

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Mahabharata: A Strategic Overview

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## **S***ummary*

The Mahabharata is not a prescriptive text nor is it a myth or a tale, nor is it merely a story about war and warfighting. The epic is guided by the overarching principle of idealism and its functional implementation through realism. It focuses on the concept of dharma as guidance for force application.

The recent past has witnessed an animated debate around the relevance of ancient Indian texts for modern militaries. Multiple opinions were voiced soon after the launch of Project Udbhav by the Indian Army. The project “aims to delve into India’s military history, strategy, and strategic concepts, fostering an indigenous strategic culture rooted in our rich heritage”.<sup>1</sup>

The critique that emerged pointed out misgivings at multiple levels. This included “the irrelevance of ancient weapons, tactics and military planning for a ‘tech-heavy battlefield’”.<sup>2</sup> Two, ancient texts should be seen from the prism of history and sociological development and therefore are “more a guide for political leadership”.<sup>3</sup> Three, “fascination with the study of ancient texts is at best an academic exercise in self-pride”.<sup>4</sup>

The misgivings voiced by some senior commentators and military professionals raised fundamental questions regarding the study of ancient texts, especially by military officers at two levels. Is the Indian endeavour to study ancient texts unique and founded on a questionable intellectual foundation? Further, is the study of ancient texts relevant in modern times, wherein, warfare has undergone a perceptible change in character?

This Brief will attempt to address some of the misgivings voiced in opposition to the study of ancient Indian texts and simultaneously highlight their strategic significance, using the Mahabharata as a case study.

## Is the Study of Ancient Indian Texts Questionable?

The answer to the first question is perhaps easier to formulate. The study of ancient texts is neither new nor a recent initiative. The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) has been one of the pioneer institutions and studies on these subjects have been on for well over a decade.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, user response to research at MP-IDSA further suggests that these themes have

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<sup>1</sup> [“Project Udbhav”](#), United Service Institution of India, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Rahul Bedi, [“What India’s Military is Taking From ‘Ancient Traditions’ – and What It Should Be Learning Instead”](#), *The Wire*, 1 October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Manvendra Singh, [“Project Udbhav is a Wasteful Exercise. Ancient Texts Can’t Substitute Army Training Manuals”](#), *The Print*, 5 October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> B.S. Dhanoa, [“Can Generals Chanakya, Kamandaka, Thiruvalluvar Help?”](#), *The Times of India*, 23 October 2023.

<sup>5</sup> [“Study of Arthashastra Important to Understand our Strategic Culture: Shiv Shankar Menon”](#), Indigenous Historical Knowledge Project Vol. I -III, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 2015–2016, 8 October 2013; Michael Liebig, [“Endogenous Politico-Cultural Resources: Kautilya’s Arthashastra and India’s Strategic Culture”](#), MP-IDSA, 19 April 2012; Michael Liebig, [“Statecraft and Intelligence Analysis in Kautilya-Arthashastra”](#), *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, October 2014.

consistently remained amongst the most read, indicating interest from a wide cross-section of national and international audiences.

MP-IDSA is not the only institution that has remained involved in such studies. The Department of National Security and Strategy of the US War College covers the writings of Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Thucydides, Jomini and Clausewitz. In light of the critique, it begs the question: Why would military students in distant lands want to study Sun Tzu, Kautilya and Thucydides? Perhaps, these ancient authors provide both relevant and timeless lessons for US War College students, despite the ultra-modern tools of war employed by the US Army.

It is pertinent to quote the US War College course guide in this context. The curriculum includes the study of “ancient masters” to better understand their thoughts on “the nature and character of war, and about strategy”.<sup>6</sup> It goes on to say that “we do so not simply to find historical perspective, but because these theorists set the foundation for the study of war, strategy, and statecraft, and their concepts continue to resonate in the contemporary international security environment.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet another critical element of strategic studies that has gained prominence over the last few decades is the importance of strategic culture to better understand strategic choices made by a country. In this context, Alastair Ian Johnston provides a useful perspective. He suggests that the study of strategic culture “can be observed in strategic-culture objects (e.g., texts, documents, doctrines, etc.); and its evolution (even dissolution) over time can be traced.” Further, given the challenge of large amounts of “cultural artifacts” even over a short period, he suggests evaluating “most recent texts and some from the distant past, and assume that if there is congruence in preference rankings that strategic culture exists and has persisted to the present. The longer the time across which this congruence stretches, the more powerful and persistent the strategic culture.”<sup>8</sup>

Johnston’s proposition suggests that an evaluation of India’s strategic culture can best be undertaken by assessing texts and documents that indicate strategic decision-making from the ancient period and until the present. Kajari Kamal wrote her book, *Kautilya’s Arthashastra: Strategic Cultural Roots of India’s Contemporary Statecraft* using a similar theoretical framework to reinforce the congruence of India’s strategic culture.<sup>9</sup> Similar references have also been provided from MP-IDSA’s endeavours in the past.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “[Theory of War and Strategy](#)”, The United States Army War College, Academic Year 2017, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Alastair Ian Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995, pp. 39–40.

<sup>9</sup> See Kajari Kamal, *Kautilya’s Arthashastra: Strategic Cultural Rots of India’s Contemporary Statecraft*, Routledge India, New Delhi, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See no. 5.

If strategic choices and strategic culture are indeed relevant and important for understanding a country’s strategic decision-making, then this is clearly a discipline that is as important for the national leadership, as it is for the military commanders, diplomats, administrators and students of military studies.

It is apparent from this brief assessment that the study of ancient texts goes beyond the limited scope of trying to find their correlation with the modern battlefield and its instrumentalities. These texts form a part of the well-established basis to better understand strategic culture and its impact on present and future wars. Arguably, far from being questionable, the study of relevant ancient texts is and should remain an inalienable part of our intellectual endeavours.

## Relevance of Ancient Texts: Introducing the Mahabharata

Several ancient texts like the *Arthashastra*, *Nitishastra* and *Kural* have been analysed and have become a part of the wider review of Indian literature. Yet, in comparative terms, a profound ancient text that is perhaps one of the most pervasive in Indian popular imagination, the Mahabharata, has remained on the fringes of strategic thought, with the exception of sustained interest and emphasis on diplomacy, philosophy, spirituality and history.

This brings up the second question regarding the relevance of ancient texts for strategic studies and more specifically in the military domain. This question will be answered using the rich resource of knowledge provided by the Mahabharata. Since this epic has not been as much a focus of strategic analysts, as a prelude, a brief introduction to the epic would be in order.

### ***What the Mahabharata is Not***

The Mahabharata is *not* a history in the purest sense. It becomes a problem when the epic is compared to a text like the Peloponnesian War from ancient times.

Similarly, it is *not* a prescriptive text that provides a suggested solution to common military issues, as is the case with Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*.

The epic is *not* a myth or a tale that was someone’s figment of imagination. It does include didactic elements, which are meant to draw relevant lessons. This inclusion should therefore neither take away from the seriousness of the text nor dilute its strategic import.

The Mahabharata is *not* a religious text. Even the Bhagavad Gita, in addition to being a guide for *kshatriya dharma*, is considered spiritual in its scope.

The epic is *not* a recent obsession, discovery, or rediscovery, as was the case with some texts in the past. It has not only remained pervasive across the country but also beyond its shores, over centuries of its popular dissemination and distribution.

The Mahabharata is *not* merely a story about war and warfighting. While the text provides some of the most detailed and vivid descriptions of battles, warriors, battlefield conditions, vagaries of war, and use of weapons, it is as much, if not, more about strategic objectives of war and the ways in which these can be achieved. The epic also delves into the implications and futility of war.

The Mahabharata is *not* a text that explains right and wrong in terms of strategic thought. Its focus on context, nuance and circumstantial decision-making throws up options that reflect the reality of challenges in everyday life.

During the first few centuries of its existence, the Mahabharata was *not* distributed in writing. It was disseminated verbally. Subsequently, even after it became available in written form, the epic did not remain static and evolved through distinct elements unique to different regions and languages.

### ***What the Mahabharata is?***

There exists a general consensus amongst scholars that the eighteen-day Mahabharata war took place sometime between 900 and 1300 BCE.<sup>11</sup> This period can be located between two established bookends of history. The Iron Age is associated with 900 CE and the *Puranas* indicate a period of a little over 1000 years between the coronation of Mahapadma Nanda in 382 BCE and the birth of Parikshit, the son of Abhimanyu.

The actual text of the epic was possibly composed between 800 BCE and 400 CE, as an iterative exercise. During this period, the epic underwent an evolution of perhaps a thousand years which saw it grow from 8,800 to 24,000 and eventually 1,00,000 verses as the *Jaya*, *Bharata* and eventually the *Mahabharata*.

The *Mahabharata* is distinctive in character and along with the *Ramayana*, it gets placed in a unique category of *itihasa*. The term *itihasa* suggests neither history nor mythology. Quite literally, it implies, “It happened like this.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the text is rooted in events that actually did take place. Yet, the *Mahabharata* cannot be classified in the literal sense of a historiography.

*Itihasa* has its roots in historical events but simultaneously takes the form of a living document. As a result, it has the ability to relate past events with contemporary times to draw suitable lessons. This makes texts like the Mahabharata timeless, with

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<sup>11</sup> Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata Vol. 1*, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2010, p. xxx.

<sup>12</sup> Kanad Sinha, *From Dasarajana to Kurukshetra: Making of a Historical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021, pp. 8–9.

the didactic elements of the text deriving learning value. In many ways, therefore, *itihasa* texts are as relevant if not more, when compared with a historical narration of events.

The Mahabharata is amongst the few texts that remained an integral part of Indian consciousness and understanding continuously for over 3,000 years. It has been translated into most Indian languages, simultaneously leading to variations and interpretations over time. In 1919, the Bhandarkar Institute at Pune decided to collect all available versions of the Mahabharata from across the country. By 1966, scholars went through these to create a version they considered closest to the original. Consequently, this Sanskrit edition became an authentic source of the epic, which has since been translated into English by Bibek Debroy.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to this effort, the Mahabharata has possibly remained the most popular epic in Indian consciousness. From Amar Chitra Katha comics to repeated attempts at popular outreach through television serials and from individual stories to divergent views from the perspective of major characters, the text has been interpreted in multiple ways.

Having reinforced the continuous availability of the Mahabharata over the centuries and its social impact on Indian consciousness, a logical question arises regarding its relevance as a strategic text, especially for contemporary times.

### ***Characteristics of the Mahabharata***

Prior to answering the question, it would be relevant to contextualise the characteristics of the text, which make the epic a timeless and unique source of strategic thought.

First, unlike prescriptive texts, the Mahabharata relates a real-life story, marked by strategic challenges and complex decision dilemmas. These are resolved through different approaches that range from deceit to righteousness and from realism to idealism.

Second, in addition to the obvious answers that some circumstances suggest, several incidents straddle the thin line between right and wrong making the resolution of issues a challenge. This makes the context of the decision as relevant as its guiding principles.

Third, the epic is guided by the overarching principle of idealism and its functional implementation through realism. This exemplifies an approach that is relatable to the practical needs of decision-making.

Fourth, the Mahabharata encourages debate and deliberation as the basis for making decisions instead of being bound by the words of a divine voice. This provides

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<sup>13</sup> See Bibek Debroy, *The Mahabharata Vols 1-10*, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2010–2014.

an opportunity to better appreciate persuasive arguments on both sides of the divide, thereby enabling an informed understanding of the decision-making process.

These characteristics of strategic decision-making remain unique to the Mahabharata, especially since the debate and deliberation associated are enshrined in the core values of Indian philosophy and spirituality. Both philosophy and spirituality have retained an inextricable linkage with the idea of war and human conflict and the Mahabharata successfully helps us understand not only the compulsion of wars but, more importantly, the imperative for avoiding it given its destructive character.

### ***Dharma and Artha***

The core driver for guidance and action in the Mahabharata is the idea of *dharma*. Dharma has long been acknowledged more as a synthesis of multiple concepts like morality, duty, responsibility and righteousness to name a few (For the purpose of this brief, the concept of *dharma* will be associated with righteousness and social acceptability). It therefore does not come as a surprise that the philosophical roots of strategic guidance also stem from the concept of *dharma*. In other words, *dharma* provides the direction for correctly identifying the ends, selecting the means necessary for its achievement and the ways in which the means can or should best be employed.

The debate over ends, means and ways takes place in the Mahabharata at multiple levels. The epic addresses this from the perspective of the state through the concept of *raja dharma*. However, it remains equally relevant for an individual and more specifically a soldier through the pursuit of *kshatriya dharma*. While this comes up on multiple occasions in the Mahabharata, the most profound understanding emerges from the *Bhagavad Gita*, as a prelude to the eighteen-day war at Kurukshetra.

The concept of *dharma* does not operate in isolation in the Mahabharata. If *dharma* provides the idealist moorings in the text, *artha* addresses the more realistic requirements. While the epic remains more focused on the aspect of *dharma*, it also provides the requisite details on *artha*, especially when related to *raja dharma*. However, the emphasis on *artha* in the Mahabharata operates at a more conceptual level.

If a co-relation is attempted between the Mahabharata and Arthashastra, then the latter is a classic on statecraft through the pursuit of *artha*, while the former is a timeless fountainhead of strategic thought based on the idea of *dharma*. It is through the multiple interpretations of *dharma* that the Mahabharata addresses individual and state responses to threats and challenges. The guidance provided through *dharma* allows its implementation through more functional needs of the state and tactical flexibility to achieve the ends of *artha*.

The Mahabharata provides several examples of key players employing ingenious means to achieve their ends. From a limited perspective of *artha*, success is achieved by competing sides in their own ways. Shakuni’s plan of challenging Yudhishtira in a game of dice was far more effective than fighting the Pandavas on the battlefield.

Similarly, Krishna’s choice to infiltrate into Magadha with Bhima and Arjuna to challenge Jarasandha in a wrestling match instead of fighting him in a war accrues multiple benefits. This includes the placement of a favourable ruler on the throne and garnering the support of kings imprisoned by Jarasandha for an eventual human sacrifice. What differentiates the acceptability of this pursuit of power and wealth, is its co-relation with *dharma*.

### **War**

The idea of war has remained endemic to human existence. It has also been considered one of the most important determinants for any discussion on a nation’s strategic culture. The epic delves into the threat of war at length. It clearly outlines the priorities that are ascribed to the option of waging war.

At the conceptual level, the idea of war is governed within the purview of *dharma*. Since *dharma* does provide the philosophical moorings of the idea of war, it does not come as a surprise to find war avoidance at its very foundation. This is accompanied by the pursuit of rules of engagement prior to, during and after the war. Eventually, when war does become inevitable, the Mahabharata emphasises the importance of achieving victory through flexible ways and means.

It is in this context that the use of surprise, deception and deceit are clearly evident prior to, during and after the war. This reflects a realistic approach to competition and conflict, within the wider ambit of *dharma*. In other words, the Mahabharata finds no contradiction between the pursuit of *dharma* and its implementation following the tenets of *artha*. Evidently, there remains a correlation between idealism and realism, with no contradiction in the pursuit of either.

### **Capability Development**

The importance of capability development is a long-term process. The Mahabharata brings to the fore processes by which state and individual capabilities are created over time. This is undertaken not only by forging alliances and alignments but also by weapon and force accretion.

Interestingly, the epic repeatedly reinforces the importance of quality over quantity and the impact of strategic thought over raw numbers. The individual pursuit of special skills, as witnessed during Arjuna’s pursuit to seek divine weapons and the choice of Krishna in a non-military role instead of his divine military force, emphasises the comparative importance of these capabilities.



### ***Application of Force***

The nature of society in the ancient period witnessed frequent use of force. It was a tool for seeking power and influence, resisting upheavals and resolving differences. Despite the repeated employment of military means, the Mahabharata lays down guidelines for avoiding the use of force, limiting its use and eventually its responsible application. These guidelines, yet again, focus on the concept of *dharma* as guidance for force application. This goes beyond the principles of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. While this does not suggest the scrupulous pursuit of these principles, yet, its prevalence and relevance remain deeply enshrined in the consciousness of major actors in the epic.

### ***Diplomacy***

The role of diplomacy as a tool of negotiation, seeking advantage and avoiding wars comes up repeatedly in the Mahabharata. However, what is important is the sophistication with which diplomacy is employed as a tool to achieve political ends. The most interesting and illustrative example emerges from the negotiation ability of Krishna in the court of Dhritarashtra. His targeted and focused employment of *Sama*, *Dana*, *Bheda* and *Danda* (within the limits of coercion) successfully placed the onus of responsibility for past misdemeanours on the Kauravas. In addition, he also ensures that the battle of perceptions clearly places the Pandavas and Kauravas respectively on the side of *dharma* and *adharma*. This eventually provides an umbrella of *dharma*, within which individual acts of *adharma* are seen as acceptable.

## **Conclusion**

One of the best ways to make sense of the present and prepare for the future is to understand the past. This understanding is aided by the study of history. It is perhaps influenced more by texts like the Mahabharata, which help make sense of that history. They place incidents in the right context. The Indian way of conceptualising war, employment of force, use of diplomacy, guidance for soldiering and capability development has a long and rich tradition that emerges from texts like the Mahabharata.

Yesterday we called long-range artillery a game changer, today it is drones and tomorrow it may be something else. However, the principles of warfighting remain the same, even as its context changes. The nature of war itself remains the same, even as its character changes. The collective psyche of a nation follows a protracted cycle, which emerges from the ancient and has already stepped into the future. Therefore, unless we can make sense of our past, a reasoned understanding of the future may at best remain murky.

## About the Author



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