

# HS 332 : The Mahabharata

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How does Krishna's character operate in the Mahābhārata to rationalize or justify Dharma?

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Krishna's character is a true enigma amongst various other ambiguous features of Mahabharata. His character is considered a paradox, believed to be the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, the protector, yet having the constraints of a mortal human. He is the one and only character who is mounted on the pedestal of having the highest morality and the perfect sense of Dharma, which in itself is a convoluted term, yet considered to be the perpetrator of a strikingly candid list of misdeeds, as pointed out by the author of Mahabharata himself, via the words of Duryodhana on his death bed.

*So, is Krishna the keeper of Dharma in abstruse terms that mere humans have been incapable to comprehend, or a breaker of moral values?*

One might say, that it was Krishna who advised Arjuna to place Sikhandin in front, while attacking Bhishma, knowing that the invincible Bhishma would not fight Sikhandin and would let himself be mortally wounded without resistance and Krishna again who prevailed upon Yudhisthira to utter that deadly lie which finally led to the killing of the great warrior and revered teacher Dronācārya. It was Krishna, yet again who persuaded Arjuna to kill the invincible Kama when he was engaged in lifting his chariot-wheel from the mud in which it got stuck.

These crucial manipulations are self-contradictory to his well-professed ethical doctrine. Adding to these allegations, if Krishna was infact the omnipotent incarnation of Lord Vishnu, why did he not end the battle of Kurukshetra in one day? Why didn't this omniscient being tell the truth of Karna to the Pandavas or protect Draupadi from her horrendous disrobing? Why did he allow the destruction of thousands of innocent foot soldiers? Is it really possible to justify allowing the murder of so many soldiers to kill a few bad characters for a better future?

All the answers can never really be answered to exactitude. However, to understand the possible mentality behind them, I will be considering Krishna's character in two lights :

- 1) As a normal human being with superior intellect and exceptional sense of justice, fairness and moral responsibility.*
- 2) As, a supreme God. But as a supreme "Hindu" God, subjected to the constraints of powers of deities according to Hindu Mythologies.*

Before heading on to my interpretation of Krishna's character as a means to rationalize Dharma, I would like to bring into limelight, the prevailing condition during the battle of Kurukshetra. This battle is considered as the "DharmaYuddha", which can be roughly translated as the "War of Righteousness". But, simply saying this, is a stark simplification of the ambivalent moral values of both sides. In reality, thousands of innocents were part of the Kauravas, which is considered the evil side and many of the warriors of the Pandavas, which is considered the good side, had committed some moral blunders. Therefore, this battle can not be interpreted as an allegory of a battle between unalloyed good and unalloyed bad. But, still the Pandavas were

considered as the preferred side, for they had been subjected to atrocious acts, by the grotesque Duryodhana, They were deprived of their kingdom for thirteen years through trickery and fraud. And given the unprovoked insult inflicted upon the defenceless Draupadi in public, the balance of justice was distinctly tilted in favour of the Pāndavas.

Now, if Krishna is considered as a “mere character of Mahabharata”, one might try to justify some of his “unethical manipulations”, by saying that given his supreme sense of responsibility towards Dharma, his actions were consequentially paramount to set up a Dharmic kingdom, bereft of Duryodhana’s evil.

It is important to note that this definition of Dharma may not necessarily be linked to staying on an inhumane, rigid path of righteousness, but accessing the situation to choose a better option for the greater good in the long term, even though, it might not be the best or the most ethical option at the current time.

This is also emphasized in Krishna’s justification for the immoral killing of Duryodhana by Bhima, as in a lawful battle, Bhima would’ve been defeated and the battle would’ve been won by the Kauravas, with justice unserved, not to mention the catastrophic consequences when Duryodhana would’ve been made the king.

If Krishna is considered the “reincarnation of Lord Vishnu”, as was evident when he showed his Vishva Roopa to many of the prominent characters in Mahabharata, one might consider his restraint to scrape the battle altogether as not only would it have led one to believe that “Dharma” and “Justice” are mutually exclusive, it would have also proved scathel to the posterity had the fallible yet invincible warriors not reaped the repercussions of their misdoings.

This exact reason can be mapped to his justification for persuading Yudhishthira to lie to his Guru, as Guru Drona, who, while being extremely harmful and impossible to defeat in battle, had shown immoral and inhumane repertoires at many points in his life.

In the end, to answer the remaining questions of why he didn’t interfere and prevent the mishaps from happening in this first place, one might concur, that Krishna, while being the divine incarnation was still subjected to the constraints of Hindu deities. Not only this, Krishna as a “moral agent” had to bestow the mortal beings with the ability to have “free will”, without interfering in the cycle of Karma. But given the fact, that Lord Vishnu had to reincarnate, Krishna as a character had to show what it meant to be an “ideal being”. This might sound contradictory to his track record of supposedly “unethical” acts, but if one visualizes his role as an exemplary character who adapts and transcends the definition of Dharma from its orthodox self, to a more appropriate and contemporary version, Krishna can indeed be looked upon as a harbinger of a much needed “paradigm shift” in terms of the understanding of Dharma from the vision of a utilitarian consequentialist and its accessibility on the basis of Varna.