CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The primary aspects

The nature of the self and the infinite potentials an individual has, which empower her/him to express and live its manifold facets and possibilities, is most intriguing and a compelling idea. The self is a process which has unity and coherence. In everything that we do, we try to protect and maintain this coherence while also attempting to move beyond limited and fixed states. Another critical aspect is that of the indigenous psychological thought tradition and what Indian culture and wisdom says about the psycho-experiential self. My interest expanded in the emerging domain of Indian psychology, and in understanding the self in our experiences, especially with regard to how we grow and transform, and the importance of self-growth and transformation in the counselling process. A third aspect is the use of qualitative approaches to understand in depth the life experiences in the narratives. The combined interest in self, transformation, our strengths and potentials, Indian psychology, qualitative approaches, and in counselling, have stimulated and brought me to the present research undertaking.

In this Introductory chapter I will lay out the aim of my research, its scope, as well as discuss briefly the aspects of self, well-being, self and well-being in Indian psychology, the Mahābhārata, the methodological approach which is qualitative in nature, and the structure of the thesis.

The primary focus in the research is on the self and the relation with psychological well-being, through a study of characters and their experiential contexts in the great Indian epic, the Mahābhārata, using qualitative approaches.
1.2 Introduction and background

The self is the fundamental basis of all experience. The individual personality gains its unique and dynamic character through the movement and process of the self. The self is the focus of study in the various disciplines of psychology, philosophy, consciousness studies, neurosciences, cognitive sciences, management, and several areas concerning health. These fields and disciplines seek to understand the self through their assumptions, and theoretical positions, each providing a number of ways to understand this complex concept. The self has been defined in structural and functional terms, such as in Freud's model of id, ego, and superego or Rogers' holistic self, or as in Maslow's self-actualization. Parts and aspects of self such as self-esteem, self-image have been studied to give us different conceptions of the self in various branches of psychology. Although the number of ways the self is studied is by no means exhaustive, a single definition proves elusive. Each perspective offers newer dimensions to the exciting and rapidly growing research on the self. Self-definitions have implications for how a person deals with her/himself, how s/he interacts with others and the position s/he holds in her universe with relation to the other members. The self-definitions and processes form the basis for one's well-being. We are connected with each other and with the larger universe and the connections impact, influence, and enhance our well-being.

Both self and well-being\(^1\) meld with each other, especially, in the process of growth and self-enhancement. Self-enhancement is the moving forward with purpose and meaning in an engaged manner toward growth, openness and self-actualization which are themselves constitutive of well-being. The process of self-enhancement is the bringing-to-fore and expression of potentials leading the individual to further horizons of expansion. These two key ideas, of self-enhancement and well-being, are also pivotal in interactional settings, especially, the ones in counselling settings where the person is the centre and transformation is a critical goal.

Mainstream psychology, traditionally, has employed quantitative methods to understand aspects of human behaviour – the emphasis being mainly on behaviour along with empirical and reductive approach to understand human nature. For instance, self has been studied in terms of partial aspects like self-esteem and self-

\(^1\) In this study, well-being is psychological well-being, explained in the following sections.
perception and such aspects are correlated with other variables like optimism, happiness (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2006), visual perspective, narcissism (Robins & John, 1997). The cited studies and other similar research of correlated variables, conducted on groups of people attempts to understand self as a partial entity using quantitative measures and statistical processes. Although the empirical studies and their results are valid in their own right, in the present research, I endeavour to study the self through qualitative approaches, believing that such approaches offer deeper insights in the inquiry of the self. The qualitative inquiry will be taken up subsequently in this chapter and later in the third chapter on Methodology and Approach.

Conventional and established psychology too, however, now is attempting to include eastern and oriental perspectives and qualitative approaches to formulate alternative ways of studying human nature, relations, interconnections and spirituality. In the process the discipline is attempting to add new dimensions and extend the boundaries of the entire field of study, by studying topics such as temperance, justice, kindness, and the like. According to Seligman (2000), qualities of courage, wisdom, altruism, empathy, kindness, compassion and other “virtues” traverse the space of the individual and collective/group levels. The focus is on the thriving potential of humans rather than the negative disease model and prevention and cure of pathology. Mental health takes a new turn in meaning with emphasis being placed on the positive and growth nature of the human composite. The emphasis is on well-being and the sustenance of strengths and virtues to head toward well-being.

Indian psychology is a domain that is contributing immensely to the universal and mainstream discipline of psychology. Drawing from the traditions of Indian thought, Indian psychology gains deep ground in the understanding of human nature, self, growth and possibilities. Cornelissen, et al. consider 'Indian' as indicative of the origin of an approach to psychology – “the origin of the underlying philosophy, the conceptual framework, the methods of enquiry, and the technology of consciousness that it uses to bring about psychological change and transformation” (Cornelissen, et al., 2014, p.1). Several foundational texts such as the Upaniṣad-s, the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata epics, the Yogasūtra-s, and many philosophical treatises, are vast resources to understand the nature of self. The works contain deep phenomenological content – experiential narratives and contexts, dialogues of philosophical and psychological character – and which upon close and intense reading
reveal the propensities, proclivities, and potentiality inherent in us, offering us ways of 'becoming' and 'being'. The texts offer alternative lenses of study, focusing more deeply on the core and essence of the human being.

1.3 Aim of the study

My research, which is multidisciplinary, brings in psychology, philosophy, and literature, and strives to study the interrelations of self and well-being through the Mahābhārata in the context of Indian psychology, even as it attempts to align the emergent understandings in the field of counselling. The key aspects of the study are self, well-being, the Mahābhārata, Indian psychology, and the qualitative approaches grounded in phenomenological frameworks especially relevant for counselling.

The objectives of this research study are to:

- Understand self and its relation with well-being, in the Mahābhārata, and to advance the domain of Indian Psychology
- Address the issue of conflict, the transformation of the experiential self and discuss the impact of transformation on psychological well-being
- Study the nature of desire as a motivator and as constitutive of self
- Understand the nature of grief and its transcendence for self and well-being
- Integrate these understandings with present context of a Rogerian frame of counseling

1.4 Scope of the research

The Mahābhārata is the epic text most significant for its narratives, situations, dialogues, discussions, and experiential contexts, all of which present the everyday concerns and lived experiences through its complex characters. Badrinath asserts that, “the concerns of the Mahābhārata are the concerns of everyday life,” and that, “it is an inquiry into the nature of ‘self’ in relation with the other” (Badrinath, 2007a, p.4). Every question about the human condition begins and involves a personal question, of the self, and this question seeks answers with regard to the person and his/her contexts. The human condition can be experienced and felt only in one’s person. In the course of understanding the self, the inquiry goes beyond the individual and
personal. It is in the intangible yet tenable connections of the personal and the universal, that a person’s individual situation is understood. To understand the individual, the dynamic exploration moves outward into the world, thus engaging the experiential horizons, and is perceived and assimilated again in newer perspectives by the individual.

Indian wisdom contained in the Upaniṣad-s and in the epics of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata and numerous other texts consider the human as a being with potentials to achieve the highest planes of meaning and fulfillment. The purpose of human life is conceived of as one of continual self-enhancement, which culminates in mokṣa. The idea of mokṣa is considered in a more symbolic context, as a liberation from one's ignorance, as freeing oneself from various types of psychological conditionings, moving away from toxic thought patterns, and aviveka (ignorance and a lack of discrimination). The potential for enhancement gives meaning and purpose for herself/himself – and the individual acquires understandings of the self at every stage, absorbing these, and moving forth toward the next chapters of their lives. These frontiers are not fixed structures but intangible fluid horizons which provide the goals and purposes for deeper exploration of awareness. Indian texts contain the essence of thought and layers of understanding and insights about the nature of human beings and of life.

In Indian thought as contained in the Upaniṣad-s and epics, the self moves beyond specific domains and is regarded holistically. The self is the lived experience as well as the transcendental goal. Well-being too is concerned with the larger-than-immediate aspects and with the potential for furtherance of one’s physical, mental, and transcendental planes. Well-being is not merely an individual’s private mental state, but an inclusive encompassing conception. The well-being of the other impacts the well-being of the self. The mutual and inclusive interconnectedness of self and well-being is the content of the present study. Indian psychology finds its roots in Indian philosophy with its belief in the vast potential inherent in the human being, which considers the person as not a separate fragment, but one with the universe. The Mahābhārata gives insights into the human condition and also provides practical methods to find love, joy, and peace, which they claim are within the individual. These qualities are considered to be aspects of one's true self. The Upaniṣad-s, Yogasūtra-s, and Bhagavad-Gītā emphatically ascertain the human potentials and
enhancement of self. The spiritual or transcendent perspectives in the Indian context approach well-being in terms of the various dimensions of the self, and encompass biological, psychological, sociological and spiritual aspects.

The Mahābhārata presents the complex knots of human nature, the lived experiences. In T.R.S. Sharma's view, the Mahābhārata knows no end and it is “like our diverse nation, many strands, many ramifications, many rhyzomic outgrowths!” (Sharma, 2004, p.2). The epic is the story of war within two branches of the same clan and in the process of its narration, portrays in detail the many shades and hues of human nature, behaviour, numerous situations, psychological repertory of possibilities, ethical dilemmas, intense desires, grief and suffering. As a central point, the epic presents the emphatic reiteration of dharma in pursuing one's goals. It shows what happens when one does not pursue the dhārmic path. Not only does the Mahābhārata present several experiences but also teaches through all its characters how one must 'be,' how to attain enhancement, to 'become.'

The Mahābhārata mirrors each of us in all our complexities, in all our nuances, in all our selves. The characters of the epic are embedded in the different realms of relationships, emotions, social contexts and situations. Their struggles and strivings help to recover the link between life and experience. Most stirring and fascinating in the Mahābhārata, is the plethora of human responses the characters depict, to life experiences. The multitudinal responses fuse with our own experiences and responses in contemporary contexts. The variety of responses are especially significant in counseling interactions where self-limiting attitudes can be recognized, overcome, and fresh perspectives assimilated – all of which lead to self-enhancement.

While mainstream psychology stands its ground, and forms the bedrock of research in popular cultural contexts, I, as a researcher, believe it is important to examine wisdom specific to native cultural texts and gain alternative understandings which would augment the knowledge base of the entire discipline. Not only would there be an increment in the academic sphere, but we would also gain a better understanding of our potentials. Alternative perspectives which are dominant in their own cultural contexts would open up fresh insights and lead us toward a meaningful engagement with our psychological and spiritual goals and purposes. In the present research, I study and understand through the Mahābhārata, the psychological and experiential facets of self and well-being, implications for counselling as well as for
continued research in the areas of health and well-being. The theoretical framework will be drawn both from the Mahābhārata and, to a limited extent, from Rogers’ Person-Centred approach. In this research the Mahābhārata is not being viewed as merely literature but as a body of knowledge with myriad contexts and lived experiences that are significant for study and relevant for the domain of Indian Psychology and therapeutic interactions.

Kuppuswamy (1993) reviews that psychology was not an independent discipline in earlier times, yet deep interest existed in psychological issues, and inquiry and questioning about human experience began with the nature of the self. The interest in the self led to the study of various psychological processes such as perception, emotion, desires, motivation, and other processes. Rao (2008) in reviewing the development of Indian Psychology, identifies the value of listening (śravaṇa), reflection (manana), and contemplation (nididhyāsana) in arriving at the core of one’s being, and also emphasizes that most of Indian philosophy presents a psychology which is grounded in the experiences of life (physical, mental and spiritual), exploring infinite possibilities of one’s well-being. Along with the background of these principles, the Mahābhārata takes the approach further by bringing in the concept of an interactive world, to give a realistic understanding of human self from which one can arrive at the idea of well-being.

However, in the field of psychology little has been explored from the Indian epics, especially the Mahābhārata which is a seminal epic living significantly in the psyche of the Indian people. The epic is also moving toward becoming a part of the lives of many peoples and cultures other than our own. The issues played out in the Mahābhārata resonate with the lived experiences of contemporary people. It is not merely a story of warring families, instead it reflects and propounds the ethical, socio-political, religious, value-systems of human life and envisions the supreme form of humanism in its wake. The ideas and consequences of the lived experiences of the characters in this epic engage the imagination of the people. It is through imagination and reflection that one perceives and fathoms the self – in connecting with the characters through empathy, can we envision ourselves. Not only is the Mahābhārata a text, but its inter-textuality permeates into folklore, arts, theatre, music, and is a collective heritage. For instance, B.R. Chopra’s televised ‘Mahābhārata’ weaves into the emotions and conceptions like the Jungian archetype, and percolates into the lives
of the folk and folklore. A small wonder then, that it can be said that we do not read the Mahābhārata for the first time; instead we only “re-read” the text.

The Mahābhārata’s characters and narratives are the key to understanding an individual’s self, relationships, dilemmas, well-being and transcendence. Although the text is a primary mode, I do not ignore other modalities, such as the televised story or of commentaries and lectures of scholars of the Mahābhārata, by which it permeates the manner in which people engage with the epic. The Mahābhārata is said to belong to a particular historic time, yet it transcends time and space with a ‘phenomenological’ relevance which has pan-cultural implications. The intent of the text is also therapeutic in seeking to prompt the mind to a greater awareness of one’s identity and a fostering of spiritual insight, emotional calm and acceptance.

A contemporary paradigm developed by Carl Rogers, a psychotherapist in the twentieth century also posits that the innermost core of human nature is essentially purposive, forward-moving, constructive, realistic, and quite trustworthy. He emphasizes the dynamic aspect of the individual. Rogers’ phenomenological approach to self is extant in the Mahābhārata and his application of this approach in therapeutic practice is a crucial aspect. The need for more than one theoretical paradigm is necessary at this juncture, at a global level it is important to conceptualize in terms of already familiar structures. In a way, these frameworks provide links and connections and particular indicated contexts. The necessity for bridging is noted by Paranjpe (2002b) who says that a single perspective may not be adequate to account for the diverse dimensions that one studies and that two reference frames build a conceptual bridge and provide a “meaningful context.” Both the Rogerian framework and the Mahābhārata place great significance on the self and the possibilities for self-enhancement. The subjective frame of reference also is an important similarity in the two approaches. The congruence and the similarity in scope have guided the choice of these two rubrics for the study. As the study progresses their common threads as well as differences will be elucidated.

In the following sections, I will discuss the concept and scope of self, of well-being, conceptions of well-being in Indian thought, the Mahābhārata in Indian Psychology, and qualitative inquiry which are pertinent for this research study.
1.5 Concept and scope of self and well-being

1.5.1 Concept and scope of self

The self is the subjective nucleus of the personality representing the inner core of the individual. Personality theorists, define the self in various ways. Each delineates certain characteristics which are salient to a particular framework. James, Jung, Freud, Erikson, Rogers, Allport, Maslow and others conceptualize self in their respective perspectives emphasizing the integration, unity and consistency, representing the positive, creative, growth-seeking, and forward-moving quality of human nature. Traditionally, in psychology, the self has been studied with respect to distinct aspects such as self-esteem, self-concept, self-image, self-regard, self-efficacy, self-complexity, and other self-domains. Here, while using these distinct aspects, I would also go beyond and seek to study the self as a process.

The self is a process which unfolds through experiences leading to change, autonomy, authenticity and a moving toward the ideal self. The ideal self is not a static entity or position that one is striving to reach and then feels arrived at. As we undergo various experiences we rid ourselves of those aspects which hamper us, such as prejudices/biases, negative emotions, and hence advance toward an increment in knowing ourselves reaching a new horizon of awareness. The horizon is a perspective we build according to our experiences and this horizon signifies that there are possibilities to shift through understanding and transformation.

An important characteristic of self is unity which leads to coherence. Unifying various aspects of a person is integral to obtaining a coherent structure of different psychological processes. The psychologically united self is a whole by itself, a unique dynamic system, and connected to a cosmic entity. It refers to the experience of one’s own being. It is invisible, implicit, and inherent in every experience. The inherent aspect of coherence propels us toward possibilities of self-enhancement. The self has a propensity to move towards a goal which implies purpose. In Rogers' perspective, “the purpose of each individual's life is to permit herself/himself freely to be the changing, fluid process which one is, moving toward acceptance and an “is-ness” of self” (Rogers, 1961, p.181). The horizons of one’s self are ever expanding and one moves in a direction which is most congruent with one’s ideas and values. Enhancing the self is an innate characteristic of humans. And part of this enhancement comes
from the attempt to understand and become aware of oneself.

To attempt to know the self is to move toward enhancement. Ganeri says that, “a conception about self supplies an answer to the question ‘What am I?’” (Ganeri, 2012, p.35). Ganeri’s words imply knowing the self in all its wholeness, a totality of experiences. Knowing involves experiencing and being, as well as transformation. The knowledge one acquires while resolving personal crises and conflicts is an experience that augments the self. The expansion of the self provides the inner space which is vital for growth; a movement from the periphery to the core, from the circumference to the centre. The Upaniṣad-s speak of expansion of the self suggesting an inward rather than an outward movement. An outward movement would focus on the external world, something outside of ourselves. The process would involve reflection but we would have to rely on what is reflected back to us from an outer source. Inward movement on the other hand, involves a deep reflection on one's self, a focus on what one is, on bringing out from within our resources; an attempt at understanding and awareness. This inner-directed yet self-enhancing movement is the profound road to resisting negative and debilitating forces.

The identity and self of an individual appear to be tied intimately to each other. A person’s self-definitions have implications for how a person deals with herself, how one interacts with others in a social setting, and the position one holds in her universe with relation to the other members. Pedrotti, et al. say that “the self forms the basis for one’s cognitions, emotions, and well-being” (Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2009). Knowing the self and feeling one’s worth are foundational to acquiring a meaningful life leading to one’s well-being. The concepts of self and well-being mutually influence each other providing a broad and comprehensive understanding of the processes.

We possess a self with which we relate to an interactive world and accumulate experiences. The self assumes a multiplicity and has an influence on the contexts of our experience. The multiplicity is not to be confused with multiple personalities or what is categorized as a disorder or pathology which occurs when there is a self-destructive element and/or a destructive element toward another. In a phenomenological undertaking, on the other hand, self is not fixed but journeys from horizon to horizon and in the process multiple selves evolve. It is not a fickle self that is spoken of, rather a self that is transformative and moving beyond rigid boundaries.
The integration of the self and its positive perceptions and experiences contribute to an enduring well-being. The value of attributing meaning to something beyond and larger than the individual is elevating. Meaning plays a vital role in discovering the hidden human potential. One does not know the self through rote learning or by accruing facts but only through lived experiences. The objective is to overcome one’s crises and move toward knowing the self, leading to transformation which in turn, leads to a deeper understanding, of oneself. The self that is considered here is a fluid, flexible self, holding potentialities and creating opportunities for us to actualize them. Although the self may be studied in multiple and partial entities, the continuity of the self and its coherent nature, is the cornerstone of human cognition and well-being.

Self and well-being are critical in the field of counselling. An individual who seeks counselling is considered to be in conflict, in sorrow, or otherwise undergoing dilemmas, predicaments, or crises. The core of such situations is thought to be the self, its dis-unified state, inability to gain a holistic view and a general lack of well-being. Often negative emotions, anxieties, fears, anger, and others tend to manifest during predicaments and crises. These negative emotions are debilitating and more importantly freeze the vision of the self, limiting it to fixed states. Understanding the self leads us to move through these crises and other situations through processes of self-awareness and self-enhancement.

The self is not a fixed self and the idea is best described by Carl Rogers who says that change in individuals does not mean to move from one fixed state to another fixed state, rather, “a more significant continuum is from fixity to changiness, from rigid structure to flow, from stasis to process,” and he further describes the process as a loosening of feelings, “from feelings which are unrecognized, unowned, unexpressed, the client moves toward a flow in which ever changing feelings are experienced in the moment, knowingly and acceptingly, and may be accurately expressed” (Rogers, 1958, pp. 142-149). The individual becomes an integrated process of change. The self is the whole organism which is involved and which evolves through a dynamic process. The self is an evolving, growing, transforming self, with possibilities ahead. The process aspect of the self is the focus in the study of the Mahābhārata, through the experiential contexts of the epic's characters. I believe that such an approach will open fresh doors for the formulation of diagnosis and therapy, both from a phenomenological and a spiritual standpoint.
1.5.2 Concept and scope of well-being

In order to understand the concept of self, it is important to understand another concept, namely well-being. Well-being is an intuitive concept and thus subtle in its tangibility.

The definition on mental health charted by the World Health Organization (WHO)\(^2\), is a beginning toward an encompassing view of human nature, and a recognition of the importance of one's potentials and need for 'becoming' the person one is. I hope to ascertain through this research study that well-being lies in actualizing one's potentials and in self-enhancement. Well-being is multidimensional and varies across age, gender, class, race, culture, etc. Many dimensions of well-being are being studied such as physical well-being, emotional well-being, and others. However, the focus in this study is on psychological well-being in relation to possibilities for self-enhancement. Psychological well-being pertains to using one’s abilities and potentials and acting in congruence with these innate endowments such that one progresses toward meaning, purpose and action with coherence. Individuals differ in psychological well-being, strengths and patterns of wellness, as well and they also show significant cultural differences.

Psychological well-being is viewed as not only the absence of mental disorder but also the presence of positive psychological resources, including components of hedonic or subjective well-being as noted by Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009). However, psychological well-being defies any circumscription and goes beyond the parameters of positivity, engagement, purpose and meaning, optimism and trust, and life satisfaction to encompass the inherent potential within our human nature. We harness this potential to accrue awareness of various states of being, to understand, accept and integrate these states such that we are ever emerging. The scope of psychological well-being finds continuity in Indian philosophy and psychology which contains foundational concepts regarding human nature and well-being as well as therapeutic techniques which are embedded in the continuing spiritual traditions.

\(^2\) The WHO (1946) defines mental health as, “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”
1.5.3 Conceptions of self and well-being in Indian thought

According to Safaya, “the 'science of Mind' is an outcome of the science and philosophy of the self, and hence all psychological principles are outcomes of philosophical doctrines” (Safaya, 1976, xiv). Psychology in India had not been brought to the fore as a separate discipline till recent date. Indian Psychology is a holistic, inclusive and coherent system for understanding human nature with universal relevance. The term for philosophy, darśana, itself reflects and signifies a vision, and as Safaya further says, “Indian philosophers pursued the quest of having a total vision of life and universe, based on personal experience, and not only on a limited plane of modern methodology” (Safaya, 1976, p.1). Safaya further suggests that the view of a total vision of life suggests openness to multiple possibilities of interpretations, thus increasing our abilities to understand the diversity of human nature. Indian thought goes beyond the notion of an individual as bounded by limiting urges and includes strivings toward enhancement and fulfillment of potentials.

Paranjpe (1996) discusses the Western and Indian conceptions in which the Western idea views the self, “as a changing entity, moving toward self-actualization, and suffering as removal of pleasures. In Indian thought, however, the self is viewed as a holistic, experiential subject progressing toward self-transcendence and suffering is when one has erroneous notions of the self” (Paranjpe, 1996, 7-27). In philosophical treatises such as those of the Nyāya-Sūtras of Gautama, a classification is made of twenty-one types of ‘duḥkha’ (grief) of which ‘sukha’ or pleasure is one of them. In the intervals of ‘annoyances’ or between painful realms, pleasure is accomplished and experienced by all living beings (Jha, 1919, p.1548). This is in contrast to the Western linear progression, from pain to pleasure. Instead pleasure here is cyclical and considered to be a gap between sorrows.

Well-being in Indian conceptualization is understood as the intrinsic and essential nature of the self. At the same time, the Upaniṣad-s (jñānendriyāṇi) distinguish well-being from happiness that is acquired from the senses (and their actions (karmendriyāṇi) and endorse a deeper ontological well-being founded in the self (ātmasukha and yōgasukha). The integration of the self and its positive perceptions and experiences contribute to the sense of well-being. The value of attributing meaning to something beyond and larger than the individual self is elevating and plays a vital role in discovering the hidden potentials.
Well-being and happiness have several connotations in the Indian context. Monier-Williams gives several descriptive terms: *maṅgala* – happiness, felicity, welfare, bliss; *kuśala* – welfare, well-being, prosperous condition, happiness, benevolence, virtue, desirous of happiness; *kalyāṇa* – virtuous good, salutary, beneficial, happy, prosperous; *sukha* – having a good axle hole, running swiftly, virtuous, pious, happiness, joy, and others which include *bhadra, sukṛta, kṣema, hita, śreyas, śiva*.

Indian psychology with its basis on the self enhances the contemporary scope of psychology. The approaches to studying the self, although do not exactly follow an empirical template, offer valid and alternative perspectives. The perspectives and approaches locate themselves in the situations, lived experiences, narratives, and interactions of people in their various cultural and personal contexts. Speaking on the character of the self in the Upaniṣad-s, Black analyzes that, “the narratives not only contextualize the teachings, but also characterize the knowledge, and outline how and by whom these teachings should be practiced in the social world.” He continues to say that the, “the dialogues reinforce the focus on the individual by presenting us with specific selves, the literary characters. In this way, the distinct characters and how they achieve selfhood are an integral part of the Upaniṣadic discourses about the self. As such, the Upaniṣadic notion of self is not merely a philosophical insight, but a way of being in the world” (Black, 2007, pp. 2-3). Culture and self are linked to each other and, Hermans (2001) asserts that the self assumes several positions as does culture, and each, i.e. self and culture, form dialogic relationships. Markus, et al. (1997, 13-61) talk about the powerful ways in which cultural systems come to influence individual behaviour through one's way of being a person in the world, which they term as *selfways*. Markus and others consider the self-system as a primary locus of sociocultural influence, how the self is realized through participation in cultural practices and where the individual becomes a meaningful entity as a participant in a social world. For instance, the authors cite that in Japan, being a ‘good’ person requires one to foster empathic connections with others. The self-culture linkages, as I see it, allow for multiple expressions of the self, making the self not rigid or fixed but versatile and pliant.

Psychological well-being coheres with the process of self-enhancement. The presence of positive resources and the movement toward purpose, meaning and
engagement put the individual on a similar quest. The search for meaning, purpose and engagement and the striving toward fulfillment and potentials is intrinsic to Indian thoughts and texts, such as in the Mahābhārata. The eternal quest is the search for meaning and also a supreme belief in the individual being connected with the universal. The conception of self, thus, is studied through the microscope as well as expanded to cosmic magnitude. Well-being is therefore not merely being physically or mentally well but also moving toward our potentials. What is it to 'be' is a cardinal aspect in the Indian wisdom traditions.

The Bhagavad-Gītā contains a discourse on how a person should 'be', where the 'beingness' absorbs a state of equanimity or sthitaprajñatva. Menon (1999) explains sthitaprajña to be an ontological state as well as a description of a person in the state of sthitaprajñatva (Menon, 1999, p. 380-392). The fundamental nature of our 'beingness' seems to be oriented to this state of steadiness, stability, and equanimity. Sw. Ranganathananda describes the discourse on sthitaprajñatva as, “one of building psychological strength whose composites are steadfastness and fearlessness, which are the outcomes of 'knowing' the self” (Sw. Ranganathananda, 2000, p. 95). The phenomenological relevance of this state of equanimity is revealed in Arjuna's queries (Sw. Sivananda, 1969, Bhagavad-Gītā, II. 54-72) and the responses to these queries are the epitome of the Bhagavad-Gītā where self-enhancement is expounded to the subtlest nuances. Kuchibhotla & Menon (2011) suggest that the 'steadiness' may be thought of as a crucial experiential phenomenon which fosters authenticity, genuineness, and congruence – which also resonate in the Rogerian framework – and it critically establishes well-being through self-enhancement. When one goes through the various situations, predicaments and crises in life with a meaningful engagement, transformative processes occur expanding the spaces of the self.

In the following parts, I will introduce important themes that run in the Mahābhārata and Indian Psychology and attempt to show the relevance of a qualitative inquiry in the context of this research topic.

1.6 Mahābhārata in the context of Indian Psychology

Human beings traverse through and are shaped by certain fundamental experiences in their lives. Some of these experiences that I will examine in this
research are those of desire, conflict and grief. The self expresses and experiences the intrinsic experiences of desires and conflicts and grief. To go a step ahead, the self not only expresses and experiences but desires, conflicts, and grief are considered as the self. As I shall show and explain in a later chapter on Analysis and Discussion, the characters of the Mahābhārata project their desires, conflicts and grief in many different ways, and self-processes are tied in with these experiences. The Mahābhārata presents a treatise on the phenomenological nature of desire (the Kāma Gītā which appears in the Aśvamedha Parvan of the Mahābhārata) and portrays desire as a fundamental motivator and as constitutive of the self. Desire has self-identity as its basis and exists as long as the self exists. Conflict too is considered innate to human nature and the process of resolution of conflicts involves a restructuring of the self which involves transformation and self-enhancement processes. A given human fact is the active seeking of pleasure and avoiding pain. The Mahābhārata is in a sense a tale of woe and lament but considers pleasure and pain as forming a coherent and self-consistent picture. Through the characters and their intimate personal contexts, the Mahābhārata shows that grieving is crucial and necessary and demonstrates that it brings meaning and a transformation of the self.

“Prototypical narratives,” according to Hogan, “are guided and structured to generate happiness and sorrow. Through the engagement with the characters’ and our own emotions, we become aware of our own state of being, what was, what is, and what can be attained by engaging with our self and emotions” (Hogan, 2001, pp.119-143). The Mahābhārata is such a “prototypical narrative,” which significantly lives in the psyche of the Indian people and is currently moving toward becoming a part of the lives of many peoples and cultures other than our own.

The Mahābhārata's characters, their experiences and narratives, give us a rich and diverse ground to connect with our own emotional experiences and thereby a grasp of the experiencing self. The experience that is gained through various life situations and events and through facing conflicts and dilemmas is considered to help one gain a perspective and thereby increase one’s psychological repertoire. The Mahābhārata reflects a way of being in the world in the form of stories, dialogues, narratives, characters and their experiences.

The Mahābhārata is structured in the form of “nested dialogues” (Menon, 2010) which contain stories within stories forming rich complex layers. The dialogues
offer several ways of interpretation and through the interpretations several ways of being, and the self, are also presented. The Mahābhārata comprising a rich and deep content about self provides a study base for theoretical and clinical purposes too. Although it may seem that the characters of the epic “existed” long ago, severed from us in contemporary lives, the prototypical nature of the characters draws the essence of the personality and engages our emotions and consciousness. Hogan (2001) says that “the quest for happiness and well-being is a seeking of engagement with one’s emotions” (Hogan, 2001, 119-143).

The Mahābhārata emphasizes a multitude of human characteristics and experiences (ahiṁsā, ānṛśaṁsyā, sukhā, duḥkha, kṣamā, dāna, kāma, dharma, artha, and several others) and portrays a subsequent understanding of the nature of the human being and of a congruent self. Qualities such as dāna (altruistic giving) and empathy are demonstrated as crucial to the evolution of one's character and self. Altruism and dāna have consequences in one's well-being. Lakshmi (2013) considers the idea of 'giving' in the Mahābhārata and the important connection dāna has with the self. True dāna and altruism involve a giving of the self and this dāna has value only when it is sensitive to the well-being of others.

Empathy too is a related aspect and this quality is subtly but forcefully present in various interactions between characters. Kuchibhotla & Menon (2014) discuss the quality and experiential attribute of empathy as being an intimate participle of our social world. The emotional space we occupy in the external realm draws out our experiences, which incorporate several different points of view and expand our sense of self. In the Bhagavad-Gītā, Kṛṣṇa's empathy and Arjuna's awakening and awareness draw out for us the different possibilities of self and the widening vision we can embrace through activating and cultivating these inclusive qualities of empathy and altruism.

A deeper and the most essential goal of action though, is that of dharma. The Mahābhārata describes the puruṣārtha-s, the goals of human action – and their import in all our endeavours. Along with the statement on the puruṣārtha-s the Mahābhārata (I.62.53) also asserts that what is in the epic may be found elsewhere too but what is not in it cannot be found anywhere else.

dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca puruṣarṣabha |
“In regard to dharma, artha, kama and moksa, O Best of Men, what is here may be elsewhere, but what is not here is nowhere else” (Adi Parvan, I.62.53)\(^3\)

Human initiative is regarded highly in the Mahabharata. The purushartha-s stimulate and initiate action as against succumbing to fate. Striving towards a defined goal or striving toward actualizing one's potentials has immense value. Woods states that “the epic urges the release from the despondency of one’s ‘fate’ and commands one to take note of the potential for ‘self-determination,’ one’s ability to grasp firmly the initiative and control one’s ‘destiny’ and self” (Woods, 2005, pp.103-114). Woods views obstructions, detriments and setbacks as important for they are to be looked upon as opportunities and incentives to overcome the illusory nature of the world paving the path to truly understand the self.

Dharma is the foremost of the purushartha-s and all other purushartha-s find meaning and are realized in their purposes only when pursued through dharma. Dharma is considered as the foundation of life and living – it sustains, nurtures, and enhances living and fulfillment. Chattopadhyay (2009) discusses dharma to be the sole way to happiness and says that, “there is no other way either in this life or in the life beyond it” (Chattopadhyay, 2009, p. 31). Badrinath (2007a, p.4) analyzes dharma as a state of being in right relation with oneself and the other and as the foundation of fulfilling relationships. Badrinath (2007a) considers dharma too as a process, which is dynamic and evolving just as the self is an evolving process. Draupadi, as also Yudhishthira invoke dharma in the course of the epic.

Dharma traverses along the path of truth (satya) and it is through dharma that one uncovers truth, that one realizes the truth, this truth being the core of our authentic self. Dharma, truth and self are the same processes and goals and in reaching these one's well-being is created. The discovery or revelation of a fatal flaw is a significant indication of the importance of ethical principles. Dilemmas, predicaments and crises are crises of dharma, where the individual is in dissonance with his/her self and do not tread the dharmic path. Rukmani analyzes that the “ethical principles or dharma tenets function as modes of catharsis” (Rukmani, 2005, pp.179-

\(^3\) All Sanskrit quotes from the Mahabharata have been cited from the Geeta Press Mahabharata: Sachitra Hindi anuvada sahit. Gorakhpur: Geeta Press.
194). Catharsis indicates a deep dilemma and conflict which is brought to the conscious awareness of the individual undergoing it with its subsequent resolution bringing to fore a new understanding of the self. The new understanding is assimilated into one’s self-structure leading to a different meaning and significance for one’s growth of self. Well-being is integrated in the self through its transformation, actualization, and enhancement.

The discussion of self in the Mahābhārata takes a deeply psychological context. Overcoming one’s crisis is an objective, and moves one toward gaining knowledge of the self. There is transformation in knowledge which in turn, leads to deeper understanding. The qualities of altruism, empathy, compassion, non-cruelty and non-violence enhance the self toward congruence and authentic nature. Meaning, growth, openness, self-actualization, enhancement are constitutive of well-being and these are “grasped” in the process of knowing the self and enhancing toward a congruent and authentic state.

The Mahābhārata takes up self-understanding or self-knowledge, in relation to concrete situations and contexts through which one lives one’s life, and is most amenable for a qualitative reading. The personal is best understood by understanding the human issues that go beyond itself to an inclusive realm.

1.7 Qualitative approaches

Qualitative approaches open up new worlds of possibilities, an outward projection, intended for others, and accessible to others and provide a grid and matrix of relationships of self and the world around us. In quantitative methods however, objective measures take priority and interpretations are made according to preset rules of operation. Ferrara (1995) points out that, qualitative approaches emphasize “researcher-as-tool,” highlighting the researcher's status as a primary data-gathering and interpreting instrument. He states that qualitative approaches do not provide definitive answers and resolutions to traditional questions and issues of reliability and validity but new issues and protocols do arise in interpreting and evaluating the data.

Qualitative approaches are the foundation for a reflective inquiry of the lived experiences and, in this research these approaches are the most appropriate for the study of the material presented from the Mahābhārata. The approaches are the
foundation for a reflective inquiry of the lived experiences.

The characters of the Mahābhārata and their lived experiences may be understood through a phenomenology based approach. As stated earlier in this chapter, an attempt to unravel the Mahābhārata's complex layers, nested dialogues, narratives and experiential contexts requires more, than a structured or rigid analytic framework. Humanistic paradigms provide a holistic understanding of psychology as a human science, and work with the self as the core honing the development of human potential. Anastoos (2003) contends that the humanistic self is a part of the whole and an engaged, involved, situated self, concerned and caring about the whole of being. Much of qualitative research comes from the theoretical frameworks and bodies of work in humanistic psychology. DeRobertis (2013) traces and reviews the importance and relevance of Humanistic Psychology in the current and contemporary scenario of psychology. He finds an essential need to foster these approaches for assimilation into psychology and the inevitability of phenomenological configurations in the mainstream discipline.

The philosophical foundation of phenomenology has developed and been used widely to understand texts and in praxis in clinical psychology and counselling. It seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. It is an attempt to apprehend the meaning of human experience as it is lived. Phenomenology focuses on discovery, description and meaning in contrast to prediction, measurement and control. It is not static, but reflects a dynamic and evolving nature and evokes a profoundly reflective inquiry into human meaning. The phenomenological position is not considered as something separate from one's own being. Fisher (2003) indicates that the nature of the self brings forth the subjective experiencing which reflects a phenomenological standpoint and subjective experience is primary as a source of the observer’s knowledge of the self.

Phenomenological approaches according to Finlay (2009) are primarily concerned with experiential meanings and aim for fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived, and they engage both the phenomenon and the subjective interconnection between the researcher and the researched. Finlay talks about variations in the approaches such as the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the dialogical approaches, the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach and
others. In these and others, the core characteristics are those of being descriptive and bringing out the essences of meaning immanent in human experiences. The main focus is on discovery and understanding rather than on proving or accepting empirical hypotheses.

The Rogerian perspective too is grounded in the phenomenological position. Carl Rogers, a twentieth-century psychotherapist, constructed his theory mainly on the premises of the essential goodness of human beings. He developed his theory on the basis of phenomenology and defined the self\(^4\) on phenomenological and ontological grounds.

Rogers focuses on a deep subjective understanding of the person and the presence in the here-and-now. The congruence, the unconditional positive regard, genuineness and accurate empathetic position adopted by the counsellor, itself work as the instruments and tools to effect change in the individual. The personal stance and attitude is believed to open up the potentials inherent in the individual such that the counsellee becomes self-aware. Self-awareness leads to self-acceptance and from there to reduced defensiveness as well as increased openness.

The Rogerian approach is the bulwark to understand self and well-being. It is commensurate with the Mahābhārata approach and serves as a framework with the help of which the different processes and themes may be analyzed. Both the Rogerian framework and the Mahābhārata place great significance on the self and the possibilities for self-enhancement. The subjective and phenomenological frame of reference also is an important similarity in the two approaches. The congruence and the focus on purpose, meaning, and growth, have guided the choice of these two rubrics for the study.

The Mahābhārata is inherently phenomenological in its approach focusing on the complex narratives and rich descriptions of characters and their contexts. The intrinsic phenomenological quality lends an 'approach' to understanding the self and the interactional spaces. The eternal contemporaneity of the Mahābhārata makes it a

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\(^4\) The self is “an organized, consistent, conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of the ‘I’ or ‘me’ and the perceptions of relationships of the ‘I’ or ‘me’ to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions. It is a gestalt which is available to awareness though not necessarily in awareness. It is a fluid and changing gestalt, a process, but at any given moment it is a specific entity” (Rogers, 1951, p.200).
timeless epic. At the same time the many layers of the Mahābhārata, the reference frames, the dialogic nature, and its deep cultural, psychological and philosophical connotations bring out degrees of interpretations of self which are also of great importance in counselling settings. Understandings of self and being accrue from interactions between the readers and the epic, the engagement between the narratives and the experiences of the contemporary researcher and reader. According to Bandlamudi, “the reality about the Mahābhārata is refracted through the individual's interpretation of the everyday reality” (Bandlamudi, 2010, p.5).

A dynamic movement is established by virtue of which the selves of the researcher/counsellor/reader and the characters are understood in many perspectives. The transformations take place in the present, in the here-and-now which is the crux of the interaction. The dialogic interactions take place not just between the characters and their environments but also between the readers and the characters and these fluid and intangible interactions reconstruct and transform the individual.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The study aims to understand through the Mahābhārata, the psychological and experiential facets of self, well-being, nature of intrapersonal conflicts, and mechanisms of redressal for two primary reasons: (i) the Mahābhārata holds a certain cardinal influence on how people and the nation view themselves, and (ii) it can, in a culture-specific way, advance the domain of Indian psychology through its own epic. The Mahābhārata brings in an interactive world, to give a realistic understanding of human self and well-being. In this research, the Mahābhārata is not being viewed as merely literature but as a body of knowledge with its numerous contexts and lived experiences as significant for study and relevant for the domain of Indian Psychology. The interrelations between self and well-being and their implications for counselling as well as continued research in the areas of health and well-being are important concerns in the study. An attempt will also be made to project the “way of the Mahābhārata” for research and counselling settings.

In this first chapter, the Introduction, I have introduced the research aim, and the concepts and scope of self, and well-being. I have also discussed self and well-being in Indian psychology, the Mahābhārata and Indian psychology, as well as the
importance of qualitative approaches for research in psychology and the relevance of phenomenological approaches in the Mahābhārata. Both the self and psychological well-being are linked with each other, especially, in the process of growth and self-enhancement. Psychological well-being, the presence of positive resources and not merely the absence of negative aspects, involves a movement toward our potentials. The Mahābhārata's characters, through their rich experiential contexts of desire, conflict, and grief, present varied responses, augmenting the self and expanding its psychological potential.

The body of the thesis comprises the following chapters: Review of Literature, Methodology and Approach, Analysis and Discussion. It is followed by a Conclusion, and References.

In the Review of Literature chapter, I discuss the salient research which has been done in the areas of the self, well-being, the Mahābhārata, and qualitative approaches. I distinguish between the different types of well-being and attempt to establish the importance of psychological well-being for this study. Mahābhārata studies and the development of Indian Psychology (IP) are reviewed. In addition, qualitative approaches are considered and the choice of the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach is defended.

In the Methodology and Approach chapter, I describe the research objectives of the study and present from the Mahābhārata, five characters, three themes, and two key experiential contexts for each character in each theme giving a matrix of 5x3x2 equalling 30 contexts for analysis. I also describe the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach and its relevance for the study of the Mahābhārata.

In the chapter on Analysis and Discussion, I present the characters, their key experiential contexts through the three themes of desire, conflict, and grief and the interpretations of these different aspects. I describe the parameters of self-processes, i.e. self-concept, self-complexity, and self-enhancement, and analyze the characters and their key contexts through these processes to gain an understanding of self and well-being.

In my Conclusions, I summarize the literature review, the approaches used, and the descriptive and interpretive understandings accrued through analysis of the selected characters for self and well-being and also discuss the scope of the research.