

Mahābhārata Panels in Bhuleśvara Temple near Yavat

Kumud Kanitkar

The Bhuleśvara temple near Yavat is located off Pune-Solapur highway atop a hill. No inscriptional evidence related to the construction of the temple has been found. A.V. Naik¹ placed the temple in 12th-13th century on stylistic grounds.

The shrine is surrounded by a later 15th-16th century fortification (Fig.1). In 18th century, the spires over sanctum, *sabhā-maṇḍapa* and *Nandī-maṇḍapa* were rebuilt (*jīrṇoddhāra*).² Changes made during this restoration are obvious. However, Naik's assertion that 'the overall plan of the shrine, *antarāla*, *maṇḍapa* and the surrounding *prākāra* has remained unchanged' seems valid.

On the dwarf walls of the *sabhā-maṇḍapa*, there must have been three panels (each 0.4 m. high and 1.4 m. long) of both *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. The three panels comprised of an introductory panel and two panels depicting important events that were the turning points in each epic. At present only the introductory *Rāmāyaṇa* panel is in place though fragments of other two *Rāmāyaṇa* panels are randomly fixed at other places, probably during *jīrṇoddhāra*.

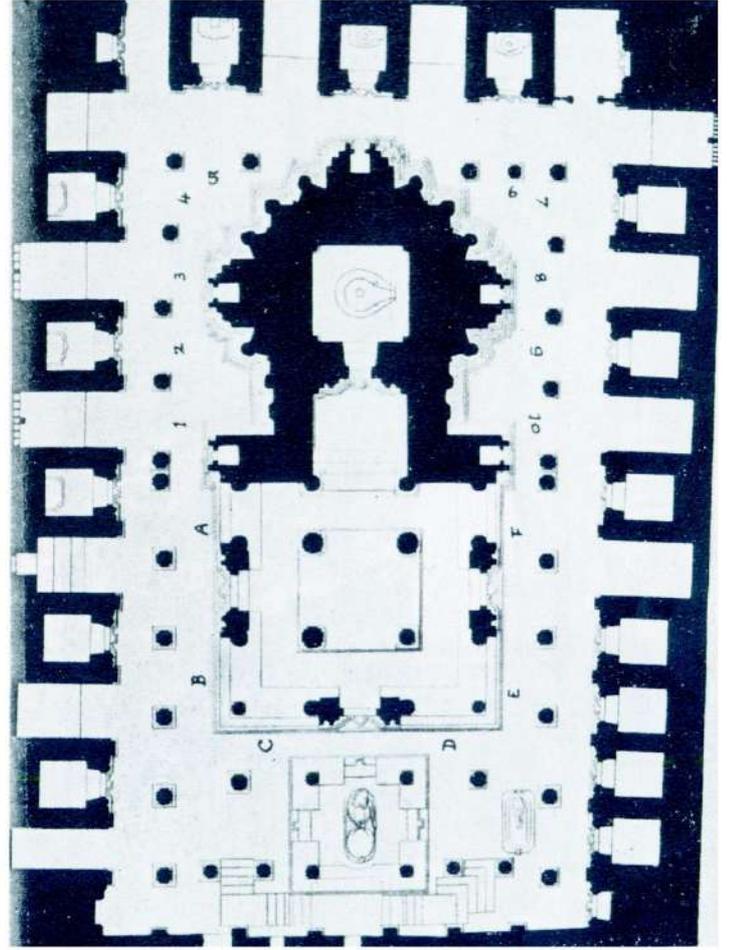


Fig.1 : Plan of the temple

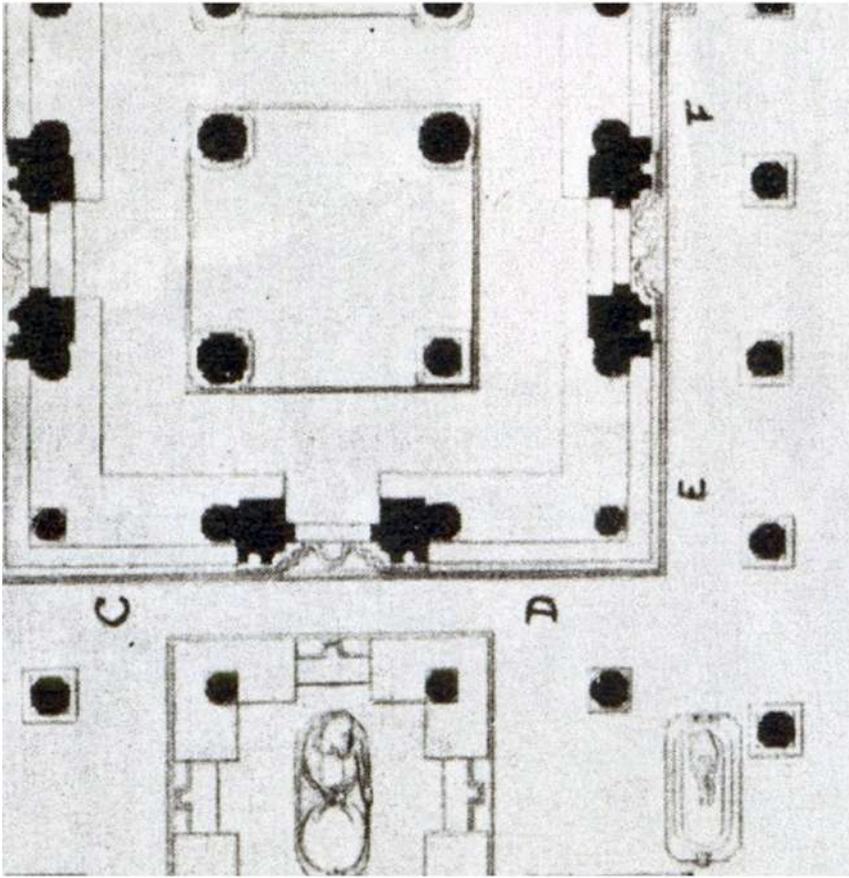


Fig.2 : Enlarged plan: *Mahābhārata* panels (marked D, E and F)

The present paper limits itself to the three *Mahābhārata* panels, on north and east side of the hall (marked D, E and F in Fig.2, the enlarged plan). These illustrate a few select episodes. The choice of episodes (18 in all) and their composition highlights the 'non-verbal mass-communication' skill of the preceptor priest who designed this east facing temple. He has distilled the essence of eighteen *parvas* of *Mahābhārata* into eighteen episodes!

The placement of the narrative panels on the outside face of the *mandapa*, walls is obviously planned. There is enough space in front of these eye-level panels for a small audience to sit there and listen to a discourse (Fig.3). It is felt that these panels were for use in educating illiterate masses through story-telling with sculptures as visual aids. The episodes chosen highlight the values taught by chosen characters from the epics.

It is conjectured that the preceptor priest belonged to the *Nātha* sect, which is supported by the following observations: (a) depiction of *Siddhas* in *haṭha-yogic* postures (Fig.4); (b) the



Fig.3 : A view of *Mahābhārata* panels on the East and north dwarf wall (D and E in plan)

shrine in the northwest corner of *prākāra* has no image left, but the pillar brackets are decorated with sculptures that hint at its being dedicated to Matsyendranātha (Fig.5); (c) other small shrine-like structures lining the wall of the *prākāra* were possibly dedicated to other important *nāthas*; most have an image of *Bhairava* on the lintel (Fig.6).

Mahābhārata panels

Mahābhārata epic is considered a *Dharma-Saṁhitā*, and *Mahābhārata* war is described as *Dharma-yuddha*, fought in *Dharma-kṣetra*. Many places in the book stress that 'Yato dharmah tato jayah'. *Dharma* here is the inevitable moral law, the code of conduct that sustains society.

It is a conjecture that the goal of the *Nātha* sect preceptor priest was to

impart the essence of *Dharma* to the common man who had neither the leisure nor the inclination to study technical treatises. Sanskrit language and the sheer volume of the epic were barriers which kept *Mahābhārata* out of reach of common man. So it had to be in the form of short, artistic, attractive pictures

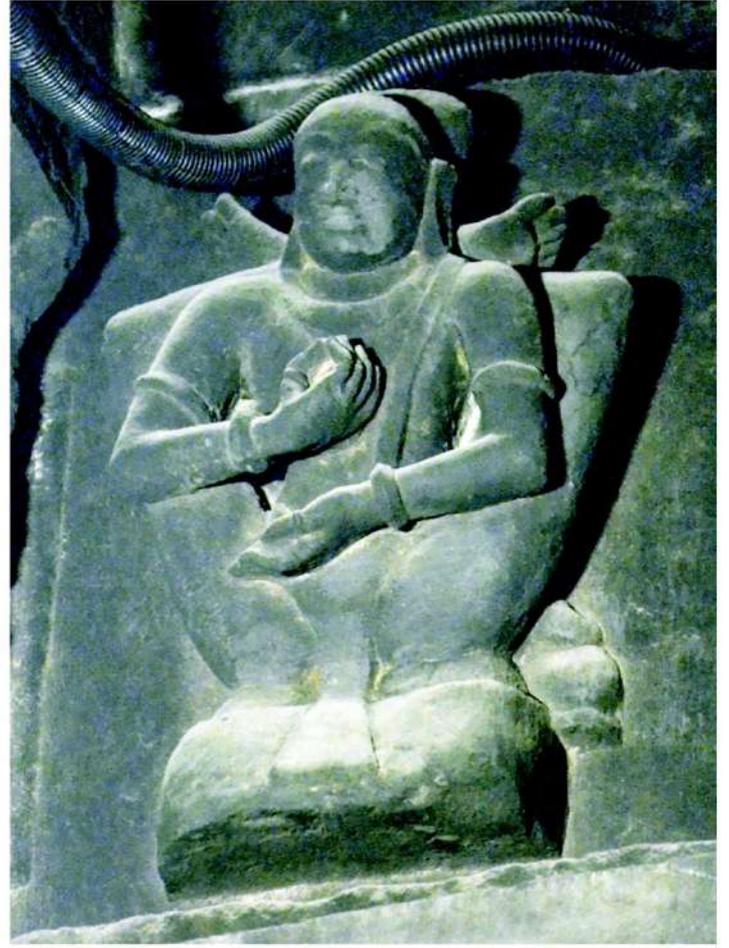


Fig.4 : Haṭhayogī



Fig.5 : Above right pillar: *Haṁsa* (probably symbolizing a Nāthayogī) riding on fish, so Matsyendranātha?



Fig.6 : Small shrines lining the walls

which conveyed the message unambiguously. Ensuring correct identification of each episode based on the relevant lines in the text was crucial to this goal.³ Hence great attention has been paid to details in carving the chosen *Mahābhārata* stories. The episodes chosen were such as would linger in the minds and lead to deeper understanding of the message with time.

Ackerman has noted that “the job of the preceptor priest was to organize the huge inheritance of culture, to make the past available to the present, to sift the imaginative, original and admirable from pedantic, conventional and superficial, to make its essence available to men who necessarily live in one small corner of the world for one little stretch of time and finally to enable them to judge the actions of the present by the experience of the past.” The preceptor priest at Bhuleśvara temple has achieved this to perfection.

These three *Mahābhārata* panels are described in the order F, D, E to follow the sequence in the epic and contain eighteen episodes in all. Panel F has eleven episodes



Fig.7 : 11 episodes; separated by 'body language' numbered in sequence as they appear in the text

from *Ādiparva*, Panel D has three episodes from *Bhīṣmaparva* and Panel E has four (two from *Droṇaparva*, one from *Karṇaparva* and one from *Śalyaparva*) episodes.

Each panel seems to convey one important message through the collection of episodes in it. The episodes have dramatic content which would attract the common man, who would then mull over the content at leisure.

The introductory *Mahābhārata* panel (panel F) depicts eleven episodes from *Ādiparva*, *svayaṁvaraupaparva* (*adhyāyas* 1.174-189) and *vaiivāhikaupaparva* (*adhyāyas* 1.190-191). Draupadī *svayaṁvara* was a crucial turning point in the life of the Pāṇḍavas. Thus, it is natural that it should be portrayed in detail. With that one arrow shot by Arjuna their whole life changed. From being fugitives wandering incognito, and in penury, they became the sons-in-law of the mighty king Drupada. The most desirable young Draupadī became their wife. Their social standing underwent a sea-change. This is emphasized visually by the preceptor priest with the help of placement and relative size of figures. Episodes are separated by body language: people from same episode face each other.

In the introductory panel (Fig.7), for convenience, episodes are numbered in the sequence in which they appear in the text. Importance of Arjuna's mastery in archery is highlighted by allotting him the central place and large size (episode 4). The purpose of showing Arjuna as the central figure could be a way of emphasizing the importance of single-minded devotion to the task at hand and the excellence at one's craft. The central theme of Panel F, thus, can be assumed to be *yogaḥ karamasu kauśalam*.

Episode 2 shows Draupadī with a *varamālā*, Drupad and Dhṛṣṭadyumna by her side. Episode 3 is when Arjuna gets up to try his hand at winning Draupadī. His small stature is indicative of the *vipras*' impression of him as a mere *baṭu*.⁴ Episode 4 is Arjuna's success in hitting the target. Episode 5 shows Arjuna leaving with Draupadī (Fig.8). Arjuna is shown much bigger in episodes 4 and 5. Since he has outdone all other mighty kings, his status has changed in the eyes of the *dviḥjas*.⁵ Changed size very effectively conveys the message that one's status in society depends on one's achievements.

Episode 6 has Kṛṣṇa (shown with four arms) and Balarāma (a mace tucked under his left arm) along with Sāmba, Cārudeṣṇa and Gada. Kṛṣṇa recognized the



Fig.8 : Left: Episode 3 - Arjuna (small stature, reflecting the opinion of the *Vipras* about him, as a mere *Baṭu*)
Right: Episode 5 - Victorious Arjuna (therefore large size) accompanied by diminutive Draupadī

Pāṇḍavas when no one else did. He signaled Balarāma who also understood and was happy. Yet both of them kept the fact to themselves in the interest of Pāṇḍavas. Similar caution is seen in Episode 7 when events took a noisy turn. Yudhiṣṭhira with Nakula and Sahadeva (disguised as Brahmins in *mṛgājīna*) left quietly to avoid being spotted. Episode 8 shows Kṛṣṇa following them unobtrusively to the Potters' abode with the intention of meeting Kuntī. This was when Pāṇḍavas met Kṛṣṇa for the first time. Here was the second great support Pāṇḍavas acquired, both in terms of rich cousins and priceless guidance of Kṛṣṇa. In Episode 9, Drupada, Dhṛṣṭadyumna and Kuntī engage in discussion (with Draupadī in the background) after Kuntī's inadvertent remark. Episode 10 shows Dvaipāyana Vyāsa who happened to come in just then. Everyone stood up and seated him with great reverence on a gold seat. He took Drupada aside and explained to him how Draupadī was fated to be married to five grooms.⁶ His size befits the reverence he commands. Marriage rites are seen in Episode 11. The groom is seated in front of the decorated *vivāhavedi* and the bride is being led to it by her attendants.



Fig.9 : Ninth day of war - Arjuna and Bhīṣma

Episode 1 has two richly dressed large warriors, much disfigured, portrayed on one side of the introductory panel. They seem to be fighting each other but that does not help identification in an epic filled with fights.⁷

Panel D shows three episodes. The first depicts fight between Bhīṣma and Arjuna on the 9th day of war (Fig.9). In the second, Bhīṣma-Arjuna are shown on the 10th day of war with Śikhaṇḍi between them (Fig.10). The third episode shows Bhīṣma on the bed of arrows surrounded by *Pāṇḍavas* and *Kauravas*.⁸ According to the story, at the end of the ninth day of a fierce but well-matched battle between Bhīṣma and Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa requested Bhīṣma to reveal how to defeat him. Based on this knowledge, Arjuna fought from behind Śikhaṇḍi and felled Bhīṣma on the tenth day.



Fig.10 : Tenth day of war - Bhīṣma and Arjuna with Śikhaṇḍi in between

This set of episodes is shown in many temples. However, the importance of accuracy of artistic detail portrayed here is remarkable. In the ninth day scene, two chariots are opposite to each other. The figures of Arjuna and Bhīṣma in the panel are broken and unidentifiable. However, *Kapildhvaja* and the presence of Kṛṣṇa as *sārathī* identifies Arjuna's chariot. The relative size of the warriors compared to Kṛṣṇa is also noteworthy. Kṛṣṇa is shown with four arms but his size is the same as the other charioteer. Time and again, the preceptor seems to emphasize that one's status is based only on one's deeds.



Fig.11 : Panel E - four episodes from three *parvas*

The tenth day episode has three chariots; two opposite Bhīṣma's chariot; again, the second of the two is identified as Arjuna's by *Kapildhvaja* and Kṛṣṇa as *sārathī*.

Bhīṣma's supreme sacrifice clearly conveys the central theme of Panel D, *karmaṇyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana*. Here was a man, born a crown prince, who not only abdicated and remained a bachelor but also performed the duties of a parent both to Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, and ended up dying at the hands of his beloved grandson.

The remaining *Mahābhārata* 'Panel E' (Fig.11) portrays four episodes: 1. *Droṇa-vadha*, 2. *Karṇa-vadha*, 3. *Ghaṭotkaca-vadha* and 4. *Śalya-vadha*.

These episodes further illustrate (justify? lament?) use of unfair means and sacrificing kin to achieve victory for a 'just' cause. The word *Yoga* is used in *Mahābhārata* in this sense. In first episodes, Kṛṣṇa knew that it would be impossible to kill Droṇa by fair means. He said *eko hi yogosya bhavedvadhāya*.⁹ Here the word *yoga* is used in the sense of an expedient measure calculated to get over a difficult situation.¹⁰

According to the story of *Droṇa-vadha*, Droṇa and Dhṛṣṭadyumna were fighting. Bhīma, in consultation with Kṛṣṇa, told Droṇa that Aśvatthāmā was dead. Believing that it was Aśvatthāmā, his son, Droṇa put down his weapon in grief. Dhṛṣṭadyumna then jumped from his chariot with a sword,¹¹ cut off Droṇa's head and threw it



Fig.12 : Drona-vadha

is based on circumstantial evidence. Arjuna is identified by *Kapidhvaja* and Kṛṣṇa as *sārathī*. The other warrior is assumed to be Karṇa (flag which would have identified him is broken). Adjacent episode depicts Ghaṭotkaca fighting elephant brigade and causing havoc in general. Based on the wild hairstyle and sheer size, it is Ghaṭotkaca and not Bhīma.¹³ Duryodhana requested Karṇa to kill Ghaṭotkaca with the weapon which Karṇa saved to kill Arjuna. In a way, *Ghaṭotkaca-vadha* was a prequel to *Karṇa-vadha*. Even then Arjuna-Karṇa fight was not fair as Karṇa's chariot wheel got stuck in the ground and Arjuna shot him while Karṇa was

down (Figs.12-13).

Drona is identified by a *Kamaṇḍalu* on his flag, Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna by his stance, jumping off his chariot, sword in hand and finally, the identification is confirmed by the head of Drona flung to the ground and seen below the hooves of horses.¹²

Identification of the next episode as *Karṇa-vadha*



Fig.13 : *Kamaṇḍalu* on Drona flag; Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna - Sword in hand decapitates Drona

struggling to free it. (Perhaps Śalya *sārathī* could/would not try to free the wheel, as Karṇa was doomed by a curse).

The last is the fight between Śalya and Yudhiṣṭhira (Fig.14). Once again, the details carved help in identification of the episodes. Śalya can be clearly identified based on the standard on his chariot, the ploughshare.¹⁴ Yudhiṣṭhira's flag standard (*dhvaja*) consisted of two



Fig.14 : Fight between Yudhiṣṭhira and Śalya



Fig.15 : Photo enlarged to highlight Flags; two *mṛdaṅgas* atop flag-mast with the singing *yantra* symbolized by a head
Plough-share flag of Śalya

huge divine *mṛduṅgas*, 'Nanda' and 'Upananda' with a *yantra* that broadcast the music they made/words they uttered.¹⁵ The depiction has the two *mṛdaṅgas* atop flag-mast with the 'singing *yantra*' symbolized by a head (Fig.15).

Śalya sympathized with Pāṇḍavas and even helped them indirectly as a *sārathī* for Karṇa. It was only his impulsive decision that had led him to join Duryodhana's side in the first place. Yet, as befits a Kṣatriya's *dharma*, both Yudhiṣṭhira and Śalya fought tooth and nail till Yudhiṣṭhira won.

This whole panel is illustrative of the apparent paradox of the side of *dharma* using dubious methods in order to win and defeat the side of *adhharma*. Surely, it would lead to much soul searching to fathom the complex nuances of *dharma*.

In summary, Draupadī *svayamvara* followed by all *parvas* of the eighteen day war, which bore the names of the generals, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya are illustrated.

In conclusion, narrative panels served the dual purpose of story-telling and teaching moral values. As seen at Yavat, the role of the Preceptor Priest in the choice of episodes and their composition was very important. Artistic excellence, though important and esthetically pleasing, was a secondary aspect.

Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to ASI, Mumbai Circle for permission to photograph at the Bhuleśvara temple, Yavat.

References & Notes

1. A.V. Naik, 'The Bhuleshvar Temple at Yavat', *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 4.2.1-29.
2. दशरथ यादव, यादवकालीन भुलेश्वर, अगस्त 2007, आविष्कार प्रकाशन, पुणे, पान 14; गोविंद सखाराम सरदेसाई, मराठी रियासत, खंड 3; प्रमुख संपादक स.मा. गर्गे, नवीन संदर्भासह संपादित केलेली आवृत्ति, 1989, पॉप्युलर प्रकाशन, मुंबई, पान 443. In 18th century, the original ruined temple was restored by Brahmendraswami Dhavadshikar. Only the facade (*Nagarakhānā*) was constructed by him; there is no doubt that the temple was constructed a few centuries earlier.

3. Text from Critical Edition of *Mahābhārata* from *BORI* is used here. The edition was prepared from 12th century Manuscripts. The temple is 12th-13th century. Some details of *Dhvajas* portrayed in the panels do not tally with *BORI* edition. Sculptures can be vandalized but not corrupted. Hence, author would like to accept the 'sculptured edition' as the one prevalent in that era in this area.

4. *BORI*, 1.179.001-005

यदा निवृत्ता राजानो धनुषः सज्यकर्मणि । अथोदतिष्ठद्विप्राणां मध्याज्जिष्णुरुदारधीः ।।001 ।।
उदक्रोशन्विप्रमुख्या विधुन्वन्तोऽजिनानि च । दृष्ट्वा संप्रस्थितं पार्थमिन्द्रकेतुसमप्रभम् ।।002 ।।
केचिदासन्विमनसः केचिदा सन्मुदा युताः आहुः परस्परं केचिन्निपुणा बुद्धिजीविनः ।।003 ।।
यत्कर्णशल्यप्रमुखैः पार्थिवैर्लोकविश्रुतैः । नानतं बलवद्विहिं धनुर्वेदपरायणैः ।।004 ।।
तत्कथं त्वकृतास्त्रेण प्राणतो दुर्बलीयसा । बटुमात्रेण शक्यं हि सज्यं कर्तुं धनुर्विजाः ।।005 ।।

5. *Ibid.*, 1.179.023

स तामुपादाय विजित्य रङ्गे; विजातिभिस्तैरभिपूज्यमानः । रङ्गान्निरक्रामदचिन्त्यकर्मा; पत्न्या तया चाप्यनुगम्यमानः ।।023 ।।

6. *Ibid.*, 1.188.20-22

तत उत्थाय भगवान्यासो द्वैपायनः प्रभुः । करे गृहीत्वा राजानं राजवेश्म समाविशत् ।।020 ।।
पाण्डवाश्चापि कुन्ती च धृष्टद्युम्नश्च पार्षतः । विचेतसस्ते तत्रैव प्रतीक्षन्ते स्म तावुभौ ।।021 ।।
ततो द्वैपायनस्तस्मै नरेन्द्राय महात्मने । आचख्यौ तद्व्यथा धर्मो बहुनामेकपतिता ।।022 ।।

7. This cannot be the fight after Draupadī was won by Arjuna. Arjuna and Bhīma were dressed in *mṛgājīna*.

8. Kumud Kanitkar, 'Narrative Scenes in Indian Art', *Proceedings of Indian Art History Congress*, XVIIIth Session, 2009, Varanasi, Ed. Dr. U.C. Dwivedi, Dr. H.P. Sinha, pp.63-69.

9. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, श्रीमद्रगवद्गीतारहस्य अथवा कर्मयोगशास्त्र, 1915, 21st edition, 2003, Tilak Brothers, Pune, p.34.

10. *BORI*, 7.164.068, आस्थीयतांजयेयोगो धर्ममुत्सृज्य पाण्डव ।

11. *Ibid.*, 7.165.116; 7.165.36; 7.165.54; 7.165.118-120

तस्य तच्छिद्रमाज्ञाय धृष्टद्युम्नः समुत्थितः । खड्गी रथादवप्लुत्य सहसा द्रोणमभ्ययात् ।।036 ।।
धृष्टद्युम्नस्तु तद्राजन्भारद्वाजशिरो महत् । तावकानां महेष्वासः प्रमुखे तत्समाक्षिपत् ।।054 ।।
तं दृष्ट्वा परमोद्विग्नं शोकोपहतचेतसम् । पांचालराजस्य सुतः क्रूरकर्मा समाद्रवत् ।।118 ।।
तं दृष्ट्वा विहितं मृत्युं लोकतत्त्वविचक्षणः । दिव्यान्यस्त्राण्यथोत्सृज्य रणे प्राय उपाविशत् ।।119 ।।
ततोऽस्य केशान्सव्येन गृहीत्वा पाणिना तदा । पार्षतः क्रोशमानानां वीराणामच्छिनच्छिरः ।।120 ।।

12. *Ibid.*, 7.165.120

ततोऽस्य केशान्सव्येन गृहीत्वा पाणिना तदा । पार्षतः क्रोशमानानां वीराणामच्छिनच्छिरः ।।120 ।।

13. *Ibid.*, 7.150.4-16, *Ghatotkacavadha Parva*.

14. संपादक भालबा केलकर, संपूर्ण महाभारत, सुरस मराठी भाषांतर, खंड 4 व 5, भीष्म पर्व व द्रोण पर्व, 1906, 3rd edition, वरदा बुक्स, पुणे, 1986, p.200, *Jayadrathavadha Parva*. Cannot locate in *BORI*.

15. *Ibid.*, p.54. Cannot locate in *BORI*.