

**LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE MAHABHARATA: AN INDIAN
KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP
THEORIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOUR**

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Abstract

The contemporary organizational environment is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), requiring leadership approaches that combine ethics, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and strategic thinking. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) provide a rich source of leadership wisdom rooted in philosophy, ethics, and human behaviour. Among ancient Indian texts, the *Mahabharata* offers profound insights into governance, conflict management, organizational conduct, and leadership. This paper analyses leadership lessons from the *Mahabharata* through the lens of contemporary leadership theories in Organizational Behaviour. Using a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the study examines dimensions such as ethical leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, emotional intelligence, and strategic leadership through the characters of Krishna, Yudhishtira, Bhishma, Karna, Vidura, and Duryodhana. The paper argues that the *Mahabharata* presents an integrated leadership framework grounded in *dharma* (ethical duty), self-awareness, emotional regulation, strategic wisdom, and collective welfare. The findings suggest that ancient Indian wisdom can significantly enrich management education and leadership development programmes.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Mahabharata, Leadership, Organizational Behaviour, Dharma, Ethical Leadership, Transformational Leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership is one of the most widely studied themes in management and Organizational Behaviour. Modern organizations increasingly seek leadership models that balance productivity with ethics, sustainability, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility. While Western leadership theories such as Transformational Leadership, Situational Leadership, and Servant Leadership dominate management education, increasing attention is being directed toward indigenous and culturally rooted leadership traditions.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into higher education. Ancient Indian epics are now viewed not only as literary or religious texts but also as valuable repositories of governance, ethics, psychology, and leadership principles. Among these texts, the *Mahabharata* occupies a unique place due to its multidimensional portrayal of human behaviour, ethical dilemmas, strategic conflict, and decision-making under uncertainty.

Traditionally attributed to Vyasa, the *Mahabharata* contains extensive discussions on governance, diplomacy, morality, and organizational conduct. The *Bhagavad Gita*, embedded within the epic, has independently influenced leadership thought across the world. Unlike idealized portrayals of leadership, the *Mahabharata* presents leaders with strengths, weaknesses, and moral conflicts. This realism makes it particularly relevant to modern Organizational Behaviour studies.

This paper critically analyses leadership lessons from the *Mahabharata* and correlates them with contemporary leadership theories taught in management programmes.

2. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on secondary sources. The analysis relies on the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*, Scholarly articles on Indian Knowledge Systems and leadership and contemporary management and Organizational Behaviour literature

A thematic approach has been used to interpret important incidents and characters from the epic through the lens of Ethical Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Situational Leadership, Emotional Intelligence Theory and Strategic Leadership Theory

3. Leadership Lessons from the Mahabharata

3.1 Ethical Leadership: Yudhishtira and Dharma

One of the foundational concepts in the *Mahabharata* is *dharma*, representing righteousness, justice, and ethical responsibility. Yudhishtira symbolizes ethical leadership through his commitment to truth, fairness, and moral conduct.

The famous principle:

“धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः”

(*Dharmo rakshati rakshitah*)

means “Dharma protects those who protect dharma.”

Yudhishtira’s leadership aligns closely with Ethical Leadership Theory and Authentic Leadership. His conduct demonstrates transparency, accountability, and integrity, which are essential for sustainable organizational governance.

However, the *Mahabharata* also critiques excessive idealism. Yudhishtira’s rigid moral approach occasionally resulted in strategic vulnerability. Thus, the epic suggests that ethics should be balanced with practical wisdom and situational awareness.

The leadership principles derived from the *Mahabharata* have significant organizational applications in the contemporary corporate environment. Ethical leadership promotes strong corporate governance by encouraging fairness, accountability, and integrity in managerial practices. Transparent decision-making helps organizations build credibility and reduce conflicts by ensuring openness and clarity in policies and actions. Such ethical and transparent practices strengthen stakeholder trust among employees, customers, investors, and society at

large. Furthermore, the emphasis on *dharma* in leadership encourages responsible leadership, where leaders prioritize long-term organizational welfare, social responsibility, and sustainable development over short-term personal gains.

3.2 Transformational Leadership: Krishna as Visionary Leader

Lord Krishna represents one of the finest examples of transformational and strategic leadership. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna motivates a psychologically distressed Arjuna by providing purpose, vision, and emotional clarity.

Krishna states:

“कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन”

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन

The verse emphasizes action without attachment to outcomes and reflects intrinsic motivation and psychological resilience.

Krishna demonstrates the major dimensions of Transformational Leadership, viz. Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation, Individualized consideration, Idealized influence. His leadership style also reflects emotional intelligence through empathy, persuasion, and situational awareness.

Effective leadership plays a crucial role in managing organizational change by guiding employees through uncertainty and helping them adapt to new situations. Transformational leadership also enhances employee motivation by inspiring individuals with a clear sense of purpose and commitment toward organizational goals. During periods of crisis, leaders must demonstrate calmness, strategic thinking, and effective communication, all of which are reflected in Krishna's guidance to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In addition, leadership in the epic emphasizes mentoring and coaching, where experienced leaders support the personal and professional growth of followers. The concept of visionary leadership is equally significant, as successful leaders must provide long-term direction, inspire confidence, and align individual efforts with the broader mission of the organization.

3.3 Strategic Leadership and Crisis Management

The *Mahabharata* is fundamentally a study of leadership under crisis conditions. Krishna's diplomatic efforts before the Kurukshetra war illustrate negotiation, alliance management, and conflict resolution.

The epic highlights Long-term thinking, Strategic planning, Resource optimization, Decision-making under uncertainty and Stakeholder management

These principles correspond closely with Strategic Leadership Theory and modern crisis management frameworks. In today's volatile business environment, leaders managing organizational conflicts, technological disruptions, and global uncertainties require similar strategic adaptability.

3.4 Servant Leadership: Bhishma's Commitment

Bhishma exemplifies sacrifice, service, and institutional commitment. He renounced personal ambitions for the stability of the kingdom and the welfare of the dynasty.

His leadership reflects Selflessness, Duty orientation, Organizational loyalty, Stewardship and Mentorship.

These qualities resemble Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory.

However, the *Mahabharata* also critiques passive loyalty. Bhishma's silence during Draupadi's humiliation demonstrates the dangers of remaining silent in the face of unethical conduct. This lesson remains highly relevant in modern corporate governance failures where leaders fail to intervene against injustice.

3.5 Emotional Intelligence and Self-Leadership: Arjuna's Crisis

At the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna experiences anxiety, emotional conflict, and decision paralysis. Krishna guides him toward self-awareness, emotional regulation, and clarity of purpose.

This reflects the modern concept of Emotional Intelligence popularized by Daniel Goleman. Leadership in the *Mahabharata* begins with mastery over oneself before leading others.

Modern managers frequently face stress, burnout, and ethical dilemmas. Emotional intelligence therefore becomes essential for leadership effectiveness, employee relations, and decision-making.

3.6 Negative Leadership Lessons: Duryodhana and Toxic Leadership

The *Mahabharata* also presents examples of destructive leadership. Duryodhana symbolizes arrogance, ego-centricity, insecurity, and unethical ambition.

A famous verse attributed to him states:

“जानामि धर्मं न च मे प्रवृत्तिः ।
जानाम्यधर्मं न च मे निवृत्तिः ॥”

Translation:

“I know what is right, yet I cannot follow it.

I know what is wrong, yet I cannot desist from it.” Duryodhana's leadership reflects toxic leadership and ethical blindness. His failures illustrate Ego-driven decision-making, Inability to accept feedback, Poor stakeholder management and Organizational toxicity

Modern corporate scandals often emerge from similar patterns of excessive power concentration and ethical erosion.

3.7 Karna and the Ethics of Loyalty

Karna represents competence, resilience, and loyalty. Despite understanding Duryodhana's unethical actions, he continued to support him due to gratitude and personal obligation.

Karna's dilemma raises several important questions related to leadership and organizational ethics. His character illustrates the conflict between personal loyalty and moral responsibility, particularly when loyalty is directed toward an unethical cause. The *Mahabharata* compels leaders to reflect on whether loyalty should ever override ethical principles and whether professional competence can justify alignment with unethical practices. Karna's life also highlights the responsibility of leaders to uphold moral truth, even when doing so involves personal sacrifice or difficult decisions. His example demonstrates that effective leadership requires not only talent and commitment but also ethical discernment, moral courage, and the ability to distinguish between gratitude and righteousness in organizational decision-making.

3.8 Vidura and Advisory Leadership

Vidura represents wisdom-based advisory leadership. Through *Vidura Niti*, he consistently advocates ethical governance, prudence, and strategic foresight.

His leadership style reflects Participative leadership, Knowledge leadership, Ethical advisory roles, Strategic governance

Modern organizations similarly emphasize the role of independent directors, governance committees, and ethical advisory systems.

4. Discussion

Thus, the *Mahabharata* presents leadership as multidimensional rather than simplistic. Unlike purely performance-oriented leadership models, it integrates ethics, emotional maturity, spirituality, strategic thinking, and social responsibility.

Several major insights emerge:

1. Leadership is contextual and situational.
2. Ethics and strategy must coexist.
3. Self-mastery is essential for effective leadership.
4. Collective welfare should prevail over individual ego.
5. Indigenous leadership models have strong contemporary relevance.

The epic therefore provides a holistic leadership framework capable of complementing dominant Western management paradigms.

5. Implications for Management Education

Integrating Mahabharata-based leadership studies into management curricula can:

- Enhance ethical sensitivity among managers
- Improve emotional intelligence and reflective thinking
- Promote culturally rooted management education
- Encourage holistic leadership development

- Strengthen value-based organizational culture

Business schools may incorporate Indian Knowledge Systems into courses like Organizational Behaviour, Business Ethics, Leadership Studies, Human Resource Management and Corporate Governance

Case-based pedagogies derived from the *Mahabharata* can significantly enrich experiential learning and leadership training.

6. Conclusion

The *Mahabharata* is not merely an ancient epic but a timeless leadership text offering profound insights into governance, ethics, emotional intelligence, and organizational behaviour. Through characters such as Krishna, Yudhishtira, Bhishma, Karna, Vidura, and Duryodhana, the epic presents diverse leadership paradigms that remain highly relevant in contemporary organizations.

The *Mahabharata* anticipates several modern leadership theories including transformational leadership, servant leadership, ethical leadership, and emotional intelligence. Within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, it provides a culturally grounded and philosophically rich model of leadership capable of complementing Western management approaches.

As management education increasingly seeks ethical, sustainable, and holistic leadership frameworks, the integration of Mahabharata-based insights can significantly contribute to leadership development in the twenty-first century.

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