9

The *Mahābhārata*, Mencius, and the Modern World

Reflections on Dharmayuddha *and* Ānṛśaṁsya

Kanad Sinha

1

> Undeniably, we were on God's side in World War II and the Cold War. But were we ourselves without sin in those just struggles?
>
> —PAT BUCHANAN

I remember coming across the quoted statement of the conservative American politician Pat Buchanan while browsing through the attention-seeking quotes of several American politicians before the last presidential election in the United States. The statement is both intriguing and disturbing. On one hand, it shows how even an ardent conservative has self-doubt despite a self-righteous confidence of being on the right side of a war. However, it also shows how, even after having doubts about one's own methods and actions, one can claim to be on "God's side," with a confidence that the "other side" (here the fascists and the communists respectively) is necessarily the evil/demonic. Buchanan is no colossus in the political history of mankind, but the tendencies inherent in the statement contain implications much wider than Buchanan's political agenda. It leads us to some questions pondered over by thinkers of different civilizations over centuries, concerning the issue of "just war." Is war justified in any time? Is pacifism a sign of weakness or of moral superiority? Should one fight for a just cause or avoid war by all means? How does one decide if one is necessarily on the right side? Even if a side proves to be morally superior, are they necessarily perfect and right in all their steps? What if one resorts to unfair means to assure a fair end (the victory of the "right" side)?

In ancient India, the text that engaged most closely with all these questions is the *Mahābhārata*. The text revolves around a family feud that turns into a bloody catastrophic war, known as the Bhārata War / Kurukṣetra War, which is traditionally described as a *dharmayuddha* (just war / righteous war). The word *dharmayuddha* can have several connotations. It may mean a war fought for the right cause (establishment of *dharma*), a war between good and evil (*dharma* and *adharma*), a war which itself is *dharma* (since *dharma* could be based on *varṇa* or caste in a caste-divided society, and warfare was a sacred duty of the militant *kṣatriya* caste), or a war fought following the right codes of warfare. The *Mahābhārata* deals with all these aspects of the question of *dharmayuddha*. However, the most basic of all these questions is if war can be the right thing to do in any situation. Can any war be *dharmayuddha?* This question is not only central to the *Mahābhārata* but utterly relevant to our contemporary world politics. In recent years, we have seen a peculiarly growing popularity of aggressive nationalist politics. Several popular leaders all over the world, from Donald Trump to Vladimir Putin, have considered a display of aggressive and militant masculinity a marker of a "strong state." The recent verbal showdowns between the American and North Korean premiers, the prevalent political sentiments regarding India-Pakistan relationship on both sides of the border, the seemingly endless Arab-Israel clashes and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine—all show that even the end of the Cold War could not free the world from consistent doubts about war and peace: whether aggressive nationalism is to be celebrated or denounced, whether pacifism is desirable prudence or undesirable weakness, whether to settle for peace or intimidate by force an enemy whose standpoint seems unrighteous, and so on. To find an ancient Indian engagement with such questions, we shall start with the heated debates in the "Udyogaparvan," the fifth book of the *Mahābhārata*, where both the contending parties of the catastrophic Bhārata War start their war preparations.

The *Mahābhārata* tradition, in all probability, originated as an *itihāsa* (one of the historical traditions of early India, possibly with a bardic origin) of the Later Vedic Kuru kingdom which, according to Michael Witzel, was not just the earliest proto-state of the Indian subcontinent but possibly the location where the *varṇa*-based Vedic orthodoxy and orthopraxy were formulated.[1] Although the composition of the text has probably gone through multiple tellings and retellings before its final canonization and has usually been dated between 500 BCE and 500 CE, historians like Romila Thapar and R. S. Sharma—who have pointed out the difference between the narrative and didactic sections of the text—note that the older narrative sections represent the context of the period of the Later Vedas (ca. 1000–600 BCE).[2] Although I am inclined to support this view and place at least the core narrative of the *Mahābhārata* in its Later Vedic context, separating the layers of the *Mahābhārata* and ascertaining its nature as either a bardic historical tradition of Later Vedic times or a memory of the Later Vedic past or a revised mythological/didactic unified text are

questions that have attracted intense debates beyond the scope of this paper. Leaving these debates aside, it can be said that the central narrative of the *Mahābhārata* revolves around a succession struggle in the most important polity of Later Vedic North India, the Kuru kingdom.

Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black rightly describe the main issue of the text as the conflict of primogenitive birthright and behavioral fitness.[3] Primogeniture appears to be a new idea in kingship, not yet completely established. The tribal notion of selecting the ablest as the chief was still present, by virtue of which the great king Bharata chose Bhūmanyu—son of Bharadvāja—as his successor, neglecting all of his own sons.[4] The system continued up to the period of Śaṃtanu, in whose favor his elder brother, Devāpi, abdicated the throne.[5] However, Śaṃtanu's passion for the fisherwoman Satyavatī brought a disjuncture. Śaṃtanu's son Devavrata (Bhīṣma), who was the fittest to succeed to the throne, made a vow to Satyavatī's father, assuring the unborn children of Satyavatī the throne.[6] Bhīṣma's famous vow unfolded into a crisis, as both the sons of Satyavatī died early.[7] In this situation, Satyavatī asked Vyāsa, her son born out of a premarital union, to beget children from the two widows of Vicitravīrya, Ambikā and Ambālikā. Born of this levirate, Dhṛtarāṣṭra—the eldest of the next-generation princes—failed to obtain the throne because of his blindness, and younger Pāṇḍu became the king. However, this choice of the fitter over the legitimacy of primogeniture created a frustration in Dhṛtarāṣṭra, which manifested itself in his son Duryodhana, who fought hard to establish his legitimate claim to the throne and remained a staunch advocate of the martial *varṇadharma* of the *kṣatriyas* throughout the text. Thus, there was a constant conflict between Duryodhana and the five surrogate sons of king Pāṇḍu (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva). The latter group, headed by the eldest Yudhiṣṭhira, known as the Pāṇḍavas, escaped the early attempts of Duryodhana to kill them off, and became powerful enough to force a partition of the kingdom, after Draupadī, the princess of the strong kingdom of Pāñcāla, became the common wife of the five brothers. The conflict reached its height when Yudhiṣṭhira not only lost all of his property in a dice game against Duryodhana and his party, but in desperation staked and lost Draupadī, who was molested in the open court. After this, war seemed the only option left, despite Yudhiṣṭhira's reluctance to fight. Yudhiṣṭhira, still unwilling to fight, followed the conditions of the dice game by accepting an exile of thirteen years for himself and his brothers. Twelve years of forest-dwelling followed by a year of masquerade was supposed to get them their share of the kingdom back. They spent the thirteenth year in the kingdom of Matsya, at the end of which a marriage between Abhimanyu, a son of Arjuna, and Uttarā, the daughter of Virāṭa (the king of Matsya), sealed a political alliance between the Pāṇḍavas and Matsya. The "Udyogaparvan" began in this situation when the marriage party also became the site of a political conference to decide what course the Pāṇḍavas were to take if Duryodhana refused to give them their kingdom back.

Right from this initial assembly, the "Udyogaparvan" presents several ethical dilemmas. After fulfilling their commitment about the exile, what should the Pāṇḍavas do? Did not they deserve their share of the kingdom back? What if Duryodhana refused to return it? One solution was war. But that would involve the killing of numerous people, including his own kinsmen. So which was better: war or peace? Peace and nonviolence were eternal virtues. It was a *kṣatriya*'s duty to fight for his property. Between one's caste duty and the eternal *dharma*, which was to be followed? Then there was another aspect to the problem. The conflict was not only about a share in the kingdom. Even if the Pāṇḍavas forgot their political interest, what about the humiliation of Draupadī? Should not it be avenged? But should a wrong necessarily be avenged by violence? Was a crime by the opponent enough justification for initiating a war that would endanger the existence of the entire clan? Draupadī's humiliation was wrong. But how right was a war that pitted a noble-hearted grandfather against his dear grandchildren, a famous teacher against his favorite student, and cousins against their equally capable cousins?

In this huge conundrum of ethical questions, everybody would provide an answer and add more questions. Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana, Arjuna and Karṇa, Drupada and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Kuntī and Gāndhārī—everyone would have a say in the matter. But the finality had to be provided by Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, a distant cousin of the Pāṇḍavas, who had practically become their friend, philosopher, and guide and had established himself as the most charismatic diplomat of the time.

In the very first meeting, Kṛṣṇa made his stand crystal clear:

> This being the case, think of what will profit
> The Dharma's[8] son and Duryodhana,
> And profit the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas,
> Consistent with Law, correct, earning fame.
>
> King Dharma is not one to covet the realm
> Of even the Gods, if it were under Unlaw,
> He would strive for lordship even in some village
> If it were consistent with Law and Profit.[9]

Therefore, we can see that Kṛṣṇa's primary ambition was a combination of Law (*dharma*) and Profit (*artha*), the first representing the eternal virtue while the second represented the practical and material interest. However, while deciding on this ground, Kṛṣṇa no longer intervened as an ally of the Pāṇḍavas, but reminded a totally pro-Pāṇḍava gathering of the need to think of a solution benefitting both parties. His sympathy for Yudhiṣṭhira was not for their friendship and alliance but because of the latter's dedication in performing the *dharma*. That *dharma*, according to Kṛṣṇa, focused on the defense of a right rather than personal gain. Therefore, even the rulership of heaven was not to be coveted unjustly, but the rightful lordship over even a village had to be carefully defended.

Thus, Kṛṣṇa indicated that Yudhiṣṭhira should defend his right to a share in the kingdom, but did not yet advocate war as the means. Rather, he emphasized the interest of both parties and wanted to know Duryodhana's stance before making any decision. Therefore, he suggested the sending of an ambassador for such purpose.[10]

Both parties, however, were sure that a war was imminent. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa had to logically resolve the doubts about war and peace in the Pāṇḍava camp to establish his viewpoint. The doubts were bound to be there, particularly with Yudhiṣṭhira's obsession in observing the *dharma*. Even the Kuru court knew it well, and tried to bank on it. Therefore, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's message in reply to the demand of a share of the kingdom for Yudhiṣṭhira, by Drupada's ambassador, turned out to be an ethical quiz. Saṃjaya, the envoy of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, presented war as an evil, a cause of total devastation, infernal and destructive. A victory in such a war would be equivalent to defeat, according to him.[11] The imminent war was shown as even more evil, since it involved the death of kinsmen.[12] Saṃjaya also suggested that begging would be better than reigning by undertaking such a war.[13]

The ploy did not work. Yudhiṣṭhira made it clear that he did not covet any wealth through *adharma*,[14] but referred the matter to Kṛṣṇa to decide what *dharma* was at that moment. Kṛṣṇa readily pointed out how empty the peace proposal was.[15] He noted that the Kurus were recommending the Pāṇḍavas to follow the path of peace without themselves undertaking any effort in the matter. In his long reply to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's message, we find the first clear exposition of Kṛṣṇa's teachings in the *Mahābhārata*. And there, Kṛṣṇa emphasized the concept that *dharma* lay in performing one's own duties properly and nothing else. That was how all divinities and natural forces also functioned, by performing their roles ceaselessly.[16] Then he extended this natural law of action to the society and envisioned a separate set of duties for the king:

> A king should protect all classes without
> Distractions and yoke them each to his task,
> Be not given to lusts and be fair to the subjects
> And not comply with lawless desires.[17]

Therefore, a king who failed to perform these actions must be considered guilty of *adharma*. Working out of a lawless desire for the Pāṇḍava property, Duryodhana thus committed such a sin, which needed to be punished:

> When one cruelly covets the land of another
> And, angering destiny, seizes power
> Then this shall be a cause of war among the kings;
>
> Where a thief steals property without witness,
> Whether another steals it by force and in public,

> They both are guilty of crime:
> What sets Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons apart?[18]

Then he reminded Saṃjaya of the humiliation of Draupadī.[19] The entire speech gives us a clear idea of the philosophy Kṛṣṇa was propagating. He believed in action. It was the proper performance of one's own duty—which we can call *svadharma*—that sustained the Cosmic Order. The king's duty was in assuring that everybody could perform his own duties. Moreover, the king had his duties as well. A king who failed to do that, coveted the wealth of the others, and was driven by desire was no better than a thief. Only the thief stole secretly, while the powerful seized what he wanted openly. The nature of the crimes was the same. A king who was guilty of a crime was to be punished.

Based on this ideology, Kṛṣṇa ripped apart Dhṛtarāṣṭra's empty peace proposal that advised the Pāṇḍavas about the evils of war without promising anything for avoiding war. Duryodhana was guilty of theft, but there was no promise to rectify that. Draupadī was publicly humiliated. No punishment or apology was promised for that. In such a scenario, it became the kingly duty of the Pāṇḍavas to punish the sinners. However, Kṛṣṇa did not deny the essence of the message that war was evil. Therefore, he took the most crucial decision upon himself by going to the Kuru court for a final attempt at peace. But that peace was possible only when both parties were ready to do their duties to avoid war.

Kṛṣṇa knew that he would fail. Still, he decided to undertake the role of an unsuccessful envoy. There lay the secret of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy—performing a duty for duty's sake, not desiring success, not thinking of the end result. The war was inevitable. Kṛṣṇa knew it. But it was his duty to try his best to stop a war, and that he had to do. When suggested later that his coming as an envoy was unwise, futile, and risky, Kṛṣṇa would again expound the same philosophy:

> Even if a man, while trying to the best of his ability, cannot accomplish a task of Law, he still—and I have no doubt of that—gains the merit of the Law . . . . So I too shall attempt to make peace without dissembling, Steward, to stop a war between the Kurus and Sṛñjayas, who are doomed to perish.
>
> The wise know that he who does not run to the rescue of a friend who is plagued by troubles and does not try to help him as far as he can is guilty of cruelty. Go as far as grabbing him by the hair to keep a friend from committing a crime, and no one can blame you, for you tried your best.
>
> No, I have come to help the cause of both parties, and having made the attempt I shall be without blame before all men.[20]

With this decision to go as an envoy to the Kuru court, Kṛṣṇa found himself center stage in the debate between war and peace. And the debate was intense. As we can see, there were two polar opposites at work. On one hand was Yudhiṣṭhira, an ardent pacifist who wanted to avoid war at any cost. On the other hand, Duryodhana, with staunch belief in his *kṣatriya* virtue, valued military victory over everything.

Making the situation more complex, the mothers of the two protagonists propagated doctrines quite opposite to what their sons believed. Gāndhārī, mother of Duryodhana, consistently advised her son to follow the eternal *dharma* for the greater good, while Kuntī fiercely urged her son Yudhiṣṭhira to leave his obsession with peace and perform the duty expected from a *kṣatriya* warrior. Kṛṣṇa stood in the middle. He had made his stand clear that he preferred peace but not at the cost of tolerating criminal offenses. As an envoy, he had the task of persuading the haughty Duryodhana to accept peace. On the other hand, the ambassador of peace had to keep the peace-loving Pāṇḍavas prepared for the war that he knew as inevitable.

Duryodhana believed in the classical Later Vedic *varṇa* order where the hereditary *varṇa* duty was to be followed like a ritual, and the aim was the desire for heaven. That ideology explained a *kṣatriya*'s task as fighting heroically. In military capability lay a *kṣatriya*'s worth and importance. Therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira's pacifism was unrighteous in Duryodhana's eyes, as his love for fighting was in the eyes of Yudhiṣṭhira. Just as the Pāṇḍavas tried hard to make Duryodhana abide by the ethics they followed, so did Duryodhana try to turn his cousins into "true" *kṣatriyas*. The sufferings of the Pāṇḍavas, to him, were the punishment for failing to perform their *svadharma:*

> I called you barren sesame seeds, and rightly so! For in the city of Virāṭa the Pārtha wore a braid and Bhīmasena served as a cook in Virāṭa's kitchen. That was my doing! That is the way *kṣatriyas* punish a *kṣatriya* who runs from a battle: they condemn him to a gambler's row, to the kitchen, to the braid![21]

Therefore, on the verge of war, after all attempts at peace failed, Duryodhana's message to the Pāṇḍavas would be:

> Be a man, remember your banishment from the kingdom, your hardships, your forest exile, the molestation of Draupadī, Pāṇḍava![22]

War was the purpose for which, Duryodhana thought, a *kṣatriya* lady gave birth. Surprisingly, the same thought was shared by the lady who actually gave birth to the pacifist Yudhiṣṭhira, Kuntī:

> Come, heed the Law that was created by the Self-existent; the *kṣatriya* was created from his chest, to live by the strength of his arms, to act always mercilessly for the protection of his subjects.[23]

Yudhiṣṭhira's deviation from the *kṣātradharma* was an irritant to Kuntī, as it was to Duryodhana:

> Look to the kingly Laws that befits your heritage, for the conduct by which you wish to stand was not that of the royal seers. A king infected by cowardice, who does not act ruthlessly, does not win the reward that results from the protection of his subjects. Neither Pāṇḍu nor I nor Grandfather have ever prayed that you be blessed with the wisdom you live by; the blessings I asked were sacrifice, generosity, austerity, heroism, offspring, greatness of spirit, and the enjoyment of strength forever.

> Whether it be Law or not, you are born to it by the very fact of birth . . . you are a *kṣatriya*, the savior from wounds, living by the strength of your arms.[24]

To inspire Yudhiṣṭhira to the code of conduct of a *kṣatriya*, Kuntī told him the story of the lady named Vidurā who had forcibly sent her reluctant son Saṃjaya to a war. Through the mouth of Vidurā, Kuntī sends Yudhiṣṭhira her message:

> Where did you come from?. . . . .Too cowardly for anger, barely hanging on to a low branch, you are a man with the tools of a eunuch.[25]

To her, manhood meant truculence and unforgivingness. The meek, forgiving man was neither man nor woman. Contentment, compassion, sloth, and fear only killed off good fortune.[26] While Kṛṣṇa would describe a greedy king's self-aggrandizement as theft, the exact opposite view would come from Vidurā and Kuntī:

> A *kṣatriya* who clings to life without displaying to the highest degree possible his talent by his feats, him they know for a thief.[27]

Life and death did not matter to a *kṣatriya*. It was better for him to flame briefly than to smoke long.[28] Irrespective of victory or defeat, a wise person should go ahead with his task.[29] The heart of *kṣatriyahood* (*kṣatrahṛdaya*), as described by Vidurā and Kuntī, is expressed in terms identical to those used by Duryodhana. Vidurā is quoted as saying:

> I indeed know the eternal heart of the kṣatriyahood as proclaimed by our forbears and theirs, and our descendents and theirs. No one born a *kṣatriya* here, and knowing the law of the *kṣatriyas*, will either out of fear or hope for a living bow to anyone else. "Hold up your head and do not bow." Standing tall means manhood (*pauruṣa*)—rather break in the middle than bend.[30]

However, irrespective of what his mother thought, Yudhiṣṭhira was equally steadfast in his allegiance to his interpretation of *dharma*. Challenging the rationale of the *varṇa* system time and again, he had hardly any regard for the notion of *kṣātradharma*. He clearly stated his disapproval of the idea that a person had to be violent and unforgiving just because he belonged to a certain caste by birth. War to him was evil by all means and so was the *kṣātradharma* that endorsed it:

> What is pretty in war? It is the evil Law of the *kṣatriyas* . . . *kṣatriya* kills *kṣatriya*, fish lives on fish, dog kills dog.[31]

Therefore, the power struggle of the *kṣatriyas* is as abominable to Yudhiṣṭhira as a brute fight between dogs:

> The wise have noticed that it is the same as in a mess of dogs. It starts with a wagging of tails, then a bark, a bark in reply, backing off, baring the teeth, loud barking, and then the fight; and the stronger one wins and eats the meat, Kṛṣṇa—it is the same with people, there is no difference at all. It is always the same thing that the stronger does to the weaker: disregard and aggressiveness—and the weak man surrenders.

> Father, king and elder always deserve respect, and therefore Dhṛtarāṣṭra deserves our respect and homage, Janārdana.[32]

Earnestly thinking along these lines, Yudhiṣṭhira provided us with one of the earliest and strongest statements against war and violence, standing in an era when heroism was the most respected manly virtue:

> War is evil in any form. What killer is not killed in return? To the killed victory and defeat are the same, Hṛṣikeśa.
>
> The victor too is surely diminished: In the end some others will kill a loved one of his; and behold, when he has lost his strength and no longer sees his sons and brothers a loathing for life will engulf him completely, Kṛṣṇa . . . .There is always remorse after the killing of others, Janārdana.
>
> Victory breeds feuds, for the defeated rest uneasy. But easy sleeps the man who serenely has given up both victory and defeat.[33]

Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira viewed heroism as a "powerful disease that eats up the heart." There were only two ways to end a feud—total eradication (*mūlaghāta*) of the enemy or giving it up. Since the former was a cruel thing, the second was preferable.[34] Yudhiṣṭhira, therefore, would prefer peace by subjugation (*praṇipāta*) than either renouncing the kingdom or ruining the family,[35]and his request to Kṛṣṇa was to ensure peace.[36]

Yudhiṣṭhira's teachings seem to have an impact on his brothers as well, for the usually violent Bhīma also requested Kṛṣṇa to try for peace at any cost. Even he would prefer bowing before Duryodhana than causing a disaster in the Kuru family, and he claimed that Arjuna thought the same.[37] Arjuna himself said nothing conclusive except to assert his desire for peace and his faith in Kṛṣṇa's ability to achieve it,[38] while Nakula hoped for the success of the peace mission.[39]

This entire atmosphere of antiwar sentiment would obviously delight our modern sensibilities. However, in this grand debate about the sharing of the kingdom, the issue of Draupadī's humiliation was almost lost. Only the youngest of the Pāṇḍavas, Sahadeva, spoke in a different voice:

> What the king has said is the sempiternal Law, but see to it that there be war, enemy-tamer! Even if the Kurus should want peace with the Pāṇḍavas, you should still provoke war with them, Daśārha! How could my rage with Suyodhana subside after seeing the Princess of Pañcāla manhandled in the hall? If Bhīma, Arjuna and King Dharma stick with the Law, I want to fight him in battle, and begone with the law.[40]

It is for this reason precisely that Kuntī urged her sons to go to war:

> Not the rape of the kingdom, not the defeat at dice, not the banishment of my sons to the forest grieves me, as it grieves me that that great dark woman, weeping in the hall, had to listen to insults.[41]

Above all, there was Draupadī herself, itching for a war that would avenge her humiliation:

> A curse on Bhīmasena's strength, a curse on the Pārtha's bowmanship, if Duryodhana stays alive for another hour, Kṛṣṇa! If you find favour in me, if you have pity on me, direct your entire fury at the Dhārtarāṣṭras, Kṛṣṇa.
>
> This hair was pulled by Duḥśāsana's hands, lotus-eyed Lord; remember it at all times when you seek peace with the enemies! If Bhīma and Arjuna pitifully hanker after peace, my ancient father will fight, and his warrior sons, Kṛṣṇa! My five valiant sons will, led by Abhimanyu, fight with the Kurus, Madhusūdana! What peace will my heart know unless I see Duḥśāsana's swarthy arm cut off and covered with dust! Thirteen years have gone by while I waited, hiding my rage in my heart like a blazing fire. Pierced by the thorn of Bhīma's words, my heart is rent asunder, for now that strong-armed man has eyes for the Law only.[42]

Again, in seeking this revenge, Draupadī put stress on the *kṣātradharma*, which Yudhiṣṭhira disregarded and Duryodhana held in high esteem:

> For a *kṣatriya*, if he follows his own Law, should kill a *kṣatriya* who has become greedy, and a non-*kṣatriya* too . . . Those who know the Law know that just as it is sin to kill one who does not deserve it, so a sin is found in not killing one who does deserve it. So see to it, Kṛṣṇa, that this sin does not touch you, the Pāṇḍavas, and the Sṛñjayas with their troops, Dāśārha.[43]

In such a heated environment, Kṛṣṇa had to perform his duty of an envoy. His very decision to go as a messenger of peace was an acceptance of Yudhiṣṭhira's pacifism. However, he was almost sure of the failure of his mission. Therefore, he had to make his stand clear about the subsequent action. Thus, he also quoted the clichéd terms of *kṣātradharma* to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira:

> Mendicancy is not a *kṣatriya*'s business, lord of the people. All those who observe the life stages have said what a *kṣatriya* should beg: victory, or death on the battlefield, as the Placer has ordained for eternity. That is the *kṣatriya*'s law, and cowardice is not extolled. For livelihood is impossible by giving in to cowardice, Yudhiṣṭhira. Stride wide, strong-armed king! Kill the foe, enemy-tamer![44]

As a response to Yudhiṣṭhira's hesitation to kill the kinsmen, Kṛṣṇa argued that Duryodhana had already been killed by his sins. However, interestingly, after the stereotypical exposition of *kṣātradharma*, Kṛṣṇa accepted that Yudhiṣṭhira's understanding of the *dharma* was what actually pleased him.[45]

Kṛṣṇa treated Bhīma's pacifism in a totally different manner. If he had respectful admiration for Yudhiṣṭhira's righteousness, he knew that pacifism was not what suited Bhīma. Therefore, he provoked Bhīma to bring out his real nature, by wondering whether he was panic-stricken.[46] The provocation had the desired result, as Bhīma's anger flared up. But it would be wrong to assume Kṛṣṇa as a champion of the *kṣātradharma* on the basis of his advice to Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma. Kṛṣṇa, rather, appeared in a totally different light in his trip to Hastināpura.

Kṛṣṇa's message to Duryodhana had nothing to do with the latter's favorite *kṣātradharma*. Rather, it placed the eternal *dharma* over any pursuit for material benefit around which a *kṣatriya*'s life was expected to revolve:

> The undertakings of the wise are consistent with the Three Pursuits, Bharata bull, but when all three are impossible to carry out at the same time, men follow Law and Profit. If those two cannot be reconciled, a sagacious person follows the Law, a middling person prefers Profit, a fool the Pleasure of discord. If a man, driven by his senses, abandons Law out of greed, and strives after Profit and Pleasure by foul means, he perishes. Even if he strives for Profit and Pleasure he should still practice the Law from the start, for neither Profit nor Pleasure ever part company with Law.[47]

Kṛṣṇa's message was accompanied by a long speech by Gāndhārī, who tried to persuade her son to the path of the eternal *dharma* that depended on control over senses, particularly lust, anger, and greed.[48] However, the speeches on *dharma* hardly had any effect on Duryodhana, who decided to bank on his power and keep Kṛṣṇa as a prisoner.[49] The plan failed. Kṛṣṇa left the court as an angry unsuccessful envoy.

We may notice an interesting aspect of Kṛṣṇa's teaching in the entire episode. To Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma, he valorized war and *kṣātradharma*. To the warmonger Duryodhana, he spoke of the eternal ethics and peace. What was Kṛṣṇa's own stand then? To understand the matter, we have to go back to Kṛṣṇa's exposition of his ideas to Saṃjaya. He placed action above all. A man chose his own *svadharma*. What Kṛṣṇa did was to persuade everyone to the performance of his own *svadharma* after offering them several alternatives to choose from. The terrible Bhīma, a hardcore warrior, could not be a pacifist. So, he instigated Bhīma to his *svadharma* of an unflinching warrior. He knew that Duryodhana's *svadharma* was *kṣātradharma*, and he ultimately let him have the war he wanted, but only after an exposition of the other faces of *dharma* in front of him. Yudhiṣṭhira was given his choice as well. Kṛṣṇa extolled the *kṣātradharma* in front of him, but could hardly move him. At the end, he happily went off as Yudhiṣṭhira's messenger of peace. Why did Kṛṣṇa decide on this balancing act? There lay his own *svadharma*, the *dharma* of performing his duties irrespective of the results and without any attachment. He had to try his best for peace, though in vain. He had to keep Yudhiṣṭhira ready for war, equally in vain.

What Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa demonstrates in the "Udyogaparvan" is a politics of balance between pacifism and justice, a balance that the present world greatly needs. In a world where the language of populist politics is becoming increasingly militant, we need to listen more carefully to the voice of Kṛṣṇa, not the deified all-knowing Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad Gītā* but the human Kṛṣṇa of the "Udyogaparvan" who constantly reminds us of the necessity of a resolution that is beneficial to all and offers himself to be a messenger of peace even when a war is imminent because, irrespective of success or failure, one cannot but perform the duty of trying every possible means to ensure peace.

2

Before exploring the *Mahābhārata*'s treatment of the issue of just war further, let us see if these various ancient Indian standpoints can be compared with the philosophical standpoints regarding the same in ancient China, especially within the Confucian tradition. Prof. Daniel Bell, in chapter 10 of this volume, shows how Mencius preferred the resolution of crisis through the awakening of the natural goodness of individuals and detested the use of force. However, there were different positions regarding war among the Confucian thinkers as well.

Mencius's attitude, even within the Confucian tradition, can possibly be contrasted with that of the pragmatist Xunzi, who stood on the frontier of Confucianism and Legalism. As Mencius had a tendency toward dialectics, he contrasted two kinds of power: humane authority and hegemony. While the first was entrenched in justice and benevolence, the second spoke of benevolence but depended on force. Mencius strongly advocated humane authority and considered hegemony undesirable. He was thoroughly against the use of force in politics, and would rather support a small state, depending on moral authority, than political expansion based on force. However, Mencius thought that proper adherence to the principles of justice and benevolence, the core of humane authority, made other rulers willingly accept the leadership of the humane king. Hegemony, based on force and false promises of benevolence, was bound to be short-lived. Xunzi, on the other hand, agreed with Mencius about the supremacy of humane authority, but did not discard hegemony altogether. He thought of three, rather than two, varieties of international power. Therefore, he considered hegemony a value placed between the best, humane authority, and the worst, tyranny. Hegemony, to him, was not just a political system speaking of benevolence but was dependent on force. It also needed to have the quality of reliability. The hegemon must be reliable to his subjects internally and reliable to his allies in international politics, which meant that he needed to adhere to his promises. Moreover, Xunzi thought that conflict was natural and hard power was important except in the ideal but rare state of humane authority. Mencius, on the other hand, pointed out that human nature was not good from birth, but "potentially" good. Therefore, baser instincts had to be curbed and good instincts cultivated to avoid conflict. He had a belief in ultimate human goodness triumphing over narrow desire.[50]

Mencius knew, however, that he inhabited a nonideal world where war was a reality. Therefore, questions need to be asked about Mencius's perception of war. Bell points out that Mencius accepted the possibility of "just war" in two cases. The first was war in self-defense, in which case there was the support of the people. The other was punitive action against unlawful rulers. However, the latter proposition was limited to situations where people's life and subsistence were at stake. Thus, Mencius would not approve of military intervention in case of the violation of freedom of speech or religious rights. Moreover, it is said that the forceful liberation of people from unlawful rule is justified only when the people welcome the

force. If the force is unwelcome, they should leave. Thus, Mencius would probably not approve of the *Mahābhārata* war as a "just war," if avenging the molestation of a woman were the sole reason. However, if it was a war in self-defense, to recover the Pāṇḍava share in the kingdom that was taken away from them, it would have been justified as long as the Pāṇḍavas enjoyed popular support.

Moreover, Mencius, arguably, was handicapped by his view that human nature was good, and it was just a matter of getting people to follow their naturally good instincts. He doesn't seem to allow for the possibility that some people can be born bad and are impossible to change, and that the people as a whole can be misguided and in favor of war to the point of being bloodthirsty and fundamentally immoral. In contrast, Kṛṣṇa did not always appeal to the good sense of warmarkers, and he tried to argue against their natural inclinations. The *Mahābhārata* points to large numbers of people, from warmongering mothers to members of the *kṣatriya varṇa*, who favored war. For Mencius, it was important for rulers to gain the hearts of the people because the assumption seemed to be that the people's hearts were fundamentally in the right place. The *Mahābhārata* does not have any such conviction about people being necessarily good. Rather, it is a text that highlights and even celebrates the multiplicity of human nature, and, therefore, acknowledges the need of acting against the immoral, who may enjoy the support of a section of the people. If we think of support in Germany for the Nazis and in Japan for imperial aggression in China, it's hard to agree with Mencius that the people are always in the right side. The *Mahābhārata* reminds one further that, in most cases, there may not be an absolutely right side. Conflict, therefore, is an unavoidable eventuality. But, what the *Mahābhārata* in general, and Kṛṣṇa in particular, points out is that war has to be the last resort, after all alternatives have been tried. It is not something which can be desired or valorized. War cannot be "just" unless all possible efforts to avoid war have been made.

But what about good conduct in war? Is it acceptable to kill civilians even if the war had been indeed the last option? What does the text say about the obligations of the victor to the conquered peoples after the war has been fought? Is *dharma-yuddha* (just war) a question of means or of end? Let us revisit the Bhārata War, the central event of the *Mahābhārata*, to understand the ethics of warfare in the text.

3

To understand the *Mahābhārata* war better, we need to read the text in its original Later Vedic context. War and aggression were part and parcel of the Ṛgvedic world (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), and hardly needed any justification. Prayers for victory and material benefits were routinely uttered without shame, and destruction and devastation of the enemy was celebrated without embarrassment. The use of poisoned arrows or any other weapon was not prohibited. The occasional justification for warfare was always sectarian, as in the case of the clashes against the

Dāsas, Dasyus or phallus-worshippers. Even in the Later Vedic texts (ca. 1000–600 BCE), turning prisoners of wars into slaves was quite usual. Though the idea of contracts and treaties existed, Indra retained his position despite deceitfully killing his friend Namuci.[51] But the Later Vedic sensibilities show a gradual development in moral consciousness that culminated in the Upaniṣads, where nonviolence appeared as a great virtue. The glorification of violence finally gave way to the teachings of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, who passionately pleaded for nonviolence and peace.

The morality of warfare in the *Mahābhārata* lies between these two attitudes. The ethos of a heroic age was still vibrant, but unrighteous conquest was discouraged. The evils of war were pointed out repeatedly to Duryodhana, the champion of the heroic virtue of the *kṣatriyas*. When war could not be averted, a lofty moral standard was set where only equals should fight equals, one should fight one on one, noncombatants should remain unharmed, and the fatigued and frightened should be spared. Ambassadors and *brāhmaṇas* were declared unslayable, so were the spectators.[52]

The reality of war was much different from the ideas of the time. Therefore, when fighting started, many of these promises were forgotten by both parties. Great heroes slaughtered ordinary soldiers, charioteers were mercilessly killed.[53] But that the rules were conceived, a good deal of them were followed, and the aberrations were criticized and debated indicate an age of transition from a period of unrestrained violence to the period when nonviolence would be valued. Kaushik Roy has analyzed the peculiarity of the military ethics of the *Mahābhārata* (*dharmayuddha*) in contrast with the *realpolitik* (*kūṭayuddha*) advocated in the *Arthaśāstra* composed in later times.[54]

M. A. Mehendale attempted to understand why the Bhārata War has been called a *dharmayuddha*—war in the cause of righteousness. He thinks that it means that the war was fought either for righteous ends or by righteous means. In the latter case, the war at issue does not deserve the tag. He enlists the several codes of ethical warfare from the epic and shows that while certain rules were observed by both sides, many other rules were violated. Thus, no side could claim the war to be a *dharmayuddha*.[55] The message that the *Mahābhārata* eventually leaves is, probably, that just war is an impossibility. Circumstances may make war unavoidable. One may have to engage in warfare when all possible alternatives fail. One must also try to limit the casualties or suffering of the civilians to the greatest possible extent. Yet there is something inherently problematic in warfare that can make it only a necessary and unavoidable evil at best. *Dharmayuddha*, war for righteousness, is an absurdity either in terms of the means or in terms of the end. This, perhaps, is one of the reasons why several schools of classical Indian philosophy, especially Jainism and Buddhism, had celebrated *ahiṁsā* (nonviolence) as the highest ideal, which left a lasting legacy in Gandhi's political philosophy.

4

What message do these classical philosophical ideas (both Indian and Chinese) leave for the modern world? Before answering this question, we must remind ourselves that classical normative texts are products of their own time and place. Using ideas from these texts out of their context to analyze modern political phenomena can be, at times, misleading. For instance, the United States, like Xunzi's hegemon, no doubt tries to maintain reliability externally and internally. It also undoubtedly speaks of benevolence but depends on force, as the latest wars in Iraq and Afghanistan prove. However, does it still match the political model of Xunzi? The importance of social and familial norms is crucial in the thoughts of any Confucian thinker. Are these things essential in American politics? Prof. Yan Xuetong has been repeatedly advocating a policy of "moral realism," following Xunzi, to be adopted by China, in which reliability to allies is given high importance. However, can morality be perceived only in terms of reliability? American intervention in the Vietnam War no doubt showed its reliability as an ally of France, but didn't it also expose the American propaganda of democratic benevolence, as Mencius suggested? In the case of China, it has mostly depended on profit-oriented hard power in asserting its rise as a global superpower, something of which Mencius would strongly disapprove. Until now, there has been little in Chinese foreign policy that would make other countries accept China's leadership on moral grounds, without any consideration for hard power. However, such scenario is not impossible even in the modern world. We may think of the Non-alignment Movement led by the Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and a few other world leaders, during the Cold War, in which newly decolonized third world countries voluntarily came together to combat the hegemony of the two global superpowers, the US and the USSR.

A greater problem in creating a parallelism between ancient texts and modern politics is the difference in context. For instance, both Mencius and Xunzi placed the individual at the center of the polity because both of them lived when monarchy was the established political system. Such individual-oriented theories may still be used for countries ruled by a single individual/party, as in the case of China, but will not be able to capture the political scenario of a democracy, such as in India.

Also, as Bell has discussed, one of the few situations in which Mencius considers warfare "just" is punitive action against unlawful rulers. However, the proposition is limited to situations where people's life and subsistence are at stake. Thus, Mencius would not approve of military intervention in a case of the violation of freedom of speech or religious rights. The question is whether this limit, framed more than two thousand years ago, needs to be accepted verbatim in the post-Enlightenment era when there is greater consciousness about human rights, civic liberty, social justice, gender justice, and minority rights.

Similar issues can be raised about using classical Indian texts to understand modern political issues. After all, just like the classical Chinese texts, the *Mahābhārata* also addressed kings or clan-chiefs. All these texts were composed in a political situation where war and conquest were part and parcel of the expansion of royal power. The situation was additionally complicated in Brahmanical and Brahmanized texts, since duty was often perceived in terms of *varṇa* or *jāti* (together known as caste). Martial valor, for a *kṣatriya* king or warrior, was not only a political necessity but a social ritual obligation. A peace-loving figure like Yudhiṣṭhira could have thus been caught up between two extreme choices: following the stipulated duty that included war and violence, or nonviolent renunciation as prescribed by the heterodox religions. Neither suits the needs and sensibilities of the modern world.

Yet the classical texts address certain issues that have relevance and moral-political lessons transcending the specificities of space and time. Mencius's proposition that the validity of rulership depended upon the support of the people, combined with his idea that the king's duty was to ensure food and education for all, speaks of values which are equally relevant to modern democratic countries. If China were to follow Mencius's political model, availability of food and education will have to be prioritized and the right to dissent will have to be acknowledged. Thus, Mencius can still provide relevant political models. Similarly, Mencius says that the forceful liberation of people from unlawful rule is justified only when the people welcome the force. When the force is unwelcome, they should leave. Thus, India's military intervention in liberating Bangladesh would have been justified according to Mencius. But the same cannot be said about the presence of American forces in Iraq. Mencius would raise controversial but relevant questions about the Chinese control over Tibet or India's handling of Kashmir.

The *Mahābhārata* also offers philosophical middle-grounds opening up possibilities of going beyond the Brahmanical caste framework even without resorting to the heterodox way of renunciation or pursuing the seemingly impossible political utopia of absolute nonviolence. This is a choice that the *Mahābhārata* often celebrates as the highest *dharma* epitomized by the character who represents the ideal rule of *dharma*, the Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira.

Yudhiṣṭhira, despite being the principal hero, is one of the most enigmatic characters of the *Mahābhārata*. Standing against Duryodhana's militant support for the hereditary *kṣātradharma*, the violent *varṇa* duty of the *kṣatriya*, Yudhiṣṭhira emerged as the most vigorous critic of the *varṇa* orthodoxy in the text. Yudhiṣṭhira asserted that *varṇa* should be determined by observance of task, and, hence, a *brāhmaṇa* (the supreme *varṇa*) was one in whom cultured conduct was postulated.[56] Yudhiṣṭhira, thus, was a complete contrast to Duryodhana. As I have shown elsewhere, the new idea of *dharma* that Yudhiṣṭhira espoused was marked by the word *ānṛśaṃsya*, which is a philosophy of noncruelty and considerate empathy for all beings. Following this model, Yudhiṣṭhira chose Nakula

(out of consideration for his deceased stepmother Mādrī) over his uterine and heroic brothers Bhīma and Arjuna when faced with the option of keeping only one of them alive, cared for not only the destitute and war widows but also the parents of his deceased enemies with sympathy and respect after victory, and refused entry into heaven at the cost of leaving alone a dog that followed him throughout his final journey. It is a value, to be practiced by the capable, that undergoes multiple tests in life and beyond, and does not have anything to do with the *varṇa* assigned by birth. Hence, it is stated that *ānṛśaṃsya* can be found among the people of all *varṇas*. Moreover, while most of the other conceptions of *dharma* were directed at the afterlife—either the attainment of heaven after death (the goal of the Brahmanical *kṣātradharma*) or the liberation from the cycle of birth and death (the goal of the Śramaṇic religions like Buddhism and Jainism)—*ānṛśaṃsya* seems to be an end in itself. It is an idea suitable even for a completely "disenchanted" universe, for neither divine grace nor a happy afterlife is supposed to be the reward of its performance. Rather, Yudhiṣṭhira would choose *ānṛśaṃsya* over heaven and continue its practice even in his afterlife. Yudhiṣṭhira's *ānṛśaṃsya* was an alternative to the ideal of martial heroism, which celebrated violence and cruelty of a *kṣatriya* clan society, rather than a critique of heterodox nonviolence. The opposition to the ideal was located not in the heterodox religions but in his surroundings, particularly in his cousin Duryodhana, his mother, Kuntī, and—most vocally—in his wife, Draupadī.[57]

If we reflect upon the unstable world order we are living in, where the practice of complete nonviolence seems desirable but impracticable, we must also need to ponder if militant aggression is necessarily the only alternative. At a time when violent aggressive nationalism, ruthless authoritarianism, majoritarianism, and jingoism are becoming dangerously popular all over the world, it is essential to remember the *Mahābhārata* notion of *ānṛśaṃsya* which, despite accepting the occasions of necessary violence in politics and practical life, speaks of the cardinal principle of considerate empathy toward all beings, the ally and the opposition, friend and foe, fellow creatures and the natural environment. In a world now challenged with a pandemic of unheard-of scale, what we need above all is probably the likes of Yudhiṣṭhira, who would remind us, amidst populist, bloodthirsty, jingoistic hatred, of the need for compassionate empathy: "*ānṛśaṃsya* is the highest *dharma*."

NOTES

1. Michel Witzel, "Early Sanskritization: Origin and Development of the Kuru State," in *The State, Law and Administration in Classical India*, ed. B. Kolver (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, Munich, 1997), 27–52.

2. R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (Delhi: McMillan, 1983), 135–52; Romila Thapar, "The Historian and the Epic," in *Cultural Pasts* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 613–29.

3. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, "Introduction," in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

4. Vyāsa, I.89.17–20. All references to Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* are from the multivolume Critical Edition prepared under the general editorship of V. S. Sukthankar, published from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona. The translations that have been followed are Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. I), trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) (for the "Ādiparvan"); Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. II), trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) (for the "Sabhāparvan" and the "Āraṇyakaparvan"); Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. III), trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) (for the "Virāṭaparvan" and "Udyogaparvan"); Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata* (Book Six): Bhishma (Vols. 1 and 2), trans. Alex Cherniak (New York: New York University Press, 2008) (for the "Bhīṣmparvan"); Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata* (Book Nine): Shalya (Vols. 1 and 2), trans. Justin Meiland (New York: New York University Press, 2007) (for the "Śalyaparvan"), and Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. VII), trans. James Fitzgerald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) (for the "Strīparvan" and "Śāntiparvan" 1–167). For the rest of the text, the translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

5. Vyāsa, I.89.53, I.90.47.

6. Ibid., I.94.

7. Ibid., I.95–96.

8. Yudhiṣṭhira was known as the son of Dharma, righteousness personified, as well as King Dharma, a king who was righteousness personified.

9. Vyāsa, V.1.13–14.

10. Ibid., V.1.23–24.

11. Ibid., V.25.7.

12. Ibid, V.25.9.

13. Ibid., V.27.2.

14. Ibid., V.28.8.

15. Ibid., V.29.1–2.

16. Ibid., V.29.6–14.

17. Ibid., V.29.25.

18. Ibid., V.29.27–28.

19. Ibid., V.29.31–40.

20. Ibid., V.91.5–20.

21. Ibid., V.158.31–33 (translation slightly modified).

22. Ibid., V.158.9 (translation slightly modified).

23. Ibid., V.130.7. (translation slightly modified).

24. Ibid., V.130.19–29 (translation slightly modified).

25. Ibid., V.131.5.

26. Ibid., V.131.30–32.

27. Ibid., V.132.2.

28. Ibid., V.131.13.

29. Ibid., V.131.15.

30. Ibid., V.132.36–38 (translation slightly modified).

31. Ibid., V.7046–49 (translation modified).

32. Ibid., V.70.70–74.

33. Ibid., V.70.53–59.

34. Ibid. V.70.65–69.

35. Ibid., V.70.68.

36. Ibid., V.70.42–45.

37. Ibid., V.72.1–23.

38. Ibid., V.76; V.81.1–4.

39. Ibid., V.78.

40. Ibid., V.79.1–4.

41. Ibid., V.135.16–17.
42. Ibid., V.80.31–41.
43. Ibid, V.80.16–19 (translation slightly modified).
44. Ibid., V.71.3–5 (translation slightly modified).
45. Ibid., V.71.21–24.
46. Ibid., V.73.15–23 (translation slightly modified).
47. Ibid., V.122.32–35.
48. Ibid., V.127.20–34.
49. Ibid., V.128.1–9.
50. I am grateful to Prof. Xu Jin for the insight on Xunzi.
51. *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*, ed. F. A. Brockhaus (Leipzig, 1886), IV.3.4; *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, I.7.1.6; ŚB, XII.7.1.1–10, XII.7.3.1.
52. Vyāsa, VI.1.26–32.
53. Sarva Daman Singh, *Ancient Indian Warfare with Special Reference to the Vedic Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 153–67.
54. Kaushik Roy, *Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Torkel Brekke, "Breaking the Thigh and the Warrior Code," in *Warfare, Religion and Society in Indian History*, ed. Raziuddin Aquil and Kaushik Roy (Delhi: Manohar, 2012).
55. M. A. Mehendale, *Reflections on the Mahābhārata War* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995).
56. Ibid., III.177.30–35.
57. Kanad Sinha, "Redefining *Dharma* in a Time of Transition: *Ānṛśaṃsya* in the *Mahābhārata* as an Alternative End of Human Life," *Studies in History* 35, no. 2 (2019): 147–61.