

### **Yudhisthira (Pandava prince in Mahabharata)**

Yudhisthira is the eldest of the five Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is the most voluminous epic poem in the world (see Sarma 88), being composed of 100,000 verses. It is said to have been composed between 400 B.C.E and 400 C.E. by a sage named Vyasa (see Olson 224-225). The story is about the Pandava brothers (Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva), who lose their kingdom and fight their cousins, the Kauravas, to gain it back. Yudhisthira stands for duty and righteousness. He is also known as Dharmaraja, and he is the son of the god Dharma.

“The *Mahabharata* is Yudhisthira’s education” (see Hildebeitel 4), and “can be seen as a treatise on Dharma or religion” (see Bae 139). The main story starts with the two brothers Dhrtarastra (who is blind) and Pandu (who is pale). Dhrtarastra and his wife Gandhari give birth to a hundred sons, the Kauravas. Pandu, because of a curse, could not engage in sexual relationships. Thus, he asked his wife, Kunti, to use a mantra in order to invoke a god and conceive a child. Kunti invokes Dharma, Vayu and Indra, and manages to conceive three sons through them: Yudhisthira, Bhima, and Arjuna. Madri, Pandu’s second wife, also uses the mantra and gives birth to twin brothers: Nakula and Sahadeva. After the death of Pandu and Madri, Kunti becomes responsible for the raising the kids. Because of Pandu’s death, Hastinapura was in need of a new king, and Dhrtarastra takes the throne until Yudhisthira is eligible.

The Kaurava brothers become tempted to kill the Pandavas due to their jealousy of the Pandava brothers’ success. The Kauravas’ attempt of murdering the Pandavas was

unsuccessful. As the story unfolds, Arjuna wins the hand of a princess named Draupadi, who then becomes the wife to all the five Pandavas. The Pandava brothers get half the kingdom, which Yudhishthira expands by defeating the surrounding regions. Yudhishthira performs the Rajasuya sacrifice, which makes the Kauravas extremely jealous who then challenge the Pandavas to a game of dice. This is where Yudhishthira's weakness comes in. Yudhishthira ends up losing his kingdom, his brothers, his wife, and himself as well. Wagering Draupadi to the Kauravas poses a huge threat to Yudhishthira's dharmic responsibility (see Hildebeitel 219-220); Draupadi's humiliation emphasizes this aspect of the story. Despite being given back what he lost, Yudhishthira loses his kingdom once again. Not only does Yudhishthira lose the kingdom, all the Pandava brothers and Draupadi are forced into exile for thirteen years. There is an event during the exile where the Pandavas encounter a *yaksa* (spirit), which is the god Dharma in disguise. Four of the Pandavas are poisoned by the spirit, because unlike Yudhishthira, they do not answer the spirit's riddles. Once Yudhishthira successfully solves all the riddles, the *yaksa* grants him a wish with which he can bring one brother back to life. Yudhishthira chooses Nakula so that each mother would have at least one son alive (see Sarma 89; see Hildebeitel 209). The years go by, and during the thirteenth year, the Pandavas disguise themselves to prevent people from recognizing them (see Bae 145). Yudhishthira, for example, "poses as a master of dicing" (see Olson 228), which is contrary to Yudhishthira in the beginning of the story. During the twelfth year of the exile, Yudhishthira has a conversation with a sage named Brhadhasva about misery. The sage tells him a story about and gives him "the heart of the dice" which gives him the talent of dicing, hence his disguise. (see Hildebeitel 216). Once the thirteenth year is over, Duryodhana (one of the Kaurava brothers), refuses to return the Pandavas' share of kingdom to them, he would not even give

them five villages where they could reside (see Bae 145). Yudhisthira tries to negotiate but the Kauravas refused, and this escalated into war.

The Pandavas and the Kauravas ask Krsna for assistance. Krsna gives them a choice; the Pandavas end up choosing Krsna himself, while the Kauravas get Krsna's army. Right before the war, Arjuna felt torn and did not want to fight his relatives, friends, and teachers (see Bae, 148). Krsna advises and successfully convinces Arjuna to fight; this conversation between Arjuna and Krsna is known as the *Bhagavad-gita*. The *Bhagavad-gita* is the most influential passage of the *Mahabharata* (see Bae 147). Right before the *Bhagavad-gita*, however, Yudhisthira has doubts himself. Yudhisthira questions Arjuna about "how so few can conquer so many" (see Hildebeitel 209). During the war, many die, including Karna, the secret son of Kunti and Surya (the sun-god), who is slain by Arjuna. Near the end of the battle only four of the Kauravas remained. Yudhisthira ended up finding Duryodhana's hiding spot, and Duryodhana agreed to fight with each of the Pandavas one by one. Bhima ended up hitting Duryodhana below the belt which threatened Yudhisthira's righteousness. Yudhisthira offered to slay Bhima as a punishment for going against the rules of chivalry. This caused an argument between the advisors of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Duryodhana was keen on taking revenge and killing the Pandavas, but his plan failed because his men killed the wrong people, not the Pandavas (see Ions 126). The Pandavas, after defeating the Kauravas, returned to Hastinapura.

Despite being victorious, Yudhisthira grieves and tells Gandhari that he is the one responsible for her sons' deaths (see Hildebeitel 210). Yudhisthira begins his journey as a ruler who performs an Asvamedha (horse-sacrifice), and protects the widows of the men who died during the battle (see Hildebeitel 210). Yudhisthira also seeks Bhisma's advice about

king's obligations and responsibilities. In the course of time, Dhrtarastra and his Gandhari die, which causes the Pandavas and Draupadi to leave Hastinapura and go on a pilgrimage. They were also accompanied by a dog in their pilgrimage.

During the journey, all the Pandavas, except Yudhisthira, die one by one. Yudhisthira considers each death as a form of punishment for each of the Pandava's weaknesses. Yudhisthira finally ends up at the gates of Indra's heaven, as he's welcomed by Indra, Yudhisthira refuses to go in unless he's assured that his brothers and wife were in there. He also requests that his dog be allowed into heaven because he did not want to abandon the dog. The dog turns out to be the god Dharma, his father. Once past the gates of heaven, Yudhisthira is horrified at the site of all the Kauravas being in heaven while his brothers and wife were in hell. Yudhisthira refused to stay in Indra's *swarga* (heaven) and demanded to go to hell where his brothers and Draupadi reside. After witnessing the many horrors of hell, Yudhisthira finds out that "the whole scene was revealed to be the product of *maya*, or illusion" (see Ions 127). Yudhisthira leaves his physical body behind and, in the end, Yudhisthira, his brothers, Krsna, and Draupadi were all welcomed into heaven.

Yudhisthira's main role in this epic is to display *dharma*, the importance of duty and righteousness. Yudhisthira's righteousness has been tested twice in the *Mahabharata* (see Adarkar 120). His first test is the one where he would not abandon his dog; the other is when he is made to believe that his brothers and wife are in hell. Yudhisthira passes both these tests because he sticks to his *dharmic* behavior and makes the right choices. Yudhisthira is very important in the *Mahabharata* because, through him, others can learn about Dharma and what it means to be righteous. Yudhisthira is not a very popular as a deity, but he does have a

temple dedicated to him known as the Dharmaraja Ratha, which is situated at Mahabalipuram in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu (see Lippe 328).

## **REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING**

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### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://www.mahabharataonline.com/>

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

<http://ultrabrown.com/posts/bhima%E2%80%99s-story-thoughts-on-yudhisthira-and-the-fluidity-of-myths>

<http://www.indianetzone.com/3/yudhisthir.htm>

<http://www.indiaoz.com.au/hinduism/Mahabharata/mahabharata.shtml>

<http://www.urday.in/jaydrath.htm>

[http://www.hindunet.org/hindu\\_history/ancient/mahabharat/mahab\\_patnaik.html](http://www.hindunet.org/hindu_history/ancient/mahabharat/mahab_patnaik.html)

<http://hinduism.iskcon.com/tradition/1108.htm>

<http://easterlybeauty.com/en/characters/mahabharata/56-yudhisthira.html>

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