

The Mahābhārata and Dharma Discourse

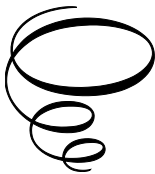
The Mahābhārata and Dharma Discourse:

*A Vision of Clarity through
Its Tales*

By

Nitin Malhotra

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Dedicated to my teacher

Prof. Shrawan K. Sharma

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PREFACE

Ever since reading the *Mahābhārata*, I have been gripped with an eerie feeling that there is something in this incredible text which eludes my grasp. During childhood, I was born and brought up listening to the stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahābhārata* in a religious way. Some questions played on my mind as I began my literary studies. Moreover, I was desperate to search for all the answers to my curiosities, and finally, I selected Indian classical texts to look for the meaning and purpose of human existence. I can see the passage of my life in three texts which are all very close to my heart—the *Panchatantra* fascinated me as a child, the *Ramayana* as a teenager, and the *Mahābhārata* as an adult, with several questions concerning dharma, the most vital question I have ever encountered among thinking minds.

Dharma, the word reflecting the core narrative of the epic *Mahābhārata*, is untranslatable. Words such as duty, rights, goodness, law, conduct, virtues, and righteous way of living seem to be possible literal translations, but they fall short when explaining the spiritual sense of the word dharma. Nevertheless, a question arises: What does dharma mean? Does it mean the faith or belief that Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs hold? Is there any individual god, society or religion that is expected to be an authority on dharma? Who is responsible for dharma? Is the root of dharma what Manu said? The entire Vedas, the traditions and customs of those who learn, teach, and practice the Vedas, the conduct of virtuous people, and what is satisfactory to oneself is dharma. Is this correct? The *Mahābhārata* keeps returning to Bhīṣma's conclusion that dharma is subtle (*sūkṣma*). Draupadī, Dhṛtrāṣṭra and others will repeat this phrase when they are in genuine difficulty. It seems that dharma is subtle (*sūkṣma*) because it does not deal with matters of fact and the world of power; rather, it deals with opinions about how we ought to behave.

Tales of the *Mahābhārata* covers all the essential questions of human existence which I believe have been the main concern of the major scriptures of the world. However, in no other culture has a non-scriptural text been so deeply embedded in the life of the people as the *Mahābhārata* has been in Indian life and thought since ancient days. In the knowledge-

centred oral Indian culture, like other intellectual texts, the *Mahābhārata* has played multiple societal roles—as a source of knowledge and values, sustaining the social fibre and fabric, as an inspiration in adversity, as an entertainer and educator in happy times, and as a proto-explanatory model for any number of problems encountered by society.

The origin of the genre of the tale, known as *Katha* in Indian tradition, is often traced back to the Vedic times when stories were narrated during the interludes of ceremonies accompanying a *yajña* and an act of sacrifice was performed. The priest would fill in the intervening hours, days, or weeks by narrating a series of stories in a digressive mode, which invariably had a moral purpose. As the priest would sometimes take the liberty to speak about the spiritual or religious purpose of the rituals to those participating in the *yajña*, the *Katha* became a form of expository narrative or comprehensive commentary. This is how the notion of the *Katha* as an interlude came into existence, something that later evolved into the concept of a framed tale or a “story within a story” mode of narration, widely recognized as a typically Indian mode of story-telling. This all-time text interrogates the fundamental verities of human life and thus poses perennial questions that face us at every step in our life—What is dharma? On whose side is dharma—Duryodhana? Yudhiṣṭhira? What is right and what is wrong? Who won the war? Who lost it? What does it teach us? Should we fight for our rights? Who is the protagonist and why? Kṛṣṇa? Duryodhana? Arjuna? Bhīṣma? Or Bhīma? What is the difference between desolation and peace (at the end of the Great War)? Is all effort futile? What is the greatest goal of life—renunciation or possession? Is a human being helpless in the face of the inviolate determinism of the consequence of his actions? Or is there a degree of redemption available to him to transcend his *karma*? All these questions are formulated, analysed and exemplified but a certain indeterminacy remains and that indeterminacy is the marker of the profound wisdom of the *Mahābhārata*. As Bhīṣma tells Draupadī, “It is difficult to decide what dharma is (meaning the nature of righteousness and truthfulness) and what *adharmā* is (unrighteousness or wickedness)”.

The present book is the fruit of my extensive study of the tales of the *Mahābhārata*, and my visits to the heads of different Indian traditions who describe dharma in rituals, customs, and philosophy. It was challenging to write on a topic that has already been discussed many times and to take a philosophical slant. In the present book, the tales answer the questions more easily. With gratitude, I take refuge among all the writers on the topic, and the different saints of the Śruti and Smṛiti traditions who have helped me to

understand the issues of dharma. This has helped me to write about the universal message at the core of the epic *Mahābhārata*. I have strived to discuss the issues of dharma described in the *Mahābhārata*. The book surely provides an opinion about how to perform dharma that is individual, universal, and situation-based in the present era.

(Dr Nitin Malhotra)

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INTRODUCTION

A list of the types of dharma described in the *Dharamśāstras* (including the *Mahābhārata*) can help us to understand the aim of the ancient sages which was to develop an orderly, non-conflicting, self-contained, and stable society. The several types of dharma that they envisaged, analysed and presented are *Sādhāraṇa*-dharma (universal dharma), *Viśeṣa*-dharma (dharma and injunctions of higher degrees at different higher levels), *Āpad*-dharma (practical application of dharma), *Strī*-dharma (dharma of women), *Lokasama*-dharma (dharma applicable to social groups and their activities), *Gṛhastha*-dharma (dharma for the householder), *Rāja*-dharma (dharma of the king), and *Varṇāśrama*-dharma (dharma for different classes of people and stages in life). But the *Mahābhārata* focuses on three dharmas—i.e. *Sva*-dharma (dharma of an individual), *Sādhāraṇa*-dharma (universal dharma) and *Āpad*-dharma (practical application of dharma). Most of us expect ready-made answers to all the fundamental questions concerning right and wrong in life, instead of having to delve deep into the problems, thinking them out completely, and understanding their whole significance.

Human problems are not simple, they are very complex. To understand them requires patience and insight, and it is of the highest importance that we as individuals understand and resolve them for ourselves. What we must realize is that we are not only conditioned by the environment, but we are the environment, not something separate from it. Our thoughts and responses are conditioned by the dharma of society, of which we are also a part. Everywhere it is advised not to follow adharmā, which means we must follow dharma. This concept has served as a beacon of hope guiding the lives of people all over the world for millennia. Although it is a timeless and universal concept, the original concept evolved in ancient India. The texts of India's intellectual tradition define this concept in different ways. They, in general, help us to understand questions about life, instead of focusing on the issue of dharma. The concept of dharma has evolved, its meaning shifting from a “ritual ethics of deed” to a more personal virtue based on one's conscience. In earlier Vedic times, dharma meant doing visible “good deeds” endorsed by society, and Sanskrit scholars generally translate this earlier meaning of dharma as “merit”.

Often these deeds were specific to one's caste, and this concept is called *sva-dharma*. In Vedic literature, the word for dharma is *ṛta* meaning firstly, the cosmic order, secondly, the field of sacrifice and finally the sphere of human conduct (Zaehner 39). Thus, the Vedas provide, in an abstract way, the principles governing life. The *Purāṇas* embody these principles in various divine beings and tell stories of how God cyclically creates and destroys the world (Patnaik 166). "With the rise of yoga sects, Buddhism and Jainism, this meaning of dharma gradually changed to mean social harmony, the cultivation of an ethical self, and to actions required of all castes" (Das chapter III). In this sense, dharma has universal appeal and is called *sādhāraṇa-dharma*. In Buddhism, the history of dharma is very detailed and can be summed up by four noble truths called *ārya satyas*. Jainism considers dharma differently and more technically. Dharma means the condition of the movement of the soul (Introduction *JiAP* 35). In the modern era, dharma is also treated as a religion. Bearing in mind the above account, it can be said that dharma does not involve religion but a moral principle that is subtle and has a wider meaning following an appropriate place, time and person. The definitions of dharma quoted by Sukthankar in his *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* are all self-evident in this regard. These definitions define dharma as:

"belief in the conservation of moral values", "a mode of life or a code of conduct which regulates a man's work and activities as a member of society and as an individual to bring about his gradual development and enable him to reach what was deemed to be the goal of human existence", "that which holds a thing together, makes it what it is, prevents it from breaking up and changing into something else, its fundamental attribute, it's essential nature, the law of its being", "the code of life based on *Vedas*, the due observance of which leads to happiness here and hereafter", "that scheme or code of laws which bind together human beings in the bonds of mutual rights and duties, of causes-and-consequences of actions arising out of their temperamental characters, in relation to each other and to society." (Sukthankar 79-83)

The definitions given above seem to include all conceivable aspects of human life. This account also seems to say that we need to understand dharma at a universal and socio-political level. This shows that dharma is not a mathematical idea. It is a fluid concern and hence it has been conceived and understood in various ways. One can feel baffled and so pose questions: What is dharma? Or what is the ultimate criterion of dharma? And why should one practice dharma? What is the need for dharma in the present period? What type of dharma can help us to find

peace? Can dharamshastras help us to obtain answers to resolve our confusion?

The author of the epic, at the end of this massive composition, laments that it is very difficult to attain dharma only through books because people are unable to understand the maxim that *artha* (prosperity) and *kāma* (pleasure) arise from dharma (*Swargārohaṇ-Parva*). *Mokṣa* is also discussed in the *Mahābhārata* but is not considered as important to dharma. It is implicit in the text that righteous living and moral integrity will automatically lead one to salvation (Matilal 36).

Scholars say that if there is any text which can provide comprehensive expositions of the issues of dharma, it is the *Mahābhārata* which is the compendium of all conceivable aspects of human life. This is why it is called the fifth Veda (*Agni-Purāṇa*), containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thoughts on human problems. It is also called *Dharamśāstra*, listing different aspects of dharma, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, the four-fold ends of life. It is clearly stated in the text:

“Whatever is said about dharma, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa* in this epic can be found elsewhere too, but what is not in this epic, cannot be found anywhere else.” (1.62.26)

This shows that what runs through all multiple aspects described in the epic is dharma. In the epic, whenever heroic men and women grapple with problems or find themselves in genuine difficulty, they talk of dharma, i.e. what to do and what not to do. The *Mahābhārata* articulates the character traits of *sva*-dharma and *sādhāraṇa*-dharma in several places. It refers to “not harming others, being truthful, and not getting angry”. Both these senses of dharma co-exist in the *Mahābhārata*. Since they are often contradictory, they contribute to the dramatic tension in the story. When Draupadī uses dharma, she has its former meaning in mind. Given her bias for action and the *kṣatriya* ethic, she usually thinks of dharma as *sva*-dharma. When Yudhiṣṭhira uses the word, he usually means universal, ethical dictates of his conscience and *sādhāraṇa*-dharma. Draupadī and Bhīma use “dharma” to awaken Yudhiṣṭhira’s sense of duty as a *kṣatriya* warrior, usually to get him to act as we shall see in the *Mahābhārata* when the Pāṇḍavas were in exile:

“If we are to observe our own dharma . . . it is in war that our task lies . . . Others have stolen our kingdom . . . [Your idea of] dharma is not dharma,

it is wrong dharma . . . O king of men, by scrapping a lesser dharma, a man obtains a greater dharma, and he is judged to be wise.” (III.150.31)

Dharma can be taken as a standard for one’s moral conduct. Dharma or “what one has to do” is a standard of conduct, and society needs standards. Yudhiṣṭhira says:

“He who doubts dharma finds in nothing else a standard and ends in setting himself as a standard.” (III.32.15)

He is saying, in effect, that following dharma is its own reward. When one acts in this way, it is motives and not consequences that are important. The *Mahābhārata* distinguishes between the two meanings of dharma: caste duty as *sva*-dharma, which varies from caste to caste, and the duty of conscience—*sādhāraṇa*-dharma—which is the same for all, i.e. universal in its form.

The *Mahābhārata* keeps returning to Bhīṣma’s conclusion that dharma is subtle (*sūkṣma*). Draupadī, Dhṛtrāṣṭra and others will repeat this phrase when they are in genuine difficulty. It seems that dharma is subtle (*sūkṣma*) because it does not deal with matters of fact and the world of power; rather it deals with opinions about how we ought to behave. This all-time text interrogates the fundamental verities of human life and thus poses perennial questions that face us at every step in our lives: What is dharma? On whose side is dharma—Duryodhana? Or Yudhiṣṭhira? What is right and what is wrong? These issues are formulated, analysed and exemplified but a certain indeterminacy remains and that indeterminacy is the marker of the profound wisdom of the *Mahābhārata*. As Bhīṣma tells Draupadī, “It is difficult to decide what dharma (righteousness) is and what is adharma (unrighteousness)”. What is dharma (righteousness) and what is adharma (unrighteousness) oscillate between two broad threads, viz. (i) accounts or tales of the long conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, and (ii) dialogues or tales on the issues of dharma.

The issues of dharma constitute an equally (or even more) important part of the *Mahābhārata*. In fact, from the perspective of the number of pages, more than half of the *Mahābhārata* is devoted to such tales or dialogues. In “Vana-Parva” three Ṛṣis (Bṛhdaśva, Lomaśa and Mārkaṇḍeya) tell Yudhiṣṭhira a large number of stories. In all, it includes the following stories and dialogues: Nala and Damyantī, Daḍhici, Vyādha-Gītā, Rāmāyaṇa, Sāvitrī, Śivi and Yakṣa-Yudhiṣṭhira. They all, in one way or another, deal with the issues of dharma. Similarly, the dialogue between

Dhrtrāṣṭra and Rṣi Sanat-Sujāta, and the story narrated in “Udyoga-Parva”, is based on the highest spiritual knowledge. Another relates to Lord Kṛṣṇa’s speech at the Kaurava assembly where he tries to persuade Dhrtrāṣṭra to control the unrighteousness of Duryodhana. “Śānti-Parva” is another important parva which contains a comprehensive coverage of dharma. Here, there is a dialogue between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira where Bhīṣma illustrates most of his replies with the help of a story. In this way, there are as many as seventy-five stories in “Śānti-Parva”. Probably the most famous of these stories (from a socio-religious point of view) is based on the dialogue between Tulādhāra (a person engaged in trade) and Jājali (a brāhmin). In the stories of these parvas, there is an exposition of *sva*-dharma (dharma of the individuals), *sādharana*-dharma (universal dharma), and *āpad*-dharma (practical application of dharma or dharma adjusted to difficult circumstances).

As far as “Āpad-Dharma-Upparva” of “Śānti-Parva” is concerned, it is mostly related to *āpad*-dharma (dharma adjusted to difficult circumstances), also known as practical applications of dharma. In “Aśvamedha-Parva”, Lord Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna directly in *Anū-Gītā*. Last but not least is the “Mahāprasthānika-Parva”, which has two important dialogues: (i) between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma, and (ii) between Yudhiṣṭhira, on the one hand, and Indra and Dharamrāja, on the other. The occasion for both the dialogues was “the great departure”, i.e. the final journey on foot to the high mountains leading to heaven’s entrance, by the five Pāṇḍava brothers and Draupadī, after having installed Parīkṣit on the throne.

In composing the great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, Vedvyāsa very eloquently appealed to this concept as the very core value and source from which all other values issue.

“It is dharma that leads to the behaviour which promotes harmony in society, facilitates its growth, and ensures its happiness. It further explains that one should not do unto others which is unpleasant to oneself.”
XII.251.19

Again,

“Whatever one desires for oneself one should desire the same for others.”
XII.251.21

Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* is in many ways an extended attempt to clarify just what dharma is—that is, what exactly should we do when we are

trying to be good in the world? Could one depend on dharma to protect oneself in this uncertain world? If so, how does a person go about finding dharma? In a life and death debate with the Yakṣa, a tree spirit, who controls the waters of a lake, thirsty Yudhiṣṭhira is asked this very question. The right answer will save him and his brothers; the wrong answer will mean their death. He tells the Yakṣa that, in seeking dharma, “reason is of limited use for it is without foundation; neither are the sacred texts helpful as they are at odds with one another; nor is there a single sage whose opinion could be considered authoritative. The truth about dharma is hidden in a cave”.

The *Mahābhārata* is about our incomplete lives, about good people acting badly, about how difficult it is to be good in this world. Although human perfection may be illusory, and dharma may be “subtle”, there are limits to what moral education can achieve. The epic leaves one with the confidence that it is in our nature to be good. The *Mahābhārata* believes that our lives should not have to be so cruel and humiliating. This explains its refrain: “dharma leads to victory!” Although there is irony at times, the epic genuinely wants our relationships to be more honest. Since the epic is a narrative, the personal viewpoint dominates. But the story stops often when the impersonal viewpoint takes over.

The idea of dharma based on one’s reason, thus, sits side by side with deep faith in the existence of the gods in the *Mahābhārata*. But it is left to individuals to decide how to best order their lives. Given the plurality of authorities, one has to depend on oneself. No wonder the *Mahābhārata* says that “dharma is subtle” (XII.130.36).

The present book attempts to look at the stories and dialogues embedded in the text regarding issues of dharma, i.e. *sva*-dharma (individual dharma), *sādhāraṇa*-dharma (universal dharma) and *āpad*-dharma (practical applications of dharma or dharma adjusted to difficult circumstances). For this purpose, the whole of the text of the *Mahābhārata* is studied, but the focus of close critical analysis is on “Ādi-Parva”, “Sabhā-Parva”, “Vana-Parva”, “Udyoga-Parva”, and “Śānti-Parva”, “Anuśāsana-Parva”, “Mahāprasthānika-Parva” and “Swargārohaṇa-Parva” which are the explanations of the issues of dharma. The study is further based on the representation of various universal and socio-political expressions of dharma as made in the *Mahābhārata*. This centres on the integral aesthetics of dharma. Thus, through comprehensive and critical analysis, this research subsumes the issues of dharma, the philosophy of life, and

the worldview reflected in the narrative structure (tales and dialogues) of the *Mahābhārata*. This framework is empirical, category-bound, and linguistic.

CHAPTER I

THE STRUCTURE OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

The *Mahābhārata* is not merely a text, it is a tradition which “is built into the extraordinary form of its text” (Ramanujan 2). In its present form, the text consisting of over one lakh ślokas, “equal to about eight times as much as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together is by far the longest poem known to literary history” (Macdonnel 282). It is unique and distinctive in the sense that it is an epic that has blended within it, an encyclopaedia of ancient Indian tradition and culture. It embodies most of the knowledge about Indian tradition, culture, religion, mythology, law, ethics and philosophy, statecraft, the art of war, history, and ethnology. For the layman, the *Mahābhārata* is always considered as a battle between the Pāṇdavas and the Kauravas. But in reality, it deals with all the foundations upon which all human relationships are based. The text itself proclaims that it is a *Dharmasāstra* (a treatise on dharma) and *Itihāsa* (historical events, describing morality and ethics). Due to the multiplicity of many subjects, it is said that “the *Mahābhārata* is not just a poetic production; rather it is a whole literature” (Winternitz 316). This encyclopaedic nature of the *Mahābhārata* is revealed in the text itself: “*vyāsociṣṭam jagat sarvam*”, in other words, there is no subject under the sun which has not been touched upon by Vyāsa (I.1.65). It has a universal appeal, immediate and contemporary. The *Mahābhārata* styles itself not only as an *Itihāsa*, *Ākhyāna* and *Purāṇa* but also as *Kāvya-Śāstra*, *Dharma-Śāstra*, *Artha-Śāstra*, *Kāma-Śāstra* and *Mokṣa-Śāstra*. As such, it is a bridge between the highly complex Vedic literature and ordinary people. It is the case that an ordinary Indian, on average, is likely to be a highly philosophical individual because texts like the *Mahābhārata* form a bridge between people and learned traditions. In characteristic legendary mode, it is said that when this narrative text with its stories from *Purāṇas* and of what transpired weighed against the Vedas, it “out-weighed” the Vedas (I.1.267). Its list of themes reads like this:

“...deep meanings of the Vedas...the essence of *Śāstras*...exposition of the auxiliary sciences...the exposition of past, present and future...old age, death, fear, disease, and the reality or otherwise of objects...duties and

stages of life...vegetation, earth, cosmos...planets and stars...birth and death...places of pilgrimage, lands and peoples, rivers, mountains, forests and seas...building forts and cities...languages and ethnic groups...arts and crafts...all that is necessary for a fulfilled life and all that is necessary to ensure the welfare of people...lineages and genealogies...all this has been expounded in this *grantha...*" (I.1.62-70)

It can equally be viewed as a human drama, a cornucopia of myths and legends and a well-chronicled text. The text itself says that "*mahattvad bhāratvad ca Mahābhāratam ucyate*" (I.1.209), i.e. this epic is called the *Mahābhārata* on account of its *mahattva* (enormous size) and *bhāratva* (weightiness). This encyclopaedic treatment of various subjects belonging to almost all branches of learning gives a complex structure to the epic. The present chapter aims to give an account of the complex structure of the *Mahābhārata* made by the sub-parvas within parvas, chapters within sub-parvas, dialogues and talks within chapters, stories within chapters, and stories within stories. The chapter also takes into account how the outsiders operate as characters and how the characters act as outsiders.

Let us begin with the conception of the *Mahābhārata*. After conceiving the *Mahābhārata*, the sage, Vyāsa, meditated on Brahmā. Brahmā advised Vyāsa to go to Lord Ganeśa and, accordingly, Vyāsa meditates on Ganeśa who appears before him. Vyāsa, with folded hands, bowing his head, prays as follows: "Lord I have conceived the story of the *Mahābhārata*. I shall dictate the whole story if you graciously agree to write it down". Ganeśa replies: "Yes, I can become your writer but with a condition. You must dictate without pause lest my pen must not stop once I start writing". Vyāsa agrees to the condition, guarding himself with a counter-stipulation. He says: "Lord, you must first grasp the meaning of what I dictate before you write it down". Ganeśa smiles and agrees to the condition. Then Vyāsa begins to sing the story of the *Mahābhārata* and Ganeśa begins to write. To keep the terms of the agreement, Sage Vyāsa very cleverly dictates one abstruse couplet after every tenth one, which makes Ganeśa pause to follow its sense. And Vyāsa avails of this interval to compose new stanzas in his mind. Thus, the *Mahābhārata* is written by Ganeśa following the dictation of Vyāsa. In this way, there are 8800 abstruse couplets which deal with the cardinal issue of dharma, the sense of which is not easily comprehensible.

Let us think about another interpretation of the composition of this great text. Some scholars are of the view that there are three stages in the composition of this epic based on its three names: *Jaya*, *Bhārata*, and

Mahābhārata. In its first stage, it was called *Jaya* and contained 8800 couplets. In its second stage, it was called *Bhārata* and contained 2400 couplets. It was narrated by Vaiśampāyana, one of the disciples of Sage Vyāsa, as well as Sumantu and Paila at the time of the performance of the serpent sacrifice of Janamejaya. As Janamejaya sought clarifications at various times, Vaiśampāyana gave answers to him by adding new couplets. In its third and final stage, containing one lakh, it was narrated by Sauti, Ugraśravā, and the son of Lomaśa Ṛṣi to the ṛṣis led by Śaunaka in Naimiśaraṇyaka. As Śaunaka and other ṛṣis sought clarifications at various times, Ugraśravā gave answers to them by adding new couplets.

In its present form, the *Mahābhārata* originated in Naimiśaraṇya, in the assembly of sages led by Śaunaka, where Ugraśravā narrates its original composition. Vyāsa's disciple, Vaiśampāyana, had narrated it at the command of Vyāsa after the Great War (5135 BC) in King Janamejaya's assembly of the learned at Indraprastha. It unfolds in the text itself that the Sage Vyāsa illustrated through his deep learning:

“righteousness, material goals of life, desires that the human beings have... the *Śāstras* that help the fulfilment of the threefold paths of knowledge, action and devotion ...the science of medicine, the science of weaponry, architecture, the science of music and such other worldly sciences...has unfolded the secrets of *Śruti* texts...has even expounded the meanings of Upaniṣads.” (I.1.48-49)

The original epic, the *Bhārata-Saṃhita* attributed to Sage Vyāsa, is known earlier as “Jaya” (the song of victory). There are three jaya-vijayas in the *Mahābhārata*: i) The Pāṇdavas do not want a battle. They send Kṛṣṇa to Dhṛtrāṣṭra as an emissary to establish peace and harmony. Seeing the zeal in the Pāṇdava brothers, their mother, Kuntī, encourages them, and conveys the story of Vidulā through Śrī Kṛṣṇa... (V.132.14); ii) Accepting a bribe from Duryodhana, Śalya comes to Yudhiṣṭhira and narrates to him the story of Indra's victory over Vṛtra... (V.9.10); iii) the first nucleus of the *Mahābhārata* is Jaya. These episodes are known as Jaya-Vijaya as they help us to attain Jaya (victory) in life and not suffer defeat... (V.136.18). It is said that the *Bhārata-Saṃhitā*, less any extraneous matter, was twenty-four thousand verses (I.1.102).

The episode of *bhāratas* is first recited in the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya. Under the instructions of *Mahaṛṣi* Vedvyāsa, Vaiśampāyana recites the epic to King Janamejaya. To satisfy the king's urge, Vaiśampāyana elaborates on the theme and adds some episodes. A great

number of verses are added as a result. Next time, the story is narrated during the twelve-year sacrifice of Sage Śaunaka at Naimiṣāraṇya. There, the narrator is Ugraśravā Sauti, the son of Ṛṣi Lomhaṛṣana. Again, a good number of verses were added. These additions and the “Harivamśa”, an addendum, increased the volume of this text named “Vijaya” and made it become *Śatasāhastri-Samhitā* (a compendium consisting of one thousand verses).

There is internal evidence in the *Mahābhārata* which speaks of its three beginnings. The *Mahābhārata* states that Sūta, known as Sauti or Ugraśravā, heard the epic as recited at the snake sacrifice and by Janamejaya and Vaiśampāyana who had learned it from Vyāsa. Ugraśrava, in turn, retells the story to the sages assembled in the Naimiṣāraṇya during the sacrifice performed by Śaunaka. In the following stanza, the *Mahābhārata* speaks of its three beginnings: (I.1.52)

- i. Manvādi (beginning with Manu): the epic begins with the benedictory verse, “Nārayaṇam Namaskṛtya” and then follows the conversation with Sauti and the sages at Śaunaka’s sacrifice.
- ii. Āstīkādi (beginning with the story of Āstīka): the Āstīka parva is the beginning of the epic.
- iii. Uparicarādi (beginning with Uparicara): from the commencement of the narration of the history of the Bhāratas in Āstīkaparva.

Perhaps these three different beginnings were preferred by Sūta, Vaiśampāyana and Vyāsa respectively.

The epic is divided into eighteen major sections known as parvas, each with a title that relates approximately to its contents. Each parva is subdivided into chapters made up of verses composed in various meters. There are also sub-parvas into which the longer major parvas are divided. The number of chapters mentioned below pertains to the Gitapress, Gorakhpur Edition of the *Mahābhārata*.

The epic begins with “Ādi-Parva”, “Ādi” meaning beginning or the first. Its 225 chapters present the cycle of myths leading up to King Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice at which Vaiśampāyana, a disciple of Vyāsa, first speaks about the *Mahābhārata*. After this introduction, it proceeds with the origin of the Pāṇḍava brothers and their cousins, the Kauravas, the marriage of the Pāṇḍavas with Draupadī, and the roots of the conflict that form the main theme of the central narrative.

The “Sabhā-Parva” (72 chapters) takes the narrative further by recounting how the kingdom was divided between the two branches of the family and how Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇdavas performed the great *Rājasuya* Sacrifice. It tells of the envy of Duryodhana and the Kauravas and finally of the gambling match, at which Yudhiṣṭhira loses everything to the Kauravas, the Pāṇdavas are exiled to the forest, and Draupadī is insulted.

The “Vana-Parva” (299 chapters), while recounting numerous adventures that befall the Pāṇdavas during their exile in the forest, also contains several notable didactic interludes in which various ṛṣis give religious and philosophical instruction to the main characters. It shows Virāta being incognito at the court of King Virāta. Here, the drama is not punctuated by didactic passages as in the “Vana-Parva”.

The “Udyoga-Parva” (197 chapters) describes the preparations for war with lengthy debates in both camps over what course of action is righteous and how success is gained in life. It is in this parva that Kṛṣṇa begins to play a prominent role as a controller of events. The “Bhīṣma-Parva” (117 chapters) describes the initial drawing-up of the armies at Kurukṣetra and contains the *Bhagwad-Gītā*, in which Kṛṣṇa is convincing up to the point at which Arjuna shoots down the enemies on the battleground, i.e. the Kauravas.

The “Droṇa-Parva” (173 chapters) takes the story of the battle further, up to the point at which Droṇa was slain by Dhṛṣṭadyumana. The “Karṇa-Parva” (69 chapters) concentrates specifically on the conflict between Arjuna and Karṇa. The “Śalya-Parva” (64 chapters) tells of the final stages of the battle in which Yudhiṣṭhira kills his uncle Śalya and Bhīma puts an end to Duryodhana during a combat.

The “Sauptika-Parva” (18 chapters) describes the massacre in the Pāṇdavas camp by three survivors from the Kaurava side, and the “Strī-Parva” (27 chapters) describes the lamentations of women whose husbands and sons have fallen and died on the battlefield and the attempts of the survivors to philosophically understand the catastrophe that has taken place.

The “Śānti-Parva” (353 chapters) is comprised of numerous didactic treatises covering a range of religious and philosophical perspectives. It opens with the victorious Yudhiṣṭhira lamenting over the suffering he has caused and wishing to abandon the kingdom he has won to take up the life of an ascetic. There follows a lengthy debate on the proper duty of a king

before everybody returns to the battlefield where the fallen Bhīṣma gives more detailed instructions on the subjects. This section discusses the *Rāja-dharma*, Bhīṣma then presents the *Mokṣa-dharma*, teaching the subject of salvation in the form of various loosely connected treatises based mainly on the ideas of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*. This parva concludes with an exposition on devotion to the deity *Nārāyaṇa* known as the “Nara-Nārāyaṇa-Parva”.

The “Anuśāsana-Parva” (154 chapters) contains a passage teaching devotion to *Śiva* and then returns to Bhīṣma instructing Yudhiṣṭhira. The teaching takes the form of a *Dharma-Śāstra* or social regulation, as well as describing ritual acts that bring reward in the afterlife of human beings.

The “Aśvamedhika-Parva” (96 chapters) then narrates how the Pāṇdavās executed a horse sacrifice to atone for the sins incurred by killing others in battle. Much of the parva, however, consists of the teaching of Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna, similar to those of *Mokṣa-dharma*, including the three chapters known as *Anu-Gītā*.

The “Āśramavāsika-Parva” (47 chapters) describes the final meeting of the surviving characters when the Pāṇdavās go to visit the elders (Dhṛtrāṣṭra, Gāndhārī and Kuntī) of the family who have now renounced the world and are practising religious austerities in the forest.

The “Mausala-Parva” (9 chapters) tells of the destruction of Kṛṣṇa’s posterity, the Yadus, through civil strife, and the departure of Kṛṣṇa from this world. The “Mahāprasthānika-Parva” (3 chapters) describes the deaths of the Pāṇdavās and Draupadī after they have given up their kingdom and journeyed to the Himālayas. The final parva, “Swargārohaṇa-Parva” (5 chapters) depicts the major characters of the epic residing among the gods in heaven.

Over and above the eighteen parvas of the *Mahābhārata*, there is another parva called the “Harivaṃśa” which is a supplement to the epic. This is divided into three sub-parvas—the *Harivaṃśa-Purāṇa*, the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* and the *Bhaviṣya-Purāṇa*. The “Harivaṃśa-Parva” is a *Purāṇa* in itself, and, in addition to legends, it narrates several genealogies. The *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* gives an account of the life of Kṛṣṇa, and the *Bhaviṣya-Purāṇa* speaks of future events. The material of the “Harivaṃśa-Purāṇa” seems to have been drawn from the *Viṣṇu*, *Bhāgavata* and *Bhaviṣya*, and other *Purāṇas*.

The introduction of tales into the main story was done with a purpose by Vedvyāsa to make others understand the dominance of the impersonal viewpoint over the personal viewpoint. The epic provides a golden thread for understanding dharma which runs through all the complex movements in the epic. Vyāsa has many important voices like Vaiśampāyana, Ugrāśravā, Bhīṣma, Vidura, and sages and ṛṣis who narrate tales to understand the issues of dharma. From the perspective of the number of pages, more than half of the *Mahābhārata* is devoted to talks, dialogues, tales or narratives. In “Vana-Parva”, three Ṛṣis (Brihadāśva, Lomaśa and Mārkaṇḍeya) narrate a large number of stories to Yudhiṣṭhira. In all, it includes the following stories: Nala and Damyantī, Daḍhiçī, Vyādha-Gītā, Rāmāyaṇa, Sāvitrī, Śivi and Yakṣa-Yudhiṣṭhira. They all, in one way or another, deal with the issues of dharma. Similarly, the dialogue between Dhṛtrāṣṭra and Ṛṣi Sanat-Sujāta, and the stories narrated in “Udyoga-Parva”, are based on the highest spiritual knowledge. One more relates to Lord Kṛṣṇa’s speech at the Kaurava assembly where he tries to persuade Dhṛtrāṣṭra to control the unrighteousness of Duryodhana. “Śānti-Parva” is another important parva which contains a comprehensive coverage of dharma. Here, there is a dialogue between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira. Bhīṣma adopts a style of illustrating most of his replies with the help of a story. In this way, there are as many as seventy-five stories in “Śānti-Parva”. Probably the most famous of these stories (from a socio-religious point of view) is based on the dialogue between Tulādhāra (a person engaged in trade) and Jājali (a brāhmiṇ). Another important story is related to *Nārāyaṇi*-dharma. In the stories of these parvas, there is an exposition of *sva*-dharma (dharma of individuals), *sādharaṇa*-dharma (Universal dharma), and *āpad*-dharma (practical application of dharma).

In the structure of the *Mahābhārata*, dharma is the central issue to which all human issues keep returning to Bhīṣma’s conclusion that dharma is subtle (*sūkṣma*) as it does not deal with matters of fact and the world of power. Instead, it deals with opinions about how man ought to behave. This all-time text interrogates the fundamental verities of human life and thus poses perennial questions that face us at every step in our life such as what is dharma? This issue is formulated, analysed, and exemplified but a certain indeterminacy remains which is the mark of the profound wisdom of the *Mahābhārata*. The fundamental question of dharma is discussed and every character asks questions of the more experienced ones about dharma. It is advocated in the *Mahābhārata* that it is difficult to decide what dharma is and what adharma is. What is dharma and what is adharma oscillate between two broad ideas, viz. (i) accounts or tales of the long

conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, and (ii) dialogues or talks on the issues of dharma. It is these two threads that give structure to the whole epic.

In “Vana-Parva”, three ṛṣis (Bṛihdaśva, Lomaśa and Mārkaṇḍeya) narrate a large number of stories to Yudhiṣṭhira. In all, it includes the following stories: Nala and Damyantī, Daḍhicī, Vyādha-Gītā, Rāmāyaṇa, Sāvitrī, King Śivi and Yakṣa-Yudhiṣṭhira. All of the stories and dialogues deal with issues of dharma. Similarly, the dialogue between Dhṛtrāṣṭra and Ṛṣi Sanat-Sujāta, Vidura-Nīti, and the story of King Nahuṣa narrated in “Udyoga-Parva” are based on the highest spiritual knowledge. One more relating to Lord Kṛṣṇa’s speech at the Kaurava assembly, where he tries to persuade Dhṛtrāṣṭra to control the unrighteousness of Duryodhana, is worth mentioning in order to gain a practical understanding of dharma.

“Śānti-Parva” is another important parva which has a full explanation of dharma. Here, in the dialogue between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīṣma adopts a way of illustrating most of his replies with the help of a story. In this way, there are as many as seventy-five stories in “Śānti-Parva”. Probably the most famous of these stories (from a socio-religious point of view) is based on the dialogue between Tulādharma (a person engaged in trade) and Jājali (a brāhmin). Another important story relates to *Nārāyaṇīya*-dharma. In the stories of these parvas, there is an exposition of *sva*-dharma (dharma of an individual), *sādhāraṇa*-dharma (universal dharma) and *āpad*-dharma (practical application of dharma). Yudhiṣṭhira announces the importance of dharma almost in despair:

“Whether we know or do not know dharma, whether it is knowable or not, dharma is finer than the edge of a sword and more substantial than a mountain.” (XII.260.12)

The nearest answer to the question of what dharma could be is given in the “Śānti-Parva” by Bhīṣma:

“That one who regards all beings to be like his own self, who never does any harm and who has wrath under control, obtains great happiness here and hereafter.” (XII.66.36)

As far as “Anuśāsana-Parva” is concerned, it is mostly concerned with the practical applications of dharma. Numerous tales describe the importance of charity, non-violence, and austerity. The story of Gautamī *brāhmaṇī* produces the best understanding of dharma. In “Aśvamedha-Parva”, Lord