

# ‘PATH TO HELL IS PAVED BY GOOD INTENTIONS’: A STUDY OF ETHICAL CONFLICT IN MAHABHARATA

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## **Abstract**

*The efficacy of Mahabharata both as an epic and itihasa cuts across time and space. It has didactic as well as poetic value which makes it relevant even today. It is an indispensable part of our intellectual and cultural tradition. It offers insight into the workings of human mind. It is in a way a handbook that teaches us the complexities of life and relationships; how even the best of the characters lose grip over situations in the face of adverse and challenging circumstances. On the surface, it seems easy to conclude that one should follow and uphold dharma to lead a peaceful and virtuous life. However, dharma in itself is not a static entity. This confusion often leads to ethical and moral dilemmas. This paper is an attempt to bring forth this ethical conflict in the life of major characters in the epic.*

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Dharma, ethical conflict, dilemmas.

Mahabharata is an epic that continues to influence the psyche of Indians even today. The complexity and the size of the epic baffle us both at intellectual as well as aesthetic level. The efficacy of the epic is evident in the way it has inspired both creative, literary artists and erudite scholars. Besides so many retellings of the epic we also witness its impact on the world of theatre and cinema, where they have endeavoured to recreate its charisma on the celluloid. Generally people tend to associate grey shades with Mahabharata and see it only as a war between brothers for the sake of empire. A war that is more devastating and heartrending than both the world wars. However, Mahabharata is much more than the war. Apart from the war there is so much to take home from this epic. Be it policy making, discipline, code of conduct, morality, kinship, concept of charity, sacrifice etc. It is rightly said that whatever is not available in Mahabharata doesn't exist in the world. Consisting of 100000 shlokas it is larger than both Iliad and Odyssey (the well known European epics) put together. Owing to its mammoth size it is also addressed as 'Literary Monster' by the literary critics. It is said that "the Vedas along with the Puranas, the Nyayas, the Mimansas, the Dharmashastras and the Angas are the fourteen sources of knowledge and Dharma. (The student should) expound the Vedas (with the help of) the itihasa and Puranas." (SD: Intro. p15) that is why, in its essence Mahabharata that is itihasa is an amalgamation of the wisdom contained in our Vedas, Puranas, shrutis etc. The wisdom here is disseminated in more practical terms. As it is both shastra and kavya, hence, it has both didactic as well as poetic value. As a shastra, the Mahabharata lays down the virtues of the four ashramas namely, dharma, arth, kama, and moksha. The very genesis of Mahabharata is rooted in the sustenance of dharma. It is mentioned in 'Adi Parva' how Earth implored Brahma to get her rid of the evil. Brahma then asks the devatas to descend on Earth. Devatas along with Indra, request Narayana to incarnate on Earth. In this way, the devatas along with Narayana descend on Earth to restore dharma. However, this task is to be carried out in such a way that people at large also understand the implications of not following dharma. The war, therefore, is predestined; Krishna says: "whatever threatens the existence of dharma shall be destroyed." (Mohan et al.163) that is why, for the restoration of Dharma, he descends on Earth from time to time.

Dharma comes from the root word dhra which means to support, to sustain, to uphold. Both the twin epics lay emphasis on the establishment of Dharma. However, dharma as we find in Mahabharata is a more complicated version as compared to Ramayana. In Ramayana, the world is simpler and the concepts of right and wrong precisely demarcated. In Mahabharata characters are more prone to their weaknesses. For example, In Ramayana Rama is not the only one who is virtuous, Hanuman, Lakshman, Bharat, Shabri; Urmila Sita etc. impress us with their virtues. It is more idealistic in tone. However, the world of Mahabharata is more bleak and complicated. Here, the characters are more self centred and mean. For example, Both Shantanu and Dhritrashtra fail as fathers; Shantanu prioritizes his own life and desires over his son, whereas, Dhritrashtra fails due to his excessive love for his son that blinds him towards his son's wrongdoings. However, the tone of Mahabharata is quite in tune with the time frame of Mahabharata. It takes place just before the beginning of Kalyuga and therefore, the definition, as well as, interpretation of morality, dharma, right and wrong change with respect to the changing scenario. It makes us realise that our actions have far deeper connotations. And that one cannot understand them fully unless kept under broader perspective which is why the epic baffles the understanding of the western scholars as they look for binaries in the epic.

As dharma varies from person to person and situation to situation, hence the characters often find themselves gripped with ethical dilemma. Sometimes, individual dharma clashes with the cosmic dharma. Bhishma, who has vowed for celibacy and has vouched to protect the throne throughout his life, finds himself at moral crossroads when Draupadi is disrobed by Dushashan. Draupadi questions his silence; it is then that he informs Draupadi that he chose his dharma that is his vow given to his mother. This is the reason why he sides with the kauravas in the war. While following his dharma eventually he finds himself standing against the cosmic dharma.

Karna whom we also know as Radheya spent his entire life trying to know his whereabouts and the circumstances of his birth. However, when he is finally told that Kunti is his mother and that he and other Pandu sons are born out of the same womb, Karna finds himself at the crossroads of dharma. If he follows his dharma as a friend he betrays his brothers and if he protects his brothers then he betrays his friend. Finally he chooses his friend which makes him stand against the supreme dharma. Yudhishtira also has his own share of moral dilemmas, when he is asked to lie about Ashvathama. He chooses to lie to Dronacharya for the sake of a bigger dharma. Bhishma, Karna and Dronacharya, all three of them are men of exceptional merit, moral strength and intellect, however, all their virtues are wasted because of the clash between their individual dharma and supreme dharma which is represented by Krishna.

Krishna is the sarathi in true sense, one who actually steers Mahabharata; one who has solutions to all problems. When Draupadi is being disrobed by Dushasana and the entire court feels crippled in the face of the conflicting dharma, she implores Krishna who rescues her by sending yards and yards long sari. He visits Hastinapur as a messenger of peace, despite of being aware that the war is destined, he tries to evade it. He pulls up Arjuna when he refuses to go to war. Yudhishtira is defeated by Karna and has to revert to his camp. He thinks that Arjuna would avenge him. When Arjuna comes to know about his brother's defeat, he rushes to his camp. Yudhishtira thinks that Arjuna has killed Karna and has arrived to convey the news. When he comes to know that Arjuna has just come to see him, he gets infuriated and starts accusing him. He says that Arjuna should throw his bow, at which Arjuna rushes to strike him. Finally Krishna intervenes and asks Arjuna why does he wishes to kill his elder brother, Arjuna informs him that he had taken a secret vow that he would kill the man that very instant who asks him to throw his bow. Krishna comes up with the solution and asks Arjuna to abuse his elder brother which is as good as killing him. Arjuna obeys him and finally tries to kill him as a punishment for abusing his elder brother, then Krishna asks him to praise himself as self appreciation is equivalent to death in the shastras. He is the one who ensures the death of Duryodhana, Karna etc.

At the end of the war, when Pandu sons defeat the kauravas, Krishna ensures that they do not indulge in self pride. It is for this reason, that he visits Barbarik along with the pandavas. Barbarik tells them that he did not see any warrior; rather he only saw sudarshan chakra ravishing the evil doers. There is another incident in the folk versions of Mahabharata when Arjuna indulges in self pride and thinks that he is the best archer and warrior on the earth. Krishna asks him to bring gopis from Mathura. On his way, he is attacked and defeated by bhills.

Mahabharata, therefore, is not only an itihasa rather a manual of life. It emphasises the need of maintaining the equilibrium between the individual and cosmic dharma. This remains the defining feature of the epic. This struggle is emblematic of modern man's struggle when it comes to making choices in life. The epic informs us that right/wrong, good/evil are in itself pretty complex entities, therefore, one cannot assess the actions in a limited frame rather it has to be placed on a broader canvass to decipher the true merit of the action.

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