**Title: Relating Mahābhārata to Veteran Experiences**

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**Introduction**

This paper is a description of a course I taught in Summer 2022 entitled “Dialogues on Veteran experiences and Indian War Epics.” It was a veteran friendly course designed with the objective of promoting education, empathy, and understanding about veterans’ experiences using the Mahābhārata (Mbh) as a narrative background. The course was designed for student veterans interested in themes of war, military service, and transition to civilian life. Through this paper, I hope to share and explore the possibility of using the Mbh as a resource which veterans could use to reflect on their own experiences.

I chose the Mbh to provide rich thematic and aesthetic structures to stimulate discussions of military experiences. The Mbh’s entertaining story, diverse characters, and their complex situations, especially ethical dilemmas provided rich content for reflection and discussion. This course was concurrently taught along with another veteran friendly course offered this summer by the Philosophy department which focused on the Greek epics, the Ilad and Odyssey. Hence, students were exposed to Greek and Indian epics simultaneously. Where possible, students traversed similar topics in the Mahābhārata and the Iliad and Odyssey, and made connections between the characters in both epics. For my course, I used Gurcharan Das’[[1]](#footnote-1) *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma* as the main textbook and sections of J. A. B. van Buitenen translations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Gurcharan Das examined prominent characters in the MBh, and made connections to the ethical dilemmas they faced with contemporary historical incidents. In doing so, he showed how the Mbh can be relevant to modern ethical realities. Following his cue, I will show how I used main characters of the Mbh to generate discussions about ethics, duty, and social interactions. First I will discuss the course layout including the objectives, and assignments. Then I will present the various characters and themes I selected from the Mbh, and the respective student reflections, and stories that emerged.

**Course Objectives**

The course objectives were to 1) to use the course as a platform towards building a close knit community for student veterans. This is a broader goal for our veterans program. As the faculty coordinator for the “Veterans at Ease” program in my College, I facilitate a smooth transition for veterans from military to student life. Part of this involves teaching an introductory course which includes a three day retreat in which veterans practice basic yoga, qigong, and breathing skills to manage stress and anxiety. This summer course supported the overall objectives of the Veterans at Ease program. I attempted to build a close classroom community through engaging students in story-telling, deep conversations sharing their experiences, and interactive class activities based on themes from the Mbh; 2) to empathize with and create awareness of veterans’ experiences while they were serving and while they transition to civilian life. This was facilitated through classroom discussions and online submissions on a platform called padlet; 3) to discuss issues raised in the Mbh that relate to decision-making, individual, and social responsibility and the complexity of dharma. I chose to focus on ethical dilemmas faced by characters like Bhīṣma, Karna, and Yudhiṣṭhira.

There were three main assignments: 1) bi-weekly online discussion forums in which students had to submit answers to questions from the readings 2) blog-like submissions that required students to tell their own stories based on themes from the Mbh and 3) a final project. For the final project, students had the option of presenting their work in any creative form they could express themselves which included poetry, art, crafts, making videos, food, design. Through these media, they had to connect their own perspectives and stories to the Mbh.

The first week of classes was used to familiarize students with the main story. Students had to create a timeline of the Mbh as a class. The following weeks were spent discussing themes broadly linked to the main characters in the Mbh. Some of them were identified by Gurucharan Das. They included envy, selflessness, status anxiety, injustice, revenge, forgiveness, remorse, overcoming adversity, moral dilemmas, and selfless action. The range of emotions were sufficient to stimulate reflection points, and enable students to connect to their personal and military experiences.

**Duryodhana**

When discussing Duryodhana, his envy of the Pāṇḍavas’ success was our main focus. For Duryodhana it was acceptable within ksatriya dharma to feel indignation at the success of one’s rival and destroy one’s enemies to safeguard one’s interest. When Duryodhana was questioned by Shakuni about the reason for his gloominess, he responded “what man of mettle in this world will have the patience when he sees his rivals prosper and himself decline?..when I see their fortune and that splendid hall and the mockery of the guards, I burn as if with fire” (Mbh 2.43.35).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Students were prompted to discuss the problems that come with envy individually and socially. Several students shared stories of envy directed towards them, or envy they felt toward others over matters of promotion and pay. One student acknowledged envy among peers was more salient because of the pay grade system, “with the military being relatively more of an equal society within each specific paygrade, envy is even easier to come by.” Another student, after describing his feelings of envy toward someone, made the following reflection in the discussion forum “All in all, being envious of somebody else isn’t productive. It is a waste of energy and emotions. The flames invoked by envy do not burn anybody but the envious person carrying it. I am very grateful for this class. Reading the Mbh has given me an opportunity to do some serious self reflection.” We also discussed ways to manage envy. One student recommended intentional gratitude to overcome envy “rationally thinking about it, I'd say the best way to combat envy would be feelings of gratitude. The thing about gratitude is that it has to be intentional, or you'll overlook all that you have achieved.”

**Bhīṣma**

We had a discussion on whether Bhīṣma was right in sacrificing his claim to the throne and vowing to remain celibate so that his father could marry Satyavatī. By that sacrifice, he inadvertently endangered the state. Some students argued that selfless acts, while admirable, would not necessarily lead to a desirable outcome if they were were was not accompanied by a careful consideration of the consequences one’s actions. One of the students commented, “His selfless action, while noble, caused the succession drama that would cost the lives of many of his own kinsmen. Bhīṣma is also inactive at times to a fault, particularly when Draupadī is being disrobed by the Kauravas, and what's worse is he has no real answer when questioned why.”

Inspired by Bhīṣma’s selflessness, a student who was a culinary sergeant, shared her own story. Once, the cooks did not make enough food for the three hundred and fifty soldiers in the field. Eventually, instead of waking her cooks up to prepare more food she stayed up by herself the whole night and cooked for them, because she felt it was her duty.

Bhīṣma’s decision to be leniently disposed to Duryodhana, which contributed to the destruction of the Kuru dynasty prompted us to cogitate on life situations in which we have to choose being kind and being just, especially when occupying leadership positions. We mostly agreed that it was important to find a balance between justice and compassion, and either extreme would not be desirable.

**Draupadī**

Draupadī’s mistreatment after the dice game drew some of the most strongest responses. We watched video clips of the dice game and its aftermath from B. R. Chopra’s Mbh series, and read selections of Draupadī speech in the assembly hall. Teaching moments included Dhritarashtra’s weakness and compliance in allowing his son to act unjustly for the sake of coveting his nephew’s wealth, Yudhisthira’s frenzy during the gambling match that made him stake his own wife and brothers, and Karna’s insults on Draupadī that stemmed from his grudge towards her. These served as examples of humans succumbing to their weaknesses despite knowing the right thing to do. The silence of the Kuru elders served to illustrate the negative consequences of silence of the people in power.

Students admired Draupadī’s intelligence in employing different strategies such as appealing to authorities, seeking empathy among the women, and arguing on a legal basis to defend her honor. One student commented  “Draupadī demonstrates a rightful distaste for the impossibly patriarchal society she finds herself in. All those facing intimidating odds within a corrupt system can look to Draupadī for daring to ask if the law was just, and her courage it took to challenge the powers that be.” Das suggested that Draupadī’s question on dharma should embolden citizens to question the dharma of public officials.[[4]](#footnote-4) Following this promo, students shared stories of moments when they were witnesses to injustice in the military or when they were themselves falsely accused, and how they spoke up or failed to do so.

**Karna**

Just as in India, Karna was the character that drew the most controversy in my class. Some students felt that Karna was a noble hero trying to make the best use of a difficult life which consistently dealt him cards of injustice, while others felt that Karna was basically a sore loser. Here are some reflections that students had on Karna:

Karna seems, for lack of a better phrase, to have a perpetual chip on his shoulder, despite his incredible prowess, as he showcased his skills against the favored Arjuna.  He was always wanting to be the best at whatever challenge he faced. It made him boastful, almost to the point of being arrogant. He wants the life of a hero, but it feels like he wants it almost too much.

He had an inferiority complex that follows him through the entire tale of the Mbh.

Following Gurucharan Das’s caricature of Karna as a negative example of dealing with social anxiety, one student commented:

Karna handled social anxiety by being boastful, overly generous, hunger for fame, and a loyalty to his status anxiety. Therefore, it is an example of how social anxiety and excessive cancers of what people think of us can distort one’s natural behavior.

Students discussed their experiences of social anxietywhile in the military and in transition to civilian life. While serving in the military anxieties about promotion and deployment were common themes. When they transitioned to college life, competing with students who were much younger, and academically more practiced were common sources of social anxiety. One student reflected, “sometimes the attention of others humans matter because one maybe uncertain of one’s own with. Whether we realize it or not, our own self identity is based on by what others think of us.” We talked about techniques to reduce social anxiety that included looking at a life from a long term and broader perspective, practicing deep breathing techniques, and have supportive friends.

Karna was also used to distinguish between the ethic of loyalty, specifically the difference between loyalty to a principle and loyalty to a person. Loyalty to a principle allows critical thinking whereas loyalty to a person can be self destructive. In Karna’s case, loyalty turned out to be a trap rather than a virtue because it was reposed on the wrong person (Duryodhana). While it gained him respect, it prevented him from fighting on the side of dharma, and eventually his own demise.

**Arjuna**

Arjuna was used as an exemplar of ideal student behavior. Some of his attributes that were highlighted were focus (with reference to him focusing on the eye of the bird when Droṇaasked him to aim), hardwork (with reference to his practicing archery at night), and hunger for learning, with reference to his learning music in Indra’s heaven that would later come of use when the Pāṇḍavas were living incognito in Virāṭa’s kingdom. Students made a list of qualities that they thought were important were them to succeed in college. In the spirit of improving skills, I invited a guest speaker to talk about note-taking and essay writing skills as part of their professional development.

Arjuna’s character was used to encourage students to see adverse situations as opportunities for moments of growth. He responded to being exiled to the forest by collecting celestial weapons and reacted to Abhimanyu’s death by slaying thousands of Kauravas the next day. Although the death of Abhimanyu affected Arjuna emotionally, it did not prevent him from fighting the next day. A female veteran submitted a story about how she was often judged in a male dominated an environment, often from female seniors. She was told not to wear make-up to work because her seniors and peers equate that with a poor work ethic. She used that pressure put in extra effort and improve her skills. She was eventually recognized by other officers who recommended her for a course she wanted to take.

We also discussed the Bhagavad Gita, highlighting how Arjuna weighed the moral consequences of war, whereas Dhṛtarāṣṭra was only weighing in on the pros and cons of victory and defeat. Arjuna’s anxiety before the battle prompted students to share personal narratives of anxiety while serving and when transitioning to civilian life. Other topics we discussed at were the systems of yoga presented in the Gita, and how they accommodated different personality types.

We discussed the possibility of seeking satisfaction through karma yoga and performing one’s dharma without being affected by someone else’s compliments or criticism. One student commented:

My reflection on… karma yoga is that it doesn't mean to become a hermit by giving up the world. Instead, learn to shift your mindset as you live and work in the world. Make a decision because it has to be made. It will not feel like an effort if you successfully change your attitude, and it's as though you're doing absolutely nothing.

**Aśvatthāmā**

Aśvatthāmā revenge-fueled massacre of Draupadī’s sleeping sons after the war prompted discussions about feelings of retribution and resentment over injuries and the loss of lives. One student compared Achilles’ revenge against Hector in the Iliad with Aśvatthāmā revenge against the Pāṇḍavas. He said, “the desire for revenge can permeate every aspect of your life and cause you to become a truly toxic individual. On the other hand, forgiveness, while it can be a source of penance, should never be given lightly.” Aśvatthāmā vengefulness was also compared with Yudhiṣṭhira’s forgiveness of Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the war. Yudhiṣṭhira instructed his brothers, “our father, the great king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, should be revered, and those who wish to please me must obey his commands and heed his preferences. If you would be kind to me please comport toward Dhṛtarāṣṭras you did before” (Mbh 15.2.3). [[5]](#footnote-5) Inspired by Yudhiṣṭhira forgiveness of Dhṛtarāṣṭra , students had a conversation with one another on, “how do we forgive the people we fought against…especially if they belong to the race, religion, or country who were our enemies in battle (sic)?”

After his father was unfairly slain by the Pāṇḍavas, Aśvatthāmā cried “where is sleep for the man who is suffering? My heart burns night and day, but never burns it out” (Mbh 10.4.23-24). [[6]](#footnote-6) His sleeplessness opened up discussion on a problem which many veterans face. Students shared experiences of insomnia from working irregular hours while serving, and due to PTSD. They also shared various resources and techniques to cope with it amongst one another.

**Yudhiṣṭhira**

Of all the characters, it was Yudhiṣṭhira whom we spent the most time covering. Some of the themes we discussed were: the dilemmas he faced, such his inclination towards peace being challenged by the call to engage in violence for the sake of justice, his transition from a pacifist to a shrewd king willing to employ questionable strategies for the sake of victory, his remorse after the battle, his reluctance to assume the throne, and his ethics of compassion.

We had an in-depth discussion of a debate that took place during the Pāṇḍavas’ exile. Draupadī, reminiscing about the past opulence of the *Pāṇḍavas*  and feeling distressed at their present life of hardship questioned Yudhiṣṭhira on why his anger was not aroused, given what had happened during the dice match, “why doesn’t your anger blaze?…else why is it that your mind is not moved at the sight of your brothers and me?”(Mbh 3.18.17-33).[[7]](#footnote-7) Yudhishthira’s immediate response was to refute Draupadī’s view on anger, “Anger kills men, anger prospers them: know wise woman, that well-being and ill-fortune are rooted in anger; for he who always controls anger reaps well-being, but beautiful Kṛṣṇā (referring to Draupadī), for a man who never controls his anger, this terrifying anger leads to his downfall” (Mbh 3.30.1-13).[[8]](#footnote-8) For Yudhishthira, it was beneficial both for the world, and oneself if one restrains anger, even when provoked because anger is self-destructive. Moreover, restraining anger reaps benefits in the afterlife. Students shared their experiences about dealing with anger. Some shared their experiences with road rage, about the proper utilization of anger while in the military, and about using anger as a useful tool while parenting and in public service.

Another response by Yudhishthira that caught the attention of students was “I do not act for the sake of the fruits of dharma. I act because I must” (Mbh 3.32.2).[[9]](#footnote-9) Upon reading this, one student reflected,

I was treated horribly in my last duty station, which caused me to sink into a deep depression. I saw that I wasn’t being recognized when I was doing great work, so I stopped working hard. This did not help me as it became a self-fulfilling prophesy. By the end of my time in the military, I wasn’t seen as a responsible Airman. Knowing what I know now, I wish I had adopted this concept of karma yoga and maybe things would have gone differently. Maybe I would have been promoted and been sent somewhere else.

Draupadī, Bhīma, and Arjuna were of the view that there was a time and place for practicing *ahiṁsā* through forgiveness, but as a *kṣatriya,* Yudhiṣṭhira was duty-bound to fight his enemies, protect his subjects, and administer justice. Through the story of Yudhiṣṭhira, the Mbh seeks to extol the virtue of *ahiṁsā.* However it puts limits on adopting *ahiṁsā* as an absolute value, especially for a ruler. Ethics according to the Mbh is contextual and not categorical. Just as Yudhishthira had to construct a hierarchy of ethics to respond to various contexts and fulfill his dharma as a king, an elder brother, a nephew, a husband, and an ethical human being, my students reflected on the plural dharmas they have to balance as students, husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers. The discussion raised awareness of the choices we have to make and the implications of those decisions. Yudhishthira’s story relays the point that dharma is not only about individual conduct, but also includes social and political obligations.

After the war, Yudhiṣṭhira experienced great remorse “I have conquered this whole earth…but ever since finishing this tremendous extermination of my kinsmen, which was ultimately caused by greed, a terrible pain aches in my heart without stopping…This victory looks more like defeat to me” (Mhb 12.1.13). Some students resonated with his feelings: “ If I was Yudhiṣṭhira, I would have probably had PTSD myself, and would have remorse (sic) due to all of the cruel things I did at war. I understand where he is coming from, for me I would still be able to visualize everything.”

Yudhiṣṭhira’s initial reluctance to accept the crown, and renounce the world was met with both empathy and ridicule. One student commented, “While it is unfortunate that the events that unfolded led to the war, it is something that cannot be changed or undone, and as such Yudhiṣṭhira must move forward and ascend the throne. It is admirable that he feels remorse for what has transpired, but that remorse should lead him to do better as the rightful ruler, and not away from ruling.” The student was projecting his own response to life after having left the military, and was looking forward to a life of service in his civilian life.

Yudhiṣṭhira’s ups and downs also prompted a student to comment, “failures in life does not equate to a failed life. Persevere despite failures when overcoming depression, PTSD, and addictions when transitioning to civilian life.”

Later, after Yudhiṣṭhira had retired from his kingship , he was welcomed by Indra to enter the heavens. However, he did not want to abandon the dog that had accompanied him. The dog, who turned out to be Dharma in disguise, assuming his original form and praised Yudhiṣṭhira because he “weeps with all creatures”[[10]](#footnote-10) (Mbh 17.13.16). My students were impressed with Yudhiṣṭhira’s quality of compassion and loyalty. They compared him to the leaders they served in the military. Some comments from my students are as follows:

I do think to ‘weep with all creatures’ is the most important qualification for a leader to have. I believe this because it will provide a check and balance to the decisions the leader will be forced to make, and if he/she does not feel the pain of his/her subjects, circumstance will make him/her dismissive to hearts and minds of those he/she rules.

I believe to truly be a just and effective ruler or leader; you must be empathic with the troubles of those who you preside over. A king or leader who does not understand or care about the plight of his people is asking for an uprising and usurpation of his power.

Our discussion ended with a debate on whether compassion comes naturally or if it’s something that one needs to be trained in. Overall students agreed that our own suffering can induce compassion for others’ suffering, but we must practice and develop it.

**Challenges and Future Recommendations**

Notwithstanding the rich materials and discussions that the Mbh provided, teaching this course had its own challenges. One of the main challenges was familiarizing students with the main story of the Mbh within the first week so that we could get into a deep discussion of the characters. I used John D. Smith’s summary from his abridged version.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, students found it incomprehensible and were daunted by the list of names and long storyline. In future renditions of the course, I hope to present a simpler summary of the Mbh suited specifically for my objectives.

The complexity of some of the characters and their contexts in which they acted were sometimes lost on my students, who were quick to judge them at face value. For example, some students saw Krishna as a war-monger, in part because they were not aware of his attempts at negotiating peace. In future, I intend to steer my students away from focusing solely on characters in isolation by presenting a more holistic view of each character. I will take on a more prominent role as narrator of the text and provide students with whole sections of conversations for their weekly readings. I see this as an important exercise as it encourages a more in-depth analysis of people and their characters instead of a shallow reading based on single instances.

I found that a number of students have little knowledge about cultural aspects of the Mbh, such as the kṣatriyaprinciple of keeping to vows, and the weight they gave to the spoken word. The Mbh is a culture-specific literary text and students’ perplexities on what they perceived to be strange customs, such as touching someone’s feet, took some time away from the focus of the course. The lack of cultural knowledge on their part demands that I contextualize the text for them by introducing Indian cultural ethos that are embedded in it, and prepare students to be more aware of the unconscious interpretive activity that they bring to bear on the readings.

Overall, teaching this course has been an enriching and educational both for my students and me. I learnt that the Mbh can be a rich resource in opening up discussions on themes which are very relevant, especially for military personnel. Mostly, I was pleased to see how the Mbh served as a launchpad student veterans to be a rich source of learning for one another. Through story-telling, informal conversations in class, and students expressing themselves in their final project, I saw how literature and artwork served to extirpate military service trauma, and prepare students for the next phase in life.

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2. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata: 2. The Book of the Assembly Hall 3*  *The Book of the Forest* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975)/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Translation by Gurucharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mbh 15.2.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Translation by Gurucharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma*, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Translation by Gurucharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Translation by van Buitenen, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Translation by Gurucharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Translation by Gurucharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good - on the Subtle Art of Dharma*, 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John D. Smith, *The Mahābhārata*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)