



# Heritage, Memory, and the Pedagogic Re-reading of *The Mahabharata*: Situating the Sabha Parva within English Literary Studies through Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

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## Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationship between heritage and memory through a critical re-reading of the Sabha Parva of *The Mahabharata* within the framework of English literary studies. It argues that the inclusion of classical Indian texts in the English curriculum is not merely recuperative but epistemologically transformative. Drawing upon Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), the paper examines how the Sabha Parva operates as a repository of ethical deliberation, political discourse, and cultural memory. Through an analysis of the dice game episode and Draupadi's interrogation, the study foregrounds the text as a site of contested meanings and collective trauma. The paper further situates this reading within contemporary pedagogical practices, emphasizing dialogic learning, translation studies, and decolonial curricular interventions. Ultimately, it proposes that teaching the Mahabharata in English departments enables a dynamic reconfiguration of heritage as a living, interpretive process rather than a static inheritance.

Keywords: Heritage, Memory, Mahabharata, Sabha Parva, Indian Knowledge Systems, Pedagogy, Translation, Gender

The conceptual categories of heritage and memory have undergone significant redefinition in recent decades, moving beyond their earlier association with static preservation toward a more fluid and process-oriented understanding. Heritage is no longer confined to monuments, archives, or officially sanctioned histories; rather, it is increasingly seen as something continually produced through acts of interpretation, negotiation, and transmission across generations. In this sense, heritage is performative—it exists not merely in objects or texts but in the ways communities engage with, reinterpret, and mobilize them in changing socio-cultural contexts. Memory, correspondingly, has shifted from being understood as an individual cognitive faculty to a collective and culturally mediated

construct. As theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs have argued, memory is embedded within social frameworks, shaped by institutions, rituals, and shared narratives. Building on this, Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory, emphasizing how the latter is sustained through symbolic forms such as texts, performances, and traditions that endure across temporal spans.

Within this expanded theoretical framework, the Mahabharata emerges as a foundational text of Indian cultural memory, functioning not simply as an epic narrative but as a vast civilizational archive. Its encyclopedic scope, layered narrative structure, and profound ethical complexity resist closure, enabling continuous reinterpretation. The multiplicity of its recensions across languages, regions, and performance traditions further underscores its status as a “living text.” Unlike fixed canonical works that demand singular readings, the *Mahabharata* invites dialogic engagement, where meaning is generated through interaction between text and reader, past and present. Its endurance lies precisely in this openness: it is not preserved unchanged but continually reimagined in response to shifting cultural and historical contexts.

The inclusion of the *Mahabharata* within the English literature syllabus marks a significant epistemic shift. Historically, English literary studies in India were shaped by colonial pedagogies that privileged Western canonical texts, often marginalizing indigenous traditions. The incorporation of Indian epics signals a movement toward decolonizing the curriculum, challenging inherited hierarchies of knowledge, and foregrounding alternative intellectual traditions. It also necessitates a rethinking of disciplinary boundaries, as such texts cannot be approached solely through conventional literary frameworks. Instead, they demand an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates literary criticism with philosophy, ethics, history, and cultural studies. In this context, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer a crucial framework, emphasizing holistic, contextual, and ethically grounded modes of understanding that differ significantly from Eurocentric epistemologies.

This paper focuses specifically on the Sabha Parva, one of the most politically charged and ethically complex sections of the epic. The Sabha Parva occupies a pivotal position within the narrative, marking the transition from relative harmony to impending catastrophe. Its central episode—the dice game culminating in Draupadi’s disrobing—serves as a powerful site for examining the interplay between power, gender, and moral responsibility. Far from being a mere narrative turning point, this episode encapsulates a profound crisis of dharma, exposing the fragility of ethical systems when confronted with ambition.

By foregrounding the dice game and Draupadi’s interrogation in the royal assembly, this study seeks to demonstrate how heritage is actively produced and reproduced through acts of reading, teaching, and interpretation. Each retelling or pedagogic engagement reconfigures the meaning of the episode, transforming it into a site of ongoing ethical and cultural negotiation. Draupadi’s question—whether Yudhishtira had the right to stake her after losing himself—continues to resonate as a challenge to patriarchal authority and juridical logic, making the Sabha Parva a crucial locus for discussions of gendered justice and moral agency.

Furthermore, the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into the analysis enables a reorientation of pedagogic practice. Rather than treating the text as a fixed repository of meaning, IKS encourages a dialogic and reflective engagement, where knowledge emerges through questioning,

debate, and contextual interpretation. This approach bridges literary analysis with ethical inquiry, transforming the classroom into a space where students not only interpret texts but also grapple with enduring philosophical dilemmas. In doing so, the study proposes that the teaching of the Sabha Parva within English literary studies can serve as a powerful means of reimagining heritage—not as a static inheritance, but as a living, contested, and continually evolving process.

The study of memory in the humanities has been profoundly shaped by the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who conceptualized memory as socially framed rather than purely individual. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is sustained through institutions, practices, and shared narratives. This idea is further developed by Jan Assmann, who distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory, the latter being institutionalized and preserved across generations. The *Mahabharata* exemplifies cultural memory in Assmann's sense. It is not merely a literary text but a civilizational archive encompassing mythology, philosophy, politics, and ethics. Its transmission across oral, written, and performative traditions reflects the continuity and adaptability central to Indian Knowledge Systems. IKS challenges the rigid separation between disciplines characteristic of Western epistemology. It emphasizes interconnectedness, contextuality, and ethical engagement. Knowledge is not an abstract entity but is embedded in lived experience and moral practice. In this sense, the Sabha Parva can be read as a dialogic text that invites interpretation rather than prescribing fixed meanings.

The Sabha Parva is more of a cross web of Power, Ethics, and the Crisis of Dharma. The Sabha Parva narrates the construction of the Pandavas' magnificent assembly hall and the subsequent sacrifice, culminating in the infamous dice game. This sequence of events marks a turning point in the epic, transforming a narrative of royal prosperity into one of ethical crisis. Yudhishtira's participation in the dice game raises fundamental questions about dharma. Despite his reputation as a just ruler, his actions reveal the fragility of ethical judgment under pressures. His willingness to stake his kingdom, and eventually Draupadi exposes the contradictions inherent in the concept of dharma. Draupadi's interrogation in the Sabha is a moment of profound philosophical significance. Her question, whether a man who has lost himself has any right to stake another—disrupts the normative structures of authority. It challenges not only Yudhishtira's but the entire assembly's complicity. This episode can be interpreted as a form of cultural trauma, a concept explored in memory studies to describe events that leave a lasting imprint on collective consciousness. The repeated retelling of Draupadi's humiliation across literary, theatrical, and cinematic adaptations underscores its centrality to Indian cultural memory.

Teaching the *Mahabharata* in English translation introduces a complex set of interpretive challenges. Translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a cultural negotiation. As A. K. Ramanujan famously argued, Indian epics exist in multiple versions, each reflecting specific historical and cultural contexts. The use of translations such as those by Bibek Debroy or Kisari Mohan Ganguli enables accessibility but also raises questions about fidelity and representation. Certain concepts—such as dharma, or other indigenous words require contextual explanation. This opens up productive pedagogic possibilities, encouraging students to engage critically with language and meaning. Moreover, the inclusion of the Sabha Parva within English curricula allows for comparative analysis. Texts like *Macbeth* offer parallels in their exploration of ambition, and moral collapse. However, the Mahabharata differs in its refusal to provide clear moral resolutions, instead presenting a spectrum of perspectives. This multiplicity aligns with contemporary pedagogical approaches that prioritize critical thinking over rote learning. Students are encouraged to interpret, question, and debate, transforming the classroom into a

space of dialogic engagement.

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into literary studies represents a significant shift toward epistemological pluralism. IKS foregrounds holistic learning, where intellectual inquiry is inseparable from ethical reflection. In the context of the Sabha Parva, the pedagogic possibilities of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) can be meaningfully operationalized through a dialogic framework that privileges inquiry over instruction. Rather than approaching the text as a stable narrative with predetermined meanings, dialogic pedagogy repositions it as an open field of ethical deliberation. This shift is crucial, for the *Mahabharata* itself is structured not as a monologic text but as a layered conversation—between narrators, characters, and philosophical positions—thereby inviting readers and students into an ongoing process of interpretation.

The ethical dilemmas embedded within the dice game episode provide particularly fertile ground for such engagement. The question of justice, for instance, cannot be resolved through a singular moral lens. When students are asked, “What constitutes justice in the dice game?”, they are compelled to navigate competing frameworks: the legality of the game, the ethics of consent, and the responsibilities of those present in the *sabha*. The silence of the elders—Bhishma, Drona, Vidura—becomes as significant as the actions of Yudhishtira and Duryodhana, opening up discussions on complicity, institutional failure, and the limits of moral authority. In this way, justice is revealed not as an abstract ideal but as a contested and context-dependent construct.

Similarly, the question of Yudhishtira’s moral culpability invites a nuanced exploration of agency and constraint. Is he an autonomous moral agent accountable for his action, or is he bound by the expectations of close-ones and the codes of kshatriya conduct? Encouraging students to debate this tension allows them to engage with the IKS understanding of dharma as situational rather than absolute. It also foregrounds the epistemological uncertainty that characterizes the epic: dharma is not a fixed rulebook but a principle that must be interpreted in context, often under conditions of ambiguity and crisis.

Draupadi’s intervention in the assembly further deepens this dialogic engagement by foregrounding questions of gender and agency. Her refusal to accept the legitimacy of the dice game, and her insistence on questioning its ethical basis, disrupts the patriarchal and jurisdictional structures that seek to silence her. Asking students how Draupadi redefines agency within a patriarchal framework encourages them to move beyond reductive readings of victimhood and recognize her as a philosophical interlocutor. Her question is not merely rhetorical; it is epistemic, exposing the contradictions within the very system that claims to govern justice and morality. In this sense, Draupadi becomes central to the text’s context, embodying the IKS emphasis on critical questioning as a mode of knowledge production.

These dialogic engagements resonate deeply with the IKS principles of dialogue and critical debate, which prioritize participatory learning over passive reception. Knowledge, within this framework, is not transmitted unidirectionally from teacher to student but emerges through interaction, disagreement, and reflection. This aligns closely with contemporary pedagogical goals that emphasize critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and the ability to engage with complexity rather than seek definitive answers.

Beyond discussion-based methods, IKS also advocates for multimodal approaches to learning, recognizing that knowledge is embodied and experiential as much as it is intellectual. The *Mahabharata*, with its rich oral and performative traditions, lends itself particularly well to such

approaches. Oral recitation, for instance, can help students appreciate the rhythmic and mnemonic dimensions of the text, foregrounding its origins in an oral culture where memory and performance were central to transmission. Performance-based activities—such as staging the dice game or Draupadi's interrogation—can further enable students to inhabit the emotional and ethical tensions of the narrative, fostering empathetic as well as analytical engagement.

Visual interpretation, through paintings, film adaptations, or digital media, offers yet another dimension of understanding. By comparing different visual representations of the Sabha Parva, students can explore how cultural memory is shaped and reshaped across mediums and historical contexts. Such activities not only enhance engagement but also underscore the idea that heritage is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of reinterpretation. Incorporating these multiple modes of learning transforms the classroom into a space of active exploration, where the *Mahabharata* is not merely studied but experienced. It allows students to engage with the text at cognitive, emotional, and sensory levels, thereby deepening their understanding of its ethical and philosophical dimensions. More importantly, it redefines the role of the educator—from an authoritative transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of dialogue—aligning pedagogic practice with the core principles of Indian Knowledge Systems. Through such an approach, the study of the Sabha Parva becomes more than an academic exercise; it becomes a means of cultivating critical consciousness, ethical sensitivity, and an appreciation for the complexity of cultural heritage. In this way, dialogic pedagogy not only revitalizes the teaching of the *Mahabharata* but also reimagines the broader aims of literary education itself.

The Sabha Parva is also a crucial site for examining gender dynamics within the framework of heritage and memory. Draupadi's disrobing has been widely interpreted as a symbol of patriarchal violence. However, her assertive questioning transforms her into a figure of resistance. Feminist scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have emphasized the importance of recovering subaltern voices within dominant narratives. Draupadi's voice can be read as an instance of such recovery, challenging the authority of patriarchal structures. Subaltern readings of the *Mahabharata* further complicate the notion of heritage by highlighting marginalized perspectives. The epic's polyphonic nature allows for multiple interpretations, making it a rich resource for critical inquiry.

The teaching of the Sabha Parva within English literary studies transforms heritage from a static concept into a pedagogic practice. Heritage is not simply inherited but actively constructed through acts of reading, interpretation, and discussion. This process is particularly significant in the context of postcolonial education. The inclusion of Indian texts challenges the dominance of Western canons, creating space for alternative epistemologies. It also enables students to engage with their cultural heritage in a critical and reflective manner. Thus, by integrating IKS, educators can further enrich this engagement, bridging the gap between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary academic practices. *The Mahabharata*, in this sense, becomes not just a text to be studied but a medium for ethical and intellectual exploration.

Hence, to conclude, the re-reading of the Sabha Parva within English literary studies offers a powerful framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between heritage and memory. Through its complex narrative and ethical dilemmas, the text invites continuous reinterpretation, ensuring its relevance across temporal and cultural contexts. The incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems

enhances this process, providing a holistic approach to literary education that integrates intellectual inquiry with ethical reflection. By situating the *Mahabharata* within the English curriculum, educators can foster a more inclusive and dialogic model of learning. Ultimately, heritage is not a static legacy but a living process, continually shaped by acts of memory and interpretation. The Sabha Parva, with its enduring questions and unresolved tensions, exemplifies this dynamic, making it an indispensable component of contemporary literary pedagogy.

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