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MAHABHARATA'S STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

NAVIGATING THE DHARMIC COMPASS

VIVEK CHADHA

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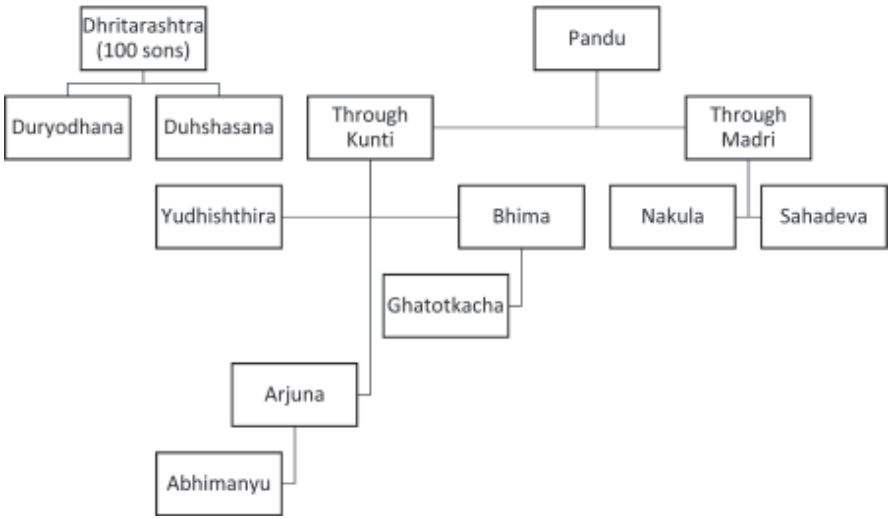
Figure 1: Kuru Family Tree



Note: The Kuru family tree details have been limited to the principal characters mentioned in the text

List of Words and Their Meaning

Adharma – Not in accordance with the guidance of dharma

Akshouhinis – An *Akshouhini* was an army composed of 21,870 chariots, 21,879 elephants, 65,610 horses and 109,350 foot soldiers

Apad Dharma – Dharma during times of adversity

Atiratha – An Atiratha was the highest classification of a warrior. He could take on 60,000 soldiers singlehandedly

Chakravarti – Ideal or a universal monarch

Chakra vyuha – A circular military formation

Dandaniti – *Dandaniti* corresponds with the power to chastise based on a selfless code of conduct by kings. It is also referred to as the rod that will reward and punish

Dharma – Has multiple meanings derived from the context. It has been used to denote righteousness, morality, duty, ethics, duty, etc.

Dharma Yudhha – A war fought based on ethical guidance and prescribed rules

Dvapara Yuga – The third phase of the four-*yuga* cycle

Guru Dakshina – Honorary fee paid to a teacher after the education is over

Kali Yuga – The fourth and the worst phase in the four-*yuga* cycle

Karma Bhoomi – It is the land of action for an individual fulfilling his duty

Krita Yuga – The first and ideal phase of the four-*yuga* cycle

Kshatriya Dharma – The role and responsibility of a *kshatriya* or warrior

Maharatha – A title given to a warrior who could take on 10,000 soldiers singlehandedly on the battlefield

Nishkama Karma – Selfless action

Parmatman – Usually referred to as the Supreme Soul, even as the *atman* relates to the individual soul

Raja Dharma – The role and responsibilities of a king

Rajasuya – A great ritual and sacrifice that culminates with the consecration of an emperor – a *Chakravarti*

Ratha – Refers to a chariot as also the warrior in charge of it

Sarathi – Charioteer

Shlokas – Verses in the Mahabharata and other classical Sanskrit texts

Suchimukh – Mouth of needle

Svayamvara – A tradition where a woman selects her husband from a group of suitors

Treta Yuga – The second of the *yuga* in the four-yuga cycle

Vyuha – Battle formation

Yagna – A ritual that involves offerings to commemorate an occasion

Yaksha – A guardian over natural resources. Usually considered attendants of Gods

Yoga kshema – Acquire what you desire and preserve what you have

Yudhha – War

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Vivek Chadha

Introduction

The appeal and allure of the *Mahabharata* have remained undiluted for centuries. What began with its dissemination in the oral tradition has continued over millennia in multiple forms, reaching the farthest corners of the subcontinent.[1] The epic finds resonance with its readers for reasons as varied as the shades of grey that its characters personify. The *Mahabharata* is a spiritual text. It is the source of ancient Indian philosophy. The epic is a clash of arms and egos on a scale that shook the very foundations of the Kuru empire. Its description of battles amplifies the raw emotions of the warring class in its purest and basest form. The *Mahabharata* is also the first text that lays the foundation of Indian strategic thought – a thought that has witnessed continuity over the centuries and resonates with contemporary Indian perspectives.

The *Mahabharata* has been written in an iterative form over the centuries. It has been translated and interpreted in different ways and languages. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that several stories from the period have undergone subtle and, at times, not-so-subtle changes.

Broadly, the text is differentiated between the Northern Recension and the Southern Recension based on its proliferation into the regions of northern and southern India. The text was further translated into major languages over centuries to include Sarada, Nepali, Maithili, Bengali and Devanagari in the north and Malayalam, Telugu and Grantha in the south.[2] Each region and era brought along its social and philosophical impressions, reflecting the times through the characters and their actions.

C. Minkowski reflects on Nilakantha's *Mahabharata* – a 17th century text titled, *Bharatabhavadipa* (Light on the inner significance of the Bharata).[3] His text contemporised the epic to his times, drawing criticism for his

"presentism". Nilakantha collected available manuscripts from across regions as a prelude to his version. He compiled his version and added commentary to it, drawing praise and criticism from those seeking a reflection of his times and purists, the original form.

Previously, the *Mahabharata* not only traversed the Indian subcontinent, it also travelled overseas. Amongst these endeavours, the Javanese version is perhaps the oldest and continues to have a cultural impact on the region. A 2018 publication, *Traces of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Javanese and Malay Literature*, traces and evaluates its influence over millennia. The book refers to the epic's Javanese translation from the 12th century, though Sanskrit versions would have been available earlier. From the initial direct translations to later adaptations, including into puppet shows, the epic has long since continued as an integral part of local cultures. These include replacing the main characters with the local in adaptations.[4]

This book's analysis is based on the English translation of *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata* produced by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Pune to ensure uniformity and a high degree of source authenticity.

The institute collected all available editions and distilled what was common and relatable through a comparative assessment of each. Simultaneously, it removed what seemed to have been inserted later and was not corroborated. Bibek Debroy translated the Sanskrit edition, which is available as a 10-volume set. The analysis of the *Mahabharata* herein is solely based on that edition.

There can be competing arguments regarding using *The Critical Edition* in contrast to others, especially regional texts that undoubtedly carry distinct variations and interpretations. However, this author prefers to go with Hiltebeitel's assessment that "the Pune Critical Edition of the Mahabharata keeps faithfully to its criteria for inclusion and exclusion, I take it to be a largely successful reconstruction of the Mahabharata as a work of written literature whose literary experiments, symbolic and philosophical complexities, thematic consistencies, and even its jarring juxtapositions and eye-opening inconsistencies are sufficiently explained by multiple authors working under a single inspired authorly design".[5] Though, as the reader can possibly conclude, Hiltebeitel considers the origin of the *Mahabharata*

text itself a collective work undertaken by a syndicate over a couple of generations and does not accept the oral origins of the epic.[6]

M.A. Mehendale's objective assessment of *The Critical Edition* delves into its evolutionary process over several decades as well as its strengths and weaknesses.[7] Mehendale notes the methodical process for its creation based on the examination of about 1,300 manuscripts, of which about 800 were used. It includes both the Northern and Southern recensions. For those interested in the variations of the epic across time and regions, the footnotes in the original critical edition include these details as well. The edition excludes later interpolations, though it does not rule out the possibility of such inclusions that figure in all manuscripts, despite the probability of these having been added in a later time frame.

Unlike Hiltebeitel and Mehendale, others do not consider *The Critical Edition* the best option for analysing the *Mahabharata*. As an example, "James Hegarty, professor of Indian religions at Cardiff University, points out that while the critically reconstituted text (the critical edition) has been applauded by philologists, it has been rubbished by those who have an interest in the anthropology of the Mahabharata tradition. These scholars are equally (if not more) interested in the footnotes and appendices. In that which has been left out."[8]

The logic of the source text, therefore, relates to the scope of the derivative research work involved. The iterative evolution of the text, as well as its regional flavours, are useful from a sociological or anthropological perspective. However, for drawing strategic insights, *The Critical Edition* is considered the best option and remains the sole primary text for analysing the contents of the epic in this book.

Since most of us have seen, heard or read stories of the *Mahabharata* since childhood, at least in India, some aspects of those stories may not directly correlate with the authentic storyline. The publication of *The Critical Edition* addressed this limitation. It has since been translated into languages that are more easily accessible to the common people. To that extent, the contribution of scholars like Bibek Debroy is laudatory and deserves acknowledgement. This analysis would have been more difficult to undertake without the work done by Debroy.

Itihasa and Its Relevance

Before attempting to encapsulate the sequence of events and main characters who remain central to the *Mahabharata*, it is important to outline the nature of the text for what it represents. This revolves around the concept of *itihasa* and its co-relation with history.

There is a possibility of treating the *Mahabharata* as either mythology or history. Mythology derives from a collection of myths. These are often associated with different cultures. From the ancient Greeks to the Romans and the Chinese to the Japanese, mythology has a special place among cultures. In contrast, history is about facts. It is a documentation of what happened in the past. Unlike mythology, history is evidence-based.

Itihasa does tend to get used interchangeably with history, however, from the perspective of Indian culture, and especially ancient Indian culture, the word is used for two major and monumental narratives – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

The word *itihasa* translates to "it happened like this". Yet it is not history as we know it. Kanad Sinha deals with the concept of *itihasa*. Sinha writes that "*itihasa* had a claim of authenticity but not the kind of factual authenticity around which Positivist historiography was formed".[9] He adds that "the historical tradition named *itihasa* narrated what it believed to be authentic account of the past, but the claim to authenticity lay not in factual or chronological accuracy but in the lesson to be learnt about *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha* from an exemplary and comprehensive account of the past".[10]

Subesh Chandra Bhattacharya explains the concept and logic of *itihasa* further. He emphasises its didactic character in comparison with the historicity. The objective of *itihasa* is "teaching by example". Accordingly, it is not the entire past that is relevant, instead, only relevant parts "that hold a salutary lesson". Finally, "It is in the sense of guiding man to the prescribed ends of human life, that the *Mahabharata* calls itself *itihasa*."[11]

In this regard, the *Mahabharata* is especially relevant, given the form in which it has been orally disseminated and subsequently converted to the written form. In addition to the narrative, the text focusses on its learning

value and the moral lessons that can be drawn. *Mahabharata's* story form facilitates sharing experiences, unlike similar texts with a more prescriptive structure. And these experiences of major characters from the period, allow easier assimilation. The experiential value of the narrative based on contentious decision-making further enhances its timeless appeal.

Itihasa in general and the *Mahabharata* in particular have emerged as living texts. There is a reason why the epic has widespread and diverse appeal across the subcontinent. The events were interpreted in the context of the people who accepted it. And beyond acceptance, imbibed lessons of life from its narrative.

To that extent, arguably, the relevance of *itihasa* goes beyond the context of history. The intention of placing historical events in the background of life lessons ensures that *itihasa* retains a timeless appeal. This can be seen concerning the *Mahabharata*. There is little doubt that practices, societal norms and structures have changed perceptibly over time. However, despite these changes, the guiding principles for fighting in a challenging environment remain similar. This is especially applicable to situations that demand the resolution of complex decision dilemmas. The desire for victory and the employment of a wide cross-section of instrumentalities in its pursuit is also as relevant now as it was in the times of the *Mahabharata*. Bhattacharya explains the difference succinctly when he says, "Briefly it can be said that while history remains trapped in the recording of the process of change, itihasa tries to wade through the process of change to reach the shore of invariance."[12]

History tends to get questioned over time since more often than not, it (and to that extent, it also includes the historical contents of the *Mahabharata*) is written from the perspective of the victor or the one who controlled the narrative at that time. As an illustration, some accounts of the British rule in India by British historians at that time have been written from their perspective. Would the history of this period be the same if it is written by a "native Indian"? Probably not. Similarly, history written by a well-educated, often upper-class elite may not necessarily reflect the reality experienced by those at the marginalised ends of society's socio-economic spectrum.

In contrast, *itihasa* does not claim the narration of irrefutable facts. However, it does provide a realistic context drawn from events. It is likely that over time, given the tradition of *smriti* or memorised events rather than *shruti* or the system of writing down the same, exaggerations, changes and additions would have crept into the text. This is also why the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute decided to create a critical edition of the *Mahabharata* in 1919. This mammoth task was finally completed in 1966.[13] The resultant edition in Sanskrit attempted to eliminate the inaccuracies and additions that were not validated across a large number of editions that had emerged over the years.

Despite the attempt to create a critical edition, it must be borne in mind that the original text of the *Mahabharata* was supposed to be 8800 *shlokas* and was called *Jaya*, which expanded to 24,000 as *Bharata* and finally 1,00,000 shlokas in the form of the *Mahabharata*.[14] Therefore, it is not as much the facts that remain the essence of the *Mahabharata*, but more so the perspective that these provide. And for the purpose of this book, this perspective has been restricted to the strategic lessons of the period, which remain as relevant today, as centuries ago.

Abiding Appeal

Several authors have acknowledged the enormity of the *Mahabharata's* scope and timeless impact. They have attempted to explain the enduring interest in the epic and its influence on the reader's mind. Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya relates its appeal to its ability to mirror human life. "It may perhaps be said that the *Mahabharata's* continued appeal, despite its many forbidding features, to a large extent springs from this fact that it tries to mirror human life in its entirety and in its multi-layered complexity."[15]

Gurcharan Das makes an interesting observation in his book, *The Difficulty of Being Good,* regarding the multiple meanings and emotions the text can evoke for different people, especially in contemporary times. He suggests, "The point is that we should not be guilty of reading too much 'into' the text, but try to read 'out' as much as we can for our lives." He adds, "that the epic may be saying a multiplicity of things to different readers at different times in history".[16]

Amongst ancient Indian literature, the texts that need little or no introduction are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Much like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* is integral to the subcontinent's spiritual, philosophical and cultural roots. The Mahabharata in particular, has also had a profound impact on India's strategic thought.

Influence on Strategic Thought

The *Mahabharata* is one of the most profound ancient Indian texts. S. Jaishankar writes, "The Mahabharata is indisputably the most vivid distillation of Indian thoughts on statecraft."[17] Its spiritual and philosophical core is best recognised, appreciated and illustrated through the *Bhagavad Gita* and the conceptualisation of *dharma*.[18] These aspects have been discussed, debated and disseminated orally, textually and through enactment across the subcontinent over centuries. In addition to the spiritual and philosophical message that these renderings have conveyed, the conceptualisation of war and its influence is another fundamental element of the epic.

As distinct as these terms might seem when viewed individually, the collective impact of perspectives on spirituality, philosophy and war is most apparent when related to the *Mahabharata's* influence on strategic thought. The value of its strategic guidance can be viewed from three perspectives.

First, as one of the oldest texts from ancient times, it provides a comprehensive understanding of war. It operates at a descriptive level, thereby visualising the minutest details of physical combat at the group and individual level. Simultaneously, the text includes the spiritual underpinnings and philosophical debate around the very idea of war. As a follow-up, instruments of statecraft ranging from diplomacy to the use of force are elaborated upon at length. At times, these assist in progressing the narrative, while at others, they emerge as a part of a dialogue, which allows a deeper understanding of their role and influence.

Second, most texts that have captured the imagination of readers and the strategic community alike, often tend to be prescriptive. This allows an inherent ease of following a structured dissemination of perspectives and guidance. Such texts include Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Sun Tzu's *Art of*

War. Undeniably, their popularity within the strategic community reinforces the success of such an approach. On the other hand, the *Mahabharata* is an interesting combination of a compelling narrative, illustrative didactic elements and prescriptive guidance, which are seamlessly woven through the epic. This combination has a distinct advantage for a reader. The narrative runs like a gripping story. Most characters display their unique strengths and weaknesses. Simultaneously, circumstances create situations rarely characterised by an easy definition of right and wrong. This implies that even the best intentions can sometimes lead to unintended disasters. The Mahabharata war itself is the most unfortunate example of this anomaly. The compelling and gripping storyline of the epic thus makes for interesting reading across a wide cross-section of society. Its popularity is more broad-based and the text influences a larger segment of the population.

The *Mahabharata's* multi-layered approach allows readers to receive its message according to the scope of their query. The text functions as a kaleidoscope, showing patterns a reader attempts to interpret. From spiritual solace to answering deep philosophical questions and from seeking balance in life to selfless perseverance in the pursuit of *dharma*, the *Mahabharata* successfully addresses its myriad audiences. Its handling of war as an idea and a reality is amongst its finest contributions to strategic thought.

The *Bhagavad Gita's* contribution to strategic thought is not limited to the conceptual understanding of *dharma* and the concept of a *karma yogi*, especially in the context of militaries. Its vision of *nishkama karma* is captured through the concept of an infinite approach in Chapter Eight of this book. The theory of finite and infinite has been derived from James P. Carse's book *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. The *Mahabharata* and Carse's book complement the construct with Carse providing the framework and the *Mahabharata* (especially the *Bhagavad Gita* as its integral part) the illustrative text for its manifestation.

While the narrative guides the reader through the story, the didactic elements help illustrate lessons and timeless ideas that assist in understanding the story better. This is especially the case when decisions and actions tend to be contentious. As an illustration, the *Mahabharata* reinforces the importance of truth. Truth is also considered one of the most important

aspects for ensuring the prevalence of *dharma*. Yet, there are instances when speaking the truth becomes a liability. The story of Koushika is an illustrative example. He ends up in hell despite sticking to the truth at all times.[19]

Finally, the prescriptive element follows a question-and-answer format at multiple instances in the epic. Amongst the best-known are the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita Parva* and the guidance provided by Bhishma to Yudhishthira in the *Shanti Parva*. The questions posed to two of the most qualified gurus in the *Mahabharata* are perhaps not very dissimilar to what a reader torn between choices that simultaneously seem right and wrong may have asked. The *Bhagavad Gita* remains the most revered text for Krishna's timeless wisdom on spirituality. Despite the passage of over 3,000 years, when the choice between right and wrong perplexes the senses, it remains relevant for the individual and society seeking guidance.

In the same vein, the *Shanti Parva* guides those responsible for the security and well-being of a state. Comparable to the *Arthashastra* in some ways, the *parva* has distinct differences that set it apart as a text in its own right. As a part of the 18-parva classification, the *Shanti Parva* discusses the duties and responsibilities of a king. This further includes recommended actions during adverse conditions. However, when the same contents are seen in the alternative 100-parva classification, these are referred to as a part of the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas*. Several actions debated for their righteousness and acceptability under *dharma* are addressed conceptually in these prescriptive parts of the *Mahabharata* by Bhishma. These include the use of *adharma*, dealing with a more powerful adversary, the importance of *artha* and treasury for a king and the use of *dandaniti* as one of the most important attributes for a king. This helps contextualise the narrative and didactic elements through a conceptual explanatory interlinkage.

This collective contribution becomes the basis for understanding ancient Indian strategic thought that emerges from the *Mahabharata*.

Having seen these three layers convey the story, illustration and guidance, the epic can be perceived in three distinct forms. According to V.S. Sukthankar, the first general editor of *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata*, these include the narrative (mundane, as described by Sukthankar), *dharmic* (or ethical) and metaphysical perspectives. The narrative is the basic storyline

of the *Mahabharata*. The *dharmic* perspective views aspects of the epic through the prism of ethics. Finally, the metaphysical elements of the *Mahabharata* provide a theological basis for actions and the symbolism that this entails.

The text can be read from each of these perspectives in isolation. However, ideally, the impact and influence of its contents and context are fully felt when these three perspectives combine to provide a cohesive understanding of what the events imply. The endeavour to highlight the strategic thought that emerges from the *Mahabharata* does relate to all three, though the emphasis is more on the *dharmic* perspective, with the narrative providing the illustrative context to help rationalise it.

Every text is a product of its times. It is therefore not surprising to find the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, distinctly different in their orientation. According to Indian culture, *yuga* (age) is characterised by repetitive cycles of time that represent different environmental realities. *Krita Yuga* illustrates the ideal conditions. *Treta*, *Dwapara* and *Kali Yuga* follow it in repeated cycles. While the *Ramayana* took place in the *Treta Yuga*, the *Mahabharata* was fought in the *Dwapara Yuga*, with events descending into the *Kali Yuga*. Since each of these periods or ages represents a different degree of ethical threshold for behavioural patterns, the actions are also accordingly illustrative of this reality. Consequently, the approach to dealing with such conditions is representative of those times. How Rama approaches an issue is very different from how Krishna handles the complexity of the grey zone of ethics in the *Mahabharata*. This has obvious implications for a reader. The desire to seek righteousness and ethical behaviour is not necessarily a guarantee for reciprocity of that sentiment. This is where *dharma* allows the use of *adharma* against *adharma*. This is also why truth is not always the best policy. In other words, the practical realities of statecraft and conflict allow exceptionalism with the caveat that it remains exceptionalism and not a routine policy in pursuit of power and prosperity alone.

The role and responsibility of an individual in his personal and public capacity must also be seen in this context. The *Mahabharata* successfully contextualises the responsibilities of an individual and their co-relation with the larger good of society. Amongst the characters represented in this text, most are not merely well-educated, some are the finest teachers, practitioners

and sages of the period. And yet, only a few of them make the right decision when they face the ultimate test of their lives, as a prelude to the great war. The *Mahabharata* highlights several instances that represent cardinal errors of judgement. This is because knowledge alone is inadequate to guide decision-making. While it lays the requisite groundwork, often judgement suffers from the failure to use knowledge in the right context. It requires leaders and advisers to look beyond their immediate duty and understand the wider impact of their actions. The inability to implement this guidance leads to repeated failure by the masters of statecraft.

The *Mahabharata*, given its real-life historical backdrop, successfully weaves interlinked aspects of individual duty, responsibility, knowledge, bravery, statecraft, benevolence, sacrifice, selfishness, deceit, revenge and wisdom into a single text with the backdrop of what *dharma* truly means and implies. The characters represented within it struggle to seek and follow what they see as the righteous path. Most fail at some stage of the epic. However, their failure and the success of a few collectively bring forth the challenges likely to be faced by military leaders, statesmen and their advisers alike. These lessons were as relevant when the *Mahabharata* was first written, as they are now, as the analysis of the text will indicate. This is so because leaders seek right decisions when faced with dilemmas. In other words, how does a leader decide on a course of action, wherein right and wrong or black and white become diffused? The *Mahabharata* represents conditions closer to the everyday reality of the grey zone, where perceptions and individual realities can alter how decisions can be viewed. This also distinguishes the two epics. As Bhattacharya notes, "The Ramayana draws the line between the protagonists of the right and wrong, of the evil and good a bit too rigidly – in terms of practically absolute black and white… In contrast the Mahabharata is more complex. The grey area between the right and wrong is more widespread in it, which makes it closer to the existential human conditions."[20]

These contrasting perspectives are best illustrated through the moral dilemmas faced in the epic. It is relatively simple to distinguish between obvious instances of right and wrong. The *Ramayana* best exemplifies this with limited scope for dilemma. The *Mahabharata*, in contrast, witnesses pulls and pressures that emanate from its layered perspectives. A moral

dilemma is created when a situation can be argued convincingly from multiple viewpoints. This makes it difficult for a protagonist to reach a decision. In other words, an easily resolvable problem is hardly a moral dilemma. K. Kunjunni Raja explains this conundrum: "In great literature as well in real life, the problems that confront people in different situations are not based on the conflict between right or wrong, between *dharma* and *adharma*, but on the conflict between different and often opposing duties; between one's duty to one's kith and kin and that to society, between truth and non-violence, between what is immediately feasible and proper and what is ultimately correct."[21]

The *Mahabharata* has immense potential to highlight ancient Indian strategic thought. In doing so, it facilitates lessons that remain invaluable for contemporary times. Since the *Mahabharata* follows the form of relating history as passed on over the ages, it illustrates real-world challenges and the courses opted for by different leaders. The detailed and elaborate retelling of the *Mahabharata*, including the period preceding the war, and its main characters, allows a deeper understanding of the circumstances and background in which each one of them take the decisions that they do. It is almost without exception that the dilemma faced by each of them is discussed at some length. This includes the circumstances and perspective of each leader.

These dilemmas often find two individuals who could be right in their way. However, when their decisions and perspectives are viewed from a detached and holistic view, the logic of decision-making in conflicted conditions becomes evident. As does how a seemingly correct and morally upright decision can cause death and destruction when viewed from the narrow view of an individual rather than society.

The *Mahabharata* is as much about the role of an individual, as it is about the individual's role in society. It elaborates on how the latter often gets diffused while pursuing the former. And the word that repeatedly describes this is *dharma*. *Dharma* has no precise definition or corresponding meaning in the English language. It is neither religion nor merely a duty. It is not responsibility or the blind pursuit of tradition. It is perhaps the ability to pursue the larger good in the right spirit. This may, however, at times,

come into conflict with the immediate or personal understanding of right or wrong.

This understanding of *dharma* forms the core or essence of the *Mahabharata*. The challenges become apparent when contemporary leaders undertake their responsibilities in an era of contradictions and tribulations. Since the *Mahabharata* revolves around the concept of *dharma* during peace and war, the role of kings and warriors as leaders becomes relevant. The societal realities of the Vedic period are different from contemporary times. However, the correlation between right and wrong remains equally relevant for decision-making today. Understanding the core thought that drives individuals to take a stand and commit mistakes is equally important. And these thoughts could well stem from the seed of positive and negative intentions with devastating results. The dichotomy of this reality, which continuously gets thrown up in the *Mahabharata*, is no different from what leaders and followers continue to face.

Every other aspect of human character and responsibility gets highlighted in the broader context of *dharma*. This includes the role of a king, adviser and warrior and the choices each is forced to make under testing conditions and circumstances.

How does all this relate to present times? Can the strategic lessons derived from the *Mahabharata* be applied to more recent military challenges? And can India's strategic thought be traced from one of the earliest Indian texts – the *Mahabharata*? How does the pursuit of *dharma* influence strategic thought derived from the *Mahabharata*? How does *dharma* influence the concept and conduct of warfighting? Does the strategic thought that emerges from the *Mahabharata* echo in other similar texts such as the *Arthashastra* and the *Nitisara*? This book aims to explore these and other questions in the context of India and from the perspective of the wider subject of strategic thought. This has evolved as an interesting attempt in light of the doubts raised over decades regarding the lack of representative strategic thought from India, including rejecting the very idea of a unified political entity in history before the advent of British colonial rule.

Amartya Sen writes:

> One of the achievements to which British imperial theorists tended to give a good deal of emphasis was the role of the British in producing a *united* India. In this analysis, India was previously not one country at all, but a thoroughly divided land mass. It was the British empire, so the claim goes, that welded India into a nation. Winston Churchill even remarked that before the British came, there was no Indian nation. "India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the equator," he once said.[22]

It is remarkable to note the not-too-nuanced absence of even superficial understanding of India's civilisational past within the governing elite of the British government, which had directly supervised the economic ruin of a country in so short a period of history. As Sen notes, the "self-congratulatory" imperialistic concept of the "White Man's burden" highlighted by Kipling, was at variance with what the facts suggest. Life expectancy in India was barely at 32 years and adult literacy at 15 per cent in contrast to claims of enlightening the people of India.[23]

The British perspective was not isolated in its orientation. The absence of India as a nation-state before British rule was also supplemented by the notion that India was bereft of distinctive Indian strategic thought.[24]

In this context, the *Mahabharata* provides invaluable insights into Bharata as a unified entity and as the source of strategic thought that can be traced over centuries within the region. The fundamental elements that emerge from this epic on war, using force and statecraft also find resonance in the *Arthashastra* and the *Nitisara*. This evolutionary trend evolved over almost 2,000 years of subcontinental history and several aspects from these texts remain timeless in their application.

Layout of the Book

This book focusses on the strategic thought derived from the *Mahabharata*. The story itself provides the backdrop and illustrative guide for the analysis. Despite the popularity of the epic, the first chapter begins with a brief narrative for two reasons. One, this brings those unfamiliar with the text up to speed with the storyline. And two, it represents a summary of *The Critical*

Edition of the Mahabharata, thereby bringing the readers to a common text for further evaluation.

As stated earlier, *dharma* forms the foundational idea of the *Mahabharata*. This remains equally relevant and valid for deriving strategic thought from the narrative and prescriptive text. Section One of the book deals with two aspects of *dharma*. The second chapter highlights the diverse canvas where *dharma* is contextualised to understand its meaning. This includes its influence on personal, social, professional and organisational behaviour. The illustrative examples allow for a comprehensive assessment of *dharma* and further help define its characteristics. The following chapter reinforces its relevance and derives its attributes. These serve as the guiding principles for its application and understanding.

Krishna emerges as an island of clarity of thought, vision and effective execution of intent within an ocean of turmoil, indecision and confusion. He is without any doubt the central character of the epic, even as actions by several others contribute to the collective wisdom of the *Mahabharata*. The second section attempts to capture the essence of Krishna's strategic thought through his insight and actions. After a brief contextualisation in Chapter Two, Chapters Three and Four focus on his ability to influence actions before and during the war. This is followed by evaluating these chapters to derive strategic insights and understand his decision-making process. The final chapter in this section employs Krishna's messages and philosophy to derive an infinite approach. This is specifically related to soldiering and has accordingly been compared with contemporary challenges.

The first chapter of the last section introduces a framework for conceptualising wars and the utility of force based on examples from the *Mahabharata*. This chapter has been derived from an earlier paper, which has since been enlarged to take a deeper dive into the utilisation of force. The chapter debates the idea of war, its acceptability and the contradictions surrounding its conduct. It also documents the preparatory period during routine peace, immediately before a war and the conduct of war. The concept of *dharma yudhha* and its co-relation with "just war" has also been discussed.

The succeeding chapter in this section deals specifically with *Raja Dharma and Apad Dharma*. This is primarily based on the answers given by Bhishma

to Yudhishthira's questions on administering a kingdom, dealing with enemies and adverse conditions. The chapter reinforces the essence of the previous narrative and provides instructive and structured guidance that reflects the strategic insight of the period.

The final chapter attempts to answer the question of continuity in India's strategic thought. This is attempted through a comparative discussion on the *Mahabharata*, the *Arthashastra* and the *Nitisara*. Evaluating these three texts helps us understand the core constituents of strategic thinking during the period, including the subtle differences that emerged over time.

This book retains its focus on the strategic and the military domain through these chapters, with a conceptual backdrop of *dharma* as its philosophical and practical anchor. In several cases, terms and concepts derived from the *Mahabharata* can potentially become metaphors to describe situations and ideas that have their roots in Indian civilisational culture, but are universal in their application. This includes *dharma yudhha*, *chakra vyuha*, *raja dharma*, *apad dharma*, *nishkama karma* and *yoga kshema*, among others. All these terms have a literal meaning derived from the text. Beyond that, these terms can also explain the symbolic understanding of a given situation. This is especially true for the strategic vocabulary.

Chapter One

The Narrative

Most people from the Indian subcontinent are familiar with the *Mahabharata's* storyline. For many. it is simply a war between good and evil. For others, there is greater nuance to this sentiment when the characters and circumstances are evaluated. On the face of it, the *Mahabharata* is a fight between cousins. Five Pandavas fight 100 Kauravas, their cousins, who repeatedly manipulate events to deny the Pandavas their rightful kingdom. Eventually, it results in an 18-day war between them, with each side being supported by an array of friends, relatives, allies and warriors on the battlefield of Kurukshetra – a small modern-day city in Haryana, a state in northern India, not very far from the capital city of New Delhi.

This narrative is not focussed on the details of the war. Instead, beyond the basic story, the book aims to co-relate some of the major incidents of the epic to derive the tenets of Indian strategic thought. Those familiar with the text will also be aware of some of these incidents – the game of dice that leads to the humiliation of Droupadi and the banishment of the Pandavas into the jungles; Bhima's immense physical strength that allows him to kill several strong opponents such as Jarasandha; and Arjuna's remarkable prowess with the bow and arrow. This concise narration highlights some of the major incidents that shape the epic.

The *Mahabharata* in Brief

The *Mahabharata's* basic story can be prefaced with the accounts of several illustrious kings in a long lineage. However, that would make the narrative

complicated. Therefore, for easier understanding at this stage, a suitable beginning can be made through the journey of two brothers: Dhritarashtra and Pandu, who come from the same lineage. Dhritarashtra is blessed with 100 sons. This includes Duryodhana and Duhshasana amongst others. Pandu has three sons with Kunti – Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna, and two with Madri – Nakul and Sahadeva.[25]

While Dhritarashtra is the elder of the two, since he is blind, he cannot be made the king. Instead, Pandu is chosen to sit on the throne. However, after he gives up the kingdom to live the life of an ascetic, Dhritarashtra becomes the king. Vidura serves as his foremost adviser, given his profound knowledge of *dharma*.

After Pandu's death, his five children, the Pandavas, are brought to Hastinapur, the capital of the Kuru dynasty. Here, they are received by Dhritarashtra. Along with the 100 children of Dhritarashtra, the five Pandavas are also taught the *Vedas* and skills at arms. Each of them hones a special talent, which becomes their recognised speciality. This training is imparted by a well-regarded sage and skilful warrior, Acharya Drona, who is accorded the highest respect and regard for his knowledge and wisdom.

The childhood of the Pandavas and Kauravas is not uneventful, given the competitive relationship they share. The *Mahabharata* precisely documents the jealousy that Duryodhana harbours even in their early years. The epic quotes Duryodhana thus:

> Kunti's son Vrikodara, the second of the Pandavas, is the best in strength. I must find some trick so as to kill him. Then I will overpower his younger brother and his elder brother Yudhishthira. I will tie them up and reign as the sovereign of the earth.[26]

Such repeated attempts of Duryodhana, despite assistance from his maternal uncle, Shakuni, do not succeed.[27] However, they do alert the Pandavas of the ulterior motives of Duryodhana, his brothers and Shakuni at an early stage of their lives.

Acharya Drona asks the Pandavas and Kauravas to showcase their skills at a public event after completing their training. One by one, each one of them enters the arena and exhibits his skills. Arjuna, in particular, mesmerises the audience with his talent and command over the bow and arrow.

As the event ends, Karna enters the arena on a chariot.[28] He displays every skill that Arjuna has shown with equal capability. Further, he challenges Arjuna to a duel. However, when asked for his royal credentials, Karna is crestfallen given his humble lineage. Duryodhana, nevertheless, seizes the opportunity to find an equal to Arjuna and immediately speaks on his behalf. He anoints Karna as the king of Anga, attempting to counter Arjuna. In exchange for Duryodhana's gracious gesture, an indebted Karna offers his friendship and loyalty to Duryodhana for life.[29] Incidentally, Karna is born with natural body armour as a blessing from the Sun God. This subsequently emerges as an important factor during the Mahabharata war.

The rivalry between the Kauravas and Pandavas continues after they return from training. Duryodhana gets around his father to send the Pandavas to Varanavata to witness a festival in honour of Lord Shiva in a conspiracy to kill the Pandavas there. On reaching their designated house, the Pandavas note its construction with lac and fat.[30] In a bid to save themselves, they get a tunnel dug from within the premises to enable their escape.

Resultantly, even as the house is burned down, the Pandavas escape to the jungle. They continue to remain there in hiding for some time. During their stay, Bhima encounters the demon Hidimba and kills him. However, the demon's sister chooses Bhima as her husband and through their union, they are blessed with a son, Ghatotkacha, who grows up to possess immense powers.

While the Pandavas are in the forest, they are told of Droupadi's *svayamvara*, where the most eligible warrior will win her hand in marriage. The Pandavas travel to Panchala, the kingdom of King Drupada, disguised as Brahmanas to participate in the *svayamvara*.[31] The assembled kings are asked to string a bow and shoot at a target through a hole. When everyone fails, Arjuna achieves it without any difficulty. Accordingly, he is granted Droupadi's hand by her father.

As the young princes come of age, it is time for them to shoulder greater responsibilities. King Dhritarashtra grants half the kingdom to the Pandavas on the advice of senior ministers such as Bhishma, Drona and Vidura. This goes contrary to Duryodhana's desire to emerge as the sole claimant to the throne, further reinforcing his hate for his cousins.[32] The Pandavas establish

their capital at Indraprastha. Shri Krishna's role becomes prominent at this stage of the *Mahabharata*. He is a king of the Yadu dynasty and is blessed with divine powers. Over time, his presence at critical junctures and resultant influence on events becomes evident.

After the establishment of a magnificent palace for the Pandavas, a considered decision is taken to undertake a royal sacrifice – *rajasuya*, which would with its culmination, establish Yudhishthira as an emperor after achieving suzerainty over other kings.

Before the customary ceremony, with Yudhishthira at his capital, his four brothers set out in all four cardinal directions to seek the subjugation of other kings. Arjuna moves out towards the north, Bhima east, Sahadeva to the south and Nakula towards the west.

It is important to reinforce the importance of the forays made by the Pandavas as an endeavour to establish Yudhishthira as an emperor. Yudhishthira's endeavour is relevant from the perspective of the storyline. It is equally pertinent to mark a 3,000-year-old successful attempt by a ruler to establish his influence over a large swathe of territory. Even though it was not centrally administrated, the king gained suzerainty over the entire region. This gains significance in light of repeated references to India not being a homogeneous unit until the British rule unified it and instilled the concept of one nation.

The Pandavas succeed in establishing their sway across the country. They prepare for the *rajasuya*, at Indraprastha. Several kings are invited to witness the great ceremony. Amongst the invitees are the Kauravas as well.

At the ceremony, an attempt is made to interrupt the event. King Shishupala expresses his vociferous opposition to Krishna being honoured as the foremost amongst those present. Eventually, this leads to Krishna beheading Shishupala after he crosses all limits of behavioural norms.[33]

When the *rajasuya* ceremony ends, Duryodhana becomes completely demoralised and disheartened. The prosperity and progress of the Pandavas, their conquests and their opulent palace are unacceptable to him. He confides in Shakuni his disillusionment and shares his disenchanted suicidal thoughts.[34]

Shakuni, a wily and scheming character, remains an integral element of Duryodhana's attempts at dispossessing the Pandavas of their kingdom and making repeated attempts on their lives. However, unlike Duryodhana's bull-headed approach to resolving issues, he prefers to employ deceit.

A frustrated Duryodhana tells his uncle:

> O king! If you permit, I will kill them with you and the other maharathas. When I have conquered them, the entire earth will be mine, and all the lords of the earth and the sabha with all its great riches.[35]

To which Shakuni replies:

> With the use of force, the masses of gods cannot defeat in battle Dhananjaya, Vasudeva, Bhimsena, Yudhishthira, Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupada and his son. They are maharathas, great archers, skilled in use of weapons and invincible in battle. O king! But I know the means through which Yudhishthira himself can be conquered. Listen and act accordingly.[36]

Shakuni suggests to Duryodhana that Yudhishthira despite being a keen dice player does not have the requisite expertise. According to custom, if challenged to play the game, he cannot refuse the invitation. And Shakuni, who considers himself the very best at it, can defeat Yudhishthira while seeking a bet on his kingdom.

Shakuni makes an emotional plea to Dhritarashtra, citing Duryodhana's condition, and the king despite advice to the contrary by his adviser Vidura, agrees to go ahead with the invitation to Yudhishthira and his brothers.

The sequence of events is predictable to the extent that Shakuni defeats Yudhishthira successively with each throw of the dice, even as the latter places successive bets using every conceivable material possession, including his kingdom. Ultimately, he loses his brothers as well. This leads to the turning point of the *Mahabharata*, wherein, Yudhishthira is asked to place a bet with his wife Droupadi at stake. He does so and loses her too.

The seething Kauravas are blinded by their hatred for the Pandavas. In a rash decision, Duryodhana orders Duhshasana, his younger brother, to bring Droupadi, in the presence of all the kings and courtiers present. Despite her

undergoing menses and being covered in a single cloth, Droupadi is dragged into the court by her hair. The inability of her husbands and all elderly and influential advisers present to protect her honour leads to an unfortunate sequence of events, which becomes a major factor in the eventual war. Earlier, Droupadi marries the five Pandava brothers when their mother, Kunti, mistakes her for alms received and asks them to "share it together".

Duhshasana attempts to disrobe her. However, divine intervention saves Droupadi with her robe continuing to regenerate itself to save her from dishonour. Ultimately, Dhritarashtra intervenes and returns the kingdom to Yudhishthira.

After the Pandavas leave, Duryodhana corners Dhritarashtra and accuses him of disregarding his interests. Goaded by Shakuni, he pleads with his father to recall the Pandavas for yet another game of dice.

Dhritarashtra, despite being cautioned again, agrees to do so and in this second round, a single game is planned. Shakuni says, "There is a single stake of exile in the forest. Whether you or we lose, we will live in the forest."[37] According to the condition, whoever loses, will spend 12 years in the forest and the 13th year in hiding. And if found during the 13th year, they will have to repeat their stay of 12 years in the forest.

The result is predictable; the Pandavas lose and prepare to move to the forest. As they leave, the ominous signs of a future war become evident. On being humiliated by Duhshasana, Bhima said, "O Duhshasana! Cruel, harsh and rough words are possible for you. Who else will boast of riches obtained through deceit? If he does not rip apart your breast and drink your blood in battle, Parth Vrikodara will not go to the worlds attained by those with good deeds. In front of all archers I will kill the sons of Dhritarashtra in battle."[38]

During the 12 years in the jungle, the Pandavas make the best use of their time to receive knowledge from several brahmanas. This contributes to their intellectual development and understanding of *dharma*. They also prepare themselves for an impending battle, especially Arjuna, who utilises the opportunity to seek the blessings of Lord Indra, his father, to gain access to his special weapons (Arjuna and his brothers were born through divine conception to Pandu and Kunti)

At the commencement of the 13th year, the Pandavas disguise themselves and hide in the kingdom of Virata. They think of suitable profiles to conceal their real identity. Yudhishthira decides to join the king's assembly as a brahmana called Kanka. Ironically, he proposes to use his knowledge of dice and gambling as a special skill. Bhima chooses to become the kitchen superintendent and employ his skills as a cook. He takes on the name Ballava. Arjuna proposes to become a eunuch in the king's court to hide the marks left by his bow's string with clothes and ornaments, and his name will be Brihannada or Brihannala. Nakul wants to become the keeper of horses and names himself Granthika and Sahadeva wants to tend to cows and adopts the name Tantipala. Droupadi decides to become a maidservant in the chamber of the king's wife and takes the name Sairandhri.[39]

The Pandavas and Droupadi remain in disguise for one year, despite the challenges faced during the period. The gravest is an attempt by the powerful Kichaka, a general of the Matsya kingdom, to molest Droupadi. Resultantly, Bhima kills him through deception. As a result, King Virata is rendered weak by Kichaka's absence. This induces the Kauravas to attack Virata and loot his cattle, a prized possession of any ruler.

The actions of Kichaka, therefore, indirectly lead to the first military clash between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, with Arjuna agreeing to assist King Virata's young son Uttara as his charioteer. However, when Uttara sees the arraignment of great warriors, including Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna and Duryodhana opposing him, he realises the implications of his false bravado and attempts to run away from the battlefield. Arjuna, until then disguised as a eunuch, restrains him and reveals his true identity. He asks Uttara to become his charioteer, while he takes on the complete Kaurava army by himself.

When Arjuna reveals his true form on the battlefield, questions are raised regarding the Pandavas completing the 13th year in disguise. Bhishma, grandfather to the Kurus, confirms its successful conclusion in exile, contradicting the doubts raised.[40]

What follows is a fierce battle between Arjuna and the great Kaurava warriors. This military engagement reinforces Arjuna's martial prowess and

he successfully defeats them despite their best attempts and consequently gets the captured cattle released.

The Pandavas return to King Virata's palace, where their true identity is revealed. King Virata proposes the creation of a marital bond between them, and as a result, his daughter is married to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu.

In the period that follows, attempts are made by the Pandavas to get their kingdom back from the Kauravas. Emissaries are sent by both sides to work out a resolution. However, contrary to counsel by Dhritarashtra's senior advisers, Duryodhana rules out returning anything to the Pandavas.

With time, it becomes increasingly evident that war is inevitable. This leads to attempts to seek alignments and allies during the impending war. Both sides vie for Krishna's assistance. He gives the option of his divine army, the *Narayanas*, considered one of the finest available, on the one hand, and his presence, without active participation in the war, on the other. Predictably, Arjuna, given his admiration and respect for Krishna, chooses him. Duryodhana, on the other hand, is happy with this choice, as he gets control over Krishna's army, which, from his perspective, is a more valuable resource in war.

A last-ditch attempt at reconciliation is made when Krishna is sent as an emissary by the Pandavas to Dhritarashtra's court. However, his attempts at seeking reconciliation fail. Duryodhana, addressing Krishna says:

> This kingdom should not have been given away. O Janardana! But when I was a child and not independent, it was given away, out of ignorance or fear. O descendent of the Vrishni lineage! But it cannot be obtained by the Pandavas. O mighty-armed one! O Keshava! As long as I am alive, I will not give to the Pandavas even that much of land that can be held on the point of a sharp needle.[41]

Krishna attempts to influence Karna, whom Duryodhana considers the mainstay of his war effort against the Pandavas, before leaving. Krishna informs Karna that, in reality, he is the eldest of the Pandava brothers. Further, if he returns to the Pandavas, Karna can rule the world. Karna, however, refuses to let go of the relationships he has invested in over the years. This includes the honour and position Duryodhana has bestowed upon him and the love of his immediate family.

As Krishna returns, preparations for war commence in all earnest.

Both sides reach the battlefield of Kurukshetra. One of the most significant aspects of the war relates to Arjuna's dilemma of fighting his elders. The prospect of killing them for the sake of a kingdom challenges the very idea of war. Demoralised by the prospect, Arjuna refuses to fight against them. This leads to Krishna's profound explanation of how a warrior should address such a dilemma. This detailed description is a part of the *Mahabharata*, though it has also received widespread acclaim and readership as a standalone text in the form of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Having clarified his apprehensions and doubts, Arjuna is ready to fulfil his responsibility as a warrior and takes up arms again to fight the Kaurava army arraigned against them.

Just before the war commences, Yudhishthira walks up to each of his elders on the opposing side to seek their blessings. His elders appreciate his actions, bless him and wish him victory on the battlefield. These seemingly contradictory reactions on both sides illustrate how these individuals successfully follow their bounden duty, despite the obvious contradictions that involve their relatives and pupils. Consequently, Bhishma and other elders, such as Drona, bless them with victory, and subsequently, fight them with all their might on the battlefield.

After 10 days of bloody fighting on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, a major blow is dealt to the Kauravas when Bhishma is brought down in battle. This holds great significance for both sides since he not only leads the Kaurava army in war but is also considered unbeatable.

This is followed by yet another major incident on the 13th day of battle. Drona, who takes charge of the Kaurava army after the Pandavas neutralise Bhishma, arraigns his forces in a *chakra vyuha*, which can only be entered by Arjuna or his son Abhimanyu. Drona asks Duryodhana to create a diversion for Arjuna to enable him to focus on the other Pandavas. With this situation arising, Yudhishthira has no other option but to ask Abhimanyu to penetrate the Kauravas' defences. It is decided that the rest of the Pandava generals will protect him while he undertakes this task.

Abhimanyu fights through the mass of Kaurava soldiers and generals, valiantly taking on seasoned campaigners. However, the Pandavas are stalled

by the Kaurava general Jayadratha. This eventually leads to Abhimanyu being surrounded by several Kaurava generals. They collectively become the cause of his death, an unfair contest wherein six of them fight him simultaneously, thereby violating the rules of a *dharma yudhha*.

This causes great consternation and anger in the Pandava camp. Resultantly, Arjuna vows to kill Jayadratha the next day before sunset and the closure of the day's battle. This he achieves on the 14th day with the guidance of Krishna.

On the 15th day, the Kauravas are challenged by the might of Ghatotkacha, Bhima's son. He causes widespread death and destruction and creates a situation that forces Karna to resort to the use of his divine spear, which he has received from Lord Indra and has saved for killing Arjuna. However, Ghatotkacha's actions force Karna's hand. This also provides Arjuna with safety from the impact of the deadly weapon.

On the 16th day, Drona becomes the primary target of the Pandava battlefield strategy, given the destruction he is causing. Despite their best efforts, the Pandavas find it beyond their capacity to kill him. Consequently, they plan to share the news of Ashvatthama's death with Drona to demoralise him. Ashvatthama is Drona's son's name, as is an elephant's, who is present on the battlefield. In reality, it is the elephant that has been killed, however, when Yudhishthira, known for his righteousness, confirms Ashvatthama's death to Drona, he does so without clearly indicating who he means. Drona is disillusioned by the news, creating an opportunity to kill him.

The 17th day witnesses the death of Karna, who has taken over the reins of the Kaurava army after Drona's death. For the Pandavas, he is the last major obstacle to achieving complete victory. The ensuing duel between Karna and Arjuna raises questions on *dharma* and righteousness. During the clash between the two, when Karna shoots a lethal arrow at Arjuna, Krishna presses the chariot down with his foot, leading the arrow to strike the ornament on Arjuna's head, thereby saving his life.

Subsequently, during the final duel, Karna's chariot's wheel is stuck in the ground. At this crucial stage of the battle, Krishna goads Arjuna to strike Karna. He cites the multiple acts of *adharma* committed by Karna, including participating in the act of dishonouring Droupadi.

Arjuna kills Karna, creating the opportunity to seek revenge against Duryodhana. Duryodhana realises his isolation and leaves the battlefield to hide in a pond. He is discovered by the Pandavas and Krishna and is challenged to a duel. He chooses to fight Bhima with his mace. This leads to a fiercely contested fight between the two. Krishna realises that Bhima, despite his superior strength, cannot defeat Duryodhana, who is arguably a more accomplished fighter. He indicates to Arjuna that, contrary to the existing rules of mace fighting, Bhima should target Duryodhana's thigh if he intends to kill him. Bhima follows this signal and succeeds in bringing down his feared adversary.

The news of Duryodhana's fight with Bhima reaches Ashvatthama. He is convinced that the Pandavas have employed deceit to win the war. This includes the killing of his father Drona, Bhishma and now Duryodhana. He decides to hit them when they are defenceless in their camp at night to take revenge.

The time and opportunity of Ashvatthama's attack coincides with the Pandavas' absence from the camp. Given the surprise he achieves, Ashvatthama is successful in killing a large number of famed warriors. This includes Dhrishtadyumna, Droupadi's brother and commander of the Pandava army, Shikhandi, who is responsible for Bhishma's death as well as all five sons of Droupadi.

The carnage is complete, and the Pandavas are devastated. On Droupadi's insistence, they chase Ashvatthama into the forest. In a bid to defend himself, Ashvatthama releases his divine weapon. Arjuna also releases his *Brahmashira* in response. However, having been informed of its devastating impact, Arjuna recalls it. Ashvatthama, unable to do so, instead, directs it towards the womb of Uttara's, (Abhimanyu's wife) foetus.

Furious at Ashvatthama's actions, Krishna banishes him to a life of isolation and constant pain. As expected, Uttara gives birth to a stillborn child, who is brought back to life by Krishna through his divine abilities. This is Abhimanyu and Uttara's son Parikshit, who lives on to carry forward the lineage of the Pandavas.

Krishna encourages Yudhishthira to seek Bhishma's guidance before he gives up his life at a designated time. Bhishma guides the Pandavas by outlining the duties, responsibilities and path a king should follow.

The *Mahabharata* comes to a close with the death of Krishna and the Pandavas seeking their way to the abode of the gods. Yudhishthira is the only one who successfully makes it there, with the rest falling by the wayside as a result of individual limitations.

SECTION I

DHARMA AS THE FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC THOUGHT

Chapter Two

Contextualising Dharma

The concept of *dharma* and its interpretation form the essence of the *Mahabharata*. *Dharma* is evoked during conflicts between warriors and armies and when confronted with decision-making dilemmas to seek the right course of action.

Many a scholar have reflected upon *dharma* as a term. V.S. Sukthankar, the first general editor of *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata*, delivered a series of lectures that discuss important aspects of the *Mahabharata*. Amongst these, his perspectives on *dharma* stand out as an outstanding source for understanding the term.[42] According to Sukthankar, one of the finest definitions of *dharma* is given by Bhishma while answering Yudhishthira in the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*.

> Dharma says Bhishma, was ordained for the advancement and growth of all creatures; therefore that which leads to advancement and growth is Dharma. Dharma was ordained for restricting creatures from injuring one another; therefore that which prevents injury to creatures is Dharma. Dharma is so called because it upholds all creatures; therefore that is Dharma which is capable of upholding all creatures.[43]

This suggests three functions of *dharma:* advancement or growth, protection and finally sustaining the desired level of conduct. In pursuit of this objective, different terms such as duty, righteousness, customs and responsibility, amongst others, are used.

Bimal Krishna Matilal makes an astute observation regarding the concept of *dharma*. "My claim so far has been that the dharma tradition developed through an attempt at rational criticism of itself."[44] This was facilitated by

the texts not being propagated as the words of God and therefore beyond critique. This allowed most concepts, including *dharma* to be debated and rationalised over time.

Svadharma, for example, has been related to an individual's *varnashrama* (more on this will be discussed later). Yet, Matilal quotes instances from the *Mahabharata* regarding *varna* to reinforce the concept of rationalisation and self-critique. He quotes Yudhishthira's discourse on *dharma* with King Nahusa and further argues, "When asked to define brahminhood, Yudhishthira said emphatically that what constituted brahminhood was not birth but a collection of moral virtues such as truthfulness, generosity, forgiveness, goodness, kindness." Quoting Krishna from the *Bhagavad Gita*, he adds, "I have created the four varnas in reliance upon the division of qualities and actions."[45]

Matilal illustrates that the concept of *dharma* comes from a passage from the *Manava-dharmasastra* or the *Manu-samhita*, which reads:

> Listen [my pupils], I shall describe *dharma* – it is always honoured by the honest and the wise [of the learned]; it is followed by those who are above attachment [greed] and aversion [hatred]; and it is approved by their hearts.[46]

This implies following the Vedic teachings or as later described as 'that which is conducive to good.' This was rationalised as something that does not harm others. It also implies giving up personal greed or hatred. Finally, it suggests that *dharma* must "meet the approval of the heart of the honest and the wise".[47]

The inherent intent of this civilisational ethos may not provide a pointed answer in this regard, yet scholars in ancient times as well as in more contemporaneous times continue to critique the concept of *dharma*, especially as related to the *Mahabharata*. Arguably then, concepts like *dharma* will possibly remain open-ended within the broader guidance provided by various commentators over centuries. Both examples of Bhishma's definition and the quote from *Manu-samhita*, including the debate around it, reinforce this conclusion. This further reinforces that *dharma* was and remains a guidance that dilemmas must ultimately be resolved by individuals and societies accordingly.

More recently, Gurcharan Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* centred around this very theme. Not surprisingly, Das acknowledges the untranslatability of the word *dharma*. He says:

> Duty, goodness, justice, law and custom all have something to do with it, but they all fall short. Dharma refers to 'balance' – both moral balance and cosmic balance. It is the order and balance within each human being which is also reflected in the order of the cosmos… It is the moral law that sustains society, the individual and the world.[48]

The term balance is a good starting point to attempt a deeper understanding of the term and its implications. For Das, it brings three actors together in a complex relationship: the individual, society and the world. *Dharma*, according to him, facilitates the creation of an order that intertwines all three.

Bibek Debroy, in his translation of *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata,* also provides a brief understanding of *dharma*. He underscores changes in its meaning based on the context in which it is used. Accordingly, he describes it as, "Depending on the context, dharma is translated as law, virtue, or religion. None of these captures the exact nuance of dharma holding things up and dharma has therefore been retained in this translation."[49] In essence, for Debroy, who saw its usage in every conceivable way in the *Mahabharata*, *dharma* as a term is context-sensitive and its meaning can vary accordingly, with no single word adequately explaining it in its entirety.

Building on his argument, Debroy illustrates how *dharma's* pursuit often raises more options than one for a similar situation. And, under the prevailing circumstances, it is not a question of right or wrong, unless it is a case of blatant *adharma,* as seen in the case of Duryodhana. Rather, it is more of a judgment call by an individual called upon to make the decision. He gives the example of Bhishma practising celibacy and Arjuna taking it up for a limited period. Both are confronted with a similar situation, wherein women approach them to seek union. This was considered acceptable as part of their *dharma*.[50] While Arjuna accepts the proposal, Bhishma does not. Can one be considered right and the other wrong? Or is it a decision taken by an individual under competing circumstances and the comparative consequences envisaged? Bhishma sees the action in contravention of the more important

dharma of living up to his promise before his father's marriage with Satyavati.[51] Arjuna has no such constraints placed upon him, which allows him the freedom to break the vow of celibacy.

If *dharma* as a term, concept, idea or virtue cannot be translated, perhaps the next best option is to seek the context in which it has been used in the *Mahabharata*. As Debroy indicates, this provides a contextual reference to its implied meaning.

The reference to *dharma* alone is not enough in the context of the *Mahabharata*, especially when its application is unmistakably apparent. That is, when individuals choose to follow the unambiguous and righteous option. However, the reference to *dharma* becomes more challenging when the line between right and wrong becomes hazy. This is especially the case during the period immediately before, during and finally, after the war. During these times, the laid-down guidelines for the conduct of war are questioned and at times, even rejected. Actions are often explained through past events. On the face of it, these can be classified as *adharma*, rooted in a deceitful tactical ploy. However, often, such indiscretions become imperative to achieve the larger strategic objective guided by *dharma*. To that extent, the *Mahabharata* represents a realistic understanding of seeking solutions to complex challenges. The text is deeply embedded in strong moral moorings, yet its context allows the requisite flexibility while implementing the dictates of *dharma*. This makes the context and text of the *Mahabharata* equally relevant for practitioners and strategic planners in contemporary times. It would probably remain so in the future as well.

Dharma is therefore neither a definite nor a defined concept with demarcated boundaries that provide a path for a practitioner to emulate or replicate. The moral dilemmas in the *Mahabharata* repeatedly suggest the importance of guidelines. Yet, these guidelines allow individuals to make decisions based on how the circumstances are interpreted.

In addition to the basic story of the *Mahabharata*, it is the didactic element accompanying it that attempts to provide an explanatory contextualisation. At times, it seems to be a diversion from the main text. Conversely, this diversion provides an illustrative and explanatory perspective for the reader. Examples from earlier times, stories highlighting relevant

lessons and characters who may have confronted similar situations provide useful anecdotal value.

The definitions of *dharma* suggest its varying meanings and applications. As an illustration, *svadharma* refers to the inherent *dharma* of an individual based on their role and responsibilities. Accordingly, the righteous conduct of a king, including his responsibility, is termed *Raja Dharma*. Similarly, *Kshatriya Dharma* refers to the responsibility of a warrior. *Putra Dharma* indicates the responsibility of a son, and so on.

Illustrative Examples of *Dharma*

Much before the times of the Pandavas, the *Mahabharata* highlights the story of King Duhshanta, his wife Shakuntala and their son Bharata. King Bharata's possible association with the naming of the Indian geographical landmass has repeatedly been reinforced throughout history.[52] In the context of *dharma*, the limited focus on this incident is on the actions of his father Duhshanta.

King Duhshanta gets married to Shakuntala in a forest on the condition that their son will become the heir apparent to the king. After his departure, she gives birth to a radiant son Bharata. Soon thereafter, she visits his court with her child for the first time to seek his recognition as the heir to Duhshanta. However, the king refuses to recognise her. Distraught at his falsehood, she says, "There is no dharma higher than the truth and nothing is superior to truth."[53] A divine voice announces the righteousness of Shakuntala's claim in the court. Duhshanta immediately accepts Shakuntala and his son saying that he knew the truth all along but wanted divine sanction for his actions to convince the people of the righteousness of his actions. "Duhshanta also paid homage and accepted his wife according to the rites of dharma."[54] Bharata is instated as the heir apparent. "He conquered all the kings of the earth and brought them under his sway. He always trod the path of dharma and attained supreme fame. The powerful king was known as Chakravarti."[55]

It is evident from the incidents of Duhshanta, Shakuntala and Bharata that *dharma* has been used to convey different meanings. Its interpretation can be defined by the context in which it is used and the implied meaning it

can have. In this particular case, it varies from *dharma* as a virtue, to its association with a cultural convention. And finally, *dharma* has been used to denote righteousness. In addition, Duhshanta feels that as a king, it is more important that the decision to accept Shakuntala has the approval of his people. This is considered more important from the perspective of his official position rather than merely from his personal capacity.

Debroy quotes yet another instance, wherein, after the Pandavas' collective marriage to Droupadi, it is decided that whenever one of them is closeted with her, no other would enter the chamber. Any violation of this arrangement would lead to an exile for 12 years. A situation arises wherein a Brahmana approaches Arjuna to save his cattle from thieves. Arjuna's weapons are in the same room where Droupadi and Yudhishthira are present. Arjuna is faced with an obvious dilemma.

> This ascetic brahmana's riches are being robbed. It is certainly my duty to dry his tears. If I do not protect someone who is weeping at our door, the great *adharma* of negligence will taint the king…But it is also certain that if I enter the room without the permission of King Ajatashatru, I will do him a great injury and I must be banished to the forest. There will either be great adharma or death in the forest. But dharma must be upheld, even if there is destruction of the body.[56]

Eventually, Arjuna decides to enter the room and, having collected his weapons, successfully protects the Brahmana's cattle.[57] However, despite Yudhishthira understanding his dilemma, he undertakes penance for violating their mutual understanding. In this instance, the question of pursuing *dharma* despite its accompanying implications, becomes an interesting case study.

On several occasions during the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma emerges as the voice of reason and righteousness. Having abdicated what could have rightfully been his right to the throne, he displays a detached yet objective approach to decision-making in the pursuit of *dharma*. In doing so, Bhishma advises Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and the Pandavas. This commences from their childhood, during their education, in times of war and even as he lies on his deathbed. There are exceptions to this reality as well, which though few, become instrumental in shaping the course of the *Mahabharata*.

There are far too many instances that can be associated with Bhishma's quest to seek the path defined by *dharma*. It may not be feasible to highlight each example. However, an attempt is made to describe a few in brief. This reinforces the idea of *dharma* through its various connotations and simultaneously outlines the challenges that came up, given the dilemma that accompanies it.

Bhishma's actual name is Devavrata. He is given the name Bhishma, or fearsome, because of his selfless pledge of celibacy for his father's happiness.

The first instance relates to the sacrifice made by Bhishma to fulfil his father's desire. Shantanu, Bhishma's father is near the River Yamuna when he sees a beautiful lady. He is attracted to her and wants to know who she is. The lady replies, "I belong to the fishermen tribe. Following the dharma prescribed for us, I ply a boat on the instructions of my father, who is the king of the fishermen."[58] Shantanu goes to her father to ask for her hand in marriage. Even though her father is delighted with the proposition, he sets a condition for acceptance that requires that their son, born through their union, becomes the heir to the throne after Shantanu.

The king cannot accept the suggestion since his son Devavrata is not only elder but is also considered the most appropriate, given his widely acclaimed and established qualities. A dejected king comes back home and remains heartbroken. Devavrata notes his father's sullen mood and finds out the reason for this state. He goes to the king of fishermen and accepts that his daughter's son would instead be king. He also promises to take the vow of *brahmacharya* so that he will never have an offspring and thereby, a competing heir to the throne. The fisherman "told the one who had dharma in his heart that he was prepared to give. From the sky, *apsaras*, gods and *rishis* rained down flowers and said, 'He is Bhishma'."[59]

These retellings indicate how *dharma* is used in different contexts to suggest alternative meanings. For the lady, rowing the boat as an assigned responsibility is the pursuit of *dharma*, whereas for Bhishma, in this particular incidence, sacrificing his claim and married life emerges as a challenging course of renunciation in the path of *dharma*.

Moving forward, after a series of incidents including an attempt to burn the Pandavas in the house of lac, their days of hiding in a forest and their

marriage to Droupadi, when the time comes for them to return to Hastinapur, Duryodhana and his close aides, including Karna, are not in favour of giving a part of the kingdom to them. However, Bhishma renders advice to Duryodhana and says:

> O tiger among men! Peacefully give them half of the kingdom. That will be the best for everyone. If you act in any other way, no good will come out of it. There is no doubt that you will be covered with dishonour.
>
> Try to preserve your good reputation. A good reputation is the source of supreme strength. It is said that a man who has lost his reputation, lives in vain. O son of Gandhari! O descendent of Kuru! As long as a man's good reputation lasts, he does not die. He is destroyed when his good reputation is lost. Therefore, follow the dharma that is worthy of the Kuru lineage.[60]

Here, Bhishma calls upon Duryodhana to follow *dharma* by honouring the custom of sharing the kingdom with his cousins in the best tradition of their lineage. He cautions against opting for war to divest them of their share of the kingdom.

Amongst the most defining moments of the *Mahabharata* is the game of dice played between Shakuni and Yudhishthira. This game represents a turning point in the history of the Kuru lineage. It leads to the Pandavas being denied their kingdom and possessions and consequently, to Droupadi's dishonour. The core of its initiation is marked by *adharma*. The failure to reach the right decision by those who stand for *dharma* stands out as the major reason for the resulting disaster right through the game and its immediate aftermath. And therefore, the question that arises is: Why did some of the most selfless and righteous individuals fail to enforce justice and stop its catastrophic consequences?

Even before the game of dice commences, Yudhishthira makes his disagreement with dice playing apparent to Shakuni. He indicates that "dishonest gambling is evil". He adds that there is "no valour" in gambling, nor is it "good policy". Yudhishthira quotes the sages Asita-Devala to suggest that "it is a sin to play with deceitful gamblers". He adds, "It is best to win a battle through dharma, in which case, gambling is sanctioned."[61]

Shakuni's rulebook suggests quite the opposite. His intent while rolling the dice becomes apparent when he says:

> O Yudhishthira! The learned triumph over the non-learned only through trickery. This is how the wise triumph over the stupid, but people don't call it trickery. In approaching me for the game, if you think that I will resort to trickery, if that is your fear, then refrain from the game.[62]

This conversation indicates that Yudhishthira knows of the possible machinations that are likely to be at play during the game. He also understands the reason for placing Shakuni at the opposing end of gameplay. However, he chooses to follow what he sees as the right approach.

> Yudhishthira replied, "O king! Once challenged, I will not withdraw. This is the vow I have taken."[63]

Yudhishthira's acceptance to play the game of dice can be attributed to two factors. His inability to refuse once invited, as mentioned above, is one. The other relates to his addiction to the game despite not being the most skilled at it.[64] However, in the context of the game, the former is given precedence since it is explicitly discussed as the reason for his inability to refuse to play.

The following events, briefly described earlier, lead Yudhishthira to lose all his possessions, including his brothers, himself and eventually their wife. Vidura is the only one present at the venue who actively opposes the events. He is not only Dhritarashtra's cousin brother, but is also an adviser and sounding board for the king. Vidura is also considered wise and an ardent follower of *dharma*.

Vidura makes two important points after the first round of gambling is completed with Shakuni emerging as the victor. He blames Duryodhana for orchestrating the gambling match and indicates its disastrous impact. He suggests that the king give up on Duryodhana for the larger good of the Kuru lineage, which is in danger of being destroyed because of the trickery at play. Vidura's wisdom is profound when he says:

> For the sake of a family, a man should be sacrificed. For the sake of a village, a family should be sacrificed. For the sake of a country, a

> village should be sacrificed. For the sake of the soul, the earth should be sacrificed.[65]

After Duryodhana censures Vidura for his hate towards him, Vidura stands his ground firmly and indicates the importance and value of someone capable of giving unbiased and rational advice. He says:

> It is rare to find those who render unpleasant and right advice. He who sticks to the path of dharma and offers advice to his lord, regardless of whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, however unpleasant, is a true aide to the king.[66]

Vidura describes the *dharma* of an adviser and reinforces the ability to render unbiased advice without fear or favour. His role as a righteous leader stands out amongst all the elders and senior statesmen in the court.

After Yudhishthira loses Droupadi in the final play of the dice, Duryodhana sends an attendant to call her. At this stage, she asks Yudhishthira if he first lost himself or Droupadi in the game of dice. Yudhishthira fails to answer the question. After Droupadi is dragged into the gathering by Duryodhana's brother Duhshasana, an angry Droupadi says, "Shame! The descendants of the Bharata lineage have lost their *dharma* and their knowledge of the way of the kshatriyas… There is certainly no longer substance in Drona, Bhishma and in the great souled one."[67]

Bhishma expresses his helplessness in answering the question posed by Droupadi and says, "O fortunate one! Since the ways of dharma are subtle. I cannot properly resolve the question you have posed."[68] He considers a woman the property of her husband. And since Yudhishthira, himself an apostle of *dharma,* has accepted this loss, Bhishma feels helpless and fails to protest against the obvious injustice.

Droupadi's question is not only profound in terms of the legal position of her status, it is but also more unnerving for those present when viewed from a moral perspective. The incident emerges as the biggest challenge faced by the proponents of *dharma* in the *Mahabharata*. It threatens to unravel centuries of traditions, customs, norms and behavioural expectations that guide *dharma* and its pursuit. It is therefore not surprising to subsequently find that this act of *adharma* becomes the basis for rules and barriers to be

broken. It creates circumstances that question the limitations of *dharma* as perceived from its narrow interpretations. And eventually, it allows for a more realistic and practical understanding of its tenets when faced with the onslaught of *adharma*.

These actions precipitated by Duryodhana and executed by Shakuni and Duryodhana's younger brother Duhshasana become synonymous with the employment of grave *adharma* during the Mahabharata war. In many ways, these actions indict the onlookers, especially those with the power and influence to stop them. It brings in the aspect of reciprocity to *adharma*. While the salience of *dharma* in every aspect of life is reinforced repeatedly, the text discusses employing deceit to counter *adharma*. This, however, is acceptable, while remaining within the guidance prescribed for *dharma*. It will be discussed later in this chapter at length with specific examples.

After the Pandavas are exiled into the forest, they get opportunities to evaluate the incidents that led to the humiliation of Droupadi and the loss of their kingdom. Unsurprisingly, Droupadi comes out strongly against their approach, and the resultant unfair treatment meted out to them, even as those who conspired are rewarded. She is critical of the creator for benefitting Duryodhana, "who lowers dharma and transgresses what the virtuous sacred texts say".[69]

Yudhishthira's reply sums up his approach to the pursuit of *dharma*. He says:

> I do not follow dharma because of the fruits of dharma, but because I do not want to transgress the traditional texts and wish to follow the conduct of the virtuous… He who wishes to milk dharma does not obtain the fruits of dharma.[70]

This message from Yudhishthira explains his behaviour and reinforces the essence of Krishna's future message through his discourse with Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The idea of remaining unattached to a righteous course without the desire for rewards forms a vital aspect of *dharma* as prescribed by Krishna and all those who understand its core tenets.

Das makes a relevant observation: "He is saying, in effect, that following dharma is its own reward. When one acts thus, it is motives and not consequences that are important."[71]

In essence, Yudhishthira's approach appears as the core value and fundamental message deduced from the *Mahabharata*. However, Krishna, while reinforcing it, also provides a more practical way to pursue it. The amalgam of the noble and the realistic eventually emerges as the middle ground that reflects his way of following *dharma*.

Sanjaya, Dhritarashtra's adviser and charioteer, conveys yet another aspect of *dharma* before the war on his return from the Pandava camp, where he is sent on a diplomatic assignment to pursue a peaceful resolution to an impending war. He describes in detail the message received from the Pandavas. Sanjaya also conveys his impression of Krishna. He says:

> Wherever there is truth, wherever there is dharma, wherever there is modesty, wherever there is uprightness, Govinda is present there. Wherever there is Krishna, victory exists there.[72]

There is a possibility of interpreting this sentiment as *dharma* becoming subservient to an individual, despite contradictions in the approach to problem-solving that come to the fore during the war. This includes an opportunistic use of stratagem to outwit adversaries such as Bhishma, Drona and Karna. However, the importance of this co-relation of *dharma* with a figure seen as all-powerful and all-knowing is essential to understanding and deriving the essence of the quote. It implies that victory comes to those who fight for a just cause, truth and righteousness. Krishna is associated with righteousness and justice. Victory, therefore, resides on the side that stands for *dharma*.

The Pandavas persuade Krishna to go on a diplomatic mission and attempt to secure peace with Duryodhana. On reaching there, he passionately appeals to the gathering at Dhritarashtra's court to broker reconciliation. He addresses the king and attempts to convince him of the need to secure peace. Krishna highlights the injustice done to the Pandavas and makes a case for their well-deserved claims. Similarly, he appeals to Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Vidura – all senior advisers in the court – to seek their intervention. He realises that it may be beyond the ability of the king to restrain his son, however, since Duryodhana is likely to rely upon the renowned and recognised martial prowess of Bhishma and Drona, their intervention could become critical to safeguard the interests of the Kuru dynasty.

Krishna seeks their support by appealing to their sense of justice and fair play. In addition, he indicts those who allow injustice in their presence when *dharma* is destroyed by *adharma* and truth by falsehood. Under such circumstances, *dharma* destroys them, just like a "river uproots the trees along its banks".[73] This correlation becomes important as it places those who witness injustice being done blameworthy, similar to those directly responsible for it. This is especially relevant for some of the senior advisers in the court, who are in a position to influence such decisions. In Duryodhana's case, Bhishma and Drona wield the requisite influence and power to intervene, if needed, through force, to stop injustice and widespread destruction.

The context of injustice and *adharma* described by Krishna also reflects upon the incident of Droupadi being dragged into the court in the presence of elders. Correspondingly, he suggests that all those present, including the Pandavas, were as guilty of *adharma* as those who had committed the disgraceful act. In addition to Duryodhana's actions, the onlookers' inaction is also responsible for the subsequent events.

Dhritarashtra is in complete agreement with Krishna's arguments. However, he expresses helplessness and requests him to convince Duryodhana by addressing him directly. Krishna attempts to convince Duryodhana by reinforcing the advice given by his elders. He warns him against the views of those who could become the cause of great destruction. He extolls the virtues of pursuing the three objectives of *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*. However, simultaneously, Krishna indicates that in their order of importance, *artha* should be preferred over *kama* and *dharma* over *artha* if the three cannot be reconciled. He adds: "If one is driven by the senses and gives up dharma because of greed, and strives for kama and artha through inappropriate means, one is ruined."[74]

Krishna's elaboration on the hierarchy between three of the four objectives, which also includes *moksha*, is important. It suggests the comparative importance of *kama*, *artha* and *dharma*, placing the latter on the highest pedestal. In other words, pleasure and asset creation remain subservient to *dharma* in all its manifestations.

These arguments by Krishna do not impact Duryodhana's decision to deny the Pandavas their rightful share of the kingdom. Nor does he agree to apologise for his behaviour towards Droupadi.

It has already been indicated that the Pandavas are fighting to seek justice. Their cause is righteous and follows *dharma*. It is reinforced by Krishna, who makes an impassioned appeal in the court of Dhritarashtra for peace and offers favourable terms to end the differences and bitterness. However, this endeavour fails.

When Duryodhana makes an argument in favour of his position, Krishna not only disputes his contention but also questions his motives and actions. He recalls the repeated attempts made by Duryodhana and his supporters to kill the Pandavas, and his use of deceit to divest them of their share of the kingdom.

As a result of the preceding events, there is little doubt in the minds of the Pandavas, their supporters, including Krishna, the elders and advisers in the court of Dhritarashtra, that the Pandava cause is just. Their decision to go to war is unavoidable and righteous.

The core of the *Mahabharata* is often associated with the 18-day war due to its destructive impact. Besides this, it also relates to the pursuit of righteousness and is therefore classified as a *dharma yudhha* or a just war.[75]

Yet, when the two sides are arraigned opposite each other on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, some of the foremost leaders amongst the Pandavas develop misgivings about their impending action. While the interaction between Krishna and Arjuna is well known and will be discussed from the perspective of *dharma* in this section, the dilemma is not limited to him alone.

Referring to Bhishma, Yudhishthira questions their ability to fight and break through the *vyuha* (battle formation) orchestrated by their grandfather. "Pandava (Yudhishthira) saw the impenetrable vyuha that Bhishma had crafted. Having seen that it was impenetrable. He was distressed and spoke to Arjuna. 'O Dhananjaya! O mighty armed one! When the grandfather fights on the side of the sons of Dhritarashtra, how will we be able to fight with them in this battle?'"[76]

Arjuna allays his fears, saying, "Where there is dharma, there will be victory." He further quotes Sage Narada who had said that victory comes to those who have Krishna on their side.[77]

However, despite convincing his elder brother of the righteousness of their cause, Arjuna is afflicted by self-doubt and a dilemma that defines the basis of fighting a just war. On the one hand, he sees himself as a duty-bound warrior required to take the battlefield and fight. On the other, he finds his elders, teachers and relatives arraigned against him. He fails to reconcile this contradiction that requires him to kill for the sake of a kingdom. Addressing Krishna, Arjuna says, "Confused about what is dharma, I am asking you. Tell me that which is decidedly best for me, I am your disciple."[78]

What follows is a back-and-forth between Krishna and Arjuna, who voices his doubts and dilemmas to Krishna. As his guide and *sarathi* (charioteer) during the war, Krishna provides clarity and the path that will assist Arjuna in seeking righteousness, especially as a warrior, a soldier on the battlefield. However, the importance of Krishna's guidance is not restricted to the role and responsibility of a warrior and the pursuit of *kshatriya dharma*. He provides direction that goes beyond a particular role or profession. While the trigger for Krishna's illuminating perspective is directly related to the impending war, its philosophical underpinnings are universal in their scope, given that the challenges of life, much like the duties and responsibilities of a soldier, involve difficult decisions, dilemmas and choices that need to be made. It ultimately co-relates with the fulfilment of assigned responsibilities and duties while dealing with the challenges of everyday life.

The basis for undertaking assigned actions is associated with the idea of *svadharma*.[79] This is highlighted in the *Bhagavad Gita* when Krishna reinforces the importance of pursuing one's actions even if they are imperfect. This underlines the relevance of perseverance and undertaking the assigned responsibility.

Accordingly, Krishna reminds Arjuna that there is nothing better than fighting a war for the sake of *dharma* for a *kshatriya*. He suggests that the war is neither a creation of the Pandavas nor did it manifest on its own. Not being a part of such an endeavour is like turning away from the natural course prescribed by *dharma*.

Soldiers, and for that matter, every individual, tend to behave within certain defined parameters that are set through an interaction within the social framework that they live in. These parameters also influence how an individual thinks or acts under different circumstances. The *Bhagavad Gita* delves into these aspects in detail. It describes the mindset needed to rise above attachment while fulfilling responsibilities. It suggests ways for soldiers to fight without fear of life or death. The *Gita* elaborates on the linkage between a soldier's duties and the cause that must guide his actions.

The *Bhagavad Gita* questions the parameters created and the linkages that influence actions. It interrogates the motivations that underline the reasons a soldier fights. Its profound philosophical message goes beyond the concept of *dharma*. Therefore, these have been discussed in Chapter Eight, which investigates the idea of a finite and infinite conflict as prescribed through the *Bhagavad Gita* and further how this relates to modern times, with specific reference to the role and responsibilities of a soldier.

War and *Dharma*

The concept of *dharma* faces the biggest challenge during the 18-day war between the Pandavas and Kauravas. As the pendulum of military advantage shifts back and forth between the two sides, the idea of *dharma* comes under increasing pressure. Often, desperation, weakness and failings witness deceit being employed by both sides to seek advantage on the battlefield.

How is deception rationalised in the conduct of war? Does it still come under the ambit of *dharma*, as visualised in the *Mahabharata*?

The *Shanti Parva* in the 18-parva classification and the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas* in the 100-parva classification, which otherwise are a part of the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, provide a detailed understanding of the duties and responsibilities of a king. This is conveyed by none other than Bhishma to Yudhishthira, who is relieved of his pain by Krishna, even as he is lying on a bed of arrows since the 10th day of the war. The interaction takes place after the Pandavas have defeated their opponents and Yudhishthira is facing guilt and disillusionment in the aftermath of death and destruction during the war and immediately after it.

This interaction is facilitated by Krishna, who considers it appropriate for Bhishma to convey the wisdom of *raja dharma* or the duty of a king as a righteous ruler. What follows is a series of answers given by Bhishma to questions posed by Yudhishthira. Most of these questions seek clarity on a king's responsibilities towards the state and his conduct while pursuing *dharma*.

A deeper analysis of this major section of the *Mahabharata* will be taken up as part of a separate chapter. However, a brief reference to the *Shanti Parva* is relevant since it attempts to answer questions regarding the role and responsibility of a king during routine administration and while conducting war. Bhishma highlights the important aspects of a king's conduct when faced with situations that transgress the prescribed course of *dharma*.

Bhishma says, "Wishing to conquer, a king uses both dharma and adharma."[80] Further, when Yudhishthira specifically asks Bhishma: "How should a kshatriya king conduct himself against another kshatriya who advances against him in battle?" His answer suggests the importance of realism while dealing with challenges associated with deceit, without diluting or violating the spirit of *dharma* as a soldier. He says:

> If the one who is fighting uses deceit, one must fight back using deceit. If he is fighting with adharma, one must counter him with adharma.[81]

What is the *adharma* that the Kauravas indulged in against the Pandavas? And is this made clear to the Kauravas and the elders before the war?

While several advisers of Dhritarashtra convey how Duryodhana is committing *adharma*, including Bhishma and more so Vidura, a public summation of Duryodhana's deceitful actions is provided by Krishna after the former's attempt at pleading innocence. Krishna says:

> You were tormented by the prosperity of the great-souled Pandavas… You plotted the gambling match with Soubala (Shakuni)… It was you who started this terrible and wicked gambling match with your wicked relatives, ignoring the norms of good conduct. Who else but you could have treated the wife of a relative in that way, bringing Droupadi to the assembly hall and speaking to her in that way?...

> When they were children, together with their mother, you made great efforts to burn them up in Varnavata… Through poison, through the bonds of snakes, you made every effort to destroy the Pandavas… O lord of the earth! You are acting against dharma and against fame.[82]

Despite this, Krishna offers to broker peace amongst the cousins. However, when Duryodhana refuses to part with anything in favour of the Pandavas, and further in a bid to weaken them he attempts to imprison Krishna, there is little else that can be done to contain his march of *adharma* other than to fight a war.

It is in the context of what Bhishma conveys to Yudhishthira as the approach to fighting *adharma* that the actions of Krishna, the Pandavas, Kauravas and even Bhishma himself need to be evaluated.

Four major actions by the Pandavas often come up for debate in the context of *dharma*. While these incidents are not the only ones during the war where deceit is employed, they certainly have the most transformative impact on the eventual result. These include the killing of Bhishma, Drona, Karna and finally Duryodhana.

The case of Bhishma is the most difficult to evaluate, given the contradiction between the pursuit of *dharma* through his conduct and in support of the institutions he serves on the one hand and the larger cause of *dharma*, wherein he witnesses injustice and yet fails to take direct action to stop it.

Bhishma's impeccable personal conduct is guided strictly by righteousness and by *dharma*. As described in an earlier chapter, this includes his vow to live a celibate life to facilitate his father's marriage. Consequently, he also gives up his right to rule the kingdom – his right as the eldest son and as one with distinguished capabilities. Bhishma's allegiance to the path of *dharma* and the throne of Hastinapur, irrespective of who sits on it, remains unshakable. This is borne by Bhishma's decision to fight for Duryodhana despite chastising him and despite his preference for the Pandavas. His pledge to protect Hastinapur remains the bulwark against anyone who challenges it militarily.

His decision to walk the righteous path remains above board. However, his responsibility to the kingdom of Hastinapur deserves deeper analysis, as it became one of the factors that eventually leads to the devastating war.

Bhishma is forthright while tendering the right advice to Dhritarashtra and checking Duryodhana's inappropriate actions. However, when he faces the grey zone of stopping *adharma* through his influence and if need be, force, he ends up giving passive advice. Yet again, when war becomes imminent, he continues to abide by his pledge to protect Hastinapur, which is exploited by Duryodhana, who understands the military advantage Bhishma could bring against the Pandavas. In addition to the presence of Drona and Karna, Bhishma's decision to fight in support of the Kauravas becomes a critical influencing factor in Duryodhana's final decision to go to war. If Bhishma had decided to either stay away from the war or threatened to fight on the side of *dharma*, the war could have been avoided. By giving precedence to his pledge, despite acknowledging the *adharma* being committed by Duryodhana, Bhishma unwillingly becomes an accomplice of those who perpetrate injustice and deceit.

However, when Bhishma is approached by the Pandavas and Krishna collectively after the ninth day of battle to seek a solution for his elimination from the battlefield, he is equally forthright in suggesting the same.

Bhishma and his opponents know that he cannot be killed unless he chooses to die. His rigid adherence to *dharma* makes him a strict follower of battlefield guidelines that he has laid down for himself. This stance also provides a loophole that can be exploited by his adversaries, as is indicated by Bhishma himself when he says:

> O king! This son of Drupada is a maharatha in your army. Shikhandi is brave and victorious one who always desires to fight… In the battle, let the brave Arjuna place Shikhandi ahead of him. Let the armoured one attack me with sharp arrows. I will see an inauspicious sign on the standard then, especially that of someone who was earlier a woman. Even if I have grasped my bow, I will never strike him then. O bull among the Bharata lineage! Let Pandava Dhananjaya then strike me from every side with his arrows… You will then be able to defeat the assembled sons of Dhritarashtra.[83]

Bhishma himself reveals how he can be killed in battle. He does so basis the realisation that he is indeed an impediment in the path of *dharma* achieving its destined victory over *adharma*. He possibly follows this path to keep his pledge to Hastinapur and simultaneously facilitate the Pandavas' victory.

The second instance relates to Drona. Unlike Bhishma, Drona does show character weaknesses over time. This emerges both from his desire to seek retribution for selfish motives and his blind love for his son, which leads him to support *adharma*.

Drona is well-regarded for his deep understanding of weapons and their employment in battle. Bhishma also selects him as a preceptor for the young princes of the Kuru dynasty (both Pandavas and Kauravas). However, even as Drona accepts them as his students, he seeks a promise from them. "O! unblemished ones! There is a special task in my heart. You must promise me that you will give it to me when you have become skilled in the use of arms."[84] Amongst all the disciples, Arjuna makes a solemn pledge to deliver, as Drona desires.

After the students' training is over and they have displayed their skill at arms, Drona calls them and asks for his *guru dakshina* (honorary fee paid to a teacher after the education is over). He directs them to capture Drupada, the king of Panchala and bring him to Drona.[85] This instruction is a result of Drupada's mistreatment and humiliation of Drona, despite the two having been friends before Drupada is anointed king. This instruction to his students is a sign of retribution that Drona wants to unleash against Drupada. After Drupada's defeat, he also takes over half of his kingdom as part of the settlement over their differences.

The unfortunate treatment of Droupadi happens in the presence of Drona. And much like Bhishma, he too fails to bring it to a stop, thereby becoming a mute observer of the *adharma* that is taking place. In light of the close association between his son and Duryodhana, Drona's failure to act is further compounded when compared with being just a mute spectator.

After Krishna's attempt to broker a settlement fails, Drona sides with the Kauravas because he is beholden to them. It is reinforced multiple times

through the *Mahabharata* that Drona's blind affection for his son allows this bias to influence his decisions.

Further, when Yudhishthira goes to seek Bhishma and Drona's blessings just before the commencement of the war, both indicate that they are "tied to the Kauravas because of wealth". This suggests their reliance on financial support mechanisms and the desire to retain these irrespective of the differences with Duryodhana.

After Bhishma's incapacitation on the 10th day of the war, Drona takes over the Kaurava army. The Pandavas find it difficult to counter his prowess on the battlefield and face the possibility of a crushing defeat. Taking note of this concern, Krishna says, "He is incapable of being killed in an encounter… O Pandava! Therefore, to ensure victory, abandon dharma and resort to yoga… It is my view that if Ashvatthama is killed, he will not fight."[86]

Krishna evaluates the situation and objectively assesses the war. He suggests a way to bring down Drona. This action may be considered deceitful, especially since Yudhishthira, the upholder of *dharma*, is asked to convey the news of Ashvatthama's death to Drona. An understandably uncomfortable Yudhishthira agrees to do this after much hesitation and soul-searching. He faces a decision dilemma, given the obvious implications of a half-truth.[87] This is highlighted by Ashvatthama after Drona's death and yet again after Duryodhana is brought down at the hands of Bhima.

The impact of this action is not limited to the killing of Drona. It leads to a trail of retribution by Ashvatthama that goes beyond the 18 days of war. It also becomes an issue for debate amongst the Pandavas, involving several senior generals within the army. Unsurprisingly, the employment of deceit remains the focus of that debate, with several generals castigating the approach adopted to kill Drona.

The *Mahabharata* attempts to explain this through the *dharma–adharma* equation, wherein to ensure *dharma's* victory against a side represented by *adharma* in their actions, the use of deceit remains permissible. Reference to this qualification has already been highlighted earlier. Drona's *adharma* is reinforced by the gods witnessing the battle. They convey as much to Drona when he is told, "You are fighting a battle characterised by *adharma*. The

time for your death has arrived. O Drona! Look at all of us assembled here and cast aside your weapons in this battle."[88]

This inclusion of divine pronouncement is meant to reinforce the distinction between the actions and course followed by the two sides. It also indicates to the readers that the direction provided by Krishna and executed by the Pandava warriors is indeed the righteous course of action under the prevailing circumstances. It emphasises the exception made and the cause that justifies it. The context of *dharma–adharma* is for once reflected in the paradox that is created. For Yudhishthira, an ardent follower of *dharma*, an act of *adharma* is justified. For Drona, who sides with those who choose *adharma*, it is eventually an act of *adharma* that brings his end.

The case of Karna is very different from the other two. He is cast away by Kunti immediately after his birth and is the eldest of the Pandavas. Even as Karna displays capabilities that can rival those of Arjuna, he does not receive similar acceptability, partly because of the background of his parents who bring him up and do not belong to the warrior class.

Duryodhana is the only one who embraces Karna unconditionally. This is largely because he sees him as the perfect foil for Arjuna on the battlefield. To create a level playing field, he bestows upon Karna the kingdom of Anga and treats him as a co-equal and a friend.

> "What can I give you that is comparable to your gift of this kingdom? O king! O tiger among kings! Tell me and I will do your bidding." Suyodhana replied, "I wish for your eternal friendship." Having been thus addressed, Karna said, "So shall it be."[89]

This makes Karna indebted to Duryodhana. A strong sense of injustice, along with the status and respect given by Duryodhana, make Karna side with him at every juncture of the *Mahabharata*.

Unfortunately, this includes actions that are unreasonable and unpardonable. The humiliation of Droupadi and the refusal to give the Pandavas their rightful kingdom after their exile are two major examples.

Karna, despite Krishna offering him the highest pedestal alongside the Pandavas before the war and despite acknowledging the injustice being committed against his brothers, refuses to change sides and prefers to remain

associated with his adopted parents and his friend Duryodhana.

The vulnerable situation in which Karna finds himself during the war while fighting Arjuna is the result of a curse, which contributes to his eventual death as well. Karna, while seeking training in weapons from the famed teacher Parshurama, who only teaches brahmanas, lies about his origins and claims to be one himself, only to be found out eventually. Consequently, Parshurama curses Karna that he will forget the learning when he needs it the most.[90]

As the battle rages between Arjuna and Karna, at a particular instance, Karna's chariot wheel gets stuck in the ground. Swept by helplessness, Karna laments the failure of *dharma* to protect those who follow it scrupulously. "He repeatedly censured dharma."

Addressing Arjuna, he invokes the tenets of *dharma* while fighting a battle. He cites circumstances under which weapons should not be used. These include circumstances involving warriors who are facing a calamity; who do not have arrows; whose weapons are shattered; or those who have fallen on the ground from a chariot. Karna says, "O Pandava! Remember the instructions of dharma and wait for a short while."[91]

Krishna, while stationed on the chariot, responds to Karna, appreciating his call to adhere to *dharma*. He references Karna's lamentations about *dharma* and indicates that inferior ones tend to curse their destiny but not their wrongdoings when facing difficulty.

A fierce battle continues between Arjuna and Karna, eventually leading Arjuna to kill his elder brother on the battlefield. Thus, Arjuna becomes the vehicle for Karna's curse to manifest itself. He also becomes the direct cause of his death. In this endeavour, Krishna's role remains vital, almost as a catalyst to ensure that justice is done on the battlefield.

The 18-day war witnesses many casualties and deaths. However, the three case studies of Bhishma, Drona and Karna are instructive and highlight the potential dichotomy while pursuing *dharma*. Though these incidents occur against the backdrop of events that have been described and conditions that the *Mahabharata* condones, the debate over them is as charged within the text as it remains until this day.

Dharma and Matters of the State

The concept of *dharma* does not end with the idea and conduct of war. For a king and in more contemporary times an elected leader, the matters of the state take up far more time than the planning and conduct of war. Yudhishthira is disillusioned with the death and destruction caused by the war. He rejects the idea of ruling the kingdom he has won.[92] Consequently, he is persuaded to seek guidance on running the state from Bhishma, still on a bed of arrows, awaiting the opportune time to embrace death. While issues related to administration are touched upon at different stages of the storyline, this guidance becomes the focus of attention immediately after the war.

It is this dialogue between Yudhishthira, the student seeking knowledge, and Bhishma, the teacher and source of wisdom, in the presence of Krishna and the Pandava brothers that sets the stage for contextualising the post-war reality and state administration. Bhishma patiently answers questions put forth by Yudhishthira on various facets of war, statecraft and administration. These are included in the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas* and are a rich source of knowledge on the relation between *dharma* and the running of a state. *Raja Dharma* refers to the *dharma* of a king and *Apad Dharma*, as the name suggests, describes his *dharma* under adverse and challenging conditions.

Bhishma contextualises the importance of *Raja Dharma* for a king when he says that it is the most important form of *dharma,* since it protects all other *dharmas*.[93]

The two *parvas* are prescriptive. This detailed conversation supplements the preceding story and fills the gaps. Accordingly, it helps provide a holistic understanding of *dharma* as an ethics-based approach to life and simultaneously acts as a realistic guide for statecraft. Keeping *dharma* as the basis of the dialogue, Bhishma also delves into the practical challenges of a ruler under both favourable as well as adverse conditions.

The *parvas* include guidance on a variety of aspects for a king. As it is beyond the immediate scope of this chapter to deal with these in detail, the same will be discussed in a subsequent chapter in greater detail.

Chapter Three

The Relevance of Dharma

What Does the Pursuit of *Dharma* Teach Us?

The first part of this section included several instances wherein the path of *dharma* is invoked. These can be viewed from the perspectives of characters in different capacities and for varying purposes. They reinforce the initial suggestion that *dharma* cannot be defined by binding it within the constraints of fixed parameters and definitions. Instead, its invocation is characterised by individual perspectives. Virtues such as righteousness, spirituality, individual responsibilities, fulfilment of duties and societal norms guide its fulfilment.

Some of these aspects emerge from the examples cited in the previous chapter. Shakuntala, while contesting Duhshanta's refusal to accept her and their son, evokes the importance of truth in the pursuit of *dharma*. On the other hand, Duhshanta seeks divine approval for his actions to ensure that in the eyes of his subjects, his role and responsibility as a king are not compromised. These are examples where *dharma* can be portrayed through personal interaction and where it is invoked in an institutional capacity. As an illustration of the latter, Duhshanta feels that a king's moral standing cannot be diminished, given its direct impact on the ability to set a righteous personal example. His decision is influenced by what can be termed *raja dharma*, one of the manifestations of *dharma*.

Examples of personal conduct and sacrifice while pursuing *dharma* come to the fore repeatedly through the *Mahabharata*. It becomes evident from a

relative perspective that righteous conduct and personal sacrifice come easily to individuals when compared with decision-making to resolve a dilemma in public life. Bhishma sacrifices his right to the throne and accepts a life of celibacy to please his father. Further, he stands by the throne of Hastinapur as a staunch guardian against all odds. In doing so he goes to the extent of fighting the Pandavas on behalf of the Kauravas, despite acknowledging the repeated instances of *adharma* committed by Duryodhana and the contradictions this decision entails. This is where the dichotomy between personal conduct and responsibility in public life emerges. And it is evident from the case study of Bhishma that he does falter in this regard. From his inability to stop the game of dice, which leads to the humiliation of Droupadi, to the war between cousins, Bhishma has the influence and the ability to put an end to the rivalry. However, his commitment to personal pledges, which he considers his foremost *dharma*, incorrectly supersedes his public decisions. This leads a man of the highest moral standing to fail the test of public responsibility, especially when it calls for the ability to reconcile personal pledges with the larger good of society.

A similar contradiction is seen in the case of Yudhishthira. He remains the last word on personal conduct and interpretation of *dharma*. His actions are selfless and righteous. Yet, Yudhishthira is responsible for the adverse impact of a game of dice and the humiliation that all of them, especially Droupadi, are put through, just like the elders in the court. Despite having a clear understanding of Shakuni and Duryodhana's motives, he accepts the gameplay fully aware of its adverse consequences. And as the events indicate, the resultant impact of the game brings disaster to the Kuru dynasty. Having lost himself and his brothers, he goes to the extent of employing Droupadi as a possession that can be won or lost in gambling. His moral standing, yet again, however upright, displays weakness when a clash between the *dharma* of an individual and the interests of a wider community takes place.

Consequently, he goes to the extent of suffering prolonged deprivation in the jungles along with his brothers and their wife while refusing to be drawn into a war to right the wrong that is committed against them. He disagrees with Droupadi and Bhima when they argue in favour of using force to take what is rightfully theirs, indicating the purpose of *dharma* is righteous action and not its fruits. For Yudhishthira, his error of judgement

now entails its consequences. It is therefore his bounden duty to undergo the punishment. "Having entered into an agreement before the righteous ones, who would wish to break it for the sake of a kingdom? As an arya, I think that transgression of dharma is worse than death, even for the sake of ruling the earth."[94] While Yudhishthira is right about keeping his pledge, he is wrong about falling for the trap that Shakuni has set for him. He accepts that despite being capable of restraining himself, he went on with the game, anger robbing him of his patience.

Dharma often tends to be seen from the perspective of black and white. It is either followed or sidelined. However, one of the most important takeaways from the *Mahabharata*, from its status as *itihasa,* is its derivative value that can be contextualised in more recent times. Accordingly, *dharma* is considered more an endeavour than a finite target that can or should be achieved. The repeated recurrence of failings and weaknesses noticed in major characters suggests that these are and will remain inherent in every individual, despite their attempts to follow the most righteous path. The *Mahabharata* suggests that life's challenges and paradoxical circumstances will demand righteousness in personal conduct and simultaneously dictate decision-making while dealing with dilemmas that impact society at large. And these decisions cannot be guided by any rule book or a code of conduct. Mistakes can and will be made. The intention behind these mistakes is what differentiates an act of omission from an act of commission.

In the *Mahabharata,* Krishna indicates through his perspectives on *dharma* that achieving it in its completeness or entirety may not always be feasible. However, more importantly, he elaborates upon the importance of the endeavour to pursue it with conviction.

> If a man strives for an act of dharma to the best of his capability, even if he is not successful, I have no doubt that he obtains merits. Those who are knowledgeable about dharma know that if one thinks of an evil deed in one's mind, but does not consent to do it, one does not suffer from the fruits.[95]

The evaluation of positive sentiments, deeds and endeavours guided by *dharma* is easier to comprehend and therefore, to contextualise. However, as

referenced through several incidents, can a contentious act in response to a paradoxical situation also conform to *dharma*?

If Bhishma, Drona, Karna and even Yudhishthira falter while pursuing *dharma*, especially with decisions in their institutional capacities, Krishna repeatedly gives appropriate answers and remains balanced in his response to decision dilemmas. This is perhaps best illustrated in the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, beyond that, despite paradoxical situations, the guidance provided by Krishna not only addresses moral and ethical issues, but it also meets the reality of circumstances that demand resolution in real time. In that sense, Krishna's actions and pronouncements are a more practical and realistic pursuit of *dharma*, both in spirit and in action.

Purely in the context of *Mahabharata's* text, the conditions under which deviations from the prescribed path are considered acceptable have been highlighted earlier. However, these conditions are justified only when forced by injustice. This is indeed the case when even advisers within Dhritarashtra's court, including Bhishma, Vidura and Drona, advise Duryodhana to return the kingdom to the Pandavas. A case of deceit on the part of the Kauravas is well established. Attempts at peaceful, diplomatic means to avoid war are attempted, including reducing the Pandavas' demand to a mere five villages instead of half the kingdom.

At the end of the parleys, there is little doubt regarding which side stands for *dharma*. And this is adequately reinforced as Krishna would not have sided with the Pandavas had this not been the case. This highlights the contradiction of the very need for a war! If Krishna is indeed all-powerful and has identified the side that stands for *dharma*, why is there a need for war and destruction? The *Mahabharata* explains this to an extent by arguing in favour of destruction when the prevalence of *adharma* in society reaches levels that a reset becomes necessary to bring order.

This can be placed in perspective through the relation between human endeavour and divine influence. While the *Mahabharata* identifies Krishna as an incarnation of God, and he does explicitly exhibit his form and powers on more occasions than one, there is a simultaneous reality that remains the focus of the text. And that is the importance of continued human endeavour. Or the idea of *karma*. Action as a means to pursue *dharma*. *Karma Yoga* as a

concept is discussed at length in the *Bhagavad Gita*. This will be discussed further in the chapter on the infinite approach. Krishna's guidance throughout the *Mahabharata* remains exactly that – guidance alone. He does not force decisions. Having received the guidance individuals are free to address the dilemmas of their lives. Krishna's role as a guide is evident at all critical junctures of the epic, including when he goes as an emissary to the court of Dhritarashtra. He repeatedly warns of the disastrous consequences in the event of a war. Krishna also waters down the Pandavas' demands to the lowest possible level. Yet, war becomes inevitable when Duryodhana remains obstinate, and his father and elders refuse to go beyond platitudes. As does the dark shadow of destruction. Destiny takes its course when human endeavour falls short of desired expectations.

Thousands of years after the *Mahabharata*, the guidance and decisions that emerge from the epic remain a source of learning. Lessons can be drawn from examples of *dharma*, *adharma*, exceptions and deviations when viewed in the right context.

Going back to the three contradictions of Bhishma, Drona and Karna, the logic that defines the Pandavas's actions can be evaluated from the perspective of Krishna's decision-making. There is little doubt that Krishna considers Bhishma as the foremost *karma yogi*. He seeks his guidance for Yudhishthira after the war, given Bhishma's wisdom and experience. However, despite his immense appreciation and respect for Bhishma, his advice follows the logic of detachment when he suggests Bhishma's elimination. For Krishna, the end of a *dharma yudhha* has far greater significance than following the warfighting rulebook to a T. Had he done so, there would have been little difference in the approach followed by Bhishma and Yudhishthira on one side and Krishna on the other. The action is very much in pursuance of *dharma* when seen from the perspective of how Bhishma explains it after the war, wherein he suggests the use of *adharma* against *adharma*. Similarly, Krishna's reply to Karna's lament when his chariot is stuck and he is dismounted during the battle explains the action from a realistic perspective. In both cases, it is reinforced that the expectation of *dharma* in the face of repeated *adharma* is impractical and unrealistic. Accordingly, the use of *adharma* against *adharma* is acceptable.

The choice made in the case of Drona and Karna is easier when viewed from the perspective of their behaviour. Both are not only guilty of fighting on the side that is guilty of *adharma*, but also of personal deviations from the path of *dharma*, as noted earlier. Karna displays unshakable loyalty, and this remains his foremost quality throughout the epic. Yet, despite the misfortune he repeatedly encounters at birth and the opportunities he misses during his upbringing as well as the repeated instances of *adharma* he is witness to, Karna's conscious choice to side with Duryodhana reflects his action rather than reflecting a stroke of destiny.

However, what makes Drona's case more debatable in the *Mahabharata*, despite his indiscretions, is the circumstance under which his killing is planned. It involves a very reluctant Yudhishthira to lie, perhaps for the first and only time, to achieve the desired strategic objective. There have been different interpretations of this action, both in favour and against it.

Joseph Dowd explains Krishna's pursuit of *dharma* through the concept of consequentialism. According to Dowd, consequentialism aims to "produce good consequences" and "maximise intrinsic goods". He applies this to the advice given by Krishna, especially during the war when it leads to the killing of some of the major opposing generals. In doing so, he considers *dharmic* behaviour not only an intrinsic good but also an extrinsic good. He feels that as a consequentialist, Krishna allows the violation of *dharma* when "doing so would maximize the dharmic behaviour of others".[96] Therefore, what seems like the violation of *dharma* should not be seen as such since it does successfully maximise intrinsic goods. "In other words, perhaps the dharmic action will maximize intrinsic goods. If so, Krsna and the Pandavas do not violate *dharma* during the war."[97]

Bimal Krishna Matilal has explored the conceptualisation of *dharma*, especially by relating the term to the story and its derivates from the *Mahabharata*. Unsurprisingly, rationality becomes important to *dharma* as Matilal suggests that *dharma* developed "through an attempt at rational criticism of itself."[98] This questioning of oneself, the teachers and the texts has remained inherent to the process of seeking what best represents *dharma*. Matilal illustrates this with an example from the *Mahabharata* where Yudhishthira is confronted by a *yaksha* (who in reality is his father, Dharma,

who wants to test him in the form of a crane guarding the water). Yudhishthira finds all his brothers dead near a pond where they have gone to get water for others. When Yudhishthira attempts to take water from the pond, he is challenged by the *yaksha*. He is allowed the liberty of drinking the water only after answering the questions posed by the *yaksha*. Yudhishthira agrees.

One of the most profound questions relates to how a decision is reached about *dharma*. Yudhishthira's answer illustrates the factors that can potentially lead to ambiguity in decision-making. Simultaneously, it also suggests why its conceptualisation has evolved with time instead of remaining a rigid fossilisation of ideas and customs that may no longer be relevant. Yudhishthira says:

> There are different Vedas, even the *dharmasastras* vary from one another. There is not a single *muni* [teacher-sage] whose view is not different [from that of other teacher]. The truth of *dharma* lies hidden in the [dark] cave. [But] the way [leading to *dharma*] is one that the *mahajana* had followed.[99]

In essence, this implies that interpretations of *dharma* can vary in the *Vedas*, the *dharmashastras* can also have different interpretations as can the understanding of teachers. The true meaning of *dharma* is hidden deep within us and can be derived through introspection. The path leading to it is one that is followed by most great people. Matilal also provides a variation for the term "*mahajana*". According to him, it could also be an action that best serves the majority.

Against the backdrop of this understanding of *dharma*, Matilal, while acknowledging the violations of *dharma* during the war, gives less credence to the logic of consequentialism, given the disastrous result of the war that brings untold misery and despair. Instead, he relates it to the need to serve justice for the unpardonable acts of the Kauravas, especially the humiliation of Droupadi. The more important ends of justice require the acts of *adharma* to be committed during the war.[100]

Therefore, the actions of Krishna, and by co-relation, of Yudhishthira, Arjuna and the Pandava generals on the battlefield become questionable when viewed in isolation. Does this imply that the Pandavas are not guilty of wrongs, do not make mistakes or are not prone to misgivings and weakness?

Certainly not. There are numerous examples of each instance in the *Mahabharata* that indicate their fallibility. Can some of their decisions be questioned despite the context? Yes, there are. Bhima's actions in the course of killing Dushasana and drinking his blood cannot be justified or condoned. Even if, as he suggests, it is a case of touching it to his lips and not drinking it.

Characteristics of *Dharma*

The *Mahabharata* is considered a living document that has evolved over centuries. There is little doubt that this evolution would have brought in both wisdom and bias in interpretation. Differences of opinion, especially where the text allows room for elaboration, are understandable and perhaps even desirable. The evolution of the text has also witnessed an evolving connotation of *dharma*, even as its fundamental principles have remained the same.

What are the characteristics and principles that can be inferred from the text? And are these relevant in more contemporary times?

Dharma is Based on Principles

Kings, soldiers, advisers, priests and the common people alike followed an ethics or *dharma*-based guidance. The pursuit of *dharma* was based on widely recognised and accepted principles created in the best interests of all citizens. These are referenced earlier in the book, wherein Bhishma underlines *development and growth, protection against injury to one another* and *upliftment of all creatures* as the objective of *dharma*. The parameters were as relevant during the Vedic period as they are now. In other words, Bhishma's definition provides a framework for better understanding the role of *dharma*. *Dharma* can be demystified using alternative parameters given by scholars over the years. However, classifying it based on Bhishma's understanding feels most appropriate, especially since these principles have not been rendered irrelevant despite changes in societal conditions and norms.

Principles Remain Consistent, Circumstances Dictate Implementation

The principles outlined above while pursuing *dharma* remain consistent across the *Mahabharata*. However, circumstances dictate how leaders choose

different paths of implementation. In certain cases, the pursuit of dharma relates to the relative significance of competing factors. In others, the priority accorded by an individual to an issue influences the decision. The example of Arjuna facing the dilemma of entering Yudhishthira's cottage while he is with Droupadi to collect his weapons to assist someone has been quoted earlier. This incident beyond its immediate scope also illustrates the wider implication of the decision-making process. On the one hand, there is an understanding between the brothers sanctified by what they consider *dharma* as a family. On the other hand, it is the question of the safety and protection of someone seeking assistance. The circumstances create a decision dilemma and Arjuna makes a choice. He chooses the latter even as he violates the former. For Arjuna, a personal violation is acceptable despite it being *adharma*. He gives precedence to the foremost *dharma* of a soldier, a *kshatriya*, who is trained and prepared to protect the common person in need and give priority to their interest rather than his own.

Krishna reasons with Arjuna on the battlefield when he hesitates to fight against his elders. Arjuna's decision violates the basic principle of *kshatriya dharma*. His emotions come in the way of his duty and responsibility. Despite Arjuna's love and respect towards his elders, the circumstances demand that he fights injustice. And if that requires him to kill his elders, who stand as impediments, it is his *dharma* to do so without hesitation and remorse.

Krishna's implementation of *dharma* can also be related to the infinite approach dealt with in Chapter Eight. One of the characteristics of the approach is not having rules. On the face of it, this might suggest a free-for-all where might is right and the winner takes it all. However, this is certainly not its intention. The refusal to adhere to a rule-bound approach merely suggests following the principle even as circumstances dictate implementation, keeping in mind the larger interests of the society. This is the principle at stake when Yudhishthira is goaded into conveying the news of Ashvatthama's death to Drona.

Alf Hiltebeital reinforces this reasoning in his book *Dharma: Its Early History, Religion, and Narrative*.[101] He further quotes Matilal who provides several examples from the *Mahabharata* to argue in favour of Krishna's application of *dharma*. Hiltebeital quotes Matilal, writing, "He looks at the

particular situation but also beyond it. He is our Krsna."[102] Hiltebeital explains, "What Krsna means is that where there is no rule, such cases call for reason if *dharma* is to flourish."[103] In other words, the broad principled guidance of *dharma* not only allows but also requires its interpretation for the larger good.

Dharma is Personal

Despite the guidelines outlined above, two individuals can make very different decisions based on their interpretations of *dharma*. Yudhishthira's decision to play the game of dice results in the loss of the Pandava kingdom and worse, Droupadi's humiliation. In response to the sequence of events, on reaching the Pandavas in the forest after their banishment, Krishna suggests an approach that is dramatically different. He indicates that instead of accepting the invitation to play dice, he "would have prevented" gambling and, if needed, used force to stop Duryodhana and all those pretending to be Pandavas' well-wishers.[104] For Yudhishthira, it is important to follow the dictates of *dharma* when invited to play a game of dice as an invitee. Conversely, for Krishna, the implications of the invitation and its potential adverse impact are the basis for decision-making. The co-relation is between Yudhishthira following the immediate needs of *dharma* that are demanded of him and the avoidance of the wider impact of *adharma* as an impending disaster.

This makes it evident that the guidance provided by *dharma* ultimately needs interpretation and context. Despite each individual seemingly following the path of *dharma*, their inability to understand its immediate or long-term implications could have disastrous consequences. This is where understanding the consequences of decisions and actions becomes relevant.

Dharma Evolves

The guidance provided by *dharma* evolves with time and is not absolute. Neither is it etched in stone. It facilitates actions through principles rather than rules that an individual must follow. In the Vedic times, guidance was provided to different *varnas* such as *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishayas* and *shudras*. Further, it changed with the stages of life to include *brahmacharya*, *garhasthya*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa* ashramas. In essence, this practise

suggests guidance for different roles and responsibilities in life to achieve designated aims and objectives. There may have been a collapse of designated *varnashrama*-based boundaries in contemporary times, yet the excellence that a *kshatriya* like Arjuna achieved then remains equally relevant for every profession today. This is also true for traditions and customs that may have been relevant during the Vedic period but have fallen into disuse over time.

The *Mahabharata* also reinforces the importance of understanding the subtlety of *dharma*. Bhishma says, "There is one kind of dharma for those who are capable and another for those in distress."[105] This suggests that a leader would need to apply the guidance of *dharma* based on what is considered the most appropriate course under the circumstances. There are no absolute paths that *dharma* designates.

The timelessness of *dharma* is and will remain so only if this evolution is accepted and the inherent principle-based guidance is given precedence over a rule-based interpretation. This is why the principles of *dharma* remain relevant in contemporary times.

The Spirit of Dharma Is More Important than Its Letter

There is repeated emphasis on truth in the *Mahabharata* as being one of the most important aspects of *dharma*. Truth is one of the foundational constituents for achieving greatness. It is a virtue, a sign of a true leader and an essential element for achieving the ends of kingship. Yet, there are times when the situation demands that truth as an attribute of *dharma* be discarded. The demands of a situation require an understanding of the spirit of implementation rather than merely the letter that conveys it.

Krishna relates the story of Koushika *Rishi* to Arjuna to illustrate the point.[106] Koushika has sworn to tell the truth at all times. Once, in a forest, he sees a group of scared people being chased by robbers. They quickly hide themselves. In their pursuit the robbers come across Koushika and ask him the people's whereabouts. He tells the robbers the direction of their departure, leading to their capture and murder. As a result, instead of going to heaven, Koushika goes to hell. He sticks to telling the truth, as he has sworn. However, in the bargain he fails to understand the subtleties of *dharma*. He sticks to the letter and misses the essence of its spirit.

This is equally relevant for Bhishma when he selflessly follows his *pratigya* (pledge). There is little doubt in Bhishma's honourable intention. Nor are his services and sacrifices under question. It can also be argued that his decision to stand by Duryodhana reflects his loyalty to the throne of Hastinapur. This is despite his disapproval of Duryodhana's conduct. Therefore, in isolation, Bhishma's conduct is above reproach. It becomes questionable when viewed in contrast to the competing options he could have and should have exercised. His decision to stick to the letter rather than the spirit eventually lead to Bhishma fighting for Duryodhana despite acknowledging its impact.

Dharma Provides Guidance

The previous incidents further suggest that *dharma* is meant to provide guidance not answers that can be applied to a situation to seek pre-designated solutions. It is not the word of God that must be applied blindly to a given situation.

Two instances stand out for the guidance delivered by Krishna and Bhishma. Krishna's role in providing Arjuna with the necessary direction as a *kshatriya* on the battlefield of Kurukshetra and Bhishma's wise counsel to Yudhishthira in the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas,* which are dealt with in detail in the next chapter. Further, Bhishma also helps Yudhishthira understand the approach to favourable and adverse conditions. Yet, despite the *parvas* being an exhaustive explanation of the roles and responsibilities of a king, they remain a guide for Yudhishthira and all others who read the text. Its application is linked to the circumstances and conditions that a ruler or in more contemporary times a leader encounters.

Similarly, *dharma* is also a guide for achieving the principles outlined by Bhishma. As indicated above, the solutions derived from it cannot be sacrosanct and rigid. Multiple factors influence the choice between what may be considered right or wrong.

The core story of the *Mahabharata* illustrates that leaders find it easier to follow the tenets of *dharma* in their personal lives. However, as soon as their decisions influence wider circumstances, it leads to a clash between what is held inviolable as an individual and its impact on friends, family and

society at large. Accordingly, Bhishma guides Yudhishthira in the *Raja Dharma Parva*. In places, this may seem contradictory to the ideals in their purest form. Truth emerges as the most important attribute of *dharma*. Yet, it remains as relevant as the context of its implementation. Similarly, the ethics of following the rules of military engagement are important, yet when faced with deceit, exceptions are made for the wider cause of sustaining *dharma*.

This inherent flexibility of interpretation can become a blessing as well as a tool for exploitation. Despite exceptions in the *Mahabharata*, these are largely avoided through a rules-based approach. This approach was as relevant for the *varnashrama* system prevalent then, as it was for the rules of engagement in war. In contemporary times, violating a rules-based approach to domestic and international engagement must not be seen as a testimony of its irrelevance. The *Mahabharata* follows a similar guidance. It shows the path and seeks to pursue it with the right intention. Yet such endeavours occasionally fail to achieve their intended objective. This is as close a reflection of the reality of life and the geopolitical system as can be illustrated through a text.

Bhishma guides Yudhishthira about the nuance of *dharma* when he says, "Some dharma is based on truth, some more on reason. Some is based on virtuous conduct, some more on implementation." He adds, "You must know about two kinds of wisdom – the straight and the crooked. Knowing about crooked ways, one should not use these, except to counter a danger that has arisen, such as when enemies use dissension to strike at a king."[107]

Dharma Does Not Function in Isolation

Dharma is considered the most important aspect of the *trivarga* of *dharma, artha* and *kama*.[108] There are multiple instances in the *Mahabharata* wherein this is reinforced. However, there remains a close linkage between them. Bhishma says *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* are united with each other. "The foundation of the body is dharma, and artha is based on dharma. Kama is said to be the fruit of artha." He adds, "dharma protects the body and artha is desired for the sake of dharma."[109]

He adds, "For a kshatriya who knows, dharma and artha are immediately evident and one cannot separate them."[110] Going beyond the immediate context of Bhishma's guidance to Yudhishthira, the linkage of *dharma* and *artha* is equally relevant for everyone, given how each helps sustain the other.

Bhishma provides an interesting correlation between *dharma* and *artha*. An individual's aspirational pursuit of *dharma*, which seeks to undertake responsibilities and duties without the desire for their fruits, can be misunderstood when this pursuit relates to the duties of a king. The concept of *artha* is associated with wealth and prosperity. For a king, wealth and prosperity or economic well-being must remain distinct from the personal desire for riches. *Artha* becomes an instrument for ensuring the welfare of the people. In this context, Bhishma says, "You must seek to obtain artha, but must give up desire and anger. A foolish king who strives for artha while placing desire and anger at the forefront, obtains neither dharma, nor artha."[111]

Beyond the understanding of *dharma* from the text of the *Mahabharata*, how relevant is it in contemporary times? More specifically, can its influence and impact allow for fresh learning despite a gap of more than two millennia?

Authors have attempted to undertake this very evaluation in the past as well. Bimal Krishna Matilal's book, *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, is an excellent example. Contributing authors of chapters in this book take up different aspects of the *Mahabharata* to evaluate moral dilemmas while pursuing *dharma*. Matilal notes, "The moral dilemmas presented in the Mahabharata were in some sense universal, for most of them can be effectively used even today to illustrate arguments in moral philosophy."[112] The chapters push the boundaries of conventional wisdom and provoke and explore the challenges associated with *dharma*. Each aspect and incident deserve deliberation, discussion and analysis. Some of these themes will be taken up in the following chapters, especially while assessing Krishna's approach to decision-making. These include the use of "*adharma*" by the Pandavas during the war, the seriousness and righteousness of Krishna's endeavour as a diplomat pursuing peace as a last-ditch effort in the court of Dhritarashtra, the actions and reactions of kings and ministers after

Yudhishthira's loss at the game of dice as well as their respective justifications for the same, amongst others.

A more recent publication by Jaishankar Subrahmanyam, India's foreign minister, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, includes a chapter on his evaluation of Krishna's choices in the *Mahabharata* and their relevance in contemporary times. These references make for interesting understanding of more recent origin events and provide a perspective for academia and policymakers alike. Jaishankar evaluates Krishna's choices, reinforcing their realist approach while interpreting *dharma*. Unlike Matilal's book, Jaishankar views ethics from the perspective of a state's responsibilities. In a sense this is not very dissimilar to the guidance given by Bhishma in the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas*. Between *dharma* and *artha*, Krishna navigates the middle ground, representing the ideal and the practical to achieve the ends of justice and state responsibilities.

Dharma is Selfless and for the Larger Good

The last characteristic of *dharma* is perhaps among its most important facilitating attributes. Unless the pursuit of *dharma* remains selfless, it could be infected by parochial interests, whims, biases and narrow ends. Yudhishthira's explanation of the path to *dharma* to the *yaksha* is appropriate in its reference to *mahajana*. To that extent, it could be both a path tread by a majority of the wise as well as one that leads to the well-being of the greatest number of people. It is also an answer that lies deep within each, waiting to be found through patient introspection.

SECTION II

KRISHNA: THE PRINCIPLED AND THE PRACTICAL

Chapter Four

Strategic Choices and Their Relevance

There is a good reason to dedicate this section to principles and practicality. In essence, Krishna's strategic choices are characterised by a seemingly unachievable reality. This makes his approach to life and decision-making timeless and relevant in contemporary times. The interpretation of *dharma* represents the foundational idea that defines strategic thought in the *Mahabharata*. The text further suggests that Krishna successfully balances the different interpretations of *dharma*. He brings the idealist and the realist together onto a practical plane for implementation under real-life conditions. Krishna is not only an interpreter of situations, he is also the fountainhead of philosophical and ethical perspectives that form the foundation of the *Mahabharata*. In doing so, he is a man of action, a friend who can provide sage advice and a guide who shows the path of *dharma* to those who seek his counsel. Collectively this rare amalgam becomes the basis for Krishna's strategic thought in the *Mahabharata*.

This might suggest that Krishna's actions, despite being seen as those of a demi-god, go unchallenged. On the contrary, he is challenged by Duryodhana when he comes as an emissary of the Pandavas to the court of Dhritarashtra, by his elder brother Balarama after Duryodhana is brought down by deceit by Bhima and also by Gandhari after the war, which includes a curse that shapes his death. Immediately after Bhima defeats Duryodhana by deceit, he also recounts what he perceives as Krishna's successive acts of *adharma*. Krishna must, therefore, be seen as someone who can navigate the turbulent waters of ethical conduct while maintaining *dharma's* desirable balance.

It becomes evident from a reading of the text that *dharma* is an essential and inalienable aspect of personal life, official responsibilities and societal behaviour. It is also seen that most major actors successfully fulfil the demands of *dharma* in their personal lives. And yet, they face the challenge of decision dilemmas in their institutional capacities. This is aggravated when personal pledges clash with the wider responsibility towards society. This is not only true for Karna, but also for Drona and Bhishma. This has been discussed at length in an earlier chapter on *dharma*.

It is apparent from the evaluation of instances related to *dharma* that its application becomes nuanced when individual actions start impacting others or when the perceived image of the self in the public eye is at stake. Bhishma's judgement is clouded by his vow to protect Hastinapur and his reliance on the state as a provider. Drona makes the wrong decisions when his self-interest and the interests of his son come in the way of his responsibilities towards society and humanity at large. Karna's burning desire to prove his worth and cement his rightful place amongst the more privileged leads him to side with Duryodhana, despite understanding the morally shaky ground that his friend has chosen to tread.

The trajectory of Yudhishthira's application of *dharma* is more nuanced. In addition to being the son of Dharma and Kunti, his steadfast application of *dharma* is respected and applauded by everyone, including his adversaries. As has been referenced earlier, Droupadi's questioning of all elders in the court of Dhritarashtra, when she is brought there forcefully, is instructive. She specifically questions Bhishma, given his status as the most respected adviser in the court. However, instead of providing an answer, Bhishma refers her query back to Yudhishthira, who is after all well versed in the ways of *dharma*!

And yet, Yudhishthira falters on more occasions than one. He fails to look beyond the text that defines and describes *dharma* to understand its context in the right spirit. Yudhishthira's acceptance to play the game of dice with Shakuni despite observing the deception at play, is perhaps the gravest error of judgement on his part. This is despite his decision to be righteous in the ways of *dharma*. Similarly, he invites Duryodhana to challenge any of the Pandavas at the terminal stage of the 18-day war with the promise to

return his kingdom if he wins the duel. This is naïve, given the proven prowess of the former to beat anyone of them, perhaps with the exception of Bhim.

Each major character in the *Mahabharata* displays individual areas of strength. Their achievements and conduct can be cited as worthy of inspiration in specific instances. However, none can become the basis for defining a comprehensive approach that is considered worthy of emulation in personal life as well as in public affairs. The latter is especially relevant from the perspective of strategic decision-making.

This suggests the importance of *dharma* in every sphere of life, especially while in a position of power and influence. However, the text, as it relates to *dharma*, cannot but be contextualised with its application to strategic decision-making. This is what differentiates the approaches of Krishna and Yudhishthira. It further contrasts Krishna with every other major character in the *Mahabharata*.

The chapter on the infinite approach will provide a practical perspective on Krishna's philosophical thought and his practical decisions related to *dharma* and *karma*. It will also offer clarity on the competing issues of confusion that are faced by Arjuna on the one hand and violations by Duryodhana on the other. This is further co-related to more contemporary challenges through illustrative examples that apply the finite and infinite approach to seek clarity of understanding. When seen together, the chapters encapsulate the guidance provided by the *Mahabharata*. This guidance remains most profound and timeless when seen in the context of Krishna's approach to decision-making.

One character who does not falter in the pursuit of *dharma* is Vidura. However, despite his faultless interpretation of *dharma*, he is not tested as the one taking tough decisions, given his advisory role. And as the text suggests, even for elders such as Bhishma and Drona, it is easier to give the right advice. They, however, falter when it comes to implementing the same guidance in their own public life.

Perhaps the only character who can address the dilemmas of personal life and provide balanced strategic guidance in matters of the state is Krishna.

When compared with Vidura, he remains more relevant, given his direct involvement with most major events in the *Mahabharata*. This allows a better understanding of his thoughts and actions, especially in times of crisis, and his approach to resolving decision dilemmas.

Krishna's guidance, both as dictated by him and also through other characters like Bhishma in the *Shanti Parva*, addresses the pursuit of *dharma* and strategic thought at multiple levels. This includes its implementation as an individual in personal life, in public life and while employing statecraft as a practitioner. It is for this reason that Krishna emerges as the most influential character in the *Mahabharata*, despite all others being relevant and important.

Krishna straddles the fine line that defines textbook righteousness, its practical application in public life and finally the ability to address the nuance of the grey zone in statecraft. He is also able to operate at the confluence of truth, spirituality and practicality.

This comparison between some of the important characters from the *Mahabharata* might give the impression that weaknesses and failure must be frowned upon. That there is little that can be drawn from the lives and times of Bhishma, Drona, Yudhishthira or Vidura. This is not the intent of the preceding assessment, and is borne by the fact that every character in the *Mahabharata*, including Krishna in his human form, is considered fallible and prone to mistakes. No single individual is considered perfect. Yet, each one of them continues to persevere in an attempt to seek perfection. The endeavour remains as important as the goal. Jaishankar Subrahmanyam observes rightly that even as the text "focusses on the importance of the sense of duty and sanctity of obligations, it is also a description of human frailties".[113] The selection of Krishna as worthy of emulation is not because the others have frailties. Instead, he represents the best example of one who can work with and around them.

The *Mahabharata* has found resonance within the Indian subcontinent and to an extent beyond it as well. The adaptation of the epic in different languages and cultures suggests its relevance over the centuries. It also indicates the ability of different segments of society to identify with its core tenets, including the centrality of Krishna's role. This, even though there are obvious

contradictions that a reader grapples with. However, as Sukthankar points out, some Western critics such as Hopkins, see Krishna as a "tricky mortal". He underlines them being "nonplussed and dumbfounded" given the "subtle Indian conception" that the *Mahabharata* represents. This is not the case with the Indian audience, who have "the untutored and rational grasp of the essential unity of the universe, which is ingrained in the Indian soul…".[114] Sukthankar adds,

> He is not ruffled by these inconsistencies because apparently by automatic mental adjustment he instantly reaches the plane of thought on which the mind of the poet is working.[115]

There is little doubt about Krishna's significance at the spiritual and philosophical level. His articulation in the *Gita* perhaps remains the most profound example that continues to resonate over the centuries. However, is the *Mahabharata* in general and more specifically, Krishna's guidance on strategic thought, considered equally profound? The supreme test of Krishna's thought process and guidance not only emerges from the evaluation of decision-making during the *Mahabharata* but also while addressing present-day challenges.

This evaluation can be done by assessing the tenets that characterise Krishna's decision-making in a more granular way, which include challenges of policy, military action and strategic decision-making and can be discerned from the text's prescriptive and descriptive aspects. Needless to say, these interpretations are of the author and can vary when evaluated by others. The richness of the *Mahabharata's* message emerges from the innate desire of analysts to interpret its message over the centuries to contextualise its contemporary reality.

These issues will be addressed over two successive chapters. While the first will draw upon Krishna's decisions during the pre-war phase, the second will focus on the war and the period just preceding it. This will be followed by a comprehensive evaluation of the approach and its contemporary relevance.

Chapter Five

Influencing Peace

An early instance wherein Krishna's decision has a bearing on the wider environment has an interesting context. It is important to reinforce this context since it relates to a social custom relevant to those times. Yet it is being cited merely to glean certain decision-making attributes of Krishna.

Arjuna, while in the company of Krishna, happens to see his sister Subhadra and falls in love with her. Krishna senses his attraction towards her. When he quizzes Arjuna, he acknowledges his feelings and expresses a desire to marry her. Krishna realises that their match is perfect. However, instead of going through the uncertain process of a *svayamvara*, he advises Arjuna to abduct his sister. An action considered acceptable for *kshatriyas* in that societal context.[116]

After this plan is put into action, there is a clamour for retribution against Arjuna amongst Krishna's supporters. He, however, pacifies them, indicating the suitability of the match. The situation is resolved and eventually, their marriage receives the blessings of both sides.

In this instance, Krishna could have also supported Arjuna's candidature in the *svayamvara*. However, there is no guarantee of the union since, as Krishna argues, several factors come into play in such a ceremony. Instead, he chooses to take a path duly sanctioned as a societal norm of those times. He also helps select a suitable partner for his sister. This indicates the simultaneous pursuit of a course prescribed by *dharma* and seeking a path that ensures its effective implementation. He further handles the immediate

fallout emerging from such a situation, thereby bringing the chain of events to its logical conclusion.

The second example relates to the killing of Jarasandha. Jarasandha is a strong king who rules over the region of Magadha. His strength and valour are well-established and respected. However, this is not necessarily the case with his conduct and treatment of peers. Jarasandha, in the course of his military campaigns, subjugates many kings. However, unlike other similar forays by contemporary rulers, he makes them his prisoners and plans their sacrifice as a part of a ritual.

For Krishna, Jarasandha remains an obstacle to fulfilling the objective of making Yudhishthira an emperor. According to Krishna, "He who defeats Jarasandha will certainly become emperor."[117] Realising the futility of seeking an encounter with Jarasandha on the battlefield, where his strength could lead to an uncertain result, Krishna suggests addressing his weaknesses and avoiding his strengths. He says, "We will cover our weaknesses and exploit those of the enemy. It is the policy of the intelligent not to attack stronger enemies with battle formations and armies."[118]

Krishna wants to eliminate the challenge emerging from Jarasandha before the conduct of the *rajasuya*. He proposes to take Bhima and Arjuna to Magadha in a bid to challenge Jarasandha. Yudhishthira immediately agrees. His encapsulation of Krishna's strengths, acumen and skills further summarises the relevance of such attributes in contemporary times.

> When led properly, forces perform supreme deeds. The learned say that forces without skilled leadership are blind and bemused. The wise always conduct water to places that are low. Those who are wise always lead their forces to places where there are holes. For accomplishing our task, we will therefore seek refuge with Govinda, who is a man famous in the worlds and is knowledgeable about policy. Krishna's strength comes from his wisdom and he knows the method and the means. If one wishes to accomplish one's objectives, one must place him at the forefront. For the accomplishment of our objective, let Partha Arjuna follow Krishna, the best of the Yadavas, and let Bhim follow Dhananjaya. Policy, victory and strength will find success in valour.[119]

This relatively detailed text provides insights into Krishna's role and approach to decision-making and accomplishing prescribed objectives. One, he is seen as someone capable of leading a group through his wisdom. Two, Krishna is attributed with the ability to seek the most appropriate path to success (conduct water to low places) and simultaneously identify chinks in the adversary's armour (lead their forces to places where there are holes). Krishna's abilities are not limited to the big idea but further ensure effective implementation (knowing the method and the means).

Krishna's selection of Arjuna and Bhima as his partners reflects these abilities. He realises that Jarasandha, proud of his physical prowess, would choose Bhima as his opponent in a wrestling match even when given the choice to fight any of them. On reaching Jarasandha's court, Krishna gives him the option of either releasing the kings imprisoned by him or fighting the challengers. Jarasandha chooses the latter.

During the long and equally matched duel, when Jarasandha finally begins to show flagging stamina and ability, Krishna decides to seize the opportune time to kill him. However, according to customary guidance, he cannot directly advise Bhima. Instead, he offers advice meant to sound contradictory, even as it provides the path to success. "O Kounteya! One should not press down on an enemy who is weakened in battle. If pressed down at such time, he might completely give up his soul."[120]

This is a message enough for Bhima to defeat Jarasandha and kill him. This victory helps release the kings who were going to be sacrificed. The action also wins their loyalty and support for the forthcoming *rajasuya*. He addresses the kings and says, "Yudhishthira wishes to perform the rajasuya. He who lives by dharma wishes to become a sovereign emperor. All of you must aid him in this sacrifice."[121] Further, the newly crowned king of Magadha, Sahadeva, also promised allegiance to Yudhishthira.

Incidentally, Jarasandha is Krishna's enemy. This victory fulfils Krishna's objective of removing his adversary since this action succeeds in eliminating him.

The incident must also be seen beyond the immediate requirement of saving the captured kings and the successful conduct of the *rajasuya*. The released kings are potential allies in any future conflict. While the forebodings

of a larger war are not evident at this stage of the *Mahabharata* yet, as events prove, the support of the kings does prove to be useful in the future. This reinforces the importance of planning for unforeseen circumstances, even though the existing conditions do not necessarily demand immediate capability accretion.

This intent is reinforced by the desire and ability to create allies amongst not only the released kings but also in the powerful kingdom of Magadha, after the death of Jarasandha. This suggests a rare confluence of wisdom, managing the immediate execution of an action and the foresight to plan for an uncertain future – all qualities of a great leader and a statesman.

It has been discussed previously that Krishna is absent from the scene when Droupadi is humiliated. After the Pandavas leave for the jungles, Droupadi vents her anger and frustration, questioning her husbands and all elders in the court. This takes place in the presence of Krishna. With the Pandavas still unable to completely come to terms with the turn of events, it is yet again Krishna who remains clear in his assessment of the past and the course of action that should have been followed during the incidents under discussion.

Addressing Yudhishthira, Krishna says that his presence, even if uninvited, would have "prevented the gambling" and its aftermath. He speaks of using the influence of elders like Bhishma, Drona and Dhritarashtra to disallow the adverse impact of the sport. He would have appealed to Duryodhana if the others failed to bring it to a closure. Seeking to enforce righteousness, he goes on to say:

> If he had not accepted my soft words, which are like medicine, I would have restrained him through force. In similar fashion, I would have destroyed all the courtiers and gamblers, ill-wishers masquerading as well-wishers.[122]

Yudhishthira and Bhishma seek to strictly interpret *dharma,* lamenting its complexity that leads to the gambling match and worse, Droupadi's humiliation. Both are considered an authority on *dharma*. Yet, Yudhishthira fails to look beyond the text that guides the fulfilment of his duty. Yudhishthira and Bhishma, despite their opposition to events, allow circumstances to define the solution. It is almost as if they follow the route to their destination

until midway and then accept the path dictated by others, including their adversaries. In contrast, Krishna not only indicates his opposition to the very act of gambling but also brings in the element of coercion and application of force if needed, to define the direction and destination of events.

In contrast to Bhishma and Yudhishthira, Droupadi emerges as the one more than willing to oppose the events being shaped at her cost. She not only questions the very idea of putting her at stake by the one who has already lost himself, but also goes on to save the Pandavas from slavery when granted a boon by Dhritarashtra.

Droupadi's humiliation and the Pandavas' loss of their kingdom are not suggestive of the limitations of *dharma*. Instead, they indicate the limitations of the minds that are constrained in its implementation. Krishna's strategic approach to *dharma's* application repeatedly indicates the reasons for this anomaly under different circumstances and with different characters of the *Mahabharata*.

The next incident does not reflect Krishna's decision-making. Instead, it provides a context for his relevance, as perceived by those who can or cannot identify it correctly. It highlights a contrast between a finite and an infinite approach to life. The option between wisdom and the sheer weight of armies. The ability to fight a war with strategic insights rather than merely with weapons and armies.

When war became imminent between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, both sides undertake speedy and urgent forays, in an attempt to gather allies. In a bid to compete for the support of Krishna and his famed army, both Duryodhana and Arjuna reach him simultaneously. Suffice to say here that given the first choice, Arjuna picks Krishna despite his condition of not actively participating in the war with arms, over his army. In contrast, Duryodhana is thrilled with the idea of having his army instead.[123]

As events prove during and even after the war, Krishna remains one of the most important factors that influences the Pandavas' victory. He emerges as a source of knowledge, solace, balance, wisdom and strategic guidance. In certain circumstances, he chooses to use guile to support their cause. And finally, he gives a new lease of life to the lineage of the Bharata and the Kuru dynasty.

It has been mentioned earlier that compared with the seven *akshauhinis in the Pandava army*, the Kaurava army has 11 *akshauhinis*. However, the size of the two armies is not the deciding factor for victory in war. It is the leaders, their martial qualities and their application of stratagem that will influence triumph. For Duryodhana, the presence of great warriors such as Bhishma, Drona and Karna and a large army are the ideal conditions for victory. In contrast, in addition to the military commanders, the application of strategic choices ultimately leads to victory.

The incident of sending Krishna as a peace emissary has far-reaching consequences at several levels. It indicates his ability to prioritise peace over war, despite knowing Duryodhana's character and the probability of failure of his initiative. It is also a classic case of a diplomat employing multiple options during a single interaction in a bid to swing the result of the interaction in his favour. It further suggests the importance of not getting carried away by the initiative and keeping the larger goal of achieving the desired objective. Finally, Krishna's peace initiative indicts Duryodhana as the one at fault, thereby tilting the balance of *dharma yudhha* in favour of the Pandavas. It also facilitates the employment of deception in the battle, given the context of its application, without it necessarily being termed as *adharma*.

The Kauravas, especially Dhritarashtra, understand the importance of Krishna as an emissary and the potential impact he could have on the future course of events. Accordingly, before his arrival, Dhritarashtra indicates his keenness to honour Krishna with gifts. However, this is opposed by Duryodhana, who is not keen to divest his riches to appease him. On the contrary, he is convinced that war is now imminent. He says, "War cannot become peace through pretence."[124]

Nonetheless, Duryodhana offers Krishna all the hospitality at his disposal. Krishna politely refuses it and makes an important observation regarding the role and neutrality of emissaries.

> Messengers enjoy and accept the honours when they have been successful in their objectives. O descendent of the Bharata lineage. You, together with your advisors, can honour me after I have been successful in my objective.[125]

Krishna's diplomatic endeavour is undertaken at the behest of the Pandavas, who are keen to avoid a war. Having heard them out and accepting the role of an emissary, Krishna provides an important context to his mission. He understands Duryodhana's intentions. "He (Duryodhana) will not give up the kingdom for the sake of obtaining peace."[126] And yet, he promises to fulfil the responsibility. His actions are anchored in the dual relevance of fate and free will. Krishna's message in this regard is profound when he says:

> Our great-souled ancestors have decided this in their wisdom – the affairs of the world depend on both human effort and destiny. I will exert myself to the best of human endeavour. But there is nothing I can do to counteract human destiny.[127]

In saying so, Krishna acknowledges the role of destiny. And yet, in his human form, he re-emphasises the importance of persistent endeavour to forestall a foreseeable disaster. Later, Vidura cautions Krishna about Duryodhana's evil intentions and questions his decision to come into their midst to broker peace. Yet again, Krishna reinforces the importance of seeking peace and an honest endeavour to pursue *dharma*, despite the probability of failure. He reinforces the importance of striving for *dharma*. Accordingly, the very act of honest perseverance deserves merit, irrespective of the eventual result. He adds, "Therefore, I will sincerely try to bring about peace between the Kurus and the Shrinjayas. Otherwise, they will be destroyed in this war."[128]

Krishna's entry into the court of Dhritarashtra takes place amidst great hope and expectation. A bid to avoid war is made by the elders in the court and famed *rishis* who especially travel to help with the reconciliation process.

However, the focus remains on Krishna's message. His diplomatic acumen is on display during the long-drawn events at the court. This is accompanied by strong emotions on all sides, mostly in an endeavour to avoid a destructive war.

Krishna's endeavour is characterised by a layered appeal to the audience at several levels. He understands Duryodhana's obstinate attitude and therefore, attempts to convince his father, uncles and elders to highlight the futility of war.

Krishna, addressing Dhritarashtra, reminds him of the noble, righteous and upright Bharata dynasty's great ways. And adds that in that context, "an improper act on your part is especially to be deplored". In doing so, he attempts to guide him towards the right decision by placing the burden of living up to the high standards and morality represented by the dynasty over centuries upon the king.

Krishna makes it clear at the very outset that the balance of justice favours the Pandavas. He says, "With Duryodhana leading the way, these sons of yours have turned their backs on dharma and artha and have strayed into violence. They are wicked. They have transgressed honour."[129]

Thereafter, he cautions Dhritarashtra about a calamitous situation that could destroy the entire Kuru lineage. "O great king! But if there is war, a great destruction can be seen. O king! There will be destruction on both sides. What dharma do you see in that?"[130]

Krishna makes an emotional plea to Dhritarashtra, as the father of not only the Kauravas but also the Pandavas. "They lost their father when they were children and were reared by you. O bull among the Bharata lineage! Protect them in the proper way, as you would your own sons."[131]

He further appeals to the king's sense of justice by reminding him of the successful fulfilment of the pledge undertaken by the Pandavas to spend 12 years in the forest and one year in hiding. It is now time for Dhritarashtra to keep his side of the agreement by returning their kingdom, which is rightfully theirs. Conveying the Pandavas' message, Krishna says, "Therefore, adhere to the agreement with us, as we have. O king! We have suffered many hardships. We should now obtain a share of the kingdom. Since you know about dharma and artha, it is for you to save us… O king. Establish us on the right path and follow it yourself."[132]

Krishna underlines that peace is possible only if Dhritarashtra fulfils his responsibility as a king. He assures him of simultaneous endeavours on the part of the Pandavas. He also reminds him of the glorious chapter that can be written under his tutelage if the Pandavas are allowed to safeguard the interests of the Bharata dynasty. "When the great-souled Pandavas protect you, not even Indra with the gods can withstand you."[133]

Shifting his attention towards the elders in the assembly, Krishna yet again conveys the Pandavas' emotional message to them, reminding the elders of their moral responsibility and the appropriate actions according to *dharma*. He says:

> To those who know about dharma and are in the assembly hall, anything inappropriate is improper, such as when dharma is destroyed by adharma and truth by a falsehood. If this happens in the sight of those who are in the assembly hall, they are themselves killed. Dharma has been pierced by adharma and has come to this assembly hall. If the stake is not taken out, those who are in the assembly hall are themselves pierced. Dharma destroys them, like a river uproots the trees along its banks.[134]

Krishna fervently appeals to their sense of justice. He summarises the injustices done to the Pandavas and Droupadi, not just in the court but since their childhood, when several attempts were made to kill them. There is quiet acceptance of the reality, but little in terms of a response from those whose sons and relatives are opposing the Pandavas.

However, their silence bears the weight of guilt, weakness and helplessness. By making them a party to the injustice of the past and the potential of destruction in the future, Krishna all but disarms every single king, adviser and elder who chooses not to oppose Duryodhana. In doing so, he makes them parties to the crime that has already been committed and the calamity that is visible on the horizon.

This approach indicts not only those who are directly involved with the injustice that has been done but also those who stand as mute witnesses. Guilt is shared between them and together they carry the responsibility of all future acts of injustice on their shoulders and their conscience.

This is relevant for a society that takes pride in following the path prescribed by *dharma*. Krishna's act of exposing their duplicity, weakness and selfish interests becomes a powerful tool for the Pandavas to strengthen their moral standing. Consequently, it allows them to employ deviations from the prescribed code with the larger cause of *dharma* having firmly been established in their favour.

Krishna's exhortations bring out revered sages like Parashurama, Kanva and Narada in favour of peace. However, Dhritarashtra expressed his helplessness, indicating that he is no longer the master and his son refuses to obey his command. "But I cannot act on my own account. Nor can I do what pleases me."[135] He requests Krishna to directly convince Duryodhana instead.

Krishna yet again reminds Duryodhana of his great lineage. He praises him for the good qualities that he was born with. Duryodhana is advised to reject the path of *adharma* that he has chosen and follow the path of peace instead. Krishna stresses the importance of seeking advice from his well-wishers, rather than the wicked. "If one transgresses the views of the virtuous and follows the views of the wicked, one's well-wishers will soon lament one's destruction. He who abandons his foremost advisors and serves inferior ones, will face a terrible calamity, with no prospect of overcoming it."[136]

Krishna, while comparing the inter-se importance of *kama*, *artha* and *dharma*, places *dharma* at the highest pedestal and exhorts Duryodhana to follow the path prescribed by it. He further underlines the importance of views expressed by the wise and the pitfalls of intolerance of perspectives offered by well-wishers.

Duryodhana is advised to let go of the ill-fated advice offered by Shakuni, Karna and Duhshasana and instead value the support of the Pandavas. He is reminded of the valour of the Pandavas and the victories they have achieved in the past. This includes their fight against the gods and senior warriors like Bhishma and Drona. Krishna adds to this existing strength, the value accretion created by his presence on the side of the Pandavas, which would make them victorious against any adversary. "With me as a second, who can challenge Partha when faced with him in battle?"[137]

After listening to Krishna, both Bhisma and Drona also speak to Duryodhana in an attempt to pacify him and remind him of the *adharma* that he is likely to commit.

Hearing this, Duryodhana addresses Krishna to point out his favouritism towards the Pandavas and exonerates himself of any wrongdoing. He points out the gambling match as a voluntary action on Yudhishthira's part.

Duryodhana also questions the very act of initially parting with half of his father's kingdom in favour of the Pandavas. He finally confirms his steadfast belief in not negotiating with the Pandavas and refuses to give even "that much land that can be held on the point of a sharp needle".[138]

This allows Krishna to sharpen his attack against Duryodhana, realising his obstinacy. He points out all the attempts made by him in consultation with Shakuni on the Pandavas' lives and efforts to seize their kingdom and possessions through trickery and deceit.

And finally, when Duryodhana remains unmoved and displays complete contempt for all reason, Krishna makes one final attempt to influence the elders in the assembly. Addressing them directly, he says:

> This is the supreme taint of all the elders among the Kurus, that they are not forcibly restraining this evil-minded king who is misusing his prosperity… O unblemished ones! Listen to me. If that is done, everything may still be well.[139]

Krishna gives the example of punishing Kamsa, who is abandoned by his relatives and chastised accordingly thereafter. Since the elders have already tried their best to convince Duryodhana, having failed, it is time to abandon him for the sake of the larger good of the lineage.

Duryodhana, angry at being castigated repeatedly, attempts to put his plan of capturing Krishna into action. However, aware of it, Krishna laughs it off and transforms into his divine form, reinforcing the power and righteousness that is represented by the Pandavas. He leaves the assembly, thereafter, convinced of Duryodhana's intent.

As Krishna leaves the assembly, he makes a last-ditch effort to wean Karna away from Duryodhana. He realises that Duryodhana relies heavily upon Karna to pursue his nefarious agenda. In addition, he also understands the value of weakening the enemy camp once the battle lines are drawn.

Krishna asks Karna to accompany him on his chariot. Addressing him, he extols his virtues, knowledge and understanding of *dharma*. Reinforcing his status as a Pandava, Krishna asks him to join his brothers and claim all that the status of the eldest Pandava will bring him. However, Karna, despite

understanding the implications of his actions, which include the eventual defeat of Duryodhana and the death of leading military figures, including him, chooses to give precedence to his friendship over the luxury afforded by a newfound status. He responds, "There is no doubt that I and the other kings, and the circle of kshatriyas will enter Gandiva's fire."[140]

Chapter Six

Shaping the War

As the Pandavas complete their 13 years of banishment, the possibility of Duryodhana refusing to honour their rightful claims on the kingdom looms on the horizon. This coincides with Abhimanyu's marriage and the congregation of like-minded kings for the celebrations.

When the ceremonies end, the kings gather to discuss their future course of action with specific reference to Yudhishthira reascending the throne and regaining his possessions. The discussions are underlined by Krishna's morally upright stance on behalf of the Pandavas.

> Think what is best for the Kurus and the Pandavas, what is in accordance with dharma, is appropriate, and also ensures glory. Dharmaraja will not crave the kingdom of the gods, if that is not in accordance with dharma. He will instead desire the lordship of a village if that is in accordance with dharma and artha.[141]

It is the emphasis on righteousness through the reference to *dharma* that becomes the basis for any further action on the part of the Pandavas and their supporters. This stress on siding with justice instead of material possessions reinforces their subsequent claim of fighting a *dharma yudhha*.

Krishna reiterates that the Pandavas have been robbed of their kingdom through deceit. Resultantly, they have undergone a prescribed and difficult period in the jungles. At the termination of this period, all they want is their rightful claim. He further suggests that the only course of action open to the Pandavas, if the Kauravas fail to keep their word, is to go to war. This

explanation underlines the core cause along with its accompanying justification for an eventual war, if and when it becomes an undesirable reality.

In a bid to stitch together an alliance if war is inevitable, Krishna appeals to all the kings present in the court to support the Pandavas in their endeavour. "But if in your view they (Pandavas) are too feeble and too few to be able to defeat them, let all the well-wishers gather together and endeavour to destroy all of them (Kauravas and their supporters)."[142]

As the discussion gathers momentum, Krishna steers it towards a dual course of action. At the outset, this includes an earnest endeavour to seek a peaceful settlement with the Kauravas. Simultaneously, it is decided to attempt an outreach to all major kingdoms to cement alliances. This indicates Krishna's desire for peace. Yet, this is accompanied by a realistic understanding of the adversary, as well as of evolving circumstances that demand a simultaneous need to build military capabilities. War is not desirable, but if it does come, Krishna wants to be prepared for it.

The last chapter includes a detailed description and analysis of Krishna's endeavour to seek peace as an emissary in the court of Dhritarashtra. Even as this attempt fails, Krishna achieves three important objectives that successfully convince the wider fraternity that their endeavour is in line with the principles of *dharma*. He convinces the gathering, which includes several generals on the opposite side of the divide, of the righteous cause of the Pandavas. Simultaneously, he also proves beyond doubt that the Pandavas are more than willing to be flexible in their demands, which indicates their reasonable approach that is aimed at reconciliation. Finally, he makes it clear that the Pandavas could resort to force if justice is not delivered. In a sense, it suggests using a carrot-and-stick policy through the layered approach of diplomatic acumen. Krishna's approach at Dhritarashtra's court establishes certain important principles of natural justice, thereby elevating the war to a *dharma yudhha*.

It is important to contextualise the idea of a *dharma yudhha* since Krishna remains the primary architect framing it through his endeavours. *Dharma yudhha* relates to the concept of just war, even though it goes beyond its conceptualisation. *Dharma* has been discussed at length in a previous chapter,

including its connotations. Amongst these are the ideas of righteousness, morality, ethics and norms. Each of these aspects characterises *dharma* when related to war and highlights the framework within which *dharma yudhha* is identified. This emerges not merely from Krishna's articulation and arguments, it is also illustrated by conditions that leave no alternative other than a war to achieve the ends of justice. It is further accompanied by a common understanding of rules for the conduct of war.

Some of these aspects that co-relate *dharma yudhha* and just war will be discussed briefly to analyse the similarities and differences, if any, in their objective and scope in a subsequent chapter.

Arjuna's Reluctance to Fight

One of the most celebrated conversations in the *Mahabharata* is between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield when Arjuna displays reluctance to fight his elders and teachers for the sake of the kingdom. This conversation has achieved its exalted status for several reasons. Krishna's perspective straddles the ideas of *svadharma*, *kshatriya dharma* and *karma yoga*. In addition, the concept of the infinite approach, which will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter, can be derived from his teachings. Collectively, these tenets provide a strategic perspective in addition to their philosophical and spiritual context.

Krishna delves into the fundamental question of why a soldier should fight. The case of Arjuna is a little different from that of a common soldier on the battlefield. Arjuna is a famed commander of the Pandava army and one of the finest archers of all time. His renowned bravery and ability to rout an entire army is well recognised and appreciated. Arjuna's prowess with arms is often used to instil fear among adversaries. This is done by Krishna during his attempt at reconciliation with the Kauravas. In that sense, Arjuna's hesitation or motivation is different from what is usually understood as the psychological factor that influences soldiers. Most soldiers in the modern era would testify to the conclusion reached through research that camaraderie is one of the foremost influences that make men and women in uniform fight.[143] In contrast, fear and concern for his own life are not the factors that concern Arjuna. For him, the dilemma is defined by a moral

question: How does he fight those he respects and looks up to for the sake of a kingdom?

At the unit level, "Small-unit cohesion provides shelter from battlefield horrors and enables a soldier to persevere in combat. The group provides soldiers with security, the belief that the threat can be overcome, a coping mechanism to deal with the trauma of death and killing and a sense that their contribution has meaning."[144] However, this relief at the unit level cannot address the decision dilemma of a commander, a diplomat or a head of state who has the responsibility to help make decisions to go to war.

Since this dilemma is driven by a philosophical question, Krishna's articulation also addresses it accordingly. He goes into the conceptualisation of the duty, role and responsibility of someone engaged in the *dharma* of a leader and a soldier. However, Krishna's teachings also go beyond this immediate concern. He realises that the dilemma of a soldier ready to go into combat is also a metaphor for the vagaries of human life. His articulation is therefore as much strategic guidance as a reflection of the philosophy of life.

Krishna's fundamental strategic guidance to a leader emanates in light of the decision dilemmas in the face of challenging situations. Accordingly, the course of action taken distinguishes the quality of leadership. While there is little doubt about this when a comparison is made between leaders like Yudhishthira and Duryodhana, it is more challenging to undertake an evaluation of decisions taken by Bhishma. Krishna's message in the *Bhagavad Gita* guides in this regard. This is further elaborated upon by Bhishma in the *Shanti Parva*, wherein he elaborates upon aspects of *raja dharma* in greater detail.

From the perspective of strategic guidance, Krishna's message in the *Bhagavad Gita* is significant. It emanates from the idea of *nishkama karma*. Here, detachment does not imply indifference. Instead, it suggests stoicism in the face of alternating emotions. Leaders are bound to experience conditions that bring both success and failure. The tendency to give in to happiness or despair imperils the ability of a leader to take a dispassionate view of the circumstances and consequently affects objective decision-making. Krishna says, "The wise person who is not affected by these (pleasure and

pain) and who looks upon happiness and unhappiness equally, attains the right to immortality."[145] He adds, "Ignorant people perform action by being attached to that action. But the wise perform similar action unattached, for the welfare and preservation of the world."[146] Similarly, stoicism is also suggested towards the outcome of actions, especially concerning their fruits, even as the importance of perseverance is underlined. An individual's *dharma* is limited merely to the purest and sincerest form of endeavour. Krishna says, "You have the right to action alone. You never have the right to the fruit."[147] In essence, the message reinforces the importance of detachment and perseverance through action for a leader. The idea also resonates with the concept of the infinite approach, which builds upon *nishkama karma* in Chapter Eight. This concept reinforces the importance of continuing with actions without necessarily looking towards the ends and the benefits they accrue.

This becomes all the more relevant during challenging times, of which war perhaps represents the worst. Wartime conditions witness death and destruction of the kind that can leave an indelible impact on society. Decisions by leaders often contribute to these realities. The destruction of armies during the *Mahabharata* is illustrative of this harsh truth. Despite the undesirability of war, when it does become a reality, it is only the *nishkama karma* of a leader that allows the ability to maintain rational thought and make sound decisions.

Bhishma

The road to Bhishma's death is the first major incident that draws contrasting opinions. It is often seen in contravention of the norms and ethics of war. In contrast to this reality, it is Bhishma himself who suggests the way to his end, with the Pandavas all but having given up. Yudhishthira seeks Krishna's advice after he suffers from a "weakness of intelligence". It is agreed that the Pandavas and Krishna will go to Bhishma for advice since he had agreed to do so despite pledging to fight for Duryodhana. Bhishma goes on to suggest the employment of Shikhandi, who was a woman in his previous birth, in the forefront, which will lead Bhishma to give up his weapons. This is meant to be an opportunity for Arjuna to strike and kill him, paving the way for an eventual victory.

Having received this guidance from Bhishma on the ninth day of the war and after returning to their camp, Arjuna fails to reconcile to his responsibility. This is where Krishna steps in to convince him of his responsibility as a *kshatriya*. He says, "O Dhananjaya! This is the eternal dharma in which kshatriyas have been established. They must fight, protect and perform sacrifices, without any malice."[148] Krishna's advice once again reinforces the idea of *nishkama karma*.

The text goes on to indicate that before Bhishma dies, it is Krishna who suggests, after Duryodhana is killed, that the Pandavas, especially Yudhishthira, have an audience with Bhishma. He insists that Yudhishthira seeks his guidance in the pursuit of his *raja dharma*. This suggests that for Krishna, the need for Bhishma's elimination from the battlefield is as much the *dharma* of the Pandavas as is their seeking his counsel after the war.

Abhimanyu's Death

The second major upheaval on the battlefield takes place on the 13th day with the death of Abhimanyu – Arjuna and Subhadra's son and Krishna's nephew. Having been decimated on the 12th day of the battle, Drona, at the receiving end of Duryodhana's barbs, creates a *chakra vyuha* – a battle formation in the form of a circle. The Kauravas are aware of Arjuna's prowess to penetrate it and therefore resort to a diversionary action further south to pull him away from the main battle. The only other warrior capable of penetrating the formation is Abhimanyu. However, he is incapable of extricating himself from it.

Abhimanyu is promised support by the others, who are supposed to follow in his wake. Having envisaged this, Duryodhana employs Jayadratha, who has the power to stop all warriors other than Arjuna. As expected, Abhimanyu succeeds in entering the battle formation after causing heavy casualties on the Kauravas. Eventually, he is trapped inside it and six warriors come simultaneously to kill him. "With Drona and Karna at the forefront, this single one has been slain by six maharathas from the side of the sons of Dhritarashtra. It is our view that this is not dharma."[149]

Arjuna is distraught and heartbroken at this loss. Overcome by his emotions, he takes a pledge to kill Jayadratha the next day by sunset or enter

the blazing fire at the very spot where they are lamenting Abhimanyu's death.[150]

Hearing about this pledge Krishna does not lose his poise. Reinforcing the importance of remaining stoic in war, which is a fundamental quality for a leader, he says:

> You performed an extremely rash act. Without consulting me, you have taken up an extremely heavy burden.[151]

Krishna's immediate reaction to Abhimanyu's death is characterised by two sentiments. He tells Arjuna, "Do not grieve. This is the path followed by all the brave ones who do not retreat, and in particular kshatriyas, whose livelihood comes from war."[152]

Simultaneously, realising the gravity of Arjuna's pledge, which if unfulfilled, can reverse the fortunes of the war, Krishna attempts to take remedial measures. "Spies have been sent by me to the camp of the sons of Dhritarashtra." Krishna finds out that extensive arrangements are in progress to protect Jayadratha from Arjuna. A formation is planned like a cart and lotus, with an array in the centre like a needle in the pericarp of the lotus, with extensive protection arrangements. This is the location of Jayadratha.[153]

The evolving situation in the war is made all the more challenging by Arjuna's vow. Krishna realises its implications. Besides gaining intelligence from the enemy camp, he keeps evaluating the possible contingencies that could emerge the next day. His human form also allows frailties to enter his mind. Given his affection for Arjuna, he even prepares himself to enter the war as a combatant.

As the battle begins, Krishna continues to provide wise counsel to Arjuna. After defeating a section of Duryodhana's army, Arjuna encounters Drona. A fierce battle ensues between the two famed warriors. As the fight continues, Krishna realises that Arjuna will not be able to achieve his stated objective if he remains engaged with Drona, who is unlikely to be defeated. Accordingly, he advises Arjuna to disengage with Drona and shift his focus towards his objective. "We should not be wasting time. Abandon Drona and let us perform the greater task."[154]

During the battle, Yudhishthira perceives the need to reinforce Arjuna and Krishna. Accordingly, he sends Satyaki, a famed warrior, to Arjuna's aid. During a fierce battle between Satyaki and Bhurishrava, an incident comes up for serious debate. It involves Arjuna's intervention while the two warriors are engaged in one-to-one combat.

The battle between Bhurishrava and Satyaki is tilting in favour of the former and a stage is reached when Satyaki, bereft of his weapons, is going to be killed. At this stage, Krishna counsels Arjuna to intervene on behalf of Satyaki. Accordingly, Arjuna severs Bhurishrava's hand that is holding a sword, not only leaving him all but helpless but also open to an attack by Satyaki.

The *Mahabharata* captures contrasting perspectives on the incident. "All the soldiers and all the men censured Krishna and Dhananjaya and applauded the bull among men."[155] Possibly knowing this reaction well, why does Krishna advise Arjuna to intervene, and why does Arjuna breach the code of conduct amongst warriors?

Arjuna's reply to Bhurishrava's censure for interfering in the fight reflects a harsh reality. In essence, it also echoes Krishna's views. Unsurprisingly, he says, "Which virtuous one will not condemn the slaughter of Abhimanyu, when he was without a weapon, without a chariot and without armour?" He adds, "All the kings know about my great vow. No one who is within the range of my arrows will be able to kill anyone on our side."[156] Arjuna goes on to reinforce that his action conforms with *dharma*. It becomes evident from the sequence of events that once the laws of war are violated, their adherence tends to follow a downward trajectory.

Eventually, when nearing the end of the day, Arjuna gets an opportunity to engage Jayadratha. He is advised by Krishna to make sure that Jayadratha's head does not hit the ground and instead lands in his father's lap, bringing the episode to its logical conclusion.[157]

There are multiple versions of the *Mahabharata*. Among these, some suggest that Krishna uses his *Chakra* to shield the rays of the sun to deceive Duryodhana and Jayadratha. However, this is not the case in *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata*. In that sense, Krishna's role in the actions that

take place after Abhimanyu's death remains advisory and he provides strategic guidance for helping the Pandavas achieve their stated objectives.

Employment of Ghatotkacha in Battle

Ghatotkacha is the son of Bhima and Hidimba. He is a master of varied weaponry and *maya* – the art of illusion. Having witnessed the exploits of Karna on the battlefield, Krishna suggests the employment of Ghatotkacha against him, simultaneously indicating that it is not an opportune time for Arjuna to take on Karna. Krishna summons Ghatotkacha and instructs him to destroy Karna through his famed valour, energy and skill at *maya*.[158]

At this stage, Krishna's choice of employing Ghatotkacha seems to be driven primarily by his abilities. However, as events prove, it is a carefully planned and executed decision aimed at all but neutralising the destructive ability of Karna, especially against Arjuna.

As the battle ensues between the great warriors, Ghatotkacha causes great havoc on the opposing army. "Using that extremely terrible shower of weapons in every direction, Ghatotkacha caused destruction. Duryodhana's army was distressed and could be seen to roam around… They were being destroyed and were miserable."[159]

Karna sees the death and devastation amongst the Kauravas as well as the panic that prevails. He is told, "O Karna! Quickly kill the rakshasa now with your spear. The Kurus and the sons of Dhritarashtra are being destroyed… We will be able to fight the Parthas in the battle only if we escape from this terrible encounter."[160]

Karna is left with little choice other than to use his spear, that has been given as a divine weapon to him. The spear can be used only once to kill any warrior and Karna wants to use it against Arjuna. Instead, the circumstances engineered by Krishna force him to use it against Ghatotkacha.

Interestingly, while Ghatotkacha's death causes immense grief among the Pandavas, Krishna is delighted. He realises that Karna has lost the opportunity to kill Arjuna and Ghatotkacha's death is a sacrifice that will ensure Karna's elimination from the battle, directly influencing the final result of the war.

Drona

It has been mentioned earlier that Drona is at the receiving end of Duryodhana's barbs and this leads to the creation of a *chakra vyuha*. His role goes beyond creating the architecture of the battle plan. Amongst the six *maharathas* instrumental in Abhimanyu's death, Drona is also actively involved. Therefore, despite the reverence that the Pandavas maintain for him, his death must be referenced in this context.

During the battle, Drona causes widespread destruction of the Pandava army. His anger and prowess with weapons become difficult to counter even for Arjuna. Krishna realises that unless remedial action is initiated, Drona will defeat the Pandavas. So he comes up with a plan to render Drona vulnerable and open to a fatal attack.

Addressing Arjuna, Krishna conveys his assessment of the unassailable Drona. He adds, "O Pandava! Therefore, to ensure victory, abandon dharma and resort to yoga." This implies foregoing the righteous path in battle and adopting deception instead. Krishna understands the dilemma faced by Yudhishthira and addresses it accordingly. "Save us from Drona. Untruth may be better than truth. By telling the truth for saving of life, untruth does not touch one."[161]

Accordingly, he unveils his plan:

> It is my view that if Ashvatthama is killed, he will not fight. Let some virtuous man tell him that he has been killed in battle.[162]

The plan creates misgivings within the Pandava ranks. Neither is Arjuna comfortable with the plan nor is Yudhishthira at ease. However, it is realised that there is little option other than killing Drona if the Pandavas want to defeat Duryodhana.

Accordingly, Yudhishthira, having killed an elephant by the same name as Drona's son, confirms to Drona that the deed has indeed been done, without attempting to clarify the obfuscation. A distraught Drona becomes vulnerable, providing Dhrishtadyumna the very opportunity he has been waiting for. The reality of Drona's death is received with mixed emotions. Arjuna continues to remain dissatisfied with the sequence of events and

conveys his displeasure. "We have killed him today, for the sake of the kingdom. It is better for us to be dead than to remain alive."[163]

Hearing Arjuna, Bhima castigates him. This is a relevant dialogue as it revisits the ideas of realism, especially under conditions of conflict. Therefore, to that extent, it becomes relevant for leaders responsible for strategic decision-making.

Bhima says, "O Partha! You speak words full of dharma, like a hermit who has retired to a forest, or like a brahmana rigid in his vows raising his staff." Bhima goes on to remind Arjuna of the deprivations and humiliation they have suffered as a result of *adharma*. He adds, "We did not deserve this, but we were made to endure this for thirteen years by the enemy. O unblemished one! There are reasons for anger, but you have abandoned your rage."[164]

Dhrishtadyumna argues that Drona is following the *dharma* of *kshatriyas* despite being a brahmana. Drona is using *maya* and superhuman weapons to kill them. He therefore sees no wrong in employing *maya* against Drona. Drona is fighting with disregard towards good and evil. "Overcome by anger, he used the *brahmastra* to even kill those who were unacquainted with the use of weapons. O supreme among men! Why should we not use any means to kill him?"

This debate highlights two important aspects. One, is that there are differing perspectives on the conceptualisation and pursuit of *dharma*, especially for a warrior. Two, the grey zone within which wars tend to be fought and correspondingly, the thin line that can diffuse the ideas of right and wrong. In this case, the debate focusses on the concept of *dharma*. However, as events indicate, its implications vary when seen in the larger perspective of the preceding events or the immediacy of the action in question. While Arjuna laments the act that kills his teacher Drona, Bhima and Dhrishtadyumna view it as a part of a longer sequence of events that render the action of Drona siding with Duryodhana itself as *adharma*.

Soon after the heated debate, Ashvatthama, seething with anger, releases the *brahmastra* to destroy his opponents. Yet again, it is Krishna along with Arjuna who read the gravity of the situation and suggest remedial passive

measures to offset the impact of the weapon. This includes dismounting from their respective chariots and casting aside their weapons.

Karna

Krishna's approach to Karna evolves through the *Mahabharata*. He praises him for his steadfast approach and simultaneously reminds him of his *dharma's* violation. Krishna attempts to wean him away from Duryodhana and despite knowing that he is Kunti's eldest son, he does not hesitate to get him targeted when he is vulnerable.

During the battle, Krishna waits for the opportune time when Karna's chariot gets stuck in the mud. At this juncture, Karna appeals to Arjuna to wait for the extrication of his chariot wheel. He cautions Arjuna and says, "O Pandava! Remember the instructions of dharma and wait for a short while."[165]

Instead of Arjuna responding to Karna, it is Krishna who does. He finds it ironic that Karna invokes *dharma* to seek justice and fair play. He says:

> O Karna! When you Suyodhana, Duhshasana and Shakuni Soubala brought Droupadi to the assembly hall in a single garment, did dharma not show itself to you... O Karna! During her season, Krishna (another name for Droupadi) was under Duhshasana's subjugation in the assembly hall and you laughed at her. Where did dharma go then?[166]

The planning and execution of Karna's death is yet again a dispassionate and professional decision taken by Krishna. It has little to do with emotions. On a previous occasion before the war, Krishna is willing to offer the kingdom to Karna if he chooses the righteous path, which could have weakened Duryodhana's resolve to go to war and avoided destruction. However, once the war begins, the only course open to Krishna is victory in the *dharma yudhha.* Since Karna invokes *dharma* once he is vulnerable, Krishna reminds him that the idea of *dharma* cannot be one-sided. It cannot be invoked only when it suits an individual. It is also in this context that the battlefield violation by Arjuna must be contextualised.

End of Duryodhana

Duryodhana remains an interesting character till his very end in the *Mahabharata*. Just like Krishna, he never once doubts the logic or justification of his actions. Even as the reality of his actions is clear to the reader, to Duryodhana, this reality reflects injustice that deserves to be righted.

His end at the hands of Bhima, guided yet again by Krishna, goes on to reinforce his conviction. After Karna's death, the Kauravas' defeat is only a matter of time. Duryodhana sees the fast-dwindling strength of the generals around him and is eventually forced to seek refuge in a pond to evade detection. However, the Pandavas do eventually locate him. Duryodhana is asked to come out and face his cousins.

Duryodhana seeks to fight the Pandavas one by one, as he has no support. This is when Yudhishthira gets carried away by the prevailing circumstances. Instead of ensuring a logical end to the war that has been fought at a heavy cost, he proposes an option that can negate all sacrifices. He says:

> Fight with us one at a time, with whatever weapon you wish… If you kill anyone of us, the kingdom will be yours. Otherwise, be slain and obtain heaven.[167]

Krishna is angry with Yudhishthira for making an offer that can lead to a disaster. He says, "O Yudhishthira! In this encounter, if he had named you, Arjuna, Nakula or Sahadeva, what would have happened? O king! How could you show rashness like this?" Krishna makes a telling comparison thereafter. "It is almost as if the ancient and unequal gambling match between you and Shakuni is being enacted again."[168]

Krishna knows that in a battle of equals with a club, Duryodhana will easily defeat all his cousins except Bhima, who is just about his equal. Duryodhana is superior to him in skills, which more than make up for Bhima's strength.

He accuses Yudhishthira of placing the Pandavas in a difficult position because his poor ploy will stake the entire kingdom on a duel with Duryodhana.

As the encounter progresses, Arjuna asks Krishna about Bhima's chance of victory. Unsurprisingly, Krishna gives his objective assessment, doubting

the possibility of Bhima's success in a fair fight. He says, "He will be able to kill Suyodhana only if he fights through unfair means."[169] He suggests that Bhima needs to fulfil his pledge of shattering Duryodhana's thigh – an act considered unfair in club fighting.

Bhima receives a signal from Arjuna and goes on to accomplish the task at hand. Duryodhana is defeated with a blow to his thigh.

Chapter Seven

Evaluation of Strategic Decisions

The previous two chapters provide a comprehensive description of events that see Krishna either make decisive choices or, more often than not, guide strategic decision-making. These events include the pre-war phase and the 18-day military engagement on the battlefield of Kurukshetra – the circumstances during which the decisions taken and the resultant actions provide diverse examples to facilitate an objective analysis.

It has been noted earlier that Krishna emerges as the best idealogue and practitioner of *dharma* in the *Mahabharata*. His choices therefore, represent a clear and practical approach to strategic decision-making within the wider ambit of *dharma*.

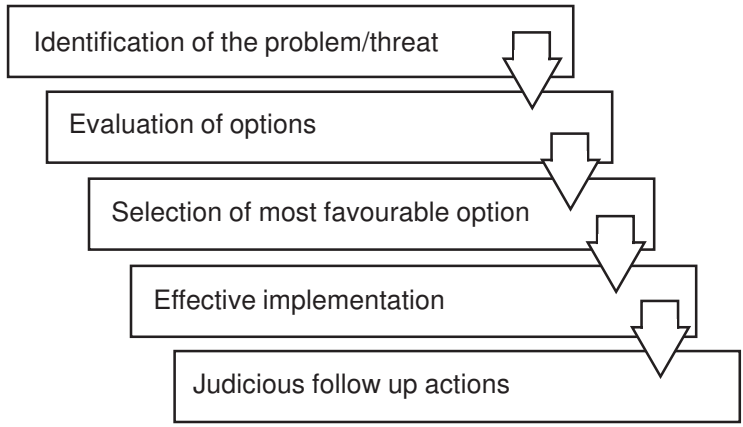
Strategic Decision-Making Cycle

Any attempt to understand Krishna's decisions and actions can be evaluated based on the sequence of the decision-making cycle and the attributes that allow effective decision-making. The *Mahabharata's* text does not attempt to derive these elements. Instead, these are based on the author's analysis of the sequence of events and his attempt to derive an underlying logic.

An evaluation of Krishna's decisions suggests a very logical and objective decision-making process to the extent that it tends to echo most modern processes. The process begins with the identification of a problem, threat or challenge. This is followed by an evaluation of options. Thereafter, Krishna chooses the most favourable option. However, the process does not end here. Subsequently, he ensures the effective implementation of the chosen

option. Finally, this is accompanied by a judicious follow up, which ensures the completion of the decision-implementation loop.

Figure 2: Krishna's Strategic Decision-Making Cycle



The process seems logical and obvious in its conceptualisation. Yet, other than Krishna, why do most actors falter in their decision-making journey? It is not because the sequence of their actions is any different; instead, it is a case of flawed evaluation of one or more of the stages listed above. This can best be understood and illustrated through the examples cited in earlier chapters.

One of the earliest instances in the *Mahabharata* that sows the seeds of eventual conflict is the game of dice and the treatment of Droupadi. If this incident is evaluated based on the sequence of actions listed above, the flaw in the process emerges clearly. Yudhishthira correctly identifies the challenge associated with playing a game of dice with Shakuni. He recognises and realises the likelihood of deceit at play. The challenge is therefore not associated with the mistaken identification of the problem at hand. It relates to the options that he considers and thereafter, the choice he eventually makes. This is further a result of misplaced emphasis on what he perceives as his *dharma* based on the literal assessment of the situation that is presented to him. Yudhishthira considers his refusal to play the game and turning down the invitation as *adharma*. Arguably, he has greater responsibility

towards the people he serves as a king, and his wife and brothers. Instead, his commitment towards fulfilling a social custom takes precedence over his *raja dharma*.

In contrast, as mentioned earlier, Krishna not only evaluates the situation differently by correctly identifying the key threat it poses, but he is equally prepared to undertake remedial measures if circumstances do not allow the Pandavas' interests to be safeguarded. This includes the destruction of individuals who participate and collude in the ensuing actions.

This suggests that even if someone were to correctly identify the problem at hand, making a wrong choice of the options available can lead to flawed decisions.

When the same incident is viewed from Bhishma's perspective, the result is similar, even though the reasons attributable to the decision-making cycle vary. Bhishma is witness to the initiation of the game of dice. Despite Vidura repeatedly chastising Duryodhana and warning Dhritarashtra of dire consequences, Bhishma chooses to remain a mute spectator at this stage. It is only when Droupadi questions the acceptability of someone who after losing himself in a game of dice, puts his wife at stake that Bhishma is forced to answer. He does so through an ambivalent and evasive reply, "since the ways of dharma are subtle, I cannot properly resolve the question you have posed".[170]

Despite understanding the gravity of the situation, he refuses to accept the obvious option of intervening and stopping the downward trajectory of events. Consequently, he fails to intervene at the appropriate juncture – an action that could prevent a war.

Krishna's role in the killing of Jarasandha has been highlighted earlier in the text. This incident is an important determinant in the crowning of Yudhishthira as an emperor. However, from the perspective of this evaluation, it is more relevant to assess the perfect execution of the strategic decision-making process.

Krishna correctly identifies Jarasandha as an impediment to the successful completion of the *rajasuya*, which involves the acceptance of Yudhishthira's suzerainty by other rulers. Given Jarasandha's military might, he possesses

the ability to stall it. Having identified this challenge, Krishna considers the alternatives. He foresees unpredictable challenges in the event of a military campaign. Therefore, he proposes infiltrating Jarasandha's kingdom in disguise and challenging him to a wrestling match. Accordingly, he decides that Bhima and Arjuna are the best partners for accomplishing the plan and ensuring its successful execution. Further, as a follow-up, he places a supportive ruler on the throne of Magadha. He also asks for the assistance of all kings freed from the captivity of Jarasandha. He thus not only eliminates the most dangerous obstacle to Yudhishthira's elevation, but also creates a useful support base for all future challenges.

An evaluation of the incidents suggests that Krishna systematically completes the strategic decision-making cycle. He identifies the challenge, looks at the alternatives, makes the reasoned choice and ensures implementation and follow-up.

Krishna's diplomatic endeavour has been discussed earlier in detail. This includes his implementation of three *upayas: sama*, *dana* and *bheda*. When this important event is evaluated from the perspective of the strategic decision-making cycle, it throws up interesting insights.

It is not Krishna's idea to undertake the diplomatic mission. However, once he is assigned this responsibility by Yudhishthira, yet again, Krishna goes about it systematically. He correctly identifies Duryodhana's obstinacy and his coterie as an impediment to peace. However, despite the option to abjure the initiative, he agrees to undertake it to pursue peace and simultaneously elevate the Pandavas to a higher moral pedestal. His outreach also follows the guidance of *dharma*.

The implementation of this strategic decision is seen through a series of persuasive arguments made by Krishna in an attempt to broker peace. When this does not succeed, as he expects, he simultaneously persuades a vast majority of the gathering of the honourable intent of the Pandavas. He also convinces them of the *adharma* being committed by Duryodhana, thereby gaining high moral ground.

Immediately after his diplomatic initiative, Krishna attempts to wean Karna away from the Kaurava camp. This is yet another attempt at disrupting

the impending war and weakening Duryodhana, who is relying on Karna to challenge Arjuna.

Unlike other case studies, this time around, Krishna does not succeed in stopping the war, nor does he convince Karna to switch sides. Yet, an evaluation of the strategic decision-making process suggests that he not only followed each stage correctly, but each option that he chose, the objectives he pursued and the path he selected to implement it were all correct. Under the prevailing circumstances, he could not have achieved anything beyond what he eventually does.

Therefore, an effective strategic decision-making process is not necessarily one that always results in success. If the choices are correct, a temporary failure can facilitate an eventual success story. Krishna's endeavours during the diplomatic initiative effectively establish the Pandavas on the side of *dharma*.

Krishna's conduct during the war is equally important, even though he does not directly intervene during the battles. His assessment of the situation during the war and advice to exercise the right option determines its ultimate result.

In the case of Bhishma, Krishna displays detached objectivity, keeping in view the demands of the situation and pursuit of *dharma*. On the one hand, on the ninth day of the war, he convinces Arjuna to undertake his *kshatriya dharma* and kill Bhishma on the battlefield.[171] In the same spirit, he advises Yudhishthira to seek Bhishma's guidance on *raja dharma* after the war ends. During the war, he perceives Bhishma as an impediment to Pandavas' victory and thereafter the most appropriate teacher given his vast experience and knowledge. The dictates of *dharma* guide Krishna's actions. This allows him to do the right thing, irrespective of the costs involved. The approach can therefore be best described as detached objectivity.

Krishna displays a similar attitude after Abhimanyu's death. Even though he is not directly involved in the incident, he remains balanced in his judgement despite losing his sister's son. He admonishes Arjuna for his rash pledge to kill Jayadratha the next day without thinking of the consequences of potential failure. Krishna advises Arjuna to remain focussed towards his

objective and avoid distractions to facilitate the fulfilment of his pledge the next day. Accordingly, he asks Arjuna to sidestep Drona and move towards Jayadratha instead. He also sends Satyaki to assist Arjuna and relieve the pressure building on him.

Krishna's identification of the challenge posed by Drona and Karna follows a similar trajectory. When Karna refuses the offer and the war commences, he becomes a legitimate target for neutralisation. In the case of Drona, having realised his destructive ability, Krishna suggests using deception to eliminate him. He helps implement this effectively by exploiting Drona's vulnerability on the battlefield.

Karna's elimination is completed in a more layered process. Krishna first forces the utilisation of Karna's divine weapon against Ghatotkacha, thereby, in the process, safeguarding Arjuna. After that, he waits for the right opportunity to corner Karna in a vulnerable situation and convinces Arjuna to strike him. He displays no hesitation or remorse for one who refuses to follow *dharma* and fails to honour the dignity of a lady. Krishna creates an opportunity for Arjuna and ensures follow-up by convincing him of the righteousness of eliminating Karna at the opportune time.

The final act of the war leads to the elimination of Duryodhana. The contrast between Yudhishthira's and Krishna's approach to Duryodhana in hiding has been discussed earlier. Yet again, their different approaches to solving dilemmas reveal the distinct differences in the strategic decision-making process of the two leaders. Both identify the challenge posed by Duryodhana. Yet Yudhishthira allows his emotion and flawed sense of fair play to have the better of his judgement when he lets Duryodhana select his challenger amongst the Pandavas. Krishna's judgement is far more objective and realistic, given the possibility of losing all the gains of the war and rendering the losses suffered a waste.

When Duryodhana selects Bhima as his challenger, Krishna expresses his apprehension regarding the eventual result. Constrained by the rules of the battle, Krishna does not help Bhima. Instead, he indicates Duryodhana's weakness to Arjuna, who finds an ingenious way to convey this to Bhima. He also ensures his victory instead of allowing the fight to take its course by indicating the gap in Duryodhana's steely and resolute defence. Interestingly,

following Duryodhana's death and anticipating anger on the part of Dhritarashtra, as a follow-up, Krishna protects Bhima by letting Dhritarashtra hug Bhima's statue instead. Dhritarashtra breaks the statute only to give vent to his emotions. He forgives Bhima thereafter. This allows an opening for the Pandavas to return to Hastinapur, bringing the events to an eventual closure.

Krishna's Decision-Making Attributes

At this stage, it would seem that the essence of Krishna's abilities is implementing the strategic decision-making cycle. His success is linked to the cycle's logical attributes and the qualities that allow him to identify, analyse, decide, implement and follow up on the emerging situations.

As a part of this chapter, an attempt is made to identify the qualities that facilitate Krishna's decisions. These emerge from the incidents that precede the analysis.

Past–Future–Present

The decisions taken by Krishna reflect learnings from the past and their impact on the future. The past and future are treated more as determinants rather than constants that cannot adjust to the needs of a situation. In other words, he is neither a captive of the past nor a slave of the future.

Krishna remains acutely aware of past events as an influence, learning and guidance. If need be, he is willing to forgive adverse past actions to facilitate a better future. This, however, does not imply that he forgets the past. Instead, he is more than willing to forgive to help charter a better future.

Krishna's handling of Karna emerges as an interesting example in this regard. He is well aware of Karna's past transgressions in partnership with Duryodhana. This includes his role in the humiliation of Droupadi. While Krishna does not forget these actions, he is willing to forgive him for the sake of peace. He realises that Duryodhana sees Karna as a counter to the military advantage enjoyed by the Pandavas. Accordingly, he gives precedence to war avoidance over settling personal scores from the past. However, when this does not succeed, Krishna ensures that Karna is eliminated during the

war at the hands of Arjuna. He justifies these actions by citing Karna's acts of *adharma*. He lists out his transgressions and does not hesitate to seek his end to help re-establish *dharma*. Krishna has learnt from the past, visualised the impact of actions in the future and then made decisions in the present.

Krishna does not read the past as he wants it to be. He sees it for what it is. Similarly, he attempts to shape the future through the lens of righteousness. But when he fails, his visualisation does not deter him from selecting a different course to achieve the larger objective.

Realism

One of Krishna's most important attributes is his realistic problem-solving approach. This has been illustrated through several case studies earlier. An assessment of these cases suggests his ability to objectively analyse problems and look for solutions within the ambit of *dharma*. Some of his actions may be misconstrued, especially when viewed in isolation. This emerges from his detached approach to solution-finding. He prefers balance and justice over the dogmatic pursuit of an ideal that serves narrow and personal interests. His sense of realism is evident through his personal affairs, advisory role and official capacity as a king. Pursuing realism can be challenging, especially when compared with idealism interpreted through its letter rather than the spirit. In the absence of balance and imposing the self on the decision-making process, realism can become self-serving and idealism a dogma. The idea of detached perseverance cannot be achieved unless the self becomes subservient to the larger objective.

Realism also falters when accompanied by a desire to suit a deep-rooted belief, rather than its true manifestation. When Krishna is asked to go to Dhritarashtra's court as an emissary, he realises the likelihood of failure. Yet, he does his best to derive the best for the larger interests of the Kurus and the Pandavas in particular. He is not blindsided at any stage of the endeavour. He therefore achieves the best he can under the prevailing circumstances. Further, even as the peace parleys are undertaken, earnest preparations for sealing alliances and preparing the army are ordered.

Krishna is equally realistic about the threat posed by some Kaurava generals like Bhishma, Drona and Karna. Despite his respect for them, he

finds them on the opposing side of *dharma*. His mind is not ambiguous about the critical need to neutralise them if the war is to be won. Each instance leads to an animated debate on the justifiability of the actions involved in killing them. Yet, Krishna remains steadfast in his understanding of the situation. His realistic approach to the conduct of war and before that the justifiable use of force is guided by *dharma*, never detached from the reality of running a state.

The ability to advance, retreat, bend or stand up to opposition is dictated by circumstances. Krishna's ability to remain flexible in the face of opposition comes across as an efficient and realistic approach to threats. After Drona's death, Ashvatthama is enraged and swears revenge for the injustice that has led to Drona's death. Accordingly, he invokes the Narayana weapon given to his father and passed on to him. It can only be used once. It cannot be returned to its user without killing him in the process. "In a battle, this great weapon must not be used to kill those who are running away, those who have cast aside their weapons, enemies who have yielded and those who have sought refuge."[172] Instead of attempting to blunt the impact of the weapon and standing up to fight its grievous effect, Krishna guides the Pandava army to dismount and cast aside their weapons. Everyone complies with his guidance, except Bhima, who is determined to stand and fight. Consequently, Krishna and Arjuna force him onto the ground and in the process save his life. When the adverse impact of the weapon ceases, the Pandavas pick up their weapons to renew the fight. Krishna's action suggests a realistic assessment of the situation. He realises that under the prevailing circumstances, discretion is better than the dogmatic pursuit of valour. In war, advance and retreat are both manoeuvres that have their utility. The preference for an option must be dictated by its immediate relevance rather than an unrealistic, though, seemingly heroic choice that can lead to disaster.

Objective

Krishna never loses sight of the objective towards which he focusses his decisions and actions. These facilitate a larger aim and he chooses the most appropriate support structure to achieve them. In the case of Jarasandha, he asks Yudhishthira for the services of Arjuna and Bhima, having fully realised the nature of adversity. The 18-day war itself is conceptualised and fought to

ensure the establishment of *dharma* and justice. Krishna supports and guides the Pandava's war effort through doubt, detachment, deference and dejection. The *Bhagavad Gita* may be the most famous illustrative example; however, it indicates Krishna's role as a mentor and guide to Arjuna and Yudhishthira. At each instance, he guides them to victory in the *dharma yudhha*.

Krishna's objective is to avoid conflict, death and destruction before war becomes a certainty. He attempts to achieve this through the use of *sama*, *dana* and *bheda* as a part of his diplomatic foray, as discussed earlier. He even goes to the extent of showing his divine form in an attempt to convince the onlookers of the righteousness of the Pandava cause and the divine support it enjoys. While his endeavour does not ultimately succeed, its impact can be gauged by the acceptance of his arguments by all present except for Duryodhana and his clique. When the negotiations fail, Krishna attempts to wean away Karna's support to dissuade Duryodhana from going to war. This does not suggest his acceptance of their perspective. Instead, it indicates Krishna's desire to broker peace even at the cost of an unequal settlement.

Krishna's endeavours indicate that success is not guaranteed despite defining objectives. Yet, they minimise the probability of failure. They also reinforce his message of *nishkama karma*, which encourages an individual to work selflessly, irrespective of the fruits of the action. Further, outlining objectives is not an end in itself. The concept of the infinite approach that is dealt with in the next chapter suggests that an infinite approach can encompass within its ambit multiple finite elements. Individual objectives and end states, while important, are ultimately a part of a continuum.

Detachment from Events and Individuals

Detachment as an attribute has been highlighted repeatedly as a contributing factor to objective decision-making. However, a more detailed assessment reveals its relevance as an independent factor. This relates to detachment not only from individuals but also from events.

Krishna's objectivity in decision-making emerges from his ability to detach himself from a situation and individuals, irrespective of his association and involvement. His approach is best contextualised concerning his dialogue with Arjuna on the battlefield before the commencement of the war. His

guidance to Arjuna on detachment, the pursuit of *svadharma* and the importance of perseverance for a just cause is also seen in equal measure through his behaviour and actions.

Krishna's guidance assists in the neutralisation of all major battlefield threats like Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana. His respect for Bhishma is evident at each stage of the epic. Yet, his detachment from him allows his elimination from the battlefield. A similar approach is evident after Abhimanyu's death and while introducing Ghatotkacha into the battlefield against Karna to force the pre-mature use of his divine spear. Each decision can be questioned when viewed emotionally. Yet, an objective assessment indicates the employment of reasoned logic at each step before and during the war.

Facilitator Rather than Dictator of Actions

A careful assessment of Krishna's role in the *Mahabharata* suggests that he is a facilitator in the pursuit of *dharma* rather than someone dictating the course of events against the will of those involved. This is illustrated through a series of events during the epic. Krishna advises Arjuna to abduct his sister and even facilitates the process, but does not directly get involved at any time. Similarly, he attempts to broker peace between the Pandavas and Kauravas, yet he does not force a decision on any party, arguably despite the powers to do so. During the war, there are several instances when Krishna feels the need to intervene. Yet, he controls his emotions and does not go beyond the role of an adviser.

The *Mahabharata* discusses the correlation between fate and free will. While acknowledging the relevance of destiny and fate, it repeatedly emphasises the importance of human endeavour. In his human form, Krishna continues the pursuit of earnest endeavour to stall the march of destiny. The choices presented to Duryodhana to avoid war, the warnings given to Shishupala and the option to release prisoners that is provided to Jarasandha are a few of the instances that come to mind.

A Mentor to All

One of Krishna's greatest qualities is his guidance and role as a mentor. Given their close association, his advice to Arjuna is well-acknowledged

throughout the *Mahabharata*. The *Bhagavad Gita* is its finest example and illustration. A closer look at the text reveals that this message, despite being profound, does not eliminate contrarian and negative ideas about war in Arjuna's mind. This is especially related to the killing of Bhishma. It is Krishna's continuous mentoring that allows Arjuna to strive towards victory.

Krishna's role as a mentor is not limited to Arjuna alone. He also guides Yudhishthira on several occasions. This includes his decisive counsel to undertake the *rajasuya*, preceded by neutralising the threat posed by Jarasandha. He is also instrumental in provisioning invaluable guidance through Bhishma at the end of the war on the vital aspect of *raja dharma*. This guidance plays a pivotal role in resolving the dilemmas in Yudhishthira's mind and educating him on his role as an ideal king.

In mentoring important characters like Arjuna and Yudhishthira, indirectly Krishna succeeds in mentoring innumerable people.

Clarity of Thought and Decisiveness

At every stage of the epic, Krishna displays complete clarity of thought and decisiveness. Unlike some protagonists, he does not sit on the side-lines as a neutral observer. His clarity of thought is repeatedly displayed in his communication and actions. Krishna does not mince his words even when he represents the Pandavas as a diplomat. He unhesitatingly shares his views on the side that follows the tenets of *dharma* and conversely, the one that repeatedly commits *adharma*. He appeals to Duryodhana's good sense and yet observing intransigence, he reprimands him for the wrongs he has committed. His straight talk does not spare the elders either. Krishna calls out their inaction in the face of injustice.

His actions during the war yet again suggest clarity of mind and decisiveness. The call to eliminate the Kaurava senior leadership indicates his accurate reading of a deteriorating situation each time the Pandavas face a critical threat. His suggestions to remove impediments in the path of victory are objective, detached and decisive. That said, does this imply that Krishna's decisive actions do not receive their fair share of critique?

Some actions by Krishna are indeed critiqued. At the end of the war Gandhari, Duryodhana's mother, conveys her displeasure in no uncertain

terms. However, this does not cause Krishna to deviate from the path that he considers righteous and for the larger good of the people. This includes the potential for personal loss as well.[173]

The ability to perceive the big picture in contrast to the immediacy of an event often distinguishes a far-sighted leader from others. Each incident during the war sees misgivings about plans that involve the employment of stratagem mostly on the part of Krishna. Arjuna is uncomfortable with the plans to eliminate Bhishma, Drona and even Karna, despite his role in support of Duryodhana's actions. It is Krishna's guidance regarding the implications of each action that convinces Arjuna. Each step, commencing from the dissemination of the *Bhagavad Gita* to the elimination of Duryodhana, is a steep learning curve for major characters to comprehend the strategic imperatives of situations. When seen through the narrow confines of the action itself, Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna and Bhima are all wrong in their actions. However, clarity of thought cannot become a slave to the letter when the spirit of an action remains violated.

Conflict situations often throw up challenges and opportunities. It is only a decisive leader who can exploit a fleeting situation. This comes from clarity of thought and the ability to sift the important from the trivial. This leads to the next characteristic of Krishna's decision-making attribute.

"Lead Forces Where There are Holes"

Yudhishthira describes Krishna's attribute while sending Arjuna and Yudhishthira to take on Jarasandha as an ability to "lead forces where there are holes". This decision-making attribute can be described in multiple ways when compared with contemporary strategic and tactical terminology. This is similar to William Lind's description of manoeuvre warfare, which describes the concept of surfaces and gaps.[174] He suggests avoiding well-defended areas, strengths of the enemy and instead, hitting the gaps – the vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

A very common term within the military and management terminology speaks about "out-of-the-box" solutions. This suggests rejecting predictability and the expected. Instead, the solution should be unpredictable and unexpected. Each case study that is analysed reinforces Krishna's ability to

take the opposing side by surprise. He looks for weaknesses in an adversary's armour – vulnerabilities that can be hit at an opportune time. This ensures the neutralisation of comparative weaknesses and the development of advantages against superior adversaries. From Bhishma to Drona and from Karna to Duryodhana, the 18-day war witnesses repeated examples of this ability.

Decision-making Is Not a Mathematical Evaluation

The evaluation of a situation might suggest the placement of pros and cons on opposing sides and choosing the option that has the maximum affirmations. However, Krishna's decisions are not guided by a system of mathematical evaluation. Instead, he tends to focus on the most important determinants to guide his actions. This very important aspect of his decision-making skills continues to remain so in contemporary times. Leaders must have the ability to discern the critical from the important and the important from the relevant. The inability to discern the more important when compared with others can potentially lead to misplaced priorities, something that is repeatedly seen in the *Mahabharata* with some characters like Karna and even Yudhishthira. This suggests the importance of focussing on higher priority aspects and keeping these as the basis for decisions.

The Infinite Approach

The concept of the infinite approach briefly mentioned earlier will be discussed at length in the next chapter. At this stage, contextualising it to Krishna's decision-making cycle, suffice to say that his ability to view issues as part of a continuum rather than as a narrow ends-based approach allows him to implement the spirit of *dharma* rather than merely its literal meaning. Since his approach links the past with the future to decide on actions in the present, it includes an inherent sense of timelessness. On the contrary, Duryodhana's belief in his ability to control events as a part of his finite approach to the circumstances fails despite enjoying the advantage of numbers and senior generals in his army's ranks.

Role of Dharma

Krishna's approach to *dharma* remains the most contentious and widely discussed. Krishna makes his divine origin evident during the epic – as do several other characters. He is also looked up to for guidance and solutions by the wisest and the elders. Bhishma suggests his name for the foremost and first honour during Yudhishthira's *rajasuya*, reinforcing this reality. And yet, at each critical juncture, especially during the war, Krishna relies upon deception and deceit to save the Pandavas from defeat. When viewed from the perspective of a *dharma yudhha*, which includes the rules of warfare, these acts violate the agreement. How can Krishna's decisions then be considered in the pursuit of *dharma*?

Krishna's approach is not without its critics, who do not entirely agree with his interpretation of *dharma*, especially during the war. This includes actions that lead to the killing of Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana. Gurcharan Das writes, "Although he did not shoot a single arrow, Krishna won the war for the Pandavas through cheating." He adds, "He, of course, calls it 'superior strategy', but the text is clear that he violated the dharma of war in doing so."[175]

The *Mahabharata* quotes several examples that cite the dangers of literal interpretations of *dharma*. Yudhishthira's *dharma* does not allow him to refuse Dhritarashtra's invitation to play a game of dice. Bhishma finds *dharma* "subtle" when Droupadi questions him after she is dragged into the court. His *dharma* does not allow him to stop the grave *adharma* being committed by Duryodhana, despite acknowledging its consequences. Krishna raises the issue of *adharma* with Karna, who acknowledges his misjudgement, yet feels compelled to stand by his friend.

On the contrary, Krishna's approach is derived from his ability to act in the spirit of *dharma* without being enslaved by its literal interpretation. Krishna's actions are aimed at the larger good of society and the establishment of *dharma*, rather than seeking immediate gains from a situation. *Dharma* for him is empowering rather than constraining. It is a facilitating agent rather than an impediment in decision-making. *Dharma* is meant to provide solutions and not merely raise questions. It provides clarity rather than confusion. When these characteristics are encapsulated, Krishna's ability to give direction and make decisions becomes clearer.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna dwells upon the concept of *svadharma*. The word combines two words – *sva* (self) and *dharma*. In the *Mahabharata*, an individual's *dharma* emerges from the person's *varnashrama*. For a *kshatriya* in his youth, this implies protecting people from hurt.[176] Three aspects relate to the fulfilment of this responsibility. First, what is the duty? Second, which one will take precedence if the need to fulfil more than one duty arises? Finally, what is the best way to fulfil this duty?

Krishna's decision-making process suggests that a selfless approach to *karma* can correctly identify the nature of duty. When the self becomes central to the thought process, the ability to determine the challenge is vitiated. Individual biases, desires and ambitions influence it. Detachment allows the mind to appropriately prioritise duties that emerge from conflicting demands. Selflessness allows an individual to achieve this objectively. For Krishna, the larger good supersedes individual interests. The interests of the state are more important than individual convictions unless the pursuit of state interests violates *dharma*. The second element defined by Krishna is the importance of *karma* or prescribed action. For Krishna, Arjuna's primary duty is to fight for a just cause. He sees no ambiguity as it is his *karma* as a *kshatriya*. The third element of the best way to fulfil one's duty is more complex as a part of the decision-making process. Krishna's decision-making process is different from Bhima's. Similarly, Yudhishthira's decisions are at times driven by different motivations than those of Krishna. In the spirit of fair play, Yudhishthira allows Duryodhana, who is hiding in a lake, to challenge any of the Pandavas and take back his kingdom if he were to win. Krishna castigates him for this short-sighted move, which could render the sacrifices of the Pandava army redundant, especially since Duryodhana is technically better at fighting with a mace. Yudhishthira is seemingly just in his offer. However, his offer is unrealistic and detached from the reality of the situation – something a king or a leader cannot forget, especially in the fulfilment of *raja dharma*.

Krishna's thought process is endorsed and reinforced by Bhishma in the *Shanti Parva* when he shares the wisdom of running a kingdom with Yudhishthira. Bhishma's insights on *raja dharma* are guided by the tenets of *dharma* and simultaneously cater to the needs of running a kingdom. Bhishma's answers to Yudhishthira's questions reflect the reality of statecraft

in the light of an ethics-based approach. It becomes evident that this approach is more likely to address the realities of strategic decision-making and the realistic challenges of life. Therefore, an attempt to judge the actions of the Pandavas during the war as *adharma* should be seen in the context of Bhishma's guidance on similar actions. This is especially the case since he is a victim of deception during the war – an action that has his blessings.

Krishna often tends to be blamed for "*adharma*" on the battlefield. This *adharma* must therefore be seen in the context of Bhishma's guidance on how and when *adharma* is considered acceptable. Some of the actions by the Pandavas will be seen as a violation of an ethics-based approach when viewed in isolation. After all, these actions violate the rules of war agreed upon by both sides before the commencement of hostilities. However, Krishna does not endorse the naïve and blind pursuit of a rule when the opposing side has violated it in the past to gain an unfair advantage to the extent of repeated attempts on the lives of the aggrieved.

The criticism of Krishna's role in the killing of Drona, Karna and Duryodhana when dissected in isolation, will lead to predictable criticism. The debate over *dharma* and *adharma*, right and wrong, valid and invalid, just and unjust when viewed through the limited scope of an incident, rarely provides the context for reasoned assessment. Each of the characters mentioned is party to grave injustice through direct or indirect acts on their part. Should the larger fight for justice be lost to adhere to the rules of warfighting? In an ideal world, that could possibly be the case. However, the *Mahabharata* gets as close to the reality of human existence as a text possibly can. The expectation or desire to achieve such a condition would have made the epic unrelatable to reality. Arguably, it was not difficult for its author to make subtle changes to the story in a manner that would eliminate the very basis of moral contention. After all, who would contest the good deeds of the human incarnation of Lord Vishnu? And yet, this was not done. One wonders why.[177]

The answer to this perplexing issue lies in the importance of dealing with dilemmas that reflect a degree of timelessness in their complexity and, therefore, lessons for future generations within the guidance of *dharma*. The epic's story weaves around a dispute between cousins, which eventually leads

to war. On the face of it, this struggle does not reflect the wider interests of the states and the ruled. However, the epic is as much about individual characters as it is about what they represent. When seen literally through the lens of the story, the constant struggle and the war seem to reflect a narrow reality. Conversely, it is a profound lesson in individual and state responses to complex realities and challenges that play out through the main characters of the text. It is this illustrative aspect of the epic that has greater and more abiding value, especially given its relatable dilemmas.

The *Mahabharata* gives a king the right to protect his people from threats. This is the king's foremost *dharma* in achieving *yoga* and *kshema*. The inability to protect and worse, the disinclination to preserve peace violates a king's *raja dharma*. This was as true for the Pandavas, as it is for a modern state. The *raja dharma* of a government dictates the protection of its citizens and the ability to punish violations that threaten peace.

The chapter on *Raja Dharma Parva* and its co-relation with the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara* comes across as a seemingly sharp contrast with the preceding storyline of the book. Even as these chapters reinforce an individual's fundamental values and behaviour, there is a simultaneous focus on the demands of running a kingdom – in more contemporary times, a state. The detailed point of emphasis on the role and responsibilities of a king will be dealt with later in succeeding chapters. At this stage, suffice to say that the epic's focus shifts from the story's steady progression to a pause that allows greater deliberation on a king's responsibilities. Bhishma's relatable guidance takes a prescriptive tone, more in the form of a teacher guiding his pupil. Several principles of statecraft highlighted by Bhishma reinforce the actions of the Pandavas on the battlefield. Incidents that seem moral aberrations and distortions of a *dharma yudhha* when viewed from within the confines of the act itself are seen differently on the scales of justice. Bhishma calls *raja dharma* the most important *dharma* for a king. If *yoga* and *kshema* are the two primary responsibilities of a king, then the individual acts on the battlefield must also be seen as a logical progression of the duties and responsibilities of the same ruler. The ends of justice and the need to ensure protection cannot become subservient to the lesser needs of fair play against an adversary who created the very conditions for war through unfair means!

Chapter Eight

The Infinite Approach

One of the most interesting and revealing aspects that come to the fore from the reading of the *Mahabharata* is the concept of an infinite approach to life and more specifically to issues of warfighting. While this sentiment resonates throughout the text, it is the *Bhagavad Gita* that provides its foundational underpinnings.

The concept of finite and infinite play has been written about earlier as well. An excellent study of the subject by James P. Carse revealed its analysis in his short book *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, originally published in 1986.[178] Incidentally, this book provides a useful framework while attempting to assess the strategic behaviour of China and Pakistan in a previous book, *Kargil: Past Perfect, Future Uncertain?,* which was published in 2019.[179] Carse's framework gives the impression that his work has been influenced by Indian philosophy, even though he does not indicate the same explicitly. The idea of a continuum of life relates closely with how life and death are explained in ancient Indian scriptures, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*. Subsequently, Simon Sinek co-related the concept with the challenges of the corporate world and corporate leadership.[180]

Carse, in his book, contrasts two types of games – finite and infinite. He suggests that a finite game is played for winning, while an infinite game is for continuing to play. Similarly, a finite game is won by someone with a clear end in sight. Infinite game comes to an end when someone wins. Finite games are characterised by boundaries, while infinite games have none. Finite

games have fixed players, whereas anyone can play an infinite game. The rules are defined for a finite game, but can be changed during an infinite play. Interestingly, finite games can be played within an infinite game, but an infinite game cannot be played within a finite game.

When some of the rules defined by Carse are analysed in the context of the *Mahabharata* and more specifically the *Bhagavad Gita*, the scope of a true infinite approach and an infinite play becomes evident. One can argue that the *Mahabharata* itself represents an 18-day war and this war is defined by fixed rules before its commencement. If this indeed is a reality, then how does it qualify as an infinite approach? This would be a valid observation if the *Mahabharata* is seen only as an 18-day event. However, that would go against the logic of Krishna's explanation of the approach to life and warfighting. In the context of a finite and infinite event, the war itself is a finite element of a much greater infinite approach that is explained by Krishna. This chapter will attempt to elaborate upon it through a closer co-relation to the text and thereafter, its applicability to warfighting.

Krishna's guidance to Arjuna unravels in several layers. It commences with the idea of the immortality of the soul right at the beginning of the discourse on the battlefield. This is in response to Arjuna voicing his inability to kill his kith and kin on the battlefield.

Krishna tells Arjuna that the body can be destroyed and not the soul (*atman*) that resides within it. Speaking of the *atman*, Krishna tells Arjuna:

> This is never born, nor does it ever die. This does not come into existence because it has been born. This has no birth, it is eternal and without destruction. It has no end… Like a person discards worn-out clothes and accepts others that are new, like that, the soul discards worn-out bodies and attains others that are new.[181]

This message by Krishna forms the foundation of an infinite play. It underlines the importance of treating even an individual's lifetime merely as one of the many episodes in the infinite role plays that will come beyond that as well. This understanding emphasises detachment and through it remaining stoic in victory and defeat. However, even as the focus of these words remains on the continuity provided by the *atman*, it does not imply indifference towards a task or responsibility that an individual is required to

fulfil. This may come across as a contradiction at the outset since the indefinite and infinite journey of the soul could lead to a sense of complacency towards the task at hand. Nothing could be further from the reality of the message.

Elaborating upon the importance of action, Krishna, in his discourse on *karma yoga* says:

> You have the right to the action alone. You never have the right to the fruit. Do not be motivated to act because of the fruit. And don't be motivated to not act either.[182]

The third element of Krishna's message focusses on the importance of the intent behind the action rather than merely the action itself. He elaborates to add that the knowledge that guides an action must take precedence over the act. This implies that even as it is important to perform a duty or responsibility, the performance should be detached from its fruits and the thought that guides the action must take precedence over its mechanical fulfilment. Therefore, the knowledge of right and wrong and its implications become the basis of human endeavour.

The *Bhagavad Gita* associates the implication of the action with *karma yoga*. This relates to the fulfilment of one's duty or responsibility that has been prescribed. Accordingly, for Arjuna, a warrior, the primary responsibility remains to fight for justice. In other words, it is his *dharma* to fight injustice.

This, when seen from the perspective of an infinite warrior, or an infinite approach, suggests a potential dichotomy, unless the correct understanding of what has been said in the *Mahabharata* is understood.

Krishna speaks of timelessness when he indicates that all time is controlled by him. Yet, he also emphasises the relevance of fulfilling given responsibilities. And by implication, in the right way and within the right timeframe. This text could be seen as a contradiction. However, its subtext indicates that a supreme power creates an environment, yet all individuals must continue to seek the fulfilment of their responsibility if they hope to achieve perfection. Perfection, according to Krishna, is the merging of the *atman* with the ultimate power or *parmatman*. In the meanwhile, the endeavour to seek salvation by the *atman* continues, which leads to a change in bodies after each cycle of life and death, until it is relieved from this burden. This is a

process of consistent and constant endeavour to seek perfection. The duties and responsibilities along this path must be fulfilled while seeking perfection, though without the yearning for immediate gains. The responsibility of a soldier lies in the endeavour and not in the fruits of the action. And even as these actions will be undertaken in a prescribed fashion and in a given timeframe, there is no timeframe for achieving ultimate knowledge and ultimate perfection. And that is the infinite scale within which the day-to-day responses of a *karma yogi* are fulfilled.

How does this understanding co-relate with the responsibilities of a soldier deployed in his *karma bhoomi*, his area of responsibility on the modern-day battlefield?

There is a fair degree of similarity in terms of the responsibilities undertaken by soldiers across the armed forces of the world. However, operational responsibilities do tend to vary from one country to another. In the case of India, more specifically, the army is deployed along two disputed borders. The Line of Control (LoC) forms a substantial part of the western border with Pakistan and skirmishes along it are not uncommon. The conditions along the border are therefore classified as no war no peace. In addition to the challenges posed by the conventional forces, India also faces the challenge of terrorism that is planned, aided and abetted from across the LoC by Pakistan. This forces a strung-out deployment of the forces to ensure minimal infiltration of terrorists.

The situation is different along the disputed border with China. The northern border is termed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and has largely remained peaceful over the decades. However, the recent past has witnessed an attempt by China to unilaterally change the status quo. This was evident in 2017 at Doklam, and more recently in 2020 at Galwan.[183]

In addition to these major state-on-state external challenges posed to India, the country has also faced internal security threats, which emerged soon after India's independence in 1947. These include several regions in northeast India, central and eastern India, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and instances of terrorism in the hinterland.[184] With a few exceptions, the conditions emerging as a result of these challenges have led to the deployment of the army in some of these areas over protracted durations.

Given the circumstances of deployment of the army and the role the organisation is required to play, how does the concept of an infinite warrior become relevant for the soldier? Can the army and for that matter the country, be more effective in dealing with these challenges if it adopts the infinite approach while dealing with its adversaries? It would be relevant to analyse these propositions in conjunction with the aspects that have been highlighted in the *Mahabharata*.

The first aspect is of time as an entity or a construct. Armed forces, in general, are brought up based on the notion of "right time, right dress, right place". Tasks once allocated must be completed on time. Reaching a designated place on time is often considered unacceptable. It must be before time. A battle plan, an operational order or a fire plan is worked out to the minutest detail in terms of timing. Contingencies exist for making changes to it, yet again in a clockwork fashion. For a soldier, what commences as a drill sergeant's cracking command and an irritating insistence on time, becomes second nature over the years. This is recognised beyond the armed forces and within society as well. The adherence to time gets so well drilled that even a retired soldier remains wedded to this foundational reality of training and the practice of warfare.

If this is the reality of a soldier's life, there should not be a need for deliberating on the aspect of time at all. However, even as a soldier strictly adheres to time for the fulfilment of an assigned task, it becomes difficult to appreciate its relevance as an infinite entity. Contrary to expectation, a one-sided emphasis on time as a finite entity may produce short-term tangible results, however, it can also lead to failure when the mind and imagination need to comprehend its infinite characteristics.

An example from the domain of counterinsurgency can be cited to illustrate the importance of understanding the infinite picture. When units get deployed in a counterinsurgency environment, it is with understandable enthusiasm to fulfil the given responsibility. The focus, more often than not and perhaps rightly so, is on collecting intelligence and undertaking effective operations to neutralise insurgents. However, even as this finite approach is successfully implemented in the military domain, it must simultaneously be kept in mind that insurgencies tend to have a protracted duration. One of

the strengths of insurgent groups is to prolong the struggle and tire out the government and the forces. Stalemate may technically be seen as a no-win, no-loss situation. However, if an insurgent group does not lose, it wins. The approach of insurgents remains contrary to that of the security forces. They prefer to follow an infinite approach to their struggle, where time is an elastic entity for conflict termination. It is employed as a means to tire out forces psychologically conditioned to get a task done in a specified time frame. Any desperation to bring the conflict to a closure, or create a finite end to it, allows the insurgents to outlast the security forces. Whenever an adversary employs a finite approach against an infinite one, it is the latter that will outlast the former and emerge victorious.

The approach of security forces and the government must therefore be two-fold in terms of time as a factor. First, several finite operations, encounters and tasks should demand precise action and a time frame for execution. Second, and more importantly, these tactical operations, however important, must remain a small part of the overall infinite approach, which must not be guided by a premature time constraint to bring closure to the deployment. Whenever a deployment in a counterinsurgency area is envisaged, it must be accompanied by the readiness to outlast the adversary. Time must not be a liability for the security forces. Instead, it should be treated as an asset.

It is at least partly for this reason that military operations are regarded as a facilitating element meant to create a suitable environment for a political settlement while dealing with such challenges. And the infinite approach can create conditions that will bring the insurgents onto the negotiating table for a settlement that meets long-term strategic interests.

There are examples to the contrary as well, wherein a country's inability to remain committed over time gave rise to limitations that could not be overcome despite the sophistication of military structures, equipment and state-of-the-art weaponry. Mistakes have been made by major powers in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and by India in Sri Lanka. This indicates the failure to adopt an infinite approach to conflicts.

In the case of Iraq, a state-on-state war was all but won, with victory being announced after the fall of Saddam's conventional military resistance. The long-range impact of precision-guided munition strikes by stealth

bombers, domination of the waters by aircraft carriers and rumbling of tanks across the desert announced unqualified success, only to be humbled by a side that had time on its side. A side willing to play the game for the sake of the game without attempting to force an early climax through a spectacular military victory that is designed on the drawing board of a precision military operation. The United States (US) was the obvious victor in the initial finite war against Iraq, only to lose the infinite struggle among the people.

Afghanistan witnessed similar failures to treat time as an infinite entity. The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and its inability to outlast the "mujahideen" supported by the US did not prevent the US from switching roles and becoming the hunted after being the hunter. The challenge, yet again, was the euphoria of an initial success, leading the sole superpower to overestimate the results created by a finite estimation of victory.

The Indian experience in Sri Lanka was not very different. Despite the challenges of fighting an entrenched Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the initial phase of Indian Peace Keeping Force's (IPKF's) deployment, success did come, even though at a cost. However, the inability to remain deployed over time made the result obvious. Even as the IPKF got the better of the LTTE in tactical encounters and controlled most areas under deployment, all that the LTTE had to do was wait out their adversary's withdrawal. And the withdrawal did come, leaving the guerrilla force an open hunting ground. This was until the Sri Lankan Army displayed the resolve to fight irrespective of the time and costs involved after the initial setbacks. It was a switch to an infinite approach to warfare. Conversely, the LTTE, primarily a guerrilla force, set aside its infinite approach to fight a finite-pitched battle, which it could never have won against a conventional military force.

Before moving forward to the next determinant, it would be useful to assess the impact of time as an element of an infinite approach for a warrior or a strategist. Many students of military studies would agree that armies are well-trained but not necessarily well-educated.[185] The emphasis on the finite and infinite can also be co-related to this limitation. A mind that has been taught to merely follow orders and deliver the goods within a given time

frame is unlikely to comprehend the nuance of an infinite approach. Not because the approach is difficult to understand, but more because the immediate ends tend to take precedence over a long-term perspective. In other cases, there lies an inability to appreciate the greater importance of a goal driven by an infinite approach, which, as a future intangible, loses out, given the perception of its immediate irrelevance. The finite, short-term benefits will always appeal in contrast to such conditions.

Can a mind that has been drilled to function on finite orders and to fulfil finite conditions evolve simultaneously to appreciate the infinite conceptualisation of time? The answer is in the affirmative. However, only if the mind is given access to this understanding at a stage when thoughts and their implications are still flexible. Once rigidity of understanding sets in, the ability to visualise the bigger picture becomes difficult. The mind then runs counter to immediate, high-value and tangible perceived gains. Often, a condition when the fuzzy infinite will fight a losing battle against the attractive finite option.

Some might feel it is unfair to focus this correlation upon the men in uniform. Often, this limitation is equally relevant to organisations across the board, including all forms of bureaucracies and the corporate world. The immediate, almost always and every time, tends to overshadow long-term interests and objectives.

This thought process is a victim of a few conditions favouring the finite over the infinite. One, when leaders tend to bring or even force the focus on themselves, their thoughts, their decisions and their vision instead of collective wisdom, there is a tendency to bandwagon with a singular strain of ideas. Unless the leader follows in the example of being a facilitator and guide, much like the role of Krishna in the *Mahabharata*, circumstances can create a despotic figurehead. And that is the dominating presence of a Duryodhana, who sees events through the prism of his interest, perspective and understanding of tangible gains. Duryodhana's solutions are more often than not meant to fix an immediate problem, without necessarily evaluating the implications of the long-term impact.

For Duryodhana, duly guided by his uncle Shakuni, the game of dice is a perfect solution to his sense of loss, humiliation and deprivation. Despite the sage advice of all elders and advisers, the decision-making is ultimately dominated by the singular voice of Duryodhana. This leads to the Pandavas being deprived of their kingdom and possessions. It also results in Droupadi's humiliation, and eventually a bloody war, despite the option to retrieve the situation before it. These events have been discussed in detail as part of Krishna's mission as an envoy to broker peace.

Duryodhana's weakness does not lie *merely* in following the finite approach. It lies in following *only* the finite approach. Any thought of the infinite thus becomes a slave of the finite. Instead of the finite being a subset of the infinite, as it is supposed to be, he chooses to follow the reverse, not only making the infinite a slave of the finite but perhaps, even irrelevant. And since this approach is steered by ill will, negativity and jealousy, the only course for history to follow is of death and destruction.

It can be argued that granting Duryodhana his wish and desire could have avoided the bloody conflict. This is contrary to the understanding of a destructive mindset. An adversary who is appeased and allowed to get away with repeated violations of acceptable norms and behaviour is only encouraged to repeat such actions. This is true of Duryodhana, who would have probably continued his retribution against the Pandavas till the very end, even if the kingdom was granted to him.

An example of Shishupal, the king of Chedi, is instructive. He has been granted a boon of being pardoned a hundred times for his mistakes. Punishment would only follow after that. During Yudhishthira's coronation, Shishupal repeatedly abuses and humiliates Krishna, only to be pardoned for his indiscretions. However, he fails to change. His despicable behaviour continues, to eventually cross the threshold of a hundred sins. Shishupal is punished and he pays for his sins with his life.

Interestingly, this has parallels with individuals influenced by autocratic behaviour and seeking to attain personal glory. And since this is only relevant for the individual concerned during a tangible and finite period of rule, the tendency to make rash and high-risk reward decisions becomes very probable.

The foolhardy intrusion into Kargil in 1999 by General Parvez Musharraf and his coterie is a case in point.

This sequence of actions is instructive as much from the perspective of the *Mahabharata*, as it is for more recent times.

The second aspect that facilitates an infinite approach is the direction provided by broad guidance. In the case of the *Mahabharata*, the root of this guidance emanates from *dharma*. The core values of *dharma* and its inherent flexibility of employment, remain relevant in contemporary times.

This may seem contrary to the concept of not playing by rules. Here, it is important to reinforce the complementarity between breaking the shackles of a constrained mindset, which allows greater ingenuity of action, and following an approach guided by righteous behaviour.

Some examples of *dharma* in the *Mahabharata* have been discussed in detail in a previous chapter. These include instances wherein deviations to address the challenge of *adharma* were also analysed.

The concept of following or deviating from rules is related more to the opening of the mind to alternatives. The danger of following an approach based on predictability is its likely supersession by the inevitability of change. While this is relevant for life, it is all the more pertinent against an adversary on the battlefield, or for that matter while pursuing the interests of a country through diplomacy.

In the infinite approach, success is best achieved by following the broad guidance of a concept like *dharma*, even as flexible implementation is retained to cater to fast-evolving conditions and circumstances. On the contrary, the absence of broad guidance leads to chaos and confusion, a condition that leads to a disastrous war like the *Mahabharata*. While the approach of pursuing *dharma* and its relevance in contemporary times has been discussed in a previous chapter, a closer focus on the flexibility of applying rules deserves some elaboration, especially in contemporary times.

Rules applied to combat are a factor related to time as an infinite entity. Or, as circumstances may demand, the approach to a similar set of problems gets repeated over time.

Finite games are played based on a set of rules. Or, in a way that certain actions are undertaken in response to a situation. It is useful to illustrate the challenges of the finite approach while countering insurgency. Armies are trained to function at the tactical level based on battle drills and battle procedures. Battle drills are a rehearsed set of actions that come into play for a given situation. As an illustration, actions in response to an adversary opening fire or a group crossing an area that could have the presence of the enemy. A battle procedure involves simultaneous actions at multiple levels upon receiving an order. An appropriate example can be mobilisation for an operational situation.

Most of these actions work well in a conventional scenario wherein drills and procedures are repeatedly practiced and rehearsed. Some rules have been framed based on experience and the need to standardise actions to bring efficiency and uniformity. However, what happens when the same unit or formation is deployed for countering insurgency? Does a certain set of rules apply under different circumstances as well? Here is an example that illustrates the experiences of the Indian Army after it was deployed to fight the LTTE.

The army had a simple battle drill or actions required to be taken when under fire. This included dash, down, crawl, observe, sight and fire. That is, reduce your profile and dart, get into a lying down position, crawl to the nearest object that gives protection from enemy fire, say a tree or a boulder, observe the enemy, place him in your sights and fire to kill. However, this procedure came under question in Sri Lanka since the army was not trained to respond to fire back as an immediate action. The LTTE would bring down one or two soldiers in the first volley and quickly escape, even as the battle drill was set into motion. The LTTE was not a conventional force, which would remain entrenched and fight ahead of their defences.

The rules had to change; not only the rules practised for ages, but more importantly, the mindset of playing by a set of given, rehearsed and drilled inputs. Soldiers and their commanders both needed to think on their feet. The fixation with rules had to be given a rethink. There was no option but to decentralise and leave decision-making to the ingenuity of tactical leaders.

This is not only relevant for tactical-level operations alone. The experience with operations along the LoC is not very different. Pakistan had employed terrorism as a tool of statecraft not only in the case of J&K but also in Punjab during the eighties and early nineties. The strategic option just below the threshold of a conventional war became an unstated national policy for Pakistan. This was accompanied by a declaration that acknowledged the possession of nuclear weapons and a first-use option in the context of India. This implied that India's ability to undertake a major conventional attack against sub-conventional provocations had been constrained. This went on for several years, despite grave incidents like the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and in 2008 at Mumbai, which led to the deaths of not only Indians but also members of the international community.

India's reaction to repeated attacks rarely went beyond a predictable series of steps that fell short of breaking the "norms" that had become well established. These were a finite response to an infinite player employing innovative ways to bleed India by a thousand cuts.

This script kept playing out until 2016 when Pakistan-based and controlled terrorists attacked a military camp at Uri in J&K. However, the script was not replayed on the Indian side as before. Unlike previous times, the government decided to retaliate in a manner that forced the Pakistani establishment to come unhinged for once.

The Indian Army undertook a surgical strike across the LoC aimed at a terrorist camp that was being run as a launchpad for pushing terrorists into India. It was struck clinically and even before the armed forces of Pakistan could react, the troops involved withdrew onto India's side. However, more importantly, the Indian government shared a clear, concise and crisp statement at the end of the operation.[186] It made the timing, target and termination of the operation clear this time around. The open public statement shared that the government intended to counter terrorism emanating from across the LoC. There was an inherent message of reversing the rules of the past. The predictability of the Indian response and unpredictable strikes *de facto* by Pakistan were turned on its head. The response was no longer predictable. The scale, location and timing of a future counterstrike would not only

cause damage but, more importantly, cause distrust amongst Pakistan's assured domestic audience fed on soft state narratives about India.

As if this incident was not enough to redraw red lines, 2019 provided another opportunity for the Indian side to reinforce their intent and throw the rule book at their adversary. An attack at Pulwama that led to heavy casualties to a convoy carrying Central Reserve Police Force personnel resulted in an air strike at Balakot.[187] Only this time, unlike in the past, it was not the ground forces that carried out the hit against a terrorist camp. It was the Indian Air Force that struck a major Jaish-e-Mohammed facility on 26 February 2019, much against the expectations of a ground-based strike of the kind undertaken in 2016.

The citing of examples at the tactical and strategic level in counterinsurgency and against terrorists controlled by a state suggests the drawbacks of a finite approach. These incidents indicate the limitations of employing a well-established and time-tested drill or a predictable approach to actions by an adversary. Does this imply the redundancy of such practices?

The purpose of both the distilled wisdom of the *Mahabharata* and these examples would be lost if such sweeping conclusions were to be drawn from these examples. It has been stated earlier that an infinite approach can include many finite actions. However, it does not function the other way around. This implies that an organisation's mindset and strategic thought beset by the status quo will fail to break out of its predictability. It will possibly be overtaken by someone more innovative and open to new ideas. This is as much a reality for an individual, as it is for an organisation or a country. Infinity is merely an approach of openness. It indicates the willingness to look beyond boundaries. It is the desire to question the status quo. In military or managerial terms, it is the ability to think out of the box.

Krishna's profound perspective on the *atman* being indestructible is foundational to this understanding because the seed of thought and action emanates from an individual. This acceptance of being righteous, responsible and reliable, even while remaining detached from the immediate gains, as difficult as it may be, is an objective worth living a life for. Perhaps even as would probably be the case, and if need be, many lives in the quest for perfection.

SECTION III

WAR AND THE ROOTS OF STRATEGIC THOUGHT

Chapter Nine

Conceptualisation and the Conduct of War

The *Mahabharata* provides a detailed blow-by-blow account of events on a battlefield. More importantly, especially from the perspective of this book, it is amongst the few ancient texts that conceptualises the idea of war. A dialogue between the major characters highlights their approach towards the reluctant acceptance of war. More importantly, it reinforces their rejection of war as the preferred means to achieving the ends of a state.

This seeming contradiction reflects the reality of the times. At the philosophical level, the guidance emerging from *dharma* rejected the idea of war as a means to gain territory and riches. However, at a more realistic and functional level, guided by the needs of *raja dharma*, the defence of the kingdom and the need to elevate a king to the status of an emperor through initiatives like the *rajasuya* were also acceptable.

This implies that the preference for peace in contrast to war did not allow a king to remain immune to the realities of threats and challenges. Accordingly, the need to attain proficiency in the use of arms and preparation for war remained integral to the role and responsibility of a ruler.

The philosophical, descriptive and prescriptive elements of the *Mahabharata* collectively provide a conceptual understanding of war, which, in turn, is a reflection of those times. This chapter will address the issue of war through illustrative examples of each element to better understand the concept. This will be guided through a framework earlier presented as a paper by the author at the Manohar Parrikar IDSA.[188]

Dharma as a Conceptual Anchor

Dharma as a concept and its applicability in the *Mahabharata* have been discussed earlier. The guidance provided by *dharma* influences individuals' conduct and impacts their personal, social and official capacities. Therefore, it is no surprise that the decision to use limited force and go to war is also guided by *dharma*.

At the core of the idea of *dharma*, *svadharma* defines the *dharma* of an individual. Krishna tells Arjuna, "Even when performed imperfectly, *svadharma* is superior to someone else's dharma performed well."[189] The idea of *svadharma* signifies the role, responsibility and duties of an individual. Its reference to a soldier is repeatedly mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. The *Bhagavad Gita* documents the instance where Arjuna seeks guidance from Krishna in the backdrop of disillusionment with the killing of his relatives for the sake of the kingdom. "O Madhusudana! I don't want to kill them, even if they kill me. Forget this earth, even for the kingdoms of the three worlds."[190] For a *kshatriya*, a soldier, this is co-related with *kshatriya dharma*. Krishna says, "Also considering your natural dharma, you should not waver. Because there is nothing better for a kshatriya than a war fought for the sake of dharma."[191]

Interestingly, given the pre-eminent role of *kshatriyas* in society, representing the warrior class, it would suggest that war was the preferred option for dispute resolution. On the contrary, major characters in the epic reject the idea of war. It is only when peaceful options fail that military force becomes an alternative. Contrary to the correlation between war and peace, the spectrum that includes both at its two ends also includes several other possibilities. The *Mahabharata* illustrates that it is more often the case that an individual applies means short of war to settle disputes.

Given the inherent linkage between *dharma* and the war in the *Mahabharata*, it would only be appropriate to deliberate upon the key attributes of *dharma*. This has been discussed at length in the section on *dharma*. Bhishma's definition, quoted by Sukthankar in his book, highlights three important qualities of *dharma* that influence the role and responsibilities of a king. Consequently, it guides his thought process on how to establish peace, prosperity and protection. Bhishma's definition includes three key

objectives: the advancement and growth of all creatures; restricting creatures from injuring each other; and upholding all.[192] The connotation of *dharma* becomes evident within the scope of this definition. In the broadest sense, it aims to ensure the well-being and prosperity of the people and simultaneously sustain it through security.

The *Mahabharata* and later the *Arthashastra*, capture this sentiment through the concept of *Yoga* and *Kshema*, though with a minor variation in the literal meaning. While the *Arthashastra* relates *Yoga* and *Kshema* with prosperity and protection, the *Mahabharata* defines them as acquiring and maintaining prosperity. Guiding Yudhishthira, Bhishma says, "O king! When a person born in a noble lineage knows about dharma and obtains great prosperity, yoga and kshema exist and welfare can be thought of."[193] However, wealth cannot be generated, maintained or enhanced under insecure conditions. Further, as Bhishma reiterates, prosperity and security can be maintained by a king who understands *dharma*. In other words, *dharma* provides the philosophical guidance for the more practical reality of prosperity and security to be fulfilled.

Economic prosperity and security are not exclusive ideas and initiatives that operate in isolation. They are closely interlinked and interrelated. Similarly, the quest for security is not restricted to war alone. The epic witnesses the employment of a wide spectrum of options short of war, ranging from deterrence to the use of arms in the individual capacity of a warrior. However, in each instance, there is an attempt to undertake actions that follow *dharma*. The context of some of these relates to a certain period of history and must be seen from that perspective.[194]

The co-relation of *dharma* with the use of force and each aspect of war can be gauged from the contextualising prefix and context of its usage. At the level of an individual, the term "*kshatriya dharma*" relates to the role and responsibilities of a warrior. This is not limited to the act of fighting alone. It also includes the expectation of righteous conduct as well. Each act of indiscretion or perceived indiscretion before and during the war is called out for violating *kshatriya dharma*.

On the part of the Kauravas, the collective killing of Abhimanyu by several warriors is seen as a violation. "With Drona and Karna at the forefront,

this single one has been slain by six maharathas from the side of the sons of Dhritarashtra."[195] Simultaneously, while the Pandavas grieve Abhimanyu's death, Krishna relates his sacrifice to the highest traditions of a *kshatriya*. He says, "Do not grieve. This is the path followed by all the brave ones who do not retreat, and in particular kshatriyas, whose livelihood comes from war… This has been sanctioned by the sacred texts and is the supreme goal for those who follow the objective."[196]

Similarly, the killing of Drona by falsely announcing the death of Ashvatthama, also leads to accusations of violating *dharma*. Hearing of his father's death, Ashvatthama says, "A wicked act has been committed by those who should have upheld the standard of dharma."[197]

Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna enter Magadha disguised as brahmanas and upon gaining an audience with King Jarasandha, Krishna questions his actions. "O king! The *kshatriyas* who live in this world have been abducted by you. Having committed this cruel act, how can you think yourself as innocent?" He adds, "We follow dharma and are capable of protecting dharma. Human sacrifices have never been seen."[198] Following this, Krishna challenges Jarasandha to a wrestling match with Bhima, who kills him. Krishna seeks the release of abducted kings from a planned act of *adharma* by Jarasandha. This is achieved through one-on-one physical combat. Krishna's action is affirmed by the kings released after the death of Jarasandha. "O mighty-armed! O son of Devaki! Aided by the strength of Bhima and Arjuna, it is not surprising that the protection of dharma should be vested in you."[199] However, this does not stop Shishupala from deriding Krishna for entering Magadha dressed as a brahmana and instigating the Pandavas to veer away from the truth.[200]

Dharma is also associated with victory on the battlefield. Just before the commencement of the war, noting a distraught Yudhishthira, Arjuna reassures him by explaining the righteousness of their cause. He adds, "Where there is dharma, there will be victory. O king! Know that it is for this reason that our victory in the battle is certain."[201] Arjuna's linking the war with *dharma* and before that Krishna's repeated co-relation of the Pandava cause with *dharma* and righteousness ensures that the brothers enter the battlefield as a morally superior force. This also becomes the basis for the war to be termed a *dharma*

yudhha, not as such in the text itself, but more by later age readers of the epic.[202]

Bhishma describes three types of victory to Yudhishthira in the *Mahabharata*. This is "victory for reasons of dharma, victory for reasons of artha and objectives, and victory that is asura in nature".[203] Debroy describes *asura* victory as that which yields neither *dharma* nor *artha*. In other words, a victory that goes against the tenets of ethics, righteousness and justice.

A *dharma yudhha* also becomes a reference for co-relation with the idea of a "just war". Besides the righteous cause for which the Pandavas fight, there is an endeavour to lay down the rules of warfighting. This is done with the intent of a fair fight. "Then the Kurus, Pandavas and Somakas had an agreement and established rules of dharma that would be followed in the war."[204]

Dharma is also associated with the entire spectrum of responsibilities of a king. People's protection and the safeguarding of territory remain an integral part of this mandate. The concept of *dharma,* when viewed from the perspective of a state, is perhaps the most relevant here. It manifests in the form of *raja dharma*. *Raja dharma* is the *dharma* of kings. As a co-relation, it can be considered the *dharma* that guides a state or those responsible for ensuring peace, prosperity and protection. Bhishma tells Yudhishthira, "O king! Just as all footprints are lost in that of an elephant, it is said that all the tasks dissolve in this (dharma of kings). Listen. All the dharmas can be seen to be based on rajadharma… Of all the dharmas, rajadharma is the most important and it protects all other dharmas."[205]

Bhishma suggests to Yudhishthira that the effective implementation of *raja dharma* creates congenial conditions, which allow the norms of society and the responsibilities of an individual to be fulfilled. In that sense, *raja dharma* becomes an enabling agency for the state to undertake its responsibility. It also helps society function in an environment of "just peace". Bhishma sees the manifestation of all attributes of *dharma* in *raja dharma*. "In that way, if dharma is delinked from *rajadharma*, one's own dharma will not be followed in any situation."[206] The idea of "just peace" can be related to conditions when the ideals of *dharma* prevail and there is no *adharma*. This is often referred to as "*Krita Yuga*".[207] It is under these conditions that

people "obtain what they wish and preserve what they have". This has been referred to as *yoga* and *kshema* in the *Mahabharata*.[208]

A king's *raja dharma* manifests in many ways. One of the most important and relevant way is the concept of *dandaniti*.[209] "*Dandaniti*, when administered well, sets boundaries for people and is like a mother or a father demarcating honour for the welfare of the world."[210] It is through the policy of *dandaniti* that a king obtains what he wishes and thereafter protects what he possesses. *Dandaniti* is the basis for *dharma* to prevail amongst the people and its undiluted implementation creates the equivalent of a welfare state – a state where *adharma* is absent and *Krita Yuga* is ushered. "A king who always wields the rod of chastisement well will obtain dharma."[211]

While ideal conditions that help generate *yoga* and *kshema* (obtaining and preserving the desired) may represent ideal conditions through a king's scrupulous implementation of *raja dharma*, this aspiration will remain a challenging end state to achieve. This might suggest that *dharma* can or does prevail only under ideal conditions. However, the very idea of a king or a state employing *dandaniti* indicates that it is a constant endeavour on the king's part to achieve a desirable condition of prosperity and security in a state. This implies that the aspiration of a welfare state has to be backed by the policy of reward and punishment. Simultaneously, it also suggests that in a less-than-ideal world, the king will be forced to ensure the *yoga kshema* by facilitating prosperity, along with the follow-up endeavour to protect, retain or maintain it. Bhishma guides Yudhishthira, "Even if one confronts a calamity when protecting the subjects, lords of the earth who act in this way accumulate great dharma."[212] Therefore, *yoga kshema,* when seen from the perspective of the state, does not get restricted to obtaining and preserving the desired. In addition, there is a constant endeavour to protect and preserve through the sword arm of the state.

The achievement of "just peace" is as much a domestic endeavour through the pursuit of *dharma*, as it is in the external relations of the state. Here as well, the king attempts to seek peace through various instrumentalities. Conceptually, inherent in the pursuit of *raja dharma* concerning threats and challenges lies the flexibility to deal with adverse conditions. This includes primarily two alternatives. The first relates to the conditions under which

adharma is used by an adversary. And the second relates to the response of a king while dealing with adverse circumstances.

Bhishma tells Yudhishthira that victory should only be achieved through *dharma*. Further, wars must be guided by its ideals and rules. Accordingly, rules for engaging an enemy on the battlefield have been laid down in detail and must be adhered to. Conversely, the *Mahabharata* also delves into conditions for dealing with adverse situations as a part of *Apad Dharma Parva*.

When Yudhishthira asks Bhishma about following *dharma* under adverse conditions, Bhishma says, "Dharma is more subtle than words and intelligence."[213] He adds, "There is one kind of dharma for those who are capable and another for those in distress."[214] Under conditions of duress, it becomes the duty of the king to protect his subjects, as is the responsibility of the subjects to safeguard the king. "If the one who is fighting uses deceit, one must fight back using deceit. If he fights with adharma, one must counter him with adharma."[215] This reflects the foundational guideline that reinforces rules of engagement in conflict.

Under conditions that witness deceit and treachery, *dharma* allows a flexible interpretation in its implementation. This is likely to be most visible during a *dharma yudhha*. The side that is clearly in the right and has been unjustly harmed, dispossessed and humiliated can use means that may not be sanctioned to seek victory, especially because this represents a victory of the righteous cause.

Dharma retains a degree of ambiguity and fluidity, perhaps as an intentional element of ethical guidance. Several instances in the Mahabharata require an interpretation that focusses on the spirit rather than on the letter of *dharma*. Accordingly, attempts by even well-regarded characters to remain fixated upon the letter can cause irreconcilable havoc. This includes the *Mahabharata* war as well, which takes place in part because Bhishma chooses to fight on the side of the Kauravas, given his pledge to protect the throne of Hastinapur. Conversely, Krishna repeatedly finds creative solutions to resolve dilemmas for the Pandavas, focussing on the spirit of *dharma* rather than on the letter alone. His solution for Arjuna after his *Gandiva* is abused by Yudhishthira is to metaphorically "kill" a *kshatriya* through insult instead of

physically taking his life during a war is a case in point.[216] For Krishna, "dharma is at least sometimes dictated by the constraints or the contingency of a situation".[217]

This flexibility of interpretation, while open to misinterpretation, is more likely to allow its evolution with the times and changing circumstances. *Dharma* as practiced in times of an ideal environment, as signified by "*Krita Yuga*" needs to make more than subtle changes in "*Kali Yuga*". Even during the best of times, truth as a virtue will need to be followed with exceptions if and when it leads to saving a life or someone's honour.[218]

When this characteristic of *dharma* is related to war or warlike conditions, the emphasis on the spirit rather than merely the letter gains special significance. Conditions surrounding the preparation, conduct and post-war environment present a complexity likely to be interpreted to suit opposing narratives and objectives. The emphasis on *dharma* allows ethical values to balance realistic realities of statecraft in an environment where both are relevant and important.

While it is difficult to capture the sentiment in brief, however, in essence, the *Mahabharata* and more specifically the idea of war are anchored in the core values of *dharma*. Even so, its implementation allows the freedom of choice that can meet the demands of both the ideal and the realistic requirements of challenging situations. More often than not, this functions in the grey zone of life. This is best illustrated by the approach adopted by Krishna in the epic. His decision-making ability is enabled by the right balance between idealism and realism, represented by an equilibrium between values and interests.[219] This balances the ideal and the prescribed at one end of the spectrum and the demands of circumstances at the other.

With this as an introduction, the conceptual framework for the conduct of war can be introduced. Each aspect of this framework will be analysed to elaborate upon the approach towards war and the ways and means employed to achieve victory.

The discussion on warfighting might give the impression that the failure of peaceful means only means the option of war. However, the framework and the succeeding discussion will suggest that war is not only the least preferred option but it is also frowned upon as an alternative. This might

come as a surprise since the epic's title has come to represent "war" as a metaphor. Yet, when it does become an inevitable reality, victory is imperative.

Framework for Strategic Thought from the *Mahabharata*

The conceptual framework for this book is illustrated through a causal loop diagram in Figure 3. The framework suggests that a state seeks to achieve the grand strategic objective of *yoga kshema* while operating under the overall guidance of *dharma*. As discussed earlier, in the larger scheme of things, the king's abiding objective remains the welfare of the people. Bhishma while guiding Yudhishthira after the war says:

> "O king! When a person born in a noble lineage knows about dharma and obtains great prosperity, yoga and kshema exist and welfare can be thought of." He adds, "If complete kshema can be obtained from someone being established (as king), then among all of us, he is the one who has obtained the best of heavens in an instant."[220]

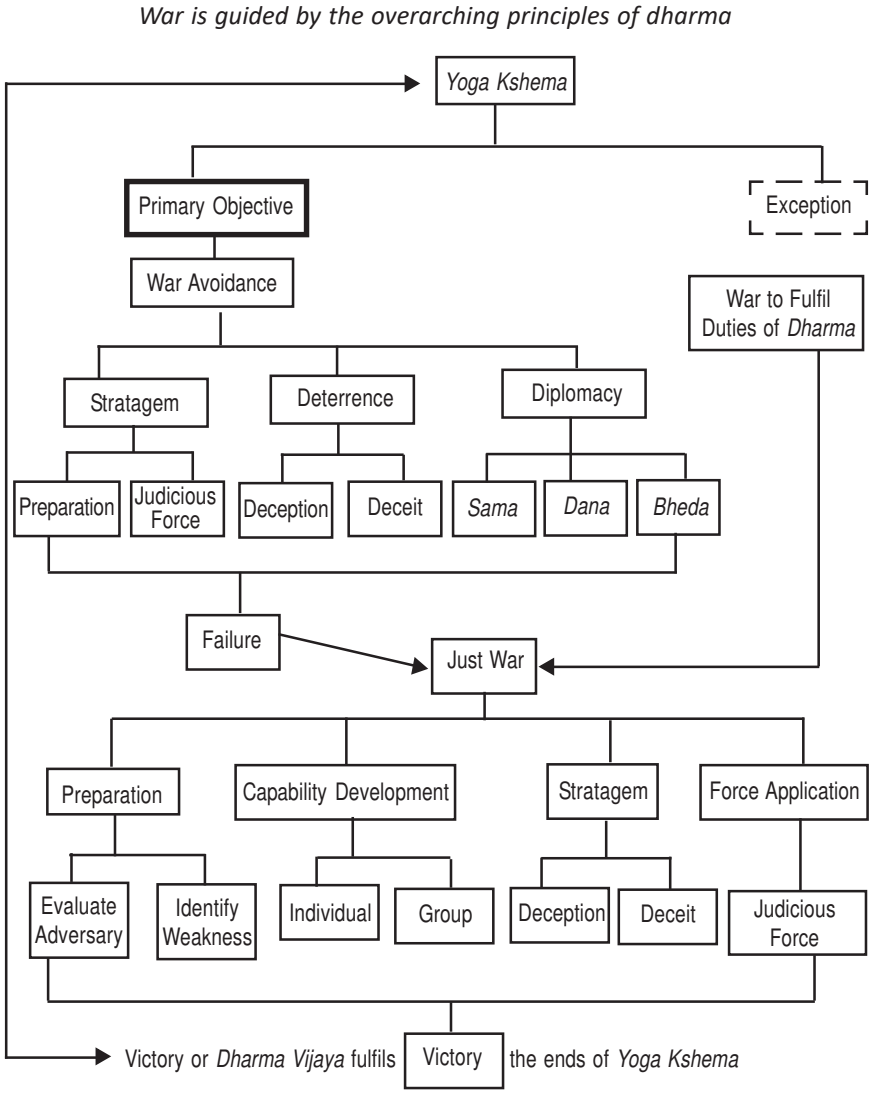
In essence, this implies that there is no greater welfare of the people than the condition of acquiring and maintaining prosperity by a king. When seen from the perspective of a state, this not only needs stability for economic growth but also protection to maintain it. Since both protection and prosperity are interlinked, so are the ideas of conflict and economic well-being.

Contrary to expectation, protection is not derived from war as the primary instrument of policy. Ideally, it emerges from the rejection and absence of war (highlighted in bold in the figure). This state objective is achieved through a combination of deterrence, stratagem and diplomacy. The only exception to this condition is the potential for war in pursuit of *raja dharma* with the *rajasuya* as an example.[221] Even here, the short-term possibility for war is offset by the long-term potential for peace and stability.

However, if and when deterrence, stratagem and diplomacy fail, *dharma* sanctions war for self-defence or to seek justice. Similar to contemporary times, this includes the process of planning and preparation, including evaluating an adversary's strengths and weaknesses, capability development, use of stratagem and judicious employment of force.

When a *dharma yudhha* does become a reality, victory becomes an inescapable imperative. This victory feeds into the loop by helping reinforce or establish *dharma* and thereby the *yoga kshema* of the ruler.

Figure 3: Evaluation of Strategic Thought on War



Having discussed the desired objective of *yoga kshema*, the following section will analyse each of the stages of the proposed strategic framework that flows from it, with suitable illustrations from the *Mahabharata*. This includes a discussion on the role of war – its rejection, means employed for war avoidance, conditional acceptability, the concept of just war and finally, the measures undertaken for attaining victory. It is accompanied by a simultaneous discussion on the role of *dharma* in resolving the inherent contradictions related to war.

Role of War

The debate over the idea of war dominates the discourse in the *Mahabharata*. This is experienced at the level of the state and as an individual warrior, along with accompanying inherent contradictions. In both cases, the framework of *dharma* facilitates its reconciliation.

At the level of the state, there is overwhelming evidence that reinforces abhorrence for war as an instrument of state policy. Yet, certain circumstances indicate its willing acceptability, even when it is not seen as an instrument of self-defence. The succeeding sub-section discusses this contradiction and its resolution according to the principles of *dharma*.

The *Mahabharata* while being a timeless text, does not use modern military vocabulary. Accordingly, the terms used for instruments to seek peace and undertake war are derivations based on the evidence that the text provides. This includes terms such as deterrence, which are later additions to military vocabulary, even as actions that denote such terms have existed well before the coinage.

Emphasis on War Avoidance

The *Mahabharata* provides multiple strands and nuanced perspectives on war as an option and policy alternative. The text rejects the idea of war as an instrument of conquests and expansion of territories as a core philosophical thought.[222] The idea of subjugation, plunder and profit through wars remains alien in its very conceptualisation. This is sanctified through the overarching principles of *dharma* – the quest for righteousness. The sentiment is repeated at multiple stages of the epic by important actors like Yudhishthira, Krishna,

Bhishma, and other independent learned advisers, acknowledged for their wisdom and experience.

Addressing Sanjaya, a peace emissary sent by Dhritarashtra, Yudhishthira says, "The absence of war is superior to war… There is nothing more foolish than going to war. Why should a man go to war, unless he has been cursed by destiny?"[223]

Krishna relates *dharma* with the pursuit of peace when he says, "When you are striving for peace, no adharma will be attached to you."[224]

By calling even a righteous war *adharma*, Yudhishthira yet again reinforces the undesirability of war as a concept and a tool for the settlement of disputes. He underlines this sentiment by indicating that "Our first intention is that we should enjoy that common prosperity, in peace with each other equally. The stage that comes beyond that is terrible and leads to the destruction of deeds, if we are to obtain the kingdom after killing the Kouravas."[225]

After the 18-day war is over, Yudhishthira seeks the guidance of Bhishma, who is on his deathbed. Bhishma says, "O Yudhishthira! After collecting a large army with four limbs (chariots, cavalry, elephants, and infantry), you must first try for conciliation. O descendent of the Bharata lineage! A victory that is obtained through war is to be abhorred."[226]

Role of Diplomacy

The idea of war avoidance in the *Mahabharata* focusses on reconciliation through peaceful negotiations. The epic highlights measures for war avoidance in great detail. Emissaries are sent by both sides to support their perspectives and seek a settlement. The role of diplomacy as a tool for war avoidance becomes evident during the visit of Sanjaya to the Pandava camp. Subsequently, and more importantly, its sophistication comes to the fore with the visit of Krishna to the court of Dhritarashtra.

The dexterity with which Krishna employs each facet of diplomacy reinforces the correlation between war avoidance at one end of the spectrum and simultaneously gaining moral superiority over the adversary at the other. Consequently, the latter becomes a vital factor in convincing a very large cross-section of influential figures that the Pandavas are on the side of *dharma* or righteousness, even as the Kauravas are committing *adharma*.

Krishna's approach of *sama* (conciliation), *dana* (gifts) and *bheda* (dissension) are applied to address each distinct constituency within the court of Dhritarashtra. While *danda* (chastisement or punishment) is not employed directly at this stage as a part of diplomacy, it takes the form of coercion in an attempt to deter war before the physical act of applying military force. Krishna's diplomacy is based on fairness and justice. This includes attempts to convince Duryodhana and his small coterie, despite their obstinate rejection of his overtures. Recalling his attempt in the presence of Pandavas, Krishna says:

> Hoping for fraternity, I first used conciliation, to prevent dissension of the Kurus and ensure the welfare of the subjects. When I saw that peace was not acceptable, I resorted to alienation and recounted your deeds divine and human. When I saw that Suyodhana[227] ignored my words of conciliation, I assembled the kings and attempted to sow seeds of dissension… I censured the kings, I denigrated Suyodhana. I repeatedly tried to frighten Radheya and Soubala[228]… Through eloquence and counsel, I tried to create disunity among the kings… For that wicked one, I see no other means but the fourth one of chastisement.[229]

The *upayas* (solutions) of *sama*, *dana*, *bheda*, and *danda* have been a part of a diplomat's toolkit for over 3,000 years. Its reference comes up in the *Ramayana* as well.[230] However, as P.K. Gautam writes, this is often misunderstood and related to Kautilya's *Arthashastra* alone. The four principles of diplomacy encompass within its scope options and instruments that can be employed not only as part of statecraft but also for war avoidance. One of the finest examples of this endeavour is highlighted by Krishna with illustrations after his failed attempt at brokering peace between the Pandavas and Kauravas.[231]

Krishna's diplomatic foray is aimed at brokering peace. Despite its failure, Krishna faces the contradiction of the Pandavas being seen as the perpetrators of war despite being the victims of injustice. He is able to convince the wider audience of their constructive intent, conciliatory overtures and desire for justice rather than vengeance.

As a result, Krishna is equally at ease justifying the possibility of an eventual war as he is when apportioning the blame on Duryodhana. This

allows him to qualify the application of force as a "just war". While it may seem convenient since history is written by the victors and it is their narrative that tends to prevail, Krishna's success can be gauged by the support his argument receives from neutral observers as well as others on the opposing side of the conflict. This includes Parshurama, Kanva, Narada, Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Vidura and Duryodhana's mother, Gandhari.

Similarly, Bhishma, while guiding Yudhishthira from his deathbed extolls the virtues of peace and conciliation as instruments of state policy. He says:

> When the king examines himself and knows himself to be weak, he must seek the counsel of his advisors and have a treaty with the one who is stronger. Even if he knows he is not weak, an intelligent king swiftly concludes a treaty with the enemy, if he desires to obtain some advantage out of this.[232]

Deterrence

The preference for peace could suggest a disinterest in martial activities and preparation for war. On the contrary, the *Mahabharata* indicates a consistent and conscious endeavour on the part of warriors to hone their military skills. The guidance of *dharma* indicates a distaste for war, even as it requires a warrior to sharpen his military skills and perfect his craft. Resultantly, the martial reputation of a warrior deters potential adversaries.

The process of creating deterrence in the *Mahabharata* is achieved through passive and active means. As part of the passive endeavour, individual warriors and their armies achieve a level of preparedness that suggests an inherent capability against misadventures. This capability development initiative is a prolonged process that begins in the early years of a prince and continues into his adulthood. It commences with basic training on the use of weapons and graduates to the achievement of special skills inspired by divine attributes.

As part of this endeavour, the Kuru princes are handed over to Acharya Drona to teach them the art of warfighting.[233] This ability and its recognition ensures deterrence amongst peers and adversaries alike, thereby limiting the potential for conflict. In that sense, it reinforces the Roman adage: "If you want peace, prepare for war."[234] This realist perspective ensures that a simultaneous strengthening of the armed forces continues to ensure the

requisite capacity to respond to any threat. This is also reconciled through adherence to *kshatriya dharma*.

The epic repeatedly suggests that the individual military prowess of the kings is built over decades through dedication and single-minded devotion to the achievement of special accomplishments. The control over divine weapons is critical to capability development and ensuring deterrence. Arjuna's acceptance to feed the Khandava forest tract to *Agni* (fire) is conditioned on the grant of divine weapons. This includes the famed *Gandiva* and an inexhaustible quiver for Arjuna and the *Chakra* for Krishna.[235]

Subsequently, while the Pandavas, banished from their kingdom, reside in the forests, Yudhishthira asks Arjuna to seek knowledge of advanced weaponry and through it the capacity to equal the likes of Bhishma in battle. He sends him deep into the mountains in the quest for divine powers to wield the most potent weapons.[236] As a result, Arjuna learns the technique to use the *pashupata* or *brahmashira* – the ultimate weapon that can destroy the entire world.[237]

The deterrence created by the Pandavas is successful until the Kauravas are swayed by the presence of Karna on their side. Further, conditions are created wherein the Pandavas are forced to initiate war against the Kauravas for their rights, which forces Bhishma to stand in defence of Hastinapur to fulfil the pledge he has taken.[238] A combination of these factors eventually leads to the failure of deterrence, even though it is based on a sound foundation of Pandava's capabilities and military prowess.

Deterrence is also achieved through the judicious use of force. The concept of judicious force goes beyond limited or proportionate force.[239] It implies using the best means through the most effective ways to achieve the desired ends. While in more cases than not, in the *Mahabharata* this does lead to the use of limited and proportionate force, however, these terms are not the same. It is not as much about minimalism or proportion, as it is about the effectiveness of force application that remains the basis for deciding the option.

There are several instances of employing limited force in the *Mahabharata*. These follow a judicious approach to force application based

on an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the adversary. The example of Jarasandha, the powerful king of Magadha, highlights a logical analysis of the circumstances and use of judicious force while simultaneously exploiting the weakness of the adversary. Krishna recommends the employment of means other than war to achieve the objective of neutralising Jarasandha.

> We will cover our weaknesses and exploit those of the enemy. It is the policy of the intelligent not to attack stronger enemies with battle formations and armies.[240]

Stratagem

The role of stratagem remains integral to resolving issues either through the use of judicious force or without the application of force. Having realised that Jarasandha, given his military prowess, could become an impediment in the conduct of the *rajasuya*, Krishna suggests entering his kingdom in disguise dressed as brahmanas. This allows them a safe passage until their audience with the king and an opportunity to unfold their plan to use limited force to eliminate him. As will be discussed later, this helps avoid a war between the two states and facilitates the achievement of their objective.

Similarly, on the opposing side, the Kauravas realise that they cannot rival the Pandavas in military prowess. Therefore, instead of challenging them militarily, they invite them to a game of dice, knowing very well that Yudhishthira would not be able to refuse them as once challenged, he will not refuse.[241] Thereafter, while playing Shakuni, a master of *maya*, the result is a foregone conclusion. Had the Kauravas not taken the logic of the defeat of the Pandavas to the extent of humiliation, the reality of events could well have been different.

When is War Acceptable?

The emphasis on war avoidance might give the impression of an idealistic and impractical approach to strategic challenges far removed from the realities of statecraft. The *Mahabharata's* approach to warfighting makes a distinction between wars that satisfy greed and those that fight injustice. The logic of war avoidance operates on the principle of *dharma* in the *Mahabharata*, just as war itself is seen as a manifestation of *adharma*. However, both at the level

of a king and an individual, this *adharma* could be considered *dharma*. In other words, the conceptual wrong could also become a right when the cause and circumstances justify it. The term "*adharma*" is used for the act of going to war, considering the avoidable loss of life that it entails. For a king, this is considered acceptable when fighting injustice (as a part of his *raja dharma*). And for an individual, in the pursuit of his duty as a warrior (*kshatriya dharma*). By accepting these conditions, the *Mahabharata* not only recommends the ideal path but also caters to the realistic demands of a state and the professional responsibility of soldiers.

The concept of a *rajasuya* represents a contradiction. This ritual requires a king to establish suzerainty over other kingdoms, which predictably includes the potential for war. Interestingly, this action is not perceived as an empire-building exercise. On the contrary, it is customary for a king to attempt it, especially if he achieves the necessary capability. A positive outcome of such a process is an ensuing period of stability, with the hierarchy among kingdoms established and the potential for a reduction in perpetual skirmishes.

Other than this exception, war is fought for self-defence or to seek justice. The former is illustrated when, despite being in hiding during their 13th year of exile, Arjuna fends off the challenge of the entire Kaurava army while being in the employment of Virata.[242] There is no better example of the latter than the 18-day Mahabharata war itself, a reluctant decision when all attempts at seeking justice fail.

Yudhishthira is considered a strict adherent of the principles of *dharma*. He is called Dharmaraja in recognition of this attribute. Yet, before the war, even at his most benevolent self, he agrees to pardon the Kauravas on the condition that their share of the kingdom is returned. He says, "O Sanjaya! Through the path of adharma, I do not crave whatever riches exist on this earth."[243] Yet, he seeks what is rightfully his, justifying his actions. "When there is a time of calamity, those who do not act, or those who do not act correctly, are both reprehensible."[244] Accordingly, he affirms the acceptability of fighting a war to undo the miscarriage of justice.

Similarly, Krishna conveys to Sanjaya a message for the Kauravas to seek peace, but from a position of strength. "The great-souled Pandavas are the followers of dharma and are positioned for peace. But they are capable of

fighting. O learned one! Relate this accurately."[245] For him as well, while peace is desirable, it is not a sign of weakness or the inability to seek justice, even if it means resorting to war as the last option.

Dhritarashtra's conscience keeper, senior adviser and cousin brother Vidura reinforces the idea of *dharma* in an attempt to guide the king. He says, "A kingdom should be obtained through dharma. It should be protected through dharma",[246] yet again reinforcing the importance of righteousness as a guide for the acquisition and protection of territory.

Addressing the Contradictions of War

The desire to avoid war and the necessity of waging it might come across as a contradiction. The *Mahabharata* attempts to address the contradiction of war both as an inevitability and an evil. And therefore, at no stage of the epic is war propagated unequivocally. There is an abiding abhorrence for war as a solution for settling differences. Even when the cause is just, there remains an element of remorse that accompanies the righteous path. Yudhishthira, while sending Krishna as a peace emissary to the Kauravas says:

> How can a war be desirable? That is the evil dharma of kshatriyas. But we have been born as kshatriyas. It happens to be our dharma, even if it is adharma.[247]

Even after the Pandavas achieve victory on the battlefield through 18 days of bloody war, Yudhishthira laments its devastating consequences. He decides to give up his kingdom and all worldly pleasures.[248] It is only through the guidance of Bhishma, regarding the duties of a king, that Yudhishthira takes up his responsibilities.

The framing of the idea of war in the *Mahabharata* resonates with more contemporary perspectives that have emerged from centuries of experience and the vagaries of human conflict. The perspectives on war avoidance at a conceptual level and the necessity to win wars to fight injustice, make the *Mahabharata's* deep philosophical core timeless and profound. This in essence, describes the concept of conditional acceptability in the *Mahabharata* as it does in contemporary times. Accordingly, the epic abhors the idea of conflict, even as it acknowledges its utility as an instrument of last resort. And when the instrument of war does need to be employed, the transformation of

dharma into *adharma* becomes a necessary evil. This sentiment is captured by Kripa, one of the statesmen in the court of Dhritarashtra, who, while cautioning the Kauravas against fighting Arjuna, says:

> Those who are learned in the ancient accounts have said that a war is the worst. A war guarantees victory only when it is at the right time and the right place.[249]

Yet another action that seems contradictory to the idea of rejecting war, is the *rajasuya*. It entails voluntary actions seeking suzerainty on the part of a king wanting to become an emperor. As a result, this could and does lead to war. In that sense, war does not remain the last resort under these circumstances. The concept of *dharma* helps us understand this potential contradiction. At different stages of human history, actions have been considered acceptable or unacceptable when viewed from the prism of societal and political righteousness. During the times of the *Mahabharata*, the conduct of a *rajasuya* was considered a rightful endeavour on the part of a king seeking to become an emperor. It was very much his *raja dharma* to undertake such an action. However, even in that case, the intent was not the physical possession of territory. Instead, it was to seek a higher pedestal and financial affluence that came with the suzerainty thus achieved. In other words, it was an amalgam of what was considered *dharma* and what strengthened *artha*.

The idea of conditional acceptability explains the contradiction of not only war as an option, but it also helps to understand the deviations during the conduct of war. The principle suggests that war must be avoided, given its destructive character, through all means available to a king. Some of these measures have been listed above to include diplomacy, deterrence and stratagem. When all other means fail, the quest for justice and the pursuit of righteousness allow the eventuality of war as a means to re-establish *dharma*. It also suggests that the possibility of war is acceptable under exceptional circumstances sanctioned by *dharma*, such as the *rajasuya*. In addition to these circumstances, since victory in a *dharma yudhha* is imperative, the *Mahabharata* finds the employment of deception and stratagem during a battle further reinforcing the principle of conditional acceptability.

Concept of Dharma Yudhha

The Pandava's recourse to war is validated by the principles of justice, righteousness and fair play. The role and influence of *dharma* for the use of force and the conduct of war have already been discussed. The guidance for conducting the affairs of the state and the role and responsibilities of a king and a warrior are established through *dharma*. Accordingly, the rejection of war, as also its acceptability as an exception, follows *dharma*. Despite the overarching philosophical and practical guidance of *dharma*, the *Mahabharata* does not explicitly define, nor does it enumerate the constituents of a *dharma yudhha*. And yet, it is often described as such.[250] Further, it is also compared to the concept of a just war.[251]

Before analysing the idea of *dharma yudhha*, it is important to describe the concept of just war. There have been several attempts at defining just war. St. Augustine provides a fundamental understanding, having witnessed the ravages of war at close quarters. For St. Augustine, a war is considered just when it complies with a just cause, is declared by a recognised authority and has the right intention.[252]

Saint Thomas Aquinas is credited with precisely articulating the concept of just war during the 13th century. Though done in the context of Christianity, his perspective provides a reasonable understanding of not only the ideas of Augustine but also the Greek philosophers before him. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas suggests a framework for ideas and concepts that continue to guide ideas on the subject. "He argues that any decision to resort to war and the use of violence must be strictly focussed on justice and the common good." He also reinforces the need for a "just authority, just cause, and just intention" as essential elements of a just war.[253]

Just war includes the concepts of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. The former consists of just cause; legitimate authority; right intention; reasonable prospects for success; proportionality; and last resort. And the latter: discrimination; proportionality; and necessity.[254]

An analysis of the conditions that lead to the use of force by the Pandavas suggests a systematic adoption of principles that more than address the requirements of *jus ad bellum* (conditions to use force). Similarly, the preparatory period of the war witnesses the adoption of humane principles

of warfighting by both sides, as included in *jus in bello* (law for the conduct of war).

An analysis of Krishna's diplomatic initiative aimed at building a case in favour of the Pandavas amplifies each aspect of *jus ad bellum*. He systematically argues his case, reinforcing each condition that justifies war as a last resort.

- Krishna reinforces the *cause* of the Pandavas by highlighting acts of deceit on the part of Duryodhana and his coterie right from childhood.[255] This culminates with their kingdom not being returned, consequent to the trickery to win the game of dice.[256] This may not still address the "cause" as a factor of self-defence or action against aggression. And in that sense, the Pandava cause is inadequate when viewed from a modern just war perspective.
- Yudhishthira is the rightful and legal ruler of Indraprastha at the culmination of 13 years of banishment. Thereby, he upholds his *authority* as the lawful king.
- It is made clear that the only *intent* of the Pandavas is to merely seek what is theirs and nothing beyond.[257]
- The might and ability of the Pandavas are underlined to convince the Kauravas of the limited *prospects of their success*.
- Krishna repeatedly attempts to convince the court of the futility of war and keeps the *option of war as the last resort*.[258]
- Finally, Krishna reinforces *proportionality* through a stand based on *dharma* – the moral right against the wrongs practiced by the Kauravas.

There is little doubt about the awareness and acceptance of principles related to just war as a concept in the *Mahabharata*. However, *dharma yudhha* and a just war may be similar, yet they are not the same. The concept of *dharma* in general and a *dharma yudhha* in particular go beyond the framework provided by modern guidance about a "just war".

There have been counter arguments questioning the legitimacy of the Mahabharata as a just war. Gurcharan Das writes that the Mahabharata was not a war in self-defence nor against aggression. He also finds the Pandava claim to the throne "dubious", thereby, finding it difficult to classify the

Mahabharata as a just war.[259] A correlation between the term just war and the Pandava cause can lead to this conclusion primarily because of the limitations that its interpretation imposes. On the contrary, when one reads Krishna's arguments definitively classifying Duryodhana's actions as *adharma*, his rejection of every possible attempt at reconciliation and the refusal to listen to wise counsel from his father, mother, senior advisers and independent well-wishers, the reality of war becomes evident. Further, short of going to war, the Pandavas' only option is meek acceptance, dishonour, injustice and humiliation. These realities cannot qualify as appropriate conditions for war avoidance. In a sense, this logic captures the reality of a country that indulges in proxy war through all means short of a war. This may lead to far greater fatalities than a conventional state-on-state war as is the case in J&K, where Pakistan's actions have resulted in more casualties than any single conventional war against India.[260] Should the actions of an errant state therefore be condoned merely because these do not strictly fall under the purview of a "just war"? Krishna's approach to *dharma* does not suggest this. Even if the counteraction taken is short of war.

Torkel Brekke cites a rather inexplicable sentiment of doubt regarding the applicability of just war norms in the *Mahabharata*. He says, "India has produced mountains of literature about war. However, Indian writers are never concerned with *jus ad bellum*."[260] He goes on to say that the Mahabharata war was really a sacrifice, and ritualising violence is one way to solve moral problems connected with the ethics of war.[262] The metaphorical comparison of *kshatriya dharma* in war to the holy process of a *yagna,* where *ghee* (clarified butter) and *dakshina* (donation) are offered, is done to relate death in war to the highest form of worship.[263] This does not imply that the Mahabharata war was a sacrifice and that death and destruction are a ritual. On the contrary, the very act of war avoidance that Krishna attempts is aimed at avoiding large-scale deaths. His diplomatic endeavour is an attempt at war avoidance. If war was the preferred option, Yudhishthira would have refused the long years of hardship and deprivation and sought his rights. Having said this, war as a last resort in the pursuit of *dharma* demands the fulfilment of a *kshatriya's* duty to fight and if it leads to death, such death is welcomed by a warrior.

Arunjana Das in the *Journal of Dharma Studies* says, "As contemporary scholars have pointed out, all the precepts that constitute *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* are already present in some shape or form in the Hindu corpus of ethical writings." She correctly concludes that "there are many a type of war betwixt the righteous and non-righteous that a binary conception cannot capture".[264]

The concept of *dharma yudhha* in the *Mahabharata* has been dealt with in detail by M.A. Mehendale in *Reflections on the Mahabharata*.[265] According to Mehendale, there can be two interpretations of the term in the *Mahabharata*. If its basis is the injustice meted out to the Pandavas when Duryodhana refuses to return their kingdom at the end of the 13 years, then it can very much be justified as a *dharma yudhha*. He reinforces this through Kunti's exhortation in her message to Yudhishthira through Krishna when he comes to Hastinapur to negotiate peace. However, he adds that if the basis of classifying it is the adherence to the rules of war, then neither side can claim it as a *dharma yudhha*.[266]

It is an interesting conclusion that Mehendale comes to. Seen in the literal sense, there is little scope to contradict him. After all, the injustice to the Pandavas is unquestionable and this goes beyond the case of refusing to return their kingdom, as noted earlier. Similarly, the several cases of violating the rules of war on both sides are also irrefutable. Then how can the war be classified under these circumstances?

The attributes of *dharma* and by co-relation of *dharma yudhha,* allow the reconciliation of contradictions witnessed during the war. A war on the scale of the Mahabharata is classified as a *dharma yudhha* for several reasons. It is fought for a righteous cause on the part of the Pandavas. The war becomes the instrument of last resort to seek justice when all else fails to bring reconciliation. There is also a clear understanding of the rules of warfighting that precede the fighting on both sides. Yet, this does not imply the absence of stratagem and deception. The killing of Abhimanyu, Drona and Duryodhana potentially qualifies as violations of the rules of war. Similarly, the use of *maya* by Ghatotkacha and the *brahmastra* by Drona against the Pandava army to seek advantage on the battlefield can also be seen as such. However, between the righteousness of the cause and the

relevance of violations during the war, it is the former that qualifies as the more important determinant for qualifying the war as a *dharma yudhha*.

A *dharma yudhha* does not take place in isolation. In any war deception, decoys, feints, misinformation, disinformation, subversion and the use of stratagem are integral to warfighting. This does not take away the righteousness of a cause. The Mahabharata is no exception and its classification as a *dharma yudhha* remains acceptable. This does not imply that the rules of warfare are redundant, as can be seen from the debate around them in the epic and by its readers in contemporary times.

Kaushik Roy, in his chapter titled *Hinduism and War* while comparing the *Mahabharata* with the *Arthashastra,* says, "The Mahabharata, in contrast, speaks only of open war, which is considered dharmic (just/righteous). When Kshatriyas break rules during combat, then they become fallen Kshatriyas because of their adharma (unjust/nonrighteous actions)."[267] In the strict sense of the term *kuta yuddha* (unrighteous war) that is being used, Roy is correct. Yet, there are several examples in the *Mahabharata*, including those quoted earlier, that not only witness the use of deceit, deception and stratagem, but also its justification under certain circumstances. These include instances of fighting *adharma* and under more *Arthashastra*-like conditionalities, as described in the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*.[268] Further, as described above, the use of stratagem for the larger cause of *dharma* is witnessed during the war, with its justification given by none other than Krishna to reinforce stratagem's inescapable reality and contextual relevance.[269]

In that sense, when different forms of warfare like *dharma yudhha* or *kuta yudhha* are discussed, it does not necessarily place these categories in silos. To that extent, Arunjana's conceptualisation of different war types as branches of the larger *yudhha* tree may not reflect the reality of war in the *Mahabharata*. Given the reality of war, even a *dharma yudhha* will not be immune to the employment of deception and stratagem. The guidance provided by Bhishma to Yudhishthira after the war on different aspects of *raja dharma* has been discussed earlier, wherein he indicates the circumstances where the use of *adharma* is acceptable. Further, at a conceptual level, the very idea of war itself is considered *adharma* – an *adharma* that is the *dharma* of *kshatriyas*. The treatment of war in the *Mahabharata* is a realistic reflection

of this reality. While it indicates the ideal and the aspirational that must be strived for, the text does not hesitate to accept the realities of warfighting. The approach to *dharma yudhha* must also be viewed from this perspective.

The very idea of war spells destruction. And yet, circumstances and conditions can make it an inevitability. The concept of *dharma* provides a context for the conduct of war, despite the inherent contradictions of the act. *Dharma* gives the justification for going to war, even as it is an instrument of last resort. The role of Krishna as a diplomat in the *Mahabharata* best illustrates the arguments in favour of *dharma* as the basis for war avoidance.

During the war itself, aberrations on both sides do take place. However, each such instance comes up for debate with divided opinions on the action and creates a contradiction between the intent and the ensuing action.[270]

Victory in War

The failure of deterrence, diplomacy and the use of stratagem eventually leads to the exercise of the option of war. The *Mahabharata* delves into several aspects related to the quest for victory in war. These can be classified into five segments: preparation for war; evaluation of adversaries and identification of weaknesses; capability development; use of stratagem; and the application of force.

Preparation for War

Both sides make meticulous preparations as they leave for Kurukshetra, the designated battlefield. Camps are established taking due consideration for availability of water, avoiding salinity and making protective arrangements like moats. "King Yudhishthira ensured that strings of bows, bows, armour, weapons, honey, clarified butter, mountainous heaps of resin and sand, plenty of water and fodder, chaff and charcoal were made available to each camp."[271]

Similarly, the Kauravas also make earnest preparations on their side. Duryodhana instructs Karna, Duhshasana and Shakuni, "Therefore, with great attention, let us make all arrangements for war. Let the lords of the earth set up hundreds and thousands of camps in Kurukshetra. They should be spacious and spaced so that the enemy cannot attack them. Water and kindling should be available nearby. The roads should be such that supplies

can be carried. There must be stores of treasure. Let them be stocked with many kinds of weapons and adorned with flags and banners. Let the roads emerging from the city be levelled."[272]

The preparations undertaken by the Pandavas also include psychological conditioning, especially for those who doubt the very logic of the impending war and the accompanying death and destruction. Krishna tells Arjuna, who is facing doubt and indecision: "Also considering your natural dharma, you should not waver. Because there is nothing better for a kshatriya than a war fought for the sake of dharma."[273]

Evaluation of the Adversary and Identification of Weaknesses

The period preceding the Mahabharata war sees several instances of threat evaluation on both sides. After the Pandavas are established at their capital Indraprastha, they are visited by the sage Narada. He proposes to Yudhishthira the conduct of a *rajasuya*. However, concurrently, Narada also cautions Yudhishthira about the resistance the sacrifice could bring in its wake, including the threat of war. "A war may follow it, leading to the destruction of the earth."[274]

Thereafter, Yudhishthira seeks the counsel of Krishna for undertaking the *rajasuya*. Krishna suggests the elimination of Jarasandha, the biggest challenger to this process. He simultaneously indicates that given his ability and strength, Jarasandha could not be defeated on the battlefield. Instead, it would be better to challenge him to a wrestling duel. "He is incapable of being defeated in battle by the gods and the demons. But we understand that he is capable of being vanquished in a battle of breath (wrestling match)."[275] This assessment of the adversary does prove correct and not only is Jarasandha eliminated, but in addition, a favourable king is placed on the throne of Magadha. Further, the kings imprisoned by Jarasandha are now beholden to the Pandavas, which subsequently assists in the conduct of the *rajasuya*.

Just before the Pandavas and Kauravas move into the battlefield, on the Kaurava side, Duryodhana requests Bhishma for his assessment of their own and the enemy's strengths and abilities. This analysis remains an integral

part of appreciating the comparative strength of two sides for militaries across the world. Referring to Bhishma, he says:

> I wish to know the total number of rathas among us and among the enemy and also the atirathas. The grandfather is skilled in knowing about the enemy and about us.[276]

Similarly, Krishna realises that certain *atirathas* such as Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana cannot be killed merely through bravery on the battlefield. In each case, their vulnerabilities are identified and thereafter exploited to ensure their neutralisation on the battlefield.[277]

In addition to the assessment of adversaries before the war, a continuous evaluation of threats and challenges continues during the war as well. This brings in the element of strategic choices to exploit the weaknesses of adversaries that had been noted as a part of the process of threat evaluation.

The employment of Bhima and Hadimba's son Ghatotkacha against the Kauravas in battle is a case in point. After Karna causes widespread devastation against the Pandava army, Arjuna volunteers to fight him. However, Krishna suggests Ghatotkacha as the challenger instead. He is considered capable of defeating Karna, given his valour and special abilities of deception in battle. More importantly, Krishna undertakes a careful evaluation of Karna's biggest strength, which could lead to Arjuna's defeat. Karna is granted the one-time use of a divine spear against any adversary of his choice. Accordingly, he has reserved its use against Arjuna. However, when Ghatotkacha runs riot against the Kaurava army, the ensuing circumstances force Karna to use his divine spear against him. This action weakens Karna appreciably for an eventual duel against Arjuna. Thus, the loss of Ghatotkacha is considered acceptable in the pursuit of a bigger goal, considering the competing capabilities of both sides. Krishna says:

> Because of Ghatotkacha, the spear has been used up. O Dhananjaya! Therefore, know that Karna has already been slain. Had Karna possessed the spear in his hand, no man in the world would have been able to stand in front of him.[278]

Similarly, it is the evaluation of battlefield conditions that leads to the employment of Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, to break a *chakra vyuha* – a battle

formation that can only be penetrated by Arjuna or his son. As a result, Abhimanyu, Krishna's nephew, loses his life.

The role that such strategies play during the Mahabharata not only suggests the employment of appropriate ways and means to neutralise an adversary, but also indicates a cold, realistic approach to seeking victory on the battlefield.

Resource Mobilisation and Capability Development

Both sides preparing to fight the ultimate war understand that the process of mobilising resources could prove to be a decisive factor for victory. This mobilisation takes place at two levels: A progressive capacity building over decades by individuals through the development of their skills and weaponry to cater to any eventuality; and a more focussed approach closer to the final war, which sees a series of steps to mobilise resources.

It is realised by both sides that the possibility of a war is very much real and the presence of additional generals and forces could have a major impact on its ultimate result.

Drupada, Droupadi's father and an ally of the Pandavas, proposes a simultaneous process of seeking allies, even as reconciliation is being attempted with the Kauravas. He says, "Let us make preparations here. Let us send word to our allies to collect forces for us."[279] He lists approximately 70 rulers, who if approached in time could support their cause.[280] A similar process is undertaken by the Kauravas. Both sides send emissaries across the country to garner support, even as parleys are being attempted to broker a peaceful settlement.

Every attempt is made, including the use of deception, to seek alliances. The case of Shalya, the king of Madra who is related to the Kuru family is an illustrative example. Duryodhana bestows upon him the highest honour during his reception and is able to extract a promise of support. Shalya is otherwise on his way to Yudhishthira's camp. Having made this mistake, a crestfallen Shalya promises to merely function as the *sarathi* (charioteer) for Karna and to distract him during the war.[281]

Eventually, with both sides having garnered the support of their allies, the Pandavas have seven *akshouhinis* and the Kauravas 11.[282]

The resources collected by both sides in their preparation for the eventual war might come across as the most important resource mobilisation exercise. In the conventional military sense, this is indeed the case.

Stratagem

Stratagem remains an integral part of force employment in the *Mahabharata*. The wider justification of a conflict according to the principles of *dharma* allow its use against an adversary. It is felt that such means are acceptable when fighting *adharma*. Bhishma opines, "You must know about two kinds of wisdom – the straight and the crooked. Knowing about crooked ways, one should not use these, except to counter a danger that has arisen, such as when enemies use dissension to strike at the king."[283]

Karna, a potent adversary for the Pandavas is first weakened by taking away his natural armour and earrings. Krishna says, "Had he possessed the armour and had he possessed the earrings, the powerful Karna would have been able to defeat everyone in the three worlds, even the immortals."[284] In return, Karna is given a divine spear, which can kill Arjuna on the battlefield. After ensuring its pre-mature application against Ghatotkacha, Karna is killed using a stratagem by Arjuna on the advice of Krishna.[285]

Krishna helps eliminate Jarasandha and Duryodhana, both strong adversaries, based on a thorough understanding of their vulnerabilities and the use of stratagem. This principle is applied when Bhima is fielded against Jarasandha and Duryodhana to ensure victory. This application can also be seen in the case of Bhishma and Drona during the war. Their weaknesses are exploited by not only applying force but also by employing deception. In each of these instances, stratagem remains an integral part of the wider strategy applied, indicating its invaluable relevance against a superior adversary.

The *Mahabharata* explicitly recognises the use of deception in war. One of the most prominent incidents that repeatedly finds reference in this regard is the killing of Drona. As described earlier, the Pandavas allude to the death

of his son Ashvatthama. Drona gives up his weapons and is rendered defenceless. This opens a fatal vulnerability for Dhrishtadyumna to exploit and kill him. From an objective perspective of force application, this is a classic case of employing deception in battle to seize an advantage over an adversary. Yudhishthira's confirmation of Ashvatthama's death makes Drona believe what is not true from his perspective. Conversely, for the Pandavas, the play of words opens a critical vulnerability that can be exploited. Referring to Dhrishtadyumna, Ashvatthama says, "He has performed an extremely ignoble deed and so has the liar Pandava. They resorted to deception against the preceptor, when he had cast aside his weapons. This is the reason the earth will drink Dharmaraja's blood today. I will use every means to kill Panchala."[286] The act is seen as both *adharma* and *dharma* on the Pandava side. Arjuna tells Yudhishthira, "Though you know about dharma and are known as a virtuous person, you have performed an extremely grave deed of adharma."[287] Dhrishtadyumna counters Arjuna and accuses Drona of treating good and evil acts as the same. Drona is guilty of using the brahmastra against soldiers unfamiliar with its impact and incapable of neutralising it. This is considered a violation of the rules of war.[288]

Deceit is employed in the *Mahabharata* with and without the application of force. Duryodhana acquires the Pandavas' kingdom and possessions through deceit. He attempts to kill them in the house of lac yet again through deceit. As the war progresses and the stakes become higher the role of deceit becomes evident. The killing of Duryodhana by Bhima emerges as an example that reinforces this aspect of force employment. The incident has been discussed earlier. It involves Bhima hitting Duryodhana with his club on the thigh, which is unacceptable according to the sport's rules. "There is no doubt that the wicked one slew you through deceit. Time is impossible to cross. He summoned you to a duel in accordance with dharma. However, Bhimasena used adharma to shatter your thighs with a club."[289]

Earlier Arjuna had sworn to kill Jayadratha, who was responsible for Abhimanyu's death. As the battle wages, Krishna appeals to Arjuna to save Satyaki from Bhurishrava. Just before Satyaki is close to meeting his end, Arjuna shoots an arrow to sever Bhurishrava's arm with which he holds his sword.[290] This not only saves Satyaki but also allows him to regain advantage and kill Bhurishrava instead. Both Krishna and Arjuna are censured for this

act. However, Arjuna justifies his action by relating it to his vow to kill Jayadratha and Bhurishrava, emerging as an impediment in its implementation.[291]

Application of Force

A casual reading of individual segments of the *Mahabharata* can create a biased perspective about what exactly the epic is saying regarding force application. There are innumerable instances of employing force, as are of force avoidance. There are examples wherein power and weapons are glorified, as are their rejection. The *Mahabharata* is as much about human values and strength, as it is about failures and frailties. In essence, force application while pursuing *dharma* is considered acceptable as a last resort.

Judicious and effective force rather than its overwhelming employment to crush an adversary remains the basis for employment philosophy. Bhishma tells Yudhishthira: "One must fight for the sake of victory, not because of anger, or the desire to kill."[292] While there are instances in the *Mahabharata* that suggest a violation of this guidance on the part of the Pandavas themselves, Bhima's killing of Duhshasana and drinking his blood is more a case of anger and revenge rather than of considered judicious action.[293] The *Mahabharata* also indicates that an overreliance on force can have a diminishing impact beyond a point. "If the enemy is oppressed too much, it will always attack." Further, dissension is preferable to the use of force.[294]

A detailed analysis of force employment in the epic illustrates how different objectives are achieved. It further highlights the impact desired and created during military engagements. With a few exceptions, the text reinforces the application of judicious force on the part of the actors. The indiscretion on the part of Bhima has been mentioned above. The deceitful action by Ashvatthama after the war highlights what is perhaps the gravest violation of all norms of warfare and civilised behaviour.

An evaluation of the text reveals five different objectives and ways employed for force application. This does not suggest that each option is operated in isolation or as a comprehensive battle manoeuvre. The sequence of events on certain days of the war suggests a set of measures employed while using force against an adversary. Yet, the variety in force application

options indicates the sophistication and complexity of battle planning and execution. Some of these ways have been recognised as such in the *Mahabharata*. Others can be deduced based on the description of the actions. Either way, these suggest a pattern that provides greater clarity on force application through its repetitive employment, often leading to contrasting opinions on both sides of the warring armies.

Disruption. A disruption causes a serious break in an activity. In the context of the war, this is successfully achieved by generals on both sides on several occasions through the use of force. Besides causing large-scale casualties, it also adversely impacts the enemy army's morale. On the Kaurava side, Bhishma, Drona and Karna cause severe disruptions that lead the Pandavas to plan their elimination.

One of the most prominent cases of disruption involves Ghatotkacha. It has been seen that Ghatotkacha's introduction into the battlefield leads to the large-scale decimation of the Kaurava army. Consequently, this forces Karna to use his divine weapon – the spear reserved for Arjuna – against Ghatotkacha.

Diversion. A successful military diversion can sidetrack the main resource from the intended target. One of the most striking examples of diversion during the war is the successful attempt of diverting Arjuna to render the Pandavas ineffectual in a bid to penetrate the *chakravyuh* created by Drona. Drona tells Duryodhana, "O king! But devise some means to take Arjuna away."[295] Accordingly, a plan is made to divert Arjuna from the main battle. "After Drona has spoken in this way, the masses of *samshaptakas* again challenge Arjuna to a battle in the southern direction."[296] As far as Drona is concerned, no one other than Arjuna can break through the formation. With the diversion successfully executed, the only option available to Yudhishthira is the employment of Abhimanyu, who has the knowledge to breach the formation. However, he cannot extricate himself from it. As discussed earlier, despite Abhimanyu's martial abilities, he is isolated after the Pandava generals are blocked from following him and is eventually killed in an unfair fight. Drona's plan to divert Arjuna from their main effort through the *samshaptakas* is an example of utilising force to achieve the requisite results.

Demoralisation. The events before and during the war repeatedly illustrate the use of force to demoralise an adversary. This ability is a manifestation of the fighting prowess of warriors. The fighting ability is well established through years of interaction and the reputations built. Consequently, this reputation's impact on the battlefield is most effective in demoralising the opposing side. One of the first instances during the war is Bhishma's repeated onslaught on the Pandava army.

> Bhishma was stationed in that battle, like a fire without smoke. He was like the sun at midday, scorching with his energy. The Pandava warriors were incapable of glancing at Bhishma. Oppressed by fear, the Pandavas looked in every direction. But without seeing a protector, they were like cattle afflicted by the cold. O descendant of the Bharata lineage! The soldiers were slaughtered in large numbers and retreated in despondence.[297]

The application of force by Drona is not very different. He too causes consternation and confusion amongst the opposing force before he is eventually killed. The array of available weapons to Drona is unsurpassed on both sides and he uses them to cause panic among the Pandava army.

> The immensely intelligent Drona invoked Brahmastra. It scorched Partha and all the invisible beings. The earth, with all its mountains and trees, began to tremble. Turbulent winds began to blow and the oceans were agitated. When the great souled one invoked that weapon, there was terror among the Kuru and Pandava soldiers and all the beings and a great uproar arose.[298]

Similar examples can be cited for warriors like Arjuna, Bhima, Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha and Karna. They are seen to create havoc and demoralise the opposing army on several occasions during the war.

Draconian Means. The employment of draconian force is not witnessed very often during the *Mahabharata*. However, when it is indeed used, the incidents come up for criticism and draw flak from both sides. Bhima's elimination of Duhshasana sends shock waves. "He tore apart the breast of the one who had fallen down on the ground and drank the warm blood."[299] The text notes, "Whoever saw Bhimasena in that state then, fell down in distress and in fear."[300] It can be argued that Bhima's action can also be

classified as demoralising and demonstrative. While it does qualify as such, however, the manner of its execution and the impact it has on those present on the battlefield is beyond merely being demoralising or demonstrative. Perhaps the only other action that can be classified in a similar category is Ashvatthama's angry outburst. He becomes incontrollable after Bhima fells Duryodhana. Ashvatthama decides to attack the Pandava camp at night while the warriors sleep. What follows is a ceaseless massacre of several kings and princes, followed by anyone who comes in his way. "While he roamed around, slaughtering many men, the terrible night was covered in darkness and seemed to become even more fearful. Some still had some life left. Other men were slain in thousands… As Drona's son angrily severed them, they fell down on the ground. Some screamed for their mothers, others for their fathers, and still others for their brothers."[301]

Demonstration. The concept of demonstrative use of force is aimed at creating the requisite impact upon peers and adversaries alike. Each warrior's establishing process is accompanied by demonstrative force. Arjuna's prowess at archery is confirmed as a student under Drona when he rightfully identifies his target – a bird, unlike his brothers.[302] Later, during Droupadi's *svayamvara*, Arjuna is the only one who successfully strings the bow and hits the target.[303] Arjuna's capability to use divine weapons like the *brahmastra* give him unique abilities for force application. Similarly, Bhima's strength is second to none. His killing of *rakshasas* like Kirmira and generals like Kichaka and Jarasandha before the war establish his unparalleled strength and application of force. The disruptive qualities of Bhishma and Drona have already been established. During their actions, they also reinforce a distinctive demonstrative capability. Karna first demonstrates his ability during a tournament for the Kuru princes to display their skills after training under Drona. After Arjuna has mesmerised the crowd, Karna replicates his actions and challenges Arjuna to a duel.[304] This is followed by several instances of actions on the battlefield that repeatedly demonstrate Karna's martial abilities.

The Mahabharata suggests a hierarchy of force application, in addition to the variation in desired effect on the adversary. This hierarchy of judicious force employment indicates using limited force as the preliminary option, and reserving the use of all-out force only as the last resort. The following two examples illustrate this distinction.

Pandavas are in disguise during the last phase of their exile in the 13th year of banishment from the kingdom. They are required to hide their identity during this period. Towards its end, Kichaka, King Virata's general misbehaves with Droupadi. Instead of making an open move against him, Bhima plans to trap him inside a dancing hall. He asks Droupadi to invite him there to meet her alone. Kichaka falls for the ruse. Once inside the dark hall, instead of meeting Droupadi, Kichaka is confronted by Bhima, who kills him mercilessly for his indiscretions.[305]

Kichaka's death is a relief for the Pandavas and Droupadi. However, it does considerably weaken the Matsya kingdom. As a result, the Kauravas decide to seize the opportunity and take away the cattle wealth of the kingdom. Arjuna gives up his disguise at this critical juncture and faces the Kaurava army. This includes most of their famed generals like Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana. He vanquishes them and returns the 60,000 cattle captured by the Kauravas.[306]

At each stage of the Mahabharata war and before it as well, force application is closely linked with the evaluation of an adversary. Strategic choices are made, though not necessarily through the application of destructive force.

Despite these instances, responsibility in force application is also evident in the *Mahabharata*. Arjuna having acquired the capability to wield the *bhahmashira* that can be compared with weapons of mass destruction in the present era, does not give in to their potential employment in the war. While granting the powers, Arjuna is told that "it must not be released at any man. If it is released at someone who lacks in energy, it will destroy the entire universe".[307] This guidance is similar to the avoidance of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. This reinforces the policy of restraint despite grave provocations.

The trajectory of violence, especially during the war, indicates the creation of a spiral that eventually crosses the threshold of the rules of *dharma*. As the 18-day war progresses, with each passing day, the transgression increases. At one level, it can be contextualised with the quest for victory. However, on another level, it suggests the receding respect for rules, laws and traditions

that guide warfighting. To that extent, war is not merely a reinforcement of futile loss of lives, it is also symbolic of a slide in human values.

There is a fierce debate over force application on both sides. This sees a clash between what is considered ethical and the realistic course of action. The killing of several heroes during the war comes up for debate. This is not merely by the side that loses a great warrior. It also includes generals on the opposing side responsible for the death. Some of these aspects have been discussed at length in the section on *dharma*. The illustrative examples used here further reinforce the actions as well as the debate.

Co-relation with Contemporary Times

The evaluation of war as a concept highlights key facets of strategic thought that can be derived from it. These include:

- *Yoga* and *kshema* while implying people obtaining what they wish for and preserving what they have, can only be ensured through a welfare state that simultaneously has the necessary protection ensured through the instruments of the state. In more contemporary times, there has been a longstanding debate about the needs of development and defence of a state. The ideals of development seek to provide people with higher standards of living – in essence obtaining what they wish for. It is also recognised that for a state to pursue its economic development and growth, an environment of peace and security is essential – preserving what the people have through security. The conclusion regarding the inter-se importance of these aspects was as interdependent and relational in the *Mahabharata* as it remains in contemporary times. Consequently, the debate shifted from the logic of defence *or* development to defence *and* development, with the two constituents remaining integral imperatives for a state.[308] Collectively, these lay the foundation of a secure welfare state, which is an aspirational principle for more modern times.
- War should be avoided through the instruments of diplomacy, deterrence and use of stratagem. The *Mahabharata* is as much about the 18-day war, as it is about the excessive use of force and its

destructive impact. It reinforces the futility of war and the cost of miscalculation and misadventures in a bid to seek strategic advantage. War is a reality and will possibly remain so over time. Yet, there must remain an endeavour to avoid it, as is attempted through the instruments of diplomacy, deterrence and stratagem.

- War when sanctioned by *dharma* is acceptable. The *Mahabharata* recommends the idea of conditional acceptability of war. It rejects the employment of war at the conceptual level, even as its utility is acknowledged and accepted as an instrument of last resort in the pursuit of *dharma* and self-protection.
- Preparations for any eventuality leading to the use of force or war must continue. Preparation for war cannot be a last-ditch effort especially since defence preparedness was and remains a long-drawn process.
- Even as war is *adharma*, for *kshatriyas* it is their *dharma*. However, such endeavours are acceptable only within the wider framework of a righteous or a just war.
- Wars fought as an instrument of last resort to fight injustice or to protect the unprotected are considered *dharma yudhha*.
- A war must be fought keeping all principles of *dharma yudhha* in mind.
- Use of force must be judicious in its employment. It should be effective and discriminate rather than indiscriminate. Eventually, the 18-day war reinforces the adverse impact of excessive force as an instrument of state policy. Similar instances continue to adversely impact nations employing war as a policy for seeking strategic advantage.
- *Adharma* can be used to fight *adharma* for the larger cause of protecting *dharma*.
- Use of stratagem is integral to warfighting.

How do these facets co-relate with more contemporary strategic thought emanating from India and do they echo similar sentiments even partially?

Can the ideas of a *dharma yudhha* relate to modern wars? India's most recent conflict was fought in 1999 against belligerent action by Pakistan. The war was imposed on India to seek favourable decisions through the use of force. India's decision to employ its armed forces fulfilled all considerations of a *dharma yudhha*.[309] Further, the contrasting actions of the two armies highlighted India's adherence to the principles of *dharma yudhha*, while Pakistan violated the same. India gave an honourable burial to Pakistani soldiers killed during the battle, as sanctioned by their religious rituals.[310] In contravention of all international conventions, Indian soldiers were tortured, and their bodies mutilated.[311] The contrast could not have been more apparent in terms of the ethos of the two armies.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlights India's view on war. While voicing his perspective on the Ukraine conflict, he says, "I know that today's era is not an era of war…". He further adds that democracy, diplomacy and dialogue keep the world together.[312]

The former national security adviser and foreign secretary, Shivshankar Menon, while delivering a lecture at the National Defence College on "The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs", contextualises the use of force by India.[313]

Reinforcing the relevance of force and the need to fight on matters of national security and principles, Menon provides three examples from the life of Mahatma Gandhi at varying junctures of his life. Each echoes the same sentiment.

The first example from 1928 emphasises the importance of military training for war, "I can conceive of occasions when it would be my duty to vote for the military training of those who wish to take it."[314] Almost 20 years later, on 26 September 1947, Mahatma Gandhi said that "he had always been an opponent of all warfare, but that if there was no other way of securing justice war would be the only alternative left to the government".[315] Finally, after Pakistani raiders swept into Kashmir in 1947, bringing death and destruction in their wake, he supported the move of Indian troops to secure the state. "He added that he would rather that the defenders be wiped out to the last man in clearing Kashmir's soil of the raiders rather than submit."[316]

Just like the core values related to war avoidance and war's utility as an instrument of last resort, Gandhi's views also reinforce a similar sentiment. Menon concludes this aptly when he says:

> In saying so, Gandhiji was entirely in keeping with a long tradition which has regarded the use of force as legitimate in certain circumstances, namely, if there is no alternative way of securing justice. This is in essence a doctrine for the defensive use of force, when all other avenues are exhausted.[317]

He further argues that India's experience of weaknesses leading to invasions, emphasises the need for strategic autonomy. Menon reinforces the need for India to "avoid weaknesses at all costs lest that history be repeated".[318] Interestingly, he practically echoes the sentiment that remains at the core of the *Mahabharata* and says, "War and peace are continuing themes in Indian strategic culture. While not celebrating war the culture treats defensive war as acceptable when good fights evil to secure justice. Indian strategic culture has been comfortable with this contradiction."[319]

Menon finds this age-old culture the basis for India's strong belief in diplomacy and the rule of law as a prelude to the use of force.

He illustrates India's position through its policies and decisions post-independence. This includes the use of military force defensively against external aggression, sending troops only as part of United Nations forces or on the invitation of governments in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. According to Menon, India has never retained the territory it occupied during wars, reinforcing the defensive intent of going to war and the utility of force as a tool to safeguard rather than conquer.[320]

Historically, each instance of India's engagement in wars reinforces the idea of conditional acceptability. In 1947, it was Pakistan's employment of tribal raiders and its regulars to invade J&K that led to India's counter-response. The reliance on war was to protect sovereignty and stop the savage actions of the tribesmen along the border areas.[321] After that, in 1962, war became an instrument of state policy after China chose force to seek resolution of outstanding disputes. Similarly, in 1965, Pakistan yet again attempted to push in raiders in an attempt to change the status quo before formally attacking India with its regular armed forces, leading to a backlash by India.[322]

1971 saw an inhuman onslaught on the people of erstwhile East Pakistan after protests against military's refusal to accept the election results, which would have seen the East gain precedence in politics.[323] This led to millions of refugees moving into India from East Pakistan, eventually leading Pakistan to declare war on India on 03 December 1971. The last major instance saw Pakistan violate the LoC at Kargil in 1999 by sending its forces across during the mutual evacuation of posts in winter.[324] The illegal occupation of territory in a bid to force a realignment of the LoC, cut off Ladakh and force negotiations on Kashmir from a position of strength, forced India to fight and reclaim its territory. These instances reflect India's ancient wisdom and the logic of conditional acceptability of war in the *Mahabharata*. This has remained India's way of dealing with the contradictions of war, wherein pragmatic security needs have been balanced with idealistic aspirations. Against the backdrop of war, in each instance, India has attempted to seek peace through diplomacy and negotiations. The Lahore bus diplomacy by Prime Minister Vajpayee is a case in point, even as Pakistan was already in the process of sending in its troops at that very juncture.

Menon's assessment might suggest that India's strategic thought has been linear over time. However, that is not true. Nor does the *Mahabharata* itself suggest a monochromatic perspective of strategic decision-making. Amongst all the characters in the epic, Krishna emerges as a balancer between the idealistic and realistic perspectives. It is his understanding of *dharma* that is accompanied by its aspirational and practical reality. The apostle of *dharma*, Yudhishthira, and the repository of knowledge on *raja dharma*, Bhishma, falter at times when it comes to relating the text to the context. Yudhishthira allows the collective advantage achieved by the Pandavas after the *rajasuya* to be squandered through a game of dice. Bhishma finds the interpretation of *dharma* a complex issue when the game of dice and its resultant actions all but seal the fate of the Kurus. It is only Krishna who can walk the thin line between righteousness and reality.

India too suffered from this blind spot over the years. The dilemma of setting the moral compass while making decisions remained a challenge. Jaswant Singh while referring to a series of issues post-independence writes, "This 'moral aspect' was in essence a confusion… It is a confusion that arises from not differentiating between individual human morality and ethics,

and the reality of national interest."[325] He goes on to explain, "It is also a consequence of not recognising that between high idealism and the hard stone of a pursuit of national goals what will splinter is always this 'moral aspect'."[326]

The second major shortcoming is the inability to assess threats and challenges realistically. Unlike Krishna who does so realistically as in the case of Jarasandha, it is not necessarily the case during more recent times. As an illustration, the preference and policy of pursuing non-violence cannot operate without the capability to deter misadventures. Non-violence emanates from a position of strength rather than weakness. Therefore, the stance that "We don't need a defence plan. Our policy is non-violence. We foresee no military threats" is bound to create undesirable security challenges, and eventually may be beyond the ability of the state to resolve.[327]

The events of 1962, which saw India being defeated by China, reinforced the inadequacy of national and military preparedness. They also suggest the inability to foresee the threat in its true manifestation. "There has been a slant in our minds that China would not attack us. It is perfectly true."[328]

S. Jaishankar, India's external affairs minister, sums up the balance struck by Krishna in the *Mahabharata*. "The Mahabharata is as much a tale of ethics as of power. It is Krishna's choices that reconcile these two imperatives." He adds, "His may be the voice of reason or the words of caution, but equally it is also the call to action when required."[329] That, in essence, sums up the strategic thought from the *Mahabharata*.

Each of these elements that are related to the conceptualisation of wars or even the limited use of force highlights the core tenets of the *Mahabharata*. These, when co-related with contemporary times, seem equally relevant, as the last section of the chapter indicates. It can be argued that these tenets are fairly universal in their scope and application. Most countries in the modern era follow these principles and little is unique about them. Even though this contention might be true, its real significance is not that there is a similarity of thought. The significance lies in the fact that its visualisation had been attempted comprehensively 3,000 years ago when such modern concepts, philosophical debates and spiritual guidance were not the same as they are now.

Chapter Ten

Raja Dharma: The Essence of Statecraft

The *Mahabharata* is an all-encompassing treatise at several levels. It provides a detailed understanding of social, political, strategic and spiritual thought processes over a thousand years. This is conveyed primarily through the epic's narrative. Yet, there are instances wherein, as part of the narrative, a prescriptive sequence is woven to convey a composite message to the readers. As mentioned earlier, the *Bhagavad Gita* remains the best-known example of this form of communication. However, from a strategic perspective of statecraft, the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas* (collectively called the *Shanti Parva* in the 18-*parva* classification) provide a detailed understanding of managing the affairs of a state. This includes guidance to a king during adverse conditions.

When this guidance is related to more contemporary times, while the functional aspects have transformed, its logic and conceptual framework remain relevant. Some fundamental themes, including going to war, relations with neighbouring states, attributes of leadership, focus on *dharma* and several others, find an echo in India's strategic thought. The universal application of some of these concepts also has a cross-border and cross-cultural relevance. The four *upayas* – *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda* – while uniquely Indian in their origin, have a universal application. Similarly, the principle of *yoga kshema* – ensuring the prosperity and protection of the people has a timeless appeal.

The two *parvas* place the king at the centre of the state structure and evaluate his responsibility to ensure *yoga kshema*. This conceptualisation

finds a detailed description in the *parvas*. According to the epic, a kingdom or a society can fall prey to internal and external threats unless a strong central authority ensures order. A king fulfils this responsibility with the support of his advisers.

This thought would immediately draw comparisons with subsequent ancient texts like Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Kamandaka's *Nitisara*. Accordingly, in an attempt to undertake a systematic analysis of these aspects in the Mahabharata, this chapter focusses on the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas* of the *Mahabharata*. The following chapter will draw suitable comparisons between the *parvas*, *Arthashastra* and the *Nitisara*, aiming to explore continuity in strategic thought between the three.

The *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas* are based on the guidance provided by Bhishma to Yudhishthira after the 18-day war ends. It takes place at the behest of Krishna, who finds Yudhishthira distraught after the deaths of near and dear ones and the calamity of war. Conveying his state of mind to his brothers, Yudhishthira expresses the desire to "discard the pursuit of ordinary pleasures" and dwell in the forests, having given up his kingdom and wealth.[330] In a bid to help Yudhishthira better understand his responsibilities, Krishna leverages Bhishma's ability to provide guidance and qualifies that "with him, all that knowledge is about to set".[331]

When Krishna and the Pandavas are in the presence of Bhishma, it is Krishna who spells out the importance of passing on Bhishma's knowledge and wisdom to Yudhishthira. "When you go to that world, all the knowledge that you possess will be destroyed. That is the reason all of these have assembled before you, for an analysis of dharma…Tell him about the union of dharma and artha."[332]

Krishna lays down the essential parameters for Bhishma to guide Yudhishthira. When it comes to the challenging responsibility of administering a kingdom and protecting the people against threats, it becomes relevant to focus on *dharma* and *artha*. The scope of Yudhishthira's questions and the depth of Bhishma's answers indicate the inextricable relationship between the two. They also suggest that even as *dharma* guides a king, *artha* gives him the resources to administer successfully. Therefore, the success of a king is closely associated with the right approach towards *dharma* and *artha*.

Ends – Yoga Kshema

According to Bhishma, during *Krita Yuga* (*Sat Yuga*), given the ideal conditions, *dharma* prevails. There is a complete absence of *adharma* as people do what they are expected to do. Under these conditions, "There is no doubt that subjects obtain what they wish and preserve what they have."[333] However, this is an ideal condition that can at best be aspired for. The *Mahabharata* is set at the junction of the *Dvapara Yuga* and the *Kali Yuga*. This suggests that the prevailing conditions demanded greater intervention by a king to ensure the well-being of his people. By implication, this required the king to guarantee protection to facilitate gaining and sustaining prosperity. In that sense, the implication of *yoga kshema* changed from the *Krita Yuga* to the *Dvapara Yuga,* wherein an ideal world did not require protection to preserve what people gained. They could maintain it on their own account.

Bhishma tells Yudhishthira that the *dharma* followed by a king is the most important among all *dharmas*. For him, "All the dharmas can be seen to be based on rajadharma."[334] This can best be explained through the desirable conditions required for an individual to follow his *dharma*: A degree of economic stability and predictability of security. Accordingly, Bhishma considers *raja dharma* the most important form of *dharma*.[335]

Bhishma's guidance to Yudhishthira straddles the two extreme ends of statecraft, with the ideal at one end and the ends of *artha* guiding the other. From the perspective of *raja dharma*, this middle ground best reflects the reality of statecraft. Bhishma wants Yudhishthira to be guided by the tenets of *dharma*, while simultaneously ensuring the needs of *artha*. Das writes, "The *Mahabharata* offers a middle ground between the realism of Duryodhana and the idealism of a younger Yudhishthira… Unlike the Realists he believes that moral principles make a claim on a political leader, but there is a sharp limit to these claims. A wise leader cannot trust other nations. He must be on guard, and sometimes be willing to take up *danda*, 'arms'."[336]

This chapter will focus on the two key constituents of a king's *raja dharma* – protection and prosperity, as illustrated through *yoga kshema*. This is reinforced by Bhishma, who says, "A king's foundations are his treasury and his army. The treasury is again the foundation of the army. It is the foundation of all dharma and dharma is again the foundation of all

subjects."[337] Therefore, a king's foundational basis for following his *raja dharma* is this interrelation between protection and prosperity. His success is dependent on the simultaneous pursuit of the same. Bhishma highlights the correlation and interdependence between the treasury, the army and the kingdom. He rightly questions the very possibility of having one without the other. It is unthinkable to imagine a kingdom without an army, an army without a treasury, a treasury without an army and a kingdom without a treasury.

Bhishma describes the importance of protection as part of a king's responsibilities. He quotes several renowned *rishis* to reinforce his contention. Rishi Bhargava emphasises the relevance of protection when he says, "One must clearly protect. The world is sustained on that protection."[338] He collates the collective wisdom of learned men like Brihaspati, Kavya, Indra, Manu, Bharadvaja and Gourashira to underline their praise for the *dharma* of protection. It emerges from Bhishma's understanding that the primary responsibility of a king as part of his *raja dharma* is the protection of his subjects and the kingdom. This role must be fulfilled despite calamitous conditions since it allows kings to accumulate "great *dharma*".

Means – Seven Elements

If *yoga* and *kshema* are the ends to be achieved, then the means available for this end state can be related to the seven elements listed in the *Mahabharata*. These elements also serve as the pillars for the implementation of *raja dharma*. These include the king, army, advisers, allies, the treasury, forts and the geographical expanse. It is the king's responsibility to protect them. It is evident from this list that the attention of a ruler is meant to remain focussed on the protector – army; means of safety – the forts; resources – treasury; supporting elements – allies; wise counsel – advisers; and the land and its resources – geographical expanse.[339]

The King

Bhishma highlights several qualities that allow a king to follow his *raja dharma* and ensure the protection of his subjects. The *Mahabharata* acknowledges the impact of divine influence. Yet, when this is co-related

with an individual's effort to achieve desired goals, it places enterprise as a more important attribute. Bhishma suggests that a king with enterprise will ultimately triumph over another who relies merely on lip service. "It is because of enterprise that a courageous person is superior to one who is eloquent."[340]

Bhishma's guidance reflects introspection on the part of a ruler. He places the onus of conquering the self before attempting to discipline and conquer others. He says, "The king must always conquer the soul and then he must conquer the enemies." For Bhishma, "Victory over one's self means restraint of the aggregate of the five (senses)."[341]

Bhishma visualises the protection of a kingdom as a complex affair. He understands and acknowledges the compromises a king makes to ensure the safety of his subjects and the protection of his assets. A powerful king can be threatened by a weaker opponent and for this, he is completely justified in using deceit when his objective is backed by *dharma*. "The secret words of a king, the amassing of troops for victory, the deceit in his heart, tasks that are done for specific purposes and the crooked acts that he undertakes – must be sustained by rectitude."[342] In essence, the needs of *raja dharma* can sometimes demand deceit and deception. However, as indicated earlier, the spirit in which a king undertakes such actions differentiates *dharma* from *adharma*. This must be done to protect and safeguard the people, their property and the kingdom's assets, instead of the personal pursuit of wealth and anger.

The king's approach to his responsibilities should ideally remain balanced. A mild king is disregarded and a fierce one becomes troublesome. An amalgam of both is therefore recommended to ensure justice and fair play. This sense of balance and moderation of behaviour is also reinforced through the sense of justice. Concerning riches, a king must take from the wicked and give to the righteous. However, this is best achieved when a king and his advisers are fair and righteous in their actions.[343]

The techniques to undertake diplomacy and protect the kingdom against all forms of threats are laid down. Four of these, *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda* have been discussed earlier in detail. In addition, Bhishma includes the technique of *upeksha* (endurance or neglect) as well.

Qualities of a King

Bhishma describes the major character traits desirable in a king. In addition, he also lists out 37 qualities of a king.[344]

(1) He must follow *dharma* without any acerbity.

(2) He must shower affection.

(3) He must not be a non-believer.

(4) He must pursue riches, but without violence.

(5) He must pursue *kama* but must not be bound down by it.

(6) Without any hesitation, he must speak pleasantly.

(7) He must be brave but should not boast about it.

(8) He must be generous but should not give to those who are undeserving.

(9) He must be bold but must not be cruel.

(10) He must not have alliances with ignoble people.

(11) He must not wage war against his relatives.

(12) He must not employ spies who are inappropriate.

(13) He must not undertake tasks because he has been forced.

(14) Before the wicked, he must not speak about his objectives.

(15) He must not speak about his own qualities.

(16) He must not take away from those who are virtuous.

(17) He must not trust those who are wicked.

(18) He must not inflict punishment without examination.

(19) He must not disclose his counsel.

(20) He must not give to those who are covetous.

(21) He must not trust those who have caused injury.

(22) He must protect his wife, but without jealousy.

(23) The king must be pure, but not compulsively so.

(24) He must not be excessively addicted to women.

(25) He must not eat sweets that are not healthy.

(26) He must humbly honour those who deserve respect.
(27) He must be sincere in serving his seniors.
(28) Without any pride, he must worship the gods.
(29) He must desire prosperity, but not in ways that give rise to censure.
(30) He must serve, even if he does not feel affection.
(31) He must be accomplished but must also know the proper time.
(32) He must comfort, but not because he wants to use people.
(33) He must not show favours and then fling a person away.
(34) He must not strike ignorantly.
(35) He must slay all the enemies that remain.
(36) He must not display sudden anger.
(37) He must be mild with those who cause him injury.

The Army

Identifying Attributes of Soldiers

Bhishma goes on to highlight the fighting prowess of soldiers hailing from different parts of the country. He identifies them for their strengths and recommends their employment accordingly. The *Gandharas*, *Sindhus* and *Souviras* are good with nails and javelins. Soldiers from the east are good at fighting on elephants and those from around Mathura fight well with their bare hands.[345] In a sense, this emphasises the importance of selecting the right person for the right task at hand. This guidance is indicative of deploying soldiers for tasks they are best suited to undertake.

Rules of Warfighting

The rules of warfighting are laid down during a battle. These include not fighting one without a weapon. A single soldier should fight a single adversary. Chariots should fight chariots. A distressed soldier should not be struck for the sake of victory. A wounded soldier should be treated or sent to his territory. A victory through *adharma* is to be abhorred and fighting should follow the principles of *dharma*. "It is better to use dharma and be killed

than to triumph through evil deeds." However, it is fair to fight deceit with deceit and *adharma* with *adharma*.[346] This suggests that like the 18-day war, the rules of war and the ethics of a *kshatriya* are guiding principles that must be followed earnestly. However, when an adversary employs *adharma*, it would be naïve to continue with an ethics-based approach. This would defeat the purpose of fighting a war, pursuing *dharma* and its eventual establishment as the basis for governance.

Fighting under Exceptional Conditions

A similar nuance is also evident when dealing with the reality of warfare. The core value of the *Mahabharata* remains the pursuit of *dharma,* as has been reinforced earlier. However, this reality is equally at ease with the vagaries of war and its associated challenges that demand actions that often violate the guidelines of *dharma*. Yudhishthira asks Bhishma about leading soldiers even when it violates *dharma* at times. Bhishma understands the conflict in his mind. He says, "Some dharma is based on truth, some more on reason." His differentiation between truth and reason relates to a war fought under ideal conditions and occasionally against the forces of *adharma*. Bhishma clarifies that a king should be equally familiar with the straight and crooked forms of wisdom. The crooked forms should only be used under exceptional circumstances, such as when the enemy uses dissension to strike. It is only when an adversary's devious means are identified that crooked means may be employed.[347]

Campaigning Season

Interestingly, Bhishma occasionally does venture to describe the practical aspects of warfare. This includes the material that is ideally used for making body armour. He suggests the ideal time for military campaigns as April–May or November–December. This is based on the easy availability of ripe crops and water. He also notes moderate weather conditions as suitable for military campaigns. This is reminiscent of discussions on the campaigning season for the armed forces. Unsurprisingly, India fought most wars during the winter, traditionally considered ideal for military action. Bhishma suggests using roads with water and grass, duly sanitised by spies moving ahead of the forces and avoiding routes that are freshly cleared. Camps and

fortifications should be protected with clear approaches and obstacles for the enemy. There should be adequate water to support the forces. Bhishma dwells upon the ideal terrain for fighting. Ground devoid of mud, water and stones is the best for horses. Level ground without obstacles is best for chariots, and elephants are best employed through small trees, large bushes and water. On the other hand, foot soldiers benefit from fortifications, large trees, bamboo clumps, hills and woods. On a clear day, chariots are preferable, and during monsoons, foot soldiers and elephants.[348] In modern-day warfare, it is not uncommon to describe a terrain as suitable for mechanised warfare based on its suitability for tanks. A similar assessment is made for the transportation of other military equipment. Finally, it is said that difficult terrain is no obstacle for the infantry, indicating the versatility of the foot soldier.

Psychological Warfare

Bhishma explains the psychological factors that influence soldiers during a battle. His understanding of men under duress and their employment at the appropriate place suggests a rare insight into human behaviour. Soldiers who achieve great military feats, like creating or closing a breach, should eat the same food as the king and be paid double the wages. They should be promoted from leaders of ten to a hundred. Soldiers should be roused and motivated before a battle. "If one runs away, there is destruction of wealth, death, ill fame and a bad reputation."[349] He even suggests a pledge for men before a battle:

> We desire heaven and are ready to give up our lives in the battle. Whether we are victorious or we are slain, we deserve to obtain the end of victorious men.[350]

Bhishma explains that men armed with swords and shields should be placed at the front of the army. The women should remain in the middle with carts behind them to ensure their safety. The best soldiers should be placed at the front and foot soldiers hidden to counter the adversary. Interestingly, he also suggests positioning weak soldiers closer together to give them a feeling of numbers. A small group of soldiers is described as *suchimukh,* or the mouth of a needle. A king should rally his men, hold them and announce the arrival of friends and the rout of an enemy. Having

raised the morale of his men, he should indicate the right time to strike the enemy. Musical instruments, conch shells and horns are recommended to create a psychological impact on the adversary.[351]

The early trends in psychological warfare indicate its contribution to warfighting. The deep understanding of its impact on the enemy and friendly forces was recognised and methods were devised to either exploit it against the adversary or safeguard one's forces. The means and methods of psychological warfare may have changed over the centuries, yet the fundamental guiding aspects have remained consistent.

Treasury

The people's prosperity and the treasury's health remain integral to a king's responsibility to achieve *yoga* and *kshema*. In a sense, both aspects are interlinked and support the health of the other. Bhishma clearly prefers those who think about the people's prosperity and facilitate a healthy treasury.

It is recommended that a king should take one-sixth of the income of his subjects to enable him to protect his people. In addition to this one-sixth, revenue should be generated through monetary penalties on wrongdoers. All taxes should be sanctioned by *dharma*. Levies should not be collected through acts of *adharma*.

The king should appoint responsible supervisors who keep track of sales, purchases and expenses to calculate tax imposition. The welfare of artisans and the progress of their craft is recommended, and taxes imposed only thereafter. Interestingly, Bhishma recommends a system of taxes that encourages productivity. "He (the king) must glance towards the outcome of a task and then determine taxes. It should never be such that there is no incentive for the work and the outcome."[352]

The importance of a healthy treasury and the relevance of the affluent are duly emphasised. Bhishma wants the society's wealthy people respected and cultivated by the king. He says, "The wealthy are referred to as a great limb of the kingdom. There is no doubt that those who are wealthy are foremost among all people."[353] The implication of this guidance possibly emerges from the ability of the rich to support the treasury and the welfare

activities of a king. Their contribution would also remain important for military campaigns undertaken by kings.

Yudhishthira further seeks guidance for a king faced with adverse conditions. A king experiences isolation from friends, a depleted treasury and a weak army. Bhishma qualifies his answer by relating these conditions to a "secret kind of *dharma*". Accordingly, it is also known as the "*Apad Dharma*" or a king's dharma under adverse conditions. Bhishma qualifies his answer with: "Dharma is more subtle than words or intelligence."[354] He suggests that adverse conditions demand solutions and answers that are unlikely to be provided by *dharma* under normal circumstances. Unsurprisingly, some of the actions and perspectives that Bhishma shares might occasionally sound contradictory to his earlier guidance. However, when his suggestions are evaluated in the right context, the solutions feel logical. Bhishma underlines this sentiment while introducing the idea of *apad dharma*. "If one considers dharma, I do not consider these kinds of action as dharma." Yet, he explains the circumstances under which such actions are justified and reasonable enough to classify as *dharma*. The importance of such actions is reinforced through the knowledge of scriptures. Bhishma highlights the importance of the treasury and its role in maintaining an army. A depleted treasury will inevitably affect the army and consequently the security of a kingdom. It will limit a king's ability to ensure the protection and prosperity of his people. Under such circumstances, it is acceptable for him to raise finances from the people and suitably compensate them in due course of time.

Bhishma finds a direct linkage between a prosperous kingdom and the ability to pursue the path prescribed under *dharma*. In that sense, a king's treasury sustains *dharma* and becomes more important than *dharma* viewed in isolation. For a period under duress, the use of *adharma* to sustain the treasury and by co-relation the kingdom becomes acceptable. In due course of time, this can be remedied, and order restored.

A king and his kingdom have a symbiotic relationship. They sustain each other. During challenging periods, a king seeks support from the people. And when the people suffer, the king opens his treasury to assist them. "The treasury is again the foundation of the army. It is the foundation of all dharma and dharma is again the foundation of the subjects."[355]

The treasury should be generated from one's kingdom or others. It is the foundation of *dharma,* and the building and sustainability of a treasury are important. It must thereafter be used for the welfare of the people.

Alliances

Bhishma outlines the importance of treaties with other kings. This is not presented as a uniform approach to diplomacy – instead, he nuances the subject by further classifying it to the nature of the ally. A weak king must try and ally with one stronger, while a strong king can enter into a treaty if it gives him an advantage.[356]

When facing a strong adversary who follows *dharma*, a king should "conclude an agreement" to regain lost territory. Even when the adversary follows *adharma*, the king should "conclude a pact" despite constraints. Conversely, he should abandon the capital to avoid calamity.[357]

Bhishma makes an important observation about dealing with an enemy. A king has the welfare of his state uppermost in his mind. Long-term interests must always supersede immediate gains. He says, "By employing the capabilities of different people in different tasks, an enemy can become a friend and a friend may find himself to be censured. There is always a change in objectives."[358] This change will influence the changing dynamics of an ally, a friend and an adversary.

The *Mahabharata* employs illustrative didactic elements to amplify and explain concepts. A relevant example cited by Bhishma highlights the importance of alliances. He also reinforces the importance of correctly identifying interests and how circumstances dictate their transitory nature. A rat lives at the base of a Banyan tree and a cat on its branches. The cat is trapped under a hunter's net, making the rat's movement safe. As the rat sits eating meat, it realises that a mongoose has reached the tree's base and an owl is sitting on the branches above. The rat is confronted by danger on both sides. In a bid to save itself, the rat proposes to help the cat in return for protection from the mongoose and the owl. The cat agrees wholeheartedly to the proposal. The rat crouches under the cat. Having observed the mouse under the cat's protection, the mongoose and the owl see the missed opportunity and lose all interest.

The rat begins to gnaw at the net slowly. The cat is uncomfortable with the pace, fearing the hunter's arrival. When it asks the rat to hasten the pace, it replies: "If a task is started at the right time, it accomplishes great objectives. If you are freed at the wrong time, you will become a great danger to me."[359] Eventually, the rat cuts the net when the hunter is in close vicinity. The mongoose and owl run for safety. The cat quickly climbs up the tree. This allows the rat to make it to the safety of his hole. After the hunter leaves, the cat is inquisitive. It says, "When it is time to enjoy with a friend, why are you avoiding me?" What follows is reflective of the ancient wisdom of the *Mahabharata*. The rat replies thus:

> Friends must be examined. Enemies must also be examined. In this world, this is seen in extremely subtle ways and is revered as wisdom. There are well-wishers in the form of enemies... No one is born a friend. Because of their different capacities, they become friends and enemies…There is no friendship that is permanent. There is no enmity that is permanent. Friendship and enmity result from a specific objective. In the course of time, a friend may become an enemy. An enemy may also become a friend. Self interest is the most important.[360]

This is as close as a text can get to the fundamental values of realism. The rat correctly sees its relationship with the cat as that of food. Accordingly, the temporary alliance is successful until it is mutually beneficial. The rat says, "You were my enemy. Later, you became my friend. You have again become my enemy."[361]

The logic of this story goes beyond its immediate circumstances. It also relates to alliances with more powerful friends. A more powerful ally can never be an equal, nor is the ally likely to behave as one. A weaker state must therefore realise the implications of an alliance with a stronger power and enter it fully understanding the compromises that will be needed. Bhishma makes an apt observation in this regard. "For a common objective, one must have an alliance with a stronger enemy… However, having accomplished the objective, one must not trust."[362]

If this is co-related with the reality of international relations, the logic of alliances and strategic partnerships emerges. Unlike most major powers,

India's policy remains linked to strategic partnerships instead of alliances. Perhaps, in this regard, over the decades, the country's relations with the United States can be instructive, having witnessed its ebb and flow to reflect the reality of those times. This is equally true for other countries, which have seen their relationships turn from centuries of war to the elimination of borders in order to enable free trade and travel.

Forts

Bhishma explains to Yudhishthira the importance of forts as an instrument of protection. He quotes the sacred texts to indicate six types of forts. These include forts protected by deserts, water, earth, forests, mountains and men. Of these, he considers the forts protected by men to be the strongest.[363] These types of forts indicate the provision of primary means of security. In each type, they would be soldiers as well. In the case of a fort protected by soldiers, all other forms of natural or man-made protection probably do not exist. Yet, the fort protected by soldiers is considered the best. This requires the king to ensure the presence of loyal and happy subjects who will support the king in times of duress.

Obstacles remain an integral part of defences in contemporary times as well. Interestingly, obstacles that are covered by fire from the defender's weapons are considered the most effective.

Bhishma suggests cutting down of trees in the vicinity of the fort. The text does not provide clarification. However, a clear line of sight facilitates good visibility from the fort and early warning of impending threats. Bhishma probably reinforces this understanding through his guidance.

Forts are to be stocked with food grains and weapons. Soldiers, horses, elephants and chariots should be stationed in the fort to cater for any eventuality. It is common for forts to have high walls and moats.[364]

Advisers

Bhishma suggests the appointment of brave and faithful advisers. Besides having good conduct, being virtuous, stoic and well-versed in *dharma*, they are expected to be learned and "conversant with the world". The preference is for members of the royal family.[365] The king is expected to compensate

them well and give them high privileges. This approach suggests the desire to place the very best as advisers and the importance of compensating them suitably to ensure distinguished service.

However, this does not stop Bhishma from suggesting the use of spies against his advisers.[366] This ensures that they do not work against the interests of the state or the king. For a weak king, it is important to seek the assistance of advisers to overcome the inherent challenges faced by the state. Bhishma also suggests the employment of advisers to supervise work that generates revenue for the kingdom.

If these qualities and characteristics are related to some of the most prominent advisers in the *Mahabharata*, then their relevance becomes apparent. The foremost adviser in the epic is Krishna. He remains a source of sage advice, detached decision-making and invaluable insights for the Pandavas. His contribution as an adviser is perhaps the most important factor in Pandava's victory. Krishna's discourse to Arjuna on the battlefield, his advisory role as a diplomat in the court of Dhritarashtra, support for neutralising the most important generals of the Kaurava army, elimination of Jarasandha and the successful completion of the *rajasuya*, facilitation of Bhishma's discourse to Yudhishthira are all examples of an ideal adviser.

On the other hand, Vidura emerges as a source of consistent and constant wise counsel to Dhritarashtra. He does not hesitate to speak the truth to powers and interpret *dharma* from the right perspective. Vidura's role in attempting to stop the disastrous game of dice and its aftermath has been highlighted earlier. He cautions Dhritarashtra that Duryodhana's actions can be the cause of widespread death and destruction. Vidura also attempts to convince Dhritarashtra to do the right thing. He wants him to return the Pandavas' share of the kingdom and avert war. Even as Vidura fails to convince the king, he refuses to give in to his wrong decisions and declines to become a willing party to these.

Having seen two positive examples of advisers in the *Mahabharata*, the impact of negative advice can also be seen. Shakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle, is an appropriate case to illustrate the adverse impact of negative advice. After Duryodhana witnesses the splendour of the Pandava capital, Indraprastha, and the successful completion of the *rajasuya*, he is unable to

accept their achievements. He expresses the desire to defeat them in battle. Shakuni expresses caution and suggests an alternative option. He notes Yudhishthira's fondness for playing dice, even though he is not adept at the game. Shakuni proposes that Duryodhana should challenge him to play and since he will not be able to refuse, the opportunity can be used to win his kingdom and prosperity.[367] It is at Shakuni's behest that Duryodhana approaches his father and the ill-fated game of dice ensues, eventually becoming the cause of a disastrous war. Shakuni reinforces Duryodhana's ill-conceived thoughts and becomes an important factor in his downfall.

Geographical Expanse

The *Mahabharata* does not overly emphasise the relevance of geographical expanse as an important constituent among the seven limbs of the kingdom. However, its importance can be gauged from its correlation with means of protection and prosperity. The kingdom is a source of revenue for a king. His *raja dharma* allows him to take one-sixth of the produce from the people. The land also becomes the basis for rearing cattle, which is yet again a currency of wealth. It is given as a reward by the king and is also a means of honouring the learned, especially the brahmanas. Accordingly, the protection and safeguarding of the geographical spread of a kingdom becomes imperative for a king.

Implementing Policy

A king executes his policy priorities through a variety of measures. This is dependent on the circumstances under which it is undertaken – during peace or times of conflict. The *Mahabharata* lists six types of policy in this regard. There are two variations of the same, which contextually refer to war and peace. These policies include alliances, war, marching, halting, dividing and fortifying the army and sowing dissension within the ranks of the adversary.[368] These also include actions at the strategic level as well as more functional responsibilities. While the decision to forge alliances to go to war and sow dissension could form a part of the former, marching, halting, dividing and fortifying the army is a more tactical action. Some of these aspects have been discussed earlier, especially alliances and the decision to go to war.

The six aspects of policy for routine governance are discussed while appointing Vidura as Yudhishthira's adviser after the Pandava victory. These aspects include "discipline, duties of government servants, ensuring law and order, the conduct of courtiers, the removal of obstructions and dealing with other kingdoms".[369] It can be seen from these responsibilities that these policy initiatives are relevant for a king to ensure order, maintain a high standard of governance and improve relations with neighbouring kingdoms.

Amongst all the responsibilities of a king, the act of maintaining order receives special focus. The primary instrumentality for this is *dandaniti*.

Dandaniti

Dandaniti is one of the most important supporting elements of a king. This rod of chastisement ensures order and protection of the people. "The greatness of punishment will be evident in all aspects of policy."[370] Bhishma also compares the rod with justice. It is the primary means available to a king to control the people and ensure order. The policy of *dandaniti* is relevant for maintaining the internal health of a state, as it is to protect it from external threats.

Bhishma underlines the need for employing *dandaniti* without attachment or anger. A king must therefore be dispassionate while wielding the rod. It is only under these circumstances that justice will prevail. *Dandaniti* is the basis for ensuring the *yoga* and *kshema* of a kingdom. It facilitates obtaining what the people desire and protects what they have obtained. It "sets boundaries for the people and is like a mother or a father, demarcating honour for the welfare of the world".[371]

The policy of using the rod becomes all the more relevant in times when *dharma* decays and lawlessness takes over. Such conditions reflect a state of administrative breakdown. Under these circumstances, the rod has a greater role. The state of lawlessness is compared with a tree's roots being cut. Under such conditions, the branches of a tree cannot survive. The role of the rod becomes more important than the four elements of policy, that is, *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda*.[372]

Bhishma gives an illustrative example to reinforce the importance of *dandaniti*. When a king abandons one-fourth of *dandaniti*, it leads to *treta*

yuga. Abandoning half of *dandaniti* results in *dvapara yuga* and when *dandaniti* is completely abandoned, *kali yuga* is ushered in.[373]

In essence, *dandaniti* is the primary instrument available to a king to ensure order and justice.

Ways – *Upayas*

The *Mahabharata* lists four *upayas* as ways to achieve political or strategic objectives. These are discussed in the chapter on conceptualising war in the *Mahabharata*. At this stage, suffice it to say that *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda* (conciliation, gifts, dissension and punishment) form the basis of a king's policy alternatives. These are referenced repeatedly as a means to address challenges faced by a king. The *Raja Dharma Parva* does include a fifth – *upeksha* (neglect) as well, though it does not find reference in the descriptive part of the text, which remains limited to the first four.[374]

The *Mahabharata* brings a degree of nuance to the application of each *upaya*. These are not used strictly in sequential order, nor are they meant to be used in isolation. *Upayas* are used singly, collectively and if needed, at times by reversing the order.

Bhishma guides Yudhishthira to attempt conciliation before choosing to fight. He refers to unpredictability on the battlefield and the factors that can lead to a rout because of unforeseen factors. Therefore, "conciliation must repeatedly be attempted."[375] He recommends using spies to create internal dissension and a truce against a strong enemy. Depending upon the circumstances, Bhishma recommends using dissension before force.

The use of *sama*, *dana* and *bheda* is evident during Krishna's diplomatic endeavour at Dhritarashtra's court. He uses each, often reversing the order, attempting to break down his adversaries' resistance. Krishna also goes beyond *sama*, *dana* and *bheda* to coerce and create fear amongst the adversaries.

Bhishma suggests using conciliation and appeasement of people in a conquered territory. He indicates the importance of winning their goodwill and trust as an enabling mechanism to control and administer a region. Bhishma says, "When kings pursue victory, they cause impediments to people. However, having obtained victory, they make the subjects prosper again."[376]

Conciliation with adversaries, especially against more powerful kings, is also reiterated as a means of securing the kingdom's interests. Bhishma says, "Assuming the guise of a friend, the enemy must be assured through conciliation. But one must be careful about the enemy, since he is like a snake which has entered the house."[377]

The *Mahabharata* provides specific details of aspects that illustrate the use of *upayas*. These can be seen as functional elements and guidance for implementing the *upayas* as part of the prescribed policy.

Winning Over the People

A victory achieved through *adharma* is undesirable. It is not permanent. A king should treat his adversaries who surrender in battle mildly. Similarly, Bhishma recommends the honourable treatment of women as well. He makes an important observation regarding conquered territories, suggesting the importance of appeasing the people who have been invaded. "If they are forced to bend down and confront oppression in their own country, they will serve the enemies and wait for a calamity to descend."[378]

Yudhishthira understands the contradictions associated with the role and responsibility of a *kshatriya*. He sees the *dharma* of a *kshatriya* as evil, given the death and destruction that it often involves. Acknowledging the challenges associated with the life of a *kshatriya*, Bhishma recommends ways in which these can be made more humane within the constraints of the task involved. He says, "When kings pursue victory, they cause impediments to people. However, having obtained victory, they make the subjects prosper again… By showing favours to people, they prosper again."[379] Bhishma makes a distinction between cutting of crops and destroying dry grass and grain. When the crop is cut, the grain is not destroyed. Similarly, having achieved victory, a king must ensure that the people are prosperous and protected.

Conciliation

The importance of conciliation and forgiveness emerges as an important aspect of warfighting. Conciliation as a policy is useful to seek victory. An army, when overly suppressed, will have little choice but to fight back. A

truce is also advantageous against a more powerful adversary. Bhishma recommends forgiveness as a quality of the virtuous. He, however, cautions against forgiving without ascertaining the circumstances of a situation. "However, a piece of wood that has not been completely burnt returns again to its natural state." Accordingly, both fierce and mild behaviour must be adopted with care and in line with the requirements of a situation.[380]

Dealing with Enemies

Yudhishthira seeks Bhishma's counsel on dealing with different kinds of enemies to protect his state. Bhishma quotes Brihaspati's words to reinforce the importance of balance and poise. He warns against intolerance and conflict. A king should remain pleasant even with adversaries and give up pointless hostility. He adds, "A fowler wanting to catch birds imitates the tones of the birds. A king wanting to subjugate should act in that way." Further, after taking over a territory, a king should remain vigilant to the possibility of uprisings. An adversary waits for a suitable opportunity to strike back. The king should be patient and await the right time to strike. "Those who are virtuous honour the technique of defeating the enemy's energy. Time always brings success."[381] Bhishma reinforces the importance of patience, timing and opportunity when he says, "At a time when the enemy is stronger, one must bow down. However, one must be attentive in seeking for a weakness when he is careless, so that one can kill him."[382] A king should avoid engaging multiple adversaries simultaneously. It is better to use *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda* against the enemy.

Conduct Against a Strong Enemy

Yudhishthira is keen to understand the approach to surviving as a weak kingdom, especially when pitched against a stronger one. Bhishma explains this challenging condition through an illustrative example of a river with tree-lined banks. When a river is in flood, rigid stationary trees are uprooted under the pressure of fast-flowing water that overflows the banks of the river. Conversely, reeds along the river bend as the water gushes by and regain their posture after the flow recedes. In other words, when reeds come under pressure, they bow down momentarily but remain rooted to their spot. Unlike a tree, a reed better understands the reality of a situation and

lives on longer under adversity. "If a person does not tolerate the powerful onslaught of an enemy who is stronger, he is swiftly destroyed."[383] Wisdom lies in understanding the relative strengths and weaknesses. Against a strong adversary, the conduct of the weed is better suited for survival.

Spies

The protective requirements of a kingdom are influenced by the use of force and equally by passive means like the employment of spies. Bhishma explains this aspect to Yudhishthira at length. Spies should be trusted and tested with the ability to withstand hunger, heat and thirst. They should come across as people with limitations and disabilities to allow them to blend inconspicuously with the environment. Interestingly, Bhishma suggests using spies against allies, friends, relatives and vassals, thereby indicating the need for a comprehensive intelligence network against threats from any potential source. He also makes a very relevant suggestion to keep the identity of spies hidden from each other. Conversely, he indicates the possible places where enemies tend to deploy their spies. These include shops, pleasure grounds, amongst beggars, groves and gardens, assemblies of learned men, brothels, assembly halls and dwelling units. He underlines the need to locate and identify enemy spies to make them redundant.[384]

Ways – Six Methods of Foreign Policy in War

In the ends, means and ways paradigm, the *Mahabharata* also lists more specific ways to address the needs of routine administration and conflictual situations. This is in addition to the *upayas*, which are universal in their application across war, peace and foreign policy. Along with the *upayas*, some of the suggested ways of policy execution find resonance with later texts like the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The six ways to conduct foreign policy during conflictual times include: "being seated after concluding a treaty (peace), ensuring a treaty after marching out (preparing for war to strike fear in the enemy), being seated after declaring war (preparing for war with readiness for peace), seizing after marching out (war), creating a division in the enemy (dissension amongst the enemy) and seeking asylum with the enemy (seeking shelter)."[385]

An assessment of these methods suggests that five of the six either seek peace, indicate a willingness to accept peace or display a preference for peace. However, as the themes suggest, the desire for peace is not synonymous with pacifism. It is backed by guile and military preparedness for any violent eventuality. Preparation for war remains a constant endeavour, yet war is not a preferred option. This does not imply that if and when war does become an eventuality, the armies are not prepared for the same. In the case of a stronger opponent, options to pursue a peaceful settlement are preferred.

The most important takeaway from the six options is the repeated emphasis on stratagem, including the employment of ruse, deception and feints to resolve situations favourably through peaceful endeavours. The actions suggest a deep understanding of psychological warfare as a means to achieve strategic objectives. Further, there is little hesitation in suing for peace if the circumstances prove unfavourable. The *raja dharma* of a king entails a nuanced understanding of statecraft and diplomacy to ensure the well-being of the kingdom and stability that will facilitate prosperity.

Ways – Six Methods for Peace

The endeavour for peace is also evident through the six focus areas in routine administration. As mentioned earlier, these include "discipline, duties of government servants, ensuring law and order, the conduct of courtiers, the removal of obstructions and dealing with other kingdoms."[386] This links *dandaniti* as a tool with discipline and law and order, which remain the core policy initiatives of a king. Bhishma also mentions the role of administrative functionaries in executing a king's policies and the importance of foreign relations.

Most of these aspects are specifically highlighted in the *Raja Dharma Parva*. In addition to pointed references, such as the ones quoted above, descriptive additions can also be found that provide a more elaborate understanding of aspects highlighted by Bhishma attempting to explain these. As an illustration, Bhishma describes at length the defensive arrangements that should be carried out by a king when confronted by a more powerful enemy. He recommends alliances of three kinds: direct allies, allies of allies and enemies of enemies. There is a realisation of the importance

of the wealthy and senior functionaries of the army. In times of distress, their role becomes more relevant. All available resources of grains are to be collected, and if that is not possible, then burnt, to build their food reserves and limit its availability to the enemy. Bridges are to be destroyed and stored water released to cause flooding and limit access to it for the enemy. Walls should be constructed around forts and crocodiles were left inside moats around the forts. Wells should be dug and existing ones purified. Spies are to be sent to common places to seek intelligence. Stores should be constructed for grains and weapons, stables for animals and barracks for soldiers. Food and medicines are to be collected. People should be entertained to keep them busy. Once the hostilities are over, the ones who contributed the most should be rewarded and the loans taken to cater for the emergency are to be repaid.[387] In addition, Bhishma recommends that "The king must protect seven things – his own person, his advisors, his treasury, his army, his allies, his country and his city."[388]

The *Shanti Parva*, which includes the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas,* follows the culmination of the 18-day war. The prescriptive nature of the two parvas makes them distinct from the preceding text of the epic. Their practical guidance seeped in realism, is different from the other major prescriptive text – the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is more philosophical and spiritual in its orientation. The *Shanti Parva* attempts to address Yudhishthira's concerns and emotions through a functional approach towards his responsibilities – his *raja dharma*. Goaded by Krishna, Bhishma, while lying on his deathbed, answers Yudhishthira's questions and clears his doubts regarding the affairs of the state and governance. The *parva* describes a king's duties, roles and responsibilities, which are guided by the tenets of *dharma* while keeping in mind the needs of *artha*. Several aspects of the *Raja Dharma Parva* can be related to the *Arthashastra* and the *Nitisara*. The next chapter will analyse these aspects to investigate the similarities and differences.

Chapter Eleven

Co-Relating Shanti Parva with Arthashastra and Nitisara

The continuity of strategic thought can best be derived through a series of texts, crisscrossing the ancient, medieval and modern periods of history. The chapter on *raja dharma* from the *Shanti Parva* discusses the core tenets of certain aspects of strategic thought from the *Mahabharata*. How do these tenets relate to the subsequent texts that impacted India's strategic thought?

To answer this question, this chapter will discuss and compare the strategic strands derived from the *Mahabharata* with those from the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*. Collectively, these texts represent almost 2,000 years of history and a much longer influence on strategic thought across the country.[389] This period stretches from the initial verbal dissemination of the *Mahabharata* between 1100-900 BCE until the *Nitisara* continued to actively and significantly influence strategic thought in the country at least until 800-1100 CE.

In addition to these texts, the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha* are also relevant, as these texts attempt to present important lessons for understanding politics and strategic affairs.[390] However, this chapter will limit the comparative analysis to the first three texts.

The *Arthashastra* is possibly the best known, researched and discussed ancient Indian strategic text. This comparative analysis uses L.N. Rangarajan's translation of the *Arthashastra* as its primary source.[391] Rangarajan, while introducing the classic, acknowledges that Kautilya's *Arthashastra* does not

represent the first text of its kind and that there were at least "'five different schools of thought – those of Brihaspati, Ushanas, Prachetasa Manu, Parasara and Ambhi' in addition to individual scholars such as Vishalaksha and Bharadwaja."[392] The *Mahabharata* also references some of these schools and individuals to reinforce core thoughts and ideas. This suggests that during the ancient period in India, there existed a long tradition of public articulation on subjects like politics and statecraft. It is argued that the core thoughts represented by these texts are based on a common foundation, with specific changes emerging to cater to the character of conflicts and requirements of the respective times. These changes varied from the challenges of a king fighting for survival and enlarging his kingdom to the challenges of another who was possibly consolidating his empire.

The rise of Chandragupta Maurya is attributed to Kautilya, who became the reason for the demise of the Nanda dynasty in 321 BCE. Kautilya's understanding of strategic affairs is reflected as much in the rise of the Maurya dynasty, as in his theory and practice of *artha*. Much like *dharma*, *artha* describes several aspects of individual and state interests. Rangarajan writes, "Artha is an all-embracing word with a variety of meanings. In {1.7.6-7}, it is used in the sense of material well-being; in {15.1.1}, livelihood; in {1.4.3}, economically productive activity, particularly in agriculture, cattle rearing and trade; and, in general, wealth as in '*Wealth of Nations*'."[393] The *Arthashastra* covers aspects as diverse as routine administration and taxation at one end of the spectrum and foreign policy, defence and war at the other. Rangarajan adds, "Its three objectives follow one from the other: promotion of the welfare of the subjects leads to acquisition of wealth which, in turn, makes it possible to enlarge the territory by conquest."[394]

Kajari Kamal identifies the three main parts of the *Arthashastra* as "political theory, problems of administration, and interstate relations in that order". She categorises the theoretical foundation of the text in "*Anvikshiki*" or the "science of inquiry" and further adds that "the core branches in the *Arthashastra* are *Anvikshiki* (Philosophy), *Trayi* or the *Vedas*, *Varta* (Economics) and *Dandaniti* (Political Science)".[395]

The *Kamandakiya Nitisara* or "The Essence of Politics" is a successor text to the *Arthashastra*. The *Nitisara* does not merely follow up on the

Arthashastra along the timeline, from the ancient to the early medieval period, it also attempts to make it more accessible and appealing. Much like most other ancient texts, the exact date of the *Nitisara* is not known. Similarly, it also evolved as a text over time. "Likely composed in late-Gupta or early post-Gupta times, and redacted and refined across centuries (c. fifth–eighth century CE)."[396]

The Arthashastra refers to *itihasa* both as a philosophical insight and as a part of the training of young princes. There is an attempt to imbibe the teachings from the epics. Referring to the princes, it says, "In the latter part of the day, he shall listen to *Itihasas*."[397] There are also specific references to characters from the *Mahabharata* in the *Arthashastra*, though not as many as in the *Nitisara*. The *Arthashastra* cites the example of Duryodhana not returning the kingdom to Yudhishthira while referencing the importance of self-control.[398] Similarly, it cites Yudhishthira's weakness for dice and its resultant impact.[399] The reference to the *Arthashastra* in the *Nitisara* is more pronounced, with Kamandaka indicating it as the inspiration for his text. The *Nitisara* also cites the *Mahabharata* more often, possibly because of its focus on *dharma* and illustrative writing style. It refers to Shalya, Duryodhana and Yudhishthira while discussing *upayas*. Similarly, Arjuna is cited to describe an "advance with disregard".[400]

In essence, the *Mahabharata* is the *dharma granth* that lays the foundation for an ethics-based approach. This foundation is supplemented by an interactive dialogue between Bhishma, the teacher and Yudhishthira, the student. This prescriptive text focusses on important aspects of *raja dharma* while reinforcing several facets of *artha*. Given the practical focus on running a kingdom, the guidance is underscored by a realistic approach to the challenges and threats faced by a king. The *Arthashastra* draws its inspiration from the fundamentals of *dharma*, though its focus is primarily on the running of a state. The guidance is meant for a king. Its core is similar to the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, even as it brings more functional details for every aspect of state administration. Finally, the *Nitisara* is a condensed and focussed text that draws its inspiration from the *Arthashastra*. It brings in a few variations, though its foundational thought reflects the spirit of its predecessor. Between the three, the texts represent continuity, despite the distinct character of each, that represents the period in which it was written.

This chapter will analyse the correlation between the three texts. This commences with a brief discussion of the similarities and differences between the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*. This will be followed by comparing the essence of these two texts with the *Mahabharata*. This should logically be accompanied by the questioning of this endeavour, especially since the focus of the book remains on the *Mahabharata*. The study of Indian strategic thought can be considered a work in progress. For long, it was argued that India lacked a coherent strategic culture. With the *Arthashastra* gaining prominence within strategic circles, grudgingly, an exception to this contention was accepted. However, a deeper reading of ancient texts suggests that neither the Mauryan empire nor the *Arthashastra* are the only exceptions to this argument. On the contrary, several texts before and after the *Arthashastra* reinforce a similar sentiment with shifts to cater for a progressive and flexible approach to security. Amongst these texts, the *Mahabharata* and the *Nitisara* are ideally located in terms of the timeline and specific focus to enable a comprehensive understanding of representative strategic thought over two millennia. Each of these texts was written and evolved with a very specific focus. Accordingly, none can claim to be all-encompassing in all regards. To that extent, a singular focus on one can potentially misconstrue its intended message. The description of the *Arthashastra* as Machiavellian is an example in this regard, even though the comparison itself is fallacious.[401] In that sense, the texts are complementary and representative of the collective wisdom of ancient India with a varying focus that makes each distinct and yet a part of a continuum of strategic thought.

P.K. Gautam's monograph, *The Nitisara by Kamandaka: Continuity and Change from Kautilya's Arthashastra*, provides a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between the two texts.[402] He also includes assessments of the *Nitisara* by other authors and gives his critical perspectives. His monograph is highly recommended for a detailed comparative analysis. The following paragraphs briefly capture the correlation between the two texts to allow for a more deliberate discussion of the *Mahabharata*. A similar comparison can also be found in Upinder Singh's *Political Violence in Ancient India*, despite differences in perspectives between the two authors on certain issues.[403]

The *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*

The *Nitisara*, as the name suggests, is the essence of politics. In other words, it encapsulates what Kamandaka considered the core strategic thought from the *Arthashastra*. In addition, he also brings in a degree of variation to some aspects where, perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight, he could reframe some of the perspectives offered by Kautilya. It is neither as elaborate nor as detail-driven in its layout as its inspiration. The focus remains on underlining the most important aspect of the previous text. Kamandaka deliberately drops the functional details related to economic and administrative aspects that are covered in the *Arthashastra*. One can argue that both texts are the products of their times and represent the prevailing requirements, with the *Arthashastra* being more of a do-it-all text while the *Nitisara* is simpler in its narrative style and perhaps is meant as a summarised overview for its intended audience.

In the first chapter of the *Nitisara*, Kamandaka shares his undiluted adulation and admiration for Vishnugupta or Kautilya. He describes him as a man from a great lineage of sages and a scholar of the *Vedas*. Kamandaka says that Kautilya's strategy "handed over the earth to Chandragupta". He adds, "He mined the nectar of politics from the ocean of political science."[404] He attributes his text to the *Arthashastra*, which, in turn, brings the distilled wisdom of several sages. The *Nitisara* reinforces the idea of continuity in political and strategic thought over the centuries. This is despite discussions and debates on the functional attributes of governance that emerge in the *Arthashastra* and Kautilya's disagreements with his predecessors on several aspects of abstract issues of state administration and philosophical thought.

There is a stark contrast in the layout of the two texts. This stands out especially given that the *Nitisara* is derived from the *Arthashastra*. The *Arthashastra's* scope and form are encyclopaedic. It goes into detail beyond generic guidance and delves into specific aspects of administration, such as criminal investigation and the law of contracts. The treatise is all-encompassing with guidance on war, foreign policy, strategic thought, political economy and routine administration. In contrast, the *Nitisara* restricts itself to providing guidance primarily on strategy, war and foreign relations. Even this has been made easier to read and assimilate, indicating a different audience

for the text. "It can be read quickly and on-the-go – a perfect introduction to the field for young princes, upstart warlords...".[405]

Kautilya reinforces the need for a king to be a *rajarishi* (a king as wise as a sage). This includes several qualities. The foremost attribute is the ability to have "self-control, having conquered the [inimical temptations] of the senses".[406] Control over the self is associated with control over all senses. "A king who gives in to the pursuit of pleasure falls prey to six enemies (lust, anger, greed conceit, arrogance and foolhardiness)."[407] The ability to establish control over the self is compared to the attributes of a sage, which leads to the desirable end state of a *rajarishi*.

Despite the brevity of the *Nitisara*, the author chooses to give greater emphasis to certain subjects he possibly feels are important for the intended audience. The first chapter talks about controlling the senses, which remains an abiding thought in the book. As compared to the *Arthashastra*, the *Nitisara* places greater emphasis on "mastery of the self". It says, "A king who has attained self-mastery through knowledge never becomes despondent in adversity." It adds, "Self-mastery is the prerequisite for political success."[408] The *Nitisara* refers to it as "self-mastery", which involves the ability to control the senses. For a king, it recommends that first he achieve self-control and thereafter attempt to imbibe the same in his ministers, sons and subjects.[409] "The Essence (Nitisara) is far more introspective than earlier political thought and presents spiritual self-control as the model for rule."[410]

Knutson argues that stress on the role of a king and the conceptualisation of the self evolved and by this time, as can be seen in texts of the period, he was confabulated with certain god-like qualities. This evolution in the role and status of kings is indicative of changing patterns of history related to the socio-religious environment, the impact of military campaigns, revisionist or status quo stability experienced by kings and the author's orientation towards the ruler. Kautilya's role as a mentor was possibly different from the more impersonal and adulatory approach of his successors. Similarly, the challenges associated with constant conflicts that stem from the role of a conqueror to an inheritor of a kingdom could also bring variations in their respective approaches.

The conceptualisation of *dharma* is an important factor in both texts,

though with a varying degree of salience. According to Kautilya, there are four branches of knowledge to understand "dharma [spiritual welfare] and *artha* [material well-being]". These include philosophy, "which is the lamp that illuminates all sciences; it provides the techniques for all action; and it is the pillar which supports dharma." He adds that philosophy helps distinguish between *dharma* and *adharma*.[411] Kautilya also refers to the *itihasas* as a source of knowledge for kings. In doing so, he also provides a link between the two texts.

Kautilya emphasises the importance of *svadharma*. This is contextualised within the frame *of varnashrama,* as is the case in the *Mahabharata*. *Svadharma* is seen as the path to achieve joy and eternal bliss. Its violation is seen as a path to chaos.

The *Arthashastra* acknowledges the philosophical roots of *dharma* and its inspirational relevance in daily life. Kautilya considers *dharma* among the guiding factors for the legal resolution of disputes. The others are royal edicts, customs and evidence.[412]

Given the clear focus on achieving and ensuring *artha*, Kautilya considers it an essential prerequisite for adhering to *dharma*. "Kautilya, however, says: *artha* (sound economics) is the most important; for *dharma* and *kama* are both dependent on it."[413]

The *Nitisara* reinforces the focus on *dharma*. It says that "the king should put dharma first, and then work towards power. Through *dharma* the kingdom prospers, and royal riches are its sweet fruit."[414] *Dharma* is emphasised equally for individuals with stress on nonviolence, truthfulness, purity, compassion and tolerance.[415]

These are interesting correlations between *dharma* and *artha* in the three texts. While the *Mahabharata* places *dharma* as the anchor for a king, the *Arthashastra* takes a more practical approach by linking the pursuit of *dharma* to first the prevalence of *artha*. This seems to reflect an approach derived from an idealist, ethics-based core in the case of the *Mahabharata* and an ultra-realistic, practical perspective in the *Arthashastra*. The hard-nosed realist that Kautilya represents is partially moderated in the *Nitisara*, though, despite the emphasis on *dharma*, when referring to the conduct of war, the text

recommends the employment of deceit, deception and stratagem to achieve victory.

This connection can also be seen through the references to the *Mahabharata* and its characters found in both texts. The *Arthashastra* does refer to *itihasa* as a source of education and knowledge. However, there are fewer references to incidents or characters from the *Mahabharata*. On the contrary, the *Nitisara* frequently makes these references to reinforce and validate its points. "Shalya, who went to join Yudhishthira and then changed sides to Duryodhana, is an example" while referring to the aspect of "deceptive advance".[416]

This differentiation also reflects the nature of the two texts. The *Arthashastra* remains restricted to procedures and processes. It does not get into illustrative examples, other than at places commenting on the views of previous sages to reinforce or contradict their perspectives. Conversely, *Nitisara's* political poetry blends well with such examples. This is illustrative of the *Mahabharata,* where repeated correlations are made to reinforce a point.

Kautilya's four *upayas*: *sama*, *dana*, *bheda* and *danda* emerge as important distinguishing contributions of the *Arthashastra*. In contrast, the *Nitisara* adds to these by including *maya* or illusion, *upeksha* or disregard and *indrajala* or magic.[417] Gautam dwells in depth on *upeksha* and provides a correlation of the *upaya* with contemporary times. He acknowledges that "This strategy of long-term patience and struggle is inherent in Indian traditions," comparing it with the approach adopted by Mahatma Gandhi.[418]

Gautam also notes differences in the kinds of conquests that are designated in the *Arthashastra* as "dharmavijai (conquest by justice), lobhavijai (conquest for greed) and asuravijai (conquest by plunder and scorched earth)", which are not mentioned in the *Nitisara*. He adds that in contrast to the *Arthashastra*, the *Nitisara* does not mention the types of combat or *yudhha* – *prakash yudhha* and *kuta yudhha*. Whereas, it does talk of the destruction of enemy territory, even as the *Arthashastra* suggests its integration through dignified treatment.[419] Contrary to this contention, the *Nitisara* does mention the comparative importance of *prakash yudhha* and *kuta yuddha*. It says, "When the powerful king has the advantages of time and place and has

alienated the enemy's state-elements, he should engage in open warfare. In other circumstances, he should engage in underhanded warfare."[420] Further, Kamandaka goes on to provide several illustrative examples of *kuta yudhha* or underhanded warfare. This includes the use of favourable terrain to seek advantage, exploitation of forest cover, sowing dissension, bribery and the use of ruse to outwit the enemy. He suggests the employment of conscripted convicts and those who defected from the enemy's side to exhaust the enemy before employing regular forces to seek victory. There are several examples of employing deceit with illustrative examples to outwit the enemy. This rather clearly indicates the ease with which the *Nitisara* straddles the aspirational elements of *dharma* and the realities of war.[421] Even as part of routine administration, Kamandaka links the use of violence and punishment as acceptable when it follows the guidance of *dharma*. Referring to kings, he says, "When they slaughter bad people for the sake of dharma, they are not tainted by sin."[422]

The description of the mandala system in the *Nitisara* is more detailed. As Gautam states, Kamandaka refers to all schools of thought on the subject, highlighting their concepts without refuting any. He indicates his preference for the mandala of 12 rulers.

Upinder Singh finds that the *Nitisara* does not share *Arthashastra's* "grandiose vision of the state power" and differs on the "interface between kingship and violence."[423]

Correlating the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara* with the Mahabharata

A brief assessment of the two texts suggests a few differences that emerge. Despite these differences, possibly reflecting the intended audience and the prevailing times, the similarity far exceeds these variations. This section will assess the similarity of these two texts to the *Mahabharata*. It will investigate their correlation and degree of continuum in strategic thought over the period these texts represent.

Several aspects of statecraft, governance, foreign policy and war are referred to in the *Mahabharata*, though not necessarily as elaborately when compared to the *Arthashastra* and to a lesser degree, the *Nitisara*. Why is it that the *Mahabharata,* which refers to several aspects of foreign policy and

routine administration to include taxation and punishments, does not delve into the kind of details that the *Arthashastra* does?

The *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra* both reference several sources of knowledge on *dharma* and *artha*. This includes the work done by sages like Brihaspati, Ushanas and Bharadwaja. The *Mahabharata*, especially in the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas,* refers to these texts in a manner of acknowledging and accepting their prevailing guidance. Accordingly, as an illustration, it merely mentions the 12-state system under the mandala theory, without getting into too much detail about it. Similarly, there are references to the six elements of foreign policy, yet again, without too much elaboration on the same.

The *Arthashastra* takes a different approach. At the very outset, Kautilya contests the branches of knowledge after referencing the other competing arguments and giving his understanding of the subject. This approach suggests an endeavour to re-evaluate the existing guidance on state administration, security, foreign policy and warfare through a comprehensive text. The functional details in the *Arthashastra* seem to reinforce this argument. In that sense, Kautilya succeeds in providing a single source that encapsulates all aspects of statecraft for a king and his administrators.

The style of writing that Kautilya chooses to argue his perspective is different from the *Nitisara*. Unlike the others, almost like an academic, he provides alternative perspectives from scholars on the issue at hand. He follows this with his views and reasons for the same. As an example, he does so while evaluating the sources of knowledge and yet again while disagreeing with the policy of a weak king. He counters, "One should neither submit spinelessly nor sacrifice oneself in foolhardy valour. It is better to adopt such policies as would enable one to survive and live to fight another day."[424]

Variations also arise because of the differing manner of disseminating strategic perspectives in the *Mahabharata* and the other two texts. The *Mahabharata* follows the descriptive storytelling model to begin with, peppered with anecdotal incidents to draw lessons. This is followed by a prescriptive back-and-forth in the *Raja Dharma* and *Apad Dharma parvas,* where Bhishma answers Yudhishthira's questions. While this form is likely to be a more interesting and engaging format for disseminating the message,

it cannot be as structured as a textbook format of the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*.

Despite the difference in approaches, the similarities in the core state functions, foreign policy and the conduct of war do reflect a degree of continuity through the texts. Some of these aspects will be discussed to highlight the common thread that weaves through history.

Comparative Perspectives on Strategic Issues

There are several common aspects dwelt upon by the three texts. As the comparison will illustrate, the focus of attention of the texts varies, yet their core beliefs remain tied by a common thread. All three texts are bound by the guidance provided by *dharma*. Similarly, though in varying degrees, achieving *artha* as an objective remains the focus of attention. Each text contextualises the idea of war and discusses its nuances. There is a discussion on the applicability and utility of force. Aspects such as building alliances, using stratagem and employing spies find mention.

Dharma – The Anchor

The role and references to *dharma* in the *Mahabharata* have been highlighted in detail. These suggest the centrality of *dharma* in the state's affairs and the pursuit of an individual's designated role. It also emerges that *dharma* empowers rather than constrains. It allows exceptions and does not demand a dogmatic pursuit of its textbook interpretation. While illustrating these aspects, it emerges that Krishna, rather than Bhishma, Karna or Yudhishthira, best understands the nuances of *dharma*, especially when dealing with complex situations in the grey zone of life.

The descriptive narrative of the *Mahabharata* remains deeply embedded in the core of *dharma*. The text highlights several instances that elaborate upon its multiple roles in society. *Dharma* emerges as the instrument of guidance, improvement and protection simultaneously. Among several manifestations of *dharma*, *svadharma* – the dharma of an individual, *kshatriya dharma* – the *dharma* of a soldier and *raja dharma* – the *dharma* of a king remains the most relevant and abiding during the epic.

Dharma does not operate in isolation in the *Mahabharata*. It is closely associated with *artha* as an integral element of personal conduct and similarly for a king pursuing his *raja dharma*. The *Mahabharata* highlights the impracticality of pursuing one without the other. Yet, its primary focus of attention remains on the nuanced understanding and pursuit of *dharma*. In contrast, the *Arthashastra*, while retaining *dharma* as its anchor, focusses more on *artha* as a guide for dealing with the strategic, political and administrative affairs of the state. The *Nitisara* again places *dharma* as more important than *artha*, even as both operate in unison.

What does this back-and-forth indicate? In reality, the gap in strategic thought between the three texts is not as wide as the paragraph above might suggest. In the *Apad Dharma Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, the importance of *artha* supersedes *dharma*. The *parva* underscores the practical need for sustenance and support to help create the conditions under which *dharma* can be pursued. This might suggest that the ideal conditions dictated by *dharma* are merely aspirational and remain the king's objective only under a conducive environment. And therefore, the more practical derivatives of *artha* support *dharma's* fulfilment. This would have indeed been the case if the tenets and application of *dharma* were to follow a rigid path. Krishna's guidance on *dharma* does not support this narrow perspective. Viewed from his perspective, *dharma* has an all-encompassing potential for application. Possibly, by the time the *Nitisara* was written, it gave adequate time and deliberation over the generations for political scientists to discuss the texts and come to their assessment of this co-relation, leading to *dharma* yet again being considered the foremost element of the *trivarga*. It is also possible that the *Nitisara* takes a different approach, given its intended purpose of educating young princes. This leads to a varying articulation of the text from the *Arthashastra* despite retaining several similarities.

Interpretations of Dandaniti

Dandaniti is a central focus of the *Raja Dharma Parva* in the *Mahabharata*. The *parva* provides an interesting account of its genesis. This genealogy of the concept of *dandaniti* also indirectly reflects changes in the approach towards state administration. Both aspects are relevant for better understanding the logic and conceptualisation of *raja dharma* in the

Mahabharata. Bhishma says that during *krita yuga*, the guidance of *dharma* was followed in letter and spirit. There was no need for a king to discipline the people, as all norms of social interaction operated seamlessly. However, as order relented and disorder prevailed, a need was felt to create and establish guidance. This led to the compilation of "one hundred thousand chapters that described dharma, artha and kama." This text includes six ingredients of policy, techniques of *sama*, *dana*, *bheda*, *danda* and *upeksha*. It describes three kinds of victory: *dharma*, *artha* and *asura*. There is a description of neighbouring kingdoms, including friends, enemies and neutral ones. The role of spies is dealt with in detail, as are the different types of *vyuhas* (battle formations) that can be created. In addition, a series of questions on foreign policy, security and a kingdom's routine administration are also included.[425]

This led to a voluminous text that addresses all aspects of *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*. This was termed as *dandaniti*. Since the text is meant to create and ensure order, for a king, chastisement is a part of its implementation. Over time, this text was abridged repeatedly by sages like Brihaspati. His version was accordingly called the Brahaspatya. Kavya further made it concise. Neither of these versions is now available. However, Kautilya refers to the guidance these sages provide in the *Arthashastra*. In all probability, his treatise is a successor to the earlier texts and given his influence and clearheaded articulation of political thought, the *Arthashastra* became more prevalent. In effect, it represents and enlarges upon the core message of *dandaniti* that the *Mahabharata* professes.

The contrast between guidance under ideal conditions and under challenging times can be related to the different *yugas,* even if these are considered representative of prevailing conditions. As the *Apad Dharma Parva* illustrates, the instruments required by a king under duress will vary from those required under more favourable conditions. It is impractical to retain a fixed and inflexible toolkit for varying conditions. Just as an umbrella is adequate to remain dry under a drizzle, one might need the support of a sturdy shelter against a gale. The *Mahabharata* outlines conditions that see no need for *dandaniti* at one end of the spectrum to *apad dharma* at the other.

The *Arthashastra* was created and refined over time to reflect the needs

of a king under contested circumstances. In that sense, it reflects the needs of challenging conditions and therefore may come across as ultra-realist in its approach. It is the very essence of what *dandaniti* represents for a ruler. Rangarajan writes, "An integral part of *Arthashastra* is *dandaniti*, the enforcement of laws by a voluminous and comprehensive set of fines and punishments." He adds, "*Dandaniti*, the science of law enforcement, is a name given in the *Mahabharata* to the mythical original work of this kind, said to have been handed down by *Brahma* himself at the time of creation."[426]

The *Arthashastra* may have been a successor text to similar ancient texts. Its scope suggests that *dandaniti* was possibly referring to one of its sections, while the others dealt with aspects of statecraft, including foreign policy. Conversely, the *Mahabharata* uses *raja dharma* as an umbrella term and *dandaniti* is its primary instrumentality.

The *Nitisara* provides an interesting example. It opens the first chapter with the sentence, "Victory to the majestic king, god and wielder of the rod."[427] The text relates to the king as the one wielding the rod since he becomes the instrument for bringing pacification. "The politics of the rod is known as governance."[428] Note 1 of the *Nitisara* elaborates upon this clarification to suggest that "The term 'governance' here is *dandaniti*, literally the 'politics' or 'leading/ directing' of the rod."[429] Even as the rod is praised as an instrument of coercion, the *Nitisara* stresses the importance of moderation and balance in its use. Just like the other texts, it says, "Without the rod, the destructive law of the fishes prevails, in which people go astray, greedy for each other's flesh."[430]

Emphasis on the Self

The three texts emphasise the importance of control over the self as the basis for effective governance. Krishna guides Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* and emphasises the importance of controlling the self as the basis for righteous action. He says, "For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy."[431]

Similarly, in varying degrees of emphasis, as discussed earlier, the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara* also reinforce the importance of self-control and

leading by example through the conduct and behaviour of a king.

Mastery of the self may seem out of place when discussing common elements of strategic thought from ancient India. It needs to be emphasised here that *dharma* was the spiritual and philosophical core for establishing an ethics-based approach to governance. The pursuit of *dharma* was enabled when a king developed the ability to control his mind. This, in turn, allowed detachment and objectivity in dealing with political and strategic functions. It also allowed the king to place the interests of the state and the people ahead of his own.

State Objective (Ends)

The *Mahabharata* clearly defines the objective of *yoga kshema* for a king. This, as discussed earlier, includes the twin objectives of prosperity and protection. Bhishma explains to Yudhishthira that the "eternal duty of a king is ensuring the pleasure of his subjects."[432] Kautilya underlines the importance of a king behaving like a *rajarishi* or a sage king. Having achieved this desired state, he is "active in promoting the *yogakshema* of the people". Rangarajan defines *yoga kshema* as a "compound, made up of yoga, the successful accomplishment of an objective and *kshema*, its peaceful enjoyment."[433] Dr Kajari Kamal considers *yoga kshema* as the desirable end goal to ensure acquisition and protection.[434]

The *Nitisara* also dwells upon the dual relevance of the economy and protection. Interestingly, the text not only co-relates the two key objectives for a king, but also prioritises them. The text argues that the protection of a state is dependent on the king, while his ability to ensure this relates to a strong economy. Without these two conditions, people may breathe, but they are barely alive. It adds, "Protection is more important than economic prosperity since when protection is lacking, prosperity is as good as nonexistent even when it exists."[435]

Kamandaka's pointed reference to the inter-se priority makes it an interesting reading since the debate over the co-relation and relevance of these two attributes continues to this day. A segment within academia highlights the adverse impact of defence spending on economic growth.[436] The argument suggests that national resources are ultimately finite and any

addition to defence expenditure is bound to impact developmental projects adversely. On the face of it, this sounds logical. However, can the neglect of defence lead to a rise in national security threats – both internal and external? And will these threats not adversely affect the economic and investment climate of a country? Can it not lead to a situation that eventually forces a far greater defence expenditure to ward off a calamity that might have been brewing? Ultimately, the economy and protection or defence and development are not an either-or binary. Instead, they are complementary objectives of a state that must be accomplished simultaneously. The focus and allocation to each will depend on the nature of threats and capabilities that are desirable to ensure deterrence against envisaged challenges.

Means

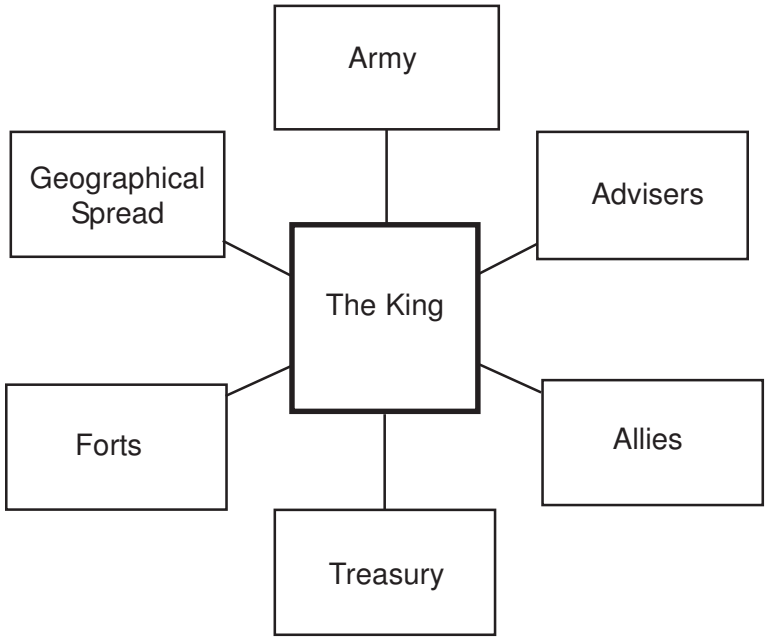
The three texts describe the means available to a kingdom. There is little disparity in this assessment and the importance of each element between the three texts. These elements are described appropriately as the seven limbs (*Saptanga*). In effect, collectively, these emerge as the means available to achieve the objective of *yoga kshema*.

These have been discussed in the chapter on *raja dharma* earlier in the book. The three texts do not give a comparative hierarchy of these state elements. However, the sequence of listing does vary to an extent. The king remains the first element in each text. The *Mahabharata* sequences the other elements – army, advisers, allies, treasury, forts and geographical spread – after the king.[437] The *Arthashastra* lists the sequence as king, advisers, territory or geographical spread, forts, treasury, army and allies. The list in the *Nitisara* reads as king, ministers, kingdom, fortification, treasury, army and allies. It is seen that the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara* follow the same sequence, while the *Mahabharata* lists it differently.

The three texts highlight the centrality of a king's role compared to the other six elements. The *Arthashastra* says, "However ideal the other constituent elements may be, they are all subordinate to the qualities of a king."[438] It goes on to say that a strong king can strengthen supporting elements and a weak king can dilute them. Therefore, even as the elements are listed sequentially, the texts unambiguously suggest that it is more like a hub and

spoke model where the king is at the centre. The other six elements provide him with the necessary support to achieve the objectives of *yoga kshema*.

Figure 4: The Seven State Elements



The *Arthashastra* delves into the qualities of a king, listing out his leadership skills, qualities of intellect, energy and drive and personal attributes. The desired attributes of a king are similar, though there are some differences in the *Nitisara*. As mentioned earlier, there is greater emphasis on the "self" for a king to be considered suitable to take the throne. He is, at least in metaphorical terms if not in reality, referred to as a "god-on-earth".[439] The qualities of a king listed in the *Mahabharata* were described in the chapter on *raja dharma*.

The three texts discuss each of the other elements of the state. As with other aspects, the *Mahabharata* takes these up separately even as Bhishma answers Yudhishthira's questions. These do not necessarily follow a sequence, nor are they dealt with in a single place collectively.

The reference to foreign policy also follows a common guidance with minor variations. The *Mahabharata* briefly refers to the 12-state mandala theory. "O king! There are thoughts about a circle of twelve kings."[440] It refers to the 72 aspects of *dharma,* including the three types of allies, four kinds of neighbours and six elements to give a multiple of 72. The *Mahabharata* subsequently delves into aspects of foreign policy, with Bhishma clarifying the approach towards kings who have a large army and are either mild or fierce. He quotes Brihaspati's guidance to Indra in this regard. Brihaspati recommends patience and caution to subjugate the enemy. "Having conquered the enemy, one should never sleep happily. Like a crackling fire, the evil-souled can arise again."[441] He adds, "However, a man who is waiting for the right time should not let the moment pass. This is the dharma of time."[442] He says, "At a time when the enemy is stronger, one must bow down. However, one must be attentive in seeking for a weakness when he is careless, so that one can kill him."[443] Brihaspati cautions against taking on multiple enemies simultaneously. He is not in favour of destroying crops or poisoning water bodies. In essence, he argues against the concept of a scorched earth policy. Brihaspati makes an interesting observation regarding the importance of defeating an adversary's energy. He suggests patience and the importance of waiting for the right opportunity. Dissension is a prelude to employing force.

The *Arthashastra* provides an in-depth understanding of foreign policy. In many ways, this builds upon some of the aspects that are briefly mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. Rangarajan's translation of the *Arthashastra* makes important observations regarding the context in which Kautilya provides his foreign policy perspectives. The challenges are related to the foreign policy requirements of a king ruling a small state and not a large kingdom, more concerned with retaining its size and influence. Kautilya's policy prescriptions should therefore be seen in this regard. For Rangarajan, Kautilya's prescriptions are based on four key determinants: "relative power, deviations from the ideal, classification by type of motivation, and the influence of the intangible and unpredictable."[444]

The *Arthashastra* describes relations with a more powerful, equal or weaker king. The desirable actions of a ruler under each condition are accordingly enumerated. Kautilya further analyses deviations from some of

these suggested courses of action. He also indicates opportunities arising from the changing conditions of states and the benefits of exploiting a favourable condition that might arise out of good fortune or good counsel. As an illustration, Kautilya suggests conquering a weak king. He also highlights the circumstances under which exceptions can be made to this guidance. Letting go of short-term advantages in the interest of long-term interests can be one such condition. Similarly, calamities create conditions that can alter the balance of power between states. A king might need to employ one of the six foreign policy methods to safeguard his interests or take advantage of the situation presented. He may also need one of the *upayas* to achieve the foreign policy objectives.

Ways – Upayas and Sadgunya

The three texts refer to *upayas* as ways or methods for dealing with potential or actual conflict. The *Mahabharata* witnesses Krishna not only employing three of the four *upayas* practically in the court of Dhritarashtra, but also describing the logic behind each after he returns to the Pandavas. He also attempts coercion and *maya* when he shows his real form to convince the Kauravas of the foreseeable future. There are several examples of the use of conciliation, gifting, dissension and force application in the descriptive and prescriptive parts of the *Mahabharata*. It is also suggested that conciliation is preferable over the use of force, as conveyed to Yudhishthira by Bhishma. He adds, "You should never advance towards a clash, if it can be prevented. It is said war should be adopted only after conciliation, dissension and gifts have been tried out."[445]

As mentioned earlier, the *Nitisara* formally expands upon the *upayas* mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra* from four or five, as the case may be, to seven. The text does so while acknowledging the original four and their expansion to seven to include illusion, disregard and magic. This is prefaced by the contention that a king can conquer his enemies on the strength of his strategy and treasury, thereby reinforcing the relevance of the *upayas*.

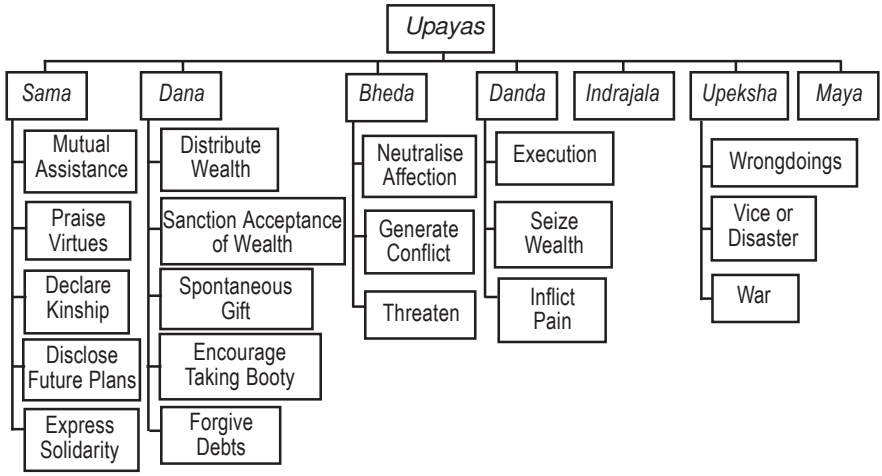
Each of the *upayas* is further subdivided into options that can be employed to achieve the desired objectives (Figure 4). The *Nitisara* delves deeper into

the ways each *upaya* can be implemented. These may not be the only options available to a ruler; however, the range of choices suggests the collation of distilled wisdom that led to the codification of the age-old *upayas* by the time the *Nitisara* was written. The text also suggests proactive and passive measures under each option.[446]

Beyond the first four, specific examples are cited to illustrate the other three. Some of these examples quote the epics, indicating their deep impact over centuries of dissemination. The example of Bhima dressing up as a woman to trap Kichaka is used to amplify illusion.[447]

Upeksha is illustrated in the *Nitisara*, yet again using an example from the *Mahabharata*. Bhima's killing of the demon Hidimba is used to prove his sister's disregard for him to achieve her objective of marrying Bhima. This suggests that even though examples of the additional three *upayas* can be found in the *Mahabharata*, these are not formally included in the discussion on the subject. The *Nitisara* suggests using *upeksha* for ongoing wrongdoings, vices, disasters and wars. The disregard for someone else's activity aims to directly benefit a king or weaken an adversary, thereby creating a future opportunity.[448]

Figure 5: Classification of *Upayas* in the *Nitisara*



The *Nitisara* also gives examples of how *maya* can be created, including the employment of darkness, rain, fire, and clouds amongst other options.[449]

Ghatotkacha uses some of these elements during his fight with Karna. This forces Karna to use his divine spear to kill him, thereby exhausting the possibility of its employment against Arjuna. The use of *maya* could have had a psychological impact on the enemy, thereby facilitating the creation of a desired end state. Its use could be during the conduct of war, as the example indicates, or merely to weigh down an adversary to achieve the desired results during negotiations.

If the *upayas* are the techniques available to execute policy, then the *Mahabharata* also refers to six methods to tackle an adversary. While these are not specifically referred to as the *sadgunya* or six methods of foreign policy, as is the case in the *Arthashastra*, these methods seem to suggest a similar, though not the same, approach. These include "being seated after concluding a treaty (peace), ensuring a treaty after marching out (preparing for war to strike fear in the enemy), being seated after declaring war (preparing for war with readiness for peace), seizing after marching out (war), creating a division in the enemy (dissension amongst enemy) and seeking asylum with the enemy (seeking shelter)."[450]

An assessment of the text indicates the repeated rejection of war as an option. It is only taken up when found acceptable under the guidance of *dharma*.[451] Similarly, the focus of the four (or five) *upayas,* that is, *sama*, *dana*, *bheda*, *danda* and *upeksha* suggests that three of the widely repeated four, or four of the enlarged five if *upeksha* is also included, pursue an attempt at war avoidance. It is only *danda* that represents the use of force, which too may or may not result in war, as the chapter on the conceptualisation of war suggests.

The aspect of violence receives a nuanced approach in the three texts. As Upinder Singh notes, the option of violence is used with caution in the *Mahabharata*, distinguishing between "wanton, uncivilized violence" and "necessary force".[452] Similarly, she also finds this message resonating in the *Arthashastra* where the text "defines the limits of use of force and lays down the negative consequences of transgressing these limits."[453] The reference to violence in the *Nitisara* is justified on the grounds of maintenance of order, preservation of a king and dispensation of justice. Yet this is balanced by the emphasis on non-violence and "disqualifications on force".[454]

The *Arthashastra* deals with the six methods in detail. These include *Samdhi* or making peace; *Vigraha* or hostilities to include an open war, secret war and an undeclared war; *Asana* or staying quiet; *Yana* or preparing for war; *Samsraya* or seeking protection; and *Dvaidhibhava* or making peace with one to wage war against another.[455]

The *Arthashastra* provides a detailed understanding of foreign relations among states from the perspective of a conqueror. A conquering state's circle of kings includes the ally and the friend of the ally. Similarly, a middle king, a neutral king and an enemy king constitute the others. Each of these kings have six elements, as discussed earlier, making a total of 72 constituents. The middle king shares his boundaries with the conqueror and the enemy. A neutral king does not share his boundary with any of the above, though he is more powerful than each individually.[456]

A king's power, signifying his strength, is meant to ensure the happiness of his people as the terminal objective. Power can be derived from intellectual strength, a healthy treasury and physical force. A king attempts to enhance his power in contrast to that of his enemy. Since a king can be vulnerable when surrounded by his enemies and their allies, he attempts to create a circle of allies and friends around him.

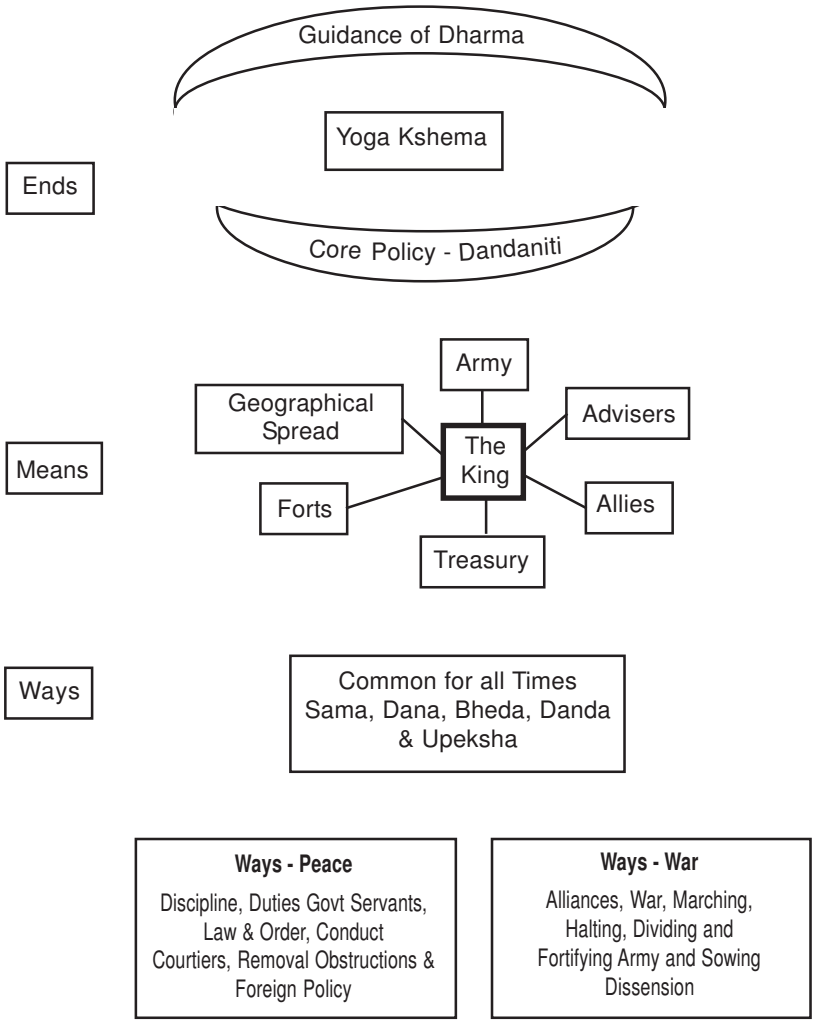
Kautilya discusses in detail the six elements available to a king under conditions of strength and relative weakness, including exceptions to the guidelines he provides. Collectively, these methods discuss the conditions under which a king can pursue different courses of action, ranging from peace to war and seeking protection to a dual policy.[457]

A comparative analysis of the three texts, including *dharma*, *yoga kshema*, *dandaniti*, the seven key elements, *upayas* and *shadgunya* fits into a more modern hierarchy of grand strategy, ends, means and ways. This classification, despite minor variations, is common to the three as the preceding comparisons reinforce (Figure 3).

The strategic derivatives from the *Mahabharata* resonate with the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*. These include the perspectives on *dharma* as guidance for the state, the correlation between peace, protection and prosperity, the importance of war avoidance, the means employed to achieve

ends without resorting to force, the key aspects of foreign policy and how it is to be implemented, the utility of force and the conditions under which it becomes desirable, the relevance of intelligence and its collection through spies and the use of stratagem.

Figure 6: Common Elements of Strategic Thought



Chapter Twelve

Concluding Thoughts

The introductory chapter raises a set of questions that this book attempts to explore. The succeeding chapters examine these issues at length. In the process, several aspects come up for deliberation that facilitate the derivation of strategic thought from the *Mahabharata*. Some of these aspects are subsequently reinforced through texts such as the *Arthashastra* that emerge over the centuries. Collectively, all of the above give us a reasonably clear understanding of ancient strategic principles and practices.

The concept of war is one constituent of strategic discourse that is debated, discussed and dissected at length in the *Mahabharata*. In doing so, the epic rejects the idea of war while acknowledging its reality and underlines the importance of preparing for an eventuality.

This seeming contradiction contextualises war and the use of violence through the lens of *dharma*, which remains the basis for individual, collective and state pursuit of perfection in designated roles and responsibilities. Collectively, this relates to the concept of *varnashrama* in the *Mahabharata*. The idea of *varnashrama* further becomes the basis of an individual's perception, dictated by their circumstances and their interpretation. This distinguishes one character from another. This differentiation repeatedly comes to the fore, especially when faced with testing conditions. The Kuru princes perceive and act differently when tested by their guru, as is noted by Drona while testing the young students, reinforcing Arjuna's superior martial instincts. Similarly, Krishna differs with Yudhishthira's approach to playing the game of dice and allowing its disastrous aftermath. Droupadi and Bhima

differ with Yudhishthira on their treatment by Duryodhana after the game of dice, with the former suggesting the use of force to seek justice, whereas the latter is more accepting of the rules of the game, irrespective of the accompanying trickery involved. There are several cases of disagreement during the war as well. The means chosen to bring down Bhishma, Drona, Abhimanyu, Karna, Bhurishrava and Duryodhana come up for heated debates, questioning the violation of *dharma*. In other words, *dharma*, despite its flexible implementation, remains the basis for holding actions to the highest standards of righteousness. Clearly, there are exceptions and deviations. However, these actions reflect the best course under prevailing circumstances rather than merely the ideal – an attempt at addressing decision dilemmas under imperfect conditions.

The focus on *dharma* and the emphasis on *yoga kshema* suggest that these are timeless concepts that transcend periods of history. The relevance of protection and prosperity, as a derivative of *yoga kshema,* remains an enduring idea in the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra*. It was an integral part of a king's responsibility to his people. Correlating the concept to more contemporary times will suggest its continued importance for modern nation-states. The *Mahabharata* and the *Arthashastra* illustrate that there cannot be a fixed and prescriptive formulation for ensuring an ideal state of *yoga kshema*. The approach and the instruments at play will change with prevailing circumstances. These circumstances are influenced by the internal and external security challenges faced by a state. The *Mahabharata* describes these variations in the *Shanti Parva*, including the reference to the *Apad Dharma Parva* to illustrate the extreme measures needed during adverse conditions to ensure the safety of the people and the well-being of a state.

The *Mahabharata* also proves that focussing on *dharma* does not constrain a state's ability to administer and undertake foreign relations through diplomacy and the use of force. Chapter 10 provides a detailed assessment of *raja dharma*, which confirms this assessment. The epic also reinforces that *raja dharma* is the highest form of *dharma* since conformity with its principles allows the practice of all other forms of *dharmas*.

The epic was not written as a military treatise, yet the fundamental constituents of war and its application derive from it. The instruments of

warfare have changed during successive phases of history. Yet, the idea of war, concepts of war avoidance, planning, preparation, conduct and follow-up found in the *Mahabharata* indicate high levels of understanding of these aspects. These are further reinforced by successfully correlating the epic with subsequent texts on statecraft like the *Arthashastra* and *Nitisara*.

The conceptualisation of violence as a tool is not limited to wars. The utility of force emerges across its varied manifestations as an instrument of individual and state will. The spectrum of its employment ranges from coercion through the threat of force to its draconian employment with apocalyptic impact. Despite the epic being seen through the prism of the 18-day war, the sophisticated understanding of force employment is evident from the illustrative examples quoted in Chapter Nine. These suggest the need to achieve desired objectives without resorting to force. Consequent to failure, the judicious application of force remains a preferred option to mass-scale violence.

Section Three deals with war and the roots of strategic thought, assessing the collective aspects of war, violence, diplomacy, deterrence and stratagem in the *Mahabharata's* context. These aspects point towards the foundations of strategic thought. The principles continue to resonate over centuries and can be identified in contemporary perspectives and vocabulary, despite their full potential yet to be fully embraced.

The *Mahabharata* is often referred to as the fifth *Veda*. The epic also represents the essence of the *Vedantic* philosophy derived from the *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. This makes it comprehensive and complete as a source of spiritual, philosophical and strategic thought.

For a leader, the conceptualisation of war, use of force, seeking peace and the ability to make decisions when confronted by complex conditions that impact the interests of the state and the welfare of the people require an understanding that goes beyond statecraft and strategic insights. Leaders, especially those operating in the strategic space, seek guidance through answers to questions influenced by philosophical and spiritual aspects, desiring to look beyond the state's or their organisation's immediate interests. The role and influence of Krishna in the *Mahabharata* suggests that this insight and

understanding do not constrain or limit a leader. Instead, they empower without imposing constraints.

The essence of strategic thought derived from the *Mahabharata* would have limited value if it did not find resonance in contemporary times. However, as some of the examples cited earlier indicate, India continues to be influenced by the core values of the *Mahabharata* and the strategic framework that the epic employs, given its universal appeal.

It can also be argued that the strategic wisdom of the *Mahabharata* is available in contemporary texts. Is there then a need to go back to it? The *Mahabharata* is possibly India's oldest strategic text. The strategic guidance from the epic is reinforced in subsequent texts. These linkages suggest a distinct Indian strategic culture that can be traced back at least 3,000 years. The descriptive text with didactic elements facilitates its dissemination and readership across large population segments. This helps inform, guide and encourage disseminating these ideas to a large audience. Since a philosophical and spiritual core accompanies it, people find it easier to identify with its layered messaging. This is distinct to the epics written in the *itihasa* format, unlike strategic texts from contemporary times. More recent texts tend to remain isolated from the philosophical underpinnings of the idea and conduct of wars. To that extent, the *Mahabharata* is a unique source for conceptualising wars, the employment of force and diplomacy.

The structure of this book evolved as it was being written. One of the more perceptible changes was necessitated by the role and influence of Krishna. The longer and deeper the deliberation, the more it became evident that Krishna represents not only the cosmic balance but also the balance in human behaviour. The epic illustrates that such personalities and their influence, despite the divine linkages, can only guide and facilitate events. Beyond that, it is the collective impact of human endeavour that dictates the course of events. This conclusion is relevant from the perspective of strategic thought, especially when free will is given precedence over fate. The emphasis on perseverance, *karma* and the guidance of *dharma* remains among the most important takeaways.

Krishna's decision-making cycle, derived from his actions, is logical in evaluating a situation and effective in its implementation. This is comparable

with any contemporary decision-making model and reinforces its timelessness. One of the most important facets of Krishna's guidance is the concept of detached perseverance, which remains imperative for objectively assessing situations. This in turn, becomes the basis of evaluating multiple courses of action as a prelude to the eventual decision.

Krishna's decision-making cycle, while seemingly a finite loop, is a part of a larger continuum that represents the infinite construct at play. Each feedback cycle allows successive decisions and actions to play out in the spirit of detached perseverance.

This infinite approach was relevant in the times of the *Mahabharata*, perhaps best exemplified through the *Bhagavad Gita*. Contemporary writers like Carse reinforce the relevance of the approach, as does Simon Sinek in a more corporatised conceptualisation.

The successful fulfilment of individual responsibilities – personal, familial, societal or institutional – can potentially be compromised if the end justifies the means. If an individual looks after his parents only to inherit their riches, or a prince obeys the king to emerge as the one picked to sit on the throne, then the actions fail the very spirit of *dharma's* intent. The *Mahabharata* does consider the ends – personal and strategic. Yet, the epic emphasises equally, if not more, the processes that must be followed to achieve these ends.

Two of the most celebrated dialogues in the *Mahabharata* – the *Bhagavad Gita* between Krishna and Arjuna and the *Shanti Parva* between Bhishma and Yudhishthira occur at critical stages of the epic. The *Bhagavad Gita* precedes the war, even as both armies are arrayed against each other, poised for combat. The *Shanti Parva* is an even longer dialogue between a distraught and disillusioned Yudhishthira and Bhishma lying on a bed of arrows after the war is over. In both cases, in addition to the ends, Krishna and Bhishma spend more time focussing on the processes – how an individual, a soldier or a king should undertake his responsibility. Therefore, while the ends remain relevant, how these are achieved remains central to the discussions. To that extent, the limited example of the war and some of the actions therein should not give the impression that the end justifies the means.

If this aspect is co-related to a more concrete example and one that remains a contentious aspect of the epic, then the description of the 18-day war as *dharma yudhha* is ideal for analysing the end and means debate. This is especially the case since, by any consideration, unethical actions do take place on both sides during the war.

On the contrary, the complexion of this argument changes when it is viewed in the context of the *Bhagavad Gita's* central theme – the message of *nishkama karma*. It requires individuals to fulfil duties and responsibilities without being attached to their fruits. In other words, actions are to be undertaken without looking at the benefits and rewards accompanying them. Be it an action in an individual's personal or institutional capacity, its detachment from rewards makes it objective and insulated from greed. In addition to the emphasis on detachment, this message emphasises the importance of perseverance. The aspect of detached perseverance is more about the journey that the endeavour takes rather than the ends that are achieved.

When the concept of a *dharma yudhha* is seen in the context of *nishkama karma,* the potential and possibility of its abuse is minimised. A ruler who remains detached from the material benefits of a war is less likely to discard the processes for the ends. After all attempts at *sama*, *dana* and *bheda* fail, the king resorts to *danda*. He goes to war for a righteous cause sanctioned by *dharma* (the *Mahabharata* rejects the idea of fighting a war for riches and territory).[458]

The concept of *dharma yudhha* is influenced by the ends of justice that should be met. If a wronged and humiliated side avoids contestation or loses the contest in the spirit of fair play, it is a case of missing the woods for the trees. This is especially the case when the debate around dharma yudhha is viewed from the perspective of *raja dharma* and not merely from the perspective of an individual watching a bout with no context or implication beyond its immediate result. The consequences of the latter are possibly accolades for the winner and little else. On the contrary, for states, dharma yudhha's impact is on the safety, prosperity and well-being of people represented in that contest. On the face of it, the *Mahabharata* might come across as a fight among cousins, but from the perspective of statecraft and

strategic insights, it reflects state behaviour and is accordingly representative of state interests.

This idea can also be related to the infinite approach that the book discusses in an earlier chapter. There, the focus is also on playing the game for the sake of play rather than the ends. Contrary to the ends-based approach, infinite play works only when the ends become irrelevant to the play. This approach does not imply the irrelevance of planning or the completion of a time-bound task, as discussed earlier. The infinite approach operates at the level of how we approach life and its major objectives rather than day-to-day tasks and responsibilities.

The *Mahabharata*, especially given its distinct place in the cultural space, introduces and reinforces several terms that deserve to be a part of the strategic lexicon. Bibek Debroy, in his translation of *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata*, chooses to retain *dharma* amongst a few terms in their original form. This decision emerges from the contextual meaning that *dharma* tends to mirror, as seen in the example discussed earlier in the book. Similarly, some terms describe reality only as they can. *Nishkama Karma* is not only one of the key takeaways of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but is also the essence of distilled wisdom that Indian philosophical thought represents. And this philosophical thought remains an indelible influence on India's strategic thought.

Strategic phraseology often tends to become an inalienable link between its source and the contemporary situations where it is used. It tends to resonate with the ancient wisdom that it echoes in its sentiment. Concepts like *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and *Achilles Heel* are good representative examples. The *Mahabharata* is as yet inadequately explored in this regard. Terms like *raja dharma*, *chakra vyuha*, *dharma yudhha*, *bhishma pratigya* and *yoga kshema* merit inclusion in the international strategic vocabulary. These terms remain profound in their conceptualisation and continued relevance.

Concepts and terms are not limited to a few texts that have taken centre stage for strategic thinkers. India has one of the richest resources of ancient texts. According to Bibek Debroy, "About 95% of the estimated 40 million ancient manuscripts are yet to be translated."[459] This suggests the existence of a vast pool of literature from a period that has witnessed limited accessibility

and investigation. Several theories and perspectives that have been prevalent could potentially be questioned over time as these texts are translated and read by subject experts. These texts can also introduce new concepts, fresh ideas and terminologies that add to the existing understanding of strategic thought.

Irrespective of how the *Mahabharata* is perceived from the mundane, *dharmic* or metaphysical plane, some of its most interesting aspects emerge from the dilemmas confronted by the major protagonists. These dilemmas are evident in their personal domain and in the strategic sphere. However, it is the dilemmas in the strategic domain that develop into some of the most challenging situations during the epic.

For the resolution of a personal dilemma, as was the case with Bhishma, it is a question of giving up personal aspirations when it comes to the happiness of his father. However, it is more challenging for Yudhishthira, who attempts to resolve a professional dilemma, to speak a half-truth (in essence a lie) to his *guru*, Acharya Drona, rather than the truth, both in letter and spirit. For someone like Drona, the dilemma is between his love for his son, dependence on Hastinapur and siding with *dharma*. Drona gives precedence to the former, leading to consequences that have been discussed earlier. The resolution of a dilemma that emanates from the clash of personal and formal responsibilities can arise from one of several reasons. In the case of Drona, it emerges from a higher priority to his personal interests. In contrast, Bhishma remains selfless in his actions. However, when it comes to the resolution of a professional dilemma, thereby favouring public good instead of the sworn allegiance to the throne of Hastinapur, Bhishma falters. In that sense, Bhishma's faltering represents the failure to resolve a dilemma in favour of a consequence-based approach that gives precedence to the wider impact of an action – in this case, the ensuing war.

The Pandavas face a similar dilemma on the 18th day after Yudhishthira invites Duryodhana to a fight with any of the brothers after all else has been won on the battlefield. Yudhishthira promises to return everything to Duryodhana if he wins the duel – a grave strategic error of judgement. Even though Duryodhana chooses to fight Bhima, he could have arguably won if the Pandavas do not resort to deceit. Should Duryodhana have been allowed

to win, thereby nullifying all the sacrifices, humiliations and deprivations merely because of Yudhishthira's error of judgement? Or is Yudhishthira's word more important than its resultant impact?

The conceptualisation of war and the relevance of war avoidance, as contradictory as these might seem, are in fact two sides of the same coin. The *Mahabharata* reinforces the importance of the latter on several occasions, yet, despite classifying war as an act of *adharma*, when it does become an imperative for a warrior and a king, it becomes their *kshatriya dharma* and *raja dharma*. And since preparations for war are a continuous exercise, they remain an integral part of the state's responsibility. What differentiates the negative connotation of war and its reality is, therefore, the intent and purpose that accompany it. Interestingly, for a king, the failure to protect the people and the kingdom against a threat, even though this entails a war, is also considered a violation of his *raja dharma*. This was as relevant in the times of the *Mahabharata* as it remains in more contemporary circumstances.

These examples indicate that dilemmas have been an integral part of life and decision-making. The bigger challenge is not to discard them because these seem contradictory. It is in assessing their comparative merit and seeking the best options under the prevailing circumstances. Bimal Krishna Matilal while introducing his edited volume on *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, writes: "Genuine paradoxes are seldom solved. They are, generally speaking, resolved or dissolved."[460] This is indeed true, as the different perceptions of contentious actions in the *Mahabharata* indicate. The example of Yudhishthira quoted above is a reflection of this reality.

Krishna's dialogue with Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is perhaps one of the most profound illustrations of not only an attempt at resolving his immediate dilemmas, but also the predicaments that we face at varying stages of life, both in personal and professional life.

Krishna's guidance to Arjuna offers multiple paths to seek one's goals. This varies from *Karma Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga,* to *Jnana Yoga* (yoga of action, spirituality and knowledge). The very act of suggesting multiple paths to a leader indicates the option of seeking different ways to reach an objective. Accordingly, dilemmas are also best addressed through ways and means that allow the most appropriate solution to address a strategic challenge at hand.

Despite the context of dilemmas changing over time, the approach to resolving them remains the same.

Krishna emerges as the most important figure in the *Mahabharata*. Moving beyond the basic story of the epic, each character signifies more than merely the individual they represent. They also symbolise the ethical, practical, realistic, idealistic, unethical, foresighted and naïve roles they play in the storyline. These characteristics help draw invaluable lessons, strategic insights and moral guidance through individual actions and debates. These also reflect interstate relations, competition and rivalry.

Several examples that reinforce Krishna's balanced strategic influence have been highlighted. These include the emphasis on detached perseverance to seek answers to the dilemmas of life. He accomplishes this both in war and peace. More importantly, this is achieved in an imperfect world where others grapple with contradictions and paradoxes.

For a leader in contemporary times, Krishna represents the moderate and practical reality of decision-making. Yudhishthira and Bhishma, both with their respective strengths and qualities, still fall short of handling the nuances of *dharma*. When Bhima fells Duryodhana to bring the war to a close, the latter castigates the Pandavas and Krishna for their devious actions. Duryodhana says, "O unblemished one! I will go to heaven with my well-wishers and my relatives. Your objectives are yet unaccomplished. You will sorrow here."[461]

Facing a despondent group of Pandava brothers, Krishna responds to Duryodhana's assertion. He says, "When enemies are many and numerous, they have to be killed through falsehood and other means."[462] He attributes this approach to the gods in their fight against the *asuras*. In essence, he suggests that in the fight against evil, it is acceptable to deviate from the prescribed norms of war. Pavan K. Varma notes, "In the Mahabharata, the actions of Krishna himself illustrate the difference between textual rectitude and practical choices."[463] These practical choices resonate the most with the challenges and realities faced by states as much in ancient times as in contemporary. The Indian civilisational evolution saw innumerable gods represent specific segments and needs. Krishna's universal appeal notwithstanding, he could be treated as the God of Choice by statesmen,

generals and diplomats – people who face decision dilemmas in the real world and struggle to make the right choices in the national interest. He backs this ability with insights about the interplay between cosmic balance and maintaining balance in the real world.

Krishna's ability to straddle between the idealist and the realist represents the closest reflection of strategic dilemmas leaders are called upon to resolve. He narrates the story of Rishi Kaushika, who had sworn to speak the truth. This leads to the death of innocent people and consequently, his entry into hell instead of heaven. Similarly, he gives practical advice to Arjuna, who has vowed to kill anyone abusing his Gandiva, when Yudhishthira does so in a fit of anger. As a result, he diffuses the tricky situation during the war. These examples exemplify Krishna's ability to find practical and appropriate solutions to vexed problems.

The *Mahabharata* best epitomises India's civilisational ethos through Krishna. It reflects the spiritual, philosophical and strategic thought processes of leaders. While this may confound others, it comes across as rational to the Indian mind, recognising a paradox without seeming contradictions. Sukthankar calls this an "automatic mental adjustment" in sync with the poet's mind.[464] Matilal explains, "He looks at the particularity of the situation but also looks beyond it." He compares Krishna's interpretation of *dharma* with the "poet who accepts the constraints of meters, verses, and metaphors. But he is also the strong poet who has absolute control over them."[465]

In other words, Krishna's mind is instinctively trained to achieve the requisite balance of thought and action. It understands the vagaries of conflict and yet, plans for it and fights to achieve victory. His mind is guided by strong ethical moorings, but understands the need for deviations. And all this time, it is in control of both these realities. This is the essence of strategic guidance for a leader in contemporary times.

Endnotes

1 G.N. Devy documents the widespread appeal of the *Mahabharata* in *Mahabharata: The Epic and the Nation*, Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2022, pp. 17–25. Devy describes the numerous translations and oral traditions that disseminated the *Mahabharata* across the Indian subcontinent. The ninth-century poet Perundevanar did the early Tamil translation titled *Bharat Venba*. The Telegu version was produced in the 11th century by Nannaya and the Kannada version by Narayanappa. Devy adds that oral the oral tradition of disseminating the *Mahabharata* continues to exist. "One such work is the long poem Bharath in the Garasiya variety of Bhili spoken in the Banaskantha – Sabarkantha area on the border of Rajasthan and Gujarat."

2 See Thennilapuram P. Mahadevan, 'On Southern Recension of the Mahabharata, Brahman Migrations and Brahmi Paleography (For Frits Stall),' *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 15 (2), 2008, p. 10.

3 C. Minkowski, 'Nilakantha's Mahabharata,' *Seminar*, at https://www.india-seminar.com/2010/608/608_c_minkowski.htm (Accessed February 28, 2025).

4 See Riyadi Suparno, 'Mahabharata, Javanese Stories,' *Jakarta Post*, January 26, 2017, at https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/01/26/mahabharata-javanese-stories.html (Accessed February 28, 2025).

5 Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative,* Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 13–4. As Hiltebeitel notes, this assessment is contrary to the views offered by Sutherland, Wendy Doniger and Madeleine Biardeau on *The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata*. Hiltebeitel makes a similar argument in *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001, p. 28.

6 See Alf Hiltebeitel in "Weighing Orality and Writing in the Sanskrit Epics", in Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (eds.), *Reading the Fifth Veda: Studies on the Mahabharata: Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*, 1, Brill Academic Pub, Leiden, 2011, pp. 3–-4.

7 M.A. Mehendale, "The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata – Its Constitution, Achievements, and Limitations", in Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty (ed.), *Text and Variations of the Mahabharata: Contextual, Regional and Performative Traditions*, National Mission for Manuscripts, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2009, pp. 3–24.

8 Rohini Bakshi, 'Mahabharata: The Critical Edition and Beyond,' *Mint*, July 01, 2017, at https://www.livemint.com/Sundayapp/MGzWHO2hFNC87saL4SRdkN/Mahbhrata-the-critical-edition-and-beyond.html (Accessed February 18, 2025.

9 Kanad Sinha, *From Dasarajana to Kuruksetra: The Making of a Historical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021, p. 9.

10 While a detailed discussion will be undertaken on the concept of *dharma*, a brief understanding of the concepts of *artha, kama* and *moksha* would be relevant at this stage. *Arth* is associated to any kind or manner of wealth. *Kama* is referred to a sense of desire. And *moksha* implies having overcome or transcended the cycle of rebirth.

11 Subesh Chandra Bhattacharya, "Mahabharata. Itihasa. Agency", Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya, Vrinda Dalmiya and Gangeya Mukherji (eds.), *Exploring Agency in the Mahabharata: Ethical and Political Dimensions of Dharma*, Routledge, Oxon, 2019, p. 36.

12 Ibid.

13 Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata Vol. I (Translation)*, Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, p. xxii.

14 Ibid, p. xx.

15 Subesh Chandra Bhattacharya, no. 11, p. 32.

16 Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2012, p. xlviii

17 S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, Harper Collins India, New Delhi, 2020, p. 48.

18 The *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of the *Mahabharata*. It is a dialogue between Arjuna, disillusioned with the thought of fighting a war against his relatives, teachers and elders and Krishna, his mentor, guide and charioteer during the war. The *Gita* is considered one of the most profound texts on Indian spiritual and philosophical thought.

19 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1199(49)", *The Mahabharata Vol. 7 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, pp. 221–2. Koushika has sworn to speak the truth. Resultantly, he gives away the location of innocent people being followed by cruel robbers. Eventually, the robbers catch and kill them.

20 Subesh Chandra Bhattacharya, no. 11, p. 33.

21 K. Kunjunni Raja, "A Note on Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata", in Bimal Krishna Matilal (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 2014, p. 49.

22 Amartya Sen, 'Illusions of Empire: Amartya Sen On What British Rule Really Did for India,' *The Guardian*, June 29 ,2021, at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/29/british-empire-india-amartya-sen (Accessed April 04, 2022).

23 Ibid.

24 George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, RAND, 1992, at https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R4207.html (Accessed June 09, 2022).

25 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 90", no. 13, p. 251.

26 Ibid, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 119", p. 323. Vrikodara is also a name for Bhima.

27 Shakuni is the Kauravas' maternal uncle. He is Gandhari's brother, who is married to Dhritarashtra. Both Shakuni and Gandhari are from Gandhara, an area bordering present-day Northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan.

28 Karna is Kunti's firstborn. However, since he is born with the blessings of the Sun god before her marriage, she places him in a basket and hands him over to the mercy of the River Ganga. The child is found by a charioteer and raised as his own.

29 Bibek Debroy, "Jatugriha-daha Parva, Ch. 126", no. 13, p. 345.

30 Bibek Debroy, "Jatugriha-daha Parva, Ch. 134", no. 13, p. 357.

31 Drupada is the king of Panchala. He is Droupadi and Dhristadyumna's father. The rivalry between Drona and Drupada plays out during the *Mahabharata*.
32 Bibek Debroy, "Rajya-labha Parva, Ch. 199", no. 13, p. 491.
33 Shishupala is given a boon that a hundred transgressions will be pardoned before he is brought to justice. He ends up crossing this tipping point before Krishna beheads him with his *Sudarshana Chakra*.
34 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 268(43)", in *The Mahabharata Vol. 2 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, p. 188.
35 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 269(44)", no. 34, p. 189. *Maharathas* refers to the kings in support of Duryodhana, and the *sabha* to the grand palace created for the Pandavas, where Yudhishthira is crowned as the emperor.
36 Bibek Debroy, no. 35, p. 189. Drupada is Droupadi's father.
37 Bibek Debroy, "Anudyuta Parva, Ch. 292(67)", no. 34, p. 253.
38 Bibek Debroy, "Anudyuta Parva, Ch. 293(68)", no. 34, p. 255.
39 Bibek Debroy, "Vairata Parva, Ch. 597(1) - 599(3)", in *The Mahabharata Vol. 4 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, pp. 4–9.
40 Bibek Debroy, "Go-Grahana Parva, Chapter 643(47)", no. 39, pp. 100–1.
41 Bibek Debroy,, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 788(125)", no. 39, p. 470.
42 V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, Delhi, 2021.
43 Ibid, p. 81.
44 Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Dharma and Rationality", in Jonardon Ganeri (ed.), *Ethics and Epics – The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal Volume 2*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p. 51.
45 Ibid, p. 54.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid, pp. 55–6.
48 Gurcharan Das, no. 16, p. xiii.
49 Bibek Debroy, "Arjuna-Vanvasa Parva, Ch. 200", no. 34, refer note 2 on p. 2.
50 Bibek Debroy, no. 34, p. xxxiv.
51 Bhishma's father, Shantanu falls in love with Satyavati. To facilitate the marriage that will allow Satyavati's offspring to become the heir apparent to Shantanu, Bhishma gives up his right to the throne and takes a vow of celibacy.
52 See 'India that is Bharat: The Origin and Meaning of the Ancient Name,' *The Economic Times*, September 06, 2023, at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-that-is-bharat-the-origin-and-meaning-of-the-ancient-name/articleshow/103401596.cms?from=mdr (Accessed August 28, 2024).
53 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 69", no. 13, p. 201.
54 Ibid, p. 203.
55 Ibid.
56 Bibek Debroy, "Arjuna-Vanvasa Parva, Ch. 201", no. 34, p. 14. Ajatashatru is one of Yudhishthira's names.
57 Bibek Debroy, "Introduction", no. 34, p. xxxiv.
58 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 94", no. 13, p. 264.
59 Ibid, p. 267.
60 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 195", no. 13, pp. 481–2.

61 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 278(53)", no. 34, p. 213.
62 Ibid, p. 214.
63 Ibid.
64 Bibek Debroy, "Tirth Yatra Parva, Ch. 441(144)", in *The Mahabharata Vol. 3 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, p. 173.
65 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 280(55)", no. 34, p. 218.
66 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 282(57)", no. 34, p. 222.
67 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 285(60)", no. 34, p. 231.
68 Ibid, p. 232.
69 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 328(31)", no. 34, p. 357.
70 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 329(32)", no. 34, p. 358.
71 Gurcharan Das, no. 16, p. 66.
72 Bibek Debroy, "Yana-Sandhi Parva, Ch. 729(66)", no. 39, p. 347.
73 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 756(93)", no. 39, p. 411.
74 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 785(122)", no. 39, pp. 463–4.
75 The concept of *dharma yudhha* will be discussed at length in the chapter on the conduct of war.
76 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Chapter 881(21)", in *The Mahabharata Vol. 5 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, p. 122.
77 Ibid, p. 123.
78 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 884(24)", no. 76, p. 130.
79 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 900(40)", no. 76, p. 204.
80 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1409(81)", in *The Mahabharata Vol. 8 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, p. 165.
81 Bibek Debroy, Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1424(96)", no. 80, pp. 406–7.
82 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 789(126)", no. 39, pp. 471–2. Text in parentheses by author for clarity.
83 Bibek Debroy, "Bhishma Vadha Parva, Ch. 963(103)", no. 76, pp. 430–1.
84 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 122", no. 13, p. 331.
85 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 128", no. 13, p. 347.
86 Bibek Debroy, "Drona-Vadha Parva, Ch 1141(164)", in *The Mahabharata Vol. 6 (Translation),* Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, p. 454. Yoga, according to the translation, means a trick. Ashvatthama is the son of Drona.
87 Ashvatthama, besides being Drona's son, is also an elephant by the same name who has been killed. Yudhishthira used this information to convey a half-truth to Drona.
88 Bibek Debroy, "Drona-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1141(164)", no. 86, p. 455.
89 Bibek Debroy, "Jatugriha-Daha Parva, Ch. 126", no. 13, p. 345.
90 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch 1216(66)", no. 19, p. 299.
91 Ibid, pp. 300–1.
92 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1404(76)", no. 80, p. 353.
93 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch 1491(63)", no. 80, p. 317.
94 Bibek Debroy, "Kairata Parva, Ch. 332(35)", no. 34, pp. 371–2.
95 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 754(91)", no. 39, p. 404.
96 Joseph Dowd, 'Maximizing Dharma: Krsna's Consequentialism in the Mahabharata,' *Praxis*, 3 (1), Spring 2011, p. 41.

97 Ibid, p. 43.
98 Bimal Krishna Matilal, no. 44, p. 51.
99 Ibid, p. 67.
100 Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Krsna: In Defence of a Devious Divinity", no. 44, pp. 104–6.
101 Alf Hiltebeitel, "Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative", no. 6.
102 Alf Hiltebeitel, no. 6, p. 24.
103 Alf Hiltebeitel, no. 6, p. 25.
104 Bibek Debroy, "Kairata Parva, Ch. 311(14)", no. 34, p. 316.
105 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1456(128)", no. 80, pp. 498–9.
106 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1199(49)", no. 19, p. 222.
107 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1429(101)", no. 80, p. 418.
108 *Trivarga* is often referred to as the three goals or objectives of human existence. This includes *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*.
109 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1451(123)", no. 80, pp. 483–4.
110 Bibek Debroy, "Apad Dharma Parva, Ch. 1460(132)", no. 80, p. 509.
111 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1385(57)", no. 80, p. 293.
112 Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics", in Bimal Krishna Matilal (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, Motilal Banarsidass Private Limited, Delhi, 2014, p. 5
113 S. Jaishankar, no. 17.
114 V.S. Sukthankar, no. 42, p. 97.
115 Ibid.
116 Bibek Debroy, "Subhadra Harana Parva, Ch. 211", no. 34, p. 27.
117 Bibek Debroy, "Mantra Harana Parva, Ch. 239(14)", no. 34, p. 113.
118 Bibek Debroy, "Mantra Harana Parva, Ch. 241(16)", no. 34, p. 115.
119 Bibek Debroy, "Jarasandha- Vadha Parva, Ch. 243(18)", no. 34, pp. 122–3.
120 Bibek Debroy, "Jarasandha- Vadha Parva, Ch. 246(21)", no. 34, p. 132.
121 Bibek Debroy, "Jarasandha- Vadha Parva, Ch. 247(22)", no. 34, p. 134.
122 Bibek Debroy, "Kairata Parva, Ch. 311(14)", no. 34, p. 316.
123 Bibek Debroy, "Udyoga Parva, Ch. 670(7)", no. 39, pp. 162–3.
124 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 749(86)", no. 39, p. 188.
125 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 752(89)", no. 39, pp. 399–400.
126 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 740(77)", no. 39, p. 371.
127 Ibid, pp. 370–1. Krishna's reference to human effort and destiny correlates to free will and fate. A more detailed discussion on the theme will be taken up in a subsequent chapter.
128 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 754(91)", no. 39, p. 404.
129 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 756(93)", no. 39, p. 409.
130 Ibid, p. 410.
131 Ibid, p. 411.
132 Ibid, p. 411.
133 Ibid, p. 409.
134 Ibid, p. 411.
135 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 785(122)", no. 39, p. 461.
136 Ibid, p. 463.
137 Ibid, p. 465.

138 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavata-Yana Parva, Ch. 788(125)", no. 39, p. 470.
139 Ibid, Ch. 789 (126), pp. 472-473.
140 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Upanivada Parva, Ch. 804(141)", no. 39, p. 514.
141 Bibek Debroy, "Udyoga Parva, Ch. 664(1)", no. 39, p. 151.
142 Ibid, p. 152.
143 Major Robert J. Rielly, 'Confronting the Tiger: Small Unit Cohesion in Battle,' *Military Review*, November–December 2000, at https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/cace/DCL/DCL_SmallUnitCohesion.pdf (Accessed February 26, 2024).
144 Ibid.
145 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 884(24)", no. 76, p. 131.
146 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 885(25)", no. 76, p. 139.
147 Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata Vol. 5 (Translation),* "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 884(24)", no. 76, p. 134.
148 Bibek Debroy, "Bhishma Vadha Parva, Ch. 963(103)", no. 76, p. 432.
149 Bibek Debroy, "Abhimanyu-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1125(48)", no. 86, p. 41.
150 Bibek Debroy, "Abhimanyu-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1128(51)", no. 86, pp. 53–4.
151 Bibek Debroy, "Pratijna Parva, Ch. 1130(53)", no. 86, p. 60.
152 Bibek Debroy, "Abhimanyu-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1127(50)", no. 86, p. 50.
153 Bibek Debroy, "Pratijna Parva, Ch. 1130(53)", no. 86, p. 62.
154 Bibek Debroy, "Jayadratha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1143(66)", no. 86, p. 104.
155 Bibek Debroy, "Jayadratha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1195(118)", no. 86, p. 280. Dhananjaya is another name for Arjuna. Bull among men is a reference to Bhurishrava.
156 Ibid, p. 281.
157 Jayadratha's father gave his son a boon wherein the archer who severs his head and causes it to hit the ground will die instantaneously. Accordingly, Krishna advises Arjuna to make sure that his head, once severed, lands in his father's lap, thereby killing him instead.
158 Bibek Debroy, "Ghatotkacha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1125(148)", no. 86, pp. 391–2.
159 Bibek Debroy, "Ghatotkacha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1131(154)", no. 86, p. 414.
160 Ibid, p. 416.
161 Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krsna in the Mahabharata*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi 2017, p. 251.
162 Bibek Debroy, "Ghatotkacha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1141(164)", no. 86, p. 454.
163 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, Ch. 1144(167)", no. 19, p. 479.
164 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, Ch. 1145(168)", no. 19, p. 480.
165 Bibek Debroy, "Karna Vadha Parva, Ch. 1216(66)", no. 19, p. 301.
166 Bibek Debroy, "Karna Vadha Parva, Ch. 1217(67)", no. 19, p. 301. Text in parenthesis by author.
167 Bibek Debroy, "Tirtha Yatra Parva, Ch. 1250(31)", no. 19, p. 438.
168 Bibek Debroy, "Tirtha Yatra Parva, Ch. 1251(32)", no. 19, p. 441.
169 Bibek Debroy, "Gadha Yudha Parva, Ch. 1267(57)", no. 19, p. 532.
170 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 286(61)", no. 34, p. 234.
171 See Alf Hiltebeitel, no. 161, pp. 249–50.
172 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, Ch. 1143(166)", no. 19, p. 475.
173 Gandhari curses Krishna when the Pandavas go to seek Dhritarashtra's blessings. She accuses him of wilfully ignoring the destruction of the Kurus, despite being capable of stopping it. See Bibek Debroy, "Stri Dharma Parva, Ch. 1326(25)", no. 80, p. 122.

174 William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, Nataraj Publishers, Dehradun, 2005, pp. 128–30.

175 Gurcharan Das, no. 16, p. 190.

176 See Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Mumbai, 1986, pp. 105–6.

177 Bimal Krishna Matilal, no. 100, pp. 106–7. Matilal makes an interesting case of three different worlds, including a perfect one and another similar to what we live in. He follows with a rhetorical question that seeks to select one. Unsurprisingly, it is not the perfect world without any *adharma*.

178 James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, Free Press, New York, 1986.

179 Vivek Chadha, *Kargil: Past Perfect, Future Uncertain?,* Knowledge World, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 198–207,.

180 Simon Sinek, 'Simon Sinek: Applying the Infinite Game Mindset to Business,' *Forbes*, April 30, 2019, at https://www.forbes.com/sites/workday/2019/04/30/simon-sinek-applying-the-infinite-game-mindset-to-business/?sh=5ef65c0033dd (Accessed January 16, 2023).

181 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 884(24)", no. 76, pp. 131–2.

182 Ibid, p. 134.

183 Josy Joseph, 'What is the Doklam Issue All About,' *The Hindu*, January 27, 2018, at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/what-is-the-doklam-issue-all-about/article22536937.ece (Accessed September 14 ,2024) and Vijay Gokhale, 'The Road from Galwan: The Future of India–China Relations,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 10, 2021, at https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/03/the-road-from-galwan-the-future-of-india-china-relations?lang=en (Accessed September 14, 2024).

184 See Vivek Chadha, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*, Sage, New Delhi, 2005.

185 Prakash Menon, 'Military Education in India: Missing the Forest for the Trees,' *Journal of Defence Studies*, at https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/jds_9_4_2015_MilitaryEducationIndia.pdf (Accessed September 14, 2024).

186 Transcript of Joint Briefing by MEA and MoD, *Ministry of External Affairs*, September 29, 2016, at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27446/Transcript_of_Joint_Briefing_by_MEA_and_MoD_September_29_2016 (Accessed November 26, 2024).

187 'Balakot airstrikes was a message that cross-border terrorism will not be a low-cost option for the adversary, says Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh,' *Ministry of Defence*, February 28, 2020, at https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1604642 (Accessed September 14, 2024).

188 See Vivek Chadha, 'How Dharma Shapes Strategic Thought on War in the Mahabharata,' *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Occasional Paper No. 62, 2024, at https://www.idsa.in/occasionalpapers/op-62-How-Dharma-Shapes-Strategic-Thought (Accessed May 14, 2024).

189 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 900(40)", no. 76, p. 204.

190 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 883(23)", no. 76, p. 128.

191 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 884(24)", no. 76, p. 132.

192 V.S. Sukthankar, no. 42, p. 81.

193 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 900(40)", no. 76, p. 354.

194 The process of elevating a king to an emperor involved the conduct of a *rajasuya*. It facilitated the pursuit of suzerainty over other kingdoms and raised the prestige and prosperity of a king.
195 Bibek Debroy, "Abhimanyu-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1027(50)", no. 86, p. 50.
196 Bibek Debroy, "Abhimanyu-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1025(48)", no. 86, p. 41.
197 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, Ch. 1143(166)" no. 86, p. 473.
198 Bibek Debroy, "Jarasandha- Vadha Parva, Ch. 245(20)", no. 34, p. 128.
199 Bibek Debroy, "Jarasandha- Vadha Parva, Ch. 247(22)", no. 34, p. 134.
200 Bibek Debroy, "Shishupala- Vadha Parva, Ch. 264(39)", no. 34, pp. 173–4.
201 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 881(21)", no. 76, p. 123.
202 See Kaushik Roy, *Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia: From Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, p. 29.
203 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1387(59)", no. 80, p. 298.
204 Bibek Debroy, "Jambukhanda - Vinirmana Parva, Ch. 861(1)", no. 76, p. 63.
205 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1391(63)", no. 80, p. 317.
206 Ibid, p. 318.
207 *Yuga* or eras have four divisions. The ideal state is said to be *Krita Yuga*, thereafter in descending order, it is followed by *Trita Yuga*, *Dvapara Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*.
208 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1398(70)", no. 80, p. 340.
209 *Dandaniti* corresponds with the power to chastise based on a king's selfless code of conduct. It is also referred to as the rod, which will reward and punish. See Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1387(59)", no. 80, p. 302.
210 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1398(70)", no. 80, p. 341.
211 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1397(69)", no. 80, p. 336.
212 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1386(58)", no. 80, p. 295.
213 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1456(128)", no. 80, p. 498.
214 Ibid, p. 499.
215 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1424(96)", no. 80, pp. 406–7.
216 Arjuna has sworn that he will kill anyone who asks him "to handover the Gandiva to someone else", which Yudhishthira has done in a fit of anger after facing the wrath of Karna on the battlefield. Krishna finds a solution to overcome Arjuna's pledge by asking him to instead use a "trifling insult" against Yudhishthira. "Having thus been addressed, a senior will be as good as dead." Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1199(49)", no. 19, p. 219 and p. 223.
217 Bimal Krishna Matilal (ed.), from the introduction by Matilal in *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, no. 112, p. 10.
218 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1199(49)", no. 19, p. 221. Krishna says, "A person who is always based on truth is but a child. A person who can differentiate between truth and falsehood can alone follow dharma."
219 For a brief summation of the debate, see Victor Ramon Fernandes, 'Realism and Idealism in International Relations: An Ontological Debate,' *Janus.net*, 7 (2), November 2016, pp. 14–25, at https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/4135/413548516002.pdf (Accessed August 07, 2023).
220 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1404(76)", no. 80, p. 354.
221 The process involved kings being given the choice of accepting suzerainty or war. In the case of the Pandavas, Yudhishthira's brothers fanned out in four cardinal directions seeking

their brother's acceptance as the emperor. This did lead to several wars being fought before the eventual subjugation of the entire neighbouring region.

222 V.S. Sukthankar, no. 42, p. 61. Sukthankar notes that only nine individuals survived from the 18 *aksauhinis* that took part in the war.

223 Bibek Debroy, "Sanjaya-Yana Parva, Ch. 689(26)", no. 39, p. 209.

224 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 734(71)", no. 39, p. 362.

225 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 733(70)", no. 39, p. 357.

226 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1431(103)", no. 80, p. 425.

227 A name also used to address Duryodhana.

228 A name for Karna and Shakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle.

229 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Upanivada Parva, Ch. 811(148)", no. 39, pp. 529–30.

230 See P.K. Gautam, 'Understanding Kautilya's Four Upayas,' *Manohar Parrikar IDSA*, June 20, 2013, at https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/UnderstandingKautilyasFourUpayas_pkgautam_200613 (Accessed August 10, 2023).

231 Bibek Debroy, no. 224.

232 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1397(69)", no. 80, p. 335.

233 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, 122", no. 13, p. 331.

234 Keith Best, Si vis pacem, para bellum ("If you want peace, prepare for war"), *World Federalist Movement – Institute for Global Policy*, at https://www.wfm-igp.org/federalist-paper/si-vis-pacem-para-bellum-if-you-want-peace-prepare-for-war/ (Accessed November 23, 2023). The quote is attributed to the Roman General Vegetius.

235 Bibek Debroy, "Khandava-Daha Parva, Ch. 215-216", no. 34, pp. 42–4.

236 Bibek Debroy, "Kairata Parva, Ch. 235(38)", no. 34, pp. 378–9.

237 Bibek Debroy, "Kairata Parva, Ch. 238(41)", no. 34, pp. 389–90.

238 Bhishma had taken a pledge to protect the throne of Hastinapur against any attacks. He stands by his pledge despite realising that Duryodhana is in the wrong. Bibek Debroy, "Bhishma-Abhishechana Parva, Ch. 816(153)", no. 39, p. 546.

239 For an understanding of proportionality, see The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law, *Medicins Sans Frontieres*, at https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/proportionality/ (Accessed January 12, 2024).

240 Bibek Debroy, "Mantra Parva, Ch. 241(16)", no. 34, p. 115.

241 Bibek Debroy, "Dyuta Parva, Ch. 278(53)", no. 34, p. 214.

242 Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, *Vol. 4 (Translation)*, "Go-Grahana Parva", no. 39, pp. 55-95.

243 Bibek Debroy, "Sanjaya-Yana Parva, Ch. 691(28)", no. 39, p. 216.

244 Ibid, p. 215.

245 Bibek Debroy, "Sanjaya-Yana Parva, Ch. 692(29)", no. 39, p. 222.

246 Bibek Debroy, "Prajagara Parva, Ch. 697(34)", no. 39, p. 244.

247 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 733(70)", no. 39, p. 357.

248 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1404(76)", no. 80, p. 353.

249 Bibek Debroy, "Go-Grahana Parva, Ch. 640(44)", no. 39, p. 95.

250 See M.A. Mehendale, *Reflections on the Mahabharata,* Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, 1995 for a detailed deliberation on the concept of *dharma yudhha*.

251 Nikolaos Tzenios, 'Case Study: Just War Doctrine,' *Open Journal of Political Science*, 13 (1), January 2023, at https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=122406 (Accessed August 10, 2023).

252 See Amaya Amell, 'The Theory of Just War and International Law: From Saint Augustine, through Francisco de Vitoria, to Present,' *Hispanic Journal*, Spring 2017, 38 (1), University of Pennsylvania, p. 66.
253 Ibid, p. 68.
254 "War", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/#HistVsContJustWarTheo (Accessed July 28, 2023).
255 See Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 789(126)", no. 39, p. 471.
256 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Ch. 789(126)", no. 39, p. 471.
257 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavat-Yana Parva, Chapter 756(93)", no. 39, p. 411.
258 Ibid, p. 410.
259 Gurcharan Das, no. 16, pp. 112–3.
260 Based on data from Ministry of Home Annual Reports.
261 Torkel Brekke, 'The Ethics of War and the Concept of War in India and Europe,' *Religion and Violence*, 52 (1), 2005, p. 61.
262 Ibid, p. 71.
263 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1427(99)", no. 80, pp. 412–3.
264 Arunjana Das, 'Defining Dharma Yuddha: a Taxonomical Approach to Decolonizing Studies on Hindu War Ethics,' *Journal of Dharma Studies*, 2, pp. 135–51, November 15, 2019, at https://doi.org/10.1007/s42240-019-00058-7 (Accessed May 15, 2024).
265 M.A. Mehendale, no. 250.
266 Ibid, p. 2 and 23.
267 Kaushik Roy, "Hinduism and War," in Margo Kitts (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023, p. 98.
268 Similarities and differences between the *Mahabharata, Arthashastra* and *Nitisara* are dealt with in detail in Chapter 11.
269 The justification given by Krishna to Karna before exhorting Arjuna to attack him even when he is not on his chariot is one of the more obvious examples. This includes reminding Karna of several acts of *adharma* that he committed or was an accomplice to.
270 This included the killing of Abhimanyu by the Kauravas, the use of Shikhandi by the Pandavas to kill Bhishma, the employment of deception in messaging that led to the death of Drona, amongst others.
271 Bibek Debroy, "Abhiniryana Parva, Ch. 812(149)", no. 39, p. 537.
272 Bibek Debroy, "Abhiniryana Parva, Ch. 813(150)", no. 39, p. 538.
273 Bibek Debroy, "Bhagavad Gita Parva, Ch. 884(24)", no. 76, pp. 132–3.
274 Bibek Debroy, "Sabha Parva, Ch. 236(11)", no. 34, p. 102.
275 Bibek Debroy, "Jarasandha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 243(18)", no. 34, p. 121.
276 Bibek Debroy, "Ratha-Atiratha-Samkhya Parva, Ch. 825(162)", no. 39, p. 568. The terms *ratha*, *maharatha* and *atiratha* were used for a charioteer, a great warrior capable of taking on ten thousand warriors, and a warrior with unlimited ability greater than even a *maharatha*.
277 Bhishma had pledged not to fight any women. Shikhandi was a woman in his previous birth, which is known to Bhishma. He is fielded against Bhishma to create an opportunity to kill him. In the case of Drona, his son Ashvatthama's death is alluded to, to render him open to an attack in a state of despair. Karna is systematically weakened by seeking his protective armour and earrings, followed by creating conditions that lead him to use his divine spear prematurely. And finally, Duryodhana is hit below the belt on his thigh by Bhim, a vulnerable area, contrary to the rules of *gadha yudh*.

278 Bibek Debroy, "Drona-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1132(155)", no. 86, p. 420.
279 Bibek Debroy, "Udyoga Parva, Ch. 667(4)", no. 39, p. 157.
280 Ibid, pp. 157–8.
281 Bibek Debroy, "Udyoga Parva, Ch. 671(8)", no. 39, pp. 164–5.
282 Bibek Debroy, "Udyoga Parva, Ch. 682(19)", no. 39, pp. 192–3. An *Akshouhini* was considered an army composed of 21,870 chariots, 21,879 elephants, 65,610 horses and 109,350 foot soldiers.
283 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1429(101)", no. 80, p. 418.
284 Bibek Debroy, "Drona-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1132(155)", no. 86, p. 420.
285 Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, *Vol. 7 (Translation)*, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1217(67)", no. 20, pp. 301-303.
286 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, Ch. 1143(166)", no. 86, p. 473.
287 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, Ch. 1144(167)", no. 86, p. 478.
288 Bibek Debroy, "Narayana Astra Moksha Parva, 1145(168)", no. 86, p. 482.
289 Bibek Debroy, "Souptika Parva, Ch. 1292(9)", no. 80, p. 39.
290 Bibek Debroy, "Jayadratha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1094(117)", no. 86, p. 279.
291 Bibek Debroy, "Jayadratha-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1095(118)", no. 86, p. 281.
292 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1424(96)", no. 80, p. 407.
293 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1211(61)", no. 19, p. 272.
294 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1431(103) and 1432(104), no. 80, pp. 425 and 427.
295 Bibek Debroy, "Abhimanyu-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1009(32)", no. 86, p. 5.
296 Ibid, p. 6.
297 Bibek Debroy, "Bhishma-Vadha Parva, Ch. 905(45)", no. 76, p. 234.
298 Bibek Debroy, "Drona-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1140(163)", no. 86, p. 448.
299 Bibek Debroy, "Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1211(61)", no. 19, p. 272.
300 Ibid.
301 Bibek Debroy, "Souptika Parva, Ch. 1291(8)", no. 80, pp. 34–5.
302 Bibek Debroy, "Sambhava Parva, Ch. 123", no. 13, p. 335.
303 Bibek Debroy, "Droupadi-Svayamvara Parva, Ch. 179", no. 13, p. 446.
304 Bibek Debroy, "Jatugriha-Daha Parva, Ch. 126", no. 13, pp. 342–3.
305 Bibek Debroy, "Kichaka-Vadha Parva, Ch. 617(21)", no. 39, pp. 49–50.
306 Bibek Debroy, "Go-Grahana Parva", no. 39, pp. 76–131.
307 Bibek Debroy, "Kairata Parva, Ch. 338(41)", no. 34, p. 389.
308 See K. Subrahmanyam, *Defence and Development*, Centre for the Study of Social Change, Minerva Associates, New Delhi, 1973.
309 India responded through military means after Pakistan had transgressed the mutually accepted LoC and refused to vacate Indian posts illegally occupied by its army. This left India with no choice but to use the armed forces to ensure reoccupation of its territory. Further, India did not attempt to go any further and seize territory across the LoC and accordingly laid down restrictions during the military campaign.
310 Barry Bearak, 'India Buries Soldiers That Pakistan Won't Claim,' *The New York Times*, July 17, 1999, at https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/17/world/india-buries-soldiers-that-pakistan-won-t-claim.html (Accessed March 03, 2024).

311 Ashwani Sharma, 'Remembering Captain Saurabh Kalia On Kargil Vijay Divas,' *Outlook*, July 26, 2023, at https://www.outlookindia.com/national/remembering-captain-saurabh-kalia-on-kargil-vijay-divas-news-305774 (Accessed March 03, 2024).
312 'Indian PM Modi Tells Russia's Putin Now 'Is Not an Era of War',' *Reuters*, September 16, 2023, at https://www.reuters.com/world/indian-pm-modi-tells-russias-putin-now-is-not-an-era-war-2022-09-16/ (Accessed January 11, 2024).
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314 Ibid.
315 Ibid.
316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
318 Ibid.
319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
321 'Its Been 75 Years Since Pakistan Pushed Raiders into Kashmir; Its Opportunistic, Jihadi Nature Remains Same", *Firstpost*, October 21, 2021, at https://www.firstpost.com/world/its-been-75-years-since-pakistan-pushed-raiders-into-kashmir-its-opportunistic-jihadi-nature-remains-same-10074311.html (Accessed March 03, 2024).
322 Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh, *War Despatches: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965*, Lancers, New Delhi, 2010.
323 Sujan Chinoy, Bipin Bakshi and Vivek Chadha (eds.), *1971 India-Pakistan War: 50 Years Later*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2023.
324 General V.P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, Harper Collins, New Delhi, 2020.
325 Jaswant Singh, *Defending India*, Macmillan India Ltd, Bangalore, 1999, p. 42.
326 Ibid, pp. 42–3.
327 Jaswant Singh quoting Jawaharlal Nehru from Major General A.A. Rudra, *His Services in the Three Armies and Two World Wars*, Reliance, New Delhi, 1997, in *Defending India*, Macmillan India Ltd, Bangalore, 1999, p. 42.
328 Jaswant Singh quoting Jawaharlal Nehru in *Defending India*, Macmillan India Ltd, Bangalore, 1999, p. 48.
329 S. Jaishankar, no. 17, p. 67.
330 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1337(9)", no. 80, p. 155.
331 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1374(46)", no. 80, p. 258.
332 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1379(51)", no. 80, p. 277.
333 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1398(70)", no. 80, p. 340.
334 Bibek Debroy, "Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1391(63)", no. 80, p. 317.
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451 This aspect will be taken up in detail in the chapter on *dharma* and its relevance, conceptualisation and conduct of war.
452 Upinder Singh, no. 403, p. 76.

453 Ibid, p. 120.
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456 Ibid, pp. 558–9.
457 Ibid, pp. 566–8.
458 The *Arthashastra* distinguishes victories as *Dharma Vijayi*, *Lobha Vijayi* and *Asura Vijayi* – victory in the pursuit of dharma, possessions and destruction.
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The Mahabharata and more specifically, the idea of war, are anchored in the core values of *dharma*. Even so, its implementation allows the freedom of choice that can meet the demands of both the ideal and the realistic requirements of challenging situations. More often than not, this functions in the grey zone of life. This is best illustrated by the approach adopted by Krishna in the epic. His decision-making ability is enabled by the right balance between idealism and realism, represented by an equilibrium between values and interests.

"Hoping for fraternity, I first used conciliation, to prevent dissension of the Kurus and ensure the welfare of the subjects. When I saw that peace was not acceptable, I resorted to alienation and recounted your deeds divine and human. When I saw that Suyodhana ignored my words of conciliation, I assembled the kings and attempted to sow seeds of dissension … I censured the kings, I denigrated Suyodhana. I repeatedly tried to frighten Radheya and Soubala … Through eloquence and counsel, I tried to create disunity among the kings … For that wicked one, I see no other means but the fourth one of chastisement."

Shri Krishna
in the Mahabharata

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