Lessons on Strategic Thought and Military Manoeuvres from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Arthashastra

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Abstract

According to a saying, ‘All roads lead to Rome’. The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata on similar lines appear to be the first indigenous texts that show up when looking for literature that is widely cited as a source of knowledge about statecraft, governance, and military manoeuvres. Verses from the different parts of Mahabharata are quoted in Kautilya’s Arthashastra, and therefore also highlight the Mahabharata's influence and importance. The distinctive qualities of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Arthashastra are that they tell true tales of characters resolving conflicts with a range of morality and realism-based decision-making techniques. The research paper tries to offer insightful lessons from the two ancient epics and one treatise on statecraft in the world—the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Arthashastra about Indian strategic thinking and goal setting.

Keywords: Dharma, Indian Strategic Thought, Decision-Making Techniques, Matsya Nayaya, and Mandala Theory.

Introduction

Throughout history, ancient texts have served as repositories of wisdom, offering insights into various aspects of life, governance, and warfare. Among the treasures of ancient Indian literature, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Arthashastra stand out not only as epic narratives but also as invaluable sources of strategic thought and military manoeuvres. These texts which are timeless and have been composed over centuries are not only to entertain but also aim to provide the readers with important lessons on leadership, the art of war and diplomacy.

Through this research work, we will explore the necessary strategic lessons which will be drawn from these historical epics and philosophical works. The Ramayana, originating in the

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Treta Yuga and going towards Valmiki, unfolds the saga of Rama, a prince on an epic mission to save his wife Sita from the Ravana who captured his wife, the demonic monarch. This epic imparts significant teachings on governance, unwavering commitment and the critical role of alliances in fighting and winning against challenges. On the other hand, the Mahabharata which took place in the Dwapara Yuga and is composed by Vyasa depicts the intense conflict between the Pandava & Kaurava clans, offering various and important insights into martial tactics, moral quandaries, and the ramifications of possessing power.

The Arthashastra which is often associated with Chanakya, is a treatise that thoroughly covers matters of statecraft, strategic warfare and governance. Going back to the 4th Century BCE, this text delivers realistic perspectives on politics, intelligence operations which were kept secret and the art of governance according to practices. It stands as an authoritative guide for successful leadership and management.

By examining these works it can be said that these provide a plethora of strategic measures and military movements which are still applicable in our modern days and ages. Whether it is the politics in Ramayana or the study of battlefield tactics in Mahabharata, it is important to note that those great epics and treatises are the reference manuals for leaders, captains and strategists, which even the modern day time can’t erase. This research paper will focus not only on but also delve into the deep courses of old wisdom, from where the sounds of multifaceted thinking linger till day.

Indian Army Chief General Manoj Pande said at a seminar on 'Historical Patterns of Indian Strategic Culture' at United Service Institute in New Delhi (ANI, 2024, May 21) that:

The ancient Indian wisdom is rooted in a 5,000-year-old civilizational legacy, where immense value is attached to knowledge. This legacy is exemplified by a vast repository of intellectual literature, the world's largest collection of manuscripts, and nurturing of a multitude of thinkers and schools, across various domains.

He mentioned 'Project Udbhav' which was launched at the maiden edition of the Indian Military Heritage Festival on October 21, 2023, and, has delved deep into ancient texts such as Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, and Arthashastra, which are rooted in inter-connectedness, righteousness and ethical values and was conceptualized with the idea to
rediscover the profound Indian heritage of statecraft and strategic thoughts, derived from ancient texts of statecraft, warcraft, diplomacy, grand strategy and to introduce relevant teachings into the present-day military (Ibid).

It has also examined the strategic genius of the Maurya, Gupta, and Maratha dynasties, as well as the epic conflicts of the Mahabharata, which have formed India's rich military legacy.

It is worth mentioning that Project Udbhav has revealed substantial intellectual convergences between eminent Indian and Western scholars, highlighting the resonance between their thoughts, philosophies, and perspectives. Moreover, it has catalyzed exploration into new areas, by unveiling India's tribal traditions, the Maratha Naval legacy, and the individual heroic exploits of military figures, particularly women, the Army Chief said (Ibid).

Insights on Governance, Diplomacy, and Ethics in Warfare in the Ramayana

The Ramayana, the epic tale of Rama, is not typically considered a source of military strategy. It focuses on dharma (righteous duty), exile, and the triumph of good over evil (Bajpai, 2023). The Ramayana makes multiple references to diplomacy and some of the key qualities of a successful envoy. There are excerpts mentioning sending an ambassador or envoy to obtain intelligence. In his speech on statecraft to Bharata, Rama lays out the requirements for diplomatic or ambassadorial appointments. According to Rama, an ambassador ought to be wise, intelligent, possess a presence of mind, and be able to talk concisely.

In the Kishkindha Kand, the first meeting between Hanuman and Rama-Lakshmana is recognized as one of the most insightful depictions of diplomacy. Sugriva was terrified when he saw Rama and Lakshmana approaching his hiding location, so he dispatched Hanuman in disguise to find out what the two valiant warriors with weapons wanted. Hanuman assumed the garb of a mendicant and praised Rama and Lakshmana profusely before disclosing that he was Sugriva's emissary. Because of his diplomacy skills, Hanuman was able to communicate discreetly and politely while adhering to expectations. Lakshmana was instructed by Rama to speak softly and affectionately to Hanuman as the King was required by diplomatic practice to avoid direct communication with the ambassadors. Finally, Rama commends Hanuman for his grace, eloquence, and manners, calling him the perfect emissary. Moreover, in Chapter 54 of the Sundar Kaand, Hanuman flew to Lanka in search of Sita and to gather intelligence and in the
process was able to gain an audience with the demon king Ravana after he got himself captured to get a closer look at the strength and opulence of the Lankan Court and its Courtiers and indulged in espionage (setting fire to the city of gold after his tail was put on fire on the orders of Ravana) when the audience didn’t go the way it was expected by Hanumana.

In the Ramayana, Hanuman is often considered the ideal diplomat. His qualities are praised by Lord Rama in several verses. One such shloka is:

"अर्थानामुपपत्तीनां वक्त श्रोत च सम्मतः। भवेष्वभयदः शूरः समः शत्रौ च ममतयः॥"

Translation: "He is proficient in understanding and conveying the essence of matters, respected as a speaker and listener. He is brave in the face of fear and treats friends and foes equally."

This shloka highlights the importance of communication skills, bravery, and impartiality in a diplomat.

Moreover, the Ramayana states that monitoring and espionage are useful instruments for efficient government. In addition to helping the authorities adjust to shifting circumstances and change course to prevent future internal discontent and external aggression, they also aid in enforcing compliance among the populace. Several parts of the Ramayana’s text provide in-depth explanations of statecraft, Rajadharma (ruler's duty), diplomacy, and the ethics of war (Bajpai, 2023). The Rama-Bharata dialogue, in Ayodhya Kaand which ensued as Bharata begged his older brother to give up the hermit's life and take the crown back, is among the most insightful discussions on statecraft. Fearing that the entire demon clan will be destroyed during the battle with Rama, Ravana forcibly wakes up his brother Kumbhakarna to engage in combat. The Kumbhakarna-Ravana dialogue in chapter 12 of the Yudha Kaand again provides a masterful explanation of rajadharma and statecraft.

Vibhishana's Defection

Vibhishana’s defection to Rama's side can be seen as a form of psychological warfare, as it demoralizes and his forces.

त्यज्यतां नरकान्तायं रामाय प्रतिपाद्यताम्। मैथैव विनियम स्त्रान्तरायाय हीयते मति:॥

Translation: "Abandon this demon who is bound for hell and surrender to Rama. This is my advice, and I shall not change my mind."

This advice from Vibhishana serves to weaken Ravana's morale and bolster Rama's position.
Another illustration of the responsibilities of a monarch and a responsible citizen in preserving raja dharma is the killing of Bali. The Rama-Bali exchange in Kishkhindha Kaand provides a thorough description of the concept of just war as the Vanara king lies dying. To get to Lanka, Rama had to find a way across the ocean; and after deciding to punish the Ocean God on the fourth day of penance and prayers, Rama described the several kinds of characters, both human and non-human (Demons, Yakshi, Monkey, etc.), like Kabandha, Maricha, Viradha, Tataka, Vali, etc. that can only be tamed by force.

**Ram Bali Samvad**

*Sahasā vijayaṁ yāti, vinā yatnena kashchana | Yatnaśāstra parīkṣyante, vijayī bhavati nānṛtiḥ II*

**Translation:** "Victory is attained through effort; none can win without striving. Effort and strategy are tested, and the victorious are never deceitful."

To summarize the main features of the Ramayana:

**Dharma and Strategy:** The concept of dharma plays a crucial role in the Ramayana. Examining Rama's decisions and actions through the lens of dharma could reveal strategies based on righteousness, duty, and ethical considerations. The Ramayana emphasizes the importance of dharma (righteousness) in guiding strategic decisions and military actions. The epic’s protagonist, Ram exemplifies ideal leadership & governance through his commitment to upholding his dharma as king, husband and warrior. ‘Ram Rajya’ portrays him as the perfect ruler and it can be very obviously said that his dedication to dharma shapes his strategy in conflict and warfare.

**Leadership Lessons on Virtue:** In “The Book of Ram” which is authored by Devdutt Pattanaik, the character of Rama is portrayed as a paragon of leadership, exemplifying bravery, perseverance and the capacity to engender deep loyalty. These attributes are dissected and linked to their effective application in the realm of warfare. The Ramayana presents Rama as an archetype of the ideal leader, marked by steadfastness, valour, and benevolence. His approach to leadership stands as an exemplar for military leaders, cultivating a profound sense of trust and allegiance among his ranks. Pattanaik delves into the alignment between Rama’s leadership ethos and the Indian framework of virtuous governance, especially as it pertains to martial tactics.
Metaphors and Symbolism: The Ramayana is full of metaphors and symbols. Here Pattanaik provides a new angle giving us the chance to see the ancient warfare strategy behind the narration. For example, the deployment of the armies of monkeys can resonate with the value of non-traditional strategies or partnerships.

Strategic Planning and Diplomacy: In the epic tale of the Ramayana, the art of strategic planning and the use of diplomacy are key elements in the resolution of conflicts and the formation of alliances. Ram cleverly employs diplomatic strategies to secure alliances with important figures like Sugriva, Hanuman, Jambavan, and Jatayu on his mission to conquer the demonic king Ravana. Pattanaik examines these episodes to reveal traditional Indian tactics in diplomacy and alliance formation during wartime.

Ethics of Warfare: The Ramayana deals with the ethical issues of combat, and underlines that the desire to attain victory can never turn into bloodshed and carnage i.e. Dharmayudda. Rama closely follows the rules of war and exhibits compassion towards his opponents, showing the Indian values of fair battle as the time when Rama invites Ravana back to his palace to recover and offers him another opportunity to fight fairly. Pattanaik by showing these ethical dimensions tries to demonstrate how subtle and sophisticated the Indians were in their strategic thinking.

Divine Intervention and Cosmic Forces: The Ramayana portrays warfare as a manifestation of larger cosmic forces, with divine beings playing active roles in shaping the outcome of conflicts. The divine nature of Rama and his association with deities like Vishnu make the epic awe-inspiring because it transcends just earthly concerns. Through this main character, Pattanaik uncovers how Indian concepts of war and destiny are shaped by the prevalence of these divine elements.

Strategic Insights from the Mahabharata: Navigating Dharma, Diplomacy, and Warfare

The ancient societies (Chadha, n.d.)iv were known for their frequent use of force. It served as a weapon for achieving influence and power, fending off disruptions, and settling disputes. The Mahabharata establishes rules for refraining from using force, restricting its use, and ultimately applying it responsibly even in the face of frequent military action. These rules emphasize the idea of dharma as a framework for the use of force once more.
In terms of strategic thinking, the Mahabharata is not a book that defines right and wrong or good and bad. There is an emphasis on context, complexity, obstacles, and contextual decision-making in daily life for the choices being made by the characters. The ideas of jus ad bellum and jus in bello are not applicable here.

It is stated that anything missing from the Mahabharata can't be found anywhere else. The war is imminent after the failure of peace talks led by Krishna as a Shanti Doot (People Management, 2024) with reasonable demands. Afterwards, Karna sets out to conquer other kingdoms to bring wealth to the Kauravas. Arjuna and Bheema on the other hand, set out to obtain Divyastras, strength, and strategic knowledge. Moreover, the Pandavas made wise leadership choices. And even though, the Pandavas were on a moral high ground with moral force they would not have achieved their victory if it was not for Krishna’s wise counsel and divine presence even though benign in the form of a charioteer were not there behind the Pandavas. As realistically Kauravas with around 11 and Pandavas with 7 Akshauhinis were mismatched on the field in numerical scale.

Despite this, the Kauravas (Studocu, n.d.)vi lost the war. Even though they were numerically superior with the support of Narayani Sena promised by Krishna. Winning any game requires more than just skill; strategic knowledge, and alertness which are all essential! Expand your horizons and make new friends who will stand with you when fighting for the same cause. The ability to establish shrewd partnerships was innate in the Pandavas. Karna was forced to use a Divyastra he had kept for Arjuna against Ghatotkacha, the son of Hidimba and Bhima in a night attack on the Kaurava camp. The attack of Ghatotkacha was a master stroke of Krishna as he knew being a Rakshasa the rules of war didn’t apply for him. Forces of Nagas and Manipur fought for the Pandavas on account of Arjuna’s marriage to Ulupi and Chitrangada. Virata was another well-known Pandava ally, whose daughter Uttara had wed Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. King Drupada father of Drupadi and his son Dhrishtadyumna the Commander in Chief of the Pandava forces were also strategic allies of the Pandavas. Though Shalya the real maternal uncle of the Pandavas had to support Kauravas due to a stratagem by Duryodhana.

Adi Parva lays the groundwork for the narrative, and via the characters’ deeds, we derive a great deal of insight into statecraft (Grin News, 2021)vi. A wonderful example of how diplomacy should be carried out is provided by Udyoga Parva. While Bheeshma Parva discusses the concepts of jus in bello and jus ad bellum in warfare. Finally, in the Shanti Parva,
Bheeshma advises the victorious Yudhishthira on the fundamentals of monarchy and government.

The Mahabharata also discusses the qualities of a diplomat, particularly in the context of Krishna's role as an envoy. One relevant verse is:

धृति: क्षमा धर्ममिति स्थिति: सत्यं दयां चोपशामस्त्र दूतः। न धर्मं भ्रेष्ठो न च लघुव्यासां समास: कुर्यामात्रदेवदूतः॥

Translation: "A diplomat should possess fortitude, forgiveness, adherence to duty, truthfulness, compassion, and tranquillity. They should not deviate from righteousness or act in a demeaning manner."

Krishna’s Appeal for Peace

दुयोधन श्रुणु रथजन् यदुक्तां धथतारथष्ट्ैः। तच्छ्रु त्वथ कु रु नः शथस्न्तां प्रीमतां चैव परस्परम्॥

Translation: "Duryodhana, listen to what I have to say, as spoken by the sons of Dhritarashtra. Hear it and bring about peace and mutual affection between us."

This shloka marks the beginning of Krishna’s appeal for peace, urging Duryodhana to listen and consider reconciliation.

Krishna’s Wisdom on Righteousness and Duty

धमेणैव मह रथज्यथमन धमे ममत्रथमण बन्धवः। धमेणैव प्रकृतयः पथमत रथजथ न चथन्यर्थ॥

Translation: "By righteousness are kingdoms governed, by righteousness are friends and relatives maintained. A king protects his subjects through righteousness and in no other way."

Krishna emphasizes the importance of ruling and maintaining relationships through dharma.

The Consequences of War

विग्रहाच्चान्तिरेव स्यात्कः शम: संगरे स्थिते। अत: शम: चिकिष्ठमि भ्रातुभि: सहितोऽनघ॥

Translation: "From conflict arises only peace; what peace can there be in the midst of war? Therefore, I seek peace, together with my brothers, O sinless one."

Krishna points out the futility of war and his desire for peace.

The Value of Compromise

ददथतु पाण्डवायार्थ धर्मराजाय भरत। राज्यमिच्छति यदि वा कुलस्यार्थे भविष्यति॥
Translation: "If Duryodhana desires the kingdom, let him give half to Yudhishthira, the son of Dharma. This will benefit the family."

Krishna suggests a compromise to avert the war and benefit both parties.

**Krishna’s Counsel on Wisdom and Ego**

न कथिदेव मद्वथक्यमथत्मन्यवहितं चरेत्। यदि बुद्ध्वेत मर्त्यव्यमनागस्य नरो युधि॥

Translation: "No one who heeds my words with attention will act in such a way that leads to their own destruction. If a person understands this, they will not perish innocently in battle."

Krishna advises on the importance of wisdom and avoiding actions driven by ego and pride.

**Duryodhana’s Rejection**

Despite Krishna’s efforts, Duryodhana refuses to heed his counsel, driven by arrogance and pride. This rejection marks a pivotal moment leading to the inevitability of war.

न दथस्यथमम वसुधथारथां पथण्डवेभ्यो जनथदान। सवालोकमहां मजत्वथ भमवष्यथमम धरथमधपः ॥

Translation: "I will not give even a needlepoint of land to the Pandavas, O Janardan. After conquering the whole world, I shall be the sole ruler of the earth."

Duryodhana’s refusal underscores his arrogance and the futility of Krishna’s mediation efforts.

**Krishna's Strategy in the Mahabharata**

Krishna employs various strategies that can be considered forms of psychological warfare or covert tactics. One notable instance is the killing of Drona.

अश्वत्थथ हतः कुंजरः

Translation: "Ashwatthama, the elephant, is dead."

Krishna advises Yudhishthira to say this to Drona, exploiting Drona's attachment to his son Ashwatthama, leading to his downfall.

To summarize the main features of the Mahabharata:

**Dharma vs. Realpolitik:** The conflict between the Pandavas' righteous path (dharma) and the Kauravas' desire for power (realpolitik) is a central theme. It explores how the characters navigate this tension, offering insights into the ideal ruler's decision-making.
Alliance Building: The importance of alliances is evident in the epic. It analyses the strategies employed by Krishna in forging alliances for the Pandavas, highlighting the role of diplomacy and negotiation.

Weaponry and Leadership: The description of the weapons presented by Ashwatthama and Arjuna, as several scholars perceive, reveals that the ancient Rishis had a good idea of what the nuclear weapons would look like, or they could see some kind of imagery of them. The Kurukshetra War substantially emphasized the use of chariots in that period. It focused on the characters like Arjuna and Krishna and highlighted the battlefield tactics. This particular aspect was not new but was inspiring the warriors.

Espionage and Deception: Espionage and trickery play significant roles in the Mahabharata, examining the moral dilemmas associated with such strategies. This epic narrative unveils the intricate realm of clandestine activities and the complexities therein. It recounts various deceptive tactics used in battle, including the incineration of the lacquer house, known as Lakshagriha, intended to vanquish the Pandava princes, and employing Shikhandi to surmount Bhishma's solemn oath.

Vyuhas (formations) (Quora, n.d.): The story of the epic narrates several Military formations like:

1st Day: Bhishma - "सर्वतोमुखी दण्ड व्यूह" ("Sarvatomukhi Dand Vyuha")
Arjuna - "वज्र व्यूह" ("Vajra Vyuha")

2nd Day: Bhishma - "गरुड़-व्यूह" ("Garuda Vyuha")
Dhrishtdyumn - "क्रौंच व्यूह" ("Krounch Vyuha")

3rd Day: Bhishma - "गरुड़-व्यूह" ("Garuda Vyuha")
Arjuna - "अर्धचन्द्र व्यूह" ("Ardhchandra Vyuha")

4th Day: Bhishma - "मंडल व्यूह" ("Mandal Vyuha")
Arjuna - "श्रीन्गातका व्यूह" ("Sringataka Vyuha")
2nd time; Bhishma - "व्याल व्यूह" ("Vyaal Vyuha")
Arjuna - "वज्र व्यूह" ("Vajra Vyuha")

5th Day : Bhishma - "मकर व्यूह" ("Makar Vyuha")
Arjuna - "श्येन व्यूह" ("Shyen Vyuha")

6th Day: Bhishma - "क्रौंच व्यूह" ("Krounch Vyuha")
Dhrishtduman - "मकर व्यूह" ("Makar Vyuha")
2nd time; Dhrishtketu, Abhimanyu - "सूचि व्यूह" ("Suchimukh Vyuha")
Kourav - No Vyuha Mentioned

7th Day: Bhishma - "मंडल व्यूह" ("Mandal Vyuha")
Arjuna - "वज्र व्यूह" ("Vajra Vyuha")

8th Day: Bhishma - "कुर्मा (कुछआ) व्यूह" ("Kurma Vyuha")
Arjuna - "तिर्पुल व्यूह" ("Trishul Vyuha")
2nd time; Bhishma - "उर्मि व्यूह" ("Urmi Vyuha")
Arjuna - "श्रीनागाटका व्यूह" ("Sringataka Vayuha")

9th Day: Bhishma - "सर्वतोभद्र व्यूह" ("Sarvatobhadra Vyuha")
Arjuna - "नक्ष्य मण्डल व्यूह" ("Nakshtra Mandal Vyuha")

10th Day: Bhishma - "असुर व्यूह" ("Asur Vayuha")
Arjuna - "देव व्यूह" ("Dev Vyuha")

11th Day: Drona - "शकट व्यूह" ("Shakat Vyuha")
Arjuna - "क्रौंच व्यूह" ("Krounch Vyuha")

12th Day: Drona - "गरुड़ व्यूह" ("Garuda Vyuha")
Arjuna - "अर्धचन्द्र व्यूह" ("Ardhchandra Vayuha")

13th Day: Drona - "चक्र व्यूह" ("Chakra Vyuha")
Dhrishtdyumn - No Vyuha Mentioned

14th Day: Drona - "चक्रशकट व्यूह", "पद्मव्यूह"/"कमलव्यूह", "सूचि व्यूह" ("Chakrashatak Vayuha", "Padam Vayuha", "Suchimukh Vayuha")
Arjuna - "खड्ग सप्रव व्यूह" ("Khaddag Sarp Vyuha")

15th Day: Drona - "पद्म व्यूह" ("Padam Vyuha")
Arjuna - No Vyuha Mentioned

16th Day: Karan* - "मकर व्यूह" ("Makar Vyuha")
Arjuna - "अर्धचन्द्र व्यूह" ("Ardhchandra Vyuha")

17th Day: Karan* - "सूर्य व्यूह" ("Surya Vyuha") {Surya Bimb ki Tarah Golaakaar aakar ka Vyuha}
Arjuna - "महिष व्यूह" ("Mahish Vyuha") {Mrityudev ke vahan Mahish jaisa aakar ka Vyuha}

18th Day: Shalya - "सर्वतोभद्र व्यूह" ("Sarvatobhadra Vyuha")
Arjuna - No Vyuha Mentioned
Individual Warriors and Prowess: Legendary warriors like Bhishma, Arjuna and Karna are being featured in the Mahabharata. It analyzes the strengths & weaknesses, offering insights into the importance of skilled warriors in warfare.

Dharma (Righteousness) as the Foundation: Within the Mahabharata, dharma is integral as a code for making tactical choices and conducting warfare. This notion extends beyond simple ethical correctness to encompass responsibilities and fairness. The strategic traditions of India as represented in this historic epic are intimately interwoven with the sustenance of dharma, which casts its influence over all facets of conflict and leadership.

Strategic Planning and Deception: The Mahabharata is replete with instances of strategic planning and the use of deception in warfare. Characters like Krishna and Shakuni employ various stratagems to outmanoeuvre their adversaries. These tactics reflect Indian strategic thought, which emphasizes the importance of cleverness and ingenuity in achieving victory.

Ethical Conduct in Warfare: In the Mahabharata, the author brutally presents war but he puts a good emphasis on the ethics of war. Ideas like honourable combat, following the rules of engagement and respecting an adversary are always present. Such a situation indicates the complex nature of Indian strategic thought, where the imperatives of victory are balanced against moral concerns. In the Mahabharata, the meetings happened only during the daytime. They would go to each other camp at night to mourn the dead. Notwithstanding, in the course of the eighteen days of battle, both the Pandavas and the Kauravas broke several rules of a fair war.

Role of Leadership and Virtue: The Mahabharata illustrates the use of virtuous leadership in the creation of a war strategy as well as the art of warfare. Leaders ought to epitomize desirable attributes such as wisdom, courage, and selflessness which are very important in motivating and guiding soldiers. It brings in the question of how these values affect Indian's perceptions of leadership and commanding the military.

The Cosmic Dimension of Conflict (Govind, 2023) ix: The strategic philosophies emerging from the Mahabharata, within Indian tradition, often go beyond earthly concerns to embrace a universal scope. Depicted in this epic is the concept that battles are but expressions of greater universal dynamics, with gods interjecting in human quandaries. This all-encompassing
outlook gives Indian martial philosophy its unique profundity, framing terrestrial skirmishes against an expansive metaphysical backdrop.

No fight has had such an influence on the Indian psyche (Singh, 2021), regardless of the actual size of the conflict. The idea of Dharma & righteous wars were born out of it. Maybe this explains why no Indian emperor ventured on policies of expansion outside of the subcontinent or refrained from taking proactive measures against the imagined enemies.

During the time of the Mahabharata, war was often divided into two categories: Dharma Yuddha, also known as Nyaya Yuddha, or just war, and Kuta Yuddha, or unethical war. The genuine path of power and military prowess was Nyaya Yuddha. The rules of war and chivalry were closely adhered to by the participants in the past. Any sly tactic or tactic not sanctified by ethics. The idea that nothing in battle is unfair and that the means should only be justified by the end served as the foundation for the Kuta Yuddha, or unethical war. A total triumph always marks the end of a war with cruel techniques, such as striking below the belt, lying, deceit, or even murdering someone who is surrendering/seeking refuge or committing any other non-soldierly deed, that ought to be used in that kind of conflict. In general, people viewed the Kuta Yuddha participants as cowards, disgusting, and immoral.

Mahabharata also teaches us that we are surrounded by Kuntis (Joshi, 2020) who hide the truth in fear and are surrounded by Karna, who are bound by a bond of friendships with the villains of the piece.

In the book Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas: Stories from the Mahabharata, the authors have stated that the stories from the Mahabharata have always shown the moral quandaries people face and the results of their choices (Kolekar, 2024). The Mahabharata tales are frequently used in the context of diplomacy and international affairs to emphasize the subtleties and complexity of certain circumstances. The Mahabharata is a great resource for learning about military tactics and strategy. But the book does not stop there; it also discusses morality, obligation, virtue, and the law.

By combining well-known and lesser-known Mahabharata episodes, the book presents a distinctive perspective and imparts wisdom on a variety of contemporary issues. The first tale uses the tale of Ved Vyaas and Lord Ganesh to highlight the value of alliance and collaboration.
The author of the Mahabharata, Vyaas, visits Ganesha in an attempt to finish writing the epic due to the magnitude of the work. The latter insists that the discourse be uninterrupted. Although Vyaas accepts the offer, he adds a caveat: that Ganesha must have complete knowledge of the circumstances before he puts it to pen. The narrative emphasizes the value of wisdom, cooperation, selecting compatible partners, and the necessity of bargaining and negotiating.

The second narrative, about Arjun's ability to shut out all other distractions and concentrate just on the goal, emphasizes the need to keep an overall perspective. To attain policy coherence in the field of foreign policy, a clearly stated grand plan is required. Separating first-order, non-negotiable goals vs. second-order goals also aids in the process of setting priorities. The writers address the importance of forming relationships by overcoming societal boundaries in the third narrative. It is commonly known that Duryodhana and Karna are friends. The former accepted the latter as a friend and ally despite the latter's upbringing in a royal household. By highlighting similarities in today's world, the authors emphasize the necessity of an inclusive strategy for global governance to be effective.

The Bhagavad Gita, which is the central text of Hindu philosophy, is also highlighted. Lord Krishna gives distressed Arjun teachings before the war about the importance of carrying out one's duty and not being fixated on the result. The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes the significance of using force only as a final resort in the modern world after all other measures have failed. This school of thinking bears similarities to the liberal traditions of international relations' just war theory.

Nowadays, with the advent of digital technology, false news and misinformation efforts are more prevalent than ever. The Pandava's shrewd tactics deceived even a valiant warrior like Dronacharya. The authors emphasize the significance of narrative structure and the necessity of news verification before dissemination. The next narrative tells the story of Karna and Snake Prince and emphasizes the value of adaptation and flexibility. The two characters share the same goal of eliminating Arjun, their rival. But because Karna feels that accepting help from a third party is beneath his dignity, their alliance never works out. The narrative emphasizes how crucial it is to be adaptable when making strategic decisions.
The story that Bhishma told Yudhishthira on his deathbed is another narrative. The King of Gods, Indra, is moved by a parrot's love for a tree despite the tree's impending death and grants the tree perpetual life. The relationship between Russia and India, and their history of supporting one another in times of need, are used by the authors as an example.

**Insights from Kautilya's Arthashastra: Foundation of Indian Strategic Culture**

Kautilya in his Arthashastra rightly quoted ‘Anything that protects the people is the womb of the civilization’ (Mani, 2021). To secure life, one has to ensure safety measures.

The primary source of Indian strategic culture, which is centred only on the function of power, is the Arthaśāstra. Power was a tool, not an end, for Kautilya. Happiness is the goal, and strength is the means to it. Therefore, a king must constantly work to increase his authority. Whoever is inferior to another shall make peace with him; whoever is superior in power, shall wage war is the general rule when it comes to the expansion of power. Therefore, gaining power served as the foundation for gaining additional power.

The problems facing international security in the modern day are the same as those that plagued the Mauryan Empire in 300 BCE. A persuasive and unbiased examination of the Arthaśāstra demonstrates striking parallels between the issues facing Kautilya's ideal state and the contemporary menace of insurgencies and terrorism. Modern warfare follows archaic traditions. In military matters, the adage those who forget the lessons of history are condemned to repeat it, is applicable.

In terms of application, Kautilya identified four types of strategic measures against enemies:

- Conciliation (Sama)
- Gifts (Dhama)
- Coercion (Danda)
- Dissension (Bhedā)

Kautilya believed that the time leading up to the actual combat was crucial to the final result. The ruler and his advisors needed to objectively assess the entirety of their state's resources in comparison to the adversary (or foes), adjusted for the contributions of allies. Therefore, several factors needed to be carefully considered, including the dynasty's stability, seasonal changes,
mobilization timetables, planning for internal rebellions and discontent, and assessing material losses relative to strategic gains. Attacking a stronger state without first conferring with friends was pointless.

In a similar vein, it was best to avoid assigning troops to a mission without considering the likelihood of escalation and the potential losses. Although the military was indoctrinated to believe in itself, optimism was a risky and perhaps disastrous indulgence for the monarch and his advisors. Indeed, Kautilya believed that astute counsel was more powerful than brute force and that the conqueror could defeat militarily stronger opponents by fusing superior political acumen with superior intelligence.

Kautilya's doctrine, as presented in the Arthaśāstra, revolved around the prosperity of the King and the nation, as well as the King's pursuit of victory over competing bordering states (CLAWS, 2013)xiv.

According to Kautilya, the law of Matsya Nyaya—big fish consuming smaller fish—will take effect if danda is not applied. When Matsya Nyaya is in operation, the people of the nation are not happy. Therefore, to do away with matsya nyaya in all forms to achieve peace and security, countries must adopt proper rules and use caution while dealing with the little fish (Gautam, 2013)xv.

**Matsya Nyaya**

Matsya Nyaya, or the law of the fish, is a metaphor for anarchy and the survival of the fittest. It implies that in the absence of a strong ruler, the strong will prey upon the weak, much like big fish devouring smaller fish.

**Key Shloka on Matsya Nyaya**

मात्स्यन्यायं प्रवर्तति बलेन च बलीयं: समाश्रयते॥

Translation: "In the absence of governance, the law of the fish prevails, where the stronger fish devour the weaker ones."

This shloka emphasizes the need for a strong and just ruler to prevent chaos and ensure the protection of the weak.
Strategic Thought in the Arthashastra

The Arthashastra is a comprehensive treatise on statecraft, economic policy, and military strategy. It provides detailed guidelines on how a ruler should manage the Mandala and prevent Matsya Nyaya.

Use of Alliances and Diplomacy

संधिविग्रहयोरन्तरमाकाशयेत। संधि चानेकधर्म, विग्रहमनेकधर्म कुर्यात॥

Translation: "A ruler should create opportunities for both peace and conflict. Make peace under multiple pretexts and make war under multiple pretexts."

This shloka advises rulers to be flexible and strategic in their use of alliances and conflicts.

Importance of a Strong Ruler

राजा प्रकृतियोपस्य स्वाभावतो धर्मेण पालयेत्। स चास्ते न चास्ते च यः स्वधर्मेण विविधतिः॥

Translation: "A king whose subjects are loyal to him should rule with righteousness. Such a king stays firmly in his place and prospers by following his duty."

This shloka emphasizes the importance of a just and strong ruler who governs according to dharma to maintain order and prosperity.

According to the Kautilya Arthashastra Sutra, "Concerning the Topics of Training," those who are angry, avaricious, scared, or arrogant are more likely to be tricked by their adversaries.

Kautilya also emphasized the use of what is now known as misinformation or propaganda to scare or demoralize enemy soldiers (Boesche, 2003) xvi. Using deception to flatter a second or third son and convince him to conduct a coup against his father was a method that Kautilya particularly enjoyed. Kautilya wanted spies to declare fake enemy failures and own victories because he believed that misinformation may motivate his soldiers as well. Moreover, religion was also used extensively in this misinformation.

Kautilya's Arthashastra is replete with strategies involving deceit and covert operations, highlighting the pragmatic and often ruthless approach to statecraft.

Spies and Espionage

द्विविधं तु शुद्धं चायुक्तं च कार्यं भवति। तत्र शुद्धं स्वराज्यं तदधीनानां च योःस्थं। अशुद्धं परराज्यं तदधीनानां च योःस्थं॥
Translation: "Actions are of two kinds: pure and impure. Pure actions are those that concern one's own state and its subjects. Impure actions are those that concern enemy states and their subjects."

This highlights the use of espionage and covert actions against enemy states as a legitimate strategy.

Use of Deceit

समृद्धां यावदाश्शितिवृद्धिः सर्वस्थानो तथातरां परान। तावत्तक्कर्त्तिं संधानं भरेणासहते यदि॥

Translation: "As long as one has strength, one should use it to keep others under control. When it becomes unbearable, then make peace."

This suggests using one's strength to dominate others and resorting to peace only when necessary, implying the use of deceit and covert tactics to maintain power.

In addition to military matters, the Arthashastra addresses the importance of economic security and resource management for the stability and prosperity of the state. Kautilya's ideas on economic policy and trade have continued to shape India's approach to economic development and international trade relations (Ramesh, 2002)xvii.

Despite its emphasis on power and pragmatism, the Arthashastra also contains ethical guidelines for governance and administration. These principles of ethical governance resonate with contemporary debates on transparency, accountability, and good governance in India's political system.

Dharma was used relativistically in the Arthashastra and is a psychological and philosophical idea that is intended to regulate both collective and individual behaviour (Bisht, 2021)xviii. It is also possible to argue that dharma served as a flexible interpreter for the meaning of ideas found in the Arthashastra, including authority, justice, morality, and order. The theoretical and political basis of Dandniti is laid out by Arthashastra, which brings up the issue of varnadharma, or the sacred law of social classes, which Arthashastra championed through rajdharma, or the sacred law of monarchs.

Kautilya developed a theory of an international system that was characterized by extraordinary intellectual elegance and a clear policy framework. It included its subsystems, structural dynamics, typologies, and the mutual interaction of the major actors. Due to his moral
relativism and deep-rooted farsightedness, Kautilya has drawn comparisons to Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli for their methodical approaches free of theological dogma.

Like the great Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, who believed that the greatest triumphs were those in which objectives were accomplished without resulting in casualties, Kautilya recognized the exorbitant costs of battle and advised deceit and covert operations.

The Indian Army's Cold Start doctrine envisions tactical-level, short, highly coordinated, and integrated punitive strikes against Pakistan without going to war. This reflects an eerie revival of the centuries-old practice of "yana," which is used by stronger powers against weaker powers as a form of compliance or coercive diplomacy that avoids going to war. In a similar vein, contemporary aid diplomacy reflects the Kautilyan concept of "dana." When it comes to administering conquered areas, Kautilya wants the conqueror to replace the vices of the vanquished opponent with his virtues. This illustrates an idea that is comparable to Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," which was developed in the 1990s. However, it more accurately reflects the adage that states that "winning hearts and minds" of impacted populations is crucial when dealing with insurgencies, as demonstrated by the US occupation of Iraq and subsequent US offensives.

Diplomats

Kautilya's Arthashastra is a seminal text on statecraft and diplomacy. It provides a detailed account of the qualities of a diplomat (envoy). One notable verse is:

दू तां समथमहतां मवद्वथांस्तन्त्रकु शलम् अनवद्यम्। शुमचां स्मृमतमन्तां
युक्तां पुरुषां प्रथज्ञां प्रेषयेत्॥

Translation: "Send an envoy who is composed, knowledgeable, skilled in policies, faultless, pure, and endowed with memory and wisdom."

This shloka emphasizes the need for composure, knowledge, skill, purity, memory, and wisdom in a diplomat.

The Mandala theory, which envisions the comity of states categorized on indices of comparative hostility and amity, embodies the Kautilyan idea of IR (Set, 2015)\textsuperscript{xix}. The Mandala has been misunderstood to mean a literal arrangement of states in concentric circles, with the epicentre of international affairs being the singularly important actor (Vijigishu), its closest
rival being the principal antagonist (Ari), and allies and adversaries determined by geography. Although each state is a mandala in and of itself, the concept of the mandala is representative of the complex interstate relationships that are dependent on differing degrees of amity and animosity. The mandala, as a microcosm, represents the variety of friends and foes that a state may have, while the mandala, as an international structure, is the macrocosmic accumulation of these unit-level mandalas. In this formulation, where a state's sovereignty is personified through its unique regent, the functional premise is that states are trying to survive, if not embolden themselves, in a highly competitive strategic environment. Today, most people agree that a state's primary interests are to survive and grow and that the best way to do so is through territorial enforcement. As a result, territorial security forms the basis of Kautilya's political philosophy and provides a roadmap for maintaining national security in an era where non-state actors are becoming more and more important and borders are becoming more porous.

Mandala Theory

Key Shloka on Mandala Theory

सहायमित्रामित्रारिशत्रु-मध्यम-उदासीन-विदेशानां समवायः मंडलम्।

Translation: "A circle (Mandala) consists of allies, friends, enemies, enemy's allies, neutrals, middle states, and foreign states."

This shloka outlines the different types of states in the Mandala system and their relationships with the central ruler.

Saptanga Theory

On the King (Swamin)

प्रजासुखे सुखां रथज्ञः प्रजानां च हिते हितम्। नातमप्रियं हितं राजः प्रजानां तु प्रियं हितम्॥

Translation: "The happiness of the king lies in the happiness of his subjects. What is beneficial to the subjects is beneficial to the king. The king’s personal pleasure is not important; the welfare of his subjects is his pleasure."

This shloka emphasizes the king's duty to prioritize the well-being of his subjects over his personal desires.

On the Ministers (Amatya)
सुखार्थिनः कुतो विद्या विद्यार्थिनः कुतो सुखम्। सुखार्थी वा त्यजेद्विद्यां विद्यार्थी वा त्यजेसुखम्॥

Translation: "How can one seeking comfort attain knowledge? How can one seeking knowledge attain comfort? A seeker of comfort should abandon knowledge, and a seeker of knowledge should abandon comfort."

This shloka underlines the importance of dedicated and knowledgeable ministers who prioritize their duties over personal comfort.

On the Territory and Population (Janapada)

अपि कण्टकितो देशो मनुष्यः समुद्धाहतः। मनुष्यवांस्तु कण्टकोऽपि देशः सुखावद्धानः॥

Translation: "Even a thorny land is called prosperous if it is inhabited by industrious people. A thorny land populated by hardworking people becomes a source of joy."

This highlights the significance of a productive and industrious population in making a territory prosperous.

On the Fortified City (Durga)

दुर्ग दुर्गसमुद्रिन्त जेतुः प्राज्ञेन चेतसः। अत एव प्रशंसस्ति स्थिरमस्य च रक्षणम्॥

Translation: "A fortified city is considered difficult to conquer by wise strategists. Therefore, maintaining its security is highly praised."

This emphasizes the importance of a well-fortified city for the security and stability of the kingdom.

On the Treasury (Kosha)

कोशमूलो दण्डः कोषो मह बलमत्युपेतम्। कोषमूलः प्रजा: सर्वा: प्रजानां च परायणम्॥

Translation: "The treasury is the root of power; it is the strength of the army. The treasury is the foundation of all activities, and the subjects depend on it."

This underscores the critical role of a well-managed treasury in sustaining the state's activities and ensuring its strength.

On the Army (Danda)
Translation: "Strength must be assessed for the wielding of weapons and the leadership of the army. Therefore, for the success of the three objectives (dharma, Artha, and kama), a stable and strong army is essential."

This shloka emphasizes the necessity of a strong and well-organized army for achieving the state's goals.

On Allies (Mitra)

Translation: "An ally enhances the king’s qualities and stands by him against enemies. In times of need, such allies, endowed with virtues, are invaluable."

This highlights the importance of having virtuous and reliable allies in times of need.

Lessons from Ancient Indian Epics for Contemporary Military Leadership

The leadership lessons found in classical epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata have a lot to do with contemporary military leadership. When the matter is about good decisions, there should be no doubt that taking the example of how Lord Rama was leading in the Ramayana reflects responsibility, moral integrity and selflessness. The nature of positive aspects like Hanuman and Lakshmana demonstrated in valuing loyalty, and ingenuity and making objectives more precious than personal benefit, are well-known. A strategic vision, superb skills, understanding of human nature, and guidance of moral dilemmas and obligations are surrounded by Krishna in Mahabharata which are very important for deciding and formulating strategies for the battle. The personification of Arjuna’s conflict signifies the importance of contemplation and self-reflection for morality. Karna’s fatal unquestioned friendship with Duryodhana, along with Bhishma’s insight and unquestioning loyalty show us how to navigate moral ambiguities in contemporary times. Applying these teachings to contemporary military leadership entails emphasizing moral judgment, as exemplified by Rama and Krishna. Krishna and Hanuman serve as inspirations for innovative and strategic thinking that promotes flexibility and original ways of problem-solving. Rama, Lakshman, and Arjuna provide examples of leadership and team dynamics that shed light on the need to have
a diversified skill set. Leaders can be guided in striking a balance between personal ethics and the larger good by studying how conflicts and moral difficulties are handled in the epics. Last but not least, applying wisdom and mentoring as demonstrated by Krishna and Bhishma can improve leadership and strategic culture by highlighting the significance of ongoing education and direction on the Indian Strategic Culture.

Moreover, the dialogue scenes of Rama, Lakshmana-Ravana, and Bheeshma and Pandvas in both Ramayana and Mahabharata at the end of the epics are worth noting (Patnaik, 2010). In the first, Rama asks his erudite foe, Ravana, before he passes away, to impart some wisdom to Lakshmana. While the Pandavas ask Bhishma to impart his wisdom in the Mahabharata. The premise of both episodes is that knowledge must be transmitted to the living to be preserved because, in contrast to money, it does not survive death. The latter section of the Shanti Parva and the entirety of the Anusshasan Parva are very similar. In both, Bhishma imparts his wisdom on a range of subjects, such as space, time, duty, conflict, peace, and desire.

The strategic thought, military philosophies, and tactics reflected in texts like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Arthashastra were practised from ancient battles, such as the Kurukshetra war, to modern conflicts like the Balakot airstrikes (Singh, 2020). The rise of cavalry and the use of new weapons technologies during the medieval period. The impact of the Mughal Empire on Indian warfare, including the introduction of gunpowder and firearms. The strategies and tactics used by both Indian and British forces during the colonial period are seen as a continuation of these thoughts and practices.

Strategic thought is also influenced by specific geopolitical contexts such as regional rivalries, territorial disputes, and external threats (Patnaik, 2015). Moreover, technological innovations from the adoption of bronze and iron weapons in ancient times to the development of precision-guided munitions in modern conflicts, have shaped the conduct of warfare in India.

A king who did not fight the war following Dharmayuddha's standards would not have any position in the galaxy of honourable and victorious rulers, according to several suggestions made in Hindu sacred texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Agarwal, 2020). This served as a reminder to the monarchs to abide by the laws, bestowing upon them both cultural and theological legitimacy. However, there were numerous occasions in the Mahabharata where the precepts of Dharamyuddha were broken. Hindu rules of battle were notably
honourable and chivalrous, forbidding the killing of the defenseless, women, the elderly, and the conquered. Instead of a battle or war, it was more of a violent chivalrous game for Hindus.

The geographical diversity of the Indian subcontinent has influenced military strategies and manoeuvring throughout history (Singh & Singh, 2021)\textsuperscript{xxv}. From the rugged terrain of the Himalayas to the vast plains of the Indo-Gangetic region, the geography of India was crucial for comprehending the strategic decisions made by military commanders in various battles. Indian military history is rich with examples of tactical innovations that have shaped the outcome of battles. Indian Kings and Commanders like Hemu, Shivaji, Baji Rao I, Field Marshall Sam Maneckshaw, Lt Gen. Harbasksh Singh, Lt. Gen Sagat Singh, Lt. Gen Hanut Singh, Lt Ge. K S Brar, etc. devised novel strategies or employed unconventional tactics to gain an advantage over their adversaries. These innovations could range from guerrilla warfare tactics to the setting up of super-technological military equipment. Indian strategic thought usually has cultural and ethical elements which make it a unique feature in formulating military planning and decision-making. Ideas like dharma (duty), honour, and loyalty play off against each other in the manner of war and warfare in different historical periods. Similarly, the religious beliefs and the social norms also had a great influence on the military strategies.

Indian history ever since its inception has seen different leaders and commanders who have significantly impacted the course of various battles through their strategic leadership and military command. For the commanders and leaders with brilliant military records, how they discuss their ability to lead troops, make strategic decisions in the presence of pressure, and adapt to the varying conditions in warfare. Century-old India has gone through a lot of invasions by different foreigners who made deep changes in the Indian strategic landscape. The dealings with foreign nations including the Mughals, British, and Central Asian warlords, impacted military tactics, weapons technology and geopolitical processes of the Indian subcontinent. These fights show us what the Indian strategic mind was like and how it evolved in the context of military engagement.

Conclusion

To conclude, the two epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the Arthashastra represent a real treasure of knowledge both about leadership and warfare that have a great importance even nowadays. We find from these over 2000 old texts a lot of information about the complexity of statecraft, the subtlety of diplomacy and the moral elements of war. They epitomize the
recalcitrant values of ethical leadership, strategic planning, and governance, which offer moral teachings for military personnel, policy-makers, and researchers.

The epics emphasize dharma (righteous duty) and in particular that ethical conduct and coalition are the strategic means for victory. They also emphasise the meaningfulness of successful leadership, moral leadership and divine providence in conflict resolution and the making of the conflict outcomes. Moreover, the Arthashastra reveals the practical use of force and diplomacy but highlights in its chapters the ultimate goal of bringing the kingdom and the nation to prosperity and security. In the present time, these self-evident principles can provide the perfect compass for modern military leaders on how to deal with moral dilemmas, acquire strategic and innovative thinking skills, and learn lead and teamwork lessons. Additionally, the secretive nature of Indian strategic thought, the ethical and cultural dimensions, the diversity of the geographical environment, and the internal influence of foreign invasions on the military doctrines of India gives us a lot of information about India’s defence policy and military doctrine.

Lastly, the strategic sagacity in these antique sagas becomes a source that is everlasting for us to learn from and benefit from, providing us with deep insights on how to create leadership and strategy in the military, our culture, and statecraft. Preserving these great works of ancient literature, therefore, helps us to understand the reasons for the present-day success of the leader in war and peace.

References


