



## an immortal conversation: on the deep insights that the Mahabharata can offer

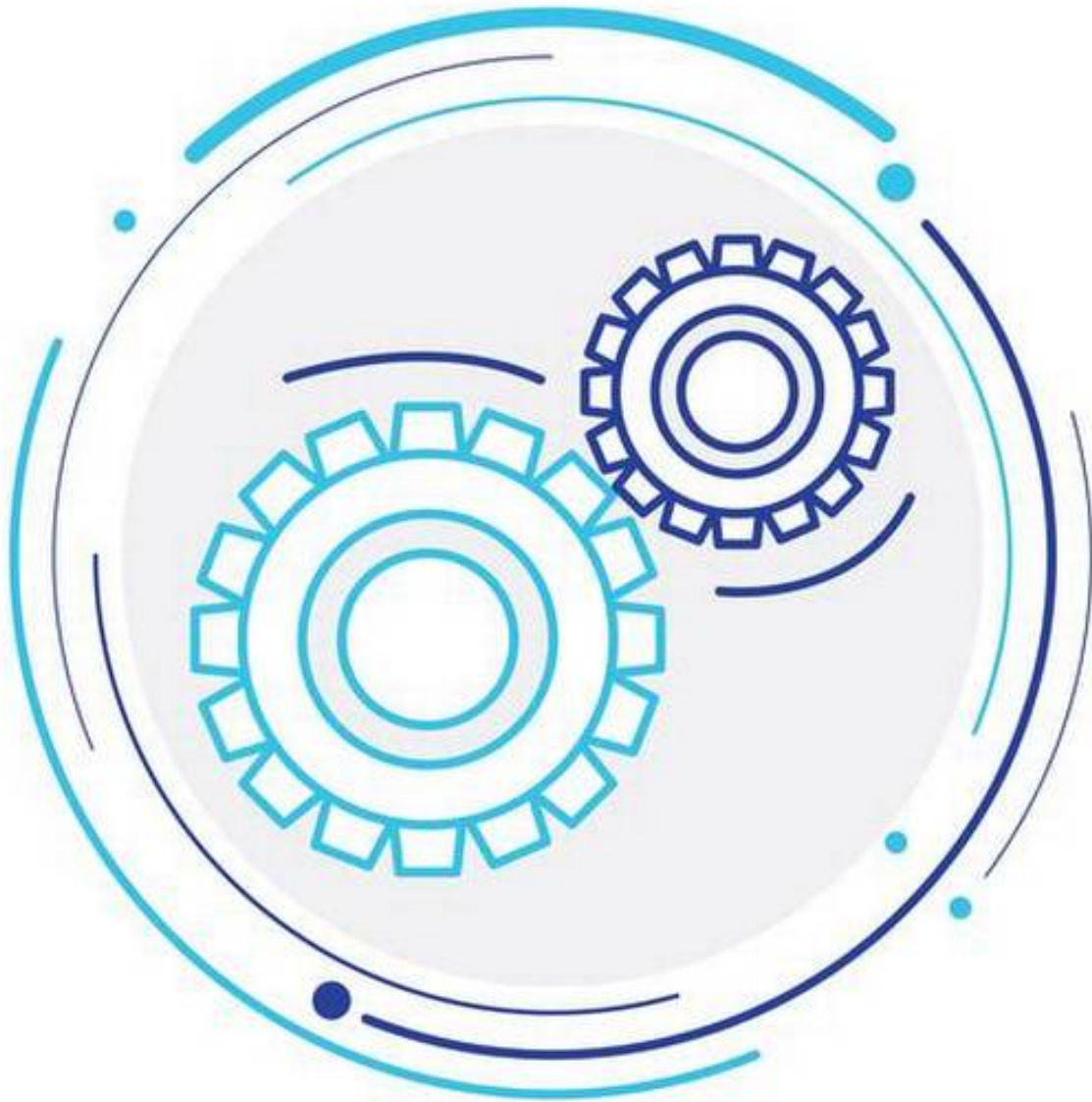
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**fronts some of its biggest strategic challenges, the Mahabharata can offer**

**I**n 1991, close to his death, Bimal Krishna Matilal, the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at All Souls College, Oxford, wrote one of his final pieces: a brilliant polemical essay, 'Krsna: In Defense of a Devious Divinity'. Brought to my attention by his favourite student, the JNU's Heeraman Tiwari, the article challenged the western view of the apparently less-than-godly conduct of Krishna before and during the war on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. In 2012, inspired, in part, by Matilal, and the compendium of *Essays on the Mahabharata* edited by McGill's Arvind Sharma, I wrote in this daily (December 11, 2012): "If all the books on war and peace were to suddenly disappear from the world, and only the *Mahabharata* remained, it would be good enough to capture almost all the possible debates on order, justice, force and the moral dilemmas associated with choices that are made on these issues within the realm of international politics."

### On strategic thinking

My article, along with other writings, was an attempt at confronting a major western critique of



India; a Eurocentric belief that India and Indians had only episodically written about strategic issues and that there was no real culture of strategic thinking in India. The American think-tank Rand's Vice President, George K. Tanham, had put this starkly in his 1992 paper, 'Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretative Essay' (commissioned by the U.S. Under Secretary for Defence) in which he argued that the Indian elite had not systematically or coherently thought about national security. Since then, many scholars, including at JNU, have reviewed different traditions of strategic thinking in India: from Asoka's post-Kalinga idealism to the more

predictive hard-headed realism of Kautilya, to the more critical traditions of thinking about war and peace

**Also read: [The evolving 'Mahabharata': Scholar Sunil P. Elayidom's new book attempts to decode the ancient epic](#)**

Fortunately, we also now have the benefit of the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar's book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, which recognises the importance of the *Mahabharata* in a deeply perceptive chapter, 'Krishna's Choice: The Strategic Culture of a Rising Power'. A must read for all students of foreign policy. Earlier, we had the inspiring account of Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar, *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata*.

### Limited scrutiny

However, even today, in contrast to the industry of researchers who devote themselves to studying Chinese strategic culture, the interest in India's thinking is still limited. This must change; not in a nativist or a revivalist fashion or by necessarily emphasising India's exceptionalism, but to understand that India's strategic culture acts as an important intervening variable between power, interest and material capabilities, on the one hand, and the higher purpose of statecraft on the other.

**Also read: [Sunil P. Elayidom on what makes the 'Mahabharata' so compellingly modern](#)**

Today, as India confronts some of its biggest strategic challenges there are deep insights that the *Mahabharata* offers us, including from the immortal dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. For Prof. Matilal's western critics: "[Krishna] is a riddle, a paradox. If anything, he appears to be a devious diplomat", an enigma. In reality, Krishna (even in his mortal form) is the ultimate strategic visionary, a political genius, who believes in upholding Dharma, almost at any cost.

What does Dharma mean particularly in terms of strategic vision? First, Dharma means upholding the larger righteous interest, the welfare of humanity both in its mundane and transcendental sense. For the leadership of a nation state, it means protecting the national interest defined as the interests of the people from internal and external adversarial circumstances.

Second, Dharma means action not passivity; acting without material incentives, and without regard for narrowly defined gains from that action. And acting decisively while recognising, however, that the war for upholding Dharma will almost necessarily always cause collateral

damage (both in terms of a strict adherence to principles as well as possibly unrestrained violence).

Finally, the war for Dharma requires acting independently, without attachment, without fear and without external pressure. In sum, Dharma in foreign policy can only be sustained through the doctrine of strategic autonomy. It is the only principle that can bring into harmony flexibility in diplomacy (even duplicity when needed) and purposeful violence when required; so much so that true statecraft and strategic autonomy become inseparable, bringing about a fusion of thought and action for the higher purposes of statecraft. Dharma is beyond self-interest, it is beyond partisan causes, it is concerned almost always with the larger good; it reifies humanity, the people and not necessarily the state. As Krishna emphasises to Arjuna: “*karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo mā te saṅgo ’stv akarmaṇi* (You have a right to act but never to any fruits thereof. You should never be motivated by the results of your actions, nor should there be any attachment”).

## Righteous national interest

In contemporary terms, what are the secular aspects of the wisdom that Krishna imparts to Arjuna, particularly in the Bhagavad Gita? Ultimately, for Krishna, our strategic policies must be rooted within the overarching framework of Dharma and for promoting the larger righteous national interest (*Yato dharmas Tato Jaya*: Victory and Dharma go together) rather than any selfish or partisan cause. In many ways, this wisdom reinforces India’s long-standing quest for strategic autonomy, defined as the pursuit of stability, space and strength, as an instrument for promoting national Dharma. As an illustrative example, even at the end of his teachings and his call for action, Krishna encourages Arjuna to reflect and to introspect on what he has learnt, and discard whatever he finds unsuitable: “Thus, I have explained to you the most confidential of all knowledge. Deliberate on this fully, and then do what you wish to do.” (*iti te jñānam ākhyātaṃ guhyād guhyataraṃ mayā, vimrśyaitad aśeṣeṇa yathecchasi tathā kuru*).

In terms of moral philosophy with deep implications for statecraft, the concerns that define Prof. Matilal’s essay or the Ryerson University scholar Vishal Sharma’s are similar to the one raised by the sage, Uttanka, in *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, when he encounters Krishna after the war. Why does Krishna not successfully broker peace between the warring cousins rather than preside over genocide? Why does Krishna undermine his stature by apparently resorting to “duplicitous or even deceitful means in the course of war”? Prof. Matilal and others offer compelling explanations to coherently justify Krishna’s actions, including those rooted in moral consequentialism and the lack of omnipotence of the lord when he acquires an earthly form. Krishna is the final guardian of Dharma, a leader; and, on occasion, as Prof. Matilal points

out, a leader needs to create “new paradigms for showing limitations of such a generally accepted moral code of truth-telling and promise-keeping”.

## A distinction

Of the few, in the West, who understood the importance of Dharma (otherwise, for most, an elusive term) was the scientist, J. Robert Oppenheimer (who led the Manhattan project that led to the development of the first atomic weapons). As he witnessed the first nuclear test in July 1945, ‘he thought of a verse from the Bhagavad Gita: *divi sūrya-sahasrasya bhaved yugapad utthitā yadi bhāḥ sadṛśī sā syād bhāsas tasya mahāḥ manaḥ* (If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendour of the mighty one)’. And then the *shloka*: “*kālo’smi lokakṣayakṛtpravṛddho lokānsamāhartumiha pravṛttaḥ* (I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”)). Not surprisingly he supported the development of nuclear weapons against fascism, but opposed the production of a thermonuclear hydrogen bomb during the Cold War. This, he believed, was the difference between Dharma and Adharma and it is a distinction that the Indian leadership must reflect upon and comprehend in its fullest and most inclusive sense.

*Amitabh Mattoo is Professor of International Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Honorary Professor at the University of Melbourne*

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