

## Theme of death in the *Mahābhārata*

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### Abstract

Death has always been a concept that arouses fear in the minds of people around the world. On the other hand, Indian ancient, cultural and oral texts deal only with the life. Wars and destruction are the only medium to remove adharma from the society and make people understand the concepts like *lokasaṅgraha* and *manurbhava*. These principles are expected to be followed practically before the physical death. The *Mahābhārata* has always focused on the fundamental concept of good living and deals with death in a very practical way. It suggests through its intellectual characters like Bhīṣma and sages like Sanat-Sujāta that life is more important to live in a skillful way rather fearing for death. The whole of the literature written in the world proclaims the same idea in a way learning from the ancient text the *Mahābhārata*.

**Keywords:** Mahābhārata, death

### Introduction

Indian ancient, cultural and oral texts deal only with the life. Wars and destruction are the only medium to remove adharma from the society and make people understand the concepts like *lokasaṅgraha* and *manurbhava*. These principles are expected to be followed practically before the physical death. Since the very beginning of human existence on the earth, there have been obstinate questions about life at various levels—philosophical, religious, social, psychological and cultural. In them, there has been a central question relating to life regulating principle. But in social psyche, life is treated against the background of the death. To them, life and death are two diametrically opposite concepts. It is this blending of life and death that perplexes man. In order to solve the mystery of life, in the texts of Indian knowledge tradition, death has been treated categorically a life regulating principle, not as a diametrically opposition to life. The queries and questions discussed in the texts of Indian intellectual tradition have been further taken up in the most celebrated epic of the world i.e. the *Mahābhārata*. The treatment of death has been woven in the story of the conflict between Kauravas and Pāṇdavas.

The *Mahābhārata* too asks the same way why should we not learn to live and tries to answer through its erudite scholars like Bhīṣma, Vidura, Kṛṣṇa and other ṛṣi's at different occasions. In the *Mahābhārata*, Vedvyāsa says that all creatures kill themselves eventually because of merits lost and demerits earned. By logic therefore, one who earns no merit can not die. Such a person can potentially rise up to paradise without dying. In other words, he becomes immortal. That is the aim of all spiritual practices.

It has also been delineated assiduously in the tales narrated in the *Mahābhārata*. The present paper is a modest endeavour to represent how death has been treated in the *Mahābhārata*. I begin my discourse with the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and Vedvyāsa:

अत्र मे सशयः प्राप्तः कुतः संज्ञा मुक्ता इति ।  
कस्य मृत्युः कुतो मृत्युः केन मृत्युरिमाः प्रजाः ॥ द्रोण 52.18 ॥

“When a man dies what dies along with him, his body or his soul? Why is it that what has been created is taken away by death?”

All curious human beings think about the origin of our life, living and all time unsolved question of death. But all efforts reach to a barrenness. Then the dialogues and instances of *dwij* (learned men) get common masses out of the state of such confusion. In the *Mahābhārata*, Vyāsa speculates the origin of death by giving a narration. The narration goes like this to Yudhiṣṭhira in the “Droṇa-Parva” (53.22-25):

Brahmā first creates all that is found in the universe—mobile and immobile. He, however, finds that he has no control over these objects. God, who created all living creatures, realizes that all his children are reproducing and their numbers are multiplying and the earth is groaning under their weight. Wrath fills him as he realizes that none of his creations can be destroyed. In anger, he let go a terrible fire which fills him with rage over the universe, destroying everything that came its way. The fire blazes for eons, until Lord Śiva becomes concerned. He appears before Brahmā and counsells him to cool his anger. After much persuasion Brahmā regains his composure. He, then, creates the goddess of death—*mṛtyu* from his body. The goddess is with red eyes and red tongue, has worn diverse ornaments. Brahmā calls her ‘death’ and orders her to go to the universe and slay all the creatures that he had created. But death, being a lady, became sad at having to deprive creatures of their lives, for she thinks that she can cause much sorrow by her action. Her prayer to Brahmā, not to be given this task, goes unheard. She therefore performs a severe penance which lasts for billions of years.

At last, Brahmā appears before her and asks what she wants. Death again requests that she shall be excused from causing the end of all creatures. Brahmā tells her that he is pleased with her penance. But the works he has given to her has to be done. He understands her feelings. But she need not experience any sorrow as ordained that creatures will bring their own death. She will be assisted by Yama. Disease, quarrels and natural calamities would cause creatures to die by themselves. It is stated that whatever is born, has to die. There

can be no escape from death. This assuages death's feelings and she has set about her task faithfully ever since. Brahmā further explains that she will merely oversee the transition. The burden of death shall be borne by those who live. Thus all creatures die not because of external factors but because of their own *karmas*.

The “Udyoga-parva” explains different factors which cause death:

अभिध्या वै प्रथमं हन्ति लोकान्  
कामक्रोधावनुगृह्याशु पश्चात् ।  
एते बालान् कृत्यवे प्रापयन्ति  
धीरास्तु धैर्येण तरन्ति मृत्युम् ॥ उद्योग 42.11 ॥

“The desire of enjoyments first killeth men. Lust and wrath soon follow behind it. These three, viz., the desire of enjoyments, lust, and wrath, lead foolish men to death. Those have conquered their souls; succeed by self-restraint, to escape death.”

Another narrative also takes place in the “Śānti-parva” of the *Mahābhārata* that explains how the death is a vital issue to discuss upon because it affects the question of life as well. Bhīṣma narrates the tale of an intelligent boy—Medhāvī, who teaches his father how the world is surrounded by the fear of death and how one can get rid of such fear. The son says that when the world is thus surrounded on all sides and is thus assailed, and when such irresistible things of fatal consequences fall upon it, how he can say these words so calmly. The sire asks that how the world is assailed. What is that by which it is surrounded. He asks what those irresistible things of fatal consequences are that fall upon it. Why he is creating fear in his father's mind. The son answers the questions of his father that death is that by which the world is assailed. Decrepitude encompasses it. Those irresistible things that come and go away are the nights (that are continually lessening the period of human life). He further exclaims that death tarries for none (but approaches steadily towards every creature), how he may pass his time without covering himself with the garb of knowledge. When each succeeding night, passing away lessens the allotted period of one's existence, the man of wisdom should regard the day to be fruitless. Death comes to a man before his desires have been gratified. Death snatches away a person when he is engaged in plucking flowers of life and when his heart is otherwise set, like a tigress bears away a ram. That should be accomplished that which is for one's good in this very life. Let not this Death come to the very life. Death drags its victims before their acts are accomplished. The acts of tomorrow should be done today, those of the afternoon in the forenoon. Death does not wait to see whether the acts of its victim have all been accomplished or not. In prime of age one should betake oneself to the practice of virtue. Life is transitory. If virtue be practised, fame here and felicity hereafter will be the consequences. It is taught through the all tales and dialogues of the *Mahābhārata* that all actions are justified by the intentions not the ends. So the virtues should be practiced to remove the fear of death.

Overwhelmed by ignorance, one is ready to exert oneself for sons and wives. Achieving virtuous or vicious acts, one brings them up and aggrandises them. Like a tiger bearing away a sleeping deer, death snatches away the man addicted to the gratification of desire and engaged in the enjoyment of sons and animals. Death overpowers a man while the latter is still

in the midst of the happiness that accrues from the gratification of desire, and while, still thinking, 'this has been done; this is to be done; this has been half-done.' Death bears away the man, however designated according to his profession, attached to his field, his shop, or his home, before he has obtained the fruit of his acts. Death bears away the weak, the strong, the brave, the timid, the idiotic, and the learned, before any of these obtains the fruits of his acts. As soon as a creature is born, decrepitude and death pursue him for (effecting) his destruction. All existent things, mobile and immobile, are affected by these two. The attachment which one feels for dwelling in villages and towns (in the midst of fellowmen) is said to be the very mouth of death. The forest, on the other hand, is regarded as the fold within which the senses may be penned. This is declared in the *śrutis*. The attachment a person feels for dwelling in a village or town (in the midst of men) is like a cord that binds him with affection with others. They that are good, break that cord and attain to emancipation, while they that are wicked, do not succeed in breaking them. He, who never injures living creatures by thought, word, or deed, is never injured by such agencies as are destructive of life and property. Nothing can resist the messengers (disease and decrepitude) of death, when they advance except truth which devours untruth. It is proclaimed that in truth lies the immortality, but truth should be evaluated with understanding the dharma thoroughly.

Yudhiṣṭhira do not ask 'what death is' considering physical factors only, rather he was trying to find all factors which lead man towards the death. It is said in the *Mahābhārata*:

जातमेवान्तकोऽन्ताय जरा चान्तेति देहिनाम् ।  
अनुषक्ता द्वयेनैते भावाः स्थावरजङ्गमा ॥ शान्ति 175.14 ॥

“As the man borns, his death also takes place. So it may be assumed that in contrast the factors of the life are also the factors of death.”

The *Mahābhārata* teaches us to free ourselves from the fear of death either it will make our lives also fearful. The text declares at various places that we should unshackle ourselves from the fear of the daily death. It has been explored in the text directly and indirectly that we should be fearful for the death of knowledge in mind, death of the daily life, which is easily placed in the common man's life. Brahmā also consoles the goddess of death, Mṛtyu as:

लोभः क्रोधोऽभ्यसूयेर्ष्या द्रोहो मोहश्च देहिनाम् ।  
अह्नीश्चान्योन्यपरुषा देहं भिन्दुः पृथग्विधाः ॥ द्रोण 54.38 ॥

“Greed, anger, jealousy, violence, fascination and harsh speech against others these malicious deeds take human beings to the death-like situation.”

Brahmā, the creator-God, promises the goddess of death that she will not be cursed for making human beings dead. These evil deeds make them die. He consoles her saying that:

नाधर्मस्ते भविता प्राणिनां वै,  
त्वं वै धर्मस्त्वं हि धर्मस्य चेशा ॥ द्रोण 54.41 ॥

“You will never be cursed. You will make human beings to follow dharma, in this way you will be called the dharma of the human beings.”

Everyone fears of death. But the question that captured my mind was if it is under our control to decide when to die or it relies wholly on fate. If in ours then how can we get relief from it and if the destiny leads us to such situation then how can we overcome the fear of it. In the *Mahābhārata*, it is elaborated further also. In the “Vana-parva”, Rṣi Ariṣṇemi explains the reality of death to a group of kings as:

कारणं वः प्रवक्ष्यामि हेतुयोगसमासतः ।  
 (मृत्युः प्रभवने येन नास्माकं नृपसत्तमाः ।  
 शुद्धाचारा अनलमाः संध्योपासनतत्पराः ॥  
 शुद्धान् शुद्धसुधनाब्रह्मचर्यव्रतान्विताः ।)  
 सत्यमेवाभिजानीमो नानृते कुर्महे मनः ।  
 स्वधर्ममनुतिष्ठामस्तस्मान्मृत्युभयं न नः ॥ वन 184.18 ॥

“Death is not an omnipotent power. We spend our life in a true manner. We do not rely on lies or false statements. We use righteous resources for righteous living. Therefore, we do not fear death.”

Yudhiṣṭhira enquires with great urge if death exists or not. But answer to this question is well given by Sanat-Sujāta in “Udyoga-parva”:

अमृत्युः कर्मणा केचिन्मृत्युर्नास्तीति चापरे ।  
 शृणु मे ब्रुवतो राजन् यथेतन्मा विशङ्कित्वा ॥ उद्योग 42.3 ॥  
 उभे सत्ये क्षत्रियैतस्य विद्धि  
 मोहान्मृत्यु सम्मतोऽयं कवीनाम् ।  
 प्रमादं वै मृत्युमहं ब्रवीमि  
 तथाप्रमादममृतत्वं ब्रवीमि ॥ उद्योग 42.4 ॥

“Some say, death is avertable by particular acts; in others' opinion there is no death; thou hast asked me that which of these is true.”

It is proclaimed in the *Mahābhārata* that he learned are of the opinion that death results from ignorance. It is said that ignorance is death, and so the absence of ignorance (Knowledge) is immortality.

अस्यादेशान्निःसरते नराणां  
 क्रोधं प्रमादो लोभरूपश्च मृत्युः ।  
 अहंगतेनैव चरन् विमार्गान्  
 न चात्मनो योगमृपैति कश्चित् ॥ उद्योग 42.7 ॥

“It is at his command that death in the form of wrath, ignorance, and covetousness, occurreth among men. Swayed by pride, men always walk in unrighteous path. None amongst them succeeds in attaining to his real nature. These three, viz., the desire of enjoyments, lust, and wrath, lead foolish men to death.”

In fact, whole of the *Mahābhārata* correlates itself with the beginning to the end of life, though it believes in the rebirth also. None of the Indian ancient and cultural texts are associated with the destruction of human beings. If there is any kind of destruction available then it was for the cause of creating nobler human beings and society as well. All have the same conception of ‘manurbhava’- being human. Thus the same is projected in the *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahābhārata* proclaims that any devastating situation is death. It announces that hatred is death, ill-behaviour with others is death, to disturb anyone intentionally, through actions and harsh speeches are also a kind of death. All the time thinking for a desire and to become a slave to the desire is also a death.

The *Mahābhārata* also suggests the solutions for being out of fear while discussing the dath. Bhīṣma announces in the *Mahābhārata* that righteousness in the conduct of life leads oneself to the higher states of thought. But there are no parameters assigned to attain such righteousness. The *Mahābhārata* suggests many ways for attaining righteousness in one’s life. For these reasons, one should practice the vow of truth. One comes to death through ignorance and loss of judgment; while immortality is achieved through truth.

There is a discussion of a father and a son in “Udyoga-Parva” which provides with the eternal truth of life. For the better understanding of the didactic talk in between both of them the whole dialogue is necessarily considered to be quoted here. Medhāvi says to his father, ‘I shall, therefore, abstain from injury and seek to achieve truth, and transgressing the sway of desire and wrath, regard pleasure and pain with an equal eye, and attaining tranquillity, avoid death like an immortal. Upon the advent of that season when the sun will progress towards the north, I shall restrain my senses, set to the performance of the *Śānti*-sacrifice, the *Brahmā*-sacrifice, the Mind-sacrifice, and the Work-sacrifice. How can one like me worship his maker in animal-sacrifices involving cruelty, or sacrifices of the body, such as *Piśācas* only can perform and such as produce fruits that are transitory? That person whose words, thoughts, penances, renunciation, and meditation, all rest on *Brahmā*, succeeds in earning the highest good. There is no eye which is equal to (the eye of) knowledge. There is no penance like (that involved in) truth. There is no sorrow equal to (that involved in) the attachment. There is no happiness (that which is obtainable from) renunciation. I have sprung through *Brahmā*. I shall devote myself to *Brahmā*, though I am childless. I shall return to *Brahmā*. I do not require a son for rescuing me. A Brāhmiṇ can have no wealth like to the state of being alone, the state in consequence of which he is capable of regarding everything with an equal eye, the practice of truthfulness, good behaviour, patience, abstention from injury, simplicity, and avoidance of all rites and visible sacrifices. What use hast thou, O Brahmāna, of wealth or kinsmen and relatives, of wives, when thou shalt have to die? Seek thy Self which is concealed in a cave. Where are thy grandsires and where thy sire? Bhīṣma continued, ‘Do thou also, O monarch, conduct thyself in that way in which the sire (in this story), conducts himself, devoted to the religion of Truth, after having listened to the speech of his son.’

Now the question arises if one should not be fearful of death then is it possible through that one attains excellence in his life that even death could not make one die. If one is ever thinking of death in a distressed way, how he can attain perfection in his life. It would not be possible for him to complete even the trivial acts of life. The *Mahābhārata* announces that the life, full of pain and distress, is a dead man’s life. Sanat-Sujāta gives the solution in the *Mahābhārata* saying that only wisdom can overcome the death:

एते बालान् कृत्यवे प्रापयन्ति  
 धीरास्तु धैर्येण तरन्ति मृत्युम् ॥ उद्योग 42.11 ॥

“Those have the power of intellect and wisdom, overcome the death. It means that they do not die even after the physical death. Indeed, as the body is destroyed when brought under the influence of death, so death itself is destroyed when it comes under the influence of knowledge.”

Medhāvi also says in the “Śānti-parva” that man takes birth and die. It is the natural and universal order for all. But it is more important to live worthily:

अमृतं चैव मृत्युश्च द्वयं देहे प्रतिष्ठतम् ।  
मृत्युमापद्यते मोहात् सत्येनापद्यतेऽमृतम् ॥ शान्ति 175.30 ॥

“As soon as a creature is born, Decrepitude and Death pursue him for (effecting) his destruction. All existent things, mobile and immobile, are affected by these two. The attachment which one feels for dwelling in villages and towns (in the midst of fellowmen) is said to be the very mouth of Death.”

Truth is not to be known only, the essence lies in to envisage it into one’s life. And the real truth in life can be seen only when we produce a balance of individual self with the cosmos. This balance provides human society sustainability without the fear of death. This balance originates dharma in human lives. This emphasizes to understand the true art and worth of living, which is the answer to the question of Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*. Bhīṣma answers the question of Yudhiṣṭhira and says that only good behaviour can make reach to attain universal dharma in life. Attaining such good behaviour one achieves the calmness in this very life:

न बान्धवा न च वित्तं न कौल्यं  
न च श्रुतं न च मन्त्रा न वीर्यम् ।  
दुःखात् त्रातुं सर्व एवोत्सहन्ते  
परत्रशीलेन तु यान्ति शान्तिम् ॥ शान्ति 286.15 ॥

“Friends, relatives, wealth, aristocratic decendance, erudition, chanting and singing of hymns and power all combined can’t relieve oneself of his sorrows. Only *Śīla* can make them calm from the all fears including the fear of death.”

*Śīla* is a technical term (which is untranslatable) that enunciates decent mode of life. It comprises in it the life, full of humanity and kindness toward others. It is basically the balanced running of own life with others. The flaws of life are also mitigated within the broad conception of universal welfare. It is also the essence of living one’s life artistically and skillfully. Bhīṣma further states that death is unavoidable. No one can deny it. But pious behaviour leads one towards attaining universality and immortality in the life.

न विक्रमो न चाप्यर्थो न मित्रं न सुहृज्जनः ।  
तथोन्मोचयते दुःखाद् यथाऽऽत्मा स्थिरसंयम् ॥ स्त्री 7.22 ॥

“Neither prowess, nor wealth, nor friend, nor can well-wishers cure a man of his grief as effectually as the self-restrained soul. Therefore, observant of the great duty of abstention from all injuries, or friendship for all creatures, be of pious behaviour.”

Every culture and society presents fundamentals for a hygienic and well-bred life style for the people it contains. The *Mahābhārata* discusses the origin of death in a way that it is only true understanding of the concept of death that can make people aware of living in a way scheduled according to the dharma. It drills not only the people of that age in which it was produced, rather it originated a culture that was able to make people learn the individual and cosmic balance. All religious and social sects believe in to make human lives better. Death deals with the conception of life more. No one knows what

will happen after death, but the span in between birth and death can be spent in a way that will increase progress of the moral and social welfare of the universe. It cannot be tied to any individual sect and human being. The universal approach of the thoughts accumulated in this paper will lead people to perceive the sense of living in a worthy manner. Greed, anger, harsh words, ignorance, false knowledge, wrath, desire of enjoyments and lust etc. disturb the balance of life and lead human beings to a death like situation. On the other hand, one engaged in the welfare of society still lives after the death of his mortal body.

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