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The *Mahabharata*: A Journey to Enlightenment

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Abstract:

Much work remains to be done on the *Mahabharata*: an unprecedented development in the field of learning from a still developing country, a book that boasts of a galore of ancient stories which are surprisingly relatable and bear immense significance even today in the 21st century. From science to religion, philosophy to logic, celibacy and sacrifice in the name of keeping promises to moral/ethical degeneracy, the text leaves no direction of human life untouched. The teachings of the *Gita* which forms an integral part of this epic justify the angst of worldly life in a way that the reader discovers better insights to everyday life. Besides, it is interesting to trace relations between this Indian epic and the esteemed Western concepts like Kantian Enlightenment, Stoicism and Renaissance, of mankind's evolution in terms of attaining true knowledge so as to find contentment in a meaning-ridden life—the same objective as that of the *Mahabharata*. The idea is to discover common strands of thought concerning the issue of enlightenment or wisdom which is the essence of what it takes to be a true human being.

Keywords: Epic, knowledge, religion, science, philosophy, logic, *Gita*, Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, Stoicism, Renaissance, contentment, life.

Introduction:

The term 'enlightenment' may be understood in three different ways. In general, it is defined as being in a state of possessing complete knowledge or understanding. According to Buddhism, it stands for final spiritual release from the physical world, which is not to be read as equivalent to death but as a state marked by an absence of desire or suffering stemming from non-fulfilment of desires; and in the history of England, it signifies a movement in the 18th century which advocated the application of reason, science and logic in all spheres of life. The 18th century philosopher and thinker Immanuel Kant had defined Enlightenment as "man's emergence from self-incurred immaturity." (Kant 1) What is notable is that the very trajectory of this transition of man, had been traced and outlined in the *Mahabharata*, thousands of centuries ago. The *Mahabharata* therefore, is not merely a historical account of two warring factions of the Pandavas and Kauravas. It is a vivid depiction of the inner struggle of an individual battling between good and evil, between spirituality and instinctual impulses, and of the final realisation of the futility of war, of the 'vanity of human wishes'.

Since the origin of what we understand from the term 'education', the process of acquiring knowledge has been considered its firmly grounded foundation as well as its limitless, overarching goal. The idea of freeing oneself from ignorance through knowledge is central to humanity and runs through the entire history of mankind's civilization. Therefore, the importance of knowledge of any

kind, good or evil, is significant as well as universally accepted by civilization. Today we have access to formal education as well as to immeasurable scholarship, ancient or modern, that is a blessing we can count upon. It is then agreeable for many to come across writing that is both story and science, mythical as well as contemporary. This need is comprehensively fulfilled in a reading of the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*. This epic is composed of 110,000 couplets in the Sanskrit language. It is also the longest poem in the world. Added to enjoyment, the perk of reading this book is the all-encompassing knowledge unveiled simultaneously. Besides realizing with wonder, the near-endless information received from it, of humanity and the universe that surrounds it, one feels bound to appreciate this piece of ancient work, shining with a glory of its own, as it is said: "Whatever is found here may be found somewhere else but what is not found here can be found nowhere"(Buitenen xxiii).

In this epic we come across lessons that have immense bearing upon our existence on earth. For example, Yudhishtira, when he encounters the Yaksha, is asked several questions, one of which is to describe the most surprising aspect of life. He replies that every human being is aware of the inevitability of death and yet nobody ever ponders about his own necessary end. This is the most surprising element of human life. From this instance, we infer the necessity of the quality of detachment which will perhaps keep us aloof from overindulgence in materialistic pursuits. The book is interspersed with life-altering lessons such as these. Therefore, it serves as an important material for reading, reflection and research.

The *Mahabharata* employs the technique of what is understood as 'Frame Narrative' or Meta-narrative in terms of Modern literature. There are stories within stories in this great epic. Adding to the complexity of it, there are stories inside stories inside stories, plots inside plots, all characters have their own background stories that shape the way they behave. There is one story even behind the assignation of the title "Mahabharata" to this book: after the completion of the epic, it had been put on a weighing scale against the wisdom of all the written books in the world. What followed was that the scales weighed down on the side of the *Mahabharata*. So it was deduced that this book had way more in store in terms of wisdom, compared to that of any composition in the universe. Consequently, the title Mahabharata which means 'great weightage' when translated literally from Sanskrit had been assigned. Commenting on the presence of a huge number of characters in the epic, Smith writes, "A narrative on such a scale, especially one centered round a war involving the entire known world of the day, inevitably boasts a large cast of characters; thus, to add one more statistic, S. Sörensen's *An Index to the Names in the Mahabharata* runs to 807 two-column pages." (Smith xxi)

Some critics like to compare the *Mahabharata* with some other great epics from the Western world such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. But the sheer size of the *Mahabharata* is what allows it a broader scope of storing more content. The *Mahabharata* offers a large canvas for diverse genres and themes. Its novelty lies in its universality of thematic concerns.

It is written in the book: "The wisdom of this work, like unto an instrument of applying collyrium, hath opened the eyes of the inquisitive world blinded by the darkness of ignorance."(Ganguli 14) The translator also adds that just as the sun puts the darkness of night to shame, the book dispels the darkness and gloomy shadow of ignorance cast upon mankind by a negligence of the light of knowledge on the part of mankind itself. It also contributes to the expansion of hu-

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man intellect by its innumerable epistemological discourses in a way similar to the blossoming of water lilies by virtue of the full-moon-light shone upon them. The entire compound of hitherto ignorant nature is illumined by the lighting of the lamp of history. Nature here presumably refers to the innate nature and character of mankind.

In terms of revolutionary ideas, the *Mahabharata* may be shocking to the sensibilities of certain civilisations. For example, Polyandry, a custom frowned upon now, and even in that era, finds space and attention in the epic. It is well known that Draupadi who is one of the central female characters has, or is 'made to have' five husbands, that may form an interesting subject of Feminist studies. What is more interesting and more enlightening is the story behind this fate meted out to her: Draupadi in her previous birth had made a wish to Lord Shiva for a husband with five praiseworthy qualities. After calculation of her virtues and clearing of all sins, her wish is granted and it is fulfilled in the following birth. Now the problem lying in the wish is that the all the qualities that she had asked for in her husband could not fit in within just one individual. That is, a man in singular capacity could not be the possessor of all the qualities desired for. Therefore, the desired qualities are distributed among the five Pandavas and each one is made to be her husband. The moral lesson learnt is somewhat similar to the oft-cited example of the five fingers of a human palm not being equal to each other in length and also being distinct from each other in function. That is, all favourable qualities are not bestowed upon one individual singularly. Each individual possesses certain distinguished qualities different from but not inferior to other qualities inherent in other individuals.

Apart from polyandry, the power of the gods is also seen to be challenged as in the battle of Arjuna, a mortal, with Indra, enjoying the status of god, the god of thunder and lightning as he is known, for burning the Khandava forest. So, it is not blind acceptance of what befalls a man in the name of fate. There is sceptical interrogation as well as retaliation. We must also keep in mind that like all 'pagan' mythical figures, the gods depicted in this book are anthropomorphic, that is, they display human qualities and emotions.

The book paints almost all the characters in shades of grey and makes no attempt to resort to subjective colouring. Even Krishna who is considered omnipotent and worshipped as a god is portrayed objectively. Everyone has their faults and this makes the stories realistic and colourful. The faults of none of the characters are concealed. For example, the faults of the Pandavas are revealed when the dying Duryodhana puts to shame some acts of the Pandavas and enumerates the instances wherein they had cheated. Also, in the Swargarohan Parv, in the final journey to heaven on foot through the mountains, all the Pandavas excluding Yudhishthira fall off the cliff of the mountain one by one due to certain flaw in their character. Even Yudhishthira has the vision of hell as a punishment for having chosen to play the game of gamble. So, the characters are meted out some kind of punishment or the other depending on the degree of severity of their flaw in character.

The following description of the main characters is given in Ganguli's translation: "Yudhishthira is a vast tree, formed of religion and virtue; Arjuna is its trunk; Bhimasena, its branches; the two sons of Madri are its full-grown fruit and flowers; and its roots are Krishna, Brahma, and the Brahmanas."(Ganguli,19) The book is so remarkable that even the great Moham-

medan Emperor, Akbar, had had the book translated into Persian while painters at his court illustrated the tales. It was called *Razmnama* or the Book of War.

Some critics have linked the central theme of the epic to the Hindu concepts of *Dharma* and *Adharma* as in the words of the translator: "On the human level, the two opposing armies consist of the Pandavas and the Kauravas... the Pandavas represent dharma, while the Kauravas represent adharma." (Smith xv) The chief objective of the teachings of the Mahabharata is to render every subject born on earth to the path of Dharma, dissuading the reader from any inclination towards Adharma. For an individual to abide by the principles of Dharma, the utmost necessity is of wisdom and enlightenment which comes through reading of the book. Once a person is enlightened, he will not follow the path of Adharma even remotely. In a way, it can be said that through the wisdom and enlightenment attained by virtue of reading the epic purges an individual of his sins and brings about what is known as the effect of catharsis.

Due to the sheer coverage of a vast number of subjects, much work has been done and remains to be done in regard to this book. The book has stood the test of time through millennia. Be it politics or warfare, economics or household affairs, science or religion, social issues or philosophical convictions, lessons of life or death: every idea conceived by the human mind is discovered upon singular reading of this book. For example in the Anusasana Parva, it is described how Yudhishtira, finding himself in political and moral conflicts seeks the invaluable advice of Bhishma and is brought to self-reconciliation. This Parva deals with rules in detail and of principles related to *Dharma* as well as *Artha* which is commonly understood as economics; the chapter also contains the rules of charity. Also guidelines concerning individual duty, code of conduct and the matchless virtue of truth are illustrated. The famous story of Yudhishtira's meeting with the Yaksha requires little mention. It is within this story that through the wisdom of Yudhishtira's answers, we gain new insights to everyday facts. This may be elucidated through the following quotes taken from the same episode:

"What is faster than the wind?
The mind.
More numerous than grass?
Thoughts.
What is more valuable than gold?
Knowledge.
...
Who is man's most dreaded enemy?
Anger..."
(Pattanaik 190-191)

No wonder then, the book may be read as a journey towards true enlightenment. It is not due to no reason that such a voluminous project had been undertaken ages and ages ago. It had a purpose of its own, a purpose which is of universal aid. It had for its objective, the benefitting of humanity.

We know that the thin line of demarcation of human beings from other animals is of the endowment of the faculty of reason which facilitates acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. "If dharma enables us to outgrow the beast in us, then adharma makes us worse than animals. If dharma takes us towards divinity, then adharma fuels the demonic."(Pattanaik 346) As mentioned in the be-

gining of this paper, the term enlightenment has three connotations. So, this paper aims at a study of the same in relation to this great Indian epic.

The Mahabharata and Immanuel Kant's Concept of Enlightenment

Centuries after the composition of the *Mahabharata* in the year 1784, we come across Immanuel Kant throwing some light on the concept of enlightenment in his famous essay "*An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*" In it, he gives his famous definition of Enlightenment and quotes Horace: dare to be wise; have the courage to use your own mind; think for yourself. He adopts the same as the motto of Enlightenment: Sapere aude! He claims that by and large, mankind is lazy and ignorant. Man remains immature throughout life owing to this unforgivable 'laziness and cowardice' of his own. Highly critical of this lethargic tendency, he writes,

"It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me..."(Kant 1)

We may understand this with an example from the context at hand. Accepted that the *Mahabharata* is a storehouse of wisdom and knowledge, mere reading without self-realisation is inadequate for the purpose of enlightenment. A seeker of true enlightenment needs to incorporate the learnings from the same in his life, that is to adopt the path of Dharma and lead a meaningful life. Only then will his enlightenment be complete, otherwise in vain.

Kant further defines 'immaturity' as "the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another."(1) He elaborates: "This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another." (1) In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna faces a painful dilemma when he realizes that he has to fight a battle against his teacher, his own brothers and his beloved kin. He arrives at a serious moment of indecisiveness. Failing to resolve this conflict, the 'immature' Arjuna seeks 'guidance' from Krishna.

The role of Krishna therefore, may be read as corresponding to the rational faculty of those seeking it. Also, Arjuna's immaturity is 'self-imposed' because it is not that he did not 'understand' the complications of war and its implications. He only 'lacks resolution and courage' to step forward and fulfil the demands of necessity. So, he requires the 'guidance of another' who is none other than Krishna, symbolically read as his own reason.

As a criticism of social institutions and their impositions of specified rules and principles upon the ordinary life of individuals, Kant says, "Dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity."(Kant 1) This may be related to the case of the game of Dice being played in the *Mahabharata*. Many interpretations tend to attribute it to an inherent weakness in the character of Yudhisthira. Yet after losing the game and his empire to the trickery of Shakuni, he justifies his stance on the grounds of Dharmic duty, upholding which is the goal of his life. It had been the duty of every Kshatriya to accept all kinds of challenges, while refusing any would simply be interpreted or misinterpreted as cowardice. Such is the demand of social standards of behaviour. Alt-

though Yudhisthira refuses to respond initially, it is the mastermind of Shakuni playing upon his dilemma; and the ultimate chagrin of humiliation for a man of kingly position that makes Yudhisthira succumb to vile play. So, we see that man is subject to the demands of society and its standards of behaviour as Kant mentions, "I hear on all sides the cry: Don't argue! The officer says: Don't argue, get on parade! The tax-official: Don't argue, pay! The clergyman: Don't argue, believe!"(2) Clearly, he states that such obligations lead to incarceration of the individual under abhorrent conditions of social expectations. Another example of this may be the case leading up to Draupadi's polyandry: that when the Pandavas are mistakenly asked by their mother to share whatever they had received and thereby, Draupadi is compelled to accept all the five brothers as her husbands. So deeply ingrained is the obligation towards duty that any possibility of non-conformity is ruled out.

This obligation to Dharmaic duty is further problematised in the following words of Smith about individual dharma:

“A person’s dharma is what is right for that person to do, but one person’s dharma is different from that of another. It may be wrong for you to have sex, but right for me; it may be right for you to take up a life of asceticism in the forest, but wrong for me. A range of factors combines to determine what constitutes dharma for any given individual.”(Smith xviii)

It is to be remembered that Kant was writing during the period of what is known as the Enlightenment period of the 18th century. If we go by the characteristic features of the age we shall see that the movement believed in the use of reason and logic for leading a meaningful life. It was an age of scientific temperament. In keeping with similar ideologies, Kant espouses the idea of application of reason freely in all matters of conscience as part of the task of an enlightened individual. The same is found in the *Mahabharata*, as in when Yudhisthira asks Bhishma how a king should behave whose rule has fallen into utter ruin and decadence, Bhishma answers that it is a great mystery, and that Yudhisthira will have to apply his own judgement to resolve it. This emphasis on the application of judgement again borders on what Kant has to speak on the apparent lethargy and lack of judgement in the generation of his time.

Bhishma also says that dharma varies in accordance with demands of the situation: there is one dharma for moments of strength and another in times of distress. Self-preservation is a priority over everything else, and one in distress may find ways of survival other than by his regular dharma. Even during a famine a king ought to maintain his exchequer, his army and his allies. Nothing is easily achieved without wealth, and a king may therefore, use any means to obtain wealth. In such cases, he will not incur sin. Now, these words are found somewhat resonating again during the Renaissance when Machiavelli wrote his famous essay titled *The Prince*, drawing guidelines for any ruler to become successful in running his empire, with power and glory, and without getting into trouble. Although Machiavelli had been vehemently criticised for this piece of writing as being loaded with cunning, an enlightened mind would choose to accept it as just another ideological assertion of a philosopher. Identical ideological view is found also in the revered Indian philosopher Chanakya's espousal of shrewd political tactics in order for a prince to be successful in his career. What is noteworthy here is the advocacy of the use of reason, logic and calculation rather than emotion and impulsiveness. Clearly, the analogy may be drawn between Kant speaking for application of reason and Bhishma's words, bordering on the same philosophy.

"All states, the good and the evil, in the three worlds, are caused by Time... Knowing, as thou dost, that all things past and future and all that exist at the present moment, are the offspring of Time, it behoveth thee not to throw away thy reason. (my underline)" (Ganguli 44)

These words here point directly towards the importance placed on application of reason even in the *Mahabharata*.

Being an Enlightenment thinker, Kant by all means advocated use of reason and by implication, it means that he was no different from other Enlightenment philosophers, in terms of perceiving the world as a giant machine, that has a mechanical mode of existence. Empirical evidence is the basis of all kinds of scientific thought and science is the basis of Enlightenment theory. It is not that the *Mahabharata* is a religious text. It is as much scientific as it is mythical. Krishna is seen as the ultimate embodiment of reason and rationality, the epitome of an enlightened soul. He remains unaffected by the warfare although he is as much an active participant in it as he is instrumental in its occurrence. What is noteworthy is his use of practical reason often bordering on shrewd and cunning. For example, in order to render an infringement of the fighting spirit of the invincible guru Dronacharya, Krishna resorts to a lie in an extremely manipulative manner. The lie is about the death of Ashwatthama the elephant being juxtaposed against the name of Ashwatthama, the guru's son, who had been alive and is believed to remain alive even today. Quite cleverly, Krishna exclaims that Ashwatthama is dead, literally meaning the death of the elephant of the same name, thereby making Dronacharya weak and vulnerable, on account of the overwhelming grief. But he also purges himself of his guilt by mentioning that it is only the elephant, however in a low voice, so as to avoid its audibility reaching the enemy. Thus, we see that this time he places little value on the emotional nature of human individuality. The only objective is to have one's mission fulfilled by hook or by crook. Some critics like to critique the stance adopted by Krishna during the event of the battle. Krishna is blamed as responsible for the continuation of the war. However, it may be observed that Krishna had had a farsighted goal behind the annihilation of an entire generation of warriors. Not only were the Kauravas a great number but also representatives of evil. So a necessity of their removal had arisen. That Krishna was not biased or selfish may be deduced from the very fact that he had planned his own death as well whereas being supposedly omniscient and omnipotent, he could have conveniently prevented it.

Again, when Arjuna is troubled by the sight of his kinsmen in the battlefield, his problem is resolved by Krishna's equivocal words of reason: "For one who has taken his birth, death is certain; and for one who is dead, birth is certain. Therefore, in the unavoidable discharge of your duty, you should not lament." (Gita 82) These words are not just consolatory but pretty much logical, pragmatic and scientific. As Newtonian law says that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, likewise every living being born must die and for every death, there is birth. This is analogous also to Shelley's famous rhetorical question: If winter comes can spring be far behind?

The *Mahabharata* and Stoical Thought

According to the Upanishads and Buddhist philosophy, enlightenment implies being in a state of spiritual freedom due to detachment from worldly affairs, which is often invariably read as *Nirvana* or *Moksha*. This notion is very similar to the concept of Stoicism. Stoicism refers to a

school of Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens in the early 3rd century BC. The Stoics claimed that emotions lead to errors of judgment which are destructive in nature. Stoicism became a very popular philosophy among the elite, educated classes in both the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire alike. The doctrine had a considerable following throughout the Roman Empire till the time when the closing of all schools devoted to pagan philosophy, took place in AD 529 as per an order issued by the Emperor Justinian I, who saw these schools as being at loggerheads with the Christian faith.

The teachings of the *Mahabharata* tend to develop the quality of Stoicism in any human being who receives it wholeheartedly. The following is written about the book: "It contains an account of various manners and rites. It is accepted by the wise, as the state called Vairagya is by men desirous of final release." (Ganguli 54) The keyword here is *Vairagya* which is a Sanskrit term roughly translated as dispassion, detachment, or renunciation, in particular, a renunciation from the pains and pleasures (Maya) of the material world. So it is quite evident that the intellectual leanings of the epic borders on a Stoical perspective.

Inculcation of a Stoical perception of life is an important aspect of the process of enlightenment because it is believed that the ultimate goal of an enlightened individual is to become one not with the worldliness of the world but with the super-soul of God. "He who is without attachment, who does not rejoice when he obtains good, nor lament when he obtains evil, is firmly fixed in perfect knowledge." (Gita 107) says Krishna. Since, the *Gita* is an integral part of the *Mahabharata*, its teaching may be indispensably read as a part of the epic itself. This is undoubtedly in keeping with Stoical stream of thought.

We know that the *Mahabharata* forms one of the most important books of Hinduism which is understood better not as a religion or faith but as *Sanatana Dharma* or the eternal Way of Life. The Stoics also presented their philosophy as a way of life common for all and not as a separate school of thought. The development of self-control and restraint as a means of overcoming destructive emotions is what Stoics primarily believed in apart from the premise that objective perception of life helps one to understand the universal reason, the etymological term for which is 'logos'. Thus, for the Stoics, reason meant not only using logic, but also understanding the processes of nature or universal reason, on the basis of which all things function in the universe. Living according to reason and virtue, they held, is to live in harmony with the divine order of the universe and respect the essential value of all. All of this resonates much of the philosophical teachings of the *Gita*.

A primary aspect of Stoicism involves improving the individual's ethical and moral well-being. This principle also applies to the realm of interpersonal relationships that is to be free from negative emotions of anger, envy, and jealousy. It also talks of accepting even slaves as the equals of other human beings, because all human beings are products of nature. In the *Mahabharata* we see this equalisation being brought about in the marriage of Bhima who is a Kshatriya, with Hidimba, who belongs to the category of Rakshasas, corresponding somewhat to the modern day categorisation of those less privileged tribes deprived of the status of civilians. In this marriage not only do we see the ethical and moral goodness of Bhima but also an egalitarian goal being fulfilled.

The ancient Stoics are very commonly misunderstood because the terms they had used during their time pertained to concepts which hold different bearings in today's time. The word 'stoic'

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has come to signify one who is lacking emotions or is indifferent to pain, because Stoic ethics taught freedom from 'passion' by following 'reason' which is what Kant talks about in the 18th century. The Stoics did not seek to annihilate emotions completely. They only sought to 'transform' them through inner calm, logic, reflection, and concentration. Self-control through gaining of wisdom and thereby freeing oneself from suffering was the central idea of the Stoics. They believed that inner calm could be inculcated through peace of mind which they understood as bearing an objective perspective towards every aspect of life. Devoid of personal prejudices, one would be able to maintain balance and harmony in life.

As one reads the *Mahabharata*, the parallels between its approach to perception of life and that of Stoicism become crystal clear. The longer we are chained to the material world, the farther we shall be from enlightenment. Therefore, a stoical understanding of life is necessary for the breaking away from the tentacles of worldliness, which is one of the chief aims of what the *Mahabharata* establishes in its teachings. Not only does it enhance our ability of detachment from earthly life, it also contributes to building of inner calm and peace which is the other name of authentic joy. In other words, reading the *Mahabharata* gives joy and solace to the inner being of the reader.

It is said that we always search for permanent happiness in a universe where our life itself is temporary. During the course of earthly indulgence, it is quite natural for any human being to perceive happiness as mere fulfilment of worldly desires. However, a reading of the *Mahabharata* alters this perception in a significant way as we go on to realise the futility of human desires. So we begin to take cognisance of the fact that we are akin only to a speck of dust in the universe and our lives a mere nanosecond in the clock of eternal time. Further, this stimulates the ignition of virtues such as humility and modesty in human life. Once we discover that the world is only a resting place for the traveller-soul, we shall not harbour vain hopes of worldly glory anymore.

This subject has been dealt with by writers ages down the line. For example, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* proves wrong the human understanding of happiness and time. While the protagonist lands himself in trouble in his quest for absolute power through knowledge and of conquering time, he eventually goes on to realise, albeit too late for him, the triviality of 24 years in the chronograph of eternal time.

The efficiency of this effect is best highlighted by the most important action in the epic that is of the physical war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. While the entire garrison of a hundred Kauravas is seen being wiped out of existence, the five Pandavas go on to learn the insignificance of human life in the universe. The honour and glory of the battlefield is limited to a small phase of earthly hours. There are deeper lessons to be learned and imbibed, by virtue of which one may reach heaven, understood as a state of eternal bliss. Among the five Pandavas, only Yudhishthira is seen capable of that kind of spiritual attainment and thus, his journey is complete as he transcends earthly existence by being the only mortal man to walk to heaven while alive. That he is successful in inculcating the value of stoicism is evident from his encounter with the Yaksha who, impressed by Yudhishthira's answers says:

"I shall let one of your brothers live. Who shall it be?" Without a moment's hesitation, Yudhishthira takes Nakula's name. The Yaksha asks surprisingly, "Why him? A stepbrother? Why not Bhima or Arjuna, who are powerful warriors critical to protect

your kingship?" to which Yudhishthira replies, "My father had two wives. I, the son of Kunti, am alive. Surely a son of Madri must be kept alive too." Impressed by Yudhishthira's sense of fair play, the Yaksha restores all the four Pandavas to life." (Pattanaik 191)

What is remarkable in this instance is Yudhishthira's sense of impartiality stemming from his apparent detachment from familial ties. Of course it may have pained him to choose only one brother but it has been clearly mentioned that he utters Nakula's name 'without hesitation'. A person is capable of such an action only when he is able to 'transcend' the temptations of worldly attachments.

Seeing all his kinsmen and *Gurus* before him, Arjuna is overwhelmed with grief and he drops his bow and arrows, completely rejecting the idea of battle, to which Krishna replies saying that Arjuna's lamentation is futile and unworthy of grief. For those who are wise lament neither for the living nor the dead, they do not have to mourn the loss of anything. Clearly, the Lord is advocating the idea of staying aloof from the *Maya* of the world as Arjuna is overcome by emotions and grief, pondering over the idea of having to fight his kinsmen and beloved *Gurus*. Likewise, Krishna has the following to talk about happiness and sorrow: "the nonpermanent appearance of happiness and distress, and their disappearance in due course, are like the appearance and disappearance of winter and summer seasons." (*Gita* 69) He says that happiness and sorrow arise from sense perception and therefore one must be able to form the habit of tolerating these without being affected. This is what Samuel Johnson also talks about: the futility of human aspirations and their vanity. Enlightenment thus, also becomes a way of freeing oneself from the vicious cycle of worldly temptations as Krishna tells Arjuna that the person who remains unperturbed by happiness and sorrow alike and is steady in both is eligible for liberation and freedom from the vicious cycle of life and its miseries. He further says, "One who is in knowledge knows that the self slays not nor is slain." (*Gita* 74), highlighting the significance of the same.

"Krishna offers Arjuna two things: what he is and what he had. Arjuna chooses what Krishna is. Duryodhana is happy with what Krishna has. This divide between him and his, me and mine, what one is and what one has, is the difference between seeking the soul and being satisfied with matter." (Pattanaik 224)

This is a major dichotomy leading up to two opposing orientations wherein the ultimate triumph is manifested in the victory of the Pandavas.

One may reflect upon the idea of detachment from worldliness as breeding inactivity in men but Krishna has an answer to the same. Highlighting the necessity of duty or *Karma* he says, "Not by merely abstaining from work can one achieve freedom from reaction, nor by renunciation alone can one attain perfection." (*Gita* 121) In the modern day world, we observe that professional or academic achievements, beauty certificates and so on do not really matter as much as does what it takes to account for a good human being. Thus, the basic understanding is that instead of wasting away one's potentials in the pursuit of materialistic ends or earthly glory, one ought to indulge in finding ways to become a good individual in entirety, so as to be able to contribute to humanity at large.

The *Mahabharata* and Renaissance Understanding of Enlightenment

No essay on enlightenment may be complete without a study of the Renaissance ideals and the Renaissance concept of knowledge. For the term 'enlightenment' connotes the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom, and the central idea of the Renaissance revolves round man's attainment of knowledge, the two may be studied absolutely relatively. Technically, the term Renaissance means 'Rebirth' which in the context of this paper, may be interpreted as the birth of a new man after going through a phase of rigorous enlightenment. That is, no human being is born enlightened. He has to go through a process of truly educating himself, thereby becoming fit for survival, which again sounds typically Darwinian. This may be attributed to the fact that the *Mahabharata* is relatable to all kinds of knowledge in the universe as stated already in the beginning of this paper. After undergoing a process of enlightenment the individual gains a new birth: rejuvenated and all the more wise.

About Renaissance: Several scholars claim that the Renaissance is the beginning of what is understood as early modern Europe. The history of the Renaissance begins as an intellectual movement in Italy of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries when the term 'rinascità' meaning renaissance or rebirth was used to describe the movement. It was an age in which learning, literature, and the arts were considered as 'reborn' after the supposedly dark Middle Ages. The ancient world of Rome and Greece, their literature, learning, and politics were highly admired as ideals of glorious achievement. It remains to be seen how ancient Indian philosophy as presented in the teachings of the *Mahabharata* correspond to the Renaissance understanding of humanity in terms of attainment of epistemological enlightenment.

'Humanism' was the intellectual movement of the Renaissance. It became institutionalised as the new form of education wherein subjects such as history, grammar, philosophy, poetry and rhetoric encompassing what was understood as humanistic studies, were taught from texts of ancient authors. The Italian scholars claimed that mere reading of medieval writings and learning to write formal letters was inadequate. Therefore, a new system of curriculum and syllabi had been introduced. Guidance was sought from the ancient works of Greek and Roman scholars. Ancient Greek and Roman texts were translated from Latin to English, French or Italian. Thus, ancient wisdom was disseminated.

Renaissance Humanism emphasised on teaching the principles of living a responsible and successful life on this earth. Apart from providing fundamental education, it also incorporated a critical attitude toward received values, individuals, and institutions, especially those that betrayed their own principles. They especially questioned the age old institutions and values inherited from the Middle Ages. They developed a criticism for Medieval art, government, philosophy, and approaches to religion. Thus, we may mark the birth of what can be called discretionary powers without which enlightenment is incomplete. It is made possible only due to the indulgence in reading and analysis of ancient texts which comprises the first fundamental step towards enlightenment. We must remember that every new age develops and emerges as a reaction towards its preceding age. Once this habit of critical studying developed, they worked on it further and eventually, turned their critical perspectives on the learning of the ancient world and rejected certain parts of it. After all, mere reading and acceptance of what is read without a critical eye seldom accounts for true wis-

dom. This must not be misunderstood as being equivalent to nonconformity or retaliation to every bit of education received. Conformity is as much acceptable as nonconformity. But it ought to be with the inclusion of an understanding of both the pros and cons of it.

Common strand of thought:

We know that the Renaissance ideals considered man at the center of the universe and that it lies in the capacity of a man to attain the stature of divinity if he is able to achieve all kinds of wisdom and knowledge. It is said that winning is not as important as participating in the game. Whether or not a man is successful in this endeavour of encompassing omniscience, is not as important as the efforts put into it. Perhaps it is the sole reason why we have seen immense versatility among Renaissance men. Be it a Petrarch or a Dante, a Mirandola or a Machiavelli, a Michelangelo or a Leonardo da Vinci, every man belonging to the time of the Renaissance was a multitalented personality. This may be understood as part of their endeavour towards omniscience. Since the fall of Constantinople in 1492, the quest for attaining all kinds of knowledge began with the circulation, re-reading and re-interpretation of ancient texts. It is therefore, quite possible that their readings borrowed from the teachings of the *Mahabharata* as well.

Also, the basic idea is of the necessity of man's enlightenment according to both: the Renaissance and the *Mahabharata*. The Renaissance belief was that the only perfect being in the universe is the almighty who is omniscient and thereby, omnipotent. Thus, the idea that 'knowledge is power' may be attributed to Renaissance thought processes. Perhaps they believed that man could attain nearness to god by attaining all kinds of knowledge. Therefore, all Renaissance men strived to be better versions of themselves which is also the main objective of the *Mahabharata*. Through various trials, tribulations and experiences, the men present physically during the era of the *Mahabharata* undergo a schooling of knowledge-acquisition. As a matter of fact, all who 'read' the epic even today acquire knowledge of various sorts, fulfilling the objective of both - the *Mahabharata* as well as the Renaissance.

Even if we go by the *Bible*, the story of the origin of humankind may also be seen as the beginning of enlightenment, that is, Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit which is none other than a symbolic representation of knowledge and his subsequent fall from God's grace leads to the birth of the human race. So the implication is that for procreation to take place, knowledge is an important prerequisite, which in Adam's case is triggered by Eve's complacency with Satan's plan. However, the crucial question raised by many critics is why the most loving and benevolent God forbids his favourite creation from attaining knowledge. If this fact is compared to the idea that knowledge is power, the equation leads to a controversial debate as to why God would like to keep his favourite creation in the darkness of ignorance. Does it mean that Adam was not His favourite? Or does it mean that the Christian God, like any other anthropomorphic pagan god, harbours feelings of superiority and gets into the game of power-politics? Also, if God is omniscient, he must have known already that Adam is going to disobey him. Why then did he plant the forbidden tree in the garden? Therefore the Fall itself may be attributed as part of God's design: of the continuation of the human race therefrom. Since the Fall concerns acquisition of knowledge, we may deduce that it is enlightenment that God wants his creation to achieve.

Similarly, in the *Mahabharata*, perhaps it lied in the capacity of Krishna, who is supposedly believed to have all knowledge of what was to happen in future, to put an end to the war in the very first place. Had it been the case, there would have been no grand epic by the name of *Mahabharata* today. Perhaps the message of the entire tale is to encourage men to work and carry out the duties and responsibilities assigned by conditions of life categorically. Taking into consideration the agenda behind Krishna's motivation of Arjuna into partaking of the battle, that is of doing one's *Karma*, we may associate the same with the Renaissance encouragement of individuals into giving up lethargy and carving out a new, re-born identity for themselves founded on the grounds of their own work.

Another parallel that we may draw from is the concept of Renaissance man, also called, "Universal Man, Italian Uomo Universale.. The ideal embodied the basic tenets of Renaissance Humanism, which considered man the centre of the universe, limitless in his capacities for development, and led to the notion that men should try to embrace all knowledge and develop their own capacities as fully as possible... The ideal was most brilliantly exemplified in Alberti—who was an accomplished architect, painter, classicist, poet, scientist, and mathematician and who also boasted of his skill as a horseman and in physical feats—and in Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), whose gifts were manifest in the fields of art, science, music, invention, and writing."(Renaissance man)

Similarly, in the *Mahabharata* we come across men of unparalleled potentials and talents of unmatched quality: Bhishma as a man of words, embodiment of sacrifice, apart from being an excellent warrior and advisor of war mechanisms; Yudhishthira with his strategic upholding of dharma even in the face of adversities, besides his patience, generosity and forgiveness, excellent skills of leadership as well as kingship, Bhima with his physical power and yet immense capability of pure love in all its softness, for his wife Draupadi; while Arjuna's archery skills may be put to comparison only with Karna, the self-taught expert of archery who is also one of the most empathetic and benevolent of men in the tale, one capable of the ultimate self-sacrifice.

Krishna is an overwhelming personality in the *Mahabharata*, a detailed study of whom is indispensable to our journey of enlightenment. An article by Dr David Frawley affirms Krishna as a multitalented personality in totality:

"Shri Krishna was a multisided personality, a renaissance man who mastered every domain of human life according to the highest inner vision. He was not simply a monk, a prophet or a saint, but a master of our full human potential, in the world and beyond the world."(Frawley)

He is of the opinion that Krishna is one singular figure who represents India in its entirety, its way of life, its culture as well as history. The writer claims that he has reasons for choosing Krishna as the central influential individual, in a land replete with mighty sages and rulers such as Buddha or Rama. He believes that Krishna is a teacher of the *Bhagavad Gita* which according to him, is the primary text of the Indian subcontinent, bearing vital significance to the Indian way of life, or for that matter to an universal way of life.

Needless to mention, Krishna is the embodiment of divine love so much so that some broad-minded scholars like to study him at par with Jesus who is the epitome of true love. Numerous stories revolving round Krishna's love for his friends, with whom he had shared sweetened butter reflect that he was a man of egalitarian principles. His memorable friendship with Sudama who was financially unstable, is almost an iconoclastic example of a rich man of kingly position, abandoning any sense of pride as may develop from superior status quo, befriending one from the lowest rungs of the financial ladder. Worth mentioning is also his love for Radha indicative of the necessary friendship between individuals of opposite gender, and for his *Gopis* with whom he had played Holi commemorating healthy friendship and a life full of celebration, vibrant colours, peace and harmony. His dedicated guidance to Arjuna as a well-wishing friend is also remarkable. Unlike many others who for instance, simply condemn the war, Krishna is known for his empathy even with human weaknesses. That he is able to indulge himself in the affairs of the world while staying aloof from the same is an interesting quality of his character.

In terms of diplomacy and statesmanship, Krishna's efficiency as an active member par excellence is beyond comparison. Despite deployment of shrewd politics, he is far from doing evil. In the *Gita*, he mentions that whenever *Adharma*, which may be understood by us as deeds of evil in simple terms, overpowers all goodness and Dharma is on the path of decline, he will reincarnate himself, save all the good people, destroy all evildoers and establish the principle of Dharma once again. This corresponds to the universal belief accepted by almost all faiths, of the decadent world coming to a nihilistic end for new creation to take place. One may associate this to the idea of the Second Coming as propounded by the Christian faith.

Through Krishna's counselling of Arjuna, we as readers are also acquainted with deeper philosophical understandings of life. He talks about doing one's duty without looking for rewards: a lesson which is highly motivational for the generation of twenty-first century immersed in hopelessness.

Apart from the historical fact that Krishna's flute-playing mesmerised all, affirming his talent as a musician, we also come to know of Krishna's role in the field of art. Just as Leonardo da Vinci was famous as a painter, Krishna is but also famous as a subject of painting for several Indian artists, ages down the line. If we were to visit any shop selling Indian paintings, we would undoubtedly come across at least one painting of Krishna. Perhaps all Indian artists in their lifetime create at the minimum, one painting depicting Krishna in some form or the other: as an infant in the company of his pet, the equally innocent-looking calf or relishing sweetened butter, reflecting the beauty of childlike innocence; as a musician playing his flute in unison and perfect synchronisation with the serenity of the natural background, thereby registering his artistic skills in the history of Indian culture; as a soulfully committed lover with Radha, as one who understands the depth and intensity of two souls longing to be in company of each other; or even as a charioteer blowing a conch-shell upon the chariot driven by four white horses, trying to induct generations of humankind into doing their Karma while following the path of Dharma, of the necessity of their awakening from slumber.

These examples illustrate the fact Krishna is none but an ultimate Renaissance man with multifarious and limitless potentialities. That Krishna is a legend whose teachings are relevant for every age group and for every phase of human life is quite clear from the above examples. He was

not merely a man of versatile talents but a person who worked for the upliftment of mankind, who strived to enlighten the entire human race on an eternal note.

Because we come across diverse human traits and characteristic features which are relevant not just to 14th century Renaissance but to everyday contemporary life, it appears that enlisting the characters themselves as against their talents, potentials and credentials is more than sufficient to tell us of the grandeur of that epoch, of this grand tale of that era as a reflection of life for all eternity.

The Mahabharata as a Psychological Journey

Dante begins the first Canto of his *Divine Comedy* with the following lines:

"Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard--so tangled and rough

...

I'll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter
I cannot well say, being so full of sleep
Whatever moment it was I began to blunder

Off the true path..."
(Alighieri Canto 1, 1-15)

So, Dante is on a journey and his soul is on a voyage. Dante was a renowned poet and politician from Florence. He was exiled for alleged corruption and sentenced to burn at the stake. But we know that part of it was due to the prevailing conflict between the two opposite political orientations: the White Guelphs and the Black Guelphs. One thing made clear from this relatively recent historical fact is that what happened to the two warring factions in the battle of the *Mahabharata* has its parallels repeated in the history of mankind time and again.

Dante's journey through the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso is often interpreted by many critics as a psychological journey. The very first line of the poem 'midway on our life's journey' may be marked for the deliberate use of 'our' instead of 'my' journey, implying that it is a 'universal journey' that every human being embarks upon. He also mentions that he was 'full of sleep' while on his journey, hinting perhaps at the fact that his is a journey of the sleeping soul to its awakening which could also be called spiritual awakening. Alternatively, this 'sleep' could be read as a metaphor for lack of knowledge. Thus, it can be said that he assumes the role of any individual who comes across many crossroads in life, wherein more often than not, one is dissuaded from the path of virtue which Dante refers to as the 'true path'. It is then, that the necessity of undertaking this psychological journey becomes significant so that the individual comes out as a rejuvenated being, having cleansed himself or herself of all his or her sins, or in other words, having reached an understanding of what is right and what is wrong.

In a forest there is darkness and uncertainty. One does not know what one may come across in this darkness of the forest. As opposed to the orderliness of a cultivated land, a forest is full of

chaos and disorderly growth of familiar as well as unfamiliar, exotic vegetation. It is often read as a symbol of the unconscious state of human mind which is so full of concealed mysteries that an individual himself or herself fails to understand and demystify the same. In fact, the individual feels lost in the labyrinthine maze of his own thoughts lying in that inner being. An exile in the forest inevitably leads to a kind of adventure which is full of surprises for the one undertaking the journey. But to the other end of the forest lies a kind of a revelation of the greater self.

However, a very important prerequisite for this achievement is a little self-awareness and self-introspection which would not only aid him or her in rectification of his or her mistakes but also help in staying away from committing mistakes in the first place. In the *Mahabharata*, not every character is chosen for the path of enlightenment just as not every individual is able to transcribe on paper a journey like Dante. Only the Pandavas, and specifically Arjuna and Yudhisthira, apparently due to their exercise of ethics and morality in the highest degree, are conspicuously engaged in the process of enlightening themselves.

Just as a child grows up to be an adult through innumerable experiences, good or bad, but with the constant accompaniment of a guide: either its parents or later, its teachers till it is able to understand and exercise its own reason and conscience, throughout Dante's journey, he is guided, helped and encouraged by Virgil just as Arjuna is by Krishna in the *Mahabharata* on the surface level. At a symbolic level, the presence of Virgil in Dante's journey or Krishna accompanying Arjuna may also be interpreted as their own conscience telling them the distinctions between right and wrong. Why is it that only Krishna, who is perceived as the omniscient being, possessing all knowledge of past, present and future, becomes Arjuna's charioteer is a question commonly asked.

Similar to Hector fighting Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, despite knowing of his own fatal end; Arjuna reacts in the following way:

"My dear Krsna, seeing my friends and relatives present before me in such a fighting spirit, I feel the limbs of my body quivering...My whole body is trembling, and my hair is standing on end. My bow Gandiva is slipping from my hand,... and my mind is reeling. I foresee only evil..."(Gita 45-51)

As Arjuna succumbs to emotional sway, facing a major moral dilemma, he seeks the aid of Krishna to guide him. Herein, we see Arjuna coming to terms with a psychological battle going on inside his head. He is torn between duty and emotional impulse. Krishna rids him of his trouble by saying that it is but cowardice on the part of a Kshatriya to flee the battlefield. Krishna says, "Perform your duty and abandon all attachment to success or failure." (Gita 100) This is presumably, the answer any questioning mind would have received from the conscience during times of crises.

The episode of Draupadi's maltreatment received at the hands of men has been a subject of much debate since ages. It is this tragic episode which has been time and again, interpreted as a major anti-feminist case. Certainly it is, but in the light of our reading the text as a source of enlightenment, it is seen that the tale is not merely a historical narration of events but also, as one that informs us of how things should be or should not be. In other words, it strikes our conscience and ignites our otherwise dormant thoughts. It makes us more conscious, more aware, more probing about why and how of events. It stimulates our discretionary faculty, thereby attempting to maintain order and peace in society, so that unfavourable or unacceptable turn of events does not take place again.

In today's world, the crucial problem is lack of true education or enlightenment, which is why incidents of rape and molestation are repeated occurrences from time to time.

Considering the metaphorical use of the forest as an archetype of the dark recesses of the human mind, we may interpret the physical journey of the Pandavas as taking place on the plane of their psychic realm. For any being to attain supreme enlightenment he has to undertake this journey as did Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, Rama in the *Ramayana*, or for that matter, even Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Many scholars have interpreted this journey as a psychological one rather than physical wherein the individual delves deep into the inner recesses of his own mind. These inner regions or layers of the mind are akin to a dense forest, shrouded in mysteries. The mysteries unfold in layers after self-introspection and deep probing and one comes out illuminated with the dissolution of all impure thoughts and intentions. Thus, a kind of cleansing or catharsis takes place. Besides, one unveils the innumerable treasures of knowledge and wisdom which had hitherto remained unexplored. For all these reasons Krishna says, "When your intelligence has passed out of the dense forest of delusion, you shall become indifferent to all that has been heard and all that is to be heard." (Gita 103)

"In the forest, the sons of Kunti encounter the three gods who made their mother pregnant. Yudhisthira meets Yama, Arjuna meets Indra, and Bhima meets Hanuman, his brother... These three meetings have a major transformatory effect. All three are humbled and enlightened...The exile is clearly a time when the Pandavas are transformed through stories and adventures (my underline)" (Pattanaik 192)

This bit takes us back to Dante's experience in the 'forest', representing symbolically the trials, tribulations, chaos, anxiety, difficulties, or moral dilemmas circumscribing human life.

"The forest transforms the Pandavas, makes them better kings. The tragedy of exile thus seems very much part of a divine plan to help men be better rulers." (Pattanaik 182) Also, "Traveling to holy spots and listening to sacred stories are believed to reduce the burden of karmic debts and increase the load of karmic equity. The unlucky Pandavas thus use their long period of exile to clean up their fate." (174) The dichotomy is further illustrated by the translator as he writes: "All their life, the Kauravas live in wealth but their life is full of envy and rage and bitterness. For most of their life, the Pandavas live in poverty, in forests, in exile, as dependents in the house of their uncle but their life is full of learning" (224) and that learning is what is important for the purpose of enlightenment.

It is not just the forest that is seen as an archetype but also the journey to the Underworld which is too commonly found in works of epic proportion to be read as an archetype. It is as though without the journey to Hades in the *Aeneid* or *Odyssey* or even in Dante's, the process of enlightenment remains incomplete. Likewise, we see Yudhisthira's vision of Naraka or Hell during his ultimate gait to Swarga in the final chapter, Renunciation wherein he is deceptively made to hear the lamentations of his brothers while being shown the zone allotted for sinners. For complete enlightenment, knowledge of both good and evil is indispensable. Therefore, the vision of hell is common to all the epics be it *Aeneid*, *Odyssey* or *Divine Comedy*, with this aim at hand. It is included in order to ensure that the individual is acquainted with the differences between what is good and what is evil.

Reading the *Mahabharata* as a psychological journey, one may also observe that it aims at a kind of transcendence of all emotions, desires, aspirations wherein the ego subsides and one is at peace with the universe. If we keep in mind the surface-level purpose of why the tale of the Mahabharata had been narrated by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya in the event of the Snake Sacrifice which he had organised in order to avenge the killing of his father Parikshit by the deadly venom of Takshaka, we may note that it was part of the process of his enlightenment, so that he would give up his ego and anger and stop the Snake Sacrifice. By the end of the tale, we see him doing so, thereby putting an end to his anger stemming from fear and insecurity: "Janamejaya had overpowered his fear and abandoned his rage. No more serpents would be killed. 'Shanti, Shanti, Shanti', he had said...This was a cry for inner peace."(Pattanaik 343) So, we can see the final dissolution of anger and hatred paving the way for peace.

Krishna tells Arjuna, "when a man gives up all varieties of sense desire which arise from mental concoction, and when his mind finds satisfaction in the self alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness."(*Gita* 105) This building up of self-sufficiency is partly the objective of the journey irrespective of the mode: physical or psychological.

"The Mahabharata is not as much concerned with the war as it is with the root of conflict... as long as we do not accept life for what it is, as long as we try to control and change things, there will always be conflict. Conflict ends when we realise that beyond tangible material reality, there is intangible spiritual reality."(Pattanaik 344)

Therefore, it is spiritual rejuvenation which is aimed for. After all,

"The point of existence is not to accumulate merit but to attain wisdom. We have to ask ourselves- why we do what we do? When we truly accept the answer, we break free from the cycle of births and deaths, and discover the realm beyond Swarga, Vaikuntha, where there is peace forever."(Pattanaik 342)

This kind of questioning and self-introspection helps in self-correction and rectification. It further helps by endowing us with a new kind of transcendental freedom, a freedom that comes from an understanding of both good and evil, of both joy and sorrow, that helps in finding a meaningful existence on earth, that makes us live life than merely exist as automatons, more specifically in the mechanised version of the world today.

Conclusion:

It is now clear that Enlightenment encompasses acquisition of knowledge and wisdom which will enable one to make the right use of one's rational faculty and conscience, thereby emerging from 'self-incurred immaturity'. It will also help one lead life successfully to meet the final end of Nirvana or Moksha. In the beginning of this paper, we had taken into consideration all these three aspects of our understanding of enlightenment and we have seen how the same correspond to the teachings of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Krishna says, "The liberated living entities seek that place where there are no material miseries."(*Gita* 102)

Singular reading of the epic, without drawing any analogy with the Kantian concept of enlightenment or with the Buddhist interpretation of the same, is sufficient to understand the depth

and immensity of all the wisdom contained in the book. Nevertheless, our analysis of the text as a journey towards enlightenment, keeping in mind Immanuel Kant's definition as well as the stoical detachment from worldly affairs as propounded by Buddhist philosophy, adds a new dimension to our study in terms of having a well set goal of reading the epic.

What is noteworthy is the fact that the entire journey of enlightenment circumscribes man and his holistic development. The world at large is seen as intervening in the life of the individual being who is at the center of existence. Be it Professor Kant's definition of enlightenment, of Stoical or Buddhist philosophy, and significantly that of the *Mahabharata*, the central idea is of mankind's upliftment from abysmal degeneracy, release from the weight of worldly attachments, trajectory from darkness of ignorance to the light of wisdom. This emphasis on the necessary enlightenment of humankind highlights the importance and centrality of the same. Because human beings are endowed with rational faculty which demarcates them from other beings in the hierarchy of life it lies in their capacity to exercise their conscience and reason in order to lead fruitful lives. Until and unless enlightenment takes place, they remain incapable of judgement, incapable of discretion. Therefore, the seriousness of why enlightenment is essential to human existence is high.

The *Mahabharata* then, we have seen, serves as a journey towards attainment of enlightenment, by virtue of its encompassing a great deal of wisdom in immense density. It is said that our life is a constant process of learning. We live in a symbiotic existence with the world surrounding us wherein give and take occurs reciprocally. We learn from our experiences of this life on the plane of the universe and what we acquire, we give back in some form or the other. Knowing the importance of plants and trees, for instance, we learn to plant more plants, water and grow them. Knowing the value of peaceful and harmonious coexistence, we learn to be helpful and empathetic towards fellow members of society. But this knowledge which is more of wisdom than mere absorption of factual information is what is to be aspired for.

It is a fact universally acknowledged that life is not a bed of roses for any human being born on earth. Certainly, there is illusory relief in ignorance as the belief: Ignorance is Bliss, still prevails, which is the major cause of worry for our old Professor Kant. Nevertheless, it is agreed upon that trials and tribulations make life itself a chaotic existence from which escape, temporary or eternal, is sought. However, when such potentially exploitable sources of priceless wisdom such as of ancient philosophies and more importantly, of a text such as the *Mahabharata* are available to humankind at its disposal, there arises no crisis of resolution. All it requires is a little dedication, understanding and patience on the part of those striving to add meaning to life.

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