



Learning Character Development from the Mahābhārata

Colonel Prof Dr N N Murthy

International Quality, Environment & Management Expert, Director, Jagruthi Kiran Consultants, Nagpur, (Industrial, Management & HRD Consultants), Limca Record Holder - 29 Degrees from 21 Universities, President, Swadeshi Academy of Sciences & Arts (SwASA), Post Doctorate Research Scholar, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur
Email: saraswatiputhra@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Mahābhārata is an epic narrative of the thinking, Kurukshetra War and the fates of the Kaurava and the Pāṇḍava princes. The Mahābhārata contains much philosophical and devotional material, such as a discussion of the four "goals of life". The paper examines the role of Mahābhārata as an eternal source book for character building in the face of contemporary social, professional and personal dilemmas. The key characters and situations---bunched as Dharma and moral dilemma in Yudhiṣṭhira, leadership and accountability in Arjuna illustrated a values framework including trustworthiness, willpower, compassion, responsibility, critical inquiry. The paper argues that the epic does not propose moral absolutes but rather promotes character development, critical flexibility, and ethical reflection in ambiguous situations. While integrating the lessons from the Mahābhārata to contemporary requirements such as ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, social harmony and spiritual growth, this research vindicates its lasting relevance in becoming a framework of an integrated character education. The results indicate that the use of ethical and philosophical insights from the Mahābhārata could be beneficial for character developmental practices, in preparation of responsible and value-based



1. Introduction

Education in the modern world is experiencing a severe crisis in character development values. Materialism, environmental degradation, social strife and decadence have led to an urgent necessity of values-related and sustainable education, this should lead to character development. It will no longer be sufficient to solve such global problems with academic knowledge. The pre-historic writings like the *Mahābhārata* can provide the wisdom of how to lead an ethical life, discipline oneself and be compassionate as well as responsible towards society with a good character development of younger generation. This paper thus examines the Mahabharata as a tool of native education that propagates the principles of sustainability, character building, and moral education such that it is quite applicable in modern education.

2. Objectives of the Study

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

- To analyze Mahabharata as a native system of education that combines moral, social, and spiritual studies.
- To determine the importance of the Mahabharata in character development and moral education and its applicability to modern value-based education.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Ahmed (2020) examined digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach in multilingual learning classrooms and discovered that narrative-based instruction was an effective way of increasing student engagement, cultural sensitivity, and moral insights. The paper has pointed out that storytelling was not only a means of communication but also a potent means of passing values and ethical views to a classroom of a culturally diverse classroom. Ahmed was able to conclude that emotional connectivity of the learners to stories leads to their enhanced moral awareness. This discovery is very applicable to the current research because the Mahabharata also employs the use of narrative to deliver moral messages and foster character development and character growth.

3.2 Bhat and Javaid (2024) concentrated on its philosophical background, approaches to teaching, and the real practice. They revealed that in ancient India, education was based on moral discipline, spiritual



development, and social responsibility in addition to intellectual education that should lead to character development. They expounded that in the gurukula system the form of imparting knowledge was based on oral traditions, storytelling, dialogue, and experience. The authors added further that many of the epics like Mahabharata were referred to as important educational literature which is in favor of the argument that the epic served as an indigenous pedagogical instrument to build character and its development.

4. Character Development through Epic Narratives

Among the most valuable contributions to the education the Mahābhārata made was the realistic and all-rounded image of human character. We are not told about perfect and morally upright heroes in the epic. Instead, it portrays individuals that experience internal struggles such as doubt, pride, fear, anger, jealousy, loyalty and compassion. These emotional and moral predicaments make the characters recognizable and human. Mahabharata in its decision and acts teaches that character is not a thing that an individual is born with but rather a process which is accumulated over time through experience, thinking and ethical deeds.

The epic serves as a reflection where younger generation will be able to look at their behavior. Seeing the errors, regrets and changes of the characters, the people are made to think of their moral choices. This type of education is not based on strict rules and punishments. Rather, moral values are developed with the help of stories, which demonstrate how actions can result in consequences, how improper choices can cause pain, and how moral decisions can help to become an inside world and bring peace to the society. By so doing, the Mahabharata also favors a self-educational process and moral introspection that is a distinguishing aspect of native education for character development.

This principle of self-development is stated in one of the main verses of the Bhagavad Gita:

उद्धरेदात्मनाऽत्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत्।

आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥

*uddhared ātmanātmānaṁ nātmānam avasādayet
ātmaiva hyātmāno bandhur ātmaiva ripur ātmanah*

(Bhagavad Gītā 6.5)

Meaning: Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self.



The message that this śloka imparts is that people have to raise themselves by using self-discipline, awareness, and good effort. It highlights the fact that an individual is his/her best friend and also his/her best enemy. This message brings out the issue of individual accountability in shaping character. Development of morality is not a matter of the external control but the inner awareness and conscious effort. The Mahabharata, therefore, introduces character development as a kind of lifelong learning which is based on self-reflection and the ethical way of life.

5. Character as a Moral Learning Process

The Mahabharata describes the development of personalities as a process that is acquired during life and not necessarily good in nature. The epic proves that individuals grow with assistance of inner struggle, self-doubt, failure and contemplations. The character is not defined, but it is shaped as time moves on the character reaction to moral matters. This view changes the perspective on the moral perfection and dwells upon the self-perpetual self-improvement.

The characters in the epic are also at the place where they can find themselves in the scenario where there are no choice and no consequence at all. These morality problems require them to be critical thinkers who make good choices and live with the outcomes of their actions. This means that they will be able to become intelligent and they will become emotionally stable. This is a form of experiential learning that is deeply entrenched in indigenous learning whereby knowing is achieved by experience in life, through stories and contemplation rather than memorization.

It is a model of learning that leads to critical thinking, moral thinking, and emotional intelligence. The students are tested to think about the consequences of a course of action and learn to put themselves in the position of others by knowing of the different opinions. This approach assists in the encouraging of the holistic approach to education since it addresses the intellectual, emotional and ethical growth.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* reinforces this philosophy:

श्रद्धावान् लभते ज्ञानं तत्परः संयतेन्द्रियः ।

ज्ञानं लब्ध्वा परां शान्तिमचिरेणाधिगच्छति ॥ 39॥

*śhraddhāvānllabhate jñānaṁ tat-parahḥ sanyatendriyaḥ
jñānaṁ labdhvā parāṁ śhāntim achireṇādhigachchhati*



Meaning: Those whose faith is deep and who have practiced controlling their mind and senses attain divine knowledge. Through such transcendental knowledge, they quickly attain everlasting supreme peace.

This verse describes that one can attain wisdom by having faith, commitment, and discipline. It implies that in order to learn, one must be committed and have control over his or her desires. Educationally speaking this demonstrates that character is not developed immediately; rather the result of long moral practice, thought, and self-reflection.

Therefore, the Mahabharata presents a dynamic character education model, in which the development is based on constant learning, accountability, and self-awareness, these leads to character development.

5.1 Yudhiṣṭhira: Truth, Justice, and Moral Conflict

The eldest of the Pancha Pandavas, Yudhiṣṭhira, is the Mahabharata figure who symbolizes the idea of satya (truth) and dharma (righteous conduct). He is several times mentioned as Dharmaraj, that is, the king who governs by the law of morality. In contrast to most heroes of the epic who do something because of their physical power or desire, Yudhiṣṭhira has his identity which is based on moral thought, righteousness, and honesty. His biography demonstrates the idea that the leadership should be based on moral responsibility and not power or conquest.



Picture: Yudhiṣṭhira answering during Yaksha Prasna



But the Mahabharata does not depict Yudhiṣṭhira as a morally perfect person. One of the most tragic and complicated moments in the epic is his involvement in the dice game. Although he knows that gambling is destructive, he takes the risk because the society pressures him to do it, he is bound to the traditions of the royalty, and because he does not want to be viewed as a disgraced person. Yudhiṣṭhira is well aware of the consequences, if he loses the game. But he was fully following the *Raja Dharma* as it was the rule of that time, if some other King invite him for dice game, one should not refuse it. The consequences of this decision are devastating: his kingdom is lost, his brothers have been turned into slaves, and Draupadī has been humiliated in public. This episode shows that even the good people are not always good when moral reasoning is obscured by the social pressure and emotional vulnerability.

The agony of Yudhiṣṭhira is not defeated. Rather, it becomes a point of departure of his moral development. He feels very remorseful and inquisitive and wonders whether he has learned dharma. His self-conflicting teaches, that one cannot fail morally, but the dawn of moral becoming, of ethical conscience. Yudhiṣṭhira carries himself with humility and responsibility by admitting that he has made an error- something that is needed when being a real leader.

The moral lesson that was connected with his personality is the one that is vivid in the teaching that follows:

सत्यं वद धर्मं चर।

(Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva)

Meaning: Having taught the Vedas, the Guru enjoins the pupils: ‘Speak the truth, do your duty. This quote is from Taittiriya Upanishad – Siksha Valli – 1-11-1.

This quote aids in emphasizing the fact that truth and righteousness should be the guides towards all areas of life. It suggests that moral values do not constitute idealistic ideas but lifetime loyalty. The life of Yudhiṣṭhira is just one example to show that the one must be brave to be capable of exercising the truth and justice even in the situations when even the social systems are against the righteousness.

In addition, the pilgrimage of Yudhiṣṭhira shows that dharma is not some sort of a guide but a living value, which can be contemplated and requires moral sensitivity. His character is what causes the learner to question the practice which is immoral and accept responsibility and seek the uprightness of ethics even after the failure. Mahabharata tells us through a lesson that is taught by Yudhiṣṭhira that



righteousness is knowing what one is, resolute will and willingness to evolve through the righteous struggle.

5.2 Arjuna: Doubt, Learning, and Courage

The Mahabharata centers with Arjuna in both emotional and philosophical sense. His indecisiveness in the battle field of Kurukshetra is not only his personal crisis but it is the element of the human experience. He is left with a choice of whether to be a fighter or his emotional attachment to his family, his Gurus, teachers, and his friends who are on the other side. It is a duty war and a heart war, a sanity and sympathy, fear and bravery, and that is what this inner struggle is all about. The epic brings to light the place of moral confusions not as a weakness of Arjuna but a normal process in the way of knowledge.

The fact that Arjuna chooses to put down his weapons and decline to go into battle depicts how sensitive he is ethically. He wonders what it means to win, what power is and what is the outcome of violence. His suspicions show that moral life is not easy, as decisions are seldom straightforward and happy. Arjuna does not repress these feelings, but instead, he shares them with Krisna making his crisis a learning experience.



AI Picture: Arjuna at War Field

The conversations between Krasna and Arjuna turn out to be one of the largest examples of reflective and



dialogical learning in literature. Krasna does not coerce Arjuna to take any action, but he instructs him using logic, moral values and wisdom. This mode of teaching promotes critical thinking and self-awareness, as well as moral responsibility some of the objectives of indigenous education.

This life- changing experience of Arjuna has been expressed in the verse:

अर्जुन उवाच |

नष्टो मोहः स्मृतिर्लब्धा त्वत्प्रसादान्मयाच्युत |

स्थितोऽस्मि गतसन्देहः करिष्ये वचनं तव || 73||

arjuna uvācha

naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā tvat-prasādān mayāchyuta

sthito 'smi gata-sandehaḥ kariṣhye vachanam tava

(Bhagavad Gītā 18.73)

Meaning: Arjun said: O Infallible One, by Your grace my illusion has been dispelled, and I am situated in knowledge. I am now free from doubts, and I shall act according to Your instructions.

This saying means that the confusion that Arjuna is facing in past and his sanity has come back. It is a representation of the triumph of reflective learning where the realization of knowledge is not possible through intimidation or authoritative influences and command but through insight and self-awareness.

Lastly, the bravery of Arjuna is not the mindless heroism that it is but one that is well-informed and morally upright. He is doing it not out of anger or the need to win but out of duty, based on knowledge. His adventure teaches that real bravery is nurtured by wisdom, contemplation and good character. The Mahabharata, via Arjuna, introduces learning as a process of making change, which comes by doubting to becoming knowledgeable and by being afraid to being responsible.

6. Conclusion

The *Mahābhārata* stands as a timeless repository of wisdom on character development, offering insights that transcend historical and cultural boundaries. Through its complex narratives and multifaceted



characters, the epic illustrates that character is shaped not merely by ideals but by choices made in moments of moral conflict and uncertainty. The lives of its protagonists reveal enduring values such as righteousness (*dharma*), self-control, compassion, resilience, and accountability, while also cautioning against traits like ego, greed, and moral compromise. Rather than presenting simplistic notions of good and evil, the *Mahābhārata* encourages reflective thinking and ethical discernment, acknowledging the complexities of human behavior and social responsibility for character development.

In the context of contemporary life—marked by rapid change, ethical challenges, and emotional pressures—the teachings of the *Mahābhārata* remain profoundly relevant. Its emphasis on inner discipline, responsible leadership, and harmonious coexistence provides a valuable framework for personal growth and social well-being. By integrating the epic’s moral and philosophical insights into modern education and character-building initiatives, individuals can develop a balanced personality grounded in values while remaining adaptable to changing realities. Thus, learning character building and development from the *Mahābhārata* not only preserves cultural heritage but also contributes meaningfully to the formation of ethical, thoughtful, and socially responsible individuals in today’s world.

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