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Epics and Ethics

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Epics and ethics

Gurcharan Das looks back to the Mahabharata in search of ethical guidance for India in a time of galloping growth, explosive conflict and dizzying change, Ananya Vajpeyi writes

Most South Asians would immediately recognise a type of conversation, conducted among friends and family members, over chai in the classroom, in which an elder draws an analogy between a situation in the present and an episode or character in one of the best-loved texts of the subcontinent, the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. Turning to the epics to seek out the moral of the story, as it were, is a standard feature of South Asian talk. It should come as no surprise then that one such elder, Gurcharan Das, has devoted a book to a series of such observations, turning back to the *Mahabharata* as a way to understand the challenges of leading an ethical life today.

For Indians, the *Mahabharata* serves as a repository of prophecies, commentaries and analogies to help negotiate the political and live ethically in the world. The text says of itself: “What’s here is everywhere; what’s not here is nowhere.” Indic cultures have taken it for its word for two millennia. Das continues what is both a perfectly commonplace practice and a hallowed tradition, rereading and reframing the epic in light of the here and now – in this case, the large-scale political and economic transitions that India experienced in the first decade of the 21st century, a time, Das writes, when “prosperity had begun to spread across India, but goodness had not”.

The Difficulty of Being Good could have been written by my uncle, or your grandmother, or indeed you or me, as we think about and try to make sense of the many risks, the shearing dilemmas, the awful humiliations, the terrible defeats, the ethical conundrums and the complex machinations that always have and always will characterise politics – both in the public realm of power, law and violence, but also the private realm of incessant adjustment and interaction between individuals.

Those seeking evidence of the continuing presence of the *Mahabharata* need look no further than the daily newspaper, where Indian politics is still narrated in the tones of the epic: leaders with poor judgment are cast in the role of the blind king Dhritarashtra; over-ambitious and ruthless politicians likened to the Kaurava prince Duryodhana; and women over whom conflicts erupt compared to the Pandava queen Draupadi. Any reader will sense that behind the great drama of the present there is another ongoing narrative that everyone already knows, in which brothers vie for a kingdom, intelligent and proud women chafe under patriarchal norms, wily advisers make enigmatic pronouncements, rightful heirs go into exile, usurpers rule the roost, ambition is curbed by unaccountable fate, unexpected winners emerge, appetites are ever-insatiable, and the ultimate message seems to be that of our ineluctable mortality.

Is the tale of the *Mahabharata* an allegory of the world, or is the world an allegory of the *Mahabharata*? It’s hard to say. This gigantic work, a “book of books” – as it was called by one of its greatest modern editors, VS Sukthankar – provides a lexicon, a repertoire of knowledge considered to be valuable in India. Like the life of Jesus or the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, the *Mahabharata* is a master text we are always familiar with but also never tire of learning from – a kind of “ancient Wikipedia,” as Wendy Doniger called it in her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Indians treat it as “equipment for living”, to borrow a phrase from the literary critic Kenneth Burke.

In his dual capacity as a pundit and a littérateur, Das could hardly have chosen a more relevant filter for the ethical questions before India in a time of galloping growth, explosive conflict and dizzying change. Das uses the *Mahabharata* to trigger his reflections on everything from corporate corruption scandals and Ponzi schemes, to affirmative action and reforms in higher education;



Schoolchildren dressed as the Hindu gods Krishna and Radha re-enact an episode from the Mahabharata in Amritsar/Narinder Nanu / AFP

from the future of Gandhian resistance to the fate of tribal communities in the face of rampant development; from the quarrels of industrialists to the personalities of politicians. Sometimes he takes a detour through American history, German social theory, Greek philosophy and English literature; at other times, he recalls moments from his own life and career in India.

A Harvard-educated former CEO of Procter and Gamble India, Das is now a well-respected novelist, playwright, columnist, globalisation guru and social commentator, the author of a best-selling book, *India Unbound*. He might have had plenty to say about the *Mahabharata* anyway, but he did his homework during what he calls “an academic holiday”, going back to school at the University of Chicago to study Sanskrit with the world’s leading scholars of ancient India.

Ironically, Das’s efforts to really learn Sanskrit and the special discipline of how to read Sanskrit texts highlight a crisis in the study of Indian antiquity: Indians are losing the ability to read and understand their classical languages. Once that competence is lost, a dire eventuality that could come to pass within a generation, India will no longer have the capacity to decipher its staggeringly rich textual past. Thousands of works and inscriptions will become unreadable, and knowledge of Indian antiquity will recede to a few highly specialised departments in foreign universities. This sorry state of affairs in Indian letters explains why Das, who first learnt his Sanskrit at Harvard in the 1960s, had to go back to Chicago to polish it up 40 years later, why his book is written in English, and why *The Difficulty of Being Good* is a popularising rather than a scholarly effort. Das’s work reminds us of the crisis in the classics, but does not provide a solution.

The book’s subtitle, *On The Subtle Art of Dharma*, takes us to the heart of the epic’s subject matter: *dharma*, an idea without which India cannot be understood to any degree of historical or conceptual accuracy, just as modern France cannot be deci-

phered sans “égalité”, nor America without “liberty”. When Barack Obama had to decide whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan, and if so then how many, he grappled with a problem of *dharma*. When developed countries do not take steps to address the climate change that their technologies have precipitated, theirs is a failure of *dharma*. When the Indian government augments its nuclear capability even while its population suffers widespread malnourishment, that too is a matter of *dharma*. When the Bush administration presided over the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib or denied them fair trial in Guantanamo, it violated the *dharma* associated with great power. Places such as Gaza and the West Bank, where conflicting moral claims give rise to violent military engagements, are theatres of *dharma*.

But when my friend must decide whether to keep his dying parent on life-support, that too is an engagement with *dharma*. It is clear that the term is complex and capacious, enfolding everything from “right” to “norm” to “law” to “duty” to “injunction” to “righteousness”. All Sanskrit philosophical systems, and all the Indic religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism – stand on the foundation of this one concept, which in Indian languages also routinely translates as “religious practice” or “belief”. In a way *dharma* is most apparent when it is most elusive: it is when we do not know what to do, that we think most carefully about what we ought to do. Moments of personal, political, moral and ideological confusion force us to consider our *dharma* most urgently. *Dharma* is notoriously “subtle” because as anyone who has lived knows, the answer to any ethical problem, however small or large, is never simple and straightforward. The *Mahabharata* is a civilisational reference manual to help us navigate the field of ethical choice that forms the terrain of our mortal existence.

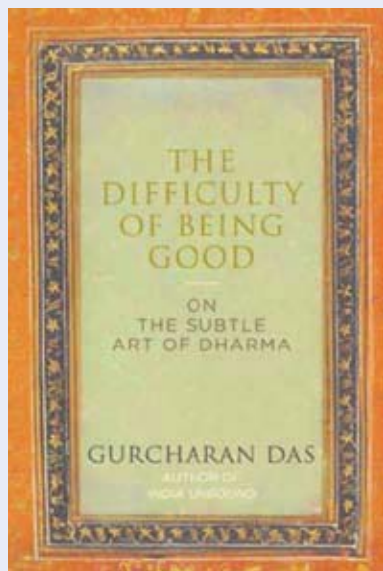
In the *Mahabharata*, sometimes *dharma* is manifested through death; at other times, it could be a dog or a stork; in crucial chapters it

is a game of dice. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great dialogue embedded in the epic, it is the god Krishna who delineates *dharma* in its minutest and most magnificent forms, for the reluctant hero, Arjuna. In famous episodes, *dharma* lies at the bottom of a deep lake, in a burning palace, in an impenetrable phalanx of troops advancing into enemy territory, in a gathering of kings intent on dishonouring a queen, in a virgin’s dalliance with the morning sun, in an old general’s protracted dying discourse on a bed of arrows, in the womb of a young widow, in the death march of the survivors of an apocalypse, in halls and hearts, in war and in sex, in the beginning of the world and at its bitter, ashen end. The epic is a literary text; its poetic form – consisting of 100,000 verses in 18 books – is inextricably related to its substantive content, which is moral ambiguity. The multiplicity of meaning made possible by the language of poetry is exactly suited to convey the difficult, unstable and protean nature of *dharma*.

Though Das is both educated and thoughtful, his sensibility is prosaic. He is focused on drawing out the lessons of the *Mahabharata*, missing perhaps the truth which South Asian audiences have known for two millennia: the epic is meant as much to entertain as to edify; it doesn’t just disambiguate life’s tough choices, it also complicates our appreciation of human nature, and evokes in us the literary responses of wonderment and rapture. The plea of the disheartened and bewildered Arjuna to his divine charioteer, friend and adviser has a power that can only be described as poetic, as a single line brings together the almost unbearable dramatic tension in the plot, the launch of the most celebrated section of the text, known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, and an image of frailty and confusion that resonates in every reader’s heart:

“Between the two armies
Halt my chariot,
O Krishna Inviolable!”

Epics in any culture are meant to orient our moral being. In 1939, Simone Weil, in flight within occu-



The Difficulty of Being Good
Gurcharan Das
Penguin India
Dh55

For Indians, the Mahabharata serves as a repository of prophecies, commentaries and analogies to help negotiate the political and live ethically in the world

pied Europe, wrote a long essay in French titled *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*, which gave her the wherewithal to address the catastrophic advent of Nazism. In re-reading the Homeric epic, she found a way to meditate on violence, suffering, defeat and retribution, the realities that were destroying Europe during the Second World War. Das compares the *Iliad* and the *Mahabharata* at length, dwelling on its warrior heroes. “The ethical impulses of Achilles and Arjuna are confused, ambiguous, and even pessimistic,” he writes. “The battlefield is indeed a field of *dharma* in which there are no easy answers.” For most of us, alas, no Krishna appears to show us the way, as we confront seemingly incommensurable and overwhelming prospects, fearful of defeat, flagging in our courage, torn apart by our attachments.

At the birth of the Indian republic, India’s founding fathers turned one and all to the age-old question of *dharma*, to meditate on its subtle art, in Das’s felicitous phrase. Mahatma Gandhi read and reread the *Bhagavad Gita*; Jawaharlal Nehru thought about the Mauryan Emperor Asoka, who gave up violence to propagate *dharma* in the second century BC; BR Ambedkar, the leader of India’s untouchables and chairman of the committee that drafted the Indian Constitution, converted to Buddhism. Emblazoned at the very centre of the Indian flag is the *dharmachakra*, the wheel of *dharma*, whose turning signifies the political life of the new nation, and its perpetual engagement with the problem of ethical sovereignty. Through his reading of the *Mahabharata*, Das returns to the oldest themes that have preoccupied the Indian mind while he meditates on yet another passage in the history of the world’s largest democracy – one that still endeavours to be a righteous republic as well.

Ananya Vajpeyi teaches South Asian History at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her book, Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India, will be published by Harvard University Press.