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Bhima fighting with Jayadratha in a page from the *Mahabharata* (c1615), Popular Mughal School, probably done at Bikaner, India. Photo by Getty

# The living Mahabharata

Immorality, sexism, politics, war: the polychromatic Indian epic pulses with relevance to the present day

*Audrey Truschke*

The *Mahabharata* is a tale for our times. The plot of the ancient Indian epic centres around corrupt politics, ill-behaved men and warfare. In this dark tale, things get worse and worse, until an era of unprecedented depravity, the Kali Yuga, dawns. According to the *Mahabharata*, we're still living in the horrific Kali era, which will

unleash new horrors on us until the world ends.

The *Mahabharata* was first written down in Sanskrit, ancient India's premier literary language, and ascribed to a poet named Vyasa about 2,000 years ago, give or take a few hundred years. The epic sought to catalogue and thereby criticise a new type of vicious politics enabled by the transition from a clan-based to a state-based society in northern India.

The work concerns two sets of cousins – the Pandavas and the Kauravas – who each claim the throne of Hastinapura as their own. In the first third of the epic, the splintered family dynasty tries to resolve their succession conflict in various ways, including gambling, trickery, murder and negotiation. But they fail. So, war breaks out, and the middle part of the *Mahabharata* tells of a near-total world conflict in which all the rules of battle are broken as each new atrocity exceeds the last. Among a battlefield of corpses, the Pandavas are the last ones left standing. In the final third of the epic, the Pandavas rule in a post-apocalyptic world until, years later, they too die.

From the moment that the *Mahabharata* was first written two millennia ago, people began to rework the epic to add new ideas that spoke to new circumstances. No two manuscripts are identical (there are thousands of handwritten Sanskrit copies), and the tale was recited as much or more often than it was read. Some of the most beloved parts of the *Mahabharata* today – such as that the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha wrote the epic with his broken tusk as he heard Vyasa's narration – were added centuries after the story was first compiled.

The *Mahabharata* is long. It is roughly seven times the length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, and 15 times the length of the Christian Bible. The plot covers multiple generations, and the text sometimes follows side stories for the length of a modern novel. But for all its narrative breadth and manifold asides, the *Mahabharata* can be accurately characterised as a set of narratives about vice.

Inequality and human suffering are facts of life in the *Mahabharata*. The work offers valuable perspectives and vantage points for reflecting on how various injustices play out in today's world too.

**T**he *Mahabharata* claims to show *dharma* or righteous conduct – a guiding ideal of human life in Hindu thought – within the morass of the characters' immoral behaviours. But the line between virtue and vice, *dharma* and *adharma*, is often muddled. The bad guys sometimes act more ethically than the good guys, who are themselves deeply flawed. In the epic's polychromatic morality, the constraints of society and politics shackle all.

Bhishma, a common ancestor and grandfather-like figure to both sets of cousins, is a

quintessential *Mahabharata* figure. Loyal to his family to a fault, he takes a vow of celibacy so that his father can marry a younger woman who wanted her children to inherit the throne. Bhishma's motivation, namely love of his father, was good, but the result of denying himself children was to divert the line of succession to his younger brothers and, ultimately, their warring children. Appropriately, Bhishma's name, adopted when he took his vow of celibacy, means 'the terrible' (before the vow, he was known as Devavrata, 'devoted to the gods'). Bhishma remains devoted to his family even when they support the Kauravas, the bad guys, in the great war.

Sometimes even the gods act objectionably in the *Mahabharata*. Krishna, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, endorses dishonesty on more than one occasion. Even when Krishna advocates what the epic dubs dharma, the results can be hard to stomach. For example, when Arjuna, the third Pandava brother and their best warrior, hesitates to fight against his family and kill so many people, Krishna gives an eloquent speech that convinces him to plunge into battle.

Krishna's discourse to Arjuna, known as the *Bhagavadgita* ('Song of the Lord'), or *Gita* for short, is often read as a standalone work today, and revered by many across the world for its insights on morality and even nonviolence. In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi understood the *Gita* to support nonviolent resistance to colonial oppression. In the *Mahabharata*'s plot, however, the *Bhagavadgita* rationalises mass slaughter.

## What is the point of ruling when you got there only through deceit, sin and death?

'Mahabharata' translates as 'great story of the Bharatas', the Bharatas being the family lineage at the centre of the tale. However, in many modern Indian settings, 'Mahabharata' means a great battle. War is the narrative crux of the epic. The war that settles the succession dispute between the Pandavas and the Kauravas draws much of the world into its destructive whirlwind. Along with peoples from across the Indian subcontinent, Greeks, Persians and the Chinese also send troops to stand and fall in battle.

The Pandavas win, but at a magnificent cost of human life. The epic compels readers to imagine that human cost by describing the battle in excruciating, bloody detail over tens of thousands of verses. The Pandavas kill multiple members of their own family along the way, including elders who ought to be revered. Their victory is further soured by a night raid in which, on the last night of the war, the few remaining Kauravas creep into the slumbering Pandava camp and kill nearly everyone, including all the victors' sons.

After the slaughter, when blood has soaked the earth and most of the characters lie dead, Yudhishtira, the eldest of the five Pandavas, decides that he no longer wants the throne of Hastinapura. What is the point of ruling when you got there only through deceit, sin and death? Yudhishtira says:

आत्मानमात्मना हत्वा किं धर्मफलमाप्नुमः  
धिगस्तु क्षात्रमाचारं धिगस्तु बलमौरसम्  
धिगस्त्वमर्षं येनेमामापदं गमिता वयम्

Since we slaughtered our own, what good can possibly come from ruling?  
Damn the ways of kings! Damn might makes right!  
Damn the turmoil that brought us to this disaster!

Yudhishtira's fellow victors ultimately convince him to fulfil the duty to rule, regardless of his personal inclination to retire to the forest. In an attempt to address his numerous sharp objections, Bhishma – who lies dying on a bed of arrows – gives a prolix discourse on dharma in various circumstances, including in disasters. Still, for some readers, lingering doubt cannot but remain that Yudhishtira might be right to want to shun a bitter political victory.

The *Mahabharata* follows Yudhishtira's reign for some years. It concludes with the demise of the five Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi. In an unsettling twist, the six wind up visiting hell for a bit, en route to heaven. This detour calls the very core of dharma, righteousness, into question, again reminding us that the *Mahabharata* is an epic ordered by undercutting its own professed ethics.

In its philosophy and ethics, the *Mahabharata* proffers riches to its readers, in particular about the nature of human suffering as an ever-present challenge to any moral order. But how does the work measure up as literature? The work is considered to be *kavya* (poetry). In classical Sanskrit literary theory, each *kavya* ought to centre around a *rasa*, an aesthetic emotion, such as erotic love (*shringara*) or heroism (*vira*). But what aesthetic emotion might a tale of politics and pain, such as the *Mahabharata*, spark in readers?

Confounded by this question, one premodern Indian thinker suggested adding a ninth *rasa* to the line-up that might suit the *Mahabharata*: *shanta*, quiescence or turning away from the world. The idea is that, after perusing the vicious politics and violence endemic to the human condition as depicted in the *Mahabharata*, people would be disenchanted with earthly things and so renounce the world in favour of more spiritual pursuits, as Yudhishtira wished to.

**T**he *Mahabharata* condemns many of the appalling things it depicts, but one area where its response is more tepid concerns the treatment meted out to women.

The story of Draupadi, the leading Pandava heroine, is the most well-known. Before the great war, her husband Yudhishtira gambles her away in a dice game, and Draupadi's new owners, the Kauravas, strip and publicly assault her at their court. The *Mahabharata* condemns this event, but Draupadi's notorious sharp tongue also undercuts the empathy many might have had for her.

After she is won at dice, Draupadi argues with her captors. First, she speaks up privately, from her quarters of the palace. Then, after being dragged into the Kauravas' public audience hall, traditionally a male space, she advocates openly about how the situation is 'a savage injustice' (*adharmam ugram*) that implicates all the elders present. Her self-assertion in a hall of men works. She convinces Dhritarashtra, the Kaurava king, to release her and eventually the rest of her family. But in a world favouring demure women, Draupadi's willingness to speak about her suffering means that she has always carried a reputation as a shrew and a troublemaker.

Draupadi entered the Pandava family when Arjuna won her in a self-choice ceremony. In such ceremonies, the name notwithstanding, the woman is given as the prize to the victor of a contest. However, Draupadi ends up with five husbands, when Arjuna's mother tells him – without looking over her shoulder to see that she is speaking about a female trophy rather than an inanimate one – to split his prize with his brothers. To make her words true, all five Pandavas marry Draupadi.

### Nobody ever says that a bride should be like Draupadi, unless the goal is to curse the newlywed

Nobody ever asks Draupadi if she wanted polyandry, and the question has rarely interested readers. However, the *Mahabharata* offers further justifications for this unusual arrangement that blame Draupadi. For instance, in a prior life, Draupadi had asked for a husband with five qualities; unable to find a man who had all of them, Shiva gave her five husbands. She should not have asked for so much.

Draupadi has never been considered a role model in mainstream Indian cultures. Some later Sanskrit and vernacular works mock her. Even today, a refrain at Hindu weddings is that the bride ought to be like Sita, the heroine of the *Ramayana*. Nobody ever says that a bride should be like Draupadi, unless the goal is to curse the newlywed.

In the *Mahabharata*, kidnapping is also an acceptable way to compel a woman to marry. For instance, Arjuna falls in love at first sight (or perhaps in lust) with Subhadra but, unsure whether she would accept him, he abducts her. This story has been cleaned up in some modern retellings – such as the TV serial from Doordarshan (one of India's largest public service broadcasters) – which tend to water down

misogyny.

The world of the *Mahabharata* is stacked against women. Our world today looks distinct in its details, but some basic principles are not much different. For example, more than one person has compared Draupadi's plight with that of 'Nirbhaya', the name given to the young woman mortally gang-raped in Delhi in 2012. Nirbhaya (meaning 'fearless') resisted her attackers, and one of the rapists later said that this resistance prompted him and his fellow assaulters to be more brutal than they would have been otherwise. Two millennia later, the corrupt 'moral' remains: she should not have objected to unjust treatment.

**T**he *Mahabharata* represents a world of caste and class, where bloodline determines identity. Many characters try to break out of the bonds of lineage, but they usually fail in the end. Among the many tales in this vein, that of Karna stands out as offering harsh reflections on the limits of an individual to reshape his identity.

Karna's mother is Kunti, mother of the five Pandava brothers, but Karna is not counted among the five. The story goes that, when Kunti was a girl, a sage gave her a boon that she could call any god at any time to impregnate her. Still unmarried, one night she calls Surya, the Sun god. Surya's brilliance scares Kunti, and she asks him to leave, but he insists on seeing the matter through. And so, compelled by a male god who said she asked for it, Kunti conceives Karna.

This troubling conception augured Karna's future troubled life. Kunti fears her father's wrath if he were to find his daughter with child but without a husband. So, after giving birth, she sends Karna, her first-born son, down the river in a basket. A low-caste barren couple finds the abandoned infant and raises him as their own. The story parallels (unintentionally, most likely) that of Moses, with the classes of the birth and adopted parents reversed. Like Moses, Karna could never escape his birthright.

Karna is born with brilliant armour, inherited from his father, and other marks that he would be a great warrior. He is also drawn to fighting, which leads him, early in the epic, to enter a weapons competition in which the Pandavas and Kauravas also participate. When Karna is asked to announce his lineage, it comes out that he is the son of low-caste parents, and Bhima – one of the good guys – ridicules him. Sensing a chance to make a new friend, the Kauravas – the baddies of the story – give Karna a kingdom and so make him, technically, a king and eligible to fight. At this point in the tale, nobody knows that Karna is actually the eldest Pandava and that he is already royal by birth – except for his mother, Kunti, who watches the event silently.

**Internalising the caste prejudice that condemned him,**

## Ekalavya cut off his thumb and was never a threat again

As the eldest Pandava by blood, Karna should have been king. In fact, Krishna goes to Karna to make this argument on the eve of the great war, as a last-ditch effort to avoid catastrophe, and the conversation is one of the most interesting in the *Mahabharata*. The core questions are timeless: what determines a person's identity? Can an individual reject or change who they really are? Who gets to say who each of us really is? Can we escape our destinies?

Karna refuses Krishna's request to take his place as the eldest Pandava and ascend the throne. Instead, choosing bread over blood, Karna fights and dies with the Kauravas. But, according to Vyasa and the *Mahabharata*'s many unknown authors, Karna, no matter his actions, was never a Kaurava. At the end of the epic, in a scene twisted in more ways than one, Karna winds up in hell with the other Pandavas, briefly, while the Kauravas bask in heaven.

The epic's stance that we can't transcend our births can appear very dark to modern eyes (or at least to some modern eyes) in stories that feature low-caste characters. Take the tale of Ekalavya. Ekalavya is born a tribal (*nishada*), outside of the four-fold Hindu class system, but his heart is set on life as a warrior (*kshatriya*) and learning to fight from Drona, who taught both the Pandavas and Kauravas. Drona denies Ekalavya instruction because of casteism, and so Ekalavya honours a clay statue of Drona every day while learning on his own. After a while, Ekalavya's skills exceed those of Arjuna. And so, Arjuna cajoles Drona to demand that Ekalavya slice off his own thumb, thus ensuring that Ekalavya could never shoot an arrow again. Drona does so, under the guise of asking for *gurudakshina* (a teacher's fee) since Ekalavya had built a statue of Drona's likeness. Internalising the caste prejudice that condemned him, Ekalavya cut off his thumb and was never a threat to Arjuna again. The message is that, one way or another, *varnashramadharma* (moral behaviour according to one's social class and life stage) prevails.

A 20th-century poem by the Dalit writer Shashikant Hingonekar puts it like this:

If you had kept your thumb  
history would have happened  
somewhat differently.  
But ... you gave your thumb  
and history also  
became theirs.  
Ekalavya, since that day they have not even given you a glance.  
Forgive me, Ekalavya, I won't be fooled now by their sweet words.  
My thumb will never be broken.

The *Mahabharata* claims to be about the totality of human life in a verse included in both its first and final books:

धर्मं चार्थं च कामे च मोक्षे च भरतर्षभ  
यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न तत्त्वचचित्

What is found here regarding the aims of human life –  
righteousness, wealth, pleasure, and release –  
may be found elsewhere, O Bull of the Bharatas.  
But what is not here, is found nowhere.

Indeed, the *Mahabharata*'s promise to explore (among other things) immorality, politics, sexism and identity problems as general features of human life rings true in our times.

Over the past several years, politics in India and the United States have taken dark turns as both countries turn their backs on the values of pluralism and embrace ethno- and religious nationalisms. Violence and death are heavily used tools by governments in both countries.

Sexism has never gone away. It is a critical part of the current surge of Right-wing ideologies and their embrace of male privilege. Moreover, the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are reasserting retrograde gender roles in many places across the globe. The pandemic's toll on women's physical safety, mental health and careers is great and growing.

Identity, too, plagues us. The caste system is still very much alive, in both India and the diaspora. We also struggle with types of oppression birthed in modernity, such as racism.

The *Mahabharata* makes no false promises of solving such problems, but it does offer us tools for thinking them through, now and in the future, even if – or perhaps especially if – that future looks dark. The epic itself foretells:

आचख्युः कवयः केचित्संप्रत्याचक्षते परे  
आख्यास्यन्ति तथैवान्ये इतिहासमिमं भुवि

Some poets told this epic before.  
Others are telling it now.  
Different narrators will tell it in the future.

*A note on the text: translations in this article are my own; I prefer colloquial translations. For recent retellings of the Mahabharata in English, I recommend that of John D Smith's Penguin edition (2009) for fidelity to text and completeness, and Carole Satyamurti's*

*Norton edition (2016) for poetry.*

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