

SEM I

Morality and ethical considerations in the Dice scene in Mahabharata

The dice game in the Mahabharata is one of the epic's most pivotal and controversial episodes, leading directly to the great war of Kurukshetra. This event is laden with complex moral, ethical, and social dilemmas, and it has been the subject of extensive analysis, interpretation, and debate over the centuries. Here are some of the main controversies related to the dice game:

Following the Rajasuya Yajna and the incident at the Maya Sabha, Duryodhana's envy turned into a burning desire for revenge. He conspired with his uncle, Shakuni, to invite the Pandavas to a game of dice. Shakuni, known for his cunning and deceit, played the game on behalf of Duryodhana and used loaded dice to ensure the Pandavas' defeat.

Vidura, known for his wisdom, righteousness, and impartial advice, played a crucial role in the Mahabharata. When he was sent as an envoy by Duryodhana to invite Yudhishtira to the dice game, Vidura was placed in a difficult position. As a loyal and upright member of the Kuru dynasty, he was bound to carry out the king's orders, yet he was also deeply aware of the potential consequences of the dice game due to the animosity between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, as well as Shakuni's deceitful nature. Vidura tried to subtly warn Yudhishtira of the impending danger and the moral implications of gambling. He is known to have used indirect speech and allegorical advice to convey his concerns, as direct opposition to the royal command was not considered appropriate. Vidura emphasized the virtues of righteousness, the dangers of gambling, and the importance of adhering to dharma. He hinted at the disastrous outcomes that could result from participating in the dice game, especially one orchestrated by Shakuni, who was infamous for his cunning.

Despite Vidura's warnings and his clear discomfort with the situation, Yudhishtira, bound by his duty as a Kshatriya to accept challenges and his belief in destiny, decided to go to Hastinapura and participate in the game. Yudhishtira's decision to play the game, despite the warnings, highlights the complex interplay of dharma, fate, and personal choice that characterizes the epic.

The Integrity of the Game: The game was rigged from the start, with Shakuni, Duryodhana's uncle, using loaded dice to ensure Yudhishtira's loss. This raises questions about fairness, deceit in conflict, and the ethics of gambling. In some stories it is claimed that the dice is made from the bones of Shakuni's father who was killed by Bhishma and Shakuni is in Hastinapura to take revenge on the Kuru dynasty. And the dice obeys the mental command of Shakuni.

The Ethics of Gambling: Yudhishtira's decision to gamble, especially when he starts to stake his kingdom, brothers, and finally his wife, Draupadi, raises significant ethical questions about gambling itself. It highlights the dangers of addiction to gambling and how it can lead to the loss of moral compass and the destruction of one's life and the lives of those around them.

Duty and Responsibility: Yudhishtira, as a king and husband, had the duty to protect his subjects and his wife. His failure to do so, driven by the compulsion to continue gambling, brings into question the responsibilities of leaders to their dependents and the consequences of neglecting these responsibilities.

Draupadi's Questions

When Draupadi was humiliatingly dragged into the court by Dushasana after being staked and lost in the dice game, she posed several poignant and significant questions to the assembled elders, which underscored the profound moral and ethical dilemmas presented by the situation. These questions were not only a challenge to the actions of the Kauravas but also an indictment of the passive complicity of the elders present. Some of the critical questions and challenges she raised include:

On the Legality of Staking Her: Draupadi questioned whether Yudhishtira had the right to stake her in the game at all, given that he had already lost himself and all his possessions. Her question was about the very basis of her being wagered in the game: Could a man who was no longer free and had lost all his possessions, including himself, legally or morally stake someone else? Draupadi's unique marriage to all five Pandavas adds another layer of complexity. Her question implies that Yudhishtira alone didn't have the authority to stake her in the game without the consent of his brothers.

The Nature of Dharma: She challenged the assembly on the nature of dharma (righteousness or duty). Draupadi asked the court which dharma they were following by allowing her, a princess and the wife of their kings, to be treated in such a humiliating manner. Her question was a

critique of the ethical and moral decay evident in the silence and inaction of those who were considered pillars of dharma in the society.

Draupadi's Humiliation: Draupadi's disrobing in the Kaurava court is one of the most harrowing and criticized scenes in the Mahabharata. It highlights issues of women's honour, the duty of husbands and kin to protect their womenfolk, and the use of women as tools in male conflicts.

The Silence of the Elders: Draupadi directly challenged the elders and wise men of the court, including figures like Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura, asking them how they could remain silent and inactive in the face of such adharma (unrighteousness). Her question was a condemnation of their failure to uphold dharma and protect her dignity and rights.

The Concept of Victory: She questioned the very concept of victory in the context of the dice game. Was it truly a victory when it was achieved through deceit and the humiliation of others? This question challenged the moral integrity of the Kauravas' claim to victory and the righteousness of their actions.

The Rights and Protection of a Wife: She challenged the assembly on the protections afforded to a wife and a woman, questioning how she could be treated as property and subjected to such indignity. This raised broader questions about the status of women in society, their rights, and the duties of a husband and a family towards them. Draupadi questions whether Yudhishtira, as her husband, had the right to treat her as property. Does the sacrament of marriage include a man's ownership of a woman?

Draupadi's questions were not just a defence of her own position but a broader critique of the societal, legal, and moral failings of the time. Her challenge to the assembly was a call to action for the upholding of dharma and the protection of the vulnerable against injustice and humiliation. These questions and the ensuing silence from the elders highlight the complexity of dharma and the struggle between moral righteousness and societal norms.

Dharma (Righteousness) vs. Adharma (Unrighteousness): The episode forces characters and readers alike to contemplate the nature of dharma. Is it defined by strict adherence to rules and duties, or does it necessitate the consideration of context, intent, and the greater good?

Yudhishtira's adherence to the "rules" of the game, despite the harm it causes, is challenged by Draupadi's questions about righteousness and justice.

The Subtlety of Dharma

Bhishma's response to Draupadi's questions during the dice game incident in the Mahabharata, stating that "Dharma is very subtle" (Dharma is sukshma), encapsulates the profound complexity and ambiguity that often surround moral and ethical decision-making in human life. This statement is not just a remark on the situation at hand, but a reflection on the nature of dharma itself, which is a central concept in Hindu philosophy, representing righteousness, moral law, and duty. The subtlety of dharma, as Bhishma indicates, lies in its contextual nature and the fact that it cannot always be universally applied with a one-size-fits-all approach. Bhishma's statement reflects the inherent moral ambiguity in many situations, where the right course of action is not clear-cut. This ambiguity can lead to differing interpretations of what constitutes righteous behaviour, complicating the process of making ethical decisions.

Bhishma's acknowledgment of the subtlety of dharma was not just an evasion of Draupadi's questions but a reflection on the inherent difficulties in interpreting and applying dharma in complex and morally ambiguous situations. It highlights the importance of judgment, the context-specific nature of dharma, and the limitations of human understanding in comprehending divine or cosmic laws fully.

Contextual and Situational Nature: Dharma varies greatly depending on the context, circumstances, and roles of individuals involved. What is considered righteous in one situation may not be seen the same way in another. This complexity makes it difficult to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding and practicing dharma.

Interplay of Multiple Dharmas: Individuals often have to navigate conflicting duties (svadharma) – for example, a king's duty to uphold justice versus his duty to protect his subjects, or a warrior's duty to fight in a just cause versus his duty to his family. Bhishma's response to Draupadi reflects this conflict between his duty as an elder and protector of dharma and his loyalty to the throne of Hastinapura.

Personal Interpretation and Wisdom: Understanding and interpreting dharma requires wisdom, introspection, and often, a personal journey. It's not merely about following the letter of the law but understanding the spirit behind it. This subtlety means that individuals must constantly seek to align their actions with the highest principles of truth, righteousness, and welfare for all.

Personal Dharma vs. Universal Dharma: There is often a distinction between one's personal dharma (svadharma) and the universal dharma (sadharana dharma). Navigating the tension between these can be challenging, as individuals must balance personal obligations and moral integrity against broader societal and cosmic duties.

Evolution over Time: The understanding of dharma evolves over time, influenced by changing social norms, cultural practices, and philosophical interpretations. What was considered dharma in one era or context might change as society evolves. This evolution adds another layer of complexity to determining what actions are aligned with dharma in any given era.

Several layers add to the subtlety of dharma: Dharma varies according to the context, including the time (kala), the circumstances (desha), and the individuals involved (patra). What is considered righteous in one situation may not be seen as such in another. This makes it challenging to delineate a clear, unambiguous path of action that applies universally across all situations.

Interplay of Duties: Individuals often have multiple roles in society (e.g., as a king, a husband, a father, a warrior), and the dharma associated with each role can sometimes come into conflict. For Yudhishtira, his role as a king and protector of his wife conflicted with his role as a participant in the dice game, leading to a dilemma that was difficult to navigate.

The Consequences of Actions: The aftermath of the dice game illustrates the principle of karma, where every action has consequences. The event sets off a chain reaction leading to the Pandavas' exile and ultimately, the Kurukshetra war, emphasizing the long-lasting impact of actions driven by greed, deception, and moral failure.

Forgiveness and Redemption: The narrative arc that follows the dice game explores themes of forgiveness, penance, and redemption. It raises questions about the possibility of atonement for grave mistakes and the path to reconciliation and justice.

Divine Intervention: Did Krishna really intervene to protect Draupadi while Dussasana was trying to disrobe her? However, a careful study of the episode reveals something else. Vyasa's statement is unambiguous: it is Dharma who covers her and protects her. Who is Dharma? Is this not the other name of Vidura, younger brother of Pandu, who is also the one sanctioned by social mores (niyoga) to be called upon first if the elder brother is unable to procreate? Vidura is the incarnation of Dharma and it is he, who is the father of Yudhishtira and the father-in-law of Draupadi, who comes to her rescue. It is a later poet, intent on establishing Krishna as deity, and

writing at a time when the hero had been established in society as a godhead, who had embellished the original with the miracle of an unending stream of cloth protecting Draupadi's modesty.