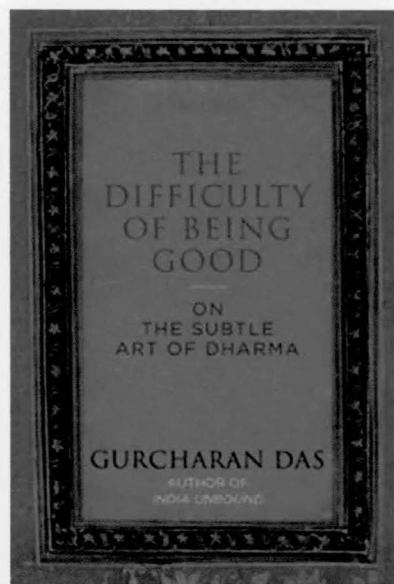


The Difficulty Of Being Good – On The Subtle Art Of Dharma by Gurcharan Das

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Name of Book: *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the subtle art of Dharma*

Writer: Gurcharan Das

House of Publication: Penguin Books India

Year of Publication: 2010

Edition: 1

Number of Pages: 488

Price: ₹699

ISBN: 13-9780670083497
10-0670083496

The Difficulty of Being Good: On the subtle art of Dharma examines the lapses in the moral values of mankind through our two thousand year old epic Mahabharata. The book is inspired from Mahabharata which prompted me to pick this book for reading. Our ancient epic is a tremendous source of knowledge and wisdom and Gurcharan Das probes us to stop and think – What is right and what is wrong.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the key happenings in Mahabharata – the dice game, exile to Pandavas, onset of the Great War, rise and fall of the greatest warriors. Thereafter the author presents the perspectives of the central characters – Duryodhana's Envy, Draupadi's Courage, Yudhishtira's Duty, Arjuna's Despair, Bhishma's Selflessness, Karna's Status Anxiety, Krishna's Guile, Ashwatthama's Revenge, Yudhishtira's Remorse and finally summing up everything in Mahabharata's Dharma. What I found interesting is that the human nature has remained the same over thousands of years. Gurcharan Das has aptly compared Duryodhana's envy towards Pandavas to that of Hitler's towards Jews. Duryodhana's jealousy led to the destruction of the Kaurava clan while Hitler's hunger for power and envy towards the Jews led to the Second World War and destruction of Germany.

As the author analyses the principal characters, he tries to draw a picture of the character and his nature. He begins with Duryodhana whose jealousy led to his own destruction. Duryodhana never tried to hide his harsh

feelings towards the Pandavas. He had an egoistic philosophy and nurtured his evil feelings. Also, Mahabharata never makes the choice between the 'good' and 'bad' easy. For example, in the claim to the Hastinapur throne both Yudhishtira and Duryodhana were justified. Duryodhana's father was the elder son and since he was blind, the throne went to Yudhishtira's father Pandu. Yudhishtira was born to Pandu through *niyoga* whereas Duryodhana was naturally born to Dhritarashtra. Also Yudhishtira was born just minutes before Duryodhana was born. Even after Dhritarashtra divided the kingdom between the two lines, discontent remained with Duryodhana on seeing Pandavas prosperity. This is how the argument goes and we can never figure out who is right and who is wrong.

The famous 'game of dice' is also questionable. Duryodhana might say that he just took advantage of a king's weakness for gambling whereas Yudhishtira might say that he was duped to play the game against a cheat as a king cannot refuse an offer on the day 'rajsuya' ceremony is performed. Duryodhana might pronounce that Yudhishtira wasn't playing against a cheat but a player better than himself. Das connects this episode to the tiff between the Ambani brothers which prompted them to resort to legal proceedings. It's astonishing to find that relationships, emotions and reactions have remained very same through thousands of years.

The other famous or rather infamous incident in Mahabharata is the disrobing of Draupadi. No one in the

entire assembly could protect Draupadi from being wagered in the game. All the elders including the respectable Bhishma were painfully silent when Draupadi was dragged in the assembly hall in a sole piece of garment. No one speaks and no one answers her bold question 'Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?'. This question posed a terrifying moral and social challenge to the society at that time. Finally Bhishma, the eldest of all, answers the question as a legal dilemma. If Yudhisthira lost himself first, he was not competent to stake Draupadi in the first place. But if we see from another angle, that a wife belongs to a husband and is expected to act upon his orders, Yudhishtira is allowed to stake her. Hence Bhishma fails to solve Draupadi's dilemma.

Such instances in Mahabharata make us stop and wonder – what is moral and what is not. What is just and what is unjust. Gurcharan Das comes back to the present world when Pratibha Patil was elected as the President of India. She had murder cases pending on her and still she was endowed with the most prestigious position of power. Bhishma like person Manmohan Singh remained silent. Gurcharan Das aptly calls this response of silence as 'immorality of silence'.

Further, the author reflects on Arjuna's state of mind, his anxiety, his despair on fighting against his own family. Arjuna is pained at the thought that he has to fight against his own cousins, elders, Guru from whom he has learnt everything. As his eyes gaze at the battlefield he sees Dronacharya, Bhishma and he falls silent. This is the part of Bhagavad Gita in Mahabharata. Krishna debates with

Arjuna and explains him that his duty is to fight the war. The author relates this to the war waged by U.S. on Iraq. Saddam Hussain's evil force in Iraq was removed by intervention of the US. But this was achieved through a blood curdling war. May be a war was necessary to free Iraq, or not. The dilemma stays.

If Arjuna's duty is to fight, it is Yudhisthira's duty to follow 'dharma'. Yudhishtira follows dharma not from any hope of rewards, but because of his sense that 'he must do what he has to do'. The author connects Yudhisthira's sense of duty to a CEO of a firm he knew. This man refused to pay bribes to government, though the company was on the brink of bankruptcy. Half his workforce had to be fired and the organization was restructured, he lost 80% of his business to competitors but still chose to follow his sense of duty. Gurcharan Das aptly says – Yudhishtira follows dharma not from any hope of rewards, but because of his sense that 'he must do what he has to do'.

I believe that no one reads Ramayana or the Mahabharata for the first time. We hear the stories as children, grow with it and every time we read it we find something new. Everytime I pick up Mahabharata to browse through, it provides me a new line of thought, a new piece of wisdom, a new theory to rationalize upon. Gurcharan Das' work is like a mirror to us. Reflecting our actions and seeking answers to it in the Mahabharata. It reminds us about our aspirations to be good and 'how difficult it is to be good'.