

A Study of Various Facets of Dharma as Duty in the Mahabharata

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Abstract

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Dharma is a multi-faceted term that means, religion, duty, belief systems, morals, ethics and a lot more, in different contexts. The aspect of dharma that will be looked into this paper is one that would be related to 'duty'. 'Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.', (Rousseau, The Social Contract, 1762), this idea encompasses the dilemma faced by human beings in relation to the idea of dharma as duty. Dharma maintains and sustains; it is the natural order of life, when followed diligently, can lead to fulfilment and attainment of one's purpose of existence. The Mahabharata is a repository of the way of life, it has the potential to provide direction and meaning to life. The idea of dharma as expressed in the Mahabharata is multi-hued. Be it the apt reward enjoyed by the anonymous dasi who follows her dharma and unites with the odious Vyasa following the orders, as a result birthing the only wise and able progeny – Vidura, is an instance of an upright action leading to a right consequence. Duryodhana finding place in heaven after the foul blow on his thigh which causing his death, in spite of the machinations that he participates in all through his life, as he has diligently followed his Svadharma - the Kshatriyadharma.

Guru Dronacharya and his son Ashvatthama, born as Brahmins but donning the mantle of Kshatriyas are found creating havoc on and off the battlefield. Irawati Karve in the Yuganta; The End of an Epoch, 1967, has rightly titled one of the chapters 'Paradharmo Bhayavahah' which deals with the flip side of adopting dharma, the 'duty' prescribed for a group of people that should not be taken up, even mistakenly, by ones not belonging there. This paper would attempt to take a look at the spectrum of examples from the epic pertaining to following one's prescribed duty and also would consider its associated outcome. At the same time, the application of the principle of dharma with reference to business set ups would also be looked into, for the benefit of its stakeholders.

Keywords: Dharma, epic, karma, dilemma, consequences

धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः

तस्माद्धर्मो न हन्तव्यो मा नो धर्मो हतोऽवधीत् ॥

Dharm ev hato hanti dharmo rakshati rakshitah I

Tasmaaddharmo na hantavyo ma no dharmo
hatovadheet II

(The extinction of dharma leads to the destruction of those who cause its extinction and protects the

preserved dharma by safeguarding its protectors. Therefore, one should never commit the annihilation of dharma, lest the lost dharma never cease to exist within us.)

This quotation on dharma is from the Manusmriti verse 8.15. It has appeared at several places in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is a repository of the way of life, it has the potential to provide direction

and meaning to life. To quote Prof. Dandekar, “If there is any one single work which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of the life and thought of Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influence, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the Mahabharata.” (A Toppling World-View, Writing from the Margin, Pg.199). Dharma is discussed at length at various places in the epic.

Dharma is a multi-faceted term, it means religion, duty, belief systems, morals, ethics and a lot more. The aspect of dharma that will be looked into this paper is the one that would be related to ‘duty’. The term ‘dharma’ is used on a regular basis in different contexts. Especially, if someone transcends one’s limits, the person is accused of not following his/her dharma. Each profession has its own set of dos and don’ts and if those are not followed, the individual is held responsible for not carrying out his duty or dharma. Similarly, every organisation has to follow its own individual dharma which is spelt out in its mission, vision and values upheld.

Business set ups and dharma:

In an article titled ‘Why a dose of Dharma is good for organisations?’ PVS Suryakumar, elaborates on the need for organisations to have their moorings in place by clearly defining the roles they play. The idea as the author opines is “... to tether organisations to their moorings for attaining role clarity. Social anthropologists and management experts are requested to transform this idea into a framework through research. This idea is based on the dharma (obligations) enshrined for all citizens based on roles performed by them for the society.” (January 17, 2021) at 08:58 PM.

In the context of a society, each one of us is assigned with a role to play, so also in an organisation. Playing our part then, to the fullest and in the right spirit is what preserving and protecting dharma is all about, it is this, which in turn protects people and systems.

With reference to an organisation, the dharma is played out by ethically and diligently following the values that have been spelt out at the inception of the organisation.

Dharma and Organizational Ethics: Lessons from the Mahabharata’ an informative article throws adequate light on the practical aspects of dharma and the categories it can be classified in which are as follows: Sadharana or General, and the Vishesha or Particular. The article elaborates on Sadharana dharma as general principles that are applicable to all individuals, regardless of their background or social status and the Vishesha dharma, pertaining to specific obligations and duties that are unique to particular individuals based on their social roles, family traditions, and personal circumstances.

It suggests that dharma provides a framework for individuals to live a meaningful and purposeful life, while also contributing to the well-being of society as a whole. Manu, a Hindu lawgiver, outlines ten essential components of Sadharana dharma, which include self-possession, forbearance, bodily discipline, non-theft, purity of body and mind, sense-control, intellectual efficiency, learning and knowledge, devotion to truth, and non-anger. While Vishesha dharma consists of specific obligations and duties that are unique to each of the four varnas (or castes) and the four stages of a Dvija (or twice-born) person. Each varna has its own set of duties and responsibilities, based on their particular role in society. Similarly, each stage of a Dvija person's life comes with specific obligations and expectations that must be fulfilled. These Vishesha dharma requirements vary depending on an individual's social status, (www.dharmadispatch.in, n.d.).

Further on, in the same article, it is clearly described that ‘Organizational ethics is concerned with the ethical principles, values, and standards that shape the behaviour of individuals and organizations in their dealings with others. This is crucial because it

helps organizations establish a climate of trust, respect, and accountability, and fosters an atmosphere in which employees, customers, and other stakeholders feel appreciated and treated fairly' (Satyendra, 2022) www.ispatguru.com.

The article further elaborates on organizational ethics and values and their importance in Indian philosophy, and the fact that ethics and dharma are closely connected concepts. It defines dharma as a set of moral and ethical obligations that individuals have in their life, including values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and respect for others. It further contextualises it in terms of an organisation, wherein, it can be understood as the set of ethical principles that guide the behaviour of individuals and organizations in their interactions with others. It underscores the importance for organizations to incorporate dharma into their ethical practices because it helps create a sense of purpose and meaning for employees, and fosters a culture of trust and respect for all stakeholders. It further states that, dharma focuses on the importance of social responsibility and the need to contribute to the welfare of society. This is particularly relevant for organizations in today's world, where social and environmental issues have become critical concerns. By incorporating dharma into their organizational ethics, companies can contribute to the greater good while also creating value for their stakeholders (Bhangaokar et.al. 2009). Bhangaokar, Rachana & Kapadia, Shagufa. (2009). At the interface of 'Dharma' and 'Karma': Interpreting moral discourse in India. *Psychological Studies*. 54. 96-108. 10.1007/s12646-009 0018-1.

The article is particularly relevant in the context of this paper with organizational ethics dharma is particularly important as it perpetuates a culture of trust and respect, and provides a framework for ethical behaviour that is rooted in moral and ethical duties and responsibilities. By incorporating dharma into their ethical practices, organizations can create a

sense of purpose and meaning for employees, contribute to the welfare of society, and foster a culture of trust and respect for all stakeholders.

Dharma and the Mahabharata:

The Mahabharata can be considered a handbook on dharma. One of the important lessons of the Mahabharata has been to follow one's own dharma. The term dharma is translated as 'religion' 'religious duty' or just 'right action'. It is a subtle term that can be interpreted in different ways by different individuals. Dharma for Yudhishtira meant virtues that need to be adopted for the well-being of everyone in the society. Dharma also refers to social duties that an individual has to deliver by virtue of the position that one occupies in society. The most illuminating example in this regard could be the 'dasi' who births Vidura, who is the most 'complete' of all of Vyasa's progeny. That is because, the dasi single-mindedly follows her dharma of serving Vyasa without questioning the situation. Amba's single-minded devotion, is similarly rewarded in her rebirth as Shikhandi. In a similar manner, Duryodhana follows the dharma of his kshatriya varna that is his svadharma in spite of all odds. Yudhishtira on the other hand, is caught between the tension that arises out of treating dharma as virtue and carrying out the social dharma of the kshatriya, so much so that Bhima has to remind Yudhishtira in order to rouse him to action:

svadharmam pratipadya svajahi satrun samagatan/

"Perform your dharma, the duty pertaining to your own Varna or order and destroy your enemies." (3.34.125 quoted In. Sukthankar 69)

Also, Mother Kunti's parting words of advice to Yudhishtira may be taken to be the motto of the Mahabharata: dharma te dhiyatam buddhir manas tu mahad astu ca/ "Let thy reason be fixed on Dharma. Let thy mind be ever great." (B.15.17.21 quoted in Sukthankar 90)

Yudhishtira's patience is unbearable and quite unlike a kshatriya, it forces Draupadi to express:

“You are the most unusual kshatriya I have ever seen. I have been watching you ever since we came here. You do not seem to be worried at all about the trouble that has visited us. My frame burns day and night with anger and humiliation. But you do not seem to be affected at all. A kshatriya, who does not reveal his anger, is no kshatriya at all. You are a great believer in the virtue called patience. But my lord, misplaced patience is wrong. You must not show patience now. This is not the time for it. You must not be patient and forgiving towards your enemies. Wrath is the only becoming ornament of a kshatriya...there should be a happy blending of the two in the mental make-up of every man and especially in that of a kshatriya” (Subramaniam 219).

In the ‘Anushasana Parva’, the ritualised social conduct based on the four varnas or social classes: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are described. The social duty of a kshatriya is different from that of a brahman for he is expected to be warlike, aggressive and heroic, whilst a brahman is expected to have a more peaceful demeanour and always endeavour to avoid any form of quarrel or hostility. However, Mahabharata does not offer easy answers, it creates an awareness that dharma is not just an easy-codes of dos and don'ts. The Mahabharata explores these tensions and uses them to enhance the drama of its narrative, with some characters committed absolutely to the kshatriya code and others refusing to accept any type of behaviour that appears to contravene the great virtues they revere.

In this context it is relevant to draw attention to Krishna's version of karma-yoga as expressed in the ‘Bhagavad Gita’ which believes that, a person does not have to abandon the social dharma of a kshatriya or any other class, but one has to fulfil this duty without a selfish desire. In this way society can

continue to function effectively on the basis of dharmic duty and the individual can simultaneously undertake the ‘karma-yoga’ that leads ultimately to moksha, liberation from rebirth. It is this logic, that is witnessed in the ‘Svargarohanaparvan’ Duryodhana shares space in the heavens with others. The enmities of the otherworld cease to exist in heaven and Duryodhana is worshipped along with the gods because he offers his body as the oblation in the sacred fire of battle. It is true that he persecuted the Pandavas, but he attained the position because of his observance of kshatriya-dharma. He remained brave and heroic even amidst the terror of war.

Another angle to this discussion can be added with the help of the essay titled ‘Message of the Mahabharata’ (2000-2001) where M.A. Mehendale throws light on the importance of the concept of Dharma and Apaddharma of a kshatriya. According to Mehendale, the epic nucleus of the Mahabharata lies in the four stanzas collectively known as the Bharatasavitri and of relevance to this thesis is the fourth and the last stanza of Bharatasavitri, where Vyasa asserts that while dharma is eternal, happiness and grief are transitory. A man should not leave the path of dharma due to longing, fear, or greed, nor even to save his life.

These last lines reveal the importance attached to the path of dharma. The two incidences where dharma is forsaken are the ‘bare faced’ lie by Yudhishtira to Drona and the second is the foul blow below the navel by Bheema. Both these incidents take place on the advice of the friend, philosopher and guide of the Pandavas i.e. Krishna himself, who exhorts the Pandavas to act contrary to dharma. Thus, as Krishna preached, one may have to take recourse to adharma for a just cause. What was taught on an absolute level by Vyasa needed modification in actual practice-a distinction to be made between dharma and appaddharma. Thus, appaddharma is the exception to the rule that one needs to follow in order to face life as a mortal. The Mahabharata heralds the beginning of

the Kaliyuga, thus the ways and means of leading life in the next yuga are charted in the Gita, by lord Krishna.

Irawati Karve's 'Paradharma Bhayavahah':

In the essay titled 'Paradharma Bhayavahah' which literally means 'adopting other's dharma is scary' to explicate the title, Karve expresses that Ashwatthama and Drona, who are integral to the main story of the Mahabharata born as brahmanas but adopt the kshatriya way of life, which leads to their downfall. In fact, Drona's fall begins from the time he deprives a defeated king (Drupada) of his kingdom which is against the kshatriya code.

Drona asks for his dakshina to the Pandavas, the short-sighted Drona thinks it is the end of the matter. However, a kshatriya is as capable as a brahmana of hatred, and right enough the deprived king Drupada's son avenges his father's lost honour, by seizing the opportune moment and attacking Drona in the Kurukshetra battle. An assumption on Drona's part thus leads to his death.

'Forgiveness', 'serenity', 'self-control'-none of the Brahmana virtues mentioned in the Gita are seen in Drona'(Karve1991:129). In fact, during the Kurukshetra war, Drona is a compromise choice as general as Duryodhana is harassed by conflicting claims for precedence by his kshatriya allies. After Bhishma, when the general-ship is handed over to Drona, he tries his best to prove his loyalty to the new master. The three days of his general-ship are days of great slaughter.

By seeing his unrighteous ways of fighting the rishis in the skies and Bharadwaja his father come to Drona and say, "Drona, you have begun to fight in a manner which is not righteous. The time has come when you should die. Your end has come. Look at us and lay down your arms. After seeing us, you should not continue this cruel deed. You are a master of all the Vedas and Vedangas as befits a Brahmin. You must

not be a kshatriya anymore. It does not become a great man like you to be cruel..." (Subramaniam 678)

In spite of all this, Drona does not relent, it takes Bheema's words, to bring about the desired effect on Drona and he finally relents. Bheema looks at the acharya and said:

"If Brahmins had continued to practice their dharma, without taking up the work of kshatriyas, the race of kshatriyas would not have been destroyed at all. They say that being compassionate and refraining from hurting others, is the virtue of the highest order, and that the Brahmin is the home of all virtues. But you are different. You are a great Brahmin. But you are a Brahmin just by birth. By profession you are a butcher. You have been killing thousands and thousands of men who have all been faithful to their professions, unlike you. You are too fond of wealth and you are blinded to the true value of things by your ignorance. Why do you want all this wealth? Is it for the sake of your wife and children? Your only son is dead and still you are continuing the work of a butcher. You teach dharma to others and you will not follow it yourself. Are you not ashamed of yourself?" (ibid 681)

So blinded is Drona by mixed emotions of devotion to Duryodhana, of winning the battle, of proving himself as the best general that, even when he is killed, he shouts in helplessness and anger, 'Karna, Kripa, Duryodhana, fight on, I am gone' (Karve 1991:129)

Drona's son Ashwatthama is a sharp contrast as he discards all qualities of Brahmana-hood. He is utterly debased, as he is caught in a cycle of injury and retaliation. In the use of astras, he is supposed to be an equal of Arjuna. The reputation that Arjuna enjoyed, of an ideal warrior is never enjoyed by Ashwatthama thus, his name is not considered for general-ship in the Kurukshetra battle.

In a way, Ashwatthama causes the death of Duryodhana, for whom he professes such concern through his impatience and thoughtlessness, he betrays the hideout of Duryodhana, by talking aloud outside the pool where Duryodhana was hiding. After Duryodhana's fall, he forcibly anoints himself as the commander of the army. The heinous crime of killing the sleeping brave-hearts in the Pandava camp is carried out by Ashwatthama in spite of Kripa dissuading him from this plan, Aswathhama's reply is intriguing:

“You tell me to act like a Brahman, but I have never learned Brahman code. From childhood onwards, all I have learned is weaponry. I was born in a high Brahman family, but unlucky that I am, I have lived as a kshatriya. Now let me follow that dharma” (ibid: 134).

Thus, paying no attention to Kripa's objection, he sets out. The unruly use of the terrible astra, invites the wrath of Krishna. Krishna curses him of a long life, deserted by people. Ashwatthama is doomed to a life more terrible than death. Drona never had the burning consciousness of his dharma. Ashwatthama had given up his own dharma and could never understand other's dharma. He was born a Brahman. He could have become a king by virtue of the acquired kingdom of Drona, that did not materialise. The use of astras was only for bringing about destruction and inviting the terrible curse of Krishna. Ashwatthama, thus rejected his own Brahmanhood, and never could manage to be a kshatriya. He is a perfect example of loss of smriti or consciousness opines Karve.

In contrast to Yudhishthira, Drona and Ashwatthama, Duryodhana stands out as a shining example of following his svadharma, which also helps Bhoo Devi to shake off her burden by eliminating the bad elements and help regain the lost balance of the universe, which is reason why the Mahabharata war 'had' taken place. Gitomer (1992) in the essay titled 'King Duryodhana: The Mahabharata Discourse of

Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama', focuses on Duryodhana and his virtues. Following kshatradharma till the end, has been his strong point.

Conclusion:

Thus, following one's duty or dharma is beneficial to the individual and society on the whole. Sadharana dharma, Vishesh dharma and Appaddharma have to be integrated in life as and when circumstances demand. Dharma paves the path for action. If one is on the side of dharma, usually one cannot go wrong. Knowing what is one's dharma and yet not following it because of ego, malice or jealousy is a grave sin, which should not be committed under any circumstances. Business set-ups have to spell out their vision and mission statements clearly and also the CSR policies which in turn would help them follow the path of righteousness. Dharma should not be abandoned for petty gains by organisations. The same applies to individuals holding high ranking posts. Leaders need not be goaded into action by external force, it has to flow naturally, in pursuance of their responsibility. Employees on the lower rungs of the hierarchy ought to follow orders unquestioned, at times, bearing the well-being of the organisation in mind. Ethics, morals and values have to be the guiding principles for running an organisation, without which such business houses would be reckoned as places where solely profit – making motivates individuals, which is akin to a body minus the soul.

Dharma as duty then, should be the fulcrum on which the life of an individual or an organisation should hinge.

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