

THE GAMBLING CONFLICT IN THE *MAHABHARATA*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SANSKRIT, TAMIL, AND MALAY VERSIONS

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Abstract: This comparative study examines the gambling episode from the Mahabharata across three different literary traditions the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, the Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* to identify key similarities and differences, understand how these variations reflect theological and cultural priorities, and analyze the unique Tamil innovation of a second gambling match within its Saiva cultural context. The study employs comparative textual analysis of thirty-two discrete narrative elements identified from the Sanskrit *Sabha Parva*, the Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*. Elements were coded for presence, absence, variation, modification, addition, or omission across all three versions. While all three versions preserve the core sequence dice game, Yudhiṣṭhira's loss, Draupadi's humiliation, and Bhima's vengeance vows are significant divergences emerge. The Tamil version uniquely introduces a second gambling match where Yudhiṣṭhira, after worshipping Krishna, wins back everything, yet voluntarily enters exile to honour Dhrtarastra's request. The Malay version omits Krishna's miracle entirely, eliminates the second game and transforms the Pandavas into permanent slaves rather than exiles, with no subsequent war narrative. The Tamil innovation demonstrates how bhakti theology reshaped the narrative to present voluntary suffering as devotion and Krishna's grace as superior to human deceit. The Malay redaction reflects post-Islamisation constraints, where Hindu divine miracles became unacceptable and indigenous performance traditions influenced localisation. These findings illuminate how classical Indian epics were indigenised across South India and Southeast Asia in response to distinct religious, cultural and literary contexts. The gambling episode's divergent resolutions across Sanskrit, Tamil and Malay traditions reveal that adaptation choices were neither random nor merely abridging, but systematically shaped by theological priorities, cultural constraints and literary tastes, with the Tamil version representing the most theologically innovative recension.

Keywords: *Mahabharata*, gambling conflict, Sanskrit, Tamil, Malay

INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata* is a long and important story that has been told for centuries. It started in the subcontinent but it has travelled to many other places like Java and the Malay Peninsula. Everywhere it went people retold the story translated it and changed it to make it their own. One of the exciting parts of the *Mahabharata* is the gambling match at Hastinapura. This is where Yudhiṣṭhira, the oldest of the Pandavas brothers makes a mistake. He bets his kingdom, his brothers, himself and even his wife Draupadi. He loses everything to the sneaky Sakuni, who is playing for the mean Duryodhana. This loss sets off a chain of events that leads to the Pandavas being exiled to the forest for twelve years. Then they have to live in disguise for a year. After that they fight a war at Kurukshetra.

The *Mahabharata* is not told the way everywhere. The original Sanskrit version is a story that deals with big questions about right and wrong and it features many characters like Vidura, Vikarna, Karṇa and Krishna. The Tamil version, called the *Villiparatam* is similar to the Sanskrit version. It has some key

differences. For example, in the Tamil version Yudhiṣṭhira gets to play another game and wins back everything after praying to Krishna. Even though he wins the Pandavas still decide to go into exile because they want to honour their uncle Dhṛtarāṣṭra's request. The Malay version, called the *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* is very different, from the two. In this version the Pandavas become slaves. Krishna does not perform a miracle to save Draupadi. This version of the story also does not involve the Pandavas going into exile or fighting a war. The Mahabharata is a story that has been retold in ways and each version has its own unique twists and turns.

These differences are not arbitrary. They reflect the theological priorities, cultural constraints, and literary tastes of three very different audiences. By examining them side by side, this paper seeks to answer three questions:

- i. What are the key similarities and differences in the gambling episode across the Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay versions?
- ii. How do these differences reflect the theological and cultural priorities of each tradition?
- iii. What does the unique Tamil version especially the second gambling match reveal about the narrative's adaptation for a Saiva Tamil audience? In answering these questions, the article contributes to our understanding of how classical Indian epics were indigenised in South India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the Mahabharata in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay traditions has been conducted through books, theses, and scholarly articles in Indonesian, Malay, English, and Tamil. Early studies primarily focused on tracing the transmission of Indian epic traditions into Southeast Asia. Choo Ming Ding and Willem van der Molen examined the presence of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Javanese and Malay literature, highlighting the adaptation of Indian epics within local literary traditions (Ding & Van der Molen, 2018). Likewise, Coedès (1968) and Sarkar (1970) explored the broader process of Indian cultural influence and its role in shaping the civilizations of Southeast Asia, including the incorporation of Mahabharata narratives into regional literary cultures.

Subsequent scholarship focused on the development of Malay literature and the integration of Mahabharata elements into it. Ismail Hamid (1985, 1987) demonstrated the significant influence of the Mahabharata and Javanese literary traditions on classical Malay literature. Similarly, Khalid Hussain (1990) analyzed the *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* and argued that the Javanese Mahabharata played a central role in shaping Malay retellings of the Pandava story. Studies by Sachithanandam (1970, 2004) and Muniyandi (2017) further situated these literary developments within the broader framework of Indian cultural and religious influence in Southeast Asia.

Comparative studies of the Mahabharata across linguistic traditions remain limited. One of the most significant contributions is that of Samikkanu Jabamoney Ishak Samuel (2002), whose master's thesis compared the Malay, Sanskrit, and Tamil versions of Hikayat Pandawa Lima and identified important similarities and differences among the three traditions. His doctoral research (Samuel, 2008) and subsequent article (Samuel, 2019) further examined the influence of the Ramayana and Mahabharata on Tamil and Malay literary works in Malaysia. Harry Aveling (2018) also adopted a comparative approach by analyzing the portrayal of Abimanyu's death in Javanese, Malay, and modern Indonesian texts (Aveling, 2018).

Despite these important contributions, existing scholarship has largely focused on bilateral comparisons, such as Indian–Malay or Javanese–Malay literary relationships. Brakel (1980), for example, compared Indian epics in Malay and Javanese literature but did not include the Tamil tradition. Consequently, comprehensive comparative analyses encompassing Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malay versions of the Mahabharata remain rare. This gap highlights the need for further research that examines all three traditions together in order to better understand the processes of adaptation, transmission, and localization of the Mahabharata across South and Southeast Asia (Brakel, 1980; Samuel, 2002; Aveling, 2018).

METHODS

This study employs comparative textual analysis. Three primary texts were examined:

1. *Īyasar Aruliya Mahābhārata. (MBV)* Vol. 1-4. 1989. Trans. A.L.Nadarajan. Madras: Bharaty Pathipagam (vol. 1, pp 286-368).
2. Villiputturar. (1990). *Villiparatam (VP)* (Vol. 1–4, A. Manikkam, Ed.). Madras: Vartamanan (vo. 1 pp 110-299).
3. *Hikayat Pandawa Lima (HPL)* – The edited text by Khalid Hussain (1992), gambling episode (pp. 1–3).

The researcher found thirty-two parts to the story in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* account like Duryodhana being jealous the invitation, Sakuni's dice, the order of bets, Draupadi being called her clothes being taken off Krishna's miracle, the second game and the condition of being sent away. I checked each of these parts to see if they were in the *Villiparatam* and *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* and if they were different. The findings were then categorised into five types: (a) similarities across all three versions; (b) similarities between two versions; (c) modifications; (d) unique additions; (e) omissions. This framework allowed systematic documentation of variation while remaining sensitive to the distinctive literary character of each tradition.

The analysis is based on what I thought when I read the texts though I also looked at other people's translations to make sure I was right. The information, in Table 1 is taken from a paper I wrote for my master's degree at the University of Malaya where I explained it all in detail.

FINDINGS

Overview of the Gambling Episode in Each Version

Sanskrit Mahabharata (MBV)

Duryodhana is really jealous of the Pandavas. How well they are doing at Indraprastha. So Duryodhana comes up with a plan with Sakuni to invite Yudhiṣṭhira to play a game of dice. Sakuni plays the game for Duryodhana. He uses cheating dice. Yudhiṣṭhira loves to gamble. He bets everything he has. His money, his kingdom, his brothers, himself and even Draupadi. When they call Draupadi to come she says that the bet was not fair because Yudhiṣṭhira had already lost himself. Vidura and Vikarna think she is right. Karna is mean, to her and says she is a bad woman. Duhsasana tries to take her clothes off. Krishna helps her by making her clothes never end. Bhima gets very angry. Says he will drink Duhsasanas blood and hurt Duryodhanas leg. Dhrtarastra is scared of what the Pandavas might do so he lets them go home. Duryodhana wants to play another game of dice. This time the person who loses has to go in the forest for twelve years and then live in secret for one year. Yudhiṣṭhira loses again. The Pandavas go to the forest. (*Vyasara Aruliya Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 286-368).

Tamil Villiparatam (VP)

The Tamil version is very similar to the Sanskrit one. It has a big difference in the second game of dice. After the game and the way Draupadi was treated so badly Draupadi herself asks if she can play dice again. She wants to play so she can free herself from being a servant in a way. Then Tarmar plays dice after saying prayers to Kannan. Because of Kannans help Tarmar wins back everything they had lost. Even though they won the Pandavas still choose to go into the forest on their own to do what Tirutarāttiran asked. This way it still shows that Kannan helped them and they also have to go into exile like they were supposed to. It seems like this is saying that choosing to suffer is a way to show devotion than being forced to do it. The Tamil version of the story is about Krishna and the Pandavas. It shows how Krishna helps them. The story is saying that the Pandavas went into exile because they wanted to not just because they had to. This is a part of the story and it shows how much they care about doing the right thing. The Tamil version is, about the Pandavas and Krishna and it shows how much they believe in doing good things. (Villiputturar, vol 1, 110-299).

Malay Hikayat Pandawa Lima (HPL)

The Malay version is really short. The episode starts all of a sudden: Duryodhana tells Arya Manggala and Patih Sangkuni to be the game board and Dushasana to be the dice. "*Maharaja Duryudana mengarahkan Arya Manggala serta Patih Sangkuni menjadi papan dan Sang Dursana menjadi parih*" (Khalid Hussain, 1). They play the game and Darmawangsa, who is also known as Yudhiṣṭhira loses everything he has his palace. The Kauravas go to Indera Pasta, which is also known as Indraprastha to take what is theirs. Dushasana pulls Draupadis hair. Even unties her bun. Draupadi says she will not tie her hair again until she washes it with Dushasanas blood. Bhima tries to attack Dushasana. Someone stops him. Then Yudhiṣṭhira puts himself at risk and loses so all five Pandavas become slaves. Bhima gets really angry.

Breaks the dice, which turn back into Patih Sangkuni and Arya Manggala. Bhima kills Arya Manggala. The Pandavas say they do not want to be slaves because Duryodhana cheated. They still have to be slaves because Bhima killed Arya Manggala. There is no miracle from Krishna, no game, no time in the forest and no war in this episode. The story keeps going with the Pandavas as slaves, in Hastinapura (Khalid Hussain, 1-3).

Comparative Table of Narrative Elements

The 32 narrative elements were systematically selected from the Sanskrit *Mahabharata's Sabha Parva* as a comprehensive baseline framework. These parts were chosen to show the story of the gambling episode. The story starts before the gambling begins, with Duryodhana feeling envious getting an invitation and getting ready for the Rajasuya. Then the story shows what happens during the game like the bets that are made Draupadi being called to come and the bad things that happen to her. The story ends with what happens after the game like Krishna doing a miracle Dhrtarastra stepping in playing the game again and being sent away. Each big turn in the story what the characters do what is important, to God and what people think is right or wrong are all looked at one by one. The *Mahabharata's Sabha Parva* and the gambling episode are the things that are being talked about here. The *Mahabharata's Sabha Parva* is used to understand the story of the gambling episode. The decision to do this made sure that each part was big enough to check if it was there not there or different in the Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*. This way it was still possible to see what made each one special. The table with 32 points is a tool that's easy to follow and use again. It helps to move from just getting a general idea and towards a careful analysis that is based on facts. This lets the author see how certain ideas about religion like the Tamil story of Yudhiṣṭhira winning after praying to Krishna and cultural limits like the Malay story leaving out the miracle from God because of Islamisation affected how each version was adapted. The Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* are two stories that have these differences. The author can now look at the Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima*. See how they are different. This is because the Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* have things, about them. The Tamil *Villiparatam* and the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* can be compared in a way that's clear and easy to understand.

Table 1

Summarises the presence or absence of thirty-two narrative elements across the three versions. The symbols mean: ✓ = present, ✗ = absent, ~ = present but with variation.

Element	MBV	VP	HPL
1 Mayan builds a hall at Indraprastha	✓	✓	✗
2 Narada conveys Paṇḍu's message	✓	✓	✗
3 Bhima kills Jarasandha	✓	✓	✗
4 Collection of tribute for Rajasuya	✓	✓	✗
5 Invitation of kings to Rajasuya	✓	✓	✗
6 Krishna kills Sisupāla	✓	✓	✗
7 Duryodhana's envy at Pandavas' success	✓	✓	✗

8	Duryodhana humiliated at Indraprastha (mistaking floor for water)	✓	✓	✗
9	Duryodhana consults Sakuni only (MBV) / consults Karna, Sakuni, Duhsasana (VP)	~	~	✗
10	Dhrtarastra seeks Vidura's advice, orders hall built	✓	~	✗
11	Dhrtarastra unhappy (MBV) / happy (VP)	~	~	✗
12	Dhrtarastra sends Vidura to invite Pandavas	✓	✓	✗
13	Gambling match between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana/Sakuni	✓	✓	✓
14	Dice/board as gambling tools	✓	✓	✓
15	Before the game, Duryodhana appoints Arya Manggala and Sangkuni as board, Dushasana as dice	✗	✗	✓
16	Yudhiṣṭhira loses all his wealth	✓	✓	✓
17	Yudhiṣṭhira stakes his brothers and himself	✓	✓	✗ (only himself)
18	Yudhiṣṭhira stakes Draupadi	✓	✓	✗
19	Draupadi summoned – Vidura refuses	✓	~	✗
20	Duhsasana drags Draupadi by her hair	✓	✓	✓
21	Draupadi swears not to tie her hair until washed with Duhsasana's blood	✓	✓	✓
22	Bhima swears to drink Duhsasana's blood	✓	✓	✓
23	Krishna's miracle saves Draupadi's honour	✓	✓	✗
24	Vikarna protests the bet	✓	✓	✗
25	Karna insults Draupadi	✓	✓	✗
26	Bhima swears to break Duryodhana's thigh	✓	✓	~ (mentioned later)
27	Dhrtarastra frees the Pandavas	✓	✓	✗
28	Second game proposed with exile condition	✓	~ (different resolution)	✗
29	Yudhiṣṭhira loses second game	✓	✗ (wins after worshipping Krishna)	✗
30	Pandavas go into forest exile for 12 years	✓	✓ (voluntarily)	✗ (become slaves)
31	Pandavas lives incognito for 1 year	✓	✓	✗
32	Draupadi remains with Pandavas in exile	✓	✓	✗ (not mentioned)

As Table 1 shows, MBV and VP share most narrative beats, with VP differing mainly in Dhrtarastra's emotional reaction, the consultation scene, and crucially the outcome of the second game (Yudhiṣṭhira wins rather than loses). HPL preserves only a few core moments the dice game itself, the hair-dragging, and the two famous vows but completely omits the miraculous rescue, the protests, the freeing of the Pandavas, and replaces exile with enslavement.

DISCUSSION

The Theological Innovation of the Tamil Version

The Tamil *Villiparatam* was composed in a predominantly Saiva cultural environment, yet Villiputtur gives extraordinary prominence to Krishna as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The second gambling match serves a clear theological purpose: it demonstrates that Krishna's grace is superior to human deceit

(Sakuni's loaded dice). When Tarmar worships Kannan, he simply cannot lose. This is not merely a narrative convenience; it is a statement about *bhakti* (devotion) as the ultimate refuge (Anandakichenin, S. 2022).

The important thing is that after the Pandavas got everything back, they decided to go into exile on their own. This changes the idea of exile from being a punishment to being something they chose to do because of their devotion. In the Sanskrit version of the story the exile is something that happens to the Pandavas because Yudhiṣṭhira has a problem with addiction. In the Tamil version the exile is something the Pandavas do to honour a promise they made to Dhrtarastra. This is much, like what we see in Tamil bhakti theology, where people think it is very good to suffer for the sake of doing the right thing and being devoted.

Valliammal wrote in 1989 that Villiputturar always makes Krishna seem important and he even adds scenes where the characters worship Krishna before they do something big. The second time they play the gambling game is a good example of this.

The Malay Version: Simplification, Islamisation and Localisation

The Malay Hikayat Pandawa Lima tells a different story. The absence of Krishna's miracle is very noticeable. By the century when HPL was written the Malay people had become Muslims. Showing a Hindu god doing a miracle would have been a problem for an audience. So, the Malay writer leaves out the miracle where Krishna helps Draupadi. Draupadi's hair gets. She says she will get revenge but there is no divine help (Hamid, I. 1985).

The Pandavas become slaves forever of being sent away. This changes the story. In the Sanskrit and Tamil versions being sent away leads to a war. In HPL there is no war in the story about gambling. Instead, the Pandavas do work as slaves. This might be because the Malay people liked stories about serving others and being loyal or maybe it was just made simpler for people who did not know the stories.

The use of words like *papan* and *parih* and turning characters into game pieces is a special way of telling the story. It makes the game with dice into a performance with people, as pieces. This is not found in the Sanskrit or Tamil versions. It seems to be influenced by Javanese shadow plays, where people act out stories (Hamid, I. 1985).

What the Tamil Version Preserves That the Malay Version Loses

The Tamil version preserves the core moral and legal debate of the Sanskrit original: Vidura's objection, Vikarṇa's dissent, Karṇa's insult. These elements are entirely absent in HPL. The Malay version reduces the episode to a simple sequence: game → loss → hair pulling → slavery. There is no discussion of the legality of staking Draupadi, no philosophical argument, no character complexity. This suggests that the Malay adapter was less interested in the legal-moral nuances of the episode and more focused on advancing the plot of enslavement that leads to the subsequent adventures (Anandakichenin, S. 2022).

The Voluntary Exile as a Tamil Innovation

The concept of voluntary exile to honour a request is not found in *MBV*. In the Sanskrit version, Dhrtarastra is manipulated by Duryodhana into allowing a second game, and the exile is imposed as a binding condition of the wager. In *VP*, after Tarmar wins everything back, there is no compulsion to go into exile. Yet they go anyway, out of respect for Dhrtarastra's wish. This reframes the Pandavas as dutiful and honourable, rather than foolish and addicted. It also allows the narrative to retain the required exile, necessary for the later war, while avoiding the problem of Yudhiṣṭhira losing twice, a loss that might diminish his moral authority. By having him win the second game through Krishna's grace, Villiputturar preserves Yudhiṣṭhira's dignity while still achieving the narrative goal of exile (Valliammal, S. 1989).

Comparative Significance

These differences are not arbitrary. They reflect three distinct literary and religious contexts:

- Sanskrit *MBV*: A Brahmanical synthesis of law (*dharma*), epic heroism, and theistic devotion (*bhakti*). The gambling episode is a moral tragedy caused by Yudhiṣṭhira's vice, redeemed only by Krishna's grace and the Pandavas' eventual return.
- Tamil *VP*: A bhakti-infused retelling for a Saiva but Vaiṣṇava-sympathetic Tamil audience. The episode is modified to maximise Krishna's glory and to present the Pandavas as models of voluntary devotion.
- Malay *HPL*: A post-Islamisation adaptation from Javanese sources. The episode is stripped of Hindu theological content, simplified for a Malay audience unfamiliar with the original legal and ritual contexts, and localised with indigenous performance elements (human game pieces).

CONCLUSION

This study compared the gambling story in the Sanskrit Mahabharata, Tamil Villiparatam and Malay Hikayat Pandawa Lima. It found that all three versions have a story base but with some big differences. * They all agree on these points: Duryodhana challenges Yudhiṣṭhira to a dice game Yudhiṣṭhira loses Draupadi is. Bhima swears vengeance.

However, how the story ends is very different. The Tamil version has an idea. A second gambling match. In this match Yudhiṣṭhira wins back everything after praying to Krishna. The Pandavas still choose to go into exile to respect Dhrtarastra's wish. This change makes a religious point: it shows Krishna's help and makes exile a choice, not a punishment. This idea is not in the Sanskrit story or the Malay version.

The Malay version is different. It leaves out Krishna's miracle and the second game. Instead, the Pandavas become slaves forever not exiles. This is because the Malay Muslim audience did not accept Hindu miracles. For them the epic was for entertainment not, for lessons.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how the *Mahabharata* was indigenised across Asia. Future research should extend this comparison to other episodes, the war, the death of Drona, the pilgrimage and include Javanese *kakawin* as an intermediary source between Sanskrit and Malay. Additionally, a full translation of the Tamil *Villiparatam* into English would enable wider scholarly access to this important but understudied version.

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DISCLOSURE

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