

Deconstructing the concept of goodness: With Special Reference to the *The Difficulty of Being Good - On the Subtle Art of dharma* by Gurcharan Das

Ashia

Research Scholar

Department of English and Cultural Studies

Panjab University

Abstract

The Difficulty of Being Good - On the Subtle Art of dharma, authored by Gurcharan Das, exemplifies the famous epic *Mahabharata* depicting the role of moral duty in everyday life. Throughout the book, the author contemplates the true definition of correct moral duty, i.e., Dharma, by picking notable characters such as Arjuna, Krishna, Duryodhana etc. Their actions and the repercussions obtained from those are analyzed in depth. This book is the author's way of bringing purpose to life through the process of identifying one's final duty and core responsibility or goal.

This book applies the principles of one of the most ancient and popular religious and literary texts in our real life to solve contemporary issues. Through simple objective comparison and subjective application, the author manages to resolve any questions that plague our minds and leave the readers in awe of the power of the literary knowledge that it contains about human minds and the nature of this world.

The Mahabharata is a great epic that has inspired many authors to write books in fiction and non-fiction. However, at the same time, the book also raises many unanswered questions. Correct moral duty and conduct are the major themes of this book, and yet, as we reach the end, the correct definition of these words is still a blur. For Gurcharan Das, it was a project in his late 50s to find the answers to life's biggest question: 'What is the right thing to do?' He studies and scrutinizes *The Mahabharata* to get to the core of every character's mindset to decode the secret that the epic holds. This paper elucidates

various essential themes in every chapter and the questions and answers that would arise in a reader's mind while perusing this book.

The Difficulty of Being Good is a 400-paged book that probes deeply into one of the most significant literary and religious texts of Indian history - *The Mahabharata*. Penguin Books first published it in 2009. The edition mentioned here is a unique 'Popular Penguin' edition published in 2012 when Penguin Books India brought together 25 of its best-loved titles to commemorate their 25th birthday. Gurcharan Das, the author of this book, is also the author of the international bestseller *India Unbound* and a columnist for six Indian newspapers, including *The Times of India*. He often writes newspapers and periodicals such as *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Foreign Affairs*. Gurcharan Das has studied philosophy under John Rawls and Sanskrit language under Daniel Ingalls at Harvard University, from where he graduated. Before being a writer, he was CEO at renowned company Procter & Gamble India before he took early retirement in Delhi and began to write his books. Apart from this book, he has written many fine books such as *India Unbound*, *The Elephant Paradigm*, *A Fine Family*, *India Grows at Night* etc.

In this book, he operates from a very great perspective of the epic of Mahabharata, constantly comparing and contrasting the situations and principles from this 5000-year-old epic with our everyday modern real-life scenarios. The book is divided into chapters that centralize the personality traits of the several main characters of Mahabharata but eventually narrow down to one single theme. Each main character in the epic represents a significant moral flaw or virtue, and their battles mirror our own human emotions with remarkable clarity. He talks about Duryodhana's Envy, Draupadi's Courage, Arjuna's Despair, Bhishma's Selflessness, etc. Underlying the overall analysis of these characters is the attempt to understand the true nature of 'dharma'. One should never do to another what one regards as injurious to oneself. This, in brief, is the law of Dharma. (*Mahabharata* XVIII.113.8)

Why be 'good'? Why spend your energy on being kind to others in a world where there is no guarantee that all that kindness will be reciprocated? Why cross the boundaries of self-interest and choose to be selfless? Is a bad person never good? Does not the good sometimes become bad? Ultimately, what is good and what is evil? These questions are at the heart and root of every chapter in this book. As we dwell further on the book and traverse the sequence of events that led to the Great War,

and as we try to understand the choices and actions that led up to the war, we encounter many different explanations for the fundamental lesson that the Mahabharata is trying to impart about Dharma. The wholeness of Mahabharata's world and the integrity of its character sketches are miracles of poetic conception even today. For the ancient Indians and even today, these stories were a Bible, a manual carried in memory everywhere and always, a source of wise, proverbial, and aphoristic wisdom that would never abandon them. Gurcharan Das, in his book, tries to squeeze out the wisdom from the stories to make them stand-alone. Trying to narrow down wisdom from such a deep ocean of knowledge as *The Mahabharata* is like trying to achieve a remarkable feat, but still, Das manages to make sense of the epic.

The name of the book suggests Gurcharan Das's idea of Dharma. He calls 'dharma' a subtle art. Just like how art is subjective to the artist, so is the meaning of Dharma subjective to the person upholding it? From chapter to chapter, we see how different characters in this book interpret the meaning of true Dharma to justify their actions. In a way, they are all right, but in a way, they are all wrong too. Duryodhana's Dharma was to not weakly stand and watch as his enemies prosper and he declines; Draupadi's Dharma was to fight for herself rather than give up on the commands of all the men around her. Yudhishtira was blindly tied to his duty, and Arjuna found it against his Dharma to fight the war. On the other side, Bhishma's Dharma was selfless, and Krishna believed in letting things go the way they were going and used it to justify manipulating his enemies in war. The book is not just an agreement or appreciation of the religious text of Mahabharata but also an interrogation of its teachings. The author attempts to measure the length to which the principles and lessons taught by the Mahabharata can be applicable in actual reality. As mentioned above, the author examines the Mahabharata from various angles, comparing the figures' achievements and shortcomings to those of actual personalities, many of whom are prominent members in the fields of politics, economics and trade. In each case, he draws surprising analogies applicable to anyone dealing with ethical or moral difficulties in today's complicated world.

As the author reaches the end of the book, he realizes that being good is not easy. He says, 'Dharma, the word at the heart of the epic, is, in fact, untranslatable. Duty, goodness, justice, law, and custom all have something to do with it, but they all fall short.' Like the author, the Mahabharata

characters are also still trying to figure out its meaning at the epic's end. The Mahabharata is vast and filled with copious amounts of insight. Das's work can only be considered a book-length introduction to the epic at best, but it makes a perfect introduction. The themes prevailing throughout the book are immensely impactful and helpful. Upon reading the blurb on the back of the cover, one cannot keep calm and will start reading a book that talk about all the unanswerable questions that everybody face in their life about right and wrong. If we find the answer to this, wouldn't all the world's issues be solved? It was difficult to review this book, as right and wrong are ill-defined words based on relativity and individual experience in today's world. From observations in life, one can tell that right and wrong cannot be separated. They both are tenants of the same heart. For example, even Harry Potter had a part of Voldemort hiding inside of him. The matter of Dharma is subtle yet delicately complex. Moreover, this intricate simplicity is beautifully discussed in this book through various chapters that dissect each character of *The Mahabharata* and influential people of current times.

The story of the Mahabharata is, in some or another way, the story of our lives. While the Mahabharata is an epic that imparts idealistic qualities to its readers, at the same time, it is rooted in reality itself. The characteristics of numerous characters, such as Duryodhana and Arjuna, are relevant and may be experienced by the average individual. One of the most impactful chapters is Bhishma's Selflessness with the tagline 'Be intent on the act, not on its fruits'. Krishna quoted these words to Arjuna on the battlefield. Why must Arjuna fight the war? The only answer provided in the epic to this dilemma is that 'he must'. This moral insight is acknowledged in the book as nishkama karma.

Nishkama karma is a crucial concept even in the Bhagwad Gita, which advises us to act selflessly without any personal gain in mind. This has been one of the most distinctive contributions of Mahabharata if considered ethically. While reading this chapter written by Gurcharan Das, where he includes an adoring example of his own father's commitment to his duty, one would fall in love with the concept of nishkama karma. Knowing the Indian tendency to believe that the only way to be righteous is to renounce the world and all its materialistic things, Krishna clarifies through this concept that doing one's duty in this selfless spirit of detachment without yearning for anything in return is equally important. This disciplined karma yoga attitude makes us less selfish and less envious and helps us lead a peaceful life free from expectations. In this way, a person can have a calm attitude even amid constant

activity. Bhishma performs his duty well. Whether what he did was right or wrong is a question for another day, but he did what he promised, and in this way, he stayed true to his Dharma. He was a true karma yogi and believed in nishkama karma. Bhishma carries his role with detachment, serving his kingdom selflessly and acting from a sense of duty rather than the personal interest, which feels commendable unless we read further about all the side effects that this attitude can cause. Through Bhishma's character arch, the Mahabharata might be trying to indicate that even selflessness has its limitations. To explain this, Gurcharan Das presents various examples, such as that of Dhirubhai Ambani, who was selfless in his pursuit and acted not for himself but humanity. However, to get to the top, didn't his employment terms and conditions lead him to be a part of corruption and bribery? This demonstrates that selflessness does not always imply morality.

Another horrifying example is Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, who systematically murdered 2.9 million Jews. He later wrote in his autobiography that he suffered great emotional pain, but he did his job disinterestedly as a duty towards his nation. Although Das does conclude that if balanced well and not used in its extreme, Nishkama karma can be a handy trick in the bag for the stressful and expectation filled lives of us modern first world dwellers.

Another exciting chapter in the book that inspires many questions is Krishna's Guile. Krishna's use of trickery and deceit on the battlefield has unarguably been the most controversial and debated subject in Mahabharata studies. Krishna is God, after all. 'Casting aside virtue, the sons of Pandu, adopt now some contrivance for gaining the victory.' Krishna preaches righteousness all through the Gita. Suddenly, in the war, Krishna asks the Pandavas to let go of their Kshatriya dharma - 'the warrior's code of conduct that defines the rights and wrongs meticulously in the war. This is jus-in-Bello. The author also discusses jus-ad-Bellum in the chapter Arjuna's Despair, talking about the reasons to go to war and jus-post-Bellum in the chapter Yudhishtira's Remorse about the consequences of war. Krishna firmly believes that once you decide to go to war, you must win at any cost. This chapter underlines the entire point of Mahabharata, which is that Dharma is sukshma, subtle. There is an outstanding line between good and evil, and slotting anything in compartments is a grave mistake.

The Difficulty of Being Good is one of the best books in the genre of non-fiction and philosophical books. This generation needs to look into the self occasionally and conduct philosophical

inquiries in today's day and age. This is a powerful book that forces one to be thoughtful in every action and constantly questions your motives but at the same time. It also puts one at ease. The book relieves society from the anxiety of constant wondering and dilemma and instead provides you with various examples and techniques to tackle life's issues.

The Mahabharata and *The Difficulty of Being Good* complement each other. It also profoundly reflects India's ancient culture and code of conduct. Adhering to one's duty, selflessness, and forgiveness, the art of war, the art of living, and other concepts discussed in this book are teachings present in Indian texts, which date back centuries and millenniums. Like the protagonists in the Mahabharata, the author of this book is left perplexed and bewildered, realising that pure Dharma cannot be defined empirically. It is the amalgamation of situations and thoughts, which can only be figured out spontaneously. The author says, 'Dharma, the word at the heart of the epic, is, in fact, untranslatable. Duty, goodness, justice, law and custom all have something to do with it, but they all fall short.'

Overall, the book has been successful in making a powerful point while at the same time acknowledging that no one, not even the Mahabharata contains the answer to the throbbing questions in our minds. *The Mahabharata* is a magnificent and magical epic that is open and willing to be interpreted in whatever way we find correct and suitable. Dharma is such a complex word and has been used in various ways within the Hindu tradition for different moral ideals ranging from truthfulness, ahimsa, compassion etc. Towards the end, the book provides its readers with a huge reassurance that Dharma is not rigid. Goodness can be expressed in a myriad of flexible ways suitable to the situation at hand. Whenever one finds oneself deep in emotional turmoil, confused, indecisive or stuck in a moral dilemma, Krishna's words should echo in your heart – 'That is the way it is!'

Work Cited

- 1.Das, Gurcharan. *The Difficulty of Being Good - On the subtle art of dharma*. Penguin Books, 2009.
- 2.Das, Parnaprajna. *Mahabharata - An authentic presentation*. Sri Sitaram Seva Trust, 2014.
- 3.Giesbrecht, Ethel. "Just War Theory." *Asia Pacific Theological Seminary* (2020), "Goodreads." n.d.
- 4.Pathak, Krishna. "Nishkama Karma and the Categorical Imperative: A Philosophical Reflection on the Bhagvad Gita." *International Journal of Applied Ethics* (2013): 119-140.