

The Mahabharata as Archive of Indian Knowledge Traditions: Ethics, Ecology and Governance as Foundations for Viksit Bharat

Dr. Ritambhara Misra

Associate Professor,
Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi

Abstract

The Mahabharata is a vast civilizational archive preserving Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) specially as it relates to the domains of ethics, ecology, and governance, and should be utilised as such. The Mahabharata is perhaps the greatest Indian Itihasa text, which encapsulates history embedded with philosophical insight, which becomes apparent once we study the many-layered discourses on moral reasoning, political responsibility, and environmental consciousness that it has to offer. This paper draws upon selected episodes from the Sabha Parva, Udyoga Parva, Shanti Parva, and Anushasana Parva, with qualitative, interpretive, and textual analytical methodology to explore and demonstrate how the epic encodes ancient knowledge traditions.

The concept of Dharma Sankat in particular highlights the knowledge of context as being imperative to lived ethics, and eschews any broad-brush prescriptive morality that can only stay theoretical. Instances such as the ethical dilemmas faced by Yudhishtira, Draupadi's interrogation in the royal assembly and Bhishma's words on Rajdharma show us again and again that moral deliberation is less about absolute rights and wrongs and more about appropriately meeting the current situation. At the same time there is an abundance of ecological wisdom in the Mahabharata that comes to us not as preachy edicts but through its subtle but constant reverence for Prakriti, forests, rivers and all life. Thirdly, Vidur Neeti is one of the great ancient lessons on Governance. Lastly, the Shanti Parva discourses upon the principles of justice, welfare, and accountability, and envisions rule as protective stewardship aligned with Lokasangraha i.e the good of the people.

One of the benefits of bringing these examples and their lessons into the contemporary discourse on sustainability, ethical leadership, and governance is that in the Mahabharata we can find an organically Indic intellectual foundation that is also supremely relevant to the modern vision of a Viksit Bharat. Of course this can be taken too overzealously, so the paper also addresses methodological challenges including ideological appropriation, selective interpretation and the need for finding actionable insights for the modern day. Ultimately, the Mahabharata emerges as a living repository of civilizational wisdom capable of informing India's pursuit of holistic development—material, ethical, and ecological.

Keywords

Mahabharata, Viksit Bharat, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Dharma, Prakriti, Ethics, Governance

1. Introduction: Reframing the Mahabharata

There is nothing like the Mahabharata in the cultural history of India, and perhaps even the world. Described within the tradition as Itihasa, it is not merely an epic narrative of dynastic conflict, nor is it solely a poetic monument of classical Sanskrit literature. Indeed if seen properly, the Mahabharata, as evident from its name itself, is a civilisational text that gathers within itself the entire philosophical, pedagogical, historical as well as mythical milieu of the ancient nation known as Bharat, or India. Its reflections range from ethics, politics, kinship, cosmology, pedagogy, to even metaphysics. In fact more eloquent words on its vastness and cultural significance are difficult to find than the preface of V. S. Sukthankar's (1933) Critical Edition of the Mahabharata:

“Next to the Vedas, it is the most valuable product of the entire literature of ancient India ... venerable for its very antiquity, it is one of the most inspiring monuments of the world and an inexhaustible mine for the investigation of the religion, mythology, legend, philosophy, law, custom and political and social institutions of ancient India.” (V. S. Sukthankar, 1933, p. iii)

Further, its famous internal claim, “Yad ihāsti tad anyatra, yan nehāsti na tat kvacit,” translated as “What is found here may be found elsewhere; what is not found here is nowhere else” (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute [BORI], 1933–1966, 1.56.33; also 18.5.38), which every reader is aware of, is surprisingly believable once you digest the Mahabharata. In the simplest analysis the Mahabharata is a comprehensive reservoir of timeless knowledge, and to approach it as mere myth or just classical epic poetry is therefore to severely reduce its scope. Whether this reduction of scope has happened in academia because of a sort of post-colonial shame hangover, or by deliberate design of political ideologues, one thing is certain—the Mahabharata is a deeper and broader reservoir of Indian Knowledge Systems than any other single text, and its time has come.

In recent decades, Indian Knowledge Systems have fortunately gained scholarly attention, particularly in conversations concerning the decolonisation of epistemology, educational reforms towards this direction, and the formal promotion of a return to what can be called natively Indic civilisational self-understanding. From a policy perspective, the National Education Policy 2020 foregrounds the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge traditions into our contemporary curricula. We must also take care, of course, that these texts are studied as living frameworks of thought, and not mere antiquities. Hence the Mahabharata assumes a renewed relevance in modern India's education if it is to move forward while also remembering its roots. Further, there is no singular text in which complex reflections on almost every facet of life are discussed with such rigor as in the Mahabharata. What is interesting, of course, is that all this is delivered to us in narrative form. Rather than presenting systematic treatises, it embeds knowledge through dialogue, crisis, and ethical deliberation.

This paper argues firstly that the Mahabharata functions as a vast civilisational archive of Indian Knowledge Systems, but since the scope of the text is so vast, in the interest of being able to deliver any serious insight at all, I will focus on three foundational domains: ethics, ecology, and governance. I will first articulate a theory of contextual ethics via the concept of dharma, frequently dramatized as dharma sankat, or ethical crisis. Second, I will endeavour to display how the Mahabharata encodes a deeply ecological worldview grounded in reverence for prakriti and the interconnectedness of all life. The third point of focus for this paper will be studying some of the Mahabharata's reflections on political authority, legitimacy, welfare, and responsibility, especially in the discourses of the Sabha Parva, Shanti Parva and the counsel known as Vidur Neeti.

The objectives of this study of the Mahabharata are five: to examine it as a storehouse of Indian Knowledge Systems, to analyze dharma and its applications as ethical reasoning throughout the text, to explore the relationship between the people of Bharat and their ecology, to study its models of governance and leadership, and finally, to relate these knowledge traditions to contemporary discussions surrounding the vision of Viksit Bharat. It is not the aim of this paper to romanticize the text or our ancient past in a broad sweep of sentimentalism that does nothing to educate us in the present, but at the same time we must also not continue the trend of marginalising ancient Indic thought when we consider modern academic and public concerns. The idea of this paper is to tackle our greatest ancient text critically and with an open mind, demonstrating how the wisdom contained within can elucidate modern minds just as constructively as any other western 'classic' text.

With these aims in mind, I have adopted an interpretive textual approach in terms of methodology, reading selected episodes from the Sabha Parva, Udyoga Parva, Shanti Parva, and Anushasana Parva from the broad contextual lens of Indian Knowledge Systems. Revisiting the Mahabharata as a living archive in this way, we may find ideas capable of informing a model towards development that is relevant, materially progressive as well as morally grounded.

2. The Mahabharata as Archive within Indian Knowledge Systems

I have described the Mahabharata as an archive within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, but this requires a clarification of what is precisely meant by the word archive in a civilisational context, especially one with so ancient a history as Bharat. An archive need not be confined to written records preserved in institutional repositories or libraries. In countless knowledge traditions, especially those rooted in oral cultures, the archive exists as a living testimony transmitted from teacher to pupil or from the learned and scholarly traditions to the ordinary masses orally, forming a rich strata of layered memory sustained through transmission, repetition, commentary, and reinterpretation. This turns it from a static collection into a living repository, and the Mahabharata is an example of this method of the archival continuity and communal memory of a civilization.

Within the ancient Indian intellectual tradition, knowledge was not originally organised around the primacy of the written text. The gurukul system of education,

which in various forms continues even today, was fundamentally oral in structure. Learning unfolded through recitation, dialogue, questioning, memorization, and lived proximity between teacher and student. As a result, authority over the studied material emerged from a far more embodied method of learning as compared to simply reading texts. The Vedic corpus itself was preserved through precisely such intricate oral techniques designed to ensure accuracy across not just years but generations. Stories are great educators everywhere, and pretty much every old civilisation had its memories, heroes, villains, lessons, warnings and deepest beliefs encoded in one or the other such text. One can look at the Kalevala of the Finnish people. One can of course think of the Iliad and the Odyssey. But especially in such a verbal civilisational setting, narrative becomes a powerful vehicle for the future transmission of knowledge. And such is the case with The Mahabharata. It must therefore be read against this pedagogical background. Its vastness is not an accident, and its structure betrays deep as well as deeply encoded insight.

The layers upon layers in structure, the interpolated dialogues, the myriad philosophical discourses cocooned within the story, and even the genealogies and narrative digressions form a composite knowledge system. Ethics is not separated from politics, nor politics from cosmology, nor cosmology from social life. Each blends into the next, ad infinitum. In an era where super-specialised academic disciplines are being encouraged to be interdisciplinary, we find that the Mahabharata integrates domains that modern academia has been isolating so far. Hence instead of having to perform synthesis, so to speak, we see how educational material would look if it were to be effortlessly ‘multidisciplinary’, devoid of those demarcations to begin with.

There is a famous assertion within the epic that says “What is found here may be found elsewhere, but what is not found here is nowhere else” (BORI, 1933–1966, 1.56.33). This is not a personal claim by some ambitious author. It is in fact an ancient educational tradition’s declaration of pedagogical breadth, presenting the Mahabharata as encompassing the entire spectrum of possible human experience and knowledge. Even structurally, there is a lot of range within the text. There are direct treatise-like sections such as the discourses of the Shanti Parva and Anushasana Parva, but there is also much what has formerly been seen as Socratic dialogic inquiry in episodes like the Yaksha Prashna, while we find ethical debates in the Sabha Parva and strategic reasoning in the Udyoga Parva. Each of these modes of instruction adds to a layered base of moral values embedded within the story. Knowledge is rarely delivered as monologue and is instead generated through tension, disagreement, crisis, and reflection. We see few lectures, and instead see characters learning through living. Yudhishtira learns through loss. Bhishma teaches us from the threshold of death. In each of these situations, the context matters at least as much as the information shared. The archive is therefore dynamic, and preserves modes of reasoning rather than fixed answers.

This is precisely why ancient Indian Knowledge Systems can be so easily adapted to modern application contexts. The value lies in situational discernment displayed by each character, active ethical deliberation we see examples of, and hence permits the continual integration of theory with lived experience. By so staging knowledge within the complexities of human action, the Mahabharata embodies this epistemology and continues to invite reinterpretation across centuries.

To approach the Mahabharata as archive is thus to reaffirm its role as a civilisational memory-bank in which ethics, ecology, governance, and social philosophy are preserved in narrative form. It stands as an enduring testament to a mode of knowledge transmission which grounds a civilisation in its roots.

3. Dharma as Ethical Knowledge System

At the heart of the Mahabharata lies the concept of dharma, a term that through blatant reductionism has come to be severely misunderstood, and is yet used amply, simply and clearly with a much broader meaning than religion throughout the Mahabharata. Dharma encompasses duty, law, righteousness, moral order, filial piety, even the world-sustaining principle itself, and yet it goes beyond even all of these. Dharma is not a rigid list of commandments like the laws laid down by Moses. Instead, dharma is shown as being contextual, relational, and the extremely situation-dependent application of something that approximately equates to morality.

A corollary to dharma is the recurring instances of dharma sankat, or ethical crisis. This alone should clarify to even a cursory reader that dharma is not merely religious, since dharma sankat very clearly goes beyond religious considerations almost every single time. Anyhow, to return to our topic, personages in the Mahabharata repeatedly face situations in which competing obligations intersect. This reminds one, of course, of the education Roman kings-to-be were given, where they would be asked questions of precisely this style, and asked to take a stand and defend it in debate. The classical Bharatiya understanding is the same. Loyalty to kin may conflict with the abstract ideal of justice. Truthfulness as an absolute may clash with the demands of survival. Political necessity may force one with compassion to not act compassionately for once, which can be extremely difficult and is precisely a dharma sankat, if one thinks about it deeply enough. And what does the Mahabharata say to us about these? Rather than resolving these tensions via easy to give but hard to follow doctrinal pronouncements, the epic shows us how often they come up in life, how unavoidable they really are, and that in the end one can only try their best with a clear conscience. Ethical knowledge emerges through discernment under pressure. We are always going to be faced with tough decisions, and a simple checklist is not available. Instead, we must look to each situation, and look to the truth in ourselves, and resolve these as best we can, again and again.

Moving to some concrete examples as ways in which the Mahabharata delineates the impact of ethics towards the outcomes in a person's life, but also those of the state, the Sabha Parva provides one of the most profound examinations of ethical failure in all of classical literature. Important enough that they are even today studied within Delhi University curricula, the dice game and the humiliation of Draupadi represent a glaring collapse of institutional dharma. Beyond the personal tragedy itself, present in the court are Kings, elders, and teachers who all remain silent while injustice unfolds. Authority figures fail at the precise moment they are most required. This is dharma sankat for the entire court, and its ramifications are destruction at a civilisational scale.

Draupadi's fierce interrogation of the assembly is hence a critical ethical moment. If such a heinous act is possible in the royal court supposedly filled with moral stalwarts,

what is the state of society? The shame is reverted from Draupadi to those who sat by as this callous behaviour was subject upon a woman, any woman. The moral authority of the court itself is called to question, as it should be, and this instance speaks to believers in democracy today in that a failure to govern renders the rulers questionable, and always has. It further signals a moral decay of sorts, and one can argue that the civilisational level of ruin caused by the Great War of Kurukshetra is a symptom of such decay.

We have mentioned earlier in the paper the dialogic method of inquiry, and the episode of the Yaksha Prashna as a good illustration. Yudhishtira is faced with a riddle that is not answered easily and is asked a set of philosophical questions. What hangs in the balance are the very lives of all the brothers, which makes us see how heavy a load dharma really is in the course our life follows. The questions in themselves are metaphysical reflections upon applied ethics. This conversation form supports a key aspect of Indian Knowledge Systems of wisdom being nurtured through active inquiry and discussions contributing significantly to our actual cognition of anything whatever.

The responses of Yudhishtira transcend the abstract theorizing of detachment from life, and are the result of an experience. When questioned on what is the highest path, he answers in a way that gives moral behavior more privilege than learning does. Upon being questioned about the greatest wonder, he thinks about human mortality and our instinct for its denial. We also see the concept of dharma stretched beyond ethics into existential awareness itself and the largest questions and answers in it.

In order to get back to matters more realistically at the level of the state we go on to the Shanti Parva, in an archetypal scene: Bhishma, on his deathbed of arrows, is telling Yudhishtira about kingship and ruling. The word Rajdharma itself makes it very clear that it is the moral responsibility of the ruler, therefore placing the political authority in a moral framework that sits above it. The king is not sovereign by whim or even holy writ, and is bound by duty toward the welfare of subjects. Power is legitimate only when it acts with justice, restraint, and compassion, and if not, it is swiftly taken away.

Bhishma leaves us timeless wisdom on leadership: the ruler must protect the vulnerable, ensure equitable administration, and avoid greed above all. The social stability of the state rests on the moral integrity of the sovereign. Governance without an ethical ground leads to disorder and ruin. In this sense, political knowledge in the Mahabharata remains inseparable from ethical self-discipline, and both are again bound indelibly within the larger concept of dharma, or duty. Duty can be towards self, the state, the sovereign, the teacher, and in all cases the correct path forward is the way of dharma. A narrow rendition of the idea of dharma robs us of one of the most philosophically important concepts in all of philosophy, comparable to the Tao and the Logos. Dharma is a very broad thing, but applies to every small, specific thing, path, decision and situation. Lived as a constant moral compass, it can enlighten our way forward in every circumstance. That it is paired with karma, which is to say the actual actions we take that end up determining our future, it is far more powerful a set of concepts than any in most world philosophy.

4. Ecological Consciousness and the Ethic of Prakriti

As in all Bharatiya history, philosophy, education as well as the overall belief system, nature in the Mahabharata is a living presence, and the very manifestation of life-force, i.e. prakriti. The ecological facets of the Mahabharata are not thrust down our throats, but they are in fact ever present and form an integral component of its civilisational knowledge system. The settings of multiple important scenes are in forests, by rivers, in the mountains, and so forth, and these are important elements of spiritual context in a tale where the worldview itself is grounded in prakriti, the generative principle of nature as the source and balance of all life.

A significant portion of the epic unfolds outside the palace and battlefield, within forest spaces such as Kamyā Vana. The exile of the Pandavas begins thus, and this fact is significant as it signals a turning away from the normal noise of life. This is a well-understood metaphor, of course, but it is heavy with meaning beyond the mere going away. The forest is a natural place, and the moral mistakes humans, specially those in the courts of power, are wont to make are not seen in the forest. It is a return to the pure law of nature, so to speak. Nature makes no such mistakes, is innocent, and for humans spending an extended period of time in it, returns them to this state as well.

The forest thus carries multiple meanings. It is exile, yes, but also refuge, and also a pure site of austerity and power. It is also a space where all are vulnerable, no matter who they are descended from, no matter their rights in the human world. It is, of course, as well a sphere of deep introspection. Instead of the ambition and intrigue that dominate the day and keep one entangled in the finer details of human life in the royal court, the forest provides an opportunity to reflect and refocus. Human beings are made aware of their embeddedness in the higher rhythms of life, and that there is indeed a world beyond that of human beings which is life. This is exactly where any contemporary society that is obsessed with shareholder value increase must first begin. Life in the forest is also life, and seeing animals, celestial beings, and ascetics in epics like the Mahabharata (one also thinks of the Ramayana) strengthen a cosmology where the human has neither a central nor a supreme place. This humility highlights an ecological ethic that is highly required in our world lest the balance be destroyed beyond repair, and man finally confronted with what he has done. The Indian reverence of rivers and sacred places over a long period of time only serves to demonstrate this consciousness, and it is easy to see even today that the most holy sites for Hindu pilgrimage are often from within the context of the Mahabharata, and most happen to be natural sites such as springs, rivers etc. These are places of pilgrimage, cleansing and remembrance and even today have both grandeur and holiness. The Ganges, of course, is the holiest of Hindu pilgrimage sites, but mountains too are described with awe, and trees with great sanctity. What we see across it all is deep respect and an awareness that the environment is intimately linked with moral life. Injury to the natural world is a symptom of disorder in human society, and as is signalled whenever dharma is broken, despair follows soon afterwards.

So we see that dharma also relates to nature, and the way humans treat it, and the concept of interconnected existence and sacred balance is also shown in the text's focus on restraint. The core message of the Mahabharata after all is that excessive desire,

greed, and unbridled ambition lead to destruction, for a person, a family, a state as well as an ecosystem. The catastrophic war of Kurukshetra is a warning against unrestrained power. While the text does not develop environmental treatises in modern terms, its moral universe assumes that harmony depends upon balance and it is implicit that human flourishing cannot be isolated from the well-being of the larger order. In fact one imagines that such a thing as over-utilisation, over-mining, over-polluting, over-farming and so forth would not be even imaginable to the mind of that milieu, and if so, would only be seen as the grossest adharmā, sins against Mother Nature sure to be punished.

Within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, this inherently ecological orientation aligns with the broader principle of respectful coexistence rather than avaricious extraction. Humans are only a small part of a vast relational web whose sustenance and continued existence depends on all its nodes following the law of reciprocity. While natural cycles keep everything in balance of their own accord, the human animal has figured out ways to disrupt them in ways never seen before. The underlying fact, however, is that the laws of nature are ultimately inviolable and inevitably have the final say. One of the moral lessons repeatedly demonstrated in the Mahabharata is that hubristic disregard for limits will inescapably result in destruction, and that no matter how powerful one may think oneself, there is ultimately a law and it is inescapable. Civilisationally, that looks like humans abusing the earth's resources as if they were inert and had no force of their own to exert back upon us. An ecological-economic view of this overarching Law yields the idea that it is no surprise that the infinite desire for the economy's growth for which unrestrained consumption has been taught to the masses is the same thing causing death to the planet's ecology, which is the actual source of all life. As the entire planet struggles with and races towards climate instability, ecological degradation, and excessive resource depletion, the societal vision of the Mahabharata offers an alternate model where an awareness of the interconnectedness of life teaches the leaders a healthy respect for moderation and a knowledge of limits.

The Mahabharata's environmental awareness goes beyond symbolic imagery and reflects an ancient Indic understanding of the harmony between human desire and the natural state of things as the foundation of the longevity of any civilisation. The epic places ethical and political life in a wider cosmological context. Viewing ecological awareness through the prism of Indian Knowledge Systems in this way, one discovers that this is not something new to Indian thought and is in fact an essential part of Indian literary and philosophical tradition.

5. Governance, Statecraft and Political Knowledge

The Mahabharata is one of the most sustained reflections on governance, its ideals as well as its many pitfalls in all of premodern world literature. Those who anticipate an ancient epic to show political power as an inheritance of the royalty are surprised to learn that it subjects power to severe moral questioning and makes a large point of demonstrating that when governance falls into the hands of the morally weak, disaster follows. Ruling is a ceaseless task and not a divine right, and the supreme task of all is high moral standards in the King himself. Only then can these values trickle downwards

to the court and subsequently to the subjects. The political outlook that comes to us through reading the Udyoga Parva, Shanti Parva and Anushasana Parva presents us with a body of knowledge which situates governance around accountability, prudence and welfare of the populace.

The Udyoga Parva of the Mahabharata introduces to us the celebrated counsel known as Vidur Neeti, delivered by adroit scholar and moral authority Vidur to Dhritarashtra. While Vidur is the voice of wisdom throughout the Mahabharata and one of the great markers of the coming misfortunes is in fact that most of his advice goes unheeded, in this specific discourse he articulates principles of statecraft deeply grounded in ethical foresight and restraint. He particularly emphasizes the importance of having wise advisors, the dangers of flattery and why rulers should avoid it at all costs as well as the corrosive effects of greed. He warns that a ruler that allows himself to be surrounded by sycophants will soon lose all sense of judgment. He states that disregarding principled counsel leads to political blindness and ruin not long after. In passages of sublime beauty we see how subtly the ancients understood human and courtly affairs, but we also see how it is wilful ignorance, not lack of insight, that causes ultimate ruin through bad decisions made by leaders who get caught in personal *moha* rather than following the larger dictums of statecraft as part of their duty and destiny i.e. *dharma*. A masterpiece of the dialogic method of teaching, the parva speaks to leaders even today since they face the same human problems regardless of the era.

Vidur lays special emphasis on valuing objectivity and prudence instead of personal emotion as a leader. One may even draw parallels with the advice Machiavelli gives in his famous *The Prince*, but Vidur gives a lot more consideration towards the good of the people. He expounds the ancient Indian idea of *karma* for leadership and states that a King's decisions must be taken with deep regard for their long-term consequences. Any fool can chase the fool's gold of immediate gratification. However, the kingdom's stability depends upon the King's proper judgement which is expressed via fairness in taxation, the protection of the vulnerable, the avoidance of war etc. In a sharp lesson that isn't popular now and wasn't popular then, he posits that wealth hoarded through oppressing others destroys one morally and that this inevitably brings ruin. In Vidur's case, he scales these conversations to leadership/kingdom terms, but these are all lessons that the individual human would do well to implement in their personal lives even today. Though he is not a king himself, Vidur is the moral conscience of the court and his being underlines the need for sound counsel, and the disasters that occur when it goes unheard. The Mahabharata thus describes a model of governance where authority did not reside in the monarch alone, with advisory structures being integral to decision-making long before senates and parliaments ever existed.

Now let us take a look at the Udyoga Parva, which is on one level an account of sophisticated diplomacy in that era and also represents what ancient Indians believed constitutes political legitimacy. The Udyoga Parva shows Lord Krishna himself negotiating with the Kauravas for a peaceful settlement, speaking of the avoidance of war as the highest virtue of leadership. Ultimately he shows us that the war took place for Duryodhana's personal ego alone, and this in itself renders him moot as a leader in fact. Lord Krishna combines moral appeal and strategic calculation in a way that is very instructive to the modern diplomat. His personal attempts to prevent war demonstrate

first and foremost that force is only ever a final necessity the use of which should be avoided as much as possible. When Duryodhana refuses even the smallest compromise, his ethical failure is revealed to all and a kingdom with such an unjust king fundamentally lacks a durable foundation.

As a sidebar, this episode complicates earlier simplistic readings of the epic as a celebrating war since we see every attempt made by Sri Krishna to avoid this fate. Further, even when the war does take place, the conflict is framed as the ultimate tragedy, brought on by greed, the ignorance of wise counsel and moral blindness. The Mahabharata hence professes a theory of statecraft in which power is conditioned upon constant responsibility and must always be kept in check by wisdom.

We also find an extensive treatment of political philosophy in the Shanti Parva. The war is over, Kurukshetra has been devastated, and yet Yudhishtira hesitates to assume the throne. His reluctance is based upon his awareness of the moral cost of power. At this moment, Bhishma's instructions on rajdharma seek to reconcile the assumption of authority with the establishment of justice. The king is shown as a protector and trustee. There is only one meaning of being King, and that is the protection of and service to subjects. The point driven home is that for a prosperous nation a leader must be present, and what sort of leader is that to be? The ruler must safeguard social order, administer justice impartially, and ensure the material welfare of the entire kingdom. Charity, compassion, and adherence to law are essential virtues without which the weak are not protected, and the moral authority of the king falls apart.

Bhishma emphasises that the prosperity of the state depends upon the ethical self-control of the ruler. Personal vice at the zenith flows downward. Conversely, integrity at the top fosters collective stability. Political knowledge is hence inseparable from moral psychology as it relates to the ruler.

The concept of lokasangraha, or the welfare of society, resonates throughout these teachings. Although elaborated elsewhere in classical Bharatiya literature, its spirit is present in the epic's insistence that rulership exists for collective good rather than personal aggrandisement. The king embodies and holds the responsibility for maintaining harmony between social classes, economic activity, and moral order through the cleanliness of his own personal character, and in taking good advice from those around him.

There is an old idea that negation is one of the best ways of teaching, i.e. what not to do is just as important as knowing what to do. One of the ways the Mahabharata presents its political philosophy is through this kind of negation in the figure of Duryodhana. His abject refusal to yield even minimal territory to the Pandavas to secure peace, his inability to restrain envy as well as his moral mistakes at every turn paint him into the opposite of what a ruler should be, illustrating almost every ill-consequence of ego-driven governance. When he wields his authority as an instrument of personal obsession, he destroys his legitimacy as a ruler and so his rule must end. Aside from his personal behaviour, even Duryodhana's court is a perfect image of institutional breakdown. This is seen by both the glossing over by others of his own blunders, as well as sane voices going unheard. Vidur's ethical appeals are marginalised in the court again and again, and objective counsel is subordinated to pride. One of the core lessons

in the entirety of the Mahabharata, truly the great lesson, in fact, is that such hubris in leaders inevitably brings catastrophe and war. Duryodhana is an immortal cautionary tale against all sycophantic ideas of power as a personal plaything.

Another interesting thing to see is that the Mahabharata resists triumphalism even after the war has ended. The victors are not seen exulting. There is no joy and no celebration, emphasising the tragedy that any war at all must be as well as the grave nature of political responsibility. The Pandavas understand that victory in the war against evil does not erase the moral burden of actually ruling well. To assume rule is to assume responsibility, and Yudhishtira's reluctance shows us how aware he is of this ethical weight.

Political reflections such as these are Indian Knowledge Systems that present a coherent structure that can guide modern leaders just as well as it did the ancient kings. In the Mahabharata, good governance consists firstly of sound moral judgment, then readiness to listen to informed advice, and above all a sublimation of one's own personal interests into pursuing the collective interest of society. No leader involved in ego is worthy of the name. Another interesting thing about the text is that its narrative form and dialogic teaching combine to deliver both theoretical principles as well as their lived consequences. To return to the parallel with Machiavelli's Prince for example, it's as if the text of the Prince was shared with the reader, but then also the story of what happens to one who listens to this advice, as we all as what happens to one who doesn't, and all of this in a story form also contains the book itself. Such a text within text is not mere feeling by the way, since the Bhagavad Gita is in fact an entire text of its own that is embedded within the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata thus emerges as an incredible text structurally that is, among other things, a vast storehouse of political wisdom relevant even today. Its political meditations encapsulate nearly every area of concern in governance, whether it be what makes a ruler legitimate, what are the causes and effects of corruption, how is institutional trust kept up and eroded etc as well as spending an inordinate amount of time on the ethics of leadership, since it considers all the rest to be downstream of this. The epic insists that the moral authority of the ruler is what gives (or loses) them political authority, and this is an insight that is truly timeless.

By framing statecraft as a moral calling in this way, the Mahabharata fuses ethics and governance and the all-pervading concept of dharma is seen as being the core once again. It is the inner discipline of the ruler that establishes lokasangraha, and is his dharma to keep. Such integration of all things into one constitutes one of the most significant contributions of the Mahabharata to the corpus of Indian Knowledge Systems.

6. The Mahabharata and the Vision of Viksit Bharat

The vision of Viksit Bharat in contemporary national discourse as I understand it aims at holistic development combining economic growth, social justice, institutional integrity as well as long-term sustainability. Rapid development through rampant capitalism has happened in many places across the world, but sadly they seem to lose something of their culture in the process, with South Korea being an example where

wealth has flown, but fertility has dropped, the family unit has broken down, and so forth. In this light, when we speak of development, the hard part is for it to be durable and not corrosive to the cultural bedrock of Bharat. Hence it must rest upon ethical and intellectual foundations that are culturally resonant as well as structurally sound. In this context reading the Mahabharata as a civilisational archive of Indian Knowledge Systems offers conceptual resources that extend far beyond the symbolic. It provides us a framework for thinking about leadership, governance, environmental responsibility, social cohesion and far more in fact that is beyond the scope of this paper. Let us suffice it to say that there is more depth to be mined here than there is in any other single text, regardless of the applications we are looking for.

One of the pressing challenges of modern public life is the erosion of ethical leadership, and the increasing sense people have that the 'system is rigged'. When even democratically elected authority is commonly seen as self-serving, opaque, and beyond accountability, public trust begins to fall apart. The modern political crisis consists of many parts, one of which is that this failure of belief is happening in many areas of the world as it relates to the modern democratic method of government. The state and the individual are now commonly seen as being at arms with each other, and this rift grows daily through the barrage of information consumed on algorithmic platforms like Facebook and Instagram that further alienate the individual from larger society. While deeper discussions upon the effects of such technology lie outside the scope of this paper, the Mahabharata shares guidance regarding public belief in leadership by a near-constant refrain to the idea that the legitimacy of rule derives from adherence to dharma. Rulers must act as guardians of collective welfare and think far beyond themselves, else they are not fit to rule after all. This translates in contemporary terms to governance models emphasising transparency and accountability on the part of the government, and the prioritisation of public good. The moral underpinnings of leadership emphasised throughout the epic remain central to sustainable statecraft even today.

Equally relevant in today's time of aggressive geopolitics with 'World War 3' always looming on the horizon is the recognition of diplomacy and conflict resolution as a moral endeavour. Lord Krishna's mission to the Kaurava court reflects the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and principled compromise, and the tragedies that can occur if this is not done in time. Sadly this is what we see in many modern geopolitical tragedies such as that of the Gaza Strip. While India is known across the world as a peacemaker and ethical contributor to international relations, studying the Mahabharata and finding the same ideas resonant in it gives us a more solid grounding that our foreign policy is one rooted in historic principles, and not an accident or weakness. Restraint, especially in geopolitics demonstrates strength and foresight about the connectedness of our world.

Another important pillar of the Viksit Bharat vision is environmental sustainability. One of the most pervasive ill-effects of a growth-at-all-costs attitude caused by rampant capitalism globally has been the rapid depletion of nature due to excessive exploitation, and this can result in an existential crisis for the entire planet if India is not more careful as a rapidly growing economy. But beyond the widespread environmental fears that abound today, the ecological reverence embedded in the Mahabharata gives us a moral

and intellectual grounding for models of sustainable development that is entirely Indian and ancient, meaning that care of Prakriti has always something very close to our nature as a civilisation. The Mahabharata when studied as proof and reminder of this makes it automatic for the vision of a modern Viksit Bharat to include the protection and care of nature in every way possible.

Another idea that further enriches this conceptual framework for Viksit Bharat is that of lokasangraha, inculcating notions of civic collaboration, societal cohesion as well as the overall welfare of everyone regardless of their role in society. While its definition is not explicitly laid down within the text, its spirit pervades throughout, and the notion of a righteous ruler is centred around not just the right to succession but more importantly on who protects the vulnerable multitudes better. Further, when it comes to educational reform, through the example of the Mahabharata we see that pedagogy in ancient India meant the transmission of knowledge through dialogue, stories and applied practice instead of rote instruction. In an era where contemporary educational practices are increasingly concerned with practical education, the Mahabharata offers us evidence that this is not new, and has the approval of all of our teachers of old. One of the reasons to increasingly underline the role of Indian Knowledge Systems in modern Indian education is that an education lacking in ethical and civilisational grounding can produce technical competence without a moral compass, and in an age of growing existential concerns amongst the youth worldwide, this can lead to catastrophic consequences. Fortunately, as Indians we can pull from a long tradition that can anchor our ambitions in a reservoir of wisdom that is ancient and continuous, provided we do not lose touch with our roots.

However, such ideas must be approached with restraint. It is not useful to pretend as if the Mahabharata offers us policy blueprints that we can simply copy in modern administrative terms. However, the conceptual orientations that can be pulled from it are useful regardless of how we apply them today. Proper critical study of the text through a lens of searching for Indian Knowledge Systems yields timeless principles that inform present discourse on myriad topics while leaving us flexibility for how we apply them today. If the vision of development i.e. *vikas* in Viksit Bharat is comprehensive development and not just economic growth, then such an aim finds many ideas that are useful in this ancient text. In this way the Mahabharata becomes an invaluable intellectual bequeathment to the aspiration of a developed India that is materially prosperous, socially just, and ethically anchored.

7. Methodological and Hermeneutic Challenges

The study of as great and ancient a text such as the Mahabharata is obviously beset with many challenges. This is an important acknowledgment to make since any true scholarship demands attention to detail and an awareness of the mistakes possible. Here is a brief outline of the key challenges and how I have attempted to deal with them.

The first problem is the persistent debate of whether the Mahabharata should be studied as being history or myth. The text has traditionally been seen within Indian tradition as Itihasa but also as dharmashastra, arthashastra, kamshastra, nitishastra as well as mokshashastra. I have simply chosen to focus on these *shastra* aspects of the

Mahabharata, and the one certainty I have is that this text has a nearly infinite number of things to teach us. By focusing on these lessons whether they be about governance or dharma and so on, I have sidestepped the matter of its historicity entirely and engaging in that debate has never been of interest to my study. I have simply approached the Mahabharata as a vast cultural treasure the significance of which lies in the knowledge it holds rather than in the verification of its events. The thing to note is that such a reading of the text does not require acceptance of its historicity whatsoever.

A second challenge arises from the layered and composite nature of the text itself, since the text of the Mahabharata has developed over centuries, incorporating constant interpolations and regional variations. The sum result of scholarly efforts to standardise these versions through rigorous comparative manuscript analysis has led to the current Critical Edition. For my study I have used the Kisari Mohan Ganguli translation which while historically influential is based on manuscripts available prior to the Critical Edition.

Again, the act of translation itself introduces further concerns since Sanskrit terms such as dharma and prakriti carry multiple layers of meaning that cannot possibly be captured fully in equivalent English words. The rendering of them as “law” or “duty” or “nature” is a 2D-ification of them and narrows their conceptual range by a lot. I have retained key Sanskrit terms wherever depth would be lost otherwise to avoid this problem.

The most significant concern however is that of the danger of selective, ideologically biased reading, which can cause mistakes in either direction. One can easily be turned overzealous in believing this text holds all the answers, and see the past with golden blinders on, or, as has so far happened in academia, see mere backwardness in everything ancient regardless of the context and in spite of contrary proof. It is my duty as a scholar to point out that the Mahabharata, like any text with great depth, contains many contradictory voices and unresolved tensions. As a text that teaches us through compare and contrast, it presents ethical ideals alongside their opposites, personified both ways, and timeless wisdom is shown to us alongside all too human folly. In and of itself this is not troublesome at all, and is in fact precisely what allows it to speak to the entire range of human experience. However, if one was to extract only those passages that support a certain agenda, this distorts the text’s complexity. In my opinion the responsible way of scholarly engagement is to account for ambiguity and leave room for debate. I have endeavoured to avoid oversimplification or ideological colouring, and ultimately I think that the Mahabharata’s value as a knowledge archive lies precisely in its refusal to offer simplistic certainties or sweeping statements. I believe that acknowledging these challenges head on strengthens rather than weakens the arguments I have shared in this paper.

8. Conclusion: The Mahabharata as a Living Knowledge Archive

There is no easy answer as to why the Mahabharata has endured for so long that its very origins cannot be dated accurately. This paper finds that its depth of wisdom when it comes to myriad human experiences makes it singular as well as universal. As a civilisational archive of Indian Knowledge Systems, we see many valuable ideas

embodied in the characters: foundational questions of ethical conduct on the part of rulers, respect for ecology as being sacred, and so on. These areas do not manifest themselves as separate themes but as threads of one overall vision of social order which extends beyond these themes but these are the ones I have focused on in this paper.

The principle of dharma is everywhere, it is limitlessly vast and cannot be reduced to a simple definition. It finds application in almost every context, and there is a right way to do everything. How to be a student, how to be a teacher, how to be a warrior, how to be a ruler, how to be a friend, each one of these tangents has a dharma that is willing to clarify and demonstrate the path. Through many narrative techniques including the concept of dharma sankat, the text shows rather than tells the right way ahead. This educates discretion and a general understanding that moral awakening comes out of questioning, meditation and encountering the grey rather than dogma being imparted in a rigid manner. We discussed the Sabha Parva, Yaksha Prashna and Shanti Parva as examples that represent the way of dharma as a never-ending, constant search requiring humility and situational awareness.

At the same time, the Mahabharata is highly ecological. Much of the story takes place in forest settings and continually reaffirms an interconnected cosmology. Human aspiration is shown to be subject to limits established by a larger order of which we are only a small part. This reflects an understanding of the importance of the coexistence of human society and the environment. In contemporary discussions on sustainability, such perspectives offer an originally Indian intellectual grounding rather than assuming that imported paradigms are the only ones with these insights, or worse, that these are new ideas to begin with.

This integrated vision is further supported through the political reflections that we have discussed. Through examples covered in the paper such as Vidur Neeti, Krishna's diplomacy, and the extended teachings on rajdharma, we see that the Mahabharata expresses a model of government based on accountability, welfare and restraint. Technological and economic development is not sustainable if it becomes detached from moral foundations and reverence for the environment. Lokasangraha, which is to say the overall welfare of society is directly downstream of ethical behaviour on the part of its leaders, and Duryodhana's rule demonstrates the consequences of power wielded as a personal plaything and not a constant responsibility towards the public. On the other hand, good intentions without strategy and clear execution cannot achieve anything.

To conclude, what we find in the Mahabharata is a holistic latticework of ideas where every kind of virtue reinforces the other, and clear lessons can be drawn from what it says about governance and how rulers should be. The aim of this paper has been to show that we can engage with the Mahabharata in a way that goes beyond idealising the past or forcing modern categories and judgements onto an ancient text, and that this in fact has little value for contemporary discourse. The useful thing to do instead is to realise that the traditions that have survived the passing of time hold within them deep conceptual resources that can still guide us. The Mahabharata offers a truly Indic conceptual basis for thinking about leadership, sustainability, and social justice, and the ideas it presents are incredibly relevant to the ever-evolving aspiration of a

Viksit Bharat when studied critically and responsibly.

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