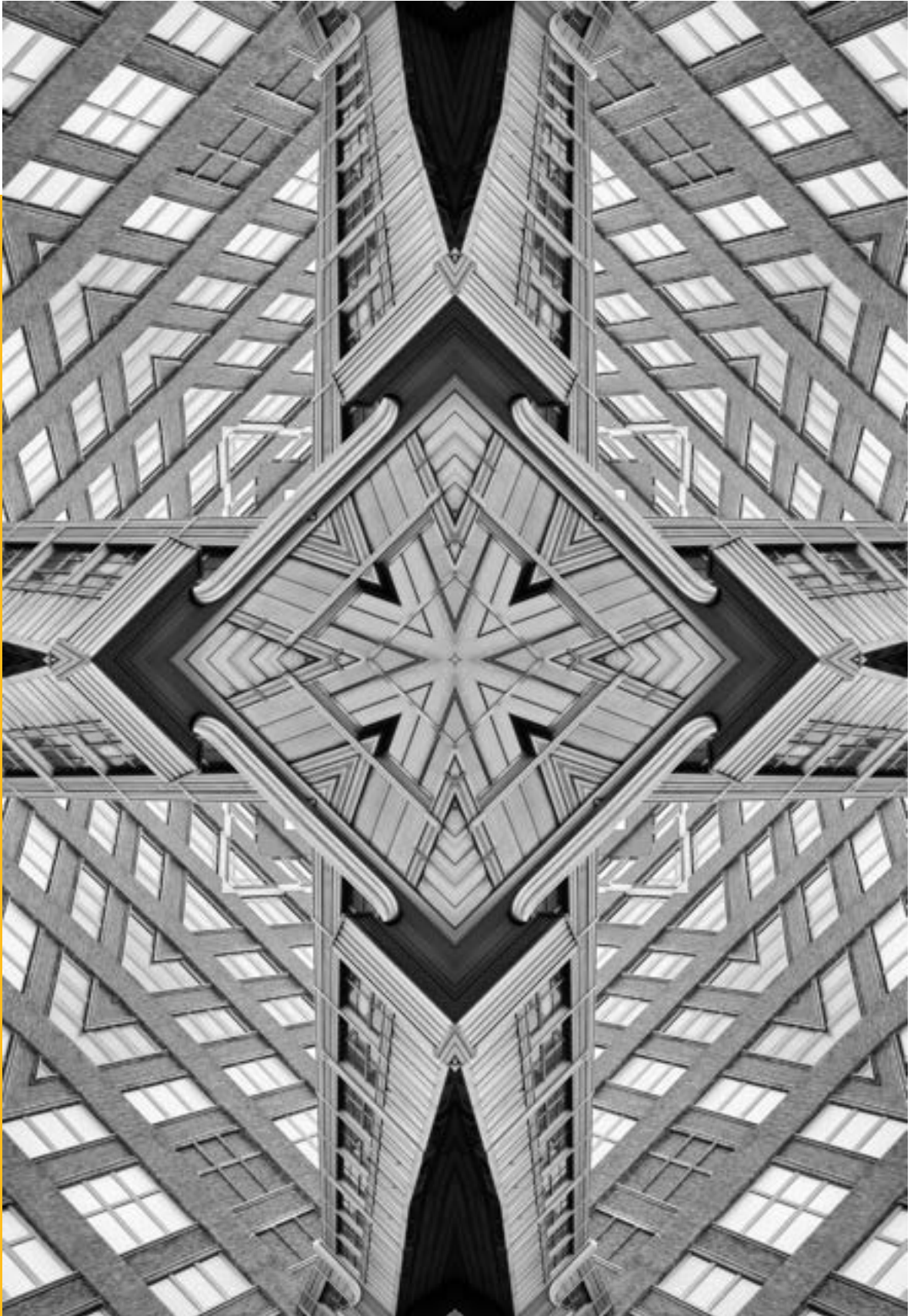


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Shaastra Neeti, Shastra Neeti: The Ancient Roots of Indian Strategic Thought

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Abstract

As India's power is rising, the country is becoming more self-aware, with more willingness to explicitly reclaim and "own" the civilisational roots of its strategic thought. From international quarters too, interest in understanding India's grand strategy is growing. Especially in the context of a deepening transatlantic rift and further divisions within the "West", many state and non-state actors are seeking to strengthen their partnerships with India. A focus on the indigenous sources of Indian strategic thought is therefore timely. This paper offers a deep dive into the foundational philosophy, practice, and potential of Indian strategic thought. This analysis serves as a resource for those hoping to negotiate effectively with the world's largest democracy. It also offers a useful guide for policymakers and engaged citizens within the country: a reminder of their ancient wisdom on questions of power and leadership, some of which has practical relevance for the existential problems that the world faces today.

The literal meanings of the Sanskrit words *Shaastra* (शास्त्र) and *Shastra* (शस्त्र) are text (or science) and weaponry (or instruments), respectively.¹ This paper takes the two words at face value and further interprets them in the broader sense of *theory* and *practice*. National (security, economic, and foreign policy) strategy requires careful consideration of both concepts. While *Neeti* (नीति) has a variety of meanings, one straightforward interpretation of the term is *strategy* and *statecraft*.² This study draws on India's living traditions of *Shaastra* and *Shastra*—understandings on theory and practice, on ethics and interests, and on soft and hard power—to distil and expand upon the core precepts of strategic thought.

A focus on the indigenous sources of Indian strategic thought is timely. As India's power is rising, the country is becoming more self-aware. With this comes a willingness to explicitly reclaim and “own” the civilisational roots of its strategic thought. Similarly, from international quarters, there is increasing interest in understanding India's grand strategy. Many state and non-state actors are seeking to strengthen their partnerships with India amid a deepening transatlantic rift and further divisions within the “West”. This analysis serves as a resource for anyone hoping to negotiate effectively with the world's largest democracy. It also offers a guide for policymakers and engaged citizens within the country: a reminder of their ancient wisdom on questions of power and leadership, some of which has practical relevance for the world's existential problems.

The argument proceeds in three parts. The first section presents the academic and policy context and makes the case for such an analysis to fill important gaps in the literature. The second section draws on primary sources and distils key tenets of Indian strategic thought, highlighting the sophistication of each concept, and the richness of Indian strategic thought as a whole. The paper closes with a third section that discusses the disciplinary and policy implications of the analysis.

In an article published in 1929, Herbert Gowen identified a yawning gulf in political theory—namely, the absence of Indian political thought in available scholarship. Trying to find an explanation for this bizarre and blatant omission, he wrote:

“The omission of India from consideration by most writers on political science would probably be defended by the general statement that India is a land of philosophers rather than of practical politicians. It may be affirmed with some plausibility that throughout the long history of the peninsula (so far as that history is to be recovered, mainly by the contributions of foreigners) Realpolitik has generally been subordinated to mysticism; that the people who think in terms of kalpas instead of dynasties, whose ideal it has been to retire to the jungles and there, by a kind of self-hypnotism, sever the nexus between the visible world (conceived as maya) and the eternal soul, could not conceivably be interested in questions of political administration.”³

Unfortunately, Gowen has largely remained a lone voice over the decades. Barring a variety of interesting commentaries on Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* (which Gowen himself had pioneered), the omission persisted, as did the explanations that external observers sought for it. For instance, in an agenda-setting essay published in a US-based journal in 1992, George Tanham identified the following as “an essential characteristic of Indian strategy”:

“...Indians have not been great strategic thinkers or developers of strategy, although they have been profound thinkers in many other fields. Nature provided them with a natural strategic area, the subcontinent, but geographical subdivisions and cultural factors leading to political disunity hindered Indians from developing strategies for it. Their culture, with its cyclical concept of time and its view of life as unfathomable and hence unpredictable, did not lead Indians to see the need for strategy, and even if they had, they would have been unlikely to proceed because, if in their minds the future is unknown and unknowable, why plan?”⁴

Admittedly, certain self-perceptions of Indians, within and outside the country, did not help to correct Tanham's crude essentialism.⁵ Many, too often, allowed themselves to be pigeonholed into a "spiritualism" box; presenting themselves as renouncers and moralists, they played to Western stereotypes.⁶ Ironically, the acceptance of its role-allocation as a pacifist country, committed to Gandhian *Ahimsa* and steeped in the ancient practices of *Yoga*, was in itself—at least partly—a strategic choice: after all, the importance of soft power is not to be underestimated. Reality, however, is also reflexive, and the acceptance of decontextualised typecasts came at a cost.⁷ India would often end up buying into the primarily Western framing of its foreign policy debates,⁸ and the originality and richness of its own strategic traditions was sidelined, internally and externally.

Some serious rebuttals involved identifying the growing realist elements in India's foreign policy in the 1990s. Pioneering work in this direction was conducted by C. Raja Mohan.⁹ Ambassador Shivshankar Menon also hit back hard: "There have been those, like George Tanham, who deny that India has a strategic culture. My view is that this is an impossibility for a self-conscious (sic) culture and civilisation such as ours, with our heritage and sense of our own importance and role. Just as saying one is apolitical is itself a political choice, saying that India has no strategic culture is only to say that it is different from the strategic cultures one is used to."¹⁰ But the West heard what it wanted to hear. India, too, did not systematically claim and assert its strategic heritage. Even today, the central theoretical frame remains a Western one. Few courses in political theory, international relations, or strategic studies—in India or abroad—incorporate primary sources from ancient India (or secondary sources studying them) as part of the curriculum. Meanwhile, the embrace of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Clausewitz (and occasionally Sun Tzu) continues. In research institutions abroad, which claim to work "on and with the Global South," recognition of India's pre-colonial political thought remains scarce. When pushed by this author, during her decade-long experience as head of a research institute in Germany, the best that most India "experts" were able to do was to refer to the "Indian Machiavelli"—an excusable misnomer perhaps in 1929 when Gowen was writing and India was still under British rule, but somewhat ludicrous in this age of India's rise, and the fact that the *Arthashastra* predates *The Prince* by almost two thousand years.

The purpose of this paper is to remind India and the world of the deep roots of the country's strategic traditions. This matters at several levels. First, a recognition of India's indigenous strategic culture is necessary for finally putting the record straight: India did not start thinking strategically simply as a reaction to British rule, or post-independence, or post-1990s reform. Its strategic thought has a history that predates the emergence of Western states; its foundations are civilisational. Second, an awareness of Indian strategic thought is indispensable for anyone hoping to negotiate effectively with this remarkable powerhouse; in the absence of this knowledge, India's partners will remain trapped in unhelpful tropes about the country's "difficult" bargaining behaviour.¹¹ Third, scholarship on this subject will be a vital instrument for analysts, and policy insiders, too, in the systematisation and further development of India's strategic policy. The historical layers and diverse facets of its strategic thought deserve to be documented. And any such record must include not only the relatively well-studied aspects of Indian political thought from colonial and post-colonial times, but deep-rooted ideas that form the very psyche—a *mentalité*—of this ancient culture.

Fourth, as IR theory seeks to escape its Western cage, the arguments presented in this paper can serve as a key ingredient for a bigger intellectual project: the development of a non-Western theory of International Relations, which goes beyond the token reference to Sinic texts and bulldozes its way into the creation of a state-centric, anthropocentric, unethical, and violent international system. Instead, by mainstreaming Indian strategic thought, the world will have in its hands a remarkable resource for building theory that is neither naïvely idealistic nor ruthlessly materialistic. Using this evolving theory provides an opportunity to build a world that has clear red-lines (rather than constant moral slippage), is ready for conflict when needed (in a manner that is precise and circumspect), appreciates the rights of the individual across species, and cares for both people and planet.

From a vast menu that analysts of Indian strategic thought could choose from, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*¹² translates most readily into the Western imagination as an exposition on strategy and has thus also received the most scholarly attention.¹³ However, if one accepts that strategic thought need not be based solely on Western boilerplates, then there are several other texts to choose from—not just arcane treatises like the *Manusmriti* and the *Dharmasutras*, but also a variety of *Subhashitani* (quotable wisdom) from the *Panchatantra*, Bhartrihari's *Neetishatakam*, and other beautiful compositions in prose and poetry. Even more than all these texts, there is one that is a particularly strong candidate as a primary source for Indian strategic thought: the *Mahabharat*.¹⁴

The *Mahabharat*—one of India's two great epics—comprises 100,000 verses. Unlike the *Arthashastra*, this is not a “textbook” of dry teachings; rather, it is a lively and dramatic narration of the politics of succession, containing within it a variety of stories within stories, histories, parables, myths, and legends. It resembles the *Ramayan*—India's other great epic—in being a part of the country's living traditions. And yet, unlike the *Ramayan*, which contains representations of the ideal (*Bhagwaan* Shri Ram is *Maryaada Purushottam*—the ideal man, Maa Sita is the ideal wife and mother, Lakshman is the ideal brother),¹⁵ the *Mahabharat* deals with a messier reality. Its heroes, while admired and loved to this day, have many human flaws, while its villains reveal virtuous traits. Even Lord Krishna—the great divinity in the text, and not just a minor god from the Hindu canon but a reincarnation (an *avataar*) of Vishnu¹⁶ himself—resorts to lies and deceptions. Renowned *Mahabharat* scholar, V. S. Sukthankar thus rightly describes him as “a paradox, a riddle, to say the least,”¹⁷ and Bimal Prasad Matilal's classic essay on the deity describes him as “a devious diplomat”.¹⁸ The *Ramayan* teaches us of ethical standards which we can, at best, hope to aspire to; the *Mahabharat*, in contrast, walks with us on many treacherous paths and shows us how they may be navigated to our strategic advantage as well as moral redemption. While seldom losing sight of the ideal, the *Mahabharat* lives in the real world.

The first striking observation, if one engages with many Indians on the *Mahabharat*, is the enthusiasm and vigour with which any questions and debates on the text are greeted. The *Mahabharat*, despite its extraordinary length and prolixity, is not an elite affair. Even if few have read the original, they know versions of it from the stories they would have heard in childhood, have clear views on the characters (whom they would have gotten to know through various televised versions), and gladly share their understandings of the various moral and practical lessons of the epic. The *Mahabharat* is deeply embedded in the popular imagination. This is a useful quality for a primary source on strategic thought: explicit and implicit references to the text in strategic narratives have domestic resonance. This matters for the sustainability of policy, and doubly so in a democracy.

In terms of content, the core of the plot is about a great and terrible war between two factions of the same family. This fratricidal war represents the eternal battle between good and evil, *Dharma* and *Adharma*. The epic teaches us about the laws of war and war strategy, not only as theory but also through many memorable stories that illustrate the precepts and tactics in action. It is perhaps not surprising that in common parlance, the word '*Mahabharat*' is used as a synonym for war.

That said, the *Mahabharat* is much more than a treatise on war.¹⁹ Of its 18 *Parvas*,²⁰ five are focused on the 18 days of ferocious battle in the *Dharmakhshetra* (the battlefield of Dharma) that *Kurukshetra* is; the remaining 13 books deal with the politics of peace. They explore a wide range of issues, including statecraft, leadership, ethics, negotiations, and good governance. It is true that the possibility of war is seldom far away in the 13 books, and there is extensive discussion on strategies to preserve peace, avoid war, prepare for war, acquire weapons (and establish rules for their use), build alliances, deal with the terrible consequences of war, and secure a just and stable peace. That the shadow of war is present through much of the text, even as it deliberates the material and spiritual ways in which the tragedy of the human condition can be transcended, qualifies it even further as a resource for the troubling and uncertain times that we live in today.

The remainder of this section outlines key concepts from the *Mahabharat* that serve as foundational principles for the making of Indian strategic thought.

1. Dharma

The most important concept that underpins Indian strategic thought is Dharma. Its usage depends on context—it can refer to religion, duty, charity, morality, righteousness, legitimacy, law, and more. At its core, it represents the foundational principle of social order. As such, it has direct implications on how this civilisational power thinks about global order, governance, war, and peace.

The *Mahabharat* has a great deal to say about Dharma. But the deep and pertinent insights that it offers tend to be subsumed by one shocking incident: when challenged by the brave Draupadi in the royal court on the heinous conduct of the Kauravas, Bhishma Pitamaha's reply is: "Dharma is subtle". Many regard this answer as a cop-out. The great grandsire's answer is especially inadequate, given the existential context in which the question has been posed and the very high stakes involved. Work solely with this episode, and it would be easy to dismiss the concept as an empty signifier. Delve deeper and advance further in the text, however, and clarity emerges. Without shying away from its complexities, the *Mahabharat* offers a distinct view on Dharma. Importantly, this clarity should not be mistaken for diktat; even when the lessons come from the most enlightened and venerated protagonists (including the god Krishna himself), the importance of human choice is emphasised. We are responsible for the making of our own destinies.²¹

Amongst the many oft-quoted insights from the *Mahabharat*, one that captures why Dharma matters for strategic thought and policy is: धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः (*Dharmo rakshati rakshitaha*). Dharma protects those who protect it. Hence the protection of Dharma is paramount.²² But what is this Dharma? Without engaging with the many "subtleties" that one could get into, two views of Dharma are important: *Swadharma* and *Sadhaaran* Dharma.

‘Swadharma’ refers to the duties that one has within the social order. At the battlefield of Kurukshetra, even as the two armies stand facing each other, the bravest of archers, Arjun, is overcome with grief and distress at the prospect of killing his teachers, elders, and kinsmen. Even if his side—the *Pandavs*—were to win, what joy could there be in such a victory? With tears in his eyes, Arjun lays down his famous bow, Gandiv, and says, “I will not fight” (न योत्स्य). What follows is an utterly remarkable sermon known as the *Bhagwad Gita* (The Divine Song),²³ in which his charioteer—Lord Krishna—with a clear set of arguments, helps quell Arjun’s doubts.

Krishna’s first set of arguments appeals to Swadharma. Arjun is a *Kshatriya*—a warrior—whose duty is to fight; such unmanliness does not befit him. Society has ordained a clear role for him, and this is a just war (*Dharma Yuddh*); to abrogate his responsibilities would bring great peril to himself and to others. Krishna reminds Arjun of his Swadharma in the following words:

स्वधर्ममपि चावेक्ष्य न विकम्पितुमर्हसि |
धर्म्याद्धि युद्धाच्छ्रेयोऽन्यत्क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते ||

*Considering your duty (as a warrior), you should not waver.
There is nothing better for a warrior than to fight for Dharma.*

- *Bhagwad Gita*, 2.31

Having reminded Arjun of his duty as a warrior, Krishna expands on the importance of following Swadharma:

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् |
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ||

It is better to follow one’s own Dharma (allocated duty), even if imperfectly, rather than to follow someone else’s Dharma to perfection.

It is better to die performing one’s own duty; taking on the functions allocated to another is to be feared and avoided.

- *Bhagwad Gita*, 3:35

Embracing the path of Swadharma ensures material and spiritual benefits:

हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम् ।
तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कृतनिश्चयः ॥ 37 ॥

*Get slain in battle and you will attain heaven, win and you will enjoy the earth,
For this reason arise, son of Kunti, and fight with determination.*

- *Bhagwad Gita*, 2: 37

It becomes clear quite early on in the *Bhagwad Gita*, however, that this type of reasoning alone will not suffice to persuade our distraught hero. In the discussion, spread over 18 chapters, Krishna's argumentation draws on eternal and universal principles, which belong to the category of Sadhaaran Dharma, and which transcend class, caste, and creed. He advises Arjun that his grief is unnecessary because the soul is eternal: how can one who knows the soul to be imperishable and indestructible believe that anyone can be slain (2:21)? Having highlighted a fundamental equality of all human beings via a non-dualistic interpretation of reality, Krishna goes further: more-than-humans are also included in this vision. He tells Arjun:

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि ।
ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः ॥

*Those who see all beings within themselves, and themselves in all creatures,
And look upon all beings, everywhere, as the same, they are united with the divine.*

- *Bhagwad Gita*, 6: 29

Krishna uses the complementarities of Swadharma and Saadhaaran Dharma to remind and persuade Arjun of his duty in a just war. Contra stereotypes and reductionist views associated with Indian pacifism (and otherwise), the philosophy of the *Bhagwad Gita* is of action—and not any action, but action that is righteous, performed according to one's (social and higher) duty, without regard to personal gain.²⁴

While Shri Krishna reconciles the imperatives of Swadharma and Saadhaaran Dharma in his discourse, there are other important occasions in the *Mahabharat* where the contradictions are more apparent (and hence also Bhisma's description of Dharma as "subtle" or intricate and complex). In the *Aranyak Parv*, when the Pandavs have been sent into exile after a rigged dice game, Draupadi and Bheem try to coax and hector Yudhishtir to stand up to the Kauravas and reclaim his fair share of the kingdom. A major part of the argumentation that they use is based on Swadharma. Draupadi reminds Yudhishtir that he is a Kshatriya who should be fighting the righteous war but is misguidedly following the path of a Brahmin with his predilection for peace at any price. He is a noble and brave king; to now accept without resistance this life of a hermit is most unfitting to him and his family.

Yudhishtir, however, is no ordinary hero; he is the son of Dharma himself, and the high standards to which he holds himself belong to the realm of Saadhaaran Dharma. While respectful of their views and deeply contrite of his own role in the sordid affair, *Dharmaputra* Yudhishtir insists that he will not break the vow that he took in the royal assembly: he intends to adhere to fulfil the terms of the agreement that was struck with the Kauravs. He offers some strategic justifications for his arguments. For instance, try to fight the Kauravs from their weakened position in exile, and the Pandavs are certain to lose; it would be far better to attack from a position of strength, which will require several years of preparation. But the crux of his argumentation is moral. Doing the right thing will ultimately pay off—on this, Yudhishtir has no doubt—but interestingly, even this is not the central motivation for his behaviour; rather, he is committed to righteous action for its own sake. It is only when Duryodhan violates his side of the bargain, and refuses to return their share of the kingdom—despite the Pandavs having duly endured 12+1 years in exile—and multiple attempts at mediation fail that Yudhishtir is forced to recognise the inevitability of the war that he will have to wage.

Arguments based solely on Swadharma can be misused by the unscrupulous to excuse their abominations. A similar genre of arguments has been employed, for instance, in attempts to defend the perpetrators and supporters of Nazi atrocities, on the dubious ground that soldiers

and officials were “merely” obeying orders and fulfilling their duty. Saadhaaran Dharma prevents us from hiding behind the demands of corrupt politicians and blood-baying mobs: it makes us think for ourselves, and answer to a universal law that recognises the dignity of all beings across class, caste, race, and species. But Saadhaaran Dharma on its own presents us with a different type of problem: while emphasising *Anukrosh* (compassion) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence), it can lead us down a path of excessive idealism that is unsuited to surviving in the real world (as was the case with Yudhisthir during the years of exile). A distinguishing feature of Indian strategic thought is that it brings together the insights of Swadharma and Sadhaaran Dharma on worldly problems—just as Shri Krishna had done in Kurukshetra—and thereby draws the attention of scholars and practitioners to questions of interests and values in equal measure.

2. War Strategy

Outside perceptions of Indian precepts on war cluster at extreme ends. On the one hand, references are made to Mahatma Gandhi’s commitment to non-violence; depending on their political standpoints, some see this as a commendable, peace-loving quality in a state, while self-declared realists ridicule this as naïve war-avoidance. On the other hand, readers in the West are horrified to discover that Shri Krishna’s purpose in delivering his sermon on the battlefield is not to talk Arjun out of the war, but to actually fight it; combining that with their partial and incorrect understanding of Dharma and Krishna’s arguments, they conclude that Indian views on war are no different from the crusades of medieval Christianity. Both perceptions are wrong. Indian strategic thought, as enunciated in the *Mahabharat*, displays a unique combination of principle and pragmatism on questions of war and peace.

First and foremost, war is not to be taken lightly. It is a measure of last resort, when all other efforts at mediation and conflict resolution have failed. The first five chapters of the *Mahabharat* (in varying degrees) contain accounts of the numerous efforts to foresee, avoid, and manage conflict. The fifth book—*Udyog Parv*—is an impressive treatise on pre-war diplomacy: the wisest in the *Mahabharat* (from both the Pandav and Kaurav

sides) invest their greatest efforts to prevent the war. Yudhishtir offers to accept a much smaller kingdom in the interest of peace. Trusted emissaries are sent from both sides to each other. While Duryodhan is especially jingoistic and belligerent, the Pandavs—representing by and large) the side of reason and goodness—are more circumspect. Their balanced response to Kaurav overtures for peace is: We are prepared for peace and war, for mildness and severity. Lord Shri Krishna himself engages as a mediator to resolve the conflict between the two sides (whom Duryodhan foolishly tries to capture as a prisoner, in violation of one of the most basic laws of diplomacy). War is accepted as the course of action only after determined and sincere efforts to reach peace have been exhausted.

Second, once the course of war is set, there can be no turning back. All the previous chapters that show the excesses of the Kauravs, especially *Sabha Parv* and *Udyog Parv*, give us convincing reasons as to why the cause of the Pandavs is just, and war is inevitable. The *Bhagwad Gita* further offers clear prescriptions on the spirit in which such a war should be fought, which leads us to consider the legitimacy of not just the action itself, but the motivation behind it. From this stems the inspiring philosophy of *Nishkaam Dharma*, which stresses the importance of action, but without attachment to the fruits of action.

सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ |
ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि ||

*Treating joy and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike,
Engage in battle; in doing so you will incur no sin.*

- *Bhagwad Gita*, 2-38.

Interestingly, Krishna's injunctions to Arjun to go into battle and Draupadi's (and Bheem's) attempts to persuade Yudhishtir to do the same during the Pandav exile share an important feature: both insist on the importance of action and condemn inaction. But there, the similarity ends. Draupadi and Bheem's reasoning for action has no element of detachment. They seek revenge and recompense against the wrongdoings of the Kauravs, and the action they demand is premature. In contrast, the

action that Krishna advises Arjun to take is free from attachment, and it is exactly timed. Even when the cause is just, war should be fought only with such purpose. And then, it must be determinedly seen through to its conclusion.

Third, clear rules for conduct in war are agreed to in advance. *Dharma Yuddh* refers not only to the great war between good and evil, but also a war that is supposed to be fought as per the established rules. Before the start of war, Bhishma Parv clearly lays out the code of conduct: for instance, like will fight like (in terms of experience, age, or weaponry), an armed person will not attack one unarmed or defenceless, and all fighting will cease upon sunset. In accordance with the realism that we can expect from the *Mahabharat*, the rules are breached by the Pandavs and Kauravs alike as the war progresses. There are many twists in the tale, and the text keeps us on our toes with villains sometimes showing greater honour than heroes, and heroes resorting to callous deceit. Challenges are posed over rule violations. For example, when Karna is unarmed, disembarked, and trying to free his chariot wheel that is stuck in the ground, Krishna nonetheless advises Arjun to shoot the lethal arrow. Karna rightly, but unsuccessfully, challenges him. Indeed, almost all the Kaurav greats are killed through deceitful means, in violation of the agreed principles of fairness and humanitarianism. Counter-arguments and justifications are given with equal force.²⁵ Compliance with and violation of these laws matter not only at a rhetorical level; there are real consequences when the rules of conduct are breached. When Yudhishtir tells a lie that leads to the death of his otherwise invincible *guru*, Dronaacharya, his chariot—which had always floated above the ground—now touches the earth. As punishment for attacking the Pandavs camp in the middle of the night and further using the terrible *Brahmashirsha* weapon against the unborn children of the Pandavs, a terrible curse is placed upon Ashwatthama: he is said to roam the earth alone, to this day, with wounds that never heal. Lord Krishna himself is cursed by the mother of the Kauravs, Gandhari, resulting in the decline of the Yadav clan through infighting.

We thus have before us a cohesive collection of ideas that stresses war only as a measure of last resort (and provides methods of mediation and conflict resolution to avoid war, as far as possible), conditions in which war is legitimate (relating to the causes of war as well as the driving motivation of individuals fighting it), and the legality of certain acts of war versus the illegality of others (and thereby establishing a code of conduct for war, breaches of which have serious consequences). Contra stereotyping, Indian strategic thought prescribes neither a blanket war avoidance at all costs (e.g., in the name of Ahimsa or other tenets of Saadhaaran Dharma), nor does it support warmongering and jingoism (e.g., in the name of Swadharma). Its context-appropriate pragmatism and circumspection is not fence-setting but reflects strategic and moral depth. It presents guidance, sometimes in great detail, for specific situations. And still, it ultimately reminds us the power of individual choice. Having revealed the divine wisdom and developed a theory of war, peace (and a great deal of all that is in between the two), Lord Shri Krishna advises Arjun to reflect deeply and then “do as you will” (यथेच्छसि तथा कुरु).²⁶

3. Alignment and Alliances

Western commentators are quick to point to India’s decades of proclaimed commitment to “non-alignment”, and its leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to argue that India prefers neutrality over alliances. More recently, India’s positioning over the Russian invasion of Ukraine, while successfully managing to also receive overtures from the European Union and the United States, has attracted similar censure of fence-sitting. Such interpretations are gross oversimplifications, as the overview in the following paragraphs illustrates.

Engage someone from India in a debate, and it will be hard to find them maintaining neutrality: strong opinions are a hallmark of Amartya Sen’s “argumentative Indian”. The inclination to take a clear position also translates into foreign policy and grand strategy. In the *Mahabharat*, almost no major character is neutral.²⁷ Even the gods recognise the limits of going it alone and the necessity of working with partners when formidable foes are involved. Alliances are key.

The story begins with the negotiation of a powerful alliance between the putative author of the *Mahabharat*, the sage Ved Vyaas, and the auspicious, elephant-headed deity of creativity, Ganesh (the remover of obstacles, and whose blessings are sought to this day before the start of any new endeavour). Ved Vyaas had composed the *Mahabharat* in his head, but needed a scribe to pen the long and complex poem. Lord Ganesh alone was deemed to be capable of taking on this mammoth task. A historic partnership was duly formed. The story illustrates the importance of teamwork. The wise Vyaas was aware his own limitations, and sought to overcome them through an alliance. The ally that he sought was no ordinary human but a God known for his exceptional intelligence and benevolence. Ganesh agreed to Vyaas's request, but only after some hard bargaining from both sides.²⁸ The story gives us an early peek into what follows in the epic: the importance of partnerships, finding the right allies, and how mutually supportive conditions can be negotiated even under conditions of high asymmetry.

As the plot develops and the conflict between the Kauravs and Pandavs deepens, the necessity of allies becomes apparent. On both sides, military alliances are formed through marriages in powerful kingdoms. When faced with the inevitability of war, however, the Pandavs find themselves in a structurally weaker position. The twelve years of exile have required them to surrender their empire, military, and wealth. And as if this were not enough to emaciate their influence, the Kauravs have ordained that the thirteenth year of exile must be spent *incognito*; should their true identities be discovered, the Pandavs will have to restart their exile all over again. Having to spend the last year of exile in disguise significantly reduces the Pandavs' ability to influence public opinion back in their favour or build alliances. When the Pandavs finally return after having duly fulfilled the terms of the 13-year exile, considerable attention goes to finding a peaceful return of their rightful kingdom. But long-standing supporters are sceptical that polite entreaties and reminders to the Kauravs to honour their part will suffice. Drupad suggests that envoys be sent out to friendly kingdoms in order to boost the power of the Pandav side through alliances—a strategy that is duly and successfully adopted. These alliances turn out to be indispensable for the Pandavs in winning the war. For instance, the otherwise unvanquishable Bhishma is defeated only after the

Pandavs seek the assistance of Shikhandi, and it is Dhritadyumna's hand that strikes the fatal blow to kill Dronaacharya.

In peacetime and in war, the characters of the *Mahabharat* avoid both neutrality and isolationism. But its characters also walk the fine line between unquestioning allegiance, on the one hand, and strategic opportunism on the other. Exceptions to this represent deviations from the path of *Dharma*, and bear poor fruit. Dhritarashtra's excessive devotion to his sons constitutes one such exception. Dhritarashtra's blindness is not only physical but also metaphorical: blinded by his loyalty to his sons, he readily ignores their many misdeeds, crimes and sins. Almost consistently refusing to follow the advice of his wise counsellors on his duty to maintain an impartiality between the Pandavs and the Kauravs, Dhritarashtra is an anti-hero. His lack of moral courage to intervene at key instances is a major factor for the devastating war. It also produces the opposite effect from the one that Dhritarashtra has intended: the Kauravs are defeated, neither his beloved Duryodhan nor his 99 brothers survive the battle of Kurukshetra.

An example of unsuccessful strategic opportunism is that of Duryodhan. Duryodhan and Arjun both go to Lord Krishna to seek his help in the impending war. Krishna offers a choice: one side can have his highly trained and well-equipped army, while the other side can have his person but in the capacity of a non-combatant. Arjun, without hesitation, chooses Krishna; Duryodhan gleefully accepts Krishna's military forces, convinced that he has landed the better deal. Krishna's strategic acumen and moral force turn out to be a crucial—perhaps even the primary—reason for the ultimate victory of the Pandavs. Duryodhan's transactionalism—to go to Krishna in the first place (after having tried to incarcerate him during the peace talks), and then his short-sighted eagerness to accept Krishna's army—do not serve his side well; Arjun's love and loyalty for Krishna are rewarded with victory.

Partnerships and coalitions are regarded as an essential instrument of foreign policy in the *Mahabharat*. This is no crude transactionalism: strategic partnerships are underpinned by norms and values, and usually constructed with a close eye on not just the immediate context but the history of the relationship.²⁹ A strong non-dualistic tradition ensures that a

great diversity of partnerships falls within the feasibility frontier, and there are a few pariahs.³⁰ India's refusal to ostracise Russia over its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 would have been less shocking to Western observers had there been more awareness of this key aspect of Indian strategic thought.

4. Environmental Protection and Economic Pursuits

An impressive array of episodes in the *Mahabharat* show us the importance that Indian political thought attaches to the protection of the environment, biodiversity, and sustainability.

When in exile, Yudhisthir dreams of a small herd of deer standing before him. He observes that they are trembling and their eyes are filled with tears. When asked, the deer tell him that the presence of the Pandavs in their forest has rapidly depleted their numbers because they are being ruthlessly hunted. Very soon, all of them will be exterminated. Would the Pandavs now consider leaving the forest so that their numbers might slowly be restored? Yudhisthir recognises the legitimacy of their cause and the Pandavs move to another location. This short story from an ancient Indian text contains within it several ideas that humanity is only just waking up to: the necessity of biodiversity preservation (having destroyed over 70 percent of biodiversity in 50 years), the importance of "re-wilding",³¹ and the urgent need to balance the demands of urbanisation and consumption with sustainability and planetary rights.

The text goes further in insisting on respect for the environment, looking askance at certain farming practices. In a detailed exchange among two spiritually advanced and wise characters, Tulaadhaar speaks with Jajali, and unreservedly condemns the suffering inflicted on draft animals (likening it to foeticide). At face value, agriculture is regarded as a moral livelihood, but is in fact horrific: wooden implements with iron injure the earth and kill the beings that live in the ground. Violence against animals is not acceptable. Our fellow more-than-humans are loved by their mothers (just as humans are); the gods reside in them; the natural corollary is that farm animals too deserve the dignity and respect that most reserve only for human beings (*Mahabharat*, XII. 254).

Tulaadhaar is holding his fellow humans to a much higher ideal than most, across cultures, are able to follow in farming practices.³² But consider this discussion in the context of environmental standards in trade agreements, over which the European Union believes itself to have the moral high ground, despite the cruelty embedded in its own factory farming traditions. India, in turn, has found itself at the receiving end of European sermons on this matter, and adopts a defensive position. Both sides would be better served in treating Tulaadhaar's teachings as a model to aspire to, and thereby set new, higher standards for animal welfare and rights in agricultural production and trade.

While the theme of protecting the environment aligns easily with the idea of Dharma, just as important is the pursuit of *Arth* i.e., material wealth and prosperity. Those who still regard India as the land of renunciation would be well-served to read up on India's ancient political thought on the matter. The pursuit of prosperity is a legitimate exercise—and expected from all but saints and hermits. This is not, however, a blind and uncritical enthusiasm for markets for their own sake; rather, the pursuit of wealth is advocated in order to fulfil one's moral duty. A well-known verse, taught to children even today, has the following to say:

विद्या ददाति विनयं विनयाद् याति पात्रताम्।
पात्रत्वात् धनम् आप्नोति धनाद् धर्मं ततः सुखम्॥

Knowledge gives humility, from humility comes competence,

Through competence one acquires wealth, wealth enables one to pursue Dharma, and thereby attain happiness.

- *Hitopadesh*, I. 6.

There are several ways in which wealth can be used for the purposes of Dharma, including charity. For instance, in the section of *Vidurniti*, we are told:

मितं भुङ्क्ते संविभज्याश्रितेभ्यो मितं स्वपित्यमितं कर्मकृत्वा ।
ददात्यमित्रेष्वपि याचितः सं— स्तमात्मवन्तं प्रजहात्यनर्थाः॥

He who eats what little remains after having distributed food to those who depend on him, sleeps little and works a great deal,

Gives his wealth readily to a needy person, even if the petitioner is not his friend—all misfortune avoids such a person.

- *Mahabharat, V, Vidurneeti, 1. 123*

The pursuit of *Arth* is thus partly self-oriented—to have the capacity to fulfil one's *Dharmic* duties and achieve *Moksha* (salvation)—but it also has a significant social component. This social component includes consideration for our fellow human beings, as well as respect for planetary rights.

The “green” agenda of the *Mahabharat* is embedded in an idea of sufficiency rather than excess, which serves as a guiding principle on several matters, including food security. In a famous dialogue (Yaksha Prashna) in the epic, a magical being who resides in a lake (Yaksha) poses a series of riddles to Yudhishtir. On being asked “who can rejoice”, Yudhishtir answers:

पञ्चमेऽहनि षष्ठे वा शाकं पचति स्वे गृह।
अनृणी चाप्रवासी च स वारिचर मोदते ॥

He who has (the reliability of) even scant food to cook at home,

Who is not in debt, and who does not need to travel, he is the one who can be truly happy.

- *Mahabharat, III.313.115*

This verse is interesting, as it shows the importance that is being attached to self-reliance—a form of strategic autonomy that guards against excessive dependence on external parties. An attention to *Atmanirbharta*, however, does not translate into an anti-trade stance. Here too, there is caution: trade must be fair. The story of Yayati is a case in point. Yayati—the ancestor of our key protagonists—is banished from heaven; his request, however, that he falls only among the noblest of men is duly granted by Indra. During his fall, Yayati encounters four remarkable sages, each of whom offers him their respective portions of heaven (acquired through penance and good deeds) to facilitate Yayati's swift return.

The first two sages generously make two unilateral offers respectively, to Yayati, which he declines on the grounds that he can never accept charity as a Kshatriya. The third sage then offers him an exchange: he will trade his share of heaven in return for a piece of straw. Yayati's response is polite but firm: he has never engaged in unfair dealings. Finally, when the fourth sage suggests that Yayati consider his offer a loan (one that he has no intention of reclaiming) rather than gift, Yayati once again declines. For their selfless offers, the four sages are rewarded with heaven. But Yayati too is allowed to return to heaven for his demonstrated commitment to fairness despite the temptations of the deal. No deal is better than an unfair deal (even if the balance is tipped in one's own favour). Awareness of such stories may help its negotiating counterparts understand some of India's readiness to walk away from seemingly attractive trade deals; building in development-friendly, fairness-oriented considerations³³ will be important to win India over.

5. An Indian Variant of Liberalism: Human Rights, and More-Than-Human Rights

A key tenet of Western liberalism is the centrality attached to human rights. It is conventionally assumed that "Asian" values prioritise the family, in contrast to Western values that emphasise the rights of the individual; a dichotomy between the Asian and "liberal" understandings of human rights is thereby assumed. The *Mahabharat* presents a different perspective about how Indian strategic and ethical thought conceptualises this matter. The importance attached to the rights of the individual—across species—in fact makes the Indian interpretation of liberal values in this domain more "liberal" than Western variants. The famous episode of Yudhishtir and the dog is a powerful illustration of this.

After a long and successful reign, the Pandavs and Draupadi renounce their kingdom and begin their final journey: *Mahaprasthan*. On this long, gloomy and arduous trek to the Himalayas and beyond, they come to be accompanied by a stray dog. One by one, for their respective sins, the Pandavs fall to their deaths. For the virtuous life that he has tried to lead, Yudhishtir emerges as the lone survivor, with the dog still by his side. Indra, the king of the gods himself, then arrives to welcome Yudhishtir

to heaven. When Yudhishtir says that he has no desire for celestial bliss without his family, Indra reassures him that his brothers and wife are already in heaven. He urges Yudhishtir to now embrace his celestial rewards, leaving the dog behind. An inspiring debate ensues.

Indra offers several types of arguments—ethical, religious, strategic—as to why Yudhishtir should now abandon the dog. To each of the arguments, Yudhishtir’s comeback is polite but firm. The dog has been faithful to him, and there can be no greater sin than abandoning one such:

भीतिप्रदानं शरणागतस्य स्त्रिया वधो ब्राह्मणस्वापहारः।
मित्रद्रोहस्तानि चत्वारि शक्र भक्त्यागश्चैव समो मतो मे॥

To abuse/ frighten anyone who has sought refuge with one, to kill a woman or a religious/spiritual person,

To betray a friend – for me, these four sinful acts in aggregate are morally as despicable as the heinous act of abandoning one who has been devoted.

- Mahabharat, XVII.3.16

Our hero thus stands his ground, courageously picks an argument with the king of the gods himself, and potentially jeopardises his prospects of attaining heaven (where, it has been promised, he can be reunited with the family he dearly loves). The stakes are high. At this point, the dog transforms to his true self. He is Dharma—the god of duty, time, and death, as well as Yudhishtir’s birth father—who has been testing his son. And in mellifluous tones, he says the following:

अभिजातोऽसि राजेंद्र पितुर्वृत्तेन मेधया ।
अनुक्रोशेन चानेन सर्वभूतेषु भारत ॥...
...अयं श्वा भक्त इत्येवं त्यक्तो देवस्थस्त्वया ।
तस्मात् स्वर्गे न ते तुल्यः कश्चिदस्ति नराधिपः । ।

*Through your virtue, intelligence and compassion towards all beings,
You have truly proven yourself to be the worthy son of your father*

...This time too, by insisting, "This dog is faithful to me," you were willing to renounce Indra's chariot

For this reason, O King, heaven has none equal to you.

- Mahabharat, XVII.3.18, 21

This story has moved generations of readers of the *Mahabharat*, with one frequent takeaway being an appreciation for Yudhishtir's *Anukrosh* (compassion) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) that extends to all creatures (and which has been likened to some of the views expressed in the edicts of the great king, *Ashoka*).³⁴ But take a closer look, and Yudhishtir's world-view is even more far-reaching.

Through the case that he presents, Yudhishtir is highlighting the merits of non-anthropocentrism. The dog who has shown him his faithfulness receives the same devotion in return, *exactly* as a human being might. In the systematic arguments that he presents, the son of Dharma makes no distinction between species. Both humans and more-than-humans are worthy of the same respect and dignity, and every life is equally worth saving.

Apply Yudhishtir's view to the present and we get a "save-the-planet" case that is very different from mainstream arguments. Greta Thunberg, for instance, who has triggered "Fridays for Future" protests by schoolchildren across Europe and beyond, has insisted: "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words...You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you, and if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you."³⁵ While Thunberg rightly alerts the world to the inadequacy of climate action, hers is an entirely anthropocentric case. In contrast, followers of Yudhishtir would demand climate action not only for their own futures or for future generations of humans, but for all the many beings across different species with whom they share this planet.

While most in the West (and indeed many in the Global South too) argue for *inter-generational* justice, the Indian view presented here creates space for *trans-species* justice. The latter view has transformative implications for debates on sustainability and biodiversity, which continue to be framed even today with an eye to human consumption and preservation. Adopt Yudhishtir's view and the reference point changes. Every individual being, across diverse species, deserves a life free of suffering.

Yudhishtir is a paragon of virtue, but his is not a lone voice in the *Mahabharat* (or indeed, in the annals of ancient Indian literature at large). Within the *Mahabharat*, we have the exchange between Jajali and Tulaadhaar on the importance of animal welfare and animal rights; other famous verses that find ready reference in Indian political life refer to the respect that must be extended to the planet, and the entire earth as being one family (e.g., *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* from the *Mahopnishad*).³⁶ These are the kinds of views that have led some thinkers to argue that in India, “human rights are not human only.”³⁷

Analysts and negotiating counterparts who have long found India a “difficult” and complicated negotiating partner are right, in a way, for *Dharma* cannot be served up in an easy manual of guidelines. A central and recurring message is that we must think for ourselves, and only then decide on the lines of strategy that we want to pursue. Tulaadhaar captures this sentiment perfectly when defending the cause of animal rights: “You engage in some terrible misdeeds because they have been practised by men since ancient times, and not because they align with the principles of your own, higher understanding. One should practice what one considers to be one’s duty, guided by reason, instead of blindly following some diktats of Dharma.” We see a strong proclivity for autonomy—not only strategic but also normative—and this is fundamental to how India defines its place in the world. The country’s historic struggle against colonial rule has only reinforced this line of thinking. Those baffled by India’s negotiation positions—be this over its unwillingness to succumb to external pressures to side with one party or another (e.g., Russia or Ukraine), or over its insistence self-sufficiency in the past and self-reliance (*Atmanirbharta*) today—would be well-served to understand this deep-rooted preference, as well as others outlined in the previous pages.

Does the selection of ideas presented here belong primarily to the realm of strategic thought? The answer is a vehement yes, if we are open-minded enough to recognise that other countries, cultures and civilisations (besides those that constitute the “West”) can also have ideational power and thought leadership. Thus far, ideas of what constitutes “strategy” has been understood using the lens of Western IR theory.³⁸ But as this paper highlights, India brings original ideas to current debates on globalisation, order, and governance. There is much on offer: new ways of thinking about war and peace, bringing ethics into statecraft, reshaping the rules that balance considerations of prosperity and security, rebooting old models of development to incorporate the needs of the marginalised and the voiceless, and redefining “human” rights in more inclusive and planet-sensitive ways.

Implications and Impact

Civilisational strategic thought, as presented here, is directly relevant for scholars, practitioners from different fields, and students who want to understand India's strategic thinking, and negotiate more effectively with the country. It is also useful for a broader readership interested in questions of Indian foreign policy and strategy. A careful consideration of these ideas can further ignite more self-awareness of its strategic traditions within India and contribute to public debates on the subject, as well as the policy-making process. A few of the ideas presented here already form the lived experience of Indian foreign policy; many, however, still occupy the realm of the potential, waiting to be discovered, applied, and implemented.³⁹ Systematic scholarly engagement with our ancient strategic traditions holds a key to the self-discovery and future rise of the great power that is India.

Studies such as this on Indian strategic thought can also help sow the seeds of much-needed breakthroughs in the theory and practice of International Relations. Much of IR theory is founded on Western political thought; the sub-fields of Strategic Studies and International Political Economy are similarly West-centric in their assumptions. Were we to build a theory of International Relations that incorporates aspects of Indian political and strategic thought, we could be working with very different, and useful, premises. Such a theory would be less anthropocentric to start with, and the idea of human rights would differ dramatically not only from "Asian" variants (that stress society and family over the individual), but would also be more protective of the rights of the individual than Western variants of liberalism by recognizing the personhood of more-than-human beings. Planetary rights would enter mainstream intellectual and public debates.

A parallel move by practitioners in like-minded countries (as well as officials of international organisations) would require them to move out of their technocratic silos and disciplinary comfort zones, and ensure that policy is informed by a diversity of disciplinary, global perspectives. Incorporating key aspects of Indian political thought could be a useful and timely input for those seeking to meaningfully reform global governance. Bringing in some of the ideas presented in this paper into mainstream debates can help create international trade regimes that recognise the importance of food security, national security, and access to medicines, as

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well as international treaties that respect the dignity and worth of all—human and more-than-human—lives. These are not just “soft” areas of negotiation. Improving the condition of animals is key to global health and pandemic prevention. Embedding security considerations in trade regimes takes us directly into questions of re-aligning supply chains and hard-core geopolitics. As the world muddles through multiple challenges and existential risks, Indian strategic thought offers innovative pathways for action. [ORF](#)

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- 1 It is worth emphasising that the knowledge contained in “Shaastra” (texts and treatises) is in no way restricted to the realm of “Shastra” (weapons of war), but extends to all manner of topics, including the uses of what we refer to today as “soft power” in politics.
- 2 Another important meaning of *Neeti* is ethics and morality. Attention to *Shaastra*, *Shastra*, and *Neeti*, enables the editor and contributors to carefully consider values and interests in the making of Indian strategic thought.
- 3 Herbert Gowen, “‘The Indian Machiavelli’ or Political Theory in India Two Thousand Years Ago,” *Political Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1929), p. 173.
- 4 George K. Tanham, “Indian Strategic Culture,” *The Washington Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1992): 134. This article was based on a longer report that Tanham had conducted for RAND, under the sponsorship of the Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, RAND: National Defence Research Institute, 1992, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf>
- 5 What V. S. Sukthankar had written almost over half a century ago, sadly stands true to this day: “... as we are in the habit of reading our ancient books through the spectacles balanced on our noses by our Western *gurus*, most of whom have yet to show any real understanding of them, we are beginning to acquire a very distorted view of these books,” Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay: The Asiatic Society of Bombay, Monograph No. IV, 1957), p. 95. And hence also his plaidoyer; “It is high time that we look from our own standpoint at these ancient scriptures of ours, which have served our people for some millennia as their guides in life and spiritual solace, make them our own, and re-live their truth.”
- 6 For more on this, see Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (New Delhi: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2009). Even the assumption of a dichotomy between spiritualism and materialism, or interests and values, and other such polarised conceptualisations is antithetical to key strands in Indian political thought. For instance, non-dualism (*Advaitvaad*) rejects a separation between the ultimate reality/ the divine and the individual. The four goals to pursue for an individual are Dharma (roughly righteousness and duty, but more on this later in this chapter), Artha (material gain), Kaama (pleasure and desire), Moksha (spiritual liberation) – and they are not seen to be in contradiction with each other.
- 7 It is worth noting that the tendency to assume the “absence” of strategic thought in India persists in relation to other political virtues too. India is deemed to be almost incapable of having indigenous varieties of liberalism or democracy (let alone the possibility that some homegrown varieties may be more far-reaching than their Western variants). If there is the occasional recognition that India can and does think strategically, act democratically, or advance the cause of liberalism, it comes with an assumption that this is a hangover of Western colonial baggage or Western (colonial or modern-day) tutelage. For a discussion, critique, and corrective of these approaches, see Amrita Narlikar, “India and the World: Civilizational Narratives in Foreign Policy,” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, eds. Steve Smith, Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield and Nicolas Kitchen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

- 8 “Sadly many Indians have picked up Tanham’s refrain say that India has no strategic culture,” see Shivshankar Menon, Address by National Security Advisor on *Strategic Culture and IR Studies in India* at the 3rd International Studies Convention held at JNU Convention Centre, New Delhi (11 December 2013), <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22632/Address+by+National+Security+Advisor+Shiv+Shankar+Menon+on+Strategic+Culture+and+IR+Studies+in+India+at+the+3rd+International+Studies+Convention+held+at+JNU+Convention+Centre+New+Delhi>.
- 9 C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave, 2004).
- 10 Menon, “Strategic Indian Culture and IR Studies in India.”
- 11 Amongst the first book-length studies to offer a corrective to Western reductionism about India’s negotiating culture was Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar, *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Further works include S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2022); Aruna Narlikar, Amitabh Mattoo and Amrita Narlikar, *Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas: Stories from the Mahabharat* (Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2023); Dhruva Jaishankar, *Vishwashastra: India and the World* (Delhi: Viking, 2024).
- 12 Phonetic spelling has been used in this paper. The anglicised and unnecessary extra “a” at the end has been avoided: so Arjun (rather than Arjuna). But in words where no vowel precedes the last consonant, the “a” has been added, in order to pre-empt a fundamental mispronunciation. Hence, for instance, without the “a” at the end, *Dharm* will usually get vocalised as *Dharam*, and *Arthashastr* risks becoming *Arthashastar*; to avoid these verbal errors, we use *Dharma* and *Arthashastra*. Usually, for the long “a”, aa is used, except for words that have already had significant exposure in English. Hence *Mahabharat* should rightly be written as *Mahaabhaarat*, and the *Arthashastra* similarly as *Arthashaastr*, but this will make for awkward reading for those already familiar with the name. To facilitate access for an audience not familiar with linguistics, diacritical marks have been deliberately avoided.
- 13 E.g. Subrata K. Mitra and Michael Liebig, *Kautilya’s Arthashastra, An Intellectual Portrait: The Classical Roots of Modern Politics in India* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2017); Medha Bisht, *Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy* (London: Routledge, 2020); Kajari Kamal, *Kautilya’s Arthashastra: Strategic Cultural Roots of India’s Contemporary Statecraft* (London: Routledge, (2022).
- 14 There are many versions of the Mahabharat that we can draw on. I have resisted the temptation to rely purely on the critical edition of the Mahabharat, published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (Pune). While this is the most authoritative edition, it is also a trimmed version. As such, it (understandably) excludes some of the episodes that may have appeared later, but form a part of our folklore and living traditions. To not lose out on these stories, I have additionally made use of the Gita Press edition and the Ganguly editions.

- 15 This is not to say that the Ramayan sacrifices all pragmatism at the altar of idealism; India's Foreign Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, for instance, has rightly pointed to the god Hanuman as an exemplary diplomat, sent by Prabhu Shri Ram into the hostile territory of Lanka (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/eam-jaishankar-cites-hanumans-role-in-lanka-to-explain-challenges-as-diplomat-101740231739673.html>). The battle between good and evil is present also in the Ramayan, with the central plot deriving from the abduction of *Maa Sita's* abduction by the demon king, *Ravan*; *Ravan*, in turn, is a complex character, who has strayed from his path of righteousness. Even the epitome of goodness and patience, *Bhagwaan Shri Ram*, knows – and successfully resorts to – the demonstration of power, in order to get compliance from a recalcitrant sea. But overall, the Ramayan is set in an earlier and simpler epoch -- a different “Yug” when Dharma – goodness and duty – had more power (and – literally – as per the Indian view of time, more “legs” to stand on). The beauty of the Mahabharat, moreover, is that an abridged version of the Ramayan is contained within it, and we can draw on its insights too, if we so choose.
- 16 Vishnu is the preserver in the Hindu Holy Trinity, with Brahma being the creator and Shiv the destroyer.
- 17 Sukthankar, *On The Meaning of the Mahabharata*, p. 96.
- 18 Bimal Prasad Matilal, “Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Deity,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 91.
- 19 For the purposes of this paper, I glean the *Mahabharat* for its insights specifically on strategy and foreign policy. But it is worth remembering that the *Mahabharat* makes the following claim:

धर्मं चार्थं च कामं च मोक्षं च भरतर्षभ ।
यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र, यन्नेहास्ति न तत् क्वचित् ॥

On the topics of Dharma, material pleasures, desire, and salvation, what is written here may be found elsewhere, but what is not contained in the Mahabharat can be found nowhere else.

Mahabharat, 1.62.53.

This is an exaggeration, but perhaps only slightly so, for the text is indeed vast and detailed in its coverage, and thus fascinating from sociological, anthropological, historical, economic, political and literary perspectives.
- 20 *Parv* commonly translates to “chapter” or “episode”, but given their size, the *Parv(s)* of the *Mahabharat* constitute books in their own right, and are referred to as such in standard practice.

- 21 As such, the *Mahabharat* offers a much-needed corrective to colonial caricatures (many surviving to the present day) of Indian fatalism. *Karma* is action; past action partly determines our current lives, but it is up to us how we shape our future life/ lives.
- 22 Note that in this short proposition lies the resolution of the values-interests dichotomy that has dogged Western IR theory and practice; for more on this, see Amrita Narlikar, “The Ancient Roots of Global Bharat,” in *The Making of a Global Bharat*, eds., Sameer Patil and Harsh Pant (ORF & Global Policy, 2024), <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20240220113216.pdf>.
- 23 A useful, online version of the *Bhagwad Gita* can be accessed at <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/>. For some practical applications of the *Bhagwad Gita* to the modern day, see Narlikar et al, *Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas*.
- 24 The final chapter of the *Bhagwad Gita* distinguishes between two types of renunciation: of action itself (*Sanyaas*) versus the fruits of action (*Tyaag*). The latter – action performed as per one’s duty (which can be interpreted in terms of *Swadharma* and *Saadhaaran Dharma*) – is vastly superior to the former.
- 25 For one of the best analyses on this, see Matilal, “Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of A Devious Deity.”
- 26 *Bhagwad Gita* 18:63.
- 27 The two noteworthy exceptions to this rule were Balaram and Vidur.
- 28 For more on this alliance, see Narlikar et al 2023.
- 29 E.g.: Karna’s refusal to defect to the Pandavs, even after the overtures of Lord Krishna and his birth mother, Kunti, is based on his history with Duryodhan (who has befriended him at a time of great need).
- 30 In a recent podcast, Joshi offers an excellent discussion on this aspect of Indian foreign policy: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sunjoy-joshi-the-view-from-india/id1765328819?i=1000717966662>, 18 July 2025.
- 31 I am grateful to Simon Leadbeater for introducing me to academic and policy debates on this issue.
- 32 It is worth mentioning that some Indians do appreciate and try to live by similar high ideals; practising Jains, for instance, abstain from the consumption of root vegetables, on grounds of non-violence.
- 33 E.g. via clauses that take into account the concerns of the poorest within India in the case of bilateral agreements, and those also of the poorest in the Global South in the case of multilateral agreements.

- 34 E.g. Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good*.
- 35 Greta Thunberg, *UN Climate Action Summit* (23 September 2019), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/news/2019/09/greta-thunberg/>.
- 36 For more on this, see Amrita Narlikar and Amrita Narlikar, “One Earth, One Family, One Future: Unpacking the Theme of India’s G20 Presidency and Its Wide-Ranging Implications,” in *Well-Being, Values and Lifestyles: Towards A New Development Paradigm*, ed., Sachin Chaturvedi, Seeta Prabhu and Sabyasachi Saha (Singapore: Springer, 2025). Sunjoy Joshi (2025) also eloquently emphasises a distinctive, non-anthropocentric aspect of India’s world-view.
- 37 Raimundo Panikkar, “Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?,” *Diogenes* 30, no. 120 (1982): 75-102; also see Narlikar et al., *Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas*.
- 38 Amongst the few exceptions where attempts are made to de-centre the West in mainstream IR theory (without going down the critical IR theory route), Amitav Acharya’s work is noteworthy, most recently via his book, *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2025). On an interesting take with regard to a non-Western approach to teaching, see Deepshikha Shahi, “Teaching International Relations in India: From Pedagogy to Andragogy,” *E-IR*, October (2016), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Deepshikha-Shahi/publication/309547284_Teaching_International_Relations_in_India_From_Pedagogy_to_Andragogy/links/5816e57a08aeb720f6881984/Teaching-International-Relations-in-India-From-Pedagogy-to-Andragogy.pdf.
- 39 For instance, India has already taken a big step forwards by bringing the world’s attention to planetary rights via its “LiFE: Lifestyle for the Environment” agenda, developed as part of its G20 Presidency. The next steps will now require not only international action, but also India leading by example at the domestic level by updating its laws on prevention of cruelty to animals and further measures to protect the rights of nature. India could exercise agenda-setting power on this issue also via various connectivity projects, particularly when working closely with the EU, e.g. Ghosh et al, *Rethinking India Europe Trade Routes in a New Era of Connectivity*.



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