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## The Mahabharata as a Pedagogical Text: The Gurukul System, Experiential Learning, and their significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education

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### ABSTRACT

The Indian old epic of Mahabharata has provided a deep insight into education that goes beyond mythical story to the high level of pedagogical vision that would be applicable in modern education. The key element of this vision is the Gurukul system, which is a residential based, mentor-based system of learning, in which the guru-sisya (teacher-student) relationship is fundamental, wherein students reside, serve and learn with their guru, integrating both intellectual, ethical and experiential aspects of education. This model put emphasis on immersive learning, moral growth, and self-discipline instead of memorisation of information and was in line with the modern paradigms of experiential and holistic education .

Inscribed in the Mahabharata and other works such as the Bhagavad Gita are Sanskrit shlokas urging the importance of humility towards the teacher and of service and inquiry in the knowledge process, such as Bhagavad Gita (4.34) “Tadviddhi Praanipata Tunena Pariprasnena Sevaya” which means Learn through humility service, through questioning, and through inquiry. The paper uses textual analysis and comparative analysis based on Sanskrit verses, extant studies on Gurukul pedagogy, and contemporary educational theory, to find similarities between ancient pedagogical approaches and current 21st century learning models like personalized mentoring, moral education, and learning by experience. The paper notes that a combination of these classical pedagogical concepts in the contemporary curriculum can enhance learning experiences, character education, and higher learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Gurukul system, experiential learning, guru-student pedagogy, holistic education, Bhagavad Gita.

### Introduction

The Indian education was not an institutional and mechanical process, meant to transfer information, but it was conceived as a form of life, which was oriented to the holistic development of the individual. Knowledge (vidyata) could not be taken out of ethics (dharma), discipline and social responsibility. Learning was very interwoven in the life experience, the moral and the spiritual enquiry. The Gurukul system is one of the traditional systems of education, in comparison with other systems, which has been a unique model of pedagogy which combined intellectual education with the character building, practical skills and philosophical thinking.

Here the Mahabharata, one of the greatest and the most complicated Sanskrit epics, comes out not only as a piece of literature or a religious work but as an entire repository of pedagogy. The epic, with all its stories, conversations, and philosophic speeches, offers a subtle concept of learning via experience, moral investigation, and guidance by a teacher. The descriptions of the Gurukul of Drona where the pandavas and the kauravas are educated and the Krishna-Arjuna dialog in the bhagavad gita are two representations of the old Indian ideals of education in practice.

Excessive standardization, the decrease in the ethical orientation, and the lack of involvement in the experiential learning have become major educational issues in the contemporary world. In this regard, it will be very pertinent to revert to the educational philosophy underlying the Mahabharata. This paper examines the ways in which the Gurukul system and experiential pedagogy as reflected in the Mahabharata are relevant to the contemporary educational philosophy and the ways in which these traditional values could be of value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education, which is becoming more focused on flexibility, moral basis, learner activity, and holistic growth.

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 The Gurukul System in Ancient India

The Gurukul system constituted a holistic, residential, and value-oriented mode of education in ancient India, wherein students (sisyas) resided with their teacher (guru) and participated actively in all aspects of daily life. Education was not restricted to formal instruction but extended to agricultural work, household responsibilities, ritual practices, physical training, and community interaction, creating an immersive learning environment (Altekar, 1944; Sharma, 2003). This residential structure

enabled the seamless integration of cognitive learning with moral, physical, emotional, and spiritual development.

Scholars argue that the primary objective of the Gurukul system was the formation of complete human beings, rather than merely producing technically skilled individuals (Mukerji, 2018). Knowledge (vidya) was inseparable from ethics (dharma), self-discipline, humility, and social responsibility. The emphasis on guru-seva (service to the teacher) was pedagogical in nature; it functioned as a means of cultivating discipline, respect, cooperation, and social consciousness among learners (Radhakrishnan, 1951). Learning was continuous, informal, and dialogic, unfolding through observation, participation, and reflection rather than through standardized examinations.

Recent studies revisiting indigenous education systems highlight that Gurukul pedagogy anticipated many principles of modern experiential and holistic education, such as learning-by-doing, moral education, and community-based learning (Kumar & Prakash, 2020; Mishra, 2022). In contrast to examination-driven modern systems, the Gurukul emphasized internalization of values through lived experience, enabling learners to integrate knowledge with conduct. Contemporary scholars increasingly recognize the relevance of this system in addressing present-day educational challenges such as ethical erosion, learner disengagement, and over-standardization (Singh, 2021).

## **2.2 Guru–śiṣya Parampara**

At the heart of the Gurukul system lay the guru–śiṣya parampara, a deeply personal and transformative teacher–student relationship that defined ancient Indian pedagogy. The guru was not merely a transmitter of information but a mentor, moral exemplar, and spiritual guide, entrusted with the responsibility of shaping the learner’s character, intellect, and worldview (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Dasgupta, 2009). Education was individualized, responsive to the learner’s aptitude (*adhikāra*), temperament, and stage of moral development.

Educational historians note that this model fostered personalized and learner-centric education, long before such approaches gained prominence in contemporary pedagogy (Sharma, 2003). The relationship emphasized trust, discipline, dialogue, and ethical accountability, enabling students to engage critically with knowledge while remaining anchored in moral values. Unlike impersonal institutional systems, the guru–śiṣya tradition was relational and dialogical, allowing learning to emerge through sustained interaction and guidance (Mukerji, 2018).

Recent educational research draws parallels between the guru–śiṣya model and modern mentoring and coaching frameworks, which stress individualized support, formative feedback, and holistic learner development (Noddings, 2013; Singh & Verma, 2020). Scholars argue that reviving elements of this tradition particularly mentorship and moral guidance can enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning in contemporary educational settings (Kumar, 2021).

## **2.3 Mahabharata and Educational Themes**

The Mahabharata embeds a rich and nuanced educational philosophy within its narrative structure, portraying learning as a lifelong moral, intellectual, and experiential journey. Far from being a mere epic of war, the text explores profound educational themes such as duty (dharma), justice, leadership, ethical dilemmas, self-knowledge, and social responsibility (Hiltebeitel, 2001). Education in the Mahabharata is neither neutral nor value-free; rather, it is intrinsically linked to moral discernment and the pursuit of righteous action.

A pivotal pedagogical moment within the epic is the Krishna–Arjuna dialogue in the Bhagavad Gita, which represents a paradigmatic model of dialogic and experiential learning. Krishna does not impose knowledge upon Arjuna; instead, he engages him through questioning, reflection, and moral reasoning. This approach aligns closely with contemporary constructivist and dialogic learning theories (Mehta, 2019).

Scholars interpret this verse as articulating a learner-centered and experiential pedagogy, where reverence and questioning coexist, and learning is grounded in ethical practice (Rao, 2016; Malhotra, 2020).

Recent interdisciplinary studies have highlighted the relevance of Mahabharata’s educational insights for contemporary education, particularly in leadership studies, ethical education, and value-based learning (Sharma & Gupta, 2021; Iyer, 2022). These studies argue that the epic offers a framework for integrating intellectual rigor with ethical wisdom, a dimension often neglected in modern technocratic education systems.

## **3. Methodology**

This paper follows a qualitative and interpretative research approach, which is based on thematic, textual, and comparative analysis, in order to discuss the pedagogical philosophy implicated in the Mahabharata. Qualitative methods suit best the studies of classical texts, philosophical traditions, and value-based education in that it is possible to interpret the context profoundly instead of generalizing numbers (Creswell, 2014).

To begin with, a textual critique of some of the Sanskrit shlokas and narrative events of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad

Gita have been pursued. The texts were analyzed to reveal the pedagogical topics of teacher role, experiential learning, moral education, and dialogic learning. Traditional Sanskrit verses were explained in terms of the existing translations and commentaries in order to guarantee veracity and correctness of ideas (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Sharma, 2003).

Second, thematic interpretation approach was used in the analysis of the Gurukul system, guru-siṣya relationship and the practice of experiential learning in the form of the epic. The themes were induced out of the text and sorted into major educational aspects like holistic development, moral education, mentorship, and experience based learning (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Third, the ancient Indian concepts of education were compared and contrasted with the contemporary theories of education, especially experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and whole person education models (Miller, 2007). This comparative methodology makes it possible to comprehend the way in which ancient pedagogical wisdom can be relevant or more enriching to the modern discourse of education.

Secondary literary sources of education, philosophy and cultural studies provide support to primary Sanskrit works in order to maintain the academic rigour, interpretative triangulation and methodological soundness.

#### **4. Mahabharata as a Pedagogical Text**

##### **4.1 The Gurukul of Dronacarya**

The Mahabharata shows a clear description of the Gurukul of Dronacarya where the Pandavas and Kauravas got their formal education. Dronacarya is shown as one who was a teacher who focused not just on training in martial arts like archery, warfare and battle tactics but also on discipline, obedience, moral behavior and accountability (Ganguli, trans., 1883-1896). Drona taught under strict discipline and strict rules which were aimed at the expectation that learning takes discipline and hardship.

The Gurukul had been a socially constructive environment and students were taught to be cooperative, competitive, humble and in control by living together and performing tasks collectively. The Gurukul was residential so that the teacher and students were in constant contact with each other and the values were passed through observation and practice as opposed to being taught alone (Altekar, 1944).

In ancient India, education was value-based according to Gurukul by Dronacarya. The skills were a skill that was promoted but there was also a lot of moral discipline that accompanied the excellence in skills. Individual success was not the final purpose of education but the training in social responsibility and leadership. In this regard, Gurukul was a miniature of a society where students were trained on how to live in the society and ethical leadership (Sharma, 2003).

##### **4.2 Krishna-Arjuna Discourse as a Teaching Model**

An example of a teaching model is Krishna-Arjuna Discourse. The Bhagavad Gita, which is a part of the Mahabharata, is one of the most significant pedagogical dialogues in the world literature. The discussion between Krishna and Arjuna takes place on the Kurukshetra battlefield, and it demonstrates that education takes place not in vacuum, but in the environment of the real-life conflicts and moral challenges. Krishna does not teach Arjuna anything; he uses a learner-centered and dialogic approach, in which doubts, fear, and confusion used by Arjuna are the initial point of learning (Mehta, 2019). The pedagogical essence of this dialogue is captured in the verse:

द्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।

उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥

(भगवद्गीता, 4.34)

This shloka stresses on the fact that knowledge is acquired by humility (prāṇipata), inquiry (pariprashna), and service. Researchers understand this text to suggest a constructivist and experience-based pedagogy, in which inquiry and reflection are promoted under an ethos of respect and moral discipline (Rao, 2016; Malhotra, 2020).

The teaching of Krishna has blended philosophical thinking and practical action, which supports that learning should result into moral action and ethical decision-making. The model has a lot of appeal to the modern educational theories that have focused on reflective learning, critical thinking, and moral education.

##### **4.3 Integration of Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning was a defining feature of the Gurukul system. Students actively participated in real-life tasks such as collecting firewood, tending cattle, agriculture, and maintaining the household. These activities were integral to the learning process, reinforcing the belief that knowledge is constructed through experience and reflection, rather than abstract instruction alone (Mukerji, 2018).



The Mahabharata reflects this pedagogical approach by portraying education as inseparable from lived reality. Learning occurred through action (karma), followed by reflection and moral evaluation. This aligns closely with Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which conceptualizes learning as a process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

Through experiential learning, students developed not only practical competence but also resilience, adaptability, and social awareness. Such qualities are increasingly recognized as essential for personal growth and societal well-being in a rapidly changing world (Singh, 2021).

## **5. Relevance to 21st-Century Education**

### **5.1 Experiential and Holistic Learning**

Contemporary education systems increasingly acknowledge the limitations of rote memorization and standardized testing. Educational theorists emphasize experiential and holistic learning, which integrates cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of development (Miller, 2007). The Gurukul system exemplifies this approach, demonstrating that experiential learning is not a modern innovation but a time-tested pedagogical practice.

By engaging learners in real-life tasks and reflective inquiry, the Gurukul model supports whole-person education, which is essential for addressing complex global challenges such as ethical crises, environmental sustainability, and social inequality.

### **5.2 Mentor-Based Personalized Instruction and Ethical and Value Education**

The guru-śiṣya model offers valuable insights into mentor-based education, which is increasingly advocated in modern academic and professional settings. Personalized mentorship enhances learner engagement, critical thinking, and ethical awareness (Noddings, 2013). Unlike mass education models, mentorship-oriented learning recognizes the individuality of learners and supports their intellectual and moral growth.

In an era dominated by digital learning and large classrooms, reviving mentorship practices inspired by the guru-śiṣya tradition can humanize education and strengthen teacher-student relationships (Kumar, 2021).

The Mahabharata situates education firmly within a moral framework centered on dharma. Modern education systems often prioritize employability and technical skills, neglecting ethical formation. The epic repeatedly emphasizes that knowledge without moral discernment can lead to social destruction.

Ethical orientation integrates value education, social responsibility, and moral reflection into contemporary curricula to promote sustainable development and social harmony (Sharma & Gupta, 2021).

## **6. Discussion**

While modern education has significantly expanded access and standardized learning outcomes, it often lacks the depth of moral engagement and experiential richness found in ancient pedagogical traditions. The educational insights of the Mahabharata underscore the importance of balancing intellectual rigor with ethical sensitivity and lived experience.

Integrating mentorship, community engagement, experiential learning, and reflective practices can help cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of navigating complex social realities. The Gurukul model and Krishna-Arjuna pedagogy offer a complementary framework that can enrich contemporary educational reforms.

## **Conclusion**

The *Mahabharata* offers a timeless educational philosophy rooted in holistic development, experiential learning, and ethical inquiry. The Gurukul system and the Krishna-Arjuna pedagogical dialogue provide enduring insights for reimagining education in the 21st century. By integrating ancient wisdom with modern pedagogical frameworks, contemporary education can move toward a more humane, ethical, and transformative learning paradigm, capable of addressing both individual and societal needs.

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