

***Svadharmā, Śāntiparva, and Andhayug:* Exploring the Psycho-Social Terrains of Dharma within Ancient and Contemporary Indian Texts¹**

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Abstract: Philosophical and psychological thought in early India is primarily based on dharma. It is highly complex and encompasses several interrelated meanings that have generated discourse across a wide range of fields and schools of thought. In Buddhism, it denotes a deep metaphysical thought process. Simultaneously, within the broader context of Hinduism, it encompasses a wide range of thought, including the details of everyday life, ritual action, an emphasis on one's duty, and even psychological problems that aid understanding and inspire human action. As a social and ethical principle, dharma embodies a moral order that incorporates both natural and positive law and delineates the duties and responsibilities associated with individual societal roles. Therefore, even as its modern implications equate it to religion, it was much more than that in its genesis. The objective of the paper is to understand the changing contours of one aspect of dharma — *svadharmā* — as it appears in various ancient texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Śāntiparva*, and to connect its import to the implications of dharma in the contemporary Hindi play *Andhayug*. This, in turn, may require us to examine the interconnection of this term with yet two other facets of dharma, *Āpaddharma* and *Mokṣadharmā*. This research examines the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Śāntiparva* of the *Mahābhārata*, and Dharmavira Bharti's play *Andhāyuga*. It seeks to explore the different hues of dharma — its underlying philosophies, changing interpretations, applications, and inferences in the context of society and psychology.

Keywords: Indian psychology, *dharma*, moral conflict, ethical decision-making, *Bhagavad Gītā*

Historical Location of the Texts

An examination of dharma in ancient and contemporary texts necessitates its placement within a spatial and temporal framework. The *Mahābhārata* provides this framework, within which the *Śāntiparva* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* are situated. The *Mahābhārata* is traditionally estimated to comprise 100,000 verses. The text is highly diverse due to manuscript variations and because the narrative encompasses numerous sub-narratives that are densely interwoven with theological discussions, ritual lore, legal discourse, and philosophical, cosmological, and astronomical teachings. Its famous proclamation encapsulates this interdisciplinary nature: "What is here may be found elsewhere. [Yet,] what is not here is nowhere to be found". It spans a wide range of compilation time from the 4th century BCE to the 4th century CE. There is also an acknowledgement that the story of the feud between the two sets of cousins of the Kuru clan may be a folktale from a much earlier period, which we refer to as the Later Vedic period.

We focus on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, a part of *Bhīṣmaparva* that unfolds as a long philosophical dialogue between the Pāṇḍava warrior Arjuna and his charioteer and cousin, Kṛṣṇa. There is some debate on its date. While some historians question whether the *Bhagavad Gītā* was a later interpolation, many agree it was composed between the 2nd century BCE and the 3rd century CE. Historically, this period in northern India was marked by intense intellectual ferment, and the dialogic exchange between Arjuna and Lord Kṛṣṇa echoes the prevailing intellectual climate. The same may be said of the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Śāntiparva*, a section that stands out in the vastness of the epic. The *Śāntiparva* emerges from a similar historical milieu and functions as the epic's didactic and normative core, with a philosophical orientation closely aligned with that of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Both texts engage questions of dharma through themes of awareness and psychological reflection. In contrast, *Andhāyuga* is a modern text, written in 1953 against the backdrop of the Second World War and the Partition of India, drawing on the *Mahābhārata* as a metaphor to explore shifting concepts of dharma. Collectively, these

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texts reflect not only their socio-historical contexts but also the psychological conditions of their respective periods.

The Present Study

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical-analytical design grounded in textual interpretation and interdisciplinary hermeneutics. The analysis is based on a comparative and interpretive examination of classical and modern Indian texts to trace how *svadharma* is conceptualised, contested, and psychologically negotiated across ancient and modern texts, and to examine how violence, moral agency, emotional distress, and self-regulation are framed within these narratives.

Primary texts were accessed through standard critical editions and authoritative translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata*, particularly the *Śāntiparva*, as well as Dharamvir Bharati's modern Hindi play *Andhāyug*. Secondary scholarly literature was sourced through academic databases including JSTOR, Project MUSE, Google Scholar, and university library catalogues. Journals focusing on Indian philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and literary criticism were prioritised. Search terms included combinations of: *svadharma*, *āpaddharma*, *mokṣadharma*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and psychology, *Mahābhārata* ethics, dharma and violence, Indian moral psychology, *Andhāyug* trauma, and dharma and masculinity.

Texts and articles were included if they (a) directly engaged with the concepts of dharma, *svadharma*, or moral agency in Indian textual traditions, (b) provided philosophical, psychological, or ethical interpretations relevant to the research question, or (c) examined the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śāntiparva*, or *Andhāyug* in relation to human suffering, moral conflict, or psychological distress. Non-peer-reviewed commentaries and devotional interpretations without analytical grounding were excluded.

The Findings

The theoretical analysis yielded four central thematic findings. First, across the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śāntiparva*, and *Andhāyug*, *svadharma* emerges not as a fixed, externally imposed duty but as a dynamic construct negotiated between social roles, ethical responsibility, and

psychological disposition (*svabhāva*). Second, violence is consistently framed as morally permissible only under constrained conditions, accompanied by intense psychological burden, guilt, and the need for cognitive or ethical justification. Third, both Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira exhibit profound emotional distress that is acknowledged and addressed within the texts, suggesting an implicit recognition of psychological vulnerability rather than its dismissal as weakness. Finally, *Andhāyug* presents a radical breakdown of *svadharma*, where unresolved trauma and grief distort moral reasoning and transform dharma into a mechanism for legitimising violence. Together, these findings highlight the enduring relevance of dharma as a psychological and ethical framework rather than a rigid social code.

Variants of Dharma

Svadharma

Svadharma is often understood as the duty associated with one's gender, varṇa, or āśrama, with varying implications. As Fitzgerald (2004) notes, "though ancient Indian *karman* is highly individualistic, one's *svadharma* is not individual or personal: it varies according to one's sex, varṇa, and āśrama." Similarly, Della Santina (1989) observes that a characteristic of Hinduism is the social duties of individuals as determined by their position within the varṇa structure.

From this perspective, *svadharma* in early India aligned with station duties; for instance, *kṣātra dharma* defines the responsibilities of the Kṣatriyas, particularly rulers. However, the import of *svadharma* extended to other varṇas and *jātis* too, where a shared sense of identity and prescribed norms existed. An example appears in the Ādiparva: when Hidimbā appeals to Kuntī, declaring her love for Bhīma, she has forsaken her companions, her *svadharma*, and her *svajanam*—her kin. In doing so, she acknowledges having transgressed the dharma of her social group to embrace a love that crossed normative and social boundaries.

This interpretation, however, has been challenged. Das (1932) and Vanita (2022) maintain that *svadharma* should not be narrowly interpreted through the lenses of caste or gender but rather understood in terms of individual tendencies. Such readings foreground the connection between *svadharma* and *svabhāva*, thereby

opening the psychological dimensions of interpreting *svadharma*. The particular traits render *svadharma* unique to each person, even among those who share the same external social identity. So, the Pāṇḍavas, who were all male Kṣatriyas and supposedly the followers of kṣātradharmā, exhibited distinct characteristics and inclinations. These divergences suggest that *svadharma* may involve ongoing tensions between social expectations and psychological orientation, a theme that will be examined further in the subsequent analysis.

Āpaddharma

Āpaddharma refers to exceptional norms applicable in times of crisis. The phrase *vipatigrasta kālaḥ āpadkālaḥ* (Mbh.XII.7.5-9)², — “A time seized by misfortune is a time of distress”—indicates the moments of calamity, danger, or upheaval and necessitate a re-evaluation of dharma. Ancient lawgivers acknowledged the need for flexibility in such exigent situations and, therefore, sanctioned alternative codes of conduct under the rubric of *āpaddharma*. Although they appeared to disregard the fundamental notion of dharma, these actions were not deemed *adharmā* in such contexts. The notion of *āpaddharma* allowed individuals to depart from *svadharma*—i.e., their personal or caste duty—temporarily without compromising varṇa status, sculpting it as a context-sensitive rather than an inflexible concept. However, this raises a critical question: Can these modifications be unlimited? At what point does an ethical deviation become an abuse of its elasticity? If a deviation from normative dharma is too radical, what justifies its legitimacy as dharma at all? Is there an element of ethics involved even in the digression from the normative dharma? Moreover, the discussions of ethics, such as *āpaddharma*, embedded within a Parva (book or section) that primarily addresses political strategy and statecraft, is a juxtaposition. It suggests an underlying engagement between moral philosophy, political pragmatism, and the psychological readiness required to act against one's habitual dispositions or *svabhāva* under conditions of crisis.

Mokṣadharmā

Mokṣa signifies release from the bondage (*bandha*) of continual embodied existence. Indian philosophical systems generally agree that liberation is attained through an intense effort of consciousness—a withdrawal of

awareness of the individual soul, understood as a reflection of the Supreme Soul, from external influences. The attainment of higher consciousness and liberation emerges as a theme that touches all three texts, either tangentially or overtly. This also brings the discussion closer to the cosmic dimension of dharma. Even as *mokṣa* denotes total liberation in the afterlife, preparation for it begins by tapping into the inner forces that lead to higher consciousness in the current life. Hence, *Mokṣadharmā* refers to following a path and practice that brings about mental discipline and self-awareness. These themes are addressed in both the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Śāntiparva* section of the *Mahābhārata*. Can *Mokṣadharmā* assist in Self-Actualisation? Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs culminates in self-actualisation and self-transcendence, where individuals fulfil their highest potential by pursuing actions that reflect their true nature. We must investigate how the varied readings of dharma in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Śāntiparva* can be understood as forerunners of this idea, advising individuals to live in accordance with their essential temperament and authentic self.

Discussion

Svadharma and the Bhagavad-Gītā

The *Bhagavad Gītā* has a global readership, owing to its capacity to address both worldly and transcendent dimensions of human anxiety. Alongside its engagement with complex philosophical and religious questions, the text seeks to offer responses that bear upon psychological well-being. This study examines how the authors of the *Bhagavad Gītā* endeavoured to reconcile the moral ideals of dharma with realistic concerns, addressing contemporary social issues concerning existence and ethics, and simultaneously evolving strategies that demand the intellectual acknowledgement of ideas often held to be mutually exclusive. This raises the question of whether the text re-evaluated the notion of *svadharma*.

Context of the Dialogue

The dialogue in the *Bhagavad Gītā* opens with Arjuna laying down his weapons upon seeing his relatives arrayed against him and concludes with his decision to take them up again, signalling both the resumption of the *Mahābhārata* narrative and the beginning of war. The conflict arose from the Kauravas' refusal to grant the Pāṇḍavas their due share of the kingdom, leaving war,

from the latter's perspective, as the only remaining course of action. Although the *Pāṇḍavas* were clearly aggrieved, redress entailed large-scale damage, including the destruction of the entire family. This moral burden fell primarily upon Arjuna. His dilemma was both profound and ethically grounded, rooted in a genuine conflict between duty and compassion. From the standpoint of conventional dharma, Arjuna's hesitation appeared justified. Yet, in the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa advances an ethical argument that departs from standard prescriptions of duty and seeks to release Arjuna from paralysing guilt.

Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's maternal cousin and charioteer (*sārathi*), possibly owing to his well-known divine prowess, promised not to fight the war, yet retained the right to counsel the *Pāṇḍavas* when necessary. Kṛṣṇa was predominantly close to Arjuna, and their association was multi-layered—they were cousins, friends, brothers-in-law after he had incited Arjuna to abduct and marry his sister, Subhadrā, and most importantly, they were strategic collaborators. Within the *Bhagavad Gītā*, this relationship evolves into one of spiritual mentorship.

Just before the battle was to commence, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa surveyed the Kaurava army amid the blare of drums, cymbals, and conches. Suddenly, at the sight of his own kinsmen and revered teachers standing as enemies, Arjuna lost the will to fight. The moral dilemma that had once troubled Yudhiṣṭhira now consumed Arjuna: could he truly wage war against his own family? Overcome with sorrow and doubt, Arjuna was shaken—his body trembled, his mind reeled, and he cast aside his formidable bow. In a moment of emotional turmoil, he declared, “I will not fight” (Buitenen, 1981). Arjuna's paralysis on the battlefield lends itself to interpretation as a manifestation of neurotic anxiety arising from suppressed intrapsychic conflict, conceptualised as tension between ego and superego.

For Kṛṣṇa, the situation constituted a critical moment. Victory depended on everyone fulfilling their role (or performing their *svadharma*), and the most skilled among them could not afford to retreat from battle. This was an existentialist crisis. Arjuna was wavering from his *svadharma*—the dharma of a Kṣatriya ruler, responsible for protecting his people's interests and eradicating evil in society. Kṛṣṇa, though unable to fight himself, recognised the urgency of intervening as Arjuna needed immediate

guidance and reassurance. The dialogic exchange became particularly moving because Arjuna bared his vulnerable self without concern for the implications for his masculinity (Dhillon, 2023). It is worth noting that the text's compilers were willing to recognise human fragility and address it. Arjuna was permitted to air his deepest worries and uneasiness at the unavoidable loss.

Recognising the urgency of Arjuna's paralysis, Kṛṣṇa engages him in sustained dialogue aimed at restoring his capacity for action. Through this exchange, Arjuna articulates the dual nature of his distress, encompassing both psychological anguish and moral conflict. He expresses concern over the inevitable grief and devastation the war would entail, irrespective of its outcome, and questions the value of a victory achieved at the cost of immense suffering.

Lord Kṛṣṇa addressed the situation as a modern-day therapist would. He knew that he had to be swift in counselling Arjuna so that the latter would pick up arms. On being prodded by Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna revealed the dual nature of his torment, which was both psychological and moral in nature.

Arjuna contended with the moral consequences of the war, in relation to dharma, particularly the tension surrounding his *svadharma* and real responsibility. He was torn between fighting to uphold his role as a Kṣatriya and honouring familial responsibilities, especially when many of his relatives stood against him, destined to perish in battle. Kṛṣṇa's counsel began with confronting the issue of death. “The wise do not grieve for the dead,” he declared³ (Telang, 1998). The soul, Kṛṣṇa explains, is eternal and does not perish—a position that alludes to the doctrine of metempsychosis. Further, he introduces the concepts of *kṣara* and *akṣara*—the perishable and the imperishable. He explained that the soul belongs to the realm of *akṣara*, the indestructible. Only the body perishes; the soul merely transitions, much like changing garments. This reasoning may be read as an attempt to soothe Arjuna's agitated psyche.

Drawing on classical Upaniṣadic thought, Kṛṣṇa invoked the ideas of karma and the transmigration of the soul. The real challenge, however, was to reconcile this spiritual framework with the concept of a “Just War.” Kṛṣṇa addressed this by urging Arjuna to adhere to his varna-based duty (*svadharma*)—that is, the obligations of

his caste and station. “It is better to fail in one's own duty than to succeed in another's” (XVIII.47), Kṛṣṇa emphasised. At the same time, he was not averse to explaining the situation in terms of the concept of *svabhāva*.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* does not appear to interpret *svadharma* solely within the framework of *varṇadharma* as an objectively ordained cosmic or moral order, nor merely as a social code, as understood by scholars such as Thapar⁴ (2009) and Fitzgerald (2004). As suggested above, the idea has been contested. According to Sinha (1988), it does not appear that the moral value—whether 'rightness' or 'wrongness'—of an action is determined by its alignment or misalignment with the externally validated norms of *varṇa*-based duty. Nor is 'goodness' an inherent attribute of the action itself, considered in isolation within the *varṇa* model. The contention was that the action that expressed *svadharma* was the intentional positioning of the actor, located in the subjective structure of his *svabhāva*—that is, in the innate disposition and nature. In this view, it is this internal orientation, not external conventionality or outcome, that confers moral consequence to action in the *Gītā*'s ethical vision.

While Lord Kṛṣṇa affirmed that the *varṇa* system was his creation, the *Bhagavad Gītā* presents *varṇadharma* primarily in terms of *svadharma*, grounded in one's inner *svabhāva*—one's inherent nature or disposition. Apart from reiterating the station duty, the *Gītā* emphasises internal qualities and innate tendencies that shape one's rightful path. This interpretation prompts one to question *svadharma* as defined solely by birth and external observance. Instead, it offers a vision of dharma rooted in both inner disposition and the inherited social status.

A good example is this verse. 'Calmness, restraining, austerity, purity, forgiving, sincerity, knowledge, discernment, faith are *Brāhmaṇa* action born of *svabhāva* (innate nature). Heroism, majesty, firmness, skill, not fleeing in battle, generosity, and lordly spirit are Kṣatriya actions born of *svabhāva* (BG, XVIII. 30-36). Similarly, the actions of Vaiśyas as well as Śūdras acquire a dharma character, not on account of conformity to external injunctions, but on account of their intrinsic character derived from *svabhāva*, i.e., their inherent nature. It is this inner disposition, rather than adherence to outward injunctions, that lends their duties moral and spiritual

significance. The verse is a fine example of an amalgamation of the societal implications with an understanding of human dispositions. Therefore, Arjuna was urged to act in accordance with his *svabhāva* and *svadharma*. Kṛṣṇa thus attempted to reassure that by picking up arms and fighting his cousins, he would not incur sin or error.

Some psychologists draw a parallel between Kṛṣṇa's persuasive arguments and concrete psychological therapies. Sharma (2014) finds a correspondence between Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and the dialogue between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He argues that, as CBT aims to foster positive transformations in a patient's thought patterns and interpretations of events, Lord Kṛṣṇa does not seek to alter the external reality of the impending war. Instead, he works to reshape Arjuna's perception of the conflict and its underlying purpose. Building on this, Phogat et al. (2020) extend the comparison by linking the *Gītā* to humanistic-existential therapy. They note that, like the humanistic and existential approaches' focus on self-awareness and personal meaning as pathways to psychological well-being, the *Gītā* emphasises self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) as the route to inner peace and spiritual fulfilment. Kṛṣṇa expounded on the need to be free of the bondage of karma. He said that the correct action, *niṣkāma*, should not be attached to the consequences or outcomes. *Svadharma* was to be conducted in a detached commitment based on *niṣkāma-karma*. Through this concept, Kṛṣṇa attempted to bridge the gap between engagement in worldly action, including actions that may involve violence, and the moral ideals upheld by renunciatory traditions. Non-attachment should not be mistaken for *akarma*, or complete inaction. Action must be undertaken, but with self-discipline. As Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna: “Abandon your inaction and engage in worldly action. Remain steadfast in discipline, and view success and failure with equal regard” (BG.II.47–49). This attitude of equanimity is referred to as yoga because it is the disciplined intellect, rather than the act itself, that holds the greater significance.

Upon closer analysis, it may be observed that *niṣkāma-karma* serves as a form of moral persuasion intended to convince Arjuna to join the battle through rational argument. While some scholars note that Kṛṣṇa's reasoning blends logic with emotional appeal, the overall tone suggests a rational justification for moral action. As

such, it is presented as a philosophical approach to ethical conduct. However, the principle of *niṣkāma-karma*—action free from emotional attachment—can only be fully understood in relation to its ultimate aim: *mokṣa*. *Mokṣa* denotes the liberation of the empirical self from all forms of bondage, culminating in the self's consciousness as pure *atman*. No wonder, the *Gītā*'s ideal individual is the *sthita-prajña* or *guṇatīta*, whose essential characteristics are detachment, inner balance (*samatva*), and untiring calm, even while remaining actively involved in the world with concentration and commitment. This framework invites consideration of whether *niṣkāma-karma* can be examined from a psychological standpoint.

Niṣkāma-karma, with its emphasis on non-attachment to consequences and self-controlled action, resonates with modern psychological understandings, particularly in motivation, emotion regulation, cognitive-behavioural theory, and mindfulness. The concept also aligns with what psychology describes as 'intrinsic motivation'—a drive towards activity-oriented action that does not seek external rewards. This can be contrasted with 'extrinsic motivation', where action hinges on the accrual of rewards such as success, praise, or material gain. *Niṣkāma-karma*, then, may be understood as a mode of action promoted by 'intrinsic motivation'.

Moreover, Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna to act without being emotionally invested in the outcomes (success or failure) mirrors strategies of emotional regulation in psychology. Detachment (*vairagya*) can be understood as a form of cognitive distancing—a technique for managing stress and reducing emotional reactivity. Practising such detachment can reduce performance anxiety, rumination, and depression associated with failure, and ego-inflation associated with success. It encourages an individual towards 'mindfulness', which entails full engagement with the present without concern for the outcome.

Niṣkāma-karma, when linked to the idea of *mokṣa*, implies a decentring of the ego—seeing the self not as the doer but as an instrument or witness (*sākṣhī*). The occasion arose when Arjuna witnessed Kṛṣṇa's Virāṭa Viśvarūpa. The issue becomes clearer when we observe a change in their dialogic exchange. Kṛṣṇa had tried his best to explain things to Arjuna using the device of pragmatic rationality, which would have, in the normal course, soothed a troubled Arjuna and helped him overcome a

sense of guilt. But that had not happened. The theological arguments were not persuasive enough, and Arjuna, in a bid to convince himself of the Lord's words, said, 'Show your inexhaustible form to me' (BG.XI.1-10). Kṛṣṇa then gradually unveiled his divine form, allowing Arjuna to witness his cosmic form. Arjuna saw Kṛṣṇa expanding infinitely in all directions, a vision that filled him with awe and terror. He saw a vivid scene of battle where his enemies were being annihilated, and recognised Kṛṣṇa in his fearsome Kāla (Time) form—the destroyer of all beings. Overwhelmed and shaken, Arjuna no longer saw him as a friend or relative, but as the Supreme Lord. Thereafter, Arjuna pleaded, "Show me once again your familiar form" (XI.46). The absolute scale of this image restructured Arjuna's understanding of the battle and his *svadharma*; he now understood that he was merely an instrument within a larger, prearranged cosmic plan to which he had already given in. All his doubts about Lord Kṛṣṇa vanished. Suddenly, all that Kṛṣṇa had explained to him earlier made sense. He felt equipped to follow his *svadharma* and discharge his duty against the Kauravas, and he picked up the arms. Concepts of *svadharma* and *niṣkāma* karma acquired a new layer of understanding: the layer of *bhakti*, or devotion, that would lead Arjuna to his ultimate emancipation in this world and hereafter. Arjuna was filled with a newfound confidence, allowing him to enter the battle guilt-free. After all, the self was no longer a doer; it was just an instrument of action in a larger cosmic plan.

Ultimately, Arjuna's cure lay in his receptivity to Lord Kṛṣṇa's word, which was slow but came at last. From a therapeutic perspective, an alliance between the counsellor and client is essential. The therapeutic alliance, a critical component of successful therapy outcomes (Thomas, Werner-Wilson, & Murphy, 2005), is the degree to which a client and therapist engage in a cooperative, goal-oriented relationship and form an emotional connection. The description befits Lord Kṛṣṇa's and Arjuna's emotive exchange and its outcome.

Svadharma and the Śāntiparva

The end of the Great War saw tremendous devastation impacting those left behind materially, socially and psychologically. *Śāntiparva* of the *Mahābhārata* presents a profound psychological exploration, particularly in its treatment of dharma, justice, and human suffering. It

examines the emotional toll of war, the pain of loss, and the heavy responsibilities of leadership, emphasising the essential roles of truth, compassion, and self-awareness in coping with life's complexities, and it shares with the *Bhagavad Gītā* an analysis of core existential issues. The *Śāntiparva* encourages introspection and self-awareness, and underscores the significance of fulfilling one's dharma (duty) and the profound psychological burden that accompanies any failure to do so.

In literary terms, the *Śāntiparva*, or the Book of Peace, recounts the events following the Kurukṣetra battle. A pervasive atmosphere of grief and desolation had settled over the Kuru kingdom. The text, which is essentially a dialogic exchange between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma Pitāmāh, tells the story of persuading the reluctant would-be king, Yudhiṣṭhira, to follow his *svadharma* and ascend the throne. The text can be broadly divided into three subsections: a) *Rājadharmaparva*, texts dealing with lessons on governance; b) *Āpaddharmaparva*, an anthology of texts dealing with the question of how requirements of dharma are to be regarded or performed or not when circumstances impede their proper performance; and c) *Mokṣadharmaparva*, an anthology of texts that deals with ultimate liberation or *mokṣa*, a newer kind of dharma based on subtle knowledge, compared to one based on Vedic *karmakāṇḍa*. The sections on *Rājadharmaparva* and *Āpaddharma*, in a sense, overlap and primarily address the consciousness of politics and issues from the perspective of a ruler. *Mokṣadharmaparva* is a logical sequel to the king's quest for higher consciousness, which may extend beyond his political being. All three sections broadly deal with the *svadharma* of the ruler.

Ethical Idealism and Statecraft

The exhibition of valour and the constant use of violence are repeatedly endorsed as essential aspects of *kṣatriya svadharma* in the epic. However, as in the *Bhagavadgītā*, the issue of the unbridled use of violence and its impact on the inner self is also addressed here. As mentioned above, the protagonists in this story are Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma. Through the character of Yudhiṣṭhira, the text portrays the inner turmoil that arises when personal desires clash with moral responsibilities, highlighting the profound struggle of remaining true to one's ethical path amid great personal suffering. Yudhiṣṭhira had expressed his utter dislike for violence early in the epic. But the pain became acute after a colossal loss of lives in the battle. He took the blame for

the blood loss and the consequent disorder and expressed a desire to renounce. In the opening passages of the Parva, Yudhiṣṭhira voices intense anger toward what he perceives as *kṣatradharma*, exclaiming, "Damn, the *kṣtra* way! Damn, the power of the mighty chest! Damn, the unforgiving stubbornness that brought us to this disaster! Good are the tolerance, self-control, sincerity, harmonious disposition, unselfishness, harmlessness and truthful speech that are the constant traits of those who dwell in the forest..." (Mbh.XII.7.5-9). Expounding further on violence, he stated, "What is attractive in war? It is the evil Law of the Kṣatriyas . . . Kṣatriyas kill Kṣatriyas, fish live on fish, dog kills dog." (Mbh.V.70,46-49) Yudhiṣṭhira openly stated, "There is no dharma more wicked than the dharma of Kṣatriyas. In marching forth—*abhiyāne*—and in battle, the king kills many people. (Mbh. XII.98.1)"

Yudhiṣṭhira did not receive affirmation for his moral hesitation. Instead of concurring with his doubts, Bhīṣma told him that the kingdom was a tremendous organisation that was difficult to support for an unsophisticated man. 'It is the worst scene of slaughter, and a tender-hearted man cannot bear it. . . . Even when the king suffers setbacks while protecting his subjects, he must perform (Mbh.X II.20-25). He was reminded that he was the foremost man of the state and that the king's masculinity was defined by his fearlessness and courage. Consequently, Yudhiṣṭhira's attempt to reframe or evade the pain inherent in his role by redefining *svadharma* proved unsuccessful. He was instructed to adhere to the *svadharma* of rulership rather than contemplate renunciation.

However, Bhīṣma Pitāmāh did not remain completely unaffected by Yudhiṣṭhira's inner turmoil. He was aware that Yudhiṣṭhira blamed himself for the great destruction and for the half-truth he had spoken about Ashwatthama to remove Droṇācaraya from the battle scene. Moreover, Yudhiṣṭhira had only recently discovered that Karṇa was the Pāṇḍavas' eldest brother, and that at one point, he had encouraged Arjuna to kill him. All this had disturbed Yudhiṣṭhira considerably. Gauging Yudhiṣṭhira's mental state, Bhīṣma now worked towards assuaging his soul and helping him overcome a sense of guilt by concurring with some of Yudhiṣṭhira's ideas of ethical kingship, while also showing him a way to achieve *mokṣa*. The following two subsections, *Āpaddharmaparva* and *Mokṣadharmaparva*, provide a nuanced examination of the political, moral, and psychological dimensions of *svadharma* as they emerge in

Bhīṣma Pitāmāh's response to Yudhiṣṭhira's relentless questioning of its character.

When asked how a king should behave in times of distress, Bhīṣma provided several escape clauses in the guise of *āpaddharma* that appeared to contradict dharma to Yudhiṣṭhira. However, the issue of *āpaddharma* appearing as *adharma* did not leave Yudhiṣṭhira's mind; on the other hand, it only became consolidated after Bhīṣma narrated some *upākhyānas*. One such instance was the story of Sage Viśvamitra, who consumed dog meat, which was prohibited to brahmins, to satiate himself during an intense famine (Mbh. XII.139). Then he determined to make an expiation. What was Yudhiṣṭhira's reaction? He was upset, and he wondered aloud what had happened to the *svadharma* of a rishi. Moreover, the act seemed to have Bhīṣma's approval under the Law of Distress, which further bothered Yudhiṣṭhira. In passage XII.140, Yudhiṣṭhira makes his disapproval explicit, questioning how a learned man could distance himself from dharma and engage in conduct that contradicted the scriptures. The concept of *āpaddharma* appeared unacceptable to Yudhiṣṭhira.

However, the story can also be interpreted in different ways. Bhīṣma, recognising Yudhiṣṭhira's inner turmoil and the surrounding chaos, sought to ease his guilt by recounting ancient tales in which even sages had faltered. So, if sages did something unusual and veered away from their prescribed *svadharma*, a king surely had the right to use the escape clause. By this time, Bhīṣma must have read Yudhiṣṭhira's mind and begins to mull over issues of ethical consciousness with seriousness to salvage Yudhiṣṭhira's troubled soul.

Subsequently, when Yudhiṣṭhira asked probing questions, Bhīṣma's response was much measured and somewhat in line with Yudhiṣṭhira's frame of ethical thinking. "What is the foundation upon which evil deeds rest?" Bhīṣma's answer, in turn, outlined the central theme that Greed (*lobha*) is presented as the root of all negative qualities in verses XII.152.3–10. Alongside greed, Bhīṣma also cautions against ignorance (*ajñānata*) and subsequently extols the virtue of self-restraint (*dama*). With his reflections on self-control and truth, the *Āpaddharmaparva* gradually transitions into the *Mokṣadharmaparva*, moving towards a deeper philosophical consciousness befitting a man seeking self-awareness.

Within this progression, Yudhiṣṭhira's sustained questioning leads the patriarch to reconsider his earlier articulation of Kṣatriya *svadharma*. Despite his success in eliciting a more ethical answer from Bhīṣma, the pain he had experienced did not leave Yudhiṣṭhira. In the passage XII.168, he confessed to Bhīṣma, "I am burning in grief at my kingdom having been devastated." Bhīṣma responded with empathy: "Ah, that pain" (XII.168.7).

Yudhiṣṭhira was an emotional man. Interestingly, the epic did not regard his emotions as a mark of weakness. His vulnerabilities are acknowledged, and the need to address them is also recognised. In a world where a teary-eyed man might be dismissed as effeminate, Bhīṣma instead recognised Yudhiṣṭhira's sorrow as a profound expression of guilt and deep emotional anguish. Left unchecked, these feelings could obstruct his capacity to govern. Bhīṣma, therefore, offered a path out of this emotional impasse.

As Fitzgerald (2015) suggests, Bhīṣma advised Yudhiṣṭhira to cultivate a perspective that allowed him to step back from his grief and regard it with detachment, not to dwell on suffering but to accept it as inevitable. The term *buddhi* is frequently used in the *Mokṣadharmaparva* to refer to the enduring faculty of the mind that makes intellectual decisions, holds firm resolves. This exercise of *buddhi* (wisdom) was not a sermon meant for introspective moral deduction. Instead, it served as a pragmatic tool for immediate psychological relief, while also opening a path to self-actualisation. However, it had the critical mass to pave the way for spiritual transformation, an emancipation from the cycles of *karma*, rebirth, and suffering. This type of distancing is akin to 'cognitive distancing', a technique employed to reduce emotional responses and cope with stress.

Yudhiṣṭhira's struggle appeared to stem from his conflicting identities – one rooted in his Kṣatriya status and warrior behaviour (*svadharma*), and the other in his innate nature (*svabhāva*) that inclined him toward seeking mechanisms to acquire higher consciousness related to the subtle self. It was Yudhiṣṭhira's moral hesitation, discomfort with the events of the war, and desire to renounce the kingdom to live as a forest-dwelling sage that led some to label him a Brāhmaṇa rather than a Kṣatriya. Through numerous *upākhyānas*, Bhīṣma ultimately persuaded Yudhiṣṭhira to fulfil his *svadharma*.

as a ruler by ascending the throne. At the same time, he urged him to cultivate the detachment (*vairāgya*) of an ascetic, which would soothe his troubled soul. What emerges, then, is a resolution that harmonises the performance of one's social duty (*svadharma*) with an inner calling (*svabhāva*) toward self-emancipation.

Svadharma in Andhāyuga: Reading Aśwatthāma's Interpretation of Dharma

In Dharamvir Bharati's seminal Hindi play *Andhāyuga* (translated as *The Age of Blindness*), Aśwatthāma is portrayed as a tragic and psychologically tormented character. His interpretation of dharma is central to the play's moral conflict. Bharati uses Aśwatthāma to explore the disintegration of ethical boundaries in the aftermath of the *Mahābhārata* war and, by extension, to examine what happened to the world and to India after the Second World War and the Partition of India. Aśwatthāma's understanding of dharma here is marked by complexity, tragedy, and profound distortion, shaped by grief, fury, and a desire for vengeance. His actions represent a stark departure from the traditional understanding of *svadharma*, exposing profound moral ambiguity and a turbulent struggle between the demands of righteous duty and the impulses of personal revenge.

Location of Aśwatthāma within the Mahābhārata

Aśwatthāma in the *Mahābhārata* was the brave son of Droṇāchārya, who fought on the side of the Kauravas in the Great Kurukshetra War. Kṛṣṇa understood that Droṇa had to be removed from the scene if the Pāṇḍavas had to win. He convinced Yudhiṣṭhira to persuade Droṇa that his son Aśwatthāma had died when, in reality, only an elephant by that name had been killed. When the news reached Droṇa that Aśwatthāma had been killed, he chose to ask Yudhiṣṭhira to confirm it, as he trusted the latter completely. Yudhiṣṭhira did that, but uttered under his breath that it could be an elephant. (This has often been cited as Yudhiṣṭhira's half-truth on Aśwatthāma). Droṇa suddenly stopped fighting and became prey to Driṣṭadyuma's arrows. The *Mahābhārata* states that, upon learning of the Pāṇḍavas' deception, Aśwatthāma was shattered. The shock was not only in his father's death but also in the manner of it: through a moral compromise by even the most righteous one (Yudhiṣṭhira) and the violation of Kṣātradharmā. His pain was poignant. Two

days later, when Duryodhana was killed, again through deception, Aśwatthāma swore to avenge his father's and Duryodhana's deaths by destroying the entire Pāṇḍava clan at night, even though the norm prohibited entering the enemy camp at night. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī were not present, but their sons and other family members, including Uttara, who was to bear the scion of the family, were subjected to his furious attack, including the one by the *bharmāstras*. Kṛṣṇa could barely save Uttara's child and cursed Aśwatthāma with both immorality and decay. "You will roam the earth in misery, without companionship, without rest, suffering from wounds that will never heal." The jewel that Aśwatthāma had carried on his forehead was removed, and he became a symbol of unending remorse and decay. Overall, he emerged as a grief-stricken character unable to bear the torment of his loss that had pushed him to avenge his dear one's death. Somehow, this appears comprehensible within the epic's larger emotional framework.

Aśwatthāma in Andhāyuga

Aśwatthāma gains another powerful layer in *Andhāyuga*. Bharati's work is a commentary on moral degeneration and lack of ethical conscientiousness. The character of Aśwatthāma plays this out well. His personal grief assumes the proportion of an existential void. Aśwatthāma is not just the tragic figure of the epic; he stands as a melancholic representation of an era consumed by its own decadence. Compared to Aśwatthāma in the *Mahābhārata*, Bharati's Aśwatthāma emphasises a sense of revenge bordering on cosmic destruction. His decision to unleash the *Brahmāstra* is more than an act of destruction—it is apocalyptic, a deliberate attempt to obliterate all future possibilities, even the faintest glimmer of hope. In the process, the readers are introduced to his intense, irreconcilable psychological struggle, not known in the epic version.

On being questioned by Kripāchārya in the play why he chose to kill members in the Pāṇḍava camp, he responded, "I was blind with rage, I wanted to annihilate the future which has been prophesied..." At one point in the play, he encounters Sañjaya, who is reporting the war scene to a blind Dhṛtarāshtra. Aśwatthāma is angry with Sañjaya, feeling that the latter chose to side with the Pāṇḍavas even in the account of the war. Kripāchārya reminds him that Sañjaya was neutral, not taking sides,

and that Aśwatthāma, a true soldier, must spare him. Aśwatthāma's response is classic; he says, "Neutral, the word neutral is meaningless. I am no soldier. I am a beast, a wild, ferocious beast. Whoever is not with me is against me!" He went on to say, "I don't think it is a sin to kill. I am now obsessed with killing; I long to break the neck of anyone I meet. Tell me what I should do. Tell me" (p.56). At another point, he accuses the Pāṇḍavas of killing his father and Duryodhana through *adharma* (which is a reference to deception here). Hence, he announced that now his dharma was to kill. He justifies his killing of Driṣṭadyumna, the Pāṇḍavas' son and directing *Brahmāstra* in Uttara's direction. In Bhārati's *Andhāyug*, Aśwatthāma's conduct marks a significant shift in the understanding of *svadharma*, a transgression for which Kṛṣṇa ultimately holds him accountable.

Clearly, in *Anadhayug*, Aśwatthāma is shown as a frenzied individual who has lost his sense of purpose. The author intended to cast him as an embodiment of Post-War/post-Partition trauma. He becomes a tormented survivor of a ruined era, condemned to wander in agony, shunned by both divine and human realms. His story clearly conveys the futility of war and the perversion of *adharma*. Aśwatthāma becomes a forceful symbol of the ethical breakdown that comes from unleashing uncontrolled ferocity. Bharati uses the character of Aśwatthāma to question whether dharma can exist in a world devastated by war. *Andhāyug* makes a good study from a psychological vantage as well. It serves as a powerful allegory of psychological blindness, indicating an inability to face the consequences of one's actions or to recognise one's own inner collapse. Here, Aśwatthāma is the potent symbol of such blindness. He signifies the risks of unprocessed trauma, unresolved grief, and the collapse of the ego, all of which contribute to a profound moral breakdown. In such a scenario, the notion of dharma stops being a compass for moral deeds and instead becomes a device for justifying violence.

Violence, *svadharma* and the contemporality of the *Mahābhārata*

This brings the discussion back to the central line of enquiry: the extent to which violence can define an individual's *svadharma*. The narratives examined above present divergent interpretations of dharma—some interrogate the legitimacy of violence within a broader ethical framework, while others seek to rationalise

ruthlessness in the name of a higher collective good. The first two accounts come from ancient mythological narratives, distinguished by the rise of large empires, in which those in power sought to create narratives that certified and strengthened their actions. But their actions were questioned by some dissenting voices that contested the unbridled use of violence. Many philosophical discourses emerged that began to interrogate the rightfulness of violence or *himsā*⁵ (Buddhism and Jainism). Both the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Śāntiparva* address these apprehensions with unwavering clarity. While these texts permit the use of force by kings or Kṣatriyas as part of their ordained *svadharma*, they recognise a code for its use and, more importantly, frame it strictly as a measure of last resort. Crucially, these texts understand that violence disrupts both mental peace and social harmony. Thus, its use is justified only in circumstances where the entire social order stands in peril. The challenge lies in understanding it in the context of Aśwatthāma of *Andhāyuga*, whose frenzy elevated the use of violence to a new level, masquerading it as his understanding of *svadharma*. He breached an acknowledged code of war that established certain rules of fair play. His frantic actions came to represent individuals with serious psychological concerns who could not reconcile with the trauma of loss or killing. Historically, this was an oblique reference to a new, modern capitalist age of empire-building that ended in cruel wars and partition, bringing about a similar kind of havoc to that reflected in the great epic.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study is limited by its reliance on textual interpretation and secondary scholarship, which constrains its ability to make empirical claims about psychological processes. The analysis focuses primarily on select episodes and characters within vast literary traditions, and alternative readings may yield different interpretive emphases. Additionally, applying modern psychological concepts to ancient texts carries the risk of anachronism, despite efforts to exercise conceptual caution.

Future research may extend this analysis by examining other Indian texts such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Buddhist *Jātakas*, or Jain narratives to explore alternative ethical responses to violence and moral conflict.

Empirical studies in Indian psychology could investigate how concepts like *svadharma* and *niṣkāma-karma* inform contemporary moral reasoning, resilience, and coping strategies. Comparative studies between Indian ethical frameworks and modern psychotherapeutic models may further create indigenous pathways to psychological well-being and ethical decision-making.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we can conclude that the Bhagavad Gītā, Śāntiparva, and other books of the *Mahābhārata* remain relevant to the contemporary world. Issues of violence and brutality are rife, and this pushes individuals to mull over their *svadharma* as conscious and psychologically aware citizens, drawing lessons from indigenous ancient texts. Rather than presenting dharma as a rigid social prescription, these texts reveal it as a nuanced ethical framework that acknowledges human vulnerability, emotional conflict, and the necessity of self-regulation. The integration of *svadharma* with *svabhāva* suggests a model of moral action grounded in both social responsibility and inner disposition. In an age marked by political violence, ethical polarisation, and psychological strain, these texts invite renewed reflection on how moral duty can be exercised without sacrificing mental well-being or ethical restraint.

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¹ This is a modified version of the talk given at the summer school organised by the Psychology Department, Lady Shri Ram College, on 'Virasat: Tapestries of Indian Culture; Timeless Lessons; Gīta and Psychological Insights' on 20th June 2023.

² Mahābhārata (Mbh), XII-,126-139. All references to the Mahābhārata are taken from the *Critical Edition of Sukthankar, ed. Mahābhārata, 1933-1966. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and JAB. Buitenen and Fitzgerald translated the Critical edition of Sukthankar*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

³ Bhagvad Gītā, (BG) II.11. All references to the text are from K.T.Telang ed and trans. *The Bhagvad Gītā, Sacred Books of the East, 1882*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass,1998.

⁴ According to Romila Thapar, the essence of the social code is to act according to Svadharma, the social obligations of one's caste, and for the kshatriya, this includes violence in defending good against evil. PMLA, Vol. 124, No. 5, Special Topic: War (Oct., 2009), pp. 1832.

⁵ Sanskrit term for violence.