

The Mahabharata

an introduction, by Naomi Appleton

The *Mahabharata* (or *Mahābhārata*, pronounced *ma-haa baa-ra-ta*) is one of the great epics of India. Traditionally understood to be 100,000 verses long (though in reality it is not quite so exact) it is a huge text, around four times the length of the Bible, or ten times the combined length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is composed in Sanskrit, the language of classical India, of liturgy and scripture, as well as of literature and court. (Comparing Sanskrit to the Latin of medieval Europe is a common – and helpful – trope.) It dates to somewhere between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th century CE.

There are, in fact, many other *Mahabharatas* in many different languages in circulation, not to mention in film, comic book, or TV series form. However, the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is viewed as the most important and earliest extant version that we have.

The basic story of the *Mahabharata* is reasonably straightforward, but it is greatly complicated by various back-stories, tangents, explanatory narratives, divine genealogies, embedded teachings, and other digressions. A famous verse in the epic states “All that is here is elsewhere. All that is not here is nowhere.” In other words, the text is encyclopedic in nature, and this makes it rather difficult to navigate. It also, however, makes it a very rich source for Hindu stories.

The main narrative of the *Mahabharata* concerns two rival kings. The trouble begins with the brothers Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Dhritarashtra is the eldest so should rule, but he is blind and so considered unfit, and Pandu is crowned. However, Pandu soon becomes victim of an angry ascetic, who curses him to die should he ever again experience union with his wives (he has two: Kunti and Madri). He decides to abdicate and live a life of penance in the forest, leaving Dhritarashtra to take up the throne.

In the forest, Pandu discovers that his wife Kunti earned a boon when she served a visiting ascetic, long before her marriage. This boon allows her to call upon a god to father a child on her. (In fact, she has used this boon once before, when as a young girl she accidentally called on the Sun god and had an illegitimate son, whom she smuggled away in shame. But she does not tell Pandu this.) Using this boon, Kunti bears Pandu three sons: Yudhishthira, by the god Dharma, Bhima, by the Wind god, and Arjuna, fathered by Indra, the king of the gods and warrior supreme. Kunti then allows her co-wife Madri to use the boon once, and she cleverly calls upon the twin gods known as the Ashvins, and gives birth to twin boys,

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Nakula and Sahadeva. These five brothers, known as the Pandavas (the sons of Pandu) are the heroes of the *Mahabharata*.

One day, unable to resist the allures of Madri, Pandu succumbs to his curse and dies in her arms. She insists on joining him on the funeral pyre, and thus in heaven, leaving Kunti the single mother of five. She returns to the city with her boys. Meanwhile Dhritarashtra has also produced sons, 100 of them to be precise, with the eldest called Duryodhana. Duryodhana was conceived before Yudhishthira, but born after him. And here lies the puzzle: Which of the cousins is heir to the kingdom?

Duryodhana and his brothers soon turn out to be nasty types, constantly trying to have their cousins killed. In one famous episode, Duryodhana sends the five Pandava brothers and their mother Kunti to stay in a house that is secretly made of lac, then has it burnt down. Luckily, they had been tipped off and so they escape, and choose to live in disguise for some years. It is during this time that Arjuna wins Princess Draupadi as his bride. When he returns to his home he jokingly says to his mother, “Look what I won today!” and she, without turning around, tells him to share it with his brothers. Once said, it cannot be undone, and so Draupadi marries all five of the Pandavas. (Various back-stories are given as to why this is okay!)

Somewhat later, the blind king Dhritarashtra decides to divide his kingdom into two, giving the best bit to his son, and the wild and unproductive bit to Yudhishthira. Annoyingly for Duryodhana, the Pandavas nonetheless succeed in building a magnificent palace and ruling their kingdom so well that all the neighbouring kings bring tribute. Duryodhana is wild with envy. He invites Yudhishthira to a gambling match, and there manages to cheat him out of his kingdom and even his freedom (though this is then won back by an enraged Draupadi, in one of the most famous scenes of the epic). The end result is that the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi are exiled for twelve years, followed by a further year in which they must live in disguise. If they succeed in remaining undiscovered during this thirteenth year they can have the kingdom.

Much of the exile is spent hearing stories. Indeed, many of the shorter narratives contained in the *Mahabharata* are found in the “Book of the Forest” (Book 3) which covers this period. The brothers even hear a version of the *Ramayana* (the other great Hindu epic).

After their year in disguise is over, Duryodhana predictably enough refuses to give up the kingdom, and so war is now inevitable. The war takes up around a quarter of the text, and results in the death of almost all the warriors of the earth, including sons and other relatives of the Pandavas, and – unbeknownst to them – their older half-brother, Kunti’s

illegitimate child, who had been fighting on Duryodhana's side. The Pandavas emerge as the victors, with some help from their key ally the god Krishna. However, they are anything but joyful. Yudhishthira has to be given lots of long teachings from elders and friends before he is ready to rule the kingdom.

The war, lying as it does at the centre of the epic, is given cosmic significance by the frame narrative. It is said that the Earth (a goddess) was overburdened, and approached the gods for help. The god Vishnu descended in the form of Krishna to help bring about the destruction of the many warriors who were causing her trouble. Thus Krishna is a key character in the epic, a neighbouring king who befriends the Pandavas (especially Arjuna) and serves as Arjuna's charioteer during the war. The *Mahabharata* came to play an important role in the development of Vaishnava Hinduism (a type of Hinduism that takes Vishnu to be the supreme deity) and a long narrative of Krishna – the *Harivamsha* – forms the appendix to the epic. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which has become one of the most important texts for Hindus, is the teaching given by Krishna to Arjuna on the eve of battle.

As well as the activities of the gods, another key concern of the *Mahabharata* is *dharma*, which means something like 'duty' or 'responsibility'. According to many early teachings, one's *dharma* depends on one's role, so the *dharma* of a king is different to the *dharma* of a priest or the *dharma* of a servant. (Indeed the Hindu caste system becomes intertwined with this idea.) However, there are also many teachings about universal aspects of *dharma*, such as the obligation to avoid harming others or to tell the truth. Yudhishthira, as the son of the god Dharma, embodies *dharma*, and can do no wrong. Thus his moments of moral crisis are of particular interest, for example when he has to tell a lie in order to defeat one of his opponents in the war. The story as a whole revolves around crises or puzzles of *dharma*, which is often said to be knotty and hard to understand.

If you would like to read the full epic then I heartily recommend this recent retelling in blank verse: Carole Satyamurti, *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling* (Norton, 2015). Although it is not exactly short, it is abbreviated nicely, and very accessible in its style. Another fun way to get to know the story is through the Hindi TV series (available on DVD) or the film version of Peter Brook's stage play from the 1980s. There is also a neat little podcast version at <http://mahabharatapodcast.blogspot.co.uk/>

This is only the shortest of short introductions to a huge and richly interesting text! If you have any specific questions or would like recommendations for further reading please feel free to contact me (Naomi Appleton) on naomi.appleton@ed.ac.uk.