

Hospitality as Dharma in the Kapota-Śākunika Ākhyāna of the Mahābhārata: An Ethical Reflection

Dr. (Ms) Geetesh Nirban

Associate Professor

Department of Philosophy

Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi

Abstract: This article studies the ethical interpretation of the *Kapota-Śākunika ākhyāna*, the story of the doves and the fowler as narrated by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan* of the *Śāntiparvan* in the *Mahābhārata*. The narrative is not presented as a moral fable but emphasis is laid on the distinction made by the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* between *śreyas* (the good) and *preyas* (the pleasurable), as reflected in the concept of *atithi-dharma*—the ethics of hospitality. The article focuses on the female dove’s courageous advice on *dharma* of the doves, the male dove’s act of *svadharma* in form of self-sacrifice, and the fowler’s transformation through witnessing (*darśana*) rather than instruction (*upadeśa*). It illustrates that the episode promotes a non-transactional understanding of *dharma*—hospitality provided regardless of the guest’s status or situation—based on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*’s teaching *atithidevo bhava*. The discussion concludes with a brief reflection on the episode’s significance within the broader *ākhyāna* tradition of Indian Knowledge Systems and its relevance to contemporary debates.

Keywords: *dharma, āpaddharma, atithi-dharma, śreyas-preyas, svadharma, transformation, kapota-śākunika akhyāna, Śāntiparvan, Indian Knowledge Systems.*

Introduction

The *Śāntiparvan* section of the *Mahābhārata*¹ features many instructive passages on kingship and governance. Within this context, a brief story about two doves and a fowler appears. It occupies only six chapters (143-148) of the *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan* of *Śāntiparvan*, yet it holds

¹ All the Sanskrit verses and their translation are taken from—Dutt, M.N. (2001). *Mahābhārata: Sanskrit Text with English Translation*, Vol.VII. Since the article is based on the story from a sub-*parvan* of a *parvan* thus the format of reference is—(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan, Chapter.Verse*).

profound moral significance. Bhīṣma narrates it to Yudhiṣṭhira in direct response to a particular question—what merit does one gain from protecting a being who seeks refuge—a *śaraṇāgata*?² The question is timely and relevant. Yudhiṣṭhira, who rules a kingdom born from the destruction of his relatives, needs to understand how a ruler should treat those who come to him in need with no prior claim. Bhīṣma’s answer is not a mere rule. His instruction emerges in the form of a fable which demonstrates how *dharma* can be most effectively conveyed through storytelling when reasoning alone may not be the only way of teaching *dharma*.

The story raises a challenging question about the ethics of reciprocity—does hospitality (*ātithya*) depend on the guest’s moral character, or must it be extended unconditionally, even to enemies? It is observed that a female dove is caught and caged by the fowler who traps her. She lies helpless under her tree during a storm and must decide how to respond to him. Her decision, together with her husband’s extraordinary action afterwards, illustrates this article’s explanation of the *śreyas-preyas* distinction—the choice between the pleasurable and the good—through the story or *ākhyāna* of the birds. The article contends that the *Kapota-Śākunika* episode promotes a form of *dharma* that is non-transactional, i.e. *atithi-dharma*, as shown in this story, which asks not whether the guest deserves care but only whether they are in need. This idea frames the epic’s broader themes, emphasising endless casuistry over the desert, and celebrates unconditional goodness and authentic ethical action filled with virtues over vices.

The following discussion situates the episode within its narrative context in the *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan* and identifies it as a moral category within the epic’s broader concept of *dharma*. It also examines two key ethical frameworks i.e. the female dove’s rejection of *preyas* and the male dove’s fulfilment of *svadharma* through self-sacrifice. Finally, it explores the episode’s core argument about the essence of *dharma* and briefly discusses its role in the wider *ākhyāna* tradition and its relevance in the contemporary Indian ethic of *atithidevo bhava*.

² *pitāmaha mahāprājña sarvaśāstraviśārada | śaraṇaṁ pālayānasya yo dharmas taṁ vadasva me||*

“O grandfather, O you of great wisdom, O you who are master of scriptures, tell me what the merit is of one who supports a person seeking his protection.”

(*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 143.1)



***Dharma in a situation of Distress: The Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*³**

In the *Mahābhārata*, *dharma* is a layered concept rather than a fixed rule. The epic distinguishes between *sāmānya dharma*, the universal conduct applicable to everyone regardless of social status, and *svadharma* or *viśeṣa dharma*, the specific duty assigned to an individual based on birth, caste or situation. Much of the epic demonstrates how these layers can come into conflict. The *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan* introduces an even stricter set of conflicting situations and *dharma*, called *āpaddharma*, which applies in extreme or crisis situations when normal rules become inadequate or contradictory. Adam Bowles, in his detailed study of this section of the *Śāntiparvan*, explains that *āpaddharma* refers to special rules made for exceptional circumstances (Bowles, 2007). The key moral point is that under normal conditions, the goals of *śreyas* (self-realisation) and *preyas* (pleasure) often align, or their differences are minor. But in times of hardship such as hunger, danger, grief—they part ways and the choice between them becomes crucial.

The setting of the *Kapota-Śākunika ākhyāna* enacts this condition with precision. Every figure in the story is in distress *āpad*. The fowler, drenched, frozen, and lost in the forest after a storm, is as vulnerable in that moment as any suppliant (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 143. 25–27). The female dove lies caged, entirely at his mercy. The male dove, watching his captured wife from above, is helpless to alter her condition by any power of his own. No character in this story occupies a position of comfort from which virtue could be performed at no cost. This is the condition under which Bhīṣma chooses to answer Yudhiṣṭhira’s question about supporting a suppliant (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 43.1)—not through a possibility of ease, but through one in which every actor already suffers or is in distress, and the one further asked to give/help/be hospitable is the one with the least to spare.

Dharma that only expects the comfortable to be generous is fragile and vulnerable to collapse when circumstances change. By illustrating hospitality amid shared crisis, the *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan* emphasises a deeper truth, i.e. that *dharma* must be practised both

³ For a detailed understanding *Āpaddharma*, the English renderings of the *Śāntiparvan* verses from M. N. Dutt’s (2001) translation of the *Mahābhārata* is undertaken as well as details have been verified from the literal and interpretive methodologies as adopted by Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Śāntiparvan*, (Fitzgerald, Trans. & Ed., 2004) and Bowles’s close study of the *Āpaddharmaparvan* (Bowles, 2007).



towards the deprived and also to those who cause suffering. This essential concept sets the episode apart from a mere sentimental birds' fable and raises it to a true ethical lesson.

Why Bhīṣma, even as he rests on his bed of arrows, chooses to speak about doves rather than kings is significant here. Here there is a story within the story that highlights the many elements harmoniously. Bhīṣma here is a humble teacher, patiently awaiting his death, and Yudhiṣṭhira is a recently crowned king who is confronted with questions of justice and violence. The lesson on unconditional hospitality, offered by a dying man to a remorseful king, resonates deeply with their circumstances of *āpad*. The main message of the *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan* emphasises that a ruler's real test of *rāja-dharma*, i.e. understanding about governance, lies not only in the treatment of allies but also in the treatment of those he has least alignment with. The story of the doves vividly exemplifies this crucial aspect of royal responsibility.

A Brief account of the Narrative

Bhīṣma shares a story about a fowler (*śākunika*), a man who has dedicated his life to killing and selling birds. He is described as cruel and without kin (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 143.10-12). When caught in a forest storm, he finds an injured female dove and cages her, even though he's trembling from the cold himself—highlighting a habitual cruelty that persists even amid his own suffering (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 143.26–27). Tired, he finds shelter under a tree, not knowing that it is the home of the dove's mate, and falls asleep after praying to the forest spirits for protection (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 143.31–33).

The male dove, unaware that his wife is the fowler's prisoner, mourns her absence throughout the night, expressing deep affection in words that brim with affection and tenderness (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 144. 4–11). His mourning reveals a very strong bond between the doves before any ethical considerations/interpretations are introduced in the fable. It is this grieving husband whom the caged wife then addresses. Instead of requesting freedom for herself or seeking revenge from the fowler, she advises him to watch over the stranger sleeping below and reminds him that birds exist to satisfy others' hunger. She emphasises that a guest at one's door, regardless of who he/she is, owes a duty of hospitality (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 145.6–11). This establishes the story's moral universe.



The male dove obeys the female dove's moral guidance. He gently sparks a fire from dry leaves to warm the cold fowler. When the fowler asks for food, the dove feels helpless, as birds do not hoard food. He then gracefully circles the fire three times and enters it, offering his own body as a sacrifice. He becomes the food for the fowler (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.16–17,23). Filled with remorse, the fowler questions his actions (*Śāntiparvanparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.24). Later, he vows to follow the righteous example set by the doves (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 147. 8–9). He releases the female dove. But she, mourning her mate, is unwilling to survive without him; thus, she follows him into the flames (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 148. 8–9). Deeply moved by the dedicated affection and sense of duty of doves, the fowler abandons his profession. He undergoes the path of penance in the hope of attaining (like the doves), a place among the virtuous in the world beyond.

4. Choice of *Śreyas* over *Preyas*: The Female Dove's *Dharma*

The core message of this episode isn't just about the self-sacrificing male dove, but more about the caged female dove who remains imprisoned until the very end. Of all the characters, she's the only one who, through her speech, explains that retribution is neither ethically understandable nor justified, and that any harm to the fowler would not pass the test of fairness on the part of the birds' *dharma*. She's the one who's hurt, and her captor's actions are not justified. Amidst this distress, she cries out for a sense of duty. What she truly longs for isn't revenge—it's kindness and acceptance towards the one (Fowler) who caused her pain, because he too was in distress (in the biting cold and dampness).

This point is worth considering because it directly reflects the distinction the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.2.1-2) makes between *śreyas* and *preyas*. In that text, Yama explains to Naciketas that everyone faces both the preferable (*preyas*) and the good (*śreyas*) options. The wise individual, after evaluating both, chooses *śreyas* over *preyas*, whereas the ignorant, motivated by *yogakṣema*—worldly gain and security—opts for *preyas*:

anyacchreyo'nyadutaiva preyaste ubhe nānārthe puruṣaṁ sinītaḥ |
tayoḥ śreya ādadānasya sādhubhavadati hīyate'rthādya u preyo vṛñīte ||

“(Death said) One is good while another is pleasant. These two, serving different ends, bind men; happiness comes to him who, of these, chooses the good; whoso chooses the pleasant forfeits the true end.”(*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.2.1)



śreyaśca preyaśca manuṣyametaṣtau samparītya vivinakti dhīraḥ |
śreyaḥ hi dhīro'bhipreyaṣo vṛṇīte preyaḥ mando yogakṣemādvṛṇīte ||
“Both the good and the pleasant approach the mortal; the intelligent man examines and distinguishes them; for, the intelligent man prefers the good to the pleasant; the ignorant man chooses the pleasant for the sake of his body.” (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.2.1)⁴

Within the story’s context, *preyas* goes beyond simple pleasure. It encompasses anything that offers immediate satisfaction to the self, including the desire for revenge (if the female dove had harboured it against the fowler). Revenge against an oppressor (the fowler in the story) can be interpreted as a form of *preyas*. Actions rooted in *preyas* can be understood psychologically and may appear as justified, reactive responses. Such responses also provide immediate mental relief for oneself rather than attaining the broader ethical good (*śreyaṣ*).

The reasoning of the female dove, as explained in the text, takes quite a different approach. She gently reminds her husband that they are pigeons, the creatures with an innate knowledge of themselves, and therefore must follow the path set out for them by the *dharma* of doves (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 145.9).⁵ Her words are not based on mere feelings but on *svadharma*—i.e. the obligations that the very nature of birds as beings calls them to uphold and adhere to no matter how they might feel about the guest who is before them. She even makes a strong comparison that neglecting a suppliant in need is as serious as killing a brahmin or a cow (*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 145. 8)⁶, which stands as one of the most severe acts in the moral domain of the *Mahābhārata*. This isn’t a gentle suggestion, but it’s

⁴ For textual understanding of *Upaniṣads* even Radhakrishnan, S. (Ed. & Trans.). (1953). *The principal Upaniṣads* is used.

⁵ *yāsmākaṁ vihitā vṛttih kāpotī jātīdharmataḥ |
sā nyāyyātmavatā nityaṁ tvadvidhenābhivartitum ||*

“You are endowed with knowledge of the self. You should follow the course which has been ordained for us as pigeons on account of our birth.”

(*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 145.9)

⁶ *yo hi kaś cid dvijaṁ hanyād gāṁ vā lokasya mātaram |
śaraṇāgataṁ ca yo hanyāt tulyaṁ teṣāṁ ca pātakaṁ ||*

“The sin that a person commits by killing a Brahmana or that mother of the world, viz. a cow, is equal to what one commits by allowing a suppliant to die”

(*Śāntiparvan*, *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 145.8)



the female dove guiding her husband towards a higher ethical ideal. She is pointing towards a more challenging good (*śreyas*), using the firm and serious words that the birds are to be hospitable:

śaraṇāgatasya kartavyam ātithyam iha yatnataḥ |
pañcayajñapravṛttena gr̥hasthena viśeṣataḥ ||

“One should with diligence do the duties of hospitality towards a person who seeks shelter. Indeed, one is particularly bound to do so if he leads the life of a householder that consists of five sacrifices.”

(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.6)

The female dove, reminding the husband of his duty of hospitality despite being in distress, makes this a heartfelt moral and ethical moment, rather than merely an admirable one, while showcasing how the *Mahābhārata* empowers her to choose differently and shows her opting for *śreyas* over *preyas*. She makes this choice from within her captivity, without any promise that virtue will be rewarded or even recognised.

At that moment of her ethical decision-making (asking the male dove to be hospitable to serve the very fowler who has harmed her), she couldn't have known that the fowler would be reformed by her choice of actions. Her choosing of *śreyas* isn't justified by its eventual outcome (holding no utilitarian value), but it simply precedes and doesn't depend on the outcome. This idea resonates with Bimal Krishna Matilal's exploration of moral reasoning in the *Mahābhārata* while highlighting the epic's oft-spoken message that sometimes right action must be chosen without the reassurance of a guaranteed good outcome (Matilal, 2002).

This comparison shows how the female dove's decision stands out within the epic's broader ethical themes. While many women in the epic suffer injuries inflicted by others, exercising limited choices, the *Mahābhārata* also reminds us that responding to such injuries (of hues) isn't always simple. The central theme of the text illustrates how difficult decisions can be, especially when wounds impact broader policies. When we see it this way, the dove's choice isn't that easy at all. It is a sincere example of making a tough decision with clarity—without the compromises that often complicate similar choices for the male and female protagonists in the epic. Free from the political chaos that makes human decisions in the *Mahābhārata* so complex and variegated, the story of the doves focuses on the core issue of moral dilemmas and presents it without the noise



of conflicting loyalties. What the Dove fable handles with ease, the various humans of the epic are able to do only with great trouble and tribulations.

***Svadharma* as the Foundation of Male Dove's Self-Sacrifice**

In the narrative, the female dove exemplifies renunciation by forgiving even the fowler who confined her and by refraining from the path of *preyas*, i.e., seeking revenge or seeing herself as a victim. The roles of husband and wife are markedly contrasting—while the female dove demonstrates restraint, the male dove exhibits excessive generosity and compassion that surpass ordinary hospitality. His sense of duty is never reluctant but warmly adhered to without any questioning. When asked for warmth (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.9), he provides fire. When further asked for food (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.15) and unable to supply any (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.16), he does not simply admit his incapacity but instead offers his own body. The text describes him circling the fire three times with a smile before entering it:

tataḥ satyapratijño vai sa pakṣī prahasann iva |
tam agniṁ triḥ parikramya praviveśa mahīpate ||
“Having thus made up his mind, the great bird with a smiling face, thrice went around that fire and then entered its flames”
(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.23)

Reflecting on the above act highlights that the male dove's action is not merely heroism but also a way of following *svadharma* as *āpaddharma*, blurring the distinction between *śreyas* and *preyas*. The *Śāntiparvan*, where Bhīṣma's broader teaching to Yudhiṣṭhira on *svadharma* often emphasises on the difficulty of defining duty's proper boundaries, illustrates this. One way to interpret the male dove's act is not as excess but as *svadharma* free from doubts rooted in fear, self-interest, or desire. His wife told him that birds exist to serve others' hunger (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 145.6) and the male does not merely perform a symbolic or partial act of service but executes it fully. Because the logic she presented is taken seriously by him, and once basic hospitality in the form of shelter and warmth is provided, no other conclusion than self-sacrifice as the *āpaddharma* is left. This interpretation is backed by a verse from the *Bhagavadgītā*, part of the *Mahābhārata*'s moral structure, where Kṛṣṇa addresses Arjuna:



*śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt |
svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyaḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ ||*

“Better is one’s own dharma, though imperfectly performed, than the dharma of another well performed. Death in the discharge of one’s own duty is better; the duty of another is fraught with fear.”

(*Bhagavadgītā* 3.35, 18.47)

This demonstrates that the male dove’s act of self-sacrifice reflects and justifies the principle of *svadharma* from the *Bhagavadgītā*. The dove has not abandoned his specific duty as a host—a duty his wife described as the *dharma* of the doves. Therefore, his action rooted in *svadharma* highlights that duty cannot be replaced by any alternative virtue.

Atithidevo Bhava as dharma

In summary, the actions of the two doves support the article’s central ethical insight that *atithi-dharma*, as depicted here, is inherently non-transactional. It does not depend on the guest’s moral character, past actions or current threat level. The fowler is not portrayed as a neutral outsider, arriving with good intentions at the moment of hospitality. He is actively the captor of the dove and the cause of the female dove’s suffering. The story does not undermine this fact or set conditions for providing hospitality to the fowler. Instead, the fowler receives the honour as due to the guest, despite his cruel treatment of the female dove—which is the highlight of the story’s core message. The *Śikṣāvallī* of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* instructs the departing student:

mātr̥devo bhava, pitr̥devo bhava, ācāryadevo bhava, atithidevo bhava |

“Let your mother be a god to you, let your father be a god to you, let your teacher be a god to you, let your guest be a god to you.”

(*Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Śikṣāvallī*, 1.11.2)

This injunction’s structure is worth highlighting here because it shows how the guest is placed on the same plane as family and teachers. These relationships aren’t based on choice or merit. We don’t choose our parents based on who’s most deserving to be ours. The duty/obligation/responsibility to care for them is natural and without judgement about their worth. By placing the guest in this company of distinguished relations, it emphasises that hospitality is a kind of unconditional regard which is given regardless of the personal qualities of an individual.



The *Kapota-Śākunika ākhyāna* can be read as this *Upaniṣadic* principle dramatised under the most adversarial (*āpad*) conditions. If hospitality is owed even to one's captor, then the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*'s injunction is not a sentiment reserved for convenient occasions but is a genuine ethical demand of all times. The male dove's own words to the fowler make this logic explicit, wherein hospitality is due even to an enemy who arrives at one's house, for the tree does not withdraw its shade even from the one who comes to cut it down (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146 5). Being good in this context stands as a necessity.

Gurcharan Das, surveying the *Mahābhārata*'s broader treatment of *dharma*, calls the epic's stubborn insistence that being good is difficult precisely because it so often asks more of a person than fairness alone would require (Das, 2009). The doves may not have been fair to the fowler, in the sense of giving him what his conduct has earned.⁷ He is given in accordance with his need/requirement, which determines the moral worth of the episode. It is worth adding, briefly, that this same non-transactional logic underlies the episode's quieter ecological suggestion — that the forest-dwelling creature, unlike the human being who hoards and accumulates, gives according to present need alone (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146, 16–17).⁸ This is a point that the narrative raises not as sentiment about nature but as a further instance of *dharma* practised without calculation of return.

7. The Transformation of the Fowler through Reflection

A final ethical query addressed in this write-up concerns not the doves but the fowler, who seems to have undergone a deep inner transformation. The doves' self-sacrificing acts to uphold the ethics of hospitality are virtuous, but a remarkable change in the fowler's attitude and actions after witnessing the sacrifice manifests a new approach that leads him to regret and repent for what he

⁷ The doves could have been cruel to the fowler as that's what he was towards the female dove. Believing in principle of dharma they maintained calm, kindness and generosity.

⁸ *na me 'sti vibhavo yena nāśayāmi tava kṣudhām | utpannena hi jīvāmo vayaṁ nityaṁ vanaukasah ||*

"I have nothing in store by which you may satisfy your hunger. We dwellers of the forest always live upon what we get every day."

(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.16)

saṁcayo nāsti cāsmākaṁ munīnām iva kānane |

ity uktvā sa tadā tatra vivaraṇavadano 'bhavat ||

"Like the ascetics of the forest we never amass for the morrow!—Having said so, the bird's face grew pale"

(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, 146.17)



had done (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*,146.24-25).⁹ This inner transformation prevents him from reverting to his old self as a fowler, with cruelty and insensitivity ingrained in him.

This mode of moral learning through the process of witnessing or *darśana*, rather than instruction or *upadeśa*, is a distinguishing feature, with roots deep in the Indian pedagogical and interpretive tradition. In keeping with this logic, the *ākhyāna* itself, the narrated example, is treated as a legitimate and often superior vehicle for transmitting *dharma* alongside direct perception. This story, added to the *āpaddharma* section, shows that when Bhīṣma is asked a direct question by Yudhiṣṭhira about the merit of supporting a suppliant, he does not answer by stating a rule but instead presents a story. His choice is no coincidence, and he may well be aware that a rule is contestable and can be set aside, whereas a narrative example, as absorbed by the fowler himself, can work on Yudhiṣṭhira differently. The entire moral vocabulary of the fowler is grounded in his perceptual and experiential learning, as he himself says that he is taught by the pigeon's example; he will practise righteousness henceforth, for righteousness is the greatest refuge (*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*,147.8–9).¹⁰

There's an interesting point to consider about the overall teaching style of this episode, which is quite different from just the fowler's personal change. Bhīṣma doesn't directly answer Yudhiṣṭhira's question about the duties of a suppliant with a strict definition or a list. Instead by

⁹ *agnimadhyam praviṣṭam taṁ lubdho dṛṣṭvātha pakṣiṇam |
cintayām āsa manasā kim idaṁ nu kṛtaṁ mayā ||*
“Seeing the bird enter the fire, the fowler began to think and asked himself—what have I done?”
(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*,146.24)
*aho mama nṛśaṁsasya garhitasya svakarmanā |
adharmāḥ sumahān ghorā bhaviṣyati na saṁśayaḥ ||*
Alas dreadful will be the sin, the outcome of my own acts. I am highly ruthless and blameable.”
(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*,146.25)

¹⁰ *upavāsair bahuvidhaiś cariṣye pāralaukikam |
aho dehapradānena darśitātithipūjanā ||*
“I shall by various sorts of fasts, practise such vows as will take me to the other world. Alas by giving up his body, the pigeon has shown how a guest should be adored.”
(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*,147.8)
*tasmād dharmam cariṣyāmi dharmo hi paramā gatiḥ |
dṛṣṭo hi dharmo dharmiṣṭhair yādṛśo vihagottame ||*
“Taught by his example, I shall hereafter practise righteousness. Righteousness is the greatest refuge. Indeed I shall practise the righteousness shown by the virtuous pigeon, that foremost of all winged creatures.”
(*Śāntiparvan, Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*,147.9)



sharing a story he lets Yudhiṣhira, like the fowler in the story, arrive at the principle by following the reasoning of the doves, rather than being given the answer outright. Arvind Sharma's research highlights how this storytelling approach is common across the *dharmaśāstra* and *itihāsa* traditions, emphasising on moral lessons through stories rather than just rules (Sharma, 2000). Similarly, Nicholas Sutton points out that the *Mahābhārata* often explores its most important ethical ideas through stories instead of direct statements, which allows the teachings to naturally emerge from the narrative (Sutton, 2000). The *Kapota-Śākunika* story exemplifies this teaching method of sharing about *dharma* through stories to a king, so he can pass on the same lessons to his people in the kingdom in the same way.

This narrative asks us to explore *dharma*'s connection to the non-human world. Instead of a traditional human sage, the teacher here is a bird—one that teaches through death rather than life. This storytelling approach changes the usual hierarchy in the epic, where humans teach through words and animals present lessons through their actions as observed from a distance. In this case, the doves become the true moral guide, while the human observer is more of a passive witness who is transformed through the experience. Alf Hiltebeitel's insightful view of the *Mahābhārata* as a continuous lesson on the importance of *dharma* fits perfectly with this story (Hiltebeitel, 2001). It's literally an educational moment designed for a fowler, who receives no other kind of guidance.

Conclusion: *Atithidevo Bhava* and Relevance in Time

The *Kapota-Śākunika* story continues to live on, even centuries after it was first narrated. Its core principle of hospitality still resonates in Indian homes, temples, and community gatherings with a message of *Atithidevo Bhava*. Offering hospitality isn't just a polite gesture, but an essential duty, as portrayed in the *Āpaddharmānuśāsanaparvan*, when doves don't honour a visitor who is kind and conscientious. Instead, they honour their captor with cruelty in him while emphasising that true *dharma* is tested not by how easily it's obeyed when circumstances are convenient, but by whether *dharma* is upheld when the temptation to give it away is stronger. The test of *dharma* is toughest in situations of crisis (*āpad*).



This idea as presented in the article through the story goes far beyond the simple act of welcoming someone into our home, as suggested by the phrase *Atithidevo Bhava*. Today, we often reflect on this saying in broader contexts—especially while talking about how we treat displaced or troubled individuals, or handling the everyday responsibilities of institutions that are asked to show kindness, even when those they help may not seem to deserve it. The story itself offers a meaningful perspective that it's not about sentimentality or emotions. It indeed is about the brave choice of the female dove to keep the value of *śreyas* over *preyas*, even while being caged by the fowler. Similarly, it is also about the male dove's unwavering adherence to his *svadharma*, facing the troubled situation rather than just focusing on evading it. In this way, the story encourages us to look inward, question ourselves, and reflect on whether our hospitality is simply a feeling or if it's guided by the true ethic of kindness—like a tree that provides shade even to the person who cuts it. Is hospitality just a means, or is it an end in itself? The story reminds us that it's an end and it is our *dharma* to be hospitable to everyone in need, even when we feel they may not deserve it.

On revisiting the context which Bhīṣma sets for this story, one finds—a dying warrior offering guidance to a grieving king on how to lead a kingdom built on loss; it's a lesson in governance. The unique point is that this lesson in statecraft comes through the gentle image of two small birds. This subtle choice of Bhīṣma highlights the *ākhyāna* tradition, reminding us that the deepest truths of *dharma* are often conveyed better through stories rather than strict commands. It also reflects a timeless message that a society which teaches its children to see guests at the door as beings to be honoured, rather than judged, is quietly honouring the *ākhyāna* tradition of the *Mahābhārata* and the Indian narrative structuring of the ancient texts. The story, nestled in a forest storm, continues to inspire us even today as that's part of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

The *Kapota-Śākunika ākhyāna* is not merely a simplistic curiosity within Indian Knowledge Systems. Instead, it gracefully exemplifies how these systems have operated—showing that *dharma* is often conveyed, communicated, explained and understood more through storytelling, such as *itihāsa* and *ākhyāna*, rather than through strict rules. This narrative approach carries the full depth of ethical teachings, making it a powerful reflection of the tradition. Thus, engaging with this story in its own honest language, on its own terms—rather than viewing it as simple folklore—serves as a gentle act of respect for Indian Knowledge Systems, which root the ethics



and ethos of India that we are today. In fact, it might be the most genuine guidance the doves' own example offers us: the *dharma* of hospitality.

References

- Bowles, A. (2007). *Dharma, disorder and the political in ancient India: The Āpaddharmaparvan of the Mahābhārata* (Brill's Indological Library, Vol. 28). Brill.
- Das, G. (2009). *The difficulty of being good: On the subtle art of dharma*. Oxford University Press.
- Dutt, M. N. (Ed.). (2001). *Mahābhārata: Sanskrit text with English translation* (I. C. Sharma & O. N. Bimali, Eds., Vol. 7). Parimal.
- Dutt, M. N. (Trans.). (1903). *The Mahabharata: Shanti Parva*. Elysium Press.
- Fitzgerald, J. L. (Ed. & Trans.). (2004). *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. 7, Book 11: *The Book of the Women*; Book 12: *The Book of Peace*, Part 1). University of Chicago Press.
- Hiltebeitel, A. (2001). *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A reader's guide to the education of the dharma king*. University of Chicago Press.
- *Kaṭha Upaniṣad with Śāṅkara's commentary*. (1928). (S. Sitarama Sastri, Trans.). Retrieved from <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/katha-upanishad-shankara-bhashya/d/doc145178.html>
- Matilal, B. K. (2002). *Ethics and epics: Philosophy, culture, and religion* (J. Ganeri, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (Ed. & Trans.). (1953). *The principal Upaniṣads*. George Allen & Unwin.
- Sharma, A. (2000). *Classical Hindu thought: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Sutton, N. (2000). *Religious doctrines in the Mahābhārata*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- *Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Śikṣāvallī: Reflections* (2019). Swami Gurubhaktananda. https://chinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/36_01_Taittireeya_Up_Part_1_-_Sheeksha_Valli-73408042-9c87-45b3-a8f9-957af6510332.pdf

