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Abduction of Subhadrā

Abstract

One of the themes in *Mahā-bhārata* is the story of the abduction of Subhadrā, Kṛṣṇa's sister, by Arjuna. This topic was taken up in *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and then it became the favourite story in Bengali literature. The narration of Subhadrā's abduction has undergone numerous transformations over two thousand years. In *Mahā-bhārata*, Kṛṣṇa's speech of defence comes to the foreground, justifying the right of the Kṣatriyas to the marriage of abduction. Sanskrit *Bhāgavata* emphasises the political significance of this marital union. Bengali epic broadly develops the theme of the female scheme, which is not the abduction of Subhadrā but rather the seduction of Arjuna by the girl. Developed by Bengali poets, the rather short story grew larger, changed, was enriched with additional strands, explanations or plots, in result of which Subhadrā became the main character of the epic.

Although the main message of *Mahā-bhārata* concerns the contention over the right to rule between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the Bharata line, as well as the great battle fought by them on the Kurukṣetra field, the epic also contains numerous threads connected with the characters' everyday and family life. One of them is the story of the abduction of Subhadrā, Kṛṣṇa's sister, by Arjuna, the third of the Pāṇḍava brothers. This topic was taken up in *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the most popular among the *purāṇas*, and then it became the favourite story in the literature of Bengal.

Epic threads started permeating into the poetry of Bengal in the 15th and 16th centuries. There emerged at the time a separate trend based on translations of epics and *purāṇas*; authors drew also from folklore, and hence we have diverse variants of the stories about Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas. *Mahā-bhārata* began to be translated at the turn of the 16th century. Bengali poets rarely translated the whole epic, most frequently they covered some books, prepared summaries of the main narrative or developed the topics particularly popular among the audience, such as the story of Nala and Damayantī, Sāvitrī and Satyavant, Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta, a tale about the horse offering (*aśva-medha*) or

the abduction of Subhadrā, etc. None of the authors took up political, philosophical or moral issues. The authorship of the most popular translation of *Mahā-bhārata* in Bengal is ascribed to Kāśīrām Dās from the first half of the 17th century.

Developed by Bengali poets, the rather short story of Subhadrā's abduction (*subhadrā-haraṇa*) grew larger, changed, was enriched with additional strands, explanations or plots, and eventually Subhadrā became the main character of the epic, altogether eliminating Draupadī or Kuntī from it. It is worth analysing how this happened.

Mahā-bhārata

The first version of Subhadrā's abduction and her marriage to Arjuna known to us is included in the *Mahā-bhārata* (Mbh I.211-213).

As an introduction, it is worth mentioning that Arjuna took the highest number of wives among all the brothers – Bhīma has three wives, the remaining Pāṇḍavas two each. It was Arjuna who – during an archery tournament – won Draupadī, a princess from the Pāṇḍava country who became the first wife to all the five brothers. In order to avoid arguments among the brothers, the sage Nārada offered them a piece of advice – Draupadī was to live with each of them in turn. The Pāṇḍavas took an oath: the one who disturbs another in his free enjoying of the presence of their wife will go into exile.

(According to the critical text and a southern recension, the one-year long exile is mentioned at the moment of taking the oath, but from the remaining places in the text one can conclude that the exile was to last 12 years (Katz 1990: 68).)

It happened that one Brāhmaṇa (Mbh I.205.5-9) demanded that Arjuna should win back his stolen cows, and the latter, in order to take a bow, had to enter the room where Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī stayed. Thus he breached the oath and, as a consequence, set off for a pilgrimage to holy places as a *brahma-cārin*, i.e. vowing sexual abstinence. (However, he got married three times during that period.) He first headed for the North, to Gaṅgādvāra, where during a ritual bath in Gaṅgā he met Ulūpī (Mbh I.205.14-34).

Ulūpī

Ulūpī (Bhawalkar 2002: 352-363) was a daughter of Kauravya, a king of the Nāgas from the Airavata race. She took Arjuna to her father's underwater palace and declared that she loved him. The protagonist refused her, however, explaining himself by his vows. Ulūpī noted that abstinence was binding to him only with regard to Draupadī (Mbh I.206.24-32), and she threatened him with death in case of refusal. Arjuna married her and spent one night with her. She gave birth to a child who was given the name Irāvata.

Citrāṅgadā

Then Arjuna went to the East. In Manalūra, close to the sea, he saw Citrāṅgadā, a beautiful princess. He was so delighted with her that he asked her father, king Citravāhana, for her hand. The ruler agreed, but he set down particular conditions. The son born of Citrāṅgadā, who did not have a brother, would continue the line of her father's family. Arjuna spent three years with Citrāṅgadā. That marriage brought the birth of Babhruvāhana, who ascended to the throne after the death of his grandfather.

Subhadrā

Subhadrā from Dvārakā, in the West of India, was the last wife of Arjuna.

Arjuna, having visited various places of pilgrimage, reached Prabhāsa on the western coast of the ocean. Kṛṣṇa got to know about it and came to see him. They went together to the Raivataka Mountain, and then set out to Dvārakā, where Arjuna took up residence in Kṛṣṇa's palace. After some time, a great feast was prepared on the Raivataka, in which numerous inhabitants of Dvārakā took part.

Arjuna, strolling along with Kṛṣṇa, saw Subhadrā, a beautiful daughter of Vasudeva, and felt enchanted by her. Kṛṣṇa noticed it and asked jocularly whether the heart of a forest-dwelling anchorite could be troubled by love. That girl was his half-sister, he said, and if Arjuna liked her so much, he would inform their father. Pāṇḍava replied that he would be happy to have Kṛṣṇa's sister as his wife. He wanted to know how he could obtain her. Kṛṣṇa explained that although *svayam-vara* (a free choice of the fiancé by a girl) was a custom of the Kṣatriyas, in this case one could not be sure what she thought of Arjuna. Experts in the law allow abduction, especially if a brave knight is concerned. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa recommended that solution. Messengers were sent to Yudhiṣṭhira who approved of his brother's plans.

Arjuna learned that Subhadrā had left for the Raivataka Mountain. He followed her in his chariot under the pretext of hunting. Subhadrā made an offering to Raivataka, the lord of the mountains, and to all the gods. When she started her journey back to Dvārakā, Arjuna seized her and took her into his chariot.

The guards broke the news in Dvārakā about the abduction of Subhadrā. The knights started to get ready for the fight. Balarāma, outraged, considered Arjuna's deed a manifestation of disparagement, lack of respect and an act of disgrace to his own family. However, he restrained the knights, taking into consideration his younger brother's calmness and silence.

Then Kṛṣṇa spoke out on the matter (Mbh I.213.1-11). He stated that Arjuna did not bring disgrace to their family, but on the contrary, he showed them respect because he did not suspect them of greed. In fact, during *svayam-vara* one cannot be sure of its result. And who is going to sell one's own offspring? Undoubtedly, Arjuna took all that into account. Therefore, according to the law he abducted the girl by force. Who would not like to have him for a spouse? Arjuna comes from the Bharata tribe, he is

a descendant of the noble Śantanu, the son of Kuntībhoja's daughter. There is nobody in the three worlds who could defeat him. One should follow him and bring him back in haste. If Arjuna defeats them by force and reaches his town, he will divest them of fame, but there will be no shame in reaching an agreement with him.

Everyone agreed with the Kṛṣṇa's words. Arjuna was brought back and his marriage with Subhadrā was celebrated.

As can be gathered from the further part of the epic, Subhadrā must have had a strong character and a powerful position in the family. After the extermination of the Yādavas, Arjuna announced Vajra, Aniruddha's son, the king of the remaining members of the family. Yudhiṣṭhira summoned Subhadrā and instructed her to take care of the minor Vajra (Vettam 1996: 821).

In that story two issues are significant: Arjuna's love at first sight for Subhadrā without any information about the girl's feelings and Kṛṣṇa's speech to his angry brother and the Yādava knights.

Kṛṣṇa's speech

Kṛṣṇa considers the matter of a marriage suitable for the Kṣatriyas. He mentions *svayam-vara*, pointing to its uncertain result, and then compares handing over a girl (*kanyā-dāna*) to a gift of an animal, and he considers selling one's daughter to be equally shameful (marriage in the *asura* way). Having rejected those three types of marriage, Kṛṣṇa recommends the marriage through abduction (*rākṣasa*) as appropriate for a knight.

Undoubtedly, that way was close to Kṛṣṇa, who himself married Rukmīṇī, his first wife, in this way. Moreover, it has to be admitted that abductions of women happened rather frequently in princely families. Bhīṣma abducted Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā, three daughters of king Kāśī, for Vicitravīrya, his younger brother, whereas Samba, Kṛṣṇa's son, abducted Lakṣmaṇā, Duryodhana's daughter.

Sanskrit dramas

Strangely enough, although the creators of the courtly artistic epos and dramas frequently reached for topics from *Mahā-bhārata*, the story about Subhadrā did not arouse much interest. The only drama that appeared on the subject was entitled *Subhadrā-haraṇa*, written by Mādhava, relating Arjuna's escape with Subhadrā, whom he met in her father's house, disguised as a beggar (Keith 1924: 268-269).

Another author who devoted his work to this topic was Kulaśekharavarman (Renik 1994: 28-30; 2001: 113), a ruler, lover of theatre and playwright from Kerala, living at the turn of the 10th century, who composed for the purposes of performances taking place in temples, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the drama *Subhadrā and Arjuna* (*Subhadrā-dhanañjaya*)

(Śliwczyńska 2001: 233-234; 2003: 187-189). It is still performed nowadays in temples and beyond them. In the 15th century Vyāsa Śrīrāmadeva composed the drama *Subhadrā-parinayana* (Keith 1924: 270).

Bhāgavata-purāṇa

The account of the fourth marriage of Arjuna can be found in *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (BhP: 484-485), in book ten, chapter 86.

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* story is exceptionally short and contains only 12 couplets. Although it is consistent with *Mahā-bhārata* as regards the basic fact – Subhadrā's abduction, it differs in detail. The sage Śuka, answering king Parikṣit's question on how his grandfather Arjuna's marriage to Subhadrā, Kṛṣṇa's and Balarāma's sister, came about, recounts the story.

The sage goes straight to the heart of the matter, mentioning neither Arjuna's exile and its circumstances nor his marriage to Ulūpī and Citrāṅgadā. Arjuna learns in Prabhāsa that Balarāma intends to let Subhadrā, his cousin-german (Kuntī, Arjuna's mother, and Vasudeva, Subhadrā's father, were siblings), marry only Duryodhana, the oldest of the Kaurava brothers, not taking into consideration other potential candidates.

The meeting with Kṛṣṇa, the conversation with him and the spotting of the girl on the Raivataka Mountain are not mentioned in the text. However, at that moment *Bhāgavata* introduces a new thread. Arjuna, wishing to win Subhadrā, goes to Dvārakā disguised as an ascetic. Thus, the motive of Arjuna's activities is not love, as had been suggested in *Mahā-bhārata*, but most probably a political consideration – he wants to hinder the alliance between the Yādavas and the Kauravas, which would put the Pāṇḍavas on a hiding to nothing.

In Dvārakā, Arjuna, not recognised, spends four months of the rainy season. One day Balarāma invites him as a guest to his palace. There he sees the beautiful Subhadrā, who gives him a shy glance. They both fall in love with each other. Now Arjuna only waits for a good opportunity. Then we learn from one short expression, without additional explanations, that the protagonist obtains the approval of Subhadrā's parents and Kṛṣṇa. When she is travelling from the fortress to the temple, he gets into her chariot and overpowers her guards. Balarāma becomes very angry, but he calms down when Kṛṣṇa, his relatives and friends humbly embrace his feet. He sends a plethora of riches, elephants, chariots, horses and servants to the young couple as a gift.

In this way *Bhāgavata* brings several changes into the story: the disguise as an ascetic, the political motives of Arjuna's decision, and Subhadrā's love; the text considerably diminishes the role of Kṛṣṇa in the abduction and omits his famous speech.

Bengali literature

Bhāgavata-purāṇa

In Bengal, *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* was the first to be translated into the native language; therefore one should start with this text.

The first Bengali *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* is the composition by *Malādhār Vasu*, entitled *Kṛṣṇa's triumph (Śrī-kṛṣṇa-vijay)*, one of the most valuable works of the early phase of Bengali *vaiṣṇavism*. According to one of the stanzas of the poem, it was composed in 1473-1480. The poem used to enjoy and still enjoys a high prestige in the community of believers. The composition is not a translation of the whole *purāṇa*, but relates Kṛṣṇa's story from books 10 and 11. Although the poet did not try to render the content of the original in much detail, also deriving material from *Mahā-bhārata* and *Hari-vamśa*, numerous passages are literal translation.

The chapter of interest to us is entitled "The Abduction of Subhadrā by Arjuna" (*Arjuner Subhadrā-haraṇa*) (ŚKV: 172-174). The poet begins with the arrival of Nārada, the advice given to the Pāṇḍavas, the Brāhmaṇa's complaint about the theft of cows and Arjuna's one year exile. This introduction cannot be found in the original *Bhāgavata* – the poet most probably draws upon *Mahā-bhārata*. We do not learn anything about Arjuna's journey to pilgrimage places during that year. The author brings the protagonist immediately to Dvārakā and informs us about his meeting with Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. Arjuna was spending his time happily with the younger brother, and one day he saw a beautiful girl.

Thus, we have another version of the story: Arjuna for the first time sees Subhadrā, accompanied by Kṛṣṇa, not on the Raivataka Mountain, as the story goes according to *Mahā-bhārata*, but in Dvārakā. He saw her in Dvārakā according to *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, but there he was disguised as an ascetic. In this way the Bengali author creates his own version, selecting threads from both the classical texts and combining them.

Kṛṣṇa explains that the beauty seen by Arjuna is his sister and, seeing Arjuna's enchantment, he promises to let him marry her. However, he stresses that there is one problem – Balarāma is not going to accept it (the poet does not provide the reason), and nobody dares to stand against him. Hence, Kṛṣṇa suggests abducting Subhadrā at a suitable moment, when she is by herself.

In this text Subhadrā did not go either to the Raivataka Mountain, or to the temple, but to have a bath. Arjuna abducted her and took to his town. The outraged Balarāma with great anger announced revenge and ran with a bludgeon. Yādavas and Kṛṣṇa followed him. Balarāma noticed that Arjuna was driving Kṛṣṇa's chariot and understood that the abduction had taken place with his assent. However, Kṛṣṇa refused to admit his guilt. Moreover, he pointed to the fact that Arjuna was a suitable fiancé in every respect. His speech contained only a long praise of Arjuna and a short mention qualifying his deed as consistent with the Kṣatriya law. There were no reflections on marriages suitable for knights. Balarāma calmed down and only remarked that Kṛṣṇa had cunningly taken him

in. Arjuna came to Hastinanāgara [*sic*] the capital of the Pāṇḍavas was Indraprastha) and recounted everything to Yudhiṣṭhira. (So he had not sent a messenger to his brother asking for approval before.) Yet, we learn that Kṛṣṇa followed them with valuable jewels for Subhadrā.

Mahā-bhārata by Kāśīrām Dās

Kāśīrām Dās (Kāśīrām 1950: 207-240), following the original, introduces the Brāhmaṇa complaining about the theft of the cows, Arjuna's breaking into the armoury and his exile for 12 years. He relates Arjuna's one-day long marriage to Ulūpī, met in Haridvāra, and Citrāṅgadā from Maṇipura with whom he spent one year (not three years). Arjuna meets Subhadrā during a feast on the Raivataka Mountain.

At this moment, contrary to the Sanskrit original, the poet talks about the girl's sudden, incapacitating love. Swept by this emotion, Subhadrā is too weak to walk and sits down by herself. She explains to Satyabhāmā, Kṛṣṇa's beloved wife, that a thorn hurt her leg. When Kṛṣṇa's wife cannot find a wound on her foot, Subhadrā confesses that the arrows of Arjuna's glances had hurt her. Now, there comes a dialogue between the women. Reprimanded, Subhadrā complains about woman's lot, while Satyabhāmā, on the contrary, glorifies female power and promises to make her get married. Subhadrā warns Kṛṣṇa's wife that either Arjuna becomes her husband or the responsibility for her death will fall on Satyabhāmā.

Satyabhāmā promises to arrange a meeting with Arjuna at night. But first she informs Kṛṣṇa about Subhadrā's feelings, and he is glad to hear the news. Satyabhāmā leads the girl to Arjuna's room and wakes him up. She expresses concern about his marital situation – five brothers have to be contented with one wife. She offers a beautiful woman to him – he can be married to her in the *gandharva* way tonight. Arjuna resists the temptation – he agrees to marry a girl from the Yādava line only by order of Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa, and reminds her that he travels to places of pilgrimages as a *brahma-cārin* with his senses under control. Resigned, Subhadrā goes back home with Satyabhāmā, who asks Rati, goddess of love, for help. Rati puts magic cinnabar on the girl's forehead and mascara on her eyes. Subhadrā comes before Arjuna again. He becomes angry and lifts his hand in order to cut her nose off with a knife, but when he sees the cinnabar and the mascara, he loses his head and takes Subhadrā in his arms. Kṛṣṇa, informed of everything, shows contentment, but realises that Balarāma has an aversion to Arjuna. On the following day, at the meeting of the Yādava leaders, Kṛṣṇa mentions the issue of Subhadrā's marriage. He states that it is a shame and disgrace for the family, if a girl already has her period and she is still a maid. He recommends Arjuna, Kuntī's son, as the fiancé. The man is the best one in respect of his looks, virtues, family and character. Although Vasudeva and the Yādavas like the idea, Balarāma gets angry. He has chosen Duryodhana for Subhadrā, the oldest of the Kaurava brothers, from a great family, famous, powerful and wealthy. Arjuna cannot compare with him even in the slightest degree. Everyone hangs

his head and sits in silence. Balarāma sends messengers to Hastināpura. The intervention of Devakā and Rohinī, Vasudeva's wives, informed about Subhadrā's situation, does not help. Satyabhāmā, worried by this failure, goes to Kṛṣṇa to seek assistance. He gives Arjuna his chariot and recommends abducting the girl.

Arjuna abducts Subhadrā during her premarital bath in the Sarasvatī River, and goes to Indraprastha. He ties up the coachman, and Subhadrā undertakes driving the chariot. The vehicle bolts with the speed of the wind. The Yādavas set off in pursuit. The chariot sometimes glides over the sky, at other times over the earth, hides in the clouds, cruises in the skies and attacks suddenly, like a serpent. Arjuna is fighting, and nobody knows where he is.

When Balarāma learns that Arjuna is riding Kṛṣṇa's chariot, he sits down on the ground and cries, offended. Kṛṣṇa brought disgrace on him. He unfairly blames Arjuna, and immediately summons Duryodhana, whereas the Brāhmaṇas were conducting premarital celebrations. Kṛṣṇa refuses to admit his guilt, he used to give his chariot to Arjuna many times, how could he know that the man would abduct his sister. There is no one in the three worlds who would be able to defeat the Pāṇḍava. A knight who gets married by force is brave. Moreover, if Subhadrā were not in love, would she drive the chariot? One should follow Arjuna and arrange the nuptials.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana comes to Dvārakā and threatens revenge. However, when he gets to know that Arjuna has been summoned to go back to Dvārakā, he returns to Hastināpura.

Subhadrā is married to Arjuna in accordance with the Veda regulations.

This thread from the Bengali epic is not the abduction of Subhadrā by the infatuated Arjuna, but rather the seduction of Arjuna by the girl overwhelmed with uncontrollable love. The marriage takes place due to her initiative, and the abduction is only a consequence of her choice.

The story of Kṛṣṇa (Kṛṣṇa-caritra) by Bankimchandra

Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), the originator of the Bengali novel, introduced interesting reflections on Kṛṣṇa's part in the process leading to Subhadrā's marriage. In his treatise *The Story of Kṛṣṇa (Kṛṣṇa-caritra)* 1886) the writer, treating *Mahā-bhārata* as a credible source, tried to prove the historic nature of Kṛṣṇa. Bankimchandra declared himself Kṛṣṇa's follower, but in his work examined only Kṛṣṇa's human life, and did not ascribe divine features to him. He considered Kṛṣṇa to be the most perfect embodiment of mankind's best ideals, a farsighted statesman, a noble knight, a committed son, husband and father. He considered the numerous episodes in the epic which contradict his vision of the character to be later interpolations introduced by Kṛṣṇa's enemies.

The writer devoted the third chapter of the fourth book, entitled "Indraprastha", to the abduction of Subhadrā (Bankim 1969: 498-504). In doing that he had no doubt that the story makes part of the original epic. Subhadrā is strongly connected with the events

in *Mahā-bhārata* as Abhimanyu's mother and Parikṣit's grandmother. The descendants of Subhadrā and Arjuna ruled the empire of the Bharatas for long centuries. Bankimchandra distances himself from Kāśīrām Dās's version, grandmothers' tales, storytellers' legends, talking about Subhadrā's infatuation with Arjuna, Satyabhāmā's mediation, the fight with the Yādava soldiers and Subhadrā's riding the chariot in the skies. All that is a beautiful tale, an innovation introduced by Kāśīrām, or by later poets, but it has nothing to do with the original narrative from the epic.

Bankimchandra stated at the beginning of his investigations that from the point of view of the morals accepted by 19th century society, Kṛṣṇa's deed, advising Arjuna to abduct his sister, was reprehensible and liable to punishment. Abduction constitutes an act of violence towards the girl, her parents and society. However, one should take into account the principles of the respective epoch. Kṛṣṇa was Subhadrā's elder brother, his duty was to find the best husband for her. Undoubtedly, Arjuna was such a perfect candidate, and Subhadrā did not show aversion to him. Bankimchandra wonders at that moment, what types of vows came into consideration four thousand years ago, when Arjuna met Subhadrā. (The writer, considering different historical references and astronomical calculations, came to the conclusion that Bharata's descendants fought in the Kurukṣetra field in 1430 BC) (Bankim 1969: 415). The author derived his information from the Manu treatise, which lists eight types of marriages: *brahma*, *daiva*, *ārṣa*, *prājāpatya*, *asura*, *gandharva*, *rākṣasa* and *paiśāca*, i.e., the espousal of Brahma, gods, sages, the Lord of the Creatures, a demiurge, geniuses, demons and ghosts (Manu 1985: 81).

Not all the estates, as the writer emphasises, had the right to choose from the whole set. The Kṣatriyas could get married only according to *asura*, *gandharva*, *rākṣasa* and *paiśāca* custom. In turn, *asura* and *paiśāca* were not recommended by legislators, so only two types were left to the Kṣatriyas: *gandharva* and *rākṣasa* (Manu 1985: 81-82). Yet, we also have a stanza there which recommends exclusively the marriage of demons to the Kṣatriyas.

The marriage in the *gandharva* way (the marriage of geniuses), with the mutual consent of the young couple, could not be taken into consideration due to the lack of Subhadrā's love for Arjuna. Thus, only the marriage through abduction, the vows of demons (*rākṣasa*) was left, recommended by the treatise as appropriate for the Kṣatriyas.

Bankimchandra quite rightly wonders whether Manu's work was known in the times of *Mahā-bhārata*. He reminds us that the treatise constitutes only an inventory and codification of customs, laws and norms, applying to the members of the society. The answer to whether such marital customs were known in Yudhiṣṭhira's times is given by Kṛṣṇa's famous reply to the accusations against Arjuna expressed by Balarāma.

Kṛṣṇa mentions three types of marriages which he considers to be inappropriate for the Kṣatriyas, and the marriage through abduction as the only one that brings honour and fame. Thus, Kṛṣṇa, advising Arjuna to abduct his sister as an appropriate solution for a Kṣatriya, behaved like the best brother, wishing good to Subhadrā and to his own family. Simultaneously, it was a type of marriage recommended by legislators. There was nothing blameworthy in his advice.

One more issue is still puzzling. Bankimchandra, considering so meticulously the conformity of Subhadrā and Arjuna's marriage to the law, did not take into account Manu's preliminary recommendation for the selection of the candidate for a wife, namely: the wife should not be either the mother's or the father's relative (Manu 1985: 78-79).

Subhadrā is the daughter of Arjuna's uncle (his mother's brother), so she is his very close relative. Basham (Basham 1973: 208) stresses that the rights concerning the obstacles to enter into marriage, resulting from kinship, were very strictly observed in Northern India, though in Deccan marriages between relatives sometimes occurred.

Characteristically, Kṛṣṇa, praising Arjuna in front of the angry Balarāma and the Yādavas ready for the fight, presented him as someone born in the Bharata family, a descendant of Śantanu and the son of Kuntībhoja's daughter. Kṛṣṇa did not make them aware that Arjuna was the son of Kuntī, Vasudeva's sister. Śūrasena, father of Vasudeva and Kuntī (she was born as Prthā, and later her name was changed to Kuntī), promised to let his eldest daughter be brought up by his sister's son, the childless king Kuntībhoja. Does the fact that she was the foster-child of that Kuntībhoja, obscure the real kinship? Or, in fact, did the Yādavas observe different marital laws?

If one reflects on Arjuna's marriages, none of them fully conformed to Manu's laws. In that respect, let us consider the way Arjuna entered into the three previous marriages. He won Draupadī during her *svayam-vara*. However, it was not a free selection by the princess of a fiancé from among the knights gathered. Draupadī was to be given to the knight who would hit a rather small target, placed high, from a heavy, hard bow. Arjuna succeeded at it, but she became the wife to all the five brothers, so we have here an example of polyandry. The marriage to Ulūpī was contracted in the *gandharva* way (with the mutual consent of the young couple). Although that manner is appropriate for the Kṣatriyas, Arjuna did not take Ulūpī to his house and did not live with her, the marriage lasted one day. The espousal with Citrāṅgadā is a particular case of wife purchase, Arjuna paid with the son who was going to be born. Katz (1990: 62) claims that it was a marriage in the way of demiurges (*asura*) – for the price of the son. Citrāṅgadā also did not move to her husband's house. It seems that the only wives approved by the Pāṇḍava and Yādava families were Draupadī and Subhadrā, the latter a beautiful and young woman, of whom the older one was jealous.

Nevertheless, the four wives of Arjuna represent not only the four cardinal directions: Draupadī – the South, Ulūpī – the North, Citrāṅgadā – the East, Subhadrā – the West. As R.C. Katz put it (Katz 1990: 61), his four wives in the four parts of the world represent also four elements of existence (*bhūta*). Although Katz (Katz 1990: 62) connects Ulūpī with the earth (*prthivī*) (the relationship with Ulūpī is the folk theme of marriage with an animal and Ulūpī as a serpent is a symbol of fertility connected with the earth), I think that this element is represented by Draupadī, Arjuna's first wife, whereas Ulūpī corresponds to water. She sees Arjuna in Gaṅgādvāra, the source of the Ganges river, and takes him to her father's underwater palace. Citrāṅgadā, an inhabitant of Maṇipura, living in the South-Eastern part of the world, whose guardian is Agni, represents fire. Subhadrā is then connected with the air. Vāyu, the wind, air, is the guardian of the North-West.

Arjuna's wives come from four different parts of the world and symbolise four elements of existence: earth, water, fire, and air. However, in the epic period, a theory of five elements was known (ether, wind, fire, water and earth), and it permeated to nearly all the schools and systems (Frauwallner 1990: 126, 138-142, 169). Although Arjuna did not have the fifth wife, the fifth element can be represented by the nymph Urvaśī, a heavenly being, inhabitant of paradise, who offered her love to him, in spite of the fact that the protagonist turned her advances down.

Arjuna and his wives represent perfectly the ideal of a hero and a brave knight.

Nabinchandra Sen

Still another treatment of the theme of Subhadrā and Arjuna is proposed by Nabinchandra Sen (1847-1909), an outstanding romantic poet, the author of an epic trilogy: *Raivataka* (1887), *Kurukṣetra* (1893) and *Prabhāsa* (1896), called the *Mahā-bhārata* of the 19th century. Nabinchandra, having studied Bankimchandra's epic and treatise, provided a new interpretation of the classical work, placing Kṛṣṇa, not the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, at the centre of the events. The action of the three parts is concentrated around the abduction of Subhadrā, the killing of Abhimanyu and the extermination of the Yādava family. Subhadrā becomes the main female character. In this *Mahā-bhārata* Draupadī and Kuntī do not appear at all.

Arjuna, travelling to places of pilgrimages, arrives at Prabhāsa and together with Kṛṣṇa goes to the Raivataka Mountain, where Vyāsa lives in the forest of asceticism. He confesses to the sage the reason for his travels. It is not exile as a result of the disturbance of his eldest brother in an intimate situation, but the pangs of conscience after Arjuna has killed the thief who had stolen the Brāhmaṇa's cows. The ruler of the Nāgas turned out to be the thief who complained to Arjuna about his lot. The Āryas took the large kingdom of his ancestors, his wife cries of hunger, his eight-year old daughter asks for milk (Sen 1988: 28). Arjuna killed the ruler of the Nāgas. However, he was worried about his eight-year old daughter, and therefore set off on a journey to places of pilgrimage and looked for her in vain for a long time.

Arjuna saw Subhadrā for the first time in Vyāsa's hermitage, on the Raivataka Mountain (according to the epic version). Subhadrā fell in love with Arjuna. The young girl painted a portrait of her beloved one and thus gave away her feeling. Arjuna met her in the palace garden, where due to the pranks of the five-year old Pradyumna-Manmatha, Kṛṣṇa's son, they managed to convince each other of their mutual love. Satyabhāmā, Kṛṣṇa's beloved wife, learned about it and informed him about her decision of giving Subhadrā to Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa was afraid that Balarāma would oppose the marriage anyway.

The great politics of India concentrates around Subhadrā's marriage. Vāsuki, the leader of the Nāga tribe, demanded her hand in marriage as a reward for his assistance in defeating Kāṁsa. Kṛṣṇa calmly refused arguing that his sister was still a child, but Balarāma became indignant at his willingness to mix the noble blood of the Yādavas

with a wild animal, which he considered Vāsuki to be. Angry Vāsuki collaborated with Durvāsas, who wanted to take revenge on the Kauravas and the Yādavas, because once, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, busy in conversation, had not noticed his arrival and had not shown him appropriate respect. Durvāsas wished for the destruction of the Kṣatriyas and devised before Vāsuki his plans for a powerful state of the Non-Āryas, guided by the advice of the Brāhmaṇas. He decided to divide the Yādavas and the Kauravas. He informed Balarāma that Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, talked about him with admiration, while Bhīma the second of the Pāṇḍava brothers, expressed neglect towards him and considered him to be weak. The simple-hearted Balarāma believed the sage and immediately decided to give Subhadrā to Duryodhana. Durvāsas was convinced that when Arjuna got to know about it, bloodshed would take place between the cousins.

Meanwhile Arjuna meditated how to get married to Subhadrā. It was very important to him not only for emotional reasons but also for political ones. If the Kauravas allied themselves with the Yādavas through Subhadrā's marriage, the situation of the Pāṇḍavas would be disastrous. The abduction of the girl would solve the matter, but then he would be guilty as a guest received kindly by the Yādavas. Eventually, Satyabhāmā encouraged him to undertake abduction, while Kṛṣṇa lent him his chariot, so that he could set off at dawn under the pretext of hunting.

In his speech of defence before his elder brother, Kṛṣṇa (Sen 1988: 258) refers to the holy books. The abduction of the girl is the right of the Kṣatriya. Arjuna knows that Balarāma will not agree to *svayam-vara*, he knows that one does not sell daughters in the Yādava family. What Kṣatriya would beg for a wife? Arjuna is a son of the Bharata family, Śāntanu's son, and Kuntī's son.

The messenger who brings the news that Subhadrā is driving the chariot, and protecting Arjuna, injured in the fight, with a bow. The Yādavas, full of high regard for the girl, shouted: "Victory for Bhadrā and Arjuna!"

Thus, the abduction of Subhadrā, similarly to the abduction of Helena, brought about a terrible war and the extermination of the Kṣatriyas in the Kurukṣetra field.

In the final parts of *Prabhāsa*, Nabinchandra (Sen 1988: 161) refers to the three statues in the temple of Jagannātha in Puri. The author announced that a Non-Ārya artist would make statues of Jagannātha, Subhadrā and Arjuna out of the *neem* tree under which Kṛṣṇa lost his life. A great temple would be built there. The place would become a place of linkage between the Āryas and the Non-Āryas. An Ārya Brāhmaṇa and a Non-Ārya would sing the same name of Kṛṣṇa.

The cult of Subhadrā in Puri

In Jagannātha's temple in Puri the wooden statues of Subhadrā and of both her brothers, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, are treated with particular respect. Subhadrā, a female deity, takes the central position in the triad. Numerous aspects of her cult suggest that initially she was a Śāktic deity, the Mother of the World (Jagan-mātā), Durgā Bhuvaneśvarī, and her

original partner was Śiva. Once, Puri was the centre of Śivaism and Śaktism. Probably, at first two statues stood in the temple: the one of Jagannātha and the other of Subhadrā, whereas Balarāma was introduced later. The interpretation of the female deity in the triad as a sister to both could not be the original one; it is a later innovation (Stietencron 1986: 49, 57). Subhadrā from *Mahā-bhārata*, Arjuna's wife, and Abhimanyu's mother, was not deified. Here are the other names of the female deity from Puri: Kātyāyanī, Durgā, Bhadrakālī, associating her with the second sister of Kṛṣṇa, Ekānamśā, Yaśodā's daughter, who died instead of Kṛṣṇa, crushed against a stone by Kamsa (Eschman 1988: 182). Over time, she had been forgotten and Subhadrā replaced her in the triad.

Summary

The story of Subhadrā's abduction, her marriage to Arjuna and the images of the characters has undergone numerous transformations over two thousand years. Undoubtedly, it was caused by the expectations of the audience, the social situation of the epoch, the authors' outlook and their objectives.

In the first text, the Sanskrit epic, Kṛṣṇa's speech of defence comes to the foreground, justifying extensively the right of the Kṣatriyas to marriage through abduction. Kṛṣṇa confirms here his reputation as an adroit politician. His words alleviate the imminent conflict; Balarāma stops thinking of revenge and accepts Arjuna as his brother-in-law. Subhadrā is not an active character here; she does not have her own opinion.

Bhāgavata-purāṇa agrees to that type of relationship as if by necessity, the text attempts to introduce the approval of the abducted maiden into the plot. Subhadrā gets to know Arjuna in her brother's house and smiles at him shyly, full of admiration for his looks. Approximately one thousand years later, a *purāṇa* was composed in the South, which paid attention to women's feelings, experiences and opinions. Women's love started to be important. This text also emphasises the political significance of Subhadrā's marriage. Arjuna sets out to Dvārakā only because he does not want Duryodhana to get her. In the epic, Kṛṣṇa, encouraging Arjuna to act, plays practically no role.

The Bengali version of the *purāṇa* is, in turn, closer to the epic, and takes it as its model, differing with rather insignificant details, although it is of course much simpler.

A new, rich version of the theme is presented in the Bengali *Mahā-bhārata*, developing broadly the theme of the female scheme concerning Subhadrā's marriage. Here, women take matters into their own hands. It turns out that Kṛṣṇa's young, innocent sister seduced the stubborn Arjuna, and the abduction became only a logical consequence of her deed. Both women, Satyabhāmā and her ward, show great courage, ingenuity and independence. The marriage was not decided by the fiancé or her brothers, but the girl herself, with assistance of her kinswomen and relatives who help her to implement her plans. Would that image of women's rule be, to some extent, an allusion to the Court of the Great Mughals?

It is Subhadrā's eldest brother that has the right to take the decision concerning her marriage, the parents have nothing to say here, Vasudeva and Devakī are rarely mentioned in that thread. The elder and the younger brothers compete over which candidature will win. Will Subhadrā marry Duryodhana, chosen for her by Balarāma, or Arjuna, supported by Kṛṣṇa?

Bankimchandra tries first of all to prove that Kṛṣṇa's advice recommending Arjuna to abduct his sister was the only right one and consistent with the tradition of the times.

Nabinchandra clearly places emphasis on the character of Subhadrā, as the most important events happen around her and because of her. She is the reason for the fight among the Bharatas. Numerous versions of the abduction of Subhadrā were created, but none of them had such a complicated political background.

As can be seen, society (politicians, historians, artists) chooses facts from its history and interprets them according to its needs. *Mahā-bhārata* and its characters in the Hindus' awareness constitute their own historic past, it is the knowledge about *dharma* and *adharma*, about conflicts and solutions to them. In literature, like in a mirror, one can see a reflection of the epoch, its beliefs and ideas. The short story of Subhadrā's abduction was enriched with additional threads and used as an argument in the defence of caste rights, it defended universal values and the good, it maybe criticised the reality of the times, and praised ideal characters drawing a vision of a bright future.

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