

32. Some Thoughts on Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is undoubtedly one of the greatest works of the world, unique in many ways—unique for the deepest philosophic truths, for the wide range of human life covered by the ethics and for the high spiritual stimulus provided in this epic. It is sometimes called the *fifth Veda*. Vedas are said to be Divine Revelations. The Mahabharata though not technically a revelation, is more than a revelation in the nature of its contents. For one thing it contains the greatest spiritual treasure ever known to the world, the BHAGAVAD GITA, which may be rightly called the scripture of the world. This alone will suffice to make the epic the greatest work of the world.

Apparently it is the story of a war between two rival sections of a dynasty, but it is very much more. It is the story of evolution of all life, it is a treatise on cosmogony, a code of universal ethics; it is also a history of the human race in its most general sense. All life is rooted in the One Life; the Devas, Rishis, men, beasts, flowers, rocks, why, everything in this manifested universe are all evolved from this One Life and finally go back to and get merged in that One Life. There is a Great Plan in the mind of God (Ishwara Sankalpa) and everything that was, that is and that shall be, happens in accordance with that Plan.

Human free will is part of that Plan. How the inviolability of the Divine Plan and the free will of man can be reconciled is a metaphysical problem whose solution may evade the limited intellect of man. But it is there; spiritual intuition alone can solve such problems. The Divine Plan works itself out under the great Law of Karma to which everything in manifestation conforms. Millions of souls are in manifestation and their karmic interactions make an exceedingly complicated karmic pattern. But there are Agencies in the Plan who see to it that all such interactions are balanced; all karmic debts repaid and all karmic bonds dissolved ultimately. It is an interesting study to watch how this balancing of complex karmic debts is worked out in this epic. Down here we see inexplicable happenings but their root causes are to be found in the remote past. When one takes what may be called the cosmic view point we shall find that everything falls in its own place and every occurrence has a profound significance.

Let me now consider a few specific points coming out of this great epic. In the first place we get a glimpse of the immense wealth and the great prosperity of ancient India. When we compare that prosperity and wealth with the present-day condition our hearts will bleed at the tragic degeneration to which we have reduced ourselves. Again consider the all-round education which prevailed in those times. We are now tinkering with our educational schemes, we adopt one scheme and before we have had time to work it out fully and reap its benefits, some faddist brings in another scheme and that is adopted. The result is that the poor youth on whom these varying experiments are performed—suffers. We deplore that the products of the modern education are poor stuff. Well, it may be so, but who is responsible for it? Certainly not the poor youth. In those days the princes learnt not only literature, statecraft and military science but also the fine arts. Technical

education without humanities will make one soul-less. A man is not merely his brain or stomach; there is his heart, he has his emotions which play a more important part in his life as a *man* than mere brawn and brain. So we find Arjuna is not only a great warrior, a superb archer but an expert in music and dance. This comes in handy to him when he enters service in Virata's court as Vrihannala and teaches these arts to the princess there.

This epic brings out very forcibly the great truth of the relativity of ethics. *Dharma* has two aspects. One of these is *Sanatanadharma* which means the Eternal Law. This holds good for all time and for all the Universe; it is the basic Law of Manifestation. But what is generally meant by *Dharma* is only the application of the Eternal Law to human life. The Eternal Dharma is unchanging but the application varies with individuals, their avocations, their stages in evolution, the particular epoch in which they live; their races, their nationality and so on. The application of the Great Law in its manifold aspects is explained in detail, and in unmistakable terms in the *Shanti* and *Anusasana* parvas. Bhishma the great stands out as a teacher of Dharma. Questions after questions are put to him and he answers them all as he alone can answer.

Realisation of Unity of all that lives as the ultimate goal of life is stressed on every possible occasion. Hence we are urged to practise the great virtues of compassion, love, friendliness and charity. The story of Ushinara and the pigeon should be an object lesson to all of us. Reverence for the guru is another virtue exemplified in the story of Ekalavya.

Next perhaps only to Sri Krishna the greatest figure in the epic is Bhishma, the great teacher of Dharma, an invincible warrior and an embodiment of all human virtues. His vow of celibacy is alone enough to entitle him to a

place of unique honour. At every turn this Great Grand Sire warns Duryodhana not to rush to ruin, but his words fall on deaf ears.

Yudhishtira is another grand figure. We may learn many a truth from his triumphs and defeats, his strength and weaknesses. He was a great student of Dharma and on two occasions his proficiency in understanding Dharma is tested. Firstly, in *Sabha Parva* Narada proposes a series of questions to him which he answers ably. Again in *Vana Parva*, the Yaksha faces him with a number of complex questions (Yakshaprasna) and Yudhishtira is able to answer them all to the satisfaction of the Yaksha. But deep down in his nature lay hidden a certain element of weakness which had to be cured and Sri Krishna managed to bring it out to the surface so that it may be eradicated. We shall revert to this later.

Arjuna is another great figure in the epic, a distinctive type, intensely human but always sensitive to the inner promptings of the higher soul, the spiritual intuition in him always alert to act on the slightest whisper of his higher nature. The well-known story narrated in the epic in which Duryodhana and Arjuna both go to Sri Krishna for help and while Duryodhana chooses Krishna's army, Arjuna unhesitatingly chooses Krishna's mere company with the definite understanding that Krishna will not take any part in the warfare: this story well illustrates Arjuna's special trait. His love and regard for Sri Krishna is something unique and is revealed in various ways on various occasions. That was why he was chosen to be the recipient of the great teaching in the battlefield.

I was referring to some weaknesses in Yudhishtira. He had in his heart of hearts a lingering temptation for gambling. However much one may cover up this weakness it is there and will be there till it is rooted out. In a great soul like Yudhishtira, even a small blemish has disastrous

consequences. This is well illustrated in the episode of the gambling leading to thirteen years of exile. Nothing short of this terrific experience could cure Dharmaputra from this weakness. He had also another weakness far more subtle and hence more dangerous. This also had to be expunged from his character. The Lord accomplishes this, though the manner in which the conquest of Yudhishtira over these weaknesses is achieved may appear to be rather drastic. But in the case of Yudhishtira nothing short of it would accomplish the object. Every human soul striving for superhuman levels has to be tested and found fit before he can be allowed to rise beyond the human kingdom. Such tests are seen employed in the lives of all saints and bhaktas. This is called usually *Bhakta Pariksha*. The Lord arranges for such testing in the case of most of the spiritual aspirants who figure in the story of the great war. Let us consider the cases of Arjuna and Yudhishtira. While Arjuna passes successfully through the tests prescribed for him, Yudhishtira fails in one of the tests and recognises his failure. This recognition of his failure is the crucial point in his inner life and leads to his ultimate triumph.

During the eleventh year of the exile, Sri Krishna suggests to Yudhishtira the idea of boldly attacking Duryodhana, defeating him and winning the kingdom. A subtle hint is used to test Yudhishtira. But Yudhishtira does not yield to the temptation though the suggestion came from the Lord. His inner vision revealed the truth and he stood firm. He passed the test successfully. So also, during the war, Sri Krishna offers to enter the fight himself and defeat the Kaurava army. Everyone knew Sri Krishna's vow not to take part in the fight. Yudhishtira again saw the trap and stood firm. Yet it was this same Yudhishtira who yielded to the persuasion to utter a lie to Drona—not perhaps a *literal* lie, but a lie all the same; a sin all the more deplorable as it was sought to be covered by some

literal camouflage! He fails, but repents deeply and makes up for it later by his sustained loyalty to a dog which stuck to him to the very end. I need not here repeat in detail the well-known story of how on their final journey to Swarga the five Pandavas and Draupadi dropped dead one by one till Yudhishtira and a dog that attached itself to him and would not part from him were alone left, and how when he was invited to enter heaven he wanted the dog also to go with him and refused to enjoy the joys of Swarga without his companion dog also sharing in those joys and how at that instant the dog revealed himself as God Dharma and all entered heaven. This was the final test and Yudhishtira won.

On the other hand Arjuna also is tested but he stands his tests successfully. The first test was the choice given to him to have either Sri Krishna's army or Krishna alone without taking any part in the fight. He wins. During the fight, one day when the odds were heavily against the Pandavas and Arjuna had a very bad time and felt almost desperate Sri Krishna got his Chakra and with it in hand rushed into the battle arena. But Arjuna would not allow Krishna to break his vow; so he prevents Sri Krishna from entering the battlefield and reminds him of his vow. Again he wins. On another occasion also when Arjuna felt helpless in the fight the Lord jumps from the chariot and with his whip in hand rushes into the fighting ground. But Arjuna, helpless as he was, would not allow Krishna to break his promise and so prevents Krishna from engaging himself in the fight. So he wins again. This was his strong point; to him Sri Krishna was everything; whatever happened to himself, be it even death, he would not allow the slightest reproach to be levelled against Krishna. And so he became the favourite of Sri Krishna. Such lessons and thousands more are found scattered in this great epic. It is then too much to call it the "fifth Veda"?