

'The Dicing', 'The Sequel to Dicing' and 'The Book of the Assembly Hall'

**Lesson: 'The Dicing', 'The Sequel to Dicing' and 'The Book of the Assembly Hall'**

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*Mahabharata* is a major Sanskrit epic from Classical India which has influenced not only theatre, literature and other art forms but the very lives of people in India. In India the *Mahabharata* has had a rich and varied reception history across centuries. As Sukthankara says, "Whether we realize it or not, it remains a fact that we in India still stand under the spell of the *Mahabharata*."<sup>i</sup> Characters and incidents from the *Mahabharata* are often quoted and serve as paragons to drive home various messages of everyday life in all spaces, including the home. Whether it is in the form of numerous dramatic performances, musical and dance representations or even the televised *Doordarshan Mahabharata*, this Sanskrit epic has therefore been a rich source of guidance and entertainment for people in India.

The Mahabharata is said to be composed over a period of 1000 years from 400-300 BCE to 400AD, with many adaptations, interpolations and expansions. Since it has been an essential part of the living force of India, it has undergone many changes which include a lot of material that has been added to its original nucleus-*Jaya* or the victory song - like Brahmanic philosophy and thought, legends and myths of *Brahmanic* origin, geographical and genealogical data, fables, moral stories, parables, ascetic poetry, et cetera.<sup>ii</sup> Traditionally, it is said to be comprised of 1,00, 000 *Shlokas* which make it almost eight times the length of the Western classical epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.

### **What is the Mahabharata?**

*Mahabharata* is called a *kavya*. A *kavya* is generally regarded as a story that narrates the lives of personages of high status in society. As an epic, it is a recounting of the lives and actions of kings and queens in a dignified, elevated language. The expounding of a noble purpose is also considered as part of the epic tradition of which *Mahabharata* is a model. According to Wendy Doniger, the epic cloaks its narrative in Vedic terms and perhaps preserves many memories of the Vedic period. For instance, it places a lot of value on ostentatious rituals. It begins with King Janmejaya's snake sacrifice and looks back at Yudhistira's horse sacrifice, which was an important event in the *Mahabharata* narrative. Yet, it is very much a product of its times, that is, the centuries before and after the first millennium BC in which it might have been compiled.<sup>iii</sup>

In the tradition of the epic, a people look back at another heroic age, belonging to the past, with nostalgia. So, in the many stories and narratives of the epic, attempts are made to reconstruct that past. Yet, this reconstruction of the past may be disordered to some extent,

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due to the multiple retellings of it. An epic like *Mahabharata* spans many societies and generations and has been recited countless number of times to different audiences.

The primary narrative or story in the *Mahabharata* revolves around the resolution of the question of succession or the struggle over royal kingdom and power between the Kauravas and Pandavas, who are the main actors in the epic. It is this struggle which is at the core of the epic and is part of the reconstruction of a past age of heroes. Moreover, besides various aspects of laws and ideas governing human life and conduct like *karma*, *artha* and *moksha*, the Mahabharata has a great significance in Indian thought and philosophy because of its important, all permeating exposition on *dharma* or the order of things in the universe and human life, in a very attractive and comprehensible manner. It has therefore been given the status of the *fifth Veda*. It deals with many other aspects of human life in a way which is accessible even to the common man on the street. This has been achieved in the epic through a rich use of many narrative techniques like legends, fables and elements from folklore and vernacular tradition.

Despite the fact that the *Mahabharata* grew and changed with time across various traditions of thought, it is not a literary hodgepodge. Rather, an intertextuality of Hindu thought and ideas made it a conversation between various sources who added to its hybrid, contested narrative. Wendy Doniger claims that "The contradictions at its heart are not the mistakes of a sloppy editor but enduring cultural dilemmas that no author could ever have resolved."<sup>iv</sup>

However, precious little is known about the composition or even the dissemination of the epic *Mahabharata*. In fact, very little is known about who composed the text or even where it was composed. According to the traditional view, the author of the *Mahabharata* is said to be Vyasa, a great sage who is born of *Rsi* Parashara and a fisher woman of unknown antecedents. He is said to have also sired the blind King Dhrtarastra and Pandu of the *Kuru* clan. Thus, in the person of Vyasa, both fatherhood and authorship coalesce.<sup>v</sup> Vyasa is recounting the story of his own creation, that is, lives of his sons and grandsons. But it is most unfortunate that he has to witness the destruction of his own creation in the brutal, apocalyptic Mahabharata war.

However, many critics argue that Vyasa is not the author of the epic but the one who finally compiled it in written form. Yet, the complex relationship between oral tradition and transmission of epic through writing makes the idea of the single author-Vyasa - problematic. Interestingly, the meaning of the word Vyasa is one who arranges and edits.<sup>vi</sup>

According to tradition, this small text of *Jaya* or victory song with further additions became larger in the *Bharata* text of the epic narrative and later, with more interpolations and addition of new material to it, it grew to become the *Mahabharata*. The new material added to the epic through a slow process of accretion has made it almost impossible to assign a particular date or even authorship to the epic period.

Recent scholarly research on the composition and transmission of the text has challenged the view that the text was originally composed orally and was later compiled into a written one. Critics have argued that this is a simplistic view and that the Mahabharata, as we know it today is a product of an environment in which writing and the tradition of oral dissemination of knowledge were linked to each other in far more complex ways. In a way,

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the recreation of an early *Mahabharata* text, known as the *Poona text* through collating of various manuscripts from both northern and southern recensions of the Mahabharata, shows this complex relation between oral tradition and writing that are part of the composition of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Mahabharata as a Literary Text**

*Mahabharata* is the story about a brutal war, fought between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas over the Kingdom of the Bharatas. Although the war between the two sets of cousins is often seen as a tussle for power, questions like what the war is about, whether it can be averted and why does it take place at all, abound in the epic. As a literary text belonging to the epic tradition, the *Mahabharata* contains many twisting tales and riddle questions. These questions that have not been resolved conclusively in the epic form an important aspect of its central narrative. In fact such tales are also part of the most confounding of its many riddles. They contribute to its meaning as a literary text in interesting ways.

In Book 5 of the epic *Mahabharata*, the extreme measures that the Pandavas take to secure peace have been described. They send Krishna to Duryodhana as their emissary of peace and implore him to persuade Duryodhana to avoid war. And even though a divine figure acts as a messenger of peace, the war is imminent in The *Mahabharata*. But the question remains that given all the efforts by the Pandavas, why can not the war be averted?

Many of the problems and riddles, such as this one about peace and war, are never resolved conclusively in the *Mahabharata*. These form a tissue of unresolved questions which contribute to the thematic and formal complexity of the epic. In fact, a crucial literary feature of the epic is its "riddle-question design."<sup>viii</sup> For instance, Yudhistira was most reluctant to wage a decisive war and upon hearing the staggering number of those who died in the apocalyptic, brutal carnage along with his own kinsmen, Yudhistira finds he is unable to rule as a king and go beyond his immense grief. So, a question posed here is – could the war and the bloodshed that followed be averted? This is a riddle which cannot be resolved in the narrative of the epic, even after the Mahabharata war.

Emily T. Hudson argues that "many of the 'problems' or riddle-questions that the *Mahabharata* raises and never conclusively resolves revolve around two related issues: the power of human agency and the complexities of the moral life."<sup>ix</sup> Such riddles are linked to the exploration of other concepts in the epic and are an important part of the epic's literariness. The unresolved question of Yudhistira's grief and suffering due to the war, for instance, is inextricably tied up with the epic's concern with 'dharma'- what is *dharma*, does following *dharma* ensure well-being?

Moreover, beside this, the *Mahabharata* has many unique literary features which provide a sense of coherence to an otherwise dizzyingly complex text. The epic, in fact, contains a story about why it is full of so many knots and riddles. This is included in a popularly known passage, which was probably a later addition, and describes how Vyasa composed the epic

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verbally by seeking out as his scribe, Ganesa. Ganesa, who is also known as Lord of Obstacle, however, put forward the condition that Vyasa dictate the entire epic without any single pause. So Vyasa, when he needed time to think about what he would include next, deliberately introduced mysterious knots or complex narratives and elements in the text to stump the scribe, Ganesa.



**Ganesa the Scribe, writing the Mahabharata.**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata#/media/File:Karwar\\_Pictures\\_-\\_Yogesa\\_19.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata#/media/File:Karwar_Pictures_-_Yogesa_19.JPG)

Furthermore, the text's narrative structure of 'stories within stories', that is the use of frame stories as a mode of narration, many a times with audiences built in the text itself, adds to its complexity and provides the epic with textual and literary means to convey its meanings in different ways.<sup>x</sup>

For example, the *Mahabharata* begins with a narrative of Ugrasrava, who is asked by a group of Brahmins headed by one called Saunaka, to narrate to them the story of the epic. Ugrasrava is an expert on stories about kings. He agrees and tells the Brahmins that he himself heard the story of the Bharatas at King Janmejaya's *yagya* or sacrifice performed to kill and annihilate all the Nagas, so he could avenge the death of his father, King Parikshita, by Takshaka who is the king of Nagas. To avoid carnage similar to the Mahabharata war

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which brought untold misery to the world, King Janmejaya is persuaded to give up the *Yagya* by Vyasa himself. He is told the story of the *Mahabharata* by Vaishampayana in the presence of Vyasa. This complex mode of narration with many frame stories foregrounds the idea of presenting the epic in multiple ways, rejecting any single meaning of the text or any singular perspective with which to view it.

King Janmejaya's snake sacrifice not only provides the inner frame of the story of the epic *Mahabharata* but also helps to emphasize upon the significance of reception of this story by the audience. For example, the direction of the story is determined to a large extent by Janmejaya's promptings and questions. Indeed, each narration was somewhat like a theatrical performance with meanings and concepts conveyed in relation to familiar human experiences.

Like Janmejaya's questions driving the narrative forward, the reference to the audience's present circumstances, and the presence of multiple narrators enriches the text by creating shifting points of view of any character, event or problem.

An interesting fact about this dual recitation of the epic is that a Brahmin-Vaishampayana recites it to Kshatriyas including King Janmejaya and later a non-Brahmin- Ugraravas to a group of Brahmins, which is a curious inversion in itself. <sup>xi</sup>And both these narrators claim that their recital is exactly that which has been composed by Vyasa. Therefore, once again it becomes important to reiterate that it is difficult to assign the authorship of the epic to any single author.

It is noteworthy that numerous narratives, characters, concepts all contribute to the epic *Mahabharata's* mind boggling size and its almost encyclopedic nature. As David Shulman points out, "Vyasa, it is said, left behind him (in his work) the entire world." <sup>xii</sup>Known as *itihasa*, it is the summation of an entire way of life and culture; an open text which includes the world itself.

### **Game of Dice in the Mahabharata**



**The game of Dice**

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/Shakuni\\_is\\_master\\_of\\_Dice\\_Game.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/Shakuni_is_master_of_Dice_Game.jpg)

The dicing scene in the *Mahabharata* is a pivotal one. In this scene, Duryodhana and Sakuni invite Yudhistira to a rigged game of dice in which he loses his kingdom, entire wealth, his brothers, himself and finally even his wife, Draupadi. Throughout the epic, the immense destruction and suffering that has been brought on through the war is seen by the characters as resulting from the game of dice. Janmejaya calls the game of dice as the root or origin of the destruction brought to the entire world.

### **The Dicing episode**

In this episode Duryodhana is burning with envy at having witnessed his cousin Yudhistira's rise to the position of a sovereign. In this impassioned condition of mind, he is tricked into believing a pond for a piece of land in Yudhistira's grand palace hall into which he falls to public humiliation. Arjuna, Bhima and in one version of the story, Draupadi's laughter at his falling prey to tricks add to his discomfort and fury. In some ways then, it points towards his inability to see anything beyond that which he perceives to be real. His sense of humiliation figures later in Draupadi's abusive humiliation in his court. He seeks revenge and is aided by Sakuni, his uncle, in the game of dice.

It is significant that Duryodhana seeks to obtain his father, King Dhrtarastra's approval for the game. Dhrtarastra, at first, refuses to give his permission, saying that gambling will divide the family. In the end, however, he gives in to Duryodhana's heated persistence, after much wavering. Dhrtarastra then sends his brother Vidura, who is one of the wisest men in the epic, to summon Yudhistira to his hall for a game of dice. Yudhistira is unwilling to go, yet has to follow Dhrtarastra's commands. He laments that both fate (*daiva*) and *dharma* bind him. Yudhistira begins the game of dice with losing a modest stake of a string of pearls to Sakuni. He accuses Sakuni of playing a trick, that is, of playing the game through *Maya*.

Upon losing in the subsequent stakes, seventeen in number, he gambles away his entire kingdom, his massive wealth, his four brothers and finally himself. He also loses his queen and wife, Draupadi in the nineteenth stake in the game of dice. A menstruating Draupadi is then dragged in to the assembly hall by Duhsasana, one of the hundred Kaurava brothers, by the hair in the presence of King Dhrtarastra and other elders, who watch her disrobing helplessly in the assembly hall.



**Draupadi in the assembly hall**

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/Draupadi\\_s\\_presented\\_to\\_a\\_pachisi\\_game.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/Draupadi_s_presented_to_a_pachisi_game.jpg)

Draupadi, however, at her most magnificent, raises some tricky questions of *dharma* and legality, which challenge the wager that makes her a crucial stake in the game of dice. The staking of Draupadi thus becomes more ambiguous rather than decisive as Draupadi asks Yudhistira whether he wagered her before or after losing himself.

None can answer this question including Bhisma, Vidura and Yudhistira, considered the three wisest men amongst those gathered in the assembly and hence, the game is interrupted. Due to such questions challenging the game of dice itself by Draupadi, in addition to the various inauspicious omens like the howling of the jackals, Dhrtarastra comes to his senses and grants three boons to Draupadi who uses them to get freedom for her husbands. The Pandavas, now free, leave for Indraprastha, their kingdom. However, they are exiled for twelve years in the forest and one to be lived out in disguise in the city after they are summoned back to the assembly hall for one last throw of the dice.

The conclusion of the dice game is pregnant with a sense of impending doom. In fact, beginning with the game of dice, a weight of despair and suffering falls on the Pandavas who face a long chain of destructive events beginning with the fateful game until the very end of the epic's narrative. They lose their kingdom and face exile. Their attempts at peace negotiation with the Kauravas fail and which causes them much pain. After the war, they emerge victorious as rulers of a kingdom which has witnessed carnage and is now empty and finally, they succumb to death.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Context and Significance of the Game of Dice**

In the Mahabharata the game of dice is significant as it provides an opportunity to sort out or settle the question of power or succession that can otherwise be resolved only through a destructive war. The game of dice then becomes that realm of make-believe in which winning or losing the game turns out to be a matter of life and death. Many issues of *dharma-adharma*, fate, human desires and actions and questions of political power are played out in the game of dice.



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The main issue to be settled through the game is the question of power and succession to the kingdom. The law of primogeniture and succession demands that the eldest son must succeed. Yet in the Mahabharata it is not a simple matter of good versus evil, as is often made out to be in popular retellings of the epic. Such popular versions of the epic narrative pose Yudhistira and Duryodhana as upholding good and evil values of conduct, respectively. Yet, one must not forget that Duryodhana has a strong claim as the successor of the kingdom.

Dhrtarastra, the eldest son born of Vyasa is blind and cannot succeed to the throne. Pandu, the younger son, becomes the King violating the rule of primogeniture. Thus, the application of the rule of primogeniture to questions of power is riddled with complexities. Duryodhana, being the eldest son of Dhrtarastra, who though elder to his brother Pandu could not become the King because of his blindness, has a justified claim to rule the kingdom. However, he is younger than Yudhistira, who is the eldest son of the rightfully anointed ruler Pandu apart from being the eldest of the entire Kuru clan.

The claim to inheritance being equal on both the sides, the kingdom had been equally divided, to Duryodhana's dissatisfaction. Hence, the game of dice became the means to resolve this question of rift within the family.

An important point to be noted in this context is the idea that the game of dice could be seen as the rival ceremony of Yudhistira's *Rajasuya yagya*. Duryodhana undertakes the game of dice to posit a rival claim to the right to rule as a sovereign. And since it is suggested in the epic that the game of dice is part of the ritual of *Rajasuya*, it is not necessarily an evil proposal as is made out in popular perception. Historians claim that the distribution of land for grazing animals amongst rival chiefs was achieved many a times through a game of dice. Hence, throwing the dice was another means for distribution of wealth and resources in society.

Furthermore, the game of dice in which the Kauravas win should have made their claim to the kingdom legitimate and the story of *Mahabharata* should have come to an end with this event, but for other important considerations like that of *dharma*, fate, et cetera, which remained unresolved throughout the epic.

### **Political Power and Social Structures in the Mahabharata**

In an interesting essay on the economic data in the *Mahabharata*, Romila Thapar argues that the epic as a genre looks "for a past age of heroes and the clans to which they belonged. This slowly gave way to the present where the heroes are less important in a society governed by kings and the code of castes. The nature of authority is more focused and therefore different in kingship, or a monarchical set-up from that of a clan-based society. In a monarchical society, the determining of status and social attitude is by reference to caste and gradually becomes more predictable."<sup>xiv</sup>

The first few books of the epic narrate the story of the Kauravas and the Pandavas with the game of dice as the central event to a point where war between the two seems imminent.

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Providing an analysis of Yudhistira's stakes in the game of dice, Thapar notes that the society is one of clan-based, lineage networks. The identity and social functions are brought out through membership of the family and clan. The items of wealth wagered in the game point towards a form of produce largely associated with pastoralism and primitive agriculture.

However, by the end of the war a substantial historical change seems to have occurred in the epic. Advancement in agriculture led to a more settled way of life. In the latter parts of the epic, one can see that this sort of economic structure, based on stable agriculture in part, led to a transition from an egalitarian network of clan-based social organization to concentration of greater power in the figure of the monarch. This is brought out well in the war when Arjuna is dismayed by the thought of killing his own kinsmen and family members. In a clan based society the killing of kinsmen was considered a heinous crime. However, in the battle, Krishna tells him that it is his *dharma* as a *Kshatriya* to fight against evil, even if it involves the killing of one's family members and kinsmen. This indicates the hardening of caste structures in a monarchical, agriculture-based society.<sup>xv</sup>

The *Mahabharata* was perhaps composed, or compiled in the period (400BC to 400AD), that witnessed the rise and fall of the first great empire of the Mauryas in India. It depicts a period of chaos and change after the fall of this great empire. Various historical sources provide evidence for extension of stable agriculture into forest areas. This was different from pastoralism. It probably resulted in unequal distribution of wealth in society during that time, which sharpened social hierarchies and differences.

The period also saw the rise of various social groups like specialists in craft and also sectarianism in Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>xvi</sup> The growth of ascetic groups was an important part of this change which posed a threat to the Brahmin-Kshatriya nexus of power in society, as it questioned the authority of Vedic Brahmins over issues of knowledge and *dharma*. Apart from the ongoing tussle over power between Brahmins and Kshatriyas, tensions arose in society as lower classes gained greater economic and political power, thereby challenging the status of these upper classes. The epic's examination of issues of kingship, social structures and rituals to be performed in society and also its exploration of *dharma* in part can be explained through a consideration of such a socio-political and historical milieu in which it might have been composed.

Indeed when Yudhistira renounces kingship after having witnessed the violence of the Mahabharata war, Bhishma through a long discourse on various categories of *dharma*, including *rajadharma*, tells him to govern the kingdom as a king. This kingship was then viewed as a superior form of political structure in that period.

At a textual level, in the opening passages of the episode of the dicing game, the audience is forewarned that the game will take place and will have disastrous consequences. This disclosure is prompted by the 'inner frame' story of Janmejaya asking Vaishampayana about how such an unfortunate event came about.

The important point to be noted here is that the text itself breaks the suspense about whether the game of dice will happen by making Janmejaya inform the audience that it will happen. This shifts the attention of the audience to questions of how and why the game of

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dice took place, thereby prompting a search for answers to many of the riddle questions that the epic attempts to examine. The answers to some of these pertinent questions can therefore be better understood through an analysis of the moral dilemmas that characters like Duryodhana, Dhrtarastra and Yudhistira face and which, in a way, lead on to the game of dice in the Mahabharata.

### **Role of Duryodhana**

Duryodhana can be considered as the driving force behind the game of dice. And although the game is Sakuni's idea, he plays the most important role in its implementation through various ways. Therefore, to understand why and how the dicing episode happened, an analysis of the mental state and emotions that lie behind the actions of Duryodhana is a crucial exercise. Indeed the text itself provides the clues to this and thereby helps the audience to achieve that critical distance from the character of Duryodhana, which will help us understand the motives behind some of his actions.

The epic, in fact, evades at the textual level, a clear answer to the question of why Duryodhana falls prey to tricks and deceptions which lead him to commit some of the most cruel acts in the dicing scene or even why does the dicing scene come to be at all. Duryodhana tells Sakuni that since the time he has witnessed Yudhistira's grand sacrifice and his sway in the kingdom, he has been agonized and tormented by feelings of resentment, which has resulted in him being miserable. Also, as mentioned earlier, the humiliation that he faces at the hands of the Pandavas (except Yudhistira) and their servants in their grand palace, results in the audience's sympathizing with his misery to some extent.

However, as he spins out of control under the influence of the frenzy of revenge, while convincing his father to give his consent to the game, he seems to lose his grip on any sort of reasonable behaviour. This textual strategy distances the audience from the character of Duryodhana to critically evaluate and understand the motives behind his action that have a crucial bearing on the dicing episode. During the game of dice, he causes the cruel act of getting a menstruating, half naked Draupadi to be humiliated in front of the men in the assembly hall of Dhrtarastra's palace. Thus, the text in some sense helps the audience to question such inconceivable behaviour on the part of Duryodhana. His speeches to his father and uncle reveal that his mind became evil with jealousy, greed and resentment which made him miserable and unsteady. This was perhaps the cause of his despicable behavior. Therefore, it is suggested that to some extent human conduct depends not on some inherent evil or vice in a person, but springs from the quality or state of mind he or she is in. This idea of human conduct resulting from a confused state of mind and not just from some innate source of evil, further complicates the issue of what is the right conduct and *dharma*.

### **Role of Dhrtarastra**

Dhrtarastra plays a crucial role in the dice game. Firstly, in the form of approval that he gives to Duryodhana for the game of dice to take place. Secondly, it is he who sends the invitation to Yudhistira for the game and which Yudhistira cites as his own reason for

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accepting to go to the same. Thus, in order to understand why the disastrous game actually takes place, it is important to understand Dhrtarastra's motives and actions as well.

Initially, when Duryodhana and Sakuni approach him with the proposal to hold a game of dice and invite Yudhistira to it, Dhrtarastra shows insight and great wisdom and refuses to give his consent to it. He cites very reasonable arguments for his disapproval of such a proposal by Duryodhana such as the idea that the game of dice will surely result in a bitter quarrel and divide the family. He also argues that Duryodhana is not in the right frame of mind and is acting out of resentment, which even the text of the *Mahabharata* suggests. Thus, up to this point in the epic, the audience is encouraged to regard Dhrtarastra with sympathy.

However, Dhrtarastra then changes his mind even though he is well aware of the disastrous consequences of the game of dice. The text gives several reasons for his change of heart. There is more than a hint that Dhrtarastra gives in to his affection for his spoilt son upon hearing of his state of misery. He also blames fate. Another crucial aspect of this is that he argues that when a man is to meet his destruction and misfortune, his own mind loses the capacity to act reasonably which results in a confused state of mind and wrong course of action. So many reasons provided for the cause of change in his heart then complicate the issue and result in the audience's estrangement from the character of Dhrtarastra. The audience is then encouraged to look at the idea that such characters, in their confused and impassioned states of mind, take wrong decisions which appear proper to them at that time, and which are not merely a result of some inherent evil in these characters. Thus, their own suffering and despair provide the impetus to their wrong decisions and conduct. It again complicates the idea of what then is the *dharma* that one should follow to avoid suffering in this world- whether one should value individual ties of the family or go beyond it, to look for universal good?

### **Role of Yudhistira**

Yudhistira is the son of Dharma and also known as *Dharmaraja* or the king of *dharma*. Upto the dicing episode, his conduct determines the epic audience's view of what is right or wrong conduct. However, in the game of dice, he accepts the challenge because he thinks he has to fulfill some obligations on his person. He says that as part of his *kula dharma* or family *dharma* and obligation, he has to accept the order of the father or the head of the family- Dhrtarastra. Moreover, as a *kshatriya* he has to accept any unforeseen challenges. And finally, he argues that it is his fate which has impelled him to follow this course. By providing multiple reasons for his acceptance of the game of dice, even though he was aware of the fact that it will only wreck havoc, the text encourages the audience of the epic to question the assumption that Yudhistira may be a trustworthy moral guide to right conduct and *dharma* in the Mahabharata for his conception of dharma eventually leads to great destruction and suffering in the epic, starting with the game of dice.

### **Dharma in the Mahabharata**

The disrobing of Draupadi and the violation of her honour in the dicing episode is perhaps the pivotal event, to which all the other characters in the epic respond in different ways and

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at different points in the narrative. They struggle to make sense of a world in which a virtuous woman like her is left unprotected by her protectors, and also in effect, *dharma*.

*Dharma* can be defined in many different ways. *Dharma* is the total order of things in the universe. It is multifaceted, elusive and subtle. In the epic the characters are in constant search for an elusive *dharma* or conduct or path to live life in accordance with precepts of *dharma*. The question that arises at different points in the epic, including the dicing scene is regarding the correct path to follow- societal rules or universal good?

The issue of how to reconcile self-interest with the right course of action, or *dharma* for a particular actor is a central preoccupation of the epic. How do human beings perform the right action while still following their interests in this world? The focus in the epic and the *Bhagwad Gita* is on the idea of *niskama – karma*, or actions and duties performed without personal desires. Such actions should be performed for the greater good. In a way, this idea of desireless action performed for the good of one's group was therefore linked to maintenance of strict hierarchical structures and groups in society. For the individual was supposed to keep his own desires aside and work for his group in society. He must only perform actions appropriate to his group and not try to move beyond his position or station in the hierarchical structure.

According to Wendy Doniger, "The Mahabharata both challenges and justifies the entire class structure."<sup>xvii</sup> She argues that the period when the epic was being shaped into its present form was one of transition. At this time while the caste structures in society were hardening into hierarchical formations, so as to be able to conquer and include various indigenous people like forest dwellers, tribes and others belonging to the lower rungs of the social order, many sects and groups were challenging the concepts of *dharma* and violence. Buddhists, Jainas and other groups challenged the assumptions of the caste system. Around this time, with the popularization of Asoka's ideas on *dhamma/dharma* which could belong to all men and was a general order of things for right-minded men, the whole idea of *dharma* as belonging to a particular caste of Brahmins or even Kshatriyas was being questioned.<sup>xviii</sup>

According to James Fitzgerald, resolving of the tension between conflicting senses of *dharma* drove some Brahmins to create the *Mahabharata*. Thus, an exploration of a more complex notion of *dharma* through narrative, rather than a direct exposition, constitutes an important aspect of the meaning of the Mahabharata.

Fitzgerald argues that in the first sense, *dharma* means a righteous path or duty to conduct life with the goal of achieving happiness on earth and in heaven after death. In the second sense, however, *dharma* signifies a sense of detachment from the pursuit of personal happiness to achieve peace and compassion for all.<sup>xix</sup>

Emily T. Hudson argues that this perhaps helps to explain why the treatment of *dharma* in the epic is varied and ambiguous. *Dharma* eludes the characters in the epic. This is borne out well in the dicing episode. The depiction in it of Draupadi's cruel disrobing and violation is a very disturbing one. Draupadi suffers immensely from cruelty. Just as Yudhistira wagers and loses Draupadi, Duryodhana gives orders to bring her into the hall as a slave.

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The reason why this episode cuts so deep in the mind of the audience is the sheer silence of the elders and the learned men in the court who are thought to be aware of *dharma* and yet do not prevent such an act of cruelty. Draupadi continues to ask the court full of men belonging to her own family as to why they are not coming forth to protect her. Unable to answer her question about the wager, these wise men are perhaps unable to act because they cannot interpret *dharma*.

Draupadi's question is associated with legalities of ownership. Can Yudhistira stake her in the game when he has already lost his own self as a stake before wagering her? This question also raises the issue of whether a woman is a man's slave and can be staked at his will. These questions address the problematic issues of *dharma* and ownership, particularly of women within a patriarchal set-up.

Another important dimension of Draupadi's violation is that it makes one question why *dharma* should be followed if it cannot help or protect even a virtuous woman like Draupadi, who has always upheld the path of right conduct? In the light of Draupadi's sufferings, the text then suggests that the way these men have viewed *dharma* as a category that brings happiness to one's life is perhaps a flawed one. For Draupadi, it leads to immense trauma and suffering. *Dharma*, perhaps, is not to be followed for personal gains, if the massive destruction of the war is to be taken as one amongst many such examples.

It is notable that an important idea or concept in the Mahabharata in relation to *dharma* is that of compassion or *karuna*. Compassion for other human beings is every individual's *dharma* in relation to some universal truths. For instance, Duryodhana in the dice game commits a defining, villainous act of cruelty when he becomes the primary agent of the cause of sufferings of Draupadi. The textual strategies of the Mahabharata make the audience identify with those characters in the epic who are either the victims of suffering or those involved in prevention of it. So, while we are distanced from the character of Duryodhana, the sufferings of Draupadi not only stay with the audience but even the characters in the epic keep responding to it in different ways, especially in relation to *dharma*. Vikarna, one of Duryodhana's younger brothers, is one such character in the epic. When the elders including the three wise men, Yudhistira, Bhisma and Vidura remain silent during the whole episode, Vikarna raises his voice in protest. He argues that the whole game of dice is wrong. A woman is not someone who can be used as a piece of property to be wagered in a game. The silence of the elders and Vikarna's comments clearly show that women at the time were considered the property of men. It suggests an increasing rigidity of patriarchal norms and structures in society.

In fact, many critics of Mahabharata argue that the depiction of Draupadi in the dicing episode points towards many such rigid codes of patriarchal norms. The narrative of Krishna intervening on behalf of Draupadi and providing cloth to protect her honour is said to be a later addition to the epic suggesting the presence of an increasing rigid patriarchal structure in society, where a woman could only be protected by a man. Indeed, in the earlier version of the narrative, critics have pointed out, it was Draupadi's own virtue which made the whole cosmos, as it were, to come to her aid and not Krishna's divine assistance.

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Vikarna's arguments then suggest that an eternal truth like the one that women cannot be warged is at variance with the specific truth of patriarchal norms and conduct. Vikarna's protest comes at a time when the learned elders in the assembly hall remain silent upon witnessing Draupadi's humiliation. The truth emerges from an unlikely quarter like Vikarna's protest, and the epic therefore suggests that universal truth will ultimately surface no matter what the circumstances or norms are in place in society.<sup>xx</sup>

Thus, the text of the epic, particularly in the silence of men learned in the ways of *dharma* in the dicing episode, does not privilege any path of conduct as the right one. This suggests that *dharma* cannot be learnt from books or it cannot really be studied. It has to be applied to one's life and is constantly put to test. Many times in the epic, the characters are faced with conflicting *dharmas* and have to make crucial choices which affect their own lives along with others.

### **Question of Fate/Chance in the Game of Dice**

Fate or chance is often invoked in the *Mahabharata* to explain the paradoxical behaviour of many of its characters. The narrative voice and the characters in the *Mahabharata* blame fate (*Daiva*) for the many misfortunes that befall them beginning with the game of dice. The tension between desires and human actions and the role of fate is an important aspect of the dicing scene. The question that is posed in this episode is to what extent fate plays a role in causing the dice game and the immense suffering that unfolded.

According to Nicholas Sutton, "There is no clear solution to the question of which force is supreme (Desire or fate). Rather, the epic presents different possible 'accounts' of their dynamic in order to engender in the reader a clear sense of the stakes involved in the issues raised by the power(or lack thereof) of each."<sup>xxxi</sup>

It is significant to note in this context that Duryodhana, smarting under the resentment at his public humiliation in Yudhistira's assembly, saw fate as the cause of Pandavas' rise in wealth and glory. According to him, fate is a greater power than human action because he is unable to understand why, despite all his efforts, it is Yudhistira who gets a radiant life and fortune.

Similarly, Dhrtarastra claims that he acquiesces to Duryodhana's request for the game of dice because it is fated. The narrative voice of Vaisampayana, belonging to the inner narrative frame, clearly states that Dhrtarastra submits because of his fondness for his son. This matter of fate versus will in the case of Dhrtarastra is not resolved through the text and the frame narrative renders it ambiguous.

But the text of the epic provides several ambiguous answers to the question of the role of fate in the most baffling aspect of this debate, which is Yudhistira's acceptance of Dhrtarashtra's invitation to the doomed game of dice. An explanation is offered by Vyasa, who visited Yudhistira and informed him about the various portents that would happen

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when the *Rajasuya* is performed. Therefore, according to Vyasa's account, the game of dice was fated. Yudhistira's acceptance of the invitation to the game suggests his belief in the idea that outside forces beyond his control are operating. However, the text of the epic again leaves these tensions unresolved by suggesting that Yudhistira accepts due to both moral obligation and fate.

Fate or chance associated with the game of dice also suggests the unforeseen events and quests that a King has to face and master in order to emerge as the rightful ruler of a kingdom. Yudhistira accepts this challenge as part of his dharma as a *Kshatriya* in the game.

### **Women in the Dicing Episode**

When Draupadi questions Yudhistira's right to wager her in the dicing match, she brings to fore the suppression of women's voices due to the patriarchal codes of wifely behavior. Ironically, it is Draupadi who saves the Pandavas instead of them protecting her. In popular perception she is the person on whom the entire war is based. She actively participates in all the deliberations of her husbands and exhorts them to act.

In the world of *Mahabharata*, women can attain status only as mothers and wives. For instance, in order to beget suitable sons, Kunti chooses her own deities as suitable surrogate husbands. Gandhari also expresses her rage against her own marriage of political expediency to a blind Dhrtarastra by being permanently blindfolded.

In the epic the women are strong characters who play a prominent role in the epic's action and narrative. This was perhaps a reflection of the changes in the social structures at a time when the various recensions of the Mahabharata were compiled. These changes could have included the widespread recognition of women's active role in *pujas* and sacred activities that were earlier performed only by men and which were central to Hindu life and culture. Another aspect of this could be the idea that such stories were also part of the vernacular traditions in villages and rural spaces which were less bound in their attitude to women. The individualistic and feisty nature of women of the Mahabharata can probably be understood in this context.<sup>xxii</sup>

For instance, in the context of war, women in the epic take an active role and help decide the course of the future in important ways. They are unrelenting in their attempts to avenge the wrongs done to them. When Krishna comes on his mission of peace, Kunti tells him that she is unable to bear the separation from her sons for almost fourteen years. She also reminds her sons of the insult that Draupadi had to face in the midst of the assembly and spurs her sons to war.

Gandhari, in her own way, tries to make Duryodhana understand the consequences of greed and a naked lust for power, and also attempts to dissuade him from war. In relation to *dharma*, she can only conclude that victory should be attained by only those who are righteous. Thus, in matters of war, peace and other important issues, women in the epic have their own, distinct points of view.

### **Polyandry**



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Numerous events in the lives of the women in the epic, like polyandry in their lineage, can also be seen as a challenge to patriarchal control of female sexuality.

Polyandry in the lineage of women of the Mahabharata is quite common. For instance, according to Wendy Doniger, Draupadi having five husbands is "evidence either of women's greater sexual freedom or, perhaps, of men's fear of what might happen were women to have that freedom." This open-mindedness to polyandry would perhaps be explained by considering the cultural and historical milieu of the Mauryan Empire and the period just after the fall of Mauryan dynasty. It was a period in which the issue of status and role of women in society was a contentious one. Women of the royal family and upper classes were participating in sacred activities. They were generous donors to the Buddhist communities. Female ascetics were also a common phenomenon, as the case of Sulabha illustrates in the Mahabharata. There are suggestions that women were also involved in state-supervised economic work, like yarn spinning. All these reflect greater autonomy given to women in court and also villages in this period.<sup>xxiii</sup> Yet, the increasing rigidity of patriarchal norms relegated them to the sphere of the household as mothers and wives. This is borne out well in the characters of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari and several other women in the epic who, though quite strong as individuals, can attain their status in society only as wives and mothers.

Indeed the epic's complex treatment of its women characters and the world which they inhabit shows that the women in the *Mahabharata* are able to create some space for themselves in a patriarchal society.

### **Role of Krishna in the Game of Dice**

Interestingly, Krishna is conspicuously absent in the dicing episode, even though he comes to Draupadi's aid when she suffers immense humiliation upon her disrobing. Critics like Alf Hiltebeitel argue,

"Krishna's absence is necessary otherwise the outcome would have been different. Even if he had been present at Dwarka when the game was announced, he says he would not have come to Hastinapur to prevent it. As Naraina or the Divine, perhaps he can only be a witness to the unfolding of events as individuals exercise their freedom of choice and the universal order arranges and rearranges itself accordingly."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Krishna's absence during the game of dice, which culminates in a brutal war, renders the question of his role mysterious in the *Mahabharata* like many other unresolved riddle questions. Who is Krishna if he does not prevent the game of dice? Is he human or divine? Many times in the battle, Krishna acts deviously. For instance, during the battle, in a popular story it is Krishna who is also held responsible for the beheading of Drona by making Yudhistira utter the lie that Ashwatthama has died.

Yet his actions have to be understood in terms of *dharma*. Is he the Divine who acts deviously to restore the once-lost *dharma* on the earth? But the answer to this question is not a simple one for in order to establish *dharma* on earth, many immoral and unjust acts are committed. In fact, the cheating, trickery and abuse in the game of dice is synonymous with the violence, abuse and immoral acts perpetrated during the war including the lies that

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Yudhistira, the *Dharmaraja* tells in order to win or the arms that Krishna takes up against Bhishma even though he has vowed not to fight. Thus, like the game of dice, the battle becomes the arena in which all ideas of right conduct, ethics and *dharma* are wiped out and what comes across is an undisguised lust for power.

Many passages in the epic suggest that Krishna could not have prevented either the game of dice or the destructive war because human beings acted according to their own will and as the Divine figure, he could only be the witness to the folding and unfolding of events in relation to their actions. The text of the epic also suggests that Krishna though he is unable to prevent the carnage, helps the Pandavas to win in order to establish justice on earth, however much that justice or *dharma* is compromised by the immense suffering.

### **Suffering in the Mahabharata**

An important and overwhelming aspect of the experience of reading the *Mahabharata* turns out to be the stress laid on grief and suffering as an integral part of human life and experience. It almost seems like suffering along with *dharma* is the overriding factor contributing towards the source of meaning in the epic. This raises an important question in the epic- has suffering been given prime importance in the epic? Is the *Mahabharata*, then, an epic about *dukha* or suffering?

The characters in the epic describe their mental states or the quality of their minds as perplexed by the suffering that they experience in life. For instance, Yudhistira laments the victory achieved at the cost of the death of his own kinsmen and the people of his kingdom. Gandhari's grief at the loss of her own sons is another poignant example of individual's suffering in the epic.

Dhrtarastra also suffers from sadness and guilt because of the death of his sons and his own role in the war. Vidura tells him to go beyond his grief and find compassion for others. Thus, *Mahabharata* clearly shows that suffering in this world is not just of the individual but is faced by the collective. After the war all the women cry and lament the death and loss of their husbands, sons and fathers in the bloodshed.

At another level, then, the inability to understand the subtle meaning of *dharma* leads to suffering. This is borne out well in the inability of the wise men, during the dicing scene to solve Draupadi's question. It is this failure which resulted in her enormous suffering.

The *Mahabharata* lays great stress on suffering and encourages the audience to rethink the idea of following *dharma* for personal gains which leads to suffering in this world. It talks about the pursuit of life in which pain and happiness should be treated with equanimity.

### **Conclusion**

The epic *Mahabharata* may be seen as part of a tradition of later societies looking back at and reconstructing an earlier one, belonging to a clear past. Indeed, *Mahabharata* is known as *Itihasa-puratanam*- that is belonging to a past time.<sup>xxv</sup>

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The *Mahabharata* is a history of a bitter war with no winners. In the question of succession in the epic, the sons of Pandu and Dhrtashtra do not display any sense of idealized generosity. Rather, they fight tooth and nail over it. It is also interrogative of concepts of *dharma* and deconstructs it. It probably depicts a world in which all rules of *dharma* cancel out each other as it is a period of questioning and transition.

Kavita A Sharma argues that, "the aim of *Mahabharata* cannot be merely to show the victory of *dharma* over *adharma*, because that in any case always takes place. Its aim perhaps is to try to make us understand what true victory is and true *dharma*. It is not victory as conceived by Dhrtashtra or victory lamented by Yudhistira."<sup>xxvi</sup>

The immense suffering that is associated with the many political structures and events in the epic, like the game of dice and the war, reveals to the audience that the idea of acting on *dharma* and the negotiation of life should transcend personal goals and failures. This suffering encourages the audience to perhaps find personal happiness in the happiness of all. What is significant is that the epic *Mahabharata* points towards a path of peace and acceptance of suffering and also the transitory nature of life- a calm detachment that transcends suffering.

### **Glossary**

1. Shlokas : stanzas or couplets
2. Artha :Activities that bring wealth and material comforts of life on earth
3. Itihasa : Historical reconstruction of the past
4. Karma : a strict connection between action and consequence
5. Moksha : liberation from the cycle of birth and death and a world full of suffering
6. Rsi : A sage
7. Rajasuya :A ritual performed for royal consecration and assertion of kingship and sovereignty
8. Daiva : Fate
9. Dukha : grief or suffering
10. Niskama karma: Actions performed without personal desires
11. Yajna/Yagya: Sacrificial rituals performed from the Vedic times involving unity, charity and worship of deities

### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, 1-40

<sup>ii</sup> Sharma, *The Dicing and Sequel To Dicing*, 6-12

<sup>iii</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, 211-214

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- iv See Foreword by Wendy Doniger to Satyamurti, *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling*
- v Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*, 8-12, 75-97
- vi Thapar, *Epic of The Bharatas*
- vii Hildebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, 4
- viii Hudson, 22.  
Hildebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, 277.
- ix Hudson, 22
- x Minokowski, "Janmejaya's Satra and Ritual Structure", 412.  
Hildebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, 92-130
- xi Thapar, *The Epic of The Bharatas*
- xii Shulman, *Toward a Historical Poetics*, 26
- xiii Hudson, 75-90
- xiv Thapar, *The Epic of the Bharatas*  
Thapar, *Some Aspects of The Economic Data In The Mahabharata*, 1-10
- xv Thapar, *The Epic of The Bharatas*
- xvi Doniger, 164-165
- xvii Doniger, 215
- xviii Doniger, 214-217
- xix Fitzgerald, *Dharma And Its Translation In the Mahabharata*, 671-672  
Hildebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion and Narrative*
- xx Sharma, xxi-xxv
- xxi Hudson, 180-184
- xxii See Foreword by Wendy Doniger to Satyamurti, *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling*
- xxiii Doniger, 220-223
- xxiv Sharma, xIiii-xIviii
- xxv Thapar, *The Epic of The Bharatas*

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