

## Lord Krishna's war ethics



Were Lord Krishna's war ethics, which involved a disregard for the pre-ordained rules of warfare, justifiable? Was Krishna unfair and biased in the way that he dealt between the Pandavas and Kauravas?

These are common questions that are brought up against Shri Krishna, particularly with regards to the unflinching help he gave to the Pandavas in their struggle against the Kauravas, and with reference to Krishna's tacit encouragement to Bhima to strike Duryodana's thigh during the final mace between Duryodhana and Bhima on the banks of the Godavari River.

Even though it was against the warrior code to strike a man below the waist, on seeing that Bhima was losing, Krishna encouraged Bhima to strike low. Thus was Duryodhana slain.

There are several other examples in which Krishna encouraged the Pandavas to break the warrior code in order to secure victory. The slaying of Drona and Karna, great warriors who arguably the Pandavas were otherwise incapable of defeating, were achieved through schemes engineered by Krishna.

How can such incidents in the Mahabharata be explained against the general ethical and compassionate basis of Krishna's overall teachings?

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## Krishna's support of the Pandavas



Krishna told Duryodhana that his support for the Pandavas was based only on them following a dharmic way of rulership

Krishna's obsession throughout the entire Mahabharata was to establish a society where Dharma was the guiding principle. This is a society where there is protection and happiness for all, and where people live in a balanced, spiritually orientated way, with respect for other people, creatures and all of nature.

Krishna's support for the Pandavas was based solely on shared ideals, not on any intrinsic favouritism. There is an incident in the Mahabharata where Duryodhana complains that Krishna always favoured the Pandavas. Krishna's reply was simple – "Adopt a Dharmic way of life, and I will give you, Duryodhana, the same support and guidance I give to the Pandavas."

The Pandavas, consciously strove to act for the betterment of the masses rather than for their own personal gain. They were rulers who could be instrumental in bringing about such a society as Krishna wanted to create.

On the other hand, Duryodhana stood for hedonism and self-aggrandisement. As such, it would have been disastrous for society if he had come to hold sway over the most influential and powerful kingdom of that era. A Kaurava victory would have meant a rule of darkness over Hastinapoor, Indrapastha and beyond.

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## The Warrior Code



Bhishma and Duryodhana square up for final duel. In the mace fight, Bhishma is losing & Krishna encourages him to break the rules by striking Duryodhana's thigh

Rules and regulations, such as the warrior code that was then in vogue, were created for a limited purpose – to make sure that men of arms did not resort to excessive cruelty in battle, as well as to prevent them from harassing non-combatant civilians. The rules were created to protect the people, and are only relevant so long as they served that purpose.

If Duryodhana and the Kauravas had won the Mahabharata War, then society would be far more vulnerable as compared with a Pandava victory. The Epic is full of examples where Duryodhana and his followers dishonoured women and acted aggressively towards men who dared speak up against them.

If the Pandavas had abided by all the rules of warfare, but as a result of this ended up losing the War, society would have suffered greatly – the common man, woman and child would be deprived of an ethical and fair government.

In such a case, the rules that comprise the warrior's code would have actually hindered the very purpose that they were set up to serve (viz. the protection of the people). Following the written rules would have in fact violated the spirit that gave rise to them in the first place. In such circumstances, rules become a hindrance, and should be discarded. Men have to serve the principles behind rules, not worship the rules as if they are irrevocable.

When Dharma itself is at stake, a warrior should not be too choosy about the means of victory against an adversary who has no respect for Dharma.

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## War ethics



The last stand of Abhimanyu

Krishna also advised the Pandavas that it is suicidal to behave honourably and courteously towards an enemy who is willing to stoop to any level to kill you. By the time Krishna devised his seemingly cunning schemes to remove the key players in the opposing army all of them had themselves flouted the rules of warfare too. The most brutal example of this was the slaying of Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu. In such circumstances, it is foolish to maintain decency towards people who themselves have no decency and are trying to kill you at any cost.

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## Unarmed casualties

Despite all of this, it should be noted that there was no advice or no incident in the Mahabharata where Krishna would accept or justify the killing on non-combatants. The struggle was only ever directed against the individuals who were directly involved in upholding Duryodhana's powers through the force of arms.

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## Conclusion

In this brief overview, it can be seen that Krishna's guidance to the Pandavas reflects a universal and valid approach to certain predicaments that will always face mankind. His efforts to help the Pandavas should be understood in the sole context of the establishment of a righteous society in the face of tyranny, rather than any favouritism.

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<http://bhagavadgita.swami-center.org/ethical-aspect.shtml>