

# An Analytical Study of Cultural Intermediaries through the Select Tales of the Mahabharata

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**Abstract---** *Since the emergence of language, humans have been indulged in learning and developing the art of narrating a social or public event either in order to amuse or to be didactic. In the history of Indian literature, epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, were composed to convey the real teachings of Vedas and Upanishads to the common people in comparatively a simplified language. The telling and re-telling of the tales embedded in these texts depend upon the prevailing language of people and the system of understanding. We help ourselves to derive new meanings through culturally oriented texts especially the epics as they are replete of stories from our origin, life and death. As Collins dictionary defines 'culture' as a 'particular society or civilization, especially considered in relation to its beliefs, way of life, or art'. It is important to understand that art which is being explored in the Mahabharata is an integral part of life through which we understand the basis of human life. Cultural Intermediaries were the taste makers who developed the knowledge and contributed to the attitude of life which resulted in as a 'thinking society'. This research paper attempts to answer the questions about universal impact of the cultural elements as presented in the tales of the Mahabharata which is a worldwide acclaimed piece of literature. It also presents the expression of people's life and living, cultural understanding at universal level.*

**Keywords---** *Myth, Epic, Narration, Culture, Mahabharata.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata* is different from *Ramayana*, whether both of the epics present the righteous mode of life with their didactic material, in the sense of their narration as the *Ramayana* is told from the character-oriented perspective; on the other hand, the *Mahabharata* is narrated by Vedvyasa keeping 'dharma' at the centre, in an idea-oriented perspective. He never ever tried to concentrate on a single character, all good is kept under the title 'dharma' and all unacceptable has been kept under the title 'adharma'. The *Mahabharata* has been narrated by various narrators as initiating from Vedvyasa, then Suta, Sauti, different sages, saints and ascetics, Krishna, and desideratum, its characters become narrators in the hour of need. All narrators spread the message of the good of all known as *loksamgraha* including the questions of birth, death and most importantly in between the both, i.e. life. Cultural intermediaries, as they were the taste-makers, narrators, and characters at the same time, have helped the Indian continent to grow and get shaped in a different way than the rest of the world. It has paved the way for the attainment of four ends of life (Dharma, Artha, kama and Moksha) through such scriptures in practice. Hence, Indian narratives, in general, are stories of human goodness, wisdom, righteousness and social duty.

Every culture establishes through the tales and stories told from their forefathers or guided by the scriptures. These tales set the road for cultural ornamentation at universal level with their spread. In a way, the cultural setting shows the "integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas and product characteristics given by a society" in

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whole. (Heibert 25) 'Culture' is a term of manifold connotations, ranging from the cultivation of mind and spirit to denote a whole way of life, material, moral and intellectual. As Collins dictionary defines 'culture' as a 'particular society or civilization, especially considered in relation to its beliefs, way of life, or art'. Whether, anthropologists have always used the word 'culture' in a much broader sense to mean forms of life and of social expression. Here, it is important to understand that the tales of the *Mahabharata* are an integral part of life through which we understand the basic questions of human life and the social gesture throughout.

Myth, the major component of society, is a set of traditional tales common to the members of a tribe, race or nation usually involving the supernatural and serving to explain some natural phenomenon in boldly imaginative terms. In the case of Nature-myth or Cosmogony myth, the myth is an expression of an extraordinary phenomenon – a sort of an honest belief expressed, without any effort to artificiality. Such is hardly the case with a 'myth' that balances a ritual, or a discontinued ritual that develops into a myth, which could be best called reminiscenary. Ritual–myth theory is all myths like, rituals, have a specific function to indicate in a tribe: social institutions such as marriage, economic institutions, kinship and many more such as customs, manners and social behaviors. Collins dictionary too defines myth as a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs. In the same vein, the *Mahabharata* not only expresses the quintessential lessons for readers but also serves the purpose of myth that justifies the religious belief and social customs accepted universally.

We do not see the world the way it is, we see it the way we are. Though, we try to derive new meanings through culturally oriented texts especially the epics as they are replete of stories from our origin, life and death. With the expansion in the understanding of the world that surrounds us; folk culture including the epics and *Puranas* specifically the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* of India gained prominence around the globe since the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The regional literature in India is an integral and inseparable body of writings, which is the precursor of its enriched history. A strong characteristic of ancient Indian literature is the sublime influence of regional tales, fables, stories and myths, which later developed as a distinct genre. Indian literature, thus, as the cradle of the art of narration, gave birth to an important and independent genre of literature, the regional literature which gave color and voice to the locale in its true essence as the text was an expression of people's life and living. However it remained largely confined to its local panorama and its access was beyond the comprehension of the large section of the society. The *Mahabharata* which is an integral part of the regional literature of India as well as worldwide acclaimed piece of literature also presents the expression of the culture and people's life at universal level.

In the oral culture, that is India's, compositions/texts have been received and disseminated in various modes of rendition – singing, recitation, enunciation, enactment, that is all modes in which there is mass participation and transform the text into a public transaction (as against something that is accessible only to those who can read). Texts thus received and disseminated become public property and that is exactly what the *Mahabharata* is - such is the reach of its narratives and sub-narratives. This epic, seven times larger than *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, available in three recensions (Pune, Kumbhakonam, Nilakanthiki) with, in all, 100217 couplets arranged in 18 books (*parvas*), excluding the supplementary *Harivansha Purana*, is oceanic in its size and reflects in its span the grandeur of the civilization that has produced it. Called by various names – *prabandha kavya* (structured composition),

*itihasa* (record of what all happened), *purakalpa itihasa* (a narrative with several protagonists), ‘fifth *Veda*’, *Dharmashastra* (sociological treatise) – *Mahabharata* has, in its long history, been commented upon by 36 learned commentators. The epic employs the story within a story structure, otherwise known as tales, popular in many Indian religious and non-religious works. It is first recited at Takshashila by the sage Vaiśampāyana, a disciple of Vyāsa, to the King Janamejaya who is the great-grandson of the Pāṇḍava prince Arjuna. The story is then recited again by a professional storyteller named Ugraśrava Sauti, many years later, to an assemblage of sages performing the 12-year sacrifice for the king Saunaka Kulapati in the Naimiśa forest. The presence of these commentators and commentaries is an evidence of the fact that the India has recognized this text as central to its culture and society. Witness the long, continuous tradition of retellings of the episodes and narratives from *Mahabharata* in the Indian languages and dialects, Shivaji Sawant’s *Mṛityunjaya* in Marathi and Pratibha Rai’s *Yajyaseni* in Oriya being just two of the innumerable contemporary examples.

The *Mahabharata* is different from other ancient epics in that no other epic explicitly discusses such ethical questions – death and killing abound in all the epics but the concern is with personal honour and valour. In the *Mahabharata* alone, the issue is social and secular and the grain of skepticism and indeterminacy runs through the main narrative like a layer of mica in a sandstone rock. *Mahabharata*, a *prabandhakavya*, the *Itihasa* of Indian life and thought, is a *dharmashastra* and as *pancam veda* has played multiple societal roles – as provider of inspiration in adversity, as entertainer and educator in happy times, as a proto-explanatory model for any number of problems encountered by the society, as a source of knowledge and as a sustainer of the social fiber and fabric by virtue of its being an elaborate theoretical and practical disquisition on human conduct. Its message is encapsulated in the dialogue between Draupadi and Yuddhishtira

(Yuddhishtira says to Draupadi) ... one should forgive every injury... by forgiveness is it that the universe is held together...O lady, a crisis hath come in the history of Bharatas for plunging them into calamity! This hath been my certain conclusion from some time before! Duryodhana deserveth not the kingdom. Therefore hath he been unable to acquire forgiveness. I, however, deserve the sovereignty and therefore is it that forgiveness hath taken possession of me. Forgiveness and gentleness are the qualities of the self-possessed. They represent eternal virtue. (III.29-32)

The cultural intermediaries narrate many tales, incidents and dialogues that tell us what shall be righteous to do in normal situation and what shall be carried for in emergent situations. This idea of normal and emergent situations encompasses the whole graph of better understanding through various tales in the epic. Out of 289 tales and anecdotes, and more than 25 Gitas, a few tales and couplets provide us the answers full of ‘just’ that is the very nucleus of this epic. So here, after understanding the essence of the epic, I would like to start my point of saying with a tale which describes the righteous action in spite of cherishing one’s materialistic stance.

In “Sabha-Parva”, Vidura tells a tale of King Prahlada who opts for *sva-dharma* and attains the heights of dharma. King Prahlada has a son Virochana. He, for the sake of obtaining a bride, quarrels with Sage Sudhanwa who is the son of Sage Angira. The both feel superior to each other. They decide to ask Prahlada who is superior in

both of them. Prahlada feels frightened at such question being asked. He fears that if he answers in the favour of his son then it will be not according to dharma.

“If thou answerest falsely, or dost not answer at all thy head will then be split into a hundred pieces by the wielder of the thunderbolt with that bolt of his.” II.68.70

Thus addressed by Sudhanwa, Prahlada takes the decision thinking practically after the great advice of Sage Kashyapa. Sage Kashyapa advises him and says:

“He that knoweth, but answereth not a question from temptation, anger or fear, casteth upon himself a thousand nooses of Varuna. And the person who, cited as a witness with respect to any matter of ocular or auricular knowledge, speaketh carelessly, casteth a thousand nooses of Varuna upon his own person. On the completion of one full year, one such noose is loosened. Therefore, he that knoweth, should speak the truth without concealment.” II.68.74-76

After taking the advice of Sage Kashyapa, King Prahlada declares Sudhanwa the best bridegroom for the bride. He says his son that Sudhanwa is superior than him in all ways. So he says:

“Sudhanwan is superior to thee, as indeed, (his father) Angiras is superior to me. The mother also of Sudhanwan is superior to thy mother. Therefore, O Virochana, this Sudhanwan is now the lord of the life.” II.68.86

Another story of a butcher and a brahmin (which occurs in Vyadha-Gita) narrated by Rishi Markandeya in the “Vana-Parva” also elaborates the dharma which constructs the culture of India and is being accepted for its universal approach. In the story, the butcher teaches a brahmin the universal dharma. It represents a dialogic conversation between a brahmin and a housewife and then a brahmin and a butcher. The Vyadha’s dialogues with brahmin presents the universal message of doing good to all. It is also prescribed that if one is doing good to his family, then in a way, he is also profiting the society. The story goes like this. A brahmin while performing his ‘yogic-kriya’ (ritual morning meditation obeisance) feels disturbed due to dirt dropped by a bird on his head. He looks at the bird with anger and the bird falls down dead. This fills the brahmin with arrogance. With this feeling, he goes to a house, begging for alms. The housewife who is nursing her sick husband, requests him to wait. The brahmin expresses anger at which the housewife says that she is not the bird. The brahmin feels shocked and amazed. So he asks her how she comes to know about the bird. The housewife concludes with some words of advice to the brahmin and says that although he has studied the Vedas, but has not understood the essence of dharma (the right). She describes the virtues of dharma by focusing on the harms of anger. She says:

“The gods know him for a Brahmana who always speaketh the truth here, who always gratifieth his preceptor, and who, though injured himself, never returneth the injury. The gods know him for a Brahmana who hath his senses under control, who is virtuous and pure and devoted to the study of the Vedas, and who hath mastery over anger and lust.” III.206.34

Now realizing the power of the housewife, he requests her to teach him dharma. She sends him to the *dharmavyadha* (righteous butcher) in Mithila. The brahmin goes to Mithila meets the butcher who is selling meat.

The butcher welcomes the brahmin, giving him the reference to the housewife. The brahmin is again amazed to hear the reference to the housewife who has sent him to the butcher. The brahmin asks the butcher why after having acquired so much knowledge about dharma, he still sells the meat. The butcher replies:

“O learned brahmin, my family has been engaged in this occupation (of selling meat) since many generations, so I have felt that this work is suitable for me too, and is not contrary to dharma. Please do not think that I am doing anything improper.” III.207.20

“O kind – hearted soul, I only sell the meat of those animals which have been killed by others, i.e. I myself do not kill any animal. Furthermore, I do not eat meat.” III.207.32-33

After hearing such truthful and witty talk from a butcher, the brahmin asks to teach him the right conduct. The butcher says right conduct is achieved in two ways—

1. Keeping under control the vices (the most harmful vices being selfishness, anger vanity, greed and crookedness), and
2. Promoting virtues (the most helpful virtues being those that hold the society together).

The butcher says that the said practice is necessary even after attaining the state of perfection. He adds:

“*Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satya* (truth) are the two main pillars of dharma through which the highest good of all can be achieved. In fact, a decision on what is true (under difficult circumstances) should be made by sticking to that course of action which leads to the highest good of beings.” III.207.74, III.209.4

The butcher explains the *ahimsa* and says that one should have compassion towards all beings and one’s conduct should be lawful and just. Moreover, the essence of dharma is the desire to do good to all. Above all, it is the service to one’s parents, which he has neglected. The butcher tells him that he should have to pay heed to his parents who have become blind. He advises him to go back to his home and serve them. Thereafter he should study the Vedas. He finally tells him to have purity of heart and gratefulness which are necessary for acquiring the ability to distinguish between dharma and adharma.

*Vicakhnu-Gita* makes a strong plea for *ahimsa*. The King Vicakhnu refuses to perform a *yajna* by giving animal sacrifice. Bhishma produces the dialogues of King Vicakhnu before to explain how *ahimsa* is dharma:

Only those who violate norms of righteous conduct, and who are ignorant or atheists or skeptics, want to acquire fame through rituals and take recourse to animal sacrifice. XII.265.4

“Dharma should not be practiced blindly and thoughtlessly as is done by people who sacrifice animals. Subtle issues of dharma should be settled in proper authority. I firmly believe that to practice *ahimsa* towards all beings is dharma at its best.” XII.265.6

Harita-Muni too condemns *ahimsa* in *Harita-Gita* in “Shanti-Parva”. He concludes the message by ascribing that one should behave equally to all in the same way. Lack of enmity will provide the world a friendly atmosphere. He says:

“One should abstain from injuring any creature, maintaining a friendly behaviour towards all. After all, one lives in this world for a limited time only, so avoiding enmity should be the goal of life.” XII.278.5

*Parashara-Gita* contains the conversation in between King Janaka and Rishi Parashara. King Janaka asks Rishi Parashara what contributes to the shreyas i.e. good of all the beings. Rishi Parashara explains dharma and prescribes that one should be a follower of *anrishamsyam* i.e. absence of cruelty for all beings while following such dharma. Then he lists thirteen virtues that all members of society should practice. These virtues contain absence of cruelty, non-violence, diligence, allowing others what is due to them, respect for ancestors, serving guests, truthfulness, never giving way to anger, observing marriage vows, purity, never being envious, spiritual knowledge and tolerance.

Another tale of King Shivi narrated by Sage Markandeya in “Vana-Parva” exemplifies the virtue of working selflessly. One day, a pigeon falls into the lap of King Shivi being afraid of a hawk. The pigeon requests King Shivi to protect him. In a while, the hawk also reaches there. He argues for his own case and urges to King Shivi that he should not be an obstacle in the way of getting his food. Now the King has two options—to hand over pigeon to the hawk and to provide the hawk with the food of his own choice. The King considers the first option as an improper action. He gives an answer for considering this action improper:

“He that gives up a frightened creature seeking protection cannot hope to get protection when he himself needs it –even clouds do not provide adequate rain for him, nor do the seeds, though planted in the field, grow for him.” III.197.12

The King remains firm on his decision and offers to provide some other food to the hawk. But the hawk does not change his mind and asks for the pigeon only. Then the King offers him his own life in the place of pigeon’s life. The pigeon then asks for an equivalent amount of his thigh’s flesh. The King abruptly accepts the hawk’s demand. He cuts off a piece of flesh from his thigh as may be equal to the weight of the pigeon. But the weight of his thigh’s flesh weighs less than the pigeon. Then he cuts off more of his own flesh—from all parts of his body. Finally, the King himself ascends the scale.

The next tale represents the righteous path to be followed during emergent situations. The major character in the epic Bhishma stresses on the survival of life more than religious merit. By reproducing the story of Sage Vishvamitra and the Chandala, Bhishma emphasizes on the survival of life. Once there has been a draught for twelve years. No recital of the Vedas (sacred verses) is being heard and no donations are being made. The brahmins have to abstain from their sacrificial duties. There remains no food to live on. One day, Sage Vishvamitra goes out in the search of food of any kind pure or impure. Wandering aimlessly, he arrives in a village of the Chandala but he does not get any food even there. Suddenly, he finds a piece of a dog, hanging in one of those huts. He decides to steal the haunch of the dog’s carcass. Sage Vishvamitra thinks and says to himself:

“I have no means now of sustaining life. Theft is allowable in a season of distress for even an eminent person. It will not detract from his glory. Even a Brahmana for saving his life may do it. This is certain.” XII.141.38

When the Chandala comes to know that the thief is none other than the Sage Vishvamitra himself, he tries his best to dissuade him from that unethical action. But the sage cites the instance of sage Agastya, who ate Vatapi, an asura, out of hunger. Then he utters the basic principles to be followed by a man in distress. He proclaims that when life is in danger, one should save oneself by any means ethical or unethical. After the crisis is over one must acquire virtue. So, now to save his life theft is not unjust. The Chandala tells that the meat of the dog is impure and moreover, it is the hinder portion of that beast. But the Chandala cannot restrain Sage Vishvamitra from his action. He takes away the haunch of the dog to share it with his family. He kindles the *Aindrāgneya* (fire of holy sermon) and offers the meat to Indra, other gods and to the *pitṛs* (forefathers). Indra suddenly ponders rain profusely that produces huge crops. Sage Vishvamitra attains highest success of an ascetic after extirpating his sins (of theft from a Chandala's hut) by penances. Sage Vishvamitra, describing the importance of life to the Chandala concludes with his final message:

“One should, when one is dying, preserve one's life by any means in one's power without judging of their character. Afterwards, when competent, one should seek the acquisition of merit.” XII.141.63

Again,

“That by which life may be preserved should certainly be accomplished without scruple. Life is better than death. Living, one may acquire virtue.” XII.141.65

## II. CONCLUSION

Thus, the exploration of the myth and culture of all the tales of the *Mahabharata* has modern relevance in the modern global world where people are struck in the web of conflicts. The tales are impregnated with the cultural messages that inspire the modern generation to follow the values of life which pillow the human civilization. The cultural intermediaries have standardized the versions of knowledge in the form of tales and dialogues in the epic. They all have tried to provide the text with a contextual binding with a thread of universality. It has undoubtedly helped to grow modern generations to understand the analytical and empirical musing and contemplation in human life.

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