

Re-Envisioning the Mahabharata: Constructing Paradigms for Environmental Equilibrium

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Abstract

The rapid advancements in science and technology have profoundly altered the pace and quality of daily life, offering unprecedented convenience and efficiency compared to previous eras. Innovations in fields such as medicine, education and commerce have enabled humanity to realize possibilities that were once considered unimaginable. However, this accelerated tempo of modern existence has also introduced challenges to interpersonal relationships, often resulting in diminished opportunities for meaningful interaction among family members, friends and colleagues. Furthermore, these changes have contributed to a growing disconnection between humans and the natural world. Ancient Hindu scriptures provide a contrasting perspective, portraying nature as sacred and advocating for reverence towards all living beings as a means of sustaining ecological balance. The texts underscore the importance of maintaining harmony between human activities and the environment. In the contemporary context, climate change and environmental degradation have emerged as critical global concerns, threatening not only human well-being but also the stability of entire ecosystems.

This study critically examines the Mahabharata, an influential ancient Indian epic, to argue that current ecological crises are rooted in humanity's neglect and disregard for the environment.

Through an analysis of selected narratives from the text, the research highlights the significance of environmental stewardship as articulated in the Mahabharata and explores how these insights can inform strategies for restoring and maintaining ecological harmony in the present day.

Keywords: Human Apathy, Environmental Harmony, Climate Change, Ecological Equilibrium

Introduction

The Mahabharata is universally acknowledged as the magnum opus of Krishna-Dwaipayana Ved Vyasa, who is traditionally credited with its composition. Vyasa is reputed to have painstakingly compiled the epic, ensuring comprehensive coverage of its multifaceted narratives, which collectively serve to elevate cultural consciousness and safeguard the heritage of the Indian subcontinent. Originally composed in Sanskrit among the most ancient languages of the region, the Mahabharata has since been the subject of extensive translation, reinterpretation and adaptation by successive generations of writers and scholars. Over time, the epic has been rendered into more than fifteen Indian languages and has inspired countless retellings, each shaped by the unique sensibilities of its historical and cultural context.

Beyond its literary manifestations, the Mahabharata has also flourished in diverse media, including serialized television, theatrical productions and cinema. Despite this proliferation, the version attributed to Ved Vyasa continues to be regarded as the most authoritative. The epic is distinguished by its complex narrative structure and a vast cast of characters, encompassing both human figures and deities. Many of these characters are depicted as incarnations born to uphold “dharma” (righteousness) or to eradicate “adharma” (unrighteousness), while others are portrayed as products of past “karma”, seeking redemption for curses incurred in previous existences. These interwoven

stories contribute to the epic's richness, offering profound historical, moral and philosophical insights.

Spanning over two hundred thousand verses and comprising approximately 1.8 million words, the Mahabharata stands as the longest epic poem in world literature. It is celebrated not only for its literary grandeur but also for its integration of main and subplots, poetic narration and expansive settings. The epic's monumental scale and thematic depth underscore its significance as one of the most important literary achievements of ancient India. Upon their arrival in India, British colonial administrators and scholars were reportedly struck by the country's vast and sophisticated literary tradition, which they found to rival, if not surpass, their own cultural legacies. To this day, the Mahabharata continues to be studied by scholars, writers and philosophers globally, who seek to glean wisdom from its exploration of moral values, the distinction between virtue and vice, and its enduring philosophical teachings.

This literary work occupies a position of profound religious significance within Hinduism, serving as a cornerstone of both spiritual and cultural heritage. As a seminal manuscript, it provides indispensable ethical guidelines intended to steer individuals away from moral decline and towards righteous conduct. The selected text is not only a monumental literary achievement but also a vital repository of Indian cultural values, offering nuanced perspectives on issues that remain highly pertinent in modern discourse.

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented global engagement with the cultural norms and philosophical principles articulated within the text, surpassing the influence observed in any previous era. In addition, contemporary scientific disciplines including astrology, astrophysics and allied fields frequently reference the Mahabharata for insights and inspiration. The epic's detailed descriptions of ancient lifestyles provide compelling evidence that individuals of that period possessed advanced knowledge, as exemplified by the concept of the "vimana", which bears striking parallels to modern aircraft and helicopters. The

sophisticated weaponry depicted in the text has garnered particular attention, with present-day researchers undertaking theoretical and empirical studies to adapt these ancient innovations for the development of advanced armaments, thereby enhancing national security in times of conflict.

Within the Mahabharata, the coexistence of both natural and supernatural beings underscores a distinctive relationship between humans and nature one that contrasts sharply with contemporary dynamics. In the ancient context, nature was revered as sacred, often accorded a status comparable to that of the divine. Despite this reverence, episodes of ecological disruption and its consequences are also depicted, highlighting the severe repercussions faced by those who transgressed against the natural order.

This study undertakes a rigorous analysis of narratives within the Mahabharata that illustrate the importance of environmental reverence in maintaining ecological equilibrium. Through the examination of specific examples, it elucidates the consequences of environmental degradation as portrayed in the epic. Furthermore, the research explores strategies for achieving environmental harmony in the present day, addressing the urgent challenges posed by climate change, a phenomenon widely recognized as a consequence of the deteriorating balance between human activity and the natural world.

Review of Literature

A number of scholars have examined the intersection between the Mahabharata and environmental concerns, offering valuable insights into the epic's treatment of ecological themes and its relevance to contemporary environmental discourse. Dileep Jhaveri's study, "Mahabharat and Environment" (2006), addresses the environmental issues articulated within the text by exploring the complex interrelationships between humans and nature, while also emphasizing the connection between the divine and the broader universe. Jhaveri's work

highlights how the Mahabharata conceptualizes nature as both a sacred entity and a vital component of human existence.

Renowned academic Nigamananda Das (2008) extends this inquiry by drawing parallels between modern environmental crises particularly eco-scams and incidents described in the Mahabharata. Das critically examines a range of ecological concepts, including the distinctions between shallow and deep ecology, and demonstrates how the epic's narratives can inform contemporary ecological thought.

Malvika Ranjan (2010) further enriches this discussion by arguing for the necessity of recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings. She contends that humans should not seek dominance over other creatures or assume a position of divine authority, but rather should revere all creation in order to promote harmony and stability. Ranjan supports her argument with references to ancient Hindu texts, including the Mahabharata, which advocate for respect and care for the natural world.

Sayan Bhattacharya (2014) focuses on the significance of forest and community ecology as depicted in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. He asserts that contemporary society can benefit from adopting the conservation strategies practiced by earlier generations, noting that several nations have already begun to integrate traditional ecological wisdom into modern legal frameworks.

Shashi Motilal (2015) introduces a dynamic perspective on sustainable development, arguing that it is not a static condition but a continuous process. According to Motilal, true sustainability is achievable only when the well-being of all individuals is progressively enhanced, rather than remaining stagnant.

Bhavana Trivedi (2019), in her article "Ethics and Values of Environmental Conservation – A Study", emphasizes the role of ethical teachings from texts such as the "Anusasana Parva" of the Mahabharata in promoting environmental justice. She advocates for

the conservation of natural resources as a means of fostering a more equitable and sustainable society.

Fabio Zagonari (2020) offers a comparative analysis of environmental ethics in Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. He suggests that religion and science can work synergistically to conserve nature, with religious traditions providing ethical guidance and scientific inquiry offering practical solutions.

Finally, Narayan Magar (2020), in his analysis of Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of the Mahabharata, examines the epic's detailed descriptions of flora and fauna. Magar argues that current ecological imbalances are largely the result of human interactions with nature and he highlights the Mahabharata's advocacy for "dharma" the observance of which entails respecting the presence and integrity of all living and non-living entities within the environment.

Discussion

The school of eco-spirituality, rooted in the principles of "deep ecology", posits that effective environmental stewardship requires recognizing the intrinsic value of all living and non-living entities within the ecosystem. While deep ecology emphasizes the inherent worth of all components of nature, eco-spirituality extends this perspective by incorporating a spiritual dimension, thereby highlighting the sacred connection between humans and their environment. This spiritual approach to ecology is especially pertinent in the context of the Mahabharata, where nature is frequently depicted as divine and worthy of reverence.

The universe comprises a vast array of biotic and abiotic elements, with humans occupying only a small fraction of this diversity. According to eco-spiritual thought, every entity within creation is equal and subject to the laws of nature. The fundamental role of these laws is to ensure that all beings living and non-living interact interdependently, fostering a state of balance and harmonious coexistence. In contrast to this ideal, contemporary society is

marked by an overabundance of interpersonal connections, many of which have become superficial or even harmful. The erosion of kindness and empathy is evident in rising levels of violence and selfishness, a trend that stands in stark contrast to the teachings found in the Mahabharata.

In the “Anusasana Parva”, Bhishma instructs Maharaja Yudhishthira that compassion is awakened especially when witnessing the suffering of others and that virtuous conduct leads to longevity, whereas wicked actions shorten life expectancy (Dasa 1085). This passage underscores the importance of empathy and altruism, values that are increasingly scarce in the modern world. Bhishma’s admonition that a lack of compassion and a refusal to assist the weak will result in premature death serves as a powerful ethical directive.

Even amidst ongoing debates about the existence of God and the explanatory power of science, spiritual writings such as the Mahabharata continue to offer solutions to humanity’s challenges. Technological advancements have fostered a sense of human superiority and entrenched anthropocentrism, leading to a disregard for biocentric principles and a disruption of ecological balance. Human arrogance has manifested in the exploitation of animals and plants for sustenance, shelter, clothing and even recreation, as well as in the mistreatment of fellow humans for profit or pleasure, as seen in cases of organ and sex trafficking.

These behaviors have precipitated contemporary ecological crises including pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion. This research does not claim that environmental issues are unique to the present era; however, it argues that the scale and severity of ecological degradation have reached unprecedented levels, now threatening human survival itself. The widening gap between human populations and other species is a primary driver of this crisis.

Drawing upon the Mahabharata, this study identifies pathways to restore ecological equilibrium. The epic contains numerous instances of nature worship and reverence,

demonstrating that respect for the environment not only sustains life but also offers protection against various perils. The forest setting, for example, plays a pivotal role in the narrative, as seen in the Pandavas' exile in the Virata kingdom and their concealment of weapons during their incognito period. The "Vana Parva" meaning "forest section" is the third of the eighteen books of the Mahabharata and is emblematic of the deep connection between human life and the natural world.

Ultimately, the Mahabharata advocates for a worldview in which humans are neither masters nor exploiters of nature, but rather stewards who uphold the principles of "dharma" and compassion. By integrating these ancient teachings into contemporary environmental discourse, society can begin to address the root causes of ecological imbalance and move towards a more sustainable and harmonious future, as suggested by the ecofeminist perspective which also highlights the interconnected roles of women, nature and society in fostering environmental justice.

The escalation of environmental hazards in the modern era is closely linked to the rise of materialism. Since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has increasingly prioritized material wealth and luxury, a trend that has not only reshaped social values but also intensified ecological degradation. The Mahabharata offers instructive narratives that challenge this mindset, emphasizing that inner peace and ecological harmony are achieved through actions rooted in a pure mind free from greed, despair, jealousy and other negative emotions.

A notable episode from the Mahabharata involves Gautami, whose child dies after being bitten by a snake. Arjunaka, a bird hunter, seeks to console Gautami by offering to kill the snake, despite not knowing the deceased child. Gautami, however, resists this act of vengeance, arguing that killing the snake would only compound her sorrow rather than provide solace. This story highlights the principle that every event is the result of one's own "karma" and retaliating with harm or vengeance does not restore balance or bring true peace.

These narrative invites reflection on the broader implications for environmental equilibrium. In contemporary society, individuals often deflect responsibility for their suffering, blaming external forces or other beings rather than acknowledging the consequences of their own actions. The relentless pursuit of opulence and status has led to the exploitation of natural resources, with animals and plants frequently sacrificed for human needs ranging from food and clothing to cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. Such practices have disrupted the delicate balance of ecosystems, reducing biodiversity and compromising the health of air, soil and water.

The consequences of these disruptions are evident in the increasing prevalence of environmental health hazards, such as skin cancer due to heightened UV radiation, respiratory illnesses from air pollution and a host of other conditions exacerbated by global warming and insufficient green cover. The Mahabharata's tale of Gautami underscores the importance of cultivating compassion and restraint rather than succumbing to negative emotions or seeking retribution. It teaches that harming others whether humans, animals or the environment ultimately leads to further suffering and a loss of inner peace.

The Mahabharata advocates for personal accountability and the recognition that ecological balance depends on ethical conduct and respect for all forms of life. As the story of Gautami illustrates, true harmony is achieved not through vengeance or exploitation but through understanding, compassion and the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. This ancient wisdom remains profoundly relevant in addressing the environmental challenges of the present age.

The destruction of the Khandava Forest in the Mahabharata stands as a powerful narrative illustrating the profound suffering and ecological imbalance caused by environmental devastation. In this episode, Agni, the god of fire, is aided by Arjuna and Lord Krishna to burn the forest, enabling him to shed the excess fat accumulated from ritual ghee offerings. The text

poignantly describes the fate of the forest's inhabitants: "but when they found that the fire blazed on all sides and that Krishna and Arjuna were prepared to kill them if they attempted to escape, they simply stood motionless and wailed aloud as if bereft of reason" (Dasa 144). This passage vividly conveys the helplessness of living beings in the face of destruction, regardless of the perpetrators' divine status.

Despite their divine roles, Arjuna and Krishna are not exempt from the consequences of their actions. Arjuna endures numerous hardships, including exile in the forest for thirteen years, estrangement from his mother, fierce battles and ultimately the killing of his own kin. Krishna's fate being killed by a hunter's arrow further underscores the theme that nature, when harmed, will exact retribution and seek regeneration. These episodes suggest that even celestial beings must face the repercussions of their transgressions against the natural order.

The Mahabharata also offers contrasting examples of harmonious human-nature relationships. During their exile, the Pandavas choose to reside in a region teeming with diverse flora and fauna, eventually settling beside Lake Dvaitavana. This area, frequented by sages and ascetics, serves as a sanctuary where spirituality and nature coexist peacefully. The chanting of rishis and sages fills the air with hope, while the abundant plants and animals provide essential sustenance and water. This depiction highlights the potential for environmental peace when humans interact with nature in a spirit of reverence and interdependence rather than exploitation.

Such narratives from the Mahabharata emphasize that true harmony is achieved when people and nature live in accordance with their intended roles mutually supportive and free from exploitation. This ideal stands in sharp contrast to the stress and alienation characteristic of modern, mechanized existence. By drawing on these ancient stories, contemporary society can gain valuable insights into the importance of ecological balance, the consequences of

environmental destruction and the enduring need for spiritual and ethical engagement with the natural world.

Traditional cultures, as exemplified by the moral and peaceful ethos upheld by our ancestors, recognized the intrinsic value of every living being within the natural world. This worldview fostered a sense of kinship and mutual respect among all species, positioning humans as integral members rather than masters of the ecosystem. However, with the advent of technological progress, a paradigm shift has occurred: contemporary society increasingly perceives itself as superior to other life forms, resulting in widespread exploitation and mistreatment of animals, plants and natural resources to satisfy human desires.

The harshness of human behavior has escalated to such an extent that nature itself appears to respond with vengeance, manifesting in the emergence of deadly diseases, natural disasters and ecological crises. These phenomena serve as potent reminders that humans are not above nature but are deeply embedded within its delicate balance. The self-healing mechanisms of nature often symbolized by its capacity for regeneration and retribution highlight the consequences of ecological disruption. Pathogens, for instance, play a critical role in maintaining ecological equilibrium by regulating populations and ensuring the integrity of food webs and interdependent relationships. When any species, including humans, attempts to dominate others or the environment as a whole, the resulting imbalance threatens the stability of the entire ecosystem.

Humanity's rapid entry into the Anthropocene has been marked by unprecedented levels of violence against animals, plants and cattle, driven by the demands of industries such as fashion, construction, cosmetics and food production. Despite the availability of sustainable alternatives, exploitation continues unabated, contributing to a global atmosphere of dishonesty, manipulation, cynicism and hostility. In this context, acts of compassion and honesty stand out as rare and remarkable virtues.

The Mahabharata's Santi Parva underscores the erosion of these virtues in the present age, stating: "The bull of religion is supported by four legs, with truthfulness, which is gradually diminishing, being the final leg in Kali-yuga" (Dasa 997). The decline of honesty, compassion and love has led to widespread disarray and imbalance, both within human society and the natural world. Wildlife and other species are forced into defensive strategies, often resorting to aggression or flight in response to the threat of human cruelty.

The selected text argues forcefully against the killing of animals for any reason, emphasizing that such actions not only inflict suffering but also endanger the future of humanity itself. The Mahabharata illustrates this principle through the etymology of the Sanskrit word "mamsa" (meat): "'Mam' means 'I' while 'sa' means 'he'. Mamsa thus means 'me, he shall devour'". As Dasa interprets, "in essence, people who consume animal flesh will eventually be consumed by the same animals" (1089). This teaching highlights the karmic consequences of violence and exploitation, reinforcing the idea that all creatures possess inherent worth and that humans must refrain from eradicating other species for selfish reasons.

The Mahabharata's ecological and ethical teachings advocate for a return to compassion, honesty and respect for all life values that are essential for restoring harmony between humans and the natural world. These principles resonate with contemporary ecofeminist and ecocritical perspectives, which emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and the moral responsibility to protect the environment.

In earlier yugas (ages), humanity thrived in a state of natural harmony, existing without the need for a sovereign ruler or formal governance. According to the selected scripture, "during initial Satya-yuga there was no government, no king, no chastiser and no chastised. Everyone lived righteously and protected one another so that there was no need for institutionalized government. Then, with time, conditions deteriorated as men's perceptions

and understanding became clouded” (Dasa 1015–1016). In this era, mutual protection and righteousness prevailed, allowing society to flourish in tranquility.

By contrast, contemporary society, even under the guise of democratic governance, is marked by numerous restrictions and systemic turmoil. As humanity’s pursuit of material possessions has intensified, even those in positions of authority have succumbed to corruption, exploiting both their own species and the broader environment. The selected text further notes that demigods themselves experienced fear due to the overwhelming greed of humanity and sought divine intervention to safeguard the universe.

The erosion of ethical values and the rise of anthropocentrism have led to a series of ecological and social crises. The scripture suggests that humanity’s increasing confidence in its own ingenuity manifested in the desire to experiment and question all that is divinely ordained aims to assert the primacy of science and human agency over the concept of a divine creator. Such attempts to demonstrate human superiority have, in turn, resulted in severe consequences, as evidenced by recent global events such as pandemics. During these outbreaks, all human activity was brought to a halt and populations were confined indoors, a situation that starkly mirrored the captivity experienced by animals in zoos and cages.

This reversal of roles underscores the principle that anthropocentric actions inevitably lead to detrimental repercussions. As highlighted in the discourse, humans must ultimately endure suffering akin to that which they inflict upon other beings within the environment. The Mahabharata and related scriptures thus advocate for a return to the values of compassion, mutual protection and respect for the natural order principles that are essential for restoring ecological and social equilibrium in the modern age.

Conclusion

Ancient traditions demonstrate a profound reverence for nature, with individuals invoking the sun, moon, wind and sea for protection before embarking on significant

endeavors. This research affirms that recognizing the inherent value of all living beings and fostering peaceful coexistence with the environment are essential for achieving ecological harmony. By respecting nature and allowing it to flourish, humanity can gradually mitigate the detrimental effects of egocentric behavior such as pollution, global warming and rising sea levels that have disrupted the ecosystem.

Engaging in spiritual practices and spending time in natural settings can alleviate human distress and restore a sense of well-being that is often lost in today's stressful, labor-intensive lifestyles. A sustained commitment to environmental stewardship is necessary to repair the damage inflicted by previous generations. Practical measures, such as planting trees, reducing pollution and protecting waterways, are crucial steps toward ecological restoration. Prioritizing non-material needs and adopting organic alternatives wherever possible further support this goal.

This study concludes that ecological balance can only be restored if humanity respects the boundaries of its rightful place within the ecosystem. The recognition of the intrinsic worth of every life form and the restraint from overexploiting natural resources are fundamental principles. Human harshness toward nature manifested in resource depletion and environmental degradation has precipitated natural calamities, including pandemics. The pandemic, in particular, served as a stark reminder of the consequences of disrupting ecological equilibrium, compelling humanity to reflect on its actions and reassess its relationship with the environment.

Despite repeated warnings from natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions, modern society often dismisses these events as mere natural phenomena, neglecting the role of human activity in exacerbating their frequency and severity. The current generation has largely abandoned the customs, culture and habits of its ancestors, which once emphasized harmony with nature.

The Mahabharata and other Vedic texts offer valuable insights into living a virtuous and peaceful life, grounded in respect for all beings. These scriptures provide guidance for addressing historical wrongs against nature by rekindling an awareness of interconnectedness and the inherent worth of every life. By analyzing and embracing the wisdom of these religious and cultural traditions, humanity can begin to repair its relationship with the environment and restore the ecological balance essential for a sustainable future.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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