

An Essay on the Divine Krishna and His Infinite Wisdom

By

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Abstract

This paper deals with the complex aspects of Lord Krishna – the eighth incarnation of the supreme god in Hinduism– Vishnu. The immediately preceding incarnation was Rama – in the form of an ideal human being. Krishna was the predominant personality, if not the hero, of the Indian epic ‘Mahabharata’. That said, the ultimate goal of all the incarnations of Vishnu was that of establishing human harmony and social peace – referred to a ‘Dharma’ in many Indian languages. Mahabharata was written during 300 BCE and 300 ACE by a well-read sage of his days – Vedavyasa. While Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu was known to be the embodiment of humility, patience, and sacrifice, Krishna, the eight incarnation of Vishnu, is adored for his omnipresent divinity and infinite wisdom.

Key Words

Divine; Human harmony; Incarnation: Military Formation; Social Peace; War; Wisdom

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1. Introduction

The Indian epic, Mahabharata, was supposed to have been written during 300 BCE and 300 ACE by a well-read sage of those days – Vedavyasa (Vysa, for short). The epic consisted of 100,000 verses, or approximately 1.8 million words -- four times the length of the Bible. Apparently, there are additions and subtractions on the basic story developed by Vysa by several other authors but this paper limits its scope to the quintessential storyline enunciated by Vedvyasa. It is unthinkable of Mahabharata without the divine Krishna and his wisdom. One may even say that Mahabharata belongs to Krishna.

“Mahabharata has been called the Panchama veda” (Singh 2008, p.1). The presence of Krishna in the epic must have contributed to that high ranking. Add to that the rich storyline of the epic, the precarious incidents in it, as also the development of its complex characters. Note also that the four Vedas – Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda -- have been orally transmitted since the 2nd millennium BCE with the help of elaborate mnemonic techniques. Despite the presence of poetic hyperbole, Vysa tells the readers that just hearing a word from the epic would be equivalent to taking a dip in the holy rivers and other similar dharmic activities.

The epic was originally written in Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages in the world, although it has since been translated into several languages. Being a mythology, Mahabharata should perhaps be interpreted as ‘creative speculations that cannot be either confirmed or denied’ (Madhur 2024, 7 March). Hence, one could be agnostic about the epic. That said, it is also possible to argue that just because one has not seen one’s grandparents or great-great-parents, it does not mean that they did not exist (Madhur 2024, 7 March).

I draw upon my readings of abridged versions of the epic in Kannada, a south Indian language, watching both stage and debating sessions of ‘Yakshagana’ – a very popular art form performed in the South Indian States of Karnataka and Kerala; and watching the long Television serials telecast on Indian channels on these epics (Ramanand Sagar’s serial on Ramayana and B.R Chopra’s on Mahabharata and Vishnu Purana).

The key objective of this paper is to decode the charming ways in which Krishna went about the task of establishing human harmony and social peace. Krishna is not the hero of Mahabharata, yet Mahabharata without Krishna is an impossibility. Using his charming personality, he played the role of a ‘divine deity’ in the epic.

Following this introductory section, the next section provides some preliminaries that serve as the backdrop for the ensuing sections. The rest of the paper provides Krishna’s role as: a son and a

nephew (section 3); a manager of Pandava's Rajasuya Ceremony (section 4); a divine magician (section 5); an ambassador for peace (section 6); a war-time manager (Section 7). Section 8 then provides a brief summing up of the paper. Let me at the very outset mention that this essay does not deal with Bhagavad-Gita – which is far beyond the scope of this essay - a topic that would perhaps require a separate full-fledged and self-contained essay.

2. Some Preliminaries

According to Indian cosmology, the world witnesses four main 'Yugas' – epochs or eras – each era spanning over thousands of years (<https://popularvedicscience.com/history/yugas/4-yugas/>). The four eras are: Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali (the modern era). It is believed that people were 100% honest during the Satya era, while that figure declined to 75% in Treta, 50% in Dvapara, and 25% in Kali era (modern era). Mahabharata belonged to the Dvapara era. In terms of geography, Mahabharata covers the undivided Northwest India. Krishna belonged to a pastoral race referred to as 'Yadavas' (<https://www.worldhistory.org/Krishna/>).

It is possible that the declining trend in overall honesty among the people must have made the task of establishing human harmony and social peace that much harder for Krishna. Take for example that there was a reasonable distinction between 'good' and 'bad' characters in Ramayana. This distinction is far more blurred in Mahabharata. Hence, most characters in Mahabharata are less perfect than those in Ramayana. There is both good and the bad mixed up in almost every character portrayed in Mahabharata. That said, "The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are quite a different kinds of artistic creation. When we read them, our inner being is seized and cleansed, so to say, by being passed alternately through joys and sorrows, and we are finally lifted above both and taken to the Transcendent and Real" (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 451)

Rama is known to be a calm and cool human being – 'mitahari, mitabhashi, and mitanidri' – ate, spoke, and slept – all in moderation. He also was soft-spoken (mridubhashi) (Madhur 2024, 7 March). In contrast, Krishna tended to speak in his own divine riddles – almost every short sentence he spoke was spoken somewhat mischievously with at least more than one meaning in it. He was quite good at productive prolixity (Madhur 2024, January). Rama inculcated the 'one-wife' principle in his life. In contrast, Krishna stands at the opposite extreme -- being a highly romantic personality with many wives. During his upbringing, Krishna was portrayed as a highly romantic person (<https://hindupad.com/differences-between-rama-krishna/>).

Rama did not use his supernatural powers all his life; indeed he was not even aware that he was a God even when he fought his well-known battle with Ravana – king of Lanka; that is why Ramavatara was also called Naravatara (Madhur 2024, 7 March). However, on many occasions,

Krishna does use his 'divine powers'. He was thus referred to as a 'Mahima'. Rama was born in a royal palace while Krishna in a royal prison. In general, Rama has been portrayed as a self-sacrificing altruist, while Krishna's characterization resembles that of a divine deity.

Krishna had a unique relationship with number 8. Apparently, someone associated with number 8 is considered to possess all the qualities of a hugely wise person -- constantly inspiring others with his teachings, possessing the great abilities of an effective leader and an infinitely capable administrator. Let us take a look at his association with number 8. He was the eighth incarnation of the supreme god -- Vishnu. He was born as the eighth child of his mother, Devaki; he was born on the eighth day of the month: he had eight principal wives (namely, Rukmini, Satyabhama, Jambavati, Nignajiti, Kalindi, Mitravinda, Bhadra, and Lakshmana). (<https://www.namoastro.com/blog/shri-krishna-and-the-importance-of-number-8-in-his-life/>)

Reflecting his uniqueness, he made headline news in the media even before his birth, through an oracular announcement that he would cause his maternal uncle's death. Building on that, he unleashed miracles after miracles throughout the rest of his life.

3. Krishna as a Son and a Nephew

Krishna's maternal uncle, Kamsa, who deeply loved his sister -- Devaki -- had just then got her married to a suitable young man by the name of Vasudeva. Kamsa, so proud of getting his beloved sister married, was taking the newly wed on a royal procession around his kingdom - Mathura. Now comes an oracular announcement of something like this: 'King Kamsa, your sister's son -- to be born as the eight child of Devaki -- will end your life'.

As soon as Kamsa hears the oracular announcement, his attitude towards his sister, Devaki and her newly-wed husband changes for the worse, indeed for far worse. Why should he invite his own death, even if the probability of the oracular announcement coming true was unknown? He now thinks of ways and means of avoiding his own death. Kamsa handcuffs his sister and the brother-in-law and imprisons them in a royal prison under 24 -hours-a day surveillance. Kamsa does everything under his capabilities to kill the boy who is supposed to kill him.

Despite Kamsa's best efforts, the eighth child of Devaki, subsequently named as Krishna, was born on a rainy midnight. Within minutes of his birth, using his divine powers, Krishna frees both his mother and father for a while and asks his father to quietly take him away from Mathura into a nearby village named Nandnagara and quietly return to the royal prison in Mathura. Krishna had an elder brother, named Balarama, who was conceived by Devaki (the mother of Krishna) but the embryo was transplanted into the womb of Rohini, the second wife of Vasudeva. Why was this

embryo transplantation done? Because, Khamsa kept on killing every child born to Devaki. The embryo transplantation saved Balarama from death at birth!

Krishna and his elder brother were thus brought up in the little village while their parents were still in prison. Krishna and Balarama were lucky to have had a step-mother, a loving woman from the Yadava family, named Yashoda. While the two young boys were growing up, Krishna exhibited some of his divine powers -- once showing his step-mother the entire world tucked in his tummy and a second time by lifting a large hill on his little finger. Once Krishna and Balarama grow up into teenagers, they challenge their maternal uncle, with Krishna in the lead. In a fierce battle that followed, they kill their maternal uncle, Khamsa. The two brothers were successful in killing the man who would have killed them anyway. The young boys then release their parents from the prison. By that time, their parents had already spent 14 years in the prison.

Why 14 years in prison? Once again, there is an interesting story behind his. The story has it that Krishna's mother, Devaki was none other than Kaikei in her previous life, the step-mother of Rama who was responsible for sending Rama to a 14 year in exile, now being reborn as Devaki in this era. As a way of punishing her for being responsible for sending Rama into a 14 year exile in her previous life, Devaki is now deprived of her son's company for 14 years. Karma haunts, as a common-saying in Hinduism goes. On the contrary, good deeds yield good results too. Kaushalya – the loving mother of Rama in Ramayana– is now reborn as Yashoda – being rewarded for her good deeds in her previous life. Yashoda, the loving step-mother of Krishna has the company of both Krishna and his brother Balarama (<https://www.indiaforums.com/forum/topic/1052392>).

4. Krishna and the Rajasuya

Krishna is now married. He is now friendly with the five sons of his maternal aunt, Kunti, each one born to a different father. But the real husband of Kunti, 'King Pandu' (who once ruled the entire kingdom of Hastinapur, but could not have children of his own due to a curse he got from an enraged 'Sage'), had adopted the five sons as his own. They are now jointly referred to as 'Pandavas'.

Gandhari, the wife of the blind king of Hastinapur too was pregnant but was not able to bear children even after being pregnant for 23 months. Upon hearing the news that Kunti had already given birth to children, she became even more frustrated. Out of her sheer frustration, one day she squeezed her tummy. By doing that her embryo broke in to 101 pieces. She was now frightened too. But, Sage Vedavyasa using his sagely capabilities breathed in life to those 101 pieces of embryos. Thus Gandhari became the mother of 101 children with 100 of them males and the remaining one being a girl child. "The five sons of Pandu and the hundred sons of Dhritrashtra

grew up in mirth and merriment at Hastinapur. Bhima excelled them all in physical prowess. He used to bully Duryodhana and the other Kauravas by dragging them by hair and beating them” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 68).

Upon Pandu’s death, the kingdom of Hastinapur gets divided into two kingdoms Indraprastha, the share that now belongs to the Pandavas and the other part, although retains the name of Hastinapur, is now a much smaller size compared to the undivided Hastinapur. The divided Hastinapur is now being ruled by Pandu’s elder brother, Dritharashtra, who is a blind by birth. Since Dritharashtra is blind, his wife (named Gandhari), although not blind by birth chooses to be blind by covering her eyes with a scarf, just to be an ‘ideal wife’ (Pativrata in many Indian languages). Prince Duryodhana – born to the two blind parents - the father by birth but the mother by choice --thus effectively becomes the ‘uncrowned king’ of the divided Hastinapur.

Now the eldest of the five Pandavas – Yudhishtira – son of Kunti and Yama (who is supposed to be in charge of death!) has to be crowned as the king of Indraprastha. It was an elaborate ceremony meant to please the Gods and to obtain their blessings upon the new emperor (Shukla 2023, 16 January). The long and the short of this ceremony is that Pandu’s children now go on an empire-enhancing path, conquering kings and kingdoms and establishing a tributary system under which the kings whom they defeat had to pay tributes to the Pandavas. “Rajasuya in my opinion was an imperial conquest of the known realm. As we know, the four Pandavas go in four directions to conquer various kingdoms. By conquering they don't seize the kingdoms but instead an agreement is made by which the defeated kingdoms pay tribute to Indraprastha and accept Yudhishtira as its emperor” (Shukla 2023, 16 January).

Krishna now exhibits his foresight and advises Pandavas that they should first and foremost get rid of his own grandfather, by the name of ‘Maagadha’ (the king of the then Magadh kingdom, also known as Jarasandha), lest he could be a major hurdle to the coronation of Prince Yudhishtira. Magadha was indeed so powerful that he had defeated Krishna and Balarama on millions of occasions before. Therefore, Krishna envisaged that Maagadha would protest the huge empire-expansion efforts by the Pandavas.

Indeed he cautions the Pandavas that neither Duryodhana nor Karna would object to Yudhishtira’s coronation. However, Jarasandha is most likely to object to it; You cannot complete the Rajasuya without getting rid of Jarasandha (Rajagopalachari 2015). Krishna went on to emphasize that: “He has unjustly cast eighty-six princes in prison. He has planned to immolate a hundred kings and is waiting to lay hold of fourteen more” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p.114). After quietly listening to Krishna, here comes some very confident words from Bhima. He agrees with Krishna and was ready to face Jarasandha. Krishna, Arjuna and Bhima now disguise themselves

‘Vidya-Snataka Brahmins’ to make Jarasandha believe that they are just there to attend his Havana.

After Maagadha interrogated them for quite a while, they revealed their identities and challenge him to fight with any one of the of them. With so much confidence in his physical strength, initially Jarasandha made a mockery of their request. Anyway, finally he agrees to fight with Bhima. Bhima had the physical strength, said to be equivalent of 100 male elephants (no offence meant to the gender-equality principle). “Bhima and Jarasandha were so equally matched in strength that they fought with each other continuously for thirteen days” (Rajagopachari 2015, p.119). Victory or defeat was nowhere in sight. Each time, Bhima split Jarasandha’s body into two vertical halves, the two halves quickly joined back and Jarasandha would come alive. Bhima was aghast. Krishna then advised Bhima that after splitting Jarasandha’s body vertically, Bhima should throw the two halves in the opposite directions, so that the two halves do not rejoin. That was a huge tip that Krishna gave. And Jarasandha was gone for good. With that, the cruelty of a 100 human beings to be killed as part of Jarasandha’s ‘Narayaga’ was also avoided

(<https://isha.sadhguru.org/en/wisdom/article/mahabharat-jarasandha-born-divided>);
<https://isha.sadhguru.org/en/wisdom/article/mahabharat-bhima-wrestled-jarasandha>)

With Jarasandha gone, the way was clear for the completion of the Rajasuya. But surprisingly not. The time came for doing the honors of the dharmic Havana of Rajasuya. As per tradition and customs of the day, one choses one of the most respected persons as the Guest of Honor for the Rajausya’s last day. The Pandavas requested Bhishma – the eldest among them all – to recommend the ‘Guest of Honor’ for the occasion. At his advice, they chose Lord Krishna as the ‘Guest of Honor’.

Shishupala, the king of a small kingdom, Chedi and his lesser-known brother by the name of ‘Dantavakra’ (both some distant relatives of Krishna through Kunti, the mother of Pandavas) create a ruckus on the final day of the Rajasuya. Both of them laughed aloud in derision and objected to Krishna being made the Guest of Honor. It is good to hear from Shishupala’s own words: “How ridiculous and unjust, but I am not surprised. The man who sought advice was born in illegitimacy (this was an insulting allusion to the sons of Kunti), the man who gave advice was born of one whoever declines from high to low (this is in reference to the fact that Bhishma was born of Ganga, the river naturally flowing from higher to lower levels)... And what shall I say of the man honored! A fool by birth and a cowherd by breeding” (Rajagopalachari, 2015 , pp. 120-121).

Consumed by his anger, he went on and on and on throwing the choicest abuses on Krishna. He then goes on to say that anyone else who have assembled for the completion of Rajasuya, other

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than Krishna, would have been fit enough to be chosen as the Guest of Honor. At some stage, even the most patient Krishna could not take it anymore. He uses his weapon, chakra (discuss), to behead the unruly Shishupala. Pandavas then successfully completed Rajasuya.

There is a side story on Shishupala and Danatavakra. Three generations ago, they were the most obedient gatekeepers of Vaikunta, the abode of Lord Vishnu, by the names of Jaya and Vijaya. One day, four sages by the names of Sanaka, Sanatama, Sanandana and Sanatkumara (all of them born to Brahma) came to Vaikunta to visit Vishnu. But Jaya and Vijaya, the loyal gatekeepers, mentioned that Lord Vishnu was resting and thus they do not have the right to let anyone in. Angered by their behavior, the ‘foursome’ curse Jaya and Vijaya to be reborn on the earth. When Vishnu came to know about this incident, he pleaded the ‘foursome sages’ to be kinder to his loyal gatekeepers.

The foursome now give the gatekeepers two options: they would spend the next 7 lives on earth but as friends of Vishnu and then they could rejoin him as his gatekeepers, or rejoin him after living only three lives on earth but as Vishnu’s arch enemies. Eager to be back with their Lord as soon as they can, they chose the second option. As a result they were reborn on earth, first as Hiannyaksha and Hiranyakashipu (during Vishnu’s third incarnation as Varahavatara in the Satya era); as Ravana and Kubhakarna (during the seventh incarnation during the treta era); and as Shishupala and Danatavakara (during the eighth incarnation during the Dvapara era). In a way therefore, one should not mourn the death of Shishupala and Dantavakra and perhaps be happy for them that they would now be rejoining Vishnu in Vaikunta (<https://www.quora.com/What-did-Jaya-and-Vijaya-the-two-gatekeepers-of-Lord-Vishnu-do-that-they-got-cursed-to-take-birth-as-demons>)

5. Krishna, the Divine Magician

With the help of Krishna, the five Pandava brothers built a beautiful little kingdom of Indraprastha out of an otherwise jungle named Kandavaprastha – the part of Hastinapur that was ‘for namesake’ given to them by King Dritharashtra. Originally, it was indeed a dense forest with wild animals and poisonous snakes. The Pandavas had to first burn that thick forest of Kandavaprastha and then build the city of Indraprastha.

Indraprastha was described as one of the most beautiful cities of the time. Befitting the Kingdom, it had a grand palace too, sculpted with glass doors, mirrors, and water bodies everywhere around. Many royal guests were invited by the Pandavas, including the eldest son of the blind king of Hastinapur, Duryodhana. Duryodhana was walking around the well sculpted palace, admiring it as well as envying the architectural beauty of the palace. Somehow, by mistake, he falls into a little

pool of water that was tucked inside the palace. On witnessing that incident, Droupadi – the common wife of the five Pandavas --- laughs at his predicament and remarks something like: ‘after all, the son of a blind man has to be blind too’. Duryodhana, who anyway was a proud man, now feels slighted by that remark from Droupadi.

He literally swears that he will not excuse her for that and take a sweet revenge on her, no matter what it takes to do so. It was a big blunder Droupadi had committed. Even her five husbands counselled Droupadi to apologize to Duryodhana for insulting him in the open, but she remained stubborn and refused to apologize. Be that as it may, it turns out that she had to pay heavily for that remark.

After the ‘Rajasuya’, in a gesture of building goodwill between the two sides, the Pandavas and Kauravas, start playing friendly games, including the game of six-sided dice. Vidhura, the wise man among both the Pandavas and Kauravas had cautioned Yudhishtira : “Everyone is aware that the playing of dice is the root of many evils. I did my best to oppose this idea. Still the king has commanded me to invite you and I have come. You may do as you like.” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p.132). Without blinking an eyelid, Yudhishtira accepted the invitation from Duryodhana. It is believed that Yudhishtira, the eldest brother among the five Pandavas, was somewhat addicted to playing that game. On the side of the Kauravas, their maternal uncle, by the name of Shakhuni, was considered as one of the most expert, even deceptive, dice player of his times. Initially, the dice game was meant for royal family’s fun and pleasure.

But, Duryodhana now had other plans – use his maternal uncle’s skills in the dice game to defeat the Pandavas and make them lose their kingdom at the least. At his suggestion, the dice game soon turned into a real gambling game – both sides had to bet – and adhere to the consequences of a victory or defeat. In one of those dice games, the condition was that the losers will have to live in exile for 12 years plus another year in disguise. If in the thirteenth year, the losers were spotted by the winners, the former had to go through the entire thirteen-year cycle of punishment all over again.

To cut the long story short, the Pandavas lose the dice game and with it everything including their kingdom, Indraprastha, their collective wife, Droupadi , as well as their personal freedoms. Duryodhana now orders his most trusted younger brother – Dushyasana – to disrobe Droupadi out there in the public – a revenge he takes against Droupadi for insulting him out in the public, not too long ago. Dushayasana, by his name itself, is like the second breath of his elder brother, simply obeys his elder brother’s orders come what may. That results in the well-known disrobing scene in Mahabharata. Droupadi was somehow saved by Krishna, who by using his divine powers, manages the normally 6-yards-long Indian dress -- Sari -- that Droupadi wore stretch infinitely; in

the process, Dushyasana falls unconscious. Witnessing the heinous incident, the five husbands of Droupadi take oaths to settle the revenge against Duryodhana sooner than later.

These two incidents – Droupadi insulting Duryodhana out in the open and his attempt at disrobing her, enhanced the bitterness between Pandavas and Kouravas. Let me digress a bit here. Why Droupadi had to share five men as her husbands? A proximate reason has it that Kunti without knowing the details of the incident simply asked her five sons to share whatever they won when they were in exile.

Yet, the ultimate cause is quite different. Apparently, Droupadi had once pleased Lord Shiva by her austerities and requested a near-impossible boon from him: Oh Lord, give me a husband who is kindhearted, physical strong, heroic at war, handsome in looks, and highly intelligent. Lord Shiva grants her the wishes. However, unable to create one man with all these five traits, Lord Shiva blesses her with five men with these five traits – Yudhishtira (kindhearted), Bhima (physically strong), Arjuna (hugely heroic), Nakula (very handsome), and Shahadeva (highly intelligent). A key lesson: do not ever ask for a boon that even the Supreme Gods cannot grant, or else live with the consequences!

6. Krishna, The Ambassador for Peace

Upon returning from their 13 years of being in exile and disguise, Duryodhana should have returned their kingdom to Pandavas. Indeed, the Pandavas, as a gesture of goodwill, were happy to settle for even far less than their original share (Dharma 2014; Rajagoplachari, 2015). A couple of diplomatic efforts at a peaceful settlement of the family's feud – one mediated by Sanjaya, the Chief Advisor of Dritharashtra failed to yield results, as Duryodhana struck to his obstinacy. A subsequent attempt at peace, this time by none other than Krishna, too failed to convince Duryodhana. Duryodhana, known for his obstinacy, stood his ground and insisted that he would not agree for anything less than a war for settling the family's land feud. Indeed, he makes a somewhat foolish attempt at capturing Krishna and imprisoning him.

At that juncture, to quell Duryodhana's lust for power, Lord Krishna exhibited his 'divine but a scary appearance' – with all his ten incarnations combined in to one huge and scary figure with various weapons held in multiple hands – referred to as Lord Krishna's 'Vishwaroopa'. Even that did not make Duryodhana realize the dangers of a war he was welcoming to his doorsteps. Throughout the rest of the epic, Duryodhana remained stubborn.

Nearly all the elders and wise men on his side pleaded and advised Duryodhana to settle for peace and not to invite war. Those who pleaded with Duryodhana were real experts in various kinds of

martial arts, including his: (i) great grandfather – Bhishma (who was known for his chivalry and had the boon from his father to live as long as he wanted to); (ii) highly respected teachers -- ‘Guru Dhronacharya’ and ‘Guru Kripacharya’; (iii) even Duryodhana’s two best friends – Karna and Ashwatthama (son of Guru Dhronacharya) .

Duryodhana had one line for all of his advisers now ‘I would rather die fighting the Pandavas than share the kingdom with them’. Does this not remind us of the one-liner that Ravana had in Ramayana ‘I shall never return Sita to Rama in my lifetime’ ? (Madhur 2024, 7 March). Duryodhana had by now gotten used to his uncrowned kingship of the undivided Hastinapur, believed to have spanned across the then northwest India.

Moving on to the Pandava’s side, just before sending Krishna as their ambassador to negotiate with Duryodhana, the most kind-hearted and peace-loving Yudhishtira was willing to agree for a peaceful settlement of the land dispute. At that juncture, Droupadi disagreed and instigated her five husbands not to agree for peace. She could never forgive Duryodhana for attempting to disrobe her in the public. There was thus huge cross-currents at work on both sides to go in for war rather than settle for peace.

Even an otherwise quiet Bhima now tells Yudhishtira: “You speak like those who repeat Vedic mantras and are satisfied with the sound of the words though ignorant of their meaning. Your intellect has become confused. You are born as a kshatriya and yet you do not think or behave like one... We should not let the wicked sons of Dhritarashtra have their way. Vain is the birth of a kshatriya who does not conquer his deceitful enemies. This is my opinion, and to me, if we go to hell by killing a deceitful foe, such hell is heaven. Your forbearance burns us worse than fire. It scorches Arjuna and myself day and night, making us sleepless” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 152). Indeed, all these reminds one of the well-known 2012 book on ‘The Difficulty of Being Good’ that focused on Yudhishtira quite a bit (Das 2012).

Look at the contrasting views of Yudhishtira to Sanjaya, who tried to resolve the land-dispute through peaceful means: “For the five of us give at least five villages and make peace with us. We shall be content” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 271). Here is the one and the only obstinate view of Duryodhana; “The Pandavas will not receive even a needle-point of territory” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p.273).

When diplomacy fails, war becomes imminent. Once war between the two sides became unavoidable, hectic war preparations began. All the kings and kingdoms of the time took sides in the war. It is understood that the actual size of the military on Duryodhana’s side was roughly double the size of it on the Pandava’s side. Since the entire country, then referred to as ‘Bharata’,

was involved in the war one way or another, the war with its epicenter at Kurukshetra, came to be known as the ‘Mahabharata war’ (Shyam and Aitha 2023).

“The Mahabharata understands that war is terrible. Hence, it lays down elaborate rules of fighting” (Das 2012, 207). The war was thus designed to be highly principled. Unlike the saying ‘everything is fair in love and war’, rules and regulations were set right before the war began. Those rules included : (i) the war shall take place only during the day-time (between sunrise and sunset); (ii) among warriors using chariots, only one warrior can attack another, so that multiple warriors using a chariot should not attack a single warrior on either side, or put it another way, both sides should thus avoid ‘Guerrilla warfare’; (iii) between two bow-and archers, one archer will not attack the opponent, if for any reasons the opponent does not have his ‘bow and arrow’ in his hand, or if the chariot gets stuck in the mud, or any such unforeseen events; (iv) women or bigenders would not enter the battlefield on either side.

War was about to start. At that juncture, Balarama, Krishna’s elder brother, withdraws from the war. He takes a neutral stand on war: “Often have I told Krishna, ‘Duryodhana is the same to us as the Pandavas; we may not take sides in their foolish quarrels.’ He would not listen to me. His great affection for Dhananjaya has misled Krishna and he is with you in this war which I see he has approved. How can Krishna and I be in opposite camps? For Bhima and Duryodhana, both of them my pupils, I have equal regard and love. How then can I support one against the other? Nor can I bear to see the Kouravas destroyed, I will therefore have nothing to do with this war, this conflagration which will consume everything. This tragedy has made me lose all interest in the world and so I shall wander among holy places.” (Rajagoplachari 2015, P.290). He then goes on a pilgrimage of visiting holy places around the world, all by foot.

7. Krishna, the Wartime Manager

War between the two sides begins, with their great grandfather – Bhishma – leading the Kourava’s side. With the endorsement of Krishna, the Pandavas appointing ‘Drishtadyumna’ (brother of Droupadi) as their supreme commander.

It is interesting to note the contrasting strategies followed by the two sides. In general, the Kouravas went in by seniority and reputation of the person in selecting their captions. In contrast, the Pandavas gave the caption-ship of their side to a capable yet a relatively young person, allowing the seniors and those with far better abilities to focus on the war rather than be sidetracked by the responsibilities of captainship. Hence the Pandava’s side may have been smaller yet its teamwork has been much better (Shyam and Aitha 2023). At the same time, the very presence of Lord Krishna on Pandava’s side made a huge difference to the ultimate outcome of the war.

Just look at the case of Bhishma. Although he accepts to lead this side at the request of Duryodhana but he does make one thing clear to Duryodhana – he will fight the battle with all his might but would not kill any of the five Pandavas. After all, Bhishma was the Great Grandfather to both Pandavas and Kouravas. Bhishma also places another condition to Duryodhana that under his leadership, he would not let Karna participate in the war, for some reason known only to him then but he subsequently admitted while on his deathbed that he wanted to protect at least one of the two best archers in the war – Arjuna or Karna. The fact that he also knew that Karna was indeed the son of Kunti might have forced him to take that decision. By this time, Duryodhana had no choice but to accept both these conditions from his Great Grandfather.

Few days into the war, Bhishma keeps destroying the military might of the Pandavas. On one of those days, Krishna gets so mad at Bhishma causing so much havoc to the Pandavas that he himself takes up to his weapons. It is possible to argue that it was a breach of conduct on the part of Krishna. Yet, looked at from another perspective, it could just as well be that Krishna wanted to honor the huge capabilities of Bhishma even during his grand old days. Indeed, Bhishma caused huge despair for the Pandavas.

Ten days in to the war, at the advice of Krishna, the Pandavas quietly ask Bhishma how could they ever make him retire from the battlefield. Bhishma indicated that one way of making him retire is to bring a woman on to the battlefield (Das 2012, xxi). The razor-sharp mind of Krishna understood how can that be done. He suggests Arjuna to bring along a bigender, named Shikhandi, on the his Chariot. Bhishma now recognizes the woman (Amba indeed) in Shikhandi, gives up arms, and retires from the battlefield. This perhaps was the second time that Pandavas flouted the rules set before the war.

On the 11th day of the battle, Bhishma is now replaced by Guru Dhronacharya – the next senior-most person on Kaurava's side, who taught martial arts to both the sides. He now lifts the ban on Karna imposed by Bhishma. Hence Karna now becomes an integral part of the Kaurava's military might. The war goes on. On the thirteenth day of the war, as per Guru Dhronacharya's advice, Arjuna and Krishna were moved far away from the battlefield chasing two relatively unknown warriors – samsaptakas (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 360).

As Krishna and Arjuna moved farther away from the main battlefield, Dhronacharya formed what is called a 'Chakravyuya' -- a military formation of the warriors in a circular way. So, if one enters that circular warrior formation, it is so much harder to get out of it. On the Pandavas side, only Arjuna knew how to force himself into the 'Chakravyuha', fight the battle, and come out of the 'Chakravyuya'. However, he was farther away from the battlefield. In the absence of Arjuna and

Krishna on the battlefield, the son of Arjuna from Subhadra – the young nephew of Lord Krishna was almost forced by the circumstance to fight the war. However, Abhimanyu only knew how to force himself into the Chakravyuha but did not know how to get out of it.

“Thus did Abhimanyu, alone and unsupported, oppose a host of veteran warriors and show the skill in the use of arms which he had learnt from his illustrious father and from Vasudeva, his uncle. Seeing this, ... Dronacharya’s eyes were filled with tears of affectionate admiration. (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 364). That said, Jayadhratha, the brother in-law of Duryodhana, who stood at the entry-point of Chakravyuha made sure that nobody from the Pandava’s side would help the young Abhimanyu in any way. Many a warriors from the Kaurava’s side attacked the young man at once and killed him. A third time in a row that one of the pre-set rules of the war – only one warrior using a chariot would fight another warrior on a chariot - was flouted – this time by the Kauravas!

On his return after defeating Samasaptakas, Arjuna was dumfounded to hear the news of his beloved son’s death. He brooded over the day’s bitter happenings for a while. Indeed, “when he hears of his son’s death he weeps bitterly blaming himself for not teaching the boy how to exit from the military formation. However, with the timely consolation and advice from Krishna, he calms down but not before taking a vow: “He vows to kill Jayadhratha before the sunset the next day – if not, he will immolate himself” (Das 2012, p. xx)

Sacred of his life, Jayadhratha pleaded with Dronacharya, the commander of Kourava’s side, to somehow save him from Arjuna. Dhronacharya comforts him. On the 14th day of the war, all the efforts of Kouravas army were focused on protecting Jayadhratha. They almost did that, but until it was not. By using his divine powers, Krishna “employed yoga to cover the sun for a few seconds” (Das 2012, p.106). Witnessing that, Jayadhratha came out of the ring of soldiers surrounding him, declaring his victory over Arjuna. Within seconds, Krishna cleared the sky.

He then tells Arjun somewhat rhythmically: ‘here is the sun and there is Jayadhratha’. Jayadhratha could run nowhere. Arjuna swiftly beheads him. Not just that. As per Krishna’s advice, Arjuna ensures that Jayadhratha’s deranged head falls into the laps of his father who was at that time meditating somewhere. Apparently, Jayadhratha had a boon that wherever his deranged head falls, there would be huge blast. It was Krishna’s infinite wisdom that knew those little secrets. It was a quick and clever thinking on his part to let his deranged head fall on the person who gave birth to Jayadhratha himself. Sunsets and that day’s war too ends.

Next day another pre-set rule was flouted -- this time by the Pandavas in some kind of a tit-for-tat tactics for killing the young Abhimanyu by flouting the rules of the game. The demon-like son of

Bhima (born from his little-known demon-wife/girlfriend, Hidimbi) by the name of ‘Ghatotkaja’ (Ghat for short) joins the war. With his demon genealogy, Ghat was many times bigger in size than the normal human beings on both sides of the war. Being a demon, he was indeed better at fighting during the dark nightly hours. So the war drags into full night. Soldiers ran helter-skelter in the battlefield, with many coming under his huge feet and dying right then and there.

Duryodhana and his side’s commander in chief – Dhronacharya –were driven to despair. Both of them literally order Karna – the real son of Kunti (the mother of Pandavas) but was always known as a lowly Charioteer’s son during most of the epic (more on this later) -- to shoot the demon-son of Bhima, using whatever powerful weaponry he has in his toolkit. Karna arrows down Ghat. However, Karna achieved that feat by prematurely using a very special arrow that he had all the time reserved for use in his battle with his arch rival – Arjuna. Krishna, the divine deity and a clever manager, was happy that Karna’s capabilities to fight against Arjuna is now vastly reduced. So, Ghat came in and went, but only after causing some dent in Pandeva’s side.

Moving on, the 15 day’s war ends with Dhronacharya, being deceptively killed by the Pandavas. The deception was well-conceived as well as well-executed. Lord Krishna prompts Yudhishtira to announce that an elephant by the name ‘Ashwatthama’ hanging around somewhere in the battlefield is dead. But in the middle of the announcement, Krishna blows out his trumpet so that Dhronacharya only hears it as ‘Ashwatthama is dead’.

Unable to bear the news of his son’s death, he takes retirement from the war and quietly sits on a corner of the battlefield dumfounded by the news of his son’s death. In a flash of a second, Drishtadyumna jumps out of his chariot and beheads Dhronacharya (Das 2012; Rajagoplachari 2015). Interestingly: “This is the only time that Yudhishtira told what was understood as a lie, and his chariot, which always moved slightly about the ground, sinks to the earth” (Das 2012, p.xxi). Even a single lie cost Yudhishtira something right away. Once again, Karma haunts, even the kindest persons in life

After the death of Dhronacharya, now the best friend of Duryodhana, Karna’s turn to lead the depleted Kourava’s side. A fierce battle follows between the arch rivals. The best ‘bow and arrow’ power was in full display. On the 16th day of the war, Karna had connected a powerful arrow on to the cord of his bow, but he suddenly looks at the sky and decides that the arrow would not reach Arjuna before the sunset. So he held back the arrow. In a way, Karna was suffering from knowing that he indeed was not at Charioteer’s son but was the eldest brother of the five Pandavas. Lord Krishna and Kunti had quietly and somewhat apologetically conveyed that information to him just days before the Kuskshetra war. When Krishna conveyed that information to him, he had replied to Krishna something like this: ‘Oh Krishna, you indeed killed me by telling me who I am’.

Be that as it may, let us move on to the 17th days of the war, it was all about either Arjuna cutting off a sharp arrow from Karana or vice versa. None else than Lord Krishna himself appreciates Karna's skills. Karna showed that he was as capable a warrior as Arjuna, but always had to be an underdog, with everyone including Dhronacharya—the martial arts teacher to both sides --- always biased in favor of Arjuna. Karna now uses a very powerful arrow – with serpentine shaft. As luck would have it, the arrow just about hit Arjuna's crown. Why?

There is some geometry in here. By the very nature of a serpent, it has natural tendency 'to raise its hood' as it flies across to Arjuna from Karna's bow. Karna should have known that geometry. But, I presume he has now softened so much towards the Pandavas (since he came to know he came to know that he is non else than the eldest brother). To cut the long story short that simply knocked down Arjuna's crown without harming him in any way.

More misfortunes awaited Karana. Suddenly, his chariot gets stuck in the mud of the battlefield. He got down his chariot and was making a valiant effort at lifting it up. Now Karna requests Arjuna to have a short break in the war. But he does assure Arjuna: "I shall presently set my car right and give you all the battle you want." (Rajagoplachari 2015 p. 416). At that very moment, Krishna advises Arjuna to shoot Karna down. Arjuna was hesitant to shoot at someone without his chariot and weapons in place. Krishna now reminds Arjuna how merciless Karna was when he participated in the disrobing of Droupadi as well as how cruel he was in attacking his beloved son – Abhimanyu – when he was struggling to come out of the Chakravyva. That was enough of a provocation to Arjuna; he shoots Karna down.

In some ways, it was a poetic justice that was meted out to Karna for being at the right time but on the wrong side of the war. Indeed, once he came to know the secrets of his origin, Karna himself knew it very well that he was on the wrong side in the war. At that juncture, Krishna gave an interesting interpretation of the incident. He explains to Arjuna that his advice to shoot Karna down while he was not on his chariot is perhaps the wrong thing to do for an ordinary Kshatriya. However that does not apply to a kshatriya who is descendent from a royal family. A royal Kshatriya is in a very different position than an ordinary Kshatriya in that unlike an ordinary Kshatriya (for whom only his own life is at stake), for a royal Kshatriya the entire kingdom and its millions of innocent citizens are at stake. Krishna also pacifies Arjuna by saying that it was not the first time that the pre-set rules of the war has anyway been flouted.

On the last day of the war, it was the turn of Bhima and Duryodhana's fight using maces. In the mighty mace war, a warrior is not supposed to hit his opponent below the belt. However, on the 18th day of the war, Bhima hits Duryodhana below the belt. Duryodhana is now on his deathbed

in the middle of the battlefield. It was another case of flouting the basic rules of a mace fight -- this time by the Pandavas. That said, “You cannot snatch a particular act out of its context and proceed to give judgment on it ... It was not wrong for Bhima to strike below the navel an enemy who had wickedly contrived against his life on many occasions.” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 424).

During his dying moments, Duryodhana appoints one of his most trusted friends – Ashwatthama to lead his side. As his death-wish, Duryodhana requests Ashwatthama that he wants to see the five Pandava’s dead by hook or crook. The enthusiastic Ashwatthama quietly sneaks into the Pandava’s camp during the dark nightly hours and kills the five sons of Droupadi while they were fast asleep, mistaking them for the five Pandavas. That was a heinous crime to have killed the five young boys of Droupadi while they were fast asleep. Duryodhana himself realizes the huge mistake committed by his enthusiastic friend and repents for that. But by that time, what was done could not be undone. As the late economist, Herbert Stein, once quipped: “If something cannot go forever, it will stop (quoted in White, 2021, 1 April).

The Mahabharata war somehow comes to an end. With the help and blessings from the Divine Krishna, Yudhishtira becomes the king of the undivided Hastinapur and rightly so. Krishna then returns to his kingdom, Dwarka, and it is believed that the divine Krishna lived for another 36 Years. All in all, he must have thus lived up to 125 years (Dharma, 2014)

8. Summing Up

This paper has made an attempt at decoding the different aspects of Lord Krishna’s charming and multifaceted personality as depicted by Vedavyasa in one of the greatest epics of all time - Mahabharata. Using his divinity and his infinite wisdom, Krishna looked not just at the immediate aftermath of an action but also at much farther than that – the long term – or intergenerational horizon, as we now refer to it. That is why his actions were motivated by his judgement on if an action taken under a particular situation was right or wrong. In other words, he eloquently exhibited that ‘dharma’ is highly contextual and it cannot be codified into a binary table with two columns: ‘right and wrong’. Instead, it is logic and reasoning.

Krishna also makes a clever distinction between ‘ends and means’. If the ultimate objective is worth achieving, we might use certain means to attain those ends, subject to the condition that the means are not outright wrong. With that perspective, the pre-set rules of the Mahabharata war should be interpreted as broad guidelines rather than cut-and-dried solutions or water-tight compartments. True, some leakages would happen, but without those guidelines, the entire war would have turned out to be a guerilla warfare.

“As the Mahabharata unfolds, Krishna's role transcends the boundaries of a mere strategist, positioning him as a visionary who understood the complexities of human nature, politics, and the ultimate law of righteousness. His legacy as a strategist and a guide in the field of human conflict and morality continues to resonate through time, marking him as one of the most profound figures in Indian epic history”. (Maji, 2024, Book 5, p.231)

Another lesson that can be gleaned from Mahabharata is about the importance of teamwork for personal as well as institutional success (Shyam and Aithal 2023, p.29). Put differently, at times, the strategy of the Kouravas looked as if one of ‘winning the battle but losing the war’.

Human beings were much more evolved in Mahabharata than in Ramayana. Unlike in Ramayana, there are not many monkeys and demons in Mahabharata. Each character has both good as well as not-so good traits. In his own life, there were instances of Krishna running away from the battlefield and biding his time to wait for the right occasion and the right ally to come by. In a way, he was as capable of winning a war by running away from his enemies as much as by making his enemies run for life. “Life is a tangled web and there is no one in the world who has not done both good and evil” (Rajagopalachari 2015, p. 88).

At the end of Ramayana, Rama established ‘Ramarajya’ (Madhur 2024, 7 March). In a similar vein, with timely and wise advice from the Divine Krishna, the Pandavas established ‘Dharmarajya’

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