

- ‘They are my husbands - five, not one and they all look paralysed’.
- ‘While I hoped Bhīma alone could crush with his thumb the perpetrators of this horrible act’.
- ‘I do not understand why they stand there transfixed, speechless and like imbeciles.’

But surprisingly the game of dice is played according to the inexorable laws of dharma. But if the inexorable laws of dharma lead to such a situation, then it means dharma has become static and it has lost its pervasive quality. The irony of the whole thing is that if Yudhiṣṭhir is known as Dharmarāja, (the king of dharma) then why did he make that mistake of putting his wife at stake?

The epic then explores this issue of dharma and by the time it comes to the end we find Vyāsa, with his two hands up in the sky, asking everybody to follow the path of dharma. But no one is listening to the voice of dharma. His cry is almost a cry in the wilderness. He further says that dharma leads you to artha (wealth) and also to the fulfilment of kāma (desires). In other words artha and kāma are to be obtained though ‘dharmic’ means but no one is doing so. The question of dharma is connected with all the characters of *Mahābhārata*, but as these characters have no definite idea about dharma, they are highly perturbed and in a critical situation. It is then that they wonder what they should do, and what their dharma is.

Dharma is both a normative order and a pragmatic notion. Bhīṣma says that dharma cannot be determined in absolute terms. Nor can it be fathomed by the weak-hearted. One has to delve deep into all the scriptures in order to develop a total awareness of dharma.

Dharma in the era of *Rāmāyaṇa* is explained as a linear concept meaning righteousness, law, duty, benevolence, morality and virtue. However, by the time we come to the *Mahābhārata* age, this linear nature of thought is replaced by the complexity of life. Now war is not fought in a straight forward way by the divine and the demonic. Now war is mutually destructive. It reflects the tragedy and futility of that terrible fratricidal war of almost complete annihilation for the possession of a throne.

The central idea of *Mahābhārata* is that one should go back to the centre of the self, so that one may understand oneself. Understanding oneself is the ascending rhythm of life. The Pāṇḍavas ultimately leave for the great journey; a lonely journey through which the central myth of the epic is disclosed, which is that the self has to go beyond the self. It is only possible if one follows the path of dharma.

*Dharmo hṛdi samāśritaḥ:*

(In the self resides dharma).

But the tragedy, as uttered by Vyāsa, is that no one is listening to the voice of dharma. What gives depth to this epic is the poignant manner in which this reflection on dharma is woven into the very texture of the story of the epic.