



The Mahabharata

<https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/culture/story/mahabharata-epic-narrative-life-lessons-way-of-living-lifest-972070-2017-04-18>

This great Sanskrit epic, with its 90000 stanzas, is probably the longest single poem in the literature of the world.

Traditionally the author is the Sage *Vyasa*, himself a protagonist in the drama.

Like most epics, however, *The Mahabharata* is a compilation of the oft-repeated tales of gods and heroes, sung by bards in courts and temples over centuries.

The central theme is a struggle between two branches of a princely family over the hegemony of a kingdom in the region around modern Delhi.

But *The Mahabharata* is much more than that. It is a great storehouse of myths and heroic legends, didactic passages on statecraft and the ethics of kingship, lyric and theological poems-of which the *Bhagavadgita* is the greatest.

King Pandu dies, leaving his blind brother Dhritrashtra as guardian to his five sons, known as the Pandavas-the gentle Yudhishthira; Bhima, impetuous and strong; the valiant and gifted Arjuna; and the handsome Nakula and Sahadev.

They and their Kaurava cousins, the hundred sons of Dhritrashtra, are brought up together under the guidance of the family elder Bhishma.

Soon Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava, reveals his deep envy of the Pandava brothers. As their education proceeds, the rivalry between the cousins grows more pronounced, especially during

the instruction in the use of arms given by the renowned Drona.

At a tournament held to mark the end of their education, Arjuna displays his superior skill, unrivalled except by a stranger-the foster son of a charioteer. In Kama, we have the most star-crossed character of the whole epic. Burdened by the uncertainty of his origins, doomed by fate, he is cheated of the fulfilment due to one of his noble nature, his gifts-and his high birth. For he is the abandoned son of Kunti, mother to the Pandavas, and of Surya the Sun God. Again and again, even at the archery contest for the hand of the Princess Draupadi, Arjuna and he are locked in rivalry, until the final duel and Karna's death.

Yudhishthira comes of age and is consecrated heir-apparent. Duryodhana, guided by his wily uncle Sakuni, lays several plots to destroy the brothers, but gods-notably Lord Krishna-protect them against treachery.

Ultimately, knowing the eldest Pandava's weakness for gambling, Duryodhana invites him to a game of dice with the unscrupulous Sakuni, at which Yudhishthira loses all. He, his brothers and Draupadi, their joint wife, are banished to a forest for twelve years and for one more year of exile in a city where they must remain unrecognised.

In the course of the twelve years, and by their great deeds, the Pandavas form earthly alliances and gain many boons from the gods. In the thirteenth year they seek employment as

servants of Virata, King of Matsya. Duryodhana, on the alert, discovers their whereabouts and attacks Virata's kingdom.

The war begins. The kings of all Bharat ally themselves with one or other faction, and two enormous armies assemble on the plains of Kurukshetra.

Both sides claim Lord Krishna as ally. He offers the opponents the choice of a large army or himself unarmed. Unhesitatingly Arjuna chooses Krishna, who joins him as his charioteer.

On the eve of the battle, Arjuna surveys the Kaurava camp and is shaken by the prospect of shedding the blood of his kin and of his elders.

Then it is that Krishna reveals himself as the incarnation of the God Vishnu and expounds the Divine Wisdom of the *Bhagawad Gita*, the Song of God.

The *Gita* is an amalgam of philosophy, prophesy, gospel and epic-'the focus of all Indian religion'.

'Your words are wise Arjuna, but your sorrow is for nothing -bodies are said to die, but that which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited or destroyed... Realise that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat are all one and the same: then go into battle.'

The war lasts eighteen days. Great deeds are performed. There is much carnage, some treachery-and nobility on both sides. Duryodhana, but for the canker of jealousy, is a great prince, acknowledged as such even by the Pandavas.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere chronicle of chivalry and warfare. The Hindu concept of karma (destiny) runs through the epic and, as in Greek tragedy, results in tangled relationships and poignant situations-as when Kunti, fearful for her sons, reveals to Karna his true origin and begs him not to fight his brothers. Karna, with a heart rent by grief, refuses to desert Duryodhana but promises her not to fight them-all except Arjuna.

These two meet in final battle, of epic heroes, each producing his god-given weapons. But with Krishna by his side Arjuna must win, and as Karna falls Surya turns pale and all nature grieves.

And so to the inexorable end-the defeat of Duryodhana and the forces of disruption.

The Pandavas and Draupadi return to their capital Hastinapura from where Yudhishthira reigns wisely and peacefully for many years.

