

Dialogues on Dharma: Perspectives on *Bhagavad Gita* and *Shanti Parva*

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Abstract

The question of dharma, especially in the context of social duty and self-mastery, has been the central philosophical concern in the sacred texts of *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*. Individual action amidst tumultuous realities result in several contemplative phases of leadership, particularly affecting the characters in the *Mahabharata*. The *Gita* as a divine text carrying the message of the Supreme Divinity is an important prelude to the *Shanti Parva*, where the chaotic aftermath of the battle has left Yudhisthira at crossroads of renunciation and the life of an Emperor. Through this research paper, it is sought to unearth the fundamental lessons on dealing with the moral and existential crisis faced by a leader who has been involved in as big a scale of fatal and moral correction as the war of Kurukshetra was. This thematic study of selected verses, sections, and chapters of the “*Shanti Parva*” in *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*, is an exploration of the philosophical conundrums, existential complexities that surround a human being who has reached crossroads of choices and decisions. Four central themes are analyzed here: self-restraint in a leader, desireless action (*nishkama karma*), leadership as *seva*, and liberation for the worldly. The paper attempts to build the dharmic perspective of a leader in *Shanti Parva* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, with specific focus on epistemes on operational ethics, rationale of delegating social roles in the defined spectrum of a leader in a society. Dharma is an important precedent to ensure a leader is effective through self-mastery.

Keywords: action, Dharma, *Bhagavad Gita*, leadership, self, *Shanti Parva*

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Introduction

Hindu philosophy has given a plethora of concepts to the world, which have been deliberated upon, projected across and within a variety of contexts, as well as ruminated for its multifarious applicability and understanding in general. One such context is *dharma*. One thing is conclusive, dharma is intricately linked to the ideal way of life a human being is recommended to lead, and also determines the kind of “living” of a specific human person. Etymologically speaking, the root word “dhr” in *dharma* means “to hold” (Sequeira, n.d.), which has further been substantiated by M. Hiriyanna (1949) as “the basis of all order, whether social or moral.” The conundrum of pointing the limited and focused meaning of *dharma* has been acknowledged by several scholars. In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, the 14th verse of the 4th Brahmana details that the highest principle above which nothing exists, and to which all must comply, is *dharma*. In essence, it is “law or justice... that which constrains the unruly wills and affections of people” (Radhakrishnan, 1953). If a rule is established, it is to create a point of reference for all actions amongst varieties of beings with different motivations and predispositions. Dharma becomes the focal point where a general agreement of the “rightness” of different aspects of living occurs across societal and personal differences. Dharma in terms of an image resonates with balancing the extremes within a person and in a society, intricately linked to the moral, social, and personal order which needs to be upheld with accountability and integrity. Dharma is connected to the individual in specific and the ideal human life that brings in harmony and order for the world around, in general. Sage Devasthana, in *Mahabharata*, captures the aspect of dharma as follows: “...dharma lies in not injuring any being and in non-injury, truthfulness in speech, sharing, fortitude, forgiveness, procreation on one’s own wife, gentleness, modesty and steadfastness”; furthermore he stresses that the ruler has the responsibility of establishing one’s subjects on the path of dharma and must follow dharma him/herself (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.21).

This paper is an exploration of the concept of dharma, the integral core of the individual, as extrapolated across dialogic teachings within *Mahabharata*, with specific focus on understanding leadership as a role and an ingrained performance. The study highlights dharmic leadership as discussed in the “*Shanti Parva*” and “*Bhagavad Gita*” sections of *Mahabharata*. Close-reading of the sections were done in order to narrow down the common understandings and themes discussed within the larger frame of *dharma*. Four themes emerged: Self-Restraint in a Leader; Desireless Action (Nishkama Karma); Leadership as Seva; Liberation for the Worldly. These themes were comparatively analysed across the two specific sections in order to understand the scope of dharmic rule as suggested by *Mahabharata*.

Understanding Mahabharata

One of the two epics in Hindu religion, *Mahabharata* is an account of the great warrior clan of Hastinapur, who got enmeshed into the Battle of Kurukshetra over long-standing issues of good deeds and evil misadventures. Kauravas and Pandavas, cousins by birth and enemies by deeds, fight against one another in a battle that nearly extinguishes all clans of the Indian subcontinent. The epic is narrated to King Janamejaya, the grandson of Arjuna the Pandava, by Krishna Dwaipayana. This epic has 18 *parvas*, or sections, with about 220000 lines (Dowson, 1982). *Mahabharata* uses allegory to portray philosophical messages, with debates and discussions being predominant features of eliciting thoughts within the readers’ minds and to enable rumination and imbibing of ideals, values, and ethical notions to occur. Discourses on the nature of duty, attitude towards execution of a responsibility, and performing the action- these are three vectors that arise in discussions on various forms of dharma (when taken as the *doing*

of duty) in *Mahabharata*. Calling the *Mahabharata* as “a veritable encyclopedia of dharma,” Swami Harshananda (2012) notes that well-developed ideas of dharma as performing ordained duties righteously, *purusharthas* being shown as a “scheme of life,” and relaxations of rules and laws in times of emergencies and distress portrayed the “robust common sense” of the author, Veda Vyasa. In the context of action, what particularly engages the researcher’s eyes are that this epic is oft-quoted and studied by scholars for its discourse on leadership styles, attitudes, personalities and managerial wisdom.

Bhagavad Gita

In the sixth *parva* of *Mahabharata*, the “Bhishma Parva,” readers encounter Arjuna’s anxiety just before the war begins at the thought of killing his own cousins and *guru*, posited opposite to him as the enemy on the battleground of Kurukshetra. Sri Krishna pauses the chariot between the two armies, and gives Arjuna an elaborate discourse on human life, the immortal and transcendental *atman*, and the way action and values had to be weaved to ensure a just performance of one’s duties and responsibilities. This section of the Bhishma Parva became the source of religious and spiritual knowledge for Hindus across millennia, and came to be called the Bhagavad Gita, or “Song of the Lord.” *Bhagavad Gita* is a treatise of dharma invariably as it explains the nature and purpose of dharma in the world. It elaborates on human thoughts, nature and actions which needs to work towards upholding dharma. This section talks of three *margas* or paths of liberation, Bhakti Yoga (way of devotion), Jnana Yoga (way of knowledge), and Karma Yoga (way of action). These three paths unite to define the nature of a righteous, devout and detached human being who can find that liberation from *samsara*, the endless cycle of life and death. Through the human form of Arjuna, momentarily the commander of the Pandava army in a battle stricken with doubt and emotional turmoil, Sri Krishna offers advice on doing duty with a stable mind and internal equanimity. The message of righteousness as *dharma* is reinforced in the Gita through mental and metaphysical dimensions of being in the mortal world.

Shanti Parva

The twelfth *parva* of *Mahabharata* is *Shanti Parva*, where Yudhisthira undergoes a sense of dissonance and abject feeling of helplessness, and disgust, over the aftermath of the gruesome war. He decides to leave the kingdom and take up the life of a recluse. With countless advisors advising against leaving his pending duty as the Emperor, Yudhisthira engages in conversation with Bhishma, the Grandsire of Kuru dynasty who advises him on various aspects of *dharma* of the ruler. This *parva* is the longest in the entire epic, and arguably substantiates the practical application of the principles of *dharma*, *karma*, path to *moksha* through duty and attitude of the ruler towards one’s duty and subjects. Several researchers have extensively studied the nature of governance and kingship models put forth by Bhishma, Vyasa and other sages while they prepare Yudhisthira for the upcoming role as a leader in the face of chaos and mass destruction (Garg, 2004; Pareek, 2015; Saha & Khatun, 2023). For some researchers, the *Mahabharata* understanding of the Varna system in the context of Indian society stood out as a predominant feature of *Shanti Parva* (Gowda, 2015). The political philosophy of Bhishma arguably appends to the philosophy of human life expounded by Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita.

“Dialogue” Pedagogy in *Mahabharata*

Oral tradition marks the traditional ways with which knowledge was transferred across generations. The knowledge in Ancient Hindu tradition is said to have been passed down as *shruti* (heard/oral) and *smriti* (remembered/recorded) texts. The Hindu Epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, are identified as *smriti*. However, what is intriguing is the manner in which the epic records the primary *shruti* way of transferring knowledge of events, philosophies, commentaries on actions of different characters, and its interpretation by the *vakta* (conversationalist). There is literally a record of dialogic (*samvaada*) way of presenting the storyline. In essence, Veda Vyasa (author of *Mahabharata*) and Valmiki (author of *Ramayana*) are credited for reworking on narratives of human experience that existed in order to present it as a poetic epic (Phuyal, 2026). They essentially created a *smriti* of the *shruti*. In Indian traditions, stories have remained a crucial phase of shaping perspectives, transmitting knowledge, facts, information, skills and building resilient, ideal characters out of individuals. “Storytelling traditions in India have always been didactic, serving the purpose of transmitting knowledge related to leadership, ethics, statecraft, diplomacy, etc.” (Sharma & Balhara, 2025). *Mahabharata* relies on human experience used as basis by teachers giving knowledge as the most valid testimony (*Shabda Pramana*). Existence and its various aspects – good and bad-remain the biggest conundrum that stabilizes knowledge; this encourages intellectual and philosophical ruminations within the human mind. Dialogic methods- to relay stories with connoted and denoted meanings, as well as depict allegorical elements exemplifying desirable and non-desirable values and behaviors- are most prominent pedagogical techniques in the case of Hindu epics.

Dharma in *Mahabharata*

The battle of *Mahabharata* is essentially an event that led to several revelations, moderations, periods of enlightenment and revisionary approaches to life being taught, and upheld. The very event of bloodshed, mass destruction and chaos set about a physical and mental state of helplessness in everyone. The dialogues that occur in the *Shanti Parva* and Bhagavad Gita project this sense of incoherence reigning in those who received the knowledge of dharma imparted by sages, Bhishma and Sri Krishna- Yudhisthira and Arjun. Both were plagued with the abject horror of the doom that war tends to bring. While Yudhisthira feels, “we have ourselves slain those who are our own,” (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.7), Arjuna physically and mentally becomes weak and fragile before the war after seeing *swajana* (people of my own) in front of him (*Bhagavad Gita*, 1984, 1.28–29). The fundamental cognition of their enemies being related to them, creates despondency due to crisis between moral duty (to eliminate the forces of *adharma* or misconduct) and filial affection (due to the opposition in war being family members). The discourse on dharma given to both of them begins with the dismantling of fear rooted in a strong sense of material bondages to people owing to blood relations by bringing into force the supreme duty of a human being- to follow the path of conduct or dharma and to ensure any force of disorder is not given an opportunity to amass that and unleash cruelty on a multitude of people in their power-heady state of mind.

Lessons of dharma in *Mahabharata* also addresses the state of mind and conscious approach by the individual towards one’s duties, responsibilities as dictated by the social roles and relationships they handle. For this, equanimity of thoughts and emotions, and inner stability have been reinforced time and again as a desired state of mental and emotional well-being for those who need. *Sthitaprajna*, the state of “steady wisdom and deep introspection” (Bhagavad Gita, 1984, 2.54) is a result of understanding the metaphysical reality of the undivided, eternal,

formless and birthless self or atman. Vaishampayana advises Yudhisthira to remove the confusion and perplexity caused by grief, after which one loses sense of self and control over one's thoughts and emotions (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.16). Equanimity of mind and steady sense of self within the ruler is reinforced as a message by Bhishma too, in the *Raja Dharma* section. Thus, the question of understanding oneself and then learning the manner of regulating this self in different situations across life, is integral to know the working of dharma.

Self-Restraint in a Leader

Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* espouses the distinction of the true nature of Self and the perceived nature of our selves. The true nature of the *atman* (also referred to as the highest self or *Paramatman* in the image of spiritual progress) is that it resides in bodies but itself remains “free from all action and stain” (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 13.31). He stresses that the “imperishable and unlimited” Self is “embodied” in the perishable human body (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 2.18). In the *Shanti Parva*, the youngest Pandava, Sahadeva, advises Yudhisthira on the differentiation of “*mama*” (it is mine; which he calls as “death”) and “*na mama*” (it is not mine; which he calls eternal) within the scope of one's own self. Sahadeva emphasizes the need for internal renunciation from mortal relations and the path of selfless duty with the following logic: “if it is certain that the soul cannot be destroyed, then, by destroying the bodies of beings, one does not cause any violence” (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.13). Overall, the *Raja Dharma* section of the *Shanti Parva* scholastically is a trove of applicative knowledge of that which has been propounded by Krishna in the *Gita*. Only by understanding the true nature of self as beyond the mortal body, can one perform roles, and execute dharma in the appropriate manner. Dharma is contextual, since it is time and again emphasized as depending on the situation and the person who is acting out the rules of dharma. Self-regulation is nothing but a controlled flow of internal being by realizing the true nature of the *atman* as beyond physical emotions and bondages. The aspect of suffering is a necessary context that somehow becomes a test of the equanimity of self within the characters involved in the war. Upholding dharma is a responsibility. What is unique to the two sections of dialogic teaching is how the effervescent and metaphysical truths of self is reinforced through material and physical tests of time, with an aim to prepare the mindset of people to tread the path of establishing a dharmic society.

Desireless Action (*Nishkama Karma*)

The spirit of detachment from all feelings and thoughts that bind us to impermanent, transitory and material things in life, is seen as an important pre-requisite for the leader who has the primary duty to oversee the operations of life around in a dharmic manner. In the *Mahabharata*, one aspect that is shunned across all discourses and tales that surround the theme of responsibility and duty is “overindulgence.” In the path of doing actions (*karma*), it is desirable to have the dharmic orientation which is all about “balance.” Imbalance and overtakeness of any tendency-being indulgence when moderation is ideal, or being reclusive when involvement is necessary- brings harm and does not lead to overall goodness of the individual and all that one is responsible for in the world. In Hindu philosophy, there are 4 kinds of goals that all human beings strive for. These are called the *purusharthas*, which are *Dharma* (duty), *Artha* (economic well-being), *Kama* (sensual pleasures) and *Moksha* (liberation from endless cycle of life and death). In the *Shanti Parva*, execution of dharma entails a regulated manner of approaching the fulfilment of the three objectives of *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama*. To ensure this regulation, *dandaniti*, the discipline of “the rod” is repeatedly suggested as a tool of justice for the ruler in the society he/she governs. *Danda* or the rod is an object which can balance things, measure when used as part of the scale, and can punish when used to deliver results of one's

evil actions. This act of *damana* or control, can subdue those who may not be following the rules and regulations that make a society function effectively and be constructive. In essence, the aspect of *danda* is not just an image of punishment, it also symbolizes internal balance. Sage Vaishampayana asserts that the *danda* “controls and punishes” all; it essentially creates a balance and control of the three purusharthas which people attempt to achieve in their secular life-*dharma*, *artha*, *kama* (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.15). When asked about the three gunas, Bhishma warns about the side-effects of having either of the three in excess: “Dharma is stained by jealousy. Artha is stained by secrecy. Kama is stained by excessive addiction” (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.123). All three must be followed in measure, and none should be made the principal goal in life.

Detachment begins in a distance created between the *karta* (one who acts) and the *karma-phala* (result of the action). In essence, philosophy of the human person within the *Gita* and the political philosophy of the ideal ruler agree that the fundamental rule to be followed while doing karma is not to have desires and attachment (*kama*) regarding the result (probable or actual) of the *karma*. In the *karma-yoga adhyaya* (3rd chapter) of *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna warns that *kama* (lust) covers up knowledge, and should be seen as the lowest of virtues that can lead to anger. Furthermore, he also asserts that a person can only find peace when one has “abandoned the fruits of action” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 1984, 5.12). The aspect of *nishkama karma* or “egoless actionless” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 1984, 3.4), is important as it ensures that the ego of the person does not attach itself to the overall agency of the action- since the sense of “I am doing it,” “I did it” or “I will do it” leads to attachment to the *karma*. In chapter 2, *Sankhya Yoga*, Sri Krishna beautifully illustrates the chain of *kama* (desire) that leads to anger, delusion, loss of memory, lessened discrimination power, loss of intelligence and the ultimate downfall of a human being (verses 62–63). Bhishma, in the “Apad Dharma” section of the *Shanti Parva* provides the chain of evil, that is as follows:

Greed alone is the great grasper. Evil is propagated by greed. It is from this that evil, adharma and supreme misery flow. This is the foundation for misdeeds and makes people commit sin. Anger results from greed. Desire results from greed. Confusion and delusion result from greed and so do pride, arrogance, malice and lack of forgiveness. (*Mahabharata*, 2013, p. 581)

Nishkama karma becomes a central doctrine that runs through the entirety of *Mahabharata*. In the epic, and particularly in *Gita* and *Shanti Parva*, the limits of desire, and the necessity of procuring only that which is necessary, are repeated expositions. The root cause of desire is a false sense of permanence that one associates with the “I” principle. This becomes another reigning challenge for the ruler to decipher.

Leadership as Seva

Seva or the aspect of “service” is an important element in reorienting oneself and one’s primary identifications, responsibilities and actions in the context of others around him/her. For the ruler, the subjects who are governed by him/her, as well as the entirety of the surrounding for which the ruler is responsible. One important element in this regard is the recognition of one’s “self” and its scope. The primary cause of all misery is the confusion between the lower self (rooted in the nature’s output of body with which we get a material selfhood) and the higher self (the disembodied, immortal and eternally divine soul that goes beyond mortal bodies). Sri Krishna affirms that our duty is to upgrade our self from its lower form to the higher form by practicing the *marga* (path) of *nishkama karma* (*Bhagavad Gita*, 1984, 6.5–6) In regard to

battle and the woe of killing someone, Krishna roots the sense of killing to be done in the physical level, for the immortal Self can never be destroyed. The self that we often take as our true selves is the *jiva*, the “embodied spirit” which is enmeshed in the three *gunas* of the human body- *sattva* (pure, goodness), *rajas* (activity and passion), and *tamas* (inertia and darkness)- which determine the human behavior and subjectivity in their secular life. While Bhishma in the *raja dharma* section asserts that all three *gunas* are necessary in some proportion or another, Bhṛigu highlights how *kshatriya varna* (the warrior class- who are those responsible for leadership and governance in a society) is dominated by the *rajas* quality of vigor and passion (*Mahabharata*, 2013).

In *Bhagavad Gita* and *Shanti Parva*, one witnesses the practical and rational exhortations of embracing the non-attached self in order to carry out responsibilities towards the public. A predominant theme that captured the nature of work to be done by the ruler towards those ruled by him/her, is that of *seva* with the goal of “welfare for all.” In the *Gita*, Sri Krishna names *rajarishis* who were imparted the knowledge of renunciation of action (*jnana karma sanyasa*)- Vivasvan, Manu, Ikṣvaku as well as Janaka. This specific knowledge teaches the manner of carrying out the royal duty of a ruler, a monarch in charge of a society, but with the spirit of renunciation of the gifts and nature of the work done. The image of *loka samgraha* is brought up by Sri Krishna (*Bhagavad Gita*, 1984, 3.20) to define the “good of the world” to be aimed at by those in power. All such *rajarishis* were enlightened, non-attached but always conscious of the goal of the greater good of the world beyond I, me and mine.

This spirit of welfare for all is also talked about by Bhishma in *Shanti Parva* (*Mahabharata*, 2013), where he asserts that a proper administration of the *dandaniti* will ensure that the subjects are protected in accordance with dharma and policy (12.70); “if the lord of the earth protects, dharma is followed and there is no violence towards each other” (12.68). Throughout the “Raja Dharma” section, Bhishma reiterates that the *kshatriya* role of being the “protector of all dharmas” is necessary to ensure the world functions properly and prosperity is ensured in the society. The welfare of the state and the subject is thus a strong element in both the *Gita* and the *Shanti Parva*.

Liberation for the Worldly

Moksha or the act of liberation from the cycle of birth and death is an important element in the context of both *Bhagavad Gita* and *Shanti Parva*. In “Moksha Dharma” section of the *Shanti Parva*, aspects of austerities, truthful living, freedom from illusory sense of ownership over objects, people and roles, as well as following the supreme spirit of renunciation is strongly recommended. Emotional upheaval in all directions can be uprooted when “I dwell in the infinite that is beyond all these taints” (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.172). Sri Krishna has time and again elaborated on the power of *maya* (illusion of the world) which enmeshes the *atman* in the perils surrounding the mortal body. In both sections studied, the journey of discursive contemplations is aimed at understanding the aspect of leading and ruling as material roles that merge with the ultimate divine principle. While Sri Krishna revealed his Divine Cosmic form and emphasized that *saranagati* or total surrender of all that makes up the individual in the Divine is the only way to attain liberation from the sorrows and miseries of the world, Bhishma highlighted that abstention from desires and austerities ensures the attainment of divinity for any self-controlled individual (*Mahabharata*, 2013, 12.155). Dharmic action is a systematic and holistic method of preparing the self to be merged with the Brahman.

Conclusion

The paper revealed the way *Mahabharata* as an epic is an allegory of salvation; specific focus on *Shanti Parva* and *Bhagavad Gita* ensured that the method of dharma as a path to ultimate spiritual enlightenment and liberation was caricatured through the role of a leader. The material goals and hurdles attached to the role of a ruler with responsibilities, along with the personal growth as a spiritual seeker, is ensured with the basic requirement of establishing inner equilibrium within the self. Power is not just a blessing; rather, it is an opportunity to enhance life all around and contribute to the purpose of uplifting the world that all are striving hard for. Through dimensions of balance, *karma* and *karma-phala*, as well as the necessity to understand one's own spirit and individual predisposition, one can understand the dimensions and scope of dharma in a specific role. For the leader, timely and contextual performance of all duties with a dharmic approach is essential.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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