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# UNIT 1 THE *MAHABHARATA*: AN OVERVIEW

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with the diverse material that is available on the ancient Indian Epic the *Mahabharata*. It is to provide you with a perspective on the entire text along with its reception over the centuries. Certain elements pertaining to the form and structure of the epic have been discussed in order to clearly define the nature of the text which would help us in evaluating it better, as being students of Literature, we also need to develop critical skills. In the next section, we shall introduce the *Mahabharata* as a text, not the comic form or the TV Serial version.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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The *Mahabharata* is the name of an Indian oral epic to begin with and compiled traditionally in *Sanskrit* later on, charting the story of a family involved in a tussle that leads to a battle. The epic is in effortless verse and has many episodes. Each story or episode has a beginning and an ending so that, these appear as individual pieces while still being loosely connected to one another. The *Mahabharata* is a story of kinship and conflict for dynasty. It is thus, the story of a family quarrel in verse involving the two warring groups the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. The succession conflict begins when *Yudhishthira* seeks a fair share for the *Pandavas* - rule of a mere five villages. When he is denied this rightful claim, the struggle for inheritance begins and the question of 'who is the rightful heir?' is posed and emphasised.

Tracing the roots of the epic poem, we find that the epic is about the Dynasty of King *Bharata*. We are told that:

The text of the *Mahabharata* is sometimes supposed to have developed in three stages. The first was that of 8800 verses called *Jaya*, the second of 23000 verses called *Bharata*, and the third of 100,000 verses called the *Mahabharata*.  
(Pande, 37)

It is believed that in an earlier time the work was called “*Jaya*” (victory), that it was a poem of triumph which recounted the tale of a king who wins over his rival kinsmen. If we are to split the word *Mahabharata* into two syllables – *Maha* and *Bharata*, *Maha* would refer to “*the great*”; and *Bharata* to the “*story*”. Hence, the epic could also mean “*Mahabharata*” or “*The Great Story*.” Having said that by way of an introduction to the epic, it is but pertinent that we look at what an Epic is next.

An epic is a heroic poem with a long narrative and a serious subject matter. It is a collection of a series of events but has at least one major happening that determines the fate of humanity at large. Epics are often of national/universal significance and deal with warriors, legends, folktales, and histories. The setting of the epic is usually grand and involves superhuman actions. It depicts larger than life scenes, vivid descriptions, long speeches and elaborate greetings, digressions as also hardships, long arduous journeys and misadventures. The epic encompasses a large timeframe that may include generations and ages. It is wide-ranging in time and space as also in its cast of characters. This is a generic introduction to the Epic form as most of us will know and is true of most Epics be they oral or written, of the West or the East. Epics do have some common features and we shall examine them next.

Narrator — Every Epic has a narrator and epics also normally begin with an invocation / prayer to the Gods and this invocation is usually performed by the narrator, who then, sets the epic in motion. The narrator may introduce the epic question that would be dealt with, in the work and, around which the entire narrative is built. The theme and question is related to a general truth—it could open a debate on war and justice since both are important themes in epics.

Episodic in nature — An epic has several episodes each connected to the other but each with its own beginning and ending. While these episodes have a bearing on one another they are logically complete in themselves. This is an essential quality of an epic.

Grandiloquent — The style of an epic is formal and grandiloquent, which means the narration must be both grand in scope and eloquent in expression. The epic would reject ordinary speech in favour of oratory and stylised language. It would often have *epic conventions* and *epic similes*.

Heroic — An epic has a hero (es) who have extraordinary or divine power. The hero is either a progeny of a god or a disciple. The hero of the epic is able to interact with the gods and in crucial moments see the gods in their divine *avatar*. These heroic characters are able to draw strength and knowledge from the gods who play an important role in their lives. There is a union between the human and the divine in the epic. At the same time, the heroes are not mere observers or spectators of events. They are participants and agents of change. These characters work out in their minds the different perspectives and take decisions as well as act on them.

In the *Mahabharata*, however, no one person is heroic as in the case of the *Ramayana* (another Indian epic of significance). The *Mahabharata* is meant to be a record of human beings who fall prey to temptations. Unlike the *Ramayana*, which is focused on the character of Ram, the *Mahabharata* focuses on the complexity of events and characters spread over three generations. The

latter is not a one-man show and in this sense closer to our reality than the former. However, while the *Ramayana* is an epic in praise of an ideal man, the *Mahabharata* focuses on human weaknesses. The *Mahabharata* has a spate of characters important to the narrative while in the *Ramayana*, everything revolves around the figure of *Ram* and his actions. This makes the *Mahabharata* more realistic. It is seen as a historical epic spanning across generations. While in the *Ramayana* ‘god’ is at the centre of the narrative, in the *Mahabharata* it is the human being in interaction with the gods who occupies centre-stage. It has been suggested that the *Mahabharata* does not fit in the western model of the heroic epic. It in fact:

*Reflects the critical representation of a bygone heroic age from the point of view of a subsequent age of enlightenment* (Pande, 38)

Thus, the European idea of the epic cannot be applied to the *Mahabharata per se*, even as the text has epic dimension and deploys freely the characteristics of the epic.

Human-Divine characters — some gods appear as characters in epics and they have a part to play in the narrative. They make the human being the object of inquiry as they keep testing the strength and vigour of the important characters. For instance, the narrative acquaints us with the author **Vyas**, who is a god who has taken a human *avatar*. Similar is the case with the character of *Krsna* in the text.

Temperament and moral attitude— each character in the epic displays a particular temperament and moral attitude. This determines their speech and behaviour. By extension they become the epitome of the set of values they hold dear. In this way the conflict between characters in the epic actually becomes a conflict between two value systems.

Optimism — An Epic is meant to have a positive end which promises a better and just world. Good must be rewarded and evil punished. The *Mahabharata* in many ways can be looked at as a fight between good and evil as also *dharma* and *adharma*.

These are some of the important constituents of an epic in general, the Indian epic and the text under consideration – the *Mahabharata* in particular. Let us now briefly look at the structure of the *Mahabharata*.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) What is an Epic?  
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- 2) What are some of the common features of an Epic?  
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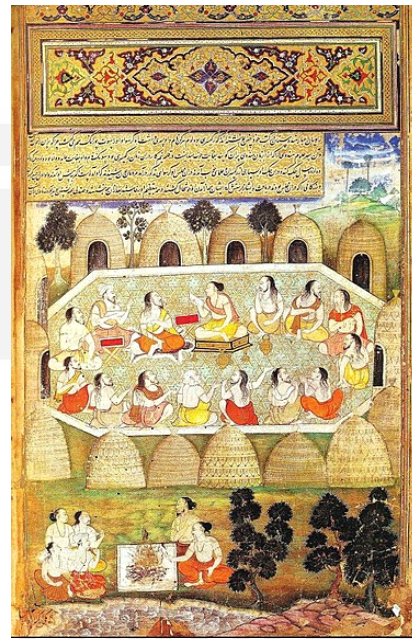
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## 1.2 THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAHABHARATA

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The *Mahabharata* has a principal narrative that binds the entire work and all the episodes together. The Epic is divided into eighteen books and a *Khila*/

*Harivamsa Parva*, (which is ‘The Book of the Genealogy of Hari’, an addendum to those parts of the life of *Krsna* that are not covered in the 18 *Parvas* of the *Mahabharata*), that are called *parvas* and each book has several sub-books. Each *Parva* has its own structure—a beginning and an end unified by action. The eighteen books are as follows: *Adi Parva* with 7982 couplets; *Sabha Parva* with 2511 couplets; *Vana Parva* containing 11663 couplets; *Virata Parva* having 2500 couplets; *Udyog Parva* –6698 couplets; *Bhishma Parva* –5863; *Drona Parva*—8909, *Karna Parva* 3900; *Shalya Parva*—3220; *Sauptija Parva*—870; *Stri Parva*—775; *Shanti Parva*—13525; *Anushasana Parva*—6700; *Ashvamedhika Parva*—3320; *Ashramavasika Parva* –1506; *Mausala Parva*—300; *Mahaprasthanika Parva*—120; *Svargarohana Parva*—200 and the *Khila/ Harivamsa Parva*, as mentioned earlier. In the next section, we shall look at the complexities in the narrative of the *Mahabharata*.



*Sauti reciting the Shlokas of the Mahabharata, [wikipedia.org]*

### 1.3 THE COMPLEX NARRATIVE

The first page of the *Mahabharata* does not introduce us to the royal courts (which would occupy much of the action later) with its dynastic struggles but the humble surroundings of a hermitage where sages are gathered to perform a ritual lasting twelve years. Here *Ugrashrava*, the bard, is urged by the seers assembled in the *Naimisa* forest to recite the interesting and grand tale of the *Bharatas*, as recited earlier by *Vaishampayana* to King *Janamejaya*. This sets the tone for the beginning of the narrative.

It is believed that *Krsna Dvaipayana Vyas* composed the *Mahabharata*. He is understood to be a participant in the events and a trustworthy eye witness. As author of the text he narrates the story to his disciples. According to certain religious readings of the text, “of the pupils to whom *Vyasa* told this story, *Narada* recited it to the Gods, *Asita Devala* to the Ancestors, his son *Shuka* to the *Gandharvas*, *Yakshas*, and *Rakshasas*, and *Vaishampayana* to the mortals” (Mehta, 72). *Vyas*’s disciple *Vaishampayana* narrates the tale to King *Janamejaya* (son of King *Parikshita* and grandson of *Abhimanyu*) of

*Hastinapura* who wished to know about the deeds of his ancestors. *Vaishampayana* narrates the *Mahabharata* to the assembly present at the court at the sacrifice of the *Nagas*. The tale as recited by *Vaishampayana* to King *Janamejaya* is heard by one *Ugrashrava*, the son of a bard (famous storyteller) and he recounts it to a group of sages who are involved in performing sacrifices and rituals for twelve years. The narrative is thus, tortuous.

The *Mahabharata* as a whole is recited by *Ugrashrava* /the loud voiced, who may be seen as the first narrator of the book. The second narrator is *Vaishampayana* who narrates in the first person the story up to a point making way for the third narrator *Sanjaya*, who recounts the battle scene step – by – step, following which *Vaishampayana* resumes his narrative. A number of stories within the text are recounted by other narrators as well.

### 1.3.1 The Question of Authorship and Reworking of the Narrative

It is believed that a generation of narrators conforming to the changes in language and style in their specific context, reworked the text of the *Mahabharata*. For instance, many critics believe that the “*Bhagvad Gita*” was a later addition and does not essentially fit in the logic of the text. Many episodes and legends too, it is believed have been added to the original composition of *Vyasa*. Thus, we have stories within stories. The *Mahabharata* for us, in this sense, has many narrators and authors. Also, “the essential thing in such oral communication is that from the very beginning, the story is told to someone, by someone face-to-face, somewhere, at some point of time, where the teller and the auditor are in an engaged relationship with the story told”. Thus, each time the text was told, new elements were added to it that was specific to the context of the teller and the auditor. The oral tradition enabled many versions of the *Mahabharata*. With later scholarship, the *Mahabharata* attained a standard form when it was passed on as a written text meant to be read and not heard. **M A Mehendale** has suggested that the *Mahabharata* “has come down to us not in its original form but with many additions made in it, in the course of its long transmission, first by reciters and later by writers of manuscripts at different places and different times”. These interpolations in the *Mahabharata* are only natural as he further suggests that “it would have been a matter of great surprise if a popular text like the Mbh. (Mahabharata) which was orally transmitted for many centuries was not burdened with many additions” (Interpolations in the *Mahabharata*, 2001, 195). In fact, oral literature is defined as a collective ownership by a community or a people who add to the compositions passed on from one generation to another. This kind of literature is often attributed as folk literature.

### 1.3.2 Folk Tales, Fables and Parables in the Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* is also a part of a strong folk tradition in India which is freely adapted and reworked; new fables and parables have been added over the centuries. Still, there is a lyrical quality about the text as it was sung by bards at courts as also by wandering minstrels. Written in simple verse form, the *Mahabharata* like the *Ramayana* was a narrative that was sung from place to place. Underpinning the significance of the folk tale several critics have viewed the great epic as primarily divided into “two main parts (i) The main story of the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* and (ii) the vast tale-literature” (Dange ix). Further it has been observed that,

*Tales like the 'Swan and the Crow', 'the Pigeon' Sacrifice' or 'the Bidalavrata' come under fable while 'king Brahmadata and Piyani' and 'Sibi' can be classed as parables, the difference being that in the former the whole tale is told as of the beasts and birds while in the latter we have human being as the central figure. Both the fable type and the parable type of tales are one in the point of a purpose which is –imparting instructions...*

*(Dange, Legends in the Mahabharata, xxxvii, 1969).*

Thus, the *Mahabharata* is didactic in tone and is meant to be a manual of a moral code of conduct. However, it also has strong contemplative and philosophical strains that bring into focus the dilemma of human choice and venture. Let's look at the society at the time of the *Mahabharata* next.

### 1.3.3 Social Life at the Time

What was society like at the time when the *Mahabharata* was composed? For that we need to ascertain when the *Mahabharata* was composed. Critics differ on the exact dates but it has been largely agreed that it was composed around 1000 B.C. This constitutes India's ancient period. **G C Pande** tells us that:

*The society described in the Mahabharata is regularly conceived as a fourfold one, one, that, consisted of the four Varnas. It has been opined that the Kshatriyas constituted the pre-eminent class in this society because of their control of political power...*

*(An Age of Change, 53)*

It is also believed that the social tussle for supremacy defined the relation between the *Brahmanas* (who had the traditional role of advising the King and performed sacred rituals) and the *Kshatriyas* who managed royal power and defended the state.

*Kshatriyas had a definite code of morality to guide them. They were expected to be hospitable, never to refuse protection to a refugee, never to forget a good deed or an injury, never to refuse a challenge,*

*(53)*

The *Pandavas* in the text can be seen practicing these laws—for instance, *Bhima* particularly would not forget the injury done by the *Kauravas* at the time of the Dicing, and *Yudhishthira* could not refuse once challenged by *Shakuni* at the game of dice. In any case,

*The social landscape of the Mahabharata is largely sylvan and rural. The forests are abode of hermits and Sabaras. Nisadas and Candalas exemplified the tribals.*

*(Pande 50)*

The peasantry mainly consisted of *vaishyas*. There were mostly villages and mention of some towns and cities (such as *Hastinapura*, *Indraprastha*, *Mathura* and *Mithila*) make us aware that these were centres of money, market and trade. With regard to the region and the culture we find that “agriculture and cattle breeding, craft and trade constituted the mainstay of economic life”. Also there was prevalence of slavery. The following observation of *Duryodhana* makes us aware of it when seeing the pomp and show of *Indraprastha*, he says,

*There are eighty-eight thousand snataka householders whom Yudhishthira supports, each of them with thirty slave girls.*

Eventually we find that the two important places— *Hastinapura* (situated somewhere near modern Delhi) and *Indraprastha*, become contending centres of power. In the next section we shall look at the *Mahabharata* as a Literary Text.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Comment on the important narrators in the Mahabharata. Who is the tale being told to?  
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- 2) How have folktales, parables and myths been used in the Mahabharata?  
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- 3) Construct an image of society during the time of the Mahabharata.  
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## 1.4 THE MAHABHARATA AS A LITERARY TEXT

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What is the *Mahabharata*? Is it a historical text or a poetic expression of the times? Is it a book of moral laws and scriptures? These questions necessarily come to mind when dealing with ancient literature. **Sheldon Pollock** explains

*It (the Mahabharata) represents itself for most part as itihasa, an account of 'the way things indeed were'. However, much modern scholarship may complicate the factuality of that record... Yet the Mahabharata was not only itihasa, it was also kavya.*

Note, that as **Pollock** suggests, the *Mahabharata* represents itself as a historical narrative depicting events as they took place by, one who is also a character in the narrative—**Vyas**. The author is the composer of the tale and a participant in the story.

Viewed from a literary angle, the historical framework is a form adopted by **Vyas**. Still, **Pollock** notes,

*Eventually the Mahabharata came to also be viewed as a transcendently authoritative moral discourse; one ninth century literary theorist conceived of the work as 'moral discourse with the aura of literature.* (Sheldon Pollock)

At the same time the *Mahabharata* has been viewed as a political narrative. **T R S Sharma** has observed that:

*While the Kuru and the Panhala lineages are historically recorded, there is no mention of Pandavas in any historical records. So it is only proper we consider the Mahabharata as an epic poem.* (Ed. T R S Sharma. 5)

Thus, for us the primary concern is to view the *Mahabharata* as a literary text with an internal logic and structure—the text never wavers from the core

narrative that is the struggle between two groups of cousins for succession and political power.

From the literary point of view, the *Mahabharata* has been analysed in different ways. According to **Anandavardhana** (the famous *Sanskrit* literary critic of the 9<sup>th</sup> AD) known primarily for his work “*Dhvanyalok*”, the *Mahabharata* is a “*dhvani-kavya*” or the poetry of suggestion. The suggested sense and creation of “*dhvani-alok*”, found in the *Mahabharata* in his view, is the highest form of poetic composition. With respect to its content, he notes that the *Mahabharata*

*... teaches man ultimately to renounce vanity of earthly glories and attain dharma (truth and righteousness), vairagya (renunciation), santi (eternal peace) and moksha (salvation)*

*(qtd. in Julian F. Woods 163)*

With respect to form, **J P Sinha** has provided us with the following classifications:

*.....the metres which have been employed in the Mahabharata may be classified under two heads—the varnavratas and the matravratas...so far the matravratas are concerned only aryaais are to be found in the Mahabharata and that too in a small number.*

He suggests that, “the vast majority of the verses of the *Mahabharata* are composed in the *anustubh* metre”. The *anustubh* is

*a sloka, is a metre of four feet of eight syllables each. In the anustubh the fifth letter of all the feet and the seventh of the second and fourth feet must necessarily be short, similarly, the sixth letter of every foot must be long. After anustubh the largest number of verses in the Mahabharata has been composed in the upjati metre* (9)

The *anustubh* was used in the oldest written document, the *Rigveda* and is known for its simple structure. The simple metre enabled recitation. Thus, didactic literature and moral tales were written using this metre.

The original text in *Sanskrit* is almost entirely in verse while the English translation of the *Mahabharata* by **J A B van Buitenen** is largely in prose. **Buitenen** tells us that the

*... verse syntax in Sanskrit is quite free and an easy-on-the-ear-attention adjective qualifying a subject at the beginning may comfortably appear at the end of the couplet* (xi)

Taking about the variations in the text he suggests:

*Unlike the Homeric epics, the Mahabharata employs a variety of meters, but by far the commonest used is the sloka. This meter presents a very free pattern well suited to narratives. Like all Sanskrit meters, it is divided into two halves, each half containing in its case sixteen syllables, while each half divides into two quarters (padas) of eight syllables each. The first four syllables of each eight are free, the second four parsed.* (xxxviii)

Thus, the *Mahabharata* is defined by its simple verse form and lyrical quality. The meter and style varies in the text in relation to the subject being narrated. It may reflect the mood of the poet as also the times. Let us examine the role of fate and chance in the *Mahabharata* next.



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## 1.5 THE ROLE OF FATE AND CHANCE

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The *Mahabharata* fosters the idea of destiny as unalterable. Foreknowledge of events cannot correct grievous wrongs nor can it prevent them from happening. There is a kind of failure of human endeavour that gets established with the notion of predetermined fate. And yet, human choice is provided adequate importance in the text. The characters in the epic do not give up when faced with dilemma, they go through the struggle of choosing a path and following it. The innate impulse in human beings to strive and act even when faced with odds keeps the text human-centric and optimistic.

Interestingly, *Duryodhana* fosters the idea of fate that plays against him while fortune favors the *Pandavas* in the scenes preceding the dicing sequence. He claims:

*Fate, methinks reign supreme and man's acts are meaningless, when I see such bright fortune fetched to the Pandava. In the past I have made attempts to kill him, Saubala, but he survived it all and grew like a lotus in the water. Therefore, methinks, fate reigns supreme and man's acts are meaningless, for the Dhartarastras decline and the Parthas are always prospering.* (8)

The idea that a man's acts are meaningless is reiterated in the *Mahabharata* time and again. In fact, it appears to be the central truth of life and emphasises determinism. *Yudhishthira* is saddened by the truth divulged to him by **Vyas** in the text that, bitter animosity among the cousins is in store—one that would wipe out most of the *Kshatriyas* from the earth. *Yudhishthira* tries in vain to cement ties and build friendly relations with *Duryodhan*. His vow to not get angry at the instigation of his cousins or brothers is a case in point. Events as they unfold in the epic show us that destiny takes its course and no one can turn the course of events. Thus, human endeavours, whatever their nature, are shown to be meaningless. Can we agree with such a proposition? Is our destiny predefined and any attempt to change it meaningless? Should we accept the given circumstances or strive to change them? The *Mahabharata* leaves us with such uneasy questions that are relevant in our time as well. Let us look at the notion of *dharma*/ the law in the context of the *Mahabharata* in the next section.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) In what way is the Mahabharata different from the western epic? What makes it realistic and human?  
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- 2) Is the Mahabharata a literary text? Discuss.  
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- 3) Would you agree with the view that a human being cannot change his/her destiny? Examine the notion of fate in the Mahabharata.  
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## 1.6 THE MEANING OF *DHARMA*: THE LAW

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The concept of *dharma* is central to the epic the *Mahabharata*. The text underpins the idea of “*Yatho dharma: tatho jayah*” (Where Dharma is, there is victory). However, *dharma* stands inverted in many a case in the text. The law is often subverted, and *dharma* involves an arduous struggle as it extracts its price from those who follow it. The presence of *dharma* and its reiteration in the text is often accompanied by its negation. And yet the term *dharma* is important for the concept of existence in the *Mahabharata*. It gives meaning to the notion of existence as well as direction to the characters.

*Dharma* is translated by **J A B van Buitenen** in the text as the ‘Law’. This may facilitate the English reader to some extent, however, to the Indian reader the term is incomplete and needs to be understood in relation to the ideas of ‘truth’, ‘justice’, ‘morality’, ‘righteousness’, ‘code of conduct’, ‘obligation’ as also ‘duty’. *Dharma* denotes all these. *Dharma* is defined by a person’s position in society and the role one plays. There is the King’s law (*dharma*) which defines what the King ought to do and his acts are based on an ethical awareness of his duties. He is meant to follow the principle of justice above all. There is the *dharma* of a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a father, a mother, a husband, and a wife, each of which determine human relationships. The roles come with pre-determined laws that the characters are supposed to live up to. It is this *dharma* that *Draupadi* calls out to in the Dicing sequence and it is *dharma* alone which keeps the *Pandava* brothers quiet when *Yudhishthira* loses them in a game of dice. The question of *dharma* haunts the *Pandavas* even after the fateful war has been won by them—a war fought for land. The *Pandavas* perform the horse sacrifice to establish their sovereignty. **Sheldon Pollock** has suggested, “*If the Pandavas’ political power has now been confirmed, both the war and the Kali Age it has inaugurated have sapped their strength and will: ‘Cursed be the law of power’, they declare, ‘that has left us dead in life’, they eventually renounce sovereignty and begin the mahaprasthana, the Great Departure*” towards Mount *Himavan*. Thus, the Law of power destroys them as it did their counterparts in war. Both sides stand to lose.

Though the *Mahabharata* is an ancient text, as mentioned in the Block Introduction, it has been serialised twice on television by two different production houses, and is also available in comic form printed by *Amar Chitra Katha*. Even today, the text is read aloud in many households. Having said that, can we assume that the text is somehow still relevant in some way even today in 2019? The next section will examine contemporary interpretations of the *Mahabharata* to give us a sense of how such an ancient text still has a hold on people’s imagination even today.

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## 1.7 CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE *MAHABHARATA*

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Discussing the modern retellings of the *Mahabharata*, we find that the context of the adaptations is juxtaposed with the world of the ancient text. The complexities of human endeavour elaborated in the original text become a constant reference point for later retellings.

Scholarship on the *Mahabharata* has steadily increased over the last century. Several critical works have opened new dimensions of the text. On the other hand, creative versions of the *Mahabharata* have also come to the fore. Characters and events of the *Mahabharata* have received renewed interest among writers. Its influence has been pan-India and the text has been adapted freely. For instance, the Telugu writer **Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad** (b. 1953), has written a novel titled *Draupadi* that charts different aspects of *Draupadi*'s character as a strong woman, confidante, mother and daughter. Similarly, **Pratibha Rai**, the Odiya writer has written a novel titled *Yagyaseni*, written in the form of a letter where *Draupadi* explains her plight to *Krsna*. In fact, in Odisha, as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, **Sarala Das** (Odisha's 'Adikavi') presented an Odiya *Mahabharata*. His *Mahabharata* however carried various indigenous myths and legends as also Odiya folklore. Similar, is the case with Assamese versions of the *Mahabharata* where medieval poets and translators selected parts of the epic keeping the core story of the fraternal feud intact and created a new text out of it. For instance, the Assamese *Nariparva* written by an unknown author is not a mere translation of the *Sanskrit Striparva*—in the Assamese version the women of the two warring groups take up arms and fight one another even after the men have died. *Draupadi* here leads the *Pandava* women and with her excellent knowledge of war she wins it by deploying her weapon, the *vayu-astra*. Variations such as these make the text of the *Mahabharata* more productive (in that there is always scope for a new narrative to emerge) and compelling.

The first Marathi novel influenced by the *Mahabharata* was *Viratparva-Hyabi Bakhar* written by **Chintamanshastri Thatte** and published in 1862 this was followed by *Pativrata Savitri* written by **S N Joshi** (1929) and *Astika* (1940), by **P S Sane** alias **Sane Guruji**. The *Mahabharata* continued to influence novels post independence with the publication of the Marathi novel *Yayati: A Classic Tale of Lust* (1959) by the *Jnanpith Awardee*, **Vishnu Khandekar**, exploring the life of the *Pandavas*'s ancestors. The play by **Girish Karnad** too, with the same title *Yayati* (1960), was inspired by the *Mahabharata*. Add to this, the reworking of the *Mahabharata* that exists in Malayalam literature. From early representations by poets of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries such as *Bharatmala* by **Niranam** poets, *Bharatam Gatha* by **Cherusseri** to contemporary reinterpretations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered by **P K Balakrishnan** and **M T Vasudevan** in their novels *Eni Jnan Urangatte (Let Me Sleep Now, 1973)* and *Randamoozham (The Second Turn, 1983)*, respectively, the unique place of the canonical epic is revealed to us. Still, **Dharamvir Bharati**'s play *Andha Yug* evokes the post-war world of devastation in the *Mahabharata* to speak about the contemporary malaise caused by the partition of the country in 1947. The *Mahabharata* in this sense has a bearing on current happenings and writers make use of myths and stories to express their views of the times. In more recent times, **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** (b. 1956), has written a novel from *Draupadi*'s perspective called, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

The *Mahabharata* has been extensively projected on stage, television series (of **B R Chopra and Ravi Chopra (1988 – 90)**; and **Swastik Productions (2013-2016)**); and cinema (**Shyam Benegal**'s *Kalyug* 1980). Among western

admirers of the epic we have the French playwright **Jean-Claude Carriere** who staged the *Mahabharata* (as a French play, nine hours long) in 1985. **Peter Brook**, adapted it for his cinematic reproduction of the *Mahabharata* (the film) in 1989. Both these adaptations offered a 20<sup>th</sup> century westerner's view of the *Mahabharata*.

Here, the western and the eastern contexts combine. However, **Peter Brook's** representation particularly has been viewed by several critics in India (**Gautam Dasgupta, Rustom Bharucha**) as an exercise in Orientalism for it exoticises and appropriates Indian culture. **Ramesh Menon's** *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering (2 Volumes)* (published in 2003) provides to the English reader the ancient tale in a novelistic form from an Indian perspective. **Gurucharan Das's** *The Difficulty of Being Good* explores the concept of *dharma* as expounded by the *Mahabharata* and tests its validity in contemporary society. These are but a few instances that acquaint us with the vast reach and influence of the *Mahabharata* in the Indian region and beyond. We have managed quite an over view of the *Mahabharata* and we think we should summarise all that has been said so far before we end this episode/ unit in the *Mahabharata* fashion and move on to the next episode/ unit.

#### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Write a note on the role dharma plays in determining the lives of the characters in the Mahabharata.

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- 2) Have you watched the Mahabharata or read any of the works based on the Mahabharata? What do you think this tells you about the Mahabharata?

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## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

Having watched the *Mahabharata* at some point in our lives or read the comic version or even read *The Palace of Illusions*, and gone through this unit, you would have noticed that the *Mahabharata* has a deep cultural and historical significance in the Indian subcontinent. In the discussion it is evident that the text of the *Mahabharata* underwent modifications in different regions at different points of time. It has become a text that is ever-productive as new narratives continue to spring from it. Still, the discussion on authorship made us privy to the fact that, the *Mahabharata* may have been composed by **Vyas** but it has gone through many additions in the later centuries. It is in this sense a collective/ social epic. Also the complex narrative tells us that the text was meant for recitation and not reading. It belonged to the oral-folk literature of India.

The unit focused on the idea of the epic and particularly the Indian epic to facilitate a better understanding of the text. The question of form was taken up in the discussion in order to place the *Mahabharata* within a literary framework so that we can view it as a text governed by specific aesthetic principles. In so far, as the themes of the text are concerned, the major theme of *dharma* as also pre-determined fate has been outlined in this unit. The social set-up of the times in which the *Mahabharata* is believed to have been composed has also been provided in this unit to help us contextualise the narrative vis-à-vis the Indian society of that period.

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## 1.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read Section 1.1 carefully, understand it, and then frame the answer in your own words.
- 2) Read Section 1.1

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read 1.3 & 1.3.1
- 2) Read Section 1.3.2
- 3) Read Section 1.3.3

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read Section 1.4
- 2) Read Section 1.4
- 3) Read Section 1.5

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Read Section 1.6
  - 2) Read Section 1.7
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## 1.10 GLOSSARY

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*Epic simile* is an extended simile running into several lines in which the comparisons are elaborated in great detail. These are “formal sustained similes in which the secondary subject, or vehicle, is elaborated far beyond its specific points of close parallel to the primary subject, or tenor, to which it is compared”

(M H Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

*Epic Conventions*: Epic conventions are formal characteristics that epic poems generally share such as: In *medias res*; Invocation; Statement of theme; Stock epithets; Cataloguing; Long, formal speeches; Divine Intervention; Epic Digressions; Vast Settings; Grandiose/Elevated Language; Definitive Meter; Epic Battles; Descent into the Underworld; Epic Similes; Didactic Nature; Dire, Foreshadowing Warnings; Heroic Oath

([unisophomoreenglish.wordpress.com/09/13/epicconversion/](http://unisophomoreenglish.wordpress.com/09/13/epicconversion/))

*Avatar*: A manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher; An incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea; An icon or figure representing a particular person in a video game, Internet forum, etc. From the Sanskrit *avatâra* ‘descent’, from *ava* ‘down’ + *tar-* ‘to cross’

([oxforddictionaries.com/definition/avata](http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/avata))

*Dharma*: Explanation in Section 1.6

*Adharma*: unrighteousness or wickedness

*Orientalism*: Literally refers to writings about the Orient (the East) as imagined, understood and defined by Europe /the West. It is about the attitude of the western writers towards the eastern parts of the world. As a term of discourse it was used by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) to elaborate the distorted view the occident (the outsiders) hold of the orient/east.