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The Mahabharata: Composition, Content and Historicity

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The Mahabharata: Composition, Content and Historicity

The Mahabharata is the longest epic poem in the world. It tells how two branches of one family fought over a throne. Tradition says the sage Vyasa composed it. It has 18 books, called parvas, and the Bhagavad Gita sits inside it.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Author**Vyasa, by tradition.

02 **Books**18 parvas.

03 **Gita**About 700 verses.

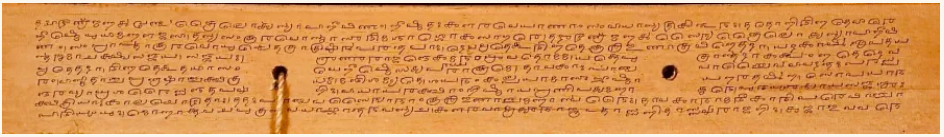
04 **War**18 days at Kurukshetra.

The epic and its story

1 The Mahabharata in brief

1.1 What is the Mahabharata?

The Mahabharata is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. The other is the Ramayana. The title can be read as the great tale of the Bharata dynasty.



A palm-leaf manuscript leaf of the Mahabharata's Drona Parvan, in Sanskrit, in Grantha script. From the Whish manuscript collection. Photo: Ms Sarah Welch, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.

1.2 How long is it?

It is the longest epic poem in the world. New World Encyclopedia counts more than 74,000 verses plus long prose passages, about 1.8 million words in all. That is roughly ten times the Iliad and Odyssey together.

World History Encyclopedia gives the traditional round figure of 100,000 verses. The counts differ; the text grew over a long period.

1.3 Who is credited with it?

Tradition credits the sage Vyasa. He is also a character inside the story. The epic includes the Bhagavadgita, and it is one of the most important texts of Indian and world literature.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: The Mahabharata is shorter than the Iliad. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org; worldhistory.org

2 The family and the feud

2.1 Who were the Kauravas and Pandavas?

The core story is a fight for the throne of Hastinapura. That kingdom was ruled by the Kuru clan. The two branches of the family were the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

The Kauravas were the elder branch. The Pandavas were the younger branch. The names come from Kuru, their ancestor, and from Pandu, father of the Pandavas.

2.2 How did the sons come about?

- Dhritarashtra, the eldest, was passed over for the throne because the laws barred a disabled person from being king.
- Pandu was crowned instead.
- The five Pandavas were Pandu's sons, born to his two wives by the Niyog custom, from gods.
- Dhritarashtra and Gandhari had 100 sons and one daughter.

Who is who

Character	Role
Vyasa	The sage credited with the epic; also a character in it
Bhishma	Son of Shantanu; took the terrible vow (Devavrat before it)
Dhritarashtra	Eldest son in the line; passed over for the throne; father of the Kauravas

Character	Role
Pandu	Crowned king; father of the five Pandavas
Duryodhana	The eldest Kaurava
Yudhishthira	The eldest Pandava; later king
Arjuna	The third Pandava; the archer
Karna	Of the Suta clan; later revealed as Kunti's son
Krishna	Arjuna's charioteer; gives the Gita
Draupadi	Wife of the five Pandavas

Sources: World History Encyclopedia and New World Encyclopedia (Mahabharata).

2.3 Where did the rivalry begin?

All 105 princes were taught by Kripa and later Drona. The hostility grew at that school. Karna, of the Suta clan, was one of the boys. Duryodhana crowned him king of a vassal state on the spot.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: The Kauravas were the elder branch of the family. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: Pandu was passed over for the throne. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Dice, exile and war

3.1 How did Draupadi come to the Pandavas?

Arjuna won her at a swayamvar, a ceremony to choose a suitor. He pierced the spinning fish's eye with all five arrows in a single attempt. It was then decided that Draupadi would be the common wife of all five Pandavas.

3.2 What was Indraprastha?

The kingdom was partitioned. The Pandavas were given a huge tract of barren land to settle in and rule over. They made it the kingdom of Indraprastha, which prospered.

3.3 What did the dice game cost?

Yudhishthir was invited to a dice game. He lost step by step his entire wealth, his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and Draupadi. In a second game the loser had to go on a 12-year exile followed by a year of life incognito. Yudhishthir lost again.

3.4 What happened in the thirteenth year?

The Pandavas lived in the Virat kingdom during their year in hiding. Arjuna taught the palace maidens how to sing and dance. After that year, peace missions failed. Krishna himself went on one. Duryodhan refused even five villages.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Yudhishthir lost Draupadi in the dice game. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: The Pandavas hid in the Virat kingdom during the first year of exile. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 The war and after

4.1 How big was the war?

The battle raged for 18 days. The armies totalled 18 akshauhinis. There were 7 on the Pandava side and 11 on the Kaurava side. The Pandavas won but lost almost everyone they held dear.

4.2 What was revealed about Karna?

After he died, Karna was revealed to be a son of Kunti. He was born before her marriage to Pandu. That made him the eldest Pandava.

4.3 What happened afterwards?

Yudhishthir became king of Hastinapur and Indraprastha. The Pandavas ruled for 36 years. Then they gave up the throne to Abhimanyu's son, Parikshit. The Pandavas and Draupadi walked on foot towards the Himalayas.

4.4 Who told the story first?

The story was recited for the first time at a sacrifice held by Parikshit's son. The reciter was Vaishampayana, a disciple of Vyasa. New World Encyclopedia names that king as Janamejaya.

Quick check 7. True or false: The Kurukshetra battle lasted 18 days. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 8. True or false: Karna was the youngest Pandava. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

The books and the Gita

5 The eighteen books

5.1 How is the epic divided?

The Mahabharata is divided into 18 books called parvas. The first is the Adi Parva. The last is the Svargarohana Parva.

The 18 books (parvas)

No.	Parva	What it covers
1	Adi	Introduction; birth and upbringing of the princes
2	Sabha	Life at court; the game of dice; the exile of the Pandavas
3	Aranyaka	The twelve years of exile in the forest
4	Virata	The year spent at the court of Virata
5	Udyoga	Preparations for war
6	Bhishma	The first part of the battle; Bhishma commands for the Kauravas
7	Drona	The battle goes on; Drona commands

No.	Parva	What it covers
8	Karna	The battle again, with Karna as commander
9	Shalya	The last part of the battle
10	Sauptika	The attack on the sleeping Pandava army
11	Stri	Gandhari and the other women lament the dead
12	Shanti	Yudhisthira is crowned; Bhishma instructs him
13	Anusasana	Bhishma's final instructions
14	Ashvamedhika	The royal horse sacrifice of Yudhisthira
15	Ashramavasika	Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti leave for an ashram
16	Mausala	The infighting of the Yadavas with maces
17	Mahaprasthanika	The great journey of Yudhisthira and his brothers
18	Svargarohana	The Pandavas return to the spiritual world

Source: New World Encyclopedia (Mahabharata). The Harivamsha follows as an appendix.

5.2 Are there other divisions?

An older division into 100 sub-parvas is mentioned in the text itself. An alternative division into 20 parvas also existed for some time. Most parvas are named after one of their sub-parvas.

5.3 What is the Harivamsha?

The Harivamsha consists of the final two of the 100 sub-parvas. The editors of the 18 parvas treated it as an appendix, called a khila. It tells of the life of Krishna.

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: The Mahabharata has 18 parvas. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 10.** True or false: The Bhishma Parva comes before the Udyoga Parva. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6 The Bhagavad Gita

6.1 Where does the Gita sit?

The Bhagavad Gita has some 700 verses. They lie in the Bhishma Parva. The talk begins before the climactic battle at Kurukshetra.

6.2 What is the setting?

Arjuna sees his relatives and teachers lined up against him. His resolve wavers. Krishna has chosen to be his charioteer. Krishna then gives him a long philosophical discourse. It has become a separate book of its own.

6.3 What does Krishna teach?

He begins with the idea that the soul is eternal and immortal. He then explains the paths of devotion, action, meditation and knowledge.

He advocates Nishkam Karma Yoga, the yoga of selfless action. Karma Yoga means doing your duty without concern for results. A verse puts it as: you have a right only to work, and no claim to its fruits.

> **Quick check 11.** True or false: The Gita belongs to the Bhishma Parva. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

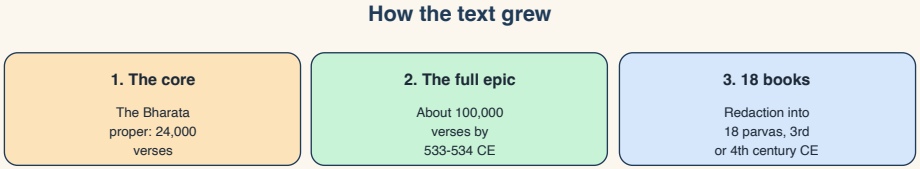
> **Quick check 12.** True or false: Nishkam Karma means acting only for rewards. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Growth, authorship and date

7 How the text grew

7.1 Did it grow over time?

Yes. It is undisputed that the full length accreted over a long period. Scholars have a long history of trying to unravel its layers.



How the Mahabharata grew.

7.2 What was the core?

The text itself names a core of 24,000 verses, called the Bharata proper. It sets this apart from additional secondary material.

7.3 What is the first testimony of the full text?

The first testimony is a copper-plate inscription of Maharaja Sharvanatha, dated 533-534 CE. It describes the Mahabharata as a collection of 100,000 verses.

The redaction into 18 books likely took place in the 3rd or 4th century CE. A mention of the Hunas in the Bhishma Parva suggests that the work was still being compiled in 400 CE.

7.4 What are the three versions?

The text says there were three versions, beginning with Manu, Astika and Vasu. The Astika version introduced the name Mahabharata and named Vyasa as author.

7.5 What is the Critical Edition?

Between 1919 and 1966, scholars of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune compared manuscripts from India and abroad. They produced the Critical Edition. It runs to 13,000 pages in 19 volumes. Today it is the text most often used in studies.

> **Quick check 13.** True or false: The earliest testimony of the full text is a copper-plate of 533-534 CE. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 14.** True or false: The Critical Edition was made in Mumbai in the 1800s. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

8 Are there different versions?

8.1 Are there different versions of the Mahabharata?

Yes. There is no single text that everyone follows. The surviving manuscripts differ from one another by region.

Scholars sort these manuscripts into families. A family of manuscripts is called a **recension**. Think of a recension as a regional edition of the same book.

One source says recensions relate either to a region or to the text as given by a certain commentator. A commentator is a scholar who explains a text line by line.

The manuscripts fall into three recensions. The **Southern** is the longest and most elaborate. The **Northern** is roughly what is called the Vulgate. The **Kashmiri** is even shorter. The Critical Edition is roughly the overlap of these.

8.2 Which printed editions came before the Critical Edition?

Printed editions appeared in the 19th century. Four editions were the main ones before the Critical Edition.

Main editions before the Critical Edition

Edition	Year	What it follows
Calcutta	1839	The Bengal recension
Bombay	1863	The Devanagari-script recension; also called the Nilakantha edition
Kumbhakonam	1910	The Devanagari script; includes the Southern recension
Southern Recension (P.P.S. Sastri)	1935	The Southern recension

Years are as given in one source. Other sources give slightly different years for some editions.

8.3 What is the Vulgate?

Vulgate means the most commonly accepted version of a text. For the Mahabharata, it is the version on which Nilakantha's famous 17th-century commentary, the Bhavadipa, is based.

Gita Press, Gorakhpur, uses the Vulgate for its Hindi translation. Its text is largely based on Nilakantha's edition. It also includes some prominent verses from the Southern recension.

8.4 What is the Critical Edition, and how was it made?

A **critical edition** tries to rebuild the earliest form of a text that can still be recovered. Editors compare many manuscripts and weigh each reading. In 1897, the Viennese scholar Moriz Winternitz asked Indologists to work toward a definitive text. Indologists are scholars of Indian studies.

The work was done at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune. It was initially led by V. S. Sukthankar. It was completed in 1966.

Here is how big the task was. For the Adi Parvan (the first book) alone, some 235 manuscripts were consulted. About 60 were finally used.

The rule was simple. A verse found in the greatest number of manuscripts was accepted. Some accepted verses carry wavy lines to show that they are doubtful. Verses that did not make the cut went into footnotes. Longer passages went into appendices at the end of the parvan.

Sukthankar explained that the result is an approximation of the earliest recoverable form of the epic. One published count puts its size at about 73,640 to 73,787 verses, depending on who counts.

8.5 What did the Critical Edition leave out?

Two episodes that many Indian readers take for granted are not in it. One is Ganesha as the scribe. The other is the re-robing of Draupadi by Krishna through a divine miracle.

They were not found in enough manuscripts to make the cut. So the Critical Edition drops them, even though many readers know them well.

8.6 Have regional poets retold the epic?

Yes. Poets in several languages made their own versions. Three are often named.

- **Pampa (Kannada):** Pampa was a Jain poet of the 10th century. His *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* is popularly called the Pampa Bharata. It has 14 chapters and 1,609 verses. It is the earliest and most famous Bharata epic in Kannada.
- **Villiputhurar (Tamil):** His *Villibharatam* condenses the epic into just 4,204 verses by one publication's count, or 4,336 by another's. One review places his Tamil *Paratam* in the fifteenth century.
- **Kashiram Das (Bengali):** His is called the most important Bangla Mahabharata, composed around 1602 to 1610. He finished only four books: Adi, Sabha, Vana and Virata. His son, nephew and other relatives finished the other fourteen. The complete text was printed in 1936. It is far from a strict translation of the Sanskrit epic.

> **Quick check 15.** True or false: A recension is a family of manuscripts from one region or tradition. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 16.** True or false: The Critical Edition keeps every verse found in any manuscript. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: swarajyamag.com; vyasaonline.com; shreevatsa.net; satish.com.in; en.banglapedia.org; jainheritagecentres.com; amrita.edu; socialscientistindia.org

9 Who wrote it?

9.1 Who is credited with it?

Tradition ascribes the epic to Vyasa. He is also a character inside it. He fathered Dhritarashtra and Pandu, and his mother was Satyavati. His father was the sage Parashar.

9.2 What is the Ganesha story?

The first section says Ganesha wrote the text down at Vyasa's request. Ganesha agreed on one condition: Vyasa must never pause. Vyasa set a counter-condition. Ganesha must understand each verse before writing it. In one version of the tale, Ganesha snapped off his tusk to use as a pen.

9.3 Did one person write it all?

The sources show a text that grew over a long period. Vyasa is the traditional name behind a long process.

> **Quick check 17.** True or false: Ganesha is said to have written down the text as Vyasa recited it. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 18.** True or false: Vyasa is not a character in the epic. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

10 Dating text and war

10.1 When was the text composed?

No single date is settled. The sources give a range, and each is a view.

What the sources say about the date

Source	What it says
New World Encyclopedia	Final form completed between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE
New World Encyclopedia	The central core goes back as far as 500 BCE
New World Encyclopedia	The Sharvanatha copper-plate of 533-534 CE calls it a collection of 100,000 verses
World History Encyclopedia	Generally thought composed in the 4th century BCE or earlier

Sources: New World Encyclopedia and World History Encyclopedia. These are views, not one settled date.

10.2 Is the war itself historical?

New World Encyclopedia says the historicity of the events is unclear. Many historians believe it to be a work of fiction. But the setting has a precedent in Vedic India. The Kuru kingdom was the centre of political power in the late second and early first millennia BCE.

10.3 What dates are proposed for the war?

Several dates have been claimed. They differ by thousands of years.

Dates proposed for the war

Who or what	Date
Aryabhatta, the 5th century mathematician	About 3100 BCE
Archaeoastronomy claims	Sixth millennium BCE (contentious)
The Puranas	1,015 or 1,500 years before Mahapadma Nanda
Historical setting	Kuru kingdom's time of power: late 2nd to early 1st millennium BCE

Source: New World Encyclopedia (Mahabharata). The sources give claims, not proof.

> **Quick check 19.** True or false: The setting has a precedent in the Kuru kingdom of Vedic India. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 20.** True or false: The sources agree on one date for the war. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Practice

11 How exams test this

11.1 What traps repeat?

- **Author:** Vyasa by tradition; Ganesha is the scribe of the legend.
- **Parvas:** 18 books, with the Harivamsha as an appendix.
- **Gita:** in the Bhishma Parva, some 700 verses.
- **War:** 18 days, 18 akshauhinis.

- **Critical Edition:** Bhandarkar Institute, Pune, 1919 to 1966.
- **Retellings:** Pampa in Kannada, Villiputhurar in Tamil, Kashiram Das in Bengali.

Remember this

- **Length:** the longest epic poem, more than 74,000 verses by New World Encyclopedia's count.
- **Parts:** 18 parvas, with the Harivamsha as an appendix.
- **Gita:** some 700 verses in the Bhishma Parva.
- **Growth:** a 24,000-verse core; full text of 100,000 verses by 533-534 CE.

Explain it back: Say how the epic grew, and name the three people in the Ganesha story.

Practice MCQs

1. The battle of Mahabharata is believed to have been fought at Kurukshetra for

A. 16 days

B. 20 days

C. 14 days

D. 18 days

See answer ↓

2. Which sage is traditionally credited as the author of the Mahabharata?

A. Ved Vyasa

B. Panini

C. Valmiki

D. Kalidasa

See answer ↓

3. The Mahabharata is organised into how many books, called parvas?

A. Twenty-four

B. Twelve

C. Seven

D. Eighteen

See answer ↓

4. Tradition credits the sage Vyasa as the Mahabharata's author. Who does a well-known legend say wrote the text down as Vyasa dictated it?

A. The bard Sauti

B. The god Ganesha

C. Vaishampayana

D. King Janamejaya

See answer ↓

5. In the Bhagavad Gita, what does nishkama karma ask of a person?

A. Act only for reward

B. Act fully without attachment to the results

C. Act only when others are watching

D. Avoid all action

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The correct answer is **18 days**. Both sources say the battle raged for 18 days, with 18 akshauhinis in the armies. 14 days, 16 days and 20 days are wrong because the epic's count is 18, the same number as the parvas. Memory hook: 18 days, 18 armies, 18 books. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The correct answer is **Ved Vyasa**. Tradition credits the sage Vyasa with the Mahabharata, and he is a character in it. Valmiki is wrong because no source names him as the author of the Mahabharata. Kalidasa and Panini are wrong because no source credits them with the epic. Memory hook: Vyasa is the traditional name behind the Mahabharata. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The correct answer is **Eighteen**. The Mahabharata is divided into 18 parvas, from the Adi Parva to the Svargarohana Parva. Seven is wrong because no source gives it for the parvas. Twelve and Twenty-four are wrong because no source gives them for the parvas. Memory hook: 18 parvas, and the Harivamsha is an appendix. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The correct answer is **The god Ganesha**. The first section of the epic says Ganesha fixed the text in writing at Vyasa's request. He agreed on one condition: Vyasa must never pause. Vaishampayana and King Janamejaya are wrong because the sources name Vaishampayana as the reciter to Janamejaya, not as the scribe. The bard Sauti is wrong because no source names him as the scribe. Memory hook: Vyasa speaks, Ganesha writes. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** Nishkama karma asks a person to act fully without attachment to the results. Gita 2.47 says you have the right to work only, never to its fruits. So duty is done with full effort, and the outcome is left alone. Acting only for reward is the opposite idea. Acting only when watched is vanity, not detachment. Avoiding all action is also rejected, since the Gita urges Arjuna to rise and fight. Memory hook: do the work, release the fruit. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The Mahabharata is the longer of the two. ↑ 1
2. **False.** It is roughly ten times the Iliad and Odyssey together. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The Pandavas were the younger branch. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Dhritarashtra was passed over. Pandu was crowned. ↑ 4

5. **True.** He staked and lost his wealth, kingdom, brothers, himself and Draupadi. ↑ 5
6. **False.** They lived there in the final year, after 12 years in the forest. ↑ 6
7. **True.** The armies totalled 18 akshauhinis. ↑ 7
8. **False.** He was revealed to be Kunti's son from before her marriage, so the eldest. ↑ 8
9. **True.** The Harivamsha is an appendix to them. ↑ 9
10. **False.** The Udyoga Parva (preparations for war) is fifth. Bhishma is sixth. ↑ 10
11. **True.** It has some 700 verses. ↑ 11
12. **False.** It means selfless action, without concern for results. ↑ 12
13. **True.** It calls the work a collection of 100,000 verses. ↑ 13
14. **False.** It was made at the Bhandarkar Institute, Pune, from 1919 to 1966. ↑ 14
15. **True.** Scholars group the manuscripts into Southern, Northern and Kashmiri recensions. ↑ 15
16. **False.** It keeps verses found in the greatest number of manuscripts. The rest go to footnotes and appendices. ↑ 16
17. **True.** He set one condition: Vyasa must never pause. ↑ 17
18. **False.** He is a character in the epic as well as its credited author. ↑ 18
19. **True.** The Kuru kingdom was the centre of power in the late second and early first millennia BCE. ↑ 19
20. **False.** The claims range from about 3100 BCE to the sixth millennium BCE. ↑ 20

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