Chapter – III

The relevance of Mahabharata to this study

3.1 THE STORY OF MAHABHARATA IN A NUTSHELL

The Mahabharata is the story of enmity between first cousins which culminates in a terrible and futile war. The story is told by three principal narrators – Vaisampayana, Ugrashrava and Sanjaya – apart from myriad other narrators who recount their stories which are interwoven into the main plot. Often the main plot deviates into several such stories with the narration eventually picking up the thread of the main story again. Vaisampayana is the disciple of Vyasa who is supposed to have composed the Mahabharata and who was both a part of the events and an eyewitness to many of the incidents. Vaisampayana narrates the story of Mahabharata, at Janamejaya’s (Arjuna’s grandson) ‘Sarpa Yagna’ (snake sacrifice). Lomaharsha’s son Ugrashrava who attends the sarpa yagna hears the story and in turn narrates it to the sages in Naimisaranya. Ugrashrava narrates it as told by Vaisampayana who is the chief narrator up to the point of the Kurukshetra war. It is then narrated by Sanjaya, who is blessed with extraordinary powers to witness the battle from Hastinapura and report the details to the blind king Dhritharashtra.

The story begins with King Santanu’s marriage to the celestial Ganga on the condition that the king will never question her actions. Ganga drowns her children one after the other immediately after their birth. Santanu though perturbed keeps to his word, but, eventually bursts out when Ganga tries to drown their eighth child. As the king had broken his vow, Ganga leaves him with a promise that she will return their eighth son back to him at the right age. Devvrat is the son who comes back to his father at the age of eighteen. Meanwhile Santanu is smitten by love for Satyavathi, daughter of the chief of fishermen. Satyavathi’s father accepts to the marriage on the condition that his daughter’s children should be the heir apparent and not Devvrat. Santanu is caught between his love for Satyavati and loyalty to Devvrat. Devvrat comes to the rescue as he sacrifices his claim to the throne, vows to a lifelong celibacy, and Santanu marries Satyavati. Moved by Devvrat’s
sacrifice Santanu blesses him with a boon that death will approach him only at his wish. Devvrat is henceforth known as ‘Bhishma’, the one of ‘terrible oath’.

Santanu’s son Vichitravirya inherits the throne. Bhishma remains the ever loyal protector of Hastinapura. He solemnizes Vivhitravirya’s marriage to the daughters of the king of Kasi – Ambika and Ambalika. As Vichitravirya dies without an heir apparent, Satyavatī calls upon Vyasa (her son before her wedlock, to the Rishi Parasara) to perform ‘Niyoga’ (the act of inviting the husband’s brother to beget children in order to continue the lineage) on the widowed princesses to continue the lineage and protect Hastinapura. Vyasa approaches the princesses in a terrible form, a strong foul smell emanating from him. Vyasa sets this as a test of integrity for the princesses as the union is for a greater cause which leaves little place for appeasing baser instincts. But pitifully, the princesses are unable to bear the terrible form of Vyasa. Ambika closes her eyes in fear and disgust as Ambalika turns pale with fear. Thus the son born to Ambika is born blind and Ambalika’s son is pale and weak. Disappointed, Satyavatī requests Vyasa to once again go to Ambika. Terrified by the prospect of bearing Vyasa, Ambika places her maid in her place and the son that the maid bears to Vyasa was Vidura who was endued with great wisdom. As the eldest son Dhritharashtra born to Ambika is born blind, Pandu born to Ambalika inherits the throne. Vidura remains the ever loyal minister, guiding the King in every important decision. Dhritharashtra marries Gandhari and has one hundred sons known as the Kauravas, Duryodhana being the eldest. Pandu on the other hand incurs the wrath of a sage and thus is unable to have children. Once when in the forests, he kills a deer while it has intercourse with its wife. The deer was actually a sage in that form. Enraged by Pandu’s callous act, the sage curses Pandu that he would meet his death if he unites with his wives. Dejected and disillusioned, he retires to the forests with his wives leaving the kingdom in the custody of Dhritharashtra. Once in the forests he consults with the wise sages regarding his destiny because a childless man loses the right to enter heaven. As the sages propose ‘Niyoga’ as one of the solutions, he discusses this with his wife Kunti. Kunti reveals that she had learnt a mantra from sage Durvasa which enables her to invoke any celestial to beget a child. Pandu implores Kunti to use this mantra and get him children. Kunti obliges and with the
help of a mantra she invokes the lord of Dharma, Vayu and Indra and gives birth to Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna. Kunti shares her knowledge of the mantra with Pandu’s second wife Madri, and she invokes the Aswini twins to give birth to Nakula and Sahadeva. Together, the five brothers, Pandu’s five sons are known as the Pandavas. The princes grow up in the wilderness in nature’s lap and in the company of the wise sages. As life moves on peacefully, one day as Pandu and Madri are enjoying the peace and beauty of the wilderness, Pandu is struck by cupid’s arrow and has intercourse with Madri. The sage’s curse takes effect and Pandu dies in his wife’s arms. Unable to forgive herself, Madri performs ‘sati’ by entering the funeral pyre of her husband leaving the responsibility of the children with Kunti. Left with no support or protection, Kunti comes back to Hastinapura with the Pandavas. Bhishma welcomes the princes and Kunti, and the young princes are given their due education. The Pandavas with their compassionate and humble bearing earn the respect and the love of everyone in the court. The subjects of Hastinapura too are more affectionate towards the Pandavas. As Pandavas become the favourites of the subjects, Duryodhana is consumed with jealousy and with the insecurity that Yudhishtira would claim his rightful inheritance to the throne. The seeds of enmity are sown and he resorts to several plots to kill the Pandavas which they escape with the timely warning of Vidura and the strength of Bhima.

The princes are trained in all the military skills by Drona and Kripa. Arjuna emerges as a warrior nonpareil and Bhima and Duryodhana master the mace fight. Bhishma arranges for a display of the skills of the princes when they finish their formal education. Arjuna becomes the darling of the masses with his incomparable skills and feats. As Duryodhana suffers a silent wrath, Karna enters the arena and challenges Arjuna. As Arjuna gets ready for the fight, the elders of the Kuru clan intervene, saying that the arena is for people of royal lineage and not for people of lowly birth. Though Karna happens to be the eldest son of Kunti (as a maiden, she playfully invokes the Sun-God with her mantra and is blessed with a child. Fearing disrepute, she lets the child afloat on a river, who is found by the charioteer Adhiratha and brought up as Karna), he is denied a chance to display his prowess as the world acknowledges him as a charioteer’s son. Duryodhana recognizes a powerful
ally in Karna to defeat Arjuna, and immediately crowns him the king of Anga. A lifelong friendship which withstands many hurdles is thus born, and Karna remains ever loyal to Duryodhana.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana attempts a futile plot to kill the Pandavas in a palace built of lac in Varanavata. With the timely warning and the help of Vidura, the Pandavas escape to Ekachakrapura. As they live in disguise, they come to hear about the ‘Swayamvara’ of the king of Panchala’s daughter Draupadi. Arjuna wins the hand of Draupadi in the swayamvara, but the Pandavas unitedly marry Draupadi. As the Pandavas return from the Swayamvar, Kunti unwittingly orders the princes to share equally whatever they had bought. It was a custom that they shared their daily alms equally amongst them. Kunti thinks that the princes were returning with their alms and thus orders to share it equally. As the Pandavas respect their mother as God himself, abide by her word and marry Draupadi as their common wife. With this marriage, the Pandavas gain the support of the powerful Drupada (Draupadi’s father). Realizing that Pandavas cannot be destroyed, Dhritharashtra brings in temporary peace by dividing the kingdom into two halves and giving the Pandavas the arid and infertile Khandavaprastha. With their hard work and resilience, they convert it into Indraprastha the most prosperous land equivalent to that of Indra’s (the lord of the Devas) kingdom. Yudhishtira performs the Rajasuya Yagna when all the kings accept his supremacy and shower him with their gifts and wealth.

Duryodhana again with the blessings of Dhritharashtra plots against the Pandavas inviting Yudhishtira for a friendly game of dice. Yudhishtira pledges and loses all his wealth, his brothers and his wife Draupadi as well. Draupadi is dragged to the assembly and insulted. Enraged, she vows that she will not rest till she sees the end of the Kauravas. Scared and realizing that his sons had crossed the limits, Dhritharashtra tries to pacify Draupadi by granting their freedom and lost wealth. Draupadi accepts freedom, but not the wealth. The Pandavas are invited to the game of dice for the second time, and this time too they face defeat.
The Pandavas are sent into an exile of thirteen years, of which they had to spend the thirteenth year incognito and unrecognized. After twelve years in the forest in which they face hardships, earn the friendship, support and the blessings of the sages, they reach the kingdom of Virata to spend their thirteenth year. Yudhishthira dons the mantle of a dice master, Bhima becomes the cook in the royal kitchen, Arjuna transforms himself into a eunuch entertaining and teaching dancing to the royal women, Nakula and Sahadeva tend to the royal horses and cows respectively. Draupadi becomes a companion to the queen and thus they spend the thirteenth year without being identified. With the end of their exile, the Pandavas return to Hastinapura and reclaim their kingdom. Duryodhana refuses to part with the space of even a needle’s head and after an elaborate and a futile attempt to bring in peace between the brothers, war becomes inevitable. All the kings pledge allegiance to either of the sides and the terrible war that annihilates the entire race ensues.

The first ten days of the war remain indecisive with neither side winning or losing, with Bhishma as the leader of the Kauravas. Realizing that Bhishma had to be defeated, the Pandavas on the advice of Lord Krishna bring in Shikandi (who was born a woman and later changed his sex) and fight Bhishma with Shikandi in the front. Bhishma lays down his arms, refusing to fight a woman and Arjuna pierces him with twenty five arrows. The grandsire falls down. After Bhishma, Drona, dons the mantle of the leader and fights valiantly.

On the twelfth day, Drona successfully diverts Arjuna to the southern end of the battlefield, creates the impenetrable military formation, the chakravyuha and advances towards Yudhishthira menacingly. Apart from Arjuna, his son Abhimanyu is the only one who knows to penetrate the formation, but unfortunately he does not know how to come out. Yudhishthira promises that they will follow Abhimanyu when he pierces the formation, but Drona quickly closes ranks and Abhimanyu is trapped alone inside the Kaurava army. The boy fights valiantly that Duryodhana is appalled and finally six kaurava warriors surround the boy who is weaponless and Jayadratha, the king of Sindhu kills him.
Drona too is killed through trickery, as it is impossible to defeat Drona as long as wields his bow and arrow. The only way to defeat him was to make him lay down his weapons. As all is fair in love and war, and the end justifies the means, Krishna kills the elephant Aswatthama and makes Yudhishtihira say that Drona’s son Aswatthama is killed. Hearing this Drona lays down his weapons and is killed by Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi’s brother and Drupada’s son who was born out of the sacrificial fire to kill Drona. After Drona, Karna takes on the reins. On the seventeenth day of the battle Karna fights valiantly getting the better of Yudhishtihira, but lets go of him faithful to the promise he had given to Kunti that he will not kill any of her sons other than Arjuna. By sunset, the two great warriors meet and a terrible battle ensues. During the course of the battle, Karna’s chariot wheel gets stuck in the bloody mire of the battle ground. As he gets down to lift the wheel out of the mire, on Krishna’s prompt Arjuna aims his arrows on Karna and kills him.

The war is almost over with only Duryodhana surviving. Losing interest in everything he goes and hides in a lake nearby the battle ground. The Pandavas find him there and in the duel that ensues between him and Bhima, Bhima smashes Duryodhana’s thigh as promised to Draupadi. Dying, Duryodhana anoints Aswatthama as the chief and Aswatthama along with Kripa attacks the Pandava camp in the night when everyone is asleep and kills all the sons of the Pandavas. Eventually Aswatthama is cursed for his heinous act, but the futility of the victory engulfs the Pandavas. Yudhishtihira especially is inconsolable and gets ready to leave the kingdom and retire to the forest. Krishna intervenes and Bhishma lectures on the Dharma of a king and Yudhishtihira reluctantly accepts the throne. People prospered in his just rule for thirty six years. Following Krishna’s death who is killed by a hunter mistaking his foot for an animal, the Pandavas decide to leave this world. One by one Draupadi and the brothers fall off the mountains and Yudhishtihira alone makes it to the Heavens.
3.2 THE MAHABHARATA AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF A COMMON MAN’S LIFE IN INDIA

J.A.B. Van Buitenen (as quoted. in Das, 2001) said in exasperation,

*If an anthology were to be made to western culture one would have to imagine something like the following: an Iliad, rather less lightly structured then it now is, incorporating an abbreviated version of the Odyssey, quite a bit of Hesiod, some adopted sequences of Herodotus, assimilated and distorted pre-Socratic fragments, Socrates by way of Plato by way of Plotinus, a fair proportion of the Gospels by way of moralizing stories, with the complex of 200,000 lines, worked over, edited, polished and versified in hexameters by successive waves of anonymous church fathers. In the western tradition, this seems incredible. In the Indian civilization, the Mahabharata is a fact.*

The exasperation is only superfluous as he is wonder-struck and speaks of it with awe. Generations have been awestruck and swayed by the sheer authority of this great epic. The Mahabharata holds the solution for the trivial to the subtle and the most poignant questions on ethics, morals and the very essence of life. Defying all the accepted norms of an epic form, this heterogeneous work of heroism, morality, love, hatred, rivalry, myths, legends and religion is a representation of life in its totality. It will not be an exaggeration if one says that every aspect of life’s mysteries has been captured by this ever fresh and vibrant narration.

The beginnings of this great epic can be traced to the narrative songs sung by the court singers called the ‘sutas’, narrating the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It is believed that these renditions can be traced back to at least ten or fifteen centuries before the birth of Christ (Das, 2001). As was the tradition of ancient India, these songs passed down to several generations in the oral form. Each rendition added a little to the original and we have the Mahabharata in its present form with 100,000 slokas, the longest poem in literary history. The Mahabharata was originally known as ‘Jaya’ which Vyasa taught his son Suka and four other disciples – Sumanta, Jaimini, Paila and Vaisampayana – who in turn passed it on to several others. As V. S. Sukthankar (1933) observes, the Mahabharata
was always ‘a text in flux’, and therein lies its beauty. He makes a very interesting observation when he says that people have not read the same Mahabharata for the last three thousand years, and yet it is amazing to note that never have the readers felt that they were reading different texts. The expansion of the poem to its present form has been so subtle and smooth.

The Mahabharata forms an integral part of the Indian culture. The influence of the two epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on the lives of the Indians is so strong, that it is difficult to find a person who is not acquainted with these epics, across the length and breadth of this country. As Jawaharlal Nehru wonders, “The old epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and other books, in popular translations and paraphrases, were widely known among the masses, and every incident and story and moral in them was engraved on the popular mind and gave a richness and content to it. Illiterate villagers would know hundreds of verses by heart and their conversation would be full of references to them or to some story with a moral, enshrined in some old classic.” (Nehru, 1946).

There are innumerable rituals and ceremonies of India, which are based on the Mahabharata. In South India, to this day, the story of Mahabharata is recited in temples erected for Draupadi, beginning mid-April and moving on till the end of June. The recital continues along with ‘Therukoothu’ (a theatrical performance similar to a street play), the major episodes of the epic being enacted – the Bakasura vadham (the killing of the Asura (demon) Bakasura by Bhima) the Keechaka vadham (killing of Kichaka by Bhima) etc. – and culminates in the ‘Theemidhi’ (walking on burning coals) ritual. This is a ritual based on the belief that after the defeat of the Kauravas in the hands of the Pandavas, Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas walked on the burning coals to commemorate her husbands’ victory and to prove her chastity. Different episodes of the Mahabharata are believed to bless people with various boons. For example, enacting or witnessing the episode of ‘Karna’s salvation’ is believed to liberate the departed soul from the vicious cycle of rebirths, and attending ‘Arjunan Thapasu’ (Arjuna’s penance) is supposed to enrich the fertility of a woman (Muthukumaraswamy, 2006). Every character – major or minor is
associated inextricably with the lives of the common people. Take for instance, the story of ‘Iravan’ (Arjuna’s son).

Iravan or Aravan (as he is referred to in South India), is the son of the Pandava prince Arjuna and the Naga princess Ulupi. He is considered to be the patron god of Transgenders. According to South Indian folklore, Iravan sacrificed himself before the goddess Kali to ensure victory to the Pandavas. But, before his sacrifice, he wished to be married and Krishna taking the form of a woman satisfies his wish. Commemorating Krishna’s marriage to Iravan and the subsequent widowhood, this episode is enacted by the Transgenders in the ‘Koothandavar’ temple in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu, in an eighteen day festival. The Transgenders first ceremonially marry the male villagers who have taken vows as Aravan, and then lament their widowhood after the ceremonial sacrifice of Aravan. As it is also believed that Lord Krishna gave a boon to Aravan that he would be able to witness the eighteen-day battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas through the eyes of his severed head, the head of Aravan is a common motif in Draupadi temples.

The enactment of the eighteenth day of the Kurukshetra war, when Duryodhana is killed, is known as ‘Patukalam’ (Muthukumaraswamy, 2011). The ‘Therukutthu’ (street play) performers enact the final duel between Duryodhana and Bhima where Bhima smashes Duryodhana’s thigh and emerges victorious. Following this, Gandhari, rushes in singing songs of dirge and lamenting her son’s death. It is significant to note that after this, the villagers perform the last funerary rites to Duryodhana as befitting a family elder (Muthukumaraswamy, 2011). The characters of the Mahabharata are never seen as fictional characters, but as people of life and blood, people who live amongst them. The Mahabharata is thus an integral part of the common man’s everyday life.

Before proceeding to discuss the relevance of the Mahabharata, it becomes the responsibility of this researcher to justify the choice of the Mahabharata, over the other equally important, influential epic, the Ramayana. The main and the only reason of this choice is that Mahabharata brings forth characters that are down to earth, real people who can be identified with and related to. As mentioned elsewhere, one can find parallels to the
characters of the Mahabharata in those around us. In contrast, the characters of Ramayana are the most ideal, extraordinary characters who have gained the status of Gods and Goddesses. As these characters are placed on a pedestal, and idolized, it will not serve the purpose of this research which strives to identify a role model for the common man to imitate and follow. Thus, characters from the Mahabharata are chosen as the common man finds himself comfortable, and at ease in their company. Moreover, as he identifies the many shortcomings in them, which are either overcome or allowed to destroy them, he too understands that he has the choice of either overcoming the weaknesses or trade his own downfall as he fails to take control. This prepares the perfect stage for this research to assert that an ordinary man has the potential to reach greater heights if only he puts his mind to it.

3.3 THE RELEVANCE OF MAHABHARATA TO THIS STUDY

The beauty of Mahabharata is that it has never lost its relevance over all these centuries from when it had been sung first. Neither the evolution of new religious beliefs and practices, nor the evolution of man himself over these centuries has obscured or overshadowed this great epic. As Das (2001) points out, the Homeric epics lost their relevance and were considered pagan with the evolution of Christianity. The pagan gods lost their divine splendor, while it is the reverse that has happened with the Mahabharata. This ‘secular’ work has gained the dimensions of a ‘religious’ work, and has deeply ingrained itself in the psyche of the people. The epic has evolved with the generations and has never lost its relevance.

The present day man is torn between the deep rooted moral philosophy of life and the practical demands of the society. This conflict can be set at rest if he is willing to look for answers in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is the tale of the individual, his destiny which is inextricably chained to his actions. It is the individual who decides his fate through his actions and there is no place for sentimentalism or heroism. Every man is responsible for his actions and thereby his destiny. He charts his own life and nobody else is responsible for his happiness or sorrow. Every character in this epic goes through the cycle of life experiencing happiness, sorrow, well-being, hardship, success and defeat. As
Das (2001) says, “The characters in the Mahabharata are desperately human; they have passion, they have attachment and they go through the world of action in a spirit of dignity.” There is no divine intervention, and in fact, as Irawati Karve (2008) points out, “God and man alike were yoked to an inevitable fate which none could escape.” The Mahabharata is a truthful reflection of life on earth with all its limitations. Miracles do not occur, Gods do not come down to turn misfortunes to good fortune. There is no all is well that ends well. The lives of the characters insist on the practicality of doing things for the sake of one’s duty and not for any exalted honour or favour. Each character is defined by the web of actions he weaves, into which he is caught inextricably. Thus, the Mahabharata becomes a practical document of life with all its inequalities and injustices, where it is up to the individual to find his own way through the maze. This practical philosophy of life touches the common man and he finds it comfortable to identify himself with the characters. Through the characters he experiences his own upheavals in life. The thought that he alone is responsible for his destiny gives him the power to face the hurdles of life with vigour. It touches the common man in all the levels – the mundane, the ethical and the metaphysical (Sukthankar, 1942) and thus remains a loyal companion through all the stages of his life. The Mahabharata thus, is an ideal platform on which any edifice that reaches out to the common man can be erected. Thereby, this study chooses the Mahabharata to study and examine the significance of emotional intelligence through the lives of four characters – Duryodhana, Dhritharashtra, Yudhishtira and Arjuna. The next four chapters analyze the four characters – Duryodhana, Dhritharashtra, Yudhishtira and Arjuna – in the said order.

The complete translation of the Mahabharata in English – the only one till date – by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, published by Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, is taken for the study, and the references pertaining to the text are given as footnotes at the end of each page.