

# AHIMSA AND ĀNṚŚAṂSYA DHARMA FROM THE MAHABHARATA FOR A SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSE

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**Abstract:** The article explores and elucidates two *parama* (greatest) dharmas from the *Mahabharata*, *Ānṛśaṁsya* (absence of cruelty, vileness, and treachery) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence), as a means to promote the goal for a sustainable way of living in the world which faces the challenges of a narrow anthropocentric worldview. Having investigated the intricacies involved in violence, non-violence, and just violence with illustrations from the *Mahabharata*, the paper delves into the principle of *anṛśaṁsya* and its practical applicability in real life. The ethical practice of *Ānṛśaṁsya* in action, if transmitted from individual to the community, can bring positive changes in the functioning of the world, ensuring the welfare and sustainable prosperity for all.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentric, Common Welfare, Interspecies Relationship, *Parama Dharma*, Sustainable Planet.

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary culture is marked by its anthropocentric approach, which emphasises upon creating a technology-oriented, human-centric universe, catering to selfish human greed and ambition. The pace at which science and technology have advanced after the industrial revolution in the west, has made human life easier and more comfortable. While such technological and scientific revolution should have made human civilisation feel more secure and less volatile, in reality, the value of life has become more insignificant. We are constantly living under the intimidating

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shadow of inter-state and intra-state terrorism, communal violence, and selective and senseless killings in the name of blind nationalism, to highlight a few.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict is the most current example of the volatile and precarious time, we live in. The pictures of violence, destruction, and thousands of soldiers, getting killed every day are witnessed by the entire world along with the Russian threat of using nuclear weapons, which can presumably destroy human civilisation to a large extent. Moreover, environmental degradation, global warming, extinction of species, chemical pollution, and aggressive exploitation of nature and natural elements for pursuing narrow political or economic interests have caused serious concern for the survival of humankind. The crisis in the ecology and human civilisation is due to the practice of a blind anthropocentric philosophy which considers the lives of other beings and organisms in nature as subservient and to be exploited for human comfort. Such an anthropocentric approach toward the universe has always proved detrimental to the goals of sustainability and to making the planet a common home (*Oikos*) for all the varieties of innumerable species that inhabit the earth (White 1203-1207).

The crisis of the universe is further escalated due to a narrow understanding of progress in the name of scientific and technological development. Science and technology-oriented progress is thought to be the *sine qua non* for the future of human beings. "Our daily habits of action," White writes, "are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress" (1205). However, a true sense of development must be holistic and should be deeply social and philosophical in nature. It needs to be informed by an ecological norm which is based on the principle of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. If progress entails the improvement of the material condition of human beings, it should equally ensure justice, equality, fraternity, and harmony. Like a double-edged sword, development destroys the planet while providing material progress. Therefore, the question of development without exploitation must be approached cautiously. We require a new approach to our thoughts and action, a revisit to

the ancient reservoir of wisdom and doctrines of life to incorporate them into the light of today. Finally, the progress which is not holistic, and fails to appreciate the uniqueness and beauty in others, cannot make the world livable. The Sustainable Development Goals aims to build an inclusive, equitable, and tolerant world, that can ensure a sustainable coexistence between the human and nature. And to achieve that, science and technology-oriented progress will never be enough.

Ancient culture, tradition, and practices espoused in religious books play a dominant role in influencing the everyday practices of its people. Unlike the western religious tradition, the classical tradition of India has always practised a reverential attitude towards the planet, and insisted on a harmonious and cohesive relationship between the two. The present article will delve into the *parama dharmas* (greatest virtues) like *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and its relationship to *Ānṛśamsya* (absence of cruelty), their practical applicability in life, as originated in the *Mahabharata*, and look into the rich wisdom, that should manifest in human actions and thoughts. The entire world can be benefitted by its practice, if one practices the moral precepts of *Ahimsa* and *Ānṛśamsya* in thoughts and action at the individual level, and gradually transmit it to family, community, humanity, animal world, natural elements, and so on. The exploitative relationship between self and other may transform into an integration, ensuring the welfare of the other, while transcending the selfish desires of the self.

## **2. Vision of Sustainability in Ahimsa and Ānṛśamsya**

Before the paper delves into the complex and nuanced philosophies of *Ahimsa* and *Ānṛśamsya*, and how they can achieve the goal of peace and harmony in the world by working on human thoughts and action, it is necessary to acknowledge that ancient Indian scholars were not unaware of the need of a supportive and sustainable universe for lives to flourish. And this knowledge is reflected in the etymological roots of Sanskrit words. Words are not simply means of expression; they carry layers, cultural nuances, and traditional values in them to reflect reality, and carry the message beyond time and space.

Some of the Sanskrit equivalents of the earth are *Dharitri* comes from *dhr* (to hold or support); *Bhuvana*, *Bhudevi* from the word *bhu*, which means 'land' that makes 'the act of becoming/arising' possible. In other words, one who supports to grow, implying that the *Bhudevi* or the Mother Earth nurtures and protects her children and helps to sustain life on the Earth. The name *Bharata* for India also has a similar etymological connection: one who bears the *bhr* (*bhar* means 'to bear/to carry') and protects its people. In the Indian culture and literary tradition, the images of the earth, the land, and the country are often portrayed as the mother/goddess, who nourishes her children and gets revered and taken care of by its children, denouncing the very concept of consumption and exploitation of the Mother Earth as nothing but service provider. I would also like to bring the concept of *dharma* from the *Mahabharata* to elucidate the importance of coexistence and sustainability. The word *dharma* also comes from *dhr*, which means to hold or support. Loosely translated as religion today, *dharma* is a complex subject, and has multiple interpretations; however, the basic understanding of *dharma* is to live righteously and perform one's duty responsibly according to one's position and situation. To sustain and strengthen life in the universe, it is imperative to undertake the right actions, following the moral norms and codes according to one's *dharma*.

### 2.1. *Ahimsa* and the *Āṅṛśaṃsya* as *Parama Dharma*

*Ahimsa* is celebrated as the greatest virtue to guide our actions in life, which can ensure welfare, stability and harmony in life. It is also a path that leads to salvation. Hinduism approaches non-violence with cautions, considering the Brahminical and non-Brahminical conflict regarding *ahimsa*. This nuanced and somewhat conflicting approach can be noticed in the *Mahabharata* also.

*Mahabharata*, "a great text of the *pravrittimarga*" (Lath 119), a path that advocates action and performing duties for *mukti* (liberation) more than practicing renunciation, tells the story of war and violence between two groups of cousins. Despite the war being one of the central motifs of the text, *Mahabharata* does not glorify

war and *himsa*. Rather, the futility of violence is reinforced time and again, especially through the character of Yudhistir, who believes in *ahimsa*, and therefore, shows his hesitation in getting involved in a mass killing to regain his kingdom.

The war in Kurukshetra, also known as Dharmkshera (the war to establish dharma/order), is justified by important characters like other Pandava brothers, Draupadi, Kunti, and Krishna. Violence has been justified by them, and the inevitability of war has been foregrounded in order to establish dharma and righteousness in the society. All of them try to convince Yudhistir to wage war against the Kauravas, the first time, before the battle and the second time, after the victory in the war, when they all try to dissuade Yudhistir, who having experienced the atrocities and meaningless of violence in the war, wanted to renounce the world. Therefore, while *himsa* has been condemned as a larger message in the text, just *himsa* or proportionate violence has been advocated. Despite Yudhistir maintaining a strong and conscious dissent against the war, the Pandavas, including him, being members of Kshatriya (the warrior class) community, follow the path of Kshatriya dharma and fights the battle to establish order and righteousness by resorting to just violence. The war is also justified as righteous, citing the well-being of others and not just motivated by personal aggrandisement. It is more like a *danda* (punishment to control evil) to cleanse the world from evil forces. Arjuna argues, "If the rod of chastisement did not protect people, they would have sunk in the darkness of hell" (Ganguly, vol.8, 25). Kunti Invokes Kshatriya honour and the importance of regaining self-respect in favour of going to war against the Kauravas. Krishna also justified war and violence as righteous to both Arjun and Yudhistir for reclaiming what rightfully belongs to them, and on a metaphysical level, for conveying the message of the true meaning of human life.

The strongest argument in favour of the war is unequivocally foregrounded by Draupadi as she criticises the indifferent and forgiving nature of Yudhistir and demands immediate destruction of the Kurus for the insult inflicted on the Pandavas: "O, king, thou shouldst not extend thy forgiveness to the foe. Indeed, with thy energy, without doubt, thou mayst slay them all!" She asserts her

view by stating that “a constant habit of forgiveness” (Ganguly, vol. 2, 57, 58) is not appreciated by the ‘learned’ people, and a balance between punishment and forgiveness is expected to be maintained; however, the actions of the Kauravas deserve persecution. Thus, the path of violence and the war has been repeatedly justified on the ground of duty, virtue, and just cause.

Besides human-centric violence, *Mahabharata* talks about the inevitability of violence inflicted by people on nature and other beings in the *Aranyakaparvan* through a conversation between the sage Kaushiki and the righteous meat seller:

The whole creation ... is full of animals, sustaining itself with fruits derived from living organisms ... fish preys upon fish, and that various species of animals prey upon other species ... while walking about hither and thither, kill numberless creatures lurking in the ground by trampling on them, and even men of wisdom and enlightenment destroy animal life in various ways, even while sleeping or reposing themselves (Gangly, vol 2, 431-32).

A negotiated violence or proportionate violence is justified as the righteous fowler teaches a lesson of dharma to the sage Kaushika in the *Aranyakaparvan*, “The commandment that people should not do harm to any creature, was ordained of old by men, who were ignorant of the true facts of the case ... there is not a man on the face of the earth, who is free from the sin of doing injury to animal life” (Gangly, vol 2, 432).

Despite its reverential approach towards nature and its organisms, eating animal flesh and animal sacrifices are justified and considered meritorious. The Pandavas, burning the entire Khandava forest, killing its inhabitants to build their new kingdom, hunting animals for sport or survival during the period of exile in the forest have also not been condemned as *himsa*. *Mabharata* exhibits a constant tension between *just himsa* for survival and carrying on duty in life, and *himsa* as part of selfish benefits, aggressive exploitation and inflicting cruelty to others; it is this constant tension and negotiation that makes this philosophy relevant in the contemporary time. The righteous fowler asserts that “There is much that can be said of the goodness or badness of

our actions. But whoever is addicted to his own proper occupation surely acquires great reputation" (432). The above references clearly imply that action must not be renounced in fear of committing violence to people or nature; if violence in action is undertaken as per one's dharma, and if it is performed without the intention of inflicting cruelty, it can be considered as just and righteous which is more nuanced and subtle than *himsa* or *ahimsa*.

Despite the overwhelming presence of *ahimsa* in the Indian thoughts and philosophical universe, we can hardly deny the difficulty or rather impossibility of its practical application in life, since a certain level of *himsa* or violence is inevitable in worldly life. Only those who aspire to achieve *mukti* (liberation) through the path of renunciation of worldly goals may truly follow the path of *ahimsa*. Thus, the philosophy of *ahimsa* hardly gets out of its religious fold and fails to establish its secular footprint. On the other hand, *Ānṛśamsya* or non-cruelty is more secular in its approach because it insists upon being kind to others and practising non-cruelty in thoughts, words, and actions with or without any sectarian or religious association. It can be the guiding principle for those who follow the *pravrittimarga* to achieve the goal of liberation through the right action as per the needs and demands of life. Practising *Ānṛśamsya* can be transmitted from individual to the community, bringing positive changes in the ways of the world. To address the tension rooted in these concepts of *himsa*, just *himsa*, and *ahimsa*, *Mabharata* exhibits a gradual turn to a more secular concept of *Ānṛśamsya*.

The concept of *Ānṛśamsya* was first identified and discussed by Mukund Lath as a new kind of moral concept in contrast to the more popularly known philosophy of *ahimsa*. *Ānṛśamsya* means the absence of cruelty, viciousness, and unselfishness in one's conduct in treating others. The term is also associated with "good-will, a fellow feeling, a deep sense of the other" (Lath 115). The 'other' in *anṛśamsya* dharma encompasses all human, non-human beings and natural organisms who inhabit the the earth.

The turn to *Ānṛśamsya* is evident as the text celebrates *Ānṛśamsya* as the *param dharma* nine times in contrast to *ahimsa* which is celebrated four times (Hiltebeitel 207). *Ānṛśamsya* is

considered a more practical alternative to *ahimsa*, argues Sibaji Bandyopadhyaya,

the notion of *anṛśamsya* functions as a stand in for *ahimsa*. It maintains a critical distance from both components of the *himsa* – *ahimsa* or ‘violence – non-violence’ binary without dissolving either of the two. It opens up a discursive space within which excessive or motivated violence is condemned and the practice of unqualified non-violence in worldly deeds is held unviable. Positioned as the golden mean between two extremes, *anṛśamsya* gestures towards the apparently contradictory prescript of ‘violence without violation’ (273).

## 2.2. Practicing *Ānṛśamsya* in Human to Human Relations

One of the initial references to *anṛśamsya* is found when Vyasa, the composer of the great saga of the Bharatas, is advised by his mother Satyavati, to perform *niyoga* (levirate) with *anṛśamsya* on the widowed wives of deceased prince Vichitravirya (Ganguly, Book I, CV). Vyasa fails to practice the *anṛśamsya* dharma as he sees repulsiveness and hatred in the eyes of the widows. The birth of Pandu and Dhritrashtra with physical deformities is the result of his failure, as he fails to empathise and be kind to the two young widows (Ganguly, Book I, CVI). The seeds of future violence, jealousy, and destruction are sown in Vyasa’s failure as the blind Dhritrashtra, despite being the elder brother, can not be the natural claimant to the throne. The seeds grow further as Pandu begets children (Pandavas) through *niyoga* in the forest. Pandu has to resort to *niyoga*, becoming impotent because of his failure to practice *anṛśamsya*. He gets cursed by the sage Kimdama, who while mating with his wife in the disguise of deer in the forest gets killed. Pandu hunts down the copulating Brahmin couple, disguised as deer without letting them finish their act. Kimdama curses him that he will die if he ever engages in sexual intercourse with his wife (Ganguly, Book I, CXVIII). In this context, the act of killing the deer is not condemned as it is a usual practice for a Kshatriya king, but killing them before they finish copulating is an act without *anṛśamsya*. The failure in practising *anṛśamsya* by both

Vyasa and Pandu gives birth to future disorder and destruction of dharma and righteousness.

Yudhistir, the foremost practitioner of *anṛśaṃsya*, champions it as the *parama dharma* in the *Aranyakaparvan* while answering a question asked by the Yaksha, the diety of a forest lake. All the Pandava brothers, except Yudhistir, get killed as they try to drink water from the lake, ignoring the warning of the Yaksha, the guardian deity of the pond. Being satisfied with Yudhistir's answers, Yakhsha grants him the boon of reviving one of his dead brothers. Yudhistir requests for the revival of Nakula's life, considering his responsibility for the deceased mother Madri (Ganguly, Book III, CCCXI). This act of Yudhistir is an example of *anṛśaṃsya*, a true unselfish act as he decides not to save his own heroic brothers like Bhima and Arjuna, who could help him win the battle against the Kauravas. The episode signifies Yudhistir's empathy, consideration, and affection for both the mothers without being moved by selfish greed for regaining the kingdom or avenging the Kauravas. He controls his emotions and senses, ignores his selfish interests, and abstains from inflicting injury to the memory of the dead mother.

As a Kshatriya, he participates and wins the battle but equally gets mortified by the damages and destruction, it has caused to innumerable people. After the victory in the Kurukshetra war, he practices *anṛśaṃsya* dharma in treating his friends and foes equally with the utmost consideration, empathy, and kindness. He arranges rehabilitation for the war widows, and treats the blind king Dhritrastra and Gandhari with supreme reverence, keeping no grudge against them who were responsible for all turbulences and deaths of his near and dear ones.

### **2.3. Practicing *Ānṛśaṃsya* in Interspecies Relationship**

The practice of *anṛśaṃsya* dharma is not limited to human-to-human relations, but extends to the interspecies relationship. In the *Swargarohanikaparva*, Yudhistir's refusal to enter the heavenly abode, leaving the dog, who was his constant companion in the entire journey, shows his fellow feelings and a deep sensibility for the other, the dog in this context (Ganguly, Book 18, XVII). He feels

equally compassionate for the dead mother and the dog; his heart cries at their pain (*anukrosha*, which means to cry with other). His preparedness to renounce heaven for a street dog, reflects his sincerity for following virtue and unselfishness.

Another example may be cited in this section when Bhishma, while illustrating the meaning of *anṛśamsya*, tells the story of a parrot and a tree, in the *Anushasana Parva* (Ganguly, Book 13, XIII). The tree sheltered a parrot, nurtured, and nourished it since its birth. Once, when a poisonous arrow of a hunter poisoned the tree, all the other birds left the tree, but the parrot decided to stay back with its host. It refused to leave its protector at its dying moment, considering the protection and nourishment, the tree had always provided. The act of leaving the tree at its dying moment would be an act of cruelty and selfishness. The kindness and generosity of the bird reflect *anṛśamsya dharma* in its compassionate, virtuous, and steadfast conduct.

### 3. *Ahimsa* and *Ānṛśamsya* for Sustainability

From the above illustrations of living tales related to *anṛśamsya*, practised by Yudhistir and the parrot, it may be observed that their conduct is in tune with compassion, empathy, and consideration for the other. The episodes also reflect their humility and ever-preparedness to *tyag*, i.e. to give up self-interest for the sake of protecting the interest of others and doing right. Yudhistir is a true Rajarshi, meaning he is a *raja* (king) and *rishi* (sage) combined. And he, despite being born in the Kshatriya clan, is a true *rishi* who advocates renunciation of *himsa* in any form. As the kingdom's rightful heir, he prefers forgiving the Kaurava clan; he argues that a war can never be righteous, violence can never be normalised, and regaining the Kuru kingdom forcibly is abominable because of the calamities the war will bring. In the *Santiparvan*, he laments: "where, indeed, is the righteousness of the king, where is truth and compassion, since he has slain sires and brothers and preceptors and sons and friends" (Ganguly, vol 7, 17). The Wars and aggressions in various countries have proved that violence brings neither prosperity nor stability; it only brings misery to the people and the planet. It is necessary that we nurture the possibility of

peace and harmony on the planet by renouncing our selfish ambitions.

The practice of *anṛśaṃsya* certainly can bring sustainable changes in the way people think and conduct themselves. The idea of right action is not confined to any particular species; rather, the entire planet with all its beings and elements survive through interdependence and interrelation. It is a condition of mind which reveals one's affectionate and compassionate self to the other, merges with the other to experience the other's agony and pain, and then detaches itself to stand with the other and act accordingly to provide a positive alternative. The self and the other maintain their relationality without getting merged with each other. Ancient Indian philosophy has never discriminated life on the earth in terms of the human and natural world. Therefore, the conflict between the human as self and the nature as other does not hold. It has always envisioned a life-centric universe of interdependence and reverence for all.

The parrot's compassion for the tree or Yudhistir's affection for the dog teaches us the inherent unity between nature and humans. In order to create a sustainable life-centric harmonious universe, human beings need to acknowledge the value of ecological balance in nature and practice reverence, responsibility and relationality in their action before destroying it under the pretext of progress and development. Unless a holistic idea of progress is construed in our mind, "we cannot get the cooperation of nature purely on our own terms. Any attempt to do so will bring violent destruction in its wake" (Kumarappa 21). It is time that we need to be concerned about our future which is being destroyed every day in the name of creating it.

*Anṛśaṃsya* advocates overcoming greed, covetousness, and selfish desires. Therefore, restraining our senses from these negative aspirations is of supreme importance. It can lead the world towards the path of ultimate goodness by realising the transitory and shortlived nature of human greed, ambitions, and aggressive desires. Renunciation of worldly desires and total detachment to achieve the ultimate good may be advocated by the philosophy of *ahimsa*, but *anṛśaṃsya* does not advocate renunciation

or non-attachment to achieve some supreme truth; it believes in responsible conduct while cultivating compassion and kindness in the heart of the self, and not violating the propriety of the other deliberately. Moreover, *anṛśamsya* dharma does not consider the other inferior; its practice uplifts the mental and physical regime of both the self and the other.

*Anṛśamsya* and *ahimsa* are not alternatives to each other; rather, they are more related through overlapping principles. The positive connotations associated with *anṛśamsya* insist upon the qualities like non-cruelty, kindness, affection, compassion, love, empathy, consideration, etc. The etymological root of the word *a-himsa*, derived from the word *himsa*, meaning to strike or injure others, is negated by the word *a-himsa*. Therefore, *himsa* refers to the will to exercise or undertake a violent action and “*ahimsa*, is a denial of any aggressive thought towards the other, which can only be kept alive by positive love” (Gispert-Sauch 53). The streak of violence begins as a desire in a person’s mind, followed by violent conduct. If the mind is controlled and desire is restrained by cultivating *anṛśamsya*, the desire to inflict violence can also be erased.

While conversing with Draupadi on the catastrophic impact of imminent war, Yudhistir asserts the importance of forgiveness as a virtue, the detrimental impact of anger and the desire for revenge. Anger is a state of mind that gets accentuated by injustice and injury meted out by others. The will to avenge results in inflicting violence on the other and equally destroys the peace of mind of the avenger, and thus, a vicious cycle of violence commences, which destroys both. On the other hand, forgiveness is a quality by which “the universe is held together” (Gangly, vol 2, 61). Yudhistir says, “Forgiveness and gentleness are the qualities of the self-possessed. They represent eternal virtue” (Gangly, vol 24, 62).

While illustrating *anṛśamsya* and *ahimsa*, a number of episodes show the failure of practising forgiveness, resulting in long-term challenges. Had Yudhistir been not cornered by everyone, had the catastrophic Mahabharata war been halted, had the blind aggression by the powerful countries been stopped, a more peaceful, harmonious civilisational history of humanity would have been written worldwide.

#### 4. Conclusion

The challenges faced by human civilisation and the ecosystem are interrelated; sustainable prosperity depends on the well-being of the both. But anthropo-centric prosperity often makes one oblivious of the ecosystem. A vicious cycle of greed and selfish pursuits leads human beings to commit aggression and violence toward nature and people; it causes environmental degradation and degeneration of human values and the worth of life. New scientific or technological innovations cannot compensate for human's overconsumption of natural elements and exploitation of natural beings. Better alternatives need to be thought of, so that, a balance between ecology and human interest can be established through inculcating ethical values in human lives.

Most cultures have traditional values and benign ethical practices for ensuring happiness and sustainability. In the present article, the ancient Indian culture and its traditional ethical practices, as espoused in the Mahabharata, are highlighted through dharma which focuses on right conduct like taking responsibility, practising non-cruelty, non-violence, compassion, respect, and forgiveness for others. All these principles can be practised beyond the religious fold and, are highly relevant today. If they are imbibed in our minds and actions, peace, prosperity, and sustainability goals can be achieved. Human beings can neither avoid science, technology, or material comforts nor can they go back to ancient ways of living life, but a mature and responsible usage of technology can save the planet and people from excessive exploitation. The ability to self-control or self-restrain is highly respected in Indian culture, which strongly supports sustainability. Restricting the mind from greed opens up further possibilities for improvement in one's actions. Transcending selfish interests for others is an ethical act; an ethical being respects fellow beings and the entire community that one shares with nature and its beings - living or non-living.

To resolve a problem, one needs to acknowledge its existence and take responsibility for bringing a long-term solution. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals show that the problems have been recognised, and each country needs to take responsibility for

achieving these goals. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while speaking at the 20th World Sustainable Development Summit in 2022, observes that the progress of humanity is determined by the 'health of our people' and the 'health of our planet'. He proposes the concept of 'climate justice,' which advocates a collective effort to work for the health of our people and our planet with trust, compassion, cooperation, and empathy. (Modi, online). *Ahimsa* and *anṛśamsya* would protect and promote climate justice, ensuring the health of the people and the planet, bringing sustainable peace and prosperity for both.

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