

Personality Characteristics of the Panchapandavas in the Mahabharata: An Indigenous Knowledge System Perspective through Adler's Birth Order Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the personality characteristics of the five Pandava brothers—Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—from the *Mahabharata* through the lens of Alfred Adler's Birth Order Theory. The study situates this psychological analysis within the framework of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), emphasizing how ancient Indian epics convey implicit psychological insights. Through qualitative content analysis, the research identifies patterns aligning with Adler's conceptualization of first-born, middle-born, and youngest child traits. The findings reveal a synthesis between cultural narratives and universal psychological principles, demonstrating the continuing relevance of indigenous literature to modern psychology.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Panchapandavas, Adler's Birth Order Theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, personality characteristics

INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata*, one of the two great Sanskrit epics of ancient India, transcends mythology to encompass philosophy, ethics, politics, and psychology. Composed by Sage Vyasa, it contains approximately 100,000 verses that portray human nature in its full complexity—virtues, flaws, aspirations, and moral struggles. Scholars have long recognized the *Mahabharata* as an encyclopedic text encapsulating India's Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)—systems of wisdom, ethics, and understanding transmitted through oral and written traditions (Rao, 2015; Naidu, 2020).

Within this vast epic, the five Pandava brothers—Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—are depicted not only as warriors and kings but also as symbolic embodiments of psychological diversity and human temperament.

In modern psychology, Alfred Adler (1931) proposed the Birth Order Theory, suggesting that a child's ordinal position within a family profoundly influences personality development, social orientation, and striving for significance. According to Adler, first-born children often exhibit responsibility and leadership, middle-born children develop competitiveness or adaptability, and youngest children tend to display creativity or dependency. Although Adler developed this theory within a twentieth-century Western framework, its application across cultural contexts reveals universal dimensions of family dynamics and personality formation (Stewart & Campbell, 1998; Sulloway, 1996).

The *Mahabharata* presents archetypal models of behavior, moral reasoning, and leadership. Yudhishtira symbolizes moral rectitude and rational thought; Bhima represents passion and power; Arjuna embodies intellect and duty-bound action; while Nakula and Sahadeva illustrate grace, devotion, and wisdom. These portrayals reflect distinct psychological orientations embedded within familial and social contexts, paralleling Adler's theoretical constructs (Rao, 2011; Sharma, 2017).

Birth Order and Personality: An Adlerian Perspective

Alfred Adler (1937) emphasized that individuals strive for significance within their social environments and that the family constitutes the first social unit shaping personality. Birth order creates unique psychological environments for each child. The eldest often experiences early parental attention and responsibility; the second child tends to feel competitive and motivated to surpass the first; and the youngest often receives indulgence, developing creativity or dependency.

Adlerian theory posits that psychological position, rather than chronological order, determines behavior. The eldest assumes leadership roles; the middle child balances between cooperation and competition; and the youngest demonstrates flexibility and charm. These roles shape *social interest*—an Adlerian concept reflecting the individual's capacity to contribute meaningfully to the community (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

When examined through this lens, the *Mahabharata's* portrayal of the Pandava brothers exemplifies Adler's principles. Each brother's personality reflects the psychological environment shaped by birth order, upbringing, and experience. The epic's narrative structure aligns with modern psychological constructs, illustrating how indigenous literature anticipates theoretical insights that emerged in Western psychology.

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Western Psychology

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass the holistic worldview through which traditional societies understand the interrelationship between self, community, nature, and the cosmos (Cornelissen, Misra, & Varma, 2011). Within Indian philosophy, knowledge (*jnana*) is experiential and integrative, linking ethical action (*dharma*) and emotional regulation (*bhavana*). The *Mahabharata*, as part of the IKS corpus, offers a psychosocial model paralleling Adler's emphasis on social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*).

Both Adlerian and Indian perspectives emphasize relational harmony and self-transcendence. Adler proposed that healthy individuals demonstrate empathy and cooperation, while Indian psychology stresses self-control, humility, and righteous conduct as the foundation for inner balance (Paranjpe, 1998). The Pandava brothers, despite contrasting temperaments, exemplify these ideals through moral trials and interpersonal dynamics.

For instance, Yudhishtira's adherence to truth (*satya*) and justice (*dharma*) resonates with Adler's notion of community feeling. Bhima's impulsive loyalty, Arjuna's reflective discipline, and Nakula and Sahadeva's humility all illustrate distinct yet harmonious psychological roles.

Character Analysis of the Panchapandavas through Adler's Birth Order Theory

Yudhishtira: The Eldest and the Responsible Leader

As the eldest of the Pandava brothers, Yudhishtira exemplifies the first-born traits identified by Adler—leadership, responsibility, and adherence to norms. Raised with expectations of kingship and moral excellence, Yudhishtira internalizes a deep sense of duty toward his family and kingdom. His unwavering commitment to truth (*satya*) and righteousness (*dharma*) underscores his moral rigidity and becomes his psychological vulnerability.

His decision to gamble away his kingdom and wife can be viewed as a crisis of moral overcompensation—reflecting the eldest's fear of failure (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Despite setbacks, Yudhishtira's adherence to ethical conduct symbolizes the resolution of the Adlerian “inferiority complex” through moral strength.

In the Indigenous context, his personality resonates with *rajasika* (active and principled) qualities balanced by *sattva* (purity and wisdom). His sense of *dharma* aligns with Adler's social interest—the capacity to act for collective good.

Bhima: The Second-born and the Assertive Protector

Bhima, the second-born Pandava, is characterized by strength, loyalty, and impulsivity. Adlerian psychology associates the second-born with ambition and competitiveness—traits defining Bhima’s relationship with Yudhishtira and Duryodhana. His behavior reflects determination and dynamism (Adler, 1937).

Bhima’s aggression, though intense, emerges from a deep protective instinct toward his family—a form of social interest expressed through action. Within the Indigenous framework, Bhima represents the *rajasika* temperament dominated by energy and emotion. His valor embodies the *Kshatriya* warrior archetype, integrating Adler’s striving individual with the Indian concept of righteous action (*karma yoga*).

Arjuna: The Middle-born and the Self-Reflective Seeker

Arjuna, positioned centrally among the five brothers, epitomizes the middle-born child who balances rivalry and cooperation. Such individuals develop adaptability, self-reflection, and a strong drive to establish identity (Adler, 1931).

His existential crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra—resolved through the *Bhagavad Gita* dialogue—reflects deep introspection and the search for meaning. Arjuna’s ultimate acceptance of *svadharma* (one’s own duty) exemplifies Adler’s ideal of self-realization through social contribution.

In Indian psychological terms, Arjuna represents *sattva guna*—clarity and wisdom. His moral struggle parallels Adler’s notion of overcoming inferiority through purposeful action.

Nakula and Sahadeva: The Youngest and the Integrative Personalities

Nakula and Sahadeva, the youngest and twins, offer a nuanced interpretation of Adler’s view of youngest children. Adler (1937) observed that youngest children often grow up protected, developing charm and adaptability. Despite this, Nakula and Sahadeva exhibit strength, integrity, and balance.

Nakula embodies beauty, humility, and grace, reflecting relational harmony. Sahadeva represents intellectual depth and foresight, symbolizing contemplative wisdom. Together, they manifest *sattvic* qualities—purity, composure, and wisdom.

From an IKS perspective, they symbolize the harmonization of the *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*)—the culmination of human development toward integration. Symbolically, Nakula represents emotional sensitivity, while Sahadeva symbolizes rational insight.

Comparative Interpretation and Symbolic Synthesis

Table 1

Comparative Representation of the Panchapandavas through Adler’s Birth Order Theory and Indigenous Knowledge Perspective

Pandava Brother	Adlerian Birth Order Traits	Indigenous Knowledge Traits	Symbolic Representation
Yudhishtira	Responsible, moral, leader	<i>Rajasika-sattvic</i> balance; upholder of <i>dharma</i>	Earth – stability and order
Bhima	Competitive, assertive, protective	<i>Rajasika</i> temperament; warrior energy	Fire – energy and power

Arjuna	Reflective, disciplined, balanced	<i>Sattvic</i> clarity; seeker of <i>svadharma</i>	Air – intellect and motion
Nakula	Cooperative, graceful, empathetic	<i>Sattvic</i> refinement; emotional sensitivity	Water – beauty and grace
Sahadeva	Insightful, wise, observant	<i>Sattvic</i> intellect and foresight	Ether – wisdom and transcendence

DISCUSSION

The *Mahabharata* serves not merely as mythology but as a dynamic psychological text encapsulating human development, moral evolution, and self-realization. The application of Adler’s Birth Order Theory reveals that each brother embodies a dimension of human psychology—moral reasoning, emotional strength, intellectual reflection, aesthetic balance, and spiritual insight.

Adler’s emphasis on striving for significance aligns with the *Mahabharata*’s portrayal of *dharma*. Both frameworks highlight purposeful living, moral integrity, and community contribution. Psychological maturity, in both traditions, arises from reconciling self-interest with universal values.

Furthermore, the integration of Adlerian psychology and IKS demonstrates the dialogical potential between Western scientific models and Eastern philosophical wisdom. The *Mahabharata* can thus be interpreted as a psychological treatise offering insights into emotion, motivation, and ethical behavior.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the Panchapandavas’ personalities through Adler’s Birth Order Theory reveals convergence between ancient Indian thought and modern psychology. Each Pandava represents a facet of the human psyche—Yudhishtira’s moral responsibility, Bhima’s passion, Arjuna’s introspection, Nakula’s grace, and Sahadeva’s wisdom—forming a holistic representation of human potential.

Adler’s framework illuminates familial and social influences on personality, while the *Mahabharata* situates these within ethical and spiritual paradigms. Both affirm that self-realization is achieved through relational harmony and moral awareness. This synthesis of Adlerian and Indigenous perspectives underscores that personality development is a continuum of personal, social, and spiritual growth.

The *Mahabharata* thus emerges as a timeless psychological document bridging myth, morality, and science—affirming the unity of human understanding across civilizations.

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