

Mahabharata and the Notion of Dharma

(Final Version)

Mahabharata is a text of great magnitude and gives us a picture of what India was, its ethos, culture heritage, its strength and weaknesses. It has become all the more necessary now to analyze, understand such texts primarily to know what was our vitality and in what way that could be a source of strength in the true development of our country. V.S. Sukthankar made a remark on Mahabharata about 59 years ago: ‘Whether we realize it or not, it remains a fact that we in India still stand under the spell of the Mahabharata. There is many a different strand that is woven in the thread of our civilization, reaching back to our hoary antiquity. It is a dateless and deathless poem....which forms the strongest link between India old and new.’ This statement of Sukhtankar after all these years, I am sure no one can challenge or even differ from it.

The basic question of Mahabharata is what is the *kendra*, centre of the Mahabharata. In general parlance *kendra* is the self and in the self resides *dharma*. The central issue of the Mahabharata is what *dharma* is. Hindus occasionally say that the word *dharma* used in Hinduism, is not a religion but a dominant and pervasive concept of Indian thought and a way of life. It is loosely translated as religion, otherwise it means righteousness, law, duty, benevolence, morality and virtue and hence it is not exactly religion as understood generally all over the world. But today this loose but incorrect translated meaning of *dharma* as

religion has become so current and popular that it has gained an unwarranted legitimacy.

In Sanskrit Pali and Ardhamagadhi as well *dharma* meant social order. The concept of *dharma* in the Vedic literature was free from all dogmas and rigidity. Coming from the root [dhr meaning 'uphold, support, sustain' (*dhr dharana-posanayoh*), it serves as the norm to support human behaviour or in short the norm of action or the rule of conduct. There are enormous discursive, circuitry, lengthy discussions with digressions available in ancient, medieval and modern texts, which make the term very confusing and ambivalent.

This is due to the fact that Hinduism has an internal diversity and is a polycentric religion and a polycentric religion does not demand any undue restraint upon the freedom of human reason, the freedom of thought, feeling and will of man.

It allows the widest freedom in matters of faith and worship. It is a religion of freedom. Hence it does not have a specific moral code because *dhama-adharma*, truth or morality and falsehood or immorality is not completely different things. They differ only in proportion and degree. So profane and sacred are complimentary to each other. It is Sri Krishna, who spoke of *dharma-vibhaga* i.e. the practical aspect of *dharma* or worldly wisdom and hence there is nothing as universal moral code. However, a religion of freedom, on the contrary, will naturally allow scholars, law makers and philosophers like Prasastapada also to talk about a number of universal virtues and ethical

duties of all human beings (*sadharana dharma*), which did reveal something like a universal ethic. It only shows the multivalent character of the term *dharma*.

What law makers, philosophers and others failed to do was accomplished by the epic writers and other story-tellers. Indeed the epics were not just heroic tales. If anything, they were also practical lessons in morals and *dharma* deliberations. Matilal says that the Dharmasastras supply only a skeletal account of *dharma*. The epic stories and narrative literature add flesh and blood to this skeleton. The richness and ambiguity of the concept of *dharma* is interwoven with the narrative at every step (The Collective Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, p.39). Robert Lingat, in his book, 'The Classical Law of India' (1973) has said that *dharma* is not imposed but proposed. Dument Louis ('Home Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications', 1980) captured this open-endedness of *dharma* when he said that *dharma* reigns from above without actually governing the world. It governs from above but does not dictate.

Mahabharata is a narrative text and its central issue is what *dharma* is and who its central figure is. Sri Krishna, an awe inspiring unfathomable divine person is the *Kendra-purusha*, central figure and he ultimately told us the meaning of *dharma* with the help of a simple equation: *swadharma*, *nishkama karma*, *atmasamarpana*. One does not find in the Mahabharata any discursive, or philosophical lengthy, analytical explication of *dharma*.

At times Vyasa, the narrator went for its analytical explanation but very soon came out of it to narrate the flow of the stream of life and so it would also be preferable not to go into a philosophical discussion what *dharma* is but to pick up the thread of the debate on *dharma* from the narration of the story.

After the war Sri Krishna said in his usual symbolical language: The sun has set, let us go back to our place of stay. Pandavas thought Krishna was asking them to go back to the camps.

But the sad tone and the far away vision of Krishna were hinting at to go back to the centre, to the self so that one may understand one's own self. Understanding oneself is the ascending rhythm of life. Pandavas ruled their kingdom for 36 years; it was only after that they realized what should be the actual course of life. Now they had no question. They all left for the great journey, a lonely journey. Pandavas ultimately left the world and thereby disclosed to us its central myth of the self to go beyond self; it is only possible if one follows the path of *dharma*

Dharmo hridi saamasrita

‘In the self resides dharma.’

The most crucial issue of Mahabharata was to understand what is *dharma* and the issue came into focus in the very beginning of the epic in the episode of *dyuta* or the gambling tournament.

The whole story rested on the game of dice and humiliation of the wife of the five Pandavas in the open court of the Kaurabas

where Dushashana tried to disrobe her after she was put at stake in the game of dice by the senior Pandava Yudhisthira, which Yudhisthira lost giving Kaurabas the right over her. At that time she cried out:

“This is monstrous. Where has morality gone? Or else how can you all are looking so passively at this atrocity.” They are my husbands—five, not one and they all look paralyzed. While I am sure Bhima alone could crush with his thumb the perpetrators of this horrible act. I do not understand why they stand there transfixed, speechless and like imbeciles.”

But surprisingly the game of dice was played according to the inexorable laws of *dharma* but if the inexorable laws of *dharma* led to such a situation then it meant *dharma* had become static and it lost its pervasive quality. The irony of the whole thing is why Yudhisthira, who is known as Dharmaraja, made that mistake to put his wife at stake. These are the moral dilemmas just like paradoxes in life which can seldom be solved. Though at times, as says Matilal, Lord Krishna played the role of the super mathematician and resolved the dilemmas for Arjuna or it was Vidura who gave the right kind of advice whenever the old, blind king Dhratarashtra was in any dilemma but, unlike Arjuna, the old blind king, blind in more sense than one, did not pay any heed to the well-meaning and ever righteous brother. Or it was mythical Dharma, natural father of Yudhisthira, appearing in many different forms— a mongoose, a stork, a *yaksha*— and so on— and instructed and taught Yudhisthira the right path

whenever dilemmas had presented themselves. One may argue that no dilemmas were left dangling or unresolved except perhaps the unique case of Draupadi's question in *Sabhaparvan*. It was uniquely described in the very beginning, in *Dhratarastra vilapa* in the Adiparva:

“I did not hope for victory, O Sanjaya, when I heard poor Draupadi was dragged into the royal court with voice choked with tears wearing a single piece of clothing. She had five husbands but still she was as if without protector and hence publicly humiliated.”

But the question that Draupadi asked was more concerned with the rights or legality of her husband's action than with the morality of the situation. Did Yudhisthira, having first lost his own freedom (as well as the freedom of the four brothers) and thus becoming a slave of the Kauravas, have any right to gamble again with Draupadi as the stake? In the story, the question was met by either silence or side-long glances. Bhisma, the oldest of the kauravas, only recognized that this ‘was a very good point’; but was unable to answer it. Only Vikarna, an insignificant character, sided with Draupadi. The society of that age did not allow wife any freedom or autonomy as an independent person. In fact legal, moral and social codes were designated by the pervasive term *dharma*— more situational rather than universal.

The epic, then moved around this issue of *dharma* and by the time it came to the end, we find Vyasa with his two hands up in the sky was shouting alone but

‘No one was listening to the voice of *dharma*.’

Urdha bahurviraumyesa na ca kaschicchronoti me|

Dharmadarthascha kamascha sa kimartham na sevyate||

His cry was almost a cry in the wilderness. He further said that *dharma* led you to wealth, *artha* and also to the fulfillment of desires, *kama*. But then *artha* and *kama* were to be hedged

around by *dharma* but no one was trying to attain wealth and fulfill desires through following the path of *dharma*.

The question of *dharma* is connected with all the characters of Mahabharata. As these characters had no definite idea about *dharma* so in a critical situation in a highly perturbed state of mind they would start asking questions, what they should do, what was their *dharma*.

The journey of the self beyond self is possible when a person achieves, *samattva*, equableness, harmony and balance. There were lots of questioning—Yudhisthira went on asking questions. Rama did not because he was the ideal man and therefore his *dharma* was rigid, Krishna’s was placid, Rama’s policy was punitive; Krishna’s logic was permissive.

In the Mahabharata it is said again and again to live in *dharma* is to live in harmony with one’s purpose on earth.

But each and every character at some point of time lost his-her balance and also harmony and this is the main theme of the Mahabharata. Let me give you just one example the example of Draupadi. Before that it would be proper to state that over the ages we notice that various episodes and subplots of these epic stories have been retold with great ingenuity in various regional and vernacular versions of the epics, in folk tales, plays, dramas, etc. Each new version may be regarded as a novel attempt to resolve the dilemma inherent in the original version. The following story is one taken from such texts.

During the initial years in exile, Pandavas were in the move in the forest hungry looking for some fruits to eat.

They had yet to possess the magic vessel which would always remain full with food.

All of a sudden they saw a tree laden with one very big size fruit. Happily one of the Pandavas climbed up the tree and brought the fruit down as they were ready to eat it but then from nowhere appeared Sri Krishna, who severely reprimanded them and said that a sage does penance under this tree and in the evening goes to have a dip in the nearby lake and when he comes back the tree offers him this fruit and now as he would not find the fruit he would curse you all and you all would die. Pandavas felt extremely threatened and requested Krishna to find a way out.

Krishna said, “All right every one of you relate one by one about your biggest ambitions in life and if you say it correctly

then the fruit would automatically go up and get itself hanged with the same branch of the tree.”

Yudhisthir said, “My biggest ambition is always to speak the truth.” Bhima said, “My biggest ambition is to kill Duryodhana.” Arjuna said, “Karna, I want to kill him.” Nakul and Sahdev also mentioned about their biggest ambitions very truthfully. Then came the turn of Draupadi and Krishna with an enigmatic smile on his face said, “My dear *sakhi*, my friend, what is your biggest ambition in life?” She said without batting her eyelid, “My dear *sakha*, I have only one ambition and that is to serve my five husbands well.” As soon as she said this, the fruit, which was almost to hang itself with the branch of the tree, came down hurling down on the floor.

“You devil of a woman, you have no concern for our lives”, all the Pandavas shouted on her. Krishna looked at Draupadi and said in his inimitable voice:

“Why don't you say correctly, my dear *sakhi*, what is your biggest ambition.” Draupadi, at last put her head down and said, “I always wanted Karna to be my sixth husband.”

But after hearing this episode if one starts thinking differently about Draupadi then one is totally mistaken and has no understanding of Mahabharata. The ever-flowing stream of life is the highest truth of the Mahabharata.

The remarkable thing about the notion truth is that there is no dichotomy between truth and untruth, as there is no one between

dharma and *adharma*. However there can never be total absence of truth or of *dharma* and that what ultimately triumphs. It only indicates that characters do lose *samattva*, equableness from time to time and that *dharma* has a very complicated structure and therefore Vyasa says:

The word *dharma* is made of thunderbolt and the wheel of *dharma* (*dharmachakra*) is being carried on by *Vaiswanara* which originally means fire but actually it is the conflict or tension of one's mind. Conflict or tension makes one's vision blurred and then one does not see the true nature of *dharma* or the highest truth which is ever flowing stream of life.

Dharma is *sukshma* subtle and *gahana* intricate because sometimes *dharma* looks like *adharma*:

Vibhrad dharmo dharmrupam

It is like the unperceivable blood-stained foot-steps of the injured fleeting deer or it is like the invisible path made by the movement of a snake or it is sharp like the edge of a sword. It is both static and dynamic.

Vedavyasa painstakingly described the debate on *dharma* under six different schemes of thought or they are the six postulates of the debate on *dharma*.

The first scheme of thought of the debate on *dharma* is developed with the help of a story of the little pond guarded by a *yaksha* in the *Aranyaka Parva*:

The story is interesting and revealing. It starts with a problem about *dharma*. On that day, a Brahmin came to Yudhisthira with a complaint. The two sacrificial sticks used to produce 'ritualistic' fire were missing. They had got stuck, accidentally, to the horns of a deer, and the deer had fled. If the sacrifice were not started on time, *dharma* would be violated. It was the duty of Yudhisthira as a king and khsatriya, to protect *dharma* and led the *agnihotra* sacrifice continue. So Yudhisthira, along with his four warrior brothers, rushed away and chased the deer. But the deer disappeared. They gave up the chase in despair, having become exhausted and thirsty. One by one Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhima were all sent to fetch water from a pond. Nobody returned. Yudhisthira finally went near the pond himself, only to discover a total disaster. All four brothers lay dead on the ground. As Yudhisthira descended to get water, a terrifying voice said: "Do not be rash, O Prince. This lake belongs to me, I am a stork. Your brothers did not listen to me and descended to get water without answering to my questions. Hence they are dead. You should answer my questions before you touch the water." Yudhisthira wanted to know who he was, "A *yaksha*," was the reply. Yudhisthira brought all his brothers back to life as he could answer the *yaksa*'s questions. One of the questions was,

Kascha dharmah paroloke

which is the highest dharma for people living in this world and Yudhisthir replied: *aanrishyamsyam* i.e. non-injury.

It means one who is not cruel, mischievous, base, vile and malicious. The positive meaning is one who is human, compassionate and has balance. One who does not fly away from this world and at the same time, who is not utterly absorbed in it. In the *striparva* (chap-5) Vidhura said:

“The world is a veritable jungle full of frightening animals and darkness that wipe away all traces of paths. Around the jungle was a net whose edge was held by a woman. Huge snakes hung from trees all around, and in the centre there was a well, hidden under dead leaves and covered with branches. Wandering in the jungle a traveler fell in the well; the vines however kept him from hitting the bottom of the well. His legs were up in the air; his head was in the well. An elephant with six faces and twelve legs stood by the mouth of the well. There were mice half black, half white. Inside the well was a great serpent. In the vines was a beehive from which nectar dripped, drop by drop. The traveler was besieged with fear. He could see that the vines and branches which held him for the moment were being gnawed at by black and white mice. The bees too were buzzing around to sting. But the nectar-drops falling in his mouth kept him wanting more despite certain death from all sides, he yearned for one more drop of honey.”

Vidhura explained the allegory:

The snakes in the trees are human follies; the woman is old age; the well is human body; the hissing serpent inside is death; the vines that held the traveler are one's lust for life; the elephant at the mouth of the wall is time - Six seasons are its faces and twelve months its legs and the white and the black mice are the day and night. The bees are desires and nectar indulgences.

From these dark depths, from this horror well, no one can haul you out. You have to do it alone. Life is to be accepted but you are not supposed to be tied by it: enjoy the honey and the nectar and then get up and leave; don't fly away from this world and at the same time don't be utterly absorbed in it.

Yaksha at the end finally revealed himself as Dharma, father of Yudhisthira, who in the form of a deer stole the sacrificial sticks and was responsible for all these deeds to teach Yudhisthira a lesson about the intractable and ever elusive nature of *dharma*. In the process the Brahmin's sacrifice or *agni*-ritual was violated, which was a violation of *dharma* and the *Kashtriya* princes failed in capturing the deer and also violated their duty or *dharma* and could not keep their words given to the Brahmin. All these happened before a superior force which humans could not control, but at the same time *dharma* gets fulfilled in novel and mysterious ways. The whole narrative here is an amplification as says Matilal, of the nature of *dharma*, of its ambiguity and the ambivalence of the person following *dharma*.

While revealing the second scheme of thought of the debate on dharma, Vyasa first made a paradoxical statement. On the one hand Vyasa said that *dharma* is fundamental, immovable and eternal

Kutastha achalam dhruvam

that it is timeless and eternal and on the other hand, Vyasa said, it is swifter than light and moves with time.

In fact it is both *rita* and *satya*; the dynamic cosmic order *rita* or the truth of becoming and it is also *satya*, the eternal the timeless the truth of Being. One is the flowing river and the other is the riverbed. Both are interrelated and knowing life as *rita* and *satya* is to know the self. One cannot escape the eternal flow of this knowledge. Life without this knowledge is static *anrita* but one feels a little confused when one hears such statement as said in the *Striparvan*:

“Whatever is collected will perish; after elevation there is a fall; meeting ends in separation; life leads to death”

Yet this should not make a person a victim of fate and inaction. He must realize that this is an epic of man's great and difficult pilgrimage of life. In this journey there is such desolate darkness at times that nothing is clear to the eyes.

“But one small lamp struggles tirelessly, fearlessly with this darkness. The base of this lamp is truth; austerity is its oil; compassion is its wick and its light is forgiveness.”

This lamp is lighted with great care for it is not always possible for man to have so much austerity in action; nor he has always the strong base of truth needed for the lamp; nor he is able to spare so much compassion; nor he is always capable of so much forgiveness that he can burn himself out to be the light.

Yet the darkness must be challenged. The challenge is to keep the lamp lighted.

Dhratarastra explained the third scheme of thought about *dharma* by relating the story of Indra and Prahlada to Duryodhana. Prahlada by his *sheela* won the kingdom of heaven. *Sheela* means not to show enmity to anybody, to be merciful to all and to give alms to one's capacity. Where there is *sheela* there resides *dharma* and with *dharma* stays *satya*.

Along with *sheela*, *dharma* and *satya* live good behavior *sadachara*, strength *balavirya*; and wealth *lakshmi shri*. Hence in humanness in *sheela* resides *dharma*.

In a nutshell *dharma* resides in the core of the mind:

Dharmo hridi samasritya

The fourth scheme of thought about *dharma* was explained by Lord Krishna, while relating the story of Kaushika, an honest saint, to Arjuna. On the very day of final encounter between Karna and Arjuna, Yudhishthira fled the battle field after being painfully humiliated in an armed engagement. When Arjuna came to the camp to pay a visit to him and asked what really had

happened. Yudhisthira flared up in anger and told Arjuna that all his boastfulness about being the finest archer in the world was all false. In a rage, he not only insulted Arjuna but also insulted the *gandiva* bow. The bow was a gift to Arjuna from Agni, the fire-god. He held it so dear to his heart that he had promised to kill anyone who would speak derogatorily against it or if he was not able to fulfill his promise (*pratijna*) he would commit suicide. Arjuna was now in real moral dilemma: promise keeping i.e. fulfilling his *Kshtriya* duty or *dharma* or avoidance of fratricide i.e. killing his venerated elder brother. When his *Kshtriya* duty (*dharma*) made him choose the first alternative, Krishna appeared. Krishna was startled and asked Arjuna the reason even of thinking of such a sinful act of killing his elder brother. Arjuna explained that he was obliged to commit fratricide in order to fulfill his obligation to keep his promise (*pratijna*). By quoting from Kant's 'Introduction to the Metaphysics of Moral' Matilal (The collected essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, p.25), interpreted the reason of Arjuna's taking a conflict free decision, by anticipating the Kantian model, to meet the *kshatriya* obligation of promise-keeping:

“Because....duty and obligation are in general concepts that express the objective practical necessity of certain actions and because two mutually opposing rules cannot be necessary at the same time, then if it is a duty to act

according to them, it is not only not a duty but contrary to duty to act according to the other.”

There may be conflict between grounds for Arjuna but not between duties. Krishna was not Kant and in his discussion with Arjuna, he turned an apparently moral conflict into a genuine moral dilemma – promise-keeping or showing benevolence towards his elder brother and in the process breaking the promise. In Sanskrit, keeping the promise is classed as protecting the truth (*satya-raksha*). In Kantian ethics, truth-telling gets the highest priority. Krishna, however, continued to argue that promise-keeping or even truth-telling cannot be an unconditional obligation when it is in conflict with the avoidance of grossly unjust and criminal acts such as fratricide. Saving an innocent life or life of a brother can be equally a strong obligation. According to Krishna two almost equally strong obligation or duties are in conflict here. Krishna here related the story of saint Kaushika to illustrate his point. Some robbers were chasing some travellers to kill them to take their belongings and money. Because Kaushika took a vow to speak always the truth, he revealed the hiding place of those travellers to the robbers as a result; the travellers were caught and killed. Krishna added that Kaushika did not reach heaven after his death (his much coveted reward) just because of this act of cruelty. Although he abided by his principle of truth-telling throughout his life, it came to no effect. Krishna said to Arjuna that honest kaushika did not know the intricate nature of *dharma*

known as *dharma-vibhaga*, the practical aspect of *dharma*. Under situational constraints or contingency of the situation (*Aavasthika*, Mahabharata, xii, 36, 2) there might be stronger grounds for rejecting truth-telling as a duty and accepting the stronger duty of saving an innocent life. This moral insight was explained by Krishna as *dharma-vibhaga*, although it is not Kantian. In Kant's ethic, truth-telling got the highest priority; in Krishna's ethic, saving an innocent life got the ultimate priority. Truth-telling has been extolled as one of the highest virtues but at the same time excusable untruths such as perjury to save life, were permitted by Gautama and Manu in their Dharmashastras.

Krishna said, you might have taken a vow in the past but now in the name of *dharma* you want to perform *adharma*. You must understand what is *dharma-vibhaga* or the practical aspect of *dharma*. Under mitigating circumstances, such as destruction of innocent lives, to tell a lie may be a duty ('where telling a lie may be as good as "truth" and truth-telling may be as good as lying,' Mahabharata, 8.49.29).

The rest of the incident was a little hilarious. When Arjuna because of the dictate of Krishna, failed to kill his brother and fulfill the first part of his vow he decided to fulfill at least the second part of the vow and was almost ready to commit suicide. Then also Krishna rebuked him and said he did not understand practical, ethical aspect of *dharma* and trying to follow the ordered system of ethical principles. The solution which Krishna

gave was that Arjuna should go on praising himself in superlative terms. Praising oneself is like committing suicide.

The movement of *dharma* is extremely intricate and multifarious. The discriminatory or the judicious vision gives a practical meaning to *dharma*.

The fifth scheme of thought is revealed when it is said that victory is on the side of *dharma*:

Yatodharmostatojaya

When Duryodhana asked for blessings from his mother Gandhari so that he could be victorious, Gandhari could only say, ‘where there is *dharma* victory will be there.’

It gives a concrete meaning to *dharma* answering in every case the question, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil and this is possible, if one has the omega vision a vision which acts like a scale, *tuladanda*. Under this vision, everything is one and the same:

Tula me sarvabhutashu samatisthati

The story of Tuladhara and Jajali in *shantiparva* disclosed this omega vision or *Turiya sakshi dristi*. But the omega vision cannot explain the dialectical situations of life and the judicious vision also gives a simple solution of life e.g. who would tell us whether Arjuna behaved justly or not when he killed Bhishma and Drone by deception. One, an elderly kinsman and a righteous soul and other his own preceptor and on the other side

whether Bhisma and Drona were justified in aiding the unrighteous Kaurava and fighting for them against their better judgment, against the dictate of their conscience. However Mahabharata gave a solution to these questions and said:

“Logical arguments are inconclusive. The Vedas are dissimilar. There is no sage whose doctrines can be taken as authoritative. The verities of dharma lie hidden in the inaccessible recesses of the soul. The traditions followed by many show the true way.”

But Mahabharata even questioned the tradition. Tuladhara an honest businessman was very critical of tradition. He said:

“Traditional practices are accidental accumulations like pieces of wood which accidently enter a river at various points and come together somewhere down the stream.”

Then he said,

“It would be absurd to say that there was some rational reason either for their entering the stream of the river or for their coming together to form a concourse.”

It is a devastating criticism of tradition. But, however, tradition has always been self-conscious and self-critical, trying to effect rationalization some-times with false moves and sometimes with right ones. In the Dronaparva, Arjuna ruefully commented that the so called ‘indirect’ or ‘white lie’ of Yudhisthira, which killed the great teacher Drona, was an indelible black spot in

Yudhisthira's *dharma*-inspired character, and comparable to the immoral act of Rama's killing Vali from behind. Both Rama and Krishna were extolled as almost perfect upholders of *dharma* but both suffered from Aristotelian *hamartia*, human weakness which left unanswerable blemishes on their characters but then that added human interest to these stories and dramatized the acuteness of moral struggles and moral conflicts.

The last scheme of thought about *dharma*, as explained by Krishna, was that at several times truth turned into falsehood and falsehood into truth.

In other words *dharma* and *adharma* are complementary to each other. They are not conceived as irreconcilable opposites but rather complementary processes. To achieve the truth one will have to move by the side of falsehood. One cannot draw a white line if there is no black background. For Krishna as said earlier, *dharma* is, at least sometimes, situational (*dharmo hi avasthikah smrtah*, Mahabharata, 12.36.2). In other words there is no absolute *dharma* or absolute *adharma*; everything is relative or in other words *dharma* is simply worldly wisdom i.e. *loka vyavahara*:

Dharmasyakhya vyavahara itisyate

But even if you follow it as *lokavyavahara* or worldly wisdom you cannot escape from the tensions of life.

Yudhisthir suffers from this tension. He always stands between two fires on one side *dharma* and forgiveness on the other the

dharma of the *kshtriya* vengeance; on one side renunciation, austerity and on the other the glory of kingdom; on one side the *dharmaraja* Yudhisthira and the other liar Yudhisthira but in his self, *kendra*, the place of *dharma* is secured. We see him standing in between the fading glow of the setting of the sun of *Dwaparyuga* and the darkness of the advancing night of *Kaliyuga*--alone, absolutely alone.

In spite of this tension he had the humanness in him and that made him a complete man. After the long journey when Indra invited him to stay in heaven, he said, no and was ready to go to hell to stay with his brothers:

Yatra te mama sa swargo

After the explanation given by Indra he was ready to enter heaven but his words uttered at the threshold of heaven, when he was asked to leave the dog, ‘Mahendra, I cannot leave this dog for my happiness’, proved amply his humanness and compassion:

Tyakshyamyena swasukharthi mahendra

Hence following the *lokavyavahara* is not sufficient, it is to be combined with reason and great human mind.

Mother Kunti's parting words of advice to Yudhisthira may be taken as the motto of Mahabharata:

Dharmo te dhiyatam budhirmanastu mahadastu cha

‘Let thy reason be fixed on *dharma*, let thy mind be ever great.’

But the most surprising thing is that in spite of these parting words of great value which enables one to understand the true meaning of *dharma*. Vyasa was not convinced and sure whether he had given the true meaning of *dharma* because nobody was listening to the voice of *dharma*.

Everybody was perplexed because everybody at a critical moment in life started asking what is the significance of life, what really *dharma* is. Even Vyasa was not an exception. The story goes like this:

Bhisma was very perturbed when he heard from Duryodhana that Pandavas were illegitimate children and they had no right over the throne. Bhimsa then decided to go to Vyasa.

Everybody knows that Vyasa was *trikalagya*, who knew the past, present and future, and so he thought to find out from Vyasa whether they were legitimate or illegitimate children and so one fine morning he left for the hermitage of Vyasa and after reaching there he found a death--like silence prevailing in the *ashrama*

He asked the reason for it and was told that Sukhadeva, the son of Vyasa had passed away that day. Sukhadeva realized that nobody could escape death and hence instead of waiting for it he invited death and to do that he stopped eating and after a month or so he died that morning.

In the evening Bhisma entered in the room of Vyasa and after the preliminaries he asked the question whether Pandavas were legitimate or illegitimate children. Vyasa replied, sorry I cannot say, I even do not know what the meaning of life is.

In this kind of a situation one tends to conclude by referring to Mahabharata:

Dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhayam

This was said by Yudhisthira in reply to the ‘riddle’ question of the yaksha on the last day of the Pandava’s exile in the forest. The detailed reply was:

“The scriptures are many and divided; the dharmashastras are many and different. Nobody is called a sage unless and until he holds a different view. The truth of *dharma* lies concealed in the dark cave of the human heart. Therefore, the way to *dharma* is the one that is taken by *mahajana* (great persons or a great number of persons).”

The truth of *dharma* always is hidden in the inner precincts of the mind of the self. And if one is unable to understand it then for him the best course is to go to a *mahajana* like Krishna, who says:

Sarva dharman parityajya mamekam sharanam braja

‘One may discard all *dharma* and come under the protection of the supreme self.’

The excellent design created in Gita by Krishna speaks about the ultimate recourse of man that is to come under God's protection.

The design is like an equation:

Swadharma. Nishkama karma, atmasamarpana

Swadharma i.e. follow one's duty; *nishkama karma* i.e. follow it desirelessly but desire is inevitable in any action and hence one must desire to do a particular work and achieve a result but after one achieves it, one must dedicate that result at the feet of the lord. This is the meaning of *nishkama karma* and *atmasamarpana* which is the last part of the equation i.e. to dedicate oneself to the feet of the lord and that makes the design complete.

To dedicate means to be with the Lord and then the Lord says, I will release you from all sins and therefore grieve not:

Aham twam sarvapapebhya mokshyishyami ma sucha

But this 'I' who is speaking is no one else but one's own self as explained by Lord Krishna:

Ahamatma gudakesha

'I am the self, O Arjuna, dwelling in the heart of everything'

When the perplexed mind knows not what *dharma* is, the self has only to commune with his own self since true knowledge in these matters is to be found within the self. One needs to learn to contact with oneself. When pleasure and pain are the same to

one, when one becomes indifferent to the success and failure of one's little schemes, when one lays no claims to the fruits of one's action, then - and then only the self guides one personally through life, counseling one at each step — metaphorically speaking, will drive one's chariot for oneself. Then one be true to oneself and does as he bids . We have to dive deeper within ourselves to find the true self, the king of the dark chamber, who resides in the heart of every being:

Iswara sarvabhutanam hriddesheorjuna tisthati

In fact all our suffering appears to be due to the building up of a strong consciousness of our existence as a separate entity. One must transcend that separateness and unite oneself to that power from which one and everything proceeds and that power is within us. Only then one understands the meaning of life - what *dharma* is and also one realizes that one will have to go beyond *dharma* to be one with the self.

The final sense is one of coming together. Becoming and being are dialectically united and one becomes that which one loves. It is a dialectical unity and hence the debate on *dharma* is inconclusive. As said earlier, with reference to Kaushika's story, the Kantian ethic of truth –telling (*satya-dharma*) got the highest priority; in Krishna's ethic saving an innocent life got the ultimate priority. Of course, Matilal says, in an ideal world, we can do both, as Kant insisted. But Krishna, who thinks that *dharma* is *avasthikah*, situational, unknowingly conceded that all we have is an imperfect non-ideal world and imperfect

human solutions. In Krishna's world, though, when one *dharma* is violated to keep another equally important *dharma*, the intrinsic value of neither is diminished thereby. Allowing flexibility in *dharma* does not mean that one is allowed to do anything one wants to do. The situation only reflects imperfect human solutions in an imperfect world. While confronting this imperfect world the only course of action, the only *dharma*, as says Mahabharata, is not to lose one's *samattava*, balance.