

Relevance of the Mahabharata

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THE MAHABHARATA SPEAKS about eternal truths and deals with India's poetry, history, sociology, religion, and spiritual philosophy. It actually covers every aspect of human life and is not limited to any specific time, place, or people. Therefore, this priceless cultural and spiritual epic, which is the longest and most sublime of India's epics, now belongs to world culture. Since the journey of *mahakala*, great time, is unbroken, it would be wrong to believe that we have nothing to do with events that occurred in the past. Modern history may divide humanity's uninterrupted journey through time into distinct ages and periods, but spiritual literature does not. Like a sand dune, which has a constantly changing crest and a base that remains unchanged for thousands of years, the changes in society and human psyche are only superficial, while deep down the human being remains constant. The Mahabharata records the ancient and very present tale of the incessant battle that an individual wages against internal and external enemies. Greed, infatuation, power, and selfishness are forever constant and active; and if anyone wants to evolve, these negative trends have to be counteracted. In fact, one has to fight these intangible forces more within than outside oneself. And there is only one way to accomplish this: by following dharma. After delineating the path of dharma, the Mahabharata assures us of its fruit: *jivan-mukti*, freedom while still living. It also states that the struggle against negative inner forces is a sacred one and has to be undertaken religiously and honestly.

The Super Narrative

The Mahabharata narrates the saga of the Pandavas and is embedded with numerous complementary stories and philosophical texts. Through them the epic establishes various personal, social, political, and spiritual values and illustrates life at many levels. The highest truths are put in a poetic form of extreme elegance, beauty, depth, and structure. The Mahabharata illustrates emotional ups and downs with astounding clarity and sincerity; it does not leave aside any one of them: envy, hate, beauty, romance, love, animosity, desire, lust, anger, excitement, fear, repugnance, grief, and so on. All these emotions are just as strong and relevant in individuals at present as they were then. Indian metaphysics believes that the entire creation is regulated by *ritam*, divine cosmic law. When considered within society and nature *ritam* is called dharma; and this dharma, when spoken in the context of laws governing individuals, is called satya, truth. Therefore, none of the basic laws change, and the narratives of the Mahabharata are as attractive today as they must have been in their own time.

In the epic's entire documentation of events, customs, and values the clash of opposing thoughts is exhibited. Both sides of the coin working on a single event or custom are presented. Many think that a number of social practices and values of that time are no longer relevant today. But the customs of polygamy; *parivedana*, the marriage of a younger brother before the older; *niyoga*, employing the brother or a close kinsman to raise children of a dead husband by marrying the widow; *svayamvara*,



Uttara and Abhimanyu as he goes off to the battle in which he will be killed, c.1930

a girl choosing her future husband by herself; and *harana-apaharana*, abducting an unmarried girl by one who wants to marry her, shown in the Mahabharata are also found in present day society with the same mental anguish or joy attending them. Not that all these customs were the current social practices, for monogamy was the normal custom, as it is now. In the cases of Satyawati and Kunti, who were unable to acknowledge that their sons were born prior to wedlock, they kept the identity of their children undisclosed, as it is also done today. Satyawati was Vyas's mother, and Kunti was Karna's; eventually both the sons did learn about their real mothers and the circumstances regarding their births. These examples clearly demonstrate that during the Mahabharata time men and women

had learning, culture, and freedom enough to choose as they saw fit. King Dushyanta married Shakuntala in a *gandharva* type marriage, a mutual agreement between a woman and a man, which was acceptable in certain cases in those days. Today such marriages are commonplace and legal, and we do not think that the couple has violated dharma. The couple, however, may go through the same emotional pangs their ancestors went through; therefore, the narratives of the epic can be of help to modern society as well.

With regard to the cases discussed above twelve types of issues were allowed by the old Hindu laws, and whatever the circumstances children were born in, they were fully accepted by society, for life was held to be sacred. Of them four are: *aurasa*, legitimate son or daughter; *kanina*, son born of an unmarried woman; *kshetraja*, offspring of a wife by a kinsman or person duly appointed to raise an issue to the husband; and *dattaka*, adopted child. If *kanina* and *kshetraja* would have not been considered acceptable by dharma, then the tradition of *niyoga* too would have been rejected. Present-day research on stem cells, as also artificial insemination, test-tube babies, surrogate mothers, and sperm donors are a reality and we do not think that all this is wrong.

We see an amazing form of joint family system in the Mahabharata. There are no words like uncle or aunt used in it. The Pandavas never refer to Dhritarashtra or Vidura as uncles, they are addressed as father; Gandhari, Dhritarashtra's wife, and Paransavi, Vidura's wife, are considered mothers. Cousins are called and treated as brothers. Family values were always held above individual needs, and such joint families have existed for centuries in India. It is only in this and the previous century that family values have been weakened due to many factors, though even now any occasion is an excuse for all the

family members to congregate. This has a positive impact on nuclear families, which tend to break up easily and are prone to much tension and distress in the absence of a support system.

Dharma at the Core

The Mahabharata is primarily the saga of royal heroes, of whom Sri Krishna is the central and towering figure. And all the personalities that appear in it are used to teach dharma in relation to individuals, families, and society. In a number of places the definition of dharma varies, but nowhere in the epic is dharma defined as 'religion'. Dharma means that which holds things together, and the epic shows how sometimes the clash between individual dharma and higher forms of dharma arise due to various circumstances. For instance, when Sri Krishna was returning from his mission in Hastinapura, which was his last attempt to prevent the great Kurukshetra War, he visits Kunti. She tells him something of great importance, which was also a message for her son Yudhishtira: 'Regardless of what age or period the calendar claims to be, when the king rules with righteousness, the Satya Yuga appears; but if the king becomes immoral, then the Kali Yuga descends on earth.' For it was the duty of a king to protect dharma and not to be engaged only in his enjoyment. This high duty entailed great trouble and called for intelligence, judgement, and personality. Present-day rulers need to learn from such lessons.

Right from the beginning the Mahabharata emphasizes the struggle against injustice and immorality, highlighting that no one's rights should be deliberately snatched and that equality and justice were open to all. When a king like Jarasandha provides protection to the immoral, numerous tyrants like Kamsa are born and torture people. When a powerful ruler intoxicated with strength starts behaving as if his whimsical

wishes were his birthright, immorality begins to breed. Sri Krishna did not want Jarasandha's influence and excessive demands to grow to such an extent that people had to suffer. He started to control and restrict the forces of Jarasandha from the Kaurava capital of Hastinapura itself. Sri Krishna had sent Akrura to Hastinapura to find out if any injustice was being perpetrated against Kunti and her sons as well as to verify if there was any infringement of dharma. Duryodhana had tried to kill Bhima by poisoning him. Bhima was lucky to escape and survive. Kunti, disheartened, complained to Vidura about the attempt to assassinate her son, but Vidura, who understood what state-inflicted terror was, asked her to remain quiet for a while; for if she would have complained to the king, her other sons might have also become targets for assassination.

Sri Krishna realized that despite the presence of men like Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura, who understood dharma, the king of Hastinapura himself was at the root of adharma, and under his rule not only was adharma gaining ground, but tyrants like Duryodhana and Dushshasana were rising. If this adharma was not curtailed immediately, it could spread like wildfire and cause terrible destruction. This explains why in any age moral and righteous people suffer when a ruler is an immoral tyrant. Only if the king is righteous can adharma, to a great extent, be contained. It was nothing but Sri Krishna's efforts and military might that enabled Yudhishtira, the paragon of dharma, to be proclaimed heir to the throne. In the meantime started the threat of a joint attack by Jarasandha, Kalayavana, and Banasura on Sri Krishna's city Mathura. In spite of Sri Krishna being one of the extraordinary warriors of the time and knowing well that war is required for self-defence, he decided to remove himself from the conflict instead of forcing the innocent citizens of Mathura to ultimate



Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna confront Karna, c.1820

destruction. He emptied Mathura and left for Dwarka. One of Sri Krishna's many names is *ranachor-ji*, one who runs away from battle. Sri Krishna accepted this dishonour, but refused to be responsible for the deaths of countless innocent people. This is an example for armies and governments today. There is a difference between war and wanton destruction: unnecessary violence and barbaric behaviour should be avoided, no matter how great the cause for a battle may be. No soldier from any side should be subject to torture. During the Pandavas' first battle against Drupada, while Bhima was unleashing destruction on Drupada's army, Arjuna told Bhima that their aim was to capture Drupada and not to kill indiscriminately. Even prisoners were treated with kindness and were not held for ransom or used to put pressure on the opponent. War is always inhumane, but civilizations have always indulged in it, so much so that it has become a truism that war is a necessary evil when societies form. Even if this is taken as true, the Mahabharata shows the proper conduct in war and the way of humane treatment of the vanquished.

We must remember that people were just as greedy for wealth and infatuated with power then as they are now. As soon as the Yadavas and the citizens of Mathura left the city, Dhritarashtra started to look for a way to steal power from the Pandavas. His minister Kunika advised him to eliminate all others who claimed power—such are the requirements of politics. Dhritarashtra accepted his advice and immediately sent his sister-in-law Kunti and his brother's sons—who considered him as their father—to a house made of wax in Varanavata; his intention was to eventually set fire to that house. It was Vidura's attentiveness and skill, along with the good fortune of the Pandavas that prevented the assassination. All through history we find numerous battles among brothers or among fathers and sons for the sake of power. These incidents demonstrate how the events narrated in the Mahabharata are not unnatural or out of the ordinary, nor have they lost relevance. A smaller version of the Mahabharata is played out in today's homes and families. We live and breathe in the same world in which the epic's characters lived. Political crimes

are still a common facet of our world. One person's greed is responsible not just for the murder of enemies, but also of his or her near ones. Wars start first in the minds and in families and then spill on to the battlefields. The wars that are being waged today under different labels are comparable to the wars that caused the deeds of Jarasandha, Kalayavana, and Banasura, and the misbehaviour of Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana. If one reads the Mahabharata carefully, one discovers that it reflects also our own era.

Sri Krishna could not sit idle and watch the destructive nature of Dhritarashtra's greed. He could have punished Dhritarashtra outright for his evil actions, but that would have not solved all the problems and established dharma. Sri Krishna wanted a person who could replace Dhritarashtra and not stray from dharma under any circumstance. And Yudhishtira, the son of dharma, was that person. It is worth noting that Sri Krishna never attempted to seat his kinsmen on a throne, as there was a great possibility of civil war amongst the Yadavas if such a development would have taken place. After Dhritarashtra's attempt to burn alive the Pandavas in Varanavata, Sri Krishna gathered them to start the process of establishing dharma by installing Yudhishtira as emperor. Vidura and Vyasa assisted Sri Krishna directly and indirectly in this effort. This was essentially the front of dharma. He understood that the Pandavas would not survive if they continued to live under the authority of Dhritarashtra. It was essential for the Pandavas not only to live away from Dhritarashtra and build their own military might, but also to have some powerful allies. Sri Krishna's strategy led to consolidating family ties between the Pandavas and the Panchalas, traditional enemies of the Kauravas.

Sri Krishna managed to make the Pandava forces strong with the assistance of the

Panchalas and Yadavas. Once again the blind King Dhritarashtra dismissed the Pandavas' request for their rights and, in order to get rid of them, gave them sovereignty over a wild dominion called Khandavaprastha. Sri Krishna funded the construction of the Pandava kingdom with his own wealth, but advised them to keep god Indra pleased and on their side, as theirs was a nascent kingdom. Khandavaprastha was renamed Indraprastha. Despite these efforts Indra nurtured Pandava enemies in their own kingdom. The tradition to maintain spies and agents even inside friendly countries has still not faded away. When the Khandava forest was set ablaze, Takshaka and his family, who were Indra's agents, were discovered. Takshaka was a *naga*, considered a snake, and later in the Mahabharata the same Takshaka ambushed Arjuna's grandson Parikshit. When Sri Krishna and Arjuna were close to Takshaka in an attempt to eradicate him, Indra intervened directly and rescued Takshaka and his family. Many governments and societies still indulge in such behaviour.

The Great Yajnas

The episode of the *rajasuya* yajna in the Mahabharata is very significant. Most people do not hesitate to describe the *rajasuya* and *ashvamedha* as long lost and forgotten incidents of an ancient royal culture. It appears that the rishis started the practice of these two yajnas in the light of problems faced by various small kingdoms and democracies. In these yajnas the emperor does not take away the land or the rule of any king. Only allegiance to the emperor and taxes are accepted from the local ruler. The aim was to enable common citizens, traders, and travellers to go from one part of the country to another without obstacles and without being inconvenienced due to established boundaries

of small states and kingdoms. Besides, kings would not start warring against each other for selfish and petty interests. Small kingdoms could also seek help from the emperor in case of external threat. As an example of this tradition there was the Maurya dynasty, which is considered to have been established to defend India from Alexander's armies. In the modern age also many governments have their own protectorates. The European Union is a new form of the same idea, in which all states within the union experience the convenience of easy travel, trade, and security by declaring a federation of sovereign states.

Sri Krishna prepared the Pandavas for a *rajasuya* yajna not just for strengthening their kingdom, but also with the intention to end the power of various immoral rulers. However, it is worth noting that Sri Krishna did not declare a large-scale war. He had already killed Kamsa, now it was necessary to eliminate the corrupt Jarasandha and Shishupala. Jarasandha had captured ninety-nine smaller kings and was getting ready to capture the hundredth, so that he could kill them all and declare himself an emperor. His death was necessary to free those ninety-nine kings, but a war with Jarasandha would have meant huge death and destruction for uncountable lives. Instead of attacking him directly Sri Krishna manoeuvres Jarasandha to agree to fight with Bhima. Bhima kills him. Sri Krishna then crowned Jarasandha's son Sahadeva as the ruler of Magadha and released the ninety-nine kings held in captivity. In this way, even before the *rajasuya* yajna took place, all these small and relatively weak kings started to care for their people.

Sri Krishna killed Shishupala, a friend and ally of Jarasandha, with his *sudarshana chakra*, divine discus, before all the assembled kings on the occasion of the *rajasuya* yajna. Shishupala's

death was required for protecting dharma. He could have become uncooperative towards the Pandavas, opposed them, and eventually even become their enemy; there was, however, a higher reason: the first sign of the establishment of a moral administration is the protection of the life and dignity of the weak, the helpless, and women. In this gathering of kings Shishupala had been behaving impolitely right from the beginning with regard to the *agrapuja*, the one to be worshipped first. The grandsire Bhishma recommended Sri Krishna's name for *agrapuja*, and this was not acceptable to Shishupala, who started swearing and cursing. He said inappropriate things not only to Sri Krishna but to Bhishma as well. Yudhishtira and the other brothers took no effective steps to quiet him, and Bhishma also remained silent. Sri Krishna let Shishupala rant, but as soon as Shishupala swore against Rukmini, Sri Krishna flung his discus and beheaded him. Numerous incidents from Sri Krishna's life can be mentioned to show how he offered protection and safety to all women. The protection of a woman's honour and dignity is more relevant today than it was in the past.

With Sri Krishna on their side, the Pandavas were satisfied with their rapid progress and prosperity. Even after all the continuous family feuds Yudhishtira and his brothers did not differentiate between the Kauravas and the Pandavas and still considered all of them to be part of one family. Bhishma was their grandfather and they considered Dhritarashtra to be their common father. Perhaps this is the reason why the Pandava forces did not proceed towards Hastinapura prior to the *rajasuya* yajna. There is no point in conquering or collecting taxes from one's own kingdom! All dignitaries from Hastinapura were invited to the yajna and important responsibilities were given to

them. Not a single representative of the Panchalas, their traditional enemies, was visible in Indraprastha, despite the Panchala kingdom being Draupadi's maiden home. This was all arranged perhaps to please Bhishma, Drona, and Dhritarashtra. The Pandavas' attempt to maintain family unity appears to be at play here instead of politics. Duryodhana, despite being heir to the affluent state of Hastinapura, could not bear to see the prosperity of the Pandavas. Envy, malice, and greed are present in all ages and societies, but when they become part of politics, they give rise to terrible wars. The world has seen how major historical wars have been waged because of a few individuals who were spiteful, jealous, and proud.

Because of his polluted psyche and greed, Duryodhana uses all sorts of excuses and tricks to force his father Dhritarashtra to command Yudhishtira to play a game of dice. Dhritarashtra does just that. Yudhishtira joins the game even, though he is completely against gambling and also ignorant of how the game is played. And all this he did because Yudhishtira wanted to honour Dhritarashtra's command, who he considered his father and king. Yudhishtira loses his kingdom, brothers, himself, and eventually, forced by Shakuni who plays with loaded dice, wagers and loses Draupadi as well. If one examines the dice game episode illustrated in the Mahabharata in its entirety, one can understand how greed gives birth to injustice, and injustice and oppression lead to



'Arjuna's Penance', c.1825-40

circumstances that can trigger a war. Defeated in the dice game the Pandavas accepted the loss of their empire and the tremendous insult to themselves and to Draupadi. They were banished to the forests for twelve years, followed by a year of living incognito. They suffered all its inconveniences; they underwent all hardships and fulfilled dutifully all conditions. Despite being capable of waging a war, as by then they already had many powerful allies, they never entertained that idea. If the Pandavas were not restrained, there would have been violence during the gambling itself—Yudhishtira kept himself and his brothers under control. He tried to maintain peace even as he accepted the pain of indignity and suffering. Many societies and cultures at present have to tolerate disrespect from not only big but also smaller powers; Yudhishtira's example is worth emulating.

The Mahabharata, apart from its literary and spiritual value, brings home to everyone in the world the role and the need for dharma, following which elevates lives and nations and leads one to the goal of human life: mukti.