



# Establishment of *Dharma*: The Influence of Krishna in the *Mahabharat*

Anshika Gaur, Research Scholar

Department of English, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, India-201001

## **Abstract** –

This paper deals with the concept of *Dharma* and explains its importance in its entirety. It showcases the importance of the term *Dharma*, studies its originality, and explores how it came into being. It portrays that *Dharma* is described through different meanings. Moreover, it expresses *Dharma* through one of the epic Indian narratives, the *Mahabharata*. Through the text of the *Mahabharata*, this research focuses on different characters such as Yudhishtira and Arjuna, presenting them through their lens and depicting their version of righteousness. But even though these characters are important, this study foregrounds its emphasis on the character of Krishna, who is depicted as an advisor to Arjuna during the Kurukshetra war, explaining to him the importance of duty and righteousness without thinking of the repercussions.

The study also incorporates the philosophical significance of the *Bhagavad Gita*, embedded within the *Mahabharat*, which provides a metaphysical resolution to the epic's moral turbulence. In conclusion, it also examines the modern view of the tales of the *Mahabharat* in contemporary society and the current interpretations of terms such as duty or righteousness, along with the diverse range of adaptations of the *Mahabharat*.

**Keywords** – *Dharma*, *Mahabharat*, Krishna, literature, righteousness, modern-day adaptation, *Bhagavad Gita*

## Introduction

" यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥"

Meaning - Whenever there is a decline in righteousness (dharma) and an increase in unrighteousness (adharma), I manifest myself.

- *Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter 4, Verse 7)

What is this word 'Dharma' that we hear so often? Why every time that we address this word 'Dharma' in simple terms 'duty' and tries to question about it, we are simply provided with an exact same answer that states it has always been this way or this is what it is written in the ancient scriptures. In basic terms, the explanation of *Dharma* would be 'doing something what is right.' But it still creates a confusion that in whose perspective should we consider if something is right or not. Do we as individuals determine this or the society does this for us? Or is the *Dharma* that we usually talk about, is a concept that remains permanent in every situation? These questions really make us think what is the concept of *Dharma* and what it symbolises within itself.

This single yet complex term is described through many definitions and has different meanings. Sometimes, it could mean personal duty that in fact depicts an act towards oneself, which we call *Svadharmā*<sup>1</sup>; or on the other hand, it can mean duty or righteousness towards the well-being of society or others. Eventually, there is no straightforward interpretation of this word, as it holds different explanations in various senses.

But if explained it in simple explanation, every principle and way of life that sustains the society and the individual is known as *Dharma*; the term which is derived from the root *dhr* 'to sustain' or 'to bear'<sup>i</sup>.

dhāraṇāt dharma ityāhur dharmo dhārayate Prajāḥ<sup>2</sup>

yaḥ syād dhāraṇa samyuktaḥ sa dharma iti niścayaḥ.

Sanskrit Translation - {धारणात् धर्म इत्याहुः धर्मो धारयते प्रजाः ।

यत् स्याद्धारणसंयुक्तं स धर्म इति निश्चयः ॥<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Svadharmā is performing your own duties in a way that is natural to you, aligned with your character, and distinct from everyone else's. The term comes from Sanskrit, with *sva* meaning "one's own" and *dharma* meaning "duty" or "righteousness".

<sup>2</sup> English Translation - "They say *dharma* (rightness / duty) from *dhāraṇa* (that which sustains).

It is *dharma* that sustains the people.

That which is associated with sustaining (society / creation) — that certainly is *dharma*."

From its broad meaning in the cosmic sense, as discussed by Paul Horsch in his essay 'From Creation Myth to World Law', *Dharma* is defined as the universal and eternal law (controlled by the gods) to its description in the ritual sense where it is portrayed as the actions observed through the rituals (controlled by the priests).

But the real question arises that how did this term come to origin and how was it established into the roots of our society? According to Joel P. Brereton in his essay *Dharman in the Rgveda*, he mentions how the term *Dharma* appears 63 times in the *Rgveda*<sup>3</sup> and how it did not have much history of it before *Rgveda*<sup>iii</sup>. Even though it did seem to have a little association before *Rgveda*, still according to the Indian Ancient scriptures, the existence of *Dharma* begins with the *Rgveda*.

But if this is the case, how does its existence make it way towards the Epic Indian Narrative like *Mahabharat*<sup>4</sup>? What was so significant about this epic that still made us think about it whenever we are pointing out the equation of *Dharma* and *Adharma*, *Mahabharat* is mentioned. We know *Dharma* as the duty or righteousness or the foundation of creation but how does *Dharma* play a part in the Epic narrative of *Mahabharat*. How does the 18-day fratricidal War of Kurukshetra, the one between the sons of Dhritarashtra (Kauravas) and the sons of his late younger brother Pandu (Pandavas) becomes a means to accomplish and restore *Dharma*?

### **Establishment of *Dharma* in *Mahabharat***

All the answers eventually come down to one word: *Dharma*. The restoration of *Dharma* was one of the most important motives why the event of war unfolded. Thereafter, it is portrayed in *Mahabharat* how the concept of *Dharma* is not always straightforward. It can be complicated in its meaning; that is the reason why it is not defined as certain fixed set of rules that anyone can follow, rather it is debated upon just like how most of the characters did in the *Mahabharat*.

The text of *Mahabharat* translated by KM Ganguly sheds its light in terms of its characters and their way of upholding *Dharma*. Just like it is said how this narrative lies on the concept of *Dharma*, which governs both universal and social order. One of the most noteworthy examples of this would be the character of Arjun debating upon his actions and his decision of standing up to fighting against his own for the sake of *Dharma*.

<sup>3</sup> The *Rgveda* or *Rig Veda* is an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns.

<sup>4</sup> The *Mahabharata* is one of two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. It is a vital source of information about the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded as both a text about Hindu moral law (*dharma*) and a history (*itihasa*). The *Mahabharata* is traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa.

Additionally, it also explores the dynamic between *Adharma* and *Dharma* (righteousness and unrighteousness) within the narrative. Yet in what way do we know that the action which is being committed is specified as *Dharma* or *Adharma*?

As stated by James L. Fitzgerald *Dharma and its Translation in the Mahābhārata* “I start by invoking the apt advice of the Apastamba Dharmasūtra<sup>5</sup>: "Dharma and adharma do not go about saying 'Here we are!' Nor do the Gods, Gandharvas, or Ancestors tell us "This is dharma," This is adhar-ma<sup>iv</sup>.” This explains in a way that the word ‘*Dharma*’ or ‘*Adharma*’ does not require any direct illustrations or meanings because sometimes what may be right in someone’s context cannot be the same for another or vis a versa.

Through the text of *Mahabharat*, at the very beginning, the notion of *Dharma* is depicted and questioned by means of various characters. Likewise, it also discusses the nature of *Dharma* and the meaning from the text of *Bhagavad Gita* that is “one’s own nature.” There are many important characters that are discussed in this narrative who demonstrate the concept of duty and righteousness. These characters portray different dimensions of *Dharma* where they are constantly placed in situations where they have to question themselves and understand what is right.

Beginning from Bhishma, one of the elders who is also referred to as Bhishma Pitamah (Kuru Dynasty’s Grand Patriarch). He, who fulfilled his *Dharma* by giving up the throne because of his duty towards his father but the question here that lingers is, was this commitment or self-sacrifice towards the throne justify his actions where he had to support the wrongdoings of Kauravas or was it still considered to be an act of *Dharma* or his duty when he refused to listen to the pleadings of Draupadi during her disrobing<sup>v</sup> where she was humiliated and dragged into the Sabha forcefully without her own will and also during the instance where he (Bhishma) chose to remain silent during the great crime that was happening when Draupadi was subjected to public disgrace in front of everyone and compelled to be the slave of the Kauravas.<sup>6</sup> Through these events that were unfolded, it presents how his loyalty and vow bound him to the extent where he couldn’t even prevent what he felt was wrong. This could be proved by the teaching that he further mentioned to Yudhisthir

<sup>5</sup> Āpastamba Dharmasūtra is a Sanskrit text and one of the oldest Dharma - post-vedic smṛiti-related texts of Hinduism that have survived into the modern age from the 1st millennium BCE. It contains thirty praśnas, which literally means ‘questions’ or books.

<sup>6</sup> Bhishma said, 'O blessed one, morality is subtle. I therefore am unable to duly decide this point that thou hast put, beholding that on the one hand one that hath no wealth cannot stake the wealth belonging to others, while on the other hand wives are always under the orders and at the disposal of their lords.'

This was answered by Bhishma when Draupadi questions the elders in the Sabha during her disrobing as to why they were silent?

on his death bed explaining to him the importance of *Dharma*, emphasizing how it is subtle and thus requires wisdom to understand it.

Tarko'pratiṣṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā nāsau ṛṣiryasya mataṁ na bhinnam |

Dharmasya tattvaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyaṁ mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ<sup>vi</sup> ||<sup>7</sup>

Another character, Yudhishtira, the eldest one of the Pandavas<sup>8</sup>, son of Pandu and Kunti who was also addressed by the name 'Dharmaraja'<sup>9</sup> or 'Dharmaputra'<sup>10</sup>. He, who was known to follow the path of truth and righteousness yet his life was shown as a series of moral failures and contradictions. The event where he decided to play the game of dice which further he lost by tricks and manipulations because of Kauravas, getting deceived by his cousin brother Duryodhana and his uncle Shakuni that led him to further stake his kingdom, his brothers, his self, and his wife as well<sup>11</sup>. This marks one of the prominent instances in the narrative where Yudhishtira's *Dharma* was being questioned by his own wife who raised an issue upon the occasion of her being placed at stake, she regarded his right if he could put her on stake when he himself had lost himself as a servant to the Kauravas.<sup>vii</sup> This completely raises a doubt whether it was *Dharma* that made Yudhishtira gamble his everything and continue that game even after losing everything or was it his adherence to the rules that led him to forget about his responsibility? In spite of being aware of his actions, still the consequences of his choice and obedience to the invitation of the Kauravas reveal a troubling tension between personal virtue and social responsibility.

"Although (a living) animal made of gold was an impossibility, yet Rama suffered himself to be tempted by a (golden) deer<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the minds of men over whom calamities hang, became deranged and out of order<sup>13</sup>."<sup>viii</sup> These words asserted by Yudhishtira himself in the Sabha Parva elucidates the fact how

<sup>7</sup> "Logic is inconclusive, the scriptures are diverse, and there is no sage whose opinion does not differ from others. The true essence of dharma is hidden in a cave (i.e., it is extremely subtle); therefore, the path to follow is that which has been trodden by great personalities"

<sup>8</sup> The Pandavas are the five sons of Pandu in Hindu legend. The parentage of the five Pandavas is nominally attributed to Pandu.

<sup>9</sup> The king of *Dharma*.

<sup>10</sup> Son of *Dharma*; the reason being he is believed to be the son of the god *Dharma* (Yama) born through the divine boon Kunti, his mother received.

<sup>11</sup> "Draupadi said, --'O son of the *Suta* race, go, and ask that gambler present in the assembly, whom he hath lost first, himself, or me.'

This was questioned by Draupadi herself when she got the news that she has been put on stake in a dice game by her husband which he lost.

<sup>12</sup> This line is a commentary on the Rāmāyaṇa story of the golden deer which is the reason of Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa.

<sup>13</sup> This line was spoken by Yudhishtira when they were sent a message from the royal messenger by the king and their uncle Dhritarashtra for the Pandavas to come and play the dice game.

Yudhishtira in this situation knows of his error and compares himself to character Rama from *Ramayana* of how sometimes the calmest minds are capable of being astray which can further compromise their judgement. These instances that are provided in the text are some of the many which raises a conflict in the meaning of *Dharma* or something that force us to contemplate whether our conception of *Dharma* is what we presume it to be or something else entirely?

### The Character of Krishna

The depiction of character Krishna in *Mahabharat* denotes how he assesses his role as an advisor or mediator. It also describes how he fulfils the role of an advisor for Arjun and the Pandavas as in the instance, prior to the war, when the choice was provided to Arjun and Duryodhana to choose between Krishna and his army, it was Arjun who choose the unarmed Krishna wanting him to be advisor. As mentioned by S. Ram Mohan also, in his essay “*Delineation of Evil in the ‘Mahabharata’ and ‘the Gang of Four’*” stating the exact same lines “Thus the satvic recognises the glory of God as "upadhirahita"<sup>14</sup> without any adjuncts, and chooses Him. He puts the chariot of life in his hand. But Duryodhana's evil mind, unable to comprehend the glory of God, chooses the army, the material alternative<sup>ix</sup>.”

To fully understand Krishna’s role in redefining *Dharma*, the initial focus should be on the importance that *Dharma* holds in its entirety. *Dharma* is not portrayed as something that is always permanent but something that is conditional and sometimes situational focusing on the circumstance as well. It can be rendered through one of the instances in *Mahabharat* when the Pandavas decided to place Shikhandi<sup>15</sup> in the battle before Bhishma as it was his vow to never raise his weapons against Shikhandi. Moreover, it was Krishna who urged Arjun to do what was needed and that was to strike Bhishma with arrows. This scene formulates and presents *Dharma* as subtle and contextual based on the situation.

Another incident would be when Krishna depicts strategic deception helping Pandavas in the Kurukshetra War. The instance where he presents the half truth to Drona that ‘Ashwatthama is dead’ whereas the complete truth was that it was an elephant named Ashwatthama that was killed by Bhima upon the advice of Krishna.<sup>x</sup> This led to the breakdown of Drona and realising that his beloved son was no more, he lost all his interest in fighting and dropped his weapon which gave chance to Drishtadyumna to behead him. Krishna also tricked Karna when the latter’s chariot got stuck and unarmed, he was struggling with his chariot’s

<sup>14</sup> It is defined as someone who is free from all material limitations or designations.

<sup>15</sup> Shikhandi, also known as Shikhandini in *Mahabharat* is illustrated as someone who was born as the reincarnation of Amba, the princess of Kāśī whose was abducted by Bhishma for a svayamvara in her previous birth.

wheel.<sup>xi</sup> This was the time when Krishna urged Arjuna to strike Karna since this was the moment and even though Arjuna was resistant, Krishna reminded him of Karna's act and his past where he also did the same to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. These actions of Krishna emphasize on the challenging of the conventional rules of war and additionally depicts that the pursuit of justice may sometimes involve morally questionable means.

Furthermore, it was Krishna who guided Arjuna when he felt overwhelmed at the thought of fighting his own family and questions whether he could confront his own family his elders in the war. Seeing his elders such as Bhishma, his teacher Dron Acharya from whom he learned a lot and respects them unconditionally followed by his cousin brothers and relatives.

“Arjuna questions to Krishna who is performing his role as Arjun's charioteer: How can I counterattack such persons as Bhishma and Drona in battle, firing arrows at those who are worthy of my respect, O Madhusudana<sup>16?</sup>”<sup>xii</sup>

Sanskrit Translation: अर्जुन उवाच ।

दृष्ट्वेमं स्वजनं कृष्ण युयुत्सुं समुपस्थितम् ।

सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि मुखं च परिशुष्यति<sup>17</sup>”<sup>xiii</sup>

Then the answer conveyed by Krishna, which articulates the importance of duty or righteousness, that it is necessary to fulfill his responsibilities as a warrior without overlooking at the consequences. He persuades Arjun to fulfill his duty (*Dharma*) that was to fight against Adharma without focusing on the repercussions.

Sanskrit Translation: कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि<sup>xiv</sup>”<sup>18</sup>

The character of Krishna is portrayed justifying the notion of *Dharma* and doing what is right, just like when Draupadi was dragged after the game of dices as she was declared as a slave after his husband Yudhisthir put a stake on her and lost her. It was Krishna who helped her when she asked help from him because no one in that Sabha, not even the knowledgeable and respectable elders such as Bhishma or Drona listened to her pleads and her helplessness during her disrobing. “The question Draupadi asked rested on a difficult and

<sup>16</sup> Arjun feeling grief at the sight of seeing his relatives in the battlefield and questioning whether he can fight them.

<sup>17</sup> English translation - “O Krishna, seeing my own kinsmen gathered here, eager to fight, my body trembles, my limbs fail, and my mouth becomes dry.”

<sup>18</sup> English Translation- “Your right is to action alone, not its fruits.” The verse mentioned is from The Bhagavad Gita itself, that somehow interprets one of the teachings that Krishna bestows upon Arjun in their conversation on the day of the Kurukshetra War.

complicated legal point.<sup>19</sup> Even Bhishma, who had often taken the part of the Pandavas in quarrels with Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana, was unable to give an answer, perhaps for fear of compromising Draupadi.”<sup>xv</sup>

## Conclusion

*Mahabharat*, as a very prominent Indian epic text has been part of this Indian society for a very long time. Just like how Irawati Karve in her book *Yuganta*<sup>xvi</sup> mentions how *Mahabharat* is a traditional scripture that provides a deep layered exploration of ethical dilemmas and human behaviour and further how every character in the narrative has their individualistic interpretations.<sup>20</sup> Growing up, everyone must have heard about the narratives of how Mahabharat portrays a story about war within a family, a war between brothers and most specifically a war between good and evil (*Dharma* and *Adharma*). Unlike how previous generations felt, Mahabharat is not just a text or a tale that is brought out as a sacred text and even though the present-day young generation and their focus on social media and technology such as AI makes it difficult for them to follow their culture and knowing about their ancient history; still it's a concept for many young people that they view as a source of philosophical and psychological insight.

*“The principal theme of the Mahabharata is one familiar to most Indians: the struggle for property in a joint family. In the Mahabharata the quarrel is between princes, the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, for the throne of Hastinapura”<sup>xvii</sup>.*

This explains how this tale, even though being an ancient scripture still relates itself in contemporary life and can be interpreted by modern generations. Through the characters of *Mahabharat* who are depicted to navigate through various ethical situation, the individuals of the younger generation can relate to the similar dilemmas in their life. Just like how Arjuna had to go through various challenges and struggle where he was torn between choosing what was right or what was wrong, where he had to decide of going against his own because he had to fulfill his duty. This feels connected and relatable to the generation as to how it demonstrates the clear reality of the contemporary society where people also are struggling with their own demons and sometimes must step up to make difficult decisions in different spheres of their life.

This Indian epic depiction of familial conflict further reinforces its relevance to everyday life. The tale of rivalry that is shown between Pandavas and Kauravas is not just a struggle for power but it is also a personal

<sup>19</sup> The question that Draupadi asked everyone in the Sabha - “Go into the assembly and ask if Dharma-rajah had become a slave before he staked me.”

<sup>20</sup> Irawati Karve in her text “The Mahabharata is an extensive record of the intimate life and thought of scores of people. Each character and each of its actions lend themselves to different interpretations.”

grudge that is rooted in jealousy, insecurity, and the need to be better than the other. Characters such as Duryodhan embody unchecked ambition and resentment for his own brothers just like the incident where he plans to take down his brother Bheema by throwing him in the river in his vulnerable state that is when Bheema was poisoned. These representations mirror the complexities and struggle of modern relationship structure where they are challenged and where conflicts often arise from similar emotional and psychological factors.

### Works Cited:

BRERETON, JOEL P. “‘DHĀRMAN’ IN THE ‘ṚGVEDA.’” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 5/6, 2004, pp. 449–489. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23497149>. Accessed 28 Dec. 2025.

Fitzgerald, James L. “Dharma and its Translation in the Mahābhārata.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 5–6, Dec. 2004, pp. 671–685, <https://doi.org/23497157>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2025.

HORSCH, PAUL, and Jarrod L. Whitaker. “FROM CREATION MYTH TO WORLD LAW: THE EARLY HISTORY OF ‘DHARMA.’” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 5/6, 2004, pp. 423–48. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23497148>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.

Mohan, S. Ram. “Delineation of Evil in the ‘Mahabharata’ and ‘the Gang of Four.’” *Indian Literature*, vol. 49, no. 1 (225), 2005, pp. 162–72. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346586>. Accessed 29 Dec. 2025.

Olivelle, Patrick, editor. *Dharma: Studies in Its Semantic, Cultural, and Religious History*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2009.

Trikha, Urmila Rani. *The Concepts of Religion in the Mahābhārata*. Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1987.

Vyāsa. *Bhagavad-gītā: Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Illuminations on the Perfection of Yoga*. Translated and with commentary by Svāmī Narasiṅha and Svāmī Giri, Senior Editor Svāmī Giri, *Gauranga Vani Publishers / Rupanuga Bhajan Ashram*, 2022.

Vyasa. *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*. Translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguly, Vol. 5, Bhishma Parva, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2012.

Vyasa. *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, Book II: Sabha Parva*. Trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli. Calcutta: Bharata Press, 1883–1896. Secs. LXVI–LXVII.

WEZLER, ALBRECHT. “DHARMA IN THE VEDA AND THE DHARMAŚĀSTRAS.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 5/6, 2004, pp. 629–54. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23497155>. Accessed 28 Dec. 2025.

---

(Endnotes)

- <sup>i</sup> The Concepts of Religion in the Mahābhārata, pg. no. xiii
- <sup>ii</sup> *Mahābhārata*, Karṇa Parva, Chapter 69, Verse 58.
- <sup>iii</sup> DHĀRMAN' IN THE 'ṚGVEDA, pg. no. 449
- <sup>iv</sup> Dharma and its Translation in the Mahābhārata, pg. no. 671
- <sup>v</sup> *Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI
- <sup>vi</sup> *Mahabharata*, Shanti Parva, Section CIX
- <sup>vii</sup> *Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI- LXVII.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXXV
- <sup>ix</sup> Delineation of Evil in the 'Mahabharata' and 'the Gang of Four, pg. no. 168
- <sup>x</sup> *Mahabharata*, Drona Parva, Section CXCI
- <sup>xi</sup> *Mahabharata*, Karṇa Parva, Section XCI
- <sup>xii</sup> Vyāsa, Translation by **Svāmī Narasiṅha and Svāmī Giri** Bhagavad-gītā 2.4
- <sup>xiii</sup> Vyāsa, Bhagavad Gītā 1.28
- <sup>xiv</sup> Vyāsa, Bhagavad-gītā 2.47
- <sup>xv</sup> Yuganta: *The End of an Epoch*, pg. no. 53
- <sup>xvi</sup> Yuganta: *The End of an Epoch*, pg. no. 10
- <sup>xvii</sup> Yuganta: *The End of an Epoch*, pg. no. 10

