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# Who Was Śalya's Father? Examining the Genealogy of an Epic Hero

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**Abstract:** To the question, “Who was the Śalya of the *Mahābhārata*?”, a wide scale of different answers can be given. Without being exhaustive, Śalya can be described as a king, a general, a friend, a charioteer or even as a traitor. The high number of his roles indicates that he is among the most prominent epic heroes. On the other hand, it is striking that none of the answers given above refers to Śalya's ancestry. The importance of the genealogical lists in the *Mahābhārata* is well established. For an epic hero it was his ancestry that determined his real identity. Therefore it is surprising that our knowledge about Śalya's family is so meagre. As a matter of fact, the only thing we know about his birth is that he was an offspring of a prestigious royal dynasty. Śalya himself was, however, very proud of his descent and considered his service as Karṇa's charioteer as a disgrace on his family. This paper attempts to identify this highly honoured dynasty from which Śalya arose. Many passages of the epic give the impression that Śalya was also of Kuru descent just as the Kaurava and Pāṇḍava heroes. This interpretation may shed new light on such events as Śalya's appointment as general and Pāṇḍu's second marriage.

**Keywords:** Bāhlika, Mādri, Mahābhārata, Śalya, Somavamśa

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that Śalya is one of the most prominent heroes of the *Mahābhārata*. Among others he appears as a great charioteer, Mādri's oldest brother, Pāṇḍu's brother-in-law, the valiant king of Madra, and last but not least the Kaurava commander-in-chief after Karṇa's death.

Accordingly, Śalya's figure has not been neglected in studies on the great epic. Meiland emphasized the ambiguity of the character, since Śalya, though he sympathized with the Pāṇḍavas, fought on the Kaurava side.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as Ruben and Hildebeitel regarded Śalya together with Karṇa as a caricatural

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<sup>1</sup> Meiland 2005: 18–19.

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counterpart of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.<sup>2</sup> Hiltebeitel, moreover, proposed an allegorical relationship between the Madra king and the Earth, on the basis of which he interpreted Yudhiṣṭhira's triumph over Śalya as the final conquest of the Earth.<sup>3</sup> Śalya's participation in the Great War has thus been fairly well examined, but less attention has been given to his origins.

In contrast to the other heroes in the epic, there is in fact very little that we know about Śalya's descent. Even Vettam Mani's enormous encyclopedia gives no more information than the fact that he and Mādri were fathered by the king of Madra, about whom there are no further details.<sup>4</sup> Bowles has paid a bit more attention to his lineage and regarded it as the main reason for the enmity between Karṇa and Śalya. According to him, the request to serve Karṇa as a charioteer was an insult for Śalya on his prestigious family.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the lack of more accurate information is quite disturbing especially in the light of such recent studies as Brodbeck's, McGrath's and Witzel's which call attention to the central role of the epic genealogies.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, to say something about Śalya's reputable ancestry, it is worth investigating those epic passages carefully, which are concerned with him. In these verses Śalya is regularly mentioned together with Bāhlika's descendants, in fact the *Mahābhārata* refers to Śalya himself as a Bāhlika.<sup>7</sup> Although this epithet has usually been explained as an allusion to his ethnic identity,<sup>8</sup> the possibility of Bāhlika being a patronymic can not be excluded and is worth further examination.

Bāhlika, Śalya's possible ancestor is a character in the *Mahābhārata* famous as Pratīpa's second son as well as Śaṃtanu's elder brother.<sup>9</sup> He left the kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Hiltebeitel 1990: 256; Ruben 1943: 221.n.

<sup>3</sup> Hiltebeitel 1990: 266–279.

<sup>4</sup> Mani 1984: 460.

<sup>5</sup> Bowles 2006: 34–35.

<sup>6</sup> Brodbeck 2009; McGrath 2004: 179–191; Witzel 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.61.6.cd; 1.105.7.d\*61.12. (Central group of the Northern recension). – Here it is important to make a comment on my attitude to the Critical edition. During my research, I regarded it as a great collection of the several *Mahābhārata*-texts rather than an Ur-version of the epic and therefore I included the so-called star passages in the references to get as comprehensive picture about the theme as it is possible.

<sup>8</sup> Brodbeck 2009: 156; Mani 1984: 674.

<sup>9</sup> *tathaiva sarvadharmajñāḥ pitur mama pitāmahaḥ| pratīpaḥ pṛthivīpālas triṣu lokeṣu viśrutaḥ|| tasya pāṛthivasimḥasya rājyaṃ dharmeṇa śāsataḥ| trayāḥ prajājñire putrā devakalpā yaśasvināḥ|| devāpīr abhavaj jyeṣṭho bāhlikas tadanantaram| tṛtīyaḥ śaṃtanus tāta dhṛtimān me pitāmahaḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 5.147.14–16). [Dhṛtarāṣṭra says to Duryodhana]: Likewise my father's grandfather, Pratīpa, who knew all the Laws, a king famed in the three worlds: to this lion among kings, who ruled the kingdom under Law, three famous Godlike sons were

after the death of his father and moved to his maternal homeland, the Śibi country:

Thereupon, with sorrowing spirit and grieving over his son, Pratīpa died: and seeing him dead Devāpi took shelter in the forest. Bāhlika had left the realm and established himself in the family of his maternal uncle. He abandoned his father and brothers and acquired a wealthy town. (van Buitenen 1978: 459.)<sup>10</sup>

Then Bāhlika started his own lineage, the descendants of which were named Bāhlikas, after their forefather. Although all of his descendants appear in the *Mahābhārata*, their accurate genealogy is spelled out in the *Harivaṃśa* and in the *purāṇas*, according to which Bāhlika begot Somadatta, who became the father of three excellent sons, namely Bhūri, Bhūriśravas and Śāla.<sup>11</sup>

However, if we examine the text of the *Mahābhārata* carefully, we see that in lists that mention Bhūriśravas and Śāla, it is Śālya who occurs right beside them and not Bhūri, as one might expect.<sup>12</sup> It is telling that, in the descriptions of the Kaurava army (enumerations) Śālya appears next to the two sons of Somadatta, while Bhūri is always omitted.<sup>13</sup> Verse 7.19.9 is perhaps the most explicit:

Bhūriśravas, Śāla, Śālya, Somadatta and Bāhlika, these heroes surrounded by the army, resorted to the southern flank.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the war books, Bhūri and Śālya will rather seem to be counterparts of each other if we take notice of the analogous list found in the *Virāṭaparvan*,<sup>15</sup> in which there occurs Bhūri instead of Śālya.<sup>16</sup>

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born. Devāpi was the eldest, Bāhlika came after him, and steadfast Śaṃtanu, my grandfather, son was the third. (van Buitenen 1978: 459.).

**10** *tataḥ pravayathitātmāsau putraśokasamanvitaḥ| mamāra taṃ mṛtaṃ dṛṣṭvā devāpiḥ saṃśrito vanam|| bāhlika mātulakule tyaktvā rājyaṃ vyavasthitaḥ| pitṛbhrātṛṇ parityajya prāptavān puram ṛddhimatḥ|* (*Mahābhārata* 5.147.26–27).

**11** *Harivaṃśa* 23.116; *Bhāgavata*–p. 9.22.18.c–19.a; *Brahma*–p. 13.116; *Garuḍa*–p. 1.140.34.c–35.a; *Viṣṇu*–*purāṇa* 4.20.31–32.

**12** *Mahābhārata* 5.196.10.a, 6.47.17.a, 6.52.5.a, 6.55.131.d, 6.57.11.ab, 6.114.15.a, 7.19.9.a, 7.36.24.bc, 7.52.15.c, 11.26.31.cd, 15.40.10.c.

**13** *Mahābhārata* 6.47.11–21, 6.52.1–9, 7.19.5–20.

**14** *bhūriśravāḥ śālaḥ śālyaḥ somadattaś ca bāhlikaḥ| akṣauhiṇyā vṛtā vīrā dakṣiṇaṃ pakṣam āśritāḥ|* (*Mahābhārata* 7.19.9.).

**15** *Mahābhārata* 4.63.41.b\*1080.1–9 (S = Southern recension).

**16** *Mahābhārata* 4.63.41.b\*1080.2. (S).

These passages, therefore, imply that one should regard Bhūri as Śalya's equivalent, which impression can be further confirmed by some additional, more explicit passages.

The *Udyogaparvan* unfolds how Duryodhana gained Śalya's assistance in the Great War.<sup>17</sup> The Kaurava prince maintained that he was as close a kinsman of Śalya as the Pāṇḍavas:

Just as the Pāṇḍavas are to you, in the same way I am to you.<sup>18</sup>

At first sight, however, Duryodhana's words make no sense, because Śalya, as Mādri's brother, was honored as maternal uncle (*mātula*) by the Pāṇḍavas, and his greater affection for them was in this way evident. But the Madra king did not refuse Duryodhana's statement which, therefore, indicates that we should also accept it as true. I was, however, not able to find any other appropriate solution to substantiate this claim than the above-proposed position of Śalya in the Kuru family tree. Duryodhana, incidentally, in the same way tried to get support from the Vṛṣṇis. In this case he similarly adduced only the common patrilineal relationship while he neglected that Kṛṣṇa, as Kuntī's nephew was the cousin of the Pāṇḍavas:

In this approaching war you should come to my aid, for you bear me equal friendship with Arjuna, and you are equally allied with us, Mādhava. (van Buitenen 1978: 197.).<sup>19</sup>

Later in the same book, there is a description of the arrival of the Kaurava allies which not only mentions Śalya and Bhūriśravas in the same verse but also puts stress on the fact that they joined Duryodhana with separate armies:

The champion Bhūriśravas, too, and Śalya joined to Duryodhana, O joy of the Kurus, with a grand-army each. (van Buitenen 1978: 219.).<sup>20</sup>

Their separate approach might be underlined here because one would expect two related warriors to come jointly. Moreover, the same account provides an analogous verse in which a similar syntagm is used concerning the two Avantī rulers who, though they were from the same country, arrived there separately:

<sup>17</sup> *Mahābhārata* 5.8.1–13.

<sup>18</sup> *yathaiva pāṇḍavās tubhyaṃ tathaiva bhavato hy aham* | (*Mahābhārata* 5.8.12.d\*52.1. (S)).

<sup>19</sup> *vigrahe 'smin bhavān sāhyaṃ mama dātum ihārhati* || *samaṃ hi bhavataḥ sakhyaṃ mayi caivārjune 'pi ca* | *tathā saṃbandhakaṃ tulyaṃ asmākaṃ tvayi mādhave* || (*Mahābhārata* 5.7.9c–10).

<sup>20</sup> *tathā bhūriśravāḥ śūraḥ śalyaś ca kurunandana* | *duryodhanam upāyātāv akṣauhiṇyā pṛthak pṛthak* || (*Mahābhārata* 5.19.16.).

Both kings of Avanti, surrounded by a mighty force, came to Suyodhana with a grand-army each. (van Buitenen 1978: 219.).<sup>21</sup>

Still before the war, Yudhiṣṭhira asked Saṃjaya to enquire after the welfare of the Kaurava heroes who, though they fought against the Pāṇḍavas, were loved by him.<sup>22</sup> Among them Somadatta, Bhūriśravas, Śalya as well as Śala are mentioned together, and, furthermore, it is added about Śala that it was he who protected Śalya's back:

The wise bull of the Bāhlikas, who has no other desire than that there might be peace among the Bhāratas – may he salute me again as he did before – he possesses many and excellent virtues, who is learned, but not harsh at all, who always endures anger out of affection – that Somadatta I consider worthy of respect. Somadatta's son, the most venerable among the Kurus, is my brother and my friend, o Saṃjaya. He is the best archer among the warriors whom his ministers attend, please, ask him about his welfare. My dear, Bhūriśravas fights against destruction, he is a great archer, the best of warriors. Approach him and address him with my words, and Śalya too, going to him in my name. Śala, the great archer, the greatest warrior, best and constant will protect his back.<sup>23</sup>

Although Śalya's descent in this manner seems to be fairly well established, we should not forget those epic passages which seem to set him apart from the Bāhlikas.

To begin with, they are evidently referred to separately in the *Ādi-* and the *Sabhāparvan*,<sup>24</sup> since these books mention side by side Śalya as well as Somadatta's sons. These references suggest that there did exist a tradition which treated Śalya separately from the Bāhlika Somadatta and his three sons.

**21** *āvanyau ca mahīpālau mahābalasusaṃvṛtau| pṛthag akṣauhiṇībhyāṃ tāv abhiyātau suyodhanam||* (*Mahābhārata* 5.19.24.).

**22** *Mahābhārata* 5.30.10–29.

**23** *yasya kāmo vartate nityam eva nānyaḥ śamād bhāratānām iti sma| sa bāhlikānām ṛṣabho manasvī purā yathā mābhivadet prasannaḥ|| guṇair anekaiḥ pravaraḥ ca yukto vijñānavān naiva ca niṣṭhuro yaḥ| snehād amarṣaṃ sahate sadaiva sa somadattaḥ pūjanīyo mato me|| arhattamaḥ kuruṣu saumadattiḥ sa no bhrātā saṃjaya matsakhā ca| maheṣvāso rathinām uttamo yaḥ sahāmātyaḥ kuśalaṃ tasya pṛccheḥ| bhūriśravās tāta nipātayodhī maheṣvāso rathinām uttamo 'gryaḥ|| gatvā sma taṃ madvacanena brūyāḥ śalyaṃ tathā madvacanāt pratītaḥ|| samaḥ śalo rakṣitā pṛṣṭham asya|* (*Mahābhārata* 5.30.19–21.d\*156.6.).

**24** *madrarājas tathā śalyaḥ sahaputro mahārathaḥ| rukmāṅgadena vireṇa tathā rukmarathena ca|| kauravyaḥ somadattaś ca putrās cāsya mahārathāḥ| samavetās trayaḥ śūrā bhūrīr bhūriśravāḥ śalaḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 1.177.13–14 The great warrior Śalya, king of the Madras, with his sons, the champion Rukmāṅgada and Rukmaratha. There Somadatta the Kaurava and his warrior sons come, the three heroes Bhūri, Bhūriśravan and Śala. (van Buitenen 1973: 350.) *ṛtaḥ śalyo madrarājo bāhlikaś ca mahārathaḥ| somadatto 'tha kauravyo bhūrīr bhūriśravāḥ śalaḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 2.31.7.c–8.b) *Ṛta*, Śalya king of the Madras, and the great warrior Bāhlika, Somadatta Kauravya, Bhūri, Bhūriśravas, Śala. (van Buitenen 1975: 89.).



The *Droṇaparvan*, in which Bhūri's character is fleshed out, seems to follow this latter tradition. After Śalya's injury,<sup>25</sup> his younger brother comes forth to protect him, but he is also killed in the battle.<sup>26</sup> Although Śalya's brother remains unnamed here, he might well be Śala who was earlier shown as protecting Śalya's back.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that Śala does not disappear completely after this event, but his name occurs in some further enumerations seems to contradict this proposition.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Śala must have passed away by end of the *parvan* where he is listed among the dead:

O king! Your valiant son, Bhūriśravas has been killed, and Śala, too, who suffered from the fall of his brother.<sup>29</sup>

At that place, where the long-armed Bhīṣma lies covered by hundreds of arrows, Pāṇḍu's strongest sons killed many heroes in battle, such as Vikarṇa, Citrasena, Bāhlika, Jayadratha, Bhūriśravas, Jaya, Jalasaṃdha, Sudakṣiṇa and Śala, the best charioteer, and the valiant Bhagadatta – these and other princes, whom even the gods could only have defeated with great difficulty.<sup>30</sup>

Since there is no mention about his death anywhere else, perhaps it was indeed Śala who was killed while protecting his brother Śalya and one might regard the re-occurrences of Śala's name as corruptions in the transmission.<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, following his brother, Bhūriśravas also lost his life in an unjust single combat against Sātyaki.<sup>32</sup>

Bhūri finally appears in a duel in which he just like his brother is killed by Sātyaki.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the *Droṇaparvan* contains the third passage which

25 *tataḥ sa viddho 'stravidā marmabhidbhir ajihmagaiḥ| śalyo rājan rathopasthe niśasāda mumoha ca||* (*Mahābhārata* 7.36.33.) O king! Then this marksman (i.e. Abhimanyu) wounded Śalya with mortal arrows, he collapsed on the seat of his chariot and lost his consciousness.

26 *Mahābhārata* 7.37.2–9.

27 *Mahābhārata* 5.30.21.d\*156.6. (S).

28 *Mahābhārata* 7.52.15c; 7.70.50.d; 7.79.4.a; 7.80.24.

29 *hato bhūriśravā vīras tava putro mahārathaḥ| śalaś caiva tathā rājan bhrātrvyasanakarśitaḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 7.131.10.).

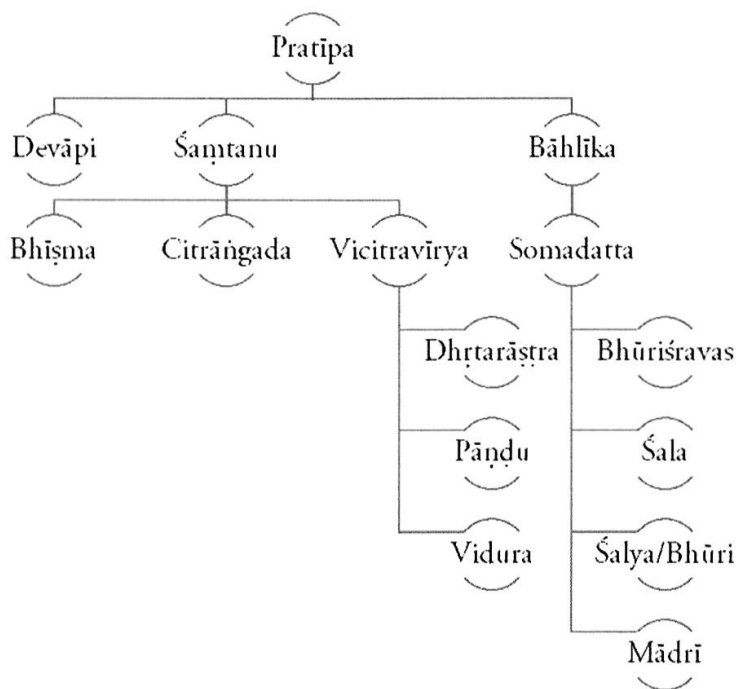
30 *yatra bhīṣmo mahābāhuḥ śete śaraśatācitaḥ|| vikarṇaś citrasenaś ca bāhlika 'tha jayadrathaḥ| bhūriśravā jayaś caiva jalasaṃdhaḥ sudakṣiṇaḥ|| śalaś ca rathināṃ śreṣṭho bhagadattaś ca vīryavān| ete cānye ca rājāno devair api sudurjayāḥ|| nihataḥ samare sūrāḥ pāṇḍavair balavattarāḥ||* (*Mahābhārata* 7.133.58.c–61.b).

31 Actually there are some additional occurrences of the name Śala (*Mahābhārata* 7.102.69.b; 8.4.101.c; 8.62.2.c), but they probably do not refer to the Bāhlika, but to a son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra by the same name.

32 *Mahābhārata* 7.117.1–118.41.

33 *Mahābhārata* 7.141.1–12.

obviously differentiates Śalya and Bhūri. In this case, however, it can not be excluded that the authors were influenced by the widely known Bhūri-Bhūriśravas-Śala triad of the genealogical lists and therefore added the death of the third brother to the same *parvan*, though he had been neglected so far. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1:** Śalya's genealogy.

We have seen above that many phases of the great epic appear to suggest Śalya's association with the Bāhlika house. One might venture the hypothesis that there might have existed such a form of the *Mahābhārata* which regarded Śalya as Somadatta's son. If this supposition is actually true, it entails two important conclusions.

On the one hand, Śalya's appointment as commander-in-chief can be better understood. Śalya's precursors, Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Karṇa were closely related to the Kurus while he, as the Madra ruler was a simple vassal, whose installation seems unwonted since more constant companions such as Aśvatthāman and Kṛpa were still alive. But, if we regard Śalya as Somadatta's son, this oddity will immediately disappear.

On the other hand, this identification of Śalya throws new light upon Pāṇḍu's marriage with Mādri. As stated in the *Mahābhārata* Pāṇḍu had two consorts who became his wives in different ways.



His first as well as chief wife was Kuntī, whom he obtained by means of a *svayaṃvara* which was evidently regarded as the most heroic manner of marriage and in which Pāṇḍu himself decided to take part:

This Prthā, Kuntibhoja's daughter, was gifted with beauty and character; she rejoiced in the Law and was great in her vows. At the bridegroom choice that her father held for her she found, in the midst of thousands of barons, the powerful lion-toothed, elephant-shouldered, bull-eyed Pāṇḍu. The scion of the Pāṇḍus joined yoke with the daughter of Kuntibhoja with boundless happiness as Indra has joined yoke with Paulomī. (van Buitenen 1973: 241).<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the first one, Pāṇḍu's second wedding was arranged by Bhīṣma. In this case, however, there is no remark about why Pāṇḍu needed a subsidiary wife just after the successful *svayaṃvara*:

Thereafter he went with Bhīṣma Devavrata to the capital city of the Madras, where Mādri, daughter of the king of the Madras, lived, renowned in all three worlds and famed among all barons for her beauty, which was unmatched on earth. Bhīṣma bought her for Pāṇḍu at a high price, then prepared for the wedding of the great-spirited Pāṇḍu. (van Buitenen 1973: 241–242)<sup>35</sup>

To understand Bhīṣma's purpose with this marriage, I suggest to have a look again at the Lunar line. After Vicitravīrya's death Bhīṣma remained the only scion of the paternal lineage in the main branch. As Romila Thapar rightly pointed out, both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas being biologically connected to Satyawatī but not to Śaṃtanu laid claim to the throne in accordance with the matriline.<sup>36</sup>

The Kuru patriline, however, had not yet completely disappeared at that time, because Bāhlika and his offspring together with Mādri still existed. Thus, Bhīṣma did nothing else but tried to save his family from the extinction of the patriline. Pāṇḍu's marriage with Mādri, therefore, might have been the only chance to restore the paternal line.

Besides, the fact that the Bāhlika princess was offered to Pāṇḍu reveals Bhīṣma's political aim that is to guarantee the kingship to him. Pāṇḍu was,

34 *rūpasattvaguṇopetā dharmārāmā mahāvratā| duhitā kuntibhojasya kṛte pitrā svayaṃvare|| siṃhadaṃṣṭraṃ gajaskandham ṛṣabhākṣaṃ mahābalaṃ| bhūmipālasahasrāṇāṃ madhye pāṇḍum avindata|| sa tayā kuntibhojasya duhitrā kurunandanaḥ| yuyuje 'mitasubhāgyaḥ paulomyā maghavān iva||* (Mahābhārata 1.105.1–3).

35 *yātvā devavratenāpi madrāṇāṃ puṭabhedanam| viśrutā triṣu lokeṣu mādri madrapateḥ sūtā|| sarvarājasu vikhyātā rūpeṇāsadyśī bhuvī| pāṇḍor arthe parikṛtā dhanena mahatā tadā| vivāhaṃ kārayām āsa bhīṣmaḥ pāṇḍor mahātmanaḥ||* (Mahābhārata 1.105.4–5).

36 Thapar 1978: 351.

actually, the second son and therefore the legal successor would have been Dhṛtarāṣṭra according to the primogeniture. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, however, as a blind man seemed to be unable to govern, so Bhīṣma chose his younger brother and gave him Mādrī to re-establish the lineage.

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