



Morals and Principles in the Mahabharata: A comparative analysis of IrawatiKarve's *Yuganta* and C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*

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Abstract

In his brief essay entitled '*On Values, Ethics Morals and Principles*', Paul Chippendale brings about a clear distinction between values, morals and ethics. He expresses that, "Values motivate, morals and ethics constrain." Values describe what is important in a person's life. With the onslaught of technology and blurring of physical boundaries, the value systems have changed and metamorphosed to suit current times. In such a scenario, one is forced to question whether values advocated in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* still an intrinsic part of us? Can we still go to epics in search of some truths about ourselves and our conditions? The answer, interestingly, lies with technology-with the high TRPs that the serialised versions of epics receive or the urge to represent the *Mahabharata* in thirty six tweets, felt by mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, goes to prove the malleability of the epics and the important position they enjoy in our lives, even today. C. Rajagopalachari aptly credits the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to bind people as one, despite differences.

Keywords: Values, Mahabharata, Yuganta, karve, Kurukshetra, Virtues

This paper attempts at studying diverse representations of the *Mahabharata*. One being a translation and summary of the epic by C. Rajagopalachari alias Rajaji. The other is a compilation of essays on important characters and events in the *Mahabharata* entitled *Yuganta*. The purpose is to familiarise the reader with the gamut of values advocated by the epic resulting out of the disparate treatment.

Rajaji's approach to the epic is that of reverence and admiration. He assures that the reader would experience his inner being seized and cleansed, after alternatingly passing through joys and sorrows. The reader would thus experience upliftment above both and



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would experience the transcendent and real. (Pg.384, *Mahabharata*) Indeed, after reading the text one emerges wiser and with complete clarity about the truths of life.

Irawati Karve, on the other hand, adopts a radically different approach. Based on the critical edition of the *Mahabharata*, Karve seems to uphold rationality as a value while de-romanticising the epic. She does not deal with the mythical and spiritual aspects of the epic stating those to be later interpolations. She in fact questions in one of her essays, ‘All human effort is fruitless, all human life ends in frustration – was the *Mahabharata* written to drive home this lesson?’ (*The Final Effort*- pg.8)

Although both these authors are starkly different in handling the epic, the attempt is to bring about a happy marriage between the two in terms of values that they espouse. The different approaches would enable the reader to blend rationality as a value along with the spiritual ideals that the epic imparts.

In *Yuganta*, Karvestates that, values are always relative to time and place. To her, like other Indians, the Mahabharata is not an imaginary tale, it represents real events that took place around 1000 B.C. She opines that the events in the *Mahabharata* must be judged in the context of their time and place. The social values of those days supported the social order. The social order then, according to Karve was male dominated, polygamous and class oriented. It is in this social framework that Karve has situated her work.

Karvein her work highlights the flaws in the characters. In this context it would be pertinent to cite Rajaji’s thoughts, where he questions the choice of the great authors of the epics to write about the lapses in Rama in *Ramayana* and Yudhishtira in the *Mahabharata*. The answer to which, as given by the author himself is that in these artistic creations, the lapses themselves impress the desired morals.

Bhishma the revered knight or callous patriarch?

For Karve, the revered Bhishma is not the perfect knight as presented by Rajaji. Bhishma, the most respected character in the epic, is accused by Karve for having wronged two generations of women, who face hardships in life due to his oath to celibacy. Karve states that there was no attitude of chivalry towards women during the *Mahabharata* but none was as callous as Bhishma. Karve questions, “Had Bhishma achieved anything in keeping his vows?” (*Yuganta*, Pg. 29) at the hands of whom many Amba were sacrificed. She severely criticizes him for not having relinquished power at the right time.

Rajaji in connection with Bhishma’s sacrifice, dextrously weaves the story of Yayati and Puru. He wishes to impress the moral upon the reader, that sensual pleasure is short lived, and it is never quenched by indulgence. Rajaji is partial to Bhishma as he expresses that Bhishma’s vow was a terrible one as he lived with it for life. Puru’s old age was short-lived and he did regain his youth, after realisation dawned on Yayati.

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Karna's birth and Pandu's untimely exile to the forest-

Karve's scientific argument helps in seeing through the miraculous birth myth of Karna. Kunti serving a Brahmin for a year could result in birth of a child (Karna), that was no extraordinary occurrence. Furthermore the maid also helped Kunti in disposing of the child thus born, with lots of gold, this supports the fact that this eventuality was foreseen and was provided for by Kuntibhoja, when he gave her in service to the Brahmana.

Karve also rationalises Pandu's retiring to the forest at the prime of his life. Karve attributes it to a 'lack' in Pandu. The entire narrative of the sage's wrath and the ensuing curse that union with a woman would prove fatal to Pandu seems to be a latter addition that tries to hide some defect in the father of the heroes.

Draupadi- Just another arrow in Yudhishtira's quiver-

Draupadi is also blamed to have caused the *Mahabharata*, according to the *Jain Purana*, in actuality the day Dhritarashtra was denied the throne due to his blindness and Pandu was made king, the seeds of war were sown. Draupadi did not cause the war, she wanted it but as true inheritors of Indian patriarchal society that they were, the Pandavas were hardly men to bow down to their wives wishes.

Khandavprastha- An inhuman venture-

The society then was such where values were male dominated, class oriented and narrow. These values prevented people from realising the cruelty involved in burning a whole forest with all living creatures in it. Karve finds such atrocities not rare, however, what she finds shocking is no one found anything wrong in Krishna and Arjuna's actions when they burnt the Khandava forest. Krishna in the *Mahabharata* is definitely not a god, as depicted in later literature. Karve acknowledges him as an extraordinary man with a personal ambition to be called Vasudeva. Krishna remains a figure for thought and search for Karve, not touching one emotionally as other figures of the great epic do. However, Rajaji's portrayal of Krishna is completely different. Krishna for him is most energetic and divine, whose divinity scintillates through a cloud of very human characteristics.

Smriti-The key to completeness-

In the essay titled *Paradharma Bhayavahah*, Karve draws our attention to the importance attributed to smriti-(memory,consciousness) and moha(confusion). Anger should be kept at bay under all circumstances as it leads to the loss of smriti. The ordinary man must try to keep the thread of smriti unbroken at least for this life. Ashwatthama completely forgot himself, he gave up his dharma and could never understand the dharma of others. An unforgettable example of loss of smriti! Rajaji also tries to impress upon the reader that hatred breeds hatred and anger is one of the deadliest of sins. Even the austere rishis lose merit when they curse, as a result of anger. Just like Karve, Rajaji advocates the smriti/memory of one's

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dharma, as the supreme duty of an individual. Arjuna in C.Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*, in support of the Rajasuya sacrifice, reminds the dharma of a Kshatriya to his brothers. He states failure is due in majority of cases due to ignorance of one's own strength.

Mahabharata-A noble poem-

C. Rajagopalachari considers the epic to be a perennial source of spiritual strength. In the Preface to the Second Edition he calls it a 'noble poem' (pg. 12. *Mahabharata*) with the characters in the epic moving with vitality of real life. The epic needs to be read in contemporary times as throughout his rendering of the *Mahabharata*, Rajaji tries to convey that hatred is never extinguished by retaliation. He drives this point home through the example of Drupada and Drona, who provide the sub plot to the epic and are major opponents at the Kurukshetra war.

Destiny and fate-

Rajaji further draws our attention to the role played by destiny and the fact that best wisdom is vain against fate. Yudhishtira considers it as a matter of honour to not refuse the game of dice. He forgets that it's not right to prove himself at the dice board, and the conquest in battle is the right path for the Kshatriya. In vain pride, even we take up unnecessary challenges. As teachers, we seldom see youth fall prey to addiction and substance abuse as a result of peer pressure.

Patience, the best of virtues-

Patience is a virtue advocated throughout by Rajaji. The long and arduous periods of exile built this in the Pandavas. Exile, a period of discipline made the Pandavas emerge nobler. Through various situations Rajaji, promotes several values, if followed would help us lead a harmonious life. Be it the instance of Yudhishtira seeking Sahadeva's advice first, (the youngest of the Pandavas) on selecting the supreme commander, as in the olden days it was a practice to ascertain the views of the younger people first, before consulting elders. (pg.259, *Mahabharata*) Today, if elders adopt an inclusive approach, and do not force their views, honour killings and suicides rates for being unable to cope with parental ambitions will surely lessen. The consolation provided to the Pandavas at various junctures in the *Mahabharata*, provide solace to the reader even in the present day. Vyasa's advice to the Pandavas to be patient in the face of adversity, is something that we must also imbibe. The restless, mobile totting generation needs to learn this from the Mahabharata.

New battle rules and suicide squads-

Rajaji also brings to light how battle rules have changed over ages as ideas of right and wrong have. Nothing is exempt from attack in modern warfare. We, who belong to the age of terrorist attacks, shouldn't be intrigued by this observation. Rajaji also introduces the presence of 'suicide squad'-the Samsaptakas, who took an oath to kill Arjuna or be martyred

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on the battlefield. It was a squad organised to achieve what Drona had pointed to be essential.(pg.321, *Mahabharata*) This surely surprises the reader, that suicide squads like suicide bombers existed even then.

Conclusion-

C. Rajagopalachari is right when he says that the “*Mahabharata* is an ancient story but human nature remains the same. (Don’t family feuds capture headlines, even in contemporary times?) Even at the present day, anger and hatred afflict and threaten with ruin without regard to age or sex or condition.”(pg.120, *Mahabharata*) People have become more impatient as the fast paced life doesn’t allow human beings to be humane even to themselves! However, our aim should be to rise above the petty issues and inculcate values of patience, forbearance, compassion, which are sorely missing from our lives and examples of which we find in abundance in our epics. Similarly, we need to cultivate the scientific temper, and the inquisitiveness to question all events and not take things at face value. If scientific temper is developed, then social activists will no more have to give up their lives for questioning and shaking people’s beliefs in superstitious practices. Also, if we follow the path of karma as shown by Krishna, we need not visit astrologers! The epic surely holds relevance today, as the rationalist Karve sums up her book in the following manner, ‘I am indeed fortunate that I can read today a story called Jaya, which was sung three thousand years ago, and discover myself in it.’ (*Yuganta*, pg. 217)

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