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THE MAHABHARATA: TIMELESS LESSONS ON JUSTICE, FAMILY, AND WOMEN

Sarika Saiyara

As Draupadi stood in the court of Hastinapura, humiliated and disrobed of her dignity, she asked a question that still troubles me to this day: “Who is responsible for justice when the protectors become the perpetrators?” The Mahabharata is filled with many such moments—stories that compel us to reflect on our values, relationships, and societal structures. Often known as the longest poem ever written, the epic’s lessons on life, family, and gender remain as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. It also happens to be my favorite poem.

Spanning six generations, the Mahabharata is a sweeping tale of kings and queens, love and loyalty, betrayal and deceit. Beyond its dramatic tales though, how do its ancient stories continue to shape our understanding of life, family, and women in the modern world?



Life: A Balance of Desires and Duties

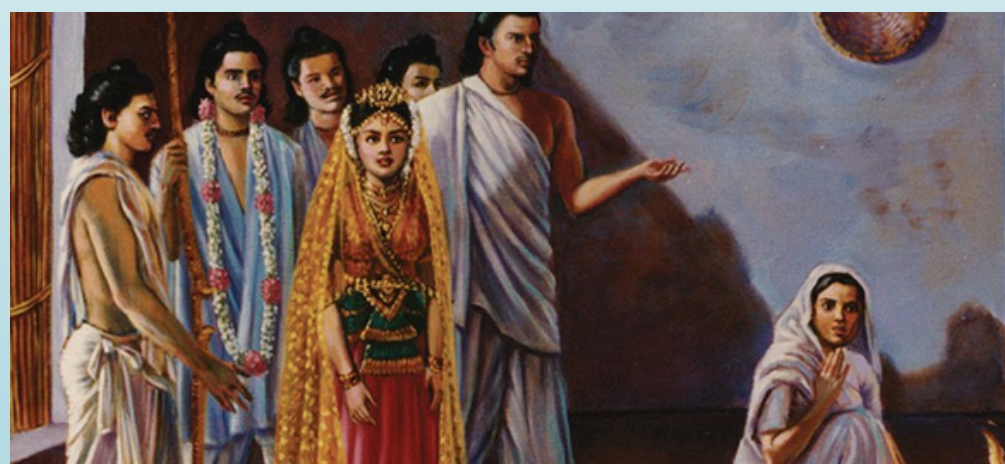
The Bhagavad Gita, sometimes referred to as the Hindu life textbook, lies tucked away in this very epic. The warrior Arjuna, divided between his moral obligations and personal wants, struggles with his obligation to fight in the Kurukshetra War in this religious scripture. His inner conflict mirrors our own: how can we balance personal aspirations as well as a higher ethical standard

Lord Krishna ends up giving Arjuna timeless advice in this part, offering a potent remedy for the stress and existential uncertainty of our fast-paced world by advocating for mindfulness in action and disengagement from results. In times of uncertainty, the wisdom of the Gita serves as a reminder that resilience is about meeting obstacles head-on with clarity and purpose rather than fleeing them.

Family: Loyalty and Conflict

The Mahabharata portrays family as a dynamic, frequently imperfect institution—a web of conflicts, alliances, and betrayals. The fierce rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas represents the conflict between ambition and loyalty, mirroring issues that still exist today, such as inheritance conflicts, sibling rivalries, and the fine line between individual liberty and familial responsibilities.

However, the Mahabharata also honors the ties that bind families together in the midst of the mayhem. It shows us that even the most strained relationships may be repaired through understanding and compromise, though perfection in relationships may be unachievable.





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Women: Resilience Amid Adversity

However, the women in the Mahabharata are, in my opinion, its most fascinating characters; they were all ferociously powerful during a time when their voices were suppressed.

Consider Amba, a princess who was kidnapped by Bhishma and rejected by her lover. Rather than giving in to hopelessness, she turned her misfortunes into determination, enduring unrelenting penance and obtaining Shiva's blessing to be reborn as Shikhandi, the warrior who would eventually face and slay Bhishma. Her narrative is one of self-determination and resistance to injustice.



And then there is Gandhari, who, in solidarity with her blind husband Dhritarashtra, decided to blindfold herself for life. Her sacrifice highlights the intricate bonds between responsibility, love, and self-imposed pain out of commitment.

Draupadi, however, is arguably the most iconic female character of the epic. Under the pretense of averting strife, she bore the collective lust of the five Pandava brothers, who she was forced to marry. Her agony peaked when she was publicly undressed in the Hastinapura court after her husband, Yudhishtira, gambled her away. The epic conflict was sparked by this act of humiliation. Draupadi's strength, however, was unwavering. After her assault, she refused to wash her hair unless it was rinsed with the blood of her perpetrator. Her unfettered hair served as a rallying cry for justice throughout the later part of the epic.

Despite enduring abduction, assault, and the loss of her sons, brother, and father, Draupadi remained steadfast in her quest for justice. Her tale serves as a moving reminder of the Mahabharata's nuanced exploration of justice and human endurance.



Enduring Relevance

The Mahabharata forces us to face life's intricacies and poses timeless queries, such as how to strike a balance between our own aspirations and our obligations to society. What is required for loyalty, and when does it wane? In a world that lacks justice, how do we pursue it?

These tales are more than just folklore to me; they are guides for dealing with life's uncertainty. Its relevance lies in its ability to inspire introspection, pursue justice with compassion, and persevere in the face of hardship.

So, as we navigate the chaos of modern existence, perhaps we can draw from the wisdom of this ancient epic—not as a set of fixed rules, but as a living, breathing dialogue with ourselves and the world around us. Because in the end, the Mahabharata isn't just a story of kings and wars—it's a story of us all, our struggles, and our hopes for a better tomorrow.

Bibliography:

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