

Book Review - The Difficulty of Being Good : On the Subtle Art of Dharma

* *Reena Apurva Mehta*

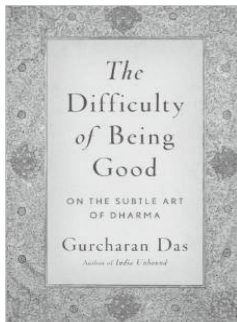
Abstract

The book review analyzed Gurcharan Das's book *The Difficulty of Being Good : On the Subtle Art of Dharma*. This book operates from the perspective of the epic *The Mahabharata*. The author has attempted to explain the meaning of *Dharma* by dissecting the behavioural patterns of the characters in *The Mahabharata*. The book discusses how the battle of Kurukshetra and the characters of *The Mahabharata* are the paradigms of different crises and moral dilemmas faced by human nature and different cultures.

Keywords : epic, dharma, morality, management ethics

JEL Classification : B31, M10, M14

Paper Submission Date : November 20, 2014 ; **Paper sent back for Revision :** December 2, 2014; **Paper Acceptance Date :** December 11, 2014



Book: The Difficulty of Being Good : On the Subtle Art of Dharma

Author: Gurcharan Das

Publisher: Penguin Books India

ISBN: 9780670083497

Edition: 1st edition 2012

Price: ₹ 299/-

Pages: 488

Binding: Paper back

‘Nature does not give a man virtue; the process of becoming a good man is an art.’ - Epictetus

The book, *The Difficulty of Being Good : On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, is a must-read for resolving the moral dilemmas of life. Gurcharan Das intends to deliver a strong dose to upcoming professionals on the significance of ‘Good’ and *Dharma* and how does one practice it with lessons from the great Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, having over 100,000 verses (shlokas) and 18 chapters compiled by sage Ved Vyasa. In today’s world, when we are constantly struggling throughout our lives between rights and wrongs, for which there are no easy answers, this book comes as a great support on the subtle art of *dharma*, which leads to victory.

*Associate Professor, K.J. Somaiya Institute of Management Studies and Research, Vidya Nagari, Vidya Vihar, Mumbai - 400 077. E-mail : reena.m@somaiya.edu

The author of this book, Gurcharan Das, is also the author of the international bestseller, *India Unbound*. The book, available in 17 languages, was later also filmed by BBC. Gurcharan Das studied philosophy at Harvard University. After heading Procter & Gamble, India and South East Asia, he became Managing Director, Procter & Gamble Worldwide (Strategic Planning). At 50, he took an early retirement to become a full time writer. He writes regular columns for five Indian newspapers, including The Times of India, and contributes to Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, Foreign Affairs, and the New York Times (Biography, Gurcharan Das, n.d. a).

Essence of the Epic

The classical Indian life has four aims. The author's earlier book, *India Unbound*, examined the aim of *Artha* – material well-being. In Hinduism, human life is believed to comprise of four stages. These are called *ashramas*, and every man should ideally go through each of these stages. It has been stated that every stage has its own significance in life. The four stages start with *Bhrahmacharya*, a period of adolescence where one is a student and celibate. The second stage in life is *Grihashthashram*, Householder, in which stage one seeks *Kama* and *Artha*. After *Grihashthashram*, one enters *Vanprastha Ashram*, where one goes to the forest and spends his life to seek Dharma. The fourth and final stage is *Sannyasa Ashram*, where one renounces the world in his/her quest of spiritual knowledge and release from human bondage, also known as *moksha*.

The author has written this book in his *Vanprastha Ashram on dharma*. *The Mahabharata* is not only a text, but is also a tradition for Hindus. *Dharma*, or 'doing the right thing,' as the author points out, is untranslatable, as it refers to both moral balance and cosmic balance. It has something to do with words like duty, goodness, law, custom, but they all fall short of explaining with precision the true significance of *dharma*. As the author puts it, *The Mahabharata* is also about incomplete lives, about good people acting badly, and about how difficult it is to be good in this world.

That the heroes in this epic are more human and fallable unlike the ones in Ramayana, was what drove the author to read *The Mahabharata*. The author's pursuit was more towards getting cultivated by reading this book than towards gathering information about it. Stories of *The Mahabharata* are linked with the current corporate, governmental, and personal issues prevailing in today's society. The jealousy Duryodhana has towards Yudhistir is explained by a very relevant example of Mukesh and Anil Ambani. Aptly put by Gore Vidal, "Whenever a friend succeeds a little, something in me dies." The author connects Karna's problem of identity with the national debate on reservation in 2006. The idealistic position of Yudhishtira is compared with Mahatma Gandhi's non - violence movement. President Truman's decision of dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima is discussed in the light of Arjun's dilemma. Dharma is also discussed in the way government schools in India are run. Mr. Das cites a survey done by a Harvard professor for the World Bank on Indian schools and government hospitals, which depicts a very gloomy picture of the issue of governance in the state.

Book Layout

The book starts with the central story of The Mahabharata, and the moral dilemmas and actions undertaken by the main characters. It is a very good read as it gives us, in the first three or four pages, all the questions related to the righteousness of the actions undertaken before, during, and after the battle of Kurukshetra, followed by a genealogical table to understand the characters and connect with their plight. The book, which is of 419 pages, is divided into 10 chapters, devoted to the main characters of the epic and their struggle to do

the right thing. After the 10th chapter, the author has given a summary on the evolution of the word 'Dharma'.

Dilemmas of Different Characters

The battle of Kurukshetra is the battle of *Dharma*. During the battle, there were many instances involved, which may question the reader about the way the battle of dharma is fought. It was almost impossible for the Pandavas to fight the mighty troops of Kauravas and defeat them. The Pandavas had to resort to using unfair means to kill Drona, Karna, Bhishma, Jayadratha, and Duryodhan, which in turn leads to their victory. Even on the part of the Kauravas, a lot of wrong actions were undertaken - penetrating Abhimanyu's *chakravyuh*, denying the Pandavas their rightful claim to their part of the kingdom, humiliating and attempting to disrobe Draupadi in the court in front of the other senior family members, and playing tricks with Yudhishtir in the game of dice.

Each incident is very nicely narrated by the author and enlightens the reader about the subtle meaning of Dharma. *The Mahabharata* presents a moral dilemma to which there are no easy answers. Thus, many interesting perspectives have been presented by the author in a language appreciated by contemporary readers.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The book is very relevant today, when our country, and the world at large, is dealing with so many financial scams. Righteousness of action is haunting the corporate world. "Doing well is not enough, but someone has to lose for us to gain" is the all-pervasive and unsaid philosophy of most of the corporate players. This book gives a fresh look at the stories told by our grandparents with contemporary examples for upcoming professionals. The book efficiently bridges the gap between our history, and the current corporate and political world by making it relevant in today's time without distorting the story and remaining faithful to history.

According to The Difficulty of Being Good : On the Subtle Art of Dharma (n.d.) :

The Mahabharata is obsessed with the elusive notion of *dharma* - in essence, doing the right thing. When a hero does something wrong in a Greek epic, he gets on with it; when a hero falters in the *Mahabharata*, the action stops and everyone weighs in with a different and contradictory take on dharma. The epic's characters are flawed; they stumble. But their incoherent experiences throw light on our day to day emotions of envy, revenge, remorse, status anxiety, compassion, courage, duty and other moral qualities. As the *Mahabharata*'s story unfolds in each chapter (and the author lets the epic speak as far as possible), the focus moves to a single character and his or her ethical problem - and its significance for our lives. (para 2).

References

Gurucharan Das (n.d. a). *Biography*. Retrieved from <http://gurcharandas.org/biography>

Gurucharan Das (n.d. b). *The Difficulty of Being Good : On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://gurcharandas.org/the-difficulty-of-being-good>