

1*A PREAMBLE TO THE GRAND ITIHĀSA

Is it possible at all to measure knowledge? Interestingly, Mahābhārata narrates an account of such a measurement¹. It is said that once the Devas came together and quantified knowledge. The four Vedas, Rig, Yajur, Sāma, and Atharva, were placed on one side of a weighing scale, and Mahābhārata was placed on the other. Vedas, devoid of a beginning or end, are considered an infinite source of wisdom. Both Itihāsas, including Mahābhārata, acknowledge the wisdom of Vedas as supreme². In fact, Mahābhārata reveals that all Itihāsas and Purānās are intended to convey the supreme ideas of Vedas to untrained people³. However, as the Devās put them to test, the scales tipped toward Mahābhārata.

Mahābhārata is described as the pañcamaveda or the fifth Veda. In fact, the Chandogya Upaniṣad describes all Purānās and Itihāsas as pañcamaveda. Sometimes Nāṭyaśāstra and Ayurveda are also categorized similarly. Then again, for all its vastness and completeness that is comparable to the Vedas, the title best suits Mahābhārata. Mahabharata itself underlines the story

The name of weighing knowledge, 'Mahatvat bhāratatvat cha mahabharatam uchyate'. Because of the huge size and weight of this Itihāsa, it was named Mahābhārata⁴. taken literally, Mahābhārata is great in size and weight, with eighteen lakh words or one lakh śloka. That means it is four times heavier than the first Itihāsa, Rāmāyaṇa, one of the times big works of poetry. Even the 'Odyssey' combined level 1 to only one-tenth and of Mahabharata. Brithy put, Mahabharata is the biggest literary work in the history of mankind'. In addition to its size and weight, history significance and greatness of Mahabharata lies in philosophical, spiritual, and devotional treatises, complex discussions on Dharma Adharma, political strategies, warfare, history, geography, aesthetics, and a lot more. Even

Alongside the ten Upaniṣads and Brahmasūtra, Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya considered Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā of Mahābhārata, for laying the foundations of his darśana. He described Bhagavadgītā as the quintessence of all the Vedas,

गीता-शस्त्रम् समस्त-वेदार्थ-सार-संग्रह-भूतम्।

gītā-śāstram samasta-vedārtha-sara-sangraha-bhutam".

Just like Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, ācāryas like Śrī Abhinava gupta¹² (Proponent of Kāśmīraśaiva philosophy), Śrī Mādhvācārya¹³ (Dvaita philosophy), Śrī Rāmānujācārya (Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy) among several others, have discussed Bhagavadgītā through their Bhaṣyās. Today, there are around 227 discourses on Bhagavadgītā in samskr̥tam alone. During our struggle for freedom from British colonisation, Lokmanya Tilak wrote his commentary on Bhagavadgītā, 'Gitārahasyam', with a focus on Karmayoga, to inspire freedom movements. Many warriors who stood at the forefront like MK

Gandhi and Aravinda Maharṣi were inspired by the Bhagavadgītā¹¹. Bhagavadgītā continues to illuminate the world from within Mahābhārata, offering infinite possibilities for philosophical and spiritual thinking.

Mahābhārata gives us lessons in statecraft, alongside lessons in forging alliances within personal, social, and national spheres. Celebrated stutis like Viṣṇu Sahasranama and Śiva Sahasranama and that of Devatās including Bhagavān Śiva, Bhagavān Viṣṇu, Durga Devī, Agni Devā, etc. are also seen in Mahābhārata. Even today, there are countless television series, movies, animated films, theses, discourses, and novels that tap into Mahābhārata. This means that the impact of this Itihāsa has not been confined to literary and cultural realms alone. Mahābhārata has influenced the lives of Indians in a number of ways, be it in the nomenclature of places and people, traditions, temples, and so on. Earlier its influence was restricted to the Indian subcontinent and countries like Indonesia and Cambodia. However, today it is well-known all over the world.

What is an Itihāsa?

Mahābhārata is one of the two great Itihāsas born in India. 'Iti iha āsa', literally means 'so indeed it was'¹². However, Itihāsa is not merely history or a description of history. It is not a myth or an epic.

History is the analysis and interpretation of the past. History becomes historical fiction when imagination and literary tools are added to it. Myths are stories that revolve around the divine or people with divine powers, even though it discusses ideologies, morality, and righteousness¹³. Aristotle observed that an epic is a narrative that revolves around a particular incident discussing its origin, progress, and consequences²⁰. However, Itihāsas do not have any of these characteristics. धर्मार्थकाममोक्षानाम् पूर्ववृत्तं कथायुक्तं इतिहास प्रचक्ष्यते dharmārtha kāmamokṣānām purvavṛitham kadhayuktham itihāsa prachakshyathe

Itihāsas explain the four puruṣārthas-dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa, by narrating historic events in the form of stories. This purpose and nature of Itihāsas are clearly visible in Mahābhārata, from head to toe.

It would be a grievous error to consider the literary genre of a particular language as universal and equate unique literary genres of other languages to it. This would make for a huge categorical blunder. And such is the case if we classify an Itihāsa as an Epic. Swami Vivekananda describes Itihāsas as the encyclopedia of knowledge and Aryasamskr̥ti. He further added that Itihāsas envisage an ideal culture that our civilisation is yet to achieve²².

Borrowing Maharṣi Veda Vyāsā's own verses on Mahābhārata²³,

धर्मं चार्थं च कामे च मोक्षे च भरतर्षभ यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न तत्कचित्

dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha yadihāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tatkvacit
Mahābhārata 1.56.33

O Bharatarṣabha! (the best among the Bharatas), whatever is found in Mahābhārata about dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa, may be found elsewhere. But, what is not in this Itihāsa, cannot be found anywhere else. Anyone who has even the slightest idea about will testify that there is no exaggeration in these words, This sloka proudly proclaims the timeless relevance and importance of Mahabharata. The puruṣārthā, Kāma, means The purusartha desire. In worldly life, an individual desires a number of things. All of those can be called kāma. To fulfil any desire, one has to put in the right kind of effort, working hard enough Artha, represents this effort (effort translates to wealth). In the quest to acquire artha and fulfil kama, care must be taken to not disrupt the existing balance towards nature and fellow beings. This care may be considered as the Dharma. Mokṣa is the ultimate freedom from our confinement to this bondage of Artha and Kama. The culture of Bharat celebrates the idea that one must acquire Artha in accordance with Dharma and experience Kāma also in accordance with Dharma. Living this way, all beings walk toward their final goal, which is Mokṣa. Itihāsa sketch this ultimate vedic truth. Mahabharata

इतिहास पुराणाभ्यां वेदं समुपबृंहयेत् । बिभेत्यल्पाश्रुताद् वेदो मामयं प्रहरिष्यतीति ॥

itihāsa purāṇābhyām vedam samupabrmhayeta. bibhetyalpaśrutād vedo māmayaṃ prahariṣyatīti.

Mahābhārata 1.1.205

Mahābhārata proclaims that, since Vedas themselves are afraid of people with half knowledge (alpaśruta), because they may interpret Vedas wrongly, the essence of Vedas have to be explained with the help of Itihāsa and Puranas. Hence, the subjects of discussion in Mahabharata are the puruṣārthās, the very fabric of life, and some heroes who lived in the past. Moreover, the characters of Mahabharata, along with being historic personalities also reflect the subtle internal conflicts in our minds. That is why Mahatmas like Sat-guru Śrī Mātā Amritānandamayī Devī tell us that the Mahābhārata war is also a representation of our internal struggles.

The Author

Maharṣi Veda Vyasa is the author of Mahabharata. He was born as Kṛṣṇadwaipayana to Satyavati and Parāśara Muni. He divided the Vedas into four and composed the fifth Veda, Mahābhārata. He is known by the name Dwaipayana as he was born on an island. Traditionally Maharṣi Veda Vyāsa is

considered as the author of the eighteen purāṇas, the commentary on Patañjali Yoga Sūtras and one of the fundamental texts of Vedānta philosophy - Brahmasūtra.

Śrīmad Bhagavata Purāṇa depicts Maharṣi Veda Vyāsa as one of the twenty-two main avatars of Bhagavān Viṣṇu". In Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā, Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa reveals that "Among Mahārṣis, I am Vyāsa."27.

In addition to being the composer of Mahābhārata, Maharṣi Vyāsa is also a powerful character within, appearing at the beginning and the end of the Itihāsa and capable of controlling the flow and direction of the story. Some of the regional versions say that Maharṣi Vyāsa was unable to find a suitable person to write Mahābhārata, which was overflowing within him. He wanted to write it for the prosperity of the world. He then approached Brahma for a solution. As per His advice, Bhagavan Mahāganapati was given the task of writing Mahabharata from Maharṣi Vyasa2. According to the story, Veda Vyasa and Ganapati formed a pact before beginning the Itihāsa. In the pact, Bhagavān Gaṇeśa said that Maharṣi Vyāsa should dictate the entire Itihāsa without any pause or interruption while Veda Vyāsa in return asked that he write only after fully understanding the meaning of the narrated verses. Thus Mahābhārata was composed by Maharṣi Vyāsa of the incarnation of Bhagavān Viṣṇu, and was written by the omniscient son of Bhagavān Śiva, Ganesa on Brahma's advice.

Birth of the Itihāsa

Mahābhārata records that it was Lomaharsana's son, Ugrasravas, who narrated Mahābhārata to the Rṣi in Saunaka's śatrā at Naimiṣāranyam. Here the Rṣis speak thus to Ugrasravas, "Please narrate to us this great Itihāsa magnificently strung together by Parvās, the essence of the four Vedas, praised by the Devās and the Brahmarṣis and is inclusive of all śāstras and the meaning of the Vedas." Mahābhārata was composed by Satyawati's son, Maharṣi Veda Vyāsa and later he narrated it to his son Suka and His other śiṣyas.

In Adi Parva of Mahābhārata, it is said that the great Maharṣi Veda Vyāsa authored a great book with sixty lakh ślokas. Out of this, thirty lakh ślokas are meant for the devās, fifteen lakhs for the pitṛs, fourteen lakhs for the gandharvas, and the remaining one lakh for mankind. Mahābhārata presents itself as a narration by Vaiśampāyana, as commanded by Maharṣi Vyasa, in the sarpa-satra yajña of King Janamejaya. And also later, as a narration by Lomaharṣaṇa's son, Ugrasravas, at Naimiṣāranyam in Saunaka's śatra, to the Rṣis.

Inside Mahābhārata

In Adi Parva, Maharṣi Vyāsa uses a beautiful metaphor to sketch and compare the characters Yudhisthira and Duryodhana. Duryodhana is a huge tree, angry by nature. Karṇā is its trunk, and Śakuni is the branch. Its flowers and fruits represent Duḥśāsana. And the naive Dhṛtarāṣṭra forms the

roots of that tree of anger. On the other hand, Yudhisthira is a great tree of Dharma. Arjuna is the trunk, and Bhīma is the branch. The flowers and fruits are Nakula- Sahadeva. And its roots, Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself, the Brahmajñas, and the Vedas²⁹.

Apart from the main characters, we find unearthly characters like Devas, Asuras, Rākṣasas, Yakṣas, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Nāgas etc. Then we have different kinds of people like Kings, Purohitas, Traders, Sūtas, Rṣis, Queens, Dāsas, Niṣādas, Mlecchas, Yavanas etc. Birds, animals and reptiles among other living beings are also there alongside mountains and rivers.

Forests, groves, palaces, punyatīrthās, grounds, and river banks alongside Indraloka, Nāgaloka, etc. are the backdrops of this grand Itihāsa. While the important parts of the story are set with Hastinapura and Indraprastha as the centre, this position is often taken by places like Dwaraka, the Ganges, Magadha, the Kingdom of Pañcala, and the Kingdom of Matsya. Although the Itihāsa primarily narrates the account of Bharatavamsa, it also portrays Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Vrsnivamśa, Pauravavamśa, etc. alongside many others.

Though the Itihāsa's primary subjects are the life and times of the Kauravas and the Pandavās, Mahābhārata begins with Janamejaya, the grandson of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. And when the past is narrated in the Itihāsa from this point, we are taken back to the time of Bhisma and beyond, to Kuru and Bharata, and further even to the origin of the world. Even though the heart of the story lies with the five sons of Pandu, the interventions of Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa- Draupadi and Maharṣi Kṛṣṇa Dwaipayana Vyāsa alter the course of the story considerably. Alongside this main story, Mahābhārata also narrates the accounts of Garuda, Nala, Duṣyanta, Bhagavān Śrī Rāmacandra, Maharṣi Viśvāmitra, Emperor Śibi, Rantideva, Bhagavān Paraśurāma, and King Hariścandra among others as antecedents or subplots.

Conclusion

Mahābhārata teaches us to perceive the actions of others, not just based on the context of their current life but also on their previous lives, and on the complicated trail of Karma and Karmaphala. The Itihāsa touches on the hard and deep realities of life that lie beyond the sankalpa of the twin notions of Truth False or Good - Evil. It does not hold back from discussing the Adharma of the Dharmic side and the Dharma of the Adharmic side. The Itihāsa reminds us that Dharma tattva is subtle and difficult to grasp if not impossible³⁰.

Known as Jaya, Bhārata, Kṛṣṇaveda, and Mahābhārata, this grand Itihāsa begins with the chanting of the mangalācaraṇa śloka. The same śloka is also found in Mahābhāgavatam.

नारायणं नमस्कृत्य नरं चैव नरोत्तमम् । देवीं सरस्वतीं व्यासं ततो जयमुदीरयेत् ॥

nārāyanam namaskṛtya naram caiva narottamam devam sarasvatim (vyāsam) tato jayam udirayet

Before starting Jaya, one has to offer namaskāram and bow down to the supreme Nara-Narayana, Sarasvati Devi and Maharṣi Vyāsa. Nara-Narāyaṇas are Mahāmunis, who were once part of Bhagavān Viṣṇu Himself. Mahābhārata says, in the Dwapara Yuga, they took birth as Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Chanting the mangalācaraṇa, let us approach Mahābhārata, as per the Itihasa's own instructions, with Śraddha and Saddharmanisthā³¹. Let us discover the mysteries of puruṣārthās with the aid of the divine words of wisdom from Maharṣi Vyāsa. Let the study of Mahābhārata become an initiation, upanayana, into the divine wisdom of Bhāratmāta.

2*MAHĀBHĀRATA - A BRIEF SUMMARY

It is believed that the great Maharṣi Veda Vyāsa recited Mahābhārata in the form of one hundred Parvas. Parvas can be considered equivalent to episodes of a grand chronicle. Vaiśampāyana narrates the Mahābhārata to King Janamejaya at the Sarpa Satra conducted by the king. A majority of the text is presented as a conversation between King Janamejaya and Vaiśampāyana. Later, Ugrasravas re-narrated the complete story at Naimiṣā forest (Naimiṣāranya) and classified them into main eighteen Parvas, the first being known as Adiparva. Certain present-day scholars who do extensive research on this work believe that the first few Parvas of the 100 Parva classification serve the purpose of granting an admit card to the reader to enter the Itihasa. It summarizes the whole work, gives subtle hints on the purpose of this Itihasa, employs metaphors and tropes to unveil hidden messages, and so on.

unwedded, very scared, and didn't really know what else to do. A childless charioteer would find and raise this child who in the future would be the sturdiest opponent to the rest of Kunti's sons. A despicable design of destiny?

After marriage to Pandu, Kunti and Madri use this same mantra and thus were born the five Pandavas, each from a different Deva. Yudhishthira from Yamadharma Deva, Bhīma from Vayu Deva, Arjuna from Indra Deva and Nakula Sahadeva from the two Aśvinī Devās. During this time, the daughter of the Gandhara King, Subala, gets married to the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Denying the vision that her husband lacks, this queen ties a cloth around her eyes and willingly remains blind throughout the Itihasa. This act of hers receives plentiful praise. Queen Gandhārī's brother Śakunī also shifts himself to Hastinapura. He becomes the mastermind behind most of the evil plots of Duryodhana and Karṇā.

Turning impatient after knowing that Kunti gave birth to Yudhishthira, a pregnant Gandhārī beats her stomach only to give birth to a lump of flesh. However, the author Mahārṣi Vyāsa divides this flesh into one hundred and one equal parts, keeps them inside mud pots, and with his blessings are born the hundred Kaurava brothers and one sister of whom Duryodhana is the eldest.

The five sons of Pāndu were born when they were in the forest, and shortly thereafter, Pandu departs owing to a curse. Kunti and the five sons return to the kingdom. These five sons and the

hundred sons of Dhṛtarāstra grow up in mirth and merriment, but the practical jokes of the physically powerful Bhima nurture deep hatred and jealousy in the mind of Duryodhana who tries through many ways to end the life of Bhima.

Meanwhile, an important parallel story is narrated.

Elsewhere, much before the Pandavas were born, Drona,

born of Maharṣi Bharadvāja, befriends prince Drupada at

the Gurukula. Being close friends, the Drupada prince offers

Drona half the kingdom once after they grow up. Drona

learns Dhanurveda, the art of archery, from Bhagavan

Paraśurāma himself. Struggling through a poverty-stricken

phase of life, Droṇa visits his childhood friend Drupada

seeking wealth. Drupada insults and sends Droṇa back,

stating, "Friendship can only be among equals".

Skilled in dhanurvedyā, Droṇa gets appointed as the chief weaponry tutor of all the princes' of Hastinapura. Burning with the rage of insult, Drona seeks vengeance through his pupils. Once the education was over, he demanded his disciples to capture and bring Drupada to him as Gurudakṣiṇā. Kauravas, including Karṇā, suffer a terrible defeat against Drupada's army, while the Pandavas, who fight next, defeat and bring King Drupada tied as demanded. After seizing his kingdom, Droṇa offers half of it back to Drupada himself and mocks, "As now we are equal, there can be friendship between us", and sends him back to his palace.

Humiliated, Drupada undertakes a big sacrifice seeking revenge. And from the sacrificial fire, are born two important characters, Drishtadyumna who will kill Droṇa in the future, and the beautiful Draupadi.

When the Pandavas and Kauravas grow in age, scared of losing the Kingship to Yudhishthira, Duryodhana and Karna plot an evil scheme to end all the five brothers by burning them in a wax palace. Fortunately, the Pandavas are timely informed of this, thanks to Vidura, and they manage to escape through a hidden tunnel. But their escape remains a secret, and the impression is maintained that they got killed in the wax palace incident.

In the next few years, they roam around in the forest killing Rākṣasas like Baka and Hidimba. This adventure trip culminates in a svayamvara at Pañcāla Deśa, where Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin, shoots down a mechanised moving target. As Arjuna wins over Draupadi in the svayamvara, the rest of the kings succumb to jealousy and start fighting the Pandavas. For the first time in the Itihāsa, Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa enters the scene, settling the dispute with his diplomatic skills and charisma. By a stroke of destiny connected to previous birth, Draupadi is married to all five brothers, and shortly all of them return to their paternal kingdom. Dhṛtarāṣṭra offers half the kingdom back, as suggested by Bhīṣma, Drona, and Vidura, and the Pandavas move to Khandava where they build a huge palace.

The second Parva - Sabhā Parva starts with the building of a huge palatial court / sabhā by the Pandavas. After that, they do a Rājasūya Yajña and expand their empire. Duryodhana, bedazzled by the beauty of the new palace of the Pandavas at Indraprastha and their unprecedented wealth, grew jealous and plots a new plan. They invite the Pandavas for a game of dice in which Yudhishthira bets and loses everything to the deceitful games of Śakuni. He would even go to the extent of betting all his siblings, himself, and their wife Draupadi. Thereafter occurs one of the most heinous and disgraceful incidents, the dishonouring of Draupadi. and

Having obtained Draupadi in the bet, provoked by the words of Karṇa, Duḥśāśana, a younger brother of Duryodhana, drags her onto the court as she resists. In front of a court disgraced with the silence of powerful men, Duḥśāśana tries to disrobe Draupadi. She pleads for Dharma and receiving no solid response, prays and surrenders herself to Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Divine intervention from Kṛṣṇa enables a continuous flow of the dress thereby saving her honour. Realizing the adharma that happened, the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra repents and offers boons to Draupadi, and accordingly, all the Pandavas were set free of the bet. Bhima, out of rage, takes an oath to pierce the chest of Duḥśāśana and break the thighs of Duryodhana. Even before the Pandavas reach back to their kingdom, Duryodhana and his accomplices convince Dhṛtarāṣṭra to call them back for another round of dice game, this time with a new gamble. The losers have to give up their kingdom and stay in the forest for twelve years and one year in disguise afterward. After completing the thirteen years, they can return and obtain their kingdom back. According to Kṣatriya dharma, Yudhishthira accepts the challenge even knowing that Sakuni would resort to deceit. The expected happens and the Pandavas lose the game. They, along with Draupadi, leave for the forest for twelve years.

There begins the third Parva, Aranya Parva, 'Aranya meaning forest. During those years in exile, they would kill many adharmic beings, and earn many divine weapons like Pāśupatāstra. They spend the last year in disguise in the land of King Virāṭa. This is the Virāṭa Parva. The daughter of King Virāṭa gets married to Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna. They complete their stipulated period and return. But Duryodhana had no intention of giving back the kingdom. War became inevitable.

In the next Parva, Udyoga Parva, Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa takes an extraordinary step to avoid war by going on a peace mission. Duryodhana makes his stance clear that not even a pinch of space will be given to the Pandavas. However, the peace mission fails desperately when the wicked Duryodhana even tries to capture Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Bhagavān here reveals his Viśvarūpa, the all-encompassing divine form.

The preparations for war begin. The whole of Kṛṣṇa's army (Yadava Sainya) fights for the Kauravās, while an unarmed Kṛṣṇa serves as the charioteer of Arjuna in the Pandava side. Bhīṣma leads the Kaurava army while Drstadyumna leads the Pandava side. The next ten days till the fall of Bhīṣma is the Bhishma Parva. mobgail

The news of the fall of Bhīṣma renders Dhṛtarāṣṭra curious. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, then asked Sañjaya how Bhīṣma fell. Sañjaya thus narrates the war from day one to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. He says that when both armies were arrayed against each other, Arjuna

fell into a dilemma born out of attachment. There happens

one of the most profound conversations in Mahābhārata -

The Bhagavadgītā. It contains the quintessence of life, its

problems, and solutions. Finally, a motivated Arjuna picks

up his Gandīva and the war begins. On the 10th day of battle

Arjuna defeats Bhishma, who chooses to remain alive in the

bed of arrows.

The following Parva is named after Droṇa, appointed as the new major general of Kauravas after Bhīṣma. It is the 11th day of war and Kauravas under the leadership of Droṇa resume the fight

against the Pandavas, whose army is still led by Dr̥stadyumna. The death of many top commanders from both sides is described in this parva. Abhimanyu, Drupada, Ghatotkaca, Droṇa, Jayadratha, etc. are some commanders who get killed in the war.

Karṇa assumes the leadership of the Kaurava army after the death of Drona and the war continues. This is Karṇa Parva. Salya, the King of Madri and the charioteer of Karṇa rebuked him for his adamancy and foolishness in thinking of killing Arjuna. Between them, there happens a strong exchange of words. A great warrior himself, Salya advises Karṇa, and the arrogant Karṇa ignore him. Here Śalya narrates the story of a Crow and Swan to Karṇa, in an attempt to make him understand his limitations. The greatest duel of the Mahabharata war is fought between Karṇa and Pārtha (Arjuna) and finally, Pārtha slays Karṇa with the help of Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa. The next parva is the Salya Parva. After the deaths of the chief warriors, the King of Madri becomes the General of the Kaurava Army. Salya dies at the hands of Dharmaraja. Bhima and Duryodhana have a battle of maces. Balarama, the elder brother of Śrī Kṛṣṇa had taught the art of mace fighting to both Bhima and Duryodhana. Unable to watch the fight between his own students, Balarama starts a holy pilgrimage along the Sarasvati River during this time. At the end of this battle, Duryodhana suffers a major injury and collapses on the field.

Then comes Sautika Parva. The warriors Kṛtavarmā, Kṛpā, and Aśvatthāmā, the son of Drona, went to the field of battle in the evening and saw King Duryodhana lying on the ground, his thighs broken, and his body covered with blood. Firm in his anger, Aśvatthāmā vowed that he would not take off his armour without killing all the Pañcālas led by Dr̥stadyumna, the Pandavas, and their allies. That night, Aśvatthāmā entered the Pandava camp to kill them all. He caught Dr̥stadyumna in his sleep and smothered and suffocated him to death. He then battled the rest of the camp single-handedly and murdered everyone, including all the sons of the Pandavas. Grief-stricken by her son's death and mourning the deaths of her father (Drupada died earlier in the war) and brother, Draupadi resolves to fast unto death. Moved by Draupadi's words, Bhīma runs after the son of his guru (Droṇa), Aśvatthāmā. The rest of the Pandavas and Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa catch up with Bhīma and they reach Aśvatthāmā. Driven by destiny and out of fear of Bhima, Aśvatthāmā unleashed the divine astra, Brahmaśira, urging it to destroy the Pandavas. Arjuna also had the extremely rare knowledge of the same weapon and he releases that as a countermeasure. There appear two rishis, Vyāsa and Nārada who warn both about the destructive nature of this released weapon. Arjuna retrieved his weapon in respect of their opinion while Aśvatthāmā couldn't. He redirects this weapon to the fetus in the stomach of Abhimanyu's wife Uttara. The newborn will be dead however Kṛṣṇa gives life to him who continues the Kuru lineage. Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa curse Aśvatthāmā for his reckless act. After the funerals of all the kings were performed with offerings of water, Kunti acknowledges Karṇa as her son. Thus concludes Sautika Parva.

After that comes the Stri Parva which recounts the pitiful lamentations of the wives of the heroes and Gandhārī, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wrath and fainting. They see the Kṣatriya warriors lying on the field of battle unable to escape destiny dead sons, brothers, and fathers. There the extremely wise king, Yudhishthira burned the dead bodies of the kings according to prescribed rites.

After that follows (the twelfth) the Santi Parva. This Parva narrates Dharmaraja Yudhisthira's despondency at having killed his fathers, brothers, sons, maternal uncles, and relations by marriage. On the bed of arrows, Bhīṣma narrates the duties and laws of a Dharmic king. Also recounted are norms during emergencies and rules of time and cause. Finally, the wonderful path to salvation, Mokṣa Dharma, is described in detail.

Then follows the Anuśāsana Parva. Here, Yudhisthira, King of the Kurus, was composed after learning about righteous conduct from Bhīṣma. It describes the rules of Dharma and Artha in detail, the different rules of donation and their fruits, the different merits of charity depending on the persons to whom charity is given, the rules of living, the rites of individual conduct, and the unmatched supremacy of truth. As this Parva concludes, the great Bhīṣma ascends to heaven.

The fourteenth, the Aśvamedhika Parva, begins with the excellent story of Samvarta and Marutta, the discovery of the golden treasures, then the birth of Parīkṣit who was burnt almost dead by Aśvatthāmā's Brahmāśira and revived by Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa again. Then there is Yudhisthira's Aśvamedha Yajña and Arjuna's journey with the sacrificial horse, and his battle with many kings.

Then follows the fifteenth Aśramavāsika Parva. Here, giving up the kingdom, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, accompanied by Gāndhārī and Vidura, retires to the forest. The virtuous Prthā, who always served her superiors, left the kingdom and her sons and followed the old couple.

The sixteenth Parva is called Mausala Parva. The word musala means pestle. The Yadavas are cursed by Rishis that a musala will destroy them. Grass turns to clubs and the Yadavas kill each other with these. Balarama and Kṛṣṇa give up their lives on earth, as they understand that their 'Avatāra lakṣya' is accomplished. Arjuna's powers vanish and he becomes a normal person, unable to rescue even Yadava women from plunders.

'Maha' means great and 'prasthānika' means journey or departure. Thus, 'Mahaprasthānam' literally means great journey but stands for departure from this world or death. Mahāprasthānika Parva is about the departure of the Pandavas for the Himalayas and their deaths, one after another. It has the story of Dharmadeva disguised as a dog and Yudhisthira's ascent to heaven in his physical body.

In the eighteen-Parva classification, Mahāprasthānika Parva is the seventeenth. Svargārohaṇa Parva is the concluding Parva of the itihāsa and here once again the author Kiṣṇadvaiṇya extols the core message of Mahābhārata.

In the concluding verses, Vyāsa laments thus, "Thousands of mothers and fathers and hundreds of sons and wives arrive in this world and then depart elsewhere. There are thousands of reasons for joy and hundreds of reasons for fear. From one day to another, they afflict those who are stupid, but not those who are learned. I am without pleasure and have raised my arms, but no one is listening to

me. If artha and kāma result from Dharma, why should one not pursue Dharma? For the sake of kama, fear or avarice, and even for the sake of preserving one's life, one should not give up Dharma. Dharma is eternal. Happiness and unhappiness are transient. The Atman is eternal, but other reasons are transient."Thus concludes Mahabharata, the largest literary project ever created, for transcending the dualities of life in worlds. One who understands this purpose of will alone benefit from its reading. men Mahābhārata

There are many important parts that had to be skipped when summarizing, like Jarasandha Vadha, the curse of Urvashi, the story of Sikhandi, śiśupāla Vadha, Yakṣa Praśna, how Bhīma killed Kīcaka and many many small stories like the story of Sārangaja bird, Vyādha Gītā, etc. We would recommend all to read the entire Itihāsa to benefit a holistic understanding.

Mahābhārata portrays the complexities of human life, like sequences of images on a grand canvas. Composed by Maharṣi Veda Vyāsa thousands of years ago, it has played a major role in preserving the culture of our Nation. It has prominently influenced the philosophy and ethos of this land. Today, every society takes pride in tracing its history to Mahābhārata.

This module explores the various traditions associated with Mahābhārata across different parts of India. Further, a revelation of the Itihāsā's impact on India at large is also presented. We can see that Mahābhārata has spread across this land through rituals, storytelling, theatre, songs, folk performances, literature, etc. alongside its textual traditions.

Impact of Mahābhārata on Indian Literature

The storyline of Mahābhārata is familiar to everyone in India, from the intellectual to the illiterate. The daily incidents in their lives pull examples of the characters and stories from this grand Itihāsa in a natural yet meaningful way. One reason for this popularity is the presence of different regional retellings of Mahabharata, and the literary works that have been inspired by the Itihāsa.

Some of the regional versions of Mahabharata are,

Malayalam

Mahābhāratam Kilippāttu by Śrī. Thunchath Ezhuthachan. Cherusseri Bharatam by Cherusser HUHT Bharatmala by Niranath Sankara Panicker.

Tamil

Mahābhārata by Peruntevanār and Villibhāratham by Villiputhūrān.

Odia

Mahabharata by Sarala Dās.

Bengali

Mahābhārata by Kabi Sanjay.

Hindi

Mahābhārata by Sabal Singh Chauhan.

Assamese

Mahābhārata by Rama Saraswati.

Besides these, Mahābhārata has been the focal centre for many literary works in various languages and literary genres. Three of the Pañcamahākāvya (Five great poems) of Samskr̥tam are rooted in Mahābhārata. Further, Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśakuntalam is a Samskr̥tam play based on the story of Sakuntala and King Duṣyanta in Adi Parva of Mahabharata. Even before Kalidasa there was Bhasa, who wrote seven plays Balacaritam, Karṇabharam, Urubhangam, Madhyamavyayogam, Pañcaratram, Dūtakhatoṭkacham and Dūtavākyaṃ, all based on Mahābhārata.

In the Vana Parva, Arjuna worships Bhagavan Paramēśvara himself, to attain the Paśupatāstra, a powerful arrow named Pāśupata. Bhagavan approaches Arjuna as a Kirata (Hunter/Gatherer) and tests him. Finally, he is pleased with Arjuna and gives him Pāśupata. Bharavi, a poet of the sixth Century CE, wrote the Mahākāvya 'Kiratarjunīyam' based on this context. In another instance, in the Vana Parva of Mahābhārata, Muni Brhadāśva narrates the story of King Nala of the Kingdom of Nisadas, to console the Pandavās who were wandering in the forest after losing their kingdom. Śrīharsa, in the twelfth Century CE, wrote the Mahākāvya Naisadha Caritham (Naisadha Caritha) based on this story of King Nala.

Almost all the characters in the Itihasa have faced inner conflicts rather than with others. This has beautifully portrayed the inevitable consequences of one's own Karma. Everyone can easily relate to these incidents with their own experiences. In this manner, different versions of Mahābhārata have played a vital role in giving new insights to people about life and living. Thus, Mahābhārata has served as a moral guide for the people of this nation over generations. Festivals Associated with Mahābhārata

When festivals are celebrated in India, it is always imbued with charm and a sense of purpose. The ritualistic and ceremonial functions of festivals reflect the prosperity of community. Some festivals are connected with the worship of the deity. Fasting and feasting are also part of the celebration [1]. Festivals help people to invoke various deities, which helps them in their spiritual upliftment.

Let us now closely look at some of the different festivals associated with Mahābhārata.

Karaga Festival is celebrated in Karnataka annually, in the month of Caitra (March / April), chiefly by the Tigala community. The Tigalas consider themselves descendants of Draupadi. Śrī Dharmarāya Swami Temple in Bengaluru is the principal ritual centre of the Karaga festival. Spread over eleven days, Bengaluru Karaga essentially celebrates nature and water as is evident from the Ganga Puja ritual (worship of Goddess Ganga) [2].

Kuvākam Festival is based on a story from one of the regional versions of Mahābhārata in Tamil Nadu. It focuses on one of the three boons granted to Arjuna's son Irāvān, or Arāvāṇ, by Bhagavan Śrī Kṛṣṇa, in honour of his self-sacrifice. Irāvān wanted to get married before his death. Bhagavān granted him this boon by taking the female form of Mohini and marrying him. The next day, Arāvān sacrificed his life and Mohini grieved like a widow [3]. This festival is celebrated at the Śrī Kūttāntavar Temple located in Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu. Dhungri Mela is celebrated on the birthday of Hidimba Devi, who is a 'Rakṣasi' being in Mahabharata, married to Bhima. It is commemorated at the Hidimba Devi Temple at Manali in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. This temple is dedicated to Hidimbā (Hidimbi) Devi. The temple sanctum sanctorum is a cave shrine believed to have foot imprints of Hidimbā. Manālī is perhaps the only place in India where Hidimbā is worshipped as a goddess [4]. This festival is also known as Hidimbā Devi Mela.

Bhīṣma Ekādaśī is celebrated by people in the month of Magha (Jan/Feb), in honour of Bhīṣma Pitāmaha, the great son of King Santanu and Gangā Devī.

Chhatha Puja is one of the major festivals of Bihar which is dedicated to the worship of Sūrya Deva. Devotees perform this Puja to thank the Sun for supporting life and seek protection and blessings. According to folklore, it is believed that Draupadi performed Chhatha Puja during their years in exile.

Temples Associated with Mahābhārata

In Indian Culture, a temple or devālaya is the abode of a deity or Deva. People visit a temple to see or seek the Darshan of the deity who lives there. Devālayas or Temples play a major role in our life, culturally and spiritually. Temples help us alleviate suffering and help unfold the divinity within each of us. Let us learn about some major temples that are associated with Mahābhārata.

Pañca Pandava Temples in Kerala are five temples in the Ceññannūr area. It is believed that each temple was built by one of the Pandavās. Devotees are supposed to start their pilgrimage with the Trecittatt Mahāviṣṇu Temple built by Yudhisthira. Then they seek Darśan from the Trppuliyūr

Mahāviṣṇu Temple built by Bhīma, Āranmula Pārthasarathy Temple built by Arjuna, Thiruvannamalai Mahāviṣṇu Temple by Nakula and the Trkōṭittānam Mahāviṣṇu Temple by Sahadeva.

Some other temples related to Mahābhārata are:

- Pāñcālī Amman Temple, Pālakkaḍ, Kerala.
- Śrī Pūrṇatrayīśa Temple, Trppūṇittura, Kerala: It is believed that the Vighraha (idol) of Pūrṇatrayīśa was given to Arjuna by Bhagavān Viṣṇu [5]. Malanada Duryodhana Temple, Kollam, Kerala.
- Gandhari Amman Temple, Tiruvannantapuram, Kerala.
- Pañca Pandava Temple, Ganeswarpur, Odisha.
- Karṇā Temple, Netwar, Uttarakhand.
- Temple of Bhishma, Narkātāri, Haryānā.
- Draupadi Amman Temple, Vélāchéri, Tamil Nadu.
- Śrī Dharmarāya Svāmi Temple, Bengalūru, Karnataka.
- Hidimba Devi Temple, Manāli, Himachal Pradesh.
- Pañca Pandava Temple, Khammam, Telangānā

There are numerous Draupadi temples in south India, especially Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu alone, there are hundreds of versions of Mahabharata in the form of folklore [6].

Ancient Indian Hand Painting

Kalamkari is a painted or block-printed cotton or silk fabric produced mainly in parts of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Two of the most prominent centres of Kalamkāri production are Śrīkālahasti, Cittiūr District, and Macilipataṇam, Kṛṣṇa District in Andhra Pradesh [7]. The Śrīkālahasti Kalamkari style involves the depiction of scenes from our Itihāsās, Mahābhārata, and Rāmāyana. It is interesting to know that the depictions of Mahābhārata scenes are even found in fabric.

There is an interesting belief in the Kalamkari community that the Hanuman flag on the chariot of Arjuna was made in Kalamkāri style. Various Art forms

cultural legacy with multiple India has a rich cultural including a multitude of performing arts. Some worship the Mahabharata characters as their stories as a devotional offering to them. traditions, traditions Let us have a look at some of the art forms which are shaped by Mahabharata Pandav Lila in Garhwal region (Uttarakhand) is one such ritualistic performance that celebrates the characters of

Pandav Lila

Mahābhārata. Paṇḍav līlā is not an annual fixed affair, it is staged to offset bad omens and seek blessings of the Pandavas for peace and prosperity. Pandavas, in their quest to relive the glory of their past, bless the village, which gives them a chance to re-enact the various scenes of Mahābhārata [8].

Terukūṭṭi is a rural folk theatre of Tamil Nadu. In a ritualistic performance, it enacts the characters of Mahābhārata. Villiputtūrār's version of Mahābhārata in Tamil is the main text upon which kūthu performances are based even today. Kathakali is a classical traditional theatre of Kerala, that is several centuries old. It is an enactment of stories, mostly from Mahābhārata. It is presented using gestures and well-defined facial expressions, alongside a blend of dance and music.

Kathakali

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is an ancient temple theatre in Kerala. It is one of the traditional performing art forms and has its episodes entirely drawn from Mahābhārata. Chākyār kūthu is a performance that includes satire and social criticism. In the olden days, Chākyār (narrator) could even criticise the king during the kūthu.

Chākyār Kūthu

Bhaona is a traditional theatrical performance in upper and central parts of Assam often featuring stories from Mahābhārata. Chhau dance is another old and popular tradition giving continuity to

Mahābhārata. It is popular in Bengal, Bihār and Odiṣā. Chhau is taught to male dancers from families of traditional artists or from local communities. The dance is performed at night in an open space to traditional and folk melodies, played on the reed pipes mohuri and shehnāi [9].

Chhau Dance

Vēlakaḷi is a martial dance, in which the dancers hold a sword and a shield in their hands. It depicts a fight sequence between the Pandavas and the Kauravas [10]. It is usually performed in temples during festivals [11].

We can see that all the art forms that we have discussed so far have grown and developed on stories from Mahābhārata. This great Itihāsā is an unlimited source of stories and sub-stories. It is a Kalpavrikṣa (the wish-fulfilling divine tree), providing everything necessary for artists and writers. Mahābhārata itself says that the Itihāsā is a livelihood for them.

In addition to this, the contemporary entertainment industry also draws heavily from Mahābhārata themes. Starting from Peter Brook's Mahābhārata to the recently announced Telugu movie Virāṭa Parva, Mahābhārata is a perennial source of themes for films and dramas worldwide.

Anthropological information in Mahābhārata

Mahābhārata is a mine of anthropological information. It presents numerous kingdoms, dynasties, languages, cultures, people, and regions. Mahābhārata lists three hundred and sixty-three Janās or jātis on different occasions [12]. The two terms, jana and jāti (from the root 'ja', meaning born or descended from), are broadly interchangeable, but the former refers more to a people forming a state, while the latter connotes a Jana. community of people or a segment of a

- Janās in the North (Northern Himalayan Region): Trigartās, Khāsās etc. Jammu has numerous traditions related to Mahābhārata. Some of the tribals there worship Pandavās and Draupadi as Iṣṭa Devatā (as their favourite deity)
- Janās in the South: Cholas, Pandyas, Dravidās, Keralas, Andhras etc.
- Janās in the West: Yadavas, Surāṣṭrās, Vahilkas, etc.
- Janās in the Northwest: Yavanas, Kambojas, Sakas, etc.

- Janās in the East: Angas, Kiratas, Vangas, Chinas, and Pundras. Kiratas correspond to the Indo-Mongoloids of the Northeast. There is a tradition that identifies Ghatotkaca with the Kacari kingdom in Assam [13].

Influence in Architecture

The architectural expression of devotion scaled new heights with carvings based on Mahābhārata in various places. The representation of Mahābhārata on the wall in the form of visuals has inspired the masses and has become a bridge between the scriptures and innocent minds [14]. From the majestic Mahabharata carvings at Hoyesaleiwara Temple Karnataka and the epitome of architectural perfection Kaju Nenance at Mahabalipuram: Tamil Nadu the intricate sculpture of the Pandavas and Draupadi the Dasavatara Temple at Deogarh, Rajasthan, we can see the luxuriousness of Indian architecture influenced by Mahabharata.

Arjuna's Penance, Rock-Cut Relief, Mahabalipuram

Scenes from this Itihasa have been depicted in Kailasa Temple, Ellora, Amriteswara Temple, Karnataka; Mallikarjuna Temple, Pattadakal; Ambā thirtha, Karnataka; Narasimha Temple, Mysore; Keśava Temple, Somnathpur, and in many other temples and palaces all over India.

Interestingly, Ammā, Sat-guru Śrī Mātā Amritānandamayī Devī, also chose a scene from Mahabharata as the primary sculpture in the Kālī temple at Her Āśram in Amṛtapuri. This is a depiction of Arjuna in a chariot with Bhagavan Set Kṛṣṇa as a charioteer, in a charging mode. Ammā might be symbolising the 'rejuvenated Arjuna who fights to re-establish Dharma'. And through this sculpture, Ammā might be requesting us to do the same.

Conclusion

Everything we discussed now is just the tip of the iceberg. There are plenty more spheres of existence where this grand Itihasa has demonstrated its stupendous impact. Names of people and places, influence on language, ethics, and an endless list of things. Undoubtedly, this Itihasa has seeped into the psyche of the Indian subcontinent. The more we learn about Mahābhārata, the more we perceive the depth of impact. Even in portraying characters and their behaviours, we would perhaps find a close similarity to those living around us. Only then that we turn absolutely speechless, bowing down to the genius of Mahārṣi Vyāsa. Only then do we truly appreciate the unbroken legacy of this monumental work in its entirety!

9*KINGSHIP AND POLITY ACUMEN

Every country has its own system of law and order. The way it works differs significantly from country to country. On the 6th of January 2021, a group of protesters marched towards the Capitol in the US, leading to a riot that killed five and injured hundreds [1]. On 26th January 2021, mobs hijacked the Republic Day Tractor Parade in India, stormed into the Red Fort and hoisted their flag [2]. Both these incidents show us an attitude of Adharma, disregard for the law and failure of state policies. What can governments do when they come across such crises? Will it help if they redefine policies of governance, maybe a proper reconstruction of ideas and rules related to state administration?

Are you wondering what all this has to do with Mahābhārata? Anything related to the four Puruṣārthas, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Mokṣa can be found in Mahābhārata. This grand Itihāsa offers solutions to all such concerns. धर्मे चार्थे च कामे च मोक्षे च भरतर्षभ यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यत्रेहास्ति न तत्कचित्

dharma carthe ca kame ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha yadihāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tatkvacit

"Whatever is found in Mahābhārata about Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Mokṣa, maybe found anywhere else.

ba But, of these whatever is not in this Itihāsa, cannot be found elsewhere."

Mahābhārata 01.56.33

bo

Let us look for laws and policies from Mahābhārata, worth emulating today. The module explores why ideas on governance suggested by Mahābhārata need to be taken up today. Finally, we examine the practicality of these ideas for

Strategic Lessons from Mahabharata

The Analogy of the Ideal Republic

If one needs the details of what a just state is like, then better might embody great virtues like wisdom and justice. Bhishma try to understand Bhishma's ideas. He explains how a state embarks on a long exposition about the ideal republic. He sets forth this idea,

नैव राज्यं न राजासीन्न दण्डो न च दाण्डिकः धर्मेणैव प्रजाः सर्वा रक्षन्ति च परस्परम्

naiva rājyam dandikah na rājāsinna dando na ca dharmeṇaiva prajāḥ sarvā raksanti ca parasparam

Mahābhārata 12.59.14

This is part of a conversation between Bhishma and Yudhisthira from Santi Parva. It means, "There is no kingdom nor any king, no lawbreaker nor any magistrate to administer a penalty to the wrongdoer. People protect each other by virtue of Dharma." What a venerable thought! Here Bhīṣma stresses one thing - holding on to Dharma. Within Mahābhārata Dharma is defined as,

धारणाद्धर्म इत्याहुर्धर्मेण विधृताः प्रजाः

dhāraṇāddharma ityāhurdharmeṇa vidhṛtāḥ prajāḥ

Mahābhārata 12.110.11

The word 'Dharma' is derived from the root word 'dhr- dhārane', which means to uphold. When people do the right thing and hold on to righteousness, a stable society is formed. In this manner, anything that holds people together as they are, is defined as Dharma. If all the country adhere to Dharma, then we have a healthy and progressive society there. The validity of this notion b Bhishma is eminent even today. There is a pressing need to impart such noble thoughts to ensure that a country, or the world at large, can move forward and become a prosperous and truly progressive society. sof

The conversation continued and Yudhisthira asked, "O King! How can a kingdom be protected? How can a won over?" Bhishma replied, "One must appoint a headman for every village, then one for ten villages, one for twenty, one for one hundred, and one for one thousand. The headman protects the village, ascertains any problems the village faces, and reports everything about the villagers to the supervisor of ten, who reports to the supervisor of twenty" [3]. A faithful supervisor will implement all the instructions given by the head of state. kingdom be

Bhīṣma then emphasizes the need to appoint spies. "He must appoint spies to travel throughout the Earth. Let them find out if my policy is sound and whether my conduct is praised. Do they like me in the countryside and what is my reputation in the kingdom?" [3]. This is still relevant today. Every country needs trustworthy spies who report to the head directly, as detailed precisely in Mahābhārata.

In the Sabha Parva, the conversation between Maharṣi Nārada and Yudhisthira also reveals a lot. Maharṣi asks, "Do you use groups of three spies, who do not know one another, find out about the eighteen tirthas on the other side and the fifteen on your own territory?" The tirthas mentioned here means ministries a bureau headed by a minister. The hint here is to deploy three mutually unknown ste. The collect details from eighteen categories of people on the other side and fifteen categories of people on their own the The eighteen categories of people to be monitored on the opposite side include the Minister, Chief Priests, Head of Judiciary, Head of Treasury, Head of the City, etc." [4].

Mahābhārata's Economic Thought

Does Mahābhārata offer insights into how well an economy can be managed? An emphatic Yes! In the conversation between Bhīṣma and Yudhishthira in Santi Parva, Bhīṣma instructs in detail regarding the economy and collection of taxes. "Every town will have one Supervisor. He must check the sales, purchases, expenses, shops, and routes of traders, impose taxes, and act to ensure their 'yoga and kṣema' (prosperity). He must glance towards the production and expenses of artisans, to ensure that they have a good living and the craft flourishes. The taxes must be commensurate."

This instruction in Mahābhārata proposes the need to connect the history of Indian economic thought with Itihāsas. Among all the myriad characters in the Itihāsa, it was Bhīṣma and Narada who imparted the wisdom of kingship and polity in Yudhishthira. There is much more in Mahābhārata, about economic well-being, that is presented in a dialogue. In the Sabha Parva, Maharṣi Narada checks how well Yudhishthira was spending his wealth. Maharṣi asked, "Is your wealth spent properly?". He also asked, "Do you pay wages to your soldiers in advance? O' scorcher of enemies! Do you distribute riches from the enemy kingdom among the chiefs of your army, in accordance with what they deserve?"

Maharṣi Narada posed some more questions to the King. "Do you examine a work and praise the creator? Do you honour good ones among good people?" Here Maharṣi wishes that the King award people with gifts of wealth according to their efforts. By now, we should feel proud while quoting about economic well-being from Mahābhārata, rather than from Milton Friedman or Simon Kuznets.

The Nature of Jurisdiction

In the Santi Parva, as the conversation between Bhīṣma and Yudhishthira continues, insights into justice and the welfare of subjects are revealed at great length. He said, "A King who desires Dharma should rule so that he is engaged in the welfare of his subjects and considers the time, the place, and the strength. Since he thinks of welfare for them and his own self, the King should ensure that Dharma prevails in the kingdom in every way. He must milk the kingdom like a bee sucks honey without damaging the flower and flies away. He must milk the cow bearing the calf in mind, without causing damage to the udders."

Bhīṣma even gives practical advice that it is extremely difficult for a King to behave similarly towards all men. He warns Yudhishthira that, "Drinking houses, prostitutes, pimps, gamblers and others who are like them must all be controlled. They can cause injury to the kingdom." This warning is very much relevant even today, where we see mob violence and vandalism around the globe, initiated by paid or misled individuals, and those who live off agitations.

In a famous yet undelivered speech, Macaulay says he has not seen beggars in India [5]. Macaulay may not have said this. But the mighty Bhīṣma insisted that Yudhisthira not allow anyone to beg for a living in his kingdom. He says, "Unless there is a disaster, no one should ever beg. However, if there is a disaster, one can beg from others. Compassionate people who wish to show pity can then follow Dharma and give. But in general, there should not be any beggars in the kingdom."

This elaborate and extensive dialogue between Bhīṣma and Yudhisthira helps us understand much about how well a country can be governed. India has a long history of kings and political leaders taking cues on governance from great sages and ṛṣis. From Cāṇakya to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa, from Samarth Ramdās to Thāthāchariar, from Vidyāranya Swami to Mātā Amritānandamayī Devī all of them have given valuable advice to different rulers. For instance, after meeting Mātā Amritānandamayī Devī, Amma, former Indian president Dr. APJ Abdul Kālām said, "The message I get from Amma is to Give. Go on giving. You can give. It is not only money. You can share knowledge. You can remove the pain. And you can even go to the person who is suffering." Misplaced Compassion
Iltagarjan An important aspect of Mahabharata still relevant for

national security is 'misplaced compassion'. In the name of compassion and high moral standards, the government has given pardons and relaxation on several occasions where it required strict actions instead. Lord Kṛṣṇa revealed this attitude towards adharmic / asura forces during Karṇa's final battle with Arjuna.

Karṇa's chariot gets stuck in the sand. He tries to pull it out whilst battling with Arjuna but in vain. Finally, he decides to seek time to pull out the chariot wheel. He hails Arjuna, a man of Dharma, to cease his Adharma of fighting a soldier on the ground from a chariot. As Arjuna begins to lower his weapon, Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa intervenes, "Oh Radheya! Now you remember Dharma!" Bhagavān then reminded Karṇa of his adharmic deeds, especially with Draupadī and Abhimanyu. This served as a reminder to Arjuna too. He raised his Gandivā yet again and continued fighting with Karṇa.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa also intervened during the Gadāyuddha between Bhīma and Duryodhana, and via Arjuna, signals to Bhīma to kill Duryodhana by hitting him in the thighs. Bhīma follows the same and instantly, the warrior Duryodhana is brought down. This seemingly adharmic act makes Balarama and others furious and they pick an argument with Bhīma and Yudhisthira. However, Bhagavān explains his part here in detail. For him, Duryodhana was the embodiment of adharma and there is no reason not to use adharma to kill him. Not only this, Sri Kṛṣṇa extends this theory to previous attacks on Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Bhūriśravas and defends the Pandavas for killing them. One important point to note here is that Kṛṣṇa is not advocating adharmic methods in all battles, but uses them as a last resort to kill enemies who have resorted to adharmic methods. This tactic was lost to our civilisational memory and the examples of Prithviraj Chauhan's encounter with Muhammed Ghori and more recently, the 1962 episode with China are grave reminders of this fact. This policy towards adharmic/asuric forces practised by Kṛṣṇa has a lesson for Indian national security policymakers. Until recently, specifically until the Bālākot strikes and Galvan incident, the border management of India always suffered from 'misplaced compassion'. To suppress the increasing number of internal and external enemies, India has to practice this policy of Kṛṣṇa with much more vigour.

Finally, Mahābhārata has a piece of advice to the head of the state, the modern equivalent to a king or monarch. Hidden in one of the lesser-known episodes of Mahabharata, the Janaka Brāhmaṇa Samvada of Anugīta Parva of Aśvamedhika Parva, Kṛṣṇa narrates the story of King Janaka to Arjuna. Let us listen to the conversation between King Janaka and the Brāhmaṇa. As a punishment for the crime committed by a Brāhmaṇa, King Janaka asked him to leave his country and live elsewhere. Now the Brahmana has a question, "Which kingdom is under your subjugation? If I know this, I can live in another king's country." This makes the king thoughtful and after contemplating for a while, the king permits the Brahmana to stay wherever he wishes. On contemplating, the King understood that the nation did not belong to him, nor to his forefathers. He said that he has conquered the five senses, and mind and renounced Mamatā (attachment). Having controlled the mind, the king performed actions only for the benefit of others. At this point in the story, the Brahmana reveals that he is Dharmarāja who has come in disguise to test the king. Dharmarāja says,

त्वमस्य ब्रह्मलाभस्य दुर्वारस्यानिवर्तिनः । सत्त्वेनेमिनिरुद्धस्य चक्रस्यैकः प्रवर्तकः ॥

tvamasya brahmalābhasya durvārasyānivartinaḥ | sattvaneminiruddhasya cakrasyaikāḥ pravartakaḥ
||

Mahābhārata 14.32.25

"Only such a king, who renounced his Mamatā and works for the benefit of others, is suitable for controlling the dharma cakra in the universe, whose spokes are of Sattva Guṇas and whose purpose is Brahma Prāpti." Here, Dharmarāja narrates that a king, by virtue of his governance, may attain Brahma Pada. What a glorious thought this is. Governance as a medium of salvation. This attitude of kings, if practised by our national leaders, will surely make India, a Viśvaguru again in all domains.

To conclude, the earlier instance explains that we Indians should take advantage of the insights and lessons from Mahābhārata for individual and national progress. For that, they must have exposure to the practical aspects of their lessons. It is said in Mahabharata that,

कालो वा कारणं राज्ञो राजा वा कालकारणम् इति ते संशयो मा भूद्राजा कालस्य कारणम्

kālo vā kāraṇam rājño rājā vā kālakāraṇam iti te saṁśayo mā bhūdrājā kālasya kāraṇam

Mahabharata 12.70.06

Here, Bhīṣma advises Yudhisthira that "You should not entertain any doubt about whether Time is instrumental in the creation of a king or the king responsible for the present day (Time). The king causes the present situation (Time)." [translation by Bibek Debroy, Mahābhārata].

Yes, Kings create the destiny of the nation. And in a democracy, we, the people, create kings and are solely responsible for the creation of a new India. Just like a firm, ruling a nation also demands certain strategic approaches to various cultures.

8*KARNA: THE MAESTRO WHO WENT WIDE OF THE MARK

Karna has been one of the most debated characters in Mahābhārata. There are different versions of his story; hence, an overall understanding of his character has become vague. Literary works like Bhāsā's Karnabhāram, Mṛtyunjaya by Śivaji Sawanth and other writers and scholars, "piece together from segments" where Karna becomes the main character (Hiltebeitel, 2011, p.484). There are a lot of explanations justifying Karna's fall from dhārmic ethics and principles, to unrighteousness and evil. Those who side with Karṇa claim his superiority over Arjuna in instances where the latter failed to resist the Nāgāstra on the seventeenth day of the Kuruksetra battle (and Kṛṣṇa saving Arjuna). The fact is that in a war, even the mightiest warrior will have their moments of failure and Karṇa cannot be labelled as superior because of this. After all, he was not the only warrior who caught Arjuna off-guard. The valiant Bhagadatta also did it Karna's defeat at the hands of Bhima, Satyaki, Abhimanyu and Citrasena must be pondered over before proclaiming his glory. This chapter will further throw light on certain overlooked and misstated actions of Karṇa in Mahābhārata.

The Birth of Karṇa

According to Mahābhārata, King Śūrasena of Yadava dynasty, had a beautiful young daughter named Prta (later called Kunti). Once, Rṣi Durvāsā visited the king for a prolonged stay at his palace as a guest. Śūrasena asked Prta to ensure that Durvāsā's stay was comfortable. Delighted with his stay and her assiduous services, Durvāsā thanked her and gave her a mantra, which would allow her to invoke any deity to provide her with a child. Being young and curious, Prīta tried to check whether the mantra would actually work. As the sun rose the next day, she initiated the mantra and invoked the Sūrya Deva. He came bejewelled with a golden glow, adorning a breastplate, and blessed her with her first son. Prta was confused, remorseful, and worried about having a baby out of wedlock. She put the newborn baby in a basket and set it afloat in the river Aśvanadī near the palace.

The basket reached the river Carmanvatī, and subsequently the Ganges River and finally reached the kingdom of Anga (ancient Bengal). There, it was found by Radha, a charioteer's wife. She took the baby to her husband, Adhīratā Nandanā.

They named him Vasuṣeṇa and decided to raise him as their own child. Later, he received names like Karṇa, Radheya and Vaikarta too. There are several stories behind the name 'Karna'. During the Pandavas' twelfth year of exile, Lord Indra came to Karna (formerly known as Vasusena) to ask for his Kavaca-Kundala (Armour and earrings that were part of his body right from birth). He got the name Vaikarta and Karṇa as he cut off the Kavaca from his body and the Kundala from his ears. The origin

of the words Karṇa and Vaikarta comes from Karna (करण) and kṛti (कृती) respectively, which means cutting off,

Karṇa: A Life Invested in Vexation

Karna's life has been a perpetual attempt to outshine and defeat Arjuna. He was blinded by jealousy and an inferiority complex towards Arjuna's prowess. He spent his student days acquiring auspicious weapons and rare skills to become invincible and superior to Arjuna. Karṇa sought the help of Parasurama - the guru of Dronacarya - to excel Arjuna in archery. The story of Droṇa refusing Karṇa as a student is gravely misconstrued. He only refused to give Karṇa the Brahmastra since it was already given to Arjuna and Aśvatthāmā. Karṇa needed a superior weapon to excel over Arjuna. He approached Paraśurāma disguised as a Brahmaṇa because Paraśurāma had taken a vow not to teach archery to Kṣatriyas. He succeeded in deceiving Paraśurāma initially, but Paraśurāma eventually found out the truth and he cursed Karna, because of which he couldn't use the knowledge he gained to save himself in war.

Droṇa held a tournament in Hastinapura after his students graduated, where his disciples exhibited their dexterity and mastery of various skills. Just as Arjuna displayed his preeminent archery skills, Karṇa stepped forward and surpassed all of Arjuna's accomplishments. Being an uninvited participant in the ceremony, it is evident that his sole intention was to transcend Arjuna's reputation. He also wanted to stir a battle with Arjuna which was inappropriate on that occasion. This tendency stayed with him throughout his life. The only person impressed by this was Duryodhana, who subsequently crowned Karṇa as the King of Anga, sealing a strong alliance against Pandavas.

Karṇa and Duryodhana: A bond that unleashed viciousness in each other

Karna's friendship with Duryodhana is a much-discussed alliance in Mahābhārata. Karṇa was indebted to Duryodhana for elevating him from a charioteer's son to the King of Anga. But their friendship wasn't based purely on commitment and brotherhood. It was a means for both of them to attain their individual goals. In a conversation with Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Karna reveals that it is not his moral obligation to Duryodhana but rather his own will to destroy Arjuna and maintain his power, that made him stay with the Kauravas. Karṇa says,

"In consequence also of my connection with Duryodhana of Dhṛtarāstra's race, I have, O Kṛṣṇa, enjoyed sovereignty for thirteen years, without a thorn in my side..... Obtaining me, O Kṛṣṇa, Duryodhana hath, O thou of Vṛishni's race, made this preparation for an armed encounter and provoked hostilities with the sons of Pandu. And it is for this, O Acyuta, that in the battle (that will ensue), I, O Kṛṣṇa, have been chosen as the great antagonist of Arjuna to advance against him in single combat." [KM Ganguly's translation]

Karṇa associated with Duryodhana's evil schemes against Pandavas not out of compulsion but out of his resentment towards Arjuna. He prepared the roadmap for every criminal act done against the Pandavas including their attempt to murder them in Vana Parva. He was also responsible for the unfortunate course of events in the Game of Dice. It was Karṇa who instructed Duhṣāsan to disrobe Draupadi. In the Kurukṣetra war, when he realised that it was not possible to defeat Abhimanyu one-on-one, it was Karṇa's idea to attack and kill Abhimanyu together inside the Cakravyuha Śrī Kṛṣṇa again accounts all this in Karṇa's final battle with Arjuna.

Amidst this, there is more that directly questions Karṇa's friendship with Duryodhana. Even though they joined hands to oppose the Pandavas, Karṇa betrayed and ditched Duryodhana during several crucial situations. For instance, when Karṇa and Kauravas were attacked by Gandharva Ci-trasena, Karṇa fled from the battlefield leaving Duryodhana high and dry. This incident shows not only his lack of ethical and moral principles as a warrior, but also his lack of faithfulness in his friendship with Duryodhana. Finally, it was Yudhishthira who came to Duryodhana's rescue.

Similarly, in Virāṭa Parva, Karṇa suspects that the Pandavas were living in disguise with King Virāṭa during their ordained 'Ajñātavasam' (living incognito). They stole herds of cows belonging to Virāṭa's kingdom in an attempt to lure the king to war. They expected Arjuna to come out and fight them on behalf of King Virāṭa. Karṇa vowed to Duryodhana over his sword that he would kill Arjuna in the war. But Arjuna who was in the guise of the transgender Brhannala, squarely defeated Karṇa and Duryodhana. Unable to tolerate the humiliation, Duryodhana decided to end his life over a spread of darbha grass while Karṇa deserted the battle, again. While Duryodhana was confident that he could defeat Bhima himself, he needed a good archer to counter Arjuna. That is where Karṇa came in handy for him. Karṇa also participated in many scheming acts against Pandavas out of his own will. Hence, the friendship between Karṇa and Duryodhana was purely for mutual benefit. The praise for Karṇa's commitment to his friendship is unsubstantial.

Karṇa's Death: Dharma or Adharma?

Another misstated account exalting Karṇa as a tragic hero is that of Arjuna killing him when he was unarmed. Karṇa's death was the result of his own evil karma. When Śrī Kṛṣṇa saw Dharma failing in his actions, he approached Karṇa and said;

"You are the eldest son of Queen Kunti. You are supposed to fight on the side of Dharma. Don't stick with the side for the sake of benefits you get. It is Dharma that should become victorious. Only then people will be victorious. You should not befriend adharma just for the sake of selfish desires. Protecting the world is a greater goal. Please come. Please come."

Karṇa refused to go with him; hence Kṛṣṇa felt no remorse when Karṇa was killed. He gave him a chance to change his fate and the rest was up to him. Adding to all of these, Karṇa's character becomes transparent in the small things he did as well. Once, he killed a Brahmin's calf for eating up

flowers from his garden. The brahmin cursed him, "The wheels of your chariot would be dragged in the soil during the time of the war". During the Kurukṣetra war, Karṇa took all the opportunities to destroy Arjuna. But in that fateful battle with Arjuna, the wheel of his chariot got stuck in the soil as the Brahmin had cursed.

Karṇa ends up in front of Arjuna, without weapons, trying to pull out his chariot from the sand. And Karṇa requests Arjuna for Dharma. The same Karṇa who sat high and mighty, much before, denying Dharma to Arjuna's wife Draupadi. The same Karṇa who sat in his chariot denying Dharma to Abhimanyu in the ground. For all he did, he ended up just like Draupadi and Abhimanyu, in the low ground, asking for Dharma, that too to his arch rival Arjuna.

He asked him, "O Arjuna, you are a pious man. Please allow me time to pull out the wheels of my chariot". But it was Śrī Kṛṣṇa who responded. His response was a reminder to Karṇa that he cannot seek the protection of Dharma as Karṇa had violated and denied dharma throughout his life. This reminder to Karṇa, also reminded Arjuna of all the adharma that Karna had done in the past. Arjuna then continued to battle Karna, and finally killed him in the battlefield.

Amma says, "Dharma is the root principle of Life. Our conscience should always be like a well-balanced needle on the measuring scale". Even though Karṇa acquired superior knowledge and skills, he failed to keep this balance and hence perished. There are various opinions on the merits of Karna's character. Lack of rational thinking led him to adharma. His to forgive or compromise resulted in his own demise. Karna's attitude towards elders, including profound unwillingness towards teachers like Drona, Bhishma and Salya, shows that despite one's might, all endeavours become fruitful only with the blessings of our elders and the grace of God. Karna was disillusioned throughout his life, being dragged into a maze of betrayal by his mother, teacher and society. He failed to use the knowledge he had acquired with great effort at the right moment. He couldn't contain and control his envy and hatred towards Arjuna. He desired to prove himself better than Arjuna on the battlefield but had to lose his own life. He worked very hard only to pay for it with his life to surpass someone else and not to improve himself for the sake of his own happiness. Karna embodies the amalgamation of right and wrong, good and bad in human nature. Nevertheless, as Hildebrandt points out "[...] Karṇa inspires admiration, affection, and a wish for things to have gone otherwise, as is ultimately expressed by Kunti and Yudhishthira." In spite of his flaws, Karna's inherent goodness makes him an appealing character who captures the audience's attention even today (quoted in Kohler, 2014, p.35)

12*STRATEGICAL SILHOUETTE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY PEACE MISSION

Did you know that Indian Naval Ships (INS) dock at tactically important locations whenever some chief personnel of our Nation is engaged in a diplomatic conversation with another from an unfriendly country? You might be wondering what this has to do with Mahābhārata. We will surely come back to this, but later.

Overture to the Peace Mission

As a prelude, let us briefly navigate through the immediate circumstances that led to this peace mission. Losing the bet to the deceitful games of Śakuni, the five Pandavas and their wife Draupadi lived in the forest for twelve years facing severe hardships and the thirteenth year incognito at the

kingdom of Virāṭa. Having completed the stipulated time of thirteen years in exile, now the Pandavas could claim back their rightful share of the kingdom. The Udyoga Parva of Mahābhārata starts here. In Samskr̥tan, Udyoga means effort or active preparation. Here we could see a very strenuous effort towards 'peace' as well as preparations for 'war', hence the befitting word choice 'Udyoga' Parva by the Sage author. We see war preparations and simultaneously peace options being explored here, in this Parva of the Itihasa.

Back to the story, a well-learned house priest of the Pāñcala king Drupada is sent as the first delegate to Hastinapura to talk peace. In the meantime, anticipating that the wicked Duryodhana would have no intention to give back the kingdom, the Pandavas raised an army of seven Akṣauhini. An Akṣauhini is a unit of battle formation consisting of a huge number of chariots, horses, elephants, cavalries, and infantries in particular ratios. Learning about this proactive measure through his spies, Duryodhana also starts gathering his side of the army and raises eleven Akṣauhini.

The Brahmin Purohita messenger reaches Hastināpura and politely demands back half the kingdom to Pandavas as it was rightfully theirs. Bhīṣma supports him but Karṇa ridicules stating that not even one-fourth of the kingdom will be given back, leave alone half. As not being able to arrive at any decision, king Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends Sañjaya to the Pandavas as the next step towards negotiation.

Sanjaya reaches the Pandava camp and conveys that Dhṛtarāṣṭra desires peace and not war. Dharmaputra Yudhisthira echoes back that they, too, consider peace superior, and if their kingdom at Indraprastha could be returned, they are willing to pardon every single suffering that they have undergone to date due to the misdoings of the Kauravas. Slipping off from that demand, Sañjaya rather sermonizes Pandavas on the evil effects of war. "Can happiness be gained with possessions obtained through war? Even if you do not get back your kingdom, you should not abandon the supreme path of Dharma" etc.

Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa intervenes in the conversation and recounts all the misconduct of Kauravas towards Pandavas, including the disrobing of Draupadi in the court. He expresses that he still desires peace, and would visit the Kauravas to settle matters before a disaster happens. Sañjaya goes back to Hastinapura.

After that, Kṛṣṇa consults all five brothers and their wife Draupadi to know about their views and get prepared to embark on this peace mission to Hastinapura. Yudhisthira points out that this mission would mostly be a futile exercise since unprincipled Duryodhana will have no honest wish to return the places they acquired.

The wise Pandava reckons that Duryodhana might even try to harm Śrī Kṛṣṇa during this visit. Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa agrees that he too understands that this journey to establish peace shall mostly be fruitless, but still, an effort has to be made in all ways to attempt peace before massive destruction happens. Also, he reveals his invincible strength announcing that if Duryodhana heedlessly tries to

capture him, he will fight and burn everything to the ground. Bhagavan Kṛṣṇa undertakes his journey with his chariot equipped with weapons and also ten Maharathis and a thousand soldiers accompanying him.

Learning about Śrī Kṛṣṇa's arrival, Dhṛtarāṣṭra arranges for a grand welcome. He keeps many ornamented citadels ready with all riches en route for Kṛṣṇa to rest but all these lavishing gifts were only a pretense to win him over! Knower of all hearts, the Yadava king wilfully brushed aside all these arrangements and went directly to Hastinapura.

Duryodhana had made splendid arrangements for Kṛṣṇa's stay but Kṛṣṇa did not accept his hospitality and went to the house of Vidura for his stay. Vidura was overwhelmed by this singular honour.

The next morning, Vidura expresses the same concern to Kṛṣṇa that this mission was not likely to succeed since Duryodhana was lost to all good counsel.

Duryodhana was just eager for war since he thought that with Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kripa, and Karṇa on his side, the war results would be in his favour. Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa patiently replies that he knows what the Kauravas think.

"I know what effect my words will have on them. Still, I want to save them from imminent death. They all are certain to die in the war. I shall win eternal fame if I can save them through my efforts. Even if I am not unsuccessful, I shall have the consolation that I have done my best efforts. I see the destruction of the Kauravas and I am keen to avoid that. I also want to tell everyone in the court about the great injustice done to the Pandavas. War is inevitable, but let everyone know who is responsible for it."

Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the court of Kauravas

Next-Day in the royal court, Kṛṣṇa addressed King Dhṛtarāṣṭra stating that the purpose of his visit to Hastināpura is to stop the war by any means. This will avoid an unnecessary massacre of the eighteen Akṣauhini army, Mahārathīs, other warriors, and heroes.

Kṛṣṇa points out the injustice that has been done to the Pandavas. He exclaimed that if the Kauravas and the Pandavas lived together peacefully, they would have no rival in the world to challenge the house of the Kurus.

Some thoughtful sentences are worth mentioning: " I see all the kings gathered here in this august assembly, going into the jaws of death. Only you are capable of preventing it! Save the world from destruction and let your sons and the Pandavas live peacefully. Don't let the opportunity slip out of your hands. Therefore, it is my humble request to you, that the kingdom of the Pandavas should be returned to them."

Listening to this, Dhṛtarāṣṭra just whines that he is powerless since his sons don't listen to him! He asks Kṛṣṇa to talk and convince Duryodhana and Karna since even Bhīṣma and Vidura cannot make them see the right path. Kṛṣṇa tries that too by praising Duryodhana, "You are a descendant of a very great family. You are endowed with great wealth and many good qualities. I am not able to understand your unjust treatment of your cousins, Pandavas. My dear Duryodhana, you should choose the path that may bring happiness to your mother, father, elders, and your teachers. You can make them happy by following the path of the truth and righteousness only."

Bhīṣma, Drona, and Vidura also approve of what Kṛṣṇa had said but on hearing such unpalatable advice from Kṛṣṇa, Duryodhana alleges that Kṛṣṇa is partial towards the Pandavas. He proudly boasts that he is ready to face the war and will not give them half the kingdom or five villages or even that much land that the point of a sharp needle can hold.

Though Kṛṣṇa gets angry at the thoughtless words of Duryodhana, he makes another try as well and reaffirms all unrighteous actions done earlier, like plotting to burn Pandavas in a wax palace, deceitful gambling, trying to disrobe Draupadi, insulting words of Duhāśana and Karna, etc.

Kṛṣṇa holds everybody in that assembly responsible for such a situation by pampering and not correcting Duryodhana. Kṛṣṇa says, "A person may be abandoned for the sake of a family, a family may be sacrificed for the sake of a village, the village may be sacrificed for the sake of a Nation. For the sake of one's soul, the entire world may be forsaken." Duryodhana walks out of the assembly hall full of rage along with his brother Duḥśāna.

Kṛṣṇa continued, "Does it not happen occasionally that a village is abandoned so that the country may be saved? I am afraid you will have to sacrifice Duryodhana if you want to save your race. That is the only way." [2] Aal busz

Now Dhṛtarāṣṭra gave it another whirl by calling Gandhārī thinking perhaps Duryodhana may listen to his mother. Still, Duryodhana remains rock-ribbed, disregards his mother's words, and leaves the assembly hall without speaking.

Meanwhile, outside, Duryodhana, Duḥśāna, Karṇa, and Śakuni secretly conspire among themselves to capture and imprison Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Sātyaki, who accompanied Madhava, was very alert.

He understood the evil plan of the wicked four and immediately alerted their soldiers at the main gate to get ready for a battle ambush and gave a hint of the scheme to Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

Then he revealed it to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura also, laughingly. They were taken aback, and at the command of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura brings Duryodhana and his brothers back to the assembly. Both Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura again described the greatness of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and advised him to take the path of virtue.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa scoffs at Duryodhana for his ignorance in trying to seize him saying that Duryodhana out of his folly considers Kṛṣṇa as a single person, while he is everything in the universe. Kṛṣṇa laughs out loud and all Gods and all Suns and everything emerge from him, in his Viśvarūpa.

His radiant form had many arms that carried many weapons. Except for Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Vidura, Sanjaya, and other Rsis, everybody got frightened at this terrible form and closed their eyes. Shortly after, Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa took permission from Rsis and left the court to meet his paternal aunt Kuntī.

Insights and Analysis of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's peace mission

This episode might seem trivial, but it's not! Comprehending this part is decisive in obtaining a holistic and unambiguous understanding of the Itihāsa. Let us have a careful glance through the event and take home a few of our learnings.

1. The first and foremost thing to appreciate is the 'spare no effort' attempt of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to establish peace amongst the cousin brothers. Sañjaya's message from Dhṛtarāṣṭra was clear that they (Kauravas) do not want a war to happen but as well they have the least intention to give back any part of the empire.

As Śrī Kṛṣṇa prepares to go as a Pandava messenger, Yudhisthira ponders over the utility of such a mission. He believes that the wicked Duryodhana will not give back any land no matter who goes for the negotiation. When that is the case, why should Kṛṣṇa take up this mission? Later, this same concern is shared by the Dharmic icon Vidura too.

Bhagavān replies to both of them that he too knows the certainty that Duryodhana won't lend an ear to his peace talk nor would he give back the kingdom share; nevertheless, before proceeding to a war that shall bring about colossal damage to both sides, it would be ideal to try for a peaceful resolution. At least this act would leave a message to our future generations that we tried our best for peace.

Secondly, if we observe the conversation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the court of the Kauravas, we can see him trying in all ways to avoid the war. This audacious step taken by Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa is very firm evidence against the misrepresentation of him as one who sought war and instigated Arjuna towards it.

Completely wrong! In all his honesty, he cared for both sides and dedicated himself to achieving peace even when knowing the probable chances for the peace attempt to work out was next to nothing!

2. Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa is rightly warned by Yudhisthira in a prior conversation to his peace mission, that Duryodhana is wickedness personified and that he would even go to the extent of harming the messenger, Kṛṣṇa.

Bhagavān acknowledges the concern and says that if the Kauravas try such a foolish experiment, it will bring destruction to them. The same expected untoward attempt happens and we all know that Śrī Kṛṣṇa exhibited his Viśvarūpa (all-encompassing form). Keeping aside this Godly spectacle, we could even find a political strategy hidden beneath.

There are ten Mahārathis and thousand soldiers travel along with Kṛṣṇa when he goes on the peace mission. And Mahābhārata particularly mentions that Kṛṣṇa has his chariot fully equipped with arms if in case required. You will be surprised to learn that a Mahārathi is a warrior who can fight over seven lakh warriors simultaneously.

Karṇa, Bhīṣma, Rāvana, Abhimanyu, Drona, Kumbhakarṇa, etc. were Mahārathis. You will be even more surprised to learn that, of the ten Mahārathīs who accompany Śrī Kṛṣṇa, one is the chief army general Satyaki who defeats even Karṇa in the Kurukṣetra war.

Satyaki is present there with Kṛṣṇa throughout the peace talks. He is always alert and prepares his army outside when he senses Duryodhana might try to capture Kṛṣṇa.

Such political precautionary measures were pursued during this negotiation meeting. As mentioned in the introduction, even today, Indian Naval Ships are docked at strategic locations whenever some chief personnel of our Nation is engaged in a diplomatic conversation with another from an unfriendly country.

Thousands of years have passed since the Mahabharata, but still, there are many examples of similar ideals, practices, and strategies practised today! [3] We can only bow down humbly to the great visionary Maharṣi Vyāsa in wonderment.³ As the peace mission concludes without any positive outcome, Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra,

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त्यजेत्कुलार्थे पुरुषं ग्रामस्यार्थे कुलं त्यजेत् ग्रामं जनपदस्यार्थे आत्मार्थे पृथिवीं त्यजेत्

tyajetkulārthe puruṣam grāmasyārthe kulam tyajet grāmam janapadasyārthe ātmārthe pṛthivīm
tyajet

Mahābhārata 05.126.48

"A person may be abandoned for the sake of the family, a family may be sacrificed for the sake of a village, and a village may be sacrificed for the sake of a Nation. For the sake of one's soul, the entire world may be forsaken."

Family prevails over the individual; Village over family; Nation over Village; When the emptiness of worldly pleasures is comprehended through experience and wisdom, one may give them up.

Krsna is not the first person who advocates this idea in Mahābhārata. More than twice, the same sloka is recited in different instances, implying that the underlying idea could be a bedrock philosophy during Mahābhārata times.

A careful glance would show the essence of Indian Culture in this verse. The Dharmic view of a greater good allows one to denounce relatively minor things and the spiritual view of complete renunciation leads one to Divinity.

13*YĀJÑASENI: A WOMAN FROM FIRE

The emergence of powerful women is certainly one of the key features of the 21st century. In many parts of the world, women have come out of their confinements and have joined men at the forefront. We saw a sharing of leadership roles, with women proving themselves to be equally, if not more competent, to men in such roles. That said, though women have come out ebulliently in many forward-leaning societies, many women still latch on to their parents or partners for support and guidance. Though they may raise their voice for womanhood, they hide behind men's shirts, ascribing their chances for success to a definitive role of men in the path they take. As such, many women have yet to break out of their cocoons, even though they don't lack opportunity or security. Self-confidence seems to be the lacking ingredient

here. History has proven ample times that, without external opportunities and security, one needs self-confidence to push to the forefront and accomplish great deeds. Strong and confident women have been present in all spheres of our society, be it politics, arts, business, law and order, or defence. Self-confidence is indisputably the one key that unlocks this infinite potential in them. Amma says, "Though there are differences in outlook, approach, and activities of men and women, bound by time, place, and culture, courageous women have lived in every age. They have broken out

of the cages that were imposed on them. Rani Padmini, Hathi Rani, Mirabai, and Jhansi Rāni represent such valour and purity."

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Everyone should remember these icons and remember them constantly, to let it sink into their minds that there is infinite potential in women. There is a tradition that calls for just that and hails the memory of our heroes of ancient time

अहल्या द्रौपदी कुन्ती तारा मन्दोदरी तथा । पञ्च कन्याः स्मरेन्नित्यं महापातक नाशनम् ॥

ahalyā draupadī kuntī tārā mandodari tathā. pañca kanyāḥ smarennityam mahāpātaka nāśanam.

Ahalya, Draupadī, Kuntī, Tara and Mandodari. Invoking the memory of these five women every morning before dawn, protects one from great sins.

Let us inspire ourselves from the life of Draupadi and see why she is an inspiration for women today, why she is prātaḥ smaranīya (to be remembered in the morning).

In Aranya Parva, Satyabhāma asks Draupadi how she can keep the mighty personalities of the Pandavas in check and how they always look toward her and do her bidding. Draupadi's response here reveals her managerial capabilities.

She relates to Satyabhama her life routines, the hard work in the household, the responsibilities she manages, and the virtues she follows. She manages thousands of servants and knows each one by name, the work they do, and the garments they wore. She knew every fine detail about the king's revenue and expenditure. In this manner, she knew everything about the Pandavas.

She catered to each Pandava as advised by Maharṣi Nārada.

Once, Maharṣi visited the Pandavas at Khandavaprastha and gave his advice regarding their marriage. He told the Pandavās that Draupadi should live with one husband per year. Draupadi strictly followed this advice. When she is with one husband, she dedicates herself to him only and does not even think of the others. In this manner, she catered to each husband equally and upheld her pātivratyam (roughly means chastity in English). There is a popular misconceived notion of this polyandrous relationship the question of her pātivratyam. It is equally pertinent today as when Karṇā insulted her in the Kaurava court during the game of dice. Karṇā calls her a veśya (courtesan) unworthy of a queen's Dharma because she is wife to five husbands. But Draupadi's conduct with her husbands is not comparable in this manner. Draupadi upholds her pātivratyam to each husband, as advised by Maharṣi Narada. Karṇā may also be unaware that she did not choose to have five husbands. It was a Niyoga or destiny and divine will. She did not have a husband in her previous birth; hence she meditated on Bhagavān Parameswara. When Bhagavān offered her a boon, she asked for a husband with all qualities. But, she repeated this five times, out of overflowing desire and Bhagavān granted that she would have five worthy husbands. Thus, it was her niyoga to have five husbands.

Furthermore, if Karṇā was right about Draupadi, she would have left the Pandavas after the game of dice and joined Duryodhana to enjoy the pleasures of life and continued in Hastinapura. But, during the game of dice, when her husband bet on her and lost, she continued to hold on to the Dharma of a devoted wife. She did not leave the Pandavas for their deeds, but instead saved them all and continued her Dharma. Today, in addition to being an effective manager, there is a dire need to be able to balance between home and career. Chasing success in their careers, both women and men fall prey to a poorly managed home and compromise their family life. Here Draupadi's extraordinary managerial capacity is simply awe-inspiring. Is it not admirable that amidst all her tasks as Queen, she never went back on her responsibilities as a life partner, that too with five husbands?

Another astounding quality of Draupadi is her vipatti- dhairya, courage in crisis. This is a hard to obtain yet essential life skill. We often find ourselves dejected and depressed after a hard traumatic event. We get drenched in fear, horrified and unable to think clearly in such circumstances. It may be abuse, theft, robbery, or even a life-threatening experience. Draupadi had to deal with all these and more, many times over. Yet she did not lose herself in the moment or afterwards. She was not lost in depression or dejected enough to retire from life or move on with a grudge towards Bhagavān or life itself.

Be it when Jayadratha abducted her from their home in Kāmākhyā forest, or when Kīcaka approached her in King Virāta's palace, Draupadi did not shudder, nor was she miserable, dejected, or afraid. She did not bow down in shame or out of fear. When Jayadratha abducted her, she kept warning him about the strength and courage of her husband. She advised him to release her and urged him to beg for their forgiveness. In the case of Kīcaka, she had to face him alone in many situations. Even Queen Sudhesna, who With the help of the queen, Kicaka made Draupadi visit him in his quarters. He proposed to her again, and when she did not accept, tried to take her by force. Draupadi managed to escape the subjugation, but could not find protection or help in any way. Yet still, her confidence did not waver. When she had no choice left, Draupadi convinced Bhima to kill him, as Kicaka rightly deserved. The same vipatti-dhairya is reflected in the game of dice as well. Though she laments in the court when no one answers her, she holds it together, addressing the

court all the while, and finally manages to save the day and rescue her husbands. Such was the endless courage and confidence of Yajñaseni.

We must realise that this courage and confidence are there in each one of us, women and men. Amma says, "Women are not weak. Her natural compassion and sympathy have too often been misinterpreted as weakness." It is always left to us to take that decision, relinquish fear and stand tall in the face of dire situations. Amma tells the story of an eagle who thought it was a chicken. Once, by chance, a baby eagle found itself living amongst a brood of chicks. The mother hen raised it in the same way she raised her own offspring. Like the chicks, the young eagle grew up foraging the ground for worms. The eagle thought itself a mere chicken, ignorant of its ability to fly and soar into the air. One day, another eagle noticed this eagle fledgling with the chicks. When it was alone, the 'sky eagle' approached the 'chicken eagle' and brought it to a lake. The 'sky eagle' said, "My child, don't you know who you are? Here, look at me, and now look at your own reflection in the water. Like me, you too are an eagle with the ability to soar in the sky - not an earth-bound chicken." Gradually the eagle realised its strength, and then, without much delay, spread its wings and soared into the sky.

Amma says, "The vast sky is the eagle's birthright. In the same way, a woman has the potential to soar into the endless sky of strength and freedom. But before this freedom can become a reality, women must prepare themselves through steady effort. It is the thought that she is powerless and saddled by numerous limitations and weaknesses that inhibit her. She must first eliminate such thinking". Today, when the women of the world strive for empowerment, Draupadi is a true role model for self-growth. She is representative of how strong a presence women can be. During the game of dice, Draupadi stood at her most desperate self in the middle of the Kaurava court. When all hope died, she still did not give in. Instead, she closed her eyes and prayed to her dear Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Her faith and devotion were so strong and intense, that Bhagavān came to her aid and rescued her. Alongside her strong devotion, courage, and managerial capabilities, she had vast knowledge and wisdom on Dharma and the Śāstrās. When the Pandavas were leaving for the forest after the game of dice, the wise Vidura, who is Dharmadeva taken birth, told Yudhishthira, "Draupadi is dharmārthakuśalā dharmacāriṇī" meaning, "Draupadi always follows the path of Dharma and is skilled in the ways of Dharma and Artha".

What better validation is required when the God of Dharma himself extols the Dharmic wisdom of Draupadi? Draupadi's life is a lesson for men as well. It reveals how men should be and should not be. It reveals the shamelessness, naivety, and sheer lack of morals in a man who misbehaves with women, and what happens in the end to such men. men and women. A truly progressive society is said to be one where women are safe, where they are free, and where they flourish and prosper. All of us have a role to play if we are to make that progress. To that end, let us remember Draupadi Devi. Let us begin by invoking her memory every morning. And through her let us embrace Mahabharata all the more, to fulfil the purpose of life and living.

DEATH AND DEATHLESSNESS

Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad bestows upon us, a beautiful mantra that is chanted by millions, even now after thousands of years of its inception.

ॐ असतो मा सद्गमय । तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय । मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय ॥

Om Asato Maa Sadgamaya | Tamaso Maa Jyotir-Gamaya | Mrtyor-Maa Amrtam Gamaya |

In most simple terms, the meaning of the prayer would be, "Lead me from the asat to sat. Lead me from darkness to light. Lead me from death to immortality."

This is not a prayer imploring for worldly things like food, health, glory, fame or even heaven. This is a sincere admission by one, of his sense of limitedness and a heartfelt cry seeking assistance to transcend such limitedness. The third line, 'mṛtyormā amṛtam gamaya' means, 'Lead me from death to immortality'. It is a prayer to realize the truth that "I am deathless since I was never born. I am not the body, not the mind, and not the intellect, but the eternal, blissful consciousness that serves as the substratum of all creation." This is a journey of knowledge from what we have misunderstood to be ourselves to what truly is ourselves. A journey from Death to Deathlessness.

Mahābhārata conspicuously delineates this idea of the journey from death to deathlessness in the penultimate Parva 'Mahāprasthānika Parva'. 'Maha' means great and 'Prasthanam' means journey or departure (3). This Parva narrates the departure of the Pandavas for the Himalayas and their deaths, one after another.

Having ruled the kingdom for many years after the Kuruksetra war, the Pandavas decided to undertake the great departure. They instated Parīkṣit as the next King of the Kurus and Yudhishthira instructed that their funeral ceremonies be performed after the departure. A lot of jewels, horses, cattle, garments, etc., were given away to charity. Wearing just tree barks, the five Pandavas and Draupadi departed. This bore a striking resemblance to how they left the kingdom much earlier, after being defeated in the game of dice. Yudhishthira walked in front, followed by Bhīma. Arjuna came after him, followed by the twins in the right order, and then the beautiful Draupadi at the back. A dog later joined them as the seventh. Immersing in yoga, following the dharma of renunciation, they passed through many kingdoms and crossed many rivers and mountains. They saw Dwaraka flooded by the ocean when they travelled in the southwestern direction. All of them fasted and headed in the northern direction and saw the giant Himalayas. Suddenly Draupadi fell to the ground.

Bhīma was shocked seeing that and spoke to Dharmaraj Yudhisthira. "This princess never committed an act of adharma. O king! Why has Draupadi fallen down on the ground?" Yudhisthira replied, "O Bhima! She had a great partiality for Arjuna and she reaped the fruits of that." Having said this, the king who was Dharma's son didn't look back and kept walking. Very soon the intelligent Sahadeva also fell down. Bhīma again spoke to the king. "Sahadeva served all of us without any pride. Why has he fallen down?" Yudhisthira replied, "He thought that there was no one to equal him in wisdom. O Bhīma! It is because of that lapse that he has fallen down." They continued their journey leaving Sahadeva.

Next to fall was Nakula. Bhīma asked Dharmaputra very eagerly, "What has Nakula done for his collapse because he always had Dharma in his soul and he always adhered to it?" Yudhisthira thought but without stopping his walk, answered, "Nakula indeed possessed dharma in his soul and was supreme among all the intelligent ones. But he held a view that there was no one equalling his beauty. O Vrkodara, this led to his fall. Anything ordained for a person is bound to happen". The three of them continued to tread the mountains accompanied by the dog. In a short while, the und fell down helplessly. Bhima expressed his surprise, "I cannot even remember any falsehood that this great-souled cannots wilfully uttered. What is the transgression, as a result of which, he has fallen down on the ground like this?"

Yudhisthira said with a sigh, "Arjuna always said that he would burn down the enemy in a single day. Though he was proud of his valour, he wasn't able to accomplish that. He disrespected all the other valorous warriors. That is the reason why he has fallen down." They continued walking. Now it was Bhimasena himself who fell down. Before embracing death, lying on the ground he spoke to the elder brother, "O King, look at me, what is the reason I have fallen down? If you know, then tell me." Yudhisthira knew the answer to that too, he said "O Bhima you ate too much and you always boasted about your strength. You disrespected others. That is the reason you have fallen down on the ground." Having said this, the mighty-armed King proceeded without looking back. The dog alone followed him.

As he walked, Lord Indra arrived before him on a divine chariot and instructed Yudhisthira to ascend the chariot. Dharmaraja was overcome by grief having seen his brothers and wife fall down. So he requested Indra to take them also to Swarga, "O lord of the Gods! Without my brothers, I do not desire to go to heaven. Princess Draupadi was also delicate and deserved happiness. Let her also come with us." To this, Indra Deva replied that all of them had to cast aside their human bodies but reached the heavens while Yudhisthira could ascend to Swarga in this body itself and there was no reason to grieve. The surviving Pandava thoughtfully said, "O lord of past and present, this dog has devotedly followed me so far, so he should also be taken along with me. Because of compassion, this is my view." Indra wasn't so happy with that proposition and said, "O king! You will now obtain immortality, prosperity like mine, all kinds of great fame, and the happiness of Swarga Loka. Abandon this dog. There is no lack of compassion in this." However, Yudhisthira was stubborn in his view, "How can a noble person perform an ignoble act? I do not want prosperity that comes about by abandoning those who are devoted to me." Indra again tried to convince Dharmaputra that there was no lack of compassion in abandoning a dog. But Yudhisthira held firm and was even ready to

forsake heaven for this dog. At that point, the dog that had followed him changed its form into Dharma Deva himself. It was another test to check the dharmaniratattvam (steadfastness in Dharma) of the eldest Pandava. Having passed the test, the Pandava ascended the chariot which travelled swiftly to the heavens.

There are at least two significant lessons that are demonstrated in this beautiful episode. One is the boundless compassion of the eldest Pandava. His unbending concern and compassion for another being and the impeccable clarity of Dharma that earned him this immortality stature. But it is also important to mention the weaknesses that caused the others to fall along with the qualities that earned deathlessness to the eldest Pandava. Through this parva, Bhagavān Vyāsa demarcates between death and deathlessness. All the remaining Pandavas and their wife succumbed to death because of a simple three-letter word 'ego'. For one it was the ego of beauty while for another it was an ego of strength. One had favouritism, while one vaunted himself, and so on. Even though the Pandavas as protagonists of the Itihāsa are always shown in the light of Dharma, the subtle identifications of their minds are showcased here. In simple terms, 'mine' and 'my' thoughts led them to death while 'selflessness' led one to deathlessness.

It is worth recollecting a story narrated by Rama Tirtha from his famous book 'In Woods of God Realization'

Once there was a sculptor who was so adept at making his own statues to such perfection that you could not tell the duplicate from the original. When he knew that Death was coming for him, he made his own replica a dozen times. The messenger of Death came but could not differentiate the real person from his creations, and so left without taking him.

However, he came back after consultation with the God of Death and remarked, "Dear, you are wonderfully clever and talented. Why, that is just the way you have made these figures, but there is one thing wherein you have erred, there is just one fault, alas!" The man jumped up and shouted "In what? In what have I erred?" And the assistant of Death caught hold of him and said, "Just this was your error". The little imp of the doer self is claimed by death.

Mahābhārata itself validates this motif. In Aśvamedha Parva, Bhagavān Vasudeva himself says,

द्यक्षरस्तु भवेन्मृत्युत्र्यक्षरं ब्रह्म शाश्वतम् ममेति व्यक्षरो मृत्युर्नममेति च शाश्वतम्

dvyakṣarastu bhavenmṛtyuṣṭryakṣaram brahma lāivatam mameti duyaksaro mrtyurnamameti ca laivatam

This means that a two-letter Sanskrit word leads one to death while a three-letter Sanskrit word leads one to Immortalit. The two-letter word is 'मम' or 'Mama' which means 'mine' and the three-letter word is 'नमम' or 'Namama', meaning 'not mine'. As long as we entertain the thought of 'I' and everything as 'mine', apparently, we are treading the path to death and when the idea of 'I' and 'mine' fades, there evidently is nothing to die and one becomes deathless.

Isn't it true we have shrunk so much into a peanut of our own likes and dislikes? As long as we feel we are the most important thing in the world, we cannot really appreciate the world around us. We turn out like a horse with blinkers and all we see is ourselves apart from everything else. Yes, we are approaching death.

Amma or Śrī Mātā Amritānandamayī Devi narrates a beautiful story.

One full moon night during the spring season Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa came to dance with the gopis. The gopis were beloved of Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa. One gopi asked, "Bhagavān, even though there are so many beautiful and fragrant flowers in Vṛndāvan, why do you like the lotus and tulasi so much?" Bhagavān replied, "These are not ordinary flowers; they are the flowers of self-sacrifice." Kṛṣṇa then narrated to them the story behind the lotus and tulasi. They came to know that the Lord of Vṛndāvan was coming their way. If one lies in His path and touches His feet, enough it is to gain liberation. The little clod and dry leaf discussed with each other, "Why don't we go and wait on the path?" So they went and saved themselves a spot on the Lord's path. But soon a gopi came and swept away the dry leaf and another gopi kicked away the dirt clod saying, "Where did this dirt clod come from in the path of Bhagavān?"

Poor things. With whom could the little dirt clod and dry leaf share their sorrows? The dirt clod said, "No one likes us, Wherever we go, they see us as dirty and useless. What is the point in living when we are just a burden to Mother Earth? It is better to pray to be reborn as a flower or grain of sand on Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa's path and put an end to this life." But the dry leaf replied, "It is due to our karma that we received this birth. Still, we have been lucky enough to hear about Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa. But if we kill ourselves, the bad karma that we get from that action might even prevent us from hearing the Bhagavan's word in our next birth. So, it is better that we make use of this life that God has given us and be useful to someone before dying." As they brooded over their sorrows, noon came and the sun's light cast down like fire. But for those who are burning in the fire of sorrow, the external sunlight does not feel hot at all. Suddenly they heard the sound of someone crying. When they looked around they saw a black seed. The dirt clod asked, "Who are you? Why are you crying? I am a lotus seed and I am about to die from the scorching heat. If only there were someone who could push me into the pond, then I would be saved."

The dirt clod replied, "If I come in contact with water then I will dissolve into nothingness, but that is okay because at least you will be saved. Let me be of that much use to the world." Saying so, the little dirt clod took the seed and rolled into the pond. After his friend left, the dry leaf's sorrow doubled. Suddenly he heard a soft cry. He found a seed even smaller than a mustard seed. "Why are

you crying?", the leaf asked. The seed replied, "I am a tulasi seed. I am about to die in the heat of the sun. I am crying and praying to God to give me some shade." "Oh, let me be of some use to you", said the dry leaf. And it covered the tiny tulasi seed. The leaf protected the seed from the sun, wind, snow, and rain and was finally powdered into nothing. Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa concluded the story to the gopis, "My dear ones when I see the tulasi and lotus, I remember the sacrifice of the dirt clod and dry leaf."

Amma says, "We all have the feeling of I and mine just like the dirt clod and dry leaf. They are impure and unwanted wherever they go. It is because of this ego and attachment that we are rejected. The feelings of I and mine are also the reason why we can never experience the presence of God. When we are able to kill this ego and attachment for the sake of removing another's sorrow then we become the beloved of God. We remain inseparable from God. The dirt clod is a hard mass of vāsanās or negative tendencies. When it comes into contact with the water of love and devotion it dissolves into nothingness. Only then will the flowers of selflessness blossom. In the same way, the dry leaf represents the fallen leaves of the past. When this leaf disintegrates into nothing it becomes the fertilizer for the ripe fruits of the present moment."

Understanding the difference between death and deathlessness, let us resolve to shed our egos and attachments. Let us at least try to lend an ear to the concern of another human being at least, if we cannot rise to the level of Yudhisthira who would forsake heaven for a dog! Let us slowly move from Death to Deathlessness.

4*DHARMIC INSIGHTS OF A BUTCHER

It is fair to say that the Bhagavadgītā is the crest jewel of Mahabharata. Bhagavadgītā is the pendant of the long string of pearls, which we call the Mahabharata. But there are two other Gītās - Uddhava Gita and Vyādha Gita. Bhagavadgītā was delivered by Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna, and Uddhava Gita by Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Uddhava, his long-standing friend and disciple. The Vyādha Gita is a highly philosophical account explicating Advaita philosophy. Vyādha stands for 'butcher', therefore, Vyadha Gita is the Gita delivered by a butcher. A butcher's job, you may know, is cutting and selling meat. This Vyādha Gita comprises profound philosophical nuances. There exists a story behind it that holds the essence of karma yoga, the definition of work and worship.

A young Brahmin boy decides to renounce the world, go to a forest, leaving his old parents, and do tapas (austerities) to attain Bhagavān (God) and truth. This may resonate with the story of Gautama Buddha, but this happens before the time of Buddha. In fact, this happens at the time when the Pandavas are in the forest. His parents requested their son to stay back and look after them as they were getting old and had no one else to take care of them.

But the adamant son left them and went to the forest one fine day. He started doing tapas in that forest. For many years he did meditation, tapas, etc. Traditionally, most people think that spirituality is doing things like leaving everything, going to a forest, and doing tapas there and that was exactly what he did. After several years, his concentration improved and he gained unique powers. One day, a crane came and sat on top of the tree under which he was meditating. Crane does not discriminate between who is sitting under the tree. The crane is incapable of distinguishing a yogi from an ordinary person. The bird then happened to evacuate, and the droppings fell on the Yogi's head. He snapped out of his meditation. The man looked up at the crane with his eyes burning with fury. And the bird was burned to ashes. The man was amused at his own power and grew proud of himself.

He usually went to seek bhiksā from the nearby village. He beseeched for food by chanting 'bhavati bhikṣām dehi'. He went to one house where a lady was preparing food. She was busy taking care of her husband who had just come home from work. So she told the young Brahmacari to wait. This infuriated him and he yelled at her for making a great man like himself wait till her chores were done. But the lady replied with a smile, "My Son, Do you think I'm a crane so that you can burn me up? I am not a Crane. Please take this food." The Brahmacāri was shocked that this lady knew about the incident with the crane.

Seeing the shock on his face, the lady calmly added, "My Son, I prioritised my duty, which is to feed my tired husband. You don't seem to know anything about yoga or spirituality yet. You have a wrong assumption about it. I don't have time to teach you. So I suggest you go to the next village and seek the guidance of a person called Dharmavyādha. He will teach you Vedic yoga and the real essence of spirituality.

This hurt his ego, especially because a lady who hasn't read the Vedas, read his mind and suggested him to seek the guidance of another man. Humbled, the young man went to the next village. He asked a few people about Dharmavyādhi. They looked at him very quizzically and they showed him the way. Finally, he reached Dharmavyādha's place and was astounded to see a butcher.

The place looked just like an ordinary slaughterhouse with an overpowering stench of blood and meat hanging in front of the shop. While the Brahmacari was studying the place, the butcher came out and said, "Son! Did the lady send you here? Come in". This further shook the Brahmacari and he thought, "How did the butcher know about the lady?" The butcher with a smile told him, "Come in, I will teach you". By now, his ego was completely smashed. Dharmavyādha welcomed the Brahmacari to his place. He then saw Dharmavyādha busy with attending to his parents. All this while, the young man was waiting and watching what Dharmavyādha was doing.

Mystified by all these unexpected experiences, the ascetic asked him why, in spite of his great wisdom, he was doing this gruesome work of a butcher. The butcher replied, "My son, you thought running into a forest and acquiring powers through meditation can make you an accomplished man! Well, you are wrong. You are sinned by killing the crane. You killed the crane because you were blind with anger and had no control over your mind or actions. This is not spirituality."

The man's ego was completely wiped out hearing this. Dharmavyādha continued, "My son, no duty is ugly, no duty is impure. My birth placed me in these circumstances and environments. I learned this trade in my boyhood; I am unattached, and I try to do my duty well. I do all I can to make my father and mother happy."

Vyādha Gita starts with the butcher teaching the Brahmacari about how to worship one's work no matter what it is. He taught him that disinterest in work will reflect in the performance of duties.

This story actually comes in the Vana Parva, when the Pindavas are in the forest.

In Mahabharata, Bhagavan Sri Kṛṣṇa says that by considering work as worship, one can attain supremacy. People like King Janaka have attained supremacy through karma yoga - by considering their actions as worship. The butcher and the lady showed the Brahmacari their devotion to their duties. The woman whole-heartedly served her husband and the butcher served his old parents with utmost reverence, without expecting any reward. They considered it as their duty and simply did it as an offering to the absolute. This has made them attain their goal. So the Butcher told the Brahmacari, "You need to go back to your home, and take care of your parents first".

Swami Vivekananda says the Vyadha Gita contains the heights of the Advaita philosophy which propagates the idea of renunciation. When the all pervading self, the true reality is constantly within us, renunciation is not all about going away from the house, taking shelter in a forest, and becoming an ascetic. One can be a householder yet engage in spiritual endeavour. Ramana Maharṣi says that one can change from a householder to an ascetic. But the point is to find out where the "I" is and to go beyond it.

A lady once requested Ammā to give her "enlightenment of realisation. Amma smiled at her and said, "Continue doing whatever you are doing, you will reach there one day"

She told her that the Yajña conducted by King Dakṣa turned into a battleground due to his audacity, whereas, with his dedication and faith in Bhagavan Sri Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna turned the Kurukṣetra battleground into a place of worship.

The Brahmin in the story was undergoing the so-called spiritual austerities and was doing so with the ego that ended up pushing him into the pit of ignorance. Spirituality is not about running away from one's actions, or avoiding the basic duties and bindings of human existence. Just by serving their family with devotion, sense of duty, and complete detachment to any reward, the lady and the butcher become good examples of Karma Yoga.

