Subaltern Resistance in the *Mahābhārata*

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Abstract

This study examines subaltern resistance in the *Mahābhārata* through a qualitative textual analysis of the epic, complemented by relevant secondary scholarship. Focusing on marginalized figures such as Vidura, Hiḍimbā, and Śikhaṇḍī, the research examines their experiences of hegemonic domination and the modes of resistance. Using Gramsci's theoretical framework, the analysis reveals that these subaltern characters confront cultural hegemony imposed by dominant groups and engage in both overt and covert forms of individual resistance, rather than collective action as suggested by Gramci's theory. By integrating subaltern inquiry with Indological perspectives, this paper advances a subtle analysis of subaltern characters in classical Indian literature and its significance for contemporary critical theory.

Keywords: subaltern resistance, hegemony, Indology, tribal resistance, queer resistance

Foundations of the Study

The *Mahābhārata*, one of the foundational epics of South Asian literature, is often read as a repository of dominant values like *dharma*, heroism, *puruṣārth*, royal lineage, and cosmic order. Yet beneath its overt celebration of the *kṣatriya* ethos lies a layer of marginalized voices—those of tribal peoples, caste-oppressed individuals, women, and gender-nonconforming figures. These subaltern characters, though often peripheral, do not merely populate the margins of the epic; rather, they introduce significant ideological tensions that disrupt its normative structures. The epic's narrators themselves, especially Vaiśampāyana and Sañjaya, present these figures through ambivalent lenses, revealing the contested terrain of social power.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined both elite and marginalized figures in the *Mahābhārata*. Indological scholars such as Hopkins (1889), McGrath (2009), and Hiltebeitel (2001) have focused on predominant themes, including the

social and military roles of the ruling *kṣatriya* class, the representation and agency of women, and holistic interpretations of the epic's philosophical and narrative structures. In contrast, scholars like Kosambi (1962), Sinha and Bhattacharya (2025), and Pauwels (2025) have investigated themes of oppression and resistance by employing analytical frameworks drawn from Marxist historical materialism, feminist and queer theory, and strategies of cultural alliance-building. The *Mahābhārata*'s layered narrative has also inspired a wide range of scholarly and creative interpretations across genres. Despite these contributions, there remains a relative gap in the critical engagement with marginalized characters—such as tribal, transgender, and caste-marginal figures—through the specific lens of subaltern studies. Their repressed voices and consequent resistance are yet to be theorized within the intersection of Subaltern and Indological approaches.

This study addresses the gap by analyzing subaltern resistance in the *Mahābhārata*, focusing specifically on three figures—Vidura, Hiḍimbā, and Śikhaṇḍī—as presented in the critical edition published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (2013). These characters have been deliberately selected to represent distinct subaltern groups: a low-caste Arya, a tribal woman, and a transgender individual, respectively. The study utilizes Debroy's (2010) translation of the critical edition to ensure accuracy in textual interpretation. Employing qualitative textual analysis, the research investigates the thematic and socio-political dimensions of selected episodes, probing the forms of hegemony experienced by these characters and their modes of resistance.

Using Gramsci's conception of hegemony—both coercive and pedagogical—as a theoretical frame, the study explores how subaltern figures challenge normative ideals while still being contained by them. Vidura's principled withdrawal from the court, Śikhaṇḍī's gender defiance and martial role, and Hiḍimbā's assertion of tribal agency all represent resistance that disrupts the status quo without establishing a new order. These characters do not form a collective movement, nor do they dismantle hegemonic authority; however, their presence reveals cracks in the epic's ideological foundation. In reading the *Mahābhārata* as a contested archive rather than a monolithic scripture, this study situates subaltern subjectivity as central to understanding the epic's complex moral and political landscape.

Hegemony and Resistance

This section critically examines the manifestations of hegemony in the *Mahābhārata*, particularly along the axes of caste, gender, and race—elements often

overshadowed by its overt celebration of heroism. Although the epic ostensibly chronicles the valorous deeds of royal and martial figures, a closer analysis reveals entrenched systems of power that marginalize certain groups. By focusing on characters such as Vidura, Hiḍimbā, and Śikhaṇḍī, this study foregrounds their roles as agents of resistance who confront and disrupt the dominant socio-political structures of their time. Through an exploration of key episodes and interactions, this section highlights the subtle and overt strategies these characters employ to challenge deep-rooted hierarchies within a rigid social order.

Vidura: The Subaltern Sage

Vidura occupies a uniquely ambivalent position in the *Mahābhārata*, both socially and theologically. As the son of sage Vyāsa and a Śūdra woman, born through the practice of *niyoga* (Ādi Parva 1.55), he shares paternal lineage with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu yet remains excluded from the Kṣatriya hierarchy of power. Further complicating his identity, another tradition casts Vidura as the incarnation of Dharma himself, born of a Śūdra mother due to a curse from sage Māṇḍavya (Ādi Parva 101.27). These dual narratives—one human and socio-political, the other divine and moral—shape his complex role in the Hastināpura court, situating him at the confluence of caste-based marginalization and ethical authority.

Despite his intellect and status as a royal counsellor, Vidura remains socially subordinate, a condition signalled by the frequent use of the term *kṣatta* (servant or Śūdra) before his name (Ādi Parva 110.23). Unlike his half-brothers, who marry Kṣatriya women, Vidura is wedded to a Śūdra woman by Bhīṣma's arrangement (Ādi Parva 106.13), underscoring the limitations imposed by caste hegemony. Recognizing these constraints, Vidura defers certain philosophical discourses to Sanatsujāta, citing his birth as a barrier to engaging with higher metaphysical knowledge:

śudrayonāvahaṃ jāto nāto'nyadvaktumutsahe
kumārasya tu yā buddhirveda tāṃ śāśvatīmaham. (Udyoga Parva 41.5).

This admission reflects the intersection of caste and epistemic authority in the epic's social architecture.

Vidura's counsel is frequently sidelined despite his role as an advisor. He is excluded from critical deliberations (Ādi Parva 192.26) and explicitly disparaged by Duryodhana, who not only rejects his advice but also threatens self-harm if Dhṛtarāṣṭra continues to consult him (Sabhā Parva 45.43). Duryodhana's antagonism is grounded in both political opposition and caste prejudice, which render Vidura's

position largely symbolic. Even in administrative matters, such as organizing rituals (Āraṇyaka Parva 242.20), Vidura is relegated to logistical roles rather than strategic decision-making.

Throughout the narrative, Vidura's warnings—such as those concerning the portentous birth of Duryodhana (Ādi Parva 107.31) or the moral hazard of the dice game (Sabhā Parva 56.1)—are dismissed. His rejection culminates in verbal abuse from Duryodhana, who likens him to a cat, a serpent, and an unchaste woman (Sabhā Parva 57.1–12). Even Dhṛtarāṣṭra employs similar derogatory metaphors, ultimately offering Vidura the option to retire (Āraṇyaka Parva 5.19), thus institutionalizing his marginalization.

Vidura's political exclusion is both overt—through caste-based insults and enforced silence—and covert, as reflected in his decision to abstain from the Kurukṣetra war. This non-participation, shaped by both ethical deliberation and caste subjugation, represents a subtle yet profound form of resistance. His critiques of the Kauravas, veiled in moral discourse, exemplify this strategy. In one instance, following Sanjaya's failed peace mission, Vidura delivers a searing speech using irony to expose the flaws of corrupt rulers:

dambhaṃ mohaṃ matsaraṃ pāpakṛtyaṃ; rājadviṣṭaṃ paiśunaṃ pūgavairam
mattonmattairdurjanaiścāpi vādaḥ; yaḥ prajñāvān varjayet sa pradhānaḥi.
(Udyoga Parva 33.96).

Such interventions affirm Vidura's position as a moral interlocutor who, despite institutional limitations, confronts the ethical failures of the ruling elite.
Vidura's resistance also takes more direct forms. He covertly undermines Duryodhana's conspiracy against the Pāṇḍavas by warning them in the *Mleccha* language and arranging their escape (Ādi Parva 135.2–6). During Draupadī's humiliation, he condemns the act as a gross violation of dharma and exhorts the elders to respond ethically:

yo hi praśnaṃ na vibrūyād dharmadarśī sabhāṃ gataḥ
anṛte yā phalāvāptis tasyāḥ so'rdha samaśrute. (Sabha Parva 61.56).
Vidura's bold speech highlights the moral paralysis of the court and his own unwavering ethical stance.

After the Pāṇḍavas' exile, Vidura explicitly blames Dhṛtarāṣṭra for the resultant strife, accusing him of succumbing to corrupt counsel and endangering the Kuru dynasty (Sabha Parva 71.28). Eventually, disillusioned by his consistent marginalization, Vidura temporarily withdraws from the court to join the Pāṇḍavas in

exile. This act, though brief, symbolizes a significant rupture with hegemonic authority. His rationale is implied in metaphors of alienation:
paraṃ śreyaḥ pāṇḍaveyā mayoktaṃ; na meṃ taca śrutavānāmbikeyaḥ
yathāturasyeva hi pathyamannaṃ; na rocate smāsya taducyamānam
na śreyase nīyate' jātaśatro ; strī śrotriyasyeva gṛhe praduṣṭā
bruvanna rucyā bharatarṣabhasya; patiḥ kumāryā iva ṣaṣṭivarṣaḥ. (Āraṇyaka Parva 6.14–15).

In contrast to other court figures like Droṇācārya, who align with political power, Vidura consistently upholds dharma over royal obligation. His rejection of privilege in favour of principle marks him as a distinct voice of dissent, illustrating a sustained resistance to caste-based and political hegemony. His moral clarity, strategic non-participation, and acts of subversion constitute a strong counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of elite heroism, positioning him as a paradigmatic figure of ethical resistance within a deeply hierarchical world.

Hiḍimbā: Embodied Resistance from the Margins

In the *Mahābhārata*, Hiḍimbā is portrayed as a woman of tribal origin, and her characterization reflects intersecting forms of hegemonic control—both external, from the dominant Aryan sociocultural framework, and internal, through patriarchal authority within her own community. From the Aryan perspective, tribal Rakṣasas are depicted as radically other, defined by physical deformity, uncivilized behaviour, and violence. The sage Vaiśampāyana, for instance, describes Hiḍimbā's brother as a flesh-eating, red-eyed, and fearsome creature, emphasizing the constructed alterity of the tribal figure (Ādi Parva 139.2). This framing contributes to Hiḍimbā's social marginalization based on her tribal identity.

Hiḍimbā's experience of exclusion is further highlighted by her initial reception. Kuntī, upon seeing her, praises Hiḍimbā's beauty and compares her to a divine being (Ādi Parva 142.3), but this praise dissipates once her non-Aryan identity becomes evident. The extent of social hegemony she faces is particularly visible through the treatment of her son Ghaṭotkaca in the war. Born from her union with Bhīma, Ghaṭotkaca becomes a target of Aryan violence. After his death at the hands of Karṇa, Kṛṣṇa rationalizes the killing by asserting that Ghaṭotkaca disrespected Brahmins and their rites, implying that his death upheld dharma (Droṇa Parva 156.25–26). This justification reflects the reinforcement of Brahmanical-Aryan dominance and the delegitimization of tribal agencies.

Hiḍimbā is also subject to gendered power structures. Her brother Hiḍimba demands that she murder the Pāṇḍavas to provide him with their flesh, while he remains luxuriously atop a Sal tree (Ādi Parva 139.10). When she hesitates, he threatens her life (Ādi Parva 140.19). Additionally, her motivations are framed through a gendered lens: her brother accuses her of being driven by lust (Ādi Parva 140.18), and Bhīma echoes this sentiment, attributing her actions to uncontrollable desire (Ādi Parva 141.3–4). These depictions situate her within a discourse that conflates female agency with moral transgression.

While Aryan narrators such as Vaiśampāyana and figures like Kṛṣṇa describe Rakṣasas as uncivilized and dangerous, the Rakṣasas themselves articulate a critique of Aryan aggression. Kirmīra, for instance, accuses Bhīma of killing their kin and abducting their woman (Vana Parva 12.32), thereby acknowledging the destructive incursions into Rakṣasa society. Similarly, Alāyudha condemns Bhīma for violating tribal customs by touching maiden Hiḍimbā (Droṇa Parva 151.7), highlighting the Aryan disregard for tribal autonomy and norms. These episodes frame the Rakṣasa community not merely as antagonists but as subjugated figures resisting dominant social forces.

Though Hiḍimbā does not engage in overt rebellion, her defiance is evident in her refusal to obey her brother's command to kill the Pāṇḍavas. Her resistance is further articulated through an emotional appeal to Kuntī when Bhīma initially rejects her. She invokes the suffering of women and questions whether her speech or tribal mannerisms are the cause of her rejection (Ādi Parva 143.5, 143.8). This appeal reflects a conscious negotiation for dignity and recognition. Ultimately, Hiḍimbā secures a union with Bhīma and gives birth to Ghaṭotkaca, asserting a limited but significant agency. Her transformation from a potential victim of both patriarchal and casteist structures into a mother of a powerful warrior signifies an act of survival and resistance embedded within the larger hegemonic discourse of the epic.

Shikhandi: Queer Rebellion

The narrative of Shikhaṇḍī in the *Mahābhārata* presents a striking case of overt hegemony and overt resistance by a transgender figure. The origins of this resistance lie in the story of Ambā, the princess of Kāśī, whose forced abduction by Bhīṣma—intended to provide a wife for his brother Vicitravīrya—initiates a trajectory of gendered marginalization and eventual rebellion. Rejected by her lover because she had become Bhīṣma's property due to her forced association with him (Udyoga Parva 172.23), Ambā seeks reparation. Her appeals to ascetics and even to

Paraśurāma prove futile, as she is repeatedly reminded that, as an Ārya woman, her rightful place is under the protection of a father or husband (Udyoga Parva 174.7). Unable to reclaim her agency within the boundaries of sanctioned femininity, Ambā embarks on intense austerities, receives a boon from Śiva to be reborn as a man destined to slay Bhīṣma, and ends her life through self-immolation—an act of self-determined transformation and symbolic resistance.

Reborn as Śikhaṇḍinī, the daughter of King Drupada of Pāñcāla, her life continues to defy normative gender constructs. Fearing Drupada might remarry to secure a male heir, the queen conceals Śikhaṇḍinī's female identity and raises her as a son—bestowing the name Śikhaṇḍī (Udyoga Parva 192.2). From birth, Śikhaṇḍī is thus assigned a transgressive identity, socially recognized as male and even married to a woman. When the wife discovers the truth and informs her father, a social crisis ensues. In response, Śikhaṇḍī seeks gender transformation and is aided by Sthūṇā, a *yakṣa*, who compassionately agrees to exchange genders. This act allows Śikhaṇḍī to fully assume a male body and fulfil his social and familial roles (Ādi Parva 57.104). The exchange signifies not only a bodily transformation but also a critical negotiation of identity, agency, and legitimacy within the rigid framework of binary gender norms.

Throughout the epic, Śikhaṇḍī's liminal status is repeatedly acknowledged. Vaiśampāyana refers to him as "male-female" (Ādi Parva 61.87), while Sañjaya underscores Śikhaṇḍī's experiential knowledge of both male and female embodiment (Udyoga Parva 49.32). Similarly, Bhīṣma refuses to fight Śikhaṇḍī in direct combat, citing his transgender identity as the reason for abstention (Udyoga Parva 169.19–20). Despite this ambiguity, his valour and strategic importance are affirmed; Bhīma even proposes him as commander of the Pāṇḍava army (Udyoga Parva 149.32). Śikhaṇḍī's narrative thus becomes a powerful locus of resistance—one that unsettles the normative structures of gender and social hierarchy embedded in the *Mahābhārata*. His journey—from Ambā's gendered dispossession to Śikhaṇḍī's embodied challenge to Brahmanical patriarchy—represents a radical reimagining of selfhood. Through acts of agency, defiance, and transformation, Śikhaṇḍī not only asserts a queer presence within the epic tradition but also destabilizes the hegemonic ideals of dharma, gender, and identity. His role in Bhīṣma's death at Kurukṣetra further inscribes this resistance into the heart of the epic's climactic conflict, offering a profound commentary on the disruptive potential of marginalized identities in the epic's moral universe.

Integrating Subaltern Inquiry with Indological Perspectives

The *Mahābhārata* serves as a valuable site for the intersection of Subaltern Studies and Indological inquiry. While the epic often upholds dominant ideologies—such as *dharma*, kingship, heroism, and *puruṣārtha*—it simultaneously opens discursive spaces where marginalized voices emerge in resistance. Through the lens of Subaltern Studies, one can trace moments in which tribal, transgender, female, and caste-marginalized characters push back against hegemonic structures. These figures align with Gramsci's conception of subalterns as those who "have no autonomous initiative in elaborating plans for construction" (1971, p. 14), yet their interventions—though fragmented and non-systematic—nonetheless disrupt the normative order encoded in the text.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony as simultaneously coercive (1971, p. 12) and pedagogical (1971, p. 35) provides a critical framework for interpreting the *Mahābhārata* as a text of domination. The epic embeds Aryan, patriarchal, and caste-based values as normative ideals through pedagogical means, while Duryodhana's arbitrary and authoritarian rule exemplifies coercive hegemony. Together, these forms of power embody what Gramsci describes as a condition indistinguishable from dictatorship (1971, p. 271). Yet this hegemonic order does not go uncontested. Characters such as Hiḍimbā, Śikhaṇḍī, and Vidura enact what Gramsci terms "disorganic" resistance—isolated and individualized forms of dissent that, while lacking collective structure, nonetheless express the potential for historical agency among the subaltern (1971, p. 52).

Hiḍimbā, for instance, rejects her brother's authority and asserts autonomy in marriage negotiations—an instance of gendered resistance grounded in survival. Śikhaṇḍī, as one of the earliest examples of "a trans man or a female to male trans person" (Revathi & Morali 2024, p. 22), destabilizes the gender binary foundational to *kṣatriya* ethics. Bhīṣma's refusal to fight Śikhaṇḍī reaffirms hegemonic gender norms, reflecting what Green (2002) calls the rendering of non-straight identities as inherently subversive (p. 537). Westbrook and Schilt (2014) similarly frame this as the cultural "sanctity of gender binarism" (p. 37). These moments resonate with Spivak's assertion that the subaltern, particularly female, is doubly effaced, silenced by both caste and patriarchy (2006, p. 32). Yet, the agency of both Hiḍimbā and Śikhaṇḍī punctures the epic's hegemonic structure, revealing fissures in its normative order.

Among all the subaltern figures discussed in this paper, Śikhaṇḍī's resistance is the most explicit and militarized. Reborn from Ambā with a vow to kill Bhīṣma, Śikhaṇḍī not only defies gender norms through bodily transformation but also claims a warrior's agency, a domain traditionally reserved for men. Their participation in battle—armed, resolute, and driven by a quest for vengeance—marks a radical departure from the epic's normative portrayal of femininity. As McGrath (2009) observes, while the *Mahābhārata* restricts the use of violence to male heroes, Śikhaṇḍī's path of asceticism, gender transformation, and ultimate battlefield presence breaks through this monopoly (p. 114). In doing so, their story offers a profound critique of both gender hierarchy and the moral economy of revenge, inscribing queer and subaltern agency into the epic's core conflict.

Śikhaṇḍī's characterization demands subtle individuation, particularly because they experience a dual subjugation: first as a woman and subsequently as a queer figure. In their earlier incarnation as Ambā, Śikhaṇḍī is subjected to patriarchal violence and seeks justice through appeals to male authorities, all of whom ultimately dismiss or fail her. This aligns powerfully with Spivak's observation that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard" (2006, p. 35), underscoring the structural silencing of female agency within a hegemonic society. Śikhaṇḍī's subsequent transformation—from Amba to Śikhaṇḍinī and finally to Śikhaṇḍī—along with their ambiguous appearance and behaviour, places them outside conventional sexual and gender categories into "queer resistance and subsequent acceptance" (Sinha & Bhattacharya 2025, p. p. 84). This ambiguity reflects Green's conception of the "queer" as embodying "a critical distance from sexual categories and identities" (2002, p. 526). It is precisely this ambiguity that becomes the locus of hegemonic marginalization which compels them to live "a life of trauma and guilt" (Sinha & Bhattacharya 2021, p. 3). Textual references reinforce this othering: Vaishampāyana describes Śikhaṇḍī as male-female; Sañjaya attributes to them the knowledge of both men and women; and Bhīṣma refuses to engage them in combat due to their transgender identity. Thus, Śikhaṇḍī's subjectivity is continually marked by exclusion, illustrating the intersection of gender, identity, and subalternity in the Mahābhārata's hegemonic narrative structure.

Among these figures, Vidura stands out at the intersection of caste, ethics, and exclusion. As the son of a Śūdra mother, yet an incarnation of Dharma, Vidura embodies a paradox: theologically central but socially peripheral. Constantly referred to as *kṣatta*, his caste origin defines his identity even as he becomes the most

consistent ethical voice in the court. He aligns with Gramsci's view of subalterns as institutionally excluded yet capable of transforming from "things" into historical "protagonists" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 337), though he takes an ethical, not revolutionary course of action.

Vidura's resistance is neither collective nor insurrectionary. Instead, it manifests through strategic speech, silence, and moral withdrawal. His refusal to participate in the Kurukṣetra war is a principled rejection of injustice, not indifference. Through veiled irony and moral clarity, he exercises what Griffiths (2006) calls "the arsenal of the subaltern subject: displacement, disruption, ambivalence, or mimicry" (p. 168). Though intellectually capable, Vidura refrains from metaphysical discourse, recognizing that epistemic authority remains caste-bound. As Spivak (2006) argues, the subaltern cannot speak (p. 32)—not due to lack of voice, but because structures of legitimacy deny their speech recognition (p. 32).

Gramsci's idea of the "disorganic intellectual" (1971, p. 396) aptly describes Vidura's solitary, ethical resistance. Though ideologically aligned with the Pandavas, he abstains from formal alignment, embodying what Gramsci (1917/2013) describes as ideological apathy, highlighting that a truly living man "cannot be indifferent" (p. 1). Vidura's withdrawal thus becomes a reactionary form of subalternity—morally engaged, yet politically inert. Unlike the organic intellectual who mobilizes mass consciousness, Vidura resembles the traditional intellectual—akin to a Hindu *purohita*—who preserves ethical norms without instigating structural change (Regmi, 2021, p. 43).

These subaltern figures do not vanish from the narrative; rather, they generate tensions that complicate the *Mahābhārata's* moral and ideological coherence. The three characters—Vidura, Śikhaṇḍī, and Hiḍimbā—do not form a unified collective, as each operates from distinct value frameworks. While the epic's dominant narrative privileges the *kṣatriya* ethic of *pravṛtti*—valorizing action, assertion, and worldly engagement (Regmi, 2015, p. 175)—Vidura gravitates toward the *Brāhmaṇical* ideal of *nivṛtti*, which emphasizes ethical restraint, detachment, and introspection. In contrast, both Śikhaṇḍī and Hiḍimbā act within the pragmatic and sometimes violent logic of *pravṛtti*. The narratives associated with these figures negate what Hopkins says about the women in the ancient epic being weak and inferior due to love and emotion (1889, p. 314). Vidura's *nivṛtti*-oriented ethics lead him to reject Duryodhana's impetuousness and moral scepticism, traits aligned with the excesses

of *pravṛtti* (Regmi, 2018, p. 14), and to morally align with the Pāṇḍavas, culminating in his submission to Kṛṣṇa's authority.

Paradoxically, while *Mahābhārata* is a "*pravṛtti* text" (Dhand 2004, p. 49), in Vidura's case, *nivṛtti* becomes a site of resistance. Yet, even this value system is not immune to critique. The epic punishes excessive *pravṛtti*, notably in Kṛṣṇa's strategic sacrifice of Ghaṭotkaca treating him merely as "expendable for the establishment (Sinha & Bhattacharya 2025, p. 63), which he justifies on the grounds that Ghaṭotkaca failed to respect Brahmins and sacrificial rites—a justification that, as Narain argues, borders on "fundamentalism and racism" (2003, p. 1682). Similarly, Śikhaṇḍī was used strategically as a living shield against the invincible Bhiṣma as the latter had vowed not to fight the former for their doubtful sex (Kosambi 1962, p. 19). Regardless of the ethical system they embody, each character—Vidura, Śikhaṇḍī, and Hiḍimbā—introduces ruptures into the epic's hegemonic logic, challenging its claim to ideological unity. The *Mahābhārata* thus emerges not as a monolithic scripture but as a contested archive—one that inscribes multiple, often conflicting, moral and epistemic worlds. Engaging Subaltern Studies alongside Indological inquiry enables a richer hermeneutic, attuned not only to the dominant voices the text amplifies but also to the marginalized subjectivities it intermittently reveals and attempts to suppress.

Despite their acts of resistance, individualized and fragmented dissent cannot be equated with genuine agency or liberation. Figures such as Śikhaṇḍī, Hiḍimbā, and Vidura remain subjects of hegemonic domination, never fully transcending the power structures that contain them. As Gramsci observes, subalterns are often subject to hegemonic control "even when they rebel and rise" (1971, p. 55). While Śikhaṇḍī and Hiḍimbā contribute overtly to the Pandava cause, their resistance ultimately reinforces rather than dismantles dominant authority. Vidura, though morally resolute, remains a marginalized advisor within the Kaurava court. None of these figures secure liberation either for themselves or for the communities they represent, and the transition of power at the end of the epic offers no substantive change to their subaltern status.

The implications of such readings extend well beyond the realm of character analysis, challenging the very frameworks through which historical and literary narratives are constructed. As Chakrabarty (2006) contends, dominant historiographies often produce *antihistorical histories*—accounts that marginalize or erase subaltern voices by subsuming them into hegemonic narratives (p. 341). This

critique is particularly salient in the context of Indological interpretations of the *Mahābhārata*, which have traditionally centred divine, heroic, and Brahmanical figures, thereby reinforcing a normative vision of dharma and social order. In doing so, these readings frequently overlook or diminish the roles of characters such as Kirmīra, Alāyudha, Ghaṭotkaca, and the Rakṣasa tribes—figures who inhabit the peripheries of the epic's moral geography.

By reading against the grain, scholars can recover the agency of these marginalized characters, repositioning them not as mere obstacles to the protagonists but as embodiments of resistance and alterity. When read through Subaltern and Indological lenses, the *Mahābhārata* reveals itself not merely as a scripture of power but as a site of resistance. Through Vidura's ethical dissent, Śikhaṇḍī's gender defiance, and Hiḍimbā's autonomous negotiation, the subaltern challenges the epic's hegemonic order. These figures do not merely endure marginalization, they reshape the contours of *dharma*, agency, and voice within the epic.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how subaltern issues manifest in the *Mahābhārata* investigating the forms of hegemony and the mode of resistance. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and employing a qualitative textual analysis of the *Mahābhārata*, this research focused on three distinct subaltern figures: Vidura, Hiḍimbā, and Śikhaṇḍī. These characters, representing caste-marginalized, tribal, and transgender identities respectively, were analyzed to explore how resistance to caste, gender, and sociopolitical domination is articulated in both overt and covert ways. The methodology combined close textual reading with theoretical insights from Subaltern Studies and Indology, enabling a layered analysis that remains sensitive to the epic's narrative, ethical, and ideological complexities.

The findings demonstrate that while the *Mahābhārata* often privileges the voice of dominant kṣatriya and Brahmanical authority, it simultaneously allows space, though limited, for subaltern intervention. Vidura's ethical dissent, Hiḍimbā's gendered survival strategies, and Śikhaṇḍī's queer rebellion each serve to destabilize the epic's hegemonic order, even as these characters ultimately remain constrained within it. Their resistance is individualized, disorganic, and largely non-systemic, aligning with Gramsci's notion of subalternity as lacking collective autonomy before they become a state. Yet, through irony, bodily transformation, and moral clarity, these figures create fissures in the dominant epistemic and ethical frameworks of the epic. Similarly, the study highlights that such moments of resistance, though unable

to achieve structural change or liberation, serve to re-inscribe the epic with contested voices and subversive meanings. The paper recommends a broader application of Subaltern Studies to classical Indian texts, advocating for future scholarship that expands the archive of marginalized characters and deepens engagement with their partial, fractured, yet resonant forms of agency. Ultimately, this study repositions the *Mahābhārata* not simply as a canon of heroic tradition but as a dynamic field of ideological contestation, where subaltern voices unsettle the certitudes of *dharma*, gender, and power.

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