

# Ethical Dilemmas in the Mahabharata: A Literature Review for Studying Contemporary Student Perceptions

## 1. BROADER CONTEXT:

The Mahabharata stands as one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India and is a foundational text of Hinduism. Attributed to the sage Vyasa, it is an epic of encyclopedic complexity, weaving together mythology, philosophy, and theology with a central historical narrative. Its vast scale, consisting of around 100,000 verses, makes it one of the longest poems in the world. The epic describes itself as a comprehensive guide to human life, covering *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (economic resources), *kāma* (aesthetic activity), and *mokṣa* (liberation), proclaiming that what is not found within its pages cannot be found elsewhere.

The central story revolves around the dynastic conflict between two sets of cousins, the

**Pandavas** and the **Kauravas**, for the throne of Hastinapura. However, the narrative is much more than an account of a battle; it is a profound exposition of human values, moral teachings, and the complexities of life. A core component of the epic is the

**Bhagavad Gita**, a philosophical dialogue between Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna that addresses fundamental questions of duty, action, and the nature of existence.

This area remains worthy of exploration because the Mahabharata serves as a timeless guide on ethics, offering lessons on morality, loyalty, bravery, and righteous living that continue to be relevant today. Its analysis of human failures and moral dilemmas provides valuable lessons for character education, encouraging individuals to reflect on their own actions and values.

## **2. MAIN CHALLENGES:**

**Engaging with the Mahabharata's ethical landscape presents several significant challenges for both scholars and students.**

- 1) The Subtle Nature of Dharma: A primary challenge is interpreting the concept of dharma, which is portrayed as extraordinarily complex, subtle (*sūkṣma*), and often situational. The epic repeatedly states that the truth of dharma is "hidden in a dark cave" (*dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhāyām*) , and its true nature is difficult to grasp. This ambiguity means dharma cannot be subsumed under a single, all-encompassing moral theory.
- 3) Conflict of Duties: The characters constantly face dilemmas arising from a conflict between different and often opposing duties. These conflicts manifest as struggles between personal duty and a greater moral order , individual responsibilities and social obligations , family loyalty and righteousness , and ideal principles versus practical reality.
- 4) *Apaddharma* (The Law of Exigency): A major interpretive challenge is the concept of *apaddharma*, the code of conduct for times of distress or emergency. This principle allows for actions that would be considered

5) *adharma* (amoral or wrong) in normal circumstances, creating a powerful dialectic between ethical consciousness and the demands of *realpolitik*. This justifies digressions from established norms for the sake of survival or a greater good.

6) The Gap Between Knowledge and Action: A recurring theme is the struggle characters face in acting righteously even when they know what dharma dictates. Dhritarashtra's lament—that he knows what is right but cannot bring himself to do it, and knows what is wrong but cannot desist from it—epitomizes this challenge of translating moral knowledge into action.

### 3. STATE-OF-THE-ART:

**The research literature provides extensive analysis of the pivotal moral dilemmas that define the epic's narrative. These episodes serve as case studies for ethical inquiry.**

- 1) Arjuna's Dilemma on the Battlefield: This is the most famous moral crisis, forming the premise of the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna, a great warrior, refuses to fight upon seeing his kinsmen, teachers, and elders on the opposing side. His dilemma is a profound conflict between his
- 2) *Kshatriya-dharma* (duty as a warrior) and his duty towards his family (*kula-dharma*), creating a state of intense depression and confusion (*vishada*).
- 3) Yudhishtira and the Game of Dice: The eldest Pandava, known as *Dharmaraja* (King of Dharma), participates in a rigged game of dice, leading to the loss of his kingdom, his brothers, and his wife, Draupadi. This act raises critical questions about addiction, compulsion, and the moral failings of even the most righteous individuals.
- 4) Draupadi's Unresolved Question: After being lost in the dice game, Draupadi is dragged into the court and asks a crucial legal and moral question: Did Yudhishtira have the right to stake her *after* he had already lost himself and his own freedom?. This question, which stumps even elders like Bhishma,

remains an "unresolved dilemma" that challenges patriarchal norms and the concept of a wife as property.

5) Bhishma's Conflicting Vows: Bhishma is bound by a vow of celibacy and unwavering loyalty to the throne of Hastinapura. This places him in a severe moral conflict, forcing him to fight for the unjust Kauravas against the righteous Pandavas, whom he personally favors. His silent spectatorship during Draupadi's public humiliation is a focal point of ethical criticism, representing a failure to act against injustice due to a misguided promise.

6) Karna's Struggle with Loyalty and Identity: Karna faces a persistent dilemma between his deep-seated loyalty to Duryodhana—his benefactor and friend—and his own innate sense of righteousness. This conflict intensifies dramatically when his true lineage as Kunti's eldest son and the Pandavas' brother is revealed, forcing a traumatic choice between his mother's plea and his debt to a friend.

7) Violations of Just War (*Dharma-Yuddha*) Principles: The Kurukshetra War is presented as a righteous

war, but it is filled with transgressions of the established warrior code (*jus in bello*). Many of these violations—such as the killings of Bhishma, Drona, and Karna through deceit—are instigated by Lord Krishna himself to ensure the victory of the Pandavas. This creates a paradox where *adharma* is used to establish *dharma*.

#### 4. ANALYSIS & CRITICISM:

**The dilemmas within the Mahabharata offer profound lessons, though they are often layered with complexity and criticism.**

- 1) Dharma is Contextual, Not Absolute: A primary lesson from the epic is that *dharma* is subtle and highly dependent on context, time, and circumstances. The concept of *apaddharma* formalizes this, suggesting that in times of crisis, the standard rules of conduct can be suspended for a

greater good, such as survival. For instance, Krishna argues that telling a lie to save an innocent life can be a higher duty than absolute truthfulness.

2) The Path of Selfless Action (*Nishkama Karma*): The Bhagavad Gita offers a philosophical solution to navigating moral conflicts: performing one's prescribed duty without attachment to the outcome (*Nishkama Karma*). By focusing on the action itself rather than its fruits, an individual can act decisively and righteously without incurring negative karmic bondage.

3) Attachment (*Moha*) as the Root of Crisis: A central teaching, particularly in the Gita, is that attachment is the primary cause of moral confusion and suffering. Characters like Dhritarashtra (attachment to his son) and Arjuna (attachment to his kin) are paralyzed by their bonds. Krishna's guidance aims to lead Arjuna from this state of attachment to a state of detached duty, which is essential for right action.

4) The Inevitability of Karma: The epic powerfully illustrates the law of karma, where actions have



unavoidable consequences. The downfall of the Kauravas is portrayed as the direct result of their hubris, greed, and unrighteous deeds, serving as a timeless cautionary tale.

5) Criticism and Paradox: The epic's moral framework is not without contradictions. The most significant paradox is the role of Lord Krishna, the ultimate upholder of dharma, who repeatedly advocates for and orchestrates deceit, trickery, and the violation of ethical codes to achieve his cosmic goals. This suggests that the ends can justify the means, a concept that sits uneasily with a strict code of ethics. This turns the "righteous war" into what some scholars term a "failed ritual," because its sacred rules are deliberately and systematically broken.

## **5. RESEARCH GAP:**

The extensive body of literature provided offers a deep and multifaceted analysis of the ethical dilemmas within

the Mahabharata from philosophical, literary, and political viewpoints. Several sources discuss the epic's educational value and its timeless lessons for humanity. However, what is conspicuously absent is empirical research on how these ancient and culturally specific dilemmas are interpreted by contemporary students, who are shaped by modern, globalized ethical frameworks.

**This leads to a clear research gap and the following proposal for investigation:**

**Novelty/Hypothesis Worth Investigating Further:**

While the epic's moral teachings are considered timeless, their reception is not. A crucial area for new research lies in understanding the perception of the Mahabharata's ethical dilemmas among modern students.

A formal research question could be: "How do contemporary students, influenced by 21st-century values of universal rights, individualism, and social

justice, evaluate the moral choices of key characters in the Mahabharata?"

**A potential hypothesis for such a study is:**

"It is hypothesized that modern students will judge the characters of the Mahabharata based on universalist ethical principles rather than context-specific duties like *svadharma* (one's own caste duty) or loyalty to kin.

Consequently, characters such as Bhishma and Drona, who prioritized duty to an unjust authority over objective righteousness, will be viewed more critically than in traditional interpretations. In contrast, characters like Karna may elicit greater sympathy, with his conflict being framed not as a failure of dharma, but as a tragic struggle between personal gratitude and universal morality."

Such a study would bridge the gap between the textual analysis of the epic and its living reception, offering valuable insights into the cross-cultural and inter-generational relevance of its profound ethical questions.

## 6.REFERENCE LINKS

□ Title: *Moral Order and Ethical Dilemmas in the Mahabharata: An Inquiry of Dharma and Human Values in Ancient Indian Literature*

- Authors: Bharathi S Rai & Manjula K.T.
- Note: This paper appears to be from a seminar proceeding. While a direct link to the specific proceeding is not available, the authors have published related work that you may find useful, such as *Re-inventing Karna of the Mahabharata* on the Srinivas University website.

□ Title: *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* (Book)

- Editor: Bimal Krishna Matilal
- Link: You can borrow or read this book online from the Internet Archive. The papers by T.S. Rukmani ("Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata") and S.P. Dubey ("The Concept of Moral Dilemma") are chapters within this book.

- <https://archive.org/details/moral-dilemmas-in-the-mahabharata-bimal-krishna-matilal-mlbd>

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- Author: Rima Rani Nath
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- Authors: Dr. Santosh Kumar Rath & Dr. Ananta Kumar Naik
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- Author: Shazia Yousuf

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