

LITERARY CONSTRUCTION, HEROIC INFLATION, AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORICITY: REASSESSING THE VIRĀṬA EPISODE IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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Abstract

In the *Mahabharata*, the episode of the cattle-raid on Virata is widely recognized—both among the general public and within academic circles—as a prime illustration of Arjuna's martial prowess and as a foundational backdrop for the Kurukshetra War. In this research paper, this prevailing perception is re-examined by shifting the analytical focus from the narrative's outcome to its underlying structural composition. Drawing upon a study of various manuscripts, textual stratification theory, internal narrative analysis, and comparative epic studies, this paper elucidates the specific function of the Virata War within the broader narrative architecture of the *Mahabharata*.

Rather than viewing this episode merely as a factual reenactment of a historical event, this analysis highlights its inherent structural characteristics—such as the intensification of heroic sentiments, narrative compression, rhetorical exaggeration, and the strategic deployment of symbolism. From this perspective, the Virata War may be conceptualized as a 'transitional narrative unit'; a unit that serves to re-establish the *Kshatriya* identity of the Pandavas following their period of exile, while simultaneously prefiguring the narrative trajectory and moral intensity of the ensuing Kurukshetra War.

By employing linguistic evidence alongside narrative and comparative methodologies, this research paper offers a significant contribution to the existing body of literature concerning the compositional process, historicity, and diverse interpretive paradigms of the *Mahabharata*.

Keywords: Mahābhārata, Dharma Studies, Epic Narrative, Textual Stratification, South Asian Religious Traditions, Cultural Memory, Comparative Epic Studies

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1. Introduction

Among the many dramatic episodes of the *Mahabharata*, few are cited more frequently than the story of 'Virata's *Go-harana*' (Cattle-Raid)—indeed, it is arguably the most cited episode of all. Occurring upon the completion of their twelve years of exile, this episode sees the Pandavas—who were at the time living in disguise—drawn into battle when the Kauravas attempt to steal King Virata's cattle. Arjuna retrieves his concealed weapons, reveals his true identity, and effortlessly defeats the opposing forces.

In popular narratives, this episode is often treated as a historical fact. It is frequently cited to demonstrate Arjuna's absolute supremacy—to argue that the outcome of the Kurukshetra War was predetermined, and that the great conflict itself was a foregone conclusion. The fundamental premise underlying such interpretations is the assumption that the episode of Virata's Cattle-Raid constitutes a factual military report.

In this research paper, this assumption is re-examined. It has long been a widely accepted truth within modern scholarship that the *Mahabharata* is not a single, monolithic work, but rather a 'stratified epic tradition' that evolved gradually over the course of centuries. The manner in which various episodes of the *Mahabharata* intersect with historical memory is a subject that has long captivated the attention of scholars of Indology—particularly in the context of the epic's 'composite nature' and the gradual evolution of its narrative content. As Moriz Winternitz (1927: 286–292) has pointed out, this epic is not the creation of a single author or a specific era; rather, it is the result of a prolonged process of evolution and of gradual accretions made over time (Winternitz 1927: 286–292). Within such a tradition, not all narrative units play an identical role. According to scholars of epic literature, narrative material (layers) added in later stages often serves to expand upon episodes imbued with the *Vīra Rasa* (the heroic sentiment)—particularly battle scenes—since staging, memorizing, and rendering such scenes ideologically meaningful is relatively easier (Brockington 1998: 3–10; Hildebeitel 1–15).

Scope of the Study

The scope of this paper is limited. It does not examine the *Virata Parva* in its entirety; rather, it focuses on a very specific incident within the *Uttara-Gograhana* (Cattle Raid) battle—the scene where Arjuna emerges from hiding and defeats the Kaurava army.

This isolation of the narrative unit helps to avoid overgeneralization in the analysis, thereby enabling an accurate assessment of the historical plausibility and literary function of this specific narrative segment.

Although an apparatus-based study falls outside the scope of this paper, a selection of passages from the Critical Edition points to certain minor yet telling differences in wording, sequencing, and descriptive emphasis. While such discrepancies do not fundamentally alter the narrative, they reinforce the view that this episode has undergone processes of transmission and molding consistent with the dynamics of epic composition.

Research Question

Does the Virāṭa cattle-raid battle behave like historical narrative, or does it function as literary construction within a layered epic tradition?

Subsidiary questions guiding this study include:

- What external textual evidence suggests late layering of the narrative block containing this episode?
- What internal narrative features distinguish the cattle-raid battle from historical warfare?
- How do modern Indological frameworks classify such episodes within epic traditions?

Methodology

The proposed research employs a critical methodology grounded in textual stratification theory, parva-lists and manuscript evidence, the analysis of internal narratives, and comparative epic theory. It also draws upon the insights of oral-formulaic theory, demonstrating how heroic episodes evolve through generations of expanding performance and narrative reconstruction. It does not argue that this episode is untrue; rather, the analysis raises the question of whether it is historically recoverable, or whether it functions primarily as a purely literary device.

Framing the Scholarship

The methodological foundation of this research paper rests upon the consensus among eminent scholars of the *Mahabharata* that: this epic is of a composite and cumulative nature; its later strata tend toward the amplification of heroic content; and warfare constitutes a defining characteristic of this epic—wars which, rather than serving as annals of historical events, appear to function more as generative narrative structures. Winternitz, Brockington, and Hildebeitel emphasize that the *Mahabharata* should be understood not merely as a singular history, but rather as a compilation of various accretions (Winternitz 1927: 286–292; Brockington 1998: 3–10; Hildebeitel 2001: 1–15).

Preliminary Thesis

Methodologically speaking, the incident of the attack on the animals in the *Virata Parva* cannot be viewed merely as a historical war narrative; indeed, strictly speaking, it is difficult to interpret it as such. Instead, it is best understood—from a narrative perspective—as a robust structural and functional event, the compositional features of which point toward patterns of extensive elaboration, symbolic resonance, and anticipatory preparation for war within the broader tradition of the *Mahabharata*.

This article does not posit a dichotomy between history and literature. Rather, it suggests that literary dynamism and historical memory coexist; however, the *Virata* episode—as this incident is known—serves as an instance of the narrative shaping the story to such an extent that it precludes its utilization as a source of historical fact.

2. External Textual Evidence: Parvan Lists, Manuscript Stratification, and the Question of Late Layering

2.1 Why External Evidence Matters

Any assertion concerning the historicity of an episode of the Mahabharata would have to commence outside the narrative itself. The behavior of a passage can be shown by internal literary analysis, but the external evidence of text can be used to show when and how that passage became part of the epic tradition. The Mahabharata remains as a manuscript tradition determined by transmissibility, elaboration, and localization. The fact that an episode is present in later manuscripts therefore does not necessarily mean that it was present in the earliest surviving form of the epic.

2.2 Early Parvan Lists and Structural Evidence

Across the various phases of the *Mahabharata's* transmission, early lists of its *Parvas* (books) document the epic's accepted narrative divisions. In the present day, however, not every section of the *Parvas*—as they appear in the later, canonical recensions—is fully corroborated by the extant textual evidence of the work. Notably, no *Parva* list within the Spitzer manuscript tradition includes the 'Virata Parva' or the 'Anushasana Parva'; this suggests that, by that time, the structural framework of the epic had not yet been fully finalized. The absence of a specific *Parva* from an early structural list does not, by any means, imply that the story itself was a recent addition; rather, it indicates that during that particular phase of transmission, the textual form of the epic had not yet become entirely stable or rigid.

Highlighting this discrepancy, Dieter Schlingloff characterizes these narrative segments as "blocks" that, at that juncture, had not yet been established as independent *Parvas* (Schlingloff 334–38). This does not imply that these stories were unknown at the time; rather, it signifies that, from a structural standpoint, they had not yet been formally organized into distinct *Parvas*.

One cannot assert with absolute certainty—solely on the grounds that the 'Virata Parva' is absent from early lists of *Parvas*—that this particular book was a later addition to the epic. On the contrary, this suggests that during the early editorial phases of the epic, its structural fabric was far more fluid; indeed, it is plausible that certain narrative units attained the status of "canonical *Parvas*" only during subsequent editorial reorganizations.

At the structural level, this apparent discrepancy between the antiquity of a narrative and its formal configuration is not a mere coincidence; rather, it is the outcome of a deliberate methodology. It is entirely possible that the incorporation of a specific episode or sequence of events into the narrative was a relatively recent development; Nevertheless, even within that very epic itself, there always remains scope for the expansion of that episode, its integration with other episodes, or the rearrangement of its narrative functions.

2.3 What Structural Lateness Implies

Structural delay does not imply fabrication. Rather, it signifies that such material was incorporated and formalized subsequent to the epic, war-related narrative. Those components of these multi-layered traditions that were formalized at a later stage serve a more interpretive or narrative function, rather than playing a documentary role.

2.4 The BORI Critical Edition

This addition of the Virata Parva of the BORI Critical Edition was sometimes referred to as evidence of its originality. This misunderstands the purpose of a critical edition: it is an attempt to produce the earliest extant text possible with the circulation of manuscripts, as opposed to historical validity. The fact that large quantities of manuscripts exist represents stabilization and transmission, not necessarily historical reconstruction.

2.5 Textual Variation in the Critical Edition Apparatus

The complex history of the transmission of the *Virata* narrative can be further elucidated by the textual variants recorded in the critical apparatus of the Critical Edition produced by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI). This is not merely a critical edition of a static text; rather, it catalogues the divergent readings preserved within various manuscript traditions—traditions broadly corresponding to the Northern and Southern recensions of the *Mahabharata*.

The Critical Edition apparatus also reveals minor variations in the Uttara-gograhaṇa sequence, such as omission of verses, alternate readings and sequence variation in manuscript families. Some recensions have longer battle scenes, while others have shorter ones, suggesting a degree of fluidity. These variants do not allow for precise stratigraphic reconstructions, but indicate that this sequence was also subject to processes of expansion and consolidation common to epic battles.

Within the *Virata Parva*, the apparatus reveals that, in several battle descriptions associated with the *Uttara-Gograhaṇa* (Cattle-Raid) episode, textual variants—including the omission and, at times, the expansion of verses—are evident even *within* specific manuscript families. In other instances, verses describing the sequence of battle events or the reactions of the warring warriors appear in a different order or employ different phrasing across the Northern and Southern textual witnesses. This variability suggests that, prior to the text attaining its final, stabilized form, certain portions of the narrative possessed a degree of fluidity. Although these discrepancies are not sufficiently pronounced to allow for the precise delineation of distinct chronological strata within the episode, they nonetheless point toward a characteristic feature of epic transmission: a certain inherent fluidity of the narrative. (Refer to the relevant sections of the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*, *Virata Parva*).

It has long been a consensus among textual critics of the **Mahabharata**—and, more recently, among scholars of epic literature—that battle sequences are particularly susceptible to alteration during the processes of oral and manuscript transmission. Performers and scribes may readily modify dramatic episodes centered on feats of valor, resulting in the addition of new verses, shifts in narrative sequence, or descriptive elaborations. The critical apparatus of the Critical Edition provides evidence of this dynamic by meticulously recording textual variants that do not align perfectly across the various manuscript families.

These linguistic indicators do not necessarily imply that the episode of the cattle-raid was a later interpolation into the heroic narrative; nevertheless, they strongly suggest that the story itself was subject to the very mechanisms of transmission, reinterpretation, and stabilization that characterize the cumulative evolution of the great epics. In conjunction with structural evidence found in lists of early **parvans** and the broader phenomenon of the epic evolution of heroic tales, the textual variation reflected in the Critical Edition confirms the diagnosis of the Virata War as a narrative unit constructed through layered transmission, rather than as an objective historical account (Sukthankar; Brockington 1998: 310). Significantly, the documents of the Critical Edition record minor expansions and sequencing changes across manuscript families, thereby supporting the hypothesis of a gradual expansion of the narrative during the course of its transmission.

2.6 Epic Accretion and Heroic Expansion

Winternitz writes regarding the Mahabharata that it was the result of a long-term development involving numerous accretions (Winternitz 1927: 286–292). See also Brockington (1998: 310), who points out that, within epic traditions, there is a tendency—through the processes of presentation and reception—to exaggerate scenes of heroic warfare.

2.7 Implications for the Virāṭa Cattle-Raid

Overall, external evidence indicates that the 'Virath' cattle-raid episode belongs to a later stage in the process of the narrative assuming a traditional form. Its textual history is linked to the developmental trends of heroic ballads, rather than to historical reconstruction.

2.8 Interim Conclusion

External textual sources indicate that the episode of the 'Abduction of Virat's Cattle' belongs to a later stratum of the Mahabharata. This undermines the arguments suggesting that this episode can be interpreted merely as a straightforward military history.

3. Internal Narrative Evidence: Heroic Inflation, Literary Patterning, and the Logic of Epic Spectacle

3.1 Why Internal Narrative Analysis Is Necessary

While external textual evidence can be utilized to establish the relative chronological placement of the narrative concerning Virata, internal analysis serves to reveal the actual manner in which the episode of the cattle-raid functions within the epic.

In historical contexts, the characteristics of warfare are typically marked by strategic uncertainty, prolonged conflict, dynamic power structures, political ramifications, and human limitations. Conversely, the primary focus of literary depictions of war lies in swift resolution, boundless valor, symbolic dominance, narrative clarity, and the restoration of order. The episode of Virata's cattle-raid—to a significant extent—conforms to these literary conventions of warfare.

3.2 Heroic Inflation and the Compression of Power

The intriguing aspect of the episode of the cattle-raid in the **Virata Parva** is not merely that it serves as a display of heroic prowess, but rather that it deliberately concentrates and condenses that power within a narrow narrative framework. Instead of depicting a protracted strategic conflict, the story encapsulates the confrontation into a rapid succession of victories, thereby predetermining the hero's triumphant return. It is the **Virata Parva** alone that explicitly illustrates how Arjuna confronts the most prominent warriors of the Kauravas—such as Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and others—and subsequently defeats their assembled armies to recover the cattle (Mahabharata, Virata Parva 4.58–4.63). Notably, this narrative tendency is not merely a descriptive account of the event; rather, it endows it with a distinct structural form.

3.3 Textual Construction of Heroic Dominance

A careful reading of the **Virata Parva** also reveals how literary elaboration has been employed within the narrative to underscore Arjuna's preeminence. This section repeatedly utilizes the cliché of the enemy's rout on the battlefield—a trope wherein enemy warriors hastily scatter in the face of the hero's forceful assault. This is not merely a matter of narrative technique; rather, it reflects a constructed mindset that prioritizes a resolution based on the dominance of a single individual over a conflict involving a multitude of participants. The **Virata Parva** vividly illustrates how Arjuna confronts some of the most renowned Kaurava warriors—such as Bhishma, Drona, and Karna—and subsequently drives the entire army into retreat (**Mahabharata**, **Virata Parva** 4.5863). As we have observed, the summary within the text states: "**Te tu Dhananjayam vyadravanta maharathah**" ("Upon seeing Dhananjaya, the great warriors fled") (**Mahabharata**, **Virata Parva** CE 4.60); yet, the narrative description of the battle consistently frames this engagement as a series of uninterrupted victories. The author emphasizes the sudden dispersal of the enemy forces and the immediate restoration of order, rather than depicting a protracted struggle. This narrative tendency is not merely descriptive; it holds significant structural importance as well. The story subsumes a conflict—which would otherwise have unfolded among a multitude of

individuals—within a narrative framework centered on a resolution achieved by a solitary hero; this constitutes a popular literary device frequently employed in epic literature. In stark contrast to the decentralized and often chaotic battle scenes found in the books describing the Kurukshetra War, the **Virata Parva** presents a succession of heroic confrontations that culminate in absolute resolution—a structural approach that prioritizes narrative style over the gritty realities of the battlefield. This tendency is also evident in texts such as the **Virata Parva** of the **Mahabharata** (CE 4.5863), where a succession of clashes is recounted with great rapidity, and battle strategies are not described in great detail—a narrative approach that corroborates the intent to present the story in a concise form. In this context, the recovery of the livestock is not merely a strategic objective; it serves as a symbolic turning point—transforming royal humiliation into honor—thereby situating this episode within the broader narrative frameworks of the **Mahabharata**, which frequently feature tales of lost honor and its subsequent restoration. This symbolic arrangement suggests that this episode is not merely a fragment of narrative recollection, but holds significant thematic and literary importance; for this very reason, it becomes difficult to utilize it solely as historical evidence. Such narrative compression constitutes a distinctive feature of the stylistic economy characteristic of epics. Rather than elaborating on strategic developments, the narrative constructs a grand tableau of the hero's resurgence. Arjuna's emergence from concealment, his retrieval of the weapons hidden within the **Shami** tree, and his immediate assertion of dominance on the battlefield—all these acts function as rituals marking the restoration of the hero's identity. This stands in stark contrast to the lengthy and intricate accounts of warfare found in later texts concerning the Kurukshetra War—narratives in which battles unfold across multiple phases and are waged over extended periods between rival heroes. Thus, the **Virata Parva** exemplifies a literary style wherein the hero's identity is re-established not through a protracted engagement in battle, but rather through the achievement of a symbolic victory within a remarkably brief span of time.

3.4 The Solo-Hero Dominance Pattern

In the sagas of the world's great epics, heroes who return after a period of exile or living in disguise establish their identity through the strength of their extraordinary deeds. Odysseus of **The Odyssey** and Achilles of **The Iliad** serve as examples of this. Arjuna's rise and his meteoric success align perfectly with this narrative tradition.

3.5 Absence of Consequences and Historical Implausibility

Wars of a historical nature typically result in a cycle of vengeance, counter-attacks, and alliances; however, in the context of the *'Virata Parva,'* this is not the case. The Kauravas launch a counter-attack, and the narrative proceeds into *'Virata.'* This constitutes a clean and distinct conclusion, signaling a deliberate and well-conceived structuring of the literary scenes.

3.6 Narrative Timing and Plot Necessity

This battle takes place precisely at the moment when the period of concealment concludes and the departure toward Kurukshetra is about to commence. Such a coincidence points less to a historical event than to a deliberate narrative construct.

This narrative also reveals that, at the time of the invasion by Susharma, the King of Trigarta, the Matsya Kingdom temporarily lacked any organized military capability. In the context of this invasion, it is recorded that an emergency mobilization was undertaken, wherein attendants, servants, and other non-professional staff were enlisted—alongside the soldiers present—to aid in the kingdom's defense (*Mahabharata, Virata Parva, Critical Edition, 4.3132; see Appendix Notes*). This temporary vulnerability stands in stark contrast to the subsequent portrayal of the Matsya Kingdom, in which it is depicted as capable of fielding a massive military force during the Kurukshetra War. This discrepancy between the two scenarios suggests that, within the narrative of the *Virata Parva*, military incapacity was deliberately understated in order to heighten the dramatic impact generated by the sudden emergence of the Pandavas from their disguise. This narrative technique—wherein conventional military structures are temporarily depicted as weakened—is a pervasive literary device employed within the epics; its purpose is to intensify the impact of a hero's sudden appearance amidst the chaos of battle. This narrative anomaly—however temporary it may be—is hardly a coincidence; rather, it appears to have been deliberately crafted to amplify the dramatic resonance of Arjuna's actions.

The "Mobilization Formula" is clearly discernible in the Trigarta episode, wherein servants and other staff members are also conscripted into the war effort:

*tataḥ saṃnahyatāṃ sarve yathāśakti narādhipāḥ
sevakāḥ paricārāś ca yodhatāṃ śatru-sūdanaḥ*
(*Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva*)

A similar emphasis continues in the following verse:

*yathāśakti samāyuktā matsyarājasya sainikāḥ
sevakāḥ paricārāś ca yuddhāya samupasthitāḥ*
(*Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva*)

3.7 Theatrical Structure and Symbolic Design

This episode is inherently dramatic in nature: it encompasses crisis, revelation, transformation, triumph, and acceptance. Its narrative sequence bears a closer resemblance to the conventions of storytelling than to a mere historical chronicle. Glimpses of the dramatic presentation of the *Virata* episode become even more evident in the dialogue exchanged between Arjuna and Prince Uttara, which takes place just prior to the commencement of the battle. Upon catching his first glimpse of the Kaurava army, Uttara's confidence falters, and he attempts to retreat from the battlefield. At this juncture, Arjuna—

disguised as Brihannala—reassures him and ultimately assumes the dual roles of both charioteer and warrior. It is only after this dramatic moment of indecision that Arjuna recalls his weapons and reveals his true identity (Mahabharata, Virata Parva 4.3036). This sequence of events further reinforces the dramatic character of this episode, which is imbued with elements of panic, revelation, transformation, and heroic triumph. Such a narrative presentation serves to frame the Virata War not merely as a historical military conflict, but as a literary dramatic performance.

This episode is further distinguished by its dramatic quality because, as Arjuna retrieves the weapons he had concealed within the Shami tree, he simultaneously reveals his true identity to Prince Uttara; thus, the narrative trajectory shifts from a focus on disguise and concealment toward the performance of heroic deeds (Mahabharata, Virata Parva 4.364.40).

This pivotal moment of revelation is articulated through language in such a manner that its entire focal point lies in the re-establishment of Arjuna's identity as a warrior—the very same Arjuna who, aided by the Shami tree, successfully retrieves his lost weapons.:

śamīrykṣāt samādāya gāṇḍīvaṃ śatrutāpanam

(Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva 4.38)

The imagery of reclaiming the concealed bow symbolizes the restoration of Arjuna's kṣatriya role after the enforced anonymity of exile.

3.8 Comparison with Historical Narrative Logic

In Kurukshetra, the war and its consequences endure for a prolonged period, whereas in Virat, this sequence of events is extremely brief. The epic clearly distinguishes the war as a 'severe trial' and a 'symbolic preview.'

3.9 Interim Conclusion

Evidence from the internal narrative supports the view that the Virat War functions as a spectacle within the war epics, rather than as a document of an actual historical event adhering to the norms of critical historiography.

4. Virāṭa and Kurukṣetra in Contrast: Literary Spectacle versus Historical War Logic

4.1 Why Comparison Is Methodologically Necessary

If we assume that the objective of the Virata War—which involved the cattle-raid episode—was to depict warfare at a narrative level akin to that of the Kurukshetra War, then we would expect to observe similar strategic, narrative, and consequential developments within it. Such a comparison by no means implies that the Kurukshetra War constitutes a strictly literal or direct historical reconstruction in its own right; the divine weaponry, supernatural interventions, and mythological exaggerations described in its epic portrayal cannot be excluded from this assessment. Conversely, the distinction between the two lies primarily in their narrative character: the Kurukshetra War is portrayed as a protracted and logical conflict, whereas the Virata War is presented as a small-scale episode of heroic resolution. Indeed, the operational dynamics of these two conflicts are entirely distinct from one another, and the fundamental purpose of their respective narratives manifests in divergent forms.

4.2 Duration and Temporal Structure

Kurukshetra is a war that spans eighteen days; it features a sequential unfolding of events characterized by battle strategies, shifts in leadership, moral dilemmas, and escalating destruction. Within this narrative, the passage of time is slow and languid. In contrast, 'Virat' is compressed into a rapid sequence of events, marked by swift victories and minimal uncertainty. The defining characteristic of this literary presentation is *Kal-sankshepan* (time compression).

4.3 Distribution of Power

At Kurukṣetra, even great heroes struggle; power shifts; victories come with losses. At Virāṭa, Arjuna's dominance is overwhelming and consequence light. This concentration of power signals epic magnification.

The narrative repeatedly emphasizes the inability of the Kaurava warriors to withstand Arjuna's assault, reinforcing the episode's function as a demonstration of restored heroic supremacy (Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva 4.59–4.65). Such concentration of power is difficult to reconcile with the distributed combat logic seen elsewhere in the epic.

4.4 Consequences and Political Reality

Kurukṣetra produces irreversible consequences. Virāṭa produces none: no retaliation, escalation, or strategic shift follows. Such consequence-free conflict aligns with literary design, not historical war.

4.5 Ethical Complexity versus Moral Simplicity

Kurukṣetra is saturated with ethical ambiguity; Virāṭa is morally simple—hero appears, hero wins, order returns. Moral simplicity marks symbolic storytelling.

4.6 Psychological Realism

Kurukṣetra depicts exhaustion and fear; Virāṭa functions as demonstration rather than ordeal.

4.7 The “Preview War” Model

Virāta fits a preview war: a controlled symbolic conflict restoring the hero, previewing scale, establishing hierarchy, and building momentum. Such episodes recur in epic traditions.

Such anticipatory battle scenes are widely recognized in epic traditions as narrative foreshadowing devices that establish heroic hierarchy before the decisive conflict unfolds.

4.8 Implications of the Contrast

The Mahābhārata clearly knows how to portray war with consequence; it does so at Kurukṣetra. Virāta’s stylization indicates narrative intent.

4.9 Interim Conclusion

Rather than engaging with the intricate strategies of warfare, the *Virata Parva* wages its battle on a distinct literary terrain—one defined by spectacle, symbolic dominance, and narrative shifts.

The distinction between the *Virata Parva* and the Kurukṣetra War should not be misconstrued as a dichotomy between literary and historical narratives; both are, at their core, profoundly literary. However, the accounts of the Kurukṣetra War feature a greater abundance of narrative detail, a broader scope for character roles, and a more elaborate exposition of military strategies, thereby rendering them more amenable to rigorous historical analysis. In contrast, the narrative of the *Virata Parva* has been significantly condensed, with the entire focus concentrated squarely upon the protagonists; consequently, the scope for such analysis is considerably more limited in this instance. This type of inconsistency in narrative logic manifests with such regularity that it cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence.

5. Modern Indological Scholarship and Epic Composition

5.1 Why Foreign Indological Scholarship Is Central

In the field of Indology, emphasis has consistently been placed on the composite and accretive nature of the *Mahabharata*. In this context—specifically regarding its peripheral narrative units, and most notably the war episodes (which are self-contained)—there is a heightened susceptibility to expansion, accretion, and symbolic depth (see: Winternitz 1927: 286–292; Brockington 1998: 3–10; Hildebeitel 2001: 1–15). The episode of the cattle-raid on Virata fits well within this paradigm.

5.2 Winternitz

Winternitz views the Mahabharata as a composite text and emphasizes a lengthy process of epic evolution, in which heroic tales—particularly episodes related to warfare—have been embellished (Winternitz 1927: 286–292). According to this model, the episode of the Battle of Virata is more a work of literature than of history.

5.3 Schlingloff

Schlingloff’s work regarding the ‘Festival List’ brings to light the fact that, in the very early period, it would have been possible for a witness to this structure to omit those texts which only became stabilized at a later stage; this suggests that these were the texts which, in the subsequent period—during the process of textual dissemination—began to establish an independent existence of their own (Schlingloff 334–38).

5.4 Brockington

Brockington emphasizes progressive elaboration of heroic episodes within Sanskrit epic growth (Brockington 1998: 3–10). Virāta aligns with this expansionary pattern.

5.5 Hildebeitel

The interpretive framework adopted by Hildebeitel presents the Mahabharata as a 'self-conscious literary tradition,' wherein various episodes hold symbolic significance within a broader 'religious and narrative structure.' However, his methodology does not specifically highlight the 'Viratanagara episode' as a distinct instance of 'heroic compression'—precisely the subject upon which the present research focuses. (Hildebeitel 2001: 1–15).

5.6 van Buitenen

In his translation project, van Buitenen presents this epic within the context of a vast accumulation of stories revolving around a war-centered core; these peripheral narratives were expanded upon in subsequent acts of composition and editing (van Buitenen, J. A. B. *The Mahabharata*. Vols. 1–3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973–1978).

5.7 Interim Conclusion

Foreign scholarship supports a layered model: battle scenes are especially susceptible to heroic magnification, and Virāta’s spectacle fits literary expansion more than direct historical reconstruction.

6. Counterarguments, Traditional Readings, and Scholarly Rebuttal

The most effective counter-argument to this is that the converse does not hold true; for labeling this as 'epic stylization' does not, in itself, negate historical memory, and the glorification of heroes may well be grounded in an underlying narrative of conflict. From this perspective, the 'Virata Parva'—albeit in a literary guise—may indeed preserve some historical event concealed beneath the surface.

Theoretically, such a viewpoint is valid and cannot be dismissed. However, the narrative economy, symbolic structure, and comprehensive resolution mechanism of the 'Virata Parva' suggest that literary fabrication is the dominant element at play; consequently, historical reconstruction is not only impossible but also highly dubious. This issue becomes even more circumscribed in light of the following objections.

6.1 The Traditional Position: Virāṭa Battle as Historical Proof

The objective of the discussion presented below is not to dismiss traditional interpretations, but rather to situate them within a broader analytical perspective in the context of textual and narrative evidence. In popular and devotional interpretations of the *Mahabharata*, the battle involving the abduction of Virat's cattle is often viewed merely as a simple historical fact demonstrating Arjuna's supreme martial prowess. In this regard, the prevalent assertions are as follows:

- Arjuna single-handedly defeated the entire Kaurava force
- The episode suggests the inevitability of Kurukṣetra's outcome
- The battle confirms divine favor and predetermined destiny

From this perspective, the Virāṭa episode is presented as a factual military precursor to the great war. Such interpretations typically rest on three assumptions:

- The Mahābhārata constitutes a unified historical chronicle
- All battle episodes share identical narrative functions
- Manuscript inclusion automatically implies original historicity

Modern textual scholarship does not support these premises.

6.2 The “Critical Edition Means Original” Argument

Another objection frequently raised is that if the 'Virata War' appears in BORI's 'Critical Edition,' it should be considered an integral part of the original epic itself and, therefore, a historical reality. This merely reflects a misconception regarding the methodology of critical editing.

As noted above, the objective of the editors of the 'Critical Edition' was to reconstruct the text's most ancient and original form—based on the textual evidence derived from various manuscripts—in order to ascertain historical events. In practical terms:

- Widespread manuscript presence indicates textual circulation
- It does not establish chronological originality
- It does not verify historical accuracy

Numerous later additions circulated so broadly that they became standardized within the tradition. Consequently, inclusion in the Critical Edition confirms literary stabilization rather than historical documentation.

6.3 The “Epic Heroes Are Superhuman” Defense

It has been argued that the grandeur of the Battle of Virat does not undermine its historicity, given that the heroes of epics are typically depicted as possessing supernatural powers. While it is true that epic traditions tend to glorify heroic figures, this fact does not resolve the underlying methodological issue.

The central question is not whether or not the heroes are capable of performing extraordinary feats, but rather whether the narrative structure resembles historical reporting or symbolic storytelling. However, a distinct contrast is evident within the *Mahabharata* itself:

The battles of Kurukṣetra portray a prolonged struggle characterized by defeat, exhaustion, and confusion.

The Battle of Virat, in contrast, presents a display of absolute supremacy—one that encounters no resistance and remains entirely unchallenged.

Thus, the epic clearly delineates the distinction between realistic depictions of warfare and stylized heroic displays. The analytical significance of this internal contradiction far outweighs that of mere claims regarding supernatural abilities.

6.4 The “One Battle Proves Another” Fallacy

One clear misconception is this: since Arjuna was so overwhelmingly superior in the events at Virat, he ought to have been equally superior at Kurukṣetra. This line of reasoning, however, overlooks the very fabric of the narrative structure. The Virat episode serves as a scene of heroic restoration, designed to reassure the audience that, even after a prolonged period of living in disguise, Arjuna still retains his latent power. Kurukṣetra, conversely, is crafted as a tragedy—a morally complex war fraught with confusion and defeat.

The epic does not portray the conflict at Kurukṣetra as a one-sided slaughter. If the battle at Virat were to be taken as a literal military precedent, then, logically, the war at Kurukṣetra should have replicated that very outcome. Yet, it does not. In this regard, the Virat episode functions less as a mere tale or reassurance, and more as a precedent.

6.5 Oral Tradition and Performative Expansion

Understanding oral epic transmission further undermines claims of strict historicity. In oral-performative cultures:

- Dramatic scenes tend to be expanded
- Heroic victories are magnified
- Transitional episodes receive embellishment
- Tales of battles are often recounted in such vivid detail because they resonate with people and uphold the values of bravery. Performative intensification was particularly apt for the Viriratta cattle raid, which stood poised between exile and open warfare.

It is this cultural dynamic that helps explain the spectacular nature of this episode—its heroic embellishments and subsequent structural stabilization—without necessarily constituting a strictly historical account.

6.6 Internal Narrative Tensions within the Epic Tradition

When one compares the episode of Virata with other narratives presented within the epic's storyline, even greater complexities emerge. In several subsequent chapters of the *Mahabharata*, there are indications of a narrative thread in which the Virata War is viewed as the definitive proof of Arjuna's superiority over Karna. The anticipation of the final battle between Arjuna and Karna is reiterated repeatedly throughout the epic's war-related chapters; in these sections, the duel between these two archers is portrayed as an event that has not yet taken place (*Mahabharata*, Drona Parva 121.17-22). For instance, in the Drona Parva, Vyasa explains that the decisive battle between Arjuna and Karna had not yet been fought prior to the war reaching its climax on the battlefield. As the sage describes this impending clash, he places particular emphasis on the fact that these two warriors had not yet confronted one another on the field of battle. Within this text, this encounter is regarded as a moment of supreme significance—the convergence of the two greatest archers of that era (*Mahabharata*, Drona Parva 121.17-22). It discusses the anticipated duel between these two heroes and the imminent battle between Karna and Arjuna—specifically, the battle involving Karna (as charioteer) and Arjuna (as warrior) is deemed to be the decisive engagement of this entire great war. Similarly, the Karna Parva also contains numerous verses depicting Yudhishtira as being constantly anxious and apprehensive regarding Karna's martial prowess. In a poignant moment, they acknowledge that the threat posed by Karna had long weighed heavily on their minds—particularly because Karna's renown had spread far and wide, and he possessed supernatural weapons bestowed upon him by the gods (Mahabharata, Karna Parva 8.49-52). In this text, Karna is also addressed as a 'Maharathi'—a warrior so formidable that his mere presence on the battlefield was enough to strike fear even into the hearts of the Pandavas. Other elements of the narrative further corroborate this tension. The epic repeatedly reminds us of the unprecedented peril arising from the weapon known as 'Shakti' that Karna possessed—a weapon granted to him by Lord Indra. Although this weapon could be wielded only once, it was believed to possess the power to slay even the mightiest of warriors. Even Krishna acknowledges the extreme danger posed by this weapon, recognizing that its deployment against Arjuna could prove catastrophic (Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva 165.2328). The text describes this weapon as *Indrashaktyā samayukta Karna*, implying that Karna had been endowed with the very same divine weapon that Indra himself possessed. Another contradiction within the narrative emerges when comparing the rules of warfare described in the Virata Parva with those depicted in other books of the epic. In the Drona Parva—specifically during the scene depicting Abhimanyu's demise—the text itself recounts how multiple Kaurava warriors collectively assaulted a single individual after having trapped him within the *Chakravyūha* (Mahabharata, Drona Parva 47.1-10). This account underscores the fact that several key warriors—including Drona, Karna, Kripa, Ashwatthama, and others—joined forces to attack the young warrior. In contrast, the narrative of the Virata War presents a scenario where Arjuna engages the high-ranking warriors of the Kauravas one by one, rather than simultaneously. It further describes the opposing warriors as quickly scattering rather than launching a coordinated assault. This distinction suggests that the Virata Parva is presented as a specific type of heroic tradition, wherein elite warriors engage the hero in face-to-face (one-on-one) combat—a convention traditionally associated with scenes of epic performance rather than the more chaotic and collective style of warfare described in the *parvas* (books) of the Kurukshetra War. The text informs us that all the warriors surrounding Abhimanyu were attacking him as a unified force—a situation described as *sarve tam abhyavartanta rathinaḥ* ("all the chariot-warriors attacked him collectively") (Mahabharata, Drona Parva 47). Taken together, these passages do not contradict the narrative of the Virata Parva; rather, they serve to illustrate the diverse—and at times contradictory—narrative traditions of the epic that have been preserved over centuries. These aspects further reinforce the interpretation that the Virata War is less of a decisive historical conflict between the epic's two greatest archers, and more of a narrative device designed to re-establish Arjuna as the true hero he fundamentally is. These narrative tensions are consistent with the stratified structure of the Mahabharata, as noted by textual critics. According to them, the various narrative layers of the epic occasionally preserve distinct interpretive traditions (Winternitz 1927: 286–292; Brockington 1998: 310).

These internal tensions are not anomalies, but are instead inherent to the stratified structure of the epic, wherein different narrative layers emphasize distinct facets of interpretation. These contradictions do not easily fit within a single narrative logic; rather, it is more appropriate to view them as the result of mixed writing.

6.7 Why Scholars Avoid Absolute Denials

Responsible scholarship does not claim that the Virāṭa battle “never occurred.” Historical certainty is rarely achievable for epic material. Instead, scholars argue that:

- The episode cannot be reliably reconstructed as history
- It belongs to later literary expansion layers
- Its narrative function outweighs its historical value

This cautious framing reflects methodological rigor rather than dismissal of tradition.

These internal tensions do not invalidate the Virāṭa narrative but highlight the coexistence of multiple narrative registers within the epic tradition.

6.8 Synthesis of Rebuttal

When opposing arguments are weighed against textual and narrative evidence, it becomes evident that a consistent pattern exists: the evidence suggests that this episode should be interpreted as a literary elaboration rather than as a direct historical reconstruction.

Consequently, the academic perspective remains unchanged: the battle involving the cattle raid of Virata should not be utilized as historical evidence. Instead, it should be viewed as a process of literary elaboration and narrative construction conveyed through symbolism.

6.9 Interim Conclusion

Arguments advocating for the historicity of the Virat War are often grounded in traditional interpretive approaches that place greater emphasis on narrative coherence and symbolic significance. Although such interpretations remain culturally relevant to this day, they do not fully align with the methodological standards employed in textual and historical analysis. When this subject is subjected to critical scrutiny—based on evidence derived from manuscripts, narrative analysis, and epic theory—it becomes difficult to sustain these assumptions.

The cumulative evidence gathered thus far demonstrates that the episode of the 'Abduction of Virat's Cattle' is merely a literary construct and an instance of heroic exaggeration, rather than a reconstruction of a historical event.

7. Synthesis of Evidence and Broader Implications for Reading the Mahābhārata

7.1 Convergence of External and Internal Evidence

When the internal narrative analysis and comparative study of the epic are considered alongside external written evidence, a clear interpretive framework emerges. All these independent lines of inquiry indicate that it is most appropriate to view the episode of the cattle-raid in the Virata Parva as a literary composition crafted within the context of a stratified epic culture.

The foregoing analysis has examined the Virāṭa cattle-raid episode from three independent yet complementary perspectives:

- External textual evidence, including parvan lists and manuscript stratification
- Internal narrative analysis, focusing on heroic inflation and literary patterning
- Foreign Indological scholarship grounded in philological and comparative frameworks

All these questions lead to distinct conclusions. Externally, the *Virata Parva* bears indications of a later structural stabilization within the epic tradition. Internally—in contrast to an actual historical conflict—the depiction of the battle serves as a literary spectacle. The traditional critical understanding of this episode has consistently characterized it as a heroic interpolation within a stratified epic composition.

When these independent methodologies converge, the argument gains considerable strength. When the results yielded by multiple analytical methods align, the likelihood of methodological error is significantly reduced. While it must be acknowledged that this convergence does not entirely eliminate all interpretive uncertainties, it does substantially narrow the range of plausible interpretations. Consequently, it lends substantial weight to the argument for interpreting this episode within a strictly literary context.

7.2 The Virāṭa Episode within Epic Architecture

Rather than functioning as a historical military event, the Virāṭa cattle-raid battle operates as a structural hinge within the Mahābhārata's narrative architecture. Its primary functions include:

- restoring Arjuna's heroic identity following concealment
- reestablishing the martial authority of the Pāṇḍavas
- transitioning the narrative from exile to open conflict
- emotionally preparing audiences for the Kurukṣetra war

In addition to playing a structural part in the story, the Virāṭa episode can be interpreted as a symbolic reinstatement of ksatriya identity in the moral order of the Mahabharata. When the Pana Pandavas are in exile and hiding they are

temporarily giving up their duties in the society as royal warriors and they are adopting the disguise that does not belong to their social standing. Arjuna especially takes the name of Bṛhannalā, a dancer teacher at the court of the king. This is a suspension of warrior identity that is temporarily reversed by the cattle-raid episode. Arjuna, by drawing his hidden arms and going against the Kaurava army in a very open way, is again asserted as a ksatriya just at the time the epic story shifts to the open warfare. In this regard the Virata war is not only a theatrical spectacle but a ritualized recovery of martial dharma, getting both the characters and the audience geared towards ethical and political battles that climax at Kurukshetra.

Another symbolic aspect of the Virrat episode is seen in the scene when Arjuna grabs his hidden weapons out of the tsunami tree and heads to battle. The dramatic point of view is reached when Arjuna finds the hidden weapons in the śamī tree and reveals his identity to the Prince Uttara. The reading stresses his warrior identity reaffirmation:

tato dhanañjayaḥ śrīmān gāṇḍīvaṃ pratyapadyata (“Then the illustrious Dhanañjaya took up the Gandīva”)
(Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva CE 4.37).

The narrative continues with the description of the weapon’s recovery: **śamīvrkṣāt samādāya gāṇḍīvaṃ śatrutāpanam**
(Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva CE 4.38).

Arjuna's resumption of arms symbolizes the end of the Pandavas' period of anonymity and the restoration of *Kshatriya Dharma*. The ensuing conflict is not merely a battle of weapons, but rather a symbolic 're-sacrifice' undertaken by a warrior in anticipation of the imminent *Dharma-yuddha* at Kurukshetra.

Such transitional scenes are common across the world. They are crafted not to preserve historical memories, but rather to construct a narrative flow and to re-establish the hierarchy of heroes.

7.3 Reframing “Historicity” in Epic Studies

A central problem in popular interpretations of the Mahābhārata is the assumption that every battle episode must be either fully historical or entirely fictional. Modern epic studies reject this binary model. The insistence on binary classification—historical or fictional—obscures the compositional reality of epic traditions.

Instead, scholars recognize a continuum that includes:

- ancient historical cores
- mythic amplification
- literary elaboration
- symbolic storytelling

The incident of cattle theft in Virata fits most precisely into the category of literary elaboration. This classification in no way diminishes its cultural or narrative significance; rather, it clarifies its purpose within the multidimensional structure of the epic.

This interpretive paradigm aligns with current scholarly research on the Mahabharata, wherein the epic is viewed as a 'layered literary tradition' that has undergone continuous revision through oral transmission, redaction, and cultural reinterpretation (Biardeau; Fitzgerald; Pollock).

7.4 Implications for Interpreting the Mahābhārata

Misreading literary spectacle as historical chronicle produces several interpretive distortions, including:

- overstating martial supremacy based on symbolic scenes
- misunderstanding the tragic complexity of Kurukṣetra
- flattening the epic’s narrative sophistication
- Recognizing the Virāṭa episode as literary construction allows for:
- more nuanced appreciation of epic design
- clearer understanding of character development
- respect for the epic’s accretive composition

Such recognition enhances rather than undermines the depth of the Mahābhārata.

7.5 Broader Implications for Other Epic Episodes

In this study, the 'Virata' episode is not the sole methodological framework. Other dramatic scenes—such as solitary acts of heroic achievement, divine interventions, or conflicts devoid of far-reaching consequences—can also be re-evaluated within the framework of a 'stratified epic.'

This does not entail a repudiation of tradition; rather, it represents an approach to viewing the epic as a complex literary and historical artifact—a work resulting from processes of performance, memory, and accretion. This methodology is pertinent to modern Indology and does not give rise to any form of 'reductionist interpretations.'

7.6 Toward a Balanced Understanding of Epic Truth

Epic truth is not synonymous with historical chronicle. The Mahābhārata conveys:

- ethical insight
- psychological depth
- social memory

- cultural values
- through narrative artistry.

The Virāṭa cattle-raid battle communicates restoration of dharma, heroic readiness, and narrative transition. Its truth resides in symbolic meaning rather than military documentation.

7.7 Interim Conclusion

When external textual evidence, internal narrative logic, and classical principles are synthesized, a coherent picture emerges. The episode of the cattle raid on Virata can be understood as a literary construct embedded within a multilayered epic culture.

This episode serves the purposes of a heroic spectacle, a pivotal narrative turning point, and a dress rehearsal for the Kurukshetra War. To view it merely as a historical reconstruction would be to misrepresent both the nature of the event itself and the narrative complexity of the epic.

8. Final Conclusion and Scholarly Contributions

Although situated within the broader context of the *Mahabharata*, the episode of Virata's *Go-harana* (cattle raid) stands as a coherent example of narrative deepening, narrative revitalization, and narrative construction—qualities often absent in the more extensive descriptions of warfare found elsewhere in the text. Consequently, it should not be viewed merely as a straightforward historical chronicle, but rather as a literary composition embedded within a multi-layered epic tradition—an embodiment of the epic's inherent narrative logic.

This conclusion does not negate the issue of historical memory within the epic. On the contrary, it underscores the necessity for methodological caution—particularly in instances where narrative structure and symbolic function play a pivotal role in the interpretation of events.

Within a synthesized framework encompassing textual stratification, narrative analysis, and the comparative study of epics, this research paper offers a critical re-evaluation of Virata's *Go-harana* episode. The findings consistently suggest that, rather than being grounded in an identifiable "historical core," this episode is, to a significant extent, the product of "literary elaboration." Its role within the epic is both structural and symbolic: it serves to re-establish the identities of the heroic protagonists, to reinvigorate the narrative momentum, and to set the stage for the impending Kurukshetra War.

In a broader sense, this discussion highlights the imperative to distinguish between the literary, symbolic, and historical modalities of truth when interpreting epic traditions. The fact that the Virata episode constitutes a literary construct does not diminish its significance; conversely, it aids in understanding the *Mahabharata* as a medium through which cultural memory and ethical concepts are transmuted into narrative forms. This methodological approach aligns with the contemporary trajectory of Indological studies and offers an opportunity to adopt a more precise and responsive perspective toward the subject matter of the epic. Future research may challenge the existence of such tendencies—specifically 'condensation' and 'heroic elaboration'—in other conflict episodes within the epic as well. The interpretive implications of this discrepancy are not limited solely to the Virat episode.

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