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# **ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE MAHABHARATA IN THE CONTEXT OF DHARMA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study considers moral behaviour in the context of dharma in the Mahabharata. Even though the Dharmasutra/Dharmasastra texts include many principles for what constitutes dharma, there are several occasions in which characters in the Mahabharata do not adhere to the dharma requirements stated in textbooks. As a result, a recurring theme throughout the Mahabharata is that dharma is not simple to grasp. Underlying the study is also the concept that dharma cannot be subsumed under an all-encompassing particular moral theory, as is sought in western moral theories, and is instead dependent on individual conditions that one confronts. With these considerations in mind, the study next analyses characters such as Satyawati, Bhishma, Kunti, Karna, and Yudhishthira in the context of Dharma.

Having the ability to judge what is right and wrong in any scenario is a challenging undertaking at any moment. An ethical issue is concerned with how to conduct correctly in any given scenario. As a result, the literature on Moral Philosophy is incomplete. We will never be able to determine if morality is transcendental, empirical, or anchored in a general ethos of individual civilizations. Different cultures have developed behavioural models based on their sense of what it means to be right in certain situations. I'd like to say that, like authors such as Austin Creel, P.T.Raju, and G.C Pande, I believe that In the Hindu worldview, moral life was one lived in line with dharma.

## Introduction

Until recent, it was common in the West to discuss ideal moral behaviour based on either deontological or utilitarian principles, and proponents were split along these lines. But, troubled by numerous issues, the West is returning to Virtue Ethics (Rosalind Hursthouse, 1999), which has a history dating back to Aristotle's time. Virtue ethics acknowledges the particular cultural moorings of any community that govern ethical behaviour. Thus, it understands virtues in terms of 'norms that are both local in origin and application' (Rukmani in SSEASR, 2007). This acknowledges the reality that each culture has its world perspective and moral behaviour based on that worldview. Of course, how one gets at a certain worldview and certain moral values in any given community cannot be addressed unequivocally. However, it is realistic to expect virtues to be founded on the ideals that every community cherishes.

It is also vital to recognise that, while ethical concerns will occur everywhere people live as a society, having an overarching moral philosophy framework to describe every particular ethical behaviour is neither required nor conceivable. Vyasa's mission as a pragmatist in the Mahabharata was to show human figures who, although being trained in conventional ethical behaviour, strayed in numerous ways owing to extraneous influences. In a way, Vyasa was presenting us with the moral quandaries that we all confront as people in real-life circumstances.

Moral behaviour was considered as part of a comprehensive approach to life in India. It was founded on certain basic principles of behaviour and, like religion, evolved alongside the growth of civilization. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Krishan in Matilal, 1989: 55) was arguably the driving principle in general, and a variety of regulations based on the notions of RTA and dharma subsequently emerged. If Aristotle's ethics in Greek philosophy were focused on what is known as the Virtues, there was an emphasis in India right from the time of the Vedas on maintaining cosmic order by living in a specific moral way. In other words, Vedic culture thought that there was a symbiotic link between how humans behaved and how the universe's physiological and moral order, known as RTA, was maintained. The Mahabharata draws this link of good deeds returning the world to its virtuous path after it has strayed from dharma in various places ( XIV. 18, 15-21). This worldview is alluded to again in literature. When Duṣyanta, for example, in the Abhijñānaśākuntalam worries whether his behaviour has disrupted the natural equilibrium in

the āśrama surrounds (Śakuntalā, V.9), Kālidāsa is referring to the fact that dhārmic behaviour and cosmic order were inextricably linked within society.

While rta was the overarching concept throughout Vedic times, the ambiguity of the definition of rta allowed for its evolution in diverse directions in following eras, keeping pace with the cultural development of its people (Rukmani in Sherma, 2008: 152). Thus, by the time of the Mahabharata, it is dharma that reigns supreme as the principle of physiological and moral stability and harmony. Furthermore, dhārmic behaviour not only aided a person in achieving a soteriological objective, but it was also required to sustain societal order.

When we consider the numerous facets of the dhārmic principle as described in the Dharmasūtras, Smṛitis, and epics, we see that it encompasses many parts of one's existence as an individual as well as a community member. Dharma can thus be seen in two ways. One is a broad collection of fundamental ideas that humanity must acquire to coexist peacefully in society. At the most basic level, this meant that humans were expected to practise certain good ethical (dhārmic) values to maintain social order. However, as civilization advanced, many additional dhārmic principles emerged and solidified into numerous specialised divisions under the broad umbrella of dharma. If we regard Dharma to be the principal set guiding one's behaviour, we may then see the others as subsets under the Dharma umbrella, such as the pacayajas, the varṇa and āśrama dharmas (svadharmas), the four puruṣārthas, sādharma-dharmas, and so on.

The five Sādharma-dharma subsequently identify ā, Satyaya, asteyabrahmacharyaya, and aparigraha. The Mahabharata, on the other hand, discusses the sādharma dharmas in several places, which sometimes correspond with the above five and sometimes lists many others. Thus, abstinence from violence against all living beings, contentment, good behaviour, forthrightness, austerity, self-control, truthfulness, and charitable acts are all mentioned as equivalent to sacrifices themselves (XIV.90,120). Which dhārmic principle would therefore govern an individual's ethical behaviour at a given time would thus be determined by a variety of criteria. The fact that dharma can never be fully comprehended is a recurring theme throughout the Mahabharata (II. 69.14; XIV. 49.13) It's not that people don't know the difference between right and wrong, but as Dhṛtarāṣṭra, puts it, even when they grasp the difference between right and wrong, they struggle to make the proper option. Thus, Dhṛtarāṣṭra regrets his incapacity to follow dharma even though he is aware of it, and he likewise refrains from adharma while being fully aware of its adhārmic character. However,

the Mahabharata also argues that adhārmic behaviour, as illustrated by Duryodhana's life, was doomed to be destroyed, but its inverse was doomed to be praised.

The Mahabharata also accepts the four pururthas, or human ambitions, with the proviso that all desires must be governed by the concept of dharma. There are countless instances in the Mahabharata where excessive attachment to kāma, also known as tṛṣṇā, ended in devastation. When Yudhishira was questioned why Draupadī had fallen by the roadside in the Mahāprasthānika-parvan, he mentioned her hidden attachment or kāma for Arjuna as the reason for her collapse (XVII. 2.6). A local version of this storey mentions Draupadī's hidden yearning for Karṇa as the source of his trouble. Dharma regulation is a warning to reconcile one's human nature with a solid understanding of what is good and wrong. It is not opposed to artha and kāma and hence maintains that society may run well in their combination. In addition to the dharmas sanctioned during normal times, the Mahabharata has a category known as āpaddharma or dharma for abnormal times, which was used to justify deviant behaviour (Rukmani, 2005:). Although incorrect, Yudhiṣṭhira's assent to announce Aśvatthāma dead in front of Droṇa can be covered by this canopy.

One could naturally wonder if, with so many distinct types of dharma to select from, there were any recommendations for how to conduct dharmically in every scenario. As previously stated, there were certain basic rules, such as honesty, on how a human being should behave, as well as more specialised types of dharma, such as sva-dharma, kula-dharma, and so on. In his massive books on the History of Dharmaśātra, P.V.Kane addressed the multifaceted nature of Dharma. According to the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras, "the authority (for the dharmas) is the consensus of those who know dharma and the Vedas." Kane (Vol.I:6) These norms are elaborated in the Manusmṛti (MS) and Yājñavalkyasmṛti (YS), with the YS stating that "the Veda, ancient wisdom, the usages of decent men, what is pleasing to one's self, and desire generated of deliberation-that is traditionally accepted as the basis of dharma" (Kane, ibid). "Know Dharma to be that which is practised by the educated that leads a moral life, is free from hatred and bias, and is accepted by their hearts (conscience)," Kane says. Kane (Volume I:5). Manu elaborates on the same notion of heart acceptance as 'pleasant to oneself' in II.16. All of this indicates that a significant amount of effort was invested in developing grounds for moral behaviour in the tradition.

Because there is no one definition of dharma, we encounter many 'situational dharmas' in the Mahabharata, as Matilal refers to them, in which characters determine what is the appropriate

dharmic behaviour in a certain situation after careful deliberation (Matilal,1989:9-10). If finally, Arjuna chooses to fight the war rather than retire, he has chosen to behave by his varna dharma rather than the sadharana-dharma of following ahimsa or even kula dharma, which would safeguard his lineage. There are several instances in the Mahabharata where one must determine why a specific course of action was chosen, even if it appears to be wrong on the surface. By putting characters like Bhishma, Yudhisthira, Drona, and even Sri Krishna in perilous situations, Vyasa appears to underline the notion that life is not a simple route of dharma, but one in which dharma appropriate to the moment must be determined based on a lifetime dedication to dharma. It's no surprise that discussion regarding the behaviour of some of the principal characters in the Mahabharata has been and continues to be a source of contention among scholars and others to this day.

The above introduction should have made it evident that, contrary to popular belief, it is not viable to analyse the behaviour of the Mahabharata characters within a single Western theoretical framework (Agrawal in Matilal, 1989:129-142). Western ideas are mostly theoretical constructs that are not intended to serve as guideposts for humans in specific situations. They are concerned with the best potential human behaviour. It is similar to Western philosophy, which is more concerned with theory than practice, as opposed to Indian philosophy (darsanas), which is directed toward a purpose and advises living one's life. As a result, in my opinion, the ethical difficulties in the Mahabharata cannot be analysed in terms of western ideas, and there is no necessity to do so. Let us now look at several characters from the Mahabharata, beginning with Satyavati.

## **SATYAVATI**

Satyavati was a self-sufficient woman who assisted her father with his work. Satyavati coped with Parasara's obsession with her before meeting Bhishma's father, and she ensured that her virginity would be safeguarded even if she was defiled. As a result, we can see that societal pressure may override ethical judgments. However, in her contacts with Santanu, she allowed her father to make all of the choices, but we must presume that everything was done with her knowledge and agreement. When Satyavati's father demands the promise of her kids inheriting the Kurus realm, he was not acting in a dharmic manner. This was pure selfishness, ostensibly to safeguard her motherly desires and future security, but it does not suit the concept of dharma and the desire was also not regulated by dharma. Indeed, his words "those who have a daughter must say this" (I.100.90) allude to a woman's maternal impulses, and if we're being fair, he

may be excused for that. Given the status of women at the time, one might even excuse the father's behaviour because he was merely trying to establish a secure position for his daughter in the royal household; after all, she was of low birth and anything could go wrong. Can the desire for Bhishma's descendants to be denied the kingdom be considered a dharma attitude? Even if Satyawati and her progeny's immediate security was ensured, demanding that Bhishma's offspring be denied any position in the future of the kingdom was a purely selfish move with no regard for Hastinapura's destiny. In any event, because Bhishma was the regent in charge of the realm, it also didn't make any sense (Chatterjee in Rukmani 2005).

The term dharma appears just once in the whole dialogue between Satyawati's father and Bhishma, and it appears that Vyasa is referring to the father and daughter's selfish behaviour in this context. Vyasa even seems to anticipate that such an adharmic action is likely to go wrong since it was an act of kama or greed that was not governed by dharma at all. So the entire beginning of the Mahabharata had an adharmic ring to it, and anything transpired after that could be traced to the false adharmic beginning of the Kauravas' entire history. Even Santanu, Bhishma's father, did not do him credit by concealing the source of his depression. Instead of admitting his passion for Satyawati, he pretended to be concerned about Hastinapura's future if Devavrata died in combat or elsewhere (I.100.64-71). He could not be accused of not understanding what dharma is, and he was once again taken away by kama, this time kama that was uncontrolled by dharma. When Satyawati is confronted with the prospect of not having a successor to the kingdom following the deaths of her sons Vichitravirya and Citrangada, she urges Bhishma to create offspring through *niyoga*. Satyawati utilises the dharmic idea that one's ancestors will suffer if not propitiated by male descendants to persuade Bhishma to acquiesce to her request. Her earlier agreement to the constraints set by her father lacked this sensitivity to dharma.

## **BHISMA**

Bhishma approaches Satyawati's father and asks her to marry his father. This is a reversal of tradition, as typically it is the boy's father who approaches the girl's father to ask for her hand in marriage. In his encounter with Satyawati's father, Bhishma falls short of our expectations and disappoints us badly. Bhishma makes a series of pledges without considering the ramifications of his actions for Satyawati to marry Santanu. If dharma is associated with 'truth,' as we are informed on several occasions in the Mahabharata, there appears to be a focus on 'promise-keeping,' and a misunderstanding between keeping a promise and maintaining truth, in the

interaction between Bhishma and Satyawati's father. The word 'prajna' stands for a promise and that is what is used in this context (I.100.91). Satya, which stands for truth in general, is absent from the conversation between Satyawati's father and Bhishma. Bhishma mistook his promise-keeping for truth and allowed "his love for his father [to] fully devour his moral judgements" (Chatterjee in Rukmani 2005:150). In reality, a wiser Bhishma later argues in the Santiparvan that "falsehood must be avoided if it seems as truth, and truth must be avoided if it appears as untruth." More crucially, he states that truth should not be stated if it is coupled with adharma. (XII.109.1-2). A pledge is not made without full consideration for the repercussions, especially by a person of Bhishma's level. His following behaviour of quiet suffering amid Draupadi's humiliation in Dhrtarashtra's court was due to his father's lineage's mistaken loyalty. He undoubtedly considered the fact that he had abandoned the throne via his pledge to indicate that he had no power to meddle in judicial rulings as well. Despite the mockery of justice that was being perpetrated in the court of Dhrtarastra, he once again found comfort in honouring a vow. He took his devotion to imply that he couldn't turn against people whose salt he'd swallowed.

The behaviour of Bhishma, who is meant to understand the difference between dharma and adharma, sitting peacefully in Dhrtarashtra's court at the moment Draupadi was hauled into the assembly to disrobe her is certainly disturbing. If Bhishma could walk out of the court in protest when Duryodhana advocated making Krishna a prisoner when he arrived as an ambassador to the Kaurava court (V.88, 13-14, & 23), it is difficult to comprehend why he sat silently during Draupadi's insult. Bhishma did have the choice, as granted by Manu, to act on reason and conscience, which he might have used in this situation. Bhishma, on the other hand, had lost his sense of reason and was unable to look beyond his 'promise-keeping nose' and lost an opportunity to redeem his character.

One has to question if it was only his promise-keeping that kept Bhishma from doing the right thing. It's possible he was believed that the husband had complete power over the wife, which distorted his judgement. Thus, in response to Draupadi's inquiry, Buddha emphasises the intricacy of dharma while simultaneously emphasising the wife's control by her husband (II. 67.47-48). As a result, in his opinion, Draupadi is not autonomous enough to challenge Yudhisthira's actions, and he consequently submits to societal tradition. Second, Vikarna argued that because Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandavas, Yudhisthira had no authority to make a judgement unilaterally in this matter (II. 68.23). The other Pandavas were allowed

to speak on Draupadi's behalf. But none of them did so, other than implying Yudhisthira's lack of ability to do so without really denying his authority. The norm of a wife being under the authority of her husband was still too powerful in society for Draupadi's voice to shake. Lacking the confidence to take a stance, even Bhishma attempts to obfuscate the problem by referring to the delicate nature of dharma.

Sitanshu Chakravarti discusses the shifting values throughout the Mahabharata period and how Bhishma was trapped in the rut of old world ideals while the world itself had progressed (2006). Similarly, James Fitzgerald discusses the "historic change from ceremonial ethics of actions to the modern yoga-ethics of perfecting oneself" (Rukmani in SSEASR 2007: 81). The Mahabharata itself demonstrates that there is a shift in values. Thus, the endeavour to integrate genuinely nonviolence (ahimsa), a vegetarian diet, non-greed, truth, and *niskama-karma* as new ideals in society, alongside Vedic sacrifices, reflects the post-Mauryan period in which the Mahabharata was authored. In Bhishma's old world, the wife was subservient to the husband *pace* Manu, loyalty to one's employer who provides bread and butter is unquestionable and promise-keeping or one's word once uttered cannot be changed. In the previous global order, it was difficult to make changes within oneself due to rigidity and inflexibility. Subordination to the authority of the eldest brother also played a role in the Pandavas' (II.68.8) cautious attitude during this occurrence, particularly by Bhishma. All of these characteristics may be seen in Bhishma's and the Pandavas' actions following the insult to Draupadi at the court of Dhrtarastra after the dice game.

## **KUNTI**

Satyavati was the Kaurava branch's matriarch, while Kunti was the Pandava branch's. Surya's illegitimate child was made possible by the potency of the mantra that Durvasas gave her. The morality of Kunti's behaviour has been debated, but the topic of whether it was ethical for Durvasas to give Kunti the mantra that enabled her to conceive has not been much examined. Ethical behaviour that is controlled by cultural constraints is a reality in everyday life. Karna teases Kunti in the Mahabharata by declaring that even an enemy would not have injured him as much as she did by abandoning him. Here's an example of a moral quandary won by societal convention. Karna does not reveal his identity to the rest of the world, just to himself.

The message of the Mahabharata is also to draw our attention to the fact that cultural pressures may cause humans to behave in unnatural ways, and therefore a warning to follow those



traditions or face the price for the transgressions. After all, many similar scenarios exist in today's society, causing people to succumb to societal pressure regularly. Even today, it is a rare brave individual who can defy collective cultural pressure.

## **KARNA**

Duryodhana and Karna are two of the many anti-heroes in the Mahabharata. Karna is recognised mostly for his devotion to his foster parents and the Kauravas, particularly Duryodhana (V. 141. 6-15). Despite Krishna and Kunti's pleas to switch sides and return to the side of his biological brothers, he remained faithful to Duryodhana. He refused vehemently, questioning Kunti's previous disinterest and comparing it with her current enthusiasm. Karna, therefore, exemplifies the smritikara condition of being honest to one's conscience, as described by Manu and Yajnavalkya. His kindness is famous. Who would give up the golden earrings and protective armour he was born with, knowing well that without them he was vulnerable and maybe killed? But that's exactly what he did when Indra came before him and demanded his most prized belongings. When one thinks about Karna, the ethical characteristics of loyalty, gratitude, and generosity spring to mind. However, we must ask if Karna always acted in line with dharma. Despite the beautiful picture of Karna portrayed in the Mahabharata, there is another side of Karna revealed in the Mahabharata. Karna is shown at his worst after Draupadi's undressing in the court after the dice game, laughing hysterically when Draupadi was insulted in the open court (II.64.44). In reality, it was Karna who cheered when Duhshasana repeatedly labelled Draupadi a slave (ibid. 67.45; V.29,43) and who also commanded the undressing of all the Pandavas and Draupadi ( II. 68.38). He is the one who chastised Vikarna for standing up for Draupadi in court (II. 68. 28-38). Karna is frequently shown as Duryodhana's accomplice, encouraging him to take on the Pandavas in combat ( V.49, 35-36; 93. 9). Duryodhana never forgot the insults he received when he was mocked and mocked by the Pandavas and Draupadi while in Khandavaprastha for Yudhisthira's Rajasuya sacrifice ( II.50 29-35). This, in turn, led to the dice game, and it is here that Karna's behaviour reaches its apex. He surpassed Duryodhana in his enmity for the Pandavas by abetting Duryodhana's bad acts in a variety of ways. Vyasa, therefore, presents Karna as a complicated personality, maybe implying that within every one of us there is a Karna with some flaw/flaw in our character that comes itself despite one's best efforts to suppress it. It is easier to relate with Karna than with Yudhisthira, who is full of dharma and makes it harder to emulate him. Karna, like most people, is a "flawed hero," despite his flaws.

## YUDHISTHIRA

Vyasa also depicts an ideal dharmic individual in Yudhisthira, who is similar to Rama in the Ramayana. As I have already stated, Yudhisthira outperforms Rama in several ways, such as his uncompromising dedication to the truth (Rukmani, 2005). When he asks the yaksa in the Yaksha-prasna storey to bring back Nakula instead of Bhima or Arjuna, he demonstrates the greatest level of dharma. When the yaksa challenges him about his decision, he claims that since one of Kunti's kids (himself) was still living, it was only right for one of Madri's sons to live (Rukmani, 2005:180). The Yaksa was so delighted with the response that he let all of the brothers come to life. Yudhisthira was the pinnacle of absolute selflessness and a personification of dharma in this situation. This characteristic also comes alive in the last Swargarohanaparvan when he refuses to abandon the dog that followed him throughout his journey to the end.

When it comes to how the Mahabharata addresses ethical concerns, there is no simple solution. Matilal discusses the malleability of our practical wisdom's application and contrasts it to the Mahabharata dharma-ethics (Ganeri: 33). This, however, "does not imply that the fixity and universality of ethical principles will be wholly optional" (Ganeri:33). Varnasrama-dharmas and sadharana-dharmas gave guidelines, and each person had to pick his or her dharma. However, there existed an unwritten norm that 'dharma alone saves, whereas adharma leads to disaster,' under which one had the freedom to act under the umbrella of dharma. We might equate dharma ethics to the freedom of expression and the right to pursue one's destiny, both of which are inscribed in many constitutions. While one has the freedom of speech one needs to remember that it is automatically circumscribed by the freedom of the others as well to the same right.

As a result, dharma is a two-edged sword. Even while negotiating the appropriate dharmic route in a specific scenario, the core dharma of maintaining the other's right to dharma must be taken into account. Yudhisthira is portrayed as the most dharmic person in the Mahabharata because he is always concerned with the other person. There is a reason he is regarded as Dharma's son, and it is a metaphor for Yudhisthira being an incarnation of dharma itself. While Yudhisthira is the finest example of dharmic/ethical behaviour in the Mahabharata, it is the other characters who, in their attempts to cope in the world, reflect the many-sidedness of virtue and vice in this great epic. The Mahabharata's hope is that a person will gain wisdom and experience as he negotiates life's vicissitudes and may gain an insight into dharma as well.

Thus, while Bhishma was firm in his promise-keeping vow in his early days, while he lies on his bed of arrows instructing Yudhisthira on the complexities of truth, he speaks of truth and its numerous facets. In the same way, whereas Yudhisthira did not bend from the truth in his early days when it came to earning the dharma-yuddha', he grudgingly consented to give a half-truth about Asvatthama the elephant being murdered in Drona's presence.

At the end of his work, Vyasa laments, "With extended arms, I cry aloud, yet no one hears me." Dharma is the source of both artha and kama. So, why is Dharma not being followed?" (XIII.5.62) He admits that it is difficult to adhere to the textbook concept of dharma. Vyasa himself provides the sole solution to that issue when he states that the knowledge of dharma is buried in the cave. The Mahabharata appears to believe that if an agent is trained in the high value of maintaining dharma, the agent will be able to make the best decision under the given circumstances, even though (as indicated above) it may not always be the best choice.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, dharma is a reappearing theme in the Mahabharata. It has been demonstrated by several well-known characters in the book, as well as something taught by multiple sages. It is the moral of many stories and something to learn from. It is the topic of many conversations, and something well known to all. Dharma is something that applies to all human beings and is something that we should live by. No action should be done only for doing Dharma, but all actions should be Dharma.

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