

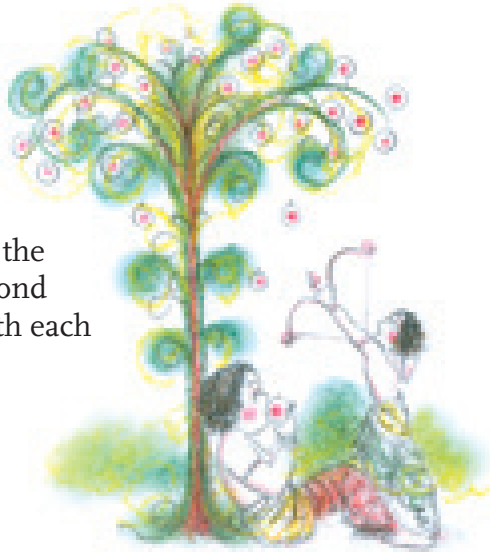
*"So much adventure and treachery!
I think the way Bhima treats his
wicked cousins is very funny."* Ajay, 12

If there ever was an epic that touches upon every conceivable human emotion and poses the most complex of questions, it has to be the Mahabharata, the most famous of stories from India.

The rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, royal cousins fighting for the throne at Hastinapura, will end in a mighty battle, but what is it that makes such a conflict inevitable?

Is it the eldest Kaurava brother's envy of his cousins' exceptional military skills? Is it the eldest Pandava's belief that he is the rightful heir to the throne? Or are elements beyond their control deciding the path each will take?

In the first of this exciting three-part story, meet the fascinating characters who play such important roles in escalating the tension between the two families.



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MAHABHARATA HOW IT ALL BEGAN Veda Vyasa



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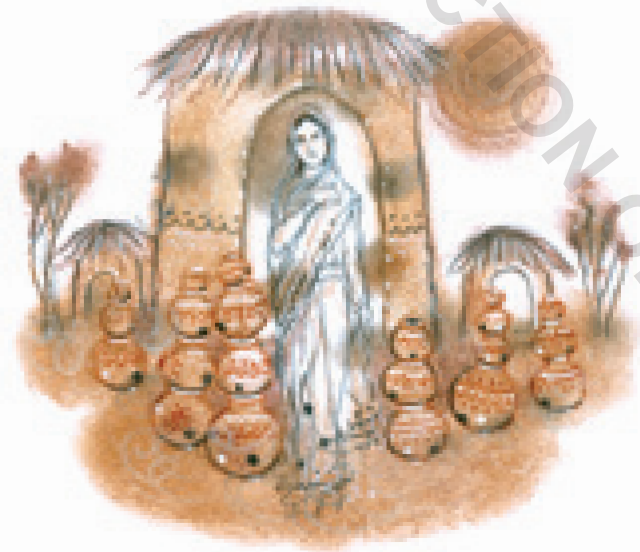
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THE CHARACTERS

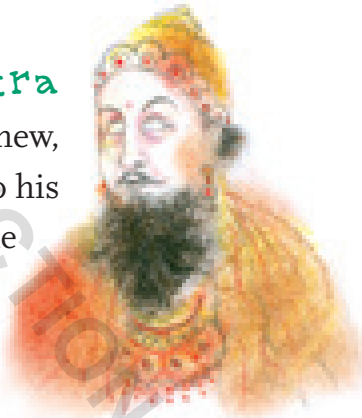


Bhishma

Born Devavrata, Bhishma is heir to the kingdom of Bharata, but gives up his right to the throne for his father's sake. Can he prevent the kingdom from being destroyed?

Dhritarashtra

Bhishma's eldest nephew, Dhritarashtra was born blind, so his younger brother, Pandu, rules the land. Can he secure the country for his sons, the Kauravas?



Duryodhana

Dhritarashtra's firstborn son, Duryodhana is the eldest Kaurava. He does not see why his cousins the Pandavas should ever rule the country, just because their father Pandu did.



Kunti

A strong woman and Pandu's widow, Kunti has to bring up five fatherless children on her own. Will she see them claim their inheritance?



The Pandavas

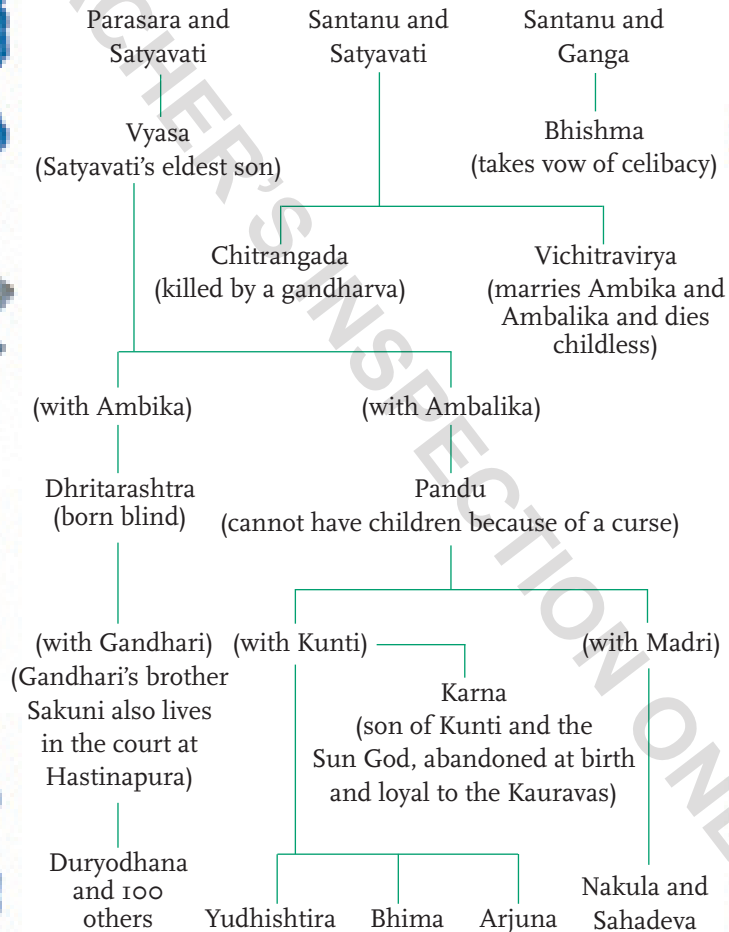
Pandu's sons, the Pandava brothers must guard themselves against the treachery of their cousins, the Kauravas.

Draupadi

Beautiful Draupadi marries the Pandava prince, Arjuna, but becomes the wife of his four brothers as well. Can they protect her honour?



THE FAMILY TREE OF THE KURU RACE



Gandhari's 101 children are called **The Kauravas**
Kunti's and Madri's 5 children are called **The Pandavas**

MAHABHARATA HOW IT ALL BEGAN

In the north of India lay the splendid city of Hastinapura, capital of the kingdom of Bharata. For centuries it had been ruled by lofty rulers of the Kuru race, but it was under King Santanu that the downfall of this glorious race – and our story – begins.

King Santanu was hunting on the banks of the River Ganga when he spied a beautiful young woman. Mesmerised by her beauty, he approached her and said, 'I am Santanu, the king of Bharata. I have fallen in love with you. Will you marry me?'

The young woman demurred. 'Oh king,' she said, 'I can only marry someone who will agree to let me live according to my wishes.' After much persuasion she finally agreed. But she warned Santanu, 'If you ever question anything that I do, I shall leave you.'

The king was willing to agree to anything to win her as his wife. They lived happily for a while, and in due course a son was born to them. But to King Santanu's horror, the queen took the baby to the banks of the Ganga and threw him into the river. Though very upset, the king remembered his promise and suffered in silence.

The same fiendish act was repeated after the birth of six more sons. Finally, when the eighth son was born, the king could bear it no longer, and stopped his queen before she could throw the baby into the river.

Tearfully she told him, 'I am Goddess Ganga, the deity of the river. I am compelled to do this to rid our sons of a curse from their previous life. As you have broken your word, I must now leave you. I am taking our son away with me. He will return to you when he has completed his education.'

Several years later the boy, who was named

Devavrata, returned to his father's court, well-versed in the arts of peace and war.



One day, on a visit to the forest, King Santanu was attracted by a wonderful smell of lotus flowers. He traced the scent to its source – a beautiful young woman who was ferrying people across the river. Forgetful of his vanished wife, Santanu fell in love with her.

'Maiden,' said the king, 'I am the king of Bharata, Santanu by name. Please be my wife and the queen of Bharata.' The young woman, whose name was Satyavati, told him to talk to her father, king of the fishermen.

Satyavati's father did not welcome the proposal. 'It is a great honour that you offer my daughter, but I have sworn that she must marry a man who can make her son a king. You already have a son who will inherit your throne.'

Back in time

Ramayana and *Mahabharata* are the epics which united India long ago, when the country was geographically divided into a number of small kingdoms. *Ramayana* has always been more popular for reading out loud, but *Mahabharata* raises questions on the nature of morality that remain provocative even today. It is the philosophical content of *Mahabharata* that makes it so special.

The date for the writing of the earliest version has been placed tentatively in the eighth century BCE. The author is clearly concerned with the nature of morality, and questions many of the values that were taken for granted at the time it was written. *Mahabharata* examines a wide range of moral issues. What justifies a war? When is it acceptable to take up arms, and to kill innocent people? When is deceit permissible? When does the desire for peace become cowardice?

The author of *Mahabharata* shows that there are few clearcut solutions. Fighting should

be avoided, but it becomes immoral not to fight against unacceptable exploitation and tyranny. While peace is desirable, it cannot be at any cost. Any war leaves victors looking at what they have won, and losers mourning what they have lost.

None of the characters in this story is perfect, and none is so wicked that the reader can find nothing in them to admire.

Major places and festivals

- Hastinapura, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, still exists, though today it is just a small town. It is believed that Indraprastha was located near to the city of Delhi. Kurukshetra, where the final battle took place, is in Haryana.
- Kasi or Benares, on the banks of the River Ganga, is the heart of Hinduism, and its most important pilgrimage centre.
- The most important temples dedicated to Lord Krishna in North India are at Mathura, where he was born, and at Brindavan, where he grew up.