

A Summary of *The Mahabharata*

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<http://www.homehighlight.org/humanities-and-science/cultures/a-summary-of-the-mahabharata.html>

The Mahabharata is an epic that comprises one hundred thousand stanzas of verse divided into eighteen books, or parvas. It is the largest single literary work in existence. Originally composed in the ancient language of Sanskrit sometime between 400 BC and 400 AD, it is set in a legendary era thought to correspond to the period of Indian culture and history in approximately the tenth century BC.

The original “author” was Vyasa who tried to tell about the Great War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas - cousins who claimed to be the rightful rulers of a kingdom.

The background to get to where the epic starts is very confusing (in medias res). I’ll present the background a bit here just to lay the groundwork.

Background

King Santanu married a strange woman he found by the river. They had many children and she drowned all of them (I told you she was strange). The king stopped her from downing the last child (a boy). She then said she was a goddess and that this child was a god but had to remain on earth as punishment for stealing a sacred cow in a past life. The child was named Devavratha, but to confuse you he is called Bhishma (one of firm vow).

The goddess went back to wherever it is that goddesses go, and the king continued ruling. One day he fell in love with a woman who ran a ferry; her name was Satyavathi. King Santanu asked her father if he could marry her, and he said yes, but only if Satyavathi’s children inherit, leaving poor Bhishma out in the cold. Bhishma was actually cool with this and said he would remain celibate so that he never had children. Thus, King Santanu and ferry woman Satyavathi married. They had two boys: one had no children and died in battle, and one (Vichitravirya) grew to adulthood and married two women (Ambika and Ambalika). But before either of his wives had children, Vichitravirya died and not long after that King Santanu also died. Thus, the only surviving member of the royal family was Bhishma who had taken a vow of celibacy and refused to break it.

What Queen Satyavathi had not told anyone that before she was married she had actually been born from a fish and had had an encounter with a sage and given birth to a son named Vyasa. So even though Vyasa isn’t exactly the heir, he can still kind of inherit.

Everyone agreed that Vyasa should sleep with Vichitravirya’s two wives and their children would inherit. Ambika gave birth to a boy named Dhritarashtra. He was a nice enough guy and should have become king, but he was born blind. Meanwhile, Vichitravirya’s other wife got with Vyasa and she gave birth to a boy named Pandu. Dhritarashtra, being blind, realizes he can’t really rule, so he gives his kingdom to his brother Pandu.

Pandu is a pretty nice guy and loves to hunt. One day he is out hunting and he kills a deer while it is in the middle of “love play.” Turns out this is no ordinary deer but a god who curses Pandu and says essentially that since you interrupted me, I’m going to mess with you. The curse states that if you have sex you’ll die. Pandu has no kids at this time, but he does have two wives: Kunthi and Madri. He decides that he can’t rule, so he and his wives hang out in the woods.

One day Kunthi (Pandu’s wife #1) calls out for the sun god. He actually appears and she is freaked out. He says, don’t call me unless you want me. He essentially ravishes her, though it’s presented in the book as somewhat consensual. She gives birth to a boy names Karna but sends him down the river in a basket. He is discovered and raised by a soldier and his wife. He comes back later as a force to be reckoned with.

Pandu thinks that maybe things will work for him if he plays the system. He tells Kunthi to have relations with some other gods and have children. Kunthi gets with Yama (god of death and justice) and she gives birth to Yudhistira. Then she gets with Vayu (god of the wind) and has Bhimasena. Finally she does the deed with Indra (chief god) and gives birth to Arjuna. Meanwhile, Pandu’s second wife, Madri, entices the gods Aswins and has twins Nakua and Sahadeva. They are all boys, they are all awesome and they are collectively known as the Pandavas. The epic focuses on these guys.

Pandu just can’t resist his urges and tries to have sex with his wife Madri. He dies in her arms and she flings herself on his funeral pyre. Kunthi (Pandu’s other wife) takes the boys to the blind brother of Pandu, Dhritarashtra, so they can be raised to inherit the kingdom.

Meanwhile, Dhritarashtra (Pandu’s blind brother) married the princess Gandharai and becomes a blind king (not a desirable leader but a nice enough guy). She blindfolds herself in sympathy of his blindness and never sees again. While Pandu was out in the woods with his two wives avoiding sex, Dhritarashtra became king, and he and Gandharai had 100 sons (I think they are all born from a metal ball that she harbors in her womb for years. When the ball “drops” she wacks it with a stick and out pop the boys). These sons are not good boys and fight with their cousins all the time. The oldest of these children is named Duryodhana and he’s a real baddy. This collection of boys is called the Kauravas

All 105 boys are looked after by Bhishma who is constantly trying to train them and have them get along. The epic is essentially an ongoing feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. If you haven’t figured it out, the Pandavas are the good guys.

Details of the story

The evil brothers were envious of their cousin Yudhistira and started scheming to dethrone him. Their first attempt to kill the Pandavas was by burning them inside a palace. The Pandavas managed to escape, but then the evil brothers once again attempted to gain control. One challenged the eldest brother Yudhistira to a game of dice which led Yudhistira to lose everything, including his and his brothers' wife, Draupadi. He,

along with his brothers and their wife Draupadi, were exiled from the kingdom. For twelve years they had to live in the forest and upon the thirteenth year they were to hide in a city in disguise. It was during those thirteen years that the brothers grew to learn what it was like to live with the bare minimum and became more knowledgeable. After the thirteenth year Duryodhana decided that he would fight against them which led to a huge war and the deaths of many. Many died from both sides and after the war, they realized that nothing was really gained.

The most dramatic figure of the entire Mahabharata, however, was Krishna who was the supreme personality of Godhead himself, descended to earth in human form to reestablish his devotees as care takers of the earth, and who practiced Dharma.

Krishna was the cousin of both parties, but he was a friend and advisor to the Pandavas, became the brother-in-law of Arjuna, and served as Arjuna's mentor and charioteer in the Great War. Krishna is portrayed several times as eager to see the war occur, and in many ways the Pandavas were his human instruments for fulfilling that end.

Throughout their lives and the terrible Great War, there were examples of the ethical gaps between men which were never resolved. In the aftermath of the war, Yudhishtira alone was terribly troubled, but his sense of the war's wrongfulness persisted to the end of the text. This was in spite of the fact that everyone else, from his wife to Krishna, told him the war was right; even the dying patriarch, Bhishma, lectured him at length on all aspects of the Good Law (the Duties and Responsibilities of Kings).

In the years that followed the Great War, the only survivors on the part of the Kauravas, Duryodhana's parents, King Dhritarashtra and his queen, Gandhari lived a life of asceticism in a forest retreat and died with yogic calm in a forest fire. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas was with them too. Krishna departed from this earth thirty-six years after the Great War. When they learned of this, the Pandavas believed it was time for them to leave this world too and they embarked upon the 'Great Journey,' which involved walking north toward the polar mountain that is toward the heavenly worlds, until one's body dropped dead. One by one, beginning with Draupadi, the Pandavas died along the way until Yudhishtira was left alone with a dog that had accompanied him from the start. Yudhishtira made it to the gates of heaven and there refused the order to drive the dog back, at which point the dog was revealed to be an incarnate form of the God Dharma (the God who was Yudhishtira's actual, physical father), who was there to test Yudhishtira's virtue. Once in heaven Yudhishtira faced one final test of his virtue: He saw only the Dhartarashtra Clan in heaven, and he was told that his brothers were in hell. He insisted on joining his brothers in hell, if that were the case! It was then revealed that they were really in heaven, that this illusion had been one final test for him.

In essence, the epic story represents an extended exploration of the responsibilities set forth by the code of dharma. In addition to recounting a heroic tale, the Mahabharata contains a collection of writings on a broad spectrum of human learning, including ethics, law, philosophy, history, geography, genealogy, and religion. It also features a number of legends, moral stories, and local tales all woven into an elaborate narrative.