Chapter VI

Evaluating Select Characters of *The Mahabharata*

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Introduction to Chapter VI

Evaluating Select Characters of *The Mahabharata*

This Chapter has two sections, presenting three aspects of the topic of the thesis.

(i) Influence of mythical and legendary characters on some Western celebrities.
(ii) How some elders lack in-depth knowledge in alluding to epic characters, and
(iii) Evaluating select characters in the epic - *The Mahabharata*

*The Mahabharata* has more number of characters than most other epics of the world. Almost every type of the human spectrum gets represented therein.

There are bands of characters in bonds of love and respect to one another and there are also gangs to conspire out of jealousy hate and covetousness.

It would be rewarding to study each character as the poet presents him/her. Still the literary nuances or the circumstances of the plot are not analyses here.

Since ‘Leadership’ is the object of study, ten characters are approached here as to how they fared as leaders, key characteristics that made them as what they were.

They are: Lord Krishna, Kunti, Arjuna, Yudhishtra, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Sanjaya, Karna, Bhishma and king Santanu.

These characters are evaluated by leadership norms set by the primary sources, *Tirukkural* and *The Mahabharata*. 
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Section 1: Mythical and Epic Characters as Inspirations

Myths, epics, legends and even folklore have been sources of inspiration to people for ages. Celebrity leaders and authors like Adolph Hitler, Agatha Christie, Albert Einstein, Ayn Rand, Bill Gates, Charles Darwin, Dostoevsky, Ernest Hemingway, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-tung, Maria Montessori, Mark Twain, Napoleon and Thomas Edison on whom many books have been written were votaries of books themselves. Says Ken Blanchard,

“Our folks get to hear the words of wisdom from great prophets and spiritual leaders like Buddha, Mohamed, Moses, Mahatma Gandhi, Yogananda, and the Dalai Lama, as well as inspirational leaders like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Dag Hammarskjold. This variety does not weaken the messages – it strengthens them, because all of these leaders share one profound conviction true happiness comes only when the centre of the universe is not yourself.”

Who inspired who

Gandhi was influenced in his boyhood by a play on Harishchandra, a hero speaking truth. On the inspiration factor Robin Sharma cites the Indian seer Patanjali,

“When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all of your thoughts break their bonds. Your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction, and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world. Dorment force, faculties and talents become alive, and you discover yourself ... greater ... than you ever dreamed yourself to be.”

French hero Napoleon had Sun Tsu’s Art of War translated in French, to draw inspiration. Albert Einstein had read Kant and Darwin before he entered his teens. Mark Twain, at 15, read Kipling’s Kim every year. Adolph Hitler carried Schopenhauer to battle; based on his Master Race thesis on Nietzsche’s Superman.

“Balzac concocted a theory he called “mythomania” to describe his hero worship of Napoleon and Attila the Hun. Karl Marx had the lifelong idolatry of the Greek God Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and purportedly brought
science to mankind. Chairman Mao spent much of his youth studying the great warriors through books that came to idealise Napoleon,'\(^3\)

notes Gene Landrum who lists 25 leaders and their favourite myths/books. (Those leaders and the books are listed in Appendix No: Books alone have not made these people celebrities, though they did exercised considerable influence on them over the components of leadership, prompting leader aspirants to go in for such books.

An elderly and erudite journalist perceives a rural urban divide in the level of consciousness with regard to drawing references to epic characters. Rural folk, who know epics and legends by oral tradition, are more knowledgeable on characters as analogies. The urban sensitivity to epic characters appears to be a mismatch to their IQ. Some Indian epic characters are invoked in innuendoes; invariably the vicious characters figure, not the virtuous ones, which means notoriety stays longer in public memory. Of course in the world of business, a few are equated to Karna for giving, as he personifies charity.

N.S. Jagannathan, eminent journalist, says the knowledge of politicians on epics, myths and legends is shallow. Some get their analogies wrong for their objects of attack. The references turn more odious than intended; the censure returns irksomely to its origin. Sometimes the slings boomerang on the sender. Just a few months ago, Yashwant Sinha, former civil servant and former minister, called Prime minister Manmohan Singh a Shikhandi. If one knows the Shikhandi episode in the *Mahabharata* he will have clues as to who stands so protected, who is pitted against the protector and the protectee in contemporary political situation.

Writing in *The New Indian Express* on Sept. 19, 2004, under an engaging title — *Manmohan, A Shikhandi? Yashwant Sinha Needs to Take Some Lessons in Hindu Mythology*, columnist N.S. Jagannathan wonders whether Sinha got all his facts right as he shot off his mouth. Of the lack of knowledge of epics even among the highly placed persons, Jagannathan observes,

"Knowledge of ancient Indian classics is progressively becoming more and more rudimentary among most Indians, especially in the urban areas. So when the BJP leader Yashwant Sinha recently hit the headlines with his comparison of Prime Minister to Shikhandi in *The Mahabharata*, many readers especially of the
younger generation were baffled. Beyond a vague impression that Sinha was rude to Manmohan Singh, they might not have cottoned on to the precise nature of the intended insult. What is the point that Sinha is making when he makes a Shikhandi out of Manmohan Singh... for describing a situation in which a person provides a kind of shield for someone else who operates from behind.... Presumably he wanted to say that Manmohan Singh was merely a “front” and the real actor was Sonia Gandhi... What he had done is to make himself one of the Kauravas pitted against the righteous Pandavas... Pursuing this line of interesting speculation, one could then wonder about which particular Kaurava the different BJP stalwarts represent. The choice is wide open: Vajpayee as the hapless Dhritarashtra seems apt enough. Advani could be Duryodhana and Sinha himself – perish the thought – Dussasshana?

The politician’s rebuttable rebuke of an allusion is from The Mahabharata, which ironically, is a political epic. Jagannathan also points out that the shallow knowledge of political leaders on epics:

“The BJP that by the implication of its public postures claims an exclusive right to the legacy of the Hindu tradition, clearly needs better literacy among its leaders about ancient classics... Uma Bharti, for example, compared Manmohan Singh to Vidura, an altogether a shrewd (and original) characterization. It is not only fair and courteous to Manmohan Singh but also probably accurate.”

While elders feel the youngsters lack knowledge of native epics and classics, Jagannathan illustrates that even elders have to refresh their knowledge. Adds he:

“Clearly, the RSS sakhas have their work cut out. They have to hold classes in Indian mythology for the Johnnies-come-lately into the party such as Yashwant Sinha to stop them from shooting off their mouths in self-incriminating ways.”

Wrongly conceived allusions to epic characters would give wrong signals. The Mahabharata being a political epic, political leaders are expected to know the implications better. Name-dropping alone would not do. A thorough knowledge of the epics is to relate the characters with qualities attributed to them, not just noting the functions. The following section evaluates ten characters from The Mahabharata as leaders, what made them fail or succeed as individuals and the leaders.
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Section 2: Failure of the Man, Failure of the Leader

The *Mahabharata* is a great panorama with various types of characters.

“A very useful commentary on the major characters of this epic can be read in Irawati Karwe’s *Yuganta* (1969)”

points out Sampat K. Singh who commends native texts as a sources for studying leadership. Here is a rating of ten characters as leaders: Lord Krishna, Kunti, Arjuna, Yudhishtra, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Sanjaya, Karna, Bhishma and Santanu.

**Lord Krishna**

Krishna could defy any definition of a man or God. He is both. For him no task was too big or too small. He did not hesitate to be an emissary of the Pandavas, though he was the Lord of the Universe. Though a great warrior himself he offered to be Arjuna’s charioteer. A strategist, sober statesman and very often a shrewd manipulator, he calls shots in the epic. His philosophy of life spans both war and peace. If a man wants peace, he needs the strength and the ability to fight a war and win it. He delivers the *Gita*, giving the epic its metaphysical strength. That role of a universal master apart, he is a catalyst. He knows, being divine, what is in store for all players in the epic; but he is not uncanny in his timing. He believes that the means should also be fair. But he uses deception and tactics. To those who face the problem to choose between the greatest evil and the lesser evil, he commends the latter.

**Kunti**

Kunti is the mother of the first three Pandavas, Yudhishtra, Bhima and Arjuna. She proves to be a good mother in inculcating Dharma to her wards who include her co-wife’s sons Nakula and Sahadeva. Pradip Bhattacharya finds Kunti epitomising leadership and the use of feminine power:

“Kunti is the epic’s finest example of inner power by a mother to act unconventionally and wholly autonomously. It is only she who agrees to shoulder the awesome burden of bringing up five teenagers in a hostile court, without any
resources but only the tacit support of Vidura ... Kunti has that rare capacity to surprise which characterises the great leaders who know how to use power. When everything she worked for has been achieved – her beloved sons are rulers of Hastinapura and her daughter-in-law has been avenged – she astonished them all by resolving to retire to the forest with, of all persons, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari... the old couple responsible for her sufferings. Her maturity is reflected in her ability to observe life closely and use learning from experiences for arriving at swift decisions to benefit simultaneously both society and her children.”

Kunti follows the Gita’s advice; she achieved her ends; her sons won back the rule that was theirs. He daughter-in-law was avenged. She could as well have stayed in the palace as mother royal. To Bhima who dissuaded her, she said she had no desire to enjoy a kingdom won by her sons. Her sense of detachment, forbearance and sacrifice are adorable qualities of leadership.

Arjuna

Raising the question ‘Who is the hero of The Mahabharata?’ Daniel H.H. Ingalls, Wales Professor of Sanskrit, Emeritus, Harvard University, who guided Ruth Cecily Katz, doing her doctorate at the Harvard on Arjuna (The word Arjuna means pure) as an epic character, says in his Foreword to her book Arjuna in The Mahabharata:

“Of the Pandava brothers, the reaction to events that we find in Yudhishtra is primarily that of piety and religion. Of Bhima, it is the brute strength. Arjuna is the youngest of the three full brothers – there are also two half-brothers, to make the five Pandavas in full. Arjuna contains traits of his older brothers, but with them is still very much himself. He kills more enemies than Bhima but he has feelings of compassion and remorse which Bhima lacks. He does not preach morality, as does Yudhishtra; and yet when God speaks to man .... it is to Arjuna that He speaks, not to his pious older brother.”

The second part of the observation of the learned professor is not acceptable. Arjuna having been chosen by Krishna for the revelation of the Gita was upon a contextual contingency, as Krishna happened to be Arjuna’s charioteer. However
Ingalls is right in identifying Arjuna as the hero. Ruth Katz hails Arjuna as a peerless hero for his positive and effective action. That is there. And what facilitated him was his capacity to focus. Arjuna remained focused right from his student days. To be focused is a key characteristic of leadership.

Says Ruth Katz:

“Arjuna’s predominant skill is in archery and is based on his absolute power of concentration upon his target, to the exclusion of all surroundings, as demonstrated during the final examination administered by Drona to his pupils at the conclusion of their studies.”

Dronacharya made a parrot of clay; placed it on the branch of a tree. The test was to hit the bird’s eye. He called the princes one by one. Before the individual could shoot, he questioned: “What do you see on the tree?” “The parrot, the leaves and branches” was the reply. When Arjuna’s turn came, he said, “Gurudev, I can only see the eye of the parrot.” He released the arrow and pierced the bird’s eye. That was his acumen of focus, concentration and precision.

Yudhishtira

Yudhishtira could be faulted for dicing away his possessions, siblings, his country and even his wife, who was not solely his, her having married the other four brothers as well; but his regard for elders was unquestionable. He was charitable even to his enemies. A remarkable leadership trait was his impartiality. Yudhishtira was sad to find all his four brothers having met a watery grave once. Granted a boon to save one of them, without a moment’s hesitation, he opted for Nakula his half-brother, born to his step-mother, saying both Kunti and Madri were his mothers and it was fair that each had one son alive. His impartiality is commendable; impartiality is one of the major traits of a leader in the attitude behind discharging one’s duties.

Next to impartiality was his integrity and his consciousness about it. Referring to this, critic Krishna Chaitanya says,

“If Yudhishtira definitely has integrity, he is not totally free from the desire to be recognised as a man of integrity.”
Seeking image recognition is not a negative factor, as the literary critic appears to censure. Yudhishtira cannot be faulted for his image-seeking bids, if any. If one seeks image recognition, it is incumbent on him to live up to that image. What is wrong is to create a hollow image. Yudhishtira had a large heart to forgive even the offenders. During their exile in the forests, when the Pandavas went on hunting, Jayadratha, abducted Draupadi. When Pandavas chased, he let her dismount from the chariot. Bhima was out to catch and kill him. But Yudhishtira bade his brothers to let him off. Yudhishtira is fair in his self-assessment and gauging the failure of leadership at the other end. He observes of what he considered the no-win post-war situation:

“We have not gained our object, nor have they gained theirs. They could not enjoy this earth, nor could they enjoy women and music. They did not listen to counsels of ministers and friends and learned men ... Burning with the hate they bore us, they could not obtain happiness and peace.” (Ganguli VIII P. 10)

Once crowned Yudhishtira proved his leadership by choosing right men for the key slots. Commentator Bharathiramajuachar characterises Yudhishtira thus:

“He sytematised and restructured the administration. Bhima was appointed Yuvaraja. Vidura became his advisor. Sanjaya was asked to manage the finances of the state. Nakula was given the responsibility of the army and personal (sic) administration. Protecting the land from the wicked forces fell on the shoulders of Arjuna. Spiritual aspect of administration was entrusted to Daumya. Sahadeva was appointed his personal secretary. Thus he gave responsibilities to able men and the king won the praise of the nobles and every subject of his land.” 12

Dhritarashtra

The blind Dhritarashtra held only the title, king but lacked everything else. To use the words of Jack Hawley,

“He knew that his son Duryodhana’s decision to go to war was wrong. ...The old man had felt pangs of conscience but had said nothing when his son had cheated Arjuna’s family out of their rightful kingdom and then denied their request even for a trifling parcel of land that was rightfully theirs. The old man had maintained his
curious silence when his son mortified Arjuna’s wife and the whole family in public by having a henchman attempt to strip her of her clothes... Indeed, the old man was so caught up in his mindless support of his son that neither ethical nor spiritual feelings could find their way into his heart. All good judgement had been lost.”

Not having a strong mind, which is a requisite leadership trait, he was forced into physical inaction, a trait tabooed by Vyasa. He was weak and vacillating.

Sanjaya
Sanjaya was an emissary and interpreter to king Dhritarashtra. He discharged his duties well on both the assigments and he does not fail to point out his faults or that of his son. As the Kurukshetra war begins, Sanjaya told Dhritarashtra that Duryodhana was nervous and hence he insulted his master Dronacharya, which ill-behoved any disciple. As a courtier, minister and an emissary he acquits himself exceedingly well.

A purely technical view or a superficial observation might present him exceeding his brief. An occasion is his withholding information on the peace mission he was on. As any emissary is expected to do, he should have disclosed what transpired. On the other hand, he has the temerity to tell the king that he will break at the court the next morning. This breach of protocol was born out of the fear that if Dhritarashtra came to know what was in store, he might adopt devious methods overnight in consultation with his son. His intent was not to hold over information to make the king sleepless. He thought a premature revealing of the information that night might immediately be passed on Duryodhana who would hatch a vile conspiracy again that might scuttle waging a just unavoidable war, which the Pandavas could win.

Duryodhana
‘A past master in subtle underhand political intelligence,’ Duryodhana was not less of a warrior, as Amalesh Bhattacharya calls him. He was a good and helpful friend to Karna. But the traits that would have made him a leader were lost in two bad qualities: jealousy and covetousness. Bhishma in his Raja Niti speaks at length on the corroding impact of covetousness; it leads to 40 other linked vices. Valluvar clamps a ban on jealousy. Thus, Duryodhana was a leader, by position, not by disposition.
When one hatches conspiracies, veiled and vile, he ceases to be a leader. What Yudhishtra tells Arjuna of Duryodhana is the right assessment:

"Duryodhana’s heart was always set upon guile. Always cherishing malice, he was addicted to deception. Although we never offended him, yet he always behaved falsely towards us.” (Ganguli VIII P.10)

**Karna**

Karna is commendable for his valour, steadfastness, commitment charity and fidelity. Any reference to these traits calls for mention of his name. But he fails when rated by leadership’s norms. An instance cited to reveal his heroic patience was his bearing the boring of his thigh by a bloodthirsty insect when his master Parasurama was sleeping on his lap. The occasion was Karna’s stint to learn weaponry under sly. Though a Kshatriya by birth he had told Parasurama that he was a Brahmin. ‘Don’t tell lies except to save a life’- is the norm prescribed by Vyasa and Valluvar. Karna told Parasurama a lie, which was impersonation rather. He told it not to save any, but to kill others by practicing on a unique weapon. By the standards set by Valluvar Karna has erred by having told a lie and acting as though the end justifies the means. By Vyasa’s standards also Karna failed to make grade. By nature he was good. But all his good qualities were brought to naught when he took to impersonation because of the wicked company of the Kauravas. The company matters.

Another inherent quality was his pride, which a leader should avoid under any circumstances. Vyasa’s code on the disciple - master relationship approves of even thieving to save the life of a master; nowhere is it is said that a disciple could tell lies.

**Bhishma**

Bhishma, the grandsire, who gave a long exposition on leadership, was a leader head and shoulders above others. He wielded clout, without holding any position of authority. He was a well-read, resolute, valourous and untempted leader of integrity, willing to do any sacrifice for others. He was brainy, brawny and modest. His concern was to the duties ordained, not to persons. A dispassionate professional was he.

As Krishna Chaitanya puts pertinently,
“Bhishma’s responsibility for administering the realm continued for two more generations, that of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, and lastly of Duryodhana. And often he had to endure the mortification of being reminded that he had no authority to decide though he had obligation to serve. And what made him continue in this curious and unhappy predicament was no compulsion by others but the demand of his own integrity.”  

At the decisive Kurukshetra war Bhishma vowed not to kill the Pandavas, for he loved them for their virtues. Beyond that, when Yudhishtra approached him in the course of the war and asks him how to win him. Bhishma revealed that he would not bear arms against women, or those were once women and even those who bear a woman’s name. Then Shikhandi, woman turned man, became Arjuna’s façade. Of Bhishma’s integrity question could a crucial be raised. So sagacious, why did he live with Dhritarashtra and his sons, knowing them to be incarnations of evil, and why did he not live with the Pandavas, if he ever intended to support the right?

That again was his commitment to leadership. He was not happy to be with Dhritarashtra and his sons. He had to bear agony and insult; still he stayed with them, because, when he gave word to his royal parents that he would not opt to be a king, he did not say that he would shirk his responsibilities as an elder member of the family. Further he knew for sure that his very presence as the patriarch of the Kuru dynasty had a sober effect on Dhritarashtra and his sons, who otherwise would have turned heinous much earlier. He, in deed, led a damage-containment mission successfully.

King Santanu

King Santanu, great grandfather of the warring cousins, might have been a good king, but he failed in his roles as a man and father. If he had been good man and a good father, he would not have been enamoured of fisherwoman Satyavati and married her, yielding to her conditions. That desire to feed his carnal cravings robbed his son Bhishma of his youth and his crown. But for that Vichitraveerya and Chitrangata would not have been born. Dhritarashtra and Pandu would not also have been born. The sagacious and valorous Bhishma would have been the king of the Kuru dynasty. A king’s slip in his personal life led to a great war generations later.
Summary of Chapter VI

Evaluating Select Characters of the *Mahabharata*

This Chapter points out how myths, legends and books influence great men like Balzac, Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi. Although *The Mahabharata* is a political epic, even some senior politicians do not bother to correct in their allusions to epic characters while critiquing fellow politicians, regrets an elderly journalist who cautions against indiscreet allusions to epic characters. He criticises former Union minister Yashwant Sinha equating incumbent Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Shikhnadi of *The Mahabharata*. He comments in lighter vein that courses in epics should be conducted implying that teaching the epic to the rising generation is a must.

This chapter evaluates ten characters of *The Mahabharata* as to what they exemplified, the Dos and the Don’ts of Leadership:

Lord Krishna: *Be sincere in peace moves; still stay well-armed.*

Kunti: *Resolve to retire when things go well.*

Arjuna: *Be focused.*

Yudhishtra: *Be impartial.*

Duryodhana: *Don’t covet,*

Dhritarashtra: *Don’t lull the pangs of conscience when it should assert its way.*

Sanjaya: *Sometimes-even breach of protocol is just, in larger interests.*

Karna: *Never set your heart on guile.*

Bhishma: *Be wise and resolute.*

King Santanu: Set duties and responsibilities to the progeny above carnal desires.

King Santanu’s selfishness interprets *The Mahabharata* as a study of leadership from failure to success; the failure of the man in a leader is the failure of his leadership. The personal failure spoils him, his progeny and his society for generations. Setting right the wrong takes a longer time and warrants desperate remedies.

Hence the man in the leader is of paramount importance.
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