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A Comparative Study Of Arjuna's *Dharma* And Karna's *Mitratva* (Friendship) In Conflict Resolution: Navigating Ethical Dilemmas In Ancient And Modern Contexts

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Abstract

This paper investigates the binary of ethical resolution presented in the *Mahābhārata* through its two preeminent warriors, *Arjuna* and *Karṇa*. The study contrasts *Arjuna's* adherence to *Viśva-Dharma* (universal duty) against *Karṇa's* commitment to *Pratītyasamutpāda-Mitratva* (relational loyalty and interdependent friendship). Utilising the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Udyog Parva* as primary sources, the research analyses how each protagonist navigates internal and external conflicts. While *Arjuna's* path represents a deontology filtered through spiritual detachment (*vairāgya*), *Karṇa's* path embodies a radical existentialist loyalty. The paper concludes by applying these models to modern institutional ethics, suggesting that while *Arjuna's* model ensures systemic stability and rule-based integrity, *Karṇa's* model highlights the profound human tension between personal gratitude and objective morality.

Keywords: *Mitratva*, *Dharma*, *Ethical Dilemma*, *Mahābhārata*, *Bhagavadgītā*, *Arjuna*, *Karṇa*

1. Introduction

The *Mahābhārata* is a complex story that explores what is right and wrong. The *Mahābhārata* features two main characters, *Arjuna* and *Karṇa*, who illustrate two distinct ways of thinking about what is right. *Arjuna* is an example of someone who does what they think is right, even if it is hard for them, because *Arjuna* believes in doing their duty. On the one hand, *Karṇa* is a good friend to *Duryodhana*, and *Karṇa* will do anything to help *Duryodhana*, even if it means doing something that is not right. This paper is going to compare how *Arjuna* and *Karṇa* deal with problems, and the *Mahābhārata* will be compared to ideas about what is right and wrong. We will look at some parts of the *Mahābhārata*, like when *Arjuna* talks to *Krishna* on the battlefield, when *Karṇa* makes some big decisions and when *Arjuna* and *Karṇa* finally fight each other. The paper says that *Arjuna* is good at thinking about what is right and wrong, and The *Mahābhārata* shows us that *Arjuna* can make good choices. The *Mahābhārata* also shows us that *Karṇa's* way of thinking can lead to bad things because *Karṇa* does not always think carefully about what is right and wrong. The study also shows that what *Arjuna* and *Karṇa* do is related to what peoples' talking about today, like how to make things right when someone does something wrong and how to solve problems without fighting.

2. Conceptual Framework: *Dharma* and *Mitratva*

2.1 Arjuna's *Dharma* as *Svadharmā*

The Bhagavadgītā shows us *Arjuna*'s crisis. He is having a time dealing with the different duties he has towards his family, teachers and the political system. At *Kurukṣetra*, witnessing his elders and kinsmen on the opposing side, *Arjuna* suffers a physical and mental collapse –

दृष्ट्वेमां स्वजनं कृष्ण युयुत्सुं समुपस्थितम्
...न च शक्नोम्यवस्थातुं भ्रमतीव च मे मनः ॥ (*Bhagavadgītā*, 1.28-30)

“O Kṛṣṇa, seeing my own kinsmen gathered here eager to fight... I am unable to stand, and my mind seems to be whirling.”

Arjuna is confused about what's right and wrong. He thinks that no matter what he does, he will do something. *Kṛṣṇa* helps *Arjuna* understand that he should follow his path. *Kṛṣṇa* says -

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥ (*Bhagavadgītā*, 3.35)

“It is better to engage in one's own occupation (Svadharmā), even though one may perform it imperfectly, than to accept another's occupation and perform it perfectly. Death in the course of performing one's own duty is better than engaging in another's path, for to follow another's path is dangerous.”

For *Arjuna*, the Bhagavadgītā path is not about following rules. It is about doing what is right for him as a warrior. He has to make sure justice is served, and the weak are protected. Even if the people he is fighting are his relatives, *Arjuna* has to do what is right. By the end of the discourse, his delusion is destroyed. He declares:

नष्टो मोहः स्मृतिर्लब्धा त्वत्प्रसादान्मयाच्युत ।
स्थितोऽस्मि गतसन्देहः करिष्ये वचनं तव ॥ (*Bhagavadgītā*, 18.36)

“My delusion is gone. I have regained my memory through Your grace, O Achyuta. I am now firm and free from doubt, and I shall act according to Your word.”

So, what is the Svadharmā for *Arjuna*? It is about doing what he should do as a warrior. He has to do his duty without thinking about what he will get in return. He has to use his brain to make decisions and trust in something bigger than himself. The Bhagavadgītā path is about following his duty, being mindful of his actions and trusting in the divine.

2.2 *Karna*'s *Mitratva* as Gratitude and Loyalty

Karna is the ultimate example of gratitude and unwavering friendship. After being humiliated in the arena due to his unknown lineage, it was *Duryodhana* who gave him recognition and made him the King of *Āṅga*. This act forged a bond of loyalty that *Karna* honoured for the rest of his life. Even when *Kuntī* revealed his true parentage and pleaded with him to join the *Pāṇḍavas*, *Karna* refused to abandon the man who stood by him when no one else would. He expressed his immovable stance through these verses:

सर्वकामैः संविभक्तः पूजितश्च यथासुखम् ।
अहं वै धार्तराष्ट्राणां कुर्यां तदफलं कथम् ॥ (*Mahābhārata*, 5.144.11)

“I have been cherished with all my desires fulfilled and honoured at my ease; how then can I allow the efforts of the sons of Dhritarashtra to go for nought?”

For *Karna*, the relationship is a 'boat' in the middle of a storm. To jump ship, even for a 'righteous' cause, would be a betrayal of his existential core:

मया प्लवेन संग्रामं तितीर्षन्ति दुरत्ययम् ।
अपारे पारकामा ये त्यजेयं तानहं कथम् ॥ (*Mahābhārata*, 5.144.14)

“They wish to cross the insurmountable battle with me as their boat; how can I abandon those who desire to reach the other shore of this shoreless sea?”

For *Karna*, friendship is a sacred obligation of reciprocity. It is about protecting a benefactor even when their cause is flawed and being willing to sacrifice oneself for their sake. He understood that his life was the debt he owed for *Duryodhana*'s patronage:

अयं हि कालः सम्प्राप्तो धार्तराष्ट्रोपजीविनाम् ।
निर्वेष्टव्यं मया तत्र प्राणानपरिरक्षता ॥ (*Mahābhārata*, 5.144.15)

“The time has now arrived for those who live under the protection of *Dhritarashtra*'s sons; I must now pay my debt, even without protecting my own life.”

While *Arjuna*'s actions are guided by a divine, universal duty (*Vishwa-Dharma*) revealed by *Kṛṣṇa*, *Karna*'s morality is rooted in radical human loyalty. He concluded his meeting with *Kuntī* by sealing the fate of the war, ensuring her that she would always remain the mother of five sons:

न ते जातु न शिष्यन्ति पुत्राः पञ्च यशस्विनि ।
निरर्जुनाः सकर्णा वा सार्जुना वा हते मयि ॥ (*Mahābhārata*, 5.144.22)

“O illustrious lady, your five sons will never perish; they will remain five either without *Arjuna* but with *Karna*, or with *Arjuna* if I am slain.”

Ultimately, *Karna*'s idea of friendship is so strong that it becomes his primary ethical compass, proving that to him, the bond of gratitude outweighs even the ties of blood. It is about being grateful to someone who helped you in the past. It is about protecting your friend, even if they do something wrong. It is about being willing to sacrifice yourself for your friend's sake. So, while *Arjuna* does what he thinks is right because of what the gods tell him, *Karna* does what he thinks is right because of his friendships with people like *Duryodhana*. *Karna*'s idea of friendship is very strong. It guides what he does. *Karna* and his friendships, like the one with *Duryodhana*, are very important to him.

3. Conflict Resolution in the *Mahābhārata*: *Arjuna* and *Karna* in Action

3.1 *Arjuna*'s Way: Dialogue, Discernment and Duty

The *Bhagavadgītā* takes place not in a classroom but on a battlefield where brothers are about to fight. *Arjuna* initially wants to quit; he puts down his bow. Says he won't fight. He does this because he feels bad about fighting his kin. This decision is not complete because it doesn't consider the unfair actions of the *Kaurava* regime. *Arjuna* changes his mind through a conversation with *Kṛṣṇa*. *Kṛṣṇa* doesn't just tell *Arjuna* what to do; he explains his points.

- By appealing to metaphysics, the immortality of the *ātman* (न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे । *Bhagavadgītā*, 2.20).
- By clarifying *Arjuna*'s social role as *kṣatriya*, flight from just war is dishonour (*akīrti*).
- He introduces the idea of doing one's duty without caring about the outcome. (*niṣkāma-karma*).

Arjun's final choice to fight is not blindly following orders but a decision made with a clear understanding of what is right. Here, resolving the conflict involves-

1. Cognitive reframing - reinterpreting the war as a necessary act of restoring *dharma* rather than personal vendetta.
2. Hierarchy of duties - recognising that duty to the moral order and the oppressed outweighs ties to unjust kin.
3. Interior renunciation - engaging in violence externally while cultivating non-hatred internally.

Thus, *Arjuna*'s model suggests that when duties collide, one must seek higher-order principles - justice, protection of the weak and long-term social harmony to rank competing obligations.

3.2 *Karṇa's* Way: Tragic Loyalty and Suppressed Moral Insight

Karṇa is also aware that *Duryodhana's* cause is not just. Some moments show this.

- In the dice hall, *Karṇa* is part of the group that humiliates *Draupadī*. He even calls her mean names. Later on, it seems like he feels bad about what he did.
- Before the war starts, *Karṇa* gives *Duryodhana* advice on what to do. Sometimes he hints that the *Pāṇḍavas* might be right. Even though he says he will fight with the *Kauravas*, he seems to know that the *Pāṇḍavas* have a claim.

After *Kuntī* tells *Karṇa* the truth about himself, he starts to feel really conflicted. When he finds out that he is actually the *Pāṇḍava*, he has to decide what to do. He has to choose between doing what is right and joining his brothers or staying with the person who helped him, *Duryodhana*. He decides to stay with *Duryodhana*. *Karṇa* says that if he left *Duryodhana*, who made him a king when nobody else would, it would be a betrayal. He thinks this would be worse than dying.

This decision shows that *Karṇa* is a tragic hero. He chooses to be loyal to his friend even if it means ignoring what is right. The steps he takes to make this decision are -

1. He puts his loyalty first. His friendship and gratitude to *Duryodhana* are more important to him than doing what is right.
2. He knows that things might not end well. He thinks his loyalty is more important than his own life.
3. He pushes aside his doubts. Justifies his decision by saying it is a matter of honour.

Karṇa shows us that even good things, like being grateful to someone who helped us, can be bad if we do not think about them carefully and consider what is good for everyone. *Karṇa's* gratitude to *Duryodhana* becomes a problem when he does not think about what's right and what is good for everyone.

4. Normative Comparison: *Dharma* vs. *Mitratva* in Ethical Theory

4.1 Structural Features of *Arjuna's Dharma*

When we look at *Arjuna's Dharma* from ethical viewpoints, we can see it in a few ways. For example, we have

- Deontological ethics, which is about doing your duty no matter what you want to do.
- Virtue ethics, which helps you become a person by being brave, controlling yourself and being fair.
- Contextualism, which means you have to think about the situation you're in and make decisions based on that, like defending your kingdom from a bad ruler.

Arjuna's Dharma has all of these things in it. He knows what he has to do. He does it because it is his duty. He also wants to do it because he is brave and strong. He only does it after he thinks about what is going on and what will happen if he does it.

When we think about God, *Arjuna's Dharma* is also about trusting in God's plan and doing what God wants. This is called *śaraṇāgati*. He figures out what God wants by talking to people and thinking about it. This way of thinking allows *Arjuna* to

- Learn and change his mind when he needs to.
- Be responsible for something, then himself or his family.
- Think about how his actions will affect everyone, not himself.

4.2 Structural Features of *Karṇa's Mitratva*

Karṇa's idea of friendship matches today's ideas of:

- Care and loyalty ethics - putting personal ties, thanks, and feelings first.
- Honour ethics - keeping promises and paying back favours (ṛṇa).

But *Karṇa* does not think hard enough about what his friend *Duryodhana* really does. *Duryodhana's* actions are very wrong; stealing the kingdom, trying to strip *Draupadī*, and breaking kingly duties many

times. *Karna* knows this but keeps going along. In terms of deeper beliefs, staying quiet about wrong is the same as joining in. Unlike *Arjuna*, *Karna* does not look for a bigger moral truth beyond thanks to one person. His way of solving inner fights comes from:

- Up-down loyalty (to his friend) instead of side-by-side duty to everyone's good.
- Honour that sticks firm even for a bad side.
- Accepting bad ends as the cost of staying true, not trying to change his friend's wrongs.

This shows a big difference; *Arjuna*'s way fixes and improves moral order; *Karna*'s way holds onto the friendship no matter the cost to right and wrong.

5. Navigating Ethical Dilemmas: Ancient Insights for Modern Contexts

5.1 Professional Duty vs. Personal Loyalty

Today's real-life problems, like reporting corruption at work, staying loyal to a bad leader, or family duties clashing with public good, look just like *Arjuna* and *Karna*'s struggles.

An officer who finds his boss doing wrong faces an "*Arjuna-type*" problem: stay loyal to the person or do what's right for the company and people. Keeping quiet to repay old favours is "*Karna-type*" friendship, while speaking up, even if it hurts you, fits *Arjuna*'s own duty better.

Arjuna's path shows that good people should -

- Talk it out to get clear (ask rules, teachers, or law).
- Put duties in order based on what helps justice, and everyone's good.
- Take personal hits to protect bigger rightness.

Karna's way warns that -

- Blind loyalty to a friend's plans can keep big wrongs going.
- Thanks, should not turn into agreeing with everything the helper does.
- True friendship sometimes means giving tough advice or even saying no for your friend's good and society's.

5.2 Restorative Justice and Conflict Transformation

The Kurukshetra war causes huge destruction, but the story shows many tries at peace -

- *Krishna*'s trip to *Hastināpura* in *Udyoga Parva*.
- Offers to compromise (like giving *Pandavas* five villages).

Arjuna does not want war at first; his fear of fighting shows he feels what we call restorative justice today fixes things without hate. The Gita says war is only the last choice, when talks fail and doing nothing lets bad things continue.

For today, *Arjuna*'s way means:

- Try talking, mediating, and fixing systems first before using force.
- If force is needed, follow rules, avoid hate, and rebuild after (like warrior codes).

Karna's way shows the problem with people stuck by personal loyalty; they can't leave bad systems. In politics or companies, "*Karna-like*" people see wrong but keep supporting bad plans because of thanks, fear of shame, or wrong team feeling. The *Mahabharata* shows a big challenge in peace work, change loyalties of key people from small groups to the whole community's good.

5.3 Integrity, Identity, and Social Location

Both *Arjuna* and *Karna* struggle with who they are -

- *Arjuna*: prince, *Krishna*'s student, keeper of family duty.
- *Karna*: raised by a charioteer, born divine, always pushed out by high society.

Karna's strong loyalty to *Duryodhana* comes partly from shame and hurt. Today's right-and-wrong thinking must see how being left out or praised shapes choices. People who get respect from bad bosses feel they owe them, making it simple, good or bad, hard.

The story says judging ethics needs to -

- Notice social place *Karna's* weakness and shame, explain (but don't excuse) his side.
- Watch who gives respect, and what it costs.

Arjuna goes against his own group and family when they go wrong, showing a way of doing right that is not tied too tightly to just your group's labels.

6. Towards a Synthesising Insight: Can *Dharma* and *Mitratva* Converge?

The story puts *Arjuna's* duty against *Karna's* friendship on opposite sides, but a deeper look says they should join. The best friendship should follow duty, and true duty should have friendship and kindness.

In the *Mahābhārata*, words:

- Friendship without duty becomes helping wrong (*Karna* with *Duryodhana*).
- Duty without good feeling can get hard or mean (some tough war parts).

Gita's idea of *lokasamgraha*, acting for the world's good and unity, brings them together. A true friend helps you follow duty, not just any wish. A duty-follower treats even enemies with respect and wants their real good, not to destroy them.

For today, this means -

- Do job duty with care for people and loyalty, but never let it hurt justice.
- Friendships and groups should share right-thinking, where being a friend sometimes means challenging bad actions.

Arjuna and *Karna* together teach that *Arjuna* shows finding right with god's help; *Karna* warns of loyalty gone loose without right-checks.

7. Conclusion

Comparing *Arjuna's* duty and *Karna's* friendship shows two strong, different ways to handle right-wrong problems. *Arjuna* talks with *Kṛṣṇa's* teachings and reaches a clear choice that mixes his own feelings, group duty, and big truths. His way stresses balance between kindness and right, family ties and big justice. *Karna* shows sad strength and risk of total loyalty; his thanks to *Duryodhana* feels deep, but pulls him into a big wrong he sees but can't fight.

In today's work, right-thinking, leader loyalty, and change work, *Arjuna's* path says to put truth, justice, and weak people's needs above thanks to persons or groups. *Karna's* path warns not to turn help you got into forever agreeing, especially if helpers fight the right order. In the end, the *Mahābhārata* asks readers to mix duty and friendship higher friendship that helps justice, a duty that respects ties without getting trapped.

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