

The Grand Epic Questions Unravelled

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An epic is a protected, poetic composition focusing upon a hero who has achieved many triumphs in his life, winning all atrocities. Epics are based on established traditions which narrate the deeds of old heroic figures. They tell us about the past of a group, religion or nation. In India, the word 'epic' brings in mind the two very famous works, Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The Mahabharat is the longest epic written in Sanskrit language. It is a collection of more than 74,000 verses and is divided into 18 books. It was written by a sage, Vedvyasa. It throws light upon the politics prevalent in the ancient times. It teaches us why we should pursue the duties assigned to us. It tells us what wrong can happen when we speak a lie, or commit a sin. It shows us how one can betray their own family members to fulfill their selfish desires. There are many lessons to be learnt but at the same time, there are many inherent layers which may question or erode our sense of morality, but, at the end, it teaches us how to become a good human being, to prioritize our necessities and the importance of every relationship in our lives. It teaches us the true meaning of love, respects and friendship. It even fills us with patriotism. Everyone should read at least one epic in their lifetime, not only to explore their past, but also to decorate their future path. Within the Indian tradition, Mahabharata is often called the 5th Veda.

The bulk of Mahabharata was probably compiled between the 3rd century BCE and 3rd century CE, with the oldest preserved parts not much older than around 400 BCE. The original events related to the epic probably fall between the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. The text probably reached its zenith (final form) by the early Gupta period.

Over the centuries, versions of the epic were written in a variety of languages through an ongoing process of dialogue between people, communities and who rewrote the texts, several stories that originated in specific regions or circulated amongst certain people, found their way into the epic, thus making it a dynamic one.

Mahabharata

(A research based narrative and argument on whether Mahabharata is likely to erode the reader's sense of ethics and morality than promoting it in them.)

The Narrative:

The word Dharma encompasses ideas such as duty, right, character, justice, religion, customs, which is appropriate, correct or morally upright. In common parlance, Dharma means 'right way of living' and 'path of righteousness'. In Hinduism Dharma also means charity, rendering service to others, being truthful, self study, compassion, faith in others, etc. Therefore, in short, Dharma means a mode of moral conduct. But there are certain aspects in Mahabharata which confuses us whether the epic really followed truly moral or ethical lines.

Mahabharata is said to be a war between Dharma and Adharma. But as the epic proceeds, sometimes so subtle that it may arouse perplexity in one's mind.

Divisions in the Society:

The society of the epic era was so rigid and divided into groups, clans, caste and class that it had to take some unethical and immoral turns like Drona, a Brahmana, refusing to teach Ekalavya a Nishada. But when Ekalavya acquired the supreme skill of archery all by himself, in front of Drona's image, made of clay, prepared by himself. Drona immediately accepted his tutorship and as a part of Gurudakshina, demanded his right thumb, without which archery is next to impossible, so that he can never supersede his Khatriya disciple, Arjun, UNETHICAL.

Draupadi, unaccepting Karna, calling him 'Sutaputra' i.e. of low caste origin, during her swayamvara, even when talent-wise and legally, he was the most deserving candidate and was equally capable of winning. There were also many other instances when Karna was disrespected for his Suta origin. Society must be divided on the basis of talent and not on the basis of birth. Merit should be valued more than status. IMMORAL.

Position of Women in The Society:

Draupadi's marriage with the 5 Pandavas was the most challenging episode of the Mahabharata. It indicated polyandry (the practice of a woman having several husbands) among the elite, during that period. It shows the degrading status of woman in the society, where her emotions and opinion was neglected. UNETHICAL

The game of dice, where Yudhishtira rolls away his possessions his kingdom, his brothers even his own freedom and his wife Draupadi since Yudhishtira had already lost himself in the game, could he jeopardize his wife? The expert in law Bhisma, gravely said, "According to the Dharma, even slave has a right over his wife, so even as a slave, Yudhishtira had the right to wager Draupadi". The law which was meant to be for the well-being of human beings, become technical to a point, where in establishing legality, HUMANITY was lost. IMMORAL.

Karna tried to shame Draupadi by saying as she was living with five men; she cannot be regarded as a wife. But as a woman with questionable character, thus according to the Kauravas, everyone had the right to humiliate her, as she had no status or dignity. Even Yudhishtira staked her perceiving her as his personal property or commodity Draupadi's Vastraharan, according to me is the dirtiest example of human character and its toxicity portrayed in the epic age. UNETHICAL

Dharma V/s Divinity:

There are many instances in the epic where the righteousness of Dharma was harmed in the name of its sanction by the divinity, like, allow me to question the justification of some :

I : Yudhishtira saying "Aswathama Hata Iti Gaja".

II : Arjuna Killed Bhisma, taking the help of Shikhandi (Amba reborn) as his armour because knew Bhisma won't ever kill a woman.

II : Indra, the king of Devas, taking away Karna's Kavach and Kundal so that he couldn't remain invincible in Kurukshetra. Moreover, he was killed when he was bare-handed and trying to remove his chariot wheel from the mud, by Arjuna.

IV : Even the killing of Duryadhana was an intrigue and unfair conspiracy.

The Argument :

The story Mahabharata is that of a dynastic struggle for the throne of Hastinapura, the kingdom ruled by Kuruclan. The two collateral branches of the family that participated in the struggle are the Kauravas and Pandavas. The struggle culminated in the great battle of Kurukshetra in which the Pandavas were victorious. The battle produced complex conflicts of kingship and friendship, instance of family loyalty and duty taking precedents over what is right as well as converse. It was a battle over Dharma and Adharma, God over Evil. It was a battle to uphold the law and protect the truth.

Divisions in the Society:

The epic society was rigid and dominated by caste and class. We are already aware of the stories of Ekalavya and Karna. But we also, must not miss the story of loyalty and friendship of Karna and Duryodhana, where Duryodhana respected Karna only for his talent and not for his origin. He crowned Karna, as the king of Anga, which was a positive gesture, which indicated that talent was respected in the society.

In Mahabharata, the marriage of Bhima and the Rakshasi Hidimba and the marriage of king Shantanu with fisherman Satyawati proves the exogamy was prevalent in the society.

Position of Women in the Society:

Power of women to choose her own husband i.e. Swayambhara added enormous prestige to her existence in the society. Draupadi, Hidimba, Rukmini, Subhadra, Shakuntala are the women of the epic era whose opinion to select their own husband was respected in the society.

Moreover, the practice of Sati was not predominant in the society Madri choosing it and Kunti's (both are the wives of Pandu) decision to raise the Pandavas shows even after husband's death, women had the opinion to choose her life.

The position of woman was a pivot in a family; this is evident from the marriage of Draupadi with all the five Pandavas. Her marriage was a classic example of the statement, "A mother's command (Kunti) could not be violated".

Lord Krishna, the 8th avatar of God Vishnu has tried to focus on respecting women. He has emphasized on the importance their opinion on love, respect and friendship. Krishna is worshipped as a supreme God in Hinduism and his message to recognize a woman's true strength adds in her upliftment in the society.

Dharma V/s Divinity:

Duryodhana was an impious person with ulterior motive, full of jealousy, selfishness, so he could never produce any good for anyone neither society nor kingdom but anyone coming close to him could turn impious. On the contrary, Yudhisthira was a pious man wanting to uphold truth. Godliness and create a prosperous and harmonious world where everyone would live in peace and where Dharma would be protected.

Although in Mahabharata the Pandavas played fair and ethical but were constantly humiliated by the Kauravas. Sometimes they tried to kill the Pandavas individually or as a whole (Lakshgrah). Draupadi was humiliated and there had been constant discriminatory attitude and cheating on the line of Adharma. During the war of Kurukshetra, the Kauravas fought unethically and killed Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna in the Chakravyuh. This

triggered anger in the Pandava's camp and only after this they started bending the rules of the war to win the battle over Adharma. Thus in Mahabharata divinity and dharma worked band in hand to create a better world.

*|| Yada Yada Hi Dharmasya Glanir Bhavati Bharata
Abhyuthanam Adharmasya Tadaatmaanam Srijaamyaham
Paritranaay SaadhunaamVinaashaay Ch Dushkritaam
Dharmasanthana Panaarthaay Sambhavaami Yuge Yuge ||*

Epics:

(The significance of epics as a source for history with special emphasis on the epic, Mahabharata)

Epics serve as main sources of information on the political institutions, social and cultural organization of the contemporary era. Moreover, epics are considered as the finest literary works of the ancient period and unclaimed for their literary and philosophical value.

Mahabharata was written in Sanskrit language. Although, there are versions of other languages as well as the Sanskrit used in Mahabharata is far simpler than that of the Vedas or Prashastis perhaps because the writers wanted to reach out to the mass.

Contents of the Mahabharata can be broadly divided into two heads, NARRATIVE (the section containing stories) and DIDACTIC (the section containing prescriptions about social norms). The narrative section of ten contains stories and the didactic sections include social messages.

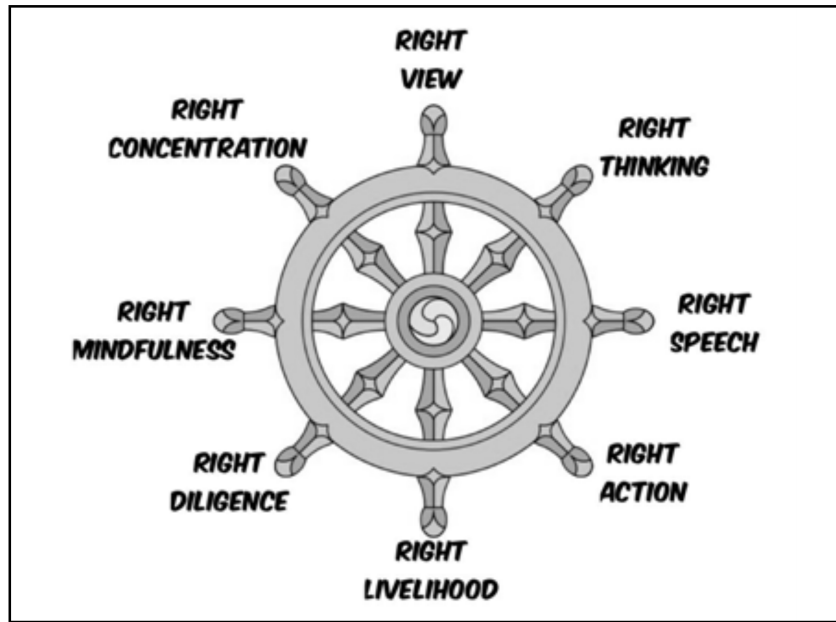
Mahabharata ('Great Epics of the Bharata Dynasty') is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded by Hindus as both a text about DHARMA.

(Hindu Moral Law) and a HISTORY (Itihas, literally, "that's what happened"). Appearing in its present form, in about 400 CE, the Mahabharata consists of a mass of mythological and didactic material arranged around central heroic narrative that tells tales of the struggle of sovereignty between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

Mahabharata, the poem is made up of almost 1,00,000 couplets divided into 18 parvans or sections. Although it is unlikely that any single person alone has wrote the poem, along with its basic plot, accounts and numerous myths, the Mahabharata reveals the evolution of Hinduism and its relation with other religions during its composition.

The period during which the epic took shape was one of the transitions from Vedic sacrifice to sectarian Hinduism, as well as the time of interaction with Buddhism and Jainism.

Above all, Mahabharata is an exposition of Dharma (codes of moral conduct) including, the proper conduct of a king of a warrior of an individual living in the times of calamity of a person seeking to attend Maksha (freedom from samsara or re-birth). The poem repeatedly demonstrates that the conflicting codes of Dharma are so 'subtle' that in some situations the hero cannot help but violate the in some respect no matter what choice he makes to uphold truth righteousness and justice.



The Wheel of Dharma

Mahabharata, the greatest epic of all time which enlightens our mind, body and soul also teaches us the Karma is the economy of action and its consequences. Dharma is one's duty and how one should rightfully act in any given situation.

The Mahabharata war itself was due to Karma - the consequences of the individual and combined actors and factors.

Dharma was about the rules of engagement. Almost the entire text discusses dharma, through conversation between the protagonists – between the pros and cons.

Dharma, does not come with a manual, so it is the reflection of one's conscience and different for each individual. The Hindu Scriptures are written like precedent cases in law; examples of right and wrong action are given and it is up to the person to make their decisions.

The Gita, which is the crown jewel of Mahabharata, sums it up quite eloquently :-

*iti te jnanam akhyatam guhyad guhyataram maya ||
vimrsyaitad asesena yathecchasi tatha kuru ||*

Which says, it is important to bear mind that in our daily lives, Karma explains the WHY of any situation – good or bad, but dharma determines HOW we should respond to that situation. People fall into rivers due to their Karma, but bur dharma is to do what we can to save the drowning man without judging or criticizing him. Thus Mahabharata teaches us, that knowledge, which is the greatest of all mysteries, must be reflected thoroughly, but one must do what one's conscience tells them to do.

Dharma should lead to Karma (pro-activity) on our part and Karma should never be used as an excuse of negligence of indifference.

Good and bad would be around us; Dharma and Adharma would surround us; right and wrong would be sometimes so overlapping. But it is our choice, but strength in character

the truthfulness within us that decides what we want, what we expect and what we strive for. A person's life is made by their beliefs – “what you think, is what you become.”

Ramayana is the story revolving around the coming or advent of the Aryans in India and winning over the Dravidians, to establish their power. Mahabharata revolves around the story that how, after setting in India, the Aryans solidified their power on the lines of dharma or righteousness.

I would not go into controversy, by telling them myth rather I respect them as our tradition, history, from which we can not only learn our past but also get the opportunity to rectify them to lead a better life.

Mahabharata is an open book and it is upto us, which exact chapters are we looking for; or rather, which chapter captivates us more. Life is not a compulsion, but a choice and these epics are nothing more than guidebooks. It is upto us, whether we learn from them or not and what exactly we prefer to learn. But when Adharma (dishonesty) comes over Dharma (honesty), I would definitely choose Dharma, however difficult its path may be ...

To conclude, I would like to quote a line, ‘LEGENDS ARE LESSONS GIVEN BY THE KINGS OF OUR PAST’. Let us celebrate that.

References

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