

## Brahmacarya and social engagement in the Mahabharata

Maithili Thayanithy (University of Toronto, Canada)

Hindu asceticism is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and one of the significant concepts associated with it is brahmacarya (celibacy). I explore the epic's gender-differentiated interpretations of brahmacarya using two narratives found in the epic: the story of Jaratkaru and the story of Kunirgargya's daughter, found in the first and ninth books of the epic respectively. These two stories are similar in structure, and can be divided into three sections: The first section describes the penance (tapas) of a male sage Jaratkaru and a nameless female ascetic, referred to as Kunirgargya's daughter. The second section describes the situation that warrants the ascetics' breaches of celibacy (brahmacarya), and the covenant into which they enter with their respective spouses. The third section refers to the achievement of heaven, the object of their desires, despite the violations of the vows of celibacy. Though structural similarities can be observed in these narratives, the epic's perceptions and meanings of brahmacarya for males and females differ sharply. Whereas men realize full potential of masculinity by means of brahmacarya, a woman's realization of womanhood is believed to stem from the discharging of her gender role as a wife (sadvi). It is noteworthy that wifeness is given precedence over motherhood in the epic. These narratives convey the notion that norms of brahmacarya are not contravened when males and females engage in sexual activity with the sole aim of fulfilling their social obligations. This view, I argue, is compatible with the chief message of the epic – karma yoga, i.e. performing one's duties without attachment. The term that is central to the epic's discussion of sex within domesticity is niyama, that is, the rules that circumscribe the sexual activities in marriage. Thus, these narratives place an utmost emphasis on social engagement, reiterating only the availability of a ritualistic path to heaven for women, while allowing men to practice asceticism and celibacy once his ritualistic obligations towards his ancestors are fulfilled.