Drona's Use of Social Powers – A Study on Select Stories from

The Mahabharata

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Abstract

The Mahabharata, one of the ancient Indian epics throws light on different dimensions of human life. It provides information about ancient Indian culture and civilization in detail. From then until now, education plays a major role in shaping one's life. *The Mahabharata* showcases the Gurukul system of education. Also, different stories in the epic aim at exposing the nature of the relationship shared between teachers and students that existed during that period. Drona, the much-celebrated guru in the epic, influences the central characters and the plot in many ways. This paper aims to understand Drona's power, the potential for social influence by analyzing selected stories from *The Mahabharata*.

Keywords: The Mahabharata, Drona, Power, teacher-student relationship

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Power plays a crucial role in *The Mahabharata*, one of the major Indian epics. The central plot exhibits the power struggle between Pandavas and Kauravas, the two groups of cousins. Their knowledge and education influenced the way they fought each other. Drona, the character chosen for the study, served as the teacher for both the groups involved in the succession conflict. Though there arouse controversies based on his biased attitude towards his students, he remains to be a distinguished teacher in Indian minds. Drona as a teacher exhibited different types of power. This paper aims to explore those varied types of power that influenced his students pertaining to the different types of social powers as pointed out by French and Raven. Lind P Rouse, in her article, outlines the five types of power suggested by French and Raven.

> French and Raven suggest five types of social power, which rest on different kinds of resources: Reward Power, when a person perceives that another can mediate rewards for him or her; Coercive Power, when a person perceives that another can mediate punishments for him or her; Legitimate Power, when a person believes another has the right (or authority) to prescribe his or her behaviour; Referent Power, based on a person's psychological identification with another; Expert Power, based on another's special knowledge (376)

Later, informational power was added to the list by Raven. These six types of powers have a great impact in the teaching-learning process. In ancient India, teachers who were referred to as gurus occupied a revered position in the society. In The Mahabharata, Drona powerfully exhibited these powers to uphold his status in society. For analysis, the stories are chosen from DevduttPattanaik's *Jaya*, the illustrated retelling of *The Mahabharata*.

"Expert Power results from the target's faith that the agent has some superior insight or knowledge about what behaviouris best under the circumstances" (Raven 3). Drona's students always had this faith in him as they believed him to be an expert in the subject. Drona's efforts to

project himself as knowledgeable should be recognized. Raven in his article discusses the various self-presentational strategies and impression management techniques suggested by Pittman, Jones and Goffman that are used by the agent to set the stage for the effective usage of the possessed powers. Through self-promotion, Drona earned this faith during the first meet itself. "For expert power, a few choice demonstrations of one's superior knowledge would be useful" (Raven 7). Drona's wise demonstration choices helped him in exhibiting the expert power.

During his first meet with Pandavas and Kauravas who later became his students, he demonstrated his excellent archery skills by helping them out. As they were struggling with the ball that had fallen into the well, Drona helped them retrieve it. This made the boys wonder and admire his knowledge on the subject. Thus, through self-promotion, he had built his image and exhibited expert power. This power helped him influence his students and they followed his instructions even without knowing the reason. Explaining the background and reason behind the instructions forms the informational power. "'Understanding the reason', then, is what distinguishes Informational Power from Expert Power" (Raven 3). Along with expertise, Drona also had known to explain them to students which eventually helped the students grow as individuals. All his students were able to use their knowledge throughout even after the guidance had ceased. While handing over the Brahmashira, he imparted Arjuna with the knowledge to use it, retrieve it and the conditions to be followed while using it. "Informational influence or persuasion would ordinarily be highly desirable but may require more time and effort than is available" (Raven 6). Though it is time-consuming he invested time in influencing his students through this type of power.

> Bharadvaja's son told the great-souled maharatha, "O mighty armed one! Receive this invincible and supreme weapon, named brahmashira, with the knowledge of releasing it and withdrawing it. You must never use it against human beings. If it is used against an enemy whose energy is inferior, it will burn the entire universe. O, son! It is said that there is nothing superior to this weapon in the three worlds. Therefore, preserve it carefully and listen to my words. O brave one! If a superhuman enemy ever fights with you, use this weapon to kill him in battle." With joined hands, Bibhastu promised that he would do as he had been asked and received the supreme weapon. His preceptor again told him, "No man in the world will be a greater archer than you" (Debroy 336).

Further, this knowledge of Brahmashira was not given to all his students in common. It was only given to Arjuna. The reason behind choosing Arjuna can explicitly portray Drona's usage of reward power. Arjuna instantly saved Drona from the crocodiles that attacked him while bathing. Drona expressed his happiness for Arjuna using the skills in the right way. So, he rewarded him with the Brahmashira knowledge. This event not only served as an encouragement to Arjuna but also should have influenced other students to enhance their skills and make them work towards rewards. Like the reward power, he also exhibited coercive power to a greater extent.

> Reward Power stems from the ability of the agent to offer a positive incentive if the target complies (a raise in pay, a promotion, special work privileges...). In Coercive Power, the agent brings about change by threatening the target with negative, undesirable consequences (demotion, termination, undesirable work assignments...), if the target does not comply (Raven 2).

This power possessed by Drona instilled fear in students. His attitude and behaviour towards Ekalavya showcases his coercive power. He denied Ekalavya archery knowledge but even without his guidance, Ekalavya managed to gain it. This, in turn, made Drona furious as his skills threatened his promise of making Arjuna the best of all. So, he demanded Ekalavya's right-hand thumb as fee and Ekalavya abided. Though the motive behind that violent act was to punish him for his non-compliance, he used the legitimate power to carry out the action.

> Drona told Ekalavya, "If you are my student, give me my fee." On hearing this, Ekalavya happily asked, "O illustrious one! What can I give you? Command me. O you know the brahman! There is nothing that cannot be given to the preceptor." Drona said, "Give me your right thumb as a fee." On hearing Drona's terrible words, Ekalavya kept his promise (Debroy 333).

Unlike other types of powers discussed, the legitimate power is the power that results from the social position of the agent and the person influenced. In this case, Drona, the agent plays the role of the teacher. In the Gurukul system of education followed in ancient India, the teachers were treated with high respect and the students were expected to exhibit unquestioned compliance.

> It is the most obvious form of legitimate power and stems from a social norm that requires that we obey people who are in a superior position in a formal or informal social structure, such as a supervisor or a higher-ranking military officer influencing a

subordinate. Other examples, reflecting various cultural norms, might be the right of parents to influence children, of older people to influence younger, teachers to influence students, police officers to influence citizens (Raven 4).

It is with this power, he demanded gurudakshina or tuition fee from Ekalavya. He readily cut off his thumb and presented it to Drona, only because he considered Drona to be his teacher and acted according to the cultural norms that existed back then. Similarly, Kauravas and Pandavas were expected to capture Drupada as gurudakshina.

The influence of powers can be either positive or negative. It is the duty of the teacher to eliminate the negative and sustain the positive. Thus, Drona wisely chose different types of powers based on the situation and used them to have positive impact on his students. This ability of Drona made him excel as a teacher.

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