

The car companies and mahabharata essay



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Introduction. While the analogy chosen for this paper may appear superficial and even far-fetched, the author believes that certain lessons and characters of Mahabharata may be extrapolated even to the field that would be completely remote from the world of ancient Indian epic literature. The main themes to be explored in this paper would be those of excellence and competition. The author will argue that modern marketing strategies for the leading car companies are based on the narratives that are programmatically similar to the eulogies to heroes and rulers commonly found in Mahabharata. In the same vein, the issue of competition shall be explored, so that the commonalities in the car companies' and Mahabharata's royal dynasties' strategies will be evident. The paper would draw on narrative analysis of both Mahabharata's and car companies' official advertisements and similar texts. The comparative perspective on both types of narratives would be provided, so as to exclude any possible random bias.

Symbolism of Power in Mahabharata and Automotive Industry's Promotional Products: A Comparison. The narrative of Mahabharata is based on the notion of a fundamental inequality between the epic poem's protagonists. While absolute majority of the latter belong to the upper Varnas of the Vedic society, the main characters of Mahabharata are separated from their lesser companions by the fact of their divine bloodline or the present affinity with the deities (as it is the case with Arjuna and Krishna). Given the importance of formal social distinctions in the traditional societies, it is evident that narratives and symbols pertaining to these characters are more exalted than

those accorded to mere mortals. Thus, it is necessary to explore both expressions and implications of such state of things.

On the other hand, the top car brands' promotional materials emphasize the former's exclusivity and elite status, which is presented so as to appeal to the notions of prestige that are dominant in the present society. The prestigious status of the car is assumed to confer the same degree of social respect on its owner. When comparing this situation to the assumption of the characters' divine pedigree or affinity in Mahabharata, certain parallels may be easily drawn between their social contexts.

One of the first significant instances of the description of the exalted qualities of the Pandavas' servants, palaces, weapons and chariots may be found in "The Great Hall", which is considered Book 2 of the epics. Here, the tale of the building of "the Greatest of all Halls", which was conducted for the Pandavas by asura Maya as the gratitude for saving his life, is presented. A "heavenly hall of celestial splendor, shimmering with the light of jewels" ("The Great Hall" 3. 21-22), this building may be regarded as the symbol of the grandeur and royal authority. The prestigious features of the "Greatest of the Halls" would include being built of "pillars of pure gold", covering the area "ten thousand cubits long and wide", and eliciting a "fiery light as intense as the Sun, white as Soma" ("The Great Hall" 3. 23-24). This description is characterized by metaphorical exaggerations so typical of ancient Indian epic literature. Together with the subsequent depictions of the hall's illustrious properties (e. g. "the crystal waters" of the building's internal pool said to be frequently mistaken for "the abundance of sparkling

waters”; “ The Great Hall” 3. 32), the narrative of the connection between power and splendor associated with material wealth is tangible here.

Using the analogy between the depiction of the royal palace and the promotionals for Bugatti, the most expensive of the cars manufactured by the Volkswagen Group, it is evident that the similar narratives are used to convey the assumptions of the exquisite authenticity and social prestige of the car in question. For instance, one of the Bugatti Veyron advertisements posted by Scott Schmitt refers the viewer to the image of the 18th century estate, comparing the prospective owner’s mansion to the examples of “ the 18th century Greek Revival” (Schmitt). Subsequently, the poster’s author compares the Bugatti car to the elite horses ridden by the 18th century European nobility, implying that the mansion would be even more “ impressive with [the] horses packed in the front” (Schmitt). The shining bulk of the Bugatti car is placed at the forefront of the poster, with the blurred lines of the imagined mansion seen as the car’s destination. Such imaging would appeal to those who associate authenticity and historical inspiration with the best-quality products, such as those provided by the elite car industry. Hence, the Bugatti car plays the same ontological role of the symbol of splendor for the company’s elite customers as “ the Greatest of the Halls” would play for Mahabharata’s royal and semi-divine characters.

Nonetheless, the main difference here is that for Mahabharata’s narrators and listeners/readers, the exquisite wealth and comfort enjoyed by the Pandavas and their close retinues were stipulated by their inherent entitlement to these riches and privileges, while the modern advertisement-driven culture of luxurious consumer goods emphasizes the relative and

personal finances-dependent character of wealth and luxury. Thus, two different approaches to social status and privileges arising from the latter may be glanced in these two cases.

In Book 4 of Mahabharata, “ Virata”, the similar depiction of the prestigious horse is provided. In the scene of Arjuna’s recognition by Uttara, the latter goes to great lengths to commend on the horses that are to be at Arjuna’s disposal. Here is the complete transcript of Uttara’s eulogy:

The horse yoked to the right-hand pole is like Krishna’s Sugriva, for it travels so fast that its hoofprints are invisible! The fine-looking horse who bears the left-hand pole is the best and most excellent of yoked creatures, and to my mind is Megha·pushpa’s equal in terms of speed. This glittering golden-armored horse bearing the rear left pole is, in my opinion, equal to Shaibya in speed, but stronger. This horse standing near the right, bearing the pole, is considered to be more powerful than Balahaka in speed! This chariot is worthy of conveying a bowman such as yourself into battle, and you deserve to fight stationed on this chariot! (“ Virata” 45. 20-23).

Given the specificity of the mythological vocabulary used in this passage, it is necessary to elucidate some of the characters mentioned therein. Sugriva, Megha·pushpa, Shaibya and Balahaka are four horses trained by Krishna in his capacity as the Pandavas’ charioteer, which were associated with the notion of ultimate equestrian speed and agility. Thus, Uttara’s remarks represent the typical comparison between the real and mythological characters that was frequently used in traditional Indian literature to commend the real-life object of comparison. While in this case both objects

of comparison are evidently mythological, this does not exclude the fact that this pattern is used here. The symbolism of such comparison lies in the establishment of the connection between the spiritual and material planes of existence, as the real thing is equated to its mythological prototype.

Within the context of car industry, the same situation may be found. As demonstrated by Skoda Muzeum project, opened this year in Mlada Boleslav (Czech Republic), the car companies may use their brands' legacies as the instrument of enhancing the brands' attractiveness to their customers. While in case of Mahabharata, mythological tradition is emphasized as the source of commendable references to the more worldly characters, creatures, artifacts, etc., the Skoda Muzeum presents quite another concept of 'tradition'. Here the brand's tradition is understood as its overarching values, such as "Pride in the brand", "Everyday utility", or "Challenges" ("New SKODA MUZEUM"). The "Evolution" section of the museum presents the 14 core and the handful of other Skoda models that reflect the brand's historical development across its existence. In particular, the technology gallery offers a wealth of information on the brand's technological development ("New SKODA MUZEUM"). Together with the "Tradition" section, this segment of the Skoda Muzeum suggests possible parallels between the current car brands and its overall historical development.

Therefore, the examples presented in this section point to the importance of the symbolism of authenticity and prestige both in Indian epics and the modern car industry advertisements and promotional materials. While in case of Mahabharata it is the divine heroes and deities themselves that play the role of the bearers of social prestige, in modern advertisement, everyone

is assumed to be able to take upon such social position. While one may consider this situation an expression of social egalitarianism, it is more certain that the social statuses' structure in pre-modern India was far more understandable to the general public than our contemporary system of social distinctions based exclusively on personal income and wealth. Therefore one may surmise that Mahabharata's concept of prestige may be more 'honest' than that of the modern West.

Competition and Rivalry in Mahabharata and Car Industry. The notion of competition between the heroes hailing from the royal dynasties that were kin to each other plays an important part in the narrative structure of Mahabharata. Both the Pandavas and the Kauravas belong to the same royal lineage, as these groups of heroes are cousins to each other via King Kuru, their common ancestor. Nonetheless, these illustrious families are seen as sworn enemies to each other, with the Kauravas seeking to destroy their righteous cousins by all means possible. As this narrative of the relatives' blood feud forms the core plot of Mahabharata, it is worth examining in the context of this paper.

Similarly, the competition between the various brands owned by the Volkswagen Group may be regarded as the example of unequal and competitive relationship between the things and phenomena that are deemed interrelated by the general public. In case of the Volkswagen Group, such competition proceeds between Bentley and Lamborghini, on the one hand, and Skoda and Volkswagen, on the other, while Bugatti is generally considered the supreme brand in terms of this car's speed and, importantly,

price. Hence, the analogy may be drawn here between the group hierarchy of the Volkswagen brands and that of the Mahabharata characters.

In view of the vertical nature of both automotive industry's and Mahabharata's technological and social hierarchy, it is necessary to begin with the 'tops' of each hierarchical relationship. The Bugatti car brand has a legendary history. Being founded in 1909 by Ettore Bugatti, the Automobiles Ettore Bugatti focused on customized and high-performance cars that would cater to the tastes of the elite and high-profile car sports competitions' participants (Ard op de Weegh, Hottendorff, and Arnoud op de Weegh 38-39). Nonetheless, the founder of the company, Ettore Bugatti, did not attempt to appeal to each and every customer if for some reason he believed that this customer is not eligible to become a member of the Bugatti owners' club; for instance, he refused the proposal of the King of Albania to purchase one of Bugatti Type 41 Royale cars – simply because Bugatti was horrified by his royal guest's lack of table manners (Ard op de Weegh, Hottendorff, and Arnoud op de Weegh 38). The company's founders considered each of their cars a true masterpiece, which was undoubtedly influenced by the Bugatti family's artistic background; this would both contribute to the Bugatti brand's 1930s popularity and bring about the original brand's demise in the post-WWII era, as only 2, 000 Bugattis of all types survived the War's predations (Ard op de Weegh, Hottendorff, and Arnoud op de Weegh 38). Eventually the company was forced to reposition itself as the aircraft spare parts suppliers, existing in this rather sad state until it was purchased by Roberto Artioli, an Italian automotive industry entrepreneur, who tried to restore the glory of the Bugatti brand. While his

company has been initially successful in the development of the innovative Bugatti sport cars' brand, such as Bugatti EB110, the late 1990s recession led to the demise of Artioli's ambitious projects. After several years of commercial tribulations, the Bugatti brand was bought by Volkswagen AG in 1998. While it would take 7 years until the regular Bugatti brand car production was launched in full with the release of Bugatti Veyron EB 16. 4 (Bugatti Automobiles S. A. S.), the ensuing commercial success that became evident by 2010-2011 demonstrated that the old brands long thought dead may return to the car market with splendor, provided that a professional marketing and competent technological re-designing are introduced.

If one applies the story of Bugatti's demise and unexpected return to the storyline of Mahabharata, tangible parallels with the story of the Pandavas' loss of kingship, years of wanderings, and the subsequent unexpected return to glory may be discerned. In Book 2 of Mahabharata, the Pandavas are invincible monarchs that have become envy to the whole of the world. They own the glorious Great Hall and have enough funds to bestow the richest gifts upon the sages and ascetics (" The Great Hall" 45). The Kauravas such as Duryodhana, the eldest son of King Dhritarashtra, marveled and resented at the Pandavas' success and glory. The following passage from Duryodhana's laments of his rivals' prosperity may be indicative here:

Yudhi-shthira supports eighty-eight thousand snatakabrahmins, each of whom has thirty servant girls at his disposal. Ten thousand more enjoy the finest foods from golden platters in Yudhi-shthira's home. The King of Kamboja gave him hides of the kadali deer, black, ruddy and red, and excellent blankets. Hundreds of thousands of elephants, women, cows and

horses, and thirty thousand camels, wander within the palace. The kings brought tribute and all kinds of riches to the royal seat for the son of Kunti's great ceremony. Never had I seen or heard of the influx of wealth I witnessed at that sacrifice! Now that I have seen those limitless mountains of treasure, all in the hands of my enemies, O king, I cannot put my mind to rest. (" The Great Hall" 49. 17-23)

The resentment felt by Duryodhana is further amplified by the humiliations he had to endure at the Pandavas' marvelous palace when he was invited to participate in the Royal Consecration Ceremony (" The Great Hall" 33-35). Just as the King of Albania was likely to be disheartened by Bugatti's refusal to sell him one of the company's prestigious cars, so did Duryodhana feel anger at the laughter he was subject to when he repeatedly mistook the crystal surface of the false pools for the real water, and vice versa (" The Great Hall" 47. 1-15). To add insult to injury, the five Pandava brothers personally laughed at Duryodhana's embarrassment: " mighty Bhima·sena saw [him] in the water and roared with laughter...Arjuna and the twins, when they saw Duryodhana in such a plight, also exploded in laughter" (" The Great Hall" 47. 6-7).

Given the importance of honor and personal dignity to the mythological kshatriyas in Puranas and Mahabharata, one may expect that Duryodhana would enter into the terrible rage that would lead to the downfall of the Pandavas' splendor. Indeed, the story of the dice game that led to Yudhi·sthira and his brothers losing their realm and going into exile may be directly traced to the insult felt by Duryodhana. Thus, the narrative of the fall

from glory is found in both the Bugatti brand's history and the story of the Pandavas' exile.

The temporary termination of the Bugattis' production may find its analogy in the story of the Pandavas' disguise before the court of Virata. Just as the Bugatti Company was forced to cope with the indignity of being turned from the proud producer of the prestigious cars into the mediocre aircraft spare parts' suppliers, so did the Pandavas when they decided on their future disguises before venturing to Virata's court to live there undiscovered.

The disguises chosen by each individual Pandava would emphasize the severing of the link with their past glory. For instance, Arjuna, renowned as “ a hero who was with Krishna when Agni, in brahmin form, eager to burn the Khandava forest, met him long ago”, “ a long-armed and invincible man”, “ who dwelled for five years in the home of Indra of a thousand eyes” (“ Virata” 2. 11, 2. 20), is to assume the guise of eunuch, bearing the mocking name of Brihannala, “ a large-reeded lady” (“ Virata” 2. 27), and entertaining the women of Virata's household with tales of the heroic actions of warriors. Bhima, the strongest of the Pandavas, would take upon the role of a head chef, bearing the name of Ballava. His strength would be now reflected not in the feats on the battlefield but in heaping “ loads of harsh wood” and restraining “ powerful elephants and mighty bulls” of the royal estate (“ Virata” 2. 3-7). Similarly, Nakula and Sahadeva, the youngest twin brothers of the Pandava clan, are to serve as royal horse-keeper and cowherd, respectively. While they used to be in charge of such issues in Yudhi-shthira's own palace, now they have to work as the menial workers in their fields, reflecting the loss of their power and prestige. Finally,

Yudhi-shthira himself, fittingly enough, becomes a gambling brahmin entertaining King Virata and his ministers and servants with the various forms of table gambling. Given that it was Yudhi-shthira's inept gamble with King Shakuni that gave the Pandavas' riches and realm to the Kauravas, such disguise may seem just as tragicomic as it is the case with Arjuna's pretended status as a eunuch. The Pandavas debase themselves in order to weather difficult times – just as the Bugatti has done.

However, just it is the case with Bugattis, the Pandavas eventually prevail over the dismal conditions they are placed in accordance with the harsh terms of their exile. After they entered the assembly of the Virata's courtiers, the Pandavas are revealed for all to see their glory. While previously Yudhi-shthira was viewed as a servant of the court, he is now described as the “ man whose body is bright as pure gold, like a massive fully grown lion”; Bhima, who was assumed to be a strong but witless cook, is now revealed to be a “ man with the stride of a furious king among elephants, who is bright as heated pure gold”; finally, Arjuna, who hid his divine prowess with weapons behind the mask of a eunuch, is revealed to be “ the dark-skinned youth,... whose shoulders are wide like those of a lion,... and whose eyes are large like lotuses” (“ Virata” 71. 13-16). Thus, just like the prestige of Bugatti was suddenly re-discovered in the 2000s, so is the glory of the Pandavas brought again to this world after the years of painful exile.

The critical comparison between these two narratives may help one to discover the common patterns in the brand and epics stories, which is, predictably, not a frequent occurrence. While brands, even prestigious ones, are viewed as the phenomena of mundane world, the Indian epics'

characters are genuinely regarded as earthly incarnations of the transcendent deities of Dharma or the archetypes of warfare and statecraft that a noble person should aspire to emulate. Nevertheless, these narratives are structurally similar, as both of them reflect the patterns of the earlier glory, then a transition to misery, and the final triumph which restores the position previously lost (thesis – antithesis – synthesis). Therefore, the Pandavas' exile and return story belong to the same narration's archetype as the history of the Bugatti brand.

Bentley and Lamborghini, Karna and Arjuna: The Discourses of Rivalry. While Bugatti is the customized sports car that combines prestige associated with luxury and the highly valued technological capacities associated with speed, Bentley and Lamborghini are two business-class brands catering to the same target clients' category and thus vying for the same market segment. As they belong to the Volkswagen Group, this rivalry is made more complicated by the possible 'familial' relationship between these two brands.

In the same vein, Karna and Arjuna are brothers, even though they did not initially know it. Karna may be viewed as a tragic hero in this situation, for he was the son of Kunti, the Pandavas' mother, born of her intercourse with Surya, the Sun-God, before Kunti's marriage to Pandu, the Pandavas' father. Therefore, as he is chosen by the Kauravas as one of their champions, Karna has to fight his half-brothers in order to fulfill his earlier vows of friendship and loyalty – a tragic situation that is often reproduced in several Indo-European epics.

In the context of this paper, such state of affairs might be compared to the relationship between Bentley and Lamborghini brands. While both of them currently belong to the Volkswagen Group of Germany (common ‘mother’), these car brands have different ‘fathers’. The Bentley car models were manufactured by the Bentley and later Rolls-Royce concerns before the latter was purchased by Volkswagen in 1998 (Feast 138). Similarly, Lamborghini is of the Italian origin, being founded in 1966 by Ferruccio Lamborghini to compete with the already established companies in grand tour car manufacture (Jolliffe and Willard 18). However, the company did not survive the 1970s oil shocks that deprived it of the sizable customer segments, going through a number of mergers and acquisitions, before it was finally acquired by Volkswagen Group. From the perspective of this paper, Lamborghini may be viewed as akin to Arjuna, with the latter enduring numerous trials and tribulations through his exile, before he finally emerged in full glory once again at Kurukshetra. On the other hand, Karna may be likened to the Bentley brand, for he is the son of the Sun-God, and the Bentley Company was founded in the times when the sun has never set over the lands of the British Empire.

The rivalry between Karna and Arjuna has passed through several stages in the epics. In “The Beginning”, Book I of Mahabharata, Karna arrives at the weapons tournament organized by Drona, the teacher and weapon master of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, when Arjuna has already displayed his prowess with weapons and performed some startling warrior feats. Karna is presented here as the towering figure “of wide eyes and wide fame, child of a virgin, of Pritha (Kunti), and a portion of the hot-rayed sun”; “the glorious

son of the Sun”, with “ his virtues inestimable” (“ The Beginning” 126. 1-5). Karna claims to be able to best the feats already performed by Arjuna and ultimately lives up to his word. While Arjuna feels slighted and distraught at such a challenge, the Kauravas are pleased and amazed at Karna’s battle prowess and offer him their lasting friendship and alliance. Since then, Karna and Arjuna have become the eternal competitors, even though they are of the same blood.

The relationship between these characters may be viewed as similar to that between Bentley and Lamborghini. Whereas the most notable rivalry in the Italian auto industry has usually been that between Lamborghini and Ferrari (note the parallels with the rivalries between the Pandavas and Kauravas), at the moment Bentley and Lamborghini play the role of the principal competitors at the global market for luxury cars. For instance, the 2012 news on Lamborghini’s intention to promote its own SUV into the Chinese market may be viewed as the challenge not only to Ford’s Maserati but also to the similar model previously announced by Bentley (Savin). Thus, in this case it is Arjuna (Lamborghini) that tries to best Karna’s (Bentley’s) performance, while, undoubtedly, this whole situation is based on the previous record of the brands’ market rivalries.

However, the epic version of the rivalry seems to be much more dramatic and uncompromising than its real-life auto industry counterpart. In Book 8 of Mahabharata, “ Karna”, the long-brooding animosity between Karna and Arjuna finds its culmination in the deadly battle between two heroes.

While it is doubtful that Bentley and Lamborghini may ever reach such a conflict stage, the story of Karna and Arjuna may serve as the metaphysical warning to both parties. The tragic fall of Karna's glory is a symbol to the ultimate temporality of each and every success, which is applicable both to politics and business affairs. As Karna is "killed by the Left-handed archer in a chariot duel" ("Karna" 8. 28), so a company may be bested by its traditional rival in the unforeseen circumstances. The business executives would be best advised to bear this in mind when planning on possible expansion or other drastic changes in the company's situation.

Conclusion. The depictions of the conflict and competition and the vicissitudes of the characters' fates in Mahabharata are remarkably similar to the processes commonly found in inter-brand rivalry in the car industry market. While in the former instance one has to deal with the quasi-divine heroes' dynasties from India's fabled past and in the latter example the commercial undertakings and conflicts would demand one's principal attention, the underlying pattern remains the same. The struggle for power and dominance (conceived of as either the absolute rule of the legendary kingdoms or as the hegemony on the selected market) informs the struggle and competition between the actors involved in both narratives' structures, irrespective of their identity or historical authenticity.

The changes in fortunes that frequently befell both rulers and entrepreneurs are underscored by demise and rise of the Pandavas, on the one hand, and Bugatti, on the other. The unimportance of filial or corporate connections from the perspective of the need to compete may be presented through a parallel between Lamborghini and Bentley, on the one hand, and Karna and <https://assignbuster.com/the-car-companies-and-mahabharata-essay/>

Arjuna, on the other. The core lesson to be received from these analogies is that the present failure does not exclude the possibility of a future triumph, be it military-political or commercial, and vice versa – the current victors should not be complacent about their future prospects.

Finally, but most importantly, the problem of the outward symbols of prestige and power is raised. Whereas both the Pandavas and the manufacturers and owners of luxurious cars may enjoy their wealth and luxuries, they can never be sure that the next turn in their fortunes (possibly induced by a Duryodhana next door) would not lead to the demise of their hopes and business (or political) plans. Thus, the rich and successful should weigh all possible alternatives and objectively view their opponents, rather than boast of their present-day fame and success.