**The Notion of *Dharma* and the Theme of Moral Dilemmas in *The Mahabharata***

*Mahabharata* is a text of great magnitude and gives us a picture of what India was, its ethos, culture heritage, its strength and weaknesses. It has become all the more necessary now to analyze, understand such texts primarily to know what was our vitality and in what way that could be a source of strength in the true development of our country. The basic question of Mahabharata is what is the *kendra*, centre of the *Mahabharata*. In general parlance *kendra* is the self and in the self resides *dharma*. The central issue of the *Mahabharata* is what dharma is. Hindus occasionally say that the word dharma used in Hinduism, is not a religion but a dominant and pervasive concept of Indian thought and a way of life. It is loosely translated as religion, otherwise it means righteousness, law, duty, benevolence, morality and virtue and hence it is not exactly religion as understood generally all over the world. But today this loose but incorrect translated meaning of *dharma* as religion has become so current and popular that it has gained an unwarranted legitimacy.

Dharma is derived from the word dhr, which in Sanskrit means to support or sustain and refers to both caste obligations and an individual’s obligation to the betterment of their society. These two types of dharma are called *svadharma*, obligation to caste, and sadharana-dharma, which is the universal obligation an individual has in relation to the world as a whole; such as using unethical means to ultimately create a better society.

Jean Holm, former Principal Lecturer in Religious Studies at   
Homerton College states, “In Hinduism, [dharma] was traditionally related to the way people fulfilled their moral duties and obligations of caste membership” (Holm, Pg.5). For the Kauravas and Pandavas, their svadharma was one of the warrior class or kshatriya caste and their dharma was to maintain justice and order in their kingdom. This idea of justice in relation to dharma is a complicated matter based upon the task of objectively separating what is considered ethical from subjective opinion, “Human nature tends to be attuned to a sense of justice, even when the specific understanding of an account may not be acceptable to the others” (Holm, Pg. 104). This tension between the subjective and objective has   
created a continuous debate for scholars over the ethics of the Pandavas actions in the Kurukshetra war.

**Ethical Dilemmas:**

One of the main concerns of *Mahabharata* is *dharma*. It is discussed throughout the text by various characters in various situations and thus all the prevalent ideas of the time are put forward and examined. An ethical dilemma arises when a person is committed to two or more moral obligations and he cannot fulfil one without violating his duty to the other. It presents irreconcilable alternatives and the choice between them seems to be made irrationally or for reasons other than moral. The classic and the most well known example is Arjuna’s dilemma at the beginning of the war which necessitates the *Bhagvadgita*. There are other instances. For example in the Karnaparva, Yudhishthira is forced to flee the battlefield after being painfully humiliated and wounded by Karna. Arjuna comes to find out what exactly has happened when Yudhishthira angrily turns upon him and says that he had undertaken the war mainly because of his confidence in Arjuna and his Gandiva bow. The war, however, was dragging on destroying thousands with no end in sight. Arjuna’s boast of being the finest archer in the world was proving to be hollow. Yudhishthira not only insults Arjuna but also the Gandiva. Arjuna now has to choose between killing his elder brother and breaking his vow that he would kill anyone who insulted the Gandiva. His kshatriya dharma demands that he kill Yudhishthira but Krishna intervenes arguing that while keeping one’s vows is an integral part of protecting the truth it cannot be an unconditional or absolute obligation especially when it demands a grossly unjust and criminal act like patricide or fratricide. In support of his proposition he narrates two stories.

A sage Kaushika had vowed to tell the truth all his life. One day he was sitting near a crossroad when some travellers ran by trying to escape the bandits who were chasing them. They requested Kaushika not to reveal to the bandits the direction which they had taken but Kaushika made no answer. The bandits, knowing that the hermit would not lie, asked him about the travellers. Kaushika told them the truth. As a result the travellers were killed by the bandits. Kaushika was condemned to hell because he had chosen his duty to tell the truth above saving innocent lives. His abiding by his vow was only egoistic and came to nothing because under certain circumstances lives must be saved even at the cost of truth. This is not to propagate expediency but to argue that there are times when a lie can become a higher truth than the truth itself.

However the world of *Mahabharata* is one of action and not of theories. It is an imperfect world in which imperfect people have to struggle to act according to their perceptions and judgements at a particular time and place. The “Shanti Parva” notes all kinds of human behaviour and acts done in the name of dharma. Some people praise conciliation and friendliness, others strenuous effort. Some praise sacrificial rites and others total withdrawal from the world. Some are only for ‘giving’ and others only for receiving. Some people leave everything and devote themselves to silence and meditation. Others obtain a kingdom after much fight and destruction all in the name of the same *dharma*.

**Conclusion**

In *Mahabharata*, Dharma is always a dialectical unity and hence the debate on dharma is inconclusive. As said earlier, with reference to Kaushika’s story, the Kantian ethic of truth –telling (satya-dharma) got the highest priority; in Krishna’s ethic saving an innocent life got the ultimate priority. Of course, Matilal says, in an ideal world, we can do both, as Kant insisted. But Krishna, who thinks that dharma is *avasthikah*, situational, unknowingly conceded that all we have is an imperfect non-ideal world and imperfect human solutions. In Krishna’s world, though, when one dharma is violated to keep another equally important dharma, the intrinsic value of neither is diminished thereby. Allowing flexibility in dharma does not mean that one is allowed to do anything one wants to do. The situation only reflects imperfect human solutions in an imperfect world. While confronting this imperfect world the only course of action, the only dharma, as says Mahabharata, is not to lose one’s *samattava*, balance.