



## Distance Education in Ancient India with Reference to the *Mahābhārata*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of distance education in ancient India with special reference to the Mahābhārata, demonstrating that the foundational principles of non-contact learning were deeply embedded in early Indian pedagogical traditions. While distance education is often viewed as a modern innovation enabled by digital technology. The study argues that its essential characteristics—such as learner autonomy, mediated instruction, and knowledge dissemination across space and time—are evident in the narrative and philosophical structure of the epic. The paper analyzes key episodes involving characters such as **Sañjaya**, **Ekalavya**, and along with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā. These examples illustrate diverse models of indirect learning, including self-directed education, real-time remote communication, dialogic instruction, and multi-generational transmission of knowledge. The study highlights how these models functioned effectively without the need for



continuous physical proximity between teacher and learner. By drawing conceptual parallels between ancient practices and contemporary e-learning systems, the paper underscores the continuity of educational philosophy from oral and narrative traditions to modern digital platforms. It further reflects on issues of accessibility, ethics, and inclusivity embedded within these narratives. Ultimately, the paper positions the *Mahābhārata* as a rich source for understanding the historical evolution of distance education and its enduring relevance in the present educational landscape.

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## 1. Introduction

Education in ancient India was not confined to formal institutional settings such as *Gurukulas* or *Ashrams*, nor was it restricted by geographical proximity between teacher and learner. Instead, it functioned through diverse pedagogical modes including oral transmission, narrative instruction, self-study (*Svādhyāya*), and guidance received through messengers, symbolic discourse, and reflective contemplation. These methods indicate the presence of an early form of what may be described, in modern terms, as distance education.

The Mahabharata, one of the most significant epics of ancient India, provides extensive evidence of such non-traditional educational practices. Knowledge transmission in the epic frequently occurs across spatial, temporal, and situational distances—through dialogues, divine revelation, moral instruction during crises, and philosophical discourses delivered outside conventional classroom settings. This study seeks to examine the Mahabharata as a foundational text illustrating the principles, methods, and objectives of distance education in ancient India.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Modern scholarship on distance education largely focuses on contemporary technological frameworks, often overlooking its philosophical and historical antecedents. While ancient Indian education has been studied extensively, limited attention has been given to the Mahabharata as a text that reflects structured forms of learning independent of physical proximity. This research addresses the gap by exploring how the Mahabharata embodies pedagogical practices analogous to Online Distance Learning (ODL) and how these practices align with the broader educational philosophy of ancient India.



### 3. Review of Literature

Scholars such as S Radhakrishnan, A S Altekar, and R K Mookerji have examined ancient Indian education systems, emphasizing *Gurukula* traditions and oral pedagogy. Studies on the Mahabharata by scholars like V S Sukthankar, Radhakrishnan, and Wendy Doniger have explored its philosophical, ethical, and narrative dimensions.

However, there is a notable lack of focused research connecting the Mahabharata with theories of distance education, learner autonomy, and non-formal pedagogy. This study aims to bridge that gap through an interdisciplinary approach.

### 4. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the concept and scope of education in ancient India beyond institutional frameworks.
2. To identify forms of distance or non-proximate learning reflected in the Mahabharata.
3. To analyse pedagogical methods such as dialogue, narration, divine instruction, and self-reflective learning in the epic.

### 5. Research Methodology

The study will adopt a **qualitative, analytical, and interpretative methodology**, involving:

- **Textual analysis** of critical editions and translations of the Mahabharata
- **Comparative analysis** with modern theories of distance education and educational psychology

### 6. Significance of the Study

This research contributes to:

- Recognition of the Mahabharata as an educational and pedagogical text
- Expansion of the historical foundations of distance education
- Integration of indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary educational discourse

The study highlights how ancient Indian wisdom offers valuable insights into learner-centered education, lifelong learning, and self-directed knowledge acquisition.

## 7. Concept of Education & Distance Education in Ancient India

Education in ancient India was not confined to formal classrooms or physical proximity between teacher and student. Knowledge transmission occurred through **oral instruction, memorization, self-study (Svādhyāya), contemplation, and disciplined practice**, allowing learners to acquire wisdom even in the absence of continuous face-to-face interaction. This system reflects early forms of what can be understood today as **online or distance education (ODL)**.

Although the term *distance education* is modern, its **functional equivalents** existed in ancient India:

- **Guru–Śiṣhya Paramparā**: Students often lived away from the guru after initial training and continued learning through prescribed texts and practices.
- **Oral Transmission (Śruti and Smṛiti)**: Knowledge was preserved and transmitted across generations without written materials, enabling learning across time and space.
- **Svādhyāya (Self-learning)**: Learners were encouraged to independently study sacred texts after receiving foundational guidance.
- **Messenger-based Instruction**: Teachings were conveyed through emissaries, bards, and sages.
- **Divine or Visionary Instruction**: Knowledge was imparted through revelation or divine communication, transcending physical distance.

**Picture:** Ancient Guru–Śiṣhya Paramparā



## 8. Discussion and Findings



## 8.1 Distance Education in the *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata* consists several illustrative examples of indirect and distance-based learning:

### a) Sañjaya and Dhṛitarāṣṭra

One of the most prominent examples is **Sañjaya narrating the Kurukṣetra war to King Dhṛitarāṣṭra**. Through divine vision granted by sage Vyāsa, Sañjaya was able to *see and describe events occurring miles away in real time*. This episode symbolizes:

- Remote transmission of information
- Learning through mediated communication
- Knowledge without physical presence

This can be viewed as an ancient metaphor for **distance learning and live instruction**.

### b) Bhagavad Gītā as Universal Instruction

Although the *Bhagavad Gītā* is delivered directly to Arjuna, its **intended audience extends far beyond the battlefield**. The dialogue:

- Serves learners across generations
- Enables self-study without a teacher's physical presence
- Functions as a timeless instructional text

Thus, the Gītā represents **asynchronous distance education**, where learners engage with teachings independently.

### c) Ekalavya and Self-directed Learning

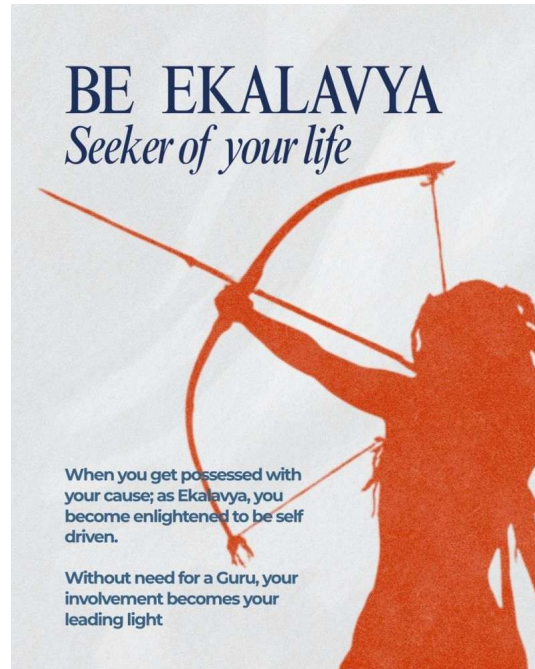
Ekalavya learns archery by **constructing a symbolic image of Guru Droṇācārya** and practicing independently. Despite lacking direct instruction, he achieves mastery through:

- Observation
- Dedication



- Self-discipline

This is a strong example of **self-learning without direct teacher contact**, aligning closely with modern distance education principles.



**Picture:** Ekalavya Self Learner

#### d) Transmission of Knowledge through Narration

The *Mahābhārata* itself is transmitted through a **multi-layered narrative structure**:

- Vyāsa → Vaiśampāyana → Janamejaya
- Ugrasravas Sauti → sages at Naimiśāranya

This structure illustrates **knowledge dissemination across space, time, and audiences**, reinforcing the idea of indirect education.

#### **Comparative Table:** Ancient Distance Learning & Modern E-Learning Models

<b>Mahābhārata Model</b>	<b>Description in the Epic</b>	<b>Core Educational Features</b>	<b>Modern E-Learning Equivalent</b>	<b>Key Similarities</b>



<b>Sañjaya Model (Remote Narration)</b>	Narrates war live to <b>Dhṛitarāṣṭra</b> using divine vision	Real-time transmission, mediated instruction	Live Online Classes (Zoom, Google Meet)	Synchronous Learning, Real-Time Engagement
<b>Bhagavad Gītā Model (Text-based learning)</b>	Teachings of <b>Krishna</b> preserved for all learners	Universal Access, Reflective Study	Recorded Lectures, E-Books, LMS Content	Asynchronous Learning, Repeatability
<b>Ekalavya Model (Self-learning)</b>	Learns archery independently using a clay image of <b>Droṇāchārya</b>	Self-discipline, autonomy, practice-based mastery	MOOCs (Ex: Coursera, SWAYAM), Self-Paced Courses	Learner Autonomy, Minimal Instructor Interaction

### 8.2. Pedagogical Features Comparable to Distance Education

Ancient Indian education, as reflected in the *Mahābhārata*, shows several characteristics similar to modern distance education:

- Learner autonomy
- Emphasis on moral and experiential learning
- Use of narrative and dialogue
- Teacher as guide rather than constant instructor
- Knowledge accessible beyond geographical limitations

### 8.3. Relevance to Modern Distance Education

The educational practices depicted in the *Mahābhārata* highlight that:

- Learning need not be limited by physical distance
- Ethical and philosophical education can be effectively transmitted indirectly
- Self-discipline and motivation are central to successful learning



These principles resonate strongly with **contemporary online and distance learning systems**.

## 9. Conclusion

Distance education in ancient India, as evidenced by the *Mahābhārata*, was deeply rooted in **self-learning, mediated instruction, and timeless textual transmission**. Though technologically different, its philosophical foundations parallel modern distance education, emphasizing accessibility, continuity of knowledge, and learner responsibility.

It is clearly establishing that distance education is not merely a modern innovation but has deep roots in ancient Indian intellectual traditions. By examining the Mahabharata as a pedagogical text, the research aims to demonstrate how education transcended physical boundaries, fostering reflective, ethical, and holistic learning—principles that remain relevant in contemporary educational systems.

This study clearly demonstrates that distance education in India is deeply rooted in ancient educational philosophy. By analysing the Mahabharata through the lens of Online Distance Learning (ODL) principles, the research establishes a meaningful continuity between traditional knowledge systems and modern distance learning frameworks.

The *Mahābhārata* demonstrates that the **principles of distance education—accessibility, autonomy, and continuity—are timeless**, even though the **medium has evolved from oral and symbolic forms to digital platforms**.

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