

MAHA BHARATA

Relevance and Application
in Contemporary Thought

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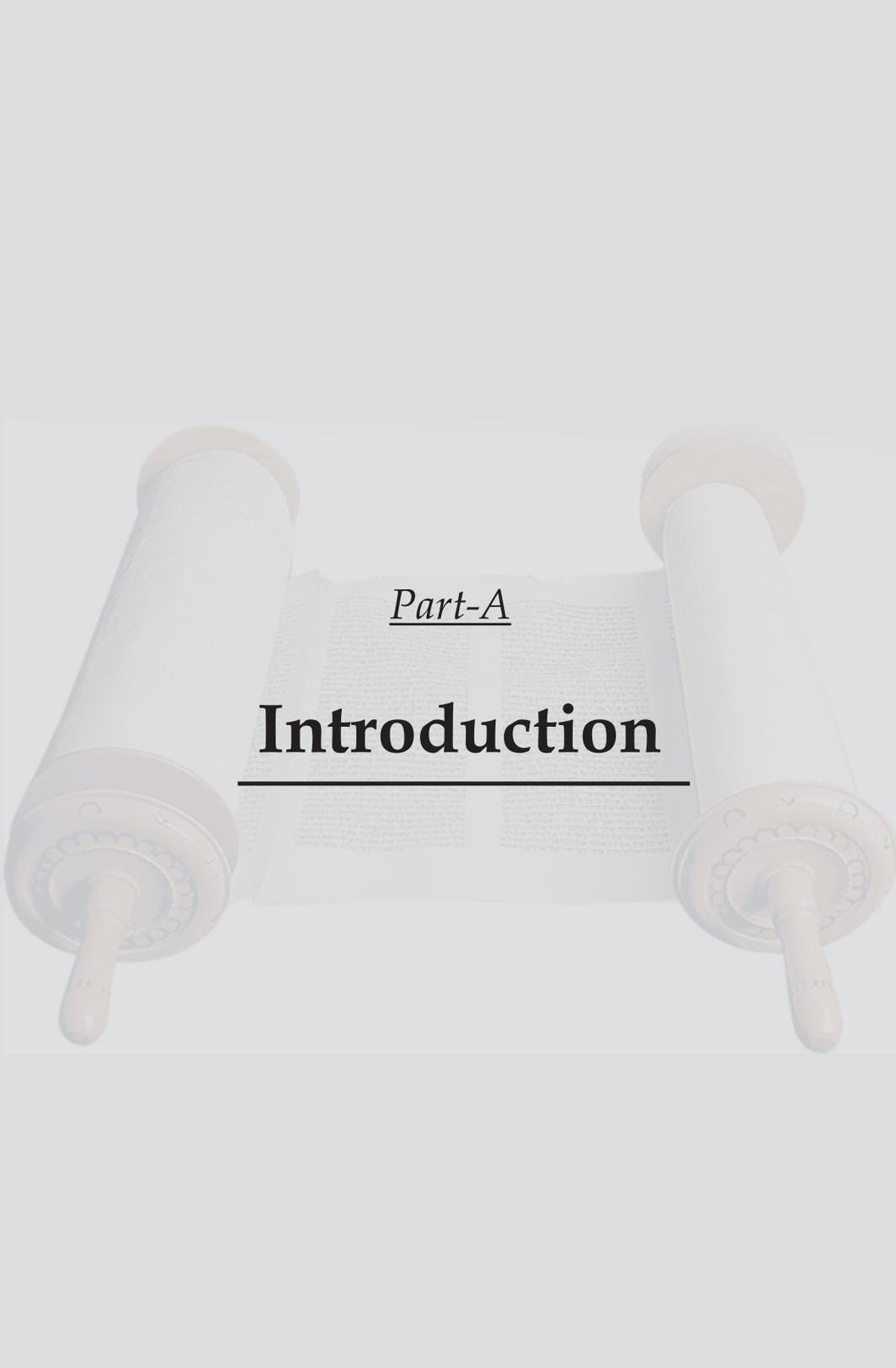
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To my wife, Smita, for her tireless patience
and constant support.

The background features a large, unrolled scroll with two wooden rollers. The scroll is partially unrolled, revealing a central section with text. The text is arranged in two columns, with a large heading in the center. The entire scene is set against a light, neutral background.

Part-A

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the MAHABHARATA

Krishna Dvaipayana, also known as Ved Vyas, composed the Mahabharata about 5,000 years ago in verses. Often referred to as the fifth Veda, it is recited either as a poem or played on the stage. Vedas are the oldest scriptures that deal with the Sanatan way of life. The story revolves around two groups of cousins of a royal household, involved in a bitter dispute of succession. Scholars date the Mahabharata to about 3,200 BCE.

The Epic is based around a pan-India settlement, focusing on the so-called Indo-Aryans, their culture and society. It details how kings govern their subjects and how they influence culture. It acknowledges the diversity of race, colour and cultures and their inter-action with other communities, often referred to as serpents or nagas, demons or rakshas or as vanars.

Every event in the Epic comes with a comprehensive background. The characterization is detailed, often originating in a past life. The story of an individual may begin from his previous birth and may end upon this death or may continue even beyond. Some episodes involve

many characters in a single event, adding to its complexity, together with a narrative of their pain, love, suffering and attachment. It unravels their financial conditions, upbringing and social background and how these influence their behaviour.

The purpose of the Epic is to help us follow the rules of Dharma, a set of moral and social laws by which a person is bound. The author wrote the Mahabharata to bring out the significance of the Vedas, necessitating their dramatization, projecting larger-than-life characters, to convey its wisdom in the form of plays or folklore.

The Epic aimed to educate even those who could not study the Vedas, basing Dharma on examples. This has helped sustain interest in the Mahabharata until the present day. The authors dramatized the core message with the sudden materialization of a god or a celestial being. The divine intervention facilitated the move between acts.

Characters may have a divine or an undivine aura to help convey the teachings of the Vedas and of Dharma. Together they create a single reference book of what is right or wrong in the individual context and situation. Good guys are not always good, nor are the bad guys always bad. This is often perplexing as it introduces us to grey shades.

In the Indic Way of Life, we do not judge an individual; we judge his actions, because he is not always regarded as evil. His actions may be right or wrong, depending on several factors. The authors of the Mahabharata have conveyed this reality through several episodes. They have described the motivations and the circumstances of characters which predispose them to act in certain ways, through which they explain the concept of Dharma.

The Epic initially comprised 8,400 verses, but expanded to 100,000 verses, resulting from later additions. Many individuals memorized the epic down the ages, adding their own interpretations of events and episodes, which helped reinforce or elaborate its central theme to connect with the listener/reader. These nuances also reflect the social customs, culture and folklore specific to a region. These also represent the prevailing views of society when the additions were made during successive phases ever since the Epic was first composed centuries ago. Although several versions exist, the basic story remained unchanged.

There are several versions of the Mahabharata. One version does not include the *Bhagwad Gita*. Bards carried these versions orally over many centuries, but now they are available in written form. The Pune-based Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute undertook an examination of the different versions and published a unified narrative, known as the critical edition. Their study showed that reciters/enactors added many local nuances to existing versions to help preserve the interest in the Epic. Lately, the Epic has also been appropriated by the entertainment channels. A number of authors have narrated the story in their own style, highlighting certain perspectives to connect with the readers.

The Epic incorporates the Bhagwad Gita comprising some 700 verses, rich in meaning and content with multiple layers. The discourses of thinkers and preachers have mesmerised listeners. Fathom then the power that must be there in the 100,000 verses that make up the entire Mahabharata.

CHAPTER 22

Draupadi's Swayamwar

Synopsis: Objectification of women. Align interests with the like-minded for success. Attacking a strong competitor, challenge his strength, not weakness.

Draupadi was exquisite. Kings and princes far and wide desired her. Many were invited to her *Swayamwar*. Duryodhana, his brothers and Karna also attended it. The Pandavas attended disguised as Brahmins.

The Swayamwar required the assembled suitors to show their archery skills. The bow had to be strung, and the contestant had to shoot an arrow to pierce the eye of a fish rotating on a disc installed at a height. They required contestants to aim at the target by looking at its reflection in a container of water placed on the floor.

It would entitle the winner of the contest to marry Draupadi. Draupadi would have to be won. The Swayamwar was open to the invited Royals and attending Brahmins.

Commentary

Lessons on Strategy to Management Students: *Drupad's strategy is worth a study. By aligning with Krishna and giving him the responsibility to find a suitor for Draupadi, he excluded him from the Swayamwar. Draupadi's marriage to Arjun would create 'cause' to support the Pandavas. He would have to support them in their bid to take back power in Hastinapur. He converted a personal grudge into an obligation of dharma. Ashwatthama was not present, leaving only Karna and Arjun who could win the contest. They set the contest to get the desired result and not as a game of a fair chance. Contests are like the lottery; they benefit the initiator.*

People with similar interests must work together, which will help facilitate success. When weak competitors join hands, they can challenge a mightier competitor. They must focus on their competitor's individual strengths. When taking on a giant competitor, they must focus on attacking the strength and not the weakness. A strong competitor has substantial resources. He will guard his weaknesses.

Advantages of Drupad and Krishna Combine: *Drupad expected his son to kill Dronacharya. Shikhandi would kill Bhishma, an outcome of his karma for abducting Amba in her previous life. After his daughter's marriage to the Pandavas, he could use Bhima and Arjun to remove the Kauravas from their throne.*

Krishna was close to his aunt Kunti, and this strengthened his influence over the Pandavas. Krishna knew Karna was Kunti's son, born before her marriage to Pandu. This would enable him to distract and divide Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana and weaken the Kauravas. He also knew Arjun could challenge Karna and of their bitter rivalry.

The management lesson is when up against a giant competitor, focus not on attacking his weakness but on how to challenge his strengths. A strong competitor has substantial resources to guard his weaknesses.

CHAPTER 63

The Pandavas' Last Journey

Synopsis: It is not easy to give up your emotional attachments and material comforts. The process of disengagement is revealed.

After crowning Parikshit and appointing Yuyutsu as his counsel, Pandavas left Hastinapur for the Himalayas as their final destination. Firstly, the Pandavas headed to the South and reached the sea. Agni appeared and asked Arjun to hand over his bow. He informed Arjun that the bow had served its purpose and he would no longer need it. After handing over the bow, the Pandavas proceeded south-west. They reached the coast where Dwarka was situated. There they saw it submerged in the sea. Thereafter, the Pandavas headed to the Himalayas and began their ascent towards Heaven. On their way, a dog befriended them and followed them on their journey.

An exhausted Draupadi was the first to succumb to her death. Bhima turned to Yudhisthir and asked him why was Draupadi not able to complete her journey. Yudhisthir told Bhima that she suffered from the vice of partiality. He said she was partial towards Arjun. The next among the

Pandavas to fall was Sahadev, and his failing was his immense pride in his wisdom and foresight. Soon thereafter, Nakul fell because he suffered from a pride that he was the handsomest of men. The Pandavas continued their journey and Arjun fell. Once again Yudhisthir explained to Bhima that Arjun's failing was his pride, that he was the world's best archer. Now Yudhisthir, Bhima and the dog continued their journey. Along the way, Bhima fell out of exhaustion. Aware that he could not continue his journey he asked Yudhisthir why he had fallen? Yudhisthir told Bhima he suffered from a vice of gluttony; he ate without discretion, ignoring the needs of others present.

A lone Yudhisthir and the dog now continued. On their journey to heaven, Indra met them in his chariot. Indra invited him to ride on his chariot to heaven but refused to allow the dog to join them. Yudhisthir refused to leave the dog, at which point the dog transformed itself into its celestial self. It was God Dharmaraj (or Yama).

When Yudhisthir reached heaven, he noticed all the people who had sinned in their lives, like Duryodhana and his other Kaurava cousins were enjoying the bliss of Heaven. He enquired about his brothers, wife and other people who he believed had lived a life of Dharma and deserved heaven. They then led Yudhisthir to Hell, where he found these people suffering. A shocked and upset Yudhisthir wanted to join these people in their suffering in Hell. It upset him that Duryodhana was enjoying bliss in Heaven, whereas his brothers were suffering.

Sage Narada appeared before Yudhisthir. He advised him that upon death, we must leave behind all our likes, dislikes, friendships, enmity, etc. Upon death we must surrender all our attachments. It was appropriate for

Duryodhana and others to be in heaven because they had died in battle while discharging their dharma.

Yudhishtir's insistence on staying with his brothers and wife pleased the Gods, and they forthwith removed the illusion of Hell. Yudhishtir could then see his brothers, his wife and many virtuous people he knew on earth all enjoying the bliss of heaven.

Thus ended the Mahabharata.

Commentary

***Krishna's Message:** Krishna described death as part of a cycle for the soul when it discards one body and clothes itself in another. In between this transition it enjoys the bliss of Heaven and the sufferings of Hell. This cycle of re-birth continues until the soul achieves moksha, and then it returns and becomes once again a part of the Param Atma.*

On earth, the soul wears a body until it leaves behind the body upon death. We cannot visit heaven or hell in the human form. This must have been the intended message.

***The Order of the End—Different Perspectives:** It is interesting to follow the order in which the Pandavas and Draupadi die. In Indic thought, after marriage the spirit of the husband and wife unite. We can therefore take this union to understand the sequence of the end.*

In our life, the first to fall is our emotional attachment. We experience our deepest, strongest and longest emotional union in our marriage. In our journey to the end this is the first union to break, and it breaks because one amongst the two will first die. It also says when we sever our emotional commitment to life, our will to live is the most compromised.

Amongst the Pandavas, the first to die is Sahadev. This is the death of our foresight, our perspective and our ability to see the future. We often see many elderly people completely oblivious of the consequences of their deeds, taking undue risks, challenging themselves to do things which can endanger their life. The withdrawal symptom of life is now at a new level. It might appear that we are challenging death every day, as if eager to die. We then see the death of Nakul the handsome one, as our emotional engagement and attachments in our life wanes. We lose interest in our personal wellbeing, looks, and engagement at a social level. Dying from within, we appear eager to embrace death and thus we lose our sense of purpose and direction and our Arjun dies. This now reflects on our body and its strength gives away. Bhima is our sense of physical wellbeing. When we impact it, we are about to die. When our brain or Yudhisthir's finds no support from our emotional and physical side; it stops working and we die.

The authors have provided guidance on why human life or our will to live represented by Bhima depends on our emotional wellbeing. Draupadi is the symbol of relationship, emotional engagement and wellbeing. Yes, so often we see people recovering from a challenging sickness or accident, and we credit this recovery to their will to live. When Draupadi passes away, Bhima loses his will to live.

The Pandavas and the Order of Death—a Perspective: *The authors of the Epic provide us with another perspective and a message. In our life, all the five attributes are important, but only Dharma can lead us to Moksha. By allowing Yudhisthir to reach heaven, the authors wanted us to understand that commitment to Dharma stands taller than Bhima's determination or Arjun's focus. Also, when we take all the five attributes together, our moksha or the release of our soul from the cycle of deaths and re-births is possible if we focus and devote ourselves to Dharma. We can only achieve moksha when we follow Dharma.*

Symbolism from their Last Journey: When a person dies, death forces him to leave behind his material and emotional attachments. Ashram Dharma recognises and prepares us for an orderly end. In Hindu Thought, they call this 'tyag' or surrender of our 'moh maya' i.e. our desires and attachment before we meet our end.

The handing over of the bow is the surrender of our materialistic side. The last journey to Dwarka was the surrender of emotional attachments. When the Pandavas reach Dwarka, they discover that it lies submerged in the sea, which implies ending emotional and material attachments. In life, we hoard our assets viz. cash, jewellery, houses, investments etc. because it secures our well being. However, a person on his deathbed will no longer have an attachment to the wealth he knows he cannot spend before he dies. The surrender of the bow was the surrender of means for their life. They then headed to Dwarka and they knew it was submerged. This journey was a pilgrimage to the shrine of Krishna. He had provided them with the methods. They owed all they got to Krishna and to his guidance. After having given up their means, they paid homage to the provider of the methods in their life and finally with motivation they commenced their last journey and surrendered their life. Shakti was the last to leave them. The circle of life was completed. Shakti gives us birth and will be with us till the last.

CHAPTER 36

Honouring of Krishna and Assassination of Sisupala

Synopsis: Experienced but passed over for promotion; beaten by a junior to the post; accord respect to your elders. Grant position based on competence and wisdom.

At the Yagna, the opulence of the Maya Sabha enchanted the guests. Aryan architecture was wood-based, whereas they used stones and coloured tiles in the Palace. Visitors were jealous of the success achieved by the Pandavas. They required Yudhisthir to honour all the attendees, including King Drupad, Ved Vyas, Vasudeva (Krishna's father), Bhishma, many learned priests and Kshatriyas. The issue before Yudhisthir was whom should he honour first. Yudhisthir could have honoured Bhishma first. He could have honoured his biological grandfather the very learned Ved Vyas. Or he could have honoured his father-in-law Drupad. They would have regarded each of them as a father or grandfather. These were men of great honour, achievement, knowledge and wisdom.

Yudhisthir sought Bhishma's advice about whom he should honour first. The patriarch pointed to Krishna because he made the ceremony possible. However, Krishna's cousin Sisupala was upset with the choice.

The roots of their enmity went back to the time when Krishna abducted and married Rukmini, after it had been settled that she would wed Sisupala. Rukmini sent word to Krishna to rescue her, with whom she was in love. Sisupala supported King Jarasandha and blamed Krishna for killing him. Many of the rulers present at the Yagya resented the sudden rise of Pandavas. Sisupala's objection to the choice of Krishna found many takers. Sisupala's behaviour shocked the Pandavas. He insulted Krishna and accused Bhishma of being impotent and dismissed the Kuru Dynasty as incompetent. He insisted that the Kurus should have punished the Pandavas for killing their allies and Krishna for creating a rift in the family.

Krishna realised that support for Sisupala by the royal assemblage was virtually jeopardizing the Yagna. He permitted the latter to mock and abuse him 99 times, just as he had promised his aunt, but killed him when he crossed the 100th mark. The authors of the Epic presented Sisupala with a demonic profile, possessing extra limbs, one who had been Ravana in his past life. His death, at the hands of Krishna, liberated his soul. But the sudden violence shocked the entire assembly. Krishna and the Pandavas calmed their guests and the Yagna ended peacefully.

Commentary

Yudhisthir the Dharma Raj? Bhishma knew Yudhisthir wanted to honour his mentor/advisor Krishna and violate conventions. He

could have chosen Guru Dronacharya or his father-in-law Drupad. Each of them was like a father figure and deserved the honour.

Honour the Deserving: *Yudhisthir's actions convey an important and subtle learning. We must honour and respect the deserving, and it need not be based on seniority.*

Krishna's Emerging Role as King Maker. *The notion that many of the royal guests recognised Krishna as an incarnation was inserted much later. The Pandavas depended on Krishna for strategic help and support. He led the way in the court of Indraprastha.*

Obligations of a Guest: *Krishna's slaying of Shishupal is a contentious issue. We must revere a guest as god as the saying 'Atihi devo bhava,' goes. It was the solemn duty of the Pandavas to protect every invitee and prevent any altercation between guests. On his part, a guest must not abuse his welcome and take advantage of the host. If a guest disagrees with the host, he may leave, but never disrupt the occasion. Sisupala's story is a message on the rules of conduct and the obligations of a Guest.*

A Lesson on Strategy: *Sisupala's killing served the interests of both Krishna and the Pandavas. Krishna killed anyone opposed to his agenda, which included the likes of Kansa, Jarasandha and Sisupala. He ended up being the power behind Yudhisthir and wanted to become the Vasudeva of his time.*

Krishna Slaying of Sisupala: *Krishna could have exercised self-restraint rather than being intimidated by Sisupala's outburst or succumbing to the ego. He had made off with a woman whose betrothal was planned with Sisupala. Stories of Sisupala being born*

with extra limbs or being Ravana in an earlier life were meant to demonise him. The authors of the Mahabharat are sending forth the message that God is forgiving, but a devotee must not take him for granted. Even in law, repeat offences may invite the death penalty.

An End for a New Beginning: *The killing of Jarasandha released several kings from subjugation and was necessary for conducting the Yagna. But it did not justify the act at the insistence of Krishna. The message here is that everything must end to herald a new beginning. Also, power can blind and corrupt and serves a warning to act with restraint.*