

# Exoteric Interpretations of Esoteric Dharma Incidences in Mahabharata Era, Leading to Conflicts and Resolution Procedure Followed

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the different ethnographic circumstances of our history in Mahabharata where it employs distinct discourses of conflict resolution. Many times, the conflict arises due to the conviction that people had on the interpretation and practicing of the Dharma.

**KEYWORDS:** Dharma, Repercussion, Interpretations, Perspectives

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धर्मः (Dharma) is derived from the root 'धृ' meaning "to hold".

Dharma is that which supports or holds together everyone and everything. Dharma is Bhagavan's ultimate law. The entire creation is sustained by this, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Therefore, recognising and practicing dharma is of paramount importance as it helps to preserve and up-lift humans. It ensures the overall wellbeing and progress that holds the society together, by nourishing and ensuring stability and maintaining social order.

Dharma provides guidance to solve problems that humans face, most of which are due to impulsive instincts. The six natural impulses are the internal enemies of humans that is termed as Arishadvarga: (अरिषड्वर्गः). These are kama (कामः| desire), krodha (क्रोधः| anger), moha (मोहः| passion), lobha (लोभः| greed), mada (मदः| infatuation) and matsarya (मात्सर्यम्| enmity). When one or more of these six these impulsive instincts get coupled with selfishness and/ or lack of big picture conflicts may arise.

This is possibly a reason why when we look at a lot of developments today though the original intention was to help humanity, we do realize that they end up being a bane. To overcome this, all our actions must be aligned to Dharma and the human mind has to understand the significance of leading a purposeful life filled with seva bhava (selfless service) which would prevent exploiting others for selfish gains.

To help people understand this, Manusmriti (6.92) gives the dasha lakshana (10 attributes) of dharma to all the twice borns across the four orders –

धृतिःक्षमादमोऽस्तेयंशौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः।  
धीर्विद्यासत्यमक्रोधोदशकंधर्मलक्षणम्॥

(1) Steadiness (2) Forgiveness, (3) Self-control, (4) Abstention from unrighteous appropriation, (5) Purity, (6) Control of the Sense-organs, (7) Discrimination, (8) Knowledge, (9) Truthfulness, and (10) Absence of anger - these are the ten-fold forms of dharmas.

Manu, also summarises the common dharma's across varnas as

अहिंसासत्यमस्तेयंशौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः।  
एतंसामासिकं धर्मचातुर्वर्ण्येऽब्रवीन्मनुः ॥ 10.63 ॥

Ahimsa (not hurting creatures), Sathya (being truthful), Asteya (not appropriating the property of others), Shaucha (Purity) and Indriyanigraha (control of senses) are in brief the common dharmas declared by Manu for all Varnas.

In Mahabharata contesting realities existing between the *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* led to many conflicts followed by contrasting ideologies with repercussions of collision in several instances. This paper meticulously studies the exoteric interpretations of dharma leading to conflicts which are followed by a set of logical discourses based on the situational analogy which is subject to evaluation, negotiation, and attempts at reconciliation. Here, the problem of conflict and its resolution shifts to a mode of discourse that must negotiate based on its time, place, people, events & circumstances. The effects of roles & relationships of the parties are taken into consideration along with the belief systems prominent during that era are important parameters for analyzing the inception of conflict based on Individual objectives, Overall Objective of the Group, and Internal Emotional turbulence as well.

In Mahabharata Shanti parva when Bhishma was requested by Yudhishtira to explain the meaning and scope of Dharma, Bhishma said:

प्रभवार्थाय भूतानां धर्मप्रवचनं कृतम्।  
यः स्यात्प्रभवसंयुक्तः स धर्म इति निश्चयः ॥ (109-9-10)

धारणाद्धर्ममित्याहुर्धर्मैर्णविधृताः प्रजाः।  
यः स्याद्धारणसंयुक्तः स धर्म इति निश्चयः ॥ 109-9-11

अहिंसा र्थाय भूतानां धर्मप्रवचनं कृतम्।  
यः स्यादहिंसासंयुक्तः स धर्म इति निश्चयः ॥ 109-9-15

The overall message from this states that Dharma is that which helps the upliftment of living beings. It is that which brings advancement and righteousness. Dharma prevents one from injuring one another. Dharma upholds and supports all creatures. Everything that involves ahimsa can be regarded as Dharma.

It is therefore clear that, Dharma sustains the society, maintains the social order, ensures well being and progress of Humanity.

Bhishma gave up his right to the throne to help his father Shantanu get married to Satyawati. This is a great gesture when we look at it from the son's love for his father, but from a dharmic sense, he did

compromise on his svadharma. If the kshatriya dharma was properly followed a lot of future conflicts might have been avoided!

Manusmriti 8.15, very beautifully explains the importance of protecting Dharma as follows:

धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः।  
तस्माद्धर्मो न हन्तव्यो मानो धर्मो हतोऽवधीत् ॥

Dharma protects its protector and destroys its destroyer. So, if we do not want to get destroyed, Dharma should be protected and not destroyed.

There are many instances where opportunity presents itself for subtle and not so subtle hints in regard to Dharma. So we look again in the Mahabharata and in particular revisit the fascinating episode known as Yaksha Prashna before the Yaksha restores the life of the "dead" brothers – Yaksha asks Yudhishtira if he can bring back to life only one brother, who would he choose? Yudhishtira chose Nakula, and when he was asked as to why he chose Nakula to be brought back to life instead of others. Yudhishtira quoted the above sloka based on Dharma, and said that at least one son of Madri should be alive as he, the son of Kunti, was!

In Mahabharata itself it is mentioned that “Shrinking from one's moral duty, refusal to act when it is difficult to act, attachment to one's interests alone and finding excuses for not being truthful destroys people and his society.

### Differences in Interpretations of dharma resulting into conflicts-

Since dharma can be interpreted in different ways by different people, it has resulted in conflicts at various instances between the parties, who have followed dharma in their own ways.

Let's take an example of the abduction of Amba and her two sisters by Bhishma which is consistent with Kshatriya dharma according to Bhishma, but also Kshatriya Kanya has all rights to choose her groom, which resulted in paradoxical instances wherein both are abiding by dharma.

Also, another example is of Draupadi Vastraharan scenario where she is dragged by her hair into royal court, When Draupadi questioned Bhishma if Yudhishtira had staked and lost himself did he have the right to stake her? Bhishma said that he was unable to answer her because Dharma was subtle - *na dharma sookshmyat subhage vivektum shaknami te prashnam imam yathavat* ! One of the consequences of this incident was the increase in the hatred and disharmony between the Pandavas and Kauravas. In hindsight, this could have been avoided if some of the

learning's on Dharma as mentioned in the same scripture had been applied in this context.

### Dharma Interpretations-

The definition of dharma has always been subtle and relative and in the period of Mahabharata has changed from person to person, subject to what is right for that person with respect to societal morality and norms carried out from generations to generations. But one important thing highlighted by Brihaspati in Mahabharata (13.11.8) about dharma-

नतत्परस्यसंदद्यात्प्रतिकूलंयदात्मनः।  
एषसंक्षेपतो धर्मः कामादन्यः प्रवर्तते ॥

Dharma is restricting doing things to others that one wouldn't do to one self. This is regarded by him as the basic rule of dharma and everything else is a product of selfish desires.

Out of four Purushartas mentioned in Bhagwat Gita, Dharma is the first one. (पुरुषार्थः) Personal aims of individuals can be categorized as Dharma, Artha, Kaama and Moksha. The four purusharthas start with Dharma and are followed by artha which is wealth, Kama is desire and moksha is liberation.

In Mahabharata, adiparva 62.53, this sloka which is a part of the conversation between Janamejaya and Vaisampayana explains that the Mahabharata is a compendium of knowledge of all the four purusharthas धर्मैर्चार्यैश्च कामैश्च मोक्षैश्च भरतर्षभ।  
यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यत्रेहास्ति न तत्कचित् ॥

Whatever is here in the Mahabharata, about Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha that indeed is elsewhere. What is not here is nowhere else.

Bhagwan Shri Krishna in Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta chapter (7.11) says

धर्माविरुद्धो भूतेषु कामोऽस्मि भरतर्षभ

which can be understood as even the desires have to be aligned to dharma for the presence of divinity. So, every work needs to be performed considering *dharma* as the foundation & when not followed or incongruously interpreted by people, can lead to conflicts.

Dharma is the knowledge that guides us to know what's right and what's wrong in different situations. There are general dharmas which are applied to everyone (Samanya Dharma (सामान्यधर्मः)) and specific dharmas (Vishesha Dharma (विशेषधर्मः)). It may be dependent on the varnas, ashramas, role of the person, location, circumstances, etc.

It can take different forms based on 'svadharmas' स्वधर्मः one's own dharma, kula dharma कुलधर्मः

dharma towards family, rashtra dharma राष्ट्रधर्मः dharma towards the nation etc. There can also be exceptions when it comes to 'apaddharma' आपद्धर्मः | dharma during exigencies!

Even Arjuna Vishada Yoga of Bhagavad Geeta (1.40) where Arjuna is confused & has an internal mental conflict on which dharma to follow which led to his indecisive state of mind and lack of further action. Arjuna explains his emotional mindset resulting in a lot of physical traits and goes on to speak about the impact of the war on Dharma –

कुलक्षये प्रणश्यन्तिकुलधर्माः सनातनाः।  
धर्मेनष्टे कुलं कृत्स्नमधर्मोऽभिभवत्युत ॥

Arjuna is worried about the destruction of the Kula which is contrary to kula dharma, and when Dharma is destroyed adharma is the consequence of what he believes resulting in conflict in Arjuna's mind about fighting or giving up the war can be referred to as a *dharma sankat* - conflict of what is the actual Dharma that shall be followed and Arjuna being a *Kshatriya*/warrior shall abide with *Kshatriya-dharma* of fighting the war.

Bhagavan Sri Krishna precisely clarifies this internal conflict in Arjuna's mind in the first 2 slokas in chapter 2 of Bhagwat Geeta (2.2,3)

कुतस्त्वाकश्मलमिदं विषमे समुपस्थितम्।  
अनार्यजुष्टमस्वर्ग्यमकीर्तिकरमर्जुन ॥

How have these impurities come upon you? This is unbecoming, degrading and disgraceful. This will not lead you to heavens but to infamy, O Arjuna!

क्लैब्यं मास्मगमः पार्थ नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते।  
क्षुद्रं हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्त्वोत्तिष्ठ परन्तप ॥

O Partha, yield not to unmanliness. This does not suit you. Oh punisher of the enemies, give up the weak heartedness and arise.

Sri Krishna helps Arjuna to resolve his internal conflict. Once the internal conflict is resolved and the clarity of objective is obtained in no uncertain terms, the individual is ready to get into full-fledged action.

Further classifications are made based on Individual Objectives of a person or set of people; Overall objectives of a group; and personal emotions involved in that scenario leading to the conflicts. A perfect example of this scenario is where King Shalya being the uncle of Pandavas is tricked by Duryodhana to fight on the side of Kauravas. This made King Shalya behave in a counterproductive way where there was a conflict between his emotion and action. He was assigned the role of being a charioteer to Karna. Because of his mental conflict, he demotivated Karna

at every given opportunity. During the war when the wheel of Karna's chariot was stuck, Shalya was not supportive which led to Karna being killed at the hands of Arjuna.

Yet another interesting episode is when Yudhishtra had to announce the death of Ashwatama (*the elephant*) to distraught Dronacharya in order to win the battle. Though this may not feel right morally, when looked at from a Dharmic sense, he implemented the plan of Krishna for the overall objective.

### Conclusion-

Alignment towards dharma and cognizance of the life's purpose is paramount, and can be made more fulfilling with seva bhava vis selfless attitude (instead of making money by exploiting others). The idea of dharma is the integral essence of Mahabharata and is essential to be followed to avoid any kind of conflicts

that can be derived from all above mentioned examples.

Mahabharata conveyed the idea of an overall objective, which made Pandavas win the war, and on the contrary individual motives like Bhishma fought for his oath of allegiance, Dhronacharya and Kripaacharya owed allegiance to the throne, Shalya fought as he was simply cheated, Karna to prove his mantle against Arjuna. Here the individual objectives didn't align and on the other side teamwork of Pandavas focused on annihilation of Kauravas didn't sustain for long.

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