

## Notes on "The Dicing" and "The Sequel to Dicing" episodes of *The Mahabharata*

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The episodes of "The Dicing" and the "Sequel to the Dicing" occupy the heart of the Sabha Parva (Book of the Assembly Hall), the second book of the *Mahabharata*. These chapters are framed not merely as a tragic gambling match, but as a ritualized theater where the foundational principles of dharma (duty/righteousness), artha (political power), and kama (desire) are violently renegotiated. This is the pivotal moment where the Pandavas transition from "protected princelings" to autonomous agents of their own destiny, albeit through a catastrophic descent into dispossession.

### The Context: The Ritualized Theater of the Sabha

The dicing match is set within the magnificent assembly hall built by the demon-architect Maya. Van Buitenen emphasizes that the Sabha is a space of political legitimacy. The game of dice, though seemingly a vice, was historically a part of the Rajasuya (Royal Consecration) ritual.

The Trap of Kshatriya Dharma: Yudhishtira, as a king, is bound by a code of honor that forbids him from refusing a challenge to a game of dice or a battle. Duryodhana and Shakuni exploit this "subtle" point of dharma to lure him into a situation where his moral rigidity becomes his downfall.

Shakuni's Agency: In van Buitenen's reading, Shakuni is the master of "Maya" (illusion/deceit). He doesn't just play; he manipulates the cosmic order. The "loaded" dice symbolize a world where the rules are followed in letter but violated in spirit.

### The Dicing: The Unraveling of Sovereignty

The first dicing episode represents a systematic stripping of Yudhishtira's identity. Van Buitenen's translation captures the rhythmic, almost hypnotic pace at which Yudhishtira wagers his wealth, his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and finally, Draupadi. |

The Psychological Collapse: Critics often point to Yudhishtira's "gambling addiction," but van Buitenen suggests a deeper metaphysical crisis. Each throw of the dice is a loss of self. When Yudhishtira wagers his brothers, he is dismantling the very kinship bonds that define his power.

The Violation of Draupadi: The climax occurs when Draupadi is dragged into the court. The chapter highlights the "legal-ethical knot" she presents. Her famous question—"Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?"—paralyzes the assembly. If Yudhishtira was already a slave (having lost himself), did he have the legal right to stake his wife? The silence of the elders (Bhishma, Drona) signifies the failure of traditional dharma to address the complexity of justice.

### The Sequel to the Dicing: The Return to Fate

After the intervention of Dhritarashtra, who restores the Pandavas' freedom out of fear of omens and Draupadi's wrath, the "Sequel to the Dicing" occurs. This second game is often viewed as a testament to the inevitability of the conflict.

Duryodhana's Insecurity: The sequel is driven by the Kauravas' realization that they cannot coexist with a free and vengeful Pandava clan. The stakes are changed from material wealth to time and identity: twelve years of forest exile followed by a thirteenth year in disguise (ajnatvasa).

The Stoicism of the Pandavas: While the first dicing was marked by shock and lamentation, the sequel is marked by a grim, ritualistic acceptance. Pandavas leave for the forest not as defeated men, but as figures entering a period of "tapas" (austerity) that will eventually empower them for the war.

### Key Critical Themes

The dicing episodes serve as a critique of several core concepts in Indian philosophy and governance:

The Subtlety of Dharma : Dharma is so subtle that even the wise are blinded. The "rules" of the game allowed the humiliation of a queen, proving that law without morality is hollow. |

Fate vs. Agency: The dice represent "Kala" (Time/Fate). No matter how virtuous Yudhishtira is, he is a pawn in a larger cosmic realignment. |

The Role of the Witness : The silent elders in the Sabha represent the collective guilt of society. Their failure to act makes them complicit in the adharma (unrighteousness).

Gender and Power : Draupadi is the only character who uses logic and rhetoric to challenge the patriarchal structure of the court, shifting the focus from "property rights" to human dignity.

### Van Buitenen's Contribution

J.A.B. van Buitenen's edition is renowned for its textual precision. He avoids the overly Victorian or moralistic tone of earlier translations, instead opting for a language that reflects the "baronial" and "sacrificial" nature of the original Sanskrit. He treats the dicing match as a cataclysmic breakdown of the old order. By the end of these episodes, the Pandavas are no longer just rivals for a throne; they have become the instruments of a divine plan to cleanse the earth of a corrupt warrior class. The dicing is the "seed" of the Kurukshetra war, proving that words and wagers can be more destructive than arrows and spears.

### Conclusion:

"The Dicing" and its "Sequel" are not merely scenes of misfortune; they are the intellectual and emotional crucible of the *Mahabharata*. Through Yudhishtira's fall and Draupadi's defiance, the epic explores the limits of human law and the terrifying complexity of dharma. Van Buitenen's edition ensures that modern readers see this not just as an ancient story, but as a timeless investigation into the fragility of civilization.