



Traditional Knowledge Systems In The Mahābhārata And Its Significance For Value Education

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Abstract

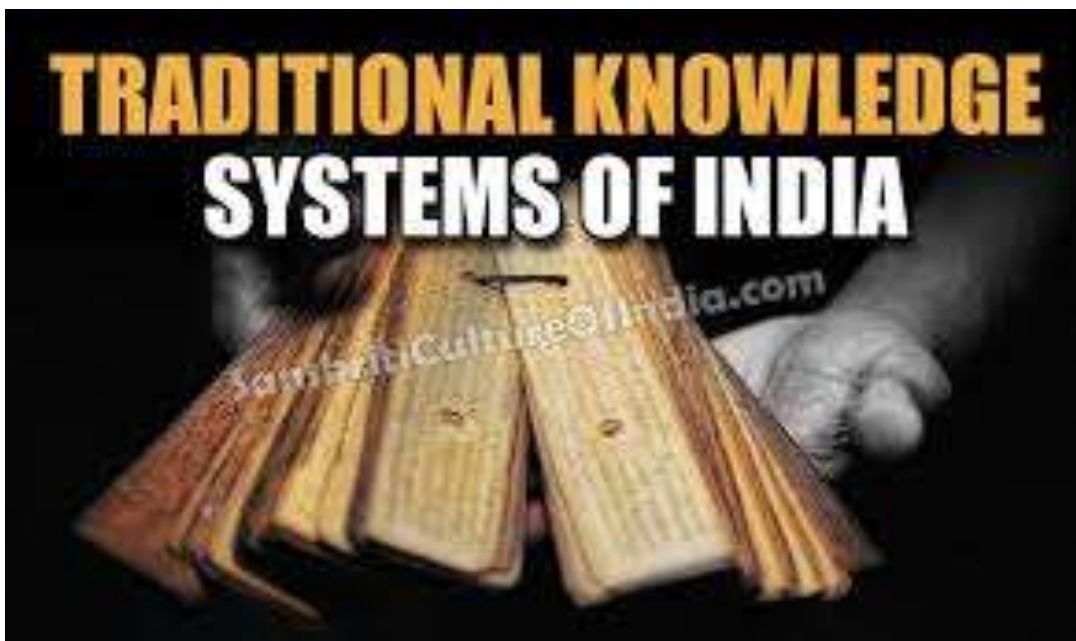
The Mahābhārata is not merely an epic narrative but a vast repository of India's traditional knowledge systems encompassing philosophy, ethics, governance, education, psychology, diplomacy, and social values. This paper examines the diverse traditional knowledge frameworks embedded in the Mahābhārata and analyzes their relevance for contemporary value education. Through episodes, dialogues, and character portrayals, the epic communicates foundational principles such as dharma (righteous conduct), karma (moral causation), nīti (ethical governance), vidyā (holistic knowledge), and saṃskāra (moral refinement).

The study highlights how pedagogical methods in the Mahābhārata—including dialogue, experiential learning, mentorship (guru–śiṣya tradition), storytelling, and moral reflection—serve as effective tools for inculcating values such as truthfulness, empathy, self-restraint, social responsibility, and ethical leadership. By situating these traditional knowledge systems within present-day educational contexts, the paper argues that the Mahābhārata offers a culturally rooted yet universally applicable framework for value-based education. The findings suggest that integrating these indigenous knowledge traditions into modern curricula can foster ethical awareness, critical thinking, and holistic development, thereby addressing contemporary moral and social challenges while preserving India's intellectual heritage.

Keywords: Mahābhārata, Traditional Knowledge Systems, Value Education, Dharma, Indigenous Knowledge, Moral Philosophy, Holistic Education

1.Introduction

Mahabharata, the epic that is traditionally attributed to Sage Vyas, is the longest and most complicated epic in the world literature. It has more than 100 thousand verses, and it gives a full picture of human life, social relations, political duties, ethical contradictions, and spiritual desires. The epic is not just a historical or mythological battle, but the inner conflict of people and communities in terms of morality. Other than the literariness, the Mahabharata can serve the purpose of a moral classroom, where students experience ethical quandaries, emotional trials, and life-altering choices, which spurs them to become more reflective and further moral.



2. Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives that are followed in the present study:

- To examine the idea of sustainable values and ethical principles that are portrayed in the chosen ślokas and narrative episodes of the Mahabharata.
- To analyze the core value-based concepts such as dharma, karma, nīti, and saṁskāra presented in the epic.
- To assess the relevance of the Mahābhārata's traditional knowledge systems for ethical understanding and contemporary value education.
- To explore the possibilities of integrating these traditional knowledge systems into modern educational practices for holistic development.

3. Review of Literature

Badal (2024) has developed a hermeneutic study of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita in reference to the people aspect of sustainable development. The analysis of the chosen ślokaś showed that the GītA was advocated by ethical leadership, social responsibility, and inner discipline. Badal claim that sustainability needs to be perceived not merely in economic or environmental cases, but in moral and human aspects. This point of view is a direct support to the current study where the Mahabharata is considered to be a concept of sustainable and value-based education.

Black (2020) studied the Mahabharata in a dialogic and interpretive way and revealed how the epic fostered moral thinking and philosophical inquiry. The text did not provide any definite moral guidelines instead it put forward opposing ideas and moral questions that were thought provoking. Black has concluded that the epic was a lively and dynamic text that kept on shaping the cultural and ethical knowledge in societies and generations. This observation supports the current study because it implies the use of the Mahabharata as a source of active learning and not a lifeless text.

4. The Mahābhārata as a Cultural and Educational Text

Having Bhagavad Gita incorporated into the Mahabharata renders the epic a special philosophical and educational text. The Bhagavad Gita shows a one-to-one teacher-pupil interaction between Bhagavan Krishna and Arjuna, showing how confusion over morals could be changed to the path of clarity with direction, introspection, and self-awareness. This conversation form is based on an indigenous approach to learning where wisdom is passed through dialogue, experience, and moral reasoning and not by strict teaching.

4.1 Non-Violence, Truth, and Compassion

The Mahābhārata endows high regard to moral virtues of Ahimsa, satya, compassion, forgiveness, humbleness and restraint. These are the values that are introduced as the ethical base of the sustainable and peaceful society. As per the epic, violence, dishonesty, greed and hatred ruin the social harmony and bring suffering to both personalities and communities. Sustainable living can only be achieved when human associations are grounded on faith, compassion, and respect to life.

In the Mahabharata, non-violence is not applied only through a physical harm but also through damaging speech, lack of justice, and harm to nature. The truth is represented as the light which ensures the social order, whereas the compassion is regarded as the emotional power which links human beings to each other and all living things. These virtues combined make the society appreciate coexistence over domination.

The Bhagavad Gītā clearly expresses these ideals:

अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् |

(Bhagavad Gītā 16.2)

ahinsā satyam akrodhas tyāgaḥ śhāntir apaiśhunam

Meaning: Non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, peacefulness, restraint from fault-finding.

According to this verse, non-violence, truth, self-control, generosity, peace and absence of hatred are some of the divine qualities. These virtues avoid conflict and promote moral actions. People who exercise non-violence do not harm others and the environment. Honesty develops trust in the social relationship and kindness in unity and respect towards one another.

Another key verse emphasizes equality and universal respect:

विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि |

शुनि चैव श्वाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः || 18||

(Bhagavad Gītā 5.18)

vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini

śhuni chaiva śhva-pāke cha paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinah

Meaning: The truly learned, with the eyes of divine knowledge, see with equal vision a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.

According to this śloka, intelligent people treat all beings, including humans, animals, as well as socially inferior beings, with equal respect. Such a vision of equality supports social justice, environmental ethics as well as inclusiveness. The Mahabharata promotes the culture of care, coexisting and sustainability by acknowledging the divine in every creature.

A combination of these teachings introduces non-violence, truth, and compassion as the key to a sustainable planet.

4.2 Harmony with Nature

In Mahābhārata, nature is not considered as a place of exploitation but a sacred and living being that supports life. Rivers, forests, mountains, animals, plants are repetitively explained as divine and worth worshipping. Human being is depicted to be closely intertwined with the nature, and any imbalanced condition to this equilibrium brings misery and devastation. The epic, therefore, suggests a vision of the ecology in the early days when the humanity considered itself to be a part of nature rather than its master.

In Mahābhārata, forests are a place of learning, contemplation and spiritual development. The story of the Pana-Davas being sent to the forest to live as exiles teaches the lesson of simplicity, sparseness and appreciation of the environment. Rivers like the Ganga and Yamuna are described as the divine mothers who are life-givers. Animals are handled with care, which is an indication that all creatures have a similar spiritual nature.

This interconnected worldview is expressed in the Bhagavad Gītā:

ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां हृद्देशेऽर्जुन तिष्ठति |
भ्रामयन्सर्वभूतानि यन्त्रारूढानि मायया || 61||

īśhvaraḥ sarva-bhūtānām hṛid-deśhe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati
bhrāmayan sarva-bhūtāni yantrārūḍhāni māyayā

(Bhagavad Gītā 18.61)

Meaning: The Supreme Lord dwells in the hearts of all living beings, O Arjun. According to their karmas, he directs the wanderings of the souls, who are seated on a machine made of material energy.

This verse informs that divine is present in every living creature. When nature is defined as a sacred place it cannot be used to make selfish profit. Rather, human beings are prompted to lead a modest, thankful, and accountable life towards the environment.

It is also a lesson in the epic that when greed and violence destroy the natural balance, disasters ensue. So, peace with nature will not be a choice because it will keep us alive. The Mahabharata therefore presents an ecological ethic that can be considered timeless that promotes sustainable living and environmental conservation.

4.3. Selfless Action and Ethical Living

The ethical core of sustainable living is selfless action, which is referred to as Niṣhkāma Karma in the Mahabharata. It is doing what one is supposed to do earnestly, without having to gain anything out of it, glory or shame of being failed. The epic demonstrates severally that selfish Desire (Kāma) and Ego (Ahaṁkāra) are the fundamental source of social injustice, strife and environmental devastation. Greed-related actions make people exploit others and misuse natural resources, causing the damage of society and the planet in the long run.

On the contrary, self-sacrificing action fosters peace of mind, mood, and conscience. It makes people concentrate on serving and duty instead of self-interest and service instead of reward. This is the core idea of the philosophy of ethical living of Bhagavad Gita:

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय |
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते || 48||

(Bhagavad Gītā 2.48)

yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā dhanañjaya
siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga uchyate

Meaning:

Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjun, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog.

This is an example of the poem which shows that one needs to do what he or she can do with a calm and balanced mind without being declared as more or less successful. This form of emotional stability helps individuals to make morally correct decisions even in tough circumstances. Instead, they do not react impulsively and selfishly, but rather react rationally and understandingly. It is an emotive science, which is required in sustainable social relationship and harmonious societies.

Self-sacrificing action is also useful in the common good. When individuals get involved in activities that benefit others, the society will be more cooperative and the society will be justified. There is leadership responsibility, and leaders who follow Nishkāma Karma do so; there is teaching responsibility and teachers are caring in their teaching and citizens are dutiful in their work towards a common good. According to this ideology, education transforms into an individual achievement instrument to social service and moral development.

In addition, altruistic actions enhance thinking in the long-term. Human beings do not consider a short-term reward, but they look into the future of their actions toward others and the nature. The present sustainability pillars, such as responsible consumption, ethical leadership, and environmental protection can be combined with this point of view.

Thus, the Mahabharata presents the selfless action as the way of religious life and the development that is friendly to the environment rather than the ideal one.

5. Ethical Decision-Making and Value Formation

Mahabharata is an ethical decision-making process where the process is carried out in a moral manner, guided by self-awareness, responsibility and compassion. The values are not forced but acquired in the process of reflections, experience, and ethical struggle.

This is the ideal that is articulated in the Bhagavad Gita:

श्रीभगवानुवाच |
अभयं सत्त्वसंशुद्धिर्ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः |
दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वाध्यायस्तप आर्जवम् || 1||
अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् |
दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं मार्दवं ह्रीरचापलम् || 2||
तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहोनातिमानिता |
भवन्ति सम्पदं देवीमभिजातस्य भारत || 3||

śhrī-bhagavān uvācha
abhayaṁ sattva-saṁśuddhir jñāna-yoga-vyavasthitiḥ
dānaṁ damaś cha yajñaś cha svādhyāyas tapa ārjavam
ahinsā satyam akrodhas tyāgaḥ śhāntir apaiśhunam
dayā bhūteṣhv aloluptvaṁ mārdaṁ hrīr achāpalam
tejaḥ kṣamā dhṛtiḥ śhaucham adroho nāti-mānitā
bhavanti sampadam daivīm abhijātasya bhārata

(Bhagavad Gītā 16.1)

Meaning:

The Supreme Divine Personality said: O scion of Bharat, these are the saintly virtues of those endowed with a divine nature—fearlessness, purity of mind, steadfastness in spiritual knowledge, charity, control of the senses, sacrifice, study of the sacred books, austerity, and straightforwardness; non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, peacefulness, restraint from fault-finding, compassion toward all living beings, absence of covetousness, gentleness, modesty, and lack of fickleness; vigor, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, bearing enmity toward none, and absence of vanity.

Fearlessness, purity of heart and devotion to wisdom featured as the pillars of ethical living in the verse. It also focuses on equality and sympathy:

विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि |

शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः || 18||

(Bhagavad Gītā 5.18)

Meaning: The truly learned, with the eyes of divine knowledge, see with equal vision a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.

All these teachings help learners to think morally, act in an empathetic, and socially responsible manner.

5.1 Reflection-Based Learning and Self-Awareness

The Mahabharata teaches self-reflection as the basis of moral development. It instructs that to lead a moral life, one has to first know his or her thoughts, feelings, and wants. A reflective person does not act on his impulses but stops and considers the circumstance before making a sound decision.

This thought can be found in the Bhagavad Gita:

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय |

सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते || 48||

(Bhagavad Gītā 2.48)

Meaning: Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjuna, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog.

The verse instructs equanimity in doing things without any attachment to outcome. This state of emotional stability promotes conscious judgment and uprightness. Empathy, patience, and compassion are also developed on the basis of reflection-based learning to enable individuals to be responsible.

5.2 Karna: Generosity, Loyalty, and Identity

Karna is arguably one of the most tragic and morally confused characters in the Mahabharata. His existence is characterized by dismissal, iniquity and self-dissension. He is born as the eldest son of Kunti yet he is left at birth and brought up in a socially marginalized family. All through his life, Karna experiences humiliation due to the perceived inferior status, though he is a person of extraordinary strength, intelligence and courage.

This is why this experience of social exclusion leaves its mark on his personality and profoundly affects his choices, making him a strong symbol of identity conflict and his moral strength.

The generosity of Karṇa is mythical. He is also referred to as Dana-vira Karṇa (Hero of Charity) since he does not turn anyone who wants his assistance. His greatest sacrifice is when he surrenders his divine Armor (Kavacha) and Earrings (Kuṇḍala) to Indra where he is fully aware of the fact that the action would render him helpless on the battlefield. This action shows the fact that real generosity does not require any transaction but is self-sacrificing and compassionate. It reflects the teaching:

दानं हि परमो धर्मः।

(Mahābhārata)

Meaning: "दानं हि परमो धर्मः" Charity is indeed the highest duty. This is a profound Sanskrit maxim emphasizing that selfless giving is the ultimate spiritual path.

This verse states that the greatest dharma is giving. This principle is reflected in the life of Karṇa since it was revealed that greatness of morality lies not in power or status but in giving.

Nevertheless, the character of Karna is not devoid of the moral tension. His unceasing devotion to Duryodhana speaks of emotional depth of moral existence. It is only Duryodhana who appreciated the value of Karṇa when others turned their backs on him. Karṇa is thankful and loyal to Duryodhana and therefore he has to help him even when he knows of his injustices. This fidelity brings out his personal integrity, yet it also brings out the risks of emotional attachment to the case when it goes against the moral truth.



Picture: Karna during the war, lifting his Ratha Chakra (Car wheel)

The life of Kararna teaches that there is a possibility of virtue and suffering to coexist. His identity is not born but made by choice, courage and compassion. The Mahabharata strikes against the fixed social stratifications through the character of Karṇa and the value of all human beings. His tale tells a strong teaching lesson about empathy, strength, and the ethical ambiguity of human relationships.

6. Conclusion

The mythological treatise of the Mahābhārata is a rich repository of ancient wisdom systems in which moral philosophy, sense of social duty, rulership policies, teaching methods and human psyche are amalgamated. More than an epic, it is a living text, side by side of recitation and values nurture through narrative, conversation and experiential learning. The principles of Dharma, Karma, Nīti, Vidyā and Saṁskāra even collectively form the ethics in Hinduism, wherein it serves as a composite theory of morality. These indigenous knowledge structures place as much emphasis on the moral and emotional development of entirely educated people for intellectual progress.

Today where devaluation of values and moral confusions are constituting insurmountable problems in the arena of education there, the teachings found in the Mahābhārata take a new relevance. Its conventional and academic pedagogical strategies, such as reflective inquiry, advocacy, moral reasoning, mentoring and contextual decision-making are consistent with contemporary objectives of value education and integrated learning. Incorporating these forms of knowledge in contemporary curriculum can foster a concern for morality, critical thought and responsible membership among children. Therefore, by invoking the traditional knowledge traditions of the Mahābhārata in value education, India not only safeguards its own civilizational wisdom but also equips itself with lasting lessons for producing individuals who are morally anchored and ready to make a valuable contribution to society.

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