

AN INTRODUCTION TO

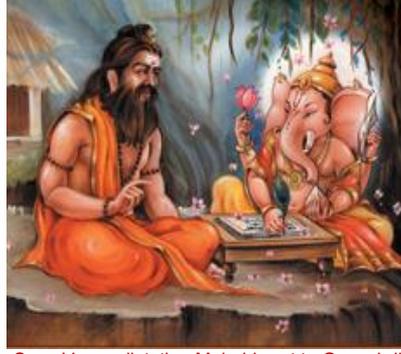
MAHĀBHĀRATA

The Mahābhārata is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the Rāmāyana.

With over 100,000 shlokas (verses) or over 200,000 individual verse lines (each shloka is a couplet), and long prose passages, about 1.8 million words in total, the Mahābhārata is the largest poems in the world. It is roughly ten times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined, or about four times the length of the Ramayana. In importance to world civilization, the Mahābhārata has often been compared to the Bible, the works of Shakespeare, or the works of Homer.

It is looked upon as the Panchama-Veda, the fifth Veda, as it contains all that is said in the Veda. While the life of Rāma in the Rāmāyana exemplifies dharma-shāstra, the Mahabharata unfolds both dharma-shāstra and moksha-shāstra, as it contains Bhagavad Gītā.

The Mahābhārata contains virtually all the lore and legend of the Classical Hindu Tradition, which is also very much a living tradition. Here are the great legends: the churning of the milk ocean, the descent of the river Ganga, and



Sage Vyasa dictating Mahabharat to Ganesh-ji

other favorite sacred stories and fairy tales. Here are the jokes. Here are the codes of law -- moral, ethical, and natural. One of the best things about the Mahābhārata is its wonderful richness of episode and detail. The Mahābhārata itself says it quite positively.

What is found herein
may also be found
in other sources,
What is not found herein
does not matter.

However, Mahābhārata is not a random collection of tales; every digressive bit of the Mahābhārata is there to shed light on the central story. In the process, the Epic has become a great repository and source of wisdom – wisdom which is as valid and applicable today as it was during the time of Mahābhārta.

The core event of that story is the great battle that was fought on the field of Kurūkshetra between the five

sons of King Pandu, known as Pāndavas, and their allies on the one side and the hundred sons of King Dhritarāshtra, known as Kauravas, with their allies, on the other side. The battle was the culmination of a long history of struggle and diplomatic maneuvering, and it involved virtually every tribal king and every powerful city-state in Central and Northern India at the time.

It was a tragic war that pitted brothers against brothers, sons against fathers and uncles, brave noble men against brave noble men. And it was devastating. Nearly all of the best men died in the long battle. The Pāndavas, the sons of King Pandu, survived, but there was no victory, for the war had destroyed the world that they knew, and the emptiness of what they had won colored the rest of their lives.

The text weaves a complex story of power, love, hate, greed, jealousy and honor stemming from the struggle between the Pāndavas, the heroes and their devious cousins, the Kauravas. This struggle within the royal family of Hastināpura influences social and political history.

Because the Story unfolds over six generations, the reader can follow changes in the

3. **Vana Parva** *also Aranyaka-parva*, (The Book of the Forest); Chapters: 29-44.

4. **Virāta Parva** (The Book of Virata); Chapters: 45-48.

The year spent incognito at the court of Virāta.

5. **Udyoga Parva** (The Book of the Effort); Chapter 49-59.

Preparations for war and efforts to bring about peace between the Kurus and the Pāndavas which eventually fail (*udyoga* means effort or work).

6. **Bhishma Parva** (The Book of Bhishma); Chapters 60-64.

The first part of the great battle, with Bhishma as the commander of the Kauravas and his fall on the bed of arrows.

7. **Drona Parva** (The Book of Drona); Chapters 65-72.

The battle continues, with Drona as commander. This is the major book of the war. Most of the great warriors on both sides are dead by the end of this book.

8. **Karna Parva** (The Book of Karna); Chapter: 73.

The battle, with Karna as the commander.

9. **Shālyā Parva** (The Book of Shālyā); Chapters: 74-77.

The last day of the battle, with Shālyā as the commander. Bhima killed Duryodhana by smashing him on the thighs with a mace, which ended the war.

10. **Sauptika Parva** (The Book of the Sleeping Warriors); Chapters 78-80.

Ashvatthāma, Kripa and Kritavarma kill the remaining Pāndava army in their sleep. Only 7 warriors remain on the Pāndava side and 3 on the Kaurava side.

11. **Stri Parva** (The Book of the Women); Chapters 81-85.

Gandhari, Kunti and the women (*stri*) of the Kurus and Pandavas lament the dead.

12. **Shānti Parva** (The Book of Peace); Chapters 86-88.

The crowning of Yudhisthira as the king of Hastinapura, and instructions from Bhishma for the newly anointed king on society, economics, and politics. This is the longest book of the Mahabharata.

13. **Anushasana Parva** (The Book of the Instructions); Chapters 89-90.

The final instructions (*anushasana*) from Bhishma.

14. **Ashvamedhika Parva** (The Book of the Horse Sacrifice) Chapters 91-92.

The royal ceremony of the Ashvamedha (Horse sacrifice) conducted by Yudhisthira. The word-conquest by Arjuna. The Anugita is told by Krishna to Arjuna.

15. **Ashramavasika Parva** (The Book of the Hermitage); Chapters 93-95.

The death of Dhritarāshtra, Gandhari, and Kunti in a forest fire where they were living in a hermitage. Vidura predeceases them. On Dhritarāshtra's bidding, Sanjaya goes to live in the higher Himalayas.

16. **Mausala Parva** (The Book of the Clubs); Chapter 96-97.

The infighting among the Yādavas with maces (*mausala*) and the eventual destruction of the Yādava clan.

17. **Mahāprasthāna Parva.**

18. **Svargarohana Parva** (The Book of the Ascent to Heaven); Chapter 98.

The great journey of Yudhisthira and his brothers across the whole country and, finally, their ascent to the great Himalayas where each of the Pāndavas falls except for Yudhisthira. Return of the Pāndavas to the spiritual world (*svarga*).

Harivamsa Parva (The Book of the Genealogy of Hari); Chapter 99-100.

ॐ