



The Mahabharata Narrative: Locating the Story of Jarasandha of Magadha

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Abstract: This paper looks at the link between myth and landscape. It not only looks at the link between location and text or myth but does so in the light of the story of Jarasandha of Magadha. The paper also raises questions about the exclusionary approach to reading religious sites in the light of the present example.

Key words: Religion, Landscape, Jarasandha, Rajgir (Bihar), Mahabharata.

This is a paper about place. More specifically it is about link between place and religious discourse more particularly the Mahabharata.

Linking faith and geography in the Indian context, Fleming says, that the impulse to map the sacred geography of a given god or goddess was evident in the Mahabharata and reached its present form sometime before the sixth century CE. "This practice became intensified in the medieval period, as evident in the Sanskrit Puranas. The medieval compilers of the Puranas promoted a number of local pilgrimage sites as well as linking local and regional sites to more widespread story-traditions, including those of the Mahabharata and other Sanskrit epics (that is, Ramayana and Harivamsa)"¹.

Fleming further suggests, that the proliferation of such lists in the Puranas may also point to the development of an awareness of India as a cultural, religious, and geographical unity very different from western conceptions. "These literary mappings of sacred geographies may reflect elite Brahmanical efforts to integrate local and regional traditions under unifying religious rubrics"² This reading of how medieval religious and cultural geographies were conceived may provide insights into how local practices and identities may have been transformed through their integration into much broader conceptual religious landscapes.

Through his analysis of the example of the twelve *dyotirlingas*, Fleming explores the development of sacred geographies. These twelve sites had their origins around the twelfth century CE, after which they became gradually and increasingly influential in shaping Saivism throughout the subcontinent. In conclusion he says that it may be more helpful to bring broader perspectives to bear on the question of the proliferation of large-scale sacred geographies in medieval Sanskrit literature. These include not just local traditions and regional identities but also the dynamism of the medieval period and its trade relations and inter-religious discourse³. The fact that these twelve *dyotirlingas* include sites that are in or near major centres of medieval trade and travel is proof of this .

In another analysis, this time of the Mahabharata, Hegarty evaluates how the text is seeking to constitute itself as a text with a difference ushering in cultural changes. Hegarty shows how the Mahabharata sought, at least in part, to replace religious ritual with religious narrative as the culturally preferred and empowered activity in early South Asia⁴. In addition, he shows the significance of place as integral to cultural memory and the importance of place and time in narrative activity. Narratives encompass a vision of place and time within which, and through which, events unfold. By incorporating a narrative of place, he believes that the Mahabharata, is privileging a particular form of discourse while simultaneously seeking to take command of both space and time⁵. The Mahabharata does this through its focus of *tirthas*. The reward of visiting *tirthas* is proclaimed as surpassing the reward of sacrifices which were the Vedic ideal. Hegarty



goes so far as to say that “*tirtha* narratives, and the Mahabharata as a whole, are then conceptualized as being capable of themselves functionally replacing *tirtha* visitation, which itself was capable of functionally replacing Vedic ritual activity”⁶.

Diana Eck whose work on what she termed “imagined landscapes” – a play on Benedict Anderson’s 1983 work titled *Imagined Communities* – reiterates this view of the myth and the landscape having an intricate inter-relation where, in the Indian context, the myth takes place in thousands of sites in the culturally created mental map of Bharat⁷. What Eck has however also pointed out, is that this imagined landscape in India is polycentric with multiple centres of sacredness – a fact which, western scholars used to the singular uniqueness of Mecca and Jerusalem found difficult to comprehend. Eck points out that even all the groups termed Hindu have never subscribed to one imagined landscape – this includes regional, tribal, religious and sectarian groups⁸. Add to this the imagined landscapes of other religions that emerged in India namely Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism and also the imagined communities of Islam and Christianity.

Eck describes the broader pattern of sanctification of space in India as characterised by polycentrality, pluralism and duplication⁹. This has meant that not all places of sacred geography are exclusive to one group. There are many sites where devotion is not restricted to those of one religion such as various dargahs of saints, or the Golden Temple in Amritsar or some churches to name a few. At the local level there are many examples of various religious traditions coming together around a sacred site¹⁰. In addition, multiple and overlapping imagined landscapes specially in dynamic sites result in competing understandings and uses of the same space.

Moving on from this discussion, to the focus of this paper, we look at one narrative in the story of the Mahabharata and its associated landscape. This narrative is centered in Rajgir, (district Nalanda) Bihar – one of the most important early historic sites in India. Rajgir, was the original or first capital of Magadha – the kingdom which expanded into the first pan-Indian state and is regarded as one of the earliest examples of early urban processes in India. Rajgir and environs are replete with myths woven round locations and persons believed to have lived here.

Our story begins with the King Brihadratha, the founder of the Barhadratha dynasty of Magadha with Girivrajapur or present day Rajgir, as his capital. He was regarded as a great hero and married the twin princesses from Kasi or Varanasi and vowed to them that he would not show any partiality to either of them¹¹. The famed king was unable to have children. He retreated to the forest where he served a sage named Chandakaushika or Kaushika. Discovering his sorrowful longing for a child, as the sage was contemplating how to help the king, a mango fell into his lap. He gave it to the king with the blessing: Take it. Your wish will be fulfilled.

The sage did not know that the king had two wives. The king cut the fruit into two halves and gave one to each wife. He did so to keep his vow not to show partiality to either. Some time after they had partaken of the fruit, the wives became pregnant. The delivery took place in due course. But instead of bringing the expected joy, it plunged them into greater grief than before. For they each gave birth to but a half of a child. These two lifeless halves were horrifying to view – they were two equal and complementary portions of one baby, consisting of one eye, one leg, half a face, one ear and so on. Brihadratha ordered these to be thrown in the forest.

The attendants did as they were instructed. A demoness named Jara found these two pieces and held each of them in her two palms. As she gathered them up both at once, accidentally the halves came together the right way and adhered together and changed into a whole living child, perfect in every detail. Not having the heart to eat a living child, the demoness gave it to the king and explained to him what happened. The father named the boy Jarasandha literally meaning one “joined by Jara“. This child Jarasandha, grew into a man of immense physical strength. But his body had one weakness namely, that being made up by the fusion of two separate parts, it could be split again into two, if sufficient force were used.

Jarasandha grew up and became king in due course. His daughters Asti and Prapti were married to the heir apparent of Mathura, Kamsa. Well known is the fact that Krishna had killed his maternal uncle Kamsa in Mathura to avenge all the wrong that Kamsa had perpetrated on his mother. Jarasandha was enraged with Krishna and the entire Yadava clan, for rendering his two daughters widows.



Jarasandha attacked Mathura and the Yadavas 17 times. One such attack included the Panchalas and the Kurus among other kings of India. While Krishna and the Yadavas survived the attacks, they led Krishna to relocate his capital city to Dwaraka, an island in Arabian sea. This flight to Dwarka led to Krishna acquiring the name *Ranchod*, meaning deserter of the warfield –a negative epithet which renders this episode with Jarasandha as one of significance.

Krishna was henceforth looking for an opportunity to slay Jarasandha. In the mean time, the Pandavas ruled Indraprastha where it was suggested that Yudhishtira should perform the Rajasuya sacrifice and assume the title of Emperor. Yudhishtira sought Krishna's advice in this matter. To assume the title, Yudhishtira said only one who could secure the respect and allegiance of all kings could win the status of emperor.

Krishna told Yudhishtira that he could not become emperor while Jarasandha of Magadha was alive and unconquered. Jarasandha would certainly oppose Yudhishtira assuming the title of emperor. The only way to overcome his opposition was to defeat and kill him. Jarasandha had also unjustly cast many kings in prison and he planned to immolate a hundred kings in sacrifice to the goddess Chandi. Krishna said, that if Bhima and Arjuna agree, he would accompany them and together they would slay Jarasandha by stratagem and set free the imprisoned princes. Yudhishtira agreed with the unanimous opinion that their duty lay in slaying Jarasandha.

Given that many of the allies of Jarasandha were no more, he was isolated, and Krishna felt this was the right time to kill him but without using armies. He must be provoked to a single combat and slain. According to the code of honor of those days, a kshatriya had to accept the challenge to a duel whether with or without weapons. The latter sort was a fight to the death in catch-as-catch-can style. This was the kshatriya tradition to which Krishna and the Pandavas took recourse for slaying Jarasandha.

They disguised themselves as men who had taken religious vows, clad in robes of bark-fibre and carrying the holy darbha grass in their hands. Thus they entered the kingdom of Magadha and arrived at the capital of Jarasandha. Jarasandha was planning his Yagna to please the goddess Chandi. For this he had imprisoned 95 kings and was in need of 5 more kings, after which he was planning to perform the Yagna, sacrificing all the 100 kings. This Yagna would make him win over the powerful Yadava Army. Some stories suggest that the kings captured by Jarasandha wrote a secret missive to Krishna to rescue them from Jarasandha. Krishna, not wanting to go for an all out war with Jarasandha to rescue the captured kings, in order to avoid a major loss of lives, devised a plan to eliminate Jarasandha.

Nevertheless, Krishna, Bhima, and Arjuna entered the palace unarmed. Jarasandha received them with respect as their noble bearing seemed to indicate an illustrious origin. Bhima and Arjuna made no reply to his words of welcome because they wished to avoid having to tell lies. Krishna spoke on their behalf: "These two are observing a vow of silence for the present as at part of their austerities. They can speak only after midnight." Jarasandha entertained them in the hall of sacrifice and returned to the palace.

It was the practice of Jarasandha to meet noble guests who had taken vows and talk to them at their leisure and convenience, and so he called at midnight to see them. Their conduct made Jarasandha suspicious, and he also observed that they had on their hands the scars made by the bowstring and had besides the proud bearing of kshatriyas. When Jarasandha demanded the truth of them they said frankly: "We are your foes and seek instant combat. You can choose one of us at will to fight with you."

After acquainting himself as to who they were, Jarasandha said: "Krishna, you are a cowherd and Arjuna is a mere boy. Bhima is famous for his physical strength. So, I wish to fight with him." Since Bhima was unarmed, Jarasandha chivalrously agreed to fight him without weapons. Bhima and Jarasandha were so equally matched in strength that they fought with each other continuously for thirteen days without taking rest or refreshments, while Krishna and Arjuna looked on in alternating hope and anxiety. On the fourteenth day, Jarasandha showed signs of exhaustion, and Krishna prompted Bhima that the time had come to make an end of him. At once Bhima lifted him and whirling him round and round a hundred times, dashed him to the earth and seizing his legs tore his body asunder into two halves. And Bhima roared in exultation. The two halves at once joined and Jarasandha, thus made whole, leapt up into vigorous life and again attacked Bhima.



Bhima aghast at the sight, was at a loss what to do, when he saw Krishna pick up a straw, tear it into two, and cast the bits in opposite directions. Bhima took the hint, and when once again he tore Jarasandha asunder he threw the two portions in opposite directions, so that they could not come together and join. Thus did Jarasandha meet his end. The captive princes were released and Jarasandha's son was crowned King of Magadha. And Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna returned to Indraprastha. These 95 kings along with Sahadeva, the new ruler of Magadha became an ally of Pandavas who took part in the Mahabharata war later and got killed. With Jarasandha gone, the way was now clear for the Rajasuya which the Pandavas performed with great pomp and splendor. Yudhishtira assumed the title of emperor. This brings to an end the story of Jarasandha and with it, any mention of Rajgir in the Mahabharata.

However, if you were to travel to Rajgir today, and take a walk around, you will be shown sites identified linked to Jarasandha. There is first of all, a temple dedicated to Jara Devi – which has a rough piece of stone stands to represent the “goddess”, still regarded as Rajgir’s presiding deity¹². This temple, situated south of the northern passage of the cyclopean wall is at the entry point into what is termed the inner city, has recently been expanded somewhat and painted pink.

Then, there is a stretch of the cyclopean wall near the western valley near Jethian valley which has been termed as the Jarasandha bund by Broadley¹³. Broadley’s informers said that Jarasandha used to walk on this pathway to enjoy the cool breeze at the end of his day. There is also, Jarasandha’s wrestling pit or *akhara* where he used to wrestle. The famous wrestling area is at the western entrance to the city and is a stone masoned platform fashioned much in the same fashion as the cyclopean wall which runs over all five hills in Rajgir. It is approached through a flight of well preserved stairs from the north, along the platform’s longer axis. The platform is 11.35 m in length; 8.25 m in width and stands at a height of 2.4 m from ground level¹⁴.

Close by is the ranbhumi or site of the actual fight between Bhima and Jarasandha – a site made red due to the spilling of blood so profuse, that the land has remained forever red. The soil here it may be noted is red laterite. There are no archaeological remains of any kind at this site. A short distance away, some archaeologists have pointed to the existence of another *akhara* or wrestling area – this one belonging to Bhima.

There are two monuments, both of which are termed Jarasandha ka Baithak or throne of Jarasandha. One is located at the foot of Vaibhara hills and the other on the peak of Giriyak hill. About 75 metres above the hot springs (satadhara), we find an imposing stone structure of squarish shape. It has been masoned with massive unhewn stones, much like the cyclopean walls. Nuchanen had observed, if not disturbed, it may remain till the day of judgement¹⁵. The significance of this structure is primarily on account of it being very well preserved. It was known locally as the place where Jarasandha sat after bathing in the Saraswati stream running below.

It has several small caverns at the base, which are regarded as caves by subsequent explorers. There is a debate on whether these are shelters for guards or Buddhist meditating cells – there are eleven such cells and they are integral to the main structure. It may also be noticed that the stones used to build these have been carefully selected with a slab like oblong stone acting like a lentel. Subsequent Buddhist literature has termed this structure Pippala Stone House.

There is also in Rajgir – the Pandu pokhar or pond where the Pandavas bathed before entering Rajgir. This has now been expanded into a large lake with an adjoining park with children’s joy rides and eateries. It has a statue meant to depict Pandu and also a Buddha statute under a bodhi tree. It thus seeks to represent some of the many historical traditions of Rajgir – with no attempt to retain the original tank that bore this name.

What is interesting about all of these structures is, one, that they are not any of them tirtha sites in the traditional sense of the word, and hence not sacred. They have not become sites of any religious or even tourist visitation – they just sit there untouched and untransformed into any new structures. The reason for this, in the dynamic and ever changing topography of the Rajgir hills could well be that the structures may have been put to use by subsequent dwellers in the region specially the Buddhists. Or, another probable explanation for their continued existence could also be that the Jarasandha story from the Mahabharata travelled into and was appropriated by the Jain tradition, thus making Jarasandha an important figure in both Hindu and Jain mythology .



Jonathan Geen in an analysis of Krishna and his rivals in the Hindu and Jain traditions, has shown how, “the Jainas conflated characteristics of the Hindu figures Jarasandha, Sisupala and Paundraka in order to create a new Jarasandha, who was now a single powerful nemesis for Krishna. Second, this new relationship between Krishna and Jarasandha provided the template for a new class of Illustrious Beings (salakapurusas) in the Jaina Universal History: the recurring and paradigmatic vasudevas and prativasudevas. And third, this evolution of Krishna mythology in the Jaina tradition may have influenced the parallel development in the Hindu tradition, including the creation of the vaisnava ten avatars doctrine, and the expansion of the puranic mythology surrounding both Jarasandha and Sisupala”¹⁶.

Rajgir, it must be remembered was home not only to the Buddha but also to the Jain tirthankara Mahavira who spent 14 years here and whose place of final rest in some 30 kilometres away from Rajgir in Pawapuri. The Rajgir hills have many Jain temples on them and some of these are also of ancient vintage. The Rajgir landscape is clearly a very good example of what Jacob Kinnard called “places in motion”¹⁷. Echoing Eck, who I quoted earlier, Kinnard writes “although the western Orientalists who have studied space and place in India, in particular, have gone to great lengths to fix their identities, to demonstrate their origins, and thus to constitute them, discursively and physically, as singular and thus fundamentally monosemic, the spaces themselves, and very often the identities of the various people who lay claim to them, are inherently polysemic, dynamic, and ...fluid.”¹⁸ This statement couldn't apply more to Rajgir, which ever since it was excavated and explored by archaeologists beginning 1812, has been regarded more as a Buddhist site than belonging to any other tradition and history. The over identification of Rajgir with Buddha and Buddhist sites, even though it had pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist associations, has led to the neglect of any analysis of this historical past or multi-religious present. Nor has it led to an analysis of the fluid dynamics of a place like Rajgir.

Buchanan (1812), Captain Kittoe (1847), Cunningham (1861-62), John Huubert Marshall(1905-06), Ghosh and Broadley (1872) all used the records of the Chinese travellers Faxien and Xuanzang as base documents. They did record the Mahabharata reference in the Shantiparva and the story of Jarasandha but continued to look exclusively for Buddhist records and remains. This is an example of the over-determination of one identity in places of mythological and theological significance.

What is more interesting as we set out this Mahabharata landscape in Rajgir, is how we may term these remains that carry these labels. Jarasandha is an important actor in the Mahabharata – for he alone, brings out the human attributes in Krishna – his fear of Jarasandha and his flight from Mathura – one of the few blots on Krishna's persona in the story. Yet Jarasandha is not a god, he is not sacred and holy and none of these sites are tirthas. For the sites themselves to continue to survive and be recorded is an interesting phenomenon.

Do we need a new terminology for such historical sites which are not sacred in the traditional sense of the word, for Jarasandha was not a god and is not venerated? Are there other sites of anti-heroes that are commemorated? How does a this reading of the site impact the imagined communities that are religiously constructed? These are interesting questions that are yet to be explored.

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END NOTES

- ¹ Fleming p. 51
- ² Ibid. p.52
- ³ Ibid. 62
- ⁴ Hegarty, p. 164
- ⁵ Ibid. 175
- ⁶ Ibid. 177
- ⁷ Eck, p.24
- ⁸ Ibid. 25
- ⁹ Ibid. p.25
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Jha, 2011, p.8
- ¹² Ibid. 11
- ¹³ Ibid. P.28
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p.27
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p.90
- ¹⁶ Geen, p.63
- ¹⁷ Kinnard, pp.1
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p.4