

Mahabharata

Biography / Overview

Mahabharata is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India (the other is Ramayana) that is attributed traditionally to the sage Vyasa, who narrated the events of the Kurukshetra War and its background into a structured poem, while Lord Ganesha transcribed it. It consists of over 100,000 verses. Its exact date of composition remains unknown, but scholars believe that the written epic took shape anywhere between the 3rd or 4th century BCE and the 4th century CE. The Mahabharata is a complex text that addresses various aspects of human life, including ethics, morality, duty, and the nature of existence. It is primarily focused on the Kurukshetra War (battle for the throne of Hastinapura), a climactic battle between two factions of a royal family, the Pandavas (sons of Pandu) and the Kauravas (sons of Dhritarashtra).

The Mahabharata is not just a work of literature but also a religious and philosophical text that has had a profound influence on Indian culture and society. It is considered one of the foundational texts of Hinduism and has been the subject of numerous interpretations, adaptations, and commentaries over the centuries. It is divided into 18 books (i.e., parvas), and each tells different aspects of the story. Some of the key books include Adi Parva (The Book of the Beginning), Sabha Parva (The Book of the Assembly Hall), and Bhagavad Gita (The Song of God – showing conversation between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna). The Mahabharata contains various subplots, stories, and philosophical discourses.

Bibliography / Primary Sources

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Birth Date / Death Date

The exact date when the Mahabharata was written is unknown, as it is a text that evolved over time through oral tradition before being written down. The composition and development of the Mahabharata are believed to have taken place over several centuries, the core text dating back to the 4th century BCE or even earlier. The epic is traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa, who is said to have composed it with the help of Lord Ganesha.

The events in the epic take place in the Indian subcontinent and its surrounding areas. It continues to be studied, interpreted, and celebrated by scholars, philosophers, and practitioners of Hinduism to this day.

(<https://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/prodCollections.asp?pid=46&id=1&lk=dp1>)

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Notable / Best-Known For

Conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, which revolves around the Kurukshetra War.

The Mahabharata is renowned for its character development, particularly the complex personalities of the main protagonists (Pandavas) such as Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva.

The Mahabharata is best known for the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text that consists of conversation between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where Krishna enlightens and guides Arjuna with spiritual wisdom. It is considered one of the most important philosophical works in Hinduism.

(Source: Hopkins, E. Washburn (trans.). "The Great Epic of India: Character and Origin of the Mahabharata." University of Calcutta, 1901.)

Famous Quotes

“One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action.” – Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 5, Verse 10

“For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy.” – Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 6

“When righteousness (dharma) is destroyed, it destroys; when righteousness is protected, it protects.” — Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, Chapter 188

“Divinity blossoms there where women are honoured.” — Mahabharata, Anushasana Parva, Chapter 113

“It is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else’s life with perfection.” – Mahabharata, Book 12, Section 289

Major Works / Textual Contents

The Mahabharata is a vast, long, and complex epic that consists of multiple books, each dealing with different aspects of the story. Some of the major works and textual contents of the Mahabharata include:

Adi Parva: The Book of the Beginning, which sets the stage for the epic narrative and introduces the main characters like Bhishma, Shantanu, Satyawati, Dhritarashtra, etc.

Sabha Parva: The Book of the Assembly Hall, which starts with narration about the infamous game of dice where Yudhishtira loses everything – including his kingdom and Draupadi – leading to the humiliation and exile of the Pandavas. This plants the seeds for the Kurukshetra War.

Vana Parva: The Book of the Forest, which describes the adventures of the Pandavas during their 12-year exile and 1 year of disguise after losing everything in the dice game. This text includes rich philosophical dialogues, encounters with sages, moral teachings, and stories that offer deep reflection on dharma, suffering, and resilience.

Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God, a philosophical dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The teachings of the Gita begin when Arjuna feels overwhelmed to fight in the battle against his own family and teachers. Lord Krishna enlightens Arjuna and encourages him to follow his dharma and perform his righteous duty.

Udyoga Parva: The Book of Effort, which details the diplomatic efforts to avoid the Kurukshetra War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It includes diplomatic negotiations, like Krishna’s peace mission to Hastinapura, where he tries to convince them to return the kingdom that belongs to the Pandavas.

Bhishma Parva: The Book of Bhishma, which describes the beginning of the Kurukshetra War and focuses on the heroism of Bhishma during the war. It includes the first ten days of battle under Bhishma’s command of the Kaurava army.

Influences / Intellectual Context

Significant Intellectual and Cultural Influences: Rooted in Vedic tradition, the Mahabharata has a profound influence on Indian culture, society, and the religious teachings of Hinduism.

Contributions to Fields or Disciplines: Crucial for literary studies, philosophy, theology, ethics, and cultural history within South Asia. The epic addresses fundamental questions of morality, duty, and righteousness in Hindu mythology.

Notable Achievements and Recognition: Known for the Bhagavad Gita, an influential philosophical and spiritual dialogue between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna, contained within the epic. It contains philosophical discourses on topics such as dharma (duty), karma (action), and moksha (liberation), which have been central to Hindu thought.

Legacy and Modern Significance

Historical and contemporary relevance: The Mahabharata continues to significantly influence Indian literature, culture, religious practices, and ethical thought.

Documented modern references or adaptations: It has been widely adapted in literature, theater, film, television, and art across South Asia and globally. It has countless interpretations in various art forms.

Current scholarly interpretations and discussions: Extensive scholarship explores narrative complexity, philosophical insights, historical contexts, and cultural significance.

Source of Guidance: The Mahabharata remains a source of moral and spiritual guidance for many Hindus and scholars alike. Its philosophical discourses continue to provoke deep reflection and debate on the nature of existence and human behavior.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

In 2018, a new English translation of the Mahabharata by acclaimed translator Bibek Debroy was released, bringing the epic to a wider global audience.

The Mahabharata continues to be a subject of academic conferences and symposia, such as the International Conference on the Mahabharata held at the University of Delhi in 2020.

Digital resources and online platforms have made the Mahabharata more accessible than ever, with websites offering interactive versions of the epic and scholarly resources for further study.

From the early 2000s to now, global universities include Mahabharata teachings in courses on World Literature, Comparative Religion, and Philosophy. It continues to help people navigate the chaos of modern life with wisdom, courage, and clarity.

Suggested Reading & Resources

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