# Inner Transformation Through the Mahabharata



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As a  seven-year-old, I sat under the mango tree in our home with my grandfather, as he helped me read aloud from C. Rajagopalachari's retelling of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. A daily morning ritual for several years, it was my introduction to our *Itihasa-Purana* tradition. While both epics fascinated me, the *Mahabharata* had me spellbound. Interestingly, several decades later, I re-engaged with the *Mahabharata* in a dramatically different way.

Recently, I participated in the *Mahabharata Exploration,* a ten-week online offering, elegantly co-facilitated by Anita Balasubramanian, Kavitha Elango and Hariprasad Varma—yoga

therapists, and members of Ritambhara Acharya Sangha,  a group of seeker-teachers affiliated to Ritambhara Ashram. Nestled amidst sylvan surroundings in the Nilgiris, Ritambhara is a community of sacred activists from diverse backgrounds who explore alternate ways of being and living as part of a quest to live a life of meaning and purpose.

A group of 24 seekers, each one so different, yet so similar in our quest for inner transformation, met every Thursday at 8 pm for an hour and half for ten weeks. The virtual space gradually transformed into a subliminal sacred space as we began to explore the *Mahabharata* as a mirror to understand ourselves and our inner reality. What can the *Mahabharata* offer to look at ourselves; to discover hidden parts of ourselves that have either been banished, exiled or simply buried under the rubble of mindless living on autopilot?

True to its promise, even our first session began with three apparently simple but challenging questions that elude knee jerk responses: Who am !? Where am I? Why am I here?

“Our approach at Ritambhara, based on the tradition and teachings of Yogacharya Krishnamacharya and Shri T.K.V. Desikachar explores the convergence of *Itihasa-Purana* tradition and inner work (*antaranga sadhana*) through dialogue and contemplation as described in the *Yoga sutras.* We use the stories in the *Mahabharata* as a mirror to engage in dialogue and contemplation to do *dharana* on the mind. The stories evoke us; cause a churning in the psyche (*manthan*). In this intense process, we  experience the story, touch the *rasa* (essence) and discover the inner deeply self-aware space (*shantam*) from where we can view our inner drama,” explained Anita, Kavitha and Hari.

Throughout the  sessions, the focus was on evocation or feelings, memories or ideas the story evoked  in our conscious minds. As we  engaged with several episodes from the epic, clubbed together as the Pandava archetypes—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Karna, Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupadi stories—we began to engage with them not  intellectually  but experientially. We were sent a story every week before the class. For instance, we began with the Sabha at Jayanta where Shakuni and Duryodhana plot to entice the Pandavas to a diabolical game of dice. Hence  it demanded that we engage with the story not from an intellectual  or cognitive space.

“Therefore, what is important is not the story or its interpretation or analysis as such. But the meaning one makes of it, because this meaning reflects me, who I am,” the facilitators said as they laid out a tentative road map for our inner exploration.

It was liberating to be freed from the tyranny of the rational, logical brain. Instead we were

now being challenged to respond viscerally, tuning in to our intuitive intelligence and an embodied way of knowing in relating to the stories. For instance, I read the Jayanta story not once but several times. It required tremendous focus and a tuning in both while reading the story and after. Often, the evocation would not be instantaneous. Journaling or writing in a free associative manner about what I had just read helped me connect deep within. Often, what was evoked could be a word, a thought, a symbol or image. The stage was set for each of us in the group to explore individually and collectively how we discover, connect and express archetypal energy patterns to heal and transform ourselves.

We were also encouraged to allow the characters to speak to us in multiple ways without stereotyping, reducing or pigeonholing them. I felt humbled to glimpse in me the jealousy and envy that Duryodhana feels at another's success. It was a shadow moment.

Shadows, in the human psyche, are qualities in ourselves that we have disowned, rejected, exiled from our psyche and refuse to acknowledge them because they are regarded as negative or undesirable qualities. Duryodhana was no longer just a character; an antihero or villain. He existed within me as an archetype or energy pattern.

Confronting my inner Duryodhana was an 'aha' moment for me. Now that I had just acknowledged the Duryodhana archetype within me, could I give myself permission to look at the pattern with compassion and curiosity and not harsh judgementality? Could I permit myself the time and space to integrate this pattern lovingly into my consciousness without hurrying to hide it, fix it, fade it or get rid of it?

"I*tihasa* and *Puranas* help us map our inner world. They reflect the yogic ideals of continuous investment in one's competencies, inner well-being and holistic health through stories that illustrate how the human mind perceives and responds. The *Mahabharata* is a yoga text that is a repository of archetypes and dilemmas in human contexts.

These are intensely human stories that although written more than 5000 years back, is still new. The root of the word *Puranam* (*pura api navam)* itself suggests this old-yet-newness. The word *Itihasa* suggests 'Wow! Is that the way it was?' and creates a sense of wonder in the reader or listener. It's the way we read the *Puranas* that makes it nascent or new," explains Raghu Ananthanarayanan, co-founder Ritambhara.

Raghu has delved deeply into Bharatiya Knowledge Traditions such as Yoga, theatre, dance, art and contemplative conversations to evolve a one-week residential experiential offering known as the *Mahabharata Immersion.* The *Mahabharata Exploration* is an abridged online version of the residential programme.

According to Raghu, contrary to popular perception, the *Puranas* are not designed to enable readers or listeners to emulate the characters. Instead they have the potential to excite the reader or listener that leads to identification (Can I be like this?), spur an immersion in the character, which can then lead to self-mastery.

Human life is an interplay of archetypes that are expressed either appropriately or inappropriately. How do I engage with the *Mahabharata* to get in touch with my archetypal energies?

"I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes," said Walt Whitman, the mystical poet. As I engaged with the characters, I discovered propensities or tendencies that reflected the heroic and shadow (contradictory) sides of each character, also embedded in me, although some were more developed than others. What meaning did the archetypes embody in my life? What in my life reflected these archetypes? How did the archetypes pan out in my life?

Every archetype had embedded within its opposite. For instance, when I looked at Yudhishthira, I resonated with his ability to respect and uphold traditions and rules. However, like him, I too get trapped in self-righteousness and rigidity. Similarly, Bhima's passion and his connect with challenges resonated with me, as his impulsivity and absence of forethought. Arjuna's ability to integrate the masculine and feminine aspects of the psyche was delightful, as his authenticity and courage in asking profound existential question, "In doing what I am doing, what am I really doing?"

Like Nakula, I am giving and compassionate, but also fail to replenish myself. Like Sahadeva, I enjoy engaging with challenges and knowledge at an abstract level, but sometimes also get trapped in intellectualism and lose my ability to be pragmatic. Draupadi's resilience, her *sharangati* (absence of resistance to the Divine) and ability to confront people and situations is also in me, but like her, sometimes I tend to forget that no action is consequence-free. Like Karna, I too have admirable skills, but like him, for several decades I was entrapped in victimhood and held on to a disempowering notion of vulnerability.

Each of these archetypal aspects plays out relentlessly in our lives. Some of us may have an excessive engagement (*ati yogam*) with one of these propensities; insufficient (*hina yogam*) or absence of engagement (*viyogam).* Awareness of these imbalances is a first step towards integration of archetypes that results in inner harmony.

Each character was a mirror that helped me see myself clearly, once the layers of dust and debris began to cleave even ever so slightly. The archetypal energies embodied by each of these characters is universal and gender inclusive. Thus, each of us contains the polarities

of the *daivic* (heroic) energy (represented by the Pandavas) and the *asuric* (shadow) energy (represented by the Kauravas) as also the *daivic* and *asuric* aspect of each Pandava character. Can I step back and look at all parts of myself with attentiveness, curiosity and compassion and hold them tentatively? Can I step back and look at the narrative I am creating about myself and the world and ask myself, "In doing what I am doing, what am I really doing?"

The exploration enabled me to realise that each of us is equally capable of behaving in a heroic or diabolical manner. If I don't behave like the Kauravas in a situation, it because of *viveka* (discrimination) that leads me to make conscious responsible choices—choices that make all the difference if my life is lived meaningfully and purposefully—either in *Kurukshetra* (battlefield) or *dharmakshetra* (a sacred space). Each of us is a work in progress… on a sacred quest of becoming the best versions of ourselves… imbued with the fragrance of *rasatmika* (full of joy) and excellence.

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