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Khela, Karma, and Nāyaka: Reinterpreting Leadership in Indian Cricket through Indian Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

Sports and games (*krīḍā/khela*) have served not merely as forms of recreation or a pastime but as vital means for holistic personality development since time immemorial. Within this framework, Sports Leadership emerges as a pivotal construct encompassing the physical, mental, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of human flourishing**.** This paper critically explores sports leadership in Indian cricket through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), a domain largely interpreted through predominantly Western leadership frameworks. By addressing the conceptual limitations of contemporary sports leadership discourse, wherein Sports Leadership is often reduced to managerial styles, the study foregrounds its deeper ethical, cultural and performative dimensions rooted in *Bhāratīya* thought. Adopting interpretive and interdisciplinary methodologies, the study examines the leadership styles of the three World Cup-winning Indian captains, *viz.,* Kapil Dev, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, and Harmanpreet Kaur through the conceptual triad of *Khela* (*krīḍā*), *Karma* (action), and *Nāyaka* (a guiding leader). Drawing upon the ethical and strategic insights of *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa,* and *Bhagavad Gītā*, the study exemplifies leadership as both a strategy and a form of lived performance or praxis by blending the aesthetic and ethical enactments marked by *dharma*, *samatva, dhṛti, and niṣṭhā* for *loka-saṅgraha*, wherein action, wisdom, and responsibility converge within a larger ethos of collective harmony and human flourishing.

Keywords: Cricket World Cup, Indian Cricket, Indian Knowledge Systems, Nāyaka, Sports Leadership.

Introduction: The Real Character of the Vedic Gods

Leadership is one of the most extensively discussed topics in sports psychology. It has been often described through types like, Autocratic, Democratic, Transformational, Transactional, Servant leadership, etc. These frameworks have significantly increased the comprehension of leadership effectiveness. However, they have predominantly originated from the western epistemological paradigms. It typically defines leadership as a mere collection of managerial behaviours. Recently, in 2025, Burton and Kane write, “Management deals with tangibles, in contrast leadership operates on the level of intangibles”. These theories, despite being useful, remain limited in their capacity to encompass the profound ethical, cultural and philosophical aspects of leadership as a lived experience, especially in eastern context. Sardar and Baishya (2) argue that IKS plays a pivotal role in the formation of good leadership and leadership training.

In competitive sports, the role of captain goes far beyond tactical decision-making. A leader also serves as a strategic guide, an emotional anchor, and a unifying force who navigates the team and the players during the period of uncertainty, pressure, and collective aspiration. In team sports, leadership is a central athletic excellence (Devine 57). Leadership is not simply a style to be embraced, but it is a dynamic approach shaped by context, awareness, and relational responsibilities, and thus there is a requirement for re-evaluation of leadership using frameworks that consider its ethical and cultural foundations.

Although cricket does not have an Indian origin yet, today cricket is a sport as well as a cultural phenomenon, in the country such as India. Devan (1413) notes that cricket binds not just fragmented and divided India but also the global Indian diaspora irrespective of nation, class or religion. The evolution of Indian cricket

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signifies not only athletic advancement but also a shift in narratives surrounding identity, resilience, and collective aspiration. Yet the assessment of leadership in Indian cricket remains largely constructed through external theoretical frameworks, frequently neglecting indigenous epistemologies that provide a deep understanding of action, duty and selfhood.

This paper seeks to address this gap by analysing leadership in Indian cricket through the perspective of *Bhāratīya Jñāna Praṇāli,* i.e., Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), by applying philosophical perspectives from the *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa,* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The Indian concept of leadership is not defined as a fixed style but as an integral alignment of *karma* (action), *dharma* (ethical duty), and *nāyaka* (the guiding leader). *Dharma*, one of the fundamental values of IKS, refers to righteousness and duty (Thakur & Kumar). In IKS, a true leader prioritizes the needs of others and the organization over personal gain, rooted in *Niṣkāma karma*, focusing on selfless action (Raval et al.).

This theoretical framework is validated by conducting a comparative analysis of the three famous World Cup-winning Indian captains, *viz.*, Kapil Dev, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, and Harmanpreet Kaur. Each of them symbolises a unique historical context and leadership style in Indian cricket. Following an inductive, interpretive, and interdisciplinary methodology, the study analyses how their leadership reflects the principles of *Samatva, Dhṛti, and Niṣṭhā,* while also fostering *Loka-saṅgraha*, i.e., the preservation of collective harmony.

The paper asserts that leadership in Indian cricket, looked at through a *Bhāratīya* epistemic perspective, transcends managerial classification and manifests as an ethical-aesthetic praxis which synthesises performance, responsibility, and consciousness within the evolving dynamics of *Khela*.

Literature Review

As Jaiswal and Rao (21) state, a leader must effectively influence those who follow them. Leadership in sports has many aspects involving the ability to manage troops, taking responsibility, and inspiring collective identity to achieve success (Priyadharshini et al.). In team sports, it is the captain's task to ensure that each player in the team puts their efforts jointly into achieving the team's goal (Devine 50). Indora has rightly pointed out that, in India, cricket serves as a unifying force, where captains often go beyond their roles to become national icons and symbols of hope. This review examines the leadership of three pivotal figures, *viz.*, Kapil Dev, MS Dhoni, and Harmanpreet Kaur, through the lens of both established leadership theories in the West and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) around the evolution of cricket in India.

The paper identifies several leadership styles from the western perspective, like autocratic, democratic, transformational, transactional, laissez-faire and paternalistic within high-performance sports establishing them into the *Bhāratīya* concepts of *samatva, dhṛti, and niṣṭhā*. While the Western approaches have primarily described the leadership qualities through the managerial and behavioural framework, the existing literature from the IKS domain has extensively interpreted leadership within the *Bhāratīya* perspective to examine leadership as a concept rooted in *Dharma,* ethical conduct and *loka-saṅgraha.* The writings of Chelladurai (128) also suggest that winning the game must be ethical. The author emphasizes, that *winning at any cost* and *winning by any means* are two different things and the leader of the group must ensure that the athletes know this difference. The leader should encourage '*winning at any cost*' because the term 'cost' here means involvement of time, efforts and money involved in the process of training, whereas the leader must strongly discourage the latter because it promotes winning by using foul means.

Leaders who take personal responsibility for decision-making, have a clear vision and are able to make quick assessments, especially during crises, are marked as authoritative leaders. This leadership style is classified as 'authoritative leadership' (Hegde et al. 1663). The authoritative leader is characterised by central decision-making without having any input from the subordinates, and this leadership style is often effective for immediate task execution but can suppress long-term creativity (Priyadharshini et al.). Chitrao et al. affirm that leadership that commands or directs is required when disciples (here, teammates) lack a certain level of maturity.

On the contrary, the leadership style that encourages team members' open communication and involvement in the decision-making process is known by the term democratic leadership. It fosters 40% higher intrinsic motivation and long-term skill development as compared to other leadership styles (Sahin, 2022).

Transformational leadership, introduced by J. M. Burns in 1978 and then elaborated and expounded by B. M. Bass upon Burns's framework, consists of various factors such as charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Kejriwal and Krishnan 30). According to Priyadharshini et al. (2018), a transformational leader shares a powerful and long-term vision, and this style of leadership involves working together with the team and inspiring others to exceed expectations. The transformational leadership has been discussed by the

Western management scholars, yet the ancient Indian literature has been discussing the development of such leadership personality and has also paved the way for the formation of such personality (Sardar and Baishya). Raval et al. portray Lord *Rāma* as a transformational leader, whose influence motivated his followers and companions to rise above their limitations and achieve greatness. Among the recent research on the Bharatīya model of leadership, a few efforts by Kumar et al. explore the *dhārmic* leadership style in the *Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa* based on *Bharata's* ethical governance during *Rāma's* exile, emphasising the aspects such as ethical decision-making, humility, loyalty, simplicity, penance and renunciation. In *Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord *Kṛṣṇa* emphasizes that the primary attribute of leadership is understanding the importance of disciples and their needs. An effective leader is able to identify the needs of each disciple and effectively address them. The *Gītā* also mentions that the specialization of the people who follow you is vitally important to be known in order to be able to motivate them successfully and to have them place faith in the leader and accept to be directed by that leader (Chitrao et al.). Leaders who follow the transformational approach are considered more effective because they create a healthy environment which leads to greater employee commitment and satisfaction (Burton and Kane), and thus a transformational leader is better to lead the organization going under significant change.

Transactional leadership is a system of rewards and punishments. This type of leadership style is based on 'give and take' relationships (Priyadharshini et al.). Thakur and Kumar mention that *'Seva* (selfless service)' has been emphasized by the traditional Indian leadership, where leaders were supposed to put the needs of their followers first. They further write that the reward and punishment approach of the transactional style of leaders has its root in the *karma* theory that deeds have repercussions. The author comments that the transformational leadership approach resonates with the foundation principles of IKS, as it focuses on the individual development as well as self-actualization through altruism (*dāna*) and benevolence (*paropakāra*).

When the leader prioritizes the welfare and development of the team, and it is reflected through player empowerment and decentralised decision-making, then the leader becomes a servant leader, and the leadership style is characterized as paternalistic leadership (Priyadharshini et al.). According to Burton and Kane, this kind of servant leadership is connected to transformational leadership, although it is a distinct form of leadership in itself. Sardar and Baishya (5) maintain by giving an illustration from the *Bhagavad Gītā* that a true leader should not only be engrossed in his own development but should also have compassion, cooperation and a positive attitude towards his subordinates and guide them all towards growth. They further claim that this approach is very similar to the modern concept of servant leadership and aligns with the Indian philosophy of *Loka-saṅgraha* that emphasizes working for the welfare and upliftment of all. Dhiman (153) also agrees that those who are connected with their inner authentic self, develops a true sense of humility (*vinayaḥ*) and gradually evolve towards selflessness and eventually towards servant leadership. The author further notes that this self-awareness allows leaders to connect meaningfully with the authentic self of others as well. Raval et al., too write, "IKS emphasizes selfless duty as motivation, focusing on righteousness rather than extrinsic rewards. This aligns with modern theories of duty-driven (*Dharma*) motivation and ethical leadership, where individuals are motivated by higher ethical standards rather than extrinsic rewards." Humility (*vinayaḥ/vinamratā*), as an ethical code of conduct, has been the cornerstone of the Indian lifestyle, resonating through ancient pedagogical systems, leadership and governance styles, as it prepares the inner self characterized by open-mindedness (lack of dogmatism and rigidity) leading to the flexibility of decisions in the changing times, respectfulness and agreeableness to the people, and independence of intellect, skills and ego (Gajjam).

As per Bass and Avolio, when a leader deliberately withdraws from active direction, allows the team members to take autonomous decisions and functions as a. non-interventionist, it is characterized as laissez-faire style of leadership. Although this style is often criticized in organizational literatures as an example of leadership absence or avoidance, its implementation in high-performance sports contexts presents a more complex perspective, as P. Chelladurai notes, when a leader with established credibility utilizes laissez-faire tendencies, promotes player ownership, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation within a team. Bowes and Jones further argue that in high-performance sports captain's selective disengagement by allowing experienced players to take their own decisions is actually a strategic leadership and not a withdrawal of leadership. This understanding finds a specific historical context in *Yudhiṣṭhira's* leadership at *Kurukṣetra* when the *Pāṇḍava* king consciously assigns operational authority to his *mahārathīs* and acts as a moral anchor rather than a tactical director. According to Hiltebeitel, this quality is central to

Yudhiṣṭhira's construction as the dharma-king (*dharmarāja)* who leads through presence and restraint rather than command. He frames *Yudhiṣṭhira* as a leader who governs by upholding *dharma* and a symbolic authority by entrusting martial and tactical responsibilities to more capable individuals aligning structurally with what leadership literature defines as 'laissez-faire' or 'delegative' leadership.

The situational or contingency approach towards leadership states that effective leadership is not a standard form but an ability to adapt to specific situations and develop levels of the players (Sahin, 2022).

The literature review above demonstrates that although Western leadership frameworks are scholastically validated, they are incomplete in their capacity to address the profound philosophical and cultural aspects of leadership, which results in a conceptual gap in understanding ethical selfhood, duty-bound action, and collective consciousness can be comprehensively addressed by the frameworks developed from the domains of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Motivation for this Research

The leadership of Kapil Dev is remarkably linked to the historic 1983 cricket World Cup, described as a 'landmark' and 'watershed' in Indian history. His role in transforming Indian cricket from a 'dark horse' into a global force proved him to be charismatic and inspirational captain (Indora, 2023). His historic unbeaten 175 against Zimbabwe rescued India from troubled waters. This performance is highlighted as a masterclass in his resilience, self-belief, and the audacity to dream. His leadership created a paradigm shift in self-belief among the Indian cricket team.

Mahendra Singh Dhoni is regarded as India's most successful captain, leading the nation to the 2007 T20 World Cup, the 2011 ODI World Cup, and the 2013 Champions Trophy (Mohanty, 2016). Dhoni follows democratic and servant style leadership (Priyadharshini et al., 2018). He is famously known as 'Captain Cool' for his calmness under extreme pressure (Mohanty, 2016).

The emergence of Harmanpreet Kaur marks a significant era in the growth of female athletes in India (Antalamarad and Upadhye, 2025). Her leadership role was identified as a 'landmark performer'; she helped bring women's cricket into the national spotlight through exceptional performance on a global level (Antalamarad and Upadhye, 2025).

1. Case Studies

a. Case Study 1: Kapil Dev

To understand the leadership style of Kapil Dev, one must understand the context of the 1983 World Cup. Before the tournament, India had won just one match in the previous two World Cups of 1975 and 1979. In their very first match of the World Cup, Team India defeated the mighty West Indies, which weren't just the defending champions but also the winners of the previous two World Cups. It was one of the biggest upsets for the cricket pundits. India soon lost two games, putting them on the edge of elimination from the World Cup. To proceed further in the tournament, India had to win their remaining games. In the must-win match against Zimbabwe at Ground Nevil, Tunbridge Wells, India lost their first 5 wickets for just 17 runs, the loss was almost inevitable, the World Cup exit was looking right into the eyes of team India when the captain looked back into the eyes of defeat and said, '*Not Today'!*

Kapil Dev, aged 24 years with an experience of 5 years of play and over a year of captaincy, smashed Zimbabwean bowlers all over the ground for 6 maximums and 16 boundaries. He scored a mammoth 175 not out in just 138 balls, which was the then world record for a limited-overs match. Kapil Dev's resilience, belief and leading from the front innings gave a new life to India's World Cup campaign after that, India did not lose a single match. They went on to defeat Australia in a virtual knockout match and entered the finals by defeating the hosts, England, by 6 wickets in the semi-final. What happened at Lord's on June 25, 1983, itched itself into the history of not just cricket but the history of India and changed the fate of the entire nation. Cricket became a household game of India, from grounds to local streets and alleys, cricket witnessed an unprecedented rise in participation. Children began to aspire to represent the country, nurturing the dream of leading India to World Cup glory.

Leadership Style

From India's campaign of the 1983 World Cup, it is observed that Kapil Dev demonstrated a combination of transformational, democratic and laissez-faire leadership styles. His transformational leadership is evident in his ability to instill confidence in an underdog team, making them believe that they can win 'not just matches' but the tournaments. At the same time, his democratic approach gave freedom to players to express themselves freely, play their natural game and contribute to the team decisions, fostering trust and cohesion in the team. Also the laissez-faire traits were seen in the autonomy he provided to the

experienced players of the team, like Sunil Gavaskar, Mohinder Amarnath, and others, which enabled them to perform without excessive pressure or rigid control. His leadership highlights the importance of belief, resilience, and inspiration in achieving extraordinary results.

Key Leadership Lessons

i. A leader who leads from the front, *walks the talk*, and performs courageously during a crisis with an extraordinary composure can transform the team's collective psychology and morale.
ii. Genuine self-belief embodied by a charismatic leader function as a powerful collective force as the performance multiplier.
iii. Active (participatory) and inclusive leadership fosters unity amidst diversity by enabling individuals to work towards a shared national vision.
iv. A single transformative act of inspirational leadership can redefine the cultural history of a nation.

Impact on National Identity

A middle-class youngster from Chandigarh who combined all-round excellence with charismatic leadership, which opened cricket to a broader demographic across the subcontinent and proved that if given the opportunity, self-belief, talent and resilience can transcend all the barriers. The 1983 World Cup win gave India the title of world champion as well as fundamentally altered the national sporting consciousness. The BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) expanded its broadcasting rights, which led to the gaining of enormous commercial power and cricket became deeply embedded in India's cultural fabric. It unleashed a wave of cricket enthusiasm in India over subsequent decades, all traceable, in significant part, to Kapil Dev led Team India's World Cup victory.

b. Case Study 2: Mahendra Singh Dhoni

After the 1983 Cricket World Cup, India became a powerhouse of the game yet could not win the prestigious trophy for 28 years until the command of the team was given into the hands of Mahendra Singh Dhoni, aged 26, who, before leading the team in the 2007 T20 World Cup, had 3 years of experience in international cricket with no leadership experience at all.

Before the 2011 World Cup, India had won the inaugural T20 World Cup under the leadership of MS Dhoni, and the team had performed exceptionally well across formats. Before winning the 2011 World Cup, Dhoni had 7 years of experience playing for the Indian men's team and 4 years of leadership experience. The team combination for the 2011 World Cup was a mix of experienced and young players, with players like Sachin Tendulkar, Yuvraj Singh, Virendra Sehwag, Harbhajan Singh, Zaheer Khan and the then young players like Virat Kohli, R Ashwin, Suresh Raina, and S Sreesanth. Dhoni-led team India lost just one match in the tournament against South Africa. Team India defeated the mighty Australians, the defenders and the winners of the previous three consecutive world cup, where in 2003 they won by crushing India in the finals by a huge margin of 125 runs. Proceeding into the semifinals, India faced their archrivals, Pakistan, and stopped them from chasing the low total of just 261 runs.

The victory in Mohali gave India the tickets for the finals, where India crafted history with their captain being the chief architect. The night of 2nd April at Wankhede Stadium gave Indians not just a memory to cherish for a lifetime but also the lesson of how to win no matter what the situation is: a simple belief in one's own capabilities can overcome the worst possible situations.

Leadership Style

MS Dhoni has shown almost all the styles of leadership at instances, but the dominant characteristics of his styles are democratic, laissez-faire, transformational and transactional. Dhoni is called as 'Captain Cool' as he remains calm and composed in every situation. This notion of Dhoni can be characterized as a *Sthita-prajña* state (someone whose intellect is settled). According to Chitrao et al., Lord Kṛṣṇa advised Arjuna that a leader must possess noble qualities and remain calm and steady in their judgement as a *sthita-prajña* because it is crucial to detach oneself from the outcome of actions.

Since Dhoni involves every player of the team in decision-making and has given freedom to his players to play their natural game, his leadership style can also be characterized by the democratic style. Dhoni, with his leadership, built a safe environment for the team, where players could take risks without fear of public shaming, as Dhoni used to absorb the criticism of his teammates, he consistently took personal responsibility for team failure while giving credit for success to his players.

His laissez-faire style is visible during games when he has allowed the experienced players of the team to take their own decisions. While leading the team, Dhoni has also transformed many young players like Virat Kohli and Ravichandran Ashwin by believing in them and encouraging them to reach their truest potential. Sathish et al. (2019), writes, "Great leadership is not possible without creating successors". When needed, Dhoni changed the team combination based on the requirements of the team in the different situations without

any hesitation, he dropped senior players and included younger players in the side. One such instance was inclusion of Ravichandran Ashwin in the quarterfinals against Australia, where he took two crucial wickets for India, including one of the Aussie captain Ricky Ponting. Effective captains rely upon intuition, awareness, and strategic judgement to determine the best plan of action (Devine, 2020, p. 54). This decision showed MS Dhoni's transactional leadership style.

Leadership Lessons

i. Unconventional decision-making, coupled with deep situational awareness and strategic clarity produces, breakthrough results.
ii. Publicly backing one's team members, particularly during the moments of failure or criticism, builds loyalty, trust and a strong sense of psychological safety within the team environment.
iii. Emotional regulation and composure under pressure constitute vital strategic assets for leadership which are trainable.
iv. Consistency and authenticity in values build long-term trust and credibility.
v. Great leaders mentor their successors and invest in their development.

Impact on National Identity

A young boy from Ranchi who used to work as a ticket collector for Indian Railways at Kharagpur led India to lift 3 ICC trophies, the small-town boy broke all the socioeconomic barriers to lead his nation to the highest levels, Dhoni became a powerful narrative of aspiration for young Indians. Dhoni's image transcended cricket, becoming a synonym for dignified excellence, quiet determination and self-belief. Dhoni's captaincy transformed Indian cricket, a batting-heavy, technically sound but mentally fragile unit into a strategically flexible and dominant side that could win in all formats across the globe. India became the No.1 test team in 2009, won three ICC trophies in a span of six years (2007-2013) and became a genuine force in cricket.

c. Case Study 3: Harmanpreet Kaur

Women have been long neglected in the domain of sports, especially in India, where cricket meant only men's cricket. To mark a shift in this thinking, the country needed a defining and decisive moment, and that moment was created by Harmanpreet Kaur and her team when the Indian team defeated the South Africans in the finals on Nov. 2nd. 2025 at Navi Mumbai to lift their first World Cup.

Overcoming societal norms and persistent challenges to conquer the world, the story of the Indian team was full of resilience and transformation led by Harmanpreet Kaur's fearless and empowering leadership. Unlike their male counterparts, the women players have grown up without the infrastructural support, institutional backing and media coverage to lead a team whose players often have to juggle family expectations, financial insecurity and social stigma around the women's sport.

Harmanpreet models resilience as a daily practice. That resilience was visible in front of the entire world when the Indian team chased down a mammoth 338 target against Australia in the semi-finals, a feat unprecedented in the women's cricket history until that moment! India had lost three back-to-back matches against South Africa, Australia and England, and one more defeat could have opened the exit doors for the team. In their must win match against New Zealand, India successfully defended the total in rain affected match. Despite not performing well in that game, Harmanpreet trusted her players and made brilliant tactical moves, like giving the ball to opening batter Pratika Rawal, who gave the team important breakthrough in the 28th over. This game showed Harmanpreet's excellent presence of mind and leadership capabilities. Her approach emphasized inclusivity and resilience, which enabled the team to navigate high-pressure situations effectively.

Leadership Style

Harmanpreet Kaur's leadership can be characterized as transformational, democratic and paternalistic, as she fostered a culture of confidence, accountability and collective belief within the team. When the opening batter of the team, Pratika Rawal got injured and was out of the World Cup, she was replaced by young Shafali Verma, Harman backed Shafali and gave her freedom to play her natural game, resulting in Shafali becoming the player of the match in the finals. Before the finals in the semi-finals when India had to chase a record total of 338 against the defending and seven-times world champions, the mighty Australians, Harmanpreet Kaur took the situation in her hands and laid the foundation for the chase by building a 167-runs partnership with Jemimah Rodrigues and contributing 89 runs in the chase. She instilled, in her partner Jemimah the belief that the target could be chased and Jemimah finished the game by scoring a record 127 not-out. By leading from the front and demonstrating composure under pressure, she inspired her teammates to transcend limitations imposed by societal expectations and institutional constraints.

Leadership Lessons

i. The strategic use of exemplary personal performance to transform collective perceptions and narrative is a powerful leadership tool.

ii. Inclusion and representation in sports is a significant performance multiplier.
iii. Inspiring and empowering the next generation of athletes is itself one of the highest forms of leadership impact.
iv. The ability to navigate both on-and off-field pressure and adversities with equal composure, resilience and dignity build robust leadership.
v. Leaders who actively advocate for structural and systemic create legacies that transcend individual achievement and contribute to the long-term evolution of sporting culture and institutions.

Impact on National Identity

Harmanpreet Kaur grew up in Moga, Punjab and navigated through all the societal barriers with characteristic determination. An exceptionally talented natural athlete, she broke into the doors of the national team in 2009 and established herself as the game's most decorated Indian captain. In her leadership Indian women didn't just win matches but they changed the fundamental narrative around women's cricket in India. The triumph of winning the World Cup will surely enhance visibility, inspire aspiring female athletes, and prompt greater institutional attention towards gender equity in cricket. Thus, this victory stands as a powerful testament to how visionary leadership, combined with collective determination, can drive both sporting excellence and meaningful social transformation.

Comparative Analysis

Table I presents a comparative analysis of three World Cup-winning Indian cricket team captains in light of values and ethos in the IKS revisiting their leadership styles characterized by the embedded *rasa*s, their styles of team building and decision making that led to their biggest achievements during their respective eras. It also presents the impact their leadership created on India as a nation.

Table I: Comparative Analysis of Three

Leaders	**Kapil Dev**	**MS Dhoni**	**Harmanpreet Kaur**
Captain's Era	1982-1987, 1989	2007-2017	2016-present
Leadership Styles	Transformational, Democratic, Laissez-faire: *Vīra Rasa* (heroic-sentiment), *Dhṛti*-centric *Nāyaka*(leader with steadfast resolve)	Democratic, Transformational, Transactional: *Samatva*, *Niṣkāma-Karma*, *Sthitaprajña Nāyaka*	Transformational, Democratic, Paternalistic: *Samatva*, *Dhṛti*, *Niṣṭhā*, *Viveka*-oriented *Nāyaka*
Team Building	Transformed underdogs into champions: Collective *śraddhā* (reverential faith) and *dhārmic* (righteously dutiful)assertion	Mentored young talent: *Loka-saṅgraha* and *guru–śiṣya paramparā* (collective welfare and living transmission of wisdom)	Strengthened women's cricket: *Loka-saṅgraha*, *sāhāyya* (supportive solidarity), and collective *ātma-viśvāsa*
Decision Making	Bold and unconventional: *Sāhasa* and intuitive *karma*	Instinctive and data-driven: *Viveka* with *samatva*	Composed and strategic: *Viveka*, *yukti*, and steady *dhṛti*
Biggest Achievement	ICC Cricket World Cup 1983: Civilizational assertion through *khela*	ICC Cricket World Cup 2011, ICC T20 World Cup 2007, ICC Champions Trophy 2013: Sustained *karma-yoga* in *khela*	ICC Women's World Cup 2025, Asian Games Gold 2023: Expansion of *khela* through *niṣṭhā*, *samatva*, and collective uplift
Inspirational Impact	Pioneer of Indian cricket identity:	Global icon of calmness:	Trailblazer for women's cricket: Embodiment of *niṣṭhā*,

	Awakening of *ātma-viśvāsa* (self-rooted confidence)	Embodiment of *samatva*	*samatva*, and aspirational *nāyakatva*
Communication Styles	Direct and motivating: *Utsāha*-driven expression (energetic vigour)	Minimal yet impactful: *Mauna* (purposeful silence) with *arthapūrṇa vāk* (meaning laden words)	Expressive and energetic: *Udgāra* (spontaneous action)with *spaṣṭatā* (clarity)
Leadership Philosophy	Lead from the front: *Ācāra-pradhāna Nāyaka*	Stay calm under pressure: *Sthitaprajña* in action	Empower and express: *Sahabhāgitā*-centric *Nāyaka* with *niṣṭhā*

Discussion

The case studies of Kapil Dev, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Harmanpreet Kaur, examined through the lens of Indian knowledge systems, especially through the philosophical frameworks of the *Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagvad Gītā,* altogether demonstrate a pattern of leadership which cannot be fully accounted for under the widespread western frameworks of autocratic, democratic, transformational or transactional categorization. As Burton and Kane observed about the intangibles of the leadership, it is those intangibles that IKS, with its deep and rich knowledge of *dharma, karma* and *nāyaka,* is able to unveil. The analysis of the three captains reveals a uniform set of leadership values which are an integral part of the Indian culture.

Throughout the analysis of the three captains *Niṣkāma-karma* is found to be the most consistent thread. The concept, as articulated by Raval et al., represents one of the foundational principles of the IKS based leadership, that a true leader prioritises the needs of the collective and the fulfilment of duty over personal gain or recognition. Kapil Dev's innings of 175 not out against Zimbabwe in the 1983 World Cup was not played for the survival of the team in the tournament, not to break the world record. Dhoni's calculated promotion of himself up the order ahead of Yuvraj Singh to absorb the high pressure of the run chase in the finals of the 2011 World Cup was to prioritize the match outcome over his personal batting average. Harmanpreet Kaur's persistent efforts for the institutional development of women's cricket in India, to prioritize the welfare of the future players above the current conveniences, were visible in the victory celebration of the team when they handed over the trophy to Mitali Raj, Anjum Chopra & Jhulan Goswami (the retired players). In each case, the action of the leaders is focused on the team rather than the individual, which the *Mahābhārata*'s *Śānti Parva* describes as the defining characteristic of the righteous king and the *Gītā* links with the greatest kind of *karma.*

This paper identifies three IKS principles as structural to Indian cricket leadership, they are *samatva*, *dhṛti*, and *niṣṭhā.* The three captains, emphasized each of the attributes are differentially suggesting that these qualities are not a fixed formula but a flexible ethical vocabulary that each leader adapts to their own historical context.

Samatva, the equanimity and equality of regard articulated in *Bhagavada Gītā,* is most visible in Harmanpreet Kaur's leadership, where the task of building collective confidence within a team that had long been marginalised by institutional structures required a quality of impartial regard. In her leadership each player is seen as a full and equal contributor to the team. *Samatva* is present in Kapil Dev's management of a diverse and previously underestimated squad and in Dhoni's well-documented refusal to abandon players experiencing poor form. In all three cases *samtva* functions as an active equalization and not as a passive tolerance. The leader's support diminishes the traditional fears that hinder the performance and replaces them with the psychological safety, which is required for fearless action.

Dhṛti is the steadfast resolve which is expressed in the *Bhagavad Gītā* as the quality that holds the mind, life energy, and senses in a disciplined alignment during a high-pressure situation. MS Dhoni has exemplified *dhṛti* in the most systematic manner, his calm and composed nature across the ICC tournament victories represents a sustained demonstration of what the *Bhagavad Gītā* calls '*sthitaprajna'* (2.54-2.72). In simple words, a person who is not shaken by adversity or elated by success is considered to be a *sthitaprajna.* It is equally present in all three of them in some manner. Be it Kapil Dev's brilliance on the field while defending the low total of just 183 runs in the finals of the 1983 World Cup against the stalwarts of the West Indies or Harmanpreet's maintenance of performative and psychological equilibrium throughout the years of institutional neglect of women's cricket. In all three instances, *dhṛti* signifies the calm and composure under extreme heavy pressure, and still remained

grounded and continued the duty-oriented approach in their actions.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s portrayal of Lord *Rāma*'s character, *Niṣṭhā* is described as steadfastness and loyalty towards one's own principles and duty, it is evident in the inner belief of Lord *Rāma* and his worldly actions. *Niṣṭhā* is illustrated in all three captains' journeys throughout their careers. Kapil Dev's *niṣṭhā* was the belief in the team, which was not even considered as an underdog rather was seen as a bunch of boys who were out for an international trip. Dhoni's *niṣṭhā* can be seen in the set of leadership values of being calm under pressure, always putting the team before self, and long-term development over short-term expedience, and all of his qualities remained consistent across almost 11 years of captaincy. Harmanpreet Kaur's *niṣṭhā* is based on the principle that demands transformation in women's cricket in India. In each case it is the *niṣṭhā* which makes a leader trustworthy, their inner wisdom is the basis upon which others build their own commitment.

The concept of *Loka-saṅgraha,* which means 'welfare of the world by holding everyone together' and is the ultimate justification for selfless action as stated by Lord *Kṛṣṇa* to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (3.20, 3.21 & 3.25). It provides the most integrative frame to understand the leadership legacy of the three captains. Kapil Dev's 1983 triumph was not just trophy but it was a shift in what we as a nation thought about ourselves in respect to world sports, it functions as a living *itihāsa* which continued to generate *loka-saṅgraha* for decades. Dhoni's commitment to groom his successors, his willingness to put the long-term needs of the team above his personal records and his cultivation of *guru-śiṣya paraṁparā* in the dressing room, constitute *loka-saṅgraha* at the institutional level. The call for structural equality for women's cricket by Harmanpreet Kaur is the maximum degree of *loka-saṅgraha.* She did not just act for the current squad but also for the wellbeing of the upcoming generation of girls who will come after her. In all three cases the finest form of leadership is not just about winning a game but expanding the possibilities for the team.

Limitation of the Study and Scope for Future Research

The study acknowledges various limitations which limit its conclusion and provides productive directions for future research. First, the applications drawn from the ancient wisdom of the *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa,* and *Bhagavad Gītā* carry the risk of what may be termed as the philosophical anachronism because these texts, when composed were not the era of high-performance team sports. The mapping proposed in this paper is carefully constructed yet remains interpretive rather than axiomatic.

Second, this study is confined to the three captains from a single sport that to a single specific format of World Cup. The applicability of the IKS leadership model to other captains and coaches of different sports from other national contexts remains to be examined. Third, the study has not done any primary interviews or surveys with the captains themselves or the players who have played under them. Fourth, the present analysis has drawn insights from three foundational texts identified in the introduction, a broader engagement with the full range of IKS sources, such as the *Veda,* the *Upaniṣad,* the *Arthaśāstra,* etc., will enrich and refine the leadership framework in productive ways. Despite these limitations, the paper provides a credible and conceptually fruitful basis for an IKS-grounded theory of sports leadership whose development constitutes an important task for future studies as well as for the leaders who are going to shape the future of sports in the country.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the leaderships styles of Kapil Dev, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Harmanpreet Kaur in their respective campaigns cannot be fully understood within the managerial frameworks developed from the western perspective. The philosophical frameworks provided by the *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa,* and *Bhagavad Gītā* provide a more complete and culturally cohesive picture of what made each of these leaders successful. The comparative study has shown that *Niṣkāma karma*, *Samatva*, *Dhṛti*, and *Niṣṭhā* are not only abstract philosophical ideas but also living principles which have emerged across the careers of all three captains. By observing the Indian cricket leadership through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, the paper has sought to demonstrate that leadership is not a style to be adopted but a way of playing that integrates *karma* (ethical action), *dharma* (righteous duty), and the quality of the *nāyaka* (the guiding leader).

Three case studies support the formulation in this paper's introduction that leadership in Indian cricket after being examined through *Bhāratīya* epistemic lens, is an ethical-aesthetic method which provides a way of doing simultaneous performance of skill, discharge of moral duty, and expression of a coherent inner life. Sports, at its highest, serves as a living philosophical theatre in which the values, disciplines, and aspirations of a civilisation are tested and represented under situations of true uncertainty. As this paper suggests, the leaders who do the best in that theatre are not the ones who adopt the sophisticated managerial techniques but the ones who have integrated action and duty with consciousness. In simple words, the one, who display the ancient wisdom of being a *nāyaka* who leads from the intrinsic presence within the dynamics of the game and not just from the position of authority.

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