

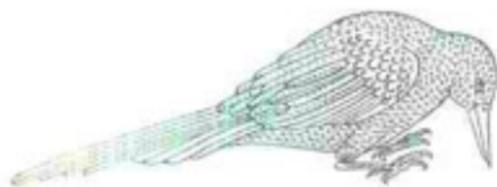
# MAHĀBHĀRATA

BOOK FIVE

## PREPARATIONS FOR WAR VOLUME ONE

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LIKE TOLSTOY'S "War and Peace," the "Maha-bhárata" can see both sides of war. It glories in immortal feats of courage, daring, and self-sacrifice, like those of Abhimányu, and showers petals over brave heroes like Karna and Duryódhana when they die on the battlefield, honoring acts of courage that are also feats of lunacy. The epic would have had much to say about today's crazed fanatics, who undertake suicide missions certain that they will go to heaven—much like the kshatriyas who fought at Kuru-kshetra.

Yet in 'Preparations For War,' the same "Maha-bhárata" condemns the approaching war in the most savage terms. While lamenting the failure of the peace negotiations, Yudhi-shthira leaves no doubt about what he thinks will be the consequences of the coming war. He expresses his feelings so forcefully that one wonders if Krishna might have given his message to the wrong Pándava in the "Bhagavad Gita."

*War is entirely disastrous, for which killer is not killed? Victory and defeat are the same to a dead man, Hrishi-kesha. I do not believe there is any distinction between defeat and death. The man who gains victory will certainly also meet his downfall, Krishna. In the end, some other men will kill someone he cares for, and when he has really lost his strength and no longer sees his sons and brothers, disgust for living will completely overwhelm him, Krishna. In fact, the firm, modest, noble, and compassionate are the ones who die in war, but the lesser men escape.* (CSL V.72.53–57)<sup>1</sup>

In between these two positions lies the Indian epic hero's fundamental question: How to live one's life? Does the good life consist of dying young in battle and going to heaven? Or should one live a long, peaceful, and probably unremarkable dharmic life of nonviolence and compassion? Where does true honor lie? These questions drive the Pándava heroes' search for the real meaning of dharma and are behind the problem which hangs over the entire 'Preparations For War.' The Pándavas undertake many efforts to negotiate a peace, but the negotiations fail. Krishna concludes, "War is the only course left." With violence inevitable, Yudhishtira voices Ádjuna's dilemma at the beginning of the "Gita":

*The ultimate disaster for which I dwelled in the forest and suffered is upon us in spite of all our striving.... For how can war be waged with men we must not kill? How can we win if we must kill our gurus and elders? (Critical Edition, V.151.20–22)*

It is Ádjuna, ironically, who must reassure his elder brother, and remind him of his duty. "It is not right to retreat now without fighting," he says. And to end this unbecoming wavering on the part of mighty warriors, Krishna exclaims impatiently and bluntly, "That is the way it is!" (CE V.151.25–26)

And so the Pándavas resolve to go to war. It is an unhappy ending after the great effort that has gone into negotiating a peace, and also a morally awkward outcome for an epic that is dedicated to preserving dharma. But at the same time, the conclusion—that war is inevitable—is not a sur-

prising one. In fact, ‘Preparations For War’ marks a turning point in the epic’s treatment of dharma. We become aware of this when Sánjaya suggests to Yudhi-shthira during the second embassy, “Do not destroy yourself! If the Kurus will not grant you your share, Ajáta-shatru, without resorting to war, then in my opinion, a life of begging in the kingdom of the Ándhaka Vrishnis would be better than winning your kingdom through war” (CSL V.27.1–2). The earlier, idealistic Yudhi-shthira might have accepted this recommendation that he turn the other cheek; now, he finds it preposterous.

In a poignant earlier scene in the forest, recounted in ‘The Forest,’ Yudhi-shthira had tried to persuade Dráupadi that “forgiveness is the strength of the virtuous”<sup>2</sup> when she had wanted him to raise an army to recover their kingdom. Dráupadi had been in tears seeing her royal husband sleeping on the hard earth when he was accustomed to sheets of silk and pillows of down, eating roots from the forest when he should have been feasting like a king served by a thousand retainers.

*I remember your old bed and I pity you, great king, so unworthy of hardship.... Sorrow stifles me.... I saw you bright as a sun, well-oiled with sandal paste, now I see you dirty and muddy.... I have seen you dressed in bright and expensive silks ... and now I see you wearing bark!*  
(CE III.28.10–14)

Yudhi-shthira responds to Dráupadi’s call for action by reminding her that he has given his word: when he lost the game of dice he had promised to live thus in exile. To fight

is easy, to forgive more difficult, he says. To be patient is not to be weak; to seek peace is always the wiser course. He reminds her that forbearance (*kṣamā*) is superior to anger (*krodha*), leaving her wondering why her husband has adopted a stubborn pacifism while their enemies exploit his goodness. She wails, “When I see noble, moral, and modest persons harassed in this way, and the evil and ignoble flourishing and happy, I stagger with wonder.... I can only condemn the Placer, who allows such outrage” (CE III.31.37–39). To which Yudhi-shthira can only reply, “I do not act for the sake of the fruits of dharma.... I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Dráupadi, I do my duty.” (CE III.32.2–4)

This was Yudhi-shthira’s high deontological position: he would not fight because he had given his word. His duty is to *satya*, truth, and he must stick to it no matter how inconvenient. It is the same high-souled Yudhi-shthira who, at the end of his exile, parched with thirst and still in shock at discovering the corpses of his brothers, shows amazing determination to play and win the moral game against the interrogating one-eyed *yakṣa* and bring his brothers to life. In that surreal moment, his admirable, winning answer is “Compassion (*ānṛśaṃsya*) I consider the highest Law, superior even to the highest goal.” (CSL III.313.129)

When Sánjaya makes his suggestion about turning the other cheek, it is this earlier Yudhi-shthira whom he has in mind. He reminds him that “non-violence surpasses moral duty” (CSL V.32.12), and chides him:

*If you must commit an evil act of such hostility, Parthas, after all this time, why then, Pándavas, did you have to live in the forest for those successive years, in miserable exile, just because it was right?... And why have you spent these successive years in the forests if you want to fight now, Pándava, when you have lost so much time? It is a foolish man who fights. (CSL V.27.16, 20–21)*

Yudhi-shthira's answer comes as a surprise:

*In times of trouble one's duty alters. When one's livelihood is disrupted and one is totally poverty-stricken, one should wish for other means to carry out one's prescribed duties.... which means that in dire situations one may perform normally improper acts. (CSL V.28.3–5)*

'Preparations For War' is a crossroads because it points to a new, pragmatic view of the world. As Yudhi-shthira, chastened by thirteen harsh years in exile, begins to take charge of the war effort and the peace negotiations, he has changed from a passive to an active individual who is "in complete control of his brothers and allies."<sup>3</sup> The first sign of this change comes on the day after Abhimányu's wedding, when Sátyaki proclaims in Virátá's court, "No law can be found against killing enemies who are plotting to kill us" (CSL V.3.20)—a down-to-earth view of dharma, one that recognizes the limits of goodness and is grounded in human self-interest without being amoral. This view avoids both ideological extremes—the Hobbesian amorality of Duryódhana as well as the idealistic super-morality of the earlier Yudhi-shthira in exile.

Yudhi-shthira's moral journey from 'The Forest' to 'Preparations For War' takes him to a position akin to the evolutionary principle of reciprocal altruism: adopt a friendly face to the world but do not allow yourself to be exploited. Recent insights of evolutionary scientists<sup>4</sup> affirm that Yudhi-shthira has attained a fundamental insight not only about the way we live, but about how we ought to.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, human beings have evolved through a long struggle in which the only the fittest pass on their genes. But to conclude that life is a tooth-and-claw struggle—or that morality is merely in the interest of the strong, as Duryódhana claims<sup>6</sup>—is a mistake. Nature is replete with examples of dharma-like goodness. Wolves and wild dogs bring food back for their young. Dolphins will help lift an injured companion for hours to help him survive. Blackbirds and thrushes give warning calls when they spot a hawk even at risk to their own lives.<sup>7</sup>

Vídura's advice to the insomniac Dhrita-rashtra in 'Preparations For War' is based on the principle of reciprocal altruism:

*The law dictates that a man must be treated in the manner he behaves. So, an illusionist should be treated with deception, and well-behaved people should be treated well.*  
(CSL V.37.7)

Dráupadi, too, has reciprocity on her mind when she urges Yudhi-shthira to get up and raise an army:

*I think, king of men, it is time to use your authority on the greedy Dhartaráshtas, who are always offensive. There is no more time to ply the Kurus with forgiveness; and*

*when the time for authority has come, authority must be employed. The meek are despised, but people shrink from the severe: he is a king who knows both, when their time has come.* (CE III.29.34–35)

In effect, she is telling her husband, “Don’t be a sucker; counter meanness with meanness.”

It has taken Yudhi-shthira thirteen years to learn that there will always be crooks in the world, and if necessary, one must be prepared to go to war. But “tit for tat” should not be confused with an aggressive worldview; its default position is to be friendly and collaborative. Yudhi-shthira presents such an affable face to the world when he sends greetings via Sánjaya not only to the princes and the mighty at the Hástina-pura court but also to elephant riders, charioteers, door-keepers, accountants, courtesans, slaves, and deformed persons (CSL V.30.23–41). Eventually, he makes an exceptionally generous offer to forgo his share of the kingdom and to accept only five villages—a deal that must have appalled the hawks in the Pándava camp. He quickly reminds Sánjaya of his reciprocal altruism: “I am just as capable of peace as I am of war ... I am as capable of duty and profit as I am of gentleness and severity.” (CSL V.31.23)

It is not implausible that, like reciprocal altruism in individuals, societies evolved the principles of dharma in order to get people to cooperate. In ‘Preparations For War,’ the “Maha-bhárata” has found a middle path between the amoral realism of Duryódhana and the idealism of the earlier Yudhi-shthira. It is a pragmatic path grounded in human self-interest, that upright statesmen—like Bhishma

and Krishna, who have the responsibility of running a state—must try to follow. In a world of power politics, the dharma of the leader cannot be moral perfection; it must be more like EDMUND BURKE’s “prudence,” which he called a “god of this lower world.” Prudence does not mean that one weighs amorally the pros and cons of victory and defeat as King Dhrita-rashtra does:

*By subtle and clear-sighted calculation of the pros and cons with proper judgment, the sagacious and intelligent man, who desired victory for his sons, precisely weighed up the strengths and weaknesses, and then the lord of men began to work out the capabilities of each side. (CSL V.60.2–3)*

The considerations of dharma are a part of the deliberations of the prudent ruler of the middle path. As Yudhi-shthira is getting resigned to the war’s inevitability, his mind is weighed down with moral issues. He asks Sánjaya:

*Why would a man ever go to war? Who, but a man whose fate is cursed, would choose war? The Parthas wish for happiness but they act to fulfill the law and for the welfare of the world. (CSL V.26.3)*

One wishes for more statesmen like Yudhi-shthira who also weigh the dictates of their conscience when they measure the pros and cons of going to war. Politics need not be a dark world of realpolitik in which force and cunning have to be the only currencies.

Societies are held together by laws, customs, and moral habits, as BURKE said, and it is these that make up dharma.

When Bhishma and others call dharma “subtle” (*sūkṣma*), they are in effect saying that it is sometimes difficult to know right from wrong. The epic’s world of moral haziness and uncertainty is closer to our experience as ordinary human beings—its dizzyingly plural perspectives a nice antidote to the narrow and rigid positions that surround us in the hypertrophied post-9/11 world. The subtle art of dharma teaches that it is in our nature also to be good, and ordinary human lives should not have to be so cruel and humiliating. One must be willing to compromise in a plural world, and reciprocity is a modest, guiding principle of civilized existence. The peace negotiations failed in ‘Preparations For War’ because Duryódhana was unwilling. The Pándavas merely want to be allowed to live, in five villages, the kinds of lives that they want to lead. No one has the right to control the lives of others, and the only thing one can do is to try to prevent intolerable choices.

The “Maha-bhárata” is a splendid, moving, and wise story “almost in the Marmion class,” as HARDY described the “Iliad,” But unlike “deep-browed” Homer, it has not invited many acts of homage from translators. KATHLEEN GARBUTT’s translation of the first volume of ‘Preparations For War’ is elegant. The weft and warp of the story leaves one with a combined sense of shock and uplift. It reflects the high standards set by the remarkable Clay Sanskrit Library that is producing true Sanskrit translations for our age.

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## Notes

- 1 I have quoted from KATHLEEN GARBUTT's translation of the first part of the *Udyogaparvan* and from W. J. JOHNSON's CSL translation of the fourth part of the *Vanaparvan*; and I have adapted quotations from J. A. B. VAN BUITENEN's translations of the remainder of these *parvans* (*Mahābhārata*, vols 2 and 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, 1978).
- 2 The good Vídura repeats these words of Yudhi-shthira's in his interminable moral teaching to the insomniac Dhrita-rashtra (CSL V.34.75).
- 3 J. A. B. VAN BUITENEN, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 133.
- 4 See, for example: W. D. HAMILTON, "The Genetic Evolution of Social Behavior I and II," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7, 1964, pp. 1–16, 17–32; E. O. WILSON, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975; RICHARD D. ALEXANDER, *The Biology of Moral Systems*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1987; RICHARD DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; ROBERT WRIGHT, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995; E. SOBER AND D. S. WILSON, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- 5 Although you cannot derive moral values from nature's workings—if you do, you're committing what philosophers call the "naturalistic fallacy" or the unwarranted inference of "ought" from "is"—recent insights of evolutionary scientists do help in explaining the moral position that Yudhi-shthira attains.
- 6 See for example *Sabhāparvan* CSL II.55.
- 7 Similarly, human parents make huge sacrifices for their children with little expectation of return. Although we behave altruistically, "there is no such passion in human minds as the love of

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mankind, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself” (DAVID HUME, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book III, part 2, section i, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984).