

DHARMA AND POWER IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA: A STUDY OF ETHICAL AMBIGUITY IN ANCIENT INDIAN EPIC

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ABSTRACT

The Mahābhārata stands as one of the great epics other than the Ramayana. It is considered as the Maha-Kavya and classified as Itihasa. It was composed by Veda Vyasa and delineates the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. It is the longest poem in the world, contains 18 chapters and about one lakh 'shlokas' or verses. It is written in Sanskrit. It is regarded as the encyclopedia of moral teachings as conceived by the Brahmanical mind. The epic largely accepts the Vedic Chaturvarṇa framework, dividing society into Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras. Each varṇa is assigned its own dharma (duty): Brāhmaṇas are to study, teach, and perform rites; Kṣatriyas are to rule and fight; Vaiśyas are to trade and cultivate; Śūdras are to serve. Karna's story is central to the epic's critique of caste rigidity: though he is Kṣatriya-born, he is treated as a low-born charioteer's son and denied access to the same training and honours as Arjuna. Similarly, Ekalavya, a Nishāda (tribal) boy, is technically outside the "pure" varṇas but outperforms Arjuna in archery; his thumb is demanded by Drona. Although the main Kuru and Pāṇḍava narratives centre on Kṣatriyas and Brāhmaṇas, the Mahābhārata includes significant figures from lower or ambiguous varṇas—such as the Śūdra-Brāhmaṇa hybrid Vidura, the Nishāda Ekalavya, and various "impure" but morally powerful characters. Through these figures, the epic often makes dharma (ethical rightness) appear superior to caste, even while the social order itself remains hierarchical and birth-centred. In this paper, the attempt and approach would be qualitative based on the textual criticism of epic Mahābhārata.

KEYWORDS- Dharma, Itihasa, Kavya, Nishāda, Purusharthas, Varna

The Mahābhārata is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the Ramayana. Both Sanskrit epics are regarded as Smṛiti and Itihasa¹, with the Ramayana sometimes categorized as *kavya*² their similar language and stylistic features indicate they developed from a shared cultural background. The Mahābhārata refers to the sage Valmiki and his Ramayana, and it retells the Rama narrative in a passage called the Ramopakhyana. Conversely, the Ramayana alludes to the Kuru lineage, Hastinapura, and King Janamejaya, and it makes reference to the

¹ A traditional History

² A poetry

Mahābhārata conflict, showing that the two epics were mutually aware of one another during their later development. Scholars generally date the composition of the Mahābhārata to a period between about 400 BCE and 400CE.³

According to Prof. R.D. Banerjee ‘Mahābhārata was written earlier than the epic Ramayana. The Mahābhārata is recognized as the longest epic poem known and has often been called the longest poem ever composed over the ages’.⁴ Of the two epics the Mahābhārata is more important. The Mahābhārata comprises more than 90,000 verses, most written in lines of thirty-two syllables, making it likely the longest single poem in world literature. As a vast epic, it also includes philosophical and devotional passages, for example a treatment of the four aims of life (the Purusharthas). Major embedded works and episodes often treated as independent texts include the Bhagavad Gita, the tale of Damayanti, a shortened retelling of the Ramayana, and the Rishyasringa story. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the song of the Lord, is a conversation between Lord Krishna and warrior Arjun on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.⁵ To generalize upon, it is still reasonable to regard these two Sanskrit epics as the ultimate source of all versions of the tales in existence.⁶

The Mahābhārata is older than the Ramayana, originally the Mahābhārata consists of 8800 verses and was called Jayasamhita. Then it was raised to 24000 and called Bharata. And at last it reached to the length of 1,00,000 and was finally called Mahabharata. Mahābhārata is also called Shatasahasri Samhita, i.e., collection of 100 thousand verses. The Epic Mahābhārata is a story which belongs to the later Vedic period. Traditionally, the authorship of the Mahābhārata is associated with the Rishi Vyasa. Vaisampayana (pupil of Vyasa) heard that poem from the *rishi* Vyasa. Suta Ugrasrava, son of *rishi* Lomaharshana, heard this poem from Vaisampayana at a sacrifice. Suta Ugrasrava narrated the poem to the *rishis* who had assembled in a forest for a twelve years long sacrifice held by king Janamejaya, the great grandson of Pandava Arjuna, one of the legends of the story.⁷

Historians commonly divide the contents of the present text into two broad categories. The first category comprises the narrative sections: parts that recount events, tell stories, and develop characters and plot lines. The second category consists of didactic sections: passages that provide prescriptions and instructions about social norms, duties, and correct conduct. Together these narrative and didactic portions form the composite structure of the work, with stories often illustrating or leading into moral and social teachings. This division is by no means watertight- the

³ Upinder Singh. (2015). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. New Delhi: Tara Art Printers. p.18.

⁴ T.R.S. Sharma.(2000). *Ancient Indian Literature: An Anthology*, Volume 2, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.p.137.

⁵ K. Siva Prasad.(2023). *Gita Acharan: A Practitioner's Perspective*, Chandigarh: Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd. p.1.

⁶ Robert P. Goldman. (1984). *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Volume.1, Princeton: University Press, Princeton, 1984, p.39.

⁷ A.L., Basham. (2004). *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent Before the Coming of the Muslims*. London: Picador Publishers.p. 409.

didactic sections include stories, and the narrative often contains a social message. However, generally historians agree that the Mahābhārata was meant to be a dramatic, moving story, and that the didactic portions were probably added later.

Bards and sages were associated with it. The Epic Mahābhārata consists of eighteen Paravas.⁸ The work survives in two principal versions, Northern and Southern. Its central plot follows a rivalry between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, culminating in a great battle at Kurukshetra. Beyond this core narrative, the text includes a vast amount of material that is only loosely related to the main tale. Tradition attributes the composition to the sage Vyasa, but the version we have today is clearly composite and even acknowledges its mixed origins. Over centuries a heroic nucleus accumulated numerous additional stories, moral teachings, and sermons, among them the dying Bhishma's discourse on duty and the powerful dialogue between Krishna and the warrior Arjuna, the latter known as the "Bhagvad Gita".⁹

The Kuru throne at Hastinapura passed to Dhritarashtra, but because he was blind he was considered ineligible to rule, so his younger brother Pandu was made king. Pandu later renounced the throne after a curse, leaving Dhritarashtra to govern. When Pandu died, his five sons Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva were still children and returned to Hastinapura to be raised alongside Dhritarashtra's hundred sons. As he matured, Yudhishtira was anointed heir, yet Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra's eldest, had no clear legal claim because of his father's blindness and the provisional nature of Dhritarashtra's rule. After surviving several attempts on their lives, the five Pandava brothers left Hastinapura and spent years wandering from one royal court to another as soldiers of fortune.¹⁰ Members of the same family commonly share meals and resources, live and work together, and take part in rituals and ceremonies together all of which tie them into broader networks of relatives known as Kinfolk.¹¹ Although family bonds are frequently seen as "natural" and rooted in blood, their definitions vary across cultures; for example, some communities treat cousins as blood relatives, while others do not.

The Mahābhārata traces shifts in kinship and inheritance. At its core the epic tells of a dispute over territory and authority between two branches of the same ruling Kuru family, two groups of cousins. The quarrel culminates in a decisive battle from which the Pandavas emerge victorious, after which patrilineal succession is established as the norm. Although patriliney existed earlier, the epic reinforces its importance: under this system sons inherit their fathers' wealth and, for rulers, their

⁸ Sacred books.

⁹ A.L., Basham. (2004). *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent Before the Coming of the Muslims*. London: Picador Publishers. p. 410.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.410.

¹¹ Sanskrit texts use the term *kula* to designate families and *jñati* for the larger network of kinfolk. The term *vamsha* is used for the lineage.

thrones. Whether the dramatic war described actually occurred is uncertain; a minor real conflict may have been expanded into a vast epic by storytellers. Some historians and archaeologists have proposed a date around 1000^{BCE}.¹² The epics are magnificent texts with powerful stories that have captured the imagination of millions of people over the centuries. To use them as a historical sources, it is necessary to identify their internal chronological layers, which is not an easy task, according to the traditions, Rama is said to have lived in the Treta Yuga (age)¹³ and the Mahābhārata war is traditionally placed in the Dvapara Yuga. Some historians, however, contend that the people and incidents described in the Mahābhārata belong to an era slightly earlier than those depicted in the Ramayana. Their reasoning rests on geographical focus: the Mahabharata's action centers on the Indo-Gangetic divide and the upper Ganga region, whereas the Ramayana's political core shifts further east, toward the middle Ganga Valley.¹⁴

The Mahābhārata is not only an epic of war and heroism but also a mirror of ancient Indian society. Among the many social ideas reflected in the text, the question of caste or varna occupies an important place. Through its characters, conflicts, and moral debates, the epic reveals both the acceptance of social hierarchy and the human tensions created by it. The Dharmashastras and Dharmasutras lay out ideal duties for the four varnas. Brāhmaṇas were expected to study and teach the Vedas, conduct and oversee sacrifices, and distribute gifts. Vaishyas shared the last three duties and were also charged with farming, herding, and commerce. Shudras had a single prescribed role: to serve the three higher varnas. The Adi Parvan of the Mahābhārata presents episodes where these social roles are observed.

Once Sage Drona, a Brāhmaṇa who taught archery to the Kuru princes, was approached by Ekalavya, a forest dwelling *Nishāda*.¹⁵ Eklavya lived in a forest hamlet near Hastinapur, the son of a Nishāda chief. From childhood he longed to learn archery. He had heard of Dronacharya, the great teacher of princes at Hastinapur, and dreamed of becoming his pupil. But because Eklavya was a forest-dweller and not of noble birth, Drona refused him when Eklavya asked to be accepted among the Kuru princes. Undeterred, Eklavya returned to his village with a fierce resolve. He fashioned a clay image of Drona and set it up in a clearing. There, before that idol of his chosen guru, he practiced day and night. He made the idol the center of his devotion; he brought leaves and offerings, prostrated at its feet, and treated it as his teacher. He studied by watching from afar when the princes trained, and he taught himself through tireless effort and imitation, turning every day into a lesson. Years passed. Eklavya's dedication bore fruit. His archery grew so perfect that he

¹² Upinder Singh.(2015). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. New Delhi: Tara Art Printers. p.19.

¹³ In Sanskrit and Hindu cosmology, "Yuga" fundamentally means an age, epoch, or era of time, usually within a great cyclic scheme of periods.

¹⁴ Upinder Singh. (2015). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. New Delhi: Tara Art Printers. p.19.

¹⁵ A hunting community.

could split arrows in flight, hit targets at impossible distances, and move with uncanny steadiness and control. Legends spread through the forest and the courts that a master archer had arisen among the Nishāda, one who could rival the best of Hastinapur.

One day, while the royal party moved through the forest, the Kuru princes and Drona happened upon Eklavya demonstrating his skill. The truth of his mastery became impossible to ignore. Drona recognized the quality of the archer's skill and, moved by the sight of his own image and the devotion shown to it, Drona confronted Eklavya. The teacher reminded the young man of the sanctity of the guru-disciple bond and asked for guru-dakshina, a teacher's fee, whatever the teacher wished. Eklavya, reverent and unwavering, rose to give what he could. When Drona required Eklavya's right thumb as dakshina to ensure that Eklavya would never be able to challenge Drona's favored pupil Eklavya offered it without hesitation. He placed his right thumb on Drona's feet, and the teacher severed it. The deed was shocking: a sacrifice of body for the sanctity of the vow and the honor of the Guru.

Eklavya's skill was thereby diminished; he could no longer shoot with the same facility but his spirit remained intact. He did not complain or curse; instead he returned to his people with dignity. Stories say that he later fought in battles alongside the Kauravas, defending his allies and demonstrating courage even after his maiming. His life stands as a complex emblem: of devotion to a guru, of the costs of rigid social order, and of the inner strength that transcends physical loss. Thus, it has been assumed that by refusing Ekalavya to have him as his pupil, Drona, as a Brāhmaṇa, was acting according to the Dharmashastras and Dharmasutras when he was teaching archery.

Karna's life in the Mahābhārata starkly illustrates the rigid caste system's injustices, where birth status overrides innate abilities and divine origins. Born to Kunti and Surya as a Kshatriya, Karna was abandoned and raised by suta (charioteer) parents, branding him a "sutaputra" despite his royal blood. This perceived low birth denied him acceptance among Kshatriyas, fueling lifelong resentment and identity struggles. At Draupadi's swayamvara, she rejected him solely due to his suta status, despite matching Arjuna's skill, highlighting caste over merit. Parashurama trained him as a Brahmin but cursed him upon discovering his Kshatriya roots, impairing his skills later exemplifying inter-varna biases. Duryodhana elevated him as Anga king, transcending caste prejudice and earning undying loyalty, even against his Pandava brothers. Karna's tragedies critique varna rigidity, portraying him as a victim of birth-based hierarchy amid calls for guna-based elevation.

Another story from the Adi Parvan indicates the completely non-Brahmanical which was followed by the Pandavas.

After the Pandavas escaped the burning lac palace, they fled into a forest. There, the rakshasa (demon) Hidimba sought to eat them. He sent his sister Hidimbi to lure the brothers, but when Hidimbi met Bhima the strongest Pandava with immense strength she fell in love with him instead. Bhima killed Hidimba in battle. Hidimbi then asked Kunti for Bhima's hand in marriage. Yudhishtira agreed under one condition: Bhima would stay with Hidimbi in the forest only until a son was born, then return to his brothers. About a year later, Ghatotkacha was born. His name comes from his distinctive appearance: *ghata* (pot-shaped head) and *ukacha* (bald). As the son of Bhima and a *rakshasi*, Ghatotkacha inherited half demon heritage, granting him magical powers: flight, invisibility, and the ability to change his size. Years later, during the Pandavas' forest exile, Bhima and Ghatotkacha met without recognizing each other and fought an evenly matched battle over a trivial matter. Hidimbi intervened, revealing their true relationship, and they had an emotional reunion. Ghatotkacha pledged to help the Pandavas whenever needed. Kunti told him, "You are the eldest son of the Pandavas. You should always be their support".

Thus, this paper argues that the Mahābhārata reflects caste-based social organization while also exposing its moral contradictions through the experience of marginalized characters.

Women in the Mahābhārata reflect strength, suffering, wisdom, resistance, and moral responsibility. Women such as Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari, Satyawati, and Subhadra are shown not as silent figures but as powerful characters who influence the course of events. Through their struggles, decisions, and moral strength, the epic presents women as active participants in family, politics, and dharma. At the same time, it also shows the difficulties, restrictions, and suffering faced by women in a patriarchal society.

At the court of the king of Panchalas Arjuna won the princess Draupadi in a Swayamvara. When the Pandavas returned with her to their mother Kunti, who, even before she saw them, asked them to share whatever they had got. She realized her mistake when she saw Draupadi, but her command could not be violated. Kunti influenced the Pandavas mostly through guidance, strategy, moral instruction, and emotional authority. She was not a battlefield leader, but her words and choices shaped how the five brothers acted as a united family. Her instruction led the brothers to share Draupadi and remain closely bound. After much thought, Yudhishtira declared that Draupadi would be shared as the wife of all five brothers. Draupadi objected when she first heard this. The sage Vyasa then explained that the Pandavas were incarnations of Indra and that Draupadi was the rebirth of Indra's wife, making their union preordained; to prevent conflict, she would be the common spouse of the five. Vyasa also recounted that in a previous life a young woman had fervently prayed to Shiva for a husband and by mistake asked five times; she had been reborn as Draupadi and Shiva had granted her repeated petition. Persuaded by these accounts, Draupadi

agreed to marry all five Pandavas, indicating the preservation of some ancient custom related to Polyandry.¹⁶ that was not acceptable in the brahmanical system of marriage. The poem mentions that Draupadi married five Pandavas in accordance with the ancient custom of the Pandava family. Was this Non Brahmanical Practice followed in Kuru lineage?

One pivotal episode in the Mahābhārata involves the escalating feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Duryodhana lured Yudhishtira into a game of dice, where Yudhishtira misled by his opponent bet and lost his wealth: gold, elephants, chariots, servants, army, treasury, kingdom, the possessions of his subjects, and even his brothers. Ultimately he wagered and lost their shared wife, Draupadi. From this episode one can assume that there was gendered access to property and wives were to be treated as the property of their husbands. Conversely, the presence of influential female figures in the Mahābhārata points to an earlier social phase when women experienced comparatively less subordination to men than in later periods. The epic's depiction of niyoga (levirate marriage where a husband permits another man to sleep with his wife to sire an heir) also indicates a societal condition preceding that of the Ramayana, which reflects much tighter restrictions on women's autonomy.¹⁷ The Mahābhārata provides us with extensive data on the age of promiscuity, an age where notions of chastity and faithfulness were non-existent.¹⁸

Scholars note a later layer in the Mahābhārata when devotion to Vishnu gained prominence and Krishna being a leader of the Yadavas and a central figure in the epic began to be equated with Vishnu. Krishna supported the Pandavas during the Kurukshetra war, which ended with almost all major warriors dead except the five Pandava brothers and Krishna. Yudhishtira was then installed as king, and he and his brothers enjoyed a long and glorious reign.

Table 1: Mahābhārata reflecting Dharma and Social Order

Aspect	In the Mahābhārata	Link to social order
Dharma	Dharma is the central idea of right conduct, duty, and moral order	It gives society a framework for how people should live and act
Kingship	A king is expected to protect people, punish wrongdoing, and uphold justice	Political power is justified only when it supports Dharma

¹⁶ Polyandry is the practice of having several husbands.

¹⁷ Upinder Singh.(2015). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*. New Delhi: Tara Art Printers. p.19.

¹⁸ R.S. Sharma.(1956). *Traces of Promiscuity in Ancient Indian Society*. Agra: PIHC, 1956, pp. 153-57.

Varna Duties	Brāhmaṇas teach, Kshatriyas fight and rule, Vaishyas trade and farm, and Shudras serve the other three groups	Society is organized by inherited duties and ranked social roles
Family and lineage	The epic strongly focuses on kingship, inheritance, and duty within the family	Social stability depends on preserving lineage and proper family behaviour
Women and Marriage	Marriage rules and household norms are tied to duty and social rank	These rules regulate social reproduction and hierarchy
Jati and Birth	Birth-based groups shape occupation, marriage, and social interaction	Social identity is often fixed by the birth and purity based hierarchy
Conflict of Dharmas	The epic shows that duties can clash in difficult situations	Social order is not always simple; Dharma can be morally ambiguous
Lower castes and outsiders	The text includes figures from outside the dominant Brahmanica order	This reveals both inclusion and tension within ancient social order

Source: By the Researcher Herself

Conclusion

From the above mentioned description it has been concluded that the Mahābhārata ranks among the Subcontinent's most abundant literary works. At its heart it narrates how people navigate real-life emotions and challenges attachment, envy, duty, moral dilemmas, and clashes. Its main plot revolves around a conflict between two rival groups of cousins. Besides the central narrative, the epic includes chapters that prescribe behavioural codes for different social groups and portrays a broad spectrum of social roles and everyday situations. The Mahābhārata does not present social order as rigid and easy; it shows Dharma must be interpreted in relation to context, duty, and power. At the same time, it reflects a hierarchical society where rank, birth, and occupation are closely connected. The women in the epic reflect both the power and the hardship of womanhood in ancient Indian tradition, showing how female characters could influence history while remaining bound by social limits.

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