

## **THE MAHABHARATA**

The *Mahabharata* is the longest epic poem in the world and along with the *Ramayana*, is one of the two most significant and influential pieces of Hindu literature ever composed. Traditionally Hindu beliefs have credited the Vedic master Vyasa with the authorship of the *Mahabharata*, however most modern scholars agree that many portions of the epic were composed by others (Fitzgerald 804-805). Due to the amount of interpolation in the *Mahabharata* it is not possible to determine precisely when it was composed though most place its origins sometime in 5th century BCE with the most recent alterations made sometime in 4th century CE.

The central story of the *Mahabharata* tells the tale of five princely brothers known as the Pandavas and their many exploits. The most significant of these is a feud between their cousins the Kauravas over the right to rule the kingdom, a conflict which eventually leads to a full scale war. The story itself is said to have taken place at the beginning of the *kali yuga*, the last of the four ages in the cycle of the universe. It is believed among those who follow Hindu traditions that the *kali yuga* is a time of great chaos and ignorance of Dharma, with fighting and violence between members of the same family. Indeed the central tale of the *Mahabharata* tells of a great war between two sets of cousins as they fight over the right to rule a kingdom. This struggle acts as a personification of the very nature of *kali yuga* (Bailey 415) and is also said to mark the beginning of this final stage of the cosmic cycle.

The actions of the Pandavas, and in particular the always dharmicly minded eldest brother Yudhisthira, serve as an example of proper conduct within the Hindu tradition and are often regarded both within the text and in Hindu society as the ideal approach to living one's life. One early demonstration of Yudhisthira's dharmic nature reveals itself during a dice game against the Kauravas. Since gambling is seen as an acceptable activity by the warrior caste who

regularly allow their own survival to be determined by fate Yudhisthira's actions are not seen as adharmic, even when he loses his kingdom and wife to the Kauravas over the course of the game. In fact by giving up their kingdom and placing themselves into exile for thirteen years the Pandavas actions are regarded as being very dharmic as they were upholding the agreement they had made with the Kauravas. By contrast the actions of the Kauravas act as an example of adharmic action. After the thirteen year exile the Pandavas returned for their half of the kingdom as had been agreed upon at the beginning of the period of exile. The Kauravas however "refused to grant their cousins even five small villages," thus breaking the vows they had made earlier. Later the *Mahabharata* demonstrates Yudhisthira's inability to lie even when doing so was a necessary part of Krsna's war strategy [he was able to overcome this problem by telling a half-truth, albeit with great difficulty,] and his unwillingness to abandon his family even when he was made to believe they were going to spend an eternity in hell for their adharmic actions on the battlefield. This strict adherence to dharma allows Yudhisthira to enter into heaven and shows the positive consequences that come from living a dharmic life.

In addition to the tale of conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas the *Mahabharata* contains several other notable stories which are sometimes regarded as individual works within the larger epic. In the tale of Nala and Damayanti, two lovers anger the god Kali when Damayanti chooses to wed Nala instead of him. Eventually Nala loses his kingdom to his brother in a game of dice, though he is later able to win it back. The similarities between this story and the overall tale of the *Mahabharata* are numerous, including the practice of bridegroom choice as a major component of the tale and a prince losing his kingdom in a game of dice. The tale of Nala and Damayanti can be said to encapsulate the message of the *Mahabharata* as a whole (Pave 101) The *Krsnavatara* tells the life story of the prince Krsna, a

family friend of the Pandavas and an incarnation of the god Visnu. Krsna would go on to play a significant role in the Pandava's war as their advisor and his counsel would prove indispensable during the fighting.

The most influential passages from the *Mahabharata* are found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a text that is 700 verses in length. The *Bhagavad Gita* tells of the Pandava brother Arjuna and his moral dilemma the night before engaging the Kaurava army in battle. Riding between the two armies with Krsna as his charioteer Arjuna sees family, friends and other loved ones who he will be fighting in the upcoming battles and in a moment of despair refuses to slay anyone, even if doing so would cost him his own life. It is at this point that Krsna reveals himself to be an avatar of the god Visnu and explains to Arjuna that any death brought about by the battle would ultimately be inconsequential as the soul is permanent and cannot be destroyed. He also tells Arjuna that he must be victorious in the upcoming battles in order to maintain Dharma in the world. Because the Pandavas represent dharmic principles a victory over the adharmic Kauravas will shift the cosmic balance back in favour of Dharma.

In his counsel of Arjuna, Krsna lectures on many topics including the nature of Dharma, Brahman, and Karma and also tells of three yogic paths that may be used to achieve *samadhi*. First amongst the yogic paths mentioned is Karma Yoga, conveyed as a means of attaining *moksa* through strict adherence to dharmic principles and selfless action. Later Krsna teaches Jnana Yoga, or the path of knowledge, a means of achieving enlightenment by ceaseless pursuit of understanding and proper segregation of one's *kshetra-jna* (or soul) and *kshetra* (or body). Lastly Krsna tells of Bhakti Yoga, which centers on complete devotion of one's self to god through love and purity of intention. Since the writing of the *Mahabharata* these three yogic

principles have been adopted by the followers of Hindu tradition and used as a means of attaining enlightenment.

After convincing Arjuna that the upcoming battle is necessary, Krsna begins his role as military advisor for the Pandavas when the war begins the next day. Though outnumbered and facing some very powerful adversaries the Pandavas are able to win many battles, largely through Krsna's aid. However many of Krsna's strategies rely on deceit or trickery. The dharmic brothers, especially Yudhisthira, disagree with these methods but Krsna tells them the adharmic nature of these acts is not as important as winning the battle and restoring the world to a more dharmic existence. Eventually, after many long battles and slaying many loved ones the Pandavas are victorious.

The war that is fought between the Pandavas and the Kauravas is regarded by the *Mahabharata* as a battle between the dharmic and the adharmic forces of nature (Hiltebeitel 184-185). However it is also implied that this battle is also a metaphor for the moral struggles that take place within each of us.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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- Pave, Adam D. (2006) "Rolling the Cosmic Dice: Fate Found in the Story of Nala and Damayanti." *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 16 Issue 2, p 99-109.

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata>

<http://web.utk.edu/~jftzgrld/MBh1Story.html>

<http://www.hindunet.org/mahabharata>

<http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/xeno.mahabsynop.htm>

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**Article written by: Dana Orpin (March 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.**