



# DISABILITY, IDENTITY AND POWER: THE ROLE OF DHRITARASHTRA AND PANDU IN REFRAMING INCLUSION

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the sophisticated intersections of power, identity, and disability through the mythic depictions of Dhritarashtra and Pandu in the Indian epic Mahabharata, utilizing the Social Model of Disability laid out by Mike Oliver as the central theoretical apparatus. Historically, these figures have been explained within moral or fatalistic frames, with the blindness of Dhritarashtra and the barrenness of Pandu as personal failing or heavenly vengeance. Yet, this research refutes such readings by positioning their accounts in a socio-cultural framework that redefines disability as not an individual deficit but the result of exclusionary norms, societal barriers, and power dynamics. In terms of Oliver's model, disability does not derive from the impairment or mental or physical condition but from the failure to accommodate and the social situation that excludes impaired people. Applying this model to Dhritarashtra and Pandu reveals how their exclusion from political leadership and their perceived incapacity are rooted in a constructed ablest worldview, rather than any inherent inadequacy.

To further analyze how these constructions shape and are shaped by social identity and group dynamics, the research incorporates the Social Identity Theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. This secondary structure assists in unraveling the processes of social categorization and group membership that inform how Dhritarashtra and Pandu are viewed and view themselves within the socio-political order of the Mahabharata. As kings, their identities remain in perpetual negotiation with the projections of kingship, masculinity, and divine rule. The restrictions imposed upon them are therefore not merely physical or symbolic, but also socio-political, reinforcing standard narratives of what counts as valid leadership and brawn. The thesis contends that their marginalization is the result of an intersectional matrix of disability, social identity, and power relations, which together dictate their places in the epic and reflect wider societal attitudes towards inclusivity and normativity.

Through the interweaving of mythological critique with modern disability and identity theory, this paper seeks to recast the narrative of Dhritarashtra and Pandu as not tragic heroes of deficiency but as nuanced symbols of resistance and social exclusion.

Their narratives provide rich soil for reimagining how ancient texts can be used to address issues of accessibility, representation, and equity in the present. The study finally suggests a paradigm shift in the way we understand disability in historical accounts not as an essentialized state but as a mediated experience thus contributing to a more inclusive and critical approach to both literature and lived experiences. Through this cross-disciplinary research, the paper aims to put forward the importance of reconsidering inclusion beyond tokenism, promoting structural reform and cultural acknowledgment in the construction of disability and identity.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Mahabharata, Dhritarashtra, Pandu, Inclusion, Identity and Power, Epic Narratives, Cultural Representation, Ableism, Narrative Agency, Mythology, Leadership and Marginalization

## I. INTRODUCTION

Disability, identity, and power are inextricably linked concepts that tend to be on the periphery of dominant discourse, both historically and today. Although contemporary society is becoming more involved with issues of inclusivity and access, exclusionary ideologies trace their roots deep into literary and cultural heritage. One such tradition is Indian mythology, which, despite its allegorical richness and philosophical depth, often displays normative assumptions about physical ability, leadership, and legitimacy. In this research paper, the stories of Dhritarashtra and Pandu from the Mahabharata are re-told through the prism of disability studies namely Mike Oliver's Social Model of Disability and the Social Identity Theory spelled out by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. These mythological characters, long viewed as tragic and morally tainted because of their physical disabilities, are instead examined as case studies in the construction, marginalization, and meaningful-making of disability within a wider socio-political and cultural context. The Mahabharata, which is perhaps the most sacred text in Indian mythology, presents a richly textured weave of human sentiment, moral dilemmas, and social stratification. In this epic, Dhritarashtra the blind king Pandu the cursed father is placed at central positions within the dynastic narrative, but their places are defined by their physical conditions. Both are refused traditional kingship and leadership, not merely on account of their disabilities but because of what their disabilities represent in the greater cultural narrative: a failure to embody the able-bodied, masculine ideal of the Kshatriya warrior-king. This exclusion talks less about their individual capacities and more about the socio-cultural frameworks that decide who is considered worthy to rule, lead, or even be remembered with dignity. As a result, their narratives are perfect places to probe how disability crosses paths with identity and power in mythological narratives.

Mike Oliver's Social Model of Disability makes a shift in attention from the person to the society, asserting that it is not the impairment in itself which disables an individual but the social barriers both physical and attitudinal used to exclude and marginalize them. The model offers a revolutionary departure from the conventional medical model, which situates disability within the body and attempts to 'fix' or 'cure' it. Applied to Dhritarashtra and Pandu, Oliver's model enables us to rethink their positions not as necessary outcomes of individual or divine failure, but as the product of a social system that cannot tolerate difference. Dhritarashtra's blindness, for example, is constantly invoked as reason for withholding the throne from him, despite the fact that he has the knowledge, lineage, and political savvy necessary for kingship. Likewise, Pandu's infertility curse is built not only as an individual tragedy, but as a failure that makes him ineligible to represent the role of a father and ruler. Their bodily afflictions are transformed into metaphors for political and moral deficiency, supporting the ableist ideology that only the physically 'whole' can lead or meaningfully contribute to society.

This view is complemented by the Social Identity Theory established by Tajfel and Turner, which argues that people gain much of their concept of themselves from belonging to social groups. Identity, according to this perspective, is neither fixed nor inherent but one that is built through intergroup relations, categorization, and comparison. When used to explain the Mahabharata, this theory assists in shedding light on how Dhritarashtra and Pandu's identities are not only constructed through their disabilities but also through the way they are perceived by the royal household, the court, and the extended Kuru dynasty. Their rejections and exclusions from central roles are not merely personal tragedies but bear testament to group-based discrimination, where the 'disabled' category is set

in contrast to the norm of the 'able-bodied' ruler or warrior. This categorization does more than influence the way others treat them; it shapes their own sense of worth, legitimacy, and identity within the narrative as well. Additionally, both characters symbolize two different but intersecting expressions of how power is negotiated in the context of disability. Dhritarashtra, even though deprived of the throne because he is blind, wields considerable power through his role as the patriarch and moral leader in the Kuru court. But his authority is repeatedly undercut by his inability to 'see' and therefore to 'know,' establishing a symbolic connection between physical vision and political acumen. Pandu, for his part, gives up the throne willingly because of his curse but still controls the succession of the Kuru dynasty by determining the birth of his sons through divine fiat. Despite this, his identity is still shadowed by inadequacy and guilt, further rooting the narrative of disability as a tragic flaw over a socially mediated experience.

In consideration of these complexities, this paper advocates for a re-framing of Dhritarashtra and Pandu's narratives through contemporary disability and identity theories. Such a strategy not only lays bare the exclusionary system intrinsic to ancient sources but also provides critical perspectives to today's debate on inclusion, representation, and social justice. Through rereading these mythological characters via the Social Model of Disability and Social Identity Theory, we bring to light the processes by which societies build up and exclude the 'other,' thereby making room for a more inclusive reconfiguring of history, literature, and culture. This question is especially pertinent in today's global context, where inclusion discourses are moving beyond policy contexts into educational, literary, and cultural spheres. Disability studies, which was once a specialist academic discipline, is now centrally involved in challenging how societies conceptualize normalcy, capability, and worth. Whereas most of the current scholarship has been concerned with modern contexts, there is still a lacuna in critically examining classical and mythological works using the frameworks of disability and identity theories. This study seeks to fill that gap by placing ancient Indian mythology in a contemporary theoretical context, thus proving that the issues of access, representation, and power are not new but have been integral to the account's societies tell about themselves for centuries. The Mahabharata, as a cultural and philosophical foundation of South Asian thinking, provides a rich ground for such examination not merely because of its impact but also because of its nuanced approach to human experience, morality, and hierarchy.

## II. Reinterpreting Disability in Ancient Indian Narratives

In traditional Indian literature, disabilities are often depicted as divine retributions, karmic repercussions, or symbolisms for deeper moral defects. In the morally nuanced Mahabharata epic, Dhritarashtra and Pandu are featured characters with physical disabilities that change the direction of the epic. Yet, through the application of the Social Model of Disability, the depictions of the two and their marginalization are shown to be less about their physical impairments and more about the socio-cultural systems that codify ability, power, and leadership.

Dhritarashtra is born blind, which becomes the rationale for denying him the throne, even though he is the eldest son of Vichitravirya. Not only is his blindness perceived as a physical weakness, but it is also a metaphor for lack of strength, lack of foresight, and incompetence presumptions well entrenched in social prejudice (Oliver 52). The Kuru court's action to overlook him for the throne demonstrates how the system in society disables people through exclusion and discrimination. The choice is not whether he can rule but whether a normative expectation that a king needs to be physically intact in order to rule successfully holds. This is in line with Oliver's argument that disability does not come from the limitations of individuals but from society's inability to include diverse bodies and abilities. Likewise, Pandu's curse that he would perish if he had sex, it will make him impotent and incapable of fathering children in the traditional sense. Although he reigns for a period, his ultimate withdrawal to the forest is emblematic of his internalized exclusion. Similar to Dhritarashtra, Pandu undergoes a type of social death, in which his kingly identity is taken away from him due to his failure to perform an essential function of royal masculinity: having sons. Rather than pursuing alternative positions within the system, he opts for solitude, and thereby indicates the depth to which social expectations define individual identity and choice (Oliver 55).

### III. Identity and Group Affiliation: A Social Identity Theory Perspective

The Social Identity Theory of Henri Tajfel and John Turner would argue that people identify themselves primarily in terms of group membership, and such group processes affect behavior, status, and perception. Both Dhritarashtra and Pandu are both high-status groups in the Mahabharata: they are Kshatriyas, royals, and rightful claimants to the throne (Tajfel and Turner 39). Their physical disabilities thrust them outside these groups, though, demonstrating the ways in which exclusion is not merely structural but also psychological.

Dhritarashtra's status as king is repeatedly under attack. Though he is designated as king, his authority is symbolic and ephemeral, ruled by others including Bhishma, Vidura, and even his son, Duryodhana. His blindness is presented by the court as a deficit that disqualifies him for leadership. This exclusion from his group causes Dhritarashtra to demonstrate behaviors characteristic of an individual who is experiencing social identity threat: ambivalence, inner conflict, and reliance on his in-group (his sons) for acceptance (Garland-Thomson 24). He becomes more concerned with being a father than a king, and this new identity is an adaptation born of his exclusion. Pandu, by contrast, tries to uphold his position through proxy. His demand that Kunti call upon the divine beings to bear him offspring is an effort to make himself masters and retain his patriarchal identity. Yet he is reminded at every turn that the children are not of his blood, negating his social identity as a father figure and king. Even in death, Pandu is an enigmatic presence in the story neither present nor absent just like most people with disabilities in today's world, who are made symbolically invisible.

### IV. Power, Resistance, and Alternative Modes of Influence

While both characters are marginalized, they also resist traditional definitions of power. This resistance speaks to the fluidity of authority and the multidimensionality of influence. Dhritarashtra, despite being habitually depicted as passive, tends to assert moral awareness and emotional sensitivity quite often. His lamenting, philosophical ruminations, and moments of prescience (like a sense of foreboding over the Kurukshetra war) testify to a non-visual form of perception. He exercises power through speech and emotion, defying the conventional connection of power with action and aggression (Mahabharata 5.49). Pandu's presence is also crucial. His sons Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva are at the center of the action in the unfolding of the story, and their moral education is largely credited to his instruction and decisions during his self-imposed exile. Although physically absent throughout the war and the political peak, Pandu's shadow influences the major moral and political conflicts in the epic. Therefore, both the characters wield symbolic and narrative power more insidious varieties of power that contemporary disability discourse tends to recover in histories and literary studies. These other kinds of power speak to the Social Model of Disability's recognition that redefining what it means to be competent and in power is a central theme. Dhritarashtra and Pandu are not completely powerless; instead, their power is channeled and redefined by the systems that limit them. By pushing against or redefining their roles, they show us the limits of the dominant discourse and encourage us to envision leadership outside of normative constructs.

### V. Power Reconfigured: Beyond the Visible and the Physical

Though Dhritarashtra and Pandu are excluded from typical power, their narratives also express alternative modes of influence, and thus subvert dominant discourses of what exactly power is. Through this process, their own characters represent an ableist subversion. Though physically excluded from the center of the narrative, Dhritarashtra maintains an active position throughout the moral and emotional trajectory of the epic. His observations, too often silenced until too late, reveal a depth of emotional and philosophical investment that exceeds numerous sighted figures. His lamentations, moral conflicts, and prophetic grief at the war's

outcome make him a nuanced moral character. His authority is not in command but in conscience, implying that power can be wielded through wisdom and emotional intelligence instead of physical presence.

Pandu, even in exile, becomes a catalyst for the epic's central lineage. His choice to call upon the gods and parent the Pandavas reconfigures classical definitions of kinship and paternity. Absent from the court during the key political events, his legacy determines the central ethical and dynastic conflicts of the narrative. His sons represent multiple facets of dharma, and their identity is inextricably linked to his choices even if their creation is not conventional. Pandu's narrative compels a rethinking of what it is to father, to lead, and to govern not by traditional masculinity but by intention, foresight, and spiritual authority. Both of these characters' lives highlight the possibility of non-normative power, that the future of societal change is to acknowledge and legitimize such alternative ways of influencing. In modern discourse, this is echoed in the trend toward inclusive leadership that respects various capabilities, viewpoints, and emotional intelligence. Redefining Dhritarashtra and Pandu not as failures but as multifaceted actors in a brutally exclusionary system enables us to reclaim their agency and challenge the norms that disqualify non-normative bodies.

## VI. Modern Considerations: Incorporation and the Myth of Completeness

Both Dhritarashtra and Pandu subvert the myth that only the bodily and mental "complete" contribute to society meaningfully. On the contemporary plane, this comes in the form of institutional disability where leadership opportunities, work, and even visual representation in popular media are inaccessible to people with disabilities. Both characters' mythical marginalization accordingly mirrors actual life obstacles confronting people with disabilities. In addition, their narratives shed light on how inclusion needs to extend beyond representation. Both characters are visible in the story but denied full narrative agency. This incomplete inclusion reflects current practices wherein people with disabilities are seen but denied decision-making, leadership, or structural change. Using the Social Model and Social Identity Theory therefore allows us to not only see how exclusion occurs, but also why it continues to occur and what can be done to break it. Through reframing Dhritarashtra and Pandu from these perspectives, this study challenges overarching myths about disability and power within both mythology and society and encourages a greater imperative toward more comprehensive models of identity, leadership, and human value (Oliver 58).

## CONCLUSION

This study has sought to redefine the accounts of Dhritarashtra and Pandu through the prisms of the Social Model of Disability and the Social Identity Theory, hence questioning the conventional understandings that circumscribe their identities to individual tragedy and bodily deficiency. By relocating the emphasis from impairment to exclusion at the systemic level, Mike Oliver's Social Model discloses the ways in which both characters are not disabling themselves through their individual behavior but are made so by the sociopolitical systems of their era systems that align kingship, masculinity, and leadership with bodily perfection and normative capability. Likewise, Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory has explained how their group identities royalty, masculinity, and warriorhood are breached by their disabilities, resulting in a fragmented self and exclusion from the domains of power. Exclusion from kingship because of blindness for Dhritarashtra, and from public life because of infertility for Pandu, are both a reflection of a society that prescribes strict parameters for inclusion and leadership. Yet, both characters also illustrate other ways of exercising influence through wisdom, emotional depth, legacy, and moral complexity that subvert the normative understandings of power. Their narratives show how inclusion is not merely about holding visible seats but about being accorded full narrative agency and dignity in a system that prizes multiple modes of being and leading. In bringing together ancient mythological storytelling and modern disability discourse, this article highlights that the exclusion of Dhritarashtra and Pandu reflects the continued marginalization of disabled people in contemporary societies. Real inclusion entails a fundamental transformation of how identity, power, and ability

are constructed not only in literature but in lived experience. By re-reading these epics through inclusive theoretical lenses, we not only recover suppressed voices but also imagine a more equitable and pluralistic understanding of leadership and human worth.

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