

# The Ethics of Memory: Ancient Indian Insights for a World That Forgets Too Quickly

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**Abstract**— In an age defined by information excess and shrinking attention spans, societies are developing an unprecedented capacity to forget. At the personal, political, and civilizational level, memory once revered as a moral responsibility has become fragile, fragmented, and easily manipulated. This article argues that forgetting is not merely an individual lapse but a profound ethical failure that distorts justice, weakens democratic accountability, and erodes cultural integrity. Drawing upon ancient Indian philosophical traditions, particularly the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Buddhist mindfulness, Jain ethics, and Vedantic reflections, this study retrieves a deep civilizational wisdom on remembrance as a duty (smriti-dharma).

Through close textual readings, the article examines the epic warnings against communal amnesia: Yudhishtira's reflections on the social cost of forgetting injustice, Sita's erasure as an example of patriarchal memory practices, Karna's forgotten lineage exposing structural bias, and the Shanti Parva's discussions on preserving moral memory across generations. These insights are placed in dialogue with contemporary political psychology to explain how nations often sanitize violence, rewrite history, and normalize injustice through strategic forgetting.

The article further analyses how digital technologies accelerate this amnesia, producing short-lived outrage cycles, algorithmic distraction, and curated memory-loss. Finally, it proposes a framework for "ethical memory" grounded in Indian epistemology prioritizing slow attention, mindful civic education, intergenerational storytelling, and transparent historical practices. By combining ancient philosophical wisdom with contemporary socio-political concerns, the article argues that societies that remember consciously are better equipped to pursue justice, nurture compassion, and prevent the repetition of harm.

**Index Terms**— Ethics of Memory; Indian Philosophy; Smriti; Collective Forgetting; Mahabharata; Ramayana; Digital Amnesia; Political Psychology; Cultural Memory; Democratic Accountability.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS OF COLLECTIVE FORGETTING

In every age, societies have wrestled with the frailty of human memory. Yet no civilization has experienced forgetting at the velocity, scale, and intensity that marks the 21st century. What earlier required generations to fade is now erased within hours. Public tragedies disappear from collective consciousness within a news cycle; injustice is forgotten before justice can be pursued; and historical memory dissolves into a sea of contradictory narratives, misremembered myths, and digital distortions. Humanity today lives with more archives than ever before and yet recalls less. This paradox is not merely epistemological. It is ethical.

Memory is rarely discussed as a matter of moral responsibility. It is often viewed as a psychological process, a neurological function, or a cultural practice. Yet the ability to remember carries ethical weight: it shapes how societies honour suffering, how communities recognize accountability, how nations prevent repetition of harm, and how individuals cultivate empathy. A society that forgets too quickly becomes vulnerable to manipulation; its moral compass falters; its historical conscience erodes; and its capacity to recognize truth diminishes. Forgetting is not innocent it has consequences.

India's philosophical traditions recognized this millennia ago. Indian thinkers developed some of the world's earliest reflections on smriti (memory), shruti (listening), smarana (recalling), and anubhava (lived experience). In these traditions, memory was not a passive repository but a dynamic ethical force. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, the Puranas, and the teachings of the Buddha and Mahavira all warned of the catastrophic effects of forgetting whether it is the forgetting of dharma, of suffering, of injustices, or of

one's deeper human responsibilities. When memory collapses, the text suggests, individuals lose self-awareness and societies lose direction.

The worldview emerging from these ancient sources is radically relevant today. Contemporary democracies increasingly struggle with selective memory: they remember what flatters them and forget what indicts them. Colonial violence is softened into nostalgia; caste violence is dismissed as "past"; gendered suffering is circumvented by cultural convenience; the climate crisis is ignored until it erupts; and injustices persist because they are strategically pushed into cultural backrooms. Collective amnesia is often engineered by media, institutions, and dominant groups making forgetting not a passive failure, but an active political project.

Digital technology amplifies this erosion. Social media platforms reward distraction rather than attention, outrage rather than reflection, and sensationalism rather than sustained engagement. They create cycles of mass forgetting masked as hyper-visibility: an incident sparks momentary fury but evaporates before any meaningful transformation can occur. Algorithmic curation fragments memory into consumable bits; attention is outsourced to screens; and individuals lose the contemplative silence necessary to remember deeply. What earlier required effort to forget now demands effort to remember.

In this context, returning to ancient Indian insights on memory is not an act of nostalgia but a critical philosophical necessity. Indian epistemology uniquely links memory with ethics, duty, self-knowledge, and social harmony. It argues that remembrance is not only about holding the past but about orienting the future. It is a discipline: to remember is to resist the dissipation of truth, to honour those who suffered, to remain awake to the cost of injustice, and to cultivate the moral clarity that enables compassionate action.

This article proposes a civilizational dialogue: how the ethics of memory encoded in Indian philosophical thought can illuminate contemporary challenges of collective forgetting. It draws upon the Mahabharata's analysis of moral memory, the Ramayana's cautionary narratives around erasure, Buddhist insights on mindful remembrance, Jain reflections on karmic memory, and Vedantic explorations of the self as the witnessing consciousness that remembers without attachment. Each of these traditions contributes to a

multi-layered understanding of memory as an ethical practice and social responsibility.

At the same time, the article brings these ancient insights into conversation with modern issues: political amnesia, digital distraction, algorithmic manipulation of public consciousness, intergenerational loss of cultural memory, and the ethics of remembrance in post-conflict societies. It examines how forgetting shapes injustice, how technology accelerates erasure, and how democratic accountability depends on the sustained ability to remember.

In doing so, the article advances a central argument: memory is a moral act. To remember deliberately, truthfully, and compassionately is an ethical choice. To forget what should be remembered is a failure of responsibility. This ethical understanding of memory deeply rooted in Indian thought offers an urgent perspective for a world fragmenting under the weight of its own amnesia.

## II. MEMORY AS A MORAL ACT: THE ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF REMEMBRANCE

To understand why memory is not merely cognitive but moral, one must first challenge the widespread assumption that remembering is a mechanical function. In many contemporary discourses whether psychological, neurological, or technological memory is framed as storage: input, retention, recall. What is often overlooked is the ethical dimension of remembrance: what we choose to remember, why we remember it, how we transmit it, and whose memories we prioritize or erase. These decisions are neither neutral nor accidental; they carry moral significance. Philosophically, every society constructs its moral identity through collective memory. Nations remember stories that affirm their self-image and forget stories that destabilize it. Families pass on certain narratives but silence others. Institutions preserve documents that sustain their legitimacy while discarding those that expose their failures. This selective remembrance shapes the ethical consciousness of entire generations. The question is not whether societies remember, but what they choose to remember and what they force themselves to forget. This dynamic was recognized early in Indian thought. The Sanskrit term *smṛiti* memory is not merely recollection; it is tied to ethics, social norms, and

intergenerational wisdom. Smriti texts are not remembered because they happened, but because they guide how one ought to live. Memory, therefore, becomes a form of moral transmission. Forgetting, in turn, becomes a profound ethical lapse a failure to uphold truth, justice, or dharma.

#### Memory As Responsibility

Indian philosophical traditions repeatedly assert that memory is inseparable from responsibility. In the Mahabharata, the notion of *smarana* (mindful remembrance) forms a cornerstone of ethical awareness. The epic warns that when individuals forget the principles of dharma whether out of convenience, emotion, or manipulation chaos ensues. The great war of Kurukshetra is itself framed as a consequence of collective forgetting: forgetting promises, forgetting fairness, forgetting kinship, forgetting the responsibility of power. When memory dissolves, duty dissolves with it.

This connection between memory and responsibility is equally evident in Buddhist thought. The word “mindfulness” (*sati* in Pali, *smriti* in Sanskrit) literally means to remember. It is the act of remembering one’s intentions, one’s actions, and the consequences of those actions. A person who is mindful is not merely aware; they are ethically vigilant. Forgetfulness, in Buddhist ethics, is not innocent it is the gateway through which suffering multiplies, because unconsciousness breeds harmful actions.

Jain philosophy deepens this insight by conceptualizing memory as continuity of karma. Every action leaves an imprint, and forgetting these imprints leads to repetition of harm. To remember is to take responsibility for one’s karmic footprint. Forgetting is not an escape; it is a moral hazard.

Thus, across Indian intellectual landscapes, memory is an act of moral attention. It is the capacity to stay awake to truth even when forgetting seems easier.

#### The Ethics of Selective Memory

Modern societies are plagued by selective memory a phenomenon ancient Indian thinkers would have recognized as ethically dangerous. Selective memory creates hierarchies of suffering. It determines whose pain is acknowledged and whose pain is dismissed as irrelevant, inconvenient, or uncomfortable.

Consider public tragedies: certain events are memorialized with rituals, monuments, and textbooks,

while others vanish without record. Social injustices are often forgotten because they challenge the dominant narrative. Gendered suffering, caste-based violence, communal trauma, and environmental destruction frequently disappear from mainstream memory because they demand accountability from those in power.

Indian epics reveal this pattern with striking clarity. The Mahabharata repeatedly shows how powerful groups rewrite narratives to protect themselves, while the voices of the vulnerable Karna, Ekalavya, Draupadi are often marginalized or erased. The epic suggests that forgetting these voices is not merely a narrative omission but a moral corruption.

In the Ramayana, the ethics of memory becomes even more complex. Sita’s suffering is remembered selectively across centuries sometimes idealized, sometimes distorted, sometimes softened, sometimes silenced. Her ordeal is often cited as moral justification for social norms, but the trauma itself is conveniently forgotten. This selective remembrance reveals how societies manipulate memory to preserve cultural comfort rather than ethical truth.

#### Memory, Truth, and Justice

Philosophically, justice is impossible without memory. To seek justice is to remember wrongdoing. To forgive is to remember compassionately. To prevent harm is to remember its causes. If memory collapses, justice becomes performative: superficial gestures without meaningful transformation.

Modern political thinkers argue that forgetting injustices creates moral numbness. When societies forget, they normalize. What was once shocking becomes acceptable. Violence becomes routine. Prejudice becomes unremarkable. Silence becomes compliance.

Indian thought anticipated this danger. The Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata explicitly states that a society that forgets the misdeeds of the past invites their return. Memory is the guardian of justice; forgetting is the invitation to repetition.

#### Memory as Love

Beyond responsibility, memory also has a tender dimension. To love is to remember: to hold someone’s joys, wounds, words, and presence within oneself. In the Indian bhakti traditions, remembrance (*smarana*) is the essence of devotion. The act of remembering the beloved divine or human is an act of care. Forgetting

becomes a form of distancing, indifference, or abandonment.

This connection between memory and love is ethically significant: societies that remember compassionately cultivate kindness; societies that forget cultivate apathy. Ethical memory, therefore, is not merely punitive or judicial; it is relational.

#### Memory as a Way of Being Human

Ultimately, memory shape's human identity. One remembers not only facts but emotions, relationships, lessons, and experiences. To forget what is essential whether personal or collective is to lose something of one's humanity. Ancient Indian philosophy urges that memory anchors the self, the community, and the moral universe.

Thus, remembering is not just recalling. It is bearing witness, honouring truth, upholding justice, and preserving humanity.

### III. EPICS AS WARNINGS: HOW THE MAHABHARATA AND RAMAYANA EXPOSE THE DANGERS OF FORGETTING

Indian civilization preserved its ethical memory not only through philosophical treatises but through its epics vast narrative oceans that hold within them the moral experiments, dilemmas, failures, and insights of entire ages. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are not merely stories; they are repositories of civilizational memory. They warn what happens when societies forget justice, forget humanity, forget compassion, and forget the responsibilities that come with power. These epics, composed thousands of years ago, diagnose the moral diseases of forgetting that plague the modern world with startling accuracy.

#### 1. The Mahabharata: Memory as Moral Awareness

The Mahabharata is a 100,000-verse meditation on human weakness, moral blindness, and the catastrophic consequences of forgetting dharma. It is an epic where almost every tragedy that unfolds originates in an act of forgetting forgetting promises, forgetting restraint, forgetting kinship, forgetting the sanctity of women, forgetting justice, forgetting one's own moral compass.

#### Kuru Amnesia: Forgetting Promises and Duties

The central conflict arises because the Kuru elders forget the commitment made to the Pandavas: that

Yudhishtira would be king. This selective forgetting is not an innocent lapse; it is deliberate and politically motivated. The elders remember what benefits them and forget what binds them. The epic condemns this as adharmā not merely injustice but a violation of memory as responsibility.

#### Duryodhana's Strategic Forgetting

Duryodhana embodies the ethics of selective memory. He remembers every insult he has perceived real or imagined while forgetting every act of generosity shown to him. His memory is skewed by ego; his forgetfulness is a moral failure. His inability to remember the goodness of others collapses his world into hostility, thereby fueling the war.

In contemporary societies, political polarisation operates similarly: individuals cling to grievance but forget nuance, remember wounds but forget shared humanity.

#### Draupadi's Unforgotten Humiliation

Perhaps the most ethically charged moment in the epic is Draupadi's public humiliation in the Kuru court. The tragedy is not only the act itself but the way it is remembered and forgotten.

The elders, scholars, and warriors who witness the atrocity choose silence. Their selective forgetfulness in that moment becomes a collective moral collapse. The epic suggests that the society that forgets the suffering of women invites its own destruction.

Modern parallels are painfully clear: societies frequently forget gendered violence unless reminded by protest or tragedy.

#### Yudhishtira: Memory as Burden and Moral Clarity

Yudhishtira, uniquely, remembers everything: every promise, every action, every moral nuance. His memory is his strength but also his pain. The epic's ethics imply that sincere remembrance is difficult, heavy, and often heartbreaking yet it is essential for righteous leadership. He embodies an uncomfortable truth: ethical memory requires courage.

#### Karna's Forgotten Identity

Karna is a profound illustration of moral amnesia imposed by society. His lineage is forgotten intentionally, erased to maintain social hierarchy. When his truth is revealed, it is too late. His life

becomes a commentary on how caste-based memory erasure creates generational harm.

This resembles modern identity politics, where entire communities are remembered for their stereotypes but forgotten in their humanity.

## 2. The Ramayana: The Ethics of Remembering and Erasure

While the Mahabharata exposes the dangers of forgetting duties, the Ramayana examines the societal mechanism of erasure how certain voices are silenced, how certain narratives are edited, how certain sufferings are forgotten because they disrupt cultural comfort.

### Sita: A Case Study in Cultural Forgetting

Across centuries, society has often remembered Sita selectively celebrated her purity, idealized her endurance, and mythologized her silence while forgetting the violence embedded in her story.

Her abduction, her trial by fire, her abandonment during pregnancy these traumas are rarely confronted with ethical seriousness. The cultural tendency to remember Sita as an ideal but forget her suffering becomes an indictment of patriarchal memory.

This selective remembrance mirrors how contemporary societies often glorify women as symbols while forgetting their lived pain.

### Kaikeyi: The Villain We Remember, the Wisdom We Forget

Kaikeyi is remembered almost entirely through the lens of betrayal. What is forgotten is the complexity of her earlier heroism, intelligence, and contributions. The narrative of a single mistake overshadows a lifetime of courage.

This highlights a universal pattern: societies are quick to remember wrongdoing but forget the human story behind it. Moral memory requires fullness, not fragments.

### Rama: The Weight of Remembering Dharma

Rama's adherence to duty is powered by memory memory of lineage, responsibilities, vows, and societal expectations. He remembers dharma even when it fractures his personal life. The Ramayana thus positions memory not only as moral clarity but as moral sacrifice.

Rama's dilemmas reflect a deeper ethical question: Can a leader remember duty so rigidly that it produces new wounds? What happens when memory is absolute but compassion is constrained? The epic does not offer

simple answers; instead, it warns that even righteous memory can create collateral damage.

### Lakshmana: The Cost of Selective Forgetting

Lakshmana forgets societal laws while protecting divine duty. His impulsiveness, moments of anger, and narrow memory of threat (as in the Surpanakha incident) generate consequences that unravel larger events.

His character teaches a vital lesson: forgetting context while remembering fear can lead to ethical imbalance.

## 3. Epics as Collective Ethical Memory

The brilliance of both epics is that they function as cultural memory-keepers. They preserve not only heroic deeds but also ethical failures. Unlike many mythologies that idealize their protagonists, Indian epics document their mistakes, doubts, and moral breakdowns.

This is ethically revolutionary: civilizations are asked to remember their own weaknesses.

The epics teach that forgetting collective failures leads to their repetition. A society that glorifies only its victories but forgets its injustices becomes ethically hollow.

## 4. Why These Warnings Matter Today

Contemporary societies mirror the ethical crisis of the epics:

- Democracies forget injustices after elections.
- Public outrage evaporates after news cycles.
- Institutions forget promises once accountability fades.
- Cultural narratives erase inconvenient truths.
- Marginalized voices remain forgotten unless they fight to be remembered.

The epics remind us that forgetting is not merely loss of information it is loss of conscience.

## IV. BUDDHIST, JAIN, AND VEDANTIC INSIGHTS: MEMORY AS MINDFULNESS, KARMA, AND SELF-AWARENESS

The Indian philosophical landscape offers some of the most profound explorations of memory as a moral, spiritual, and existential practice. Unlike many modern frameworks that treat memory as a mental archive, Buddhist, Jain, and Vedantic traditions view it as a discipline of awareness one that shapes ethical

conduct, purifies perception, and anchors the individual in truth. Each tradition proposes a distinct yet interconnected lens through which memory becomes a force that moulds character, guides decision-making, and cultivates inner clarity. Together, these traditions offer a powerful corrective to the contemporary crisis of forgetting: they teach that memory is not simply stored it is practiced.

**1. Buddhist Perspective: Memory as Mindful Presence**  
In Buddhism, memory (*sati* in Pali, *smṛiti* in Sanskrit) is not nostalgia or recollection of events; it is the disciplined act of staying awake to reality. It is a moral vigilance that prevents the mind from slipping into unconscious patterns of greed, anger, and delusion.

**Memory as Ethical Awareness**

The foundational text *Satipatthana Sutta* defines mindfulness as the ability “to remember and not forget what is valuable.” This includes:

- remembering intentions,
- remembering compassion,
- remembering impermanence,
- remembering the truth of suffering,
- remembering one’s responsibility not to cause harm.

Forgetfulness, therefore, is ethically dangerous because it allows harmful impulses to dominate.

**Why Forgetting is the Root of Suffering**

In Buddhist psychology, forgetfulness (*muṣitasmr̥ti*) leads to:

- mindless actions,
- emotional reactivity,
- harmful speech,
- repetition of mistakes,
- lack of self-awareness.

The Buddha frequently warns that suffering arises when individuals “forget the nature of mind” and become trapped in habitual reactions. To remember truthfully is to interrupt this cycle.

**Collective Memory in Buddhism**

Communities, too, are asked to remember:

- the stories of suffering,
- the lessons of past conflicts,
- the causes of disharmony,
- the teachings that prevent repeated harm.

Monastic traditions institutionalized rituals of collective remembrance recitation, confession,

recounting virtues to ensure that moral clarity was never lost to forgetfulness.

**2. Jain Perspective: Memory as Karmic Continuity**

Jain philosophy offers a radically different but complementary understanding: memory is karmic residue the subtle imprint of past actions that shapes present consciousness.

**Memory as Karmic Impression (Samskāra)**

Every action, intention, and emotion leaf behind a karmic “particle” (*pudgala*) that clings to the soul. These particles carry memory not in the literary sense, but as tendencies, inclinations, and ethical consequences.

Thus, memory becomes:

- the continuity of moral choices,
- the echo of past conduct,
- the blueprint shaping future behaviour.

To forget one’s karmic history is to risk repeating one’s moral errors.

**The Danger of Ethical Amnesia**

Jain texts repeatedly warn that ignorance of past harm leads to its repetition. When individuals forget how their actions affect others, karmic bondage deepens.

For instance:

- forgetting the violence caused by food
- forgetting the harm caused by speech
- forgetting the suffering embedded in one’s privilege
- forgetting the interdependence of all beings

all lead to karmic entanglement.

**Memory as Austerity (Tapa)**

In Jain practice, memory is cultivated through:

- introspection (*pratikramana*),
- recounting past actions,
- conscious naming of one’s mistakes,
- vows of non-harm.

Through these practices, the practitioner “remembers with precision” so that ethical clarity intensifies. Memory becomes the engine of purification.

**3. Vedantic Perspective: Memory as Self-Awareness**

Vedanta approaches memory at a metaphysical level. For Vedantins, the deepest memory is not of events it is of the Self.

**Memory as Recognition of the Real**

Vedanta teaches that the ultimate forgetting is forgetting one's true nature (atma-vismriti). This forgetfulness leads to:

- identification with ego,
- attachment to impermanent roles,
- fear, desire, and conflict,
- misrecognition of self and others.

Thus, forgetting becomes the foundation of suffering at the existential level.

The Upanishadic Call to Remember

The Upanishads encourage *smarana* the constant remembrance of the Self:

“Remember the Truth again and again.

What is remembered becomes one's reality.”

Kaṭha Upanishad

Here, memory is not recollection but recognition: the soul remembering itself.

The Ethical Dimension of Self-Memory

Self-awareness is not narcissism Vedanta stresses that remembrance of the Self leads to qualities such as:

- empathy,
- compassion,
- humility,
- equanimity,
- truthfulness.

When one remembers the Self, one remembers the unity of all beings. Ethical memory becomes cosmic memory.

#### 4. Convergence: Memory as Liberation, Not Burden

Despite their differences, Buddhist, Jain, and Vedantic traditions share four profound insights:

##### (1) Memory is Discipline, Not Data

It is cultivated through practice:

- meditation,
- introspection,
- truthful living,
- mindful speech,
- ethical restraint.

Memory becomes a spiritual muscle that strengthens awareness.

##### (2) Forgetting is Ethical Failure

In all three traditions, forgetfulness is not innocent:

- Buddhists say forgetting leads to suffering,
- Jains say forgetting deepens karma,
- Vedantins say forgetting creates ignorance.

Thus, forgetting becomes the origin of ethical collapse.

##### (3) Memory Connects Present to Truth

Memory is the bridge between:

- past action and present awareness
- present awareness and future choices,
- individual consciousness and cosmic reality.

It prevents fragmentation of time, identity, and morality.

##### (4) Memory Is Both Personal and Collective

Indian traditions insist that:

- communities must remember injustice,
- societies must remember suffering,
- nations must remember ethical teachings.
- Memory is a shared moral project.

#### 5. Why These Insights Matter Today

Modern society treats forgetting as therapeutic and remembering as burdensome. Indian traditions invert this logic: deliberate remembering liberates, while unconscious forgetting enslaves.

In a world where:

- digital distraction erodes awareness,
  - algorithms fragment attention,
  - outrage cycles trivialize suffering,
  - trauma is commodified,
  - injustice is forgotten before justice begins
- these ancient insights offer a framework for ethical resilience.

They remind us that:

- to remember is to be awake,
- to be awake is to be responsible,
- to be responsible is to be humane,
- and to be humane is to be free.

#### V. WHY DEMOCRACIES NEED ETHICAL MEMORY: SOCIAL JUSTICE, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND CIVIC HEALING

Modern democracies pride themselves on institutional frameworks constitutions, laws, elections, and public debate. Yet beneath these structures lies an invisible ethical foundation without which democracy cannot survive: collective memory. A society that forgets injustice cannot uphold justice. A society that forgets its mistakes cannot correct them. A society that forgets the suffering of its people cannot represent them.

Democracy, therefore, is not merely a political system; it is a memory system.

To understand why democracies require ethical memory, we must examine the nature of political life itself: its dependence on accountability, its vulnerability to manipulation, and its susceptibility to cycles of violence and silence. Indian philosophical traditions, combined with modern political psychology, reveal that forgetting is not just a passive lapse it is a threat to civic integrity.

### 1. Memory as the Foundation of Accountability

At its heart, democracy depends on a simple principle: those in power must answer to those they govern. But accountability is impossible if societies forget:

- promises made during elections,
- crimes committed by authority,
- corruption scandals,
- injustice faced by vulnerable communities,
- policy failures,
- institutional betrayals.

In many democratic societies, electoral cycles become mechanisms of erasure. Each cycle resets public consciousness; past failures are forgotten, past harm erased, and leaders rebrand themselves as if history has no weight. This amnesiac political culture cripples accountability.

India's epics warned against this.

The Mahabharata shows how the Kuru elders forget the consequences of injustice until the war collapses their entire lineage. The epic suggests that leaders who forget their past betrayals will repeat them.

Modern democracies echo this pattern: when citizens forget, leaders escape responsibility. Ethical memory becomes a civic necessity.

### 2. Forgetting Normalizes Injustice

Sociologists argue that injustice persists not because it is invisible, but because it is forgotten. Discrimination, violence, and exclusion become part of the national landscape when societies stop remembering the pain of those affected.

Examples include:

- forgetting caste violence because it is "old history,"
- forgetting gendered violence except during sensational cases,
- forgetting communal riots except during anniversaries,

- forgetting farmer suicides once the news cycle ends,
- forgetting environmental disasters after superficial cleanup,
- forgetting the homeless, migrant labourers, and the rural poor outside elections.

This forgetting is not accidental it is structural. Democracies forget those who are not politically convenient to remember.

Ethical memory restores moral balance.

It insists that the suffering of the marginalized is not episodic but systemic. It forces societies to confront uncomfortable truths. It ensures that justice is not a temporary sentiment but a long-term commitment.

### 3. The Political Economy of Forgetting: Why Power Encourages Amnesia

Power has always had an incentive to control memory. In earlier times, memory was shaped through chronicles, inscriptions, and oral traditions. Today, it is shaped through:

- media narratives,
- digital platforms,
- algorithmic filtering,
- selective textbooks,
- curated archives,
- political speeches,
- cultural messaging.

Those who control these tools control public memory.

Why power prefers a forgetful society:

1. Forgetting dilutes dissent. If people forget injustice quickly, movements lose momentum.
2. Forgetting allows rewriting. Historical revisionism thrives where memory is weak.
3. Forgetting softens resistance. Citizens who forget harm done to them are less likely to demand accountability.
4. Forgetting makes manipulation easier. Without memory, public opinion resets rapidly, making people vulnerable to propaganda.

This is why many political actors emphasize narrative control what must be remembered, what must be forgotten, and how.

### 4. Ethical Memory as a Democratic Virtue

In contrast to political convenience, ethical memory is the commitment to remember responsibly. It requires:

- remembering injustice without revenge,

- remembering suffering with compassion,
- remembering failures with humility,
- remembering promises with seriousness,
- remembering complexity without distortion.

Ethical memory is not about holding grudges;  
It is about holding the truth.

In Buddhist thought, right remembrance (samma-sati) means recalling truthfully, without hatred or attachment.

In Jain ethics, memory purifies when it reveals responsibility, not when it fuels resentment.

In Vedanta, remembering the Self dissolves ego-based narratives and restores clarity.

These traditions offer a blueprint for democratic virtue: remember what matters without becoming imprisoned by it.

#### 5. Democratic Healing Requires Remembering Together

Post-conflict societies across the world South Africa, Rwanda, Northern Ireland have demonstrated a powerful truth: societies heal not by forgetting, but by remembering together. Truth commissions, collective testimonies, public apologies, and memorials create a shared ethical foundation.

India's epics reflect this principle.

After the Kurukshetra war, the Shanti Parva emphasizes the need for shared memory:

- recounting the causes of conflict,
- recognizing past failures,
- acknowledging collective responsibility,
- teaching future generations.

This is not because the past must be glorified it is because the past must not be repeated.

Ethical memory is preventive.

A society that remembers its wounds honestly is less likely to inflict new ones.

#### 6. The Dangers of Memory Loss in a Digital Age

Digital democracies face a unique threat: accelerated forgetting.

Algorithms prioritize novelty over depth, sensationalism over truth.

News cycles compress tragedy into entertainment.

Social media encourages instant anger but not sustained reflection.

Historical archives are buried under endless streams of content.

This hyper-velocity of information produces what scholars call digital amnesia.

Consequences include:

- trivialization of suffering,
- polarization through curated narratives,
- erosion of long-term political memory,
- loss of intergenerational wisdom,
- weakened civic engagement.

In such a world, cultivating ethical memory becomes a revolutionary act.

#### 7. What Ethical Memory Looks Like in Practice

Democracies can cultivate ethical memory through:

##### 1. Civic Education

Teaching history honestly, without sanitization.

##### 2. Community Rituals

Public remembrance of injustice and resilience.

##### 3. Archival Transparency

Opening records to prevent historical manipulation.

##### 4. Mindful Media Consumption

Developing attention rather than distraction.

##### 5. Storytelling and Oral Histories

Preserving lived experience as ethical testimony.

##### 6. Digital Literacy

Teaching citizens to question algorithmic narratives.

##### 7. Memorial Spaces

Honouring collective suffering without politicizing it. These practices transform memory from passive nostalgia into active responsibility.

##### 8. Memory as the Heartbeat of Democracy

Ultimately, ethical memory keeps democracy human. It anchors political life in truth rather than convenience, empathy rather than apathy, and responsibility rather than denial.

A democracy that remembers becomes a democracy that cares.

A democracy that cares becomes a democracy that heals.

A democracy that heals becomes a democracy that endures.

### VI. DIGITAL ERASURE: OUTRAGE CYCLES, ALGORITHMIC FORGETTING, AND THE NEW POLITICS OF DISTRACTION

The digital age has transformed the way societies remember and, more importantly, how they forget. Human memory once depended on continuity: stories passed down generations, archives carefully curated,

rituals that preserved collective experiences. Today, memory is outsourced to machines, and machines are governed by algorithms that prioritize speed, novelty, and emotional stimulation over depth, reflection, or truth. This creates a new form of collective amnesia: digital erasure.

Digital erasure does not mean deletion; it means drowning. Important events are not removed but buried under layers of new content. A tragedy that would have shaped public consciousness for decades now disappears within days. Social platforms accelerate this forgetting by rewarding only what is immediately engaging. They create outrage cycles brief spikes of attention triggered by shock, anger, or spectacle, followed by an abrupt drop into indifference. This rhythm fragments moral memory.

#### 1. Outrage Without Remembrance

Platforms like X, Instagram, and YouTube transform suffering into consumable content. Users scroll past violence, inequality, or crisis with momentary outrage but no sustained engagement. This disposability of emotion leads to what scholar's call "compassion fatigue." The issue is not a lack of empathy, but an overload of stimuli that numbs it.

Indian philosophical traditions warned against this centuries ago.

The Mahabharata teaches that anger without memory becomes impulsive.

Buddhist ethics warns that reactive emotion, unsupported by mindful awareness, deepens suffering. Digital outrage resembles both: intense but rootless.

#### 2. Algorithmic Curation as Selective Memory

Algorithms decide what appears in a user's feed, creating a personalized reality. This curation is neither neutral nor transparent. It amplifies what is profitable, not what is truthful or necessary. Thus, entire communities, histories, and injustices may vanish simply because they are not "engaging" enough. Selective memory, once a human flaw, is now mechanized.

The danger is immense:

- communal tensions can be fuelled by selective visibility,
- marginalized voices can be silenced by low reach,
- misinformation can overshadow historical truth,
- rapid news cycles can eclipse systemic issues.

This algorithmic forgetting mirrors the selective memory practices condemned in the epics except faster, wider, and more automated.

#### 3. The Erosion of Contemplation

Digital environments erode the contemplative silence necessary for ethical memory.

Traditional Indian philosophies across Buddhist, Jain, and Vedantic lines emphasize slow attention, inner stillness, and mindful recollection. These qualities are incompatible with digital overstimulation, which trains the mind to skim rather than dwell, react rather than reflect.

Without contemplation, memory becomes superficial.

Without memory, moral judgment weakens.

#### 4. Digital Amnesia as a Democratic Threat

When citizens forget, democracy falters.

Digital amnesia obscures patterns of injustice, buries civic failures, and disrupts long-term accountability. Leaders can reinvent themselves rapidly. Policies lose continuity. Public discourse becomes fragmented.

Thus, digital forgetting is not just a technological problem it is a political and ethical crisis.

To resist it requires practices of mindful remembering, guided by ancient insights but adapted to modern realities: digital minimalism, long-form reading, archival preservation, responsible storytelling, and intentional quietude.

### VII. CONCLUSION: A SOCIETY THAT REMEMBERS BECOMES A SOCIETY THAT HEALS

Every civilization is held together not merely by its institutions, but by its memory its ability to carry forward the lessons, wounds, wisdom, and responsibilities of its past. In the modern world, however, this essential moral fabric is fraying. Forgetting has become easier than remembering; erasure has become more convenient than reflection; speed has replaced depth. This article has argued that memory, when understood through the philosophical and ethical frameworks of ancient Indian thought, is not a passive archive but an active, moral, and transformative practice. It is a discipline central to justice, empathy, and democratic health.

The Mahabharata and Ramayana demonstrate that forgetting is not merely cognitive failure it is ethical collapse. Entire wars ignite because promises are forgotten, humiliations silenced, and responsibilities

bypassed. Deep suffering occurs because societies selectively remember the ideals of women like Sita but forget their pain. These epics insist that memory is moral vigilance, and forgetting especially strategic forgetting is the birthplace of injustice.

Buddhist, Jain, and Vedantic traditions deepen this insight. For Buddhism, remembrance is awareness the capacity to stay conscious of truth, suffering, and responsibility. For Jain philosophy, memory is karmic continuity; forgetting one's harmful impact is the path to repeated harm. For Vedanta, the greatest forgetting is the loss of Self-awareness, which breeds ego-driven decisions and ignorance. Across traditions, forgetting is instability, and remembering is clarity.

Modern democracies, though outwardly structured, face an internal hollowing when collective memory weakens. Justice loses foundation when wrongdoing is forgotten. Democratic accountability collapses when citizens cannot recall past failures or promises. Social harmony falters when historical pains are erased or diluted. Public conscience weakens when suffering becomes episodic, visible only during moments of cinematic outrage. Ethical memory, therefore, is not optional; it is the core infrastructure of democratic life. The digital age magnifies these challenges. Outrage cycles, algorithmic curation, and information overload produce a new form of amnesia. Instead of helping societies remember, technology accelerates forgetting. Issues of caste, gender, environment, and inequality trend briefly but vanish before lasting impact can form. In this sense, digital culture resembles the moral environment of the Mahabharata: noise without clarity, reaction without reflection, and passion without memory. Without deliberate practices of ethical remembering, democracies risk losing their moral direction entirely.

Yet memory is not solely a tool for accountability; it is also a pathway to healing. Societies that remember compassionately rather than vindictively create space for dialogue, acknowledgment, and transformation. The act of collective remembering can honour victims, restore dignity, and prevent cycles of violence. As the Shanti Parva suggests, memory is the foundation upon which reconciliation and new ethical orders can emerge.

The ancient Indian emphasis on *smarana* mindful, truthful remembrance offers an antidote to the contemporary crisis of forgetting. To remember is to resist the flattening of history, the trivializing of

suffering, and the manipulation of truth. It is to carry forward a sense of continuity: with one's own values, one's community, and the moral universe.

Ultimately, a society that remembers becomes a society that cares.

A society that cares becomes a society that heals.

And a society that heals becomes a society capable of justice.

Memory, therefore, is not a burden it is a responsibility. It is the thread that binds the past to the present and the present to the future. In an era where forgetting is effortless, remembering becomes a revolutionary act. Through the lens of Indian philosophical wisdom, we rediscover that remembrance is not only an ethical choice but a civilizational necessity.

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