

# Did Draupadī laugh at Duryodhana?

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**ABSTRACT** - According to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*,<sup>1</sup> Vyāsa composed the epic and taught it to his five disciples, who included Vaiśampāyana.<sup>2</sup> We hear nothing more about transmission through four of the disciples but do learn that Vaiśampāyana narrates the story two generations later at a ritual performed by Janamejaya, the great-grandson of Arjuna, where Ugrasravas Sūta hears it.<sup>3</sup> Sūta later recounts the whole narrative in a gathering of sages who know about Vyāsa's composition.<sup>4</sup> While Vyāsa's and Vaiśampāyana's accounts are often indistinguishable, Sūta's version can sometimes be identified, particularly in the gambling episode. This highlights the need to examine the layers of the text, revealing the presence of different versions, even within the Critical Edition. Although the incident of mockery is mentioned several times in the Critical Edition, its details are reported only on two occasions: first, in Vaiśampāyana's account, and the second in Sūta's account. The differences between the two are indicative of how the narrative changed over time.

**Keywords** - Draupadī laugh, Duryodhana, Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, Vaiśampāyana, Ugrasravas Sūta.

**The mockery as described by Vaiśampāyana-** Vaiśampāyana recounts Duryodhana's misadventures and subsequent mockery in the Indraprastha Palace in three instances. The first occurs in the main storyline, as the events unfold, the second and third are retellings of the same by Duryodhana to Śakuni and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. In the primary narrative, Duryodhana is mocked by several individuals after becoming trapped in the deceptive architecture of the Rājasūya palace, which creates a blend of reality and illusion. There, Duryodhana mistakenly believes the crystal floor to be water and lifts his clothes to navigate it. He then falls into a pool that appears as solid ground due to the crystal illusion. Laughing servants and

<sup>1</sup> All references to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* are from the Critical Edition edited by Sukthankar et al and published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. All translations from Sanskrit passages are my own, unless otherwise indicated. I quote Sanskrit text only when it is crucial to the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> vivyāsa vedān yasmāc ca tasmād vyāsa iti smṛtaḥ. vedān adhyāpayām āsa mahābhāratapañcamān, sumantum jaiminiṃ pailaṃ śukaṃ caiva svam ātmajam (1.57.73–74).

<sup>3</sup> 1.1.8–10.

<sup>4</sup> 1.1.23.

the Pāṇḍavas—Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—mock him. Despite his anger, Duryodhana tries to maintain composure, avoiding eye contact. He then misjudges an open door, bumping his forehead. Humiliated and frustrated, Duryodhana returns to Hastināpura, embittered by the Pāṇḍavas' wealth and splendor, marking the start of his jealousy. As Duryodhana explores the palace, his confusion and embarrassment lead to ridicule from Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, and palace attendants.<sup>5</sup>

Vaiśampāyana also includes Duryodhana's retellings of the experience. In his description to Śakuni, Duryodhana does not mention the Pāṇḍavas but accuses the palace attendants of mocking him.<sup>6</sup> His first recounting to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, found in Vaiśampāyana's narrative, focuses on how Duryodhana's encounter with Yudhiṣṭhira's power and wealth makes him feel suicidal, yet he does not refer to the humiliation he faced in the palace. In contrast, his second retelling, found in Sūta's account, includes a detailed expression of his grievances, jealousy, and the humiliation he suffered. Here, Duryodhana accuses Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, Draupadī, her friends, and the palace attendants of mocking him. This second account is the only instance in the entire *Mahābhārata* where Draupadī is specifically accused of laughing at Duryodhana. In all other instances, it is the Pāṇḍavas, excluding Yudhiṣṭhira, who laugh at Duryodhana.

Let us delve deeply into the descriptions by Duryodhana to understand if Draupadī indeed laughed at him. On his way back to Hastināpura, Duryodhana, "resentful of the fortunes of the Pāṇḍavas" and fixated on the grandeur of the Sabhā and Yudhiṣṭhira's wealth, begins to plot vengeful schemes.<sup>7</sup> Śakuni notices his deep distress and silence, prompting him to ask the cause. Duryodhana then vents his frustrations about Yudhiṣṭhira's unparalleled political power and immense wealth, pouring out his grievances in sixteen verses.<sup>8</sup> However, he only briefly alludes to his humiliation, saying: "Having witnessed that splendour [of the Pāṇḍavas] and the magnificent Sabhā; and having suffered that mockery by the guards (*rakṣibhiś cāvahāsaṃ tam*), I am burning as if with fire!" (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

It appears that Śakuni is already familiar with the mockery incident—Śakuni and Duryodhana explored the palace together—as suggested not only by the brevity of Duryodhana's description but also by his use of the word "that" (*tam*), implying prior knowledge of the event. Additionally, one could argue that if Śakuni was aware of the mockery, he would likely have been aware of Duryodhana's jealousy as well, since both feelings are closely connected in Duryodhana's mind.

In his first account of the bitter experience in Indraprastha, Duryodhana expresses his despair before Dhṛtarāṣṭra in twenty-four verses.<sup>10</sup> His conversation with Dhṛtarāṣṭra is seamlessly woven into the narrative, covering the events from the Rājasūya ceremony to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command for Vidura to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to a dice game.<sup>11</sup> In this retelling, Duryodhana's anguish stems primarily from straightforward jealousy, an emotion he had previously shared with Śakuni.

Two key aspects of Duryodhana's conversation with Dhṛtarāṣṭra stand out: (1) He openly admits his jealousy of the Pāṇḍavas' rise to power and suggests that he can seize it all through a gambling match,

<sup>5</sup> 2.43.3–12.

<sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> pāṇḍavaśrīprataptasya dhyānaglānasya gacchataḥ, duryodhanasya nṛpateḥ pāpā matir ajāyata (2.43.13).

<sup>8</sup> 2.43.19–35.

<sup>9</sup> so 'haṃ śriyaṃ ca tāṃ dr̥ṣṭvā sabhāṃ tāṃ ca tathāvidhāṃ, rakṣibhiś cāvahāsaṃ tam paritapye yathāgninā (2.43.35).

<sup>10</sup> 2.45.12–35.

<sup>11</sup> 2.43–45.

and (2) he makes no mention of the mockery he faced in Indraprastha. As a result, this conversation, as reported by Vaiśampāyana, concludes without any reference to the mockery episode, with jealousy emerging as the sole motivator for Duryodhana's insistence on the dice game.

**Mockery as described by Sūta-** The conversation between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana is significantly expanded in Sūta's retelling.<sup>12</sup> In this version, Duryodhana not only laments his humiliation but also names Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī as contributors to his mockery. He says:

Bereft of jewels and stunned by the distinct fortunes of the foe, no sooner did I pull up my clothes, when the wolfish Bhīma laughed at me. If I could, I would have knocked the wolfish Bhīma down right there. That mockery at the hands of the archenemy is burning me. Again, I mistook a very similar pool full of water-lilies to be made of hard-rock floor, but Your Highness, I fell in the water. There Kṛṣṇa along with Arjuna laughed aloud at me, and so did Draupadī, heart-breakingly, with other women. What hurt me even more was the fact that the servants, directed by the king [Yudhiṣṭhira], brought additional clothing for me as I stood there with my clothes drenched in water. Your Highness, listen to yet another delusion as I tell you: I severely injured myself when I bumped with my forehead into a [crystalline] rock semblant of a doorway. There, the handsome twins saw me from afar, and pitying, they together held me up with their arms. Sahadeva—obviously smirking—even ushered me repeatedly, “Prince, this is the door, please enter through here.”<sup>13</sup>

After a prolonged lament about how Yudhiṣṭhira's sovereignty and wealth drive him to despair, Duryodhana spends nine verses detailing the mockery he endured. This retelling, while similar to Vaiśampāyana's earlier account,<sup>14</sup> introduces new elements.

In Sūta's version, Duryodhana's grievances are more explicit and specific:

1. The primary source of his distress is the Pāṇḍavas' wealth.
2. Bhīma's mockery burns him so deeply that he feels he would have attacked him, if he could.
3. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna laugh aloud at him.
4. Draupadī's mockery wounds him profoundly.
5. He is further humiliated when palace attendants bring him new clothes, making his discomfort even more apparent.
6. The twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, pity him and support him as he nearly collapses.

This description contrasts sharply with Duryodhana's earlier recounting to Śakuni, where he only blames the palace attendants for mocking him (2.43.35). In Vaiśampāyana's original account, Duryodhana expresses his jealousy to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in twenty-four verses, but there is no mention of the mockery episode.<sup>15</sup> It is only in Sūta's version that Duryodhana expands his list of mockers to include Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, the twins, and Draupadī, with the latter two names being new additions in this retelling.

<sup>12</sup> Sabhāparva, chapters 46–51.

<sup>13</sup> 2.46.27–34.

<sup>14</sup> 2.43.3–12.

<sup>15</sup> *vastram utkarṣati mayi prāhasat sa vṛkodaraḥ, śatoror ṛddhiviśeṣeṇa vimūḍhaṃ ratnavarjitam. tatra sma yadi śaktaḥ syāṃ pātayeyaṃ vṛkodaram, sapatnenāvahāso hi sa māṃ dahati bhārata. punaś ca tādṛśīm eva vāpīm jalajaśālinīm, matvā śilāsamāṃ toyē patito 'smi narādhipa. tatra māṃ prāhasat kṛṣṇaḥ pārthena saha sasvanam, draupadī ca saha strībhir vyathayantī mano mama. klinnavastrasya ca jale kiṃkarā rājacoditāḥ, dadur vāsāṃsi me 'nyāni tac ca duḥkhataram mama. pralambhaṃ ca śṛṇuṣvānyaṃ gadato me narādhipa, advāreṇa vinirgacchan dvārasaṃsthānarūpiṇā, abhihatya śilāṃ bhūyo*

Let's first focus on Kṛṣṇa's role in the mockery episode. In Sūta's account, Kṛṣṇa's involvement is mentioned twice. In one instance, Bhīma is said to have mocked Duryodhana in Kṛṣṇa's presence, with Kṛṣṇa seemingly a passive witness.<sup>16</sup> However, Duryodhana later claims that Kṛṣṇa, along with Arjuna, actively mocked him: "There Kṛṣṇa along with Arjuna laughed aloud at me."<sup>17</sup> Even if we overlook this discrepancy—whether Kṛṣṇa was merely a passive bystander or an active participant—another textual contradiction emerges: According to the narrative, after the Rājasūya ceremony, all the guests, including Kṛṣṇa, had returned to their homelands.<sup>18</sup> The mockery Duryodhana experiences in the Sabhā occurs after Kṛṣṇa's departure, so the question arises: how could Kṛṣṇa mock Duryodhana if he was no longer present in Indraprastha?

Two possible explanations can be considered:

1. **Exaggeration for effect:** Even if Kṛṣṇa wasn't physically present, Duryodhana could have invoked Kṛṣṇa's name to intensify the emotional impact of his grievance, amplifying his sense of humiliation.
2. **Textual inconsistency:** One of the contradictory statements about Kṛṣṇa's presence or absence in Indraprastha could be an interpolation, inserted at a later stage in the narrative.

Given the evidence, the second explanation seems more plausible. The inconsistency in Kṛṣṇa's presence or absence can be understood as a later addition, which fits into the broader narrative structure.

However, the main issue here is not Kṛṣṇa's presence or absence in Indraprastha, but the believability of Duryodhana's accusation against Draupadī. Duryodhana's claim that Draupadī, too, participated in mocking him needs closer scrutiny. The emotional weight of his accusation suggests that the mockery he endured from her, in addition to the other figures, may be an exaggerated or post-hoc embellishment aimed at strengthening his narrative of humiliation. This adds to the complexity of the text and raises important questions about the evolving portrayal of Duryodhana's grievances over time.

First, within the larger context of Vyāsa's text, Duryodhana's accusation that Draupadī mocked him lacks any substantiation. His claim is unique to this moment in the narrative, and nowhere else in Vyāsa's work is Draupadī even remotely associated with the mockery. The suggestion that Draupadī's involvement could be inferred from the vague reference to "other individuals" in Vaiśampāyana's description seems implausible. The phrase "those individuals laughed again"<sup>19</sup> more likely refers to the same group of people already mentioned hitherto. Moreover, Duryodhana's inclusion of Kṛṣṇa—who, according to the text, was not even in Indraprastha at the time—casts further doubt on the reliability of his accusation against Draupadī. If Kṛṣṇa's participation in Duryodhana's mockery is impossible because he had already departed from Indraprastha, should we trust Duryodhana's claim about Draupadī, especially given that she was never implicated in the mockery elsewhere in the text?

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lalāṭenāsmi vikṣataḥ. tatra māṃ yamajau dūrād ālokya lalitau kila, bāhubhiḥ  
parigṛhṇītāṃ śocantau sahitāv ubhau. uvāca saḥadevas tu tatra māṃ vismayann iva,  
idaṃ dvāram ito gaccha rājann iti punaḥ punaḥ (2.45.12–35).

<sup>16</sup> yatrāvahasitaś cāsīt praskandann iva saṃbhramāt, pratyakṣaṃ vāsudevasya  
bhīmenānabhijātavat (1.1.90).

<sup>17</sup> tatra māṃ prāhasat kṛṣṇaḥ pārthena saha sasvanam, draupadī ca saha strībhir  
vyathayantī mano mama (2.46.30).

<sup>18</sup> kṛtvā parasparenaivam saṃvidam kṛṣṇapāṇḍavau, anyonyam samanujñāpya jagmatuḥ  
svagrāṇ prati. gate dvāravatīm kṛṣṇe sātvatappravare nṛpa, eko duryodhano rājā śakuniś  
cāpi saubalaḥ (2.42.59–60).

<sup>19</sup> jahasus te punar janāḥ (2.43.9).

Second, there is something peculiar about Duryodhana's complaint. Even within the Critical Edition, it seems awkwardly placed in the narrative. Duryodhana begins with a lengthy description of his jealousy over the Pāṇḍavas' wealth, which he observed firsthand as the collector of the jewels and tributes offered during the Rājasūya ceremony. His frustration is palpable, as he is overwhelmed by the endless flow of riches he cannot keep up with.<sup>20</sup> Yet, suddenly, Duryodhana digresses from this topic to describe his humiliation,<sup>21</sup> before abruptly returning to his focus on the jewels: "I had never even heard the names of the gems that I saw there, and that burns my heart."<sup>22</sup>

Let us try to read his description take note of abrupt discrepancy in his description. At ----, he says: "Of the superb and high-priced gems and jewels (*ratnānām*) that came in, neither the nearest end nor the farthest end could be seen, Bhārata! My hand could not keep up as I received that wealth. The givers went away, taking their wealth brought from far distances with them, as I was tried."<sup>23</sup> After this, Duryodhana suddenly describes his humiliation, only to abruptly return to the topic of jewels in the last stanza of the chapter: "I had never before even heard the names of the gems and jewels that I saw in that [Sabhā]; and that scorches my heart."<sup>24</sup>

This abrupt shift in focus creates a textual and narratorial inconsistency, suggesting that the description of Duryodhana's mockery may not have originally been part of Sūta's account. It seems likely that this passage was later inserted into the text, disrupting the flow of the original narrative. Thus, the inclusion of the humiliation episode in Sūta's retelling might be a later interpolation, rather than an integral part of the original account.

Third, Duryodhana's conversations with Śakuni and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are primarily driven by his jealousy and desire to seize control of Indraprastha. It is noteworthy that neither Śakuni nor Dhṛtarāṣṭra shows any concern for consoling Duryodhana over the alleged humiliation he suffered. Instead, their sympathy is entirely focused on fueling his ambition and greed. They attempt to convince him that the Pāṇḍavas' rise from poverty to prosperity was the result of their hard work and good fortune, and that Duryodhana already possesses everything he could desire. However, these efforts to appease him prove ineffective. This also suggests that Duryodhana might not have complained about his humiliation before Dhṛtarāṣṭra. If the mockery had truly been a blow to Duryodhana's pride, one would expect both Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Śakuni to address this issue directly, yet they never do. Instead, their conversations remain centered on his feelings of jealousy and his pursuit of power. This omission further calls into question the significance of the mockery episode as a motivation for Duryodhana's actions.

The discrepancies between Vaiśampāyana's and Sūta's accounts of the mockery episode are crucial in understanding the motivations behind the gambling match. In Vaiśampāyana's version, Duryodhana's primary motivation for challenging Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice is his intense jealousy of the Pāṇḍavas. In contrast, Sūta's retelling suggests that both his jealousy and the mockery are combined factors driving Duryodhana to insist on the game. This distinction between the two versions is important for analyzing

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<sup>20</sup> 2.46.24–25.

<sup>21</sup> 2.46.26–34.

<sup>22</sup> 2.46.35.

<sup>23</sup> upasthitānām ratnānām śreṣṭhānām arghahārīṇām, nāḍṛśyata paraḥ prānto nāparas tatra bhārata. na me hastaḥ samabhadra vasu tat pratigṛhṇataḥ, prātiṣṭhanta mayi śrānte gṛhya dūrāhṛtaṃ vasu (2.46.24–25).

<sup>24</sup> nāmadheyāni ratnānām purastān na śrutāni me, yāni dṛṣṭāni me tasyām manas tapati tac ca me (2.46.35).



how the episode is framed in the text. The Critical Edition itself highlights this difference, signaling a shift in how Duryodhana's motivations are presented across versions.

This version is very similar to the foregoing one. These discrepancies between the versions of Vaiśampāyana and Sūta make the reader wonder about why it is only in Sūta's account that the mockery episode gains prominence. So far, I have found no evidence to satisfactorily resolve this puzzle. I can only conjecture that at some point, it might have struck a sensitive reader/redactor that Duryodhana's complaint to Dhṛtarāṣṭra omits the mockery episode. Consequently, a set of stanzas with appropriate changes was composed and inserted into Vyāsa text. The foregoing account of the events in the Sabhā may be concluded as follows:

1. According to Vaiśampāyana, Vyāsa's direct disciple, the primary source of Duryodhana's melancholia is his malicious jealousy—he considers his life not worth living unless he can appropriate the riches of the Pāṇḍavas; the complacent handling of affairs on the part of the Pāṇḍavas makes it worse.
2. The mockery of Duryodhana seems to be a secondary source, and one that is emphasized only in the text attributed to Sūta, who learns it from Vaiśampāyana. The following individuals are associated with making fun of him: according to Vaiśampāyana's account—Bhīma, Arjuna, the twins, the servants, and some other unspecified individuals; according to Sūta's account—Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, the twins, Draupadī along with other women, and guards.
3. According to Vaiśampāyana, Duryodhana is provoked to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira in a game of dice by his greed. But in Sūta's telling, the mockery episode, which may include an interpolation, also seems to have played a part in Duryodhana's decision.

**Conclusion-** This analysis may seem like an exhaustive examination of textual variations, but it is essential for understanding the complexity of the sequence of events that later played a significant role in shaping the unfolding narrative.

The entire episode can be summarized as follows: Duryodhana recounts the gambling episode in two distinct narrative strands. The first appears within Vaiśampāyana's account, seamlessly integrated into the broader narrative spanning the events from the Rājāsūya sacrifice to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command to Vidura to bring the challenge of the dice game to Yudhiṣṭhira. The second is a more elaborate retelling by Sūta. Notably, although Duryodhana briefly mentions his humiliation by the "guards" in the presence of Śakuni, he does not reference it at all in his first conversation with Dhṛtarāṣṭra. It is curious that both Śakuni and Duryodhana choose to remain silent about the insult before Dhṛtarāṣṭra. However, Sūta's version gives more emphasis to the mockery than Vaiśampāyana does. In all probabilities, one can plausibly claim that in the earliest textual layer of Vyāsa's text, Draupadī had no role in laughing at Duryodhana. Therefore, she cannot be accused of inciting Duryodhana and Karna, and her abuse at their hands is more heinous than it is usually considered.

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