

# Strategic Thought in the Mahabharata War: A Comparative Review

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**Abstract**—The Mahabharata War constitutes one of the most intricate and profound representations of warfare in world literature, encompassing military tactics, ethical dilemmas, leadership paradigms, and psychological warfare within a broader civilizational framework. This review article critically examines the war strategies embedded in the Mahabharata and compares them with the foundational principles of early classical military theory, particularly those articulated by Sun Tzu, Kautilya, and Clausewitz. Through a comparative analysis of key themes and concepts, the study highlights both convergences and divergences in perspectives on leadership, deception, diplomacy, moral restraint, battlefield strategy, and the central role of *dharma* (righteous conduct) in warfare. By synthesizing contemporary academic interpretations, the paper argues that the Mahabharata should not be viewed merely as an epic narrative but as a sophisticated treatise on strategic thought, whose insights continue to hold relevance for modern military and strategic studies.

**Index Terms**—Mahabharata War, Strategic Thought, Classical Military Theory, Dharma Yuddha, Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Leadership, Ethics of War

## I. INTRODUCTION

War was never only a physical struggle of arms, but it was also an intellectual and philosophical effort that has influenced the political structures, forms of leadership and theoretical principles of strategy throughout the civilizations. The ancient societies have always attempted to comprehend war so as to manage its results, reduce the casualties and to achieve

political goals. The classical Greek approach to western military thought, especially the classical Greek tradition into the modern theorists like Machiavelli and Clausewitz, was largely focused on realism, achievement of power, material superiority and attainment of decisive victory. These are the approaches that tend to view war as the continuation of the state policy, which is dominated by rational calculation, coercion, and strategic efficiency.

Conversely, there exists a more holistic and morally internalized concept of warfare in Indian literature of antiquity, where strategy and responsibility are inextricably connected in terms of moral duty (*dharma*), social order, and cosmicity. Instead of seeing war as a tool of political power, Indian epics and treatises consider it to be a complicated ethical endeavour, limited by moral codes and driven by philosophies. The Mahabharata, which is among the most powerful and longest epics in the world literature, provides a highly detailed multileveled presentation of the war that goes beyond the normal battlefield tactics. It employs diplomacy, alliances, manipulation of a psyche, intelligence gathering, crises of leadership and extreme moral dilemmas in the narrative, therefore, war is very human and moral in its process.

## II. OBJECTIVES, LIMITATIONS, SCOPE

### 2.1 Objectives of the Review

The primary objectives of this review paper are:

1. To examine the core strategic principles reflected in the Mahabharata War.
2. To compare these principles with key concepts of classical military theory.

international context on just war and ethics, diplomacy and strategic rationality.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 2.2 Limitations of the Study

1. In contrast to Classical Theorists like Clausewitz and Sun Tzu who give formal strategic teachings, The Mahabharata requires interpretive efforts, rendering its strategic teachings less readily codifiable.
2. Translations, the Languages, Interpretations, and Cultural Readings Originate Subjectivity, which in turn results in Multiple and even Competing interpretations of its Strategic Messages.
3. Mahabharata Strategic Ramifies Narratives of Both Narratives and Discourses, but It Does Not Present Theoretical Reporting by Systematic Models, and This Has Made Systematic Theorization Difficult.

The paper is founded on qualitative and conceptual review methodology that aims at analysing and describing strategic thinking as depicted in the Mahabharata in a broader perspective of the classical theory of warfare. The study relies solely on secondary literature, such as authoritative translations of the Mahabharata, classical commentaries as well as academic literature on the ancient Indian political philosophy and military theory. Moreover, classical works on military strategy, including those of Kautilya, Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, are also read so as to form a comparative theoretical framework.

The analysis takes a comparative thematic approach meaning that strategic dimensions of critical importance are highlighted and explored in both the epic story and in the classical military teachings. These are the themes of leadership and command organization, tact and strategy in the battlefield, the ethical control of war, the art of deception and psychology, and the influence of diplomacy and statecraft in peace and war activities. The themes are also examined each within a broader context of a strategic framework of interdependence instead of single concepts that demonstrate various cultural, philosophical, and historical presumptions regarding war.

#### 2.3 Scope for Future Research

The comparison of Sun Tzu, Kautilya and Clausewitz with more modern strategic thinkers, ethical thinkers and peace theorists may be considered in future research. Such Comparative Analysis with other Scholars as Immanuel Kant, Michael Walzer, or other theorists of international relations of the present generation might contribute to the academic discourse by helping to place Mahabharata in a larger

Table: Review of Related Literature

Author(s) & Year	Title of the Study	Focus/ Objectives	Key Findings/ Contributions	Relevance to Present Study
Allen (2020)	<i>Just war in the Mahābhārata</i>	Examines the concept of just war and ethical conduct in the Mahābhārata	Identifies the Mahābhārata as an early framework of just war theory, emphasizing moral constraints, duty, and ethical responsibility in warfare	Supports the ethical dimension of strategic thought and the role of <i>dharma</i> in warfare
Gupta & Garg (2020)	<i>Lessons of strategic management from Mahabharata</i>	Explores strategic and leadership lessons from Indian epics	Highlights leadership, decision-making, adaptability, and ethical governance as key strategic lessons	Reinforces leadership and strategic management perspectives drawn from the Mahābhārata

	<i>and Bhagavad Gita</i>			
Kosuta (2020)	<i>Ethics of war and ritual: The Bhagavad-Gita and Mahabharata as test cases</i>	Analyses war ethics and ritualistic justification of violence	Argues that the Mahābhārata integrates ritual, ethics, and moral reasoning into warfare	Strengthens the discussion on moral dilemmas and ethical complexity in strategic decision-making

#### IV. STRATEGIC THOUGHT IN THE MAHABHARATA WAR

The Mahabharata war is a greatly detailed and multifaceted system of strategic thinking which goes way beyond traditional ideas of military planning and strategy on the battlefield. The war in the epic is not presented as a physical conflict between conflicting armies or even as a direct physical fight, but as a complicated and changeable process predetermined by the leadership decisions, political calculations, psychological games, moral issues, and long-term prospective of the social and civilisation order. The Mahabharata strategy is multidimensional and warmly works simultaneously in many dimensions due to which it is one of the first and most advanced descriptions of holistic strategic thinking.

In its most basic form, Mahabharata considers war a consequence of all the ethical, political, and social shortcomings and not a separate military incident. The strategic decisions are not guided by tactical requirements that are short-term but also guided by the view of legitimacy, justice and the long-term sustainability of the society. The epic proves that the military action cannot be independent of the statecraft, diplomacy, and moral responsibility. Kings, commanders, and advisors are depicted to always consider the impact of their deeds on people, organizations, and generations to come, thus capping off strategy into a larger civilizational framework.

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत |

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् || 7||

*“Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata |  
Abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmyaham  
||”*

The Mahabharata is strategic thinking on several levels. At the individual level, it entails individual

judgment, self-control, clarity of morals, and soldierly and ruler qualities of warriors and rulers. At an organizational level, it includes command structure, ally’s coordination, troop morale and resource management. On the civilizational level, strategy is interested in the maintenance of the dharma, social harmony and moral government. This multilevel strategy is an indication of deep perception of war as a political or military event but a moral and social process with lasting effects.

##### 4.1 Leadership and Command

The Mahabharata War depicts leadership as a balance of power, ethical accountability, emotional intelligence and strategy. In contrast to the inflexible models of command which make leadership only equal to the position or rank, the epic focuses on the wisdom, flexibility, and moral discretion as the most important leadership aspects. The commanders are constantly put to a test by their military capability as well as by their capability to cope with the issue of loyalty conflicts, personal attachments and various issues of morality.

Krishna has been a clear-cut case of oblique and strategy leadership. His influence on the decision-making process because of his advice, his persuasion, and his understanding of the psychology of the process characterizes the entire course of the war since he has no formal command, nor is he a bearer of a weapon. His personality shows that strategic direction and intellectual leadership can be successful as compared to brute force. Conversely, characters like Bhishma and Drona represent the conventional hierarchical command systems based on discipline, experience, and compliance with the conventional systems of warfare. Yet, this can be limited by adherence to strict moral oaths and emotional bonds, exhibiting the inability of strict leadership to adapt to intricate conflict situations.

The epic therefore highlights the fact that the best leadership is not a matter of position or battle field but a matter of knowing when, where, and how to change strategy in response to changing times. This description closely predicts the current theories of leadership that focus on transformational and situational leadership in the war front.

#### 4.2 Deception and Psychological Warfare

Playing with fire and games of mind become important tools of strategy in the Mahabharata War, which frequently plays a more decisive role than sheer physical power. And the epic demonstrates many times that the command of the information, the command of the perception, and the de-motivation of the enemy is the essential element of the successful strategy. These policies consist of misinformation, feigned withdrawals, tactical silence and symbolic behavior that are intended to influence the psychological situations.

The best example is the tactical news of the death of *Aśvatthama* that leaves *Drona* psychologically imbalanced and results in a critical turning point in the war. This episode can be applied to show that even the most powerful competitors can be frightened with the use of emotional appeals as opposed to an open-field fight. These methods also bear a strong relation to the words of Sun Tzu that every war is built on deception; since these methods portray a strategic wisdom that is universal to all civilizations.

However, unlike pragmatic-based approaches to military theory the Mahabharata portrays deception as grey. Although successful, such a strategy might cause a certain ethical conflict, which just builds up the bigger theme of the epic that strategic step might cost the moral integrity.

#### 4.3 Sun Tzu's *Art of War*

The *Art of War* by Sun Tzu is one of the oldest and most important works on military strategy and it significantly transformed the concept of warfare by making the intelligence, flexibility, and mental superiority in comparison with brute force the priority. Instead of praising direct confrontation, Sun Tzu promotes a philosophical approach of strategy whereby achieving the most significant victory is done without a fight. In this perspective, war must be fought in a way that will conserve resources, the casualties should be kept at the lowest possible level and political

and social stability should be maintained. Strategy is not therefore a mode to conquer an enemy, but a science of controlling power with moderation and prudence.

The key element of the strategic thinking of Sun Tzu is flexibility. He stresses that strict plans are fundamentally faulty in an unstable battlefield situation. In order to develop a sound strategy, one has to possess a clear vision and constantly evaluate the situation and be well aware of his or her strength and weaknesses and those of the other party. Success lies in the capability to react dynamically to emerging circumstances, seize opportunities as they come and not to engage in unnecessary activities which could undermine long term strategic standings.

### V. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF MAHĀBHĀRATA'S STRATEGIC THOUGHT

The Mahabharata wisdom can also relate to the contemporary world because the issues of war, diplomacy, and political decision-making remain the most significant phenomena in the world politics. The modern wars rarely remain within the scope of the battlefield experiences, but they are also associated with hybrid wars, manipulations of information, psychological operations, and complex geopolitical manoeuvres. In this sense, the emphasis on moral considerations, psychological insight and long-term political view of the Mahabharata can easily be associated with strategic thinking in the 21st century. Its organization contributes to the fact that the success of military intervention should not be entirely the function of material excellence, but its legitimacy, the trust of the population, moral transparency, and the sense of responsibility in leadership.

Also, the recurring interest of the epic in emphasizing diplomacy as the preferable route of action before a war is also akin to the contemporary philosophy of diplomacy as well as the idea of international peace. The similar efforts of Krishna and other statesmen to prevent war can be considered as brand of the normative perspective that war is the last option when all of the diplomatic resources, negotiation and compromise are exhausted. The Mahabharata predicts the idea of political realism that has an ethical duty in the world in which the political institutions, like the United Nations, value the prevention of conflicts and the idea of peace negotiations. In such a manner, the

text demonstrates that the strategy of prudence and the moral duty are not the contrary aspect of wise statecraft but the aspects that supplement each other.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Mahabharata War offers a superb and highly intricate paradigm of war-related thought which is free to a meaningful dialog with classical theory of warfare. It is not only an epic due to the fact it has united strategy, morality, leadership, and psychology which is more a sophisticated exploration of war as a human, moral and political phenomenon. Comparison reveals that much of the ideas which were implicit to the classical military theory were instinctive and were narratively explained in the Mahabharata. This input adds to the world canon of the strategic studies and emphasizes the timeless relevance of the ancient Indian wisdom to the modern conflict.

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