. Rosaria Conte, too views memes as "a symbolic representation of any state of affairs" but then goes on to say that an artifact can incorporate a meme, even if its content is not easy to decode (qtd. in Distin 81). An artifact like the *Mahabharata* can be a 'meme interactor,' for it is able to facilitate the replication of a meme. It contains within itself the representation of the information to be copied:

Representations, not artifacts, realize generalized information – and artifacts can persist long after the information that gave rise to them has disappeared (82).

The *Mahabharata* is a culture investigated by the 'meme machine of the mind' through different inquiry levels. Memes and the mind have formed a formidable corollary to explain the emergence of new social media consciousness.

In Dennett's opinion, "no real replication is going on when someone extracts information from an artifact. Instead, "there is a sense in which he is recreating the information for himself" (93). An artifact like Mahabharata, on the other hand, "contains no information about which of its features are accidental or aesthetic, and which are essential to its function" (94). Blackmore insists it is one's inference about which features are significant and hence can be imitated thus each one

“brings to the situation his range of experience and level of deductive skills” (95). Blackmore refers to it as “Memetic Drive” where cultural evolution depends on memetic imitation:

As the tendency to imitate “meme fountains” proliferates, and people become “better at imitating the successful memes,” so culture will expand, and memetic evolution will begin to result from competition between varieties of cultural traits (97).

However, in facilitating this memetic drive, the *Mahabharata* is insouciantly fulfilling its role as *Upajivya*, i.e., one which sustains, enlivens, or operates as a source. In *Adiparvan 1.92*, the *Mahabharata* itself claims it to be classified as “an *upajivya kavya* for all the great poets, like *Parjanya* (god of rain) for all the beings” (qtd in Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay 85). It has been regarded as a *laksyagrantha*, for it expounds upon the criteria of literary theories to be devoted to itself (86). It is sucking on this succulent, nourishing tendency of the *Mahabharata* that memes have been able to thrive and replicate.

II

The *Mahabharata* as an *itihasa* function as an augmentation of the past, present, and future. It is a prescriptive as well as a descriptive tractate of what ought to be (*purusarthas*) that what was or has been. It is a repository of occurrences and episodes, which are “poems in being and becoming” imbued with subtle meanings (*suksmartha*) and major concepts (*pradhanartha*) (*Adiparvan 2.31-33*, qtd in Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay 87).

Few memes thrive on this fugacious “incidental benefit,” i.e., they gain social relevance by explicating prominent social events or occurrences (Distin 86). They tend to add awareness to the communication function in the popular culture. They appeal to sentiment as well as judgment even if received and interpreted beyond their intended purpose. For example, a *Mahabharata* meme on sexual harassment (Fig.1 and 2) would only be successful as long as barricades to such moral debasement are in action and operating well. On the other hand, the rise of such cases renders the meme, according to Blackmore redundant and ‘unadvantageous.’ In their bid to gain and retain attention, memes will succeed best if they are consistent with “facts and skills that we have already absorbed, being influenced particularly by those to which we are greatly attached” (Distin 205) i.e. sexual harassment, as in the figures given below:



Fig.1. Meme illustrating the lack of consent in sexual affiliations. Taken from *Google Images*. Source lost.

In Fig. 1, a “synchronic and diachronic notion of cultural series” comes into play striving for “novelty and change” (Distin 205). The model for the study of the image here is that of synergy (the image of Draupadi dissension embedded in the *Mahabharata*) rather than that of supersession (in which each new medium of memes tends to take the place of a previously dominating ‘old’ medium of text). This ‘incident’ meme is an astute portrayal of “glocalisation, i.e., the mutual reinvention of the local and the global” (Baetens 183). Here the context or the incident supersedes the image though the grey template lends itself to the somberness of the #MeToo campaign. The call to go back to Dharma’ is endorsed through Draupadi refusing Jayadratha’s advances and reiterating the concept of swift justice, i.e., Bhima pulling out all of Jayadratha’s hair, leaving five tufts, an emblem of the Pandavas’ mercy.



Fig.2.A meme widely circulated in the aftermath of the #MeToo online campaign. Sinha, Suchetana. Image of Lord Krishna and the gopis, 22 October 2017. www.youthkiawaaz.com, youthkiawaaz.com/2017/10/metoo-its-not-harassment-if-the-lord-does-it/

In Fig. 2, the late eighteenth century Kangra style Pahari rendition of Lord Krishna stealing the clothes of gopis, taken from *Bhagavata Purana*, erotica, or the *rati rasa*, is invalidated to generate awareness regarding sexual harassment. Here, the digital-born memes are “integrated into real environments outside the screen, giving birth to new forms of communication and agency” (Baetens 183-84). This subversion of sensual to obscene while reprising the motif of sexual harassment takes one away from the aesthetic philosophies of art. The palettes of saturated red, blue, and yellows reminiscent of the *bhakti* tradition of Hinduism instead of eliciting reactions to the divine, who is a deity of cosmic order, are obturated by the yellow text cloud with #MeToo written in black. The iconography of anguish and despair of the gopis at having their clothes stolen reinforces the theme of the torment of sexual provocation. The nonchalance of the playful god is rendered sinister in the framework of #MeToo.

III

Memes are “not acquired by imitation alone but by a complex process of construction and integration” (Distin 102). The *Mahabharata* is an axiom of philosophy consisting of various adages and epigrams. The hybridization of dictums and the *Mahabharata* reinforce its sermonic

idiosyncrasies. Dan Sperber believes that “human brains use all the information they are presented with not to copy or synthesize it, but as more or less relevant evidence with which to construct representations of their own” (103). Through a “mix of decoding or perception (*pratyaksha*) and inference (*anumana*), the information provided by the stimulus is complemented with information as well as its “intrinsic properties” already available in the system” (104). For the successful imposition of proverbs on the *Mahabharata* template, justification of violence seems to be the unifying design. It is mainly due to the fact that the *Mahabharata* is an allegory of ends justifying the means, though however despicable the means be. The Bhagavata Gita is itself a recital that both condones and condemns war. Hence it is this similitude that memes dwell on and replicate. Memes have found Mahabharata to be an analogy of vehemence as well as peacefulness, onslaught, and passivity to which precepts and aphorisms are augmented to allow for successful cultural transmission. Cultural transmission hence requires “inheritance from the previous generation of the relevant properties” (Distin 105).

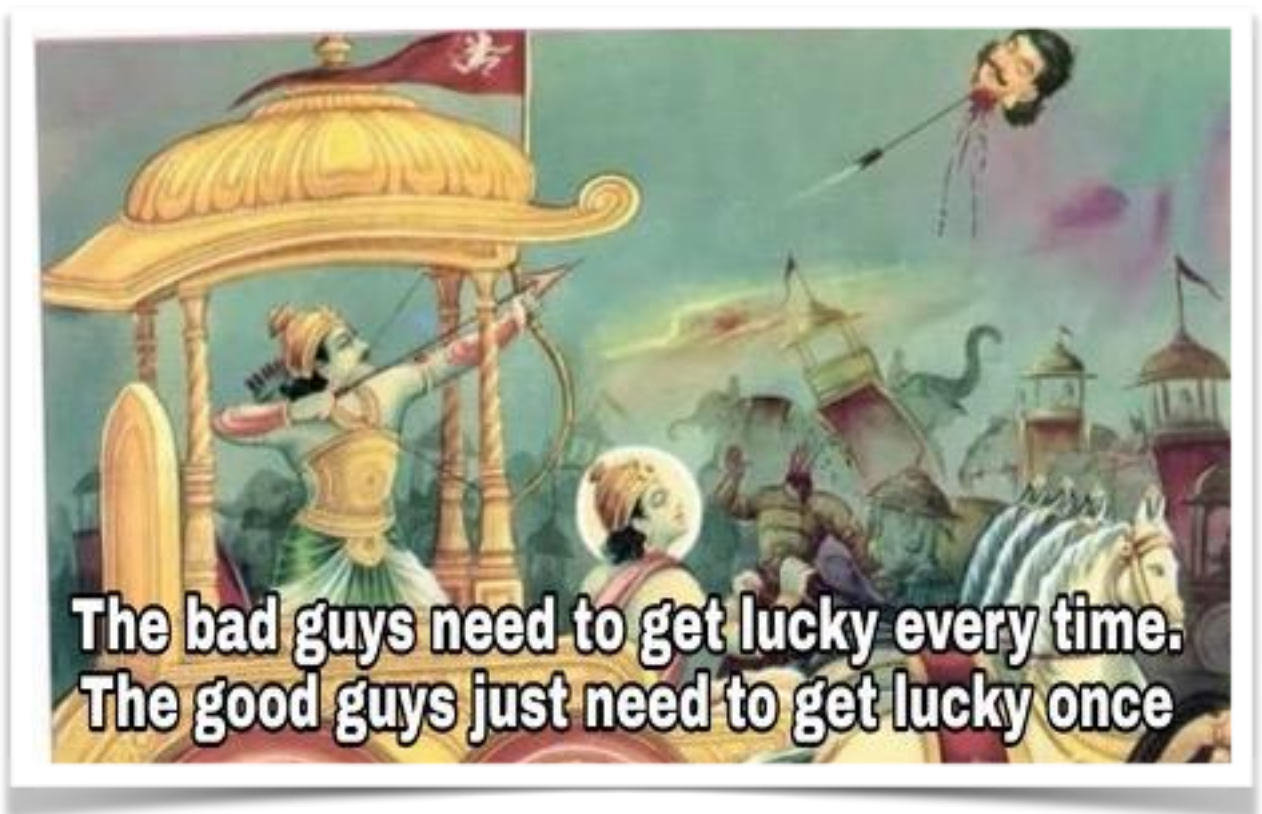


Fig.3. Here, the slaying of Karna by Arjuna while the former is trying to release the stuck chariot wheel is justified by a pretext of the quote. Taken from www.thenextmeme.com. URL lost.

This “cultural approbation” according to Sperber is like an exercise of an intelligent observer trying to infer the “ideology of justified violence” by replicating the *Mahabharata* through a Steve

Murphy quote. (Distin 110). The intrinsic properties of the *Mahabharata* fuse with the “constructive cognitive process,” i.e., Steve Murphy quote in the creator’s mind. Sperber refers to this as “observational learning, i.e., evolved domain-specific psychological dispositions,” which is “violence and its justifications” are crucial for replication (110). Meme, like Athena from Zeus’s head, comes forth as an “interpretation of the observer’s brain” (Distin 110).

Fig.4.Meme depicting Lord Krishna and Arjuna riding into the Kurukshetra War, exonerating if peace could be talked over, a flute-playing cowherd would never fight a war. Taken from



me.me/t/mahabharata

Both these ‘proverbial’ memes are late nineteenth-century calendar-art. It was a highly transformative, democratizing, and propagandizing art which dictated the single point objective of worship and portrayal. These devotional aesthetics through memes “replicative machinery” have evolved into “psychological mechanisms” (Distin 108), which allow one to draw an analogy

between Mahabharata and an anonymous Facebook post. The enjoinder of the ephemeral past with symbiotic anachronism of the *Mahabharata* lends itself to successful memetic duplications.

The *Bhagavad Gita* and its vivid and contentious existence have reinscribed itself into memes. It has transverse great cultural and linguistic distance, giving birth to too many self-replicating portrayals and translations and now surviving as a primordial prototype for memes to habituate. It is disentangled from the usual circumstances of its familiarity, and an “appropriate stimulus” interjects it to begin the exercise of “extricating their common features and comparing individual representations” to come across as a “communicable, manipulatable, memorable and widely applicable meta-representation” (Distin 134).

Seemingly abstract information, as in the meme given below (Fig. 5), comes together in “cultural input” of the mind, “is a powerful and replicable form” (Distin 149). This “meta-representational cognition” is the result of “development of not only the content of our thoughts but also our capacity for thought when we begin to compare different representational systems with each other: to meta-represent” (154). This memetic replication of an ISKON painting commissioned under its Krishna Conscious Project takes a humorous jibe at how the grandeur and splendor of the Mahabharata have inspired the magnificence and opulence of Hollywood movies. This is a lower order (Hollywood) embedded within a higher-order system (Bhagavad Gita).

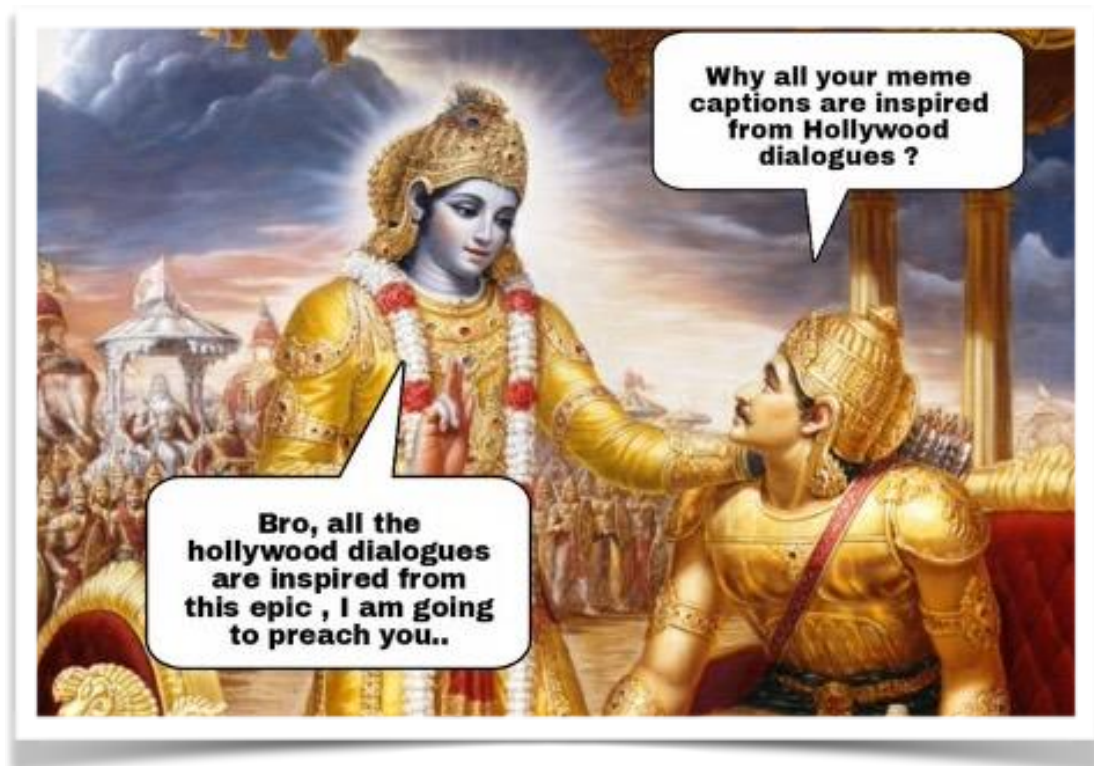


Fig.5. The above meme (www.memedroid.com) illustrates the 'cultural inheritance and selection' of two representational systems: Hollywood and Mahabharata. The 'symbol' (Gita Sermon) and the 'object' (Hollywood) are not even remotely collected but come together in a 'metarepresentation'.

IV

The meme demolishes the original premise and reverts it with often a comical, ludicrous interpolation. Bloch contends that cultural knowledge should not be characterized as a "library of propositions which can be transmitted in discrete units." Yet memes indulge and get away with "superficial blending." Bloch further contends that "any novel trait which an individual accepts must inevitably be modified to be coherent within its new context" (qtd. in *Distin* 159).



Fig.6. Lord Krishna is reassuring his father Vasudev while crossing the flooded Yamuna. Taken from incorrectmahabharatquotes.tumblr.com

The choice of words here renders a rather poignant and sorrowful episode into a playful antic leading to a 'playful' meme. The grievous episode of separation of baby Krishna from his birth parents in this ISKON painting is transposed into frivolity and frolic by the textual comment of Vasuki, the serpent king as being Lord Krishna's umbrella against the surging Yamuna. It is a renege meta-representation. In the transmission of culture, "the resultant act of re-creation totally

transforms the original stimulus and integrates it into a different mental universe so that it loses its identity and specificity” (160), as in Fig. 7.



Fig.7.The Pandavas despair upon leaving for exile is portrayed through popular rap-lyrics of a film, which is ironically about keeping the faith, leading to a successful blended-playful meme. Taken from www.picuki.com

This altered information does not repel ‘blending,’ and the context of hope and despair makes it a successful transmutation. It is existing knowledge (the *Mahabharata*) and a life experience “integrating into a “different mental universe” which has inevitably altered the essential character of a portion of information” (Distin 161) i.e., from despair to hope. Though “bits of cultural information are “constantly blended with each other,” the distinctive features of each element are not completely lost because of “our ability to partition existing knowledge, to organize and manipulate incoming information, and systematically to synthesize different parts” in jointed whole (199).

V

Memes are also “highly visual and intertextual” (Huntington 7). They make abundant references to many events and allude to many texts. Hence, they become effective carriers of “persuasive political communication,” at times dictating the entire discourse (7). Like other forms of visual political communication, such as political cartoons, memes contain visual arguments that viewers

can perceive and influence their political participation. Memes are “informal, casual, and spontaneous for they are typically grassroots, coming from the bottom up, rather than being dictated by some powerful organizing force” (7). They are an embodiment of “knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding political issues, figures, and institutions, as well as on measures of efficacy and trust” of a common denizen (Huntington 7). Since “memes intersect with pop culture and politics, they may be contributing to individuals’ mental models about the political events, issues or figures depicted, or even what political participation entails” (8).



Fig.8. A political meme duplicates the result of General Elections 2019 quite veraciously. Taken from www.onsizzle.com

In the above meme, apart from Lord Krishna’s chariot, everything is achromatized and faded. This etiolation is the reason to depict Lord Krishna as PM Narendra Modi steering the BJP to a majority win while the Opposition remains dissolved and languished as depicted by the bleached background. Memes here are increasingly working as ‘history’s record keepers. The depiction of the ruling party “as the invincible warriors in the battle against ignorance and confusion” (Huntington 7) brings to light this cultural parody of a meme as well as their ability to disengage morality and polity.

Dawkins believed that “there are two ways of looking at cultural change, the meme’s angle and that of the human individual” (qtd. in Distin 207). We can see the *Mahabharata* development as the consequence of human aspirations, creativity, intellect, and effort, or we can see it as the product of successful memetic evolution and replication. According to Dawkins, they are “two views of the same truth.” The only analogous insight that arises is that *Mahabharata* and memes are not “all there is to life, but merely one way of describing life.” The way of representations in terms of “intellect and consciousness, desires and hopes, beliefs and emotions are equally valid” in memes as it was centuries ago in a papyrus (207).

Memes did not give up on the *Mahabharata* “because they were starting from a position bogged down by the “legacy of past theses” but gained support “on the shoulders of the giants who originated them.” The pedantic sermons did not “detract them from the value of the enterprise in which they are engaged.” The *Mahabharata* and its development will ultimately be “determined by a complex interplay between memes and the New Media environment” (207). Our only responsibility is the content.

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