

# THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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## 1 DRAUPADI'S HUMILIATION: BOOK 2, CHAPTER 30

'Go, son of a Suta', said Draupadi, 'go and ask that gambler in the hall: "Heir of Bharata, did you first lose yourself, or me?"'

Draupadi: 'King Yudhishtira is the son of Dharma and abides by dharma, and dharma is subtle, requiring skill to understand it. I would not wish even a word of mine to deviate from virtue and bring my lord the least atom of shame. But for you to drag me in the midst of the Kuru heroes in the midst of my period is ignoble; and nobody here shows me any respect! Clearly they all approve your way of thinking. A curse upon you! The dharma of the Bharatas is destroyed, and so is adherence to the kshatriya way, for every one of the Kurus is watching whilst the limits of Kuru dharma are breached. Drona has no mettle, nor Bhishma, nor, for sure, king Dhritarashtra here, for they, the senior most of the Kurus take no notice of this savage violation of dharma.' [...]

'The king was challenged in this hall by skilled gamblers, wicked, ignoble deceivers, men who love gambling, while he had had little practice. How can you say that he was allowed free choice? Foremost among the Kurus and the Pandavas, he is pure by nature and does not understand the ways of deceit; that is why, even though he had been won by all of them conspiring together, he agreed to wager me afterwards. Let all the Kurus present in this hall, men with sons and daughters-in-law under their authority, consider what I have said, and properly decide this question of mine.'

## 2 YUDHISHTHIRA'S CORONATION: BOOK 2, CHAPTER 50

After Yudhishtira had performed the great *rajasuya-yajña* in Indra-prastha and received the worship and praise of all the kings in the world, Duryodhana returned to his home in Hastinapura in a disconsolate state of mind. He came to his father, Dhritarashtra, and told him of the opulence and prosperity the Pandavas were enjoying in their newly established kingdom. All the great rulers of the earth had attended the ceremony and each one of them had brought wondrous gifts as offerings to Yudhishtira. Thus the Pandava king was enjoying wealth and sovereignty that had never been known by any previous king.

**'Seeing such prosperity in the son of Kunti, my lord, I no longer see any point in living!'** he exclaimed. **'They are growing ever stronger whilst our power is in decline. Constantly thinking about this, my heart is never at peace. Hence I am plunged into a state of grief and growing pale and emaciated.'**

## 2.1 *Duryodhana and the kshatriya dharma*

The only criterion that should guide the conduct of a kshatriya is the attainment of success. So regardless of whether the means are virtuous or wicked there must be no scruples. One who desires to snatch the prosperity of his enemy should bring all directions under his rule; a weapon is not just an instrument that cuts, but a means to defeat the foe. And anyone who causes a person distress, for whatever reason, is to be regarded as his enemy. To be discontented is in fact the root of prosperity, so I want to be discontented! A successful king is one who tries to gain the prosperity of others and any wealth that has been accumulated by another can be acquired by plunder. This is the custom of kings. Just as a snake will swallow frogs, so the Earth swallows kings who are peaceful.

Anyone who pursues the same goal as oneself is an enemy and anybody who foolishly neglects an enemy will be destroyed as if by an incurable disease. Never let the enemy's prosperity be acceptable to you, for such a policy will become a great burden. One who seeks to expand his prosperity grows to greatness amongst his relatives, just as the body grows from childhood to the adult form. I covet the Pandavas' prosperity but I have not yet made it my own and I still have doubts about my ability to take it from them. I am determined to resolve these doubts. I will either take their prosperity from them or die in battle whilst attempting to do so. What do I care for life, when the Pandavas are growing in power and wealth whilst our possessions know no increase?

## 3 YUDHISHTHIRA AND THE DOG: BOOK 17, CHAPTER 1-3

Yudhishtira then said, 'This dog has become devoted to me, O lord. My heart is full of compassion for him; he must come with me.' Indra replied, 'You have gained a position equal to mine, with great prosperity and all the joys of the gods. Give up this dog; there will be no cruelty in such an act.' But Yudhishtira was unmoved. 'It is very difficult,' he said, 'for a righteous person to perform a wicked act. I do not desire the prosperity you speak of if I have to cast off one who is devoted to me.' 'There is no place in our world for persons with dogs!' said Indra. 'Leave it behind! This is not a cruel deed.' But still Yudhishtira would not listen, 'I have vowed,' he said, 'never to abandon one who is terrified, who is devoted to me, who seeks my protection, who is destitute, who is weak or who wishes to save his life.' Again Indra said, 'Give up this dog, a filthy impure creature. You even gave up your brothers and Draupadi.'

'But they were already dead,' Yudhishtira replied, 'I would never have abandoned them whilst they were still alive. To abandon a devoted follower is an evil act, O Indra.' As these words were spoken the dog vanished and in its place there was the god Dharma, Yudhishtira's true father. 'You have compassion for all beings,' Dharma said, 'as this incident has demonstrated. You have given up the delights of heaven for the sake of a dog who was dependent on you and hence I say that there is no one in heaven who can match you in terms of dharma.' Then Yudhishtira mounted the chariot of Indra and ascended to heaven.

Krishna then said to Arjuna, “Stop! Stop! No one who understands the distinctions of dharma would ever act in such a way. You do not know about the decisions made by learned men who teach disciples about matters of right conduct. It is never easy to determine what course of action should be followed and what should be avoided, but it is possible if one follows the guidance of scripture. You think that you know what dharma is, but by acting in this way as if it were dharma you are showing your ignorance of dharma for the killing of a living being is forbidden by those who truly adhere to dharma. In my opinion, never killing any living being is the highest dharma; one may speak a falsehood but one should never kill another being. So how is it that you are prepared to kill the king, your elder brother who is himself one who comprehends dharma? The vow you took was an act of folly and now as another act of folly you are preparing to embrace adharma. Why are you going to do this without thinking properly about dharma? The true end of dharma is certainly a subtle matter, which is hard to understand.

Now listen to a narration which reflects on the subtle and complex nature of dharma. One who speaks the truth adheres to dharma; there is no virtue higher than truthfulness. However, the practice of the essence of truth can be very difficult to comprehend. There are a number of occasions on which one may speak a lie: at a marriage, to woo a woman, when one’s life or property is threatened and for the sake of a Brahmin. On such occasions falsehood becomes truth and truth becomes falsehood. Anyone who adheres blindly to the principle of speaking the truth is no better than a fool.

**There was a *sadhu* named Kausika who was not well read in the teachings on dharma. He lived at a good distance from any village, at a place where a number of rivers met, and he had taken the following vow: ‘I must always speak the truth.’ He became famous for his adherence to this principle. Once some people came to the forest where he lived attempting to escape with their possessions from a gang of ferocious robbers. The robbers then approached Kausika and said, ‘A host of people came by here a little while ago. Which way did they go?’ Kausika told the truth, ‘They entered this wood here.’ Acting on this information, the robbers pursued their victims and when they found them they killed them all. And because of the adharma of speaking the truth, Kausika was reborn in a low state of life.**

There has to be some way of distinguishing dharma. Some say the highest knowledge is gained through reason (*tarka*) but many others say one gains knowledge of dharma from the *Shruti* (scriptures). I do not disagree with this, but the *Shruti* does not refer to every individual case. Dharma was created for the welfare of living beings and hence whatever sustains living beings is dharma. So we must understand dharma as that which leads to the welfare of people in the world. Now that I have given you a clear definition of dharma you must decide whether Yudhishtira should be slaughtered.

We will try first to make peace with our enemies, but if that fails then we must take up arms in a righteous cause. However, the slaughter of kinsmen and elders will indeed be a sinful act, as Sanjaya has said, so what is to be gained from battle? Alas, this kshatriya dharma is indeed sinful (*papah kshatriya-dharmo 'yam*, v.46) and we have taken birth amongst the kshatriyas.

A shudra renders service, a vaishya lives by trade, and a brahmin lives by begging, but we must live by slaughtering others. A fish lives by killing fish, **a dog lives by killing dogs and a kshatriya lives by killing other kshatriyas**. O Krishna, Kali (as in *kali-yuga*) always dwells on the battlefield. Lives are lost everywhere around and the outcome is dependent on destiny rather than our desire or endeavour. A coward may slay a hero and an unknown person may slay a famous warrior. Both parties cannot win nor can both be defeated, but on both sides there will be death and tragedy. If a kshatriya runs from the battlefield he loses both fame and prosperity, but in all circumstances war is wicked (*sarvatha vrijinam yuddham*, v.53). Who is not himself damaged when he hurts another? Even if a person wins victory, he will still suffer losses as his friends, children and relatives are struck down in battle. We see, O Janardana, that those who are quiet, modest, virtuous and compassionate are usually killed in warfare whilst the wicked escape with their lives. Even after killing enemies, still one's heart will be afflicted by remorse for this cruel deed.

Once violence begins it progresses in an endless cycle. The friends and relatives of slain kings will regroup and counterattack and so it continues without ever finding a resolution. It may be true, O Madhusudana, that exterminating the foe completely may lead to enduring prosperity, but such an act is most cruel. We do not wish to give up our kingdom nor do we wish to annihilate our entire race. Therefore peace is the best course, even if it is obtained through our personal humiliation. When those who strive consistently for peace find reconciliation impossible, then only is the time for war and terrible events must ensue. **In a quarrel between dogs first there is tale wagging, then barking, then showing teeth, then loud roars and only at last there is a fight. In such a contest the strongest dog will triumph and take the meat away from his defeated antagonist. It is exactly the same with men; there is no difference. Those who are weak must bow down and show respect to those who are powerful.**

(From: Nick Sutton, *The Mahabharata and Ramayana*, Oxford Centre For Hindu Studies, 2008)