

Ethical Dilemmas in Mahabharat

Ethics and Dharma

Before we can talk of ethics, it is necessary to keep in mind that the word used in Mahabharata is *dharma* and while the two are interrelated, the latter is wider in scope and more complex. Both deal with issues of what we ought to do but ethics seems more concerned with the moral conduct necessary for the survival and maintenance of a social group or social order while *dharma* also takes in its ambit, inner motivations and convictions and evolution of the human spirit through action. *Dharma* maintains a balance between societal norms and individual actions in a way that life remains dynamic without becoming irresponsible. It continuously tests its postulates in the ever-changing relationship between the individual and society, nature and man and, whenever necessary, redefines itself. It is neither only spirituality nor is it merely ritual or modes of worship but encompasses all aspects while leading to the transcendence of the immediate to evolve towards the ultimate. Hence it is not a static code of principles or actions. It evolves with time continuously discarding the outworn and absorbing the new values but at all times maintaining its equipoise and aspiring to a transcendental perfection.

Ethical Dilemmas

One of the main concerns of Mahabharata is *dharma*. It is discussed throughout the text by various characters in various situations and thus all the prevalent ideas of the time are put forward and examined. An ethical dilemma arises when a person is committed to two or more moral obligations and he cannot fulfil one without violating his duty to the other. It presents irreconcilable alternatives and the choice between them seems to be made irrationally or for reasons other than moral. The classic and the most well known example is Arjuna's dilemma at the beginning of the war which necessitates the Bhagavadgita. There are other instances. For example in the *Karnaparva*, Yudhishtira is forced to flee the battlefield after being painfully humiliated and wounded by Karna. Arjuna comes to find out what exactly has happened when Yudhishtira angrily turns upon him and says that he had undertaken the war mainly because of his confidence in Arjuna and his Gandiva bow. The war, however, was dragging on destroying thousands with no end in sight. Arjuna's boast of being the finest archer in the world was proving to be hollow. Yudhishtira not only insults Arjuna but also the *Gandiva*. Arjuna now has to choose between killing his elder brother and breaking his vow that he would kill anyone who insulted the *Gandiva*. His *kshatriya dharma* demands that he kill Yudhishtira but Krishna intervenes arguing that while keeping one's vows is an integral part of protecting the truth it cannot be an unconditional or absolute obligation especially when it demands a grossly unjust and criminal act like patricide or fratricide. In support of his proposition he narrates two stories.

A sage Kaushika had vowed to tell the truth all his life. One day he was sitting near a crossroad when some travellers ran by trying to escape the bandits who were chasing them. They requested Kaushika not to reveal to the bandits the direction which they had taken but Kaushika made no answer. The bandits, knowing that the hermit would not lie, asked him about the travellers. Kaushika told them the truth. As a result the travellers were killed by the bandits. Kaushika was condemned to hell because he had chosen his duty to tell the truth above saving innocent lives. His abiding by his vow was only egoistic and came to nothing because under

certain circumstances lives must be saved even at the cost of truth. This is not to propagate expediency but to argue that there are times when a lie can become a higher truth than the truth itself.

The Framework of Time, Place and Perceptions

However the world of Mahabharata is one of action and not of theories. It is an imperfect world in which imperfect people have to struggle to act according to their perceptions and judgements at a particular time and place. The *Shanti Parva* notes all kinds of human behaviour and acts done in the name of *dharma*. Some people praise conciliation and friendliness, others strenuous effort. Some praise sacrificial rites and others total withdrawal from the world. Some are only for 'giving' and others only for receiving. Some people leave everything and devote themselves to silence and meditation. Others obtain a kingdom after much fight and destruction all in the name of the same *dharma*.

The war of Mahabharata has come about as each individual has erred because of faulty judgement when faced with conflicting choices. He has been forced to acknowledge it at some time or another and suffer because of it. However, while doing the action, he has harboured the illusion that whatever he is doing is right at least in his situation. Mahabharata itself begins with the lament of Dhritrashtra who recounts each error that he has made and the tragic consequences that have followed.

There is error in the very birth of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Parashara thinks he can get infatuated with Satyawati, beget an illegitimate son and then be absolved of all responsibilities by simply granting her the boon that she would still remain a virgin. He cannot see that he has sown such seeds that the son he has begotten will be the victim of huge moral dilemmas and suffering. In spite of garnering unlimited wisdom he will be unable to deny his mother's request that will consequently create a family whose conduct will destroy all familial feelings and ties. Satyawati errs when she extracts a promise from Shantanu that her son will rule and not Bhishma who is elder and the right claimant to the throne. Bhishma errs by thoughtlessly bringing three daughters of the Kashi king for his younger brother Vichitravirya and then abandons one of them, Amba, who then becomes the cause of his death. Bhishma renounces kingship but is so blinded by his pride in his own righteousness and in being the guardian to the king that unknown to himself, he slides into such dependency on the throne that he loses all his capacity to oppose immorality and injustice in spite of his wisdom. Yudhishtira plays the game of dice because he thinks his honour is at stake as a *kshatriya* but gets so carried away that he wagers his brothers and Draupadi knowing full well that they are not his possessions. Appropriately he is hit by Virata during a game of dice during his incognito stay at Virata's court. Exigencies of war make him proclaim a half truth when he declares Ashwatthama to be dead which leads to the killing of Drona. The price is the murder of his sons in sleep by Ashwatthama, Drona's son.

Kunti errs in not acknowledging Karna and by the time she reveals the truth to him it is too late. Karna becomes Parashurama's pupil because of his envy of Arjuna and errs by pretending to be a *Brahmin*. He is found out and cursed by him that he would forget this very knowledge at the most crucial moment of his life. Again, absorbed in his practice of archery, he

by mistake kills a *brahmin's* cow and arrogantly offers to compensate him with wealth. He is cursed for his arrogance that when his chariot wheel gets stuck, he would be killed. Drona errs when angry with Drupada he becomes so dependent on Dhritrashtra that he is grossly unfair to Eklavya to prevent him from competing with Arjuna. Himself the guru of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas, he creates a *chakravyuha* for Abhimanyu the son of his favourite disciple Arjuna. Ironically, he is beheaded by Dhrishtadyumna, Drupada's son when he wrongly thinks that Ashwatthama is dead. Draupadi, born from a *yagna* forgets the basic courtesies of a host when she taunts Duryodhana that he is unable to distinguish between the floor and water because the son of a blind man can only be blind, setting in motion the cycle of revenge. When Krishna is going for reconciliation to prevent war, she laments that she has no one to fight for her, neither husband, nor brother, nor father, nor son and not even Krishna. When all her sons are murdered by Ashwatthama, Draupadi has to accept the consequences of the war for which she was so determined. She now shares a bond with Gandhari rather than Kunti as both have been left childless.

The most striking feature of Mahabharata is its honest appraisal of the human condition. It is self evident that what is right in one condition becomes wrong in another. Mahabharata shows the different characters struggling with their moral dilemmas as they try to reach their own truth whether driven consciously or unconsciously to that end. After all, all human life is a journey towards fulfilling one's *swadharma* while being true to one's *dharma* towards society. The unending fascination of Mahabharata lies in this struggle and its eternal relevance is because of the resonance it finds in us as the various characters try to make decisions when confronted by equally valid alternatives. The choice that an individual makes in such a situation tests his moral fibre.

We are all familiar with the dilemmas of conflicting duties. But the Mahabharata shows us that the value of an act depends not wholly upon one's motives but also on exigencies of time and place. The drama of human life takes place between these two co-ordinates, individual motivation and circumstances involving time and place. Only a person who understands the importance of both and uses them harmoniously succeeds in fulfilling his aspirations. Hence *dharma*, too, like every human attribute is seen in the light of this relativity. For example, the *Udyog Parva* states that an individual can be sacrificed for the sake of the family; the family for the village; the village for the region; and the world for one's soul. This indicates that the value of a thing is relative but no two people agree on what is the appropriate 'time' and 'place.' This leads to dilemmas which get further exaggerated because no one single principle or code can be laid down if the relativity of standards is accepted.

Yudhishtira's Actions and Dharma

Yudhishtira says, the path of *dharma* is a grand one from which several paths branch off but which of those is the one to follow is the dilemma. It also has to be accepted that all things in the world are a mixture of truth and untruth so how should one be distinguished from the other. Such questions come up again and again. For example, contentment checks greed but effort and discontentment with the existing conditions are a moving force to action. Mahabharata attaches

great importance to both. The question is not of finding a way out because whatever criterion one might adopt to resolve the dilemma would in itself be relativistic and must, therefore, form a part of the dilemma.

Yudhishtira is often confronted by moral dilemmas where he has to make choices with an unwavering heart. He is tested again and again perhaps because he is the eldest and also perhaps because he is the son of Dharma and himself is the *dharma* incarnate. Moreover, although the core event in Mahabharata is the war, the story is not essentially about physical courage, valour or strength but about spiritual strength, flexibility and the ability to face life unflinchingly. Some examples might help.

Yudhishtira's four brothers are laid low by the Yaksha of the lake as they are not able to answer his questions. Yudhishtira satisfies the Yaksha, who then asks him which of his brothers does he want revived. Without hesitation Yudhishtira asks for the life of his stepmother's younger son Sahdeva although the Yaksha repeatedly tries to persuade him to ask for one of his real brothers. Yudhishtira does not do so because he feels that to be unbiased is his greatest dharma and so he cannot forget his responsibility towards his dead stepmother, Madri.

Again, Yudhishtira is tested when the Gandharva Chaitrath imprisons the Kauravas who have come to the forests only to mock and humiliate the Pandavas and wants to kill them. Yudhishtira orders his brothers to go and get them released although they are unable to understand the logic of this as it would be in their interest to allow the Kauravas to be killed. Yudhishtira explains that it is their *dharma* to avenge the injustice done to them but it would be cowardice to allow the Kauravas who are after all their own brothers to be murdered by Chaitrath.

Yudhishtira is physically the weakest of the Pandava warriors but he is more convinced than others that *dharma* must be followed. In spite of all the injustices done to them, Yudhishtira does not really desire the destruction of the Kauravas otherwise why would he let go of the opportunity to allow them to be destroyed by Chaitrath. The Kauravas are defeated in Virata's city too by the five Pandava brothers living incognito but Yudhishtira does not pursue them further because he thinks that it would be more befitting to fight them openly. Although not wanting destruction, he goes into war unflinchingly unlike Arjuna because he is clear in his own mind that the war is happening in spite of him and not because of him. However, he is utterly dejected at the end of the war. He cannot eat as he sees the food drenched in the blood of his relatives. He cannot enjoy the kingdom as he would have liked to share it with the brothers that he has had to kill. His pain is the pain of a very large heart. He doesn't see his victory as victory but as defeat. Everyone tries to console him—his four brothers, ironically Arjuna being the first, Draupadi, Vyas himself and Narada. Reluctantly he agrees to his coronation but even then his heart is not at rest. He only finds peace when he goes on his last journey to the Himalayas.

Yudhishtira, Bhishma and Shri Krishna

Yudhishtira turns to Shri Krishna for advice but Krishna takes him to Bhishma. Why does he do this? He himself could have instructed Yudhishtira. Since he is the root of all

wisdom, there would have nothing surprising or extraordinary in it. But a man lives through the wisdom he expounds and Shri Krishna wants Bhishma to be immortal. In any case who could be better than Bhishma, who is lying on a bed of arrows because of his faulty understanding of his *dharma*. Bhishma had vowed not only to never stake his claim to the kingdom but also to never get married so that no dispute could arise even because of his children. In spite of this he had to see the horrifying carnage and brutal deaths of his grandchildren. This is because of his dilemma and ambiguity about what constitutes loyalty to the throne of Hastinapur. Does it mean the protection of the kingdom or the king? Are the two synonymous? It is this faultline that makes him become so weak that he becomes dependent on Duryodhana his grandson and helplessly watches the destruction of Hastinapur.

Although the inability to resolve his dilemmas has led to immense suffering for Bhishma, but suffering is a great teacher and so Shri Krishna wants him to impart his wisdom to Yudhishtira. He not only relieves him of all his pain but also shows him his real self and transfers all his own wisdom to him so that his words may spread as Vedas or eternal truths throughout the world. He knows that only a person who can await death calmly on a bed of arrows can talk to Yudhishtira about the responsibilities of statecraft, duties of kingship and lessons to be learnt for life. Wisdom comes only when a man stationed in *dharma* puts his dilemmas in front of another man equally stationed in *dharma*.

Yudhishtira asks Bhishma all the questions that keep arising within him pertaining to the doctrine of kingship, of ordinary life, of *moksha* and others. His final test is in the *Swargarohana Parva* when he is invited to go to heaven in his earthly body. He refuses to do so unless the dog that is following him is also permitted to enter. The dog disappears and Dharmaraja arrives. He was testing him because *dharma* can only be tested by *dharma*. Its eternal truth can be obfuscated and eclipsed for a while but cannot perish. It can weaken. Doubts can gather around it but it cannot die. At the same time, truth has to be a living truth otherwise it is no truth. Falsehood in itself has no existence by itself. It only gains predominance when truth becomes stagnant, dead, separated from the flow of life. That is why the waters of a pond rot but those of a flowing river remain ever fresh. This truth of an individual, of a society, of a community or of a nation has to be in consonance with cosmic and universal truths. When the immediate truth becomes at variance with the universal truth, it must be discarded, as it becomes low and mean. The most vivid example of this is during the game of dice.

Bhishma and Drona remain quiet when Yudhishtira wagers Draupadi. They do not stir when she is publicly humiliated and called a slave to be enjoyed by all and to be at the mercy of all. But Duryodhana's brother, Vikarna stands up saying, a woman is not a piece of property that can be wagered. The whole game of dice has been wrong. The silence of the elders implies that at one time this may have been true but not anymore; in contemporary society she has become man's property. Vikarna leaves because this specific truth is at variance with the eternal truth or the universal norm. The significance of Vikarna's sudden protest is that no matter how much truth is sought to be hidden or suppressed it will eventually emerge and often from the most unexpected sources. A morally intolerable event succeeds in courageously uncovering the truth because that truth is within all of us; that truth is life's unmitigated truth. It demands that we have to live this truth under the most unfavourable circumstances and that if we do not do so, our

own life will compel us to live it. Truth will eventually have to be upheld even if it comes from the least likely quarters and this will have to be done without excuses, without prejudices and without biases.

Another universal truth that Mahabharata teaches us is that *dharma* cannot be merely studied. It has to be continuously tested on one's pulses. This is because there is no rigid or absolute *dharma*. The *dharma* of ordinary life is different from the *dharma* of crises situations and such situations are infinite, so how can it be reduced to a mere inflexible code. One way to test the rightness of actions is to ask the question whether you are doing something out of fear of someone or is someone taking an action because he fears you. Another question is whether your action merely conforms to societal norms or is it the means of universal good even if it is not in consonance with the strict demands of society.

Mahabharata forces decisions where choices have to be made between conflicting *dharmas*. This has to be done after great thought, concentration and consideration. For example Gautam orders his son Chirkari to kill his mother as she has transgressed the *dharma* and leaves for the forests. Chirkari is caught between following his father's orders as a son or his own duty to protect his mother. He decides to follow the latter arguing that when a husband does not remain a provider or a protector, he loses the rights of a husband. In the meantime Gautama realizes his error and rushes back to prevent his orders from being carried out. He blesses his son for disobeying him and realizes that in worldly affairs it is not right to take decisions in haste or anger. *Dharma* moves slowly. It requires patience and often leads to extreme loneliness. Yudhishtira is the most obvious example. He is alone in his decision to stand by his word of thirteen years of exile although he knows that Shakuni has cheated just as he is alone in deciding to rescue the Kauravas from the Gandharvas. But *dharma* also sustains, gives faith that ultimately it cannot be destroyed. *Adharma* may lead to short-term rapid gains but when it is destroyed, it is from its roots. Nothing remains. *Dharma* may appear to cause suffering but ultimately it prevails. At an even higher level, there is actually no conflict between a lower and a higher truth. However, in arriving at the higher truth, one's own immediate self interest has to be eliminated and all points of view have to be considered. Then no conflict remains because there is a realization that one's own good ultimately lies in everyone's good and that what is not in everyone's good cannot also be good for the individual in the long term no matter how many gains it brings in the short term.

Relativity of Dharma and the Touchstones as Guides

Nobody's sorrow in Mahabharata is an individual one. Most or all the errors are committed by characters confronted by multiple choices. Each of them has convinced himself of the justification of his actions. This is also because it is difficult to decide one's *dharma* because of its relative aspect. However, relativity cannot also be allowed to degenerate into unprincipled conduct. So how can opportunism in the name of ethical conduct, be avoided. Further, how to resolve a genuine doubt that arises out of conflicting but valid demands. This is the question that Yudhishtira asks Bhishma. What is the test to decide on appropriate action based on *dharma*--direct perception or scriptural authority? Bhishma acknowledges that both scriptural authority and direct perception can create doubts. Those who consider themselves knowledgeable see sense perception to be the test and do not admit the existence of anything that cannot be

perceived through them. But sense perception cannot be the only test of reality because reality can only be understood through long practice and living life in its many expressions.

Bhishma in the *Shanti Parva* says that what is *dharma* and what *adharma* has to be decided according to one's own intelligence and actions done accordingly. But this does not remove one's doubts since the same act can be *dharma* in one set of circumstances and *adharma* in another. Therefore it becomes essential for the intelligence to understand relativity and have discernment so as not to be assailed by doubts while acting. But this means that *dharma* and conduct both arise from intelligence and are also known through it. This can cause one to rationalize one's actions unless care is taken to use the intelligence to learn different things from different people and not depend only on one branch of knowledge to illuminate one's path.

But if the goal is to do 'good' then what is good has to be free from doubt. To say that it is through intelligence that *dharma* and *adharma*, or truth and untruth on what is good can be distinguished does not free it from ambiguity. The dilemma is that relativity can paralyze understanding and decision making but certainty can degenerate into absolutism. Therefore certainly independent of the perceiving mind and its limitations has to be and must lie in something that has to be beyond knowledge and logic.

In the *Vana Parva* Yudhishtira also points to the unreliability of the *shastras*. If there was only one *shastra* and only one means of *dharmic* conduct, the situation would be clear. But since there are various *shrutis* and the opinion of no one sage can be taken as conclusive, *dharmic* conduct cannot be determined by scriptural authority alone. An episode in *Shanti Parva* illustrates this point. Vishwamitra, starving and desperately hungry because of famine, reaches a hut in search of food. He finds a fresh piece of dog's flesh outside it. He is about to take it and leave when the Chandala, the master of the hut comes out and tries to prevent him from eating it by pointing out that this would destroy his *dharma* and the *tapasya* or *sadhana* of his entire life. Vishwamitra's reply is that in extraordinary circumstances if a person can somehow save his life, he should do it because life is preferable to death. It is only by living that *dharma* can be attained and, therefore, one should not be contemptuous of an action that can preserve life. Hence, Vishwamitra is willing to commit the sin of eating dog's flesh because it is only if he lives that he can lead a pure life fulfilling his *dharma*.

Interestingly, when the Chandal gives him the piece of flesh, he does not eat it alone. He proceeds to make the customary offerings to the gods, the forefathers and to all living entities. Just then the rains come and the drought ends bringing an end to the famine. Yudhishtira is unnerved on hearing this story from Bhishma because of the very thought of Vishwamitra eating dog's flesh but Bhishma tells him to remember that the *shastras* cannot be read in isolation and with a weak heart. The totality of the *shastras* has to be considered to obtain wisdom that is not rigid and mechanical.

Yudhishtira then wonders whether a better guide could be to follow the path taken by masses of people earlier. But this too is not a satisfactory solution because the masses too have taken divergent paths. Moreover, even if all of them had taken one path, that too would not have been proof that it is a good path, unless we choose to define 'good' in that way. However, 'good' has been described in so many ways that it has become a labyrinth.

Yudhishtira then asks whether the conduct of good people, if not the masses, can be considered as another test of *dharma* apart from direct perception and scriptural authority. Bhishma answers, that all three together, that is scriptural authority, sense perceptions and intelligence, and the conduct of good people, rather than individually had to be valid tests. He then said non violent conduct towards others, truth, conquest of anger and aggression and giving and sharing were the abiding *dharma*. Whatever was obtained by love and friendship was *dharma* and its opposite *adharmā*. The wise said that *dharma* was the heart of all living beings and hence all should live through *dharma* rather than merely profess it. *Dharma* was a journey towards coherence in life which came from life itself and not merely from logical arguments and scriptural authority.

In order to prevent the wrong and expedient being justified in terms of place and time, Mahabharata cuts across 'either-or' situations and looks at a larger context in which to define *dharma* as the order that sustains people and secures the good of all living beings. Every individual must harmonize his life keeping this in view. Of course it leads to the question of who is to decide what is good for the people, and in relation to what can it be said that something is good. In the *Shanti Parva*, Bhishma explains that *dharma* is that which nurtures, cherishes, provides more amply, enriches, increases, and enhances all living beings. It brings them together and upholds them, thus enabling them to secure their *dharma* while preserving the good of all. It ensures a life for all living beings which is free from fear and violence. *Dharma* is not a 'doctrine' or yet another 'system of beliefs.' It points to a flow of life in which everyone is united. The *Vana Parva* says that whatever is unjust and oppressive is *adharmā*. For example, *anachara* is unjust and oppressive and so is *adharmā*. Therefore *adharmā* is the opposite of *dharma* and deprives, starves, diminishes, separates, uproots, hurts, does violence, debases and degrades living beings.

Another yardstick that is provided in the *Shanti Parva* is that an individual can decide his course of action by ensuring that what is done to another must also be acceptable to him. What makes one unhappy makes others unhappy too. The same idea is repeated in the *Aunshasana Parva*. When faced by conflicting demands the suggested course is to see if one *dharma* is destructive of another. If it is, it is not *dharma* at all but *adharmā*. Only that is *dharma* which is established without denigrating and opposing another *dharma*. In case of conflict between two *dharmas* what is to be done should be determined on their respective merits without denigrating and obstructing the *dharma* of others.