



## Sulabha-Janaka Samvada in Vyasa's Mahabharata: Debating Meaning and Language Structures

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**Abstract:** The present paper offers an analytical study on the *Sulabha-Janaka Samvada* as one of the significant pieces of philosophical and religious instructions in the *Shanti Parva* of Vyasa's *Mahabharata*. The dialogue that takes place between a male emperor and female recluse stands tall not only because it serves as an exploration of key feminine voices incessantly debating the ideas of *Samkhya* Philosophy and means to salvation (*moksa*) but also because it establishes Sulabha's discourses as a rare occasion in the ambit of Sanskrit Literature. In this discourse, we find the idea of what constitutes a well-knit argument, proponents of a debate that defines meaning-making in the process of closely scrutinized and investigated language structure. This discourse between two polar personalities becomes a short philosophical dialogic treatise, amid hefty monologues such as the incessant instructions by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* and Bheeshma in the *Shanti Parva* interspaced by many teachings of Vidura. Sulabha's counter-arguments to Janaka are significant for it redefines the meaning and path to *moksa*, and in the process, expounds on what is proper speech, the correct usage of language and vocabulary and the purpose of doing so irrespective of the biases of class, gender, caste and educational elitism. The Sulabha-Janaka conversation has not received its due credit either in the Western or Eastern academic scholarship and scholarly attention has only been invested in the teachings of the *Gita*, the ideas of *dharma* and many similar aspects. This short textual study provides a fresh perspective on philosophizing human need of meaning making and understanding the art of negotiating the engagement process of meaning associated with its structure.

**Keywords:** *Sulabha-Janaka Samvaad*, female aesthetics, *Samkhya* Philosophy, language, meaning, structure, Vyasa's *Mahabharata*

### INTRODUCTION

The Sulabha-Janaka Samvada, a philosophical and religious dialogue between a male emperor and a female recluse, is a significant piece of

instruction in the Shanti Parva of Vyasa's Mahabharata. While the dialogue explores key feminine voices that incessantly debate the ideas of Samkhya Philosophy and means to salvation, it also establishes Sulabha's discourses as a rare occasion in the ambit of Sanskrit Literature. This paper offers an analytical study of this dialogue, which becomes a short philosophical dialogic treatise, amidst hefty monologues such as the incessant instructions by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita and Bheeshma in the Shanti Parva interspaced by many teachings of Vidura (Black, 2010).

The significance of Sulabha's counter-arguments to Janaka lies in its redefinition of the meaning and path to moksa, and in the process, expounds on what is proper speech, the correct usage of language and vocabulary, and the purpose of doing so irrespective of the biases of class, gender, caste, and educational elitism. Thus, the Sulabha-Janaka conversation is not only important for its philosophical insights but also for its broader implications for language and communication.

Despite its importance, the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada has not received its due credit in both Western and Eastern academic scholarship. Most scholarly attention has been invested in the teachings of the Gita, the ideas of dharma, and many similar aspects. This lack of attention to the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada is surprising given its significance in the Mahabharata and the broader implications for philosophical inquiry, language, and communication.

Therefore, this short textual study provides a fresh perspective on philosophizing human need for meaning-making and understanding the art of negotiating the engagement process of meaning associated with its structure. The study aims to bridge the gap in the existing scholarship by providing an in-depth analysis of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada, which will enable a better understanding of the philosophical and linguistic ideas presented in the dialogue.

In conclusion, the research question of this paper is to analyze the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada, a philosophical and religious dialogue in the Shanti Parva of Vyasa's Mahabharata, with a focus on Sulabha's counter-arguments to Janaka and its broader implications for language and communication. The study aims to provide a new perspective on the philosophical and linguistic ideas presented in the dialogue, and to fill a gap in existing scholarship that has largely focused on other aspects of the Mahabharata. The research may involve close reading, textual analysis, comparative analysis, and interdisciplinary methods drawing on philosophy, linguistics, and cultural studies. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the broader field of Indian philosophy and literature by providing a deeper understanding of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada and its implications for language and communication.

## METHOD

The research method proposed in this research is an analytical study of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada, a philosophical and religious dialogue in the Shanti Parva of Vyasa's Mahabharata. The study aims to provide a fresh perspective on the philosophical and linguistic ideas presented in the dialogue, with a focus on Sulabha's counter-arguments to Janaka and its broader implications for language and communication.

The study is likely to involve close reading and textual analysis of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada, examining the arguments presented and their underlying philosophical assumptions. The analysis will likely draw on existing scholarship on Samkhya Philosophy and means to salvation, as well as theories of language and communication. The research may also involve comparative analysis of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada with other philosophical dialogues in the Mahabharata, such as the Bhagavad Gita, to highlight the unique contributions of Sulabha's discourses. The analysis may also explore the historical and cultural context of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada and its reception in both Western and Eastern academic scholarship.

The research method proposed in this paper is likely to be interdisciplinary, drawing on methods and theories from philosophy, linguistics, and cultural studies. The study is likely to contribute to the broader field of Indian philosophy and literature by providing a new perspective on the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada and its implications for language and communication. Overall, the proposed research method involves an analytical study of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada to provide a fresh perspective on its philosophical and linguistic ideas. The study aims to fill a gap in the existing scholarship and contribute to the broader field of Indian philosophy and literature.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and many other strong texts from Sanskrit literature showcase an array of strong women voices occupying several social positions and speaking on crucial political, ethical or legal issues. Among such voices, one that has mostly remained in the margins of most debates is the character of Sulabha (Rukmani, 2009). The *Sulabha-Janaka Samvada* occurs as a response to the two questions that the victorious king poses viz-a-viz if there is an example of an individual who while retaining the life and duties of a householder, an ordinary mortal has been able to reach a state of *moksa* and what is the substance that constitutes this ultimate *moksa*. To answer the two questions, Bheeshma narrates the story of Sulabha who is defined differently by multiple scholars. Nicholas Sutton in his essay, "An Exposition of Early Samkhya, A Rejection of the Bhagavada Gita and a Critique of the Role of Women in Hindu Society: The Sulabha-Janaka Samvada" states that the dialogue is less popular in the academic study on the epic springing out from the Western academia and one of the reasons for this less engagement on the short dialogue is the fact that most epic studies have only focused on the narrative aspects of the epic and have restrained from delving into a detailed,

lengthy and complex philosophical and religious components of the epic of which the *Sulabha Janaka episode*, that occurs in the “Chapter 308 of the Shanti Parva in the Critical Edition of the Sanskrit text.”(Sutton 53) is one crucial example. In the essay titled, “The Self Is Not Gendered: Sulabha’s Debate with King Janaka”, the essayist Ruth Vanita writes that neither scholarly debates nor popular discourses have contributed much to the discussion on the character of Sulabha, a notion that Sutton agrees with while stating how only one English translation of the *Samvada* exists, by Kisari Mohan Ganguli. He is speaking in the year 1999 while writing his essay “An Exposition of Early Samkhya, A Rejection Of the Bhagavda Gita and a Critique of the Role of Women In Hindu Society: The Sulabha-Janaka Samvada” and astonishingly not much has changed to refute this claim (Ganguli, 1899).

There are numerous ways in which Sulabha is defined by different scholars keeping the mystery around her characterization alive. Daughter of King Pradhana, Ruth Vanita defines her as an unmarried learned woman, more like an intellectual renunciate who counteracts Janaka’s argument while Sutton describes her as a “female aesthetic expert in the disciplines of yoga”(Vanita, 2003). Chaturvedi Badrinath, on the other hand, describes her as an anchorite or a *yogini*. Sulabha’s reputation lies in the fact that she uses Hindu philosophical principles to expound on the fact that there is no essential difference between a man and woman and in fact liberation/*moksa* is readily available to any and all woman and through the same means that are catalogued for a man, a proposition that even the *Gita* expounds on and something that the *Bhakti* movement later exemplifies. Haripada Chakravarty in his essay entitled “Female Ascetics in the Brahmanical Society in Ancient India” uses Sulabha as an example from an array of women to advocate the case of “inhospitable attitude of the Hindu lawmakers towards women denying them the privilege of Sannyasa” (Chakravarty, 1964). He calls such women as *Brahmanical* nuns or what we popularly know as *Brahmavadini* whereas Kautilya uses the term *Parivrajika* for them, loosely translated as a woman renunciate belonging to the *Brahmannical* society. He has shown through such examples, how women have consciously chosen the path of aestheticism as a way of life, a lifestyle that was thought to have been reserved only for men (Shah, 2017).

The entire discourse functions on binaries, the public versus the private, the polar symbols of a royal umbrella above the king's head as a mark of his royal insignia and the tri-danda, “three-prolonged stick of renunciation, of a sannyasi.”(Badrinath 133), one being a disciple of the great sage Panchashikha and the other an independent learner and traveler, self-taught and not tied to any educational institution. Janaka is the ruler of *Mithila*, popularly known for the ideas of desire less action (*niskama karma*) and claiming to exemplify detachment from *kama* and *artha* while occupying a social position of a monarch. There are apparent dichotomies evident in the characterization of Janaka and Sulabha, some of them the author espouses and the rest are charted out by Janaka himself in the course of his accusations against Sulabha. He states that while he is the ruler of a large kingdom, she’s a mendicant, he’s a householder while she is a free woman or a woman whose

identity he is not aware of. She's guilty of possible adultery, pride, prejudice, unrestricted intermingles, thoughtless and mindless action, and therefore there is no way that she is on the path to perfection or enlightenment. It is this very complex social positioning with tall claims that intrigues Sulabha who prepares to test him. King Janaka's idea is in the fact that if there is an attainment of *jnana* (wisdom) it becomes a key to salvation. If *jnana* is attained by a householder then it's possible to be both a mendicant and a worldly man. Janaka boastfully claims that since his liberation has taken place while occupying the social position of a householder, his stature is consequentially much higher than that of a mere renouncer. He calls himself as *jivanamukta*, someone who has attained liberation from all that defines and binds us to be a human, from the bondages of *artha and kama*. According to Sulabha however, Janaka's position was slightly higher than that of an ordinary fellow but below a renunciate.

It is interesting to note the setting of the argument which is that of a court, a space which is known in the epic to hold many scholarly and philosophical debates. The readers of the *Mahabharata* had encountered one such space earlier in the epic called as the *Jayant Sabha* in the *Sabha Parva* where the lady protagonist of the epic, Draupadi debates on the ownership of the women and it is only after a few pages later that we again encounter another woman, occupying a different social position as that of Draupadi but raising similar questions on identify, ownership and rights of a woman. It is the logical unfolding of the argument, appealing to reason than to philosophy and emotions that makes the discourse stand tall both in the epic and in the studies on it much later. It is also crucial to note the context in which the dialogue occurs which is right after the war with its eerie conclusion and the victorious king, Yudhishtira disillusioned to take up the throne. "The surviving combatants then gather together on the field at Kuruksetra to lament over those who have fallen"(Sutton, 1999). Post war is a highly existential situation where the victorious king exclaims how victory feels more like a defeat to him, strewn with meaninglessness and hopelessness. Numerous teachings are provided by the fallen Bheeshma on varying subject matters spanning between Chapter 56-353 which roughly includes a wide cataloguing of duties of the king (also termed as the *Raja dharma*) and detailed deliberations on *moksa-dharma*. This is the exact instance where the *samvada* occurs. Just as the dreading silence and disturbing peace follows the victory of the Pandavas that forces them to speculate their actions, its motive and intent, in a similar fashion a purgation of thought, ideas and beliefs systems occur through the conversation between Sulabha and Janaka that allow for the re-questioning of earlier stated philosophical and religious notions, one of them being the *Bhagvada Gita*.

After a self-congratulatory introduction, Janaka levies his accusations on Sulabha in the form of a public prosecutor. He states that there are dichotomies of class, the king being a *kshatriya* and Sulabha assumed to be a *brahmini*, thereby causing *varna sankara* or the illegitimate mixing of two different castes. Further, Sulabha was apparently in the *sanyasa* stage of life while Janaka was still occupying the social position of a householder, one being

in the *sanyasa ashram* and the other in the *grihastha asharam*, thereby leading to *asharma sankara*, or the intermingling of the various stages of life. He also accuses her on the disparity of different *gotras*, leading to *gotra sankara* or the intermixing of different *gotras*. He next accuses her of *dharma sankara* for he was not aware if she was a married woman, belonging to another man. By establishing a mental correlation there has been an evident transgression. Next, he accuses of psychic rape, as Chaturvedi points out, and further of being a spy to another king. He urges her to disclose her education, caste, class, her purpose of visit and her identify. On one hand, Janaka shows no neutrality between a man who shows reverence and hatred and on the other seems annoyed with the intermixing of *ashrams*, *gotra*, caste and social positions (Chaturvedi, 2008).

Nicholas Sutton in his essay entitled "An Exposition Of Early Samkhya, A Rejection Of The Bhagvada-Gita And A Critique Of The Role Of Women In Hindu Society: The Sulabha-Janaka-Samvada" states that with the Sulabha-Janaka dialogue, we are dealing specifically with the *moksa dharma* of the *Shanti Parva* that abounds in ideas of philosophical and religious engagement and therefore it is already setting a foundation and providing a context to the *samvada*. He further makes an interesting deliberation that Sulabha's response to the first accusation of Janaka, "is a brief exposition of Samkhya philosophy." The passages on *moksa dharma* and the discourse thereafter center around *Samkhya* Philosophy with elaborations on "significant sections on the practice of different forms of yoga." (Sutton 54). While referring to J.A.B. van Buitten's *The Mahabharata*, Vol. I, *The Book of the Beginnings*, he says that most of these discourses are often considered as an interpolation by the Western academia originating around 100-400 CE. According to Sutton, the *samvada* is not only an exposition of early *Samkhya* philosophy but also a rejection of the proponents of the *Bhagvada Gita*. The *Sulabha Janaka Samvada* is crucial "simply because of its containing a typical exposition of epic Samkhya ... and finally because of the way the text uses the philosophical teachings of Samkhya to deny claims of male dominance over women." (Sutton 54). Janaka's accusations are instilled with a view of reality which are founded on material attachment such as that to birth, lineage, *gotra*, marital status, educational merit and much more. In contrast to this, the proponents of *Samkhya philosophy* are based on detachment and "observes the world in different light, seeing unity of substance rather than infinite distinction of material variety." (Sutton 55). The *Samkhya* Philosophy was delved onto by Ishvarakrsna in the *Samkhyakarika*. However, the essence of the philosophy is captured in many discourses on the *moksa dharma* in the *Mahabharata* much before this discourse came into light. Sutton cites van Buitten in stating that there is a high probability that the teachings of *Samkhya* philosophy expounded in the many passages of the epic can be "the collective product of the different schools and *asaramas* teaching Samkhya and Yoga that existed during the epic period, each with its own peculiar perspective" (qtd. in J.A. B. van Buitten *Studies in Indian Literature and Philosophy*). The epic's *Samkhya* is primarily soteriological in nature as Sutton describes it to be. The typical *Samkhya* philosophy consists of elements of matter, either twenty or

seventeen in number and a distinct element of the soul which is the non-material element constituting the twenty fifth or the eighteenth element. The spiritual element of the soul is usually associated with *Narayana* or *Vishnu* or any of his avatars. The discourse by Sulabha offers another slight delineation from the regular *Samkhya* doctrines. This is because, to expound on the *Samkhya* philosophies is not Sulabha's intent but a means to an end where she can refute Janaka's false accusations of gaining the knowledge of salvation. Sutton catalogues that from verse 96-115, she outlines the elements of matter, thirty in number and there is no reference to the non-material aspect which would have been the thirty first element. This is dichotomous to the rest of the epic where this non-material aspect is generally called as the soul or the *atman* such as in Chapter Thirteen of the *Bhagvada Gita*, where the soul is referred to as *ksetrajna* or loosely translated as the knower of the land or the true self of all beings. Here in the *Gita* it is defined as the fourteenth element. Between verse 116-124, there is an elucidation on the development of the human body. She therefore comes up with her own definitions and delineations of the term *ksetraja* and has no soteriological conclusion. There is an independent examination of the principles of *Samkhya* philosophies which highlights how one must always strive for the independent, rational thinking.

Sulabha further rationalizes as to why a king cannot be enlightened. She states that a ruler is constantly perturbed by the affairs of the state, and has all the reasons to differentiate between a friend and a foe. Therefore, he cannot employ the principles of *Samkhya* philosophy and receive *moksa* while occupying the social position of an emperor. This also answers with negation, Yudhishtira's questions if there is an example of an individual who has gained enlightenment without renouncing the world with a negation.

The subject of the treatise is "gaining absolute salvation from the cycle of rebirth, known collectively as *moksa-dharma*" (Sutton 54). Most of the *moksa dharma* passages are based on the *Samkhya* Philosophy and the *samvada* is no different. In many years of academic study, the emphasis has only been on the study of the *Gita* and the *Upanishads*. *Sulabha-Janaka Samvada* punctures this canonical outlook to the epic. Sulabha's arguments are devoid of all vocal embellishments and her speech is based on reason, free of biasness, pride and envy. The fact that Janaka concerns and abides by the social dictates of the day puts his claim to enlightenment into jeopardy. He "made the error of thinking in material rather than spiritual terms about the issues of gender and social status." (Sutton 56) Sulabha says that the human body is in a state of constant flux from childhood to old age and therefore, the substance constituting it constantly changes too. All this was in response to the question of who she was, who did she belong to and where did she come from.

The ruler of *Mithila* (Janaka) cites *Gita's* arguments of *niskama karma* when he states that he finds no difference between gold and a lump of earth, treats with equanimity, the one who coats his one arm with sandal paste and the one who chops his other arm with an axe.

Chapter 23-40 of the *Bhagvada Gita* expound on the idea of *niskama karma* or desirless action. It is the idea that kings and householders do not necessarily have to renounce their social position and duties to attain *moksa*. It

is the complete opposite of what Sulabha claims. Krishna cites to Arjuna in the *Gita* the example of Janaka who remain detached even when *Mithila* was burnt down. Janaka himself claims to be a *mukta* to which Sutton writes, "To my mind there is no doubt that the text is portraying Janaka as a flawed character" (59). He further refutes the arguments of Bedekar that Janaka was only iterating the teachings of Panchasikha for no fault of his (Bedekar, 1957). According to Sutton, Janaka has an "imperfect grasp of the Samkhya precepts which he has received from his teacher." (59) Even the author of the epic does not seem to quite agree with Janaka's tall claims, and leaves him dumbfounded after Sulabha's reply. The latter refutes that he is a "muktalaksanam" (Sutton 61). According to her, rulers of all states are always strewn in with fear, anxiety and misery in running a state and therefore it is impossible to maintain a neutral disposition towards all human beings.

Meaning the *Sulabha-Janaka Samvada* is as multifold and multilayered as most discourses in the epic. Badrinath Chaturvedi says that the story of Sulabha is "primarily, the story of a woman's, Sulabha's, teaching as regards language, meaning and truth." (Badrinath 131). It is a woman's exquisite skill in defining linguistics, skillfully instructing the king, his courtiers and the readers on the right usage of words and language, its delivery and how to cull out the maximum meaning of the words spoken. The *Sulabha-Janaka* episode has a defining trait of making meanings and definitions through the monologue of the two characters.

While most of Janaka's monologue was highly personal, Sulabha's response was extremely impersonal. She begins her monologue with what constitutes the meaning and structure of logical verbal discourse.

In itself independent, that was more as a brief preamble to the kind of language she said she would be speaking in response to Janaka's indictment of her- suggesting to him, by her example, the kind of language one might justly expect from the man claiming to have achieved that beyond which nothing remains to be achieved. in that she was also teaching us, who may not presume to be liberated, *jivana - mukta*, what kind of language we must speak even ordinarily to be meaningful and truthful.(Badrinath 139).

She pinpoints that her response is found on four integral factors- justice, fairness, productivity and meaningfulness, laying emphasis on the choice of words, choosing the ones that add coherence and avoiding the one that only add to the bulk of the argument. She also omits the ones which are disgraceful and harsh. Her speech is also free of driving extreme emotions such as anger and fear, greed, pride. "Sulabha then offered Janaka and us, the main elements of language, the choreography of dialogue" (Badrinath 140). She goes on to define what meaningful conversation is and what the defects in a language are. A conversation in which a speaker disregards the listener, leads to the voice and meaning being lost. Alternatively, if the speaker frets too much for the listener then it leads to an element of insincerity. Therefore, proper speech must constitute that in which the speaker cares both for the speaker and the listener and it is only then that the meaning is rightfully delivered.



Sulabha talks of the transmutation of the form of the body and the characteristics of one's personality as one progresses from being a child to an adult to finally reach old age. Such a form which is constantly in flux disregards the question as to who one is, who does one belong to and where does one come from. She uses the analogy of a lamp's flame which changes but so ever so slightly that it's difficult to notice the difference. Similarly, the world is changing too fast and it is impossible to say as to where does one come from. She's thereby turning ordinary questions into metaphysical meanings. She makes use of the analogy of a droplet of water to describe the idea of taking refuge in Janaka's mind. In passing she mentions how to build and hold a state on the principles of *dharma*, for without *dharma* there will be disturbances in the kingdom which will eventually lead to anarchy. She defines *dharma* that is built on values of truth and justice. She also suggests postulates on taxation roughly amounting to one tenth of the value earned.

In his review of Arti Dhand's essay entitled "Paradigms of the good in the Mahabharata: Suka and Sulabha in quagmires of ethics", John Brockington's opinionates the ethics of renunciation in the characters of Sulabha and Suka which reflect the deficiencies and lack in Janaka's discourse. The discourse by Sulabha adds to the umpteen strong voices we have encountered in the epic before and this piece stands tall for it rests on logic, reason and attempts to open up ways no other treatise had done in the past (Brockington, 2008; Dhand, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research aims to provide a new perspective on the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada, a philosophical and religious dialogue in the Shanti Parva of Vyasa's Mahabharata, with a focus on its philosophical and linguistic ideas. The study is interdisciplinary and likely to involve close reading, textual analysis, comparative analysis, and exploration of historical and cultural contexts. The research method proposed in this abstract aims to fill a gap in existing scholarship and contribute to the broader field of Indian philosophy and literature. Ultimately, this study has the potential to deepen our understanding of the Sulabha-Janaka Samvada and its implications for language and communication.

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