

# **Feminist Interpretations of the Mahabharata: Analysing the portrayal of Women through the lens of Ecofeminism and Intersectionality**

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**DECLARATION BY STUDENT**

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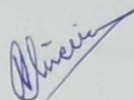
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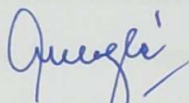
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This is to certify that the dissertation report 'Feminist Interpretations of the Mahabharata: Analysing the portrayal of women through the lens of Ecofeminism and Intersectionality' is a bonafide work carried out by Ms. Yadika Raju Gauns Dessai under my supervision in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master's of Arts in English in the Discipline of English at the Shenoj Goembab school of Languages and Literature Goa University.



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### Abstract

This dissertation delves into the Mahabharata, one of India's epic narratives, through a feminist lens, employing the frameworks of Ecofeminism and Intersectionality. The study aims to dissect the multifaceted portrayal of women within the text, uncovering underlying power structures, environmental contexts, and intersecting identities. Through the methodology of close reading and feminist theory, key passages will be analyzed to unveil the nuanced representations of women, highlighting their agency, oppression, and symbiotic relationship with nature. By integrating Ecofeminist principles, the research will elucidate how women in the Mahabharata are intertwined with the environment and subjected to patriarchal domination. Moreover, employing Intersectionality will enable a comprehensive examination of how gender intersects with other axes of identity such as caste, class, and ethnicity, shaping women's experiences within the narrative. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in ancient Indian literature and to provide insights into contemporary feminist discourse.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Patriarchy, Ecofeminism, Intersectionality

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Importance and Reasons of proposed Research**

The research on the topic ‘Untangling the Morals and Ethics of Dharma: A Study of the Epic Mahabharata Through Margins’ aims to put light of the enduring significance of the famous Indian ancient epic, Mahabharata, and it’s wide variety of discussions on the themes of morals and ethics of the Dharma principles and how different characters (male and female) are bound with different Dharma. Also, it talks about the ethical and moral dilemmas/choices and their consequences. Further, it also delves into the lives of marginalised male and female figures, constrained by the rigid expectations of dharma with no avenue for opposition. The Mahabharata is undoubtedly one of the greatest works of the world, unique in many ways – unique for the deepest philosophical truths, for the wide range of human life covered by the ethics and for the high spiritual stimulus provided in this epic. The epic is not just a story or a fictional book but also a cultural and historical representation of our ancient Indian society. Dharma being the most vital theme throughout the epic, plays a major role in shaping characters life and death. Better understanding of the concept of Dharma will increase the appreciation of the aspects such as sacrifice, loyalty, truthfulness, responsibility and duty. It will also help the future researchers, future scholars who are interested in promoting ethical decisions making and moral and cultural values among the new generations. It will help the future generations to understand the importance of being truthful to themselves and others in the growing world. With the help of the researchers we can preserve our culture and values by knowing more about the beliefs people had during that time, gender dynamics that used to play a huge role in shaping one’s individuality and also the dilemmas that shaped people’s life during that time.



The research serves as a guiding force for the future generations to guide them through their ups and downs. The way characters from Mahabharata find their ways through their dilemmas and hardships they face throughout the epic can serve as an example for the future to make ethical decisions in their lives. It can provide different perspectives on how to look and face difficult situations. It will inculcate the importance of ethics and values among the future generations to live a life full of high morals and ethics. Also the importance of upholding dharma, which is the required duty, will increase in the future.

The ethical difficulties that figures like Yudhishtira, Bhishma, and Draupadi faced and experienced over history and decades may give a shock to the readers. Researchers can highlight and showcase timeless lessons about moral responsibility, the nature of required and correct behaviour, and the consequences of actions by examining these moral dilemmas and the characters' decisions. Because of this, the Mahabharata is a fantastic global resource for ethical inquiry and discussion. Dharma is an universal topic in the Mahabharata, despite its origins in Indian mythology. Also, the study on Dharma from the epic Mahabharata will help in understanding the interdisciplinary aspects by bringing out the views from philosophies, studies based on religion, literature and anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach improves the understanding of Mahabharata's significance as a historical document and important source of ethical guidance through encouraging international discussion and academic cooperation.

## **1.2 Historical Background of Mahabharata**

One of the two major Sanskrit epics of Ancient India is the Mahabharata; Kurukshetra battle and the Emperors Kauravas and Pandavas destiny's are explained in this epic work of literature. The great scholar forms an important part in the narrator and is frequently credited with authoring the Mahabharata. The final structure was finished about the time of 4th century

BCE and is believed to have been written between the 8 and 9 century BCE. The Mahabharata historical foundation is complex, encompassing actual events, mythology and tradition. It is frequently taken as a mirror of the ancient Indian social political and cultural context.

The Vedic period that extends from 1500 to 500 BCE in which Mahabharata's origins can be found. The early Vedic texts including the Samaveda, Arthveda Yajur Veda and Rig Veda were composed during its era. These works in questions provide information about the cultural and spiritual practices followed by the ancient Indo-Aryan. It is believed that the Mahabharata itself evolved throughout ages, with new layers being included at different points. The conflict between the Kauravas and Pandavas, the two branches of Kuru dynasty, is at the heart of the Epic. With the leadership of Duryodhana the Kauravas symbolised the forces of a Dharma or unrighteousness, while Yudhishtira the Pandavas represented Dharma or righteousness.

The Kuru dynasty begins at the beginning of the Epic tracing its lineage from the legendary King Bharata to king Shantanu gets married to Ganga and then Satyawati. Devvraha, referred to as Bhishma the son of Shantanu, swears virginity in order to guarantee The Throne as one of Satyawati's sons starting with the chain of events that ultimately decides the plot of the Epic. The conflict between Dharma and adharma is one of the Mahabharat's major themes. Kurukshetra battlefield provides Arjunaa with an ethical quandary, as a reminder of his struggle. In the Bhagavad Gita which is also known as the work of philosophy contained in the Mahabharata where Lord Krishna offers Arjuna moral lessons that help him perform out his military responsibility and preserve righteousness.

The battle of Kurukshetra which lasted for eighteen days and with the Kauravas and Pandavas jointly with their troops of soldiers to start the deadly war is the epic's climax. The conflict is won by the Pandavas, but it comes out at a heavy price: numerous individuals perish, including many famous warriors and rulers.

The Mahabharata is a collection of multiple tales including myth narrative ethical lessons and philosophical debates alongside to bring a story of war and struggle. It delves into deep subjects like sacrifice duty, loyalty , honour and the foundation of reality. The epic sheds of spotlight on human existence and the ongoing conflict between good and evil through the experience is of its characters.

Scholars were at odds over whether or not the Mahabharata is accurate in time. Some view it as mythological or allegorical, while others think that it has historical reality blended in with fantasy elements over time. The cultural and historical background. The cultural and historical background of the Mahabharata has been clarified by excavations and literary evidence, although several aspects of the epic are still unexplained

Millions of people across the world still admire and read the Mahabharata despite its ancient root. Its eternal wisdom and universal theme which speak for individuals of any age and background are what give it its ongoing importance. The Mahabharata is considered one of the greatest epics in international literature and its humble Origins as an oral tradition passed down to centuries provide prove to the vaasteners and variety of the Indian civilization

### **1.3 Scope**

Through an in depth examination of Mahabharata concerning its margins, the proposed research aims to analyse the unique characteristics of ethical and moral ideas related in ancient Indian epic. This research seeks to discover various perspectives on Dharma (duty/righteousness) and its utilisation in various circumstances depicted in the narrative through investigating the epics' perimeter. This research aims to shed light on the ever changing relationships between personal ethics, societal norms, and cosmic structure as portrayed in the margins of the Mahabharata through an integrated strategy that draws from the field of

literature, philosophy and cultural studies. The study intends to improve the understanding of Dharma and its relevance in modern discourse of ethics through this research.

#### **1.4 Limitations**

- The research will revolve around important characters from Mahabharata
- Since the research is on a mythological epic, certain concepts will be unclear or unexplainable.
- The research only focuses on certain significant scenes and incidents from Mahabharata
- The research will also analyse selected marginalised characters of the epic.

#### **1.5 Research Question/Problem**

How were male and female characters in the Mahabharata obligated to adhere to their prescribed duties (dharma)? How did the male and female characters on the fringes of society find themselves powerless against the forces of dharma?

#### **1.6 Necessity in the field of languages and literature**

The Mahabharata is a vast epic that consists of numerous themes. Most of the time, the marginalised characters or the characters who are on the margins of the society are often neglected due to the high profile characters like Bhishma and Arjuna. The research will be beneficial for the study of marginal characters like Satyawati, Karna, Eklavya and others which will help in understanding their perspectives on morality. Also dilemmas played an important role in shaping the lives of characters from Mahabharata. Studying the specific moral and ethical dilemmas will help in understanding the complex nature of ethical decisions making in Mahabharata as well as in today's society. Also studying themes like caste, gender, social class

will help in understanding the nuance of injustice and inequalities which are still present in contemporary society.

### **1.7 Relevance to society**

Dharma is known for the righteous duty and commitment to responsibilities in Hinduism. Adhering to one's duty or dharma leads to an ethically peaceful life. The experiences of the characters from Mahabharata can offer diverse perspectives and takeaways that can be considered as an important aspect to the ones who are interested in living an ethical life. The experience of Pandavas and Kauravas throughout the epic offers a rich tapestry of moral values that can be relevant in present life. Also, the epic teaches us the importance of speaking truth or being truthful to others and also its consequences.

Characters like Yudhishtira and Bhishma highlight the importance of being truthful to God and yourself which helps in adhering to one's duties and responsibilities for example the academic works. Also, Mahabharata highlights the personal and societal morals and ethics based on interconnectedness. This will help in understanding an individual's duty and responsibility towards their society. Moral quandaries that are difficult in choosing between two decisions that hold equal ethical importance. Moral quandaries are still there in society and this research can help in guiding an individual which will be beneficial for them. The research will serve as a bridge between the traditional beliefs of the era of Mahabharata and contemporary dilemmas, especially moral dilemmas.

### **1.8 Objectives**

- Investigating the foundational principles of dharma as depicted in the Mahabharata.
- To explore the ethical dilemmas faced by characters and their adherence to dharma in the Mahabharata narrative.



- To analyse how dharma is different for men and women.
- Exploring the agency and autonomy exercised by the marginalised characters in defining and practising dharma amidst the societal constraints in Mahabharata

## 1.9 Literature Review

### 1. "Imbibing Ethics and Dharma" By Sunil Kumar

Mahabharata is India's one of the famous mythological epics that holds a massive significance in terms of morals and ethics. The major concept of the major theme along which all the other concepts revolve around is the concept of Dharma. Mahabharata is a famous epic in India alongside Ramayana that also holds a major significance in today's world. Mahabharata was narrated by Vedavyasa and written down by Lord Ganapati. Mahabharata has around 100000 verses. The major theme in Mahabharata is Dharma and how the characters try to uphold it based on their understanding of Dharma and also based on aspects like caste, gender, traditional norms, social class. The Mahabharata takes place as a result of the enmity between Pandavas and Kauravas despite being cousins. This war takes place for the rightful claim on the throne of the kingdom, Hastinapur. Mahabharata also covers themes like gender dynamics, morality, duty, Righteousness.

Also, Mahabharata also includes sacred books like Bhagavad Gita which talks about the ethical discourse between the warrior, Arjuna and the divine force, Krishna. When Arjuna faced ethical and moral dilemmas while competing against his own clan and family, he seemed to feel weak. But through the guidance of lord Krishna who was the charioteer of Arjuna in the war, Arjuna eventually participates in the war and fights against his own family for the greater good. Through the spiritual knowledge and guidance of lord Krishna, Arjuna was able to bring out the best version of himself. The article also talks about the overall concept of Dharma and its Philosophy in the Hindu scriptures, where an individual is bound to follow his dharma not

just in the epic but also in today's world. It also talks about the devotional verses that were highlighted in the Bhagavad Gita and how Lord Krishna helps in guiding Arjuna. Also how every action has its own consequences. The Characters in Mahabharata perform Adharma which has its own consequences. Lord Krishna teaches everyone how to remain detached from the outcomes and focus on goals. Also the concept of war that was fought for the greater good is also highlighted.

## 2. "The Concept of Dharma and its Significance" By Ivan Kovacs

The article by Ivan Kovacs on the Concept of Dharma from Mahabharata and its significant aspects highlights the wide variety themes and the importance of Dharma in Hindu scriptures. It also talks about the background of Mahabharata and the origin of Dharma. Under this article, the importance and background of Bhagavad Gita is also showcased with the examples of the warrior Arjuna and the divine entity Krishna. How lord Krishna guided Arjuna and other Pandavas through victory. Arjuna faced a lot of moral and ethical dilemmas that resulted in his hesitancy to fight against his own family which includes people like Bhishma and Guru Dronacharya.

The article also includes incidents like Bhishma's guidance to the Pandavas to follow the path of righteousness and truth. His guidance to the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira on his duty to follow the Dharma of the king Raja Dharma in order to maintain the balance between the king and his citizens. The article talks about the meaning of Dharma in Hindu scriptures and philosophies regarding this concept. The article covers the aspects of Dharma and different forms of Dharma like Sva-dharma, Raja Dharma, Kula Dharma, Adharma and other forms of Dharma. It also talks about the various consequences and outcomes if the Dharma is not followed or adhered to by the characters in Mahabharata. It also talks about how every action has its consequences, good or bad.

Further, it also covers the incidents and scenes from Mahabharata where the characters are adhering to their given dharma for example Bhishma's oaths and commitment to dharma, Yudhishtira's ultimate commitment to truth, Duryodhana's greed towards the throne of Hastinapur and jealousy towards the Pandavas, Dhritarashtra's Adharma and following his son's Adharma is also highlighted. Also, the humiliation of Draupadi and Kunti's silence on Karna's birth and origin is also highlighted. Also the discourse between Arjuna and Krishna is also covered in this article where how the guidance of Krishna resulted in Arjuna's agreement to fight against his rivals and family for the greater good. The spiritual guidance of Krishna resulted in the victory as the Pandavas successfully defeated the Kauravas in the battlefield of Kurukshetra war and claimed their rights on the throne of Hastinapur which resulted in harmony and peace for the citizens of Hastinapur.

### 3. "The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma" By Gurcharan Das

The book I'm referring to is 'The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma' by Gurcharan Das. It talks about the author's viewpoints and perspectives on Dharma. I would be using this book as a reference for my research as it will help me to understand the multiple perspectives and takeaways on the concept of Dharma. In the book, the author Gurcharan Das has picked some of the major characters from Mahabharata who faced moral dilemmas in certain situations where they had to uphold their Dharma.

Characters like Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Duryodhana, Krishna, Draupadi are mentioned in the book. Before going into the details of the concept of Dharma, the author has analysed and summarised the Mahabharata by giving a back story of the epic. The author had tried to divide the Dharma of different characters through different sections and also tried to give his views on Dharma. It contains a prelude and concepts like the jealousy and envy of Duryodhana, Karna's questions on his status and birth, Arjuna's dilemmas on the battlefield of Kurukshetra war, Draupadi's fightback against the odds, Yudhishtira's leadership and commitment to

truth, Krishna's guidance to Arjuna through Bhagavad Gita and the revenge of Ashwatthama at the end of Mahabharata. Also, the author had given his perspectives on the above mentioned situations.

4. "Ethical Issues In The Mahabharata In The Context Of Dharma" By Shazia Yousuf, Symbiosis Law School, Hyderabad

This research looks at moral behaviour in the setting of dharma in the Mahabharata. Even though the Dharmasutra/Dharmasastra literature contain many rules for what defines dharma, characters in the Mahabharata do not always follow the dharma requirements outlined in textbooks. As a result, a common topic in the Mahabharata is that dharma is difficult to understand. The research is also based on the idea that dharma cannot be subsumed under an all-encompassing particular moral theory, as is sought in western moral theories, but rather is determined by the individual conditions that one faces. Keeping these factors in mind, the research then examines personalities like Satyawati, Bhishma, Kunti, Karna, and Yudhisthira in the framework of Dharma.

Being able to evaluate what is good and wrong in each situation is a difficult task at any time. An ethical issue is concerned with how to act properly in any given situation. As a result, the literature on Moral Philosophy is insufficient. We will never be able to tell if morality is transcendental, empirical, or rooted in a general ethos of individual civilizations. Different cultures have created behavioural models based on their perceptions of what it means to be correct in certain situations.

5. "Moral, Ethical, and Life Lessons from the Mahabharata" By Venu Payyanur

The article talks about the ethical and moral dilemmas faced and experienced by some of the major characters of Mahabharata and how the consequences of their decisions shaped their lives and destiny. Before delving into the detailed study of character's dilemmas, the article largely focuses on the concept of ethical dilemma in the Hindu mythology. Ethical dilemmas

occur when an individual faces difficulties in choosing between two equally important ethical decisions.

According to the article, the solutions of the dilemmas that we face in life are very sorted and simple. It's just we being very conscious about our things tend to make things look difficult. A workaholic in today's time will be facing the dilemma of choosing between two or more career opportunities which will be equally beneficial. The author through this article has tried to gather some of the major episodes of Mahabharata where the characters face and experience moral and ethical dilemmas while adhering to their dharma that is righteous duty.

Bhishma, who was known for his ultimate commitment to dharma and his oath of living a life like a Brahmachari faced a lot of moral dilemmas while making and also after making the bold decisions that shaped the course of the entire Mahabharata. His decision to serve the throne of Hastinapur by becoming a servant despite his rightful claim on the throne for his father's happiness highlights his bold decisions. Although these decisions came with many consequences. His decision of not becoming the king made sense in one situation. But on the other hand, his decision to serve the kingdom of Hastinapur selflessly cost him as he had to fight against his own family that is Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war.

Also, the dilemma of Kunti, the mother of Pandavas when she abandons her first son that was given to her as a vardaana by the Surya Deva is also highlighted by the author. Her decision to abandon her first son, Karna since it was her first child before marriage and later transforms into a moral dilemma whether to accept him or not highlights Kunti's dilemma over her son. The author has beautifully compared the examples from Mahabharata with the real life examples. Further, Yudhishtira's dilemma during the Kurukshetra war when Dronacharya asks him about his son's death. Also, Karna's dilemma where he was torn between his morals and loyalty towards Duryodhana showcases Karna's dilemma. Arjuna's dilemma on the



battlefield of Kurukshetra war where he has to fight against his own clan and family is also showcased by the author in this article.

### **1.10 Hypothesis**

Exploring the margins of the epic Mahabharata provides insight into the complex interplay of morals and ethics inherent in the concept of dharma, offering a nuanced understanding of how characters navigate dilemmas, conflicts, and moral ambiguities within the epic narrative.

### **1.11 Research Methodology**

The research will employ a combination of Qualitative methods.

The primary text used for this research ‘Mahabharata’ by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari published by Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan centre at Bombay. General editors are R. R. Diwakar and S. Ramakrishnan.

And the Secondary texts includes ‘The Difficulty of Being Good: On a Subtle Art of Dharma’ by Gurcharan Das. First published in Allen Lane by Penguin Books India 2009 and Bhagavad Gita As It is’. It is the Second edition; revised and enlarged with the original Sanskrit text, roman transliteration, English equivalents, translations and elaborate purports by ‘His Divine Grace , A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda.

To provide a historical and cultural context for the Mahabharata  
Study of in-depth textual analysis of Mahabharata with the help of close reading, which will focus on the key episodes and character interactions to explore the nuances of Dharma principles as portrayed in the epic.

### **1.12 Chapterization**

Chapter 1: Introduction

## Chapter 2: Exploring the concept of ‘Dharma’ in Mahabharata

- Definition and Significance of ‘Dharma’ in Hindu philosophy
- Dharma in Mahabharata
- Different forms of Dharma in Mahabharata
- Role of Dharma in Character Development

## Chapter 3: Dharma’s Trails: Exploring Morals, Ethics and Dilemmas in Mahabharata

- Principles of morals and ethics of dharma in Mahabharata and their significance
- Moral and ethical dilemmas and their complexities in Mahabharata
- Consequences of moral and ethical dilemmas/choices

## Chapter 4: Dharma's Gender Divide: Unpacking Male Dominance, Female Subjugation, and Marginalisation

- Dominant aspects of male characters in upholding dharma
- Subjugation and submissive nature of female characters in upholding dharma
- Delving into marginalised male and female personas who find themselves powerless against the dictates of Dharma.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

# **CHAPTER TWO**

## **EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA IN MAHABHARATA**

## 2.1 Definition and Significance of Dharma in Hindu Philosophy

The concept of Dharma in Hinduism holds a greater value and ethical importance due to its multifaceted nature and flexibility in understanding all forms of life and dimensions. The word Dharma comes from the Hindu mythology and scriptures, which basically means one's duty towards all beings, forms and universe. Dharma also includes concepts like moral and ethical duties. The word Dharma and its essence is found in many Hindu scriptures. Dharma basically means righteous or righteousness. It serves as a guiding force for each and every individual and also towards the universe.

The importance and relevance of Dharma is highlighted in many great epics. Besides that, Vedas and Rigvedas also hold the vitality of Dharma and its relevance. Some of the great epics like Mahabharata and also the famous Ramayana, which is known for its ultimate essence of Dharma throughout the story. Scriptures like Rigveda hold the importance of Dharma in a very beautiful manner by highlighting the concepts like balance of the universe and sustainability of the universe. But also, the concept of Dharma doesn't remain the same throughout the years. It has changed and made numerous forms that helped in shaping its culture and better understanding of Dharma.

Dharma is something that has helped in developing characters of even those who didn't believe in God or its universalism. Dharma has many forms and it comes to a person through different perspectives and experiences. Being committed to dharma directly means being committed to responsibilities for example family and responsibilities towards society. Also, dharma towards oneself is also an important aspect of commitment to dharma. Dharma as discussed is not a fixed concept, it keeps changing based on one's situations and incidents but the basic ethics of Dharma remains the same, that is duty towards both, society and oneself. Being truthful is one of the major aspects of Dharma which eventually helps in guiding to a more peaceful and ethically valued life.

The concept of Dharma is majorly based on adherence to Truth and Righteousness. Dharma is originally based on 'Purusharthas' through which the basics of Dharma stand out. Righteousness is one of the most important aspects under purusharthas. Aspects like salvation which means 'Moksha' in Sanskrit. Profitability which means Artha in Sanskrit. Delight which means Kama in Sanskrit. All the mentioned aspects of Dharma work like a cycle for the better functioning of the universe. Dharma plays a major role in shaping one's destiny and life and also helps in better functioning of all the other aspects mentioned. It helps an individual to live a life full of morals and ethics while also taking care of other desires.

Dharma being the multifaceted concept offers a lot to today's generation too. It can help an individual to lead an ethical life even though it is difficult to uphold certain things in today's 21st century. There are many perspectives and interpretations of Dharma which showcase the widespread themes of Dharma too. This includes Schools of philosophy which talk about different forms and dimensions of dharma through their studies. In Hinduism, there are many philosophical schools that offer different perspectives and forms of Dharma which can be beneficial for the betterment of a person. Dharma also plays a major role in shaping an individual's duty and responsibility based on their perception towards dharma, their viewpoints. Also, the duties and responsibilities that are given to individuals are based on their work, social class, caste and gender in order to maintain the stability of the universe by giving each and every individual their dharma based on their perspectives. In Hinduism, adherence to dharma is considered as basic moral for a human being.

## **2.2 Dharma in Mahabharata**

The epic Mahabharata, narrated by the great Vedavyasa to Lord Ganapati and Ganapati wrote it down. That is the original Mahabharata that we were born hearing and listening to.

Mahabharata is one the most popular and widespread Indian mythological texts that played a huge role in shaping the destiny and future of India. The word Dharma originates from Sanskrit, which basically means to maintain. Dharma also encompasses multiple meanings. Through the epic, we can learn a lot especially with the experiences of the characters and their behaviour towards people. Mahabharata revolves around the concept of Dharma making it the central part of the epic and character's life. The characters from Mahabharata showcase tremendous adherence to upholding dharma which talks a lot about their morals and ethics. Also while upholding dharma there comes a lot of difficulties that come their way. Some characters remain successful in upholding their dharma while some face dilemmas. The epic is all about the fight and conflict between justice and injustice, dharma and adharma, truth versus falsehood. Basically, the entire Mahabharata took place as an example to showcase to everyone that even if the adharma tries to promote injustice and falsehood, at the end, it's the justice and Truthfulness that overcomes from every other thing.

The rivalry between Pandavas and Kauravas is the major highlight of the epic where the Pandavas were fighting for the justice and greater good of world whereas the Kauravas for fighting for their revenge and greed for the kingdom and throne which eventually led to their downfall and Pandavas winning the battle. In the war, characters fought against each other keeping in mind their personal dharma. Characters like Arjuna, Bhishma, Yudhishtira and others faced multiple moral dilemmas while making decisions that were raising questions on their Ethics. Duryodhana and other Kauravas fought for their greed, anguish and jealousy towards the Pandavas. Lord Krishna who was the divine force guided Arjuna and the Pandavas through his role as charioteer. Dharma had always remained a complex concept to understand especially for the characters in Mahabharata in order to live an ethical life. There are multiple examples like Yudhishtira's decision to continue the game of dice even at the cost of his brothers and wife just to uphold his word. There are many controversial decisions that ended



up in the downfall of many characters. But anyhow, the end results and consequences of the decisions highlights the importance of upholding dharma.

### **2.3 Facets of Dharma in Mahabharata**

As Dharma, being the central theme of Mahabharata around which all the other themes revolve, showcases his multifaceted nature. That's the reason Dharma can be classified into multiple forms.

The first form of Dharma is Raja Dharma. Raja Dharma is basically known as the supreme form since it means the Dharma of a king of a kingdom. Raja Dharma is tested through how well a king is able to maintain his dharma towards his citizens. If the king has been able to bring prosperity and harmony in his kingdom through his leadership then it is fair to consider that the king is following and adhering to his Raja Dharma. In Mahabharata, kings like Dhritarashtra, who was the king of Hastinapur. King Drupada, ruler and king of Panchal. Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava was also the king of Indraprastha initially and became the new king of Hastinapur after the battle against Kauravas. There were many kings in Mahabharata who fulfilled their duties as king whereas there were also some who failed to live up to the mark. Yudhishtira who was eventually given the throne of Hastinapur fulfilled his duty as a king by bringing prosperity and happiness in the kingdom after the injustice by the Kauravas. Whereas Dhritarashtra, the temporary king of Hastinapur didn't make a point to fulfil his duty as he was more concerned about his sons especially Duryodhana, which resulted in his degradation.

Next is Kula Dharma which is again one of the important forms of Dharma as it talks about one's duty and dharma towards family and clan. An individual's duty towards their mother, father, wife, brothers and other relations. Protecting one's clan is a Kula Dharma and this is very evident in Mahabharata as we see Pandavas and Kauravas fight for their respective

ownership over the kingdom. Eventually, Pandavas won the battle of war as they were fighting for the justice of the world. The Mahabharata that occurred between the two can be seen as a fight between the Kula Dharma.

Next is Sva-dharma, which generally means one's duty towards themselves. It is also considered as Dharma that is very personal. It depends upon what an Individual thinks based on their morals and ethics. This is also known by one's skills and abilities. Karna's commitment to his Sva-dharma that is to stay loyal to his friend Duryodhana who supported him when no one did even at the cost of his life at the end of the battlefield. Arjuna's initial dilemma in the battlefield of Kurukshetra war to fight against his clan and then eventually agreeing to fulfil his duty as warrior highlights his Sva-dharma.

Stree Dharma simply means the duties and dharma of women from Mahabharata. Women's role in shaping theirs and their family's destiny by upholding their dharma is the major example from this form. Female characters like Draupadi and Kunti showcase the nature of Stree Dharma. Draupadi's acceptance of five husbands as a misunderstanding of her mother in law in order to protect her family from consequences highlights her Street Dharma.

Niti dharma which refers to the Ethics and morals of the political output. This also includes the planning and strategies which helps in politics. Lord Krishna's guidance to Arjuna and the other Pandavas to win the battle against the Kauravas is the major highlight of this form as lord Krishna through his niti guided the Pandavas to the victory. His strategies like trickery towards Dronacharya downfall by making him realise that his son is dead, which was not the case in reality. His guidance to Bheema to attack Duryodhana on his thighs also signifies the strategies. Not just Krishna but also Vidura guided the blind king, Dhritarashtra through his knowledge on Niti Dharma.

Yama Dharma highlights an Individual's duty against their death and also after their death which is also known as afterlife. Major example from this is Yudhishtira whose understanding

of Yama Dharma is tested through his answers and perspectives when he encounters Yaksha prashna. It talks about his wisdom and nature.

Next is Brahma Dharma which talks about the duties and the rituals particularly related to Spirituality. These are the duties and rituals that were written down in the philosophical books like Vedas and Rig Veda. Characters while being the supreme warriors and characters also pay their respect towards these rituals by adhering to them even in the challenging situations. Bhishma and Dronacharya both pay their respect towards these rituals that were practised by the Vedas.

Lastly, Satya dharma is something which is very common among most of the characters. This dharma basically talks about one's duty towards truth and being truthful and honest to others. Yudhishtira who was known for his ultimate commitment to truth is the major example. Also, Krishna who remained honest and humble even at the battlefield also showcases the nature of Satya dharma

## **2.4 Role of Dharma in Character Development**

Mahabharata, one of the most profound epics, plays an important role in shaping the destiny of not just the characters from Mahabharata but also serves as a guiding force for the future generations who are interested in knowing more about the concept of Dharma for a better ethical life. The actions, decisions and perspectives of the characters on Dharma shapes their lives in Mahabharata. Characters who were successful to uphold their right dharma were rewarded with greater good and peace which helped in developing their character and personality.

Characters do shape their own destinies by adhering to their given dharma in Mahabharata. The epic is all about the conflict between Pandavas and Kauravas for their respective reasons. Also, themes like family attachments, personal desires, warrior duty, and greed is highlighted

through this epic. Dharma in Mahabharata is shown given equal opportunities and chances for all the characters even if they have disregarded dharma. It depends on the characters how they receive the gifts of Dharma at the end of the epic. Everyone has got their dharma based on one's gender, caste, social class. Their actions and deeds shape their future. Each and every character is tested with ethical choices and how they react and take decisions considering the consequences of it.

One of the prominent examples can be Arjuna who fought against his clan and family for the sake of greater good. Initially, he was reluctant to fight against his family but due to the guidance of lord Krishna who was his charioteer, he ended up following his Dharma as a warrior and fought for justice and that's how Pandavas eventually won the battle against their rivals, Kauravas. The discourse between Krishna and Arjuna during the battlefield of Kurukshetra war is covered through Bhagavad Gita, which talks about the spiritual guidance and difficult ethical choices Arjuna took with the help of Krishna. This helped in his growth as a character where he stands out for his duty and warrior ignoring the family attachments.

Another example can be of the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira who was known for his ultimate commitment to truth. His commitment to his word to continue the game of dice arranged by Kauravas to destroy them looks controversial. He puts everything on stake including his brothers and wife, Draupadi. It might have helped him in shaping his character by staying committed to his words but his family had to pay the price which seems unfair as they were forced to spend fourteen years in the forest. Besides this one incident, his commitment to truth always helped him live an ethical life. Through his truth, he won the battle against Kauravas. It was an example of how truth defeats falsehood at any cost. He was also rewarded as he received heaven after his life.

On the other hand, characters like Duryodhana, Dushasana were given the required punishment for their disregard towards dharma. Their involvement in Draupadi's humiliation

caused them their life at the battlefield. This also highlights how dharma can also lead to one's downfall if not adhered to or violated. Bhishma who was known for his oaths and commitment to the throne of Hastinapur also faced numerous dilemmas as he was bound to fight against his family, Pandavas as a result of his oath. Although he stays neutral but ends up fighting with the Kauravas.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **DHARMA'S TRIALS: EXPLORING MORALS, ETHICS AND DILEMMAS IN**

#### **MAHABHARATA**

### **3.1 Principles of Morals and Ethics in Mahabharata**

#### **3.1.1 Living Peace: Embracing Ahimsa**

Ahimsa which means non-violence is considered as a major aspect which helps an individual to live a peaceful life. In Hinduism, the act of non-violence is considered as the supreme quality compared to all the other principles. The act of non-violence is equal for everyone including humans, animals and plants too. Ahimsa contains qualities like respect towards all the living and non-living beings. Concern and empathy for all the living beings also falls under the theme of Ahimsa. Mohandas Karamchandra Gandhi, India's prominent freedom fighter who fought against Britishers for India's freedom and safety can be considered as a major example of following the path of Ahimsa. Gandhi played a major role in India's freedom struggle by embracing non-violence against the opposition. With the help of Ahimsa, Gandhi performed Satyagraha. In today's world where everyone is executing Ahimsa in order to receive what they desire, Gandhi proved that even with the act of non-violence, you can achieve what you want. Ahimsa inculcates a sense of unity and humanity among all the beings. Due to less violence, people feel connected to each other. Ahimsa also resolves the violent conflicts in a peaceful manner which can lead to a better and peaceful life. Not everything should be resolved with conflicts and war, some situations and incidents can also be neglected by adhering to Ahimsa by compromising and apologising to the other person.

Ahimsa can only lead to destruction, regardless of the situation. When a person inculcates the thoughts of non-violence then life becomes a bit easy to survive. When you let things go instead of reacting to each and every small thing then it can lead to a peaceful and prosperous life. Ahimsa forces a person to indulge qualities like kindness, patience and forgiving people even if they did wrong to you. This can lead to better health. Words can be considered as a most powerful weapon and humans tend to forget that their words might hurt someone very badly. Inculcating qualities of Ahimsa among oneself can reduce verbal spat, bitter words,

arguments, fights and other violent conflicts. Ahimsa is something which is very vital in today's cruel world where everyone has become selfish and greedy which is followed by Non-violence. Applying the qualities and principles of Ahimsa can lead to a beautiful and healthy journey of life.

One of the most important and prominent characters of Mahabharata who carried the qualities of Ahimsa with him throughout the journey of his life was Lord Krishna. In a place where every other character was fighting for their rights and justice, Krishna remained untouched and unbothered by the chaos around him and stayed committed to his principles of Ahimsa that is to deal with all the hurdles and difficulties with the sense of compassion and sympathy towards every other being. When the entire Kingdom of Hastinapur were fighting against each other, Krishna being the charioteer of Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra war remained detached from the armors. His decision not to participate in the war as a warrior but rather as a guide and charioteer showcases his immense respect for Ahimsa. Although, he knew that it is only by Non-violence the world would be a better place.

### **3.1.2 Satya's Legacy: Illuminating Paths of Truth**

Truthfulness which is also termed as 'Satya' in Sanskrit, is another principle of morals and ethics and is considered as a supreme aspect in humans to live a peaceful life. Being truthful to oneself and to others is considered as a beautiful quality in humans which can lead to life full of morals. It is considered as a major quality in humans. Major qualities of 'Satya' or truthfulness to someone are honesty, innocence through their actions and words. Being truthful to oneself means not just speaking the truth but also living a life full of morals and ethics. Staying truthful even when the situation allows you to lie is something which stands out. By speaking truth or going ahead on the route of 'Satya' can build the sense of attachment, strengthen the relationships, strengthen the bond between two individuals and can also develop

trusting abilities among two individuals. Sometimes the situations might appear challenging and tricky, but the one who stays committed to his adherence to speaking the truth can always find himself/herself in a better place.

A true leader with the qualities of honesty and integrity can always lead his team or his squad to victory. In Hinduism, 'Satya' is prioritised by the many sacred and holy books for the well being of humans. Rigveda, which is one of the most famous and oldest religious texts, mentions and highlights the importance of upholding truth even during adverse situations. It says that "Truth can alone Triumph" which basically means a single person who is truthful to himself can fight against thousands of lies. In Sanskrit it is termed as "Satyameva Jayate ". It highlights that no matter how great or huge is the truth, it can be defeated single handedly by a truth. Any kind of deception or falsehood can be defeated just by being truthful to yourself. Being truthful means adherence to the principles of Dharma which can lead to a rightful path in life.

In Hinduism, the achievement of a human at the end of his/her life is the realisation of one's honest nature which is also called as 'Atman' in Sanskrit. Furthermore, the importance of existence is also considered as a major aspect. When you're truly indulged in truth then all your ego, arrogance and anger issues vanish. Being on the right path of Dharma can help a person to deal with its anger issues, anxiety issues and other aspects too. It also helps to have a beautiful journey of Spirituality. This journey can help an individual to reach its 'Moksha' which means self liberation. By letting their personal ego and desires, one can receive eternal truth. In Mahabharata, there were many characters who were known for their unparalleled commitment to Satya in order to uphold their Dharma. One of the major examples was the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira who was known for his ultimate commitment to truth. His ability to speak truth and being honest even during times of difficulty was always cherished till the end. Also, the Mahabharata highlights the punishments and outcomes of the untruths used in



the name of Dharma. But here is someone like Yudhishtira who tried his best till the end of the war and succeeded in upholding his truth. Yudhishtira also faced many consequences of his dilemmas and choices.

### **3.1.3 Aparigraha: Finding Abundance in Less**

Aparigraha is again another aspect of moral and ethics which is also known as Non-possession which means detachment from the materialistic desires and living a simple life which encourages peaceful life. In Sanskrit ‘a’ refers to ‘non’ ‘parigraha’ refers to the possession. It is rooted from many famous Indian texts like Bhagavad Gita. One should keep their materialistic pleasures aside and focus on living a healthy life rather than a life filled with greed and jealousy. Staying content with what you have in your life is what Aparigraha teaches you. It also develops a sense of gratitude for the smallest of the smallest things in one’s life. It also helps an individual to get rid of unnecessary elements of their lives and focus on the necessary actions in their lives. In today’s world, where every other person is ready to compare themselves with others, Aparigraha teaches and minimises the habit of comparisons and frenzy among yourselves.

Also, the qualities of Aparigraha give less importance to the materialistic pleasures that are money or wealth and emphasise more on internal happiness and freshness. Non-possession can lead to a life with greater contribution to the world. For example, it will help in living a sustainable life. Non-possession also highlights the themes of selflessness. An Individual who inculcates and frees himself from the greed and weight of materialistic pleasures and develops the sense of honesty, quality of sharing things with each other and empathy.

Aparigraha just doesn’t talk about avoiding the physical materials but it also talks about having a soft corner for the environment and other living beings too. Application and use of simple and ordinary things to survive, staying calm and composed while making decisions and

choices falls under Aparigraha. Someone who is a minimalist is a person who lives a simple life and is content with whatever they have is known as Minimalist. Spending on things which are important and not which are fancy. All these qualities present in Aparigraha can help in preserving resources for the coming generation.

In Mahabharata, there are multiple characters who adhere to both the materialistic pleasures and also living a simple life. Duryodhana, being the antagonist of the epic, highlights the qualities of possession in his behaviour. His hunger for the throne of Hastinapur and his greed towards wealth and status showcases his temptations towards materialistic deeds. As a result, it led to the destruction of his family and the kingdom of Hastinapur. The greed and jealousy of Kauravas towards the Pandavas led them to their downfall at the end of Mahabharata. On the other hand, Yudhishtira and his four brothers lead life in a minimalistic way even after having all sorts of wealth and kingdom. They were happy with whatever they got, for example Indraprastha. When Kauravas took everything in the name of greed, Pandavas were happy to live a simple and ordinary life in Indraprastha and their villagers. Even during their exile, they lead a very ordinary life for their survival.

#### **3.1.4 Cosmic Justice: The Karma Connection**

Karma is again a force that is connected to the universe, where it talks about how one's actions and deeds can return back to them in the form of Karma. When an individual does any bad or misdeeds or any kind of negative activities then according to Hindu mythology, all those deeds come back at you in a form of punishment which is famously known as Karma. This principle also falls under laws and it is famously known as Cause and Consequence. It talks about the deeds whether it is good or bad and how the entity makes you realise your mistakes or good work by bringing that back to you in multiple forms. Whenever a person makes a

decision, good or bad, then he/she tends to think about its consequences. When you do something bad to anyone, you should be aware of the Karma which is going to hit back at you. Karma also helps in shaping one's decisions and turns their decisions or choices into ethical ones.

In Hinduism, Karma also highlights the concept of birth and rebirth. The principles of Karma also determine the ability of a person for rebirth. These rebirths are based on one's deeds and misdeeds in their previous life. Overall, the cycle starts from the day one person is born, continues till that person dies and based on their deeds and misdeeds, the rebirth takes place. If a person has led a peaceful and ethically valued life, then this will act as a plus point in their further births. The actions of Karma motivates a person to follow the path of loyalty and responsibility. It inculcates the values of selflessness and increases the qualities of kindness, contentment and simplicity in an individual's life. It also reduces arrogance, anger issues and hatred.

In the famous epic, Mahabharata, the principles of Karma or the 'Karma yoga' had played a major role in shaping the destiny of many supreme and also the minor characters. Characters have faced adversity and also prosperity due to their actions and deeds. Characters like Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Bhishma who remained content with what they had, didn't face the harmful rays of Karma. Whereas, characters like Duryodhana, Dushasana, rest of the Kauravas and also their father, Dhritarashtra too faced the Karma of their disastrous deeds. Kauravas and their father have given enough stress and have done enough injustice towards them throughout the epic that as a result their entire kin and kingdom was destroyed. Duryodhana faced an evil death by the hands of Bheema and their father Dhritarashtra, had to bear the loss of his hundred sons at a time which is the worst scenario for any father.

Even the characters like Dushasana faced death as the karma of his actions during Draupadi's humiliation as he was the one who tried to harm the dignity of Draupadi. And as a

result, Dushasana faced his death by the hands of Pandavas and eventually Draupadi completed her oath by washing her hair with Dushasana's blood after her humiliation. Not just them, but Ashwatthama's struggle for death also is an example that even if you get rid of your misdeeds then karma will come at you in your next birth. Lord Krishna cursed Ashwatthama that he won't be able to receive his death even if wants to as a result of his cruel act of trying to kill a child who is still in the womb of a woman.

### **3.1.5 The Sacred Code: Unveiling Dharma**

Dharma is one of the most important and vital principles of morals and ethics as it basically covers all the aspects of ideal human nature. Dharma means one's responsibility and duties towards their important things in life. It can be anything, family, friends and other important things. Dharma means Righteousness which helps in living a high ethical life which will bring harmony and prosperity in life. Following dharma helps an individual in attaining spiritual knowledge by calming their minds which can help them in performing their duties accurately. One should adhere to their given dharma with honesty and sincerity in order to uphold the essence of Dharma. For example a doctor has to deal with multiple responsibilities for example curing patients, checking upon the welfare of hospital and other things. A doctor's Dharma is to cure the patients and take care of them. Every individual has got different Dharma based on their situation, status, gender and age. One should fulfil their given and expected duties accurately and with sincerity. Everyone has got their own way to deal with the concept of Dharma. Dharma contains the laws of morals and ethics which help in upholding the Truth' and the righteous behaviour. Everyone has different Dharma based on their status and social class and everyone has to adhere to their dharma in order to live a peaceful and balanced life. Adherence to dharma can bring harmony and discipline in the lives of people.

With the help of Dharma, one can attain the spiritual knowledge which can help in getting Moksha at the end of their lives. There are many forms of Dharma but the important ones are Personal Dharma that is Dharma of a specific person. Your personal dharma can be your responsibilities towards your family and work and for the society. Everyone is born with their own Dharma in life which is also called as Sva-dharma that is self dharma. The next Dharma will be Eternal dharma that is dharma related to the universe. This dharma is not just based on one's individual or personal dharma but covers the entire universe. It is something beyond the boundaries of society. For better functioning and other things, one must adhere to their sva-dharma to maintain the balance in the universe and harmony in the world. Lord Vishnu, who is one of the supreme gods in Hinduism maintains this Dharma related to the universe for the betterment and smooth operations of the universe.

In Mahabharata, most of the characters have prioritised their dharma over all the other things. Characters have majorly followed their personal Dharma. Every character has got their own Dharma and their own way to deal with it. Starting with Yudhishtira's dharma to adhere to the principles of truth to Bhishma's oaths and ethical decisions for the betterment of the kingdom of Hastinapur. Although both the characters faced multiple consequences and difficulties in upholding their respective dharma, they didn't step back from their principles and stayed committed to their dharma and as a result, although many things went wrong but their Dharma remained firm and as a result the injustice of Kauravas was defeated and there was beginning of new era that is 'Kalyuga'. Dharma played a major role in shaping everyone's destiny, directly or indirectly based on their decisions and choices in the name of dharma.

### **3.1.6 Asteya: Finding Freedom in Non-Stealing**

Asteya is another principle of morals and ethics where it talks about the act of being honest. It originally comes from Vedas where it talks about the acts of non stealing. This concept is

much more beyond the stealing of materialistic pleasures like wealth and property and other valuable things. Like the other principles too, Asteya supports staying content with whatever we have in our lives. We should be thankful and show some gratitude towards the things we possess. It basically says that everything that is present in this universe, all those things belong to the divine entity and if you try to steal something which is not ours then this will result in destruction and imbalance of the universe. We shouldn't be asking for extra or something that doesn't belong to us. We shouldn't expect or desire more than we deserve. Something which belongs to us will come back to us. Through this, we tend to show gratitude and appreciation towards the things that belong to others which can help in building strong relationships and will develop trust which can be handy for a society to work. As a result, it also leads an individual to be more honest and sincere towards others.

Nowadays, people are following unfair paths to get early success but adhering to Asteya will teach an individual to be more fair and respectful towards others. Deceit is something which will completely vanish if adhered to Asteya. This will eventually help the world and society to be more respectful and sincere towards each other. Nowadays when everyone is trying to steal the credit of someone else's work, Asteya teaches us the importance of being respectful and loyal towards others' materials and works. A person who adheres to Asteya always stays motivated towards their dreams. It increases the qualities like mutual respect among each other and also helps a person to be aware of their things. A person starts to love himself/herself by staying content with what they have rather than comparing your things with others. This further also in self development and upgrades a person morally. As a result, adherence to Asteya helps an individual to stay committed and passionate rather than the acts of stealing. This can also help in balancing the harmony of the universe.

The epic Mahabharata also highlights the consequences of not adhering to the principles of Asteya. In Mahabharata, characters like Duryodhana, Dushasana and all the other Kauravas are

some of the major examples of stealing things that belong to others, that is Pandavas. Characters who remained content with what they have are the Pandavas during their exile of fourteen years. During their exile, they led an ordinary and simple life. Whereas the Pandavas tried to steal their rights on the throne of Hastinapur and eventually leading to their downfall highlights the consequences of their stealing. Kauravas also faced their punishments of Draupadi's humiliation in the court of the kingdom, Hastinapur when they tried to misbehave with the wife of Pandavas. This resulted in their downfall in the end of the battlefield of Kurukshetra war showcasing the harmful and painful consequences of trying to claim something which doesn't belong to you.

### **3.2 Moral and Ethical Dilemmas and their Complexities in Mahabharata**

#### **3.2.1 Arjuna's Crossroads: Navigating Ethical Quandaries in the Mahabharata**

The warrior Arjuna was born to Kunti, the mother of Pandavas. He was gifted with the supreme qualities of archery and since his childhood he was getting trained to become one of the greatest warriors of their time. Due to his birth in the Kshatriya community he was born with the abilities of warrior ship and courage. Being a Kshatriya, his first duty is to serve for the Kingdom as a warrior without getting involved in any kind of emotional turmoil. But at the end of the Mahabharata, there are a lot of examples where we see warriors like Arjuna facing a lot of moral and ethical dilemmas due to their family members and other personal desires. Being a warrior, he had to stay committed to his Dharma.

In the chapter 1 of Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna is completely devastated to see his family, teachers, guides and friends fighting against him in the Kurukshetra war. His denial and hesitancy to fight against his own family members and teachers highlights his inner turmoil and dilemmas during the Kurukshetra war, even though he knew it was for the greater good. He was totally confused about the thing where he has to fight against Adharma and for that he

has to defeat his own clan and family. So for him, it was a defeat at the end of the war even if he wins the battle. His constant questions to himself and contradictory thoughts forced Lord Krishna to interfere and he eventually guided him to fight against them, which was required from him as a warrior. The reason Arjuna faces a lot of difficulties in choosing between his family or duty and responsibility as a warrior is because he was so much attached to each of the people on the other side. Bhishma who guided him and protected him throughout his childhood, Guru Dronacharya, who was his favourite martial teacher and someone who played a pivotal role in shaping his archery's journey. And also many other characters who are bound to fight against Dharma. He was in a constant dilemma whether to fight or surrender but at the end, Lord Krishna, who was his charioteer, guided him to stay committed to his act of performing dharma accurately. He advised him that certain things are bound to happen and they should be done for a greater good. And in order to bring justice in the world, Adharma has to be defeated to set an example for the future generations. Arjuna's dilemma to harm the people he loved the most was a constant inner turmoil that he carried with himself till the end of the war. But he also knew that his duty as a warrior of Kshatriya is much greater than his familial bonding. The Bhagavad Gita also consists of Arjuna's constant questions to Krishna about his difficulties. For example in chapter 2, Arjuna asks Krishna, "How will I fight against Bhishma and Dronacharya, who are worthy of my worship?" This question is highlighted from Bhagavad Gita 2.4. The way Arjuna is trying to seek an impactful answer from Lord Krishna is also an example of his inner turmoil. He cannot even think of harming his own people and specially the ones who made him capable of fighting in a war. To fight against someone he loved so much and respects so much further leads to his inner conflict to fight against his own family.

Krishna's views on wisdom and spiritualism also plays a major role in shaping Arjuna's inner conflicts which helped him in focusing on his main goals. Lord Krishna played an



important role as an advisor to Arjuna and guided him till the end of the war. The way he helped him in getting over the inner conflict while defeating Karna. His philosophical wisdom and words helped him to overcome the conflicts inside him. Not just him, eventually Bhishma, Guru Dronacharya and other members from the Kauravas side also gained the knowledge from him which helped them to shape their destinies. Krishna's advice to stay detached from the personal outcomes and stick to the karma is one the greatest advice a warrior can receive. The idea where one should perform their duties and responsibilities correctly without getting attached to his personal outcomes or without thinking about the end result is also known as 'Nishkama karma' in Sanskrit, which is also known as actions that are based on selfless acts. Lord Krishna's advice not to stay attached to the outcomes or consequences of the work you're doing and only staying committed to the karma helped Arjuna to fight against his rivals, that is his family, with a clear mind. He explained to Arjuna and everyone that thoughts are something which will keep growing if we let them grow. If we stay detached from the end result, it will help one individual to focus on the present thing which is in their hands. Krishna's spiritual advice to Arjuna that even if the body diminishes, the soul remains eternal. So if the love for people is eternal and pure then the love won't disappear even if the body dies. This advice by Lord Krishna, helped Arjuna to overcome his attachments and brought a much more clear focus in the battlefield.

And finally in the end, the warrior Arjuna adheres to his principles of Dharma that is to serve in the battlefield for justice and greater good. He agrees to Krishna's advice and guidance and tells him "Karishye Vachanam tava" which basically means he will listen and will do what is required and expected from him. He finally realised his duty as a Kshatriya warrior and his decision to fight against the injustice and defeat the ones who are in support of injustice regardless of who they are facing shows his courageous thoughts and bravery to accept something which is very sensitive to his heart. He finally realises his sense of responsibility

towards the greater good and betterment of the world. Even though he was facing constant dilemmas, he decided to just listen to his guide, Lord Krishna and carry forward.

### **3.2.2 Conscience Chronicles: Yudhishtira's Inner Battles in the Mahabharata**

Yudhishtira who is the eldest son of King Pandu and Queen Kunti known for its unmatched commitment to dharma that is to speak truth and be honest even during times of difficulties. He is also the eldest brother of Pandavas however it was later revealed that Karna, the son of Surya Deva, is the first son of Kunti making him the eldest son of Kunti and eldest brother of Pandavas. But throughout the course, the love and affection as a eldest son was given to Yudhishtira. Despite being almost perfect compared to all the characters from Mahabharata, it experienced a lot of dilemmas whether it is moral or ethical. Yudhishtira was a person who stayed firm on his oath to speak truth and be honest and people who are very honest and humble towards everyone usually have to face the rays of consequences more compared to others.

Yudhishtira too faces a lot of criticism and sufferings due to his tendency of speaking truth even when the situations appear challenging. In Yudhishtira's life, there came many incidents and examples where he was highly appreciated for his unmatched commitment to dharma and loyalty towards the people he loved and also towards his enemies. He has always used an example of how an ideal person has to be in the world to make it a beautiful place to live. But since everything comes with a consequence, Yudhishtira too had to face the consequences and impacts of his decisions. If there are good people then there are also bad ones who are ready to destroy the beauty of innocent ones which leads to their destruction. It's always the people with a good heart, who want to bring positivity to the world, suffers the most for being too good or too honest. Yudhishtira is a perfect example to discuss this.

One of the prominent examples from Mahabharata is the famous Dice game introduced by the Kauravas and Shakuni in order to destroy the Pandavas and their wife, Draupadi. The entire set-up was built to destroy the Pandavas economically and emotionally too. When the invite comes from the Kauravas for the Dice game, despite knowing and realising that there's something beyond just a dice game, Yudhishtira being a person who adheres to the principles agrees to the invitation. Even after knowing everything, Yudhishtira decides to play the Dice game with Shakuni in which they have to put their wealth and kingdom at stake. Yudhishtira faced moral dilemmas before the start of the game and was confused whether he did a right job by participating in the game or not. Despite having many ethical dilemmas, he chooses to participate and puts his wealth, kingdom and even the great Indraprastha on the line. He knew very well that once he opted for the game then he won't be able to withdraw from the game till it gets over. His duty being the eldest brother and king of Indraprastha forces him to move forward in the game and he keeps playing until the game completely destroys him and his family. Shakuni keeps winning each and every time and after a point Yudhishtira and the other Pandavas realise that the game is fixed so Arjuna and other Pandavas ask him not to continue the game. But Yudhishtira's commitment to his Dharma doesn't allow him to withdraw from the fixed game and he keeps playing. This shows his unparalleled commitment to truth and his duty.

He faces moral dilemmas between his duty or personal gains and he eventually opts for committing his duty. For him everything came behind honour and self respect. And as a result and outcome, the Pandavas finally lost the game and their wife Draupadi was also humiliated in front of all the men. And as a result, they were punished by 14 years of exile. Adding to that, they also had to make sure that they don't get caught during their 14th year or else they might have to repeat all their thirteen years again. Also, Yudhishtira had also made many sacrifices to uphold the Dharma and one of the examples from that is his sacrifice during the Rajasuya

practice where it highlights how he respects the gods and their deities. He respects all types of Gods and his love and affection is not just based on caste or social group. According to him, he shouldn't bow down to lord Krishna as he thinks he is his friend and he too holds an equal position compared to him. Although other members of Pandavas bow to Krishna, Yudhishtira refuses to bow due to his Dharma. But eventually he was in a double mind whether to listen to his Dharma or Krishna.

Yudhishtira being the most honest and sincere person among all the other members of Mahabharata, gets caught in a moral dilemma where had to lie in order to win the battle. Yudhishtira had taken an oath that he would never lie to anyone regardless of any difficult or challenging situations. Due to his commitment to truth till his last breath, he suffers and experiences a lot of moral and ethical dilemmas. One of the famous incidents from this is the conversation between him and Guru Dronacharya regarding his son, Ashwatthama. Lord Krishna and Arjuna had decided to play a trickery on Dronacharya and Ashwatthama. They spread a rumour that Ashwatthama died in the war and Dronacharya comes running to the Pandavas to see his son. Krishna and Arjuna were sure about this trickery but Yudhishtira being an honest person seemed reluctant to follow the plan. When Dronacharya asks Pandavas about his son, he doesn't believe them and because of that Dronacharya asks Yudhishtira about his son since he knew that Yudhishtira won't lie to him. Yudhishtira's silence during the question highlights the dilemmas he faced during that time whether to answer honestly or to lie in order to win the battle. Yudhishtira eventually answered the question of Dronacharya by saying that 'Ashwatthama died in the war'. Listening to this Dronacharya breaks down and starts crying loudly. But Yudhishtira didn't mention about his son Ashwatthama, he actually mentioned an elephant named Ashwatthama which he doesn't clarify to Dronacharya while answering. And due to this, Dronacharya eventually surrendered himself and was killed in the war by Dhrishtadyumna. This is how Yudhishtira was able to hold his identity as an honest

person and also lead to Dronacharya's death in the war. This is one of the famous examples of Yudhishtira where he suffers between choosing his Dharma or his duty as the leader of the war.

Also, after the war was announced, Yudhishtira faced a moral dilemma in facing his own family members and brothers despite their bad deeds. Like Arjuna, Yudhishtira too was caught in a confusion of facing his family in the war. He expresses his reluctance to fight against his own clan in the war although it's for the greater good. Yudhishtira seemed totally confused one night before the war and consulted Krishna for the solution. His reluctance to fight against his family and brothers showcases the element of ethical and moral dilemma. Eventually, lord Krishna like Arjuna, advised him not to stay focused on the current situations even if they are difficult and challenging but to shift his focus on the betterment of the world.

### **3.2.3 Karna's Quest: Trials of the Soul**

Karna, the son of Surya Deva and Kunti's official first son, who was gifted to Kunti as a reward by the Surya Deva himself. Karna is considered as one of the famous tragic heroes during the era of Mahabharata who went through a lot of difficulties and hardships since his childhood and he carried baggage till his death at the Kurukshetra war. Karna's ethical and moral dilemmas played a crucial role in shaping his life throughout the epic, Mahabharata.

The problems and difficulties in Karna's life begin from his childhood when his mother, Kunti abandons him in the river Ganga since she didn't want any son during that time and also Karna was given to her by Surya Deva as a gift and he wasn't a part of the Kuru kingdom. Since it was impossible for Kunti to raise him as his normal child, she abandons him in the river in a basket. Although Kunti was gutted to abandon him, she had to do that since he was not a part of Hastinapur. Later, a couple found him in the river and they adopted him without any hesitation. He was adopted by a charioteer and his wife which gave him a new birth as well

as new parents. Karna's journey from being an ordinary person from a village to one of the greatest archers of all time along with Arjuna can be considered as a remarkable journey. But while following his dream, he also had to sacrifice a lot of things and faced a lot of difficulties in decision making which eventually led to his downfall.

Karna was a great warrior who was also considered as a major threat for the Pandavas in the battlefield of Kurukshetra war. He had all the qualities a perfect Archer must possess. He goes down as equally skilled or can be considered as the greatest archer, alongside Arjuna, in the history. Despite being so skilled he was always kept below Arjuna due to his identity as charioteer's son. He just wanted people to recognize his abilities and skills without interfering into his family background. He faced a lot of difficulties in accepting that despite having all the skills, he will never be recognized by the people. But since he was too firm on proving himself in front of the whole world, he kept practising and kept participating in competitions despite numerous insults. He was so firm to prove himself that he decided to participate in the war against the Pandavas. Although, his initial motive to participate in the war is to protect Duryodhana from the Pandavas. Duryodhana hires him and builds friendship with him due to his ultimate powers. Karna participates in the war as a protector of Duryodhana but deep down he also wanted to prove himself in the war that he is better than Arjuna in archery. But due to Duryodhana's friendship he always found himself in a double mind or dilemma of whether to protect his friend or to prove himself as it was the only chance for him to tell the world that he is better than everyone else. So he constantly found himself in a moral dilemma of whether to protect his friend since he had promised him that he will protect Duryodhana at any cost or to prove himself. The way Karna wanted to defeat and openly challenge all the Pandavas showcases his determination to prove himself in front of everyone.

Not just on the battlefield, his quest for acceptance and respect started in his childhood. When her mother, Kunti abandons him in the river, he is adopted by a couple from the village

of Hastinapur. When he grew, he started realising that people won't be appreciating him due to his identity as a charioteer's son. He wanted to be recognized by the people but not at the cost of his parents who adopted and took care of him. He knew if he tried to go against the traditional norms by trying to compete in competitions, his parents would have to listen a lot. So he was in a constant dilemma whether to choose his skills or his parents. But somehow his parents supported him to become the warrior he is now. But despite this, there were people who criticised him due to family background and his upbringing. This behaviour by the people, forced him to become the version of himself that he didn't want to be. He became rude and arrogant to the people who criticised him and also people who loved him. When he goes to Dronacharya to learn martial arts and Archery, he was completely denied by Dronacharya saying that he only teaches to the royal kids. He was also humiliated by the hands of Dronacharya. This discourse between him and Dronacharya forced him to hide his identity and portray him as a Kshatriya in front of Parashurama, who guides and teaches him archery. He was in a constant state of confusion as he faced a moral dilemma while learning Archery from Parashurama as he knew that he was doing wrong. He was learning Archery and at the same time he was also traumatised by the fact that he lied to his guru. Despite this, he kept going with constant internal conflicts. This inner turmoil highlights his concerns for being truthful to him and others too. Eventually he discloses his identity as a charioteer's son and not Kshatriya, which forced Parashurama to curse him.

Also, his confusion between choosing what is Dharma and what is trap or adharma has always been a part of conversation. Although, Karna got all the sympathy from the readers and audience due the injustice that was done to him by the people of Mahabharata. At the same time, he was also criticised for his misdeeds and adharma he performs in the name of loyalty and friendship. As we all know that he was fully committed to Duryodhana, his friend who supported him when no one did. His commitment to Duryodhana despite knowing that he is

performing unjustified actions and things highlights his fear that he will not be recognized by the people. Although he was honest and truthful to his friend, Duryodhana, he kept quiet in many of the instances where people wanted him to speak. His loyalty towards Duryodhana forced him to ignore the injustice despite being against injustice. He knew if he went against Duryodhana then everyone would abandon him like his mother. One of the notable examples from this is his silence during the humiliation of Draupadi despite being against injustice towards her. He was a part of the dice game and everything happened in front of him. Even though he wanted to raise his voice against the injustice occurring in the court, he kept quiet due to his lower position and a charioteer's son. This scene highlights his ethical dilemma in choosing what is right and wrong. He lets the injustice happen in front of his eyes and ends up insulting Draupadi which was the beginning of his downfall. Due to being on good terms with Duryodhana, he ends up insulting Draupadi and questioning her identity for being in a marriage with five husbands.

Also, as discussed, Karna's involvement with Duryodhana despite knowing his performing injustice to everyone is considered as a reason for his downfall in the war. The reason Karna remained loyal to him is because Duryodhana supported him when nobody did. In one of the competitions where every Kshatriya had to perform and showcase his skillset, Duryodhana supported Karna when he tried to participate in the competition despite not being a part of Kshatriya. Although, Duryodhana did all these to strengthen his army but for Karna that was the life changing moment. Although Karna stayed committed to his dharma and stayed honest with everyone, he also stayed loyal to his friend Duryodhana despite his misdeeds. Although he was a friend of Duryodhana, he also had soft corners for all the Pandavas and Kunti and even the other great warriors of the kingdom. But due to his involvement with Duryodhana, Pandavas used to criticise him and Karna always used to find himself in quest or dilemma of choosing his loyalty towards his friend or his duty as a honest warrior. His participation in the



war against the Pandavas despite knowing that Pandavas are fighting for justice also highlights his ethical dilemma. He supports his friend and returns the favour by protecting him. But deep down the line, he knew that he was fighting against justice and supporting unrighteousness.

### **3.2.3 Shackled by Vows: Bhishma's Inner Turmoil in the Mahabharata**

Bhishma was majorly known for his unparalleled commitment and ability to fight any great warrior without any fear. He was considered as someone who is an almost unbeatable and undisputed warrior. He was also known for his ultimate commitment and oaths he had taken for the safety of Hastinapur and other required aspects. He was known for his commitment and loyalty towards the throne of Hastinapur. It was a selfless act of serving the throne till he died. He was so powerful that he had all the rights over his own death, that is he has the right to choose his own death. But while adhering to these principles, he also got caught into many ethical dilemmas while choosing between two equally important things with equal moral impact and importance.

Bhishma faces his First moral dilemma which kind of tears him apart between two equally important things. When his father Shantanu, who was the king of Hastinapur during that time, ends up marrying Satyawati, a fisherman's daughter. Durbto this act of his father, he takes an oath that he will never compete for the rights of becoming the king of Hastinapur instead he will serve the throne of Hastinapur without becoming the king. In other words, he decides to be a 'Brahmachari' whose work is to only serve the kingdom selflessly regardless of the situation. As a result of this oath, he ended up hurting many people including his loved ones that is Pandavas. Initially he took the oath to ensure the security of the kingdom but later the Kauravas and the king of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra uses him as their protector from the unrighteousness activities they are doing. The reason he took the oath is for his father. If he had not taken the oath then his father would have been in trouble as he had to pay the price.

But Bhishma also knew that he had to become the next king of Hastinapur in order to bring justice and peace in the kingdom. But because of his father he found himself in an inner conflict whether to choose his father or the security of Hastinapur. This was the first dilemma that occurred in Bhishma's life where he eventually chooses his father and takes an oath that he won't be asking for the rights of king but he will serve the kingdom as a servant that is 'Brahmachari'. He was in a constant state of dilemma to choose between two things and he found a solution that suits him. His oath helped his father to marry Satyawati. Being a respectful son, he did what was good for his father and his kingdom by eventually putting himself in a situation where he had to silently serve the throne of Hastinapur without having any major right to say.

As already discussed, Bhishma can be seen as a great personality with a sense of familial bonds. He was a great family man who went through a lot of struggle and sacrifices to protect his family. But due to his oaths and other responsibilities forced him to follow the path of his dharma which ended up hurting his loved ones and his family. One of the examples from this is his attachments with the Pandavas and Kunti. Since Pandavas were the sons of Pandu and his nephews, he had a different kind of love and affection towards them. Despite having all the love and care towards them, he ended up supporting the Kauravas in the battlefield of Kurukshetra war. Despite of knowing that Pandavas are fighting for justice and rights of common people, he had to be the protectors of Hastinapur that is the Kauravas as he had promised and taken oath to serve and protect the throne of Hastinapur at any given situation even if it against his morals. Despite having all the love and care towards the Pandavas, he fought against them in the war highlights his moral dilemma to fight against his own family and loved ones. Although he tried to support the Pandavas even before the war and during the war. He showed his sympathies and empathy towards the Pandavas and highlighted his

dilemma between choosing his family or his duty. Even though he was firm on his decisions and dharma, he tended to show care and support towards the Pandavas in many moments.

He defended Pandavas when they returned from exile and showcased his concern for them. He also gave the blessings to Arjuna and the other Pandavas before the beginning of the war, completely showing his support for the Pandavas from heart.

Another ethical and moral dilemma that disturbed the Bhishma was due to his dharma as a servant of the kingdom and his personal morals and Ethics. Although he was loyal to Hastinapur even during the good times or bad times, he often had to face challenges, especially moral challenges or dilemmas where he had to choose between his duty and his morals as a human being. Bhishma was completely aware of Pandavas rights on the throne of Hastinapur since they were the sons of Pandu who was the elder brother of Dhritarashtra. So eventually, Yudhishtira being the eldest Pandava became the next contender for becoming the new king of Hastinapur. But Duryodhana being the antagonist of the epic, criticised Bhishma and Pandavas that he has got all the right to become the next king despite knowing that his father, Dhritarashtra was a temporary king and not a permanent king. Dhritarashtra was appointed as the king after Pandu's death and Duryodhana was expected to become the next king due to Pandavas absence. But when the Pandavas came and asked for the rights on the throne of Hastinapur, Duryodhana was agitated and furious. Despite knowing that Yudhishtira has all the rights on the throne, he was bound to remain silent and had to compromise with his choices. This eventually forced Bhishma to fight against his nephews despite knowing the truth. Throughout the war he was fighting two wars. One which was against the great warriors and one inside him, that is between his duty and dharma and his morals and ethics.

Also sometimes, Bhishma had to take decisions or support certain decisions that favoured his Dharma and not his morals. Since he was like a guide to both Pandavas and Kauravas, he always found himself caught in the dilemma whether to support his duty or his morals.

Sometimes he used to contradict the decisions taken by the king, Dhritarashtra which he felt were biased and his sons, Kauravas. Despite having a huge name in Mahabharata, he was often kept quiet by the king due to his duty towards Hastinapur. Although he supported some decisions for the stability of the kingdom, he wasn't fully committed to those decisions. His complete silence during the humiliation of Draupadi in the kingdom of Hastinapur highlights his limited agency towards his personal feelings and importance towards his duty as Brahmachari. This also highlights the complexities of Bhishma's character at different stages of Mahabharata.

Also, it was very clear from the Kurukshetra war that he had soft corners for the Pandavas during the battlefield as he purposely avoided to fight against the Pandavas and gave them assurance that he was on their side. His refusal to fight against Arjuna as he is just there to protect Duryodhana and not to fight against any warrior highlights his love and care for the Pandavas. He made sure that his Dharma as a warrior is getting fulfilled and also his love for his family also remains firm highlights his dilemma that it is next to impossible for him to choose between the two important things.

### **3.3 Consequences of the Moral and Ethical Dilemmas/choices**

Every decision or step taken comes with a consequence, good or bad. The steps we take, the decisions we make will always have the following consequence, which can be either good or bad. The characters in the Mahabharata have taken a lot of decisions and steps for the betterment of the world or for the greater good. The characters have taken a lot of decisions to uphold dharma and their moral values but while doing this they also have faced a lot of dilemmas.

#### **3.3.1 Arjuna's Decision: Echoes of Consequence**

One of the examples from Mahabharata where the character faces and experiences the consequences of his decisions is the great warrior, Arjuna. Arjuna is the character who suffered the most compared to the other characters while choosing between his family members and his duty as a Kshatriya warrior at the battlefield of Kurukshetra war. He faces inner turmoil while choosing between two important things with equal importance. This leads to his psychological thoughts in his mind. Arjuna who was considered as a very sharp person and warrior among the other Pandavas finds himself totally confused and blank even before the start of the war. His inner conflict to fight against his own family whom he loves the most kills him from inside.

This inner feeling inside him slowly starts killing him. He experiences a different level of dilemma and his confusion forces Lord Krishna to interfere and play his part as a guide to Arjuna. When someone struggles with psychological suffering, then that person needs an assistance from a well recognized guide and therapist and in this case, lord Krishna played an important role of being the supporting system of the warrior, Arjuna in the battlefield and guided him to come out of his thoughts and confusion and focus on the war and his duty as the member of Pandava and fight for the betterment of world and people in future generations. But still as a result, Pandava won the battle but left Arjuna and other Pandavas with emptiness as they lost all their brothers, their sons, the teachers and other family members. Even after winning everything, Arjuna was left behind with gutted feelings and regret. The thoughts which came during the initial stages of the war started coming in his mind again which made him realise that even though he fought for the greater good, it left him with complete silence and created a void. These thoughts about his family, his sons and other members didn't leave him alone. It came along with him whenever he went and it went too with him after his death

Another major consequence, which can be considered as a positive outcome is it led to Arjuna's growth especially Spiritual. Arjuna through his experience in the battlefield with Kauravas learned some beautiful examples of spirituality. Even though he faced a lot of

hardships and difficulties fighting against his own clan, he gained the knowledge of spirituality which eventually helped him in his later stages of life that is after the war. His major advantage in the battlefield against the Kauravas was his guide and charioteer, Lord Krishna himself. Krishna being the ultimate entity of the world guided him throughout the war which didn't only helped Arjuna to win the battle in the Kurukshetra but also helped him to live a life in a peaceful manner after the devastating impacts of the war, where he lost all his loved ones including his friends, family, sons and teachers. The fruit of enlightenment is something which everyone wants to receive or have once in a lifetime. And Arjuna after being so close to the God himself, was lucky enough to gain this. The guidance and wisdom from Krishna helped him to live his entire life with a feeling of pride. His journey towards being the ultimate warrior in Archery till now can be considered as his supreme achievement which he gained under Lord Krishna and can also be considered as a major example of Spiritual knowledge.

Also Arjuna's eventual agreement to fight against his own clan and family resulted in his destruction of the already established Kuru dynasty and reestablishment of the new and bright future of Kuru dynasty. Although he lost almost every person he loved due to the war, it shaped the destiny of the kingdom and the future generations. That's the thing Lord Krishna told him that is not to focus on the current situation and fight for the better future of the world. Before the fight and battle, except Krishna nobody knew about the result or outcome of the war. Everyone including Arjuna fought against his family members keeping in mind that they have to win this battle in order to bring justice in the world. Finally, justice was established because the Pandavas defeated the Adharma that is Kauravas. So his decision to fight in the war can be considered as a consequence of the new establishment of the Kuru dynasty and the new world.

The war of Mahabharata at the battlefield not only resulted in the reestablishment of the new world but as a result and consequence, it also destroyed many already established houses, villages, kingdoms and other valuable resources which could have been preserved for the later

generations. The war where Arjuna played one of the major roles, resulted in complete destruction of not just his family members and sons but also resulted in degradation of many farms, cultivations and other resources of people. It left an everlasting impact on the kingdom of Hastinapur and the members who were lucky enough to survive. The common people for example the farmers, poor shop owners and their business and livelihood were destroyed. The people who had no connection with the war also had to taste the outcomes of the war without any fault. Arjuna, being the part of the ultimate war and destruction due to the war lives his rest of the life with the guilt of death of millions of people and their family and loved ones. He lived the rest of his life with questions like how the war and killing of so many people was justified in order to bring justice to the world. The poor and common people lost their loved ones for the sake of a better world for future generations.

Arjuna and the other Pandavas, were already distanced from their cousin brothers, Kaurava. And the war against them increases the enmity among them which leads to further degradation of their bonds. Kauravas and Pandavas didn't like each other or can be seen as they both didn't mix along with each other despite several attempts by the elders from the family. And if there was any slight chance, that was completely vanished by the Dice game incident and declaration of war which led to Pandavas to fight against their own cousin brothers. That was the reason behind the confusion and dilemmas of Arjuna on the battlefield to fight against his own brothers and family. The adherence to dharma and following of duty didn't only impacted his relationship with the Kauravas, but also it had inter conflict among the Pandava brothers. When Yudhishtira chooses silence over the humiliation of Draupadi in front of them, Arjuna lashes out at his eldest brother, Yudhishtira for adhering blindly to the principles of Dharma. This course led to the patience of Arjuna and he openly challenged Kauravas for a war by going against his elder brother, Yudhishtira. His anger and emotions highlighted the complexities between the contrasting thought processes of the two Pandavas.

### 3.3.2 Yudhishtira's Dilemma: Unravelling the Fallout

Yudhishtira who was one of the most honest and truthful characters among all the Pandavas and also among all the other members of Mahabharata. Even after being so honest and truthful to even his enemies, he eventually goes through many moral and ethical dilemmas which eventually lead to Yudhishtira's downfall in many scenes from Mahabharata. He faced multiple consequences due to his ethical and moral decision makings, which eventually led to his personal degradation. He was so much honest to his fellow members and was so much engrossed in following the right dharma, that eventually he ended up hurting people and due to that he faced multiple consequences for his actions.

One of the main examples from this is the incident of dice game between the Kauravas and Pandavas, where Yudhishtira being the king of Indraprastha, accepts the invitation of Kauravas and Shakuni from Hastinapur even after knowing that there's something wrong in the invitation. Even after realising that Kauravas must have planned something against them during the Dice game, he still agrees with the invitation since according to him it's his Dharma to accept the invitation of the kingdom, Hastinapur. So as a respect to the king, Dhritarashtra being the elder, he accepts the invitation of Kauravas and Shakuni. This decision of accepting the invitation costs them a fourteen years of exile and one year they have to hide their identity from the Kauravas or else they might have to repeat their fourteen years of exile. This was the punishment given to them by the Kauravas as they lost everything in the fixed dice game including their identity, wealth, kingdoms, brothers and even their wife, Draupadi. Even in the fourteen years of exile, they went through multiple problems and difficulties to survive. The food, water and livelihood was completely destroyed as a result of the Dice game.

All five Pandavas were totally humiliated and were kept helpless by the Kauravas. Whatever reputation he had gained and received by all the members has been somewhat vanished or



destroyed by his one decision of accepting the invitation and choosing to play the Dice game. For him, his honour and self respect was something which stands out and when that was taken away by his own brothers, he was completely heartbroken. Even though he had no intentions of hurting people, he eventually hurts many people whom he loved the most because of upholding his duty and dharma which includes his wife, Draupadi, his mother, Kunti and his four brothers, Arjuna, Bheema, Nakul and Sahdeva. And as a result, people from Hastinapur and indraprastha started doubting his ability as a leader as the common people too had to pay the price of his deeds.

Although he had no intentions to harm people or hurt people, his commitment to duty and responsibility sometimes destroyed the happiness of people in many ways. Sometimes when the situation demanded practical solutions that time his Dharma used to interfere and used to create chaos in his mind which sometimes led to inner conflicts between mind and brain. His brain wanted something but his Dharma, that is his brain, didn't want to participate. Eventually he used to choose his Dharma because according to him, dharma cannot be wrong. The conflict between brain and mind always used to create confusion during the time of challenging decision making. And due to this sometimes people and even himself used to question his credibility and decisions. One of the examples can be the incident from the Kurukshetra war, when Guru Dronacharya asks him about his son's death and he answers with a convincing answer of Ashwatthama's death without mentioning that he was talking about elephant whose name was Ashwatthama, who died in the war. Yudhishtira didn't want Dronacharya's death as he was his guru but then until and unless Dronacharya was alive, it was almost impossible for Pandavas to win the battle. Even during that time, Yudhishtira faces a moral dilemma whether to choose his Guru or win in the battlefield. He didn't want to kill or defeat Dronacharya but eventually he dies which also leads to Yudhishtira's turmoil and he is

completely heartbroken. He was totally devastated by the fact that he played a role in his guru's death but later lord Krishna advised him with the required guidance.

Also, as a consequence to his decision making throughout the epic, Mahabharata, Yudhishtira experienced the death of many loved ones. After the war, he blamed himself for many of the decisions he took on the battlefield. He lost his friends, family and teachers while fighting for justice and the greater good of future generations. The thoughts of losing Dronacharya and the loss of his sons after the war didn't leave him even after the war was over. He was completely devastated and suffered till his last breath. And he blamed himself for his decision of opting for the Dice game because it all started from there. If he would have not agreed with the invitation then these conflicts would have been resolved without a war.

### **3.3.3 The Unforgiving Outcome: Karna's Conundrum**

Karna due to his unparalleled commitment and loyalty towards Duryodhana throughout the Mahabharata resulted in his downfall at the end of the war. Being a tragic hero of the Mahabharata, his life ended in a tragic way on the battlefield. Karna took many unjustifiable decisions by being emotional which had devastating consequences. Some of the consequences he faced due to his ethical and moral dilemmas includes the denial by the Kshatriyas to accept him as a warrior among them. His childhood was full of questions and hardships as he faced a lot of discrimination by the upper class due to his family background. His decisions in many of the incidents resulted and gave him isolation. He was left alone due to his decisions in the court of Hastinapur and also in the Kurukshetra war. When he was denied teachings from his master, Guru Dronacharya, he decided to hide his real identity and went to Parashurama, as a Kshatriya which although gave him the required knowledge and skills of archery but when Parshurama realises that he is not a Kshatriya, he curses him for his deed. Parashurama had taught Karna about the ultimate weapon, Brahmastra which can destroy and defeat any supreme

warrior in the battlefield. When Parashurama comes to know about Karna's real identity, he curses him that he won't be able to remember the mantra of Brahmastra when he will require it the most.

Despite learning the skill he was left with emptiness due to this curse which highlights the major consequence of Karna's life as it cost him his life. When the battle was at its last stage Arjuna and Karna were in front of each other. During that time Karna asks for Brahmastra and as a result, due to the curse he was not able to remember the mantra which resulted in his death' by the hands of Arjuna.

He was basically alienated by the rest of the people due to his lack of agency and lower status. But the consequences cannot always be bad. Karna's unparalleled commitment to his friend, Duryodhana served as a famous example of unconditional love for a friend. Although Duryodhana used him for his benefit, Karna's intentions were pure and he showed complete respect to his friend for his support during his hard times. He is still remembered as an example as the epitome of ultimate friend. Whenever people have to mention about respecting his friend in today's 21st century, there's some part of humanity that will remember Karna's unmatched commitment to his friend even when his own life had multiple problems.

Furthermore, Karna had to face his ultimate death which is also considered as a tragic death. Karna faces his punishment as he had insulted Draupadi in the court of Hastinapur by questioning her identity, that is her relationship with five husbands. Karna had to face the anger of Krishna and Arjuna both in the battlefield. He eventually meets his death in the hands of his own brother, Arjuna when he tries to take out the tire of his chariot from the mud. Krishna advises Arjuna to shoot the arrow which ends up killing Karna. During his last breaths, Karna learns the truth about his mother that Kunti is his real mother. His denial to fight with the Pandavas and supporting Unrighteousness that is Duryodhana keeps him away from his familial bonds that includes his mother Kunti and his five brothers. When a person is on his

last bed, that is the time when a person looks back at his deeds and misdeeds which he did. And that is what happened with Karna during his last breath. He regretted many of his misdeeds and realised his mistakes which he did throughout the course. He regretted his decisions and choices during critical moments of life. He finally realised his mistake of choosing the side of unrighteousness that is Adharma. When God gave him chances to come out of the trap, he remained firm on his decision of being honest to his Dharma and didn't choose the path of righteousness. He also regretted his words he used for his own brothers unintentionally and also Draupadi in the court.

Lord Krishna being the ultimate entity of the entire Mahabharata, also hinted and advised him indirectly to think twice on his decisions before making them. Karna initially badly wanted to know about his official family and mother but later when he comes to know that Kunti is his mother during the battle, he refuses his mother to tell the truth to his brothers as he wanted to fulfil his duty and responsibility which had been promised to Duryodhana. Despite having such a massive opportunity to overturn his mistake, he chose to support Adharma that is unrighteousness. And as a result and consequence, this led to his tragic fall in the battlefield of Kurukshetra war.

#### **3.3.4 Pathways of Consequence: Bhishma's Predicament**

Bhishma being the most powerful and one of the most vital characters from Mahabharata faced multiple consequences due to his decisions he took for the greater good of the world. The problems in his life impacted him in such a way that he took adverse decisions which later impacted him in a negative way.

His controversial decisions in difficult and challenging situations caused him eternal suffering and brought him isolation and aloneness. His decisions and dilemmas gave him sadness and forced him to be in isolation. Since he was supporting unrighteousness that is

Kauravas in the battlefield due to his commitment to the safety of Hastinapur which means he had to protect the Kauravas and the king, Dhritarashtra and the kingdom. Due to his loyalty towards the kingdom, he always remained detached from the love from his family that includes his loving nephews, Pandavas. Despite loving them unconditionally, he had to take such decisions which eventually caused him to be against the Pandavas. One of the major examples from this is his participation in the Kurukshetra war in support of Kauravas despite knowing Pandavas true intentions behind the war. His silence in the court of the kingdom when the wife of Pandavas was humiliated in front of him. His helplessness during the exile of Pandavas even after knowing that Pandavas are innocent. His inability to convince the king of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra and Kauravas to resolve the war and return the land of Indraprastha to the Pandavas.

Even if wanted to be a part of Pandavas celebration or their achievements, he was kept reluctant due to his duty for the kingdom. All these incidents in his life resulted in his loneliness and caused him isolation. He was left alone by everyone due to his duty for the Kingdom. He portrays the abilities of a strong man because even after all the troubles and problems in his life, he kept firm on his decisions and oath to serve the kingdom selflessly. Even though he was left alone by the Kauravas, he stood firm on his duty knowing that he had to survive like this till his death. Bhishma faced alienation by his own family at times due to his controversial decisions in the epic. Also, his oath to serve the kingdom of Hastinapur selflessly was majorly used as an advantage by the king, Dhritarashtra and his sons Kauravas. They used him as a shield and protector. His decision to support the Kauravas even though he had no genuine intentions to support them haunted him in the war as he experienced severe suffering.

Bhishma was given the opportunity to decide his death as a gift of his oath. Despite this, due to his adherence and loyalty towards the Kauravas even though he had no intentions to do that, he eventually meets his end. The oath and his decisions led to his suffering in all ways

that is mentally, emotionally and physically. He went through physical pain as he laid down his armors at the end of the war and refused to fight against a lady that is Shikhandi, which resulted in forfeiting the battle and eventually laid down on the bed of arrows built by Arjuna. This can be looked into two ways as he withdrew from the battlefield when he knew that Pandavas were going to win and at the same time he also fulfilled his duty as the warrior with the help of Krishna's guidance. There were multiple arrows that were shot on him by Arjuna with a heavy heart which resulted in a tremendous physical pain to Bhishma.

His ability to put his kingdom and duty first in front of any other personal desires is something which stands from the entire discourse. Initially, he sacrifices his chances of getting married and puts his father, Shantanu in front and helps him to live a peaceful life and marry Satyawati.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DHARMA'S GENDER DIVIDE: UNPACKING MALE DOMINANCE, FEMALE SUBJUGATION, AND MARGINALISATION**

#### **4.1 Dominant Aspects of Male Characters in upholding Dharma**

##### **4.1.1 Adherence to Codes of Conduct**

Adherence to Codes of Conduct in Terms of Dharma for Male Characters in the Mahabharata. One of the most important and the fundamental principles of Hinduism is 'Being truthful to self and others'. We can also term it as 'Satya' in Sanskrit. Through this term, we will try to understand the concepts of honesty, loyalty, maturity, sincerity and thoughts. The male characters from Mahabharata are often seen facing dual perspectives when they have to adhere to the principles of truth. Individual and specially male characters must keep their personal gains and relations aside and do what is required for them to uphold dharma.

There are many examples where we see characters going through this mentality. One of the major examples is Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava among the Pandavas. He is known for his commitment to the principles of Dharma and loyalty towards his kingdom and citizens of the kingdom. In the epic Mahabharata, Yudhishtira faces numerous challenges and difficulties while upholding dharma. The major example is the gambling game against the Kauravas and Shakuni where they try to destroy the Pandavas. During this game of dice, Yudhishtira eventually puts his everything on stake for example his kingdom, his wealth, jewellery and

eventually his brothers and wife, Draupadi too without her consent. And lastly he puts himself on stake too. Yudhishtira is someone who will never lie even in the time of adversity. He is known for his ultimate commitment and sacrifice towards being truthful. Initially, Yudhishtira had made a promise that he won't withdraw from the game in the middle and that's the reason he eventually keeps on playing the game even though he knew that it was destroying his identity and family. Lastly, they were punished through an exile of 14 years. Not just this, Yudhishtira's morals and ethics is also visible in the battlefield too, against the Kauravas where he denies to cheat against his rivals.

When they had to kill Guru Dronacharya, Krishna advises him to play a trick on Drona that they will pretend that his son, Ashwatthama is killed in the battlefield which will result in Dronacharya's self forfeit from the war. But Yudhishtira refuses and kills an elephant named Ashwatthama so that he doesn't have to lie about his deed. So we can see with the help of Yudhishtira that being truthful to himself and others was a major task for Yudhishtira and many others. Another example is Karna, who is marginalised due to his background. Even after being equally skilled like Arjuna, he was kept aside due to his family background. When Duryodhana helps him emotionally and mentally by adopting him as his friend, he beautifully pays him off by being loyal towards him in all situations. Even though he knew that whatever Duryodhana was doing was Adharma, he stays firm on his decision and principle to support him. He portrays a perfect example of being loyal and trustworthy towards the person who helped him in his worst time.

Furthermore, the male characters are also bound to do their duties, which is 'Sva-dharma' in Sanskrit. Which means fulfilment of one's duties and responsibilities based on their position, social status, family responsibilities and professional duties. Male characters specially are bound with such duties where they have to carry forward their duties at any given cost. Arjuna, Bhishma, Yudhishtira, Guru Dronacharya, Bheem, Nakul, Sahdevva, and also Lord Krishna



were bound to follow their sva-dharma while upholding the Dharma. All the male characters are bound to follow their duties at some given point of time in Mahabharata. Arjuna had to fight against his own family members and brothers for the justice, betterment of the kingdom and security of the future generations. Lord Krishna follows his duty as a guide by guiding Arjuna to think beyond his personal relations. Also this goes to the all 5 members of Pandavas where they have to keep aside their personal gains and relations and focus on fighting for the greater good. Nakul and Sahdeva were seen helping Karna, who was fighting against him, when he gave away his shield to Surya Deva. They cured him through their powers and gave him a life. Bhishma who was bound to the throne of Hastinapur, follows his duty by fighting against his own family members. He serves as a protector of Dharma and sons of Dhritarashtra since he had promised the king and the kingdom that he will always protect the throne and their members. Also he follows his duty as a warrior by fighting against the Pandavas.

Following that, both the characters, especially male characters, were also bound to forgive and show mercy towards the people even if they are their enemies. In Sanskrit, it's termed 'Daya' towards all the beings, animals and others too. Male characters had to balance between their professional duties and empathy for others. We can see this with the example of Krishna that how he was fair to everyone through the epic and specially during the battlefield. Even though he was a great personality and a divine force, he showed humbleness and empathy towards all the beings. Their background and upbringing was never the issue for someone like lord Krishna. He was fair to both Pandavas and Kauravas even before the start of the war where he was given a fair chance to choose between him and his Narayani Sena, where both Arjuna and Duryodhana chose Krishna and Narayani Sena respectively. Also, it is very evident when he gives a ton of chances to Shishupal and he never misses a chance to insult Krishna. Krishna forgives him for a hundred times and after that he eventually kills him. Also both Krishna and Bhishma forgave Duryodhana multiple times even after his bitter words and unjustified acts.

Bhishma, even after knowing Duryodhana's misdeeds, forgives him on multiple occasions thinking he will be a better person in future. Also during the childhood when Duryodhana and Shakuni try to kill Bheem by giving him poison, where Bheem eventually survives. Bheem forgives Duryodhana for his misdeeds. So there are many examples through which it is justified how showing compassion towards others is also a major act of Dharma.

Also, adhering to oaths and giving equal importance to vows and words is also a major highlight of the male characters which is evident through the examples like Drona and Bhishma. 'Vrata' is the Sanskrit term for Oaths. Male characters are often seen taking oaths and giving vows in order to fulfil their dharma. These oaths and vows often bind them to specific actions and activities which can also have consequences. These vows serve as a resolution to their problems and betterment of Dharma. Drona, who was the martial teacher of both Pandavas and Kauravas had taken an oath to kill and destroy the King Drupada through his skills and teachings to his students. King Drupada had insulted Dronacharya in his kingdom and as a revenge, he wanted to defeat Drupada through his teachings to his students. Eventually both Kauravas and Pandavas attack on the kingdom of Drupada and finally Drona's oath is completed when warrior Arjuna defeated Drupada in the battlefield. Also in the Kurukshetra war, when Dronacharya thinks his son Ashwatthama is killed by the Pandavas which was actually a trick played by the Pandavas, Drona forfeits from the war and waits for his death from Dhrishtadyumna, King Drupad's son since he had taken a vow that he will sacrifice his life after his son's death in the war as he didn't wanted to be a part of Adharma. Bhishma's vow of celibacy where he decides to live a life like Bharmacharya and serve the throne of Hastinapur without becoming the king of Hastinapur is also a major example. He takes this oath for his father's happiness and remains firm on it till his last breath.

Duryodhana is someone who seems to receive karma for his misdeeds and Adharma throughout the epic. Duryodhana tried his best to become the king of Hastinapur and he also

took oath to destroy the Pandavas so that he had no obstacles in the race of becoming the king. He refuses to return the kingdom Indraprastha which was built by the Pandavas. He also refuses to compromise and resolve the conflict against the Pandavas outside the battlefield due to his greed and ego to destroy Pandavas. This was the reason behind the epic Kurukshetra war between them.

#### **4.1.2 Guardians of Righteousness**

The male characters from Mahabharata were known for their abilities and responsibilities to protect the Dharma for the greater good of society.

In one of the scenes, Arjuna faces inner turmoil during the battle field at Kurukshetra war, where he's supposed to battle against his own family members. Despite knowing that they are his own family, his duty as a warrior to uphold dharma keeps him away from the personal desires and attachments. As a warrior, he's supposed to follow what is required from him as a warrior. Lord Krishna, who is guiding him, advises not to carry away with the personal gains and relations. Instead, he reminds him about his duty and responsibility as a warrior which is to fight against the Adharma, despite what the situation is. The discourse between him and Krishna is covered in Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna's adherence to the commitment of Dharma showcases his ability as a warrior. Moreover, Arjuna's adherence to dharma during the Kurukshetra war exemplifies the principles of fair warfare. The way he stayed committed to the rules and regulations of the war talks about his respect for Dharma. Respect for opponents, avoiding unnecessary violation of rules is something which is a great quality to have as a warrior of Dharma. Even in the chaos of adharma and violence from the opponents, he stays calm and sticks to his Dharma as a warrior.

Bhishma, who's again one of the prominent male figures of Mahabharata is known for his adherence to Dharma. He's the grandson of the Kuru dynasty. He is known for his unparalleled wisdom, commitment to the principles of Dharma, bravery and his selfless service to the throne of Hastinapur for greater good. Just like Arjuna, his fulfilment of what is required and expected from him as a warrior and protector of Dharma separates him from his other members of the kingdom. Bhishma's Vow of Celibacy which is where he takes an oath that he will always be a servant which means a life of Brahmacharya to the throne of Hastinapur and never will try to become the king of the kingdom despite his right on the throne. He voluntarily decides to give away the throne of Hastinapur to his father Shantanu as a respect for the higher authority. His selfless service is a great example of his adherence and protection of dharma. Despite having all the qualities a king must possess, he decides to withdraw from the kingship and voluntarily chooses to become the servant of the throne.

Also, his importance during the Kurukshetra war is one of the highlights of the episode. His unmatched commitment to the Principles of Dharma even when he is faced by moral and ethical choices is something which stands out as a protector of Dharma. Despite knowing that Pandu's are in the support of Dharma, he decides to battle with the Kauravas, who are the supporters of adharma due to his commitment and promise to the throne of Hastinapur and Dhritarashtra, who's the father of Kauravas. Bhishma leaving his personal relations with Pandu's aside, decides to fight against his own family members. This shows how Bhishma stayed committed to his words and duty as a protector of Dharma. Even though he faced a lot of moral and ethical choices during the Kurukshetra war, he remained firm on his commitment and his oath.

Moving ahead with Bhishma's self-imposed boon that he gets to decide when he wants to receive death shows and symbolises his supreme sacrifice in the name of Dharma. Bhishma being the most powerful warrior among them as he is undefeatable in the war, he still decides

to lay down his arms and waits for his death. Bhishma was given the opportunity that he gets to decide his death. He knew that he's on the wrong side and was supporting Adharma. He puts down his armors as he realises that he has fulfilled his duty as warrior which showcases his ultimate sacrifice and commitment to uphold dharma. That's the time when he waits for Amba who comes in the form of Shikandi to kill him. He patiently waited for his death since he didn't want to be a part of adharma anymore.

Furthermore, Yudhishtira who's the eldest Pandava and official heir to the throne of Hastinapur, rises as one of the central characters of the epic Mahabharata. Yudhishtira is known for his unparalleled commitment to the principles of Dharma that is Truth and Righteousness. He's basically known for his purity and someone who cannot lie. Throughout the epic, Yudhishtira tries to be fair and truthful even to his enemies in order to uphold dharma. This was his way of protecting dharma for greater cause. He possesses moral and ethical conduct and serves dharma as a symbol of being truthful to others. One of the famous incidents in Yudhishtira's life and journey while upholding dharma was during the Dice game which was organised by the Kauravas and Shakuni to destroy the wealth and kingdom of Pandavas. There are many consequences Yudhishtira faces in order to uphold dharma that is adherence to Truth (Satya). During the Dice game, Yudhishtira puts his kingdom, wealth, jewellery and everything on stake.

He was someone who remained so true to his words that eventually he puts his brothers and wife, Draupadi, on stake without her consent. According to Yudhishtira, a person shouldn't lie and stick to their words. That's the reason he eventually sells his entire Kingdom and even himself to the Kauravas. Even during this incident, Yudhishtira remains firm on his decision to play the game since he can't deny to withdraw from the Dice game. He remains firm on his principles, his truth thereby upholding the sanctity of Dharma.

Further his unparalleled commitment to dharma can be seen through his role as the righteous leader of the kingdom. After the great victory at the Kurukshetra war against the Kauravas, Yudhishtira being the eldest Pandava takes the charge of Hastinapur. His adherence to dharma as a fair ruler separates him from the other kings. He focused on imposing harmony and prosperity during his kingship. Through his views and perspective, Yudhishtira tried his everything to protect dharma for his people so that they live a life full of morals and ethics. Lastly, his beautiful and spiritual journey through the forest and his victory in the celestial realms, followed by his principles of Dharma and truth, highlights the eternal importance of Dharma as a guiding principles that will lead the future generations towards spiritual enlightenment and it will help them to receive Moksha.

#### **4.1.3 The Art of Leadership and Governance**

One of the most important characters from the epic Mahabharata, the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira serves as an embodiment of truthfulness. He is widely known for his adherence to the principles of Dharma. He is someone who chooses not to lie or be a part of any Adharma. He is also known for his leadership among the brothers and also the king of Hastinapur in the later part of Mahabharata. He showcases Virtuous leadership through his commitment to Dharma and Truth, justice, respect and moral integrity. His leadership is very evident in many scenes from Mahabharata where he sticks to his Dharma and also advises people to follow the path of Dharma through his leadership, even when the situations appear challenging. One of the examples of this is during the game of dice held by the Kauravas and Shakuni in order to destroy the moral and wealth of Pandavas. Yudhishtira denies to get down or withdraw from the game of dice even after knowing that it is to destroy their family, he continues playing the game because of his word to the Kauravas as a elder brother that he won't be withdrawing from the game until and unless the game is over. Eventually, he risks everything including his wealth,

Kingdom and even his brothers and his wife Draupadi without her consent and eventually himself too. He puts everything on stake because he refused to compromise his moral values, which is something a leader must do even though it resulted in a punishment.

His leadership skills can also be seen through his fair decisions and orders after they reclaim their kingdom after the Kurukshetra war. He ensured the welfare of the people of his kingdom by providing them with equal rights and opportunities as citizens, which is something a king is supposed to follow. His leadership style is different from the other kings for example Dhritarashtra where he only thinks about his personal gains. But here Yudhishtira, who is the eldest son of Pandu, always consults and take advice from his fellow mates, listens to multiple view points, always tries to resolve the conflicts through his speech and way of talking. Through this , Yudhishtira has earned the respect of elders and also from the citizens of the kingdom. His leadership focuses on both his friends and also his enemies.

Also, on the other hand, we have characters like Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana who possess the quality of distorted governance. Both father and son duo are completely opposite to Yudhishtira in all aspects whether it is the decision-making or taking care of his family. The epic Mahabharata also showcases the negative impact of Dharma through the characters like Duryodhana and Dhritarashtra.

Dhritarashtra, who's the blind king of the kingdom, Hastinapur and father of Kauravas is a weak leader due to his inability to see things which also impacts his decision as a leader and a king. His weakness in leadership of the Kingdom is clearly visible when he completely tries to neglect the opposition's point of view when it comes to his sons, especially Duryodhana. When the Kauravas get defeated on the battlefield, the king losses his ability to make decisions. He suffers from anxiety and depression. His inability to control his son's personal desires and fulfilling those unnecessary deeds results him and his son to a miserable end. It was actually the king Dhritarashtra who was unable to handle his son's greed which led to the great

Kurukshetra war against the Pandavas. So as a king, he failed to control the situation or to find a resolution other than the war.

Duryodhana, who was the eldest of the Kaurava brothers failed to recognise the importance of Dharma and righteousness in his life which led to his one of the painful deaths among the warriors. His leadership consisted of frenzy, arrogance, selfishness, greed, disregard to the elders and other unnecessary elements which led to his death. Duryodhana becomes an obstacle between Yudhishtira and the throne of Hastinapur which was Yudhishtira's right. He was one of the reasons why we had the epic Kurukshetra war which resulted in the victory of Dharma, that is Pandavas.

Lord Krishna stands out as the ultimate epitome of leadership. Krishna who's the divine character from Mahabharata serves as one of the prominent characters of the epic. We can say that we had the Kurukshetra war which was held for the greater good because of Lord Krishna. Krishna serves as an advisor of Pandavas and charioteer of Arjuna during the battlefield. He plays an important role in guiding the Pandavas to victory over the Kauravas. He has got this ability to see something which is not possible for the normal people is something which separates him from others. He was in the support of Pandavas and he guided them to the victory which he considered as his Dharma. It was he who conducted all this drama of war to end the Kauravas' reign that is Adharma and form the rule of Dharma through his leadership and governance. The war and violence was required in order to bring out the rule of Dharma in the society according to him. That's the reason, Krishna guided the Pandavas and whoever fighting against the Adharma to go forward without looking at its consequences. He helped the warriors to get over their dilemmas and fight for justice.

His most pivotal role in the Kurukshetra war came in the form of the charioteer of Arjuna in the battlefield. Krishna had made it clear that he wouldn't be participating as a warrior in the war. But despite this, when the time came to choose between Krishna or his soldiers, it was the



Narayani Sena of Krishna which included Balrama, Ahuka, Samba, Charudeshna, Chakra Deva and Satyaki. On the other hand, Arjuna chose Lord Krishna despite knowing that he won't be participating as a warrior. This shows Arjuna's faith in Krishna's guidance and leadership and how he respects him as a leader and teacher. Also when the time comes, during the Kurukshetra war, Krishna helps Arjuna on multiple occasions to deal with his moral dilemmas and fight for what is right for humanity. Their discourse is covered in Bhagavad Gita where he guides Arjuna on many occasions. For example his dilemma to fight against his own family for instance Bhishma, Guru Drona and others. This also includes his own brother Kauravas.

Next we can also see the leadership and governance in the battlefield in the form of Bhishma and Drona and how these warriors fought against the Dharma just to protect their own Dharma and how they eventually surrendered themselves for the greater good of humanity. Bhishma, the oldest member of the Kuru dynasty, is known for his unparalleled commitment to the loyalty to Dharma and the throne of Hastinapur. Bhishma fought with the Kauravas against his own family members as the chief in command of the Kauravas army. He led his soldiers with his courage and ability to fight against the supreme warriors like Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Bheem and others. Bhishma remained firm on his oath of celibacy that he would live his entire life as a Bharmacharya and serve as the servant to the throne of Hastinapur even though he had the ability and right to become the king. It showcases his duty and responsibility against his oath even though it resulted in personal downfall and defeat in the end. At last he surrendered himself and chose his death when he realised that his duty as warrior is over.

Dronacharya on the other hand is another example of how personal relations can interfere in the duty and responsibility. He displays the complex nature of leadership. He was the martial teacher of the Pandavas and Kauravas. Even though he served as the mentor to both Pandavas and Kauravas, he fought against the Dharma due to his son's selfishness and friendship with King Duryodhana. His son, Ashwatthama, blackmailed his father Drona to fight in the support

of Kauravas or else he would kill himself. So this is how Guru Drona was forced to commit the injustice and bitter acts in the battlefield which eventually ended when Krishna advises him to surrender himself to the greater good. Eventually he was killed and Kauravas got defeated.

#### **4.1.4 Family Stewardship for Men**

Also the knowledge of family and responsibility is very important not just in Mahabharata but also in today's world. Dharma is a context where a person has to follow certain rules and regulations in order to fulfil the given work, in simple words. It's an Hindu term where an Individual must follow the moral and ethical duties in their respective roles and situations in life. And under this, family responsibilities comes as a prominent aspect where a person has to take care of their family and follow the path of Dharma. During the era of Mahabharata, the male characters specially were bound to adhere to the principles of Dharma in order to uphold the welfare of family, respect and responsibilities of the family and honour of their ancestors, their partner, children and other necessary aspects. Male characters during that time were bound to follow these principles as they were the providers of the family. Women were given the household roles and to an extent, the role of princess. Male characters had to look after their family members which sometimes included multiple wives or children.

Some of the examples from Mahabharata where we see the male characters taking the charge of their families in terms of Dharma are Bhishma, Yudhishtira etc. The prominent example is Bhishma's Loyalty towards his family and sacrifices he made for the throne of Hastinapur and the members of the kingdom. He is one the greatest warrior of his time but more than that he was a great human being and someone who used to take care of his family members even in the worst situations. Even though he had taken the oath of celibacy and denial of the throne of Hastinapur, he stays committed to his family responsibilities by ensuring the safety of the members of Hastinapur. The decision of Bhishma that he will serve as a servant

to the throne despite of having the right on the throne comes from his father Shantanu. He takes this bold decision for his father's happiness because his father got stuck in the greedy motives of Amba. That's the reason Bhishma decides to withdraw as the king of Hastinapur and chooses to serve the kingdom without taking the charge as the king. Without thinking about his personal gains he denies to become the king for his father. Throughout the years, he served as a patriarch and also make sure that he protects the family members which includes the father-son duo, Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana and also the Pandavas.

Another example is Yudhishtira, who's the eldest Pandava among the Pandavas. He is a perfect example of someone who look after his family and other members while also making sure that he follows all the required rules and regulations. Being the elder brother, he takes over the responsibilities of the family and also the charge of the kingdom after the Kurukshetra war. Even though he faced a lot of difficulties, he remained steadfast on his principles and commitment to dharma and truth and welfare of his family. After becoming the king of Hastinapur, he also took the charge of the kingdom by assuring protection and equal rights for the people of the kingdom whom he treated as his family. When the time came of adversity, which is the exile after losing the game of dice against the Adharma, we saw how Yudhishtira acted maturely and took care of his brothers and mother and even his wife later, Draupadi. He performed his family duties very well when his family faced the consequences of his decision during the game of dice. He resembles the sense of duty and responsibility not just towards his own family members but also the enemies. We see how he very professionally tries to understand and resolve the conflicts between Pandavas and Kauravas.

Furthermore, we can also see the sense of responsibility and loyalty through the character of Karna, who is actually abandoned by his mother Kunti due to familiar restrictions and dharma. Due to this, he faced a lot of discrimination and was marginalised by the rest of the people even though he was fostered by a couple. Even after being almost more powerful and

superior than Arjuna when it comes to bow and arrow, he was kept aside due to his family background. Even after facing all the discriminations and mean comments on his upbringing and background, he remained loyal to his adopted parents and later his friend, Duryodhana, whom he gave much more importance to than his own brothers. Karna started treating him as his only brother and a friend whom he can rely on and completely surrenders himself to his friend. He fought against his own brothers, Pandavas in the battlefield and supported his friend, Duryodhana even though he was on the side of Adharma. According to him, he has to be loyal to that person who supported and believed in him when no one did. Karna's sacrifice and commitment to his family and friend in the battlefield is shown when he promises Duryodhana that he will protect him at any cost, which was basically through his shield. This is a perfect example where we can see how a person is ready to sacrifice himself even though that person is just his friend.

Arjuna who is known for his ultimate ability in bow and arrow had also made a lot of sacrifices for his family in many ways. He fulfils his role as warrior and also as a Kshatriya. His role as son, brother and husband is totally justified in the epic Mahabharata. He serves as a shield to protect his family for example during the Kurukshetra war. He gives his all to protect his family and make sure he and his brothers end up on the winning side. Also, he knew that the people he's fighting against are his own family members, for example Bhishma, Guru Drona etc. He faced a lot of inner turmoil while fighting against them in the battlefield since they were his own family and people. This shows his attachment and sense of responsibility towards the people who are on the opposite side too. That's the reason Lord Krishna had to clear the doubts of Arjuna that whatever he is doing is for the greater good and society. Dilemmas are something which is common among the male characters since whatever decisions they make for the betterment of society and their family, comes at the cost of his own family members.

Also, the characters like Karna and Bhishma signifies how sometimes the Ethical principles conflict against the familiar duties too. Bhishma's alliance with the injustice of Kauravas since he has promised the king of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra that he will always protect the throne and his sons. The loyalty and oath towards the members of Hastinapur, forces a person like Bhishma who doesn't stand by any kind of injustice to fight against the Dharma. It actually raises questions on Bhishma's point of view during that time. His act of supporting Adharma also raises questions on his limitations towards his protection and obligations of the family. Karna being the supreme warrior, decides to fight against the Dharma and his own brothers to prove that he is loyal to his friend, Duryodhana whom he considered his family.

Characters like Arjuna and Yudhishtira who were considered as the important warriors from the Pandavas side also faced and experienced many dilemmas while choosing between his family duties and his professional duties. It is very evident when Yudhishtira finally accepts the sacrifice of the Rajasuya and also the mess which he creates in the gambling match against the Kauravas speaks about his reputation as the eldest son of the family that how he makes sacrifices in order to keep their family's reputation and respect. Same goes with the other Pandava too, Arjuna, how he ends up in an inner turmoil where he feels stuck between his family and his duty as a warrior. This shows how sometimes the characters from Mahabharata had to choose between their family and duties where they have to make sure they keep a balance between both of them. Balancing the professional duties and family responsibilities was a major task specially for the male characters of Mahabharata.

## **4.2 Subjugation and Submissive Nature of Female Characters in upholding Dharma**

### **4.2.1 The Tradition of Women's Arranged Marriages**

Arranged marriages are something which is quite common in the epic Mahabharata where the women during that time unlike today's 21st century generation were not given the equal

opportunity to choose their groom or life partner. Instead they were treated as a prize or a gift for the supreme warriors. Mostly the marriages in Mahabharata are conducted through a marriage ceremony which is famously known as 'Swayamvara' in Sanskrit, where all the great warriors showcase their abilities which will impress the king of the kingdom and as a prize, the warriors are rewarded with the king's daughter as their wife. Sometimes it is also possible that a man can have multiple wives. It also talks about the societal expectations, gender dynamics and also the secondary gender of women in the epic.

One of the prominent examples of arranging marriages was Draupadi's marriage. In the history of Mahabharata, Draupadi's marriage turned out to be the ultimate marriage since she was married to the five male members of Pandavas; Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bheem, Nakul and Sahdeva. Draupadi's marriage was conducted through a Swayamvara, where the supreme warriors had participated to win the challenge or task which was put forward by King Drupada. The task was to shoot an arrow in the universe where there is a fish by looking at the reflection of that fish in the water. The contest showcases how female characters were bound to arrange marriages. Lord Krishna had purposely advised King Drupada to conduct such a difficult task that only Arjuna could complete it. Since Lord Krishna already knew the future, he wanted Draupadi to marry Arjuna. This is also an example where we see there is no agency for the women to choose their husbands or partners. Even after being the princess of the kingdom, she decides to listen to her father because that was her dharma as a daughter. Later due to Kunti's misunderstanding, Draupadi had to accept all five Pandavas as her husband, which is quite controversial in today's time. But in order to uphold dharma, Draupadi had to accept her faith. This shows how dharma plays an important role in shaping one's life and how arranged marriages can lead to problems sometimes. Her acceptance of five husbands reflects her duty and responsibility towards her people and for the greater good. This is something which we

will rarely see in today's century in Hinduism where a woman voluntarily accepts multiple husbands.

Next example would be of Kunti, who is the mother of Pandavas and wife of Pandu. Her marriage to Pandu gives us another example of arranged marriages and women's subjugation while choosing husbands for themselves. In ancient times, kings of particular kingdoms use to strengthen their kingdom by making an alliance with a stronger kingdom in order to ensure the safety and security from their rivals. Likewise, Shaurasena who is the father of Kunti arranged her marriage to Pandu, who was the next king of their kingdom after his death. In order to increase the wealth and prosperity of the kingdom, Kunti's father arranges a marriage with Pandu, which showcases how women were kept away completely from the decision of choosing their life partner. In the 21st century, it's totally different as sometimes the woman choose their partner without even concern with their parents. And as every other princess or woman in the epic Mahabharata, Kunti too decides to listen to her father and puts away her personal issues and other things towards the marriage. This also highlights her dharma of listening to her father without asking any questions. Kunti's marriage is again another example of how political issues and stuff always have to be a part of marriages. Without asking any questions she listens to her father and obeys him.

Next example can be of Subhadra, who is the sister of Krishna who was married to Arjuna which was arranged by the central character of the epic, Krishna. He thought Arjuna was a perfect match for his sister Subhadra since Arjuna was a great warrior among all the warriors. Also another reason why Krishna thought Arjuna can be his sister's husband is because he might already know the advantages and also its consequences of this arrangement of marriage. Since Lord Krishna was the creator of the entire universe and the war between Kauravas and Pandavas, he knew about the arrival of Abhimanyu, Arjuna and Subhadra's child, who was going to play an important role in the Kurukshetra war. Initially, Arjuna too was very reluctant

to marry Subhadra but later he agreed thinking about the familial advantages and benefits of the kingdom. This is an example of how women were kept away from the decision of choosing their husband. In this case, Krishna being the elder brother decides the faith of his sister by arranging her marriage with Arjuna. Also, Krishna advises Arjuna to take away or kidnap Subhadra when she was getting married to someone else. Subhadra quietly listens to her brother and adheres to her dharma as sister and decides to live her further life with Arjuna.

Another example can be of the woman who was the Queen of Hastinapur for certain amount of time, that is Gandhari. In the epic Mahabharata, Gandhari was married to a blind king, Dhritarashtra, who was also the temporary king of Hastinapur. Despite knowing Dhritarashtra's disability, Gandhari chooses to marry him for the benefits of the kingdom that is Kuru and Gandhara. This is an example of how women's marriage were used as a mode to build familial relations and advantages between the two or multiple kingdoms. Gandhari was the princess of Gandhara who accepted her faith to marry a blind man. And later she also decided to support her husband by applying a cloth over her eyes and took an oath not to remove it for the rest of her life. This shows her ability to perform her duty as a wife of a king. Being the wife, she willingly supports her husband by taking away her ability of vision. Her marriage and her sacrifices in the marriage showcases the Dharma and also her 'Pativrataa dharma', in which a woman has to follow and listen to her husband in good and bad times. Her sacrifices in the marriage talks about her loyalty towards her husband. Even when Dhritarashtra performs Adharma and negative acts multiple times in the epic, Gandhari performs her duty as wife by supporting him despite knowing that her husband is wrong.

Satyavati's multiple arrange marriages to different men in order to fulfil the duty and maintain the balance of the relations and the world also shows women's inability to choose their groom for themselves. Their marriages were used as a source to maintain and built the relations between the two kingdoms. She was the grandmother of Pandavas and Kauravas and



mother of Vyasa who's first marriage was arranged with the King Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur. Her marriage with King Shantanu is arranged by Satyawati's father in order to uphold the Dharma and for the maintenance of the prosperity of the kingdom. She agrees to fulfil her duty as a wife and adheres to the principles of Dharma. During the ancient times, Indian society was totally based on familial advantages and their benefits and characters, especially women had to pay the price for the maintenance of the kingdoms as women were considered as the pride and of their kingdom. Because of this, Satyawati had to tie knots with multiple men, for example Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. The reason behind both this arrangement of marriages is to maintain or safeguard the prosperity between the kingdoms and Hastinapur. This showcases the pivotal role of alliances between the two dynasties or kingdoms.

#### **4.2.2 Adherence to Husbands and Authorities**

Another prominent aspect where we can see the subjugation and submissive nature of women in the epic Mahabharata is their obedience and duty towards their respective husbands and elders even during the time of disparity and diversity.

One of the prominent and famous incidents from Mahabharata is Draupadi's acceptance towards her faith in marriage with the five brothers that are Pandavas. In Indian society, especially during the era of Mahabharata, wives were supposed to adhere to their husbands for their better life. Draupadi was initially married to the warrior, Arjuna but later due to Kunti's misunderstanding with her five sons caused one of the worst misfortunes during that time which resulted against the Panchal princesses, Draupadi. Kunti, without looking at what her son Arjuna has brought and won during the competition, says she orders him to share with his brothers. And as a result Draupadi finally had to accept all the five brothers as her husband with a heavy heart, as words were way more important to live a peaceful life and Kunti's words

had to pay the price if it was not fulfilled. Due to this, she obeys to her mother-in-law, Kunti and accepts her five sons as her husbands. After this there were a lot of debates and controversies in the kingdom and among the people but Draupadi being the wife of Pandavas fulfils her duty faithfully towards all of them. Another example can be of Gandhari's worship and devotion towards her blind husband, Dhritarashtra who was the king of Hastinapur.

Also, we see how the female characters obey the male characters in terms of all the relationships, especially their husbands. During that time, wives had to listen to their husbands as a sense of responsibility and respect towards them. This is highlighted through Kunti's example from Mahabharata where she stays firm and fixed on her decision and kind of forces Draupadi to accept her five sons as her husbands, even though it all happened due to Kunti's misunderstanding. Kunti being the mother of the Pandavas plays a major role in Draupadi's life that is arranging her marriage with her five sons. Even though Draupadi was very reluctant to accept the Pandavas as her husbands, Kunti advises her not to disobey the male characters who were considered as the supreme and superior among all. Her constant insistence to Draupadi to accept them as husbands despite the misfortune highlights the impact and importance of adherence to male figures and specially the husbands. Obeying husbands was considered as a major quality and ability among the women. Nowadays, there are no such cases where women are bound to obey their husbands. Women do take a stand for themselves in today's world whereas in some parts of India it is still applicable where women still wait for their husbands to return from their work and then they will eat together. With the help of Kunti's character, we see the importance of obeying and adhering to their husbands during that era.

Also, Subhadra, wife of Arjuna and sister of Lord Krishna showcases a submissive role or can be considered as a secondary role when it comes to decision making as a couple. Subhadra has always been portrayed as an innocent and pure soul who ends up listening to each and

everything uttered by her husband, Arjuna. She accepts her faith as a wife and she knows her standing when it comes to marriage. Subhadra seems to be deeply in love with Arjuna and probably that's the one of the reasons why she accepts and listens to her husband sincerely.

Being the sister of Krishna and being a child from a royal family, she accepts her faith as a wife of Arjuna. Throughout their journey of marriage, Subhadra shows unwavering promise to her husband and this can be seen when she willingly accepted to be with her husband during the exile. She stays committed to her duties even during times of adversity. Even during the challenging circumstances, she doesn't leave her husband alone which talks about her duty and responsibility as a wife and also reflects how important it is to obey their husbands during that time. Wives are usually expected to obey their partners which can lead to a beautiful and amazing marital life. Obedience is something which is seen very commonly and commonly when it comes to women. Even now women are expected to listen to their partners and follow their orders. Although there are some sections of India where things are changing, mostly Indian society is still the same.

Through the research so far, it's very evident that female characters are largely considered as inferior to male characters from Mahabharata, which highlights their inability to raise voices when it's needed. The Mahabharata is particularly based on a patriarchal society where women are supposed to worship men even if they are wrong or implementing negative things. Women are usually expected to take care of their husbands and family and children and other household works. The outcome of this arrangement results in an imbalance of the society. Women generally had to adhere to the principles of Dharma that is taking care of their fellow partners and their children and family. Limited agency for women can result in mental trauma sometimes due to lack of understanding and speaking with their partners. During the time of marriage, there were hardly any cases or incidents where women had raised her voice against the traditional gender norms. Women are expected to adhere to or follow their fathers and marry

whoever her father feels is right for her. Mostly, arranged marriages are looked at as a source of building alliances. Draupadi's example as already discussed can be a major one where she is treated as a secondary gender even when it was her who is supposed to take a decision for her life. This highlights the submissive nature of women. Even after marriage, they are expected to listen to their husbands and follow them in all the difficult situations. Besides from this text, another similar example can be of Sita, wife of Rama in Ramayana, where she's questioned about her purity when she returns from Lanka. Even though she protested, eventually she had to prove her purity through walking into the fire. This highly shows the patriarchal society and their gender norms.

Also, it has been seen in the Mahabharata how women were kept restricted from the important decision-making of their lives and also the kingdom. Male characters majorly take the decisions which play an important role in the future whereas women were kept away from all these decisions. They are bound with the domestic works and were kept away from things like travelling, education, independence etc. We can see many male figures such as Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Duryodhana and other Kauravas and Pandavas where they are given the opportunity to train themselves under marital teachers and build superior skills among them whereas no woman is allowed to enter in the battlefield or train themselves. Despite this, there are some incidents where women play a major role in fighting against injustice, physically and also mentality. Shikandi was seen as a master in fighting against the well trained warriors in the Kurukshetra war. She also defeats many skillful warriors, for example Bhishma. But besides this, very rarely it can be seen that women are fighting and raising their voices for themselves. Another example is Gandhari where despite being very intelligent and sharp in making decisions, she decides to submit her life to her blind husband, Dhritarashtra by applying a cloth on her eyes for the rest of her life. Despite being equally intelligent like the other male characters, she remained committed to her household duties and responsibilities. She had

played a major role in shaping her husband and sons life but was unable to fully participate due to the traditional gender norms.

Draupadi's humiliation in the 'Sabhagruha' by the Kauravas in front of the Pandavas and other dignitaries, highlights the tension of raising voices by women at the time of problems. Despite getting humiliated very badly by the Kauravas, she was kept away from fighting against them physically. Instead, it is seen that the male characters or her husbands (Pandavas) were seen as participating in the war for their wife's injustice. It was the male characters who had the right to actively participate in the physical war even though it was Draupadi who had to bear all the humiliation.

While we are looking at the subjugation of the female characters, it is also evident through the research that there are also examples and incidents where women have raised their voices or tried to overpower the decisions which were taken against them. Although there is limited agency for the female characters, there is an ultimate example of Draupadi who fought for her injustice towards her which occurred before the exile of Pandavas where Kauravas organised the Dice game to destroy the Pandavas and their wife. The Dice game resulted in the disrobing of Draupadi in front of all the members of Hastinapur. It is something which if it has happened in today's 21st century, the world would have erupted with candle march and other stuff. But during that time, the members of Hastinapur and Mahabharata had to adhere to the principles of Dharma or else the disrobing would have not taken place. When Draupadi realised that none of the members of Hastinapur stood up for her, that's the time she stood for herself and revolted against the injustice. She blamed the entire members of Hastinapur including her own family for not taking a stand for her. That's the time she decided to take an oath that is not to tie her hair until she has a bath with the blood of Dushasan, who had humiliated her. And probably that's the reason why the great Kurukshetra war took place. It is largely said that the entire Mahabharata and the war took place due to Draupadi's humiliation.

### 4.2.3 Silencing of Voices

Another aspect can be seen as how the female characters were kept silent and were bound to follow the given dharma. Voices of women were majorly silenced by the higher authorities or people who were considered as the primary characters. Through this, the theme of suppression and oppression is also visible through the examples from Mahabharata. This theme also focuses on how societal pressure plays a major role in shaping and silencing the voices of the female characters, especially the ones who are marginalised due to their background.

One of the prominent examples of how the female characters were kept and treated as a secondary gender by silencing their voices is the injustice towards the princess of Panchal Draupadi and how she was humiliated by the hands of Kauravas in front of the kingdom. Her disrobing marked an initial step for the great Kurukshetra war. When the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira who is also the husband of Draupadi, loses everything including his brothers and kingdom, he eventually puts her wife on stake and eventually loses. This resulted in the Kauravas' harsh treatment towards Draupadi in front of the well known warriors for example Bhishma and Guru Dronacharya. Her voice were completely ignored by the higher authorities and the king of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra. She kept on screaming until she gets stripped but none of the members of the 'Sabhagruha' raised their voices or stood for her until Lord Krishna himself came to help her and saved her. Her dignity was taken away brutally by the members of Kauravas. Her voice was completely silenced even after her constant screams and yelling in the hall. This act of silencing can be considered as a harsh reality of Indian society and the patriarchal norms set for the both genders.

People like Duryodhana and Dushasana think that they can do anything in the name of dharma and nobody is going to stop them which is what happened. Innocent people, especially women who are treated as a secondary gender, have to bear the results of the Adharma. If this

would have happened in today's 21st century, there would be a possibility where a woman would have got that support from all the people despite what their dharma is. Draupadi's example is one of the major incidents where the theme of silencing the voices of women is highly applicable. Another bold example can be of the mother of Pandavas, Kunti, and how she manages to hide the reality that Karna is her own child gifted by the Surya Deva to her but since he was not a part of the Kuru dynasty, she had to relinquish him into the river Ganga. She was completely gutted to do this but eventually she had to accept and adhere to the principles of Dharma.

Later, her complete silence when she recognizes that Karna is the one who is fighting against her son, Arjuna in the showcasing of skills completion, is a clear example of how a woman had to keep silent even if it is her own son. She survives with this secret throughout her life until at the battlefield of Kurukshetra war she had to confess that it was her son. She kept quiet because of Karna's identity, that is, he was Surya Deva, the sun god. She chooses to remain silent even after recognizing her son is due to the consequences she and her son, Karna had to face after the revelation. This silence from her mother is paid by her son, Karna as he has to face a lot of criticisms of not being a son of the Kuru dynasty. Karna was kept away from the potential and rightful leadership on the throne of Hastinapur due to his familiar background. Being a mother, Kunti had to go through a lot by not accepting him as his official son which highlights the fact how women had to let go her personal desires and how they had to keep their emotions within themselves.

Also, being a woman, they were expected to go through their grief silently unlike the male characters where they had all the liberty to express their anger and emotions through war and physical activities. But this was not the case with women from Mahabharata. This can be seen from the character of Gandhari, where it is seen how she manages to endure the pain of the loss of her hundred sons in the Kurukshetra war. Being a queen, she also had to take care of the

kingdom and also she has other responsibilities too. She remained silent due to her duties and responsibilities as a mother and also a queen of Hastinapur. Through this, it is also evident how the female characters are bound to suppress their emotions if they are feeling anything and have to silence their voices in the name of dharma.

Also, the revenge of Amba who was marginalised by the higher authorities and were kept silent at the time of occasions where she had to raise her voice. The patriarchal society forced her to fight against the injustice towards her throughout the Mahabharata. Amba was eventually abducted by Bhishma as he wanted a wife for Vichitravirya but eventually things didn't fall in place. This resulted in her detachment towards the person she used to love and they both parted ways even though Amba used to love him. Due to this, she decides to destroy the Kuru dynasty and seeks revenge from Bhishma and Hastinapur. After this, she was on a constant mission to seek her revenge from Bhishma but her voice was not raised enough to seek that revenge, as she was a woman and women were marked as a secondary gender during that time. Although there were women who raised their voices for their justice for example Draupadi but majorly the marginalised women were kept away from all the rightful things which resulted in their degradation. She protested towards the injustice, tried to find a solution but it went in vain.

Lastly, she decides to end her life which highlights and showcases the tragic flaw of the women who are kept away from the rights and justice.

Also, another major example can be Shakuntala's tragic end to her belief in the king, Dushyanta, who had promised to marry her. Shakuntala was the abandoned daughter of the king, Vishwamitra and Menaka, who was the apsara. When both Shakuntala and Dushyanta encounter each other in the dense forest, they both fall in love with each other and later they also have sexual intercourse which resulted in their son, Bharata. The king, Dushyanta promises Shakuntala that he will return and marry her but when Shakuntala approaches him in his kingdom, he refuses to recognise her and humiliates her and her son. Dushyanta completely



rejected her and she was kept silent due to her family background. This is one of the examples where women were kept reluctant from their rights even after knowing the entire truth.

### **4.3 Delving into marginalised male and female personas who find themselves powerless against the dictates of Dharma.**

The epic Mahabharata is majorly known for its wide variety of themes like Dharma, Adharma, leadership, sacrifices etc. Majorly, the epic Mahabharata is surrounded by some of the supreme characters both male and female. The epic is generally connected to Indian society and its class, social status, traditional norms etc. Where there are examples of characters like Bhishma, Arjuna, Yudhishtira and even Duryodhana who all were born with silver spoons in their mouths, there are also some characters who are marginalised due to their social status, family background and other norms. These characters go through gender discrimination, caste discrimination and other injustices towards them due to their inability to fight against the mighty theme of Dharma.

#### **4.3.1 Karna: The forgotten Hero of Mahabharata**

One of the most highlighted examples from Mahabharata is Karna, the son of Kunti and Surya Deva, who was marginalised right from his birth. He was constantly discriminated against due to his image as charioteer. He was kept away from the rightful duties and responsibilities due to his family background. He is one the tragic heroes of Mahabharata. His marginalisation begins from his birth when Kunti disowns him in the river Ganga as he was not a blood of Kuru dynasty. Karna, who was actually the eldest son of Kunti and elder brother of Pandavas, was kept away from his family by Kunti and he was raised by a village couple named Radha and Adhiratha. Since Adhiratha was a charioteer, Karna was raised and known as a charioteer because of his father. Later it is revealed to him that he was the eldest son of

Kunti and was gutted to know that so late. But due to his initial family background, he was humiliated and discriminated against by his fellow mates and other members. The society treats him as a son of lower class man and was kept deprived from the luxurious desires which was actually his rightful thing.

Later, it can be seen that he was much more talented than the well known warriors which includes the great warrior, Arjuna too. He was kept deprived of the education and his martial teacher, Dronacharya strictly scolds him for not being a part of Kuru dynasty and he tells him that he only teaches the sons of kings and not to ordinary village people. Due to his lower class, Dronacharya refuses to teach him and educate him. He refuses to accept him as his student and that's the reason later Karna seeks education from Parshurama without letting him know his original identity. He knew if he revealed his true identity, Parshurama would throw him away and that's the reason he decided to hide his true identity.

Later, when he became friends with the rivals of Pandavas, Duryodhana, he further kept distance from reuniting with his original brothers that is Pandavas and was marginalised and discriminated against by them too. Despite Karna's unparalleled skills and warrior ship, he was treated as a lower warrior than the Kauravas and Pandavas. Duryodhana treats him as a friend and he stays loyal to him. But still, Duryodhana uses Karna as his protector in the Kurukshetra war. His alliance with the rivals of Pandavas , Kauravas, further keeps him away from his rightful opportunities to become the official King of Hastinapur. Due to his unknown identity, he gets humiliated and discriminated against by the hands of Arjuna, Bhishma, Bheem, and other members of Pandavas and even their wife Draupadi. Even being one of the skillful warriors of that time, he was neglected due to his lower birth place and origin which is really said to acknowledge. The great warrior of that time was just not considered skillful or appreciated just because of his family background. This humiliation also continued in his life. Wherever he used to participate like competitions and others he used to face discrimination.

One of the incidents is Draupadi's Swayamvar where he was disrespected by Draupadi after she rejected him to marry due to his family background. Even though Karna had all the ability to shoot that arrow in the fish's eyes located in the universe, he was not given the chance to even participate and that's how Arjuna eventually participates and wins the contest. He was humiliated in front of the people and kings participating in the contest. This scene completely breaks Karna and it results in developing personal grudges against Draupadi and the Pandavas.

Even at that end of the war, he fails to reunite with his original mother and brothers. He fails to acknowledge his biological mother, Kunti. The constant rejection by his own brothers results in his anguish against them. This also results in isolation. And when finally at the end of the war when Kunti reveals to the Pandavas that Karna was their eldest brother, each of the Pandava were gutted and apologised to their eldest brother. Although he was truly honest to all his rivals and friends, he still faces a lot of inequality due to his background. He was treated as an outsider by each and every member of the Kuru dynasty at some point.

#### **4.3.2 Eklavya: The Unwavering Archer**

During the era of Mahabharata, only the privileged ones were given the opportunities to go forward and showcase their talents and were given the opportunity to be the leader of the kingdom. And majorly the people belonging to lower caste or minority people were highly ignored even if they possess equal skills as the privileged one. And sometimes the opportunities from the minorities were also taken away due to their ability to defeat or dethrone the people who are sitting on a higher stage. Eklavya, born in a tribal community is denied by the Guru Dronacharya for any education due to his background and being a tribal person. According to Dronacharya, he is only supposed to support and educate the prince of the kingdoms. Despite being exceptionally talented in bow and arrow, he was deprived from carrying his talent forward by many due to his background. The character of Eklavya showcases the

marginalisation, inequality and bias by the teachers towards their students. Initially, he faced a lot of discrimination because he was a part of the tribal community. He belonged to a Nishada tribe which according to the ones in higher authority is a lower class or belonged to a lower class. Mainly, the Kshatriyas had the rules and regulations for such things. Since he was a son of a tribal man, he is automatically getting treated the way his father got humiliated by the Kshatriyas, which makes him an outsider in the eyes of Dharma.

Eklavya badly wanted to learn archery from his idol, Dronacharya. He was a well known martial teacher during that time. When Eklavya approaches Dronacharya, he instantly refuses him to make his student as he was not a part of Kuru dynasty or a Kshatriya. This is a clear example of how even a small kid has to face the rays of discrimination. After the refusal of Dronacharya, Eklavya decides to self train himself. Even after all the humiliation by him, he still idolises his master and starts training in front of the statue which resembles Dronacharya. With the help of clay and mud, he builds a statue of his master and starts his training. He practises for hours in front of the clay model. This showcases one's hardship and dedication towards their dream even in the time of adversity. Eklavya didn't gave up on his dream due to his tribal background but instead he found a solution to tackle the particular situation. When later, Dronacharya comes to know about the unparalleled skills and amazing techniques of Eklavya, he gets insecure and finds himself in a dilemma and thought of what Eklavya surpasses his student, Arjuna. That would be an insult for Dronacharya in front of the kings of Hastinapur. After being insecure, Dronacharya asks for 'Guru Dakshina' that is the teacher's fee from him. Being an obedient student, Eklavya rapidly agreed thinking that it would finally give him that respect in the eyes of his master. As a fee, Dronacharya asked for Eklavya's right hand thumb. And Eklavya, without bringing any negative thoughts, cuts off his right hand and hands it over to Dronacharya.

The reason behind it was Dronacharya did not want anyone to surpass his students, especially Arjuna. He knew Eklavya would not be able to be the same without his thumb and that is what eventually happened. This incident also serves as a reminder of how the people in higher authorities use and torture the ones belonging to the lower class and how the marginalised people eventually end up listening to their things thinking it will benefit them. Here Eklavya's decision of cutting his thumb resulted in disability for him.

#### **4.3. 3 Satyawati: The Matriarch of the Kuru Dynasty**

Another prominent example from Mahabharata which is rarely spoken about can be of Satyawati, the grandmother of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. She is also the mother of Vyasa. Despite being connected to all supreme names, she faces marginalisation and discrimination due to her background as a fisherman's daughter. She had actually played a very important role in the ancestry of Hastinapur and Kuru dynasty. Due to her background, she was often overlooked in terms of decision-making, responsibilities, duties and other major aspects.

Satyawati, is one the oldest characters in Mahabharata which holds a massive significance in the history of Mahabharata is often ignored due to her social status. Being the oldest ancestor of the Kuru Dynasty, she didn't get the respect which she deserved. The main decisions and opportunities of her life were decided by her sons and husband. The Kauravas, Pandavas and Bhishma played a major role in shaping her life. Her life is majorly controlled by the supreme man related to her, for example Bhishma. Her marriage to King Shantanu was not her decision. It was something which was given to her which highlights how she was kept deprived from making her life decisions by herself. Usually when you are a part of a marginalised community, you're often overlooked. Not just as a person but also the efforts and sacrifices too.

The sacrifices made by Satyawati are often overlooked because of her background. When she decides to marry Shantanu and leave her family behind to fulfil it, it is seen as a duty. Being a woman they had to adhere to the given dharma and duties and responsibilities. The decision of her was never treated as a choice as it was expected from a woman to fulfil their duties. She also played a major role in protecting her children and the sacrifices she made to nurture them but due to her family background she had never got that recognition which she deserved to receive. Also being the mother of one the two great men Chitrangada and Vichitravirya who also played a major role in the development of Kuru dynasty, her role as a mother was kept below some of the important mothers from Mahabharata like Kunti and Gandhari. While there is a wide explanation and portrayal of their sacrifices and love for their children, there is no clear cut explanation on Satyawati's love for her children.

In other words, Satyawati's character as a mother is not being majorly emphasised unlike the other mother figures from Mahabharata. She is not seen actively participating in her children's life or there is also this perspective that she was not given that importance by the other characters from Mahabharata or her children. Also her absence from many important programs showcases her importance in the eyes of the Kuru dynasty. The Dice game where everyone was invited, she was ignored. Her absence from events like the great Kurukshetra war and other important events highlights her importance in the kingdom due to her background. Also she had no role in any of the lives of Pandavas or Kauravas. Also, the readers tend to ignore the background of an epic or a story and only focus on the main characters. Here the clear example is given the Mahabharata where the importance is only given to the main characters they are Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Duryodhana, Bhishma, Draupadi etc. whereas the other minor characters who are largely marginalised are not given or emphasised by the audience or readers. Satyawati's character had actually played a major role in the background

of the epic but is ignored due to her limited agency or role. She was just given one role that is to marry and give birth to Chitrangada and Vichitravirya.

#### **4.3.4 Vidura: The Moral Compass of the Mahabharata**

Another unexplored example can be of Vidura, who was considered as brother of Pandu and Dhritarashtra. His role as a counsellor of the kingdom despite being the brother of both Pandu and Dhritarashtra showcases the marginalisation of Vidura by the hands of his own family. Despite being very close to Pandavas and Kauravas, he was marginalised because he was a son of a maid. It was very common during that time where the children of maids were not given that importance. Sometimes, they have to face the agony and rude behaviour of the prince or sometimes they have to deal with the harsh treatment done by the hands of the king and queen. Vidura being the son of a maid was given importance to some extent but was kept away from the important decision-makings and other opportunities which he rightly deserved. Despite being the brother of Dhritarashtra and uncle of both Pandavas and Kauravas, he was treated less than Dhritarashtra in the kingdom of Hastinapur. He always played a major role in the court by guiding the king and other members to take right decisions but was never given the credit or appreciated for his works. Compared to his brother, Dhritarashtra, he had very little agency over the decisions and sometimes was insulted by the hands of the king. Vidura stayed committed to his duties and responsibilities of being an honest guide to Pandavas and Kauravas.

Vidura was one of the intellectual and smartest persons in the court of Hastinapur who had all the abilities to create fortune for the kingdom and he has also done that but despite that, his origin as a servant's son keeps him away from the recognition from people. This is one of the examples of how an intellectual man or woman can be kept away from receiving the appreciation which they deserve just because of their background. Many people in today's time suffer due to their background even after being supremely tremendous in any field for example

studies or business. Not just during the era of Mahabharata but also in today's 21st century. Also, Vidura is not given that political support or political power compared to his brother, Dhritarashtra who is the king of Hastinapur and also had nephews, Kauravas who also hold a prominent role and positions in the kingdom. It's embarrassing when your nephews too hold a more important position in the kingdom and he was just given a very negligible role as the advisor to the Kingdom that is king and his other members. And it's not like that his advice is always listened to by the major characters of the kingdom.

His decisions and advice are listened to and adhered to only when the major characters like Bhishma or Dhritarashtra, feel that it is correct. Even though Vidura is there as a counsellor and advisor, his decisions are not always adhered to by the higher authorities. Vidura was considered as a person who consists of high moral and ethical values. Because of this quality of his, he earns respect in the eyes of some of the major characters. The way he helps in guiding the blind king of Hastinapur and how he advises Yudhishtira to make ethical decisions also gives him that limited respect. He had the ability to see the future or predict the future of the kingdom. Most of the times his prediction used to come true and that's the reason the king of Hastinapur use to trust him but not completely. He also advises the Kauravas and Dhritarashtra to withdraw from the Kurukshetra war as it will harm the kingdom and Kauravas but his advice was completely neglected and as a result, Kauravas had to face the karma of their actions. His ability speak truth and predict the future whether it is wrong or right for the kingdom always use to create a chaos among the kingdom specially Kauravas. When he advises them not to fight against Pandavas as they will defeat them, Duryodhana continues to remain firm on his decision, which also creates a bad image of Vidura in the eyes of Dhritarashtra and Kauravas which further leads to his marginalisation till the end of Mahabharata.

#### **4.3.5 Shikhandi: A Tale of Transformation**



Shikhandi is one example, who was originally born as a woman and later she faced a gender transformation and was brutally criticised and marginalised due to her resemblance to a men's body. Her physic despite being a female used to look like a male's one, which according to Indian society was something unusual and unbearable to accept. She was highly criticised and marginalised for her different looking looks and actions especially by the male characters. It is still applicable in today's 21st century where the transgenders usually have to face the discrimination and injustice towards them by the Indian society. Her character highlights the themes of gender discrimination, traditional norms set by the society and Marginalisation by the hands of the privileged. She was originally born as Amba, and later transformed into Shikhandi. Despite being a skilled warrior, she was always kept away due to her different looks and actions. Her life was full of questions by the people regarding her gender.

She was initially born as Amba, the princess of the kingdom Kashi, and was very happy to marry her lover. But when Bhishma abducts her without her consent to marry his brother, Vichitravirya, she was filled with agony and anger which led to her revenge from Bhishma at the Kurukshetra war in the end. Bhishma had some intentions to marry his brother to Amba but that didn't happen because Amba refused the proposal despite knowing Vichitravirya was the king of Hastinapur. In the end as a result, Amba's lover also rejects her due to his mentality that she is now being touched by a random man that is Bhishma and this is how he rejects her. Amba, filled with frenzy, decides to destroy and kill Bhishma for what he has done to her life. That's the reason she took a rebirth as Shikhandi in the form of male body to participate in the Kurukshetra war to kill him. Her life was filled with challenging huddles and roads where she had to prove herself each and every day. In an Indian society where gender is a much greater issue, she faced the worst scenario of getting attacked verbally by both male and female. Her presence used to make people uncomfortable and was highly criticised for that.

As already discussed, Shikhandi's main goal was to defeat and kill the great warrior, Bhishma. And as a result, she fights alongside the Pandavas in order to defeat her enemy. The great Kurukshetra war completely changed her life as she came face to face with her rival Bhishma. She finally feels that her revenge will be over but Bhishma being the warrior refuses to fight against a woman figure and also someone who resembles both male and female body. According to him, it will be a disgrace for a warrior like him to fight against a woman which further leads to the marginalisation of Shikhandi as she was humiliated by the hands of Bhishma. This also highlights that transgenders usually have to face all these questions and consequences in Indian society.

Although finally it was Shikhandi who defeated the great warrior, Bhishma, it was majorly unnoticed by the readers or audience. Whenever we think about the defeat of Bhishma who was almost unbeatable, as an audience, we tend to remember the bed of arrows built by Arjuna for Bhishma's death. This also highlights how transgenders were not given the credit for their deeds. Not just during the era of Mahabharata, even today people don't recognize the humiliations and injustices, transgender people go through which leads to their marginalisation. Shikhandi played a major role in the defeat and downfall of Bhishma but it was majorly unnoticed by some of the major male characters.

Her bravery and courage to fight among the great skilled warriors and also being the only lady to fight in the war also gets unnoticed due to her lack of agency as a woman coming from a marginalised community. Moreover, like the typical mentality of Indian society, she gets mocked and teased for her unusual body and gestures which is still applicable in today's 21st century. Although now there are many rules and regulations for the transgender people for example the LGBTQ community who help these people to raise their voices against the traditional thinking of Indian society and also the world.

In this case, the Kauravas and other members who were fighting against the Dharma for example Shakuni, tried to break the confidence of Shikhandi by mocking her during the Kurukshetra war. They tried their best to break her confidence and commented on her looks and male body. Especially Duryodhana, who is the main villain, mocks Shikhandi for being a women warrior in the men-dominated war and advises her to leave the battlefield. The Kauravas made use of derogatory language and used harsh words for her. It is still applicable in today's world where people are transphobic to them and try to get rid of them, which showcases the typical mentality of Indian society. But despite all these mean comments made by the opposition, she stays committed and firm on her duty to fight in the war which highlights her courage and strength even when the society is always against you. It also highlights the theme of accepting one how they are without any hesitations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

A Thorough understanding of the complex ethical and moral landscape woven across the epic has been made possible through the examination of the Mahabharata via the lens of the secondary characters and incidents. It is shown that Dharma is a dynamic and multifaceted principle that is open to interpretation and contextualisation through the examination of the characters like Karna, Draupadi and Bhishma as well as lesser known incidents like the gambling match and the Eklavya incident. The Dharma's underlying disputes and inconsistency have been made clear by the marginal point of view, which has shown how flexible and particular to the situation the dharma is.

The struggle between one's ethical responsibilities to society and personal morality, as illustrated by the ethical dilemmas faced by personalities like Arjuna and Yudhishtira is one of the studies main results. According to Mahabharata, dharma is an organising principle that people must balance conflicting commitments, which frequently prompts people to make tough decisions and moral sacrifices. The epic asks the readers to consider the flexibility of ethical

frameworks and rigidity of societal norms through the analysis of marginal characters who function outside the bounds in conventional dharma, such as Vidura and Eklavya.

This research additionally emphasises the significance of agency and accounting in pursuing the path of Dharma. Characters like Arjuna and Krishna struggle with their roles as fate bearers, and excluded people like Eklavya assert their agency in violation of the rules of society. The Mahabharata challenges the notions of fate and predestination by contending that moral judgement and conscious choice allow individuals to influence their own destinies. The views from the periphery reminds us that Dharma is not just a system of laws to be passively followed, but also a summons to moral autonomy and inquiry.

Furthermore, the investigation of outline occurrences has highlighted how closely dharma is linked to larger social and political systems. According to the Mahabharata, dharma is intrinsically linked to the framework of society, relationships of power and demands of government. Even though they follow their own personal dharma, characters like Bhishma and Drona help to maintain harsh and unequal systems. The epic highlights the limitations of Dharma as a moral compass in the lack of empathy, compassion and dedication to social justice through their deeds.

The study has also demonstrated the Mahabharata's lessons and their relevance to contemporary issues of ethics and government. The epic examination of ethical dilemmas, legal responsibilities and the outcome of actions provides insightful understanding of the difficulties involved in making decisions in the contemporary world. The research aims to examine dominant narratives and power structures by comparing it with the marginal voices and perspectives found in Mahabharata. This promotes a more inclusive and equitable approach to ethics and mortality.

