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HOW DHARMA SHAPES STRATEGIC THOUGHT ON WAR IN THE MAHABHARATA

Ancient Indian texts have long influenced perspectives on historical events, social norms, spirituality and philosophy. Possibly, the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata are most deeply embedded in the Indian consciousness. It can be argued that the Mahabharata, given its plot, openness to diverse interpretations and emotional proximity to societal realities, emerges as an eternal reflection of human existence and thought.

This timeless text, classified as *itihasa*—‘it happened like this’, is derived from a historical core, layered with didactic elements to derive suitable lessons.¹ These are as relevant for the common man fed on the stories of the epic for three thousand years, as it is for social scientists and philosophers. V.S. Sukthankar, the General Editor of the Critical Edition of the Mahabharata published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute at Pune, provides three perspectives to view the Mahabharata.² He calls the first the ‘matter-of-fact’ view, which retells the basic story of the epic. The second is what he calls the ‘Dharmic view-point’. This perspective flows from the ethical plane explaining the ‘conflict between the principles of Dharma and Adharma’. And finally, the Mahabharata can be viewed from ‘the transcendental or metaphysical view-point’.³

This paper derives certain fundamental elements of ancient Indian strategic thought using the second, or the dharmic viewpoint of the Mahabharata. India’s strategic thought has been influenced by a ruler’s practical need for

¹ Kanad Sinha, *From Dasarajana to Kurukshetra: Making of a Historical Tradition*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 8–9.

² The critical edition of the Mahabharata was created as an authentic version of the text by limiting aberrations and later additions. This work commenced in 1919 and was completed in 1966 at the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute Pune.

³ V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishing House, 2021, p. 121.

artha (power and wealth).⁴ However, the quest for material well-being can be misunderstood, when viewed in isolation, unless its close association and irrevocable linkage with *dharma* is understood.

The paper evaluates the role of *dharma* as it shapes war as a defining element of strategic thought in the Mahabharata. It introduces a framework for a better understanding of the approach to war. The paper argues that the diverse scope of *dharma* successfully reconciles the seemingly contradictory conditions accompanying the conceptualization, preparation and conduct of wars. Further, the core tenets that emerge from the paper find resonance in India's approach towards contemporary issues of national security.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DHARMA AS A GUIDANCE FOR WAR

Before discussing the framework's parameters, it is relevant to briefly delve into the concept of *dharma*. *Dharma* as a term has multiple connotations and interpretations in the Mahabharata.⁵ Sukthankar quotes several sources, which provide a suitable foundation for understanding the concept in its entirety. However, according to him, two of these, stand out for their clarity of understanding and vision. In the first, he quotes Bhishma:

Dharma, says Bhishma, was ordained for the advancement and growth of all creatures; therefore that which leads to advancement and growth is *Dharma*. *Dharma* was ordained for restricting creatures from injuring one another; therefore that which prevents injury to creatures is *Dharma*. *Dharma* is so called because it upholds all creatures; that is *Dharma* which is capable of upholding all creatures.⁶

⁴ One of the foremost texts from ancient India is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which discusses issues related to statecraft and functioned as a guide for rulers.

⁵ For a discussion on the idea of *dharma*, see, V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishing House, 2021, pp. 79-85, Bimal Krishna Matilal (Ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, Shimla: IAS Shimla and Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2014, Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2012.

⁶ V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, n.3, p. 81.

Sukthakar also quotes Bhagwan Das, a philosopher-sociologist in an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of dharma. He says:

That scheme or code of laws which bind together human beings in the bonds of mutual rights-and-duties, of causes-and-consequences of actions arising out of their temperamental characters, in relation to each other and thus maintains society, is human law, manava-dharma.⁷

Having seen two interpretations of dharma describing its holistic manifestations, it would be useful to view it from a more personalized perspective, before finally assessing its relevance through the prism of a state.

At the very foundation of the idea of dharma, *svadharma* defines the dharma of an individual. Krishna tells Arjuna, ‘Even when performed imperfectly, *svadharma* is superior to someone else’s dharma performed well.’⁸ The idea of *svadharma* signifies the role, responsibility and duties of an individual. When this is interpreted for a soldier, it repeatedly finds mention in the Mahabharata. *The Bhagavad Gita* documents the instance where Arjuna seeks guidance from Krishna in the backdrop of disillusionment with the killing of his relatives for the sake of the kingdom. ‘O Madhusudana! I don’t want to kill them, even if they kill me. Forget this earth, even for the kingdoms of the three worlds.’⁹ For a *Kshatriya*, a soldier, this is co-related with *Kshatriya dharma*. Krishna says, ‘Also considering your natural dharma, you should not waver. Because there is nothing better for a *kshatriya* than a war fought for the sake of dharma.’¹⁰

The concept of dharma when viewed from the perspective of a state is perhaps the most relevant here. This manifests itself in the form of *rajadharma*. *Rajadharma* is the dharma of kings. As a co-relation, it can be

⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

⁸ Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 5, *Bhagavad Gita* Parva, Ch. 900 (40), New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012, p. 204.

⁹ Ibid, p. 128.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 132.

considered the dharma that guides a state or those responsible for ensuring peace, prosperity and protection. Bhishma tells Yudhishtira, 'O king! Just as all footprints are lost in that of an elephant, it is said that all the tasks dissolve in this (dharma of kings). Listen. All the dharmas can be seen to be based on rajadharma...Of all the dharmas, rajadharma is the most important and it protects all other dharmas.'¹¹

Bhishma suggests to Yudhishtira that the effective implementation of rajadharma creates congenial conditions, which allow the norms of society and the responsibilities of an individual to be fulfilled. In that sense, rajadharma becomes an enabling agency for not just the state to undertake its responsibilities, but also the society to function in an environment of 'Just Peace'.¹² Bhishma sees the manifestation of all attributes of dharma in rajadharma. 'In that way, if dharma is delinked from rajadharma, one's own dharma will not be followed in any situation.'¹³ The idea of 'just peace' can be related to conditions when the ideals of dharma prevail and there is no *adharma*. This is often referred to as 'Krita Yuga'.¹⁴ It is under these conditions that people 'obtain what they wish and preserve what they have.'¹⁵ This has been referred to as *yoga* and *kshema* (obtaining and preserving the desired) in the Mahabharata.

A king's rajadharma manifests in many ways. One of the most important and relevant is the concept of *dandaniti*.¹⁶ 'Dandaniti, when administered

¹¹ Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 8, Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 1391(63), New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2015, p. 317.

¹² To understand 'just peace', see Pierre Allan and Alexis Keller (Eds), *What is Just Peace?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. For this paper, 'just peace' refers to the achievement of yoga and kshema on termination of a dharma yudh.

¹³ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, p. 318.

¹⁴ Yuga or eras have four divisions. The ideal state is said to be Krita Yuga, thereafter in descending order, it is followed by Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga and Kali Yuga.

¹⁵ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1398(70), p. 340.

¹⁶ Dandaniti corresponds with the power to chastise on the basis of a selfless code of conduct by kings. It is also referred to as the rod which will reward and punish. See Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1387(59), p. 302.

well, sets boundaries for people and is like a mother or a father, demarcating honour for the welfare of the world.¹⁷ It is through the policy of *dandaniti* that a king obtains what he wishes and thereafter protects what he possesses. *Dandaniti* is the basis for *dharma* to prevail amongst the people and its undiluted implementation creates the equivalent of a welfare state—a state where *adharma* is absent and *Krita Yuga* is ushered. ‘A king who always wields the rod of chastisement well will obtain *dharma*.’¹⁸

While ideal conditions that help generate *yoga* and *kshema* may be ideal through a king’s scrupulous implementation of *rajadharma*, this aspiration will remain a challenging end state to achieve. This might suggest that *dharma* can or does prevail only under ideal conditions. However, the very idea of employing *dandaniti* by a king or a state indicates that it is a constant endeavour on his part to achieve a desirable condition of prosperity and security in a state. This implies that the aspiration of a welfare state has to be backed by the policy of reward and punishment. Simultaneously, it also suggests that in a less-than-ideal world, the king will be forced to ensure *yoga kshema* by facilitating prosperity, along with the follow-up endeavour to protect, retain or maintain it. *Bhishma* guides *Yudhishtira*, ‘Even if one confronts a calamity when protecting the subjects, lords of the earth who act in this way accumulate great *dharma*.’¹⁹ Therefore, *yoga kshema* when seen from the perspective of the state does not get restricted to obtaining and preserving the desired. In addition, there is a constant endeavour to protect and preserve through the sword arm of the state.

The achievement of ‘just peace’ is as much a domestic endeavour through the pursuit of *dharma*, as it is in the external relations of the state. Here as well, the king attempts to seek peace through various instrumentalities, as will be analysed in the section on war. Conceptually, inherent in the pursuit of *rajadharma* concerning threats and challenges, lies the flexibility to deal with adverse conditions. This includes primarily two alternatives. The first relates to the conditions under which *adharma* is used by an adversary.

¹⁷ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1398(70) p. 341.

¹⁸ Ibid, Ch. 1397(69), p. 336.

¹⁹ Ibid, Ch 1386(58), p. 295.

And the second relates to the response of a king while dealing with adverse circumstances.

Bhishma tells Yudhishtira that victory should only be achieved through dharma. Further, wars must be guided by its ideals and rules. Accordingly, rules for engaging an enemy on the battlefield have been laid down in detail and must be adhered to. However, ‘If the one who is fighting uses deceit, one must fight back using deceit. If he fights with adharma, one must counter him with adharma.’²⁰ This reflects the foundational guideline that reinforces rules of engagement in conflict. Simultaneously, under conditions that witness deceit and treachery, dharma allows a flexible interpretation in its implementation. This is likely to be most visible during a dharma yudh. The side that is clearly in the right and has been unjustly harmed, dispossessed and humiliated can use means that may not be sanctioned to seek victory, especially because this represents a victory of the righteous cause.

The second aspect relates to adverse conditions or *Apad Dharma*. When Yudhishtira asks Bhishma about following dharma under adverse conditions, Bhishma says, ‘Dharma is more subtle than words and intelligence.’²¹ He adds, ‘There is one kind of dharma for those who are capable and another for those in distress.’²² Under conditions of duress, it becomes the duty of the king to protect his subjects as is the responsibility of the subjects to safeguard the king.

Dharma retains a degree of ambiguity and fluidity, perhaps as an intentional element of ethical guidance. There are several instances in the Mahabharata, which require an interpretation that focuses on the spirit rather than the letter of dharma. Accordingly, attempts by even well-regarded characters to remain fixated upon the letter caused irreconcilable havoc. This included the Mahabharata war as well, which took place in part because Bhishma chose to fight on the side of the Kouravas, given his pledge to protect the

²⁰ Ibid, Ch. 1424(96), pp. 406-407.

²¹ Ibid, Ch. 1456(128), p. 498.

²² Ibid, p. 499.

throne of Hastinapur. Conversely, Krishna repeatedly found creative solutions to resolve dilemmas for the Pandavas, focusing on the spirit of dharma rather than the letter alone. His solution for Arjuna after his Gandiva was abused by Yudhishtira to metaphorically 'kill' a Kshatriya through insult instead of physically taking his life during the war is a case in point.²³ For Krishna, 'dharma is at least sometimes dictated by the constraints or the contingency of a situation.'²⁴

This flexibility of interpretation while open to misinterpretation, is more likely to allow its evolution with times and changing circumstances. Dharma as was practiced in times of an ideal environment as signified by the *Krita Yuga* needs to make more than subtle changes in the *Kali Yuga*. Even during the best of times, truth as a virtue will need to be followed with exceptions if and when it leads to saving a life or someone's honour.²⁵

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

²³ Arjuna had sworn that he would kill anyone who asked him 'to handover the Gandiva to someone else', which Yudhishtira had done in a fit of anger after facing the wrath of Karna on the battlefield. Krishna finds a solution to overcome Arjuna's pledge by asking him to instead use a 'trifling insult' against Yudhishtira. 'Having thus been addressed, a senior will be as good as dead.' Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 7, Karna-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1199(49), New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2015, p. 219 and p. 223.

²⁴ Bimal Krishna Matilal (Ed.), from the introduction by Matilal in *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, Shimla: IIAS Shimla and Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2014, p. 10.

²⁵ Krishna says, 'A person who is always based on truth is but a child. A person who can differentiate between truth and falsehood can alone follow dharma.' Bibek Debroy, n. 23, p. 221.

While it is difficult to capture the sentiment in brief, however, in essence, the Mahabharata and more specifically the idea of war is anchored in the core values of dharma. Even so, its implementation allows the freedom of choice that can meet the demands of both the ideal and the realistic requirements of challenging situations. More often than not, this functions in the grey zone of life. It is best illustrated by the approach adopted by Krishna in the epic. His decision-making ability is enabled by the right balance between idealism and realism, represented by an equilibrium between values and interests.²⁶ This balances the ideal and prescribed at one end of the spectrum and the demands of circumstances on the other.

FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC THOUGHT FROM THE MAHABHARATA

The conceptual framework for this paper is illustrated through a causal loop diagram in Figure 1. The framework suggests that a state seeks to achieve the grand strategic objective of Yoga Kshema while operating under the overall guidance of dharma. As discussed earlier, in the larger scheme of things, the king's abiding objective remains the welfare of the people. Bhishma while guiding Yudhishtira after the war, says:

O king! When a person born in a noble lineage knows about dharma and obtains great prosperity, yoga and kshema exist and welfare can be thought of. If complete kshema can be obtained from someone being established (as king), then among all of us, he is the one who has obtained the best of heavens in an instant.²⁷

In essence, this implies that there is no greater welfare of the people, than the condition of acquiring and maintaining prosperity by a king. When seen from the perspective of a state, this not only needs stability for

²⁶ For a brief summation of the debate see Victor Ramon Fernandes, 'Realism and Idealism in International Relations: An Ontological Debate', *Janus.net*, 7(2), November 2016, pp. 14-25, available at <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/4135/413548516002.pdf>, accessed on 07 August 2023.

²⁷ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1404(76), p. 354.

economic growth but also protection to maintain it. Since both protection and prosperity are interlinked, so are the ideas of conflict and economic well-being.

Contrary to expectation, protection is not derived from war as the primary instrument of policy. Ideally, it emerges from the rejection and absence of war (highlighted in bold in the figure). This state objective is achieved through a combination of deterrence, stratagem and diplomacy. The only exception to this condition is the potential for war in pursuit of *rajadharma* with the *rajasuya* as an example.²⁸ Even here, the short-term possibility for war is offset by the long-term potential for peace and stability.

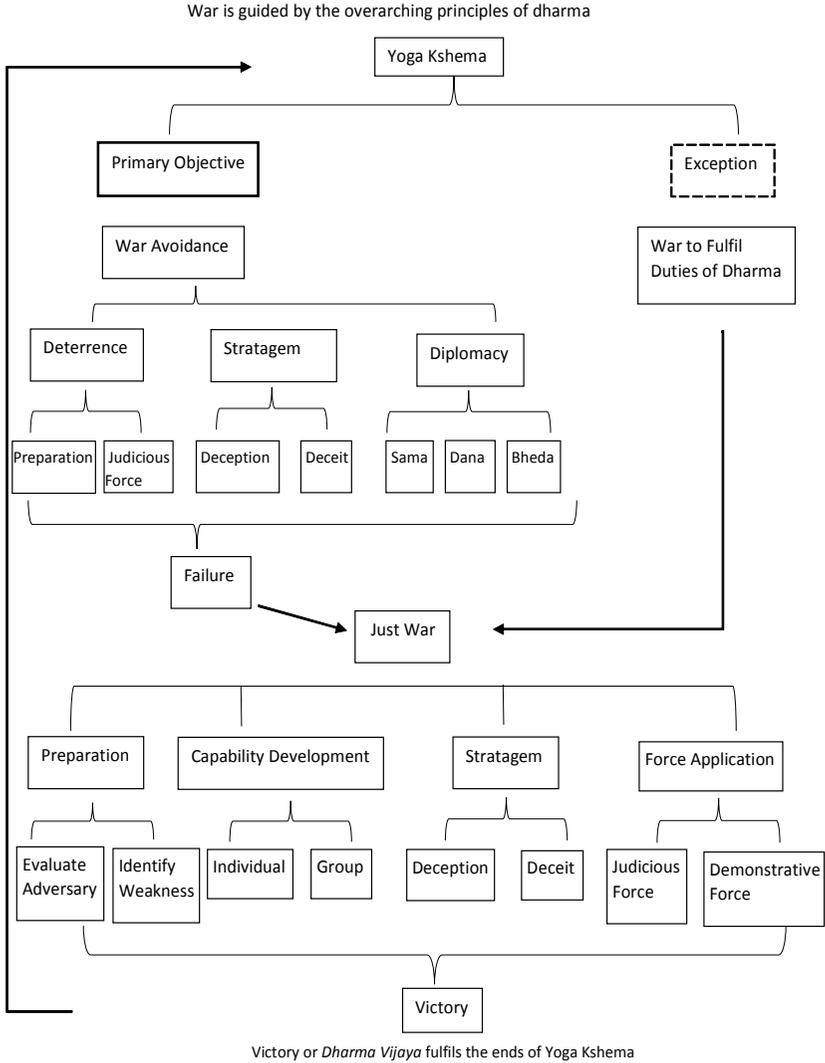
However, if and when deterrence, stratagem and diplomacy fail, dharma sanctions war for self-defence or to seek justice. Similar to contemporary times, this includes the process of planning and preparation, including evaluation of an adversary's strengths and weaknesses, capability development, use of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

When a *dharmayudh* (war sanctioned by dharma) does become a reality, victory becomes an inescapable imperative. This victory feeds into the loop by helping reinforce or establish dharma thereby the Yoga Kshema of the ruler.

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

²⁸ The process involved kings being given the choice of accepting suzerainty or war. In the case of the Pandavas, Yudhishtira's brothers fanned out in four cardinal directions seeking the acceptance of their brother as the emperor. This did lead to several wars being fought before the eventual subjugation of the entire neighbouring region.

Figure 1
Framework for Strategic Thought on War



ROLE OF WAR

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

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

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

Emphasis on War Avoidance

The Mahabharata provides multiple strands and nuanced perspectives on war as an option and policy alternative. The text rejects the idea of war as an instrument of conquests and expansion of territories as a core philosophical thought.²⁹ The idea of subjugation, plunder, and profit through wars remained alien in its very conceptualization. This is sanctified through the overarching principles of dharma—the quest for righteousness. The sentiment is repeated at multiple stages of the epic by important actors like Yudhishtira, Krishna, Bhishma, and other independent learned advisors, acknowledged for their wisdom and experience.

Addressing Sanjaya, a peace emissary sent by Dhritarashtra, Yudhishtira says, “The absence of war is superior to war... There is nothing more

²⁹ V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, n. 3, p. 61. Sukthankar notes that there were only nine souls who participated in the war, who survived from the eighteen aksauhinis that took part.

foolish than going to war. Why should a man go to war, unless he has been cursed by destiny?³⁰

Krishna relates dharma with the pursuit of peace, when he says, ‘When you are striving for peace, no adharma will be attached to you.’³¹

By calling even a righteous war adharma, Yudhishtira yet again reinforces the undesirability of war as a concept and a tool for the settlement of disputes. He underlines this sentiment by indicating that ‘Our first intention is that we should enjoy that common prosperity, in peace with each other equally. The stage that comes beyond that is terrible and leads to the destruction of deeds, if we are to obtain the kingdom after killing the Kouravas.’³²

After the eighteen-day war is over, Yudhishtira seeks the guidance of Bhishma who is on his deathbed. Bhishma says, ‘O Yudhishtira! After collecting a large army with four limbs (chariots, cavalry, elephants, and infantry), you must first try for conciliation. O descendent of the Bharata lineage! A victory that is obtained through war is to be abhorred.’³³

Role of Diplomacy

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

The dexterity with which Krishna employs each facet of diplomacy reinforces the correlation between war avoidance at one end of the

³⁰ Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 4, Sanjaya-Yana Parva, Ch. 689(26), Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011, p. 209.

³¹ Ibid, p. 362.

³² Ibid, p. 357.

³³ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1431(103), p. 425.

spectrum and simultaneously, gaining moral superiority over the adversary, at the other. Consequently, the latter becomes a vital factor in convincing a very large cross-section of influential figures that the Pandavas were on the side of dharma or righteousness, even as the Kouravas were committing adharma.

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

Hoping for fraternity, I first used conciliation, to prevent dissension of the Kurus and ensure the welfare of the subjects. When I saw that peace was not acceptable, I resorted to alienation and recounted your deeds divine and human. When I saw that Suyodhana³⁴ ignored my words of conciliation, I assembled the kings and attempted to sow seeds of dissension...I censured the kings, I denigrated Suyodhana. I repeatedly tried to frighten Radheya and Soubala³⁵...Through eloquence and counsel, I tried to create disunity among the kings...For that wicked one, I see no other means but the fourth one of chastisement.³⁶

The upayas (solutions) of *sama*, *dama*, *bheda*, and *danda* have been a part of a diplomat's toolkit for over 3000 years. Its reference comes up in the Ramayana as well. However, as P.K. Gautam writes, it is often

³⁴ A name also used to address Duryodhana.

³⁵ A name for Karna and Shakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle.

³⁶ Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 811(148), 2011, pp. 529-530.

misunderstood and related to Kautilya's *Arthashastra* alone.³⁷ The four principles of diplomacy encompass within its scope options and instruments that can be employed not only as part of statecraft but also for war avoidance. One of the finest examples of this endeavour is highlighted by Krishna with illustrations after his failed attempt at brokering peace between the Pandavas and Kouravas.³⁸

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

As a result, Krishna was equally at ease justifying the possibility of an eventual war even as he apportioned the blame on Duryodhana. This allowed him to qualify the application of force as a 'Just War'. While it may seem convenient since history is written by the victors and it is their narrative that tends to prevail. However, Krishna's success can be gauged by the support his argument received from neutral observers as well as others on the opposing side of the conflict. This included Parshurama, Kanva, Narada, Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Vidura and Duryodhana's mother, Gandhari.

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

When the king examines himself and knows himself to be weak, he must seek the counsel of his advisors and have a treaty with the one who is stronger. Even if he knows he is not weak, an intelligent king swiftly concludes a treaty with the enemy, if he desires to obtain some advantage out of this.³⁹

³⁷ See P.K. Gautam, 'Understanding Kautilya's Four Upayas', New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar IDSA, 20 June 2013, available at https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/UnderstandingKautilyasFourUpayas_pkgautam_200613, accessed on 10 August 2023.

³⁸ Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 811(148), pp. 529-530.

³⁹ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1397(69), p. 335.

Deterrence

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

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

As part of this endeavour, the Kuru princes are handed over to Acharya Drona to teach them the art of warfighting.⁴⁰ This ability and its recognition ensured deterrence amongst peers and adversaries alike, thereby limiting the potential for conflict. In that sense, it reinforced the Roman adage: 'If you want peace, prepare for war.'⁴¹ The realist perspective ensured that a simultaneous strengthening of the armed forces continued to ensure the requisite capacity to respond to any threat. This is also reconciled through the adherence to Kshatriya dharma.

The epic repeatedly suggests that the individual military prowess of the kings was built over decades through dedication and single-minded

⁴⁰ Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 1, Sambhava Parva, Ch. 122, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2010, p. 331.

⁴¹ Keith Best, Si vis pacem, para bellum ('If you want peace, prepare for war'), *World Federalist Movement – Institute for Global Policy*, available at <https://www.wfm-igp.org/federalist-paper/si-vis-pacem-para-bellum-if-you-want-peace-prepare-for-war/>, accessed on 23 November 2023. The quote is attributed to the Roman General Vegetius.

devotion to the achievement of special accomplishments. The control over divine weapons was critical to capability development and ensuring deterrence. Arjuna's acceptance to feed the Khandava forest tract to *Agni* (fire), is conditioned on the grant of divine weapons. This included the famed Gandiva and an inexhaustible quiver for Arjuna and the Chakra for Krishna.⁴²

Subsequently, while the Pandavas, banished from their kingdom reside in the forests, Yudhishtira asks Arjuna to seek knowledge of advanced weaponry and through it the capacity to equal the likes of Bhishma in battle. He sends him deep into the mountains in the quest for divine powers to wield the most potent weapons.⁴³ As a result, Arjuna learned the power to use the *pashupata* or *brahmashira*—the ultimate weapon that could destroy the entire world.⁴⁴

The deterrence created by the Pandavas was successful until the Kouravas were swayed by the presence of Karna on their side. Further, conditions were created wherein the Pandavas were forced to initiate war against the Kouravas for their rights, which forced Bhishma to stand in defence of Hastinapur to fulfil the pledge he had taken.⁴⁵ A combination of these factors eventually led to the failure of deterrence, even though it was based on a sound foundation of Pandava's capabilities and military prowess.

Deterrence was also achieved through the judicious use of force. The concept of judicious force goes beyond limited or proportionate force.⁴⁶ It implies using the best means through the most effective ways to achieve

⁴² Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 2, Khandava-Daha Parva, Ch. 215 and 216, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 42-44.

⁴³ *Ibid*, Ch. 235(38), pp. 378-379.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 389-379.

⁴⁵ Bhishma had taken a pledge to protect the throne of Hastinapur against any attacks. He stands by his pledge despite realizing that Duryodhana is in the wrong. Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 816(153), p. 546.

⁴⁶ For an understanding of proportionality see, The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law, *Medicins Sans Frontieres*, available at <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/proportionality/>, accessed on 12 January 2024.

the desired ends. While in more cases than not, in the Mahabharata, this did lead to the use of limited and proportionate force, however, these terms are not the same. It is not as much about minimalism or proportion, as it is about the effectiveness of force application that remains the basis for deciding the option.

There are several instances of employing limited force in the Mahabharata. This follows a judicious approach to force application based on an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the adversary. The example of Jarasandha, the powerful king of Magadha, highlights a logical analysis of the circumstances and use of judicious force while simultaneously exploiting the weakness of the adversary. Krishna recommends the employment of means other than war to achieve the objective of neutralizing Jarasandha.

We will cover our weaknesses and exploit those of the enemy. It is the policy of the intelligent not to attack stronger enemies with battle formations and armies.⁴⁷

Stratagem

The role of stratagem remains integral to resolving issues either through the use of limited force or without the application of force. Having realized that Jarasandha, given his military prowess could become an impediment to the conduct of the rajasuya, a process of elevating a king to the status of an emperor by seeking suzerainty, Krishna suggests entering his kingdom in disguise dressed as Brahmin. This allowed them a safe passage until their audience with the king and an opportunity to unfold their plan to use limited force to eliminate him. As will be discussed later, this helped avoid a war between the two states and facilitated the achievement of their objective.

Similarly, on the opposing side, the Kouravas realized that they could not rival the Pandavas in military prowess. Therefore, instead of challenging them militarily, they are invited to a game of dice, knowing very well that

⁴⁷ Bibek Debroy, n. 43, Ch. 241(16), p. 115.

Yudhishtira would not be able to refuse them as once challenged, he would not refuse.⁴⁸ Thereafter, while playing Shakuni, a master of *Maya*, the result was a foregone conclusion. Had the Kouravas not taken the logic of the defeat of the Pandavas to the extent of humiliation, the reality of events could well have been different.

Stratagem was used in equal measure immediately before and during the war as will be discussed in the following section.

When is War Acceptable?

The emphasis on war avoidance might give the impression of an idealistic and impractical approach to strategic challenges far removed from the realities of statecraft. The Mahabharata's approach to warfighting makes a distinction between wars that satisfy greed or fight injustice. The logic of war avoidance operates on the principle of dharma in the Mahabharata, just as war itself is seen as a manifestation of adharma. However, both at the level of a king and the individual, this adharma could be considered dharma. In other words, the conceptual wrong could also become a right, when the cause and circumstances justify it. The term 'adharma' was used for the act of going to war, considering the avoidable loss of life that it entailed. For a king, this was considered acceptable when fighting injustice (as part of his rajadharma). And for an individual, in the pursuit of his duty as a warrior (kshatriya dharma). By accepting these conditions, the Mahabharata not only recommends the ideal path but also caters to the realistic demands of a state and the professional responsibility of soldiers.

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

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 214.

Other than this exception, war is fought for self-defence or to seek justice. The former is illustrated when despite being in hiding during their thirteenth year of exile, Arjuna fends off the challenge of the entire Kourava army while being in the employment of Virata.⁴⁹ There is no better example of the latter than the eighteen-day Mahabharata war itself, a reluctant decision when all attempts at seeking justice failed.

Yudhishtira was considered a strict adherent of the principles of dharma. He is called Dharmaraja in recognition of this attribute. Yet, before the war, even at his most benevolent self, he agrees to pardon the Kouravas on the condition that their share of the kingdom is returned. He says, ‘O Sanjaya! Through the path of adharma, I do not crave whatever riches exist on this earth.’⁵⁰ Yet, he seeks what is rightfully his, justifying his actions. ‘When there is a time of calamity, those who do not act, or those who do not act correctly, are both reprehensible.’⁵¹ Accordingly, he affirms the acceptability of fighting a war to undo the miscarriage of justice.

Similarly, Krishna conveys to Sanjaya a message for the Kouravas seeking peace, but from a position of strength. ‘The great-souled Pandavas are the followers of dharma and are positioned for peace. But they are capable of fighting. O learned one! Relate this accurately.’⁵² For him as well, while peace was desirable, it was not a sign of weakness or the inability to seek justice even if it meant resorting to war as the last option.

Dhritarashtra’s conscience keeper, senior advisor, and cousin Vidur reinforces the idea of dharma in an attempt to guide the king. He says, ‘A kingdom should be obtained through dharma. It should be protected through dharma,’⁵³ yet again reinforcing the importance of righteousness as a guide for the acquisition and protection of territory.

⁴⁹ Bibek Debroy, n. 30, pp. 55-95.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Ch. 691(28), p. 216.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 215.

⁵² Ibid, Ch. 692(29), p. 222.

⁵³ Ibid, Ch. 697(34), p. 244.

Addressing the Contradictions of War

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

How can a war be desirable? That is the evil dharma of kshatriyas.
But we have been born as kshatriyas. It happens to be our dharma,
even if it is adharma.⁵⁴

Even after the Pandavas achieve victory on the battlefield through eighteen days of bloody war, Yudhishtira laments its devastating consequences. He decides to give up his kingdom and all worldly pleasures.⁵⁵ It is only through the guidance of Bhishma, regarding the duties of a king, that Yudhishtira takes up his responsibilities.

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

⁵⁴ Ibid, Ch. 733(70), p. 357.

⁵⁵ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1404(76), p. 353.

captured by Kripa, one of the statesmen in the court of Dhritarashtra, who while cautioning the Kouravas against fighting Arjuna, says:

Those who are learned in the ancient accounts have said that a war is the worst. A war guarantees victory only when it is at the right time and the right place.⁵⁶

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

The Concept of a Just War

The Pandava's recourse to war was validated by the principles of justice (dharma yudh), which, later in history was termed as just war.⁵⁷ An analysis of conditions that led to the use of force in the Mahabharata by the Pandavas, suggests a systematic adoption of principles akin to modern ideas of *jus ad bellum* (conditions to use force). Similarly, the preparatory

⁵⁶ Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 640(44), p. 95.

⁵⁷ Nikolaos Tzenios, 'Case Study: Just War Doctrine', *Open Journal of Political Science*, 13(1), January 2023, available at <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=122406>, accessed on 10 August 2023.

period of the war witnessed an adoption of humane principles of warfighting by both sides, as included in *jus in bello* (law for the conduct of war). During the war itself, aberrations on both sides did take place. However, each such instance came up for debate with divided opinions on the action and created a contradiction between the intent and the ensuing action.⁵⁸

There is little doubt about the awareness and acceptance of ‘just war’ as a concept in the Mahabharata. The concept of dharma went beyond the framework provided by modern guidance on ‘just war’. It included not only the aspects related to *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* as part of the responsibility of rulers, it delved deeper into the morality of a state, a king, and a soldier, even as war against injustice was considered acceptable. Societal norms of behaviour were repeatedly stressed to reinforce the idea of a just war, despite the very idea of a war being considered catastrophic, as discussed earlier. It is important to reinforce that the repeated emphasis on war as an instrument of last resort and its adverse impact on society, further strengthened the argument against it.

Krishna’s strategy for both war avoidance and justifying the Pandava cause within the scope of a ‘just war’ operates simultaneously. *Jus ad bellum* includes: just cause; legitimate authority; right intention; reasonable prospects for success; proportionality; and last resort. And *jus in bello*: discrimination; proportionality; and necessity.⁵⁹

Krishna’s diplomatic initiative builds a case in favour of the Pandavas, amplifying each aspect of *jus ad bellum*. He systematically argues this point, reinforcing each of the conditions that can justify war as a last resort.

⁵⁸ This included the killing of Abhimanyu by the Kouravas, use of Shikhandi by the Pandavas to kill Bhishma, the employment of deception in messaging that led to the death of Drona amongst others.

⁵⁹ ‘War’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/#HistVsContJustWarTheo>, accessed on 28 July 2023.

- Krishna reinforces the *cause* of the Pandavas by highlighting acts of deceit on the part of Duryodhana and his coterie right from childhood.⁶⁰ This culminated with their kingdom not being returned, consequent to the trickery of winning the game of dice.⁶¹
- Yudhishtira remained the rightful and legal ruler of Indraprastha at the culmination of thirteen years of banishment, thereby, reinforcing his *authority* as the lawful king.
- It is made clear that the only *intent* of the Pandavas was to seek merely what was theirs and nothing beyond.⁶²
- The might and ability of the Pandavas was underlined to convince the Kouravas of the limited *prospects of their success*.
- Krishna repeatedly attempted to convince the court of the futility of war and kept the *option of war as the last resort*.⁶³
- Finally, Krishna reinforces *proportionality* through a stand based on dharma—the moral right, against the wrongs being practised by the Kouravas.

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

⁶⁰ See Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 789(126), p. 471.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 471.

⁶² Ibid, Ch. 756(93), p. 411.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 410.

VICTORY IN WAR

The failure of deterrence, diplomacy and use of stratagem eventually led to exercising the option of war. The Mahabharata delves into several aspects related to the quest for victory in war. These can be classified into four segments: preparation for war; capability development; application of force and use of stratagem.

Preparation for War

Both sides carried out meticulous preparations as they left for Kurukshetra, the designated battlefield. Camps were established taking due consideration for availability of water, avoiding salinity and protective arrangements like moats. 'King Yudhishtira ensured that strings of bows, bows, armour, weapons, honey, clarified butter, mountainous heaps of resin and sand, plenty of water and fodder, chaff and charcoal were made available to each camp.'⁶⁴

Similarly, the Kouravas also made earnest preparations on their side. Duryodhana instructed Karna, Duhshasana and Shakuni,

Therefore, with great attention, let us make all arrangements for war. Let the lords of the earth set up hundreds and thousands of camps in Kurukshetra. They should be spacious and spaced so that the enemy cannot attack them. Water and kindling should be available nearby. The roads should be such that supplies can be carried. There must be stores of treasure. Let them be stocked with many kinds of weapons and adorned with flags and banners. Let the roads emerging from the city be levelled.⁶⁵

The preparations undertaken by both sides also included psychological conditioning, especially for those who doubted the very logic of the impending war and the accompanying death and destruction. Krishna

⁶⁴ Ibid, Ch. 812(149), p. 537.

⁶⁵ Ibid, Ch. 813(150), p. 538.

tells Arjuna who was facing doubt and indecision: ‘Also considering your natural dharma, you should not waver. Because there is nothing better for a kshatriya than a war fought for the sake of dharma.’⁶⁶

Evaluation of Adversary and Identification of Weaknesses

The period preceding the Mahabharata War saw several instances of threat evaluation on both sides. After the Pandavas were established at their capital Indraprastha, they were visited by the sage Narada. He proposed to Yudhishthira the rajasuya—a royal sacrifice that would elevate him from the status of a king to an emperor. However, concurrently Narada also cautioned Yudhishthira about the resistance it could witness, including the threat of war. ‘A war may follow it, leading to the destruction of the earth.’⁶⁷

Thereafter, Yudhishthira seeks the counsel of Krishna for undertaking the rajasuya. Krishna suggests the elimination of Jarasandha, the biggest challenger to this process. He simultaneously indicates that given his ability and strength, Jarasandha could not be defeated on the battlefield. Instead, it would be better to challenge him to a wrestling duel. ‘He is incapable of being defeated in battle by the gods and the demons. But we understand that he is capable of being vanquished in a battle of breath (wrestling match).’⁶⁸ This assessment of the adversary does prove correct and not only is Jarasandha eliminated, but in addition, a favourable king is placed on the throne of Magadha. Further, the kings imprisoned by Jarasandha are now beholden to the Pandavas, which subsequently assists in the conduct of the rajasuya.

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

⁶⁶ Bibek Debroy, n. 8, Ch. 884(24), pp. 132-133.

⁶⁷ Bibek Debroy, n. 43, Ch. 236(11), p. 102.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 121.

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

I wish to know the total number of rathas among us and among the enemy and also the atirathas. The grandfather is skilled in knowing about the enemy and about us.⁶⁹

Similarly, Krishna realized that certain atirathas like Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Duryodhana could not be killed merely through bravery on the battlefield. In each case, vulnerabilities were identified and thereafter exploited to ensure their neutralization on the battlefield.⁷⁰

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

The employment of Bhim and Hadimba's son Ghatotkacha against the Kouravas in battle is a case in point. After Karna causes widespread devastation against the Pandava army, Arjuna volunteers to fight him. However, Krishna suggests Ghatotkacha as the challenger instead. He was considered capable of defeating Karna, given his valour and special abilities of deception in battle. More importantly, Krishna undertakes a careful evaluation of Karna's biggest strength, which could have led to the defeat of Arjuna. Karna was granted a one-time use of a divine spear against any

⁶⁹ Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 825(162), p. 568. The terms ratha, maharatha and atiratha were used for a charioteer, a great warrior capable of taking on ten thousand warriors, and a warrior with unlimited ability greater than even a maharatha.

⁷⁰ Bhishma had pledged not to fight any women. Shikhandi was a woman in the previous birth, which was known to Bhishma. He was fielded against Bhishma to create an opportunity to kill him. In the case of Drona, his son Ashvatthama's death was alluded to, to render him open to an attack in a state of despair. Karna was systematically weakened by taking away his protective armour and earrings, followed by creating conditions that forced him to pre-maturely use his divine spear. And finally, Duryodhana was hit below the belt on his thigh by Bhim, an area that was vulnerable, contrary to the rules of *gadha yudh*.

adversary of his choice. Accordingly, he had reserved its use against Arjuna. However, when Ghatotkacha ran riot against the Kourava army, the ensuing circumstances forced Karna to use his divine spear against him. This action weakened him appreciably for an eventual duel against Arjuna. The loss of Ghatotkacha was considered acceptable in the pursuit of a bigger goal considering the competing capabilities of both sides. Krishna said:

Because of Ghatotkacha, the spear has been used up. O Dhananjaya! Therefore, know that Karna has already been slain. Had Karna possessed the spear in his hand, no man in the world would have been able to stand in front of him.⁷¹

Similarly, it was the evaluation of battlefield conditions that led to the employment of Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu to break a Chakravyuh—a battle formation that could only be penetrated by Arjuna or his son. As a result, Abhimanyu, Krishna's nephew lost his life.

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

Resource Mobilization and Capability Development

Both sides preparing to fight the ultimate war understood that the process of mobilizing resources could prove to be a decisive factor for victory. This took place at two levels: A progressive capacity building over decades by individuals through the development of their skills and weaponry to cater to any eventuality; and a more focused approach closer to the final war, which saw a series of steps to mobilize resources.

It was realized by both sides that the possibility of a war was very real and the presence of additional generals and forces could have a major impact on its ultimate result.

⁷¹ Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 6, Drona-Vadha Parva, Ch. 1132(155), Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2012, p. 420.

Drupada, Droupadi's father and an ally of the Pandavas proposed a simultaneous process of seeking allies, even as reconciliation was attempted with the Kouravas. He said: 'Let us make preparations here. Let us send word to our allies to collect forces for us.'⁷² He listed approximately seventy rulers, who if approached in time, could support their cause.⁷³ A similar process was undertaken by the Kouravas. Both sides sent emissaries across the country to garner support, even as parleys were being attempted to broker a peaceful settlement.

Every attempt was made, including the use of deception to seek alliances. The case of Shalya, the King of Madra who was related to the Kuru family is an illustrative example. Duryodhana bestowed upon him the highest honour during his reception and was able to extract the promise of support. Shalya was otherwise on his way to Yudhishtira's camp. Having made this mistake, a crestfallen Shalya promises to instead merely function as the *sarathi* (charioteer) for Karna and distract him during the war.⁷⁴

Eventually, with both sides having garnered the support of their allies, the Pandavas had seven *akshouhinis* and the Kouravas eleven.⁷⁵

The resources collected by both sides in their preparation for the eventual war might come across as the most important resource mobilization exercise. In the conventional military sense, this was indeed the case.

Application of Force and Stratagem

A casual reading of individual segments of the Mahabharata can create a biased perspective about what exactly the epic says regarding force application. There are innumerable instances of employing force, as are those of force avoidance. There are examples wherein, power and weapons

⁷² Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata*, n. 30, Ch. 667(4), p. 157.

⁷³ Ibid, pp. 157-158.

⁷⁴ Ibid, Ch. 671(8), pp. 164-165.

⁷⁵ Ibid, Ch. 692(19), pp. 192-193.

are glorified, as is its rejection. The Mahabharata is as much about human values and strength, as it is about failures and frailties. In essence, the application of force in the pursuit of dharma is considered acceptable as the last resort. However, even so, it is the employment of judicious force that remains the preferred option.

The use of judicious and effective force rather than its overwhelming employment to crush an adversary remains the basis for employment philosophy. Bhishma tells Yudhishtira: ‘One must fight for the sake of victory, not because of anger, or the desire to kill.’⁷⁶ While there are instances in the Mahabharata, which suggest the violation of this guidance on the part of the Pandavas themselves. Bhim’s killing of Duhshasana and drinking his blood was more a case of anger and revenge rather than considered and judicious action.⁷⁷ The Mahabharata also indicates that an overreliance on force can have a diminishing impact beyond a point. ‘If the enemy is oppressed too much, it will always attack.’⁷⁸ Further, dissension is preferable to the use of force.

The use of stratagem remains an integral part of force employment in the Mahabharata. The wider justification of a conflict according to the principles of dharma, allowed its use against an adversary. However, when stratagem crossed the line of deception and deceit was employed, it was acceptable only under exceptional circumstances. It was felt that such means were acceptable when fighting adharma. Bhishma opines, ‘You must know about two kinds of wisdom—the straight and the crooked. Knowing about crooked ways, one should not use these, except to counter a danger that has arisen, such as when enemies use dissension to strike at the king.’⁷⁹

The hierarchy of judicious force employment indicates using limited force as the preliminary option. The use of all-out force is reserved only as the last resort.

⁷⁶ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1424(96), p. 407.

⁷⁷ Bibek Debroy, n. 23, Ch. 1211(61), p. 272.

⁷⁸ Bibek Debroy, n. 11, Ch. 1431(103), p. 425 and 427.

⁷⁹ Ibid, Ch. 1429(101), p. 418.

During the thirteenth year of their banishment from the kingdom, the Pandavas are in disguise during the last phase of their exile. They must hide their identity during this period. Towards the end of this period, Kichaka, King Virata's general misbehaves with Droupadi. Instead of making an open move against him, Bhima plans to trap him inside a dancing hall. He asks Droupadi to invite him there to meet her alone. Kichaka falls for the ruse. Once inside the dark hall, instead of meeting Droupadi, Kichaka is confronted by Bhima, who kills him mercilessly for his indiscretions.⁸⁰

The death of Kichaka was a relief for the Pandavas and Droupadi. However, it did considerably weaken the kingdom of Virata. As a result, the Kouravas decided to seize the opportunity and take away the cattle wealth of the kingdom. At this critical juncture, Arjuna decides to give up his disguise to face the Kourava army. This included most of their famed generals like Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana. He vanquishes them and brings back the sixty thousand cattle that had been captured by the Kouravas.⁸¹

At each stage of the Mahabharata war and before it as well, force application is closely linked with the evaluation of an adversary. Strategic choices are made, though not necessarily through the application of destructive force.

Karna, a potent adversary for the Pandavas is first weakened by the loss of his natural armour and earrings. Krishna says, 'Had he possessed the armour and had he possessed the earrings, the powerful Karna would have been able to defeat everyone in the three worlds, even the immortals.'⁸² In return, Karna is given a divine spear, which could kill Arjuna on the battlefield. After ensuring its premature application against Ghatotkacha, Karna is killed using a stratagem by Arjun on the advice of Krishna.⁸³

⁸⁰ Bibek Debroy, n. 30, Ch. 617(21), pp. 49-50.

⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 76-131.

⁸² Bibek Debroy, n. 71, Ch. 1132(155), p. 420.

⁸³ Bibek Debroy, n. 23, Ch. 1217(67), pp. 301-303.

In the case of both Jarasandha and Duryodhana, Krishna ensures that arguably stronger adversaries are eliminated based on a thorough understanding of their vulnerabilities and the use of stratagem. This principle is applied when Bhima is fielded against Jarasandha and Duryodhana, to ensure victory. It can also be seen in the case of Bhishma and Drona during the war. Their weaknesses are exploited by not only applying force but, also employing deception. In each of these instances, stratagem remained an integral part of the wider strategy applied, indicating its invaluable relevance against a superior adversary.

Despite these instances, responsibility in force application is also evident in the Mahabharata. Arjuna having acquired the capability to wield the bhahmashira that can be compared with weapons of mass destruction in the present era, does not give in to their potential employment in war. While granting the powers, Arjuna is told that ‘it must not be released at any man. If it is released at someone who lacks in energy, it will destroy the entire universe.’⁸⁴ This guidance is similar to the avoidance of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. This reinforces the policy of restraint despite grave provocations.

CO-RELATION WITH CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The evaluation of war as a concept highlights key facets of strategic thought that can be derived from it. This includes:

- Yoga and Kshema while implying people obtaining what they wish and preserving what they have, can only be ensured through a welfare state, which simultaneously has the necessary protection ensured through the instruments of the state. In more contemporary times, there has been a longstanding debate about the needs of development and defence of a state. The ideals of development seek to provide people with higher standards of living—in essence obtaining what they wish for. It is also recognized that for a state to pursue its economic development and growth, an environment of peace and

⁸⁴ Bibek Debroy, n. 43, Ch. 338(41), p. 389.

security is essential—preserving what the people have through security. The conclusion regarding the inter-se importance of these aspects was as interdependent and relational in the Mahabharata as it remains in contemporary times. Consequently, the debate shifted from the logic of defence *or* development to defence *and* development, with the two constituents remaining integral imperatives for a state.⁸⁵ Collectively, it lays the foundation of a secure welfare state, which is an aspirational principle for more modern times.

- War should be avoided through the instruments of diplomacy, deterrence and use of stratagem. The Mahabharata is as much about the eighteen-day war, as it is about the excessive use of forces and its destructive impact. It reinforces the futility of war and the cost of miscalculation and misadventures in a bid to seek strategic advantage. War is a reality and will possibly remain so over time. Yet, it must remain an endeavour to avoid it, as was attempted through the instruments of diplomacy, deterrence and stratagem.
- War when sanctioned by dharma is acceptable. The Mahabharata recommends the idea of conditional acceptability of war. It rejects the employment of war at the conceptual level, even as its utility is acknowledged and accepted as an instrument of last resort in the pursuit of dharma and self-protection.
- Preparations for any eventuality leading to the use of force or war must continue.
- Even as war is adharma, for kshatriyas, it is their dharma. However, such endeavours are acceptable only within the wider framework of a righteous or a just war.
- Wars fought as an instrument of last resort to fight injustice or protect the unprotected are considered dharma yudh (just war).
- A war must be fought keeping all principles of dharma yudh in mind.

⁸⁵ See K. Subrahmanyam, Defence and Development, *Centre for the Study of Social Change*, New Delhi: Minerva Associates, 1973.

- Use of force must be judicious in its employment—effective and discriminate rather than indiscriminate. Eventually, the eighteen-day war reinforces the adverse impact of excessive force as an instrument of state policy. Similar instances continue to adversely impact nations employing war as a policy for seeking strategic advantage.
- Adharma can be used to fight adharma, for the larger cause of protecting dharma.
- Use of stratagem is integral to warfighting.

How does this co-relate with more contemporary strategic thought emanating from India and does it echo similar sentiments even partially?

Can the ideas of a dharma yudh, also referred to as ‘just war’, relate to modern wars? India’s most recent conflict was fought in 1999 against belligerent action by Pakistan. The war was imposed on India to seek favourable decisions through the use of force. India’s decision to employ its armed forces fulfilled all considerations of a dharma yudh.⁸⁶ Further, the contrasting actions of the two armies highlighted India’s adherence to the principles of dharma yudh, while Pakistan violated the same. India gave an honourable burial to Pakistani soldiers killed during the battle, as sanctioned by their religious rituals.⁸⁷ In contravention of all international conventions, Indian soldiers were tortured and their bodies mutilated.⁸⁸ The contrast could not have been more apparent in terms of the ethos of the two armies.

⁸⁶ India responded through military means after Pakistan had transgressed the mutually accepted LoC and refused to vacate Indian posts illegally occupied by its army. This left India with no choice but to use the armed forces to ensure reoccupation of its territory. Further, India did not attempt to go any further and seize territory across the LoC and accordingly laid down restrictions during the military campaign.

⁸⁷ Barry Bearak, ‘India Buries Soldiers That Pakistan Won’t Claim’, *The New York Times*, 17 July 1999, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/17/world/india-buries-soldiers-that-pakistan-won-t-claim.html>, accessed on 03 March 2024.

⁸⁸ Ashwani Sharma, ‘Remembering Captain Saurabh Kalia On Kargil Vijay Divas’, *Outlook*, 26 July 2023, available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/remembering-captain-saurabh-kalia-on-kargil-vijay-divas-news-305774>, accessed on 03 March 2024.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, highlights India's view on wars. While voicing his perspective on the Ukraine conflict, he says, 'I know that today's era is not an era of war...' ⁸⁹ He further adds that democracy, diplomacy and dialogue keep the world together.

The former National Security Advisor and Foreign Secretary, Shivshankar Menon, while delivering a lecture at the National Defence College on 'The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs', contextualizes the use of force by India. ⁹⁰

Reinforcing the relevance of force and the need to fight on matters of national security and principles, Menon provides three examples from the life of Mahatma Gandhi at varying junctures of his life. Each echoes the same sentiment.

The first from 1928, emphasizes the importance of military training for war, 'I can conceive of occasions when it would be my duty to vote for the military training of those who wish to take it.' ⁹¹ Almost twenty years later on 26 September 1947, he says that 'he had always been an opponent of all warfare, but that if there was no other way of securing justice war would be the only alternative left to the government.' ⁹² Finally, after Pakistani raiders had swept into Kashmir in 1947 bringing death and destruction in their wake, he supported the move of Indian troops to secure the state. 'He added that he would rather that the defenders be wiped out to the last man in clearing Kashmir's soil of the raiders rather than submit.' ⁹³

⁸⁹ 'Indian PM Modi tells Russia's Putin now "is not an era of war"', *Reuters*, 16 September 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/indian-pm-modi-tells-russias-putin-now-is-not-an-era-war-2022-09-16/>, accessed on 11 January 2024.

⁹⁰ Shivshankar Menon, 'The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs', National Defence College, 21 October 2010, available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/798/Speech+by+NSA+Shri+Shivshankar+Menon+at+NDC+on+The+Role+of+Force+in+Strategic+Affairs>, accessed on 09 January 2024.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Just like the core values related to war avoidance and its utility as an instrument of last resort, Gandhi's views also reinforce a similar sentiment. Menon concludes this aptly when he says:

In saying so, Gandhiji was entirely in keeping with a long tradition, which has regarded the use of force as legitimate in certain circumstances, namely, if there is no alternative way of securing justice. This is in essence a doctrine for the defensive use of force, when all other avenues are exhausted.⁹⁴

He further argues that India's experience of weaknesses leading to invasions, emphasizes the need for strategic autonomy. Menon further reinforces the need for India to 'avoid weaknesses at all costs lest that history be repeated.'⁹⁵ Interestingly, he practically echoes the sentiment that remains at the core of the Mahabharata and says, 'War and peace are continuing themes in Indian strategic culture. While not celebrating war the culture treats defensive war as acceptable when good fights evil to secure justice. Indian strategic culture has been comfortable with this contradiction.'⁹⁶

Menon finds this age-old culture the basis for India's strong belief in diplomacy and the rule of law as a prelude to the use of force.

He illustrates India's position through its policies and decisions post-independence. This includes the use of military force defensively against external aggression, sending troops only as part of United Nations forces or on the invitation of governments in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. According to Menon, India never retained the territory it occupied during wars, reinforcing the defensive intent of going to war and the utility of force as a tool to safeguard rather than conquer.⁹⁷

Historically, each instance of India's engagement in wars reinforces the idea of conditional acceptability. In 1947, it was Pakistan's employment of tribal raiders and its regulars to invade Jammu and Kashmir that led to

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

India's counter-response. The reliance on war was to protect sovereignty and stop the savage actions of the tribesmen along the border areas.⁹⁸ After that, in 1962, war became an instrument of state policy after China chose force to seek resolution of outstanding disputes. Similarly, in 1965, Pakistan yet again attempted to push in raiders in an attempt to change the status quo, before formally attacking India with its regular armed forces, leading to a backlash by India.⁹⁹ 1971 saw an inhuman onslaught on the people of erstwhile East Pakistan after protests against military refusal to accept the election results, which would have seen the East gain precedence in politics.¹⁰⁰ This led to millions of refugees moving into India from East Pakistan, eventually leading Pakistan to declare war on India on 03 December 1971. The last major instance saw Pakistan violate the Line of Control (LoC) at Kargil in 1999 by sending its forces across during the mutual evacuation of posts in winter.¹⁰¹ The illegal occupation of territory in a bid to force a realignment of the LoC, cut off Ladakh and force negotiations on Kashmir from a position of strength, forced India to fight and reclaim its territories. These instances reflect India's ancient wisdom and the logic of conditional acceptability of war in the Mahabharata. This has remained India's way of dealing with the contradictions of war, wherein pragmatic security needs have been balanced with idealistic aspirations. Against the backdrop of war, in each instance, India has attempted to seek peace through diplomacy and negotiations. The Lahore bus diplomacy by Prime Minister Vajpayee is a case in point, even as Pakistan was already in the process of sending in its troops at that very juncture.

⁹⁸ Maj Gen Harsha Kakar, 'Its been 75 years since Pakistan pushed raiders into Kashmir; its opportunistic, jihadi nature remains same', *Firstpost*, 21 October 2021, available at <https://www.firstpost.com/world/its-been-75-years-since-pakistan-pushed-raiders-into-kashmir-its-opportunistic-jihadi-nature-remains-same-10074311.html>, accessed on 03 March 2024.

⁹⁹ Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh, *War Despatches: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965*, New Delhi: Lancers, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Sujan Chinoy, Bipin Bakshi and Vivek Chadha (Ed.), *1971 India-Pakistan War: 50 Years Later*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2023.

¹⁰¹ General V.P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2020.

Menon's assessment might suggest that India's strategic thought has been linear over time. However, that is not true. Nor does the Mahabharata itself suggest a monochromatic perspective of strategic decision-making. Amongst all the characters in the epic, Krishna emerges as a balancer between the idealistic and realistic perspectives. It is his understanding of dharma that is accompanied by its aspirational and practical reality. The apostle of dharma, Yudhishtira, the repository of knowledge on rajadharma, Bhishma, falters at times when it comes to relating the text with the context. Yudhishtira allows the collective advantage achieved by the Pandavas after the rajasuya to be squandered through a game of dice. Bhishma finds the interpretation of dharma a complex issue when the game of dice and its resultant actions all but seal the fate of the Kurus. It is only Krishna who can walk the thin line between righteousness and reality.

India too suffered from this blind spot over the years. The dilemma of setting the moral compass while making decisions remained a challenge. Jaswant Singh while referring to a series of issues post-independence writes, "This "moral aspect" was in essence a confusion. . . It is a confusion that arises from not differentiating between individual human morality and ethics, and the reality of national interest."¹⁰² He goes on to explain, "It is also a consequence of not recognising that between high idealism and the hard stone of a pursuit of national goals what will splinter is always this "moral aspect"."¹⁰³

The second major shortcoming is the inability to assess threats and challenges realistically. Unlike Krishna who does so realistically as was the case of Jarasandha, it was not necessarily the case during more recent times. As an illustration, the preference and policy of pursuing non-violence, cannot operate without the capability to deter misadventures. Non-violence emanates from a position of strength rather than weakness. Therefore, the stance that "We don't need a defence plan. Our policy is non-violence.

¹⁰² Jaswant Singh, *Defending India*, Bangalore: Macmillan India Ltd, 1999, p. 42.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, pp. 42-43.

We foresee no military threats,' is bound to create undesirable security challenges, and eventually may be beyond the ability of the state to resolve.¹⁰⁴

The events of 1962, which saw India being defeated by China, reinforced the inadequacy of national and military preparedness. It also suggested the inability to foresee the threat in its true manifestation. 'There has been a slant in our minds that China would not attack us. It is perfectly true.'¹⁰⁵

S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister sums up the balance struck by Krishna in the Mahabharata. 'The Mahabharata is as much a tale of ethics as of power. It is Krishna's choices that reconcile these two imperatives.' He adds, 'His may be the voice of reason or the words of caution, but equally it is also the call to action when required.'¹⁰⁶ That in essence sums up the strategic thought from the Mahabharata.

Each of these elements related to the conceptualization of wars or even the limited use of force highlights the core tenets of the Mahabharata. These when co-related with contemporary times seem equally relevant as the last section of the paper indicates. It can be argued that these tenets are fairly universal in their scope and application. Most countries in the modern era follow these principles and little is unique about them. Even as this contention might be true, its real significance is not that there is similarity of thought. It lies in the fact that its visualization had been attempted comprehensively 3000 years ago, when such modern concepts, philosophical debates and spiritual guidance were not the same as they are now.

¹⁰⁴ Jaswant Singh *Defending India*, Macmillan India Ltd, Bangalore, 1999, p. 42, quoting Jawaharlal Nehru from Major General A.A. Rudra's *His Services in the Three Armies and Two World Wars*, New Delhi: Reliance, 1997.

¹⁰⁵ Jaswant Singh quoting Jawaharlal Nehru in *Defending India*, Bangalore: Macmillan India Ltd, 1999, p. 48.

¹⁰⁶ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2020, p. 67.

The Occasional Paper employs the dharmic viewpoint of the Mahabharata to derive the fundamental elements of ancient Indian strategic thought. It evaluates the role of dharma as it shapes war as a defining element of strategic thought. The Occasional Paper introduces a framework for a comprehensive understanding of the approach to war. It argues that the diverse scope of dharma successfully reconciles the seemingly contradictory conditions accompanying the conceptualization, preparation and conduct of wars. Finally, the core tenets that emerge from the Occasional Paper find resonance in India's contemporary approach towards issues of national security.



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