

# Dharmarajya And The Essence Of Good Governance: The Legacy Of Mahabharatha

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## Abstract

Mahabharatha talks about the need for establishing Dharmarajya by over powering Adharma which is important to maintain natural life on earth. The concept of Dharmarajya is almost equivalent to present day good governance and Swarajya. Like Ramayana, the Mahabharatha has also been a source of spiritual strength of Indian society. The king should govern the state on the foundation of ethical and moral principles (Dharma) leading to realization of the goal of security and progress of the subjects in all his territories. The Shantiparva chapter of Mahabharatha also speaks about the behavior and the rules to be followed to achieve Moksha (salvation / emancipation) and advices that even the king should have a high moral standard and conquer himself first before going on to subdue his enemies. Mahabharatha discusses extensively about Dandaneethi (science of punishment) to uphold righteousness (Dharma) against Adharma. The administrative system should function in such a way that it promotes peace, security and prosperity in the state. The three major aspects of teachings of Rajadharma and Prajadharma are explained in Bhagavad-Gita, Shantiparva and Vishnu Sahasranama.

## Introduction

The epic Mahabharatha, as its name implies, is a great book of wisdom (Jnana) as well as Vijnana (science of realizing and practicing knowledge) which serves as a guide to understand righteous living, divine karma, prosperity and self-realization (Adhyatma jeevana). It is indeed considered as the fifth veda (Panchama veda). The significance of Mahabharatha is underscored by its three important components: Bhagavad-Gita (life values taught by Lord Krishna to Arjuna), Shanthiparva (Rajadharma advocated by Bhishma) and Vishnu Sahasranaama or Bhishma Gita (thousand names of Lord Vishnu taught by Bhisma to Dharmaraja when the former was on his deathbed).

## Objectives

Following are the objectives of the paper:

1. To comprehend Bhishma's teachings that outline responsibilities of both the King and the citizens aimed at enhancing the well-being of the state
2. To grasp the elemental features of life lessons imparted within the Bhagavadgita

3. To ascertain how the Mahabharata, as a compilation of ancient wisdom, serves as the bedrock of Indian culture, traditions, and way of life

### Literature review

The following sections explain in detail the different aspects of Mahabharatha found in the literature.

### **Bhagavad-Gita: The teachings provided by Lord Krishna to Arjuna before the commencement of war between Kauravas and Pandavas**

Bhagavad-Gita, an assimilation of the lessons taught by Lord Krishna to Arjuna during the Kurukshetra war, has a profound influence in Indian socio-cultural life. The Bhagavad-Gita, which translates to “Divine Song” is a collection of teachings provided by lord Krishna to Arjuna. Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers, was prepared to wage war against the hundred Kauravas (who happened to be his cousins) to punish them for their illegal usurping of land rightfully belonging to the Pandavas. However, inspite of being a brave skilled warrior, Arjuna started having doubts about the need for war, its aftereffects, when he saw all his teachers, elders and relatives in the enemy camp. He questions Krishna, who is his dear friend also his charioteer in war, what glory or happiness he would achieve by defeating and killing his own cousins, teachers and elders in this war. This whole scenario of having to kill his close ones makes him nervous for the first time in his life. Lord Krishna’s advice to Arjuna on this aspect comprises the first chapter (Yoga) of Bhagavad-Gita. In the next seventeen chapters (Yogas) of Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna the Dharma to be followed for healthy, prosperous, fruitful, peaceful living not just at the individual level but also at the societal level. He prescribes the Dharma for different sections of society such as servicemen, businessmen, peasants, soldiers, rulers, teachers and advisers; based on their attributes, their nature (sattvic, rajasic and tamasic) and their duties towards society. It is to be noted that such categorization indeed worked quite well in those days but has been distorted in its representation in the current times either due to ignorance or malice.

Lord Krishna supported the Pandavas for the establishment of righteous rule (Sudharmarajya) in the times when there were several kings across India ruling in a non-righteous way. Another objective of Lord Krishna was to bring the varied small states across Bharathavarsha under one emperor (Chakravarthy) as one big nation. He envisioned an empire in which smaller states maintained their independence but were loyal to the Chakravarthy, thereby paving the way for the prosperity of the state and nation through an effective, lawful and peaceful rule, by avoiding frequent interstate wars.

Most interestingly, the principles and practice of law and order known as Sanatana Yogadharma which translates to eternal yoga for right way of living, was first taught to Sun God by the Supreme Lord. It is to be noted that one branch of Hindu religion considers that there is only one God known as Bhagavantha (Supreme Soul) and that all other Gods are his creations to take care of the origin, sustenance and dissolution of the universe. An analogy can be seen in a single source of electricity providing energy for all activities such as running a car, operating a fan etc.

The four components of Bhagavad-Gita refer to Krishna’s advice on acquiring better health (medical yoga) and prosperity in one’s profession through

- (1) yoga of knowledge
- (2) yoga of desire / devotion
- (3) yoga of work ethics for daily rituals and profession
- (4) yoga of surrendering to God, i.e; considering actions as not being done by the self (mama) but through the advice of the Lord who is seated in one's heart (na mama).

Lord Krishna emphasizes that the foremost requirement for discharging one's duty is maintenance of perfect health and righteous way of living.

### a. Medical Yoga

In the Bhagavad-Gita, medical yoga includes physical wellness yoga (external or *bahiranga yoga*), mental wellness yoga (internal or *antharanga yoga*) and social wellness yoga (integral or *saamyas yoga*) as practical methods for maintenance of health as can be seen in modern medicine as well. This section details the different aspects of health explained in the different chapters (yogas) of the Bhagavad-Gita. In the physical health wellness yoga, the approach includes wisdom (Ch. 13-15), faith including chanting om tat sat before any work (Ch 17), nutrition (Ch 17), yajna (Ch. 4, Ch. 17) comprising worship mentally or externally, tapas or discipline yoga including physical, verbal and mental discipline (Ch. 17), charity (Ch. 17), sleep (Ch. 6), exercise including walking and *asanas* (Ch. 6), breathing including *pranayama* (Ch. 4 - 8) and divine mindfulness like *prathyhaara* (Ch. 5 - 6, Ch. 8). Mental health and wellness yoga (internal or *antharanga yoga*) includes mind control yoga or *atma samyama yoga* (Ch. 6) comprising *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samaadhi* or concentration/consciousness along with *pranayama* to get rid of sorrow (*dukha vivoga samyoga*) and blissfulness (*mana prasaada*). It also includes *Dharana* or concentration on specific parts of the body to get stabilize one's mind (*dhruti*) for next stage of yoga, namely meditation. Meditation is the concentration on one principle for which one may either perform mentally or use recitation of mantras (Brahmana). The final step of yoga is trying to reach *samaadhi* (control of modifications of mindful intelligence, a step that helps to attain consciousness, near to divine consciousness, to attain the state of peace and wisdom known as *sthitha prajna* (Ch. 2). This helps one to control his / her emotional intelligence through his / her inner soul (Ch. 3, Ch. 5 - 6). Intelligence in turn controls our mind (Ch. 3) and now the divine mind (Ch. 3) engages in actions that are also divine in nature (Ch. 16 v. 1-3 for *divine nature*). The check list for knowing whether one has accomplished mind control is included in Ch. 6. Social health and wellness yoga is discussed in *sarvathma yoga*, *paramaatma* and *samaahita yoga*.

Once the mind is pure, it will help to accomplish two objectives:

- (1) seeing others as ourselves (*sarvaatma yoga*)
- (2) gaining strength (*mahaabalaani*) by
  - (a) praising others who do good work (*harsha*)
  - (b) being friends with others who have knowledge and devotion to God (*sneha*)
  - (c) helping others who are in difficulty (*muditha*)
  - (d) not reacting to the bad quality of others (*nirlakshya*, not irritating them but ignoring them).

One could discuss the subject of Gita with others so that it helps spread the right way of living (*sathsanga*) in society. Lord Krishna describes the yoga of social aspects as *samadarshina* (Ch. 5), meaning seeing God in everybody's heart. This is because the soul represents God in our heart which is immortal and carried from one life to another life (Ch. 2, Ch. 15). This integrated approach of physical, mental and social yoga approach acts as a medicine to achieve a healthy life style.

## b. Professional yoga

The concept of work environment, professional efficiency and its management is now becoming part of institutional wellness program. It is noteworthy that Bhagavad-Gita covers professional yoga in the most practical way. It is seen that one is either reluctant to accept failure (most of us are restless and get stressed as a result) or unable to overcome that failure. But Lord Krishna advises to accept failure and seek the blessing of the Supreme Soul so that one becomes determined to find a way to overcome the failure. Lord Krishna tells that one can be successful through continuous effort (*abhyaasa*), detachment (*vairgya*), forgiveness (*kshama*) and patience (*shama*), affection (*prema*) and sympathy (*karunya*), and treating everybody the same way (*samadarshina*). These are the essential qualities of a team leader.

According to Bhagavad-Gita, work is to be treated as worship of the God with the Supreme Lord as the charioteer and you as the doer with his guidance; thereby forsaking your ego. One who performs the work as worship knowing that the Supreme Lord is the one who is the universal power (*Maheshwara*) and who has compassion for everybody (*suhrida sarva bhuthaanaam* as seen in Ch. 5) will be successful in his profession (Ch. 18). When one does his work as an offering to God, while thinking of God in his mind, then it doesn't seem as he is doing any work. He is now considered to be working like a lotus - "unattached", just like the lotus is unattached to water that it inhabits in (Ch. 9). This is the essence of supreme yoga and path for enlightenment (Ch. 11, Ch. 18). Lord Krishna emphasizes that work should be focused as worship of God with one's own profession as seen in *vyasamathmika buddhi ekaha* (Ch. 2). He adds that in one's profession, one has only the right to do the duty but not on its outcome (Ch. 2). Moreover, he advises that one should treat success / failure, happiness / sorrow, gain / loss and praise / insult with equanimity (Ch. 2). He tells that when one does his duty in this manner, he is not bound by action and qualifies for enlightenment (Ch. 2). Therefore



professional yoga means balance in emotional intelligence and skill in action (*yoga samathwa uchhathe*, *yoga karmasu koushalam* as seen in Ch. 2, Ch. 17). Lord Krishna provides us through the eight verses in Ch.12 v. 13 to v. 20 a check list to validate if we have reached perfection in our profession and purposeful living. These are referred to as *Dharma amrita* by Lord Krishna and called *Dharma astatka* by learned scholars.

### **Shanthiparva of Mahabharatha and teachings of Bhishma to Dharamaraja after the war**

The Shanthiparva too provides a theory of the state which deals with some fundamental questions mentioned below :

- (1) The importance of public policy (Rajaneeti)
- (2) Origin of state
- (3) Functions of government
- (4) Ideal State
- (5) Obligation of the subjects towards the state (Prajadhama)

#### **a. Notion of Kingship**

The Mahabharatha attributed to Vyasa is a treatise on life itself, which includes Dharma and ethics, polity and governance, philosophy and pursuit of salvation. Among all chapters, Shanthiparva is more relevant in one wants to understand the duties of a king and his subjects, known as Rajadhama. Shanthiparva is a collection of political philosophy of Bhishma, Vyasa and others on the art of governance. The purpose of this collection was to secure people's freedom from all sorts of fears (Adharma). The teachings of Shanthiparva are detailed below.

The king is vested with the authority and power of governance based on the principles of Dharma (righteousness). Therefore, the king should have a high moral standard and should conquer himself before conquering his enemies. The ultimate goal of the king is to realize the wellbeing of his state and subjects. Ch. 68 of Shanthiparva states, "The king is the heart of the people; he is their refuge; he is their glory; and he is their greatest happiness". Therefore, the king receives habitual obedience from all.

A kingdom in which anarchy reigns becomes weak and is bound to fall into the hands of enemies. Hence the coronation of a righteous king becomes the first step in creating a righteous kingdom. An ideal state can be led by an ideal king.

Shanthiparva speaks of the origin of kingship. Kingship was supposed to be divinely established by God as per people's request to overcome anarchy. Therefore people were expected to show their obedience to the king. However, Shanthiparva says that, in a state of anarchy (Adharma) under a weak emperor, people can

show their disobedience. Mahabharatha discusses the qualifications of a successor to the throne and his coronation ceremony in detail.

Interestingly if Ramayana emphasized on righteous means to righteous ends, Mahabharatha, on the other hand, permits the king to make use of all means, even unethical ones, to secure the end of protecting state interests.

## **b. Duties of the King**

The attributes of the king as detailed in the Mahabharatha are explained in this section. The main duty of the king is to uphold Dharma and prajahit (wellbeing of the subjects). The king is supposed to not only protect his subjects but also prevent them from doing Adharma. He is supposed to protect people from all internal and external threats.

The six fold functions of the king are as follows :

- Establish peace with a stronger enemy
- Go to war with equals
- Establish domination over the weak enemy
- Provide shelter to the surrendered
- Handle diplomatic tactics with the enemies' officials
- Ensure security of the empire with a strong army and sound alliances

However Vyasa says that, war is to be avoided as far as possible. An intelligent king, in Vyasa's words, will always avoid war for territorial acquisition and shall achieve it through conciliation, gifts and negotiation.

A king should control his treasury (kosa) and enrich it with reasonable taxation. He should make sure the state prospers economically by providing facilities to the peasants and traders.

### c. Qualities of the king

A king should be a promotor of justice by punishing evil doers and should establish a public life free of fear. During crises, a king should take control of the situation by taking his people into confidence. The qualities of an ideal king are listed as follows :

- Humanity
- Self-control
- Righteousness
- Modesty and good look
- Softness and affection towards subjects
- Embodiment of moral values
- Farsightedness
- Intelligence and bravery
- Kindness towards the helpless
- Compassionate towards the poor

### d. Notion of the state

Mahabharatha talks about the anarchical state of nature. It is explained as the condition where there was no king, sovereignty or law and order; and the rule of the mighty prevailed over the rest. As a result, people who lost faith in this system, entered into a contract in order to protect the weak. In Mahabharatha, the state is the outcome of human efforts with divine intervention. The king was assigned with the responsibility of establishing Dharmarajya (righteous state). The king was not absolute and didn't have the authority to dominate people. However, he was allowed to regulate them in order to establish Dharma.

### e. Moral polity (Dharma and Rajadharma)

The concept of Dharma is one of the fundamental principles of ancient Indian polity. The Sanskrit word Dharma is derived from the root word 'dhr' which means to uphold and to maintain a thing in its pure form. It stresses on the right action, right conduct and righteous order - well protected by an ideal king. Mahabharatha tells us about different stages of Dharma in public life. They are as follows :

- Ashramadharma (duties of a person in different stages of life)
- Rajadharma (duties of the king in his kingdom)
- Kuladharma (duties for the family)
- Sthridharma (duties of women)

Dharma is universal and the foundation of natural life. Like Valmiki, Vyasa in the Mahabharatha, mentions that the king represents the state and that he should govern in accordance with Dharma. Rajadharma refers to the king discharging his duties towards his subjects judiciously. The basic concern here is to

promote peoples welfare through peace, security, justice and prosperity (Dharma and prajahitha). Vyasa states that the happiness of the king lies in the happiness of his people and their welfare lies in his welfare. Shanthiparva mentions that king needs to maintain a good army and able ministers, provides impetus to agriculture and trade, plant trees, encourage artists and promote education.

#### **f. Good governance**

Some of the lessons on governance and administration as mentioned in the Mahabharatha are explained in this section. The administration should be on the basis of Dharma (righteousness). According to Vyasa, people will be obedient only to a virtuous king and have the right to resist illegitimate authority of a king. According to Bhishma, there is no treasure more valuable than popular support for a king. Among six forts of water, land, forest, mountain, desert and man, the 'man- fort' is the most important one. Hence, a wise king should be kind to all four varnas. A king must rule in such a way that no enemy attacks his kingdom. The king must monitor the state through spies who won't sell themselves at any point of time. The king must also use Dandaneethi to preserve order in the society.

It is mentioned in Shanthiparva that, without able and efficient ministers, the king cannot discharge his responsibility. The ministers are the backbone of good governance and king should appoint intelligent, duty bond, honest, and obedient people as ministers. The king should respect purohitas as they give good advice to him in his Rajaneethi.

#### **g. Dandaneethi (Science of punishment based on justice)**

The 59<sup>th</sup> chapter of Shanthiparva describes Dandaneethi as the science of punishment and governance. It is a mechanism to destroy evil akin to the sun destroying darkness. According to Bhishma, if Dandaneethi is destroyed, the essence of the Vedas will disappear and the social system will collapse thereby leading to peoples' sufferings due to Adharma prevailing over Dharma.

A king should govern the state in such a way that people live fearlessly. In Shanthiparva, Danda is described as a means of Rajadharma because the fear of punishment for an evil deed acts as the basis and purpose of governance. Danda should be based on equitable law and justice in the society and not on survival (mathsyanyaya).



## Bhishma-Gita or final teaching of Bhishma to Dharmaraja before his death

Bhishma-Gita is the essence of practice of supreme religion or supreme way of rightful living by everyone such that Rajadharm is practiced in the most efficient and successful way that is conducive to building a nation of righteousness and prosperous living in the kali yuga. It contains the following six questions by Dharmaraja and the corresponding answers given by Bhishma :

Que. 1: Who (“kim”) is the greatest (“ekam”) Lord (“daivatam”) in the world (“loke”)?

Ans. 1: He who is ("yo") the very sanctity ("pavitram") that sanctifies all sacred things ("pavitraanaam"); he who is most auspicious ("mangalam"); he who is the God ("devataa") of Gods ("daivatam"); he who is the eternal ("avyayah") father ("pitaa") of all creatures ("bhootaanaam") is the one God – Vishnu.

Que. 2: Who is the one (“ekam”) refuge (“paraayanam”) for all?

Ans. 2: He who is the great ("*mahat*") effulgence ("*tejah*"); He who is the Great controller ("*tapah*"); He who is the Supreme All-Pervading Truth; ("*brahma*") he who is the Highest (*Param*) Goal (*Ayanam*)-the Lord Vishnu.

Que. 3: By glorifying (“sthuvantah”) whom (“kam”) can man (“manavah”) reach the Auspiciousness (“shubam”) (peace and prosperity)?

Ans. 3: The supreme ("uttamam") Purusha, who is ever up and dong for the welfare of all, the Lord ("prabhum") of the world ("jagat") the endless ("anantam") – Sri Maha Vishnu.

Que. 4: By worshipping (“archantah”) whom can a man reach auspiciousness (peace and prosperity)?

Ans. 4: By meditating upon ("sthuvan naama"), by ("cha") worshipping ("archayan") and by prostrating at the same Purusha, man can reach true Auspiciousness.

Ques. 5 and 6: What (“ko”) is, in thy opinion, is the Greatest Dharma and by (“kim”) doing japa of what can “creatures” (jantu) go beyond (“mutchyate”) the bonds (“bandhanaath”) of samsara?

Ans. 5 and 6: The greatest Dharma is the one Vishnu, who has neither a beginning (Aadi) nor an end (Nidhanam), the supreme Lord ("maheshwaram") of the world. All creatures can go beyond the bonds of samsara, “and he goes beyond all sorrows” who daily ("nityam") chants ("stuvan") the sahasranaamas and within glorifies “the knower of the world” (Lokaadhyaksha).

The Supreme God is described as that from which the whole world of names and forms had risen in the beginning of the creation, that in which the world continues to exit, that into which alone the world can merge back during the ‘Dissolution’ (Pralaya); this supreme is Vishnu.

After thus answering all questions, Bheeshma said, “I shall now advise you the thousand names of Vishnu. Please listen to them with all attention”. This is how the sacred hymn “Vishnu Sahasranama” or “The thousand names of Lord Vishnu”, is introduced in the Mahabharatha.

The Pandavas, after hearing all the details of right of ruling in detail as well as an essence of supreme religion in the form of Vishnu Sahasranaama, implemented effective rule for several years. Then they coronated their grandson Parikshita who also followed their foot-steps and gave the best rule for the kingdom and this rule was later continued by his son Janamejaya.

## Conclusion

Thus the epic Mahabharatha is treatise of state craft, which even in contemporary times provides relevant advice for good governance of the state. All aspects of good governance like politics, diplomacy, governance, religious, and philosophies of human life are well depicted in the epic. According to Vyasa, only under a benevolent king, people live fearlessly. Vyasa’s king was the symbol of victory, pivot of administration, guardian of state and his subjects and the embodiment of noble qualities. As a treatise of statecraft, the Mahabharatha attempts to show that even in changed times, the political ideas of the epic are relevant and ideal for the integrity of the state and welfare of the people. It is not only a religious text but a text on polity, governance diplomacy, ethics and philosophy fully embodied with the spirit of Dharma which ultimately leads to the construction of an ideal state.

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