



# Voracity Towards Space and Comfort: A Study of the Character of Bhishma Pitamah in the *Mahabharata*

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper concentrates on the character of Bhishma Pitamah in the epic of *Mahabharata*, relating his endurance to cut loose from the comfort zone, sense of duty or loyalty, despite being aware of the underlying ethical issues and commitment towards Hastinapur. Such ethics, however, aren't effective for him. Bhishma, who held great respect for his sagacity and medieval age battle capabilities, was confined into conditions caused by oaths, affections, and systems that did injustice and rendered him passive. Bhishma's fierce loyalty to place and the throne of Hastinapur show the darker side of human existence: the proclivity towards remaining inactive where they can be active because of authority in the form of position, responsibility or self-respect which exposes the character. The paper argues that the inaction of Bhishma to safeguard the interest and well-being of Hastinapur is caused due to the comfort position and space that he occupies in the Hastinapur. It is his subconscious selfish desire to keep the status quo in the state monarchy. Any change in the ruling setup could have led to his comfort position shaken to some extent and it was this desire to not bring any discomfort on self that was the cause of his inaction. Although, it was completely against the moral responsibility that he had towards the Hastinapur bounded by the oath that he had taken to protect the welfare of the throne of Hastinapur. On the basis of textual and character focused studies, the research highlights the broader theme of human reluctance to leave familiar spaces and confront uncomfortable situations, making the study relevant beyond the text to modern contexts of leadership and ethics.

## Introduction

Bhishma Pitamah, a highly esteemed and complex figure in the *Mahabharata*, exemplifies the ideals of duty, sacrifice, and moral ambiguity. Originally named Devavrata, he was the offspring of King Shantanu and the river goddess Ganga. His existence was marked by pivotal events that distinguished him as a person of great strength and steadfast dedication to his principles. The name "Bhishma," signifying "the one who took a terrible vow," encapsulates the profound sacrifices he made for the benefit of the Kuru dynasty, particularly his commitment to lifelong celibacy and renunciation of the throne, known as 'Bhishma Pratigya.' In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma plays a crucial role. As a warrior, he was unmatched, celebrated for his invulnerability and exceptional combat skills. In his capacity as a statesman and advisor, he served as a wellspring of wisdom and a guardian of the Kuru dynasty's heritage. Nevertheless, his virtues frequently clashed with the ethical challenges he encountered, and his unwavering dedication to duty resulted in considerable moral and personal dilemmas. A significant turning point in Bhishma's life was his vow of celibacy, which he undertook to allow his father, King Shantanu, to wed Satyawati. This pledge was not merely a personal sacrifice; it was a profound commitment that influenced the trajectory of the Kuru dynasty. It established Bhishma as a symbol of remarkable self-discipline and loyalty, earning him the admiration and respect of his peers. However, it also bound him irrevocably to the throne of Hastinapur, obliging him to support its rulers, irrespective of their ethical integrity.

Bhishma's role in the *Mahabharata* was multifaceted. He was a protector of Hastinapur, a mentor to the Kuru princes, and a key participant in the events leading up to the Kurukshetra war. Despite his wisdom and righteousness, Bhishma's inaction during critical moments, such as the disrobing of Draupadi, has been a subject of intense scrutiny. His unwavering loyalty to the throne often conflicted with his moral responsibility,

leading to questions about his role as a custodian of justice and welfare. As the commander-in-chief of the Kauravas' army during the Kurukshetra war, Bhishma's military prowess was on full display. Despite his loyalty to Hastinapur, his inner conflict over fighting against the Pandavas, whom he loved as his own, reveals the depth of his moral struggles. His eventual downfall on the battlefield, brought about by Shikhandi and Arjuna, symbolizes the consequences of his ethical rigidity and inability to adapt to changing circumstances. Bhishma's life is a microcosm of the broader themes of duty, loyalty, and the human struggle with ethical dilemmas. His character serves as a lens through which the *Mahabharata* explores the complexities of human behaviour and the challenges of balancing personal values with societal responsibilities.

### Literature review

Mahesh D.Makwana in his article "Bhishma: A Psychological Analysis" has given psychological sketch of some episodes of Bhishma Pitamah in *Mahabharata*.

Kavita G. and Dr Ravi M.V in their article "Leadership Lessons from *Mahabharatha* with Special Reference to Bheeshma Neethi" have made an attempt to understand the Leadership Lessons of Bhishma Pitamah from *Mahabharatha*.

### Theoretical Framework

The character of Bhishma Pitamah in the *Mahabharata* provides fertile ground for ethical, psychological, and leadership analysis. His decisions and actions can be critically examined using several theoretical frameworks, including deontological ethics, virtue ethics, psychological concepts such as the comfort zone and status quo bias. These frameworks serve as the foundation for understanding the complexities of Bhishma's choices and their consequences.

#### 1. Deontological Ethics: The Priority of Duty

Immanuel Kant is one of the philosophers who made deontological ethics famous; this emphasizes the intrinsic nature of the morality of actions by adhering to rules or duties, regardless of their consequences. In such a case, moral behavior is characterized according to whether or not an individual acts according to established principles rather than by judging his action by its consequences. For Kant, the only thing unqualifiedly good is a good will. "The good will is good 'just by its willing'... the good will is the only thing which has a value that is completely independent of its relation to other things..." (Kant XIV) But it also shows that ethical intransigence could occur if rules were followed without contextual analysis. There is clearly a tension in the duty-bound actions versus their moral implications: this is one of the limitations that deontological ethics has when applied with rigidity or lack of nuance.

#### 2. Virtue Ethics: Balancing Competing Virtues

According to Aristotle, virtue ethics subverts the moralism of rule-following into the character-building part: a virtue ethics presents the cardinal virtues as attributes, the cultivation of which make ethical behaviour possible such as courage, justice, loyalty, and wisdom. They are usually thought to be ideals around which people manage competing demands, situations, and roles in ways that render their behavior morally right. Virtue ethics suggests that true morality requires balancing competing virtues.

All free males are born with the potential to become ethically virtuous and practically wise, but to achieve these goals they must go through two stages: during their childhood, they must develop the proper habits; and then, when their reason is fully developed, they must acquire practical wisdom (*phronêsis*). This does not mean that first we fully acquire the ethical virtues, and then, at a later stage, add on practical wisdom. Ethical virtue is fully developed only when it is combined with practical wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

In Bhishma's case, his unwavering loyalty undermined his ability to uphold justice and protect the vulnerable, leading to ethical failure. The relevance of virtue ethics lies in its emphasis on moral flexibility.

#### 3. Psychological Concepts: Comfort Zone and Status Quo Bias

Psychological theories assist in understanding their actions and, in particular, the behaviour of Bhishma and his unwillingness to oppose norms or centers of power. The two concepts utilized would be comfort zone and status quo bias that can explain his passivity. These concepts explain in psychology why many conflicts are not resolved. These features are particularly evident in the actions of Bhishma.

The Comfort Zone: A comfort zone is a familiar psychological state where people are at ease and (perceive they are) in control of their environment, experiencing low levels of anxiety and stress.

Status quo bias: Status quo bias, simply put, is the inclination to oppose any form of change to the status quo. Such a bias means that people would rather defend the status quo than adopt any form of creative disruption, even when there are genuine benefits to be had in the reemergence.

<sup>1</sup> (Aristotle's Ethics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy))

## Discussion and Analysis

Bhishma Pitamah's character is a study in contrasts—while he exhibits incredible high moral values, wisdom and loyalty, his short-comings are also quite prominent as he embodies paradoxical traits such as presenting utmost weakness towards injustice and exhibiting absolute extremes of passive loyalty, firms his position as a reluctant actionist. The reasons for his structural silence accompanied by a strict adherence to all boundaries, rules owing to a monarchical structure has inner and outer layers, which are also ethical, and are psychological tendencies. Using the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, let's critically examine Bhishma's actions, motivations, and the consequences of his decisions.

### 1. Bhishma's Oaths: The Foundations of Ethical Rigidity

Bhishma's life-defining oaths—the vow of celibacy, "...from this day I adopt the vow of Brahmacharya (study and meditation in celibacy). If I die sonless, I shall yet attain to regions of perennial bliss in heaven." (Ganguly 375)<sup>2</sup> and his loyalty to Hastinapur's throne as vowed by him,

I repeat the pledge I once gave, viz., I would renounce three worlds, the empire of heaven, anything that may be greater than that, but truth I would never renounce. The earth may renounce its scent, water may renounce its moisture, light may renounce its attribute of exhibiting forms, air may renounce its attribute of touch, the sun may renounce his glory, fire, its heat, the moon, his cooling rays, space, its capacity of generating sound, the slayer of Vritra, his prowess, the god of justice, his impartiality; but I cannot renounce truth. (386)<sup>3</sup>

—established him as a paragon of sacrifice and discipline. These oaths were taken for rational purposes: none of his progeny would assume the kingship, and the other for the benefit of the Kuru lineage. These pledges are deontological in nature as they do not make any sense without the actual doing of the act and the vow itself. However, these oaths, which were meant to serve a higher purpose, became constraints that undermined his ability to act in morally complex situations.

For instance, Bhishma had vowed to remain faithful to the kingship which roped in his action to be subservient to the ruling king and his interests even if they went against ethics or morality. Such a situation under the kingship of Duryodhana forced Bhishma so far that he had to make decisions that were for a direct attack on Hastinapur's integrity and well bring. His silence during the disrobing of Draupadi was a glaring instance of his ethical failure as Vikarna the son of Dhritarashtra exclaimed, "Ye kings, answer ye the question that hath been asked by Yajnaseni. If we do not judge a matter referred to us, all of us will assuredly have to go to hell without delay. How is that Bhishma and Dhritarashtra, both of whom are the oldest of the Kurus, as also the high-souled Vidura, do not say anything!" (963)<sup>4</sup> Why did Bhishma remain silent during Draupadi's dishonoring in the assembly, especially when he could have easily intervened to stop such a shameless act? He made no effort to act on his own to stop the Kauravas. Bhishma only responded casually when questioned twice about whether Draupadi had been lost in the game and was thus a slave. Upon examining his statements in the *Sabha Parva*, it becomes clear that this supposed upholder of Dharma was not truly on Draupadi's side. "What in this world a strong man calls morality is regarded as such by others, however otherwise it may really be; but what a weak man calls morality is scarcely regarded as such even if it be the highest morality. From the importance of the issue involved, from its intricacy and subtlety, I am unable to answer with certitude the question thou hast asked."<sup>5</sup> And then, "It seemeth to me, however, that Yudhishtira is an authority on this question. It behoveth him to declare whether thou art won or not won."<sup>6</sup> Thus Bhishma accepting the authority of the husband and the subtle morality which belonged to the strong escaped his responsibility. A fatalistic acceptance that morality belonged to the strong he never stepped forward which he did forthrightly in many other occasions. The throne's protection was a part of the oath, but it also had the requirement of maintaining justice within the kingdom. This exemplifies the tensions between competing obligations and the shortcomings of such duties that narrowly follow deontological ethics in dealing with complex and morally gray responsibilities. This unquestioned allegiance showcases loyalty to duty, a constituent of fairness, in duty-oriented frameworks where compliance to commands trumps ethical considerations.

### 2. Virtue Ethics and the Failure of Practical Wisdom

Aristotle's virtue ethics offers a lens to evaluate Bhishma's inability to strike a balance between competing virtues. Bhishma embodied many classical virtues: discipline, loyalty, courage, and humility. However, his life also exposes the limitations of these virtues when not balanced by practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom involves the ability to evaluate specific situations and adjust one's actions to achieve the most ethical

<sup>2</sup> Sambhava Parva Section CI. All quotes of the *Mahabharata* are from *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa* translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguly.

<sup>3</sup> Sambhava Parva Section CIII

<sup>4</sup> Sabha Parva Section LXVI

<sup>5</sup> The *Mahabharata*, Book 2: Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXVIII

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

outcome. Bhishma's failure to act against Duryodhana's tyranny is a case in point. While loyalty to the throne was a virtue he upheld, this loyalty became a vice when it led to the perpetuation of injustice. Virtue ethics suggests that morality is not static but requires a dynamic application of principles. In Bhishma's case, his inability to prioritize the virtue of justice over loyalty indicates a lack of moral adaptability.

His silence during Draupadi's humiliation further illustrates this failure. As a Kshatriya and a protector of Hastinapur, his moral responsibility was to uphold justice, especially for the vulnerable. As he himself declares, "Breach of truth by a Kshatriya is never applauded in our treatises on religion." (386)<sup>7</sup> However, his loyalty to the throne rendered him passive. This moment exposes a critical flaw in Bhishma's character: his inability to reconcile his personal virtues with the demands of the situation as Satyawati weeps in front of him saying, "I know what thy vow was on my account. But considering this emergency, bear thou the burden of the duty that one oweth to his ancestors. O punisher of foes, act in such a way that the lineal link may not be broken and our friends and relatives may not grieve" (386)<sup>8</sup> Bhishma's story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unbalanced virtues. While virtues like loyalty and discipline are valuable, they must be tempered by practical wisdom to ensure they serve the greater good. Bhishma's inability to achieve this balance underscores the complexities of ethical decision-making.

### 3. Psychological Dimensions of Bhishma's Inaction

Bhishma's reluctance to act can also be understood through psychological concepts such as the comfort zone and status quo bias. As the protector of Hastinapur, Bhishma occupied a position of immense authority and respect. This role not only defined his identity but also provided him with a sense of security and stability. The comfort zone, a psychological state where individuals feel safe and in control, explains Bhishma's resistance to challenging the established order. Psychologists suggest that people "...create safe spaces and issue trigger warnings... to avoid any situation that makes them uncomfortable." (Staff) By supporting the monarchy, even when it was flawed, Bhishma avoided the discomfort of confronting the system he had pledged to protect. His reluctance to act against Duryodhana or intervene in the disrobing of Draupadi can be seen as attempts to preserve this psychological comfort. It was his subconscious voracity towards the space he occupied in the royal palace that led to his inability in siding with the just cause. As a Kshatriya, his ultimate Dharma was to protect the welfare of his kingdom as stated "When the ruler (Kshatriya) dedicates himself to the practice and conservation of dharma alone, the citizens do the same; no one in the Kingdom hurts (or kills) the others, rather the citizens become mutual benefactors."<sup>9</sup> As also interpreted in Prabhupad's Gita, "The *kasatriya's* duty is to protect the citizens from all kinds of difficulties..."<sup>10</sup> Moreover his oath was for the welfare of the kingdom and not Duryodhana or the Kauravas. Thus, it was only his self-preserving voracity due to the comfort he enjoyed in his position of authority that led to his inaction for moral justice. Status quo bias further reinforces this analysis. In a study conducted by Samuelson and Zeckhauser, they establish the fact that "In choosing among alternatives, individuals display a bias toward sticking with the status quo." This bias reflects a preference for maintaining existing systems and avoiding change, even when change is necessary. Bhishma's attachment to the throne and his belief in the sanctity of the monarchy made him hesitant to disrupt the power dynamics of Hastinapur. As any change in the status quo could have led to uncomfortable situations for him. Bani Basu in her novella, "Panchal Kanya Krishnaa" has rightly said that Bhishma even if not greedy of power was greedy of achievement.<sup>11</sup> He therefore, sided with maintaining the status quo in order to avoid any personal inconvenience. This psychological attachment not only limited his agency but also perpetuated injustice within the kingdom. Bhishma's inaction highlights the dangers of prioritizing personal comfort over ethical responsibility. While his reluctance to act can be understood as a human tendency, it also reveals the ethical failures that arise when psychological security is valued over justice.

### Conclusion

In the epic *Mahabharata*, Bhishma Pitamah's character displays the intricate nature of the ethics of duty, fidelity, and the moral compromises that come with expediency. Bloch sketches the life of this human ideal, ruled by noble ideas, and sees the ugly side of humanity – the fear of change and the fear of dealing with the unknown. - Shashi Deshpande in her short story "Hear me Sanjaya" says that the vow of Bhishma did more harm than good. However it was his vow which made him a larger than life character. Life sometimes puts us in situations where we need to make crucial decisions in a few moments. What we decide very much depends on the kind of inner integrity we cultivate by the associations we keep. Bhishma, surrounded by power and ambition, may have lost sight of what truly mattered. His choices didn't reflect the good he knew. It is in this context that the study places considerable emphasis on the need of taking more active steps against

<sup>7</sup> Sambhava Parva Section CIV

<sup>8</sup> Sambhava Parva Section CIV

<sup>9</sup> The *Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, Chapter 68, Verse 33 The Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 32 & Sage Vyasa's Description of Kshatriya Dharma | Ekatma

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 2, Verse 32, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* by Swami Prabhupad

<sup>11</sup> Basu Bani (2020), p. 155.

wrongdoing and moral courage, for Bhishma's story suggests that his position is far-removed from that held by 'true leaders'. Leaders for whom duty and loyalty are not enough, instead, they fight against injustice and care for others. He, losing the status of the righteous, calls on the modern leaders how to use morality in the most hyphenated and pragmatic way.

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