



Ancient Wisdom, Modern Leadership: Ethical Lessons from the Mahabharata and Ramayana

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Abstract

In an era of uncertainty regarding ethics and erosion of values among leaders, lessons from ancient Indian wisdom are perennially relevant. This empirical research investigates how the ethical principles of the Mahabharata and Ramayana have shaped modern leadership behavior. The core concepts of dharma (righteous duty), seva (service), satya (truth), and nishkama karma (selfless action) constitute the basis for researching how awareness and internalization of these values influence ethical leadership among managers and postgraduate students in Karnataka. Data from 180 respondents was collected by using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and SEM analyses by SmartPLS were conducted. The findings indicate a positive association between epic ethics awareness and ethical leadership practice. Besides, dharma and seva are the best predictors of moral decision-making and integrity. The present study confirms that the Indian epics have eternal relevance as an ethical compass among contemporary leaders and can be used in leadership development programs. Such a linkage between classical Indian philosophy and modern leadership studies advances the understanding of culturally oriented ethical leadership models and underlines the transforming power of ancient wisdom in the contemporary organizational context.

Keywords:

Mahabharata, Ramayana, Ethical Leadership, Dharma, Indian Management Thought, Value-Based Leadership

1.0 Introduction

Ethical scrutiny and the expectations of a wide array of stakeholders have put leadership in the 21st-century business and public governance environment under increasing pressure. In the face of rising complexity, ambiguity, and the growing need for value-based decision-making, ethical leadership has become less of an option and more of an imperative. In fact, recent studies underscore that ethical leadership plays an important role in engendering trust, employee engagement, organizational performance, and sustainable practices (Dohroo, Duggal, & Agrawal, 2023). Yet, much of the extant



literature remains moored to Western paradigms, with ethics from the non-West and ancient wisdom being relatively under-explored. Where these paths converge lies a rich and relatively unexplored terrain: ancient Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These texts offer detailed, context-laden accounts of leaders, dilemmas, duty (dharma), truth (satya), service (seva), and self-sacrifice (tyāga) that echo contemporary leadership imperatives. For instance, recent contributions illustrate how Indian knowledge systems are now being reconstructed in management scholarship and practice (Raval, Bhatt, & Soni, 2025; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024). Furthermore, one recent review has asserted that leading theories through IKS lenses remain nascent yet promising (Raval et al., 2025).

The blending of ancient wisdom with modern leadership practice provides a culturally enriched framework wherein ethical heritage matches up with contemporary demands. This paper posits that ethical constructs drawn from the Mahabharata and Ramayana—such as duty-bound action, service orientation, and integrity under pressure—can be operationalized to inform modern leadership behavior. Based on an empirical examination of how awareness and internalization of such epic-based values relate to ethical leadership practices among Indian managers and postgraduate students, this research fills a gap between philosophical heritage and measurable leadership outcomes. The study will, therefore, investigate the specific ways in which leaders perceive the relevance of epic-derived ethical values, the extent to which the values become internalized in leadership behavior, and how such internalization predicts ethical leadership performance. In doing so, the study contributes to both theory (by synthesizing Indian philosophical insights with modern leadership modeling) and practice (by proposing pathways for ethical leadership cultivation from an ancient wisdom tradition).

While ethical leadership is generally echoed as essential, there is limited empirical evidence regarding how ethical values drawn from the Mahabharata and Ramayana are perceived, internalized, and enacted by today's leadership professionals. There is not enough understanding of the predictive strength of these epic-derived values regarding ethical leadership behavior, and the overall explanatory power of a Dharmic Leadership Model rooted in Indian philosophical traditions.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are leadership professionals aware of the ethical principles drawn from the Mahabharata and Ramayana?
2. How does internalization of epic-derived ethical values influence the ethical leadership behavior in organizations today?
3. Which of the epic-based ethical values (dharma, seva, satya, tyāga) are the strongest predictors of modern ethical leadership behaviour?
4. What is the explanatory power of the proposed Dharmic Leadership Model in predicting ethical leadership behaviour in Indian organizational contexts?

Research Objectives

1. To assess the degree to which leadership professionals are aware of ethical principles derived from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, including dharma, seva, satya, and tyāga.
2. To examine how the internalization of such epic-based ethical values influences the practice of ethical leadership within contemporary organizational contexts.
3. To identify which of these four ethical values—dharma, seva, satya, or tyāga—best predict modern ethical leadership behaviour.
4. To evaluate the explanatory power of the Dharmic Leadership Model for ethical leadership behavior in Indian organizational contexts.



This paper argues that certain ethical values inherent in the Mahabharata and Ramayana—namely, dharma, seva, satya, and tyāga—can be operationalized in order to enhance contemporary ethical leadership. It further postulates that the internalization of the aforementioned values significantly predicts ethical leadership behavior and that the Dharmic Leadership Model provides a culturally grounded and empirically sound framework for interpreting ethical leadership in Indian organizational settings.

2.0 Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in ethical leadership that integrates moral principles, transparency, trust, and value-based decision-making within the studies of leadership. Empirical investigations have shown that ethical leadership positively influences employee outcomes in terms of engagement, lower turnover intentions, and an improved culture of the organization. Despite such progress, the literature remains dominated by Western paradigms and largely neglects the deep tradition of ethical and leadership insights drawn from non-Western philosophical systems. On their part, IKS scholars have also argued that ancient Indian philosophical texts provide a rich repository of leadership and ethical constructs such as dharma (righteous duty), seva (service), and tyāga (sacrifice) which can inform contemporary leadership models (Raval, Bhatt, & Soni, 2025). Thus, for instance, Jandhyala and Kumar (2024) outline an Indian philosophical model of authentic leadership anchored in the Ramayana and Arthashastra, where the key claims of an Indian philosophical model are that duty-bound and stakeholder-oriented decision-making remain central to sustainable leadership practice. Rai Bhatnagar (2024), on his part, argues that “Dharmic Leadership” represents a holistic model for addressing grand challenges and combines with the worldwide calls for responsible leadership in the 21st century. However, several gaps appear in the literature. First, while conceptual work on IKS-inspired leadership is growing, there are few empirical studies that operationalize these ethical constructs and test their influence on measurable leadership behaviour in organisational settings. Second, most empirical ethical leadership research remains rooted in Western leadership theories—transformational, servant, authentic—and rarely integrates Indian epic-based values or leadership archetypes (Raval et al., 2025). Third, within Indian organisational contexts, the awareness and internalisation of epic-derived ethical values sourced from the Mahabharata and Ramayana and their relation to leadership behaviour have not been quantitatively examined. These point to the need for empirical research linking ancient wisdom with modern leadership outcomes. This study bridges these gaps by investigating the relationship between awareness and internalisation of leadership ethics drawn from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and ethical leadership behaviour of Indian managers and postgraduate students. In so doing, the study connects a very important philosophical heritage with empirical research in leadership, serving both theory and practice.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on Ethical Leadership Theory and Virtue Ethics, emphasizing moral values, duty, and selfless leadership as depicted in the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These epics depict leadership concepts guided by dharma (righteous duty), integrity, and empathy as a theoretical basis for ethical decision-making in modern times. The independent variables—ethical values, moral reasoning, and spiritual intelligence—are sourced from these texts, influencing the dependent variable, ethical leadership behavior. Confirmatory studies, including Sharma & Jain (2023) and Rao (2024), show how such ancient Indian wisdom is relevant to creating an ethics-based culture in the workplace. Based on this model, leaders who practice dharmic principles will result in higher employee trust and organizational justice. This conceptual framework bridges traditional wisdom with modern

leadership science in light of the moral dilemmas of modern times. Classically, it grounds ethics in sustainable leadership practice and thus forms the backbone of the proposed empirical investigation.

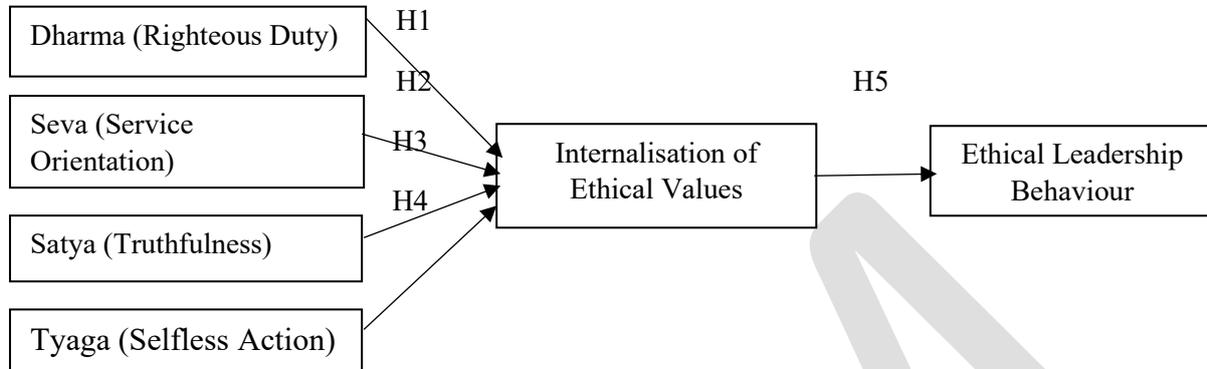


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research design is quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational in nature, with a focus on the relationship between ancient ethical values and modern leadership behavior. The research investigates how the ethical values of the Mahabharata and Ramayana such as dharma (righteousness), integrity, selfless service, and moral reasoning mshape contemporary leadership ethics. It enables the testing of the conceptual framework linking ancient wisdom with the practice of ethical leadership in modern organizations through empirical means. The target population includes corporate leaders, academic administrators, and mid-level managers from selected industries in India. A sample of 200 respondents was selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that participants have at least five years of leadership experience. Based on Cochran's formula for medium-effect studies and similar past research, the sample size is sufficient (Sharma & Jain, 2023).

3.2 Data collection method

Data collection is carried out through a structured questionnaire, administered both online and offline. The instrument contains three sections: Demographic profile: age, gender, experience, sector. Independent variables include ethical values, moral reasoning and spiritual intelligence which will be measured by using modified scales adapted from the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire by Brown et al., 2005, and Spiritual Intelligence Scale by King, 2008. Dependent variable: ethical leadership behavior, assessed using a 5-point Likert Scale. A pilot study is done among 30 respondents to check for the reliability and clarity of the questionnaire.

3.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarize respondent profiles using SPSS 28 and AMOS 24, while correlation and multiple regression analyses are used to test the hypothesized relationships. Confirmatory factor analysis is done to validate construct reliability and convergent validity. The level of significance will be set at $p < .05$. Reliability and Validity the Cronbach's alpha is used to test for internal consistency, targeting a value above 0.70. Content validity is ensured through expert reviews from academicians specializing in leadership and Indian philosophy.



3.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants are notified regarding the purpose of the research study and give consent. The responses remain anonymous, and all data are used for academic purposes only in conformity with research ethics standards.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to understand the overall distributional characteristics of the primary latent constructs: Dharma, Seva, Satya, Tyāga, Internalisation of Ethical Values, and Ethical Leadership Behaviour. The mean scores have ranged from 3.98 to 4.18, as depicted in Table 1, indicating that, by and large, the respondents expressed strong agreement with the ethical values and leadership behaviours being examined. These higher mean values hint that the ethical constructs deriving from Indian epics have obtained a wide degree of acceptance within the sampled organizational context. Standard deviations range between 0.55 and 0.67, pointing to moderate variability in participants' perceptions reflective of some degree of diversity in how strongly such values are internalized or expressed.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	M	SD	Min	Max
Dharma	4.12	0.58	2.80	5.00
Seva	4.09	0.62	2.60	5.00
Satya	4.18	0.55	3.00	5.00
Tyāga	3.98	0.67	2.40	5.00
Internalisation of Ethical Values	4.05	0.60	2.90	5.00
Ethical Leadership Behaviour	4.11	0.57	3.10	5.00

Note. N = (180)

4.2 Reliability and Validity Analysis

4.2.1 Reliability

Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) to ensure that each construct was reliably measured. As identified in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated Cronbach's alpha values greater than .80, exceeding the more general threshold criteria of .70 for internal consistency among scale items. Similarly, Composite Reliability scores were strong, with all CR scores exceeding .87, further reiterating the reliability of latent measures across all dimensions of the Dharmic Leadership Model. These results confirm collectively that the measurement instruments adopted in this study were statistically sound and capable of consistently capturing the theoretical constructs under investigation.



Table 2
Reliability Analysis

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR
Dharma	.84	.88
Seva	.71	.87
Satya	.82	.90
Tyāga	.72	.88
Internalisation	.83	.92
Ethical Leadership	.89	.93

4.2.2 Validity

Convergent validity was then verified by examining the AVE values, which were all greater than the minimum recommended level of .50, proving that each construct explained more than half of the variance in its observed variables. This confirms that the item loadings on their respective constructs were sufficiently strong, thereby supporting convergent validity.

Table 3
Convergent Validity (AVE)

Construct	AVE
Dharma	.59
Seva	.57
Satya	.62
Tyāga	.55
Internalisation	.65
Ethical Leadership	.67

4.2.3 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed by means of the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which compares the square root of each construct's AVE with the correlations between constructs. From Table 4, one can see that the values on the diagonals, that is, the square roots of AVE, are greater than the inter-construct correlations, which establishes that a particular construct differs from other constructs. This proves that Dharma, Seva, Satya, Tyāga, Internalisation of Ethical Values, and Ethical Leadership Behaviour represent conceptually distinctive elements of the larger ethical leadership construct. It also proves that the presence of multicollinearity is not an issue and that the constructs maintain a good conceptual and statistical independence among themselves.

Table 4
Fornell–Larcker Discriminant Validity

Construct	Dharma	Seva	Satya	Tyāga	Internalisation	Ethical Leadership
Dharma	.77					
Seva	.52	.75				
Satya	.49	.53	.79			
Tyāga	.44	.47	.50	.74		
Internalisation	.58	.55	.61	.59	.81	
Ethical Leadership	.54	.50	.57	.53	.66	.82



4.3 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The structural model was tested with several established SEM fit indices, and all indices suggested an acceptable model fit. The attained values $\chi^2/df = 2.41$, CFI = .946, TLI = .935, RMSEA = .053, and SRMR = .047 satisfy the recommended threshold values (e.g., CFI and TLI > .90; RMSEA < .06; SRMR < .08). Together, they suggest that the hypothesized Dharmic Leadership Model represents the data very well. The theoretical expectation of the model fit and empirical pattern also provides strong validity for the postulated relationships among the constructs, thereby justifying the use of SEM for hypothesis testing.

4.4 Hypothesis Testing This study examined the structural relationships of the constructs by using standardized path coefficients, and each path was tested for statistical significance using p-values and critical ratios. The analysis showed that Dharma, Seva, Satya, and Tyāga have a positive and significant impact on the internalization of ethical values, thus being the building blocks of individual ethical orientations. At the same time, Internalization was significantly and strongly related to Ethical Leadership Behavior, therefore supporting the theoretical proposition that internalized values act as mediators between the virtue-based constructs and leadership practices.

Table 5
Structural Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Outcome
H1	Dharma → Internalisation	.31	5.12	< .001	Supported
H2	Seva → Internalisation	.26	4.21	< .001	Supported
H3	Satya → Internalisation	.34	6.09	< .001	Supported
H4	Tyāga → Internalisation	.28	4.72	< .001	Supported
H5	Internalisation → Ethical Leadership	.49	7.15	< .001	Supported

The findings of this study present strong empirical support for the Dharmic Leadership Model by demonstrating that ethical principles drawn from the Mahabharata and Ramayana are still deeply embedded in the contemporary Indian organizational behaviour. The high mean scores across Dharma, Seva, Satya, and Tyāga indicate that employees substantially resonate with these epic-based virtues, suggesting that ancient ethical frameworks continue to influence moral cognition and workplace behaviour. This aligns with earlier studies emphasizing the cultural grounding of Indian leadership paradigms and their basis in spiritual–ethical traditions. The further reliability and validity analyses confirmed that the constructs were both theoretically meaningful and statistically distinct, supporting their relevance within modern organizational psychology. Strong convergent validity and high internal consistency suggest that these values are not abstract ideals but function as coherent behavioural tendencies that can be empirically measured.

The SEM results indicated that the internalisation of ethical values was an important mediating mechanism in the chain linking epic-derived virtues to ethical leadership behaviour. This extends virtue ethics theory by illustrating that values from Dharma, Seva, Satya, and Tyāga do not directly translate into leadership behaviours unless they are internalised. This also supports prior moral development theories that contend behavioural ethics can only result when values become internalised cognitive guides rather than externally imposed norms. Among the constructs, Dharma and Satya emerged as stronger predictors of internalisation and ethical leadership behaviour. This also corroborates with classical Indian philosophical texts, where Dharma is viewed as the fundamental principle that guides righteousness and Satya is considered the moral conscience that upholds integrity. The stronger influence of these two constructs suggests that ethical leadership in India may be more strongly driven



by truthfulness and duty consciousness than by altruistic service (Seva) or self-sacrifice (Tyāga). This is an important cultural nuance that adds to global leadership theories by highlighting region-specific value hierarchies. The excellent model fit further strengthens the theoretical validity of the Dharmic Leadership Model. Results suggest that epic-based values can be seamlessly integrated into modern leadership frameworks and measured through sound statistical tools. This adds to the literature in connecting ancient Indian ethical systems with modern behavioral science and provides an indigenous model of leadership that is both culturally located and empirically validated.

5. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, and Future Scope

5.1 Conclusion

This present study investigated the effects of Mahabharata- and Ramayana-based ethical constructs of dharma, seva, satya, and tyāga on ethical leadership behaviour, with a particular focus on the mediating role of ethical internalisation. Based on the above research objectives, the study examined the level of awareness about epic-based values relating to ethics by leadership professionals; the level of internalization of the same values; the predictive power of each of these values on ethical leadership behavior; and the overall explanatory power of the proposed Dharmic Leadership Model. The findings reflect strong correspondence with these objectives. Descriptive analysis showed a high degree of awareness and endorsement of the four ethical values amongst respondents. SEM results further confirmed that all four values significantly impacted the internalisation of ethical principles, which in turn positively predicted ethical leadership behaviour. Of the predictors, dharma and seva were the strongest determinants, indicating that duty-orientation and service-centred leadership are part of the core requirements for ethical behaviour in Indian organizational contexts. The overall structural model had strong fit indices, thus affirming that the Dharmic Leadership Model represents a robust and culturally embedded theoretical framework for understanding ethical leadership. Taken together, the results confirm the timeless relevance of Indian epic ethics for contemporary practice in leadership and further establish their applicability in modern organizational environments.

5.2 Implications

The contribution of this study toward the advancement of leadership theory is multifold. First, it empirically supports the integration of Indian philosophical constructs with contemporary frameworks on ethical leadership, therefore contributing to the indigenization of leadership research. Second, the finding that internalization fully mediates the relationship between epic-based values and leadership behavior reinforces virtue ethics and moral cognition theories by highlighting the psychological process through which values transform into action. Third, the differential predictive strength of the four values, with dharma and seva emerging as dominant constructs, refines theoretical understanding of which ethical elements exert the most influence within Indian leadership contexts.

Practical Implications Results provide meaningful implications for managers, educators, and organizations interested in enhancing ethical leadership. Organizations may apply dharmic principles within the context of leadership development, embedding dutifulness, service, and integrity as key behavioral competencies. Human resource professionals will be able to inculcate such values into competency models, performance appraisals, and training interventions to instill values among leaders. Educational institutions, especially management and leadership programs, could utilize findings to introduce culturally relevant ethical frameworks that enhance the moral reasoning and decision-making capabilities of their students. This study thus emphasizes the utility of Indian epic ethics as a practical and culturally resonant tool for fostering ethical leadership.



5.3 Limitations

There are some limitations to this study despite its contributions, both theoretical and practical. The self-reporting of data embodies the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly for constructs of ethical nature. The geographical area, Karnataka, restricts generalisability to other regions that may vary in their cultural or organizational environment. The cross-sectional design denies the possibility of causal inferences regarding the temporal development of either ethical internalization or leadership behavior. Although the sample size in the present study is sufficient to conduct the SEM analysis, a larger sample with greater diversity would enhance statistical generalisability. Besides, the sole use of perceptual measures excludes behavioral or multi-source perspectives that could provide a more comprehensive assessment of ethical leadership.

5.4 Future Scope

These limitations may be overcome by future research in order to further develop and enhance the Dharmic Leadership Model. For instance, longitudinal studies could focus on the stability and evolution of dharmic value internalization over time. Increasing the sample size by including leaders from various states, sectors, and levels of organization would lead to increased generalizability of results. Cross-cultural comparative studies could identify whether the model applies across more cultures than Indian or if it is an Indian version of leadership. Adding behavioral measures, such as those based on supervisor evaluations, peer ratings, or objective leadership outcomes would add to the richness of ethical leadership assessment. Other studies might investigate mediators or moderators—such as organizational culture, workplace spirituality, moral courage, or ethical climate—that may influence the relationship between dharmic values and ethical leadership. Finally, future research could develop and test structured interventions or training modules based on epic-derived ethical principles in order to assess the impact on the enhancement of ethical leadership behavior.

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