

**Block**

# 2

## **VYAS: MAHABHARATA**

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## BLOCK INTRODUCTION

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The second Block in this course looks at certain sections of the Indian Epic the *Mahabharata*. We are all aware of this epic, be it through religious texts that our grandmothers' might have read out loud, through the TV Serial produced by B R Chopra in the late 1990s (1988), the slightly later version telecast by Star Plus between 2013 and 2014, or even via *Amar Chitra Katha*.

The *Mahabharata*, is an epic that deals primarily with the story of two families laying claim to the throne of *Hastinapur*. The tragedy is the two families are of two brothers – the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. This ongoing skirmish between the two families ultimately culminates in the battle of *Kurukshetra* where the 100 *Kauravas* are killed and the *Pandavas* emerge victorious aided by the guidance of *Krsna*. However, the *Mahabharata* is not just the story of the war between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. There are a number of little tales, myths, and anecdotes in this huge Epic and in a sense it is a treasure trove of cultural content.

Let us now plunge right into *media res*, into the thick of things and begin by reading the translated text and then going through the Units. You are required to read 'The Dicing', 'The Sequel to Dicing', 'The Book of the Assembly Hall', 'The Temptation of Karna' and 'The Book of Effort from the *Mahabharata*', *Selections from the Sabha Prava and Udyos Prava*, Trans. **J A B Bitenen**. Ed. **Kanav Gupta & Meha Pande**, Delhi: Worldview, 2016.

Good Luck with your work!

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# UNIT 1 THE *MAHABHARATA*: AN OVERVIEW

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Structure of the *Mahabharata*
- 1.3 The Complex Narrative
  - 1.3.1 The Question of Authorship and Reworking of the Narrative
  - 1.3.2 Folk Tales, Fables and Parables in the *Mahabharata*
  - 1.3.3 Social Life at the Time
- 1.4 The *Mahabharata* as a Literary Text
- 1.5 The Role of Fate and Chance
- 1.6 The Meaning of *Dharma*: The Law
- 1.7 Contemporary Interpretations of the *Mahabharata*
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.10 Glossary

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with the diverse material that is available on the ancient Indian Epic the *Mahabharata*. It is to provide you with a perspective on the entire text along with its reception over the centuries. Certain elements pertaining to the form and structure of the epic have been discussed in order to clearly define the nature of the text which would help us in evaluating it better, as being students of Literature, we also need to develop critical skills. In the next section, we shall introduce the *Mahabharata* as a text, not the comic form or the TV Serial version.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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The *Mahabharata* is the name of an Indian oral epic to begin with and compiled traditionally in *Sanskrit* later on, charting the story of a family involved in a tussle that leads to a battle. The epic is in effortless verse and has many episodes. Each story or episode has a beginning and an ending so that, these appear as individual pieces while still being loosely connected to one another. The *Mahabharata* is a story of kinship and conflict for dynasty. It is thus, the story of a family quarrel in verse involving the two warring groups the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. The succession conflict begins when *Yudhishthira* seeks a fair share for the *Pandavas* - rule of a mere five villages. When he is denied this rightful claim, the struggle for inheritance begins and the question of 'who is the rightful heir?' is posed and emphasised.

Tracing the roots of the epic poem, we find that the epic is about the Dynasty of King *Bharata*. We are told that:

The text of the *Mahabharata* is sometimes supposed to have developed in three stages. The first was that of 8800 verses called *Jaya*, the second of 23000 verses called *Bharata*, and the third of 100,000 verses called the *Mahabharata*.  
(Pande, 37)

It is believed that in an earlier time the work was called “*Jaya*” (victory), that it was a poem of triumph which recounted the tale of a king who wins over his rival kinsmen. If we are to split the word *Mahabharata* into two syllables – *Maha* and *Bharata*, *Maha* would refer to “*the great*”; and *Bharata* to the “*story*”. Hence, the epic could also mean “*Mahabharata*” or “*The Great Story*.” Having said that by way of an introduction to the epic, it is but pertinent that we look at what an Epic is next.

An epic is a heroic poem with a long narrative and a serious subject matter. It is a collection of a series of events but has at least one major happening that determines the fate of humanity at large. Epics are often of national/universal significance and deal with warriors, legends, folktales, and histories. The setting of the epic is usually grand and involves superhuman actions. It depicts larger than life scenes, vivid descriptions, long speeches and elaborate greetings, digressions as also hardships, long arduous journeys and misadventures. The epic encompasses a large timeframe that may include generations and ages. It is wide-ranging in time and space as also in its cast of characters. This is a generic introduction to the Epic form as most of us will know and is true of most Epics be they oral or written, of the West or the East. Epics do have some common features and we shall examine them next.

Narrator — Every Epic has a narrator and epics also normally begin with an invocation / prayer to the Gods and this invocation is usually performed by the narrator, who then, sets the epic in motion. The narrator may introduce the epic question that would be dealt with, in the work and, around which the entire narrative is built. The theme and question is related to a general truth—it could open a debate on war and justice since both are important themes in epics.

Episodic in nature — An epic has several episodes each connected to the other but each with its own beginning and ending. While these episodes have a bearing on one another they are logically complete in themselves. This is an essential quality of an epic.

Grandiloquent — The style of an epic is formal and grandiloquent, which means the narration must be both grand in scope and eloquent in expression. The epic would reject ordinary speech in favour of oratory and stylised language. It would often have *epic conventions* and *epic similes*.

Heroic — An epic has a hero (es) who have extraordinary or divine power. The hero is either a progeny of a god or a disciple. The hero of the epic is able to interact with the gods and in crucial moments see the gods in their divine *avatar*. These heroic characters are able to draw strength and knowledge from the gods who play an important role in their lives. There is a union between the human and the divine in the epic. At the same time, the heroes are not mere observers or spectators of events. They are participants and agents of change. These characters work out in their minds the different perspectives and take decisions as well as act on them.

In the *Mahabharata*, however, no one person is heroic as in the case of the *Ramayana* (another Indian epic of significance). The *Mahabharata* is meant to be a record of human beings who fall prey to temptations. Unlike the *Ramayana*, which is focused on the character of Ram, the *Mahabharata* focuses on the complexity of events and characters spread over three generations. The

latter is not a one-man show and in this sense closer to our reality than the former. However, while the *Ramayana* is an epic in praise of an ideal man, the *Mahabharata* focuses on human weaknesses. The *Mahabharata* has a spate of characters important to the narrative while in the *Ramayana*, everything revolves around the figure of *Ram* and his actions. This makes the *Mahabharata* more realistic. It is seen as a historical epic spanning across generations. While in the *Ramayana* ‘god’ is at the centre of the narrative, in the *Mahabharata* it is the human being in interaction with the gods who occupies centre-stage. It has been suggested that the *Mahabharata* does not fit in the western model of the heroic epic. It in fact:

*Reflects the critical representation of a bygone heroic age from the point of view of a subsequent age of enlightenment* (Pande, 38)

Thus, the European idea of the epic cannot be applied to the *Mahabharata per se*, even as the text has epic dimension and deploys freely the characteristics of the epic.

Human-Divine characters — some gods appear as characters in epics and they have a part to play in the narrative. They make the human being the object of inquiry as they keep testing the strength and vigour of the important characters. For instance, the narrative acquaints us with the author **Vyas**, who is a god who has taken a human *avatar*. Similar is the case with the character of *Krsna* in the text.

Temperament and moral attitude— each character in the epic displays a particular temperament and moral attitude. This determines their speech and behaviour. By extension they become the epitome of the set of values they hold dear. In this way the conflict between characters in the epic actually becomes a conflict between two value systems.

Optimism — An Epic is meant to have a positive end which promises a better and just world. Good must be rewarded and evil punished. The *Mahabharata* in many ways can be looked at as a fight between good and evil as also *dharma* and *adharma*.

These are some of the important constituents of an epic in general, the Indian epic and the text under consideration – the *Mahabharata* in particular. Let us now briefly look at the structure of the *Mahabharata*.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) What is an Epic?  
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- 2) What are some of the common features of an Epic?  
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## 1.2 THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAHABHARATA

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The *Mahabharata* has a principal narrative that binds the entire work and all the episodes together. The Epic is divided into eighteen books and a *Khila*/

*Harivamsa Parva*, (which is ‘The Book of the Genealogy of Hari’, an addendum to those parts of the life of *Krsna* that are not covered in the 18 *Parvas* of the *Mahabharata*), that are called *parvas* and each book has several sub-books. Each *Parva* has its own structure—a beginning and an end unified by action. The eighteen books are as follows: *Adi Parva* with 7982 couplets; *Sabha Parva* with 2511 couplets; *Vana Parva* containing 11663 couplets; *Virata Parva* having 2500 couplets; *Udyog Parva* –6698 couplets; *Bhishma Parva* –5863; *Drona Parva*—8909, *Karna Parva* 3900; *Shalya Parva*—3220; *Sauptija Parva*—870; *Stri Parva*—775; *Shanti Parva*—13525; *Anushasana Parva*—6700; *Ashvamedhika Parva*—3320; *Ashramavasika Parva* –1506; *Mausala Parva*—300; *Mahaprasthanika Parva*—120; *Svargarohana Parva*—200 and the *Khila/ Harivamsa Parva*, as mentioned earlier. In the next section, we shall look at the complexities in the narrative of the *Mahabharata*.



*Sauti reciting the Shlokas of the Mahabharata, [wikipedia.org]*

### 1.3 THE COMPLEX NARRATIVE

The first page of the *Mahabharata* does not introduce us to the royal courts (which would occupy much of the action later) with its dynastic struggles but the humble surroundings of a hermitage where sages are gathered to perform a ritual lasting twelve years. Here *Ugrashrava*, the bard, is urged by the seers assembled in the *Naimisa* forest to recite the interesting and grand tale of the *Bharatas*, as recited earlier by *Vaishampayana* to King *Janamejaya*. This sets the tone for the beginning of the narrative.

It is believed that *Krsna Dvaipayana Vyas* composed the *Mahabharata*. He is understood to be a participant in the events and a trustworthy eye witness. As author of the text he narrates the story to his disciples. According to certain religious readings of the text, “of the pupils to whom *Vyasa* told this story, *Narada* recited it to the Gods, *Asita Devala* to the Ancestors, his son *Shuka* to the *Gandharvas*, *Yakshas*, and *Rakshasas*, and *Vaishampayana* to the mortals” (Mehta, 72). *Vyas*’s disciple *Vaishampayana* narrates the tale to King *Janamejaya* (son of King *Parikshita* and grandson of *Abhimanyu*) of



*Hastinapura* who wished to know about the deeds of his ancestors. *Vaishampayana* narrates the *Mahabharata* to the assembly present at the court at the sacrifice of the *Nagas*. The tale as recited by *Vaishampayana* to King *Janamejaya* is heard by one *Ugrashrava*, the son of a bard (famous storyteller) and he recounts it to a group of sages who are involved in performing sacrifices and rituals for twelve years. The narrative is thus, tortuous.

The *Mahabharata* as a whole is recited by *Ugrashrava* /the loud voiced, who may be seen as the first narrator of the book. The second narrator is *Vaishampayana* who narrates in the first person the story up to a point making way for the third narrator *Sanjaya*, who recounts the battle scene step – by – step, following which *Vaishampayana* resumes his narrative. A number of stories within the text are recounted by other narrators as well.

### 1.3.1 The Question of Authorship and Reworking of the Narrative

It is believed that a generation of narrators conforming to the changes in language and style in their specific context, reworked the text of the *Mahabharata*. For instance, many critics believe that the “*Bhagvad Gita*” was a later addition and does not essentially fit in the logic of the text. Many episodes and legends too, it is believed have been added to the original composition of *Vyasa*. Thus, we have stories within stories. The *Mahabharata* for us, in this sense, has many narrators and authors. Also, “the essential thing in such oral communication is that from the very beginning, the story is told to someone, by someone face-to-face, somewhere, at some point of time, where the teller and the auditor are in an engaged relationship with the story told”. Thus, each time the text was told, new elements were added to it that was specific to the context of the teller and the auditor. The oral tradition enabled many versions of the *Mahabharata*. With later scholarship, the *Mahabharata* attained a standard form when it was passed on as a written text meant to be read and not heard. **M A Mehendale** has suggested that the *Mahabharata* “has come down to us not in its original form but with many additions made in it, in the course of its long transmission, first by reciters and later by writers of manuscripts at different places and different times”. These interpolations in the *Mahabharata* are only natural as he further suggests that “it would have been a matter of great surprise if a popular text like the Mbh. (*Mahabharata*) which was orally transmitted for many centuries was not burdened with many additions” (*Interpolations in the Mahabharata*, 2001, 195). In fact, oral literature is defined as a collective ownership by a community or a people who add to the compositions passed on from one generation to another. This kind of literature is often attributed as folk literature.

### 1.3.2 Folk Tales, Fables and Parables in the Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* is also a part of a strong folk tradition in India which is freely adapted and reworked; new fables and parables have been added over the centuries. Still, there is a lyrical quality about the text as it was sung by bards at courts as also by wandering minstrels. Written in simple verse form, the *Mahabharata* like the *Ramayana* was a narrative that was sung from place to place. Underpinning the significance of the folk tale several critics have viewed the great epic as primarily divided into “two main parts (i) The main story of the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* and (ii) the vast tale-literature” (Dange ix). Further it has been observed that,

*Tales like the 'Swan and the Crow', 'the Pigeon' Sacrifice' or 'the Bidalavrata' come under fable while 'king Brahmadata and Piyani' and 'Sibi' can be classed as parables, the difference being that in the former the whole tale is told as of the beasts and birds while in the latter we have human being as the central figure. Both the fable type and the parable type of tales are one in the point of a purpose which is –imparting instructions...*

*(Dange, Legends in the Mahabharata, xxxvii, 1969).*

Thus, the *Mahabharata* is didactic in tone and is meant to be a manual of a moral code of conduct. However, it also has strong contemplative and philosophical strains that bring into focus the dilemma of human choice and venture. Let's look at the society at the time of the *Mahabharata* next.

### 1.3.3 Social Life at the Time

What was society like at the time when the *Mahabharata* was composed? For that we need to ascertain when the *Mahabharata* was composed. Critics differ on the exact dates but it has been largely agreed that it was composed around 1000 B.C. This constitutes India's ancient period. **G C Pande** tells us that:

*The society described in the Mahabharata is regularly conceived as a fourfold one, one, that, consisted of the four Varnas. It has been opined that the Kshatriyas constituted the pre-eminent class in this society because of their control of political power...*

*(An Age of Change, 53)*

It is also believed that the social tussle for supremacy defined the relation between the *Brahmanas* (who had the traditional role of advising the King and performed sacred rituals) and the *Kshatriyas* who managed royal power and defended the state.

*Kshatriyas had a definite code of morality to guide them. They were expected to be hospitable, never to refuse protection to a refugee, never to forget a good deed or an injury, never to refuse a challenge,*

*(53)*

The *Pandavas* in the text can be seen practicing these laws—for instance, *Bhima* particularly would not forget the injury done by the *Kauravas* at the time of the Dicing, and *Yudhishthira* could not refuse once challenged by *Shakuni* at the game of dice. In any case,

*The social landscape of the Mahabharata is largely sylvan and rural. The forests are abode of hermits and Sabaras. Nisadas and Candalas exemplified the tribals.*

*(Pande 50)*

The peasantry mainly consisted of *vaishyas*. There were mostly villages and mention of some towns and cities (such as *Hastinapura*, *Indraprastha*, *Mathura* and *Mithila*) make us aware that these were centres of money, market and trade. With regard to the region and the culture we find that “agriculture and cattle breeding, craft and trade constituted the mainstay of economic life”. Also there was prevalence of slavery. The following observation of *Duryodhana* makes us aware of it when seeing the pomp and show of *Indraprastha*, he says,

*There are eighty-eight thousand snataka householders whom Yudhishthira supports, each of them with thirty slave girls.*

Eventually we find that the two important places— *Hastinapura* (situated somewhere near modern Delhi) and *Indraprastha*, become contending centres of power. In the next section we shall look at the *Mahabharata* as a Literary Text.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Comment on the important narrators in the Mahabharata. Who is the tale being told to?  
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.....
- 2) How have folktales, parables and myths been used in the Mahabharata?  
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.....
- 3) Construct an image of society during the time of the Mahabharata.  
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## 1.4 THE MAHABHARATA AS A LITERARY TEXT

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What is the *Mahabharata*? Is it a historical text or a poetic expression of the times? Is it a book of moral laws and scriptures? These questions necessarily come to mind when dealing with ancient literature. **Sheldon Pollock** explains

*It (the Mahabharata) represents itself for most part as itihasa, an account of 'the way things indeed were'. However, much modern scholarship may complicate the factuality of that record... Yet the Mahabharata was not only itihasa, it was also kavya.*

Note, that as **Pollock** suggests, the *Mahabharata* represents itself as a historical narrative depicting events as they took place by, one who is also a character in the narrative—**Vyas**. The author is the composer of the tale and a participant in the story.

Viewed from a literary angle, the historical framework is a form adopted by **Vyas**. Still, **Pollock** notes,

*Eventually the Mahabharata came to also be viewed as a transcendently authoritative moral discourse; one ninth century literary theorist conceived of the work as 'moral discourse with the aura of literature.* (Sheldon Pollock)

At the same time the *Mahabharata* has been viewed as a political narrative. **T R S Sharma** has observed that:

*While the Kuru and the Panhala lineages are historically recorded, there is no mention of Pandavas in any historical records. So it is only proper we consider the Mahabharata as an epic poem.* (Ed. T R S Sharma. 5)

Thus, for us the primary concern is to view the *Mahabharata* as a literary text with an internal logic and structure—the text never wavers from the core

narrative that is the struggle between two groups of cousins for succession and political power.

From the literary point of view, the *Mahabharata* has been analysed in different ways. According to **Anandavardhana** (the famous *Sanskrit* literary critic of the 9<sup>th</sup> AD) known primarily for his work “*Dhvanyalok*”, the *Mahabharata* is a “*dhvani-kavya*” or the poetry of suggestion. The suggested sense and creation of “*dhvani-alok*”, found in the *Mahabharata* in his view, is the highest form of poetic composition. With respect to its content, he notes that the *Mahabharata*

*... teaches man ultimately to renounce vanity of earthly glories and attain dharma (truth and righteousness), vairagya (renunciation), santi (eternal peace) and moksha (salvation)*

*(qtd. in Julian F. Woods 163)*

With respect to form, **J P Sinha** has provided us with the following classifications:

*.....the metres which have been employed in the Mahabharata may be classified under two heads—the varnavratas and the matravratas...so far the matravratas are concerned only aryaais are to be found in the Mahabharata and that too in a small number.*

He suggests that, “the vast majority of the verses of the *Mahabharata* are composed in the *anustubh* metre”. The *anustubh* is

*a sloka, is a metre of four feet of eight syllables each. In the anustubh the fifth letter of all the feet and the seventh of the second and fourth feet must necessarily be short, similarly, the sixth letter of every foot must be long. After anustubh the largest number of verses in the Mahabharata has been composed in the upjati metre* (9)

The *anustubh* was used in the oldest written document, the *Rigveda* and is known for its simple structure. The simple metre enabled recitation. Thus, didactic literature and moral tales were written using this metre.

The original text in *Sanskrit* is almost entirely in verse while the English translation of the *Mahabharata* by **J A B van Buitenen** is largely in prose. **Buitenen** tells us that the

*... verse syntax in Sanskrit is quite free and an easy-on-the-ear-attention adjective qualifying a subject at the beginning may comfortably appear at the end of the couplet* (xi)

Taking about the variations in the text he suggests:

*Unlike the Homeric epics, the Mahabharata employs a variety of meters, but by far the commonest used is the sloka. This meter presents a very free pattern well suited to narratives. Like all Sanskrit meters, it is divided into two halves, each half containing in its case sixteen syllables, while each half divides into two quarters (padas) of eight syllables each. The first four syllables of each eight are free, the second four parsed.* (xxxviii)

Thus, the *Mahabharata* is defined by its simple verse form and lyrical quality. The meter and style varies in the text in relation to the subject being narrated. It may reflect the mood of the poet as also the times. Let us examine the role of fate and chance in the *Mahabharata* next.

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## 1.5 THE ROLE OF FATE AND CHANCE

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The *Mahabharata* fosters the idea of destiny as unalterable. Foreknowledge of events cannot correct grievous wrongs nor can it prevent them from happening. There is a kind of failure of human endeavour that gets established with the notion of predetermined fate. And yet, human choice is provided adequate importance in the text. The characters in the epic do not give up when faced with dilemma, they go through the struggle of choosing a path and following it. The innate impulse in human beings to strive and act even when faced with odds keeps the text human-centric and optimistic.

Interestingly, *Duryodhana* fosters the idea of fate that plays against him while fortune favors the *Pandavas* in the scenes preceding the dicing sequence. He claims:

*Fate, methinks reign supreme and man's acts are meaningless, when I see such bright fortune fetched to the Pandava. In the past I have made attempts to kill him, Saubala, but he survived it all and grew like a lotus in the water. Therefore, methinks, fate reigns supreme and man's acts are meaningless, for the Dhartarastras decline and the Parthas are always prospering.* (8)

The idea that a man's acts are meaningless is reiterated in the *Mahabharata* time and again. In fact, it appears to be the central truth of life and emphasises determinism. *Yudhishthira* is saddened by the truth divulged to him by **Vyas** in the text that, bitter animosity among the cousins is in store—one that would wipe out most of the *Kshatriyas* from the earth. *Yudhishthira* tries in vain to cement ties and build friendly relations with *Duryodhan*. His vow to not get angry at the instigation of his cousins or brothers is a case in point. Events as they unfold in the epic show us that destiny takes its course and no one can turn the course of events. Thus, human endeavours, whatever their nature, are shown to be meaningless. Can we agree with such a proposition? Is our destiny predefined and any attempt to change it meaningless? Should we accept the given circumstances or strive to change them? The *Mahabharata* leaves us with such uneasy questions that are relevant in our time as well. Let us look at the notion of *dharma*/ the law in the context of the *Mahabharata* in the next section.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) In what way is the Mahabharata different from the western epic? What makes it realistic and human?  
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- 2) Is the Mahabharata a literary text? Discuss.  
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- 3) Would you agree with the view that a human being cannot change his/her destiny? Examine the notion of fate in the Mahabharata.  
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## 1.6 THE MEANING OF *DHARMA*: THE LAW

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The concept of *dharma* is central to the epic the *Mahabharata*. The text underpins the idea of “*Yatho dharma: tatho jayah*” (Where Dharma is, there is victory). However, *dharma* stands inverted in many a case in the text. The law is often subverted, and *dharma* involves an arduous struggle as it extracts its price from those who follow it. The presence of *dharma* and its reiteration in the text is often accompanied by its negation. And yet the term *dharma* is important for the concept of existence in the *Mahabharata*. It gives meaning to the notion of existence as well as direction to the characters.

*Dharma* is translated by **J A B van Buitenen** in the text as the ‘Law’. This may facilitate the English reader to some extent, however, to the Indian reader the term is incomplete and needs to be understood in relation to the ideas of ‘truth’, ‘justice’, ‘morality’, ‘righteousness’, ‘code of conduct’, ‘obligation’ as also ‘duty’. *Dharma* denotes all these. *Dharma* is defined by a person’s position in society and the role one plays. There is the King’s law (*dharma*) which defines what the King ought to do and his acts are based on an ethical awareness of his duties. He is meant to follow the principle of justice above all. There is the *dharma* of a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a father, a mother, a husband, and a wife, each of which determine human relationships. The roles come with pre-determined laws that the characters are supposed to live up to. It is this *dharma* that *Draupadi* calls out to in the Dicing sequence and it is *dharma* alone which keeps the *Pandava* brothers quiet when *Yudhishthira* loses them in a game of dice. The question of *dharma* haunts the *Pandavas* even after the fateful war has been won by them—a war fought for land. The *Pandavas* perform the horse sacrifice to establish their sovereignty. **Sheldon Pollock** has suggested, “*If the Pandavas’ political power has now been confirmed, both the war and the Kali Age it has inaugurated have sapped their strength and will: ‘Cursed be the law of power’, they declare, ‘that has left us dead in life’, they eventually renounce sovereignty and begin the mahaprasthana, the Great Departure*” towards Mount *Himavan*. Thus, the Law of power destroys them as it did their counterparts in war. Both sides stand to lose.

Though the *Mahabharata* is an ancient text, as mentioned in the Block Introduction, it has been serialised twice on television by two different production houses, and is also available in comic form printed by *Amar Chitra Katha*. Even today, the text is read aloud in many households. Having said that, can we assume that the text is somehow still relevant in some way even today in 2019? The next section will examine contemporary interpretations of the *Mahabharata* to give us a sense of how such an ancient text still has a hold on people’s imagination even today.

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## 1.7 CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE *MAHABHARATA*

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Discussing the modern retellings of the *Mahabharata*, we find that the context of the adaptations is juxtaposed with the world of the ancient text. The complexities of human endeavour elaborated in the original text become a constant reference point for later retellings.

Scholarship on the *Mahabharata* has steadily increased over the last century. Several critical works have opened new dimensions of the text. On the other hand, creative versions of the *Mahabharata* have also come to the fore. Characters and events of the *Mahabharata* have received renewed interest among writers. Its influence has been pan-India and the text has been adapted freely. For instance, the Telugu writer **Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad** (b. 1953), has written a novel titled *Draupadi* that charts different aspects of *Draupadi*'s character as a strong woman, confidante, mother and daughter. Similarly, **Pratibha Rai**, the Odiya writer has written a novel titled *Yagyaseni*, written in the form of a letter where *Draupadi* explains her plight to *Krsna*. In fact, in Odisha, as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, **Sarala Das** (Odisha's 'Adikavi') presented an Odiya *Mahabharata*. His *Mahabharata* however carried various indigenous myths and legends as also Odiya folklore. Similar, is the case with Assamese versions of the *Mahabharata* where medieval poets and translators selected parts of the epic keeping the core story of the fraternal feud intact and created a new text out of it. For instance, the Assamese *Nariparva* written by an unknown author is not a mere translation of the *Sanskrit Striparva*—in the Assamese version the women of the two warring groups take up arms and fight one another even after the men have died. *Draupadi* here leads the *Pandava* women and with her excellent knowledge of war she wins it by deploying her weapon, the *vayu-astra*. Variations such as these make the text of the *Mahabharata* more productive (in that there is always scope for a new narrative to emerge) and compelling.

The first Marathi novel influenced by the *Mahabharata* was *Viratparva-Hyabi Bakhar* written by **Chintamanshastri Thatte** and published in 1862 this was followed by *Pativrata Savitri* written by **S N Joshi** (1929) and *Astika* (1940), by **P S Sane** alias **Sane Guruji**. The *Mahabharata* continued to influence novels post independence with the publication of the Marathi novel *Yayati: A Classic Tale of Lust* (1959) by the *Jnanpith Awardee*, **Vishnu Khandekar**, exploring the life of the *Pandavas*'s ancestors. The play by **Girish Karnad** too, with the same title *Yayati* (1960), was inspired by the *Mahabharata*. Add to this, the reworking of the *Mahabharata* that exists in Malayalam literature. From early representations by poets of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries such as *Bharatmala* by **Niranam** poets, *Bharatam Gatha* by **Cherusseri** to contemporary reinterpretations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered by **P K Balakrishnan** and **M T Vasudevan** in their novels *Eni Jnan Urangatte (Let Me Sleep Now, 1973)* and *Randamoozham (The Second Turn, 1983)*, respectively, the unique place of the canonical epic is revealed to us. Still, **Dharamvir Bharati**'s play *Andha Yug* evokes the post-war world of devastation in the *Mahabharata* to speak about the contemporary malaise caused by the partition of the country in 1947. The *Mahabharata* in this sense has a bearing on current happenings and writers make use of myths and stories to express their views of the times. In more recent times, **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** (b. 1956), has written a novel from *Draupadi*'s perspective called, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

The *Mahabharata* has been extensively projected on stage, television series (of **B R Chopra and Ravi Chopra (1988 – 90)**; and **Swastik Productions (2013-2016)**); and cinema (**Shyam Benegal**'s *Kalyug* 1980). Among western

admirers of the epic we have the French playwright **Jean-Claude Carriere** who staged the *Mahabharata* (as a French play, nine hours long) in 1985. **Peter Brook**, adapted it for his cinematic reproduction of the *Mahabharata* (the film) in 1989. Both these adaptations offered a 20<sup>th</sup> century westerner's view of the *Mahabharata*.

Here, the western and the eastern contexts combine. However, **Peter Brook's** representation particularly has been viewed by several critics in India (**Gautam Dasgupta, Rustom Bharucha**) as an exercise in Orientalism for it exoticises and appropriates Indian culture. **Ramesh Menon's** *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering (2 Volumes)* (published in 2003) provides to the English reader the ancient tale in a novelistic form from an Indian perspective. **Gurucharan Das's** *The Difficulty of Being Good* explores the concept of *dharma* as expounded by the *Mahabharata* and tests its validity in contemporary society. These are but a few instances that acquaint us with the vast reach and influence of the *Mahabharata* in the Indian region and beyond. We have managed quite an over view of the *Mahabharata* and we think we should summarise all that has been said so far before we end this episode/ unit in the *Mahabharata* fashion and move on to the next episode/ unit.

#### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Write a note on the role *dharma* plays in determining the lives of the characters in the *Mahabharata*.

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- 2) Have you watched the *Mahabharata* or read any of the works based on the *Mahabharata*? What do you think this tells you about the *Mahabharata*?

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## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

Having watched the *Mahabharata* at some point in our lives or read the comic version or even read *The Palace of Illusions*, and gone through this unit, you would have noticed that the *Mahabharata* has a deep cultural and historical significance in the Indian subcontinent. In the discussion it is evident that the text of the *Mahabharata* underwent modifications in different regions at different points of time. It has become a text that is ever-productive as new narratives continue to spring from it. Still, the discussion on authorship made us privy to the fact that, the *Mahabharata* may have been composed by **Vyas** but it has gone through many additions in the later centuries. It is in this sense a collective/ social epic. Also the complex narrative tells us that the text was meant for recitation and not reading. It belonged to the oral-folk literature of India.

The unit focused on the idea of the epic and particularly the Indian epic to facilitate a better understanding of the text. The question of form was taken up in the discussion in order to place the *Mahabharata* within a literary framework so that we can view it as a text governed by specific aesthetic principles. In so far, as the themes of the text are concerned, the major theme of *dharma* as also pre-determined fate has been outlined in this unit. The social set-up of the times in which the *Mahabharata* is believed to have been composed has also been provided in this unit to help us contextualise the narrative vis-à-vis the Indian society of that period.



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## 1.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read Section 1.1 carefully, understand it, and then frame the answer in your own words.
- 2) Read Section 1.1

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read 1.3 & 1.3.1
- 2) Read Section 1.3.2
- 3) Read Section 1.3.3

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read Section 1.4
- 2) Read Section 1.4
- 3) Read Section 1.5

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Read Section 1.6
  - 2) Read Section 1.7
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## 1.10 GLOSSARY

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*Epic simile* is an extended simile running into several lines in which the comparisons are elaborated in great detail. These are “formal sustained similes in which the secondary subject, or vehicle, is elaborated far beyond its specific points of close parallel to the primary subject, or tenor, to which it is compared”

(M H Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

*Epic Conventions*: Epic conventions are formal characteristics that epic poems generally share such as: In *medias res*; Invocation; Statement of theme; Stock epithets; Cataloguing; Long, formal speeches; Divine Intervention; Epic Digressions; Vast Settings; Grandiose/Elevated Language; Definitive Meter; Epic Battles; Descent into the Underworld; Epic Similes; Didactic Nature; Dire, Foreshadowing Warnings; Heroic Oath

([unisophomoreenglish.wordpress.com/09/13/epicconversion/](http://unisophomoreenglish.wordpress.com/09/13/epicconversion/))

*Avatar*: A manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher; An incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea; An icon or figure representing a particular person in a video game, Internet forum, etc. From the Sanskrit *avatâra* ‘descent’, from *ava* ‘down’ + *tar-* ‘to cross’

([oxforddictionaries.com/definition/avata](http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/avata))

*Dharma*: Explanation in Section 1.6

*Adharma*: unrighteousness or wickedness

*Orientalism*: Literally refers to writings about the Orient (the East) as imagined, understood and defined by Europe /the West. It is about the attitude of the western writers towards the eastern parts of the world. As a term of discourse it was used by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) to elaborate the distorted view the occident (the outsiders) hold of the orient/east.

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## UNIT 2 “THE DICING” FROM THE *BOOK OF THE ASSEMBLY HALL*

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 *Duryodhana’s Misery and the Grandeur of the Pandavas*
  - 2.2.1 *Sakuni’s Reassurance and Conspiracy*
  - 2.2.2 *The Emotional Manipulation of Dhrtarastra*
- 2.3 Reversal of Fortune
- 2.4 The Game of Dice
  - 2.4.1 *Yudhisthira’s Dharma*
  - 2.4.2 *Losing the Kingdom, Brothers and Self in Gambling*
  - 2.4.3 *Losing Draupadi*
- 2.5 The Case of *Draupadi*
  - 2.5.1 *Humiliation of Draupadi*
  - 2.5.2 *The Legal Point and Draupadi’s Questions*
  - 2.5.3 *The King’s Offering of Three Boons to Draupadi*
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Hints to Check Your Progress

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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The present unit will help us to critically analyse the epic under study - the *Mahabharata*. It will acquaint us with the major themes of the epic in general and the episode of ‘The Dicing’ in particular. Here, questions of *Dharma*, the law and its relevance in the lives of the characters will be explored at some length. A discussion on some unexplored aspects of *Duryodhana’s* character will also be undertaken. We will then be in a position to also decipher the workings of power and wealth. Importantly, the character of *Draupadi* and the significance of events that follow the dicing game will be evaluated in detail. This will help us see the place and condition of women in ancient times. These and other related questions will be explored. In the next section we will get a brief idea of the background of ‘*The Dicing*’ which is the prescribed text under study. If you have not read the text, please do so immediately.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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We are made aware in the beginning of the “Book of the Assembly Hall” that the *Pandavas* have risen to great power and a “celestial” assembly hall has been built by *Maya*, a ‘*Danava*’ to reciprocate the good acts of *Arjuna* who rescued him. Despite all attempts of the *Kauravas* to cause harm to the *Pandavas*, the latter shine in the splendour of newly acquired wealth.”The Dicing” from the “Book of the Assembly Hall” (*Sabha Parva*) shows us that *Duryodhana* has been overpowered and tricked by the marvels of *Yudhisthira’s* palace. Let us look at the causes of *Duryodhana’s* misery next.

## 2.2 DURYODHANA’S MISERY AND THE GRANDEUR OF THE PANDAVAS

*Duryodhana* having witnessed the exuberance of *Yudhishthira*’s ‘*Maya*’ palace at the *Rajasuya* sacrifice is in acute distress and despair that is incurable. He recounts the tale to his maternal uncle *Sakuni* who in turn tries to pacify his nephew but in vain. For in trying to pacify *Duryodhana*, *Sakuni* reiterates the power and luck of the *Pandavas*. *Sakuni* says:

*You must harbor no resentment against Yudhishthira, for the Pandavas have always enjoyed good luck. In the past you have often made attempts on them with many wiles, and the tiger like men escaped because of their luck. They won Draupadi for their wife, and Drupada with his sons for their ally, and the heroic Vasudeva for their helper in the winning of the earth. They won undiminished wealth as their father’s portion, king of the earth, and it grew through their energy. Why lament about that? Dhanamjaya, by sating the Fire, won the bow Gandiva, the two inexhaustible quivers, and celestial weapons. With that superb bow and the might of his own arms he subjugated the kings—why lament about it? He freed the Danava Maya from the forest fire and had him build that hall—why lament about it?* (9)



*The Pandavas lose the game of dice and Draupadi is presented in court,*  
[wikipedia.org]

Note that in the above passage *Sakuni* concedes that the *Pandavas* have displayed the will to work hard and tirelessly—they received their father’s portion but with their contribution “it grew through their energy”. This has brought them appreciation and wealth. Importantly, they have won all things mentioned by *Sakuni* with effort, including *Draupadi*—who is actually not a thing but a person. However, *Draupadi* in the text is clubbed time and again with objects and things that can be either won or lost!

*Sakuni*’s assessment of the *Pandavas*’ has an opposite effect on *Duryodhana* as it further accentuates his suffering. The palace of illusion ‘*Maya*’ in fact becomes a source of yearning for *Duryodhana*. It sows the seeds of revenge in him. The palace of illusion reminds *Duryodhana* of his humiliation at

*Yudhisthira's* palace at *Indraprastha*. The incident at the palace of 'Maya' where *Duryodhana* is mocked at by the *Pandavas* adds fuel to fire. *Vaisampayana* narrates the episode thus:

*Mighty Bhimasena saw him that way, as did Arjun and the twins, and they burst out laughing. A choleric man, he (Duryodhana) did not suffer their mockery; to save his face he did not look at them. Once more he pulled up his robe, as though crossing a pool, to ascend firm land, again those people all laughed at him. He once tried a door, which appeared to be open, and hurt his forehead; another time, thinking the door was closed, he shrank from the doorway.* (7)

These incidents leave *Duryodhana* in a state of utter despair and he is driven to thoughts of suicide. Says *Duryodhana* to *Sakuni*—

*When I saw all that blazing fortune at the Pandava's, I fell prey to resentment and I am burning, though that is not my way. I shall enter the fire, or drink poison, or drown myself, for I shall not be able to live.*

*Duryodhana* attaches significance to the fact that the five brothers united with several kings who act as their allies are invincible. He on the other hand views himself as alone—

*All alone I am not capable of acquiring such a regal fortune; nor do I see any allies, and therefore I think of death.*

The thought of death comes easy to *Duryodhana* even when *Sakuni* is quick to remind him of his own allies and wealth. The latter iterates:

*You say you have no allies, King Bharata; that is not true, for your war like brothers are your allies. So is the grand archer Drona and his sagacious son, and the Suta's son Radhey and the warrior Gautama. So am I with my brothers and the heroic Saumadatti and together with all of us you must conquer the entire world"* (9)

*Duryodhana* is barely convinced. You will notice that *Duryodhana* despairs because his own fame appears faded when compared to the dazzle of the court at *Indraprastha*. In itself, *Duryodhana's* wealth or power has not diminished. While his rivals may have prospered *Duryodhana* has not met with any misfortune. It is only when he sees his own palace and kingdom in relative worth vis-à-vis the *Pandavas* that he becomes insecure and dejected. Thus, he asserts "what man like me who sees their sovereignty over earth, with such wealth and such a sacrifice, would not burn with fever?" Still, his authority and power stands jeopardised in the face of an alternate centre of power, as he says "For what man of mettle in this world will have patience when he sees his rivals prosper and himself decline"? At the personal level, his life-long enmity with the *Pandavas* adds to his discomfiture; despite all his efforts to see their ruin he finds that they have emerged victorious and won many friends, favored by fortune as they were.

### 2.2.1 *Sakuni's* Reassurance and Conspiracy

*Duryodhana* receives assurance from *Sakuni* but the latter also admits that

*"Dhanamjaya, Vasudeva, Bhimsena, Yudhisthira, Nakula and Sahadeva and the august Draupada cannot be defeated in battle by force, not even by*

*the hosts of the Gods. They are great warriors and archers, know their weapons and are battle crazy”.* (9-10)

The *Pandavas*’s invincibility is aptly highlighted by *Sakuni*. Even the gods he claims cannot defeat the *Pandavas* in battle. However, *Duryodhana* must find a way of submitting them to his authority. *Sakuni* suggests that the formidable group of *Pandavas* be defeated in gambling—that is the *Achilles* heel of *Yudhishtira*. *Sakuni* proclaims himself to be undefeatable in gambling as he suggests:

*The kaunteya loves to gamble but does not know how to play. If the lordly king is challenged, he will not be able to resist. And I am a shrewd gambler. I don’t have my match on earth or in all three worlds! Challenge the Kaunteya to a game of dice. With my skill with the dice, King, I am certain to take from him his kingdom and his radiant fortune, in your behalf, bull among men. Mention all this to the king, Duryodhana, and if your father permits, I shall certainly defeat him* (10).

Interestingly, what cannot be done on the field will be achieved on the table and by one who is far from a warrior. In the game of minds then valour plays little part. The *Pandavas* sure are not known for wit or cunning. They could neither deceive nor play with strategy. That was *Sakuni*’s skill. *Duryodhana* too is rash and restless, known little for pragmatism or diplomacy. He is identified with valour as also ruthlessness. Here, however a different side of *Duryodhana*’s character comes to the fore. He displays an inferiority complex and appears diffident as also self-conscious. These attributes go against his grain as it were. Still, when *Sakuni* claims he can defeat the *Pandavas* in a game of dice, *Duryodhana* is thoughtful of his allies and friends as he says “*if they (the Pandavas) can be defeated without inconsiderateness to our friends and other great-spirited allies, then tell me, uncle*” (10). *Duryodhana* is cautious to not displease his allies and aware of the ties he must maintain with friends. Further, when *Sakuni* urges *Duryodhana* to speak to the king about permitting a challenge of the dice, *Duryodhana* goes on a back foot and is hesitant to speak to his father. He contrarily persuades *Sakuni* to take the task of presenting the matter to the king in “the right way”. See how he articulates his hesitation,

*“No, you yourself must mention it in the right way to Dhrtarastra, the first of the Kurus, O Saubala. I shall not be able to bring up the matter”* (10)

Why does *Duryodhana* feel incapacitated to speak to his father about permitting a game of Dice? Does he suspect it would betray his ill-intent? Contrarily, does *Duryodhana*’s conscience not allow him to justify his vicious plan? These questions surface in the reading of the text. In fact, we will note that such variations and doubts in the character of *Duryodhana* make him a more human and plausible character.

### 2.2.2 The Emotional Manipulation of *Dhrtarastra*

As we move further into the text we see *Sakuni* making a case for the game ceremony before *Dhrtarastra* dramatically. He exploits the king’s emotions by cashing in on the pain and suffering of *Duryodhana* who “looked pale and

yellow and wan...and (is) brooding”. *Dhrtarastra* unable to understand the cause, asks *Duryodhana*:

*I do not see a cause for your grief, for this grand sovereignty entirely devolves on you, son, and your brothers and friends do not do you ill. You wear fine clothes, you eat hash of meat, purebred horses carry you—why are you yellow and wan? Costly beds and charming women, well-appointed houses and all the recreation you want—all this waits on your word, without a doubt, as though on the words of Gods. You are unassailable, yet seem sad? Why do you pine, my son?*  
(11)

Note how the wealth of the court is described as also the privileges the King enjoys—a pure breed horse to carry him and all kinds of recreation made available for him, including “charming women” who are clubbed with “costly beds” as if one is the extension of the other. That costly beds and charming women are spoken in one breadth tell us a lot about the place of women in that society where they were viewed as objects of possession and recreation. This will inform us a great deal about the events that would unfold later in the episode when *Draupadi* is dragged into the court.

To return to the case of *Duryodhana*, we find that he doubts the power he wields. The *Pandavas*’ aura continues to haunt him as he tells *Dhrtarastra*, “*I eat and dress like any miserable man*” and that “*my pleasure no longer satisfies me, now that I have seen the radiant fortune at Yudhishthira Kaunteya’s, which causes my pallor*”. Almost in a trance, *Duryodhana* seems to live the memory of his visit at *Indraprastha*. He savours the experience and describes what he saw (a second time) to *Dhrtarastra* who must imagine all that is being told to him—*Duryodhana* relives imaginatively the experience he narrates. Both go over in their minds the splendour of *Indraprastha*. *Duryodhana* sets the scene and describes it vividly in the following manner:

*There are eighty-eight thousand snataka householders whom Yudhishthira supports, each of them with thirty slave girls. Ten thousand more eat daily the best food at Yudhishthira’s house from golden platters. The Kamboja send him hides of the kadall deer, black, dark, and red, and costly blankets, chariots, women, cows, horses by the hundreds and thousands, and three hundred times a hundred camel mares wander about there. The kings brought all manner of precious things to the son of Kunti at his superb ritual, O king, and in great plenty. Nowhere have I seen or heard of such an inflow of wealth as at the sacrifice of the sagacious son of Pandu! And as I have seen the limitless flood of wealth of my enemy, king, I find no shelter and brood incessantly, my lord.*  
(12)

*Duryodhana*’s description may be exaggerated and understandable as he, has been deeply influenced by the scene at *Indraprastha*. However, the exaggerated speech is also meant to persuade the blind *Dhrtarastra* who must make his judgement on the bases of what he hears. To add to the astonishment of *Dhrtarastra*, *Duryodhana* elaborates “And listen to me as I tell of a miracle there” and he continues with the saga till “it raised my hairs”. You will note that the evocative nature of *Duryodhana*’s speech makes a compelling scene. *Dhrtarastra* is almost convinced about the “sublime fortune” of the *Pandavas*. *Duryodhana* through his description has justified his wish, in fact, the necessity

to take prompt action and gain supremacy over the *Pandavas*. He says “*This man knows the dice, King, and he is able to take the fortune of the Pandava in a game. Pray allow it.*” (13)

*Duryodhana* who had earlier felt incapable of speaking the truth states it explicitly here. *Dhrtarastra* visibly moved but not yet vulnerable, decides to seek advice from “my wise councilor the Steward” who is “farsighted” and “will put first the Law and our ultimate benefit”. Note the difference between *Duryodhana*’s wish for instant gratification and *Dhrtarastra*’s emphasis on “ultimate benefit”. The latter’s is an appeal for broader humanism while the former speaks of individual uplift. Here, it is the Steward who is seen as the pronouncer of truth and in whose judgment the king places his faith. However, the idea is nipped in the bud when *Duryodhana* intervenes and says “the Steward will turn you down, if he comes in on this”. Even *Duryodhana* is aware that from the point of view of justice and the state’s welfare (which the Steward represents) the act of challenging the *Pandavas* to a game of dice could cost them dear. Still, *Duryodhana*’s urgency of tone conveys to his father the turmoil brewing in his mind. He gives the king no time to think and in fact plays the part of the victim, manipulating his father’s emotions. He says,

*... when you are turned down, lordly king, I shall kill myself! Let there be no doubt! When I am dead, be happy with your Vidura, king. Surely, you shall have the pleasure of all earth: why bother about me?* (13)

This reproach by *Duryodhana* moves the king whose affection gets the better of him as he acts contrary to his own wisdom. He orders the servants to have:

*“the carpenters build me a big hall of a thousand pillars and a hundred doors, heart-fetching and beautiful, and do it at once! And when they have splattered it with gems and thrown out the dice everywhere, report to me quietly”* (13)

Once the orders are given, *Dhrtarastra* turns into a person of steely resolve. He does not budge even when *Vidura* pleads with him to call the game off. The King proclaims:

*My decision shall not be circumvented, Vidura, I tell you! I deem it supreme destiny that makes this befall.* (13)

Note first that the King who was initially keen on taking *Vidura*’s advice now turns it down. This is because *Dhrtarastra* here speaks in the capacity of a king—his language carries the mark of authority. This is not the self-conscious man who sought *Vidura*’s advice in the privacy of his chambers. Secondly, *Dhrtarastra* seems to shift the onus of his decision on destiny entirely by suggesting that it is “*supreme destiny that makes this befall*”—where he as an individual is only a carrier of command not an active agent. The emphasis on destiny in the book is a significant motif that recurs time and again. Ironically however, *Dhrtarastra* while speaking to *Vidura* counters fate as well—

*When I and the bull of the Bharatas Bhisma are near, no foul play ordained by fate can possibly occur.*

As events in the book unfold it is revealed that, neither the King nor the supremo *Bhisma* can alter the course of events or keep in check the wrongdoing of

*Duryodhana*. They become helpless “mute spectators when the *Pandavas* are insulted. Does this suggest that destiny played a part in seeing the ruin of the *Bharata* clan? We may explore this area further (Refer to the discussion on Fate in Unit 1). A quick glance at the role of fate will show us how easily fortunes can be reversed in the blink of an eye. This we shall take up in the next section.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you think is the significance of the Palace of Illusion/ “Maya” Palace in the Mahabharata?

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- 2) Is Duryodhana’s manipulation of his father Dhrtarastra effective?

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## 2.3 REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

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We find that in the first half of the chapter ‘*The Dicing*’, *Duryodhana* goes on narrating accounts of the vast influence and wealth of King *Kaunteya* (*Yudhisthira*), exemplified in instances such as the following—

“Chinese men I saw and Huns, Scythians, Orissans, the ones who live in the interior forest, Varneyas, Robber Huns, Black Folk and Himalayans—I cannot get over the many who came and were denied admission, yet paid tribute to him, of so many shapes and so numerous” (17)

Such descriptions cover the first part of the book and paint for us a picture of exuberance, plenitude and luxury that belong to the *Pandavas*. This is the peak of power for the *Pandavas*.

The latter half of the chapter on the other hand reveals to us a complete reversal of fortune. From riches the *Pandavas* are reduced to slaves. The detailed descriptions provided by *Duryodhana* create a dramatic effect and against these the fall of the *Pandavas* appears more shocking. Also it is worth noting that *Dhrtarastra* calls this a “family game of dice” and as we see later, the entire logic of a family game stands on its head. The ‘family’ game turns into a ‘fatal’ game as it augments the fight between the two warring groups, the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Still, *Janamajeya* the eager listener of the tale, we note, is full of questions and earnestly urges the narrator of this section *Vaisampayana* to explain in detail the sequence around the dicing event which as *Janamajaya* suggests “was the root of the destruction of the world”. The reversal in the case of the *Pandavas* is complete when *Yudhisthira* not only loses his riches, himself, his brothers and *Draupadi* as well. We will need to analyse the actual game of dice next.

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## 2.4 THE GAME OF DICE

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*Yudhisthira* is invited by *Vidura* to *Dhrtarastra*’s palace to “play and enjoy a family game” (28). *Yudhisthira*’s first reaction is, “At a dicing we surely shall quarrel”. *Vidura* is quick to agree and proclaims “I know that the game



*will bring disaster*”. Interestingly, both *Vidura* and *Yudhisthira*, considered wise men in the book, hold similar opinions on the consequence of the dice game. Yet, both agree to become part of it and not stall it. They are both bound by a sense of duty or *Dharma* towards King *Dhrtarastra*.

#### **2.4.1 *Yudhisthira’s Dharma***

*Yudhisthira* is acutely aware of the danger involved in playing the game of dice, as he suggest,

*“most dangerous gamblers have been collected, who are sure to play with wizard tricks”* and yet he adds *“it is the King Dhrtarastra’s behest, so I will not refuse, sage, to go to the game. A son will always respect the father”* (29)

The reason for agreeing to the game has a moral provided to it—that a son should be ever-obedient.

#### **2.4.2 *Losing the Kingdom, Brothers and Self in Gambling***

At the game, *Yudhisthira* loses everything bit by bit. It begins with his inexhaustible gold, “*regal chariot*”, a “*thousand must elephants*”, a “*hundred thousand slave girls and male slaves*”. He goes on to lose “*myriads of chariots, carts and horses*” along with “*My city, my country, the wealth of all my people*” till he is left with nothing but his brothers and wife. Then too he stakes and loses all including himself in the game. At each turn we are told “*Sakuni* decided, tricked and cried ‘*Won*’” (33). The *Pandavas* turns into the slaves of the *Kauravas* and this invites the wrath of the elders but no one dares to chide *Duryodhana* or put an end to the game. Even when *Vidura* tells *Dhrtarastra*

*This man (Duryodhana) drunk with playing dice, does not look about him, like the mead-drinker, and in starting a feud with great warriors he does not reckon his downfall* (36)

- the King ignores his advice.

#### **2.4.3 *Losing Draupadi***

At *Sakuni*’s insinuation

*Yet there is your precious queen and one throw is yet unwon. Stake Krsna of Pancala, and win yourself back with her*

*Yudhisthira* stakes her and loses the game. At this moment *Dhrtarastra* is “*exhilarated*” than saddened while “*Bhisma, Drona, Krpa and others broke out in sweat*”. The King is thrilled by the *Kauravas*’ winning spree and is blinded by power like his son *Duryodhana* who with deep satisfaction orders his steward to bring *Draupadi* to the court—

*The beloved wife whom the Pandavas honor, let her sweep the house and run on our errands—what a joy to watch—with the serving wretches!* (35)

*Vidura* again makes *Duryodhana* aware that

*... the incredible happens through people like you, you don’t know it, nitwit, you are tied in a noose! You hang over a chasm and do not grasp it, you dumb deer to anger tigers!*

Constantly, *Vidura* underpins the fact that in the clash between the two groups – the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* — the latter are far more powerful and that *Duryodhana* is a “dumb deer” before, the *Pandavas* who are described as “angry tigers”. *Vidura* we are told, is a wise sage who can see the future and thus, his words carry an air of ominous finality. He further asserts,

*For this to be sure spells the end of the Kurus, a grisly end, the  
perdition of all* (36)

However, *Duryodhana* maddened with rage and revenge instructs the steward to bring *Draupadi* to the court. The next section deals with the scene when *Draupadi* is dragged into the *Assembly Hall* where *Yudhishthira* is engaged in the fatal game of dice.

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## 2.5 THE CASE OF DRAUPADI

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It is worth noting that the assembly to which *Draupadi* is dragged is meant for men to engage in political activities as also entertainment. Both these spheres are exclusive to men. Here, women seldom enter. When *Draupadi* is brought to this space dominated entirely by men, she is the only woman in the hall with all men watching the show as it were. In her fiery speech, after attempt has been made to disrobe her, she claims,

*What greater humiliation than that I, a woman of virtue and beauty,  
now must invade the men's hall? What is left of the law of the kings?  
From of old, we have heard, they do not bring law-minded into their  
hall* (58)

This reveals to us her precarious position. She says as she is dragged in the court by *Duhsasana*,

*... in the hall are men who have studied the books, all follow the  
rites and are like unto Indras. They are all my gurus or act for them:  
before their eyes I cannot stand thus* (50)

When the steward enters the chambers of *Draupadi* his bold words “to your chores I must lead you” irks and shocks her. She gives voice to her anger thus – “how dare you speak so, an usher, to me?” Next, she questions the judgement of *Yudhishthira* in “What son of a king would hazard his wife?” *Draupadi* raises a significant question regarding *Yudhishthira*'s right on her when he had lost himself. “Go to the game” she sends the steward back “and ask in the assembly ‘Bharata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?’” On *Yudhishthira*'s word sent by a messenger, *Draupadi* comes to the hall,

*... in her one garment knotted below, weeping and in her courses,  
she went to the hall, the Pancala princess and stood before her father-  
in-law* (37-8)

### 2.5.1 Humiliation of *Draupadi*

The scene where *Draupadi* is being dragged into the court by *Duhsasana* is appalling. *Duhsasana* speaks to her in a brazen manner thus:

*All right now, come Pancali, you're won!  
Look upon Duryodhanas, without shame!  
You shall now love the Kurus, long-lotus-eyed one,  
You've been won under law, come along to the hall!* (39)

The foul language of *Duhsasana* and *Karna*, the lewd gestures of *Duryodhana* point towards the malice they bear towards *Draupadi*. When *Draupadi* tells *Duhsasana*,

... it is now my month! This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,  
- *Duhsasana* shrewdly puts in with authority –  
Sure you be in your month, *Yajnasena*’s daughter  
Or wear a lone cloth, or go without one!  
You’ve been won at the game and been made a slave,  
and one lechers with slaves as the fancy befalls (50)

What is the significance of referring to *Draupadi* menstruating time and again in the scene? At one level it could have been used by the writer to evoke deeper sympathy for the woman and her plight, however, at another it signifies her reproductive worth as a woman. The entire discourse of woman as the “*jag-janani*” (the giver of birth to the world) gets established here. The scene becomes more dramatic for this reason as the two attributes of woman as mother and slave get starkly presented here. The symbol of motherhood contrasts with the idea of the slave. Thus we find:

*Duhsasana*, stroking her, led her and brought her,  
That *Krsna* of deep black hair, to the hall,  
As though unprotected amidst her protectors,  
And tossed her as wind tosses a plantain tree. (39)

*Draupadi* with “her hair disheveled, her half skirt drooping, shaken about by *Duhsasana*, ashamed and burning with indignation” is brought before the gathering of men. Continuing with *Drapaudi*’s humiliation, let us look at the questions she poses next.

### 2.5.2 The Legal Point and *Draupadi*’s Questions

*Draupadi* poses two questions before the audience—one, whether *Yudhisthira* who has lost his freedom, by losing the game of dice, has, any moral or legal right to stake *Draupadi*. *Duhsasana* comments, “the King, son of *Dharma*, abides by the Law, and the Law is subtle, for the wise to find out” (50). The topic is again broached by *Bhisma* who has seen *Draupadi* brought in a pitiable state in the court. He says—

As the law is subtle, my dear, I fail  
To resolve your riddle the proper way:  
A man without property cannot stake another’s—  
But given that wives are the husband’s chattels?  
*Yudhisthira* may give up all earth  
With her riches before he’d give up the truth.  
The *Pandava* said, “I have been won”  
Therefore I cannot resolve this doubt. (51-2)

This riddle remains unresolved as none can say with certainty what the Law says in this case. However, *Bhisma*’s statement “given that wives are the husband’s chattels” speaks volume about the status of women in that age and the commonly held views on them. The statement reveals to us notions that were accepted as true and considered to be the ‘given’ in normative life. *Karna* in this scene too argues that “*Draupadi* is part of all he (*Yudhisthira*) owns” and thus she has been won. Note how *Draupadi* is seen as an object here owned by the man or in her case men. *Karna* questions her character in suggesting that:

*Or if you think that it was against the law to bring her into the hall clad in one piece of clothing, listen to what I have to say in reply to that. The gods have laid down that a woman shall have one husband, scion of Kuru. She submits to many men and assuredly is a whore! Thus there is, I think, nothing strange about taking her into the hall, or to have her in one piece of clothing, or for that matter naked! She, the Pandavas' wealth, and the Pandavas themselves have all been won by Saubala here according the law. (55)*

Several points require notice here. One, that *Draupadi* has no right over her 'self' and that she is the *Pandavas'* possession. She is derecognised as a human being merely because she is a woman tied in matrimony. Two, aspersion is cast on *Draupadi's* character as *Karna* views her as a "whore" since she "submits to many men" who may be her husband(s) by law. It is the female sexuality that is at target here. If *Draupadi* can be made available to five men why can't others in the gathering likewise 'enjoy' her?—this seems to be *Karna's* suggestion. She cannot be considered a respectful-virtuous woman because she exercises her right to be with several men. This makes her a "whore" in *Karna's* views and therefore, the men have all the right to bring her "for that matter naked" into the assembly hall. The point is taken forward and *Duhsasana*

*... forcibly laid hold of Draupadi's robe, O king, and in the midst of the assembly began to undress her (55)*

The scene evokes both shock and pathos in the reader who connects with the misery of *Draupadi*. Note that the narrator's tone too is full of sorrow when he exclaims "O King" in the quote above. Whether the scene also becomes a form of titillation for the audience hearing the tale (first *Janamajeya* and then the ascetics) is an unexplored area.

*Draupadi* is molested and disrobed before the assembly of men—all her gurus, sages or relatives-in-law—yet none put a stop to it. Does it depict their helplessness? Were they bound by the Law too? Were they too appalled to react? In any case the story reaches a point when human agency fails to resolve a quandary, stands incapacitated before the law. In such a scenario the epic turns to *dues ex machina*—divine intervention—that saves *Draupadi* from the trauma of being stripped naked in public. Her humiliation and suffering finds release in the 'godly' act —

*But when her skirt was being stripped off, lord of the people, another similar skirt appeared every time. A terrible roar went up from all the kings, a shout of approval as they watched that greatest wonder on earth ... A pile of clothes was heaped up in the middle of the hall, when Duhsasana, tired and ashamed, at last desisted and sat down. The gods among men in the hall raised the hair-raising cry of "Fie!" as they watched the sons of Kunti. (55-6)*

*Draupadi* was thus, saved by the agency of god. However, the second question that *Draupadi* raises before the men in the assembly hall is of great significance. She asks:

*How can I, wife of the Pandus, sister of Dhrstadyumna Parsata and friend of Vasudeva, enter the hall of the Kings? Is the wife of the King Dharma whose birth marches his, a slave or free? Speak Kauravas. I shall abide by your answer. For this foul man, disgrace*

*of the Kauravas, is molesting me, and I cannot bear it any longer.*  
(59)

**“The Dicing” from the  
Book of the Assembly Hall**

*Draupadi’s* question is relevant in our times for it may be asked if a woman equal to a man becomes his possession in marriage that he can buy and sell or stake and lose? Was *Draupadi Yudhisthira’s* to lose? Did he have that kind of right over her? Even *Bhisma* cannot answer her question. He says “*I cannot answer the question decisively, because the matter is subtle and mysterious as well as grave*”. The complexity of *Draupadi’s* question dawns on the people in the assembly as none can say that *Yudhisthira* owned her. The issue is as tortuous in our context where patriarchy has a strong grip on social relations between men and women. *Karna* gives his view on the subject based on accepted knowledge system of the time: “*there are three who own no property, a student, a slave, a dependent woman*” (61). The point of significance here is the place women occupied in ancient literature—how they were looked at from male-centred viewpoint. This throws light on our ancient value system as well. In so far as *Draupadi* is concerned in this scene she voices her anger before the gathering thus:

*I on whom the assembled kings set eye in the arena at my Bridegroom Choice, but never before or after, I am now brought into the hall! ...I whom the Pandavas did not suffer to be touched by the wind in my house before, they now allow to be touched by this miscreant. The Kurus allow —methinks that time is out of joint—their innocent daughter and daughter-in-law to be molested!* (59)

*Draupadi* reveals to the gathered assembly the truth of their action, that they have been mute spectators and thus, accomplices in the violent treatment meted out to her. The *Kurus* and the sages she asserts, have failed to follow the law for they allowed her molestation. The significance of the speech should not be lost to us in our present context.

While *Yudhisthira* is troubled and confused, *Bhima* the “wolf-Belly” flies in rage at the entire act. He “*looked and watched how she was dragged, in her courses, with upper cloth drooping, who so little deserved it, in desperate pain*”. *Bhima*, angry with his own brother *Yudhisthira* for staking *Draupadi* and using her as a pawn in the game, gives voice to his anger thus:

*There are a lot of whores in the country of gamblers, Yudhisthira, but they never throw them, for they have pity Even for women of that stripe. The tribute that the king of the Kasis brought and all our vast wealth, the gems that the other Kings of the earth brought in, the mounts and prizes, the armor and weaponry, the kingdom, yourself and we have all been staked and lost to others. This I didn’t mind much, for you are the master of all we possess. But you went too far, I think, when you staked Draupadi. She did not deserve this! After she had won Pandavas As a girl, she is now because of you plagued by Kauravas...* (53)

The angle of law is again brought to bear upon the events. In his anger, *Bhima* calls *Duhsasana* “*mean and cruel*” and threatens to burn off his arms at which point *Arjuna* reminds *Bhima*:

*Never before have you said words like these, Bhimasena! Surely your respect for the law has been destroyed by our harsh enemies! Don’t*

*fall in with the enemy's plans, obey your highest law: no one may overreach his eldest brother by law. The king was challenged by his foes, and remembering the baronial law, he played at the enemy's wish. That is our great glory!" (53)*

Clearly, *Arjuna* is more poised and detached than *Bhima*. For all his love for *Draupadi*, his sense of duty gets the better of him. It appears that the law in fact dehumanises him as he is unable to pledge support to his wife in this moment of crisis. *Bhima* alone speaks with passion. Again the question of law takes centre-stage. The baronial law of not refusing the enemy if challenged is being posed here to explain *Yudhisthira*'s action.

### 2.5.3 The King's Offering of Three Boons to Draupadi

Finally, the scene is made more dramatic by the "horrible sound" of jackals, donkeys and grisly birds. The ghastly omens make *Dhrtarastra* wary of the danger looming over the *Kauravas*. To settle the matter amicably, *Dhrtarastra* gives three boons to *Draupadi*. She asks for the freedom of *Yudhisthira* first and with the second boon she frees all her husband(s). The third boon she refuses to take saying that "my husbands...will find the good things, king, with their own good acts". *Draupadi* is able to accomplish what none could. She as *Karna* points out

*has become the salvation of the Pandavas! When they were sinking, boatless and drowning, in the plumbless ocean, the Pancali became the Pandavas' boat, to set them ashore (65)*

Thus, *Draupadi* ironically saves the *Pandavas* who were meant to save and protect her and who failed miserably at that. Nonetheless, *Dhrtarastra* gives back to the *Pandavas* all that they had lost in the game of dice and they leave for their home, *Indraprastha*.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Do you think it wrong of *Yudhisthira* to have staked *Draupadi* in the game of dice? Give a reasoned answer.  
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- 2) Attempt a sketch of the position of women in the Mahabharata from your reading of *The Dicing*.  
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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have covered the various facets of 'The Dicing' sequence which appears in the *Book of The Assembly Hall*. We have been able to locate clear indicators that led to the game of dicing. Specific motives of *Sakuni* and *Duryodhana* to defeat the *Pandavas* also came to the fore. The unit has considered areas of fate and fortune governing the lives of individuals. The predicament of *Draupadi* has been extensively dealt with here. As we may have noticed, the question of law receives focus in the discussion.

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## 2.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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*“The Dicing” from the  
Book of the Assembly Hall*

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Read Section 2.2 carefully and write the answer in your own words.
- 2) Read Section 2.2.2

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Read Section 2.5
- 2) Read Section 2.4 and 2.5 and then organize your thoughts in your own words and write the answer.



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## UNIT 3 THE SEQUEL TO THE DICING: A READING

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Plot to Vanquish the Enemy
  - 3.2.1 The Motif of a Father’s Blind Love for his Son
- 3.3 The Importance of Loyalty and *Dharma*
- 3.4 The Second Game of Dicing
- 3.5 Departure to the Forest
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Hints to Check Your Progress

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will acquaint us with the compulsions of *Dharma* that made *Yudhishthira* return to the assembly hall. It will also introduce a seminal theme of the entire book—the King’s folly and his blind love for his son. This unit is meant to set the tone of war as well as its inevitability. In this sense, the “*The Sequel to the Dicing*” is an extension of “*The Dicing*” sequence. The objective of this unit is to help us trace the dramatic elements in the narrative that contribute to its epic nature.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit coheres well with the unit “*The Dicing*”. It begins with the *Pandavas*’ departure from *Dhrtarastra*’s court. We are told that soon after the *Pandavas* leave the assembly hall, *Duryodhana* begins to plot against them with *Sakuni* and *Karna*. He rushes to his father, King *Dhrtarastra* and urges him to call the *Pandavas* back. They, according to *Duryodhana* have left as wounded tigers and are sure to attack the *Kauravas* once they reach home. Following this, *Duryodhana* plots another game of dice through which the *Pandavas* will be exiled from their Kingdom. He reassures his father that *Sakuni* will win the game. This will be a foolproof plan to eliminate the *Pandavas* by sending them into the forest for thirteen years. *Dhrtarastra* half-scared, half-tempted consequently orders his usher to call the *Pandavas* back even if they are already on their way. The messenger reaches *Yudhishthira* who then decides to honour the word of the king. *Yudhishthira* is fully aware of the consequences of a second game. He knows it will spell doom, and bring about war and destruction. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to obey the word of *Dhrtarastra*. Thus, the *Pandavas*, we are told, return to the hall that brings them humiliation. This hall depicts the wizardry of *Sakuni* and the misdemeanour of *Duryodhana* and *Duhsasana*. In a single game of dice, the *Pandavas* again lose to *Sakuni*. They are bound by the logic of the game—the defeated group will go into the forest (basically be exiled), and live there for twelve years followed by another year in disguise. If their identity is revealed in the thirteenth year, the cycle of the twelve year-exile would begin afresh. A simple game of dice reverses the fortunes of the *Pandava* brothers along with those of the many men and women of their



kingdom. Finally, the *Pandavas* dress in clothes made of deerskin and proceed on their journey to the forest, having lost the second game of dice.

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### 3.2 PLOT TO VANQUISH THE ENEMY

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Envy coupled with fear seems to have assailed *Duryodhana* as the *Pandavas* proceed on their homeward journey. The *Pandavas* did not lose their wealth but had their honour and dignity greatly compromised. The “*Sequel to Dicing*” begins at this point. *Dhrtarastra* believes that he is successful in controlling the situation at the dicing sequence. The damage done to the *Pandavas* by his sons is in his view reversed in the three boons he offers to *Draupadi* and returns the wealth of the *Pandavas*. However, *Duryodhana* creates fear in the mind of the King by suggesting that leaving the enemy wounded and not vanquished will be their biggest mistake and before the enemy can get back at them the *Kauravas* should strike first and win the battle. *Duryodhana* dramatically presents the anger and attitude of the *Pandavas* in such a way that *Dhrtarastra* is rattled and convinced of the *Kauravas*’ doom. The question is—why does *Duryodhana* want to call the *Pandavas* back? Is he fearful of their revenge? He humiliated the *Pandavas* and will obviously be the target of their fury. Or is he using fear as a ploy to convince *Dhrtarastra* to let them play another game of dice as he bears malice against the *Pandavas*? We might find clues in *Duryodhana*’s words to *Dhrtarastra*;

*Have you not heard king, what the learned priest of the Gods, Brhaspati, said when he propounded policy to Sakra? ‘Enemy-killer, enemies must be cut down by any means before they, with war or force can do you evil!*

With this, *Duryodhana* raises an alarm that the *Pandavas* have left swearing and challenging the *Kauravas* since

*We have offended them and they will never forgive us: who among them could forgive the molestation of Draupadi?* (71)

It appears that *Duryodhana* is fearful of the end knowing the gravity of his actions. Therefore, he emphasises the pressing need for the *Kauravas* to protect themselves and to eliminate the enemy. Note how he creates panic in his father:

*Father, the Pandavas have grasped their swords, they have mounted their chariots, and they are enraged. In their fury they will annihilate us like poisonous snakes! Arjuna is going fully girt; uncovering his two great quivers, he keeps picking up his Gandiva and looks about him, panting heavily. The Wolf-Belly swiftly raises his heavy club, we hear, and is fast riding out on the chariot he has teamed.* (70)

We note urgency in *Duryodhana*’s tone. He makes *Dhrtarastra* believe that the threat is real and that they have to tackle the enemies before they move out of their territory. Ironically, *Duryodhana* refers to the *Pandavas* as furious poisonous snakes out to annihilate the *Kaurava* clan. *Duryodhana*’s narrative appears more real to *Dhrtarastra* mainly because it has visual descriptions of the *Pandavas*’ behaviour and attitude. Add to this the fact that these projections are in reality *Duryodhana*’s interpretation of the *Pandavas*’ attitude as they leave the court. Do you think *Duryodhana*’s account is truthful or is it a fabrication? In *Duryodhana*’s narrative, the characters of *Arjuna* and *Bhima* are particularly highlighted for their strength and prowess among the five brothers

who are “panting” and “fast riding” back home. Duryodhana elaborates how the Pandavas looked and what they did in the following manner:

*Nakula has taken his sword and his shield with the eight moons, and Sahadeva and the King have made their attitude clear with gestures. Mounted on their chariots that are equipped with all weapon gear, and whipping the chariot teams, they are rushing out to raise their army. (70)*

The final purpose of Duryodhana’s speech is to create a palpable picture of the Pandavas rushing out in anger to raise an army. It is in this context that Duryodhana brings up the main intent of his description—crushing the enemy before they raise their heads in revolt against the Kauravas. In the words of Duryodhana—

*We must dice again with the Pandavas, bless you, to send them to the forest: so we shall be able to bring them in our power (71)*

You will notice that the question of power and supremacy has come up again. Duryodhana cannot rest easy till his opponents are wiped out so that he will be the sole heir to the entire kingdom. The threat of the Pandavas coming back to claim their right to the throne constantly worries Duryodhana. Further, all along he has been aware of the opinion of the elders in the family including his own parents who believe in the legitimacy of the Pandavas’ right to the throne. Note that the Pandavas never ask for their claim to the entire Kingdom and merely ask for the right to rule five villages. However, for Duryodhana the threat is real and imminent can take shape at any point in time.

Thus, he feels compelled to oust the Pandavas completely. He has a ready plan and he shares it with the King—

*They or we, whoever it be that is defeated at the dicing, must go into the forest clad in deerskins for twelve years. The thirteenth year they should live disguised among people, and if they are found out, again go into the forest for another twelve years. We or they shall live there: so let the game go on (70)*

You will notice that Duryodhana’s proposal is the result of the plot that he has thoroughly worked out with his accomplices Sakuni and Karna. He takes the final plea, before the king, of saving the kingdom –

*We shall be firmly rooted in the kingdom as we embrace our allies and keep contented a vast, mettlesome and invincible army. If they survive the vow after thirteen years, we shall vanquish them (70)*

Thus, Dhrtarastra believes he is saving the Kaurava clan and the kingdom in asking the Pandavas to return to his court. Contrarily, it can be argued that the king can see the doom in calling the Pandavas back and defeating them in a game of dice but still goes ahead with it for he cannot disappoint his son. This brings to question the kind of love a parent or a father has for his son. We shall look at Dhrtarashras love for Duryodhana next.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Why does Duryodhana plan to vanquish the Pandava brothers?

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### 3.2.1 The Motif of a Father's Blind Love for his Son

*Dhrtarastra* is sufficiently convinced by his son to hold another game of dice. This is when all his kinsmen advised him not to hold another game—

*Then Drona, Somadatta, and the warrior Bahlika, Vidura and Drona's son, and the mighty son of the commoner's wench and Samtanu's son, Bhurisravas, and the warlike ViKarna, all of them said: 'Don't dice' and 'Let there be peace'.* (71)

- but *Dhrtarastra* ignores them. Even *Gandhari* cautions *Dhrtarastra* to not be impulsive and pay heed to reason. She urges him to lead his sons in the right direction, “lest, broken asunder, they abandon you”. Is it *Dhrtarastra*'s fear of being abandoned by *Duryodhana* that makes him act rashly? Or is it his fatalistic view of things that makes him see his decisions as predetermined? Speaking to *Gandhari*, *Dhrtarastra* says “Surely if our line must end, I shall not be able to avert it” (72). Do you think *Dhrtarastra* could have averted the war if he took wise decisions? It appears difficult and problematic. On the other hand, *Gandhari* in the scene gives the impression of being more rational than her husband. She is not solely driven by love for *Duryodhana* and is rather governed by law or *Dharma*. As *Vaisampayana* says, “*Gandhari* tormented by grief because of her love for her son, yet yoked to the law” speaks to *Dhrtarastra*. In her speech *Gandhari* expresses her intuitive sense about things which as events unfold turn true. She speaks to *Dhrtarastra* thus:

*When Duryodhana was born, the wise Steward said, 'It is better to send this defiler of his race to the next world!' No sooner was he born than he howled like a jackal, Bharata! Take notice, Kurus! He will be the end of this house! Do not prefer the opinion of children who are untaught, Lord! Do not become the cause of the ghastly perdition of your line!*

As is evident, *Gandhari*'s prudence contrasts sharply with the foolishness of *Dhrtarastra*. She is against taking into account the “opinion of children” that have remained “untaught” suggesting that *Duryodhana* has learnt nothing despite his education. This distinguishes *Gandhari* from *Dhrtarastra* who being King often shows lack of reason. Contrarily, in the epic she stands out as a thinking-rational woman who does not give in to her emotions. When *Vaisampayana* says,

*At the behest of the wise king Dhrtarastra, an usher spoke to Yudhisthira,”*

- we catch the irony of the adjective “wise” used for *Dhrtarastra* who acts imprudently throughout. What defines *Dhrtarastra*'s actions? *Vaisampayana* gives the explanation by claiming that *Dhrtarastra* “made the challenge to the Pandavas, for he loved his son” (71)

The *Mahabharata* is at a basic level the story about a father's love for his son. Looked at from this angle, the epic appears to be a part of folklore. It can be read as the story of a single human emotion—a father's excessive love for his son and the consequence of such a love that gives precedence to attachment over duty and law. However, the epic has many layers that add to its complexity. Despite its complex structure and nuances, the *Mahabharata* retains folklorist elements as well. This motif is carried to the end of the section with *Dhrtarastra*'s final comment—“Thus Sanjaya, did the Steward give his law-minded and apt advice; but I did not heed it, for I wanted to favour my son” (86). Let us now examine the importance of loyalty and *dharma* which seems to be the code of the age, in the next section.

### 3.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF LOYALTY AND DHARMA

Why did *Yudhishthira* agree to go back for the second game of dice when he knew well enough that he would lose against the trickery of *Sakuni*? Concepts of *Dharma* and loyalty play an important role here. Even as *Yudhishthira* is aware of the likely consequence, that, he will be offering a sacrifice of himself and his family, he still clearly ventures to stake all? It is his unwavering commitment to not disobey the king that he agrees to go back. As he says:

*It is at the disposing of the Placer that creatures find good or ill. There is no averting of either, if we must play again. Although I may know that the challenge of the dicing at the old man's behest will bring ruin, I cannot disobey his word.*

*Yudhishthira's* words suggest a sense of inevitability of happenings. He has accorded it the will of God—“*at the disposing of the Placer*” i.e. human beings do good or ill. The fact that none can avert it has a sense of finality about it. His actions in this sense are driven by the idea of fate. The notion of *Dharma* attached to the idea of obeying the king is also at work here. As he says “*How indeed could a king like me, who guards his own Law, fail to return when summoned?*” (73). There is an assertion in *Yudhishthira's* phrase, “*a king like me*”. It points towards *Yudhishthira's* essential character that is to unflinchingly abide by the law. It is his driving force and the reason for existence. In this sense, the character of *Yudhishthira* cannot go against the grain. Do you think *Yudhishthira* is free to make the choice of returning to his kingdom without accepting the proposal of the king? Can he leave without entertaining the usher?

Also, consider the question—Is *Yudhishthira* bound by law? The related idea of being bound by oath is another significant motif reiterated time and again in the narrative. *Karna* as we see in the unit on “*Temptation of Karna*” tells both *Krsna* and *Kunti* that he is bound by oath to remain loyal to *Duryodhana*. *Bhisma*, too is, stuck by his oath of not marrying and not assuming kingship—“*for the sake of my father and family I swore a difficult oath,*” says he, “*to be neither king nor father. And here I live confidently, keeping my promise*” (107). *Bhisma* despite others compelling him in desperate situations to take the position of a king (“*When Indra no longer rained on the kingless kingdom, the subjects hastened to me, driven by hunger and fear*”) rejects the offer and keeps his promise—“*The wailing of the subjects failed to shake my mind and recalling the code of the strict (adherence) I kept my promise*”. The oath taken then assumes a sacred attribute and characters are unswerving in their resolve in the *Mahabharata*. This discussion brings us to the second dicing game that takes places in the *Mahabharata*. We shall examine that quickly in the next section.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Compare the responses of Dhrtarastra and Gandhari towards Duryodhana's wish to hold a second game of dice? Which one of the two do you find more rational?

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2) Discuss Yudhisthira’s essential character trait. Why could he not disobey the king?

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### 3.4 THE SECOND GAME OF DICING

In this case, we are told that the “great warriors” the *Pandavas* return to the hall that has brought them much ignominy. But they do so with poise and calm. *Vaisampayana* begins recounting the tale thus—“*They sat down at their ease to resume the dicing, crushed down by fate, for the destruction of the entire world*”. Note how the range of the event gains almost cosmic proportions—a small incident such as dicing relevant only to two concerned parties eventually engulfs the entire world in the wake of its destruction. The active agency of fate and the complete submission of human beings to it are reinforced here. Had the *Pandavas* proactively intervened and refused to play the game, how would the events have unfolded? Would it have changed the future course of events?



wikipedia.org

Nonetheless, *Yudhisthira* “*compelled by his shame and his love for law, again had to go to the game. Though he understood, wise as he was, he returned to the game worrying, ‘will it not spell the Kurus destruction?’*”. The law again hinders free choice. We witness that *Yudhisthira* is worried about the destruction of the *Kuru* clan—destruction that would be caused by the game. He accepts the challenge to stake his kingdom and comfort trading it off for exile in the forest for twelve years and a thirteenth in incognito. Having lost the game to *Sakuni*, the *Pandavas* set off on their exile to the wilderness. At this moment, an exhilarated *Duhsasana*, we are told, cries out.

*Now the wheel has begun of the great-spirited king, the son of Dhrtarastra! The sons of Pandu have been overcome...The Parthas have been thrown into hell, for a long time, an endless time, fallen from happiness, bereft of their kingdom, for years without end (74)*

*Duhsasana* seems to believe in his victory and the *Pandavas*’ eternal state of despair. *Duhsasana* is shown breaking into the verse form to sing of the *Kauravas*’ triumph. He urges *Draupadi* to abandon the *Pandavas* and choose a man of wealth from the *Kurus*. To quote from the text:

*Having seen the fine-clad reduced to deerskins  
And penniless, homeless, in the woods,  
What joy shall you find, you Yajnaseni?  
Now choose a husband who pleasures you!*

*For all the Kurus are here assembled  
Forbearing and masterful and quite rich  
Choose one of them to be your husband  
This turn of the tide should not distress you.* (75)

Duhsasana's reference to *Draupadi* hints at his continued interest in her from the *Dicing Scene*. It was also a way of divesting the authority of the *Pandavas* vis-à-vis the woman they married. He further claims "Why wait on the *Pandavas*? They have fallen," and urges her to rethink by suggesting, "It is useless to wait for barren seeds". The *Pandavas* have been stripped of their powers. The metaphor of "barren barley" or "fruitless like barren sesame seeds" is used for them to indicate their impotency as males and by extension as owners of Kingdom and wealth. It is at this point when their manhood is challenged, that *Bhima* "the Himalayan lion" threatens the "jackal" *Duhsasana* with dire consequences. He says, "I shall make you remember" your words "when I hurt yours in battle". However, *Bhima* fiercely angry "kept to his law". We are reminded time and again in the text that law/righteousness is supreme to the *Pandu* brothers while their counterparts *Duryodhana* and his tribe work with cunning and deceit. Thus, *Bhima* claims "Abuse, rough and cruel is possible with you *Duhsasana*: for who else would dare to boast when he had won wealth with trickery?" This is followed by *Bhima*'s horrifying pledge –

*... the Wolf-Belly son of Partha shall not go to the happy worlds,  
if he does not rip open your chest and drink your blood in war!* (76)

This sets the scene for the impending battle and fear increasingly grips the *Kauravas*. *Bhima*'s calamitous words speak of the disaster that is to come, as follows:

*I shall kill Duryodhana, Arjuna shall kill Karna, and Sahadeva shall  
kill Sakuni, crook with the dice. And this grave word I shall once  
more solemnly utter in the middle of the hall—the Gods shall make  
it true when there will be war between us: I shall kill this Suyodhana  
with my club in the fight and I shall push his head into earth with  
my foot; and of this hero with words this harsh and evil Duhsasana,  
I shall drink the blood like a lion!* (77)

That war between the two groups would take place appears inevitable at this stage. Add to this the fact that *Narada*, the "greatest of divine seers", appeared after the departure of the *Pandavas* and "stood before the Kurus; and amidst great seers he spoke this ghastly words: "Thirteen years from now the *Kauravas* who are here will perish, through *Duryodhana*'s guilt and *Bhima*'s and *Arjuna*'s might". Having spoken thus, *Narada* disappears. This in a way, seals the fate of the *Kauravas* who have begun to believe in their might. *Duryodhana*, *Karna* and *Sakuni* rush to *Drona* and offer "the kingdom to him", thinking he might save them from peril. But *Drona* is aware of their fate. He tells *Duryodhana* and the entire gathering that "the twice born have said that the *Pandavas*, who are sons of Gods cannot be killed" (83)

Note that the *Pandavas* being sons of gods are immortals. In this sense they are human beings with the attributes of gods. But they are not ordinary human

beings—in that, they have superpowers given to them by the gods. In a way, the *Pandavas* are semi-god figures who are a blend of the human and the divine. They are humans because they are bound by earthly ties, (even Gods and Goddesses are known to be bound by earthly ties, don't you think?) and thus, project certain weaknesses. Emotions work on them and affect their behavior even as they are largely governed by *Dharma* and righteousness.

In the context, the purpose of this narrative appears to be defining the good and bad in life and how they work in our midst. However, it is also about how to live one's life along codes of law and ethics—accordingly, *Vyas*, the writer of the epic suggests that the gods facilitate our living and rescue human beings in times of need. Thereafter, the second game of dicing that the *Pandavas* lose, they must go into exile. The next section examines their departure.

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### 3.5 DEPARTURE TO THE FOREST

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The *Pandu* brothers after having lost in the game of dice prepare for their journey to the forest to live as ordinary folks for a period of twelve years. *Vidura* speaks to them before their departure and offers a view of their past which has been full of adventures and learning. We understand through *Vidura*'s speech the versatile and adaptable nature of the *Pandavas*. He says, “*Long before when you lived in the Himalayas, Savarin of Mount Meru instructed you. So did, in the town of Varnavata, Krsna Dvaipayana, so Rama on Bhrgu's Peak, and Sambhu by the river Drsadvati*”. First, we may note that *Vidura* emphasises the knowledge of the *Pandavas* that they had gained by living in diverse regions outside the Kingdom, away from the comforts of home—something that *Duryodhana* and his brother never obtained. Knowledge, thus, comes to the *Pandavas* from different sources. Secondly, the *Pandavas* are being compared to *Rama* and *Sambhu* who, too, have similar experiences. That the *Pandavas* are equated with *avatars* of gods is a reiteration of their godliness. *Vidura* adds “*Near Anjana you have also listened to the great seer Asita, and your priest Dhaumya has steadily seen Narada lest you lose in the world-to-come this resolve that the seers honour*”.



[wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandavas)

Note that the *Pandavas*'s priest *Dhaumya* has been in constant touch with *Narada* who in turn has direct interaction with the gods. Together their task it appears is to ensure that the *Pandavas* continue to tread the path of

righteousness and not err on the way. Certainly, these experiences add to the resilience and wisdom of the *Pandavas*. *Vidura* seems to be suggesting that moving out of the kingdom has always brought the *Pandavas* many boons and that the present exile will be an addition to their knowledge. He claims: “*Pandava, with this resolve you surpass Pururavas Aila, with your ability the other kings, with your obedience to the Law the seers*”. Certainly, the constant movement of the *Pandavas* from one region to another would have made them alert to their surroundings. Their understanding and awareness will be strengthened and the complexities of situation will awaken their critical senses. They will be more humanised in the process of living as ordinary folks in villages and forests. This may not have been possible had they had remained limited to their kingdom and looked at life from that vantage point. Calling these gifts that make a person, *Vidura* finally tells *Yudhisthira*:

*In the gift of yourself you are like the moon. Get your sustenance from water, forbearance from earth, all heat from the orb of the sun. Know that your strength comes from the wind and your own origin springs from the elements* (79)

The suggestion here seems to be that staying close to nature would add harmony to their lives.

However, as the *Pandavas* depart for the forest they project their will and attitude dramatically which, stands in contrast to their actions. They submit to the authority of *Dhrtarastra* by returning and agreeing to play the game of dice; follow the law and take it seriously. When they lost the game, which they knew they would, they take the proposal seriously and venture to live in the forest for twelve plus one years. However, while they proceed with their onward journey they display their anger in various ways. Their demeanour is found to be far from submissive. This is described by *Vidura* to *Dhrtarastra* who is eager to know the response of the *Pandavas* after their lethal defeat at the game. *Vidura* tells *Dhrtarastra* the manner in which they leave for their exile:

*Kunti's son Yudhisthira has covered his face with his shawl, and Bhima Pandava has spread his arms wide as he goes. The left-handed archer follows the king, scattering sand, and Madri's son, Sahadeva goes with his face all streaked. Nakula is much distressed in his thoughts and is walking with his whole body lined with dust, behind his king, he the handsomest man on earth. Krsna of long eyes, hiding her face in her hair, beautiful and crying much, follows the king. Dhaumya is chanting the gruesome Chants of Death, lord of the people, and as he walks the tracks he holds up kussa grass in his hand.* (81)

*Dhrtarastra* finds this manner of the *Pandavas* rather absurd and asks *Vidura* “*Why are they travelling in these strange ways?*” *Vidura* has only described to *Dhrtarastra* the manner of their going. He now adds his interpretation to this description. This provides meaning to each action of the *Pandavas* which finally appears intimidating to the ever inconstant *Dhrtarastra*. *Vidura* does not shy away from criticising *Dhrtarastra* for his actions and lays the blame squarely on him by suggesting, “*Even though with your deceitful connivance your sons took his riches and kingdom, the mind of the wise king Dharma does not stray away from Law*” (82). *Vidura* tells *Dhrtarastra* that *Yudhisthira*, “*although consumed by fury over the trickery, refuses to cast his evil eye*” on *Dhrtarastras*. “*That is why the Pandava king goes with his eyes covered*”



as *Yudhisthira* had said “Lest I burn these folk down to the ground if I look at them with my evil eye”. Seldom do we ever find *Yudhisthira* speaking in this manner. Anger is not his characteristic trait. Here, however, he displays it on this occasion and in fact speaks of its intensity—that his glance is enough to burn the enemy down.

*Vidura* offers to explain *Bhima*’s strange gait suggesting that he is aware of his great strength that equals none. To quote, “That is why he is going that way, with his arms extended wide, showing his arms, proud of the bulk of his arms, ready to employ them on his enemies”. Note that *Bhima* is angry throughout in this scene but we are told that he remains within the bounds of law and does not try to circumvent it. He pledges to kill his enemy and shows his might here but does not use it on anyone.

Next, when *Vidura* describes the gestures of *Arjuna*, the dramatic effect of the scene gets further heightened. The metaphor of scattering sand enriches the meaning of such an act. We are told that in the act of departing, *Arjuna* is seen

... scattering about sand to forecast the number of enemies that will burn with his arrows. Just as his grains of sand are separated one another, as severally shall he loose on his enemies the showers of his arrows, *Bharata* (82)

His actions appear as a prophecy ensuring the death of his enemies. *Nakul* and *Sahadev*, on the other hand, are covered with dust and streaks respectively projecting their rebellion and anger through the act.

Still, *Draupadi* is “dressed in her sole garment, disheveled and weeping in her courses, her cloth wet and besmirched with blood”. Note that the *Dicing Sequence* has shown us *Draupadi* at her most vulnerable—dressed in a single cloth stained with blood. She has been successful in winning her five husbands back from King *Dhrtarastra* and is about to leave the city of *Indraprastha* when they are called back to the assembly hall. In that semi-clad state, she comes back to the place of her disgrace and once again in a final game of dice, loses the wealth that was initially restored to the *Pandavas* by the king. Dressed in that same cloth she leaves for her exile. Thus, humiliation and rage makes *Draupadi* curse the family of the *Kauravas* in the following manner:

They because of whom I got this way, thirteen years from now their wives will have their husbands dead, their sons dead, their kinsmen and friends dead! Their bodies smeared with the blood of their relatives, their hair loosened and themselves in their courses, the women shall offer up the water to the dead, no less, as the *Pandavas* enter the City of the Elephants! (82)

You must have noted that *Draupadi*’s curse is meant for the women of the house of *Dhrtarastras*. She refers to the wives of the *Dhrtarastras* who will see their husbands’ dead and mothers who will see their sons’ dead. There is a shift in foci as *Draupadi* speaks of the suffering of women in battles. The scope of personal rivalries becomes broadened to include friends and kinsmen; wives and children. *Draupadi*’s references are to women whose bodies will be smeared with the blood of their loved ones. Her blood stained clothes become symbolic of the blood that will be smeared on the clothes of the *Kaurava* women when the *Pandavas* return from exile. She specifically refers to those

women ‘*being in their courses*’ and offering “*water to the dead*”. Note the irony here. ‘*Being in their courses*’ signifies fertility and reproduction which is a celebration of life. But *Draupadi* suggests that they will in such a time be offering prayers to the dead. *Draupadi*’s pivotal presence in this scene broadens the scene of animosity which is no more limited to rivalry between the two sets of brothers but confrontation and destruction of an entire clan and a civilisation.

*Vidura*’s final comments on *Dhaumya*, (the family priest of the *Pandavas*), creates a dramatic scene as *Dhaumya* has “*fashioned the kusa grass that is dedicated to Nirrti and leads their procession, chanting the chants that are devoted to Yama*”. The reverberating atmosphere created by the chants to death makes a terrifying scene for the beholder, as is evident from *Dhaumya*’s declaration “*When the Bharatas have been killed in the war the gurus of the Kurus shall likewise sing these Chants!*” Certainly this episode shows in detail the procession of the *Pandavas* and like any procession it carries its share of spectacle and drama. The narrative evokes both awe and fear. It is equally worth noting that as the *Pandavas* leave the place

... on all sides the anguished town people are crying, ‘O Woe! Our protectors are leaving! Look at this calamity!’ (83)

Interestingly, the populace of the town is on the side of the *Pandavas*. The common people show faith in the *Pandavas* and bemoan their departure. In fact, they consider the *Pandavas* their protectors and thus, in a way negate the authority of *Dhrtarastra* who rules the kingdom. The cry of the common people is accompanied by the fury of nature that, seems to react to the injustice meted out to the *Pandavas*.

As *Vidura* tells *Dhrtarastra* “*When these superior men in this fashion departed from the City of Elephant, lighting flashed on the cloudless sky and the earth trembled*”. We are made to understand that nature too rebels against this act and joins the *Pandavas* in their fight. *Vidura* goes on to add, “*Rahu swallowed the sun when no eclipse was due*” and “*meteors exploded widdershins*”. This fosters the idea that sending the *Pandavas* away was no less than a natural calamity. Also, it leads to chaos and misrule even in the domain of the gods. It makes the beasts even angrier. To quote, “*Beasts of prey roared forth with vultures, jackals, and crows around the temples and sanctuaries of gods and the watch towers of the palaces*”. This signifies ill omen and grave consequences. *Vidura* thus, speaks of the various portents that loom large over the future of the *Kauravas* who are well on their path to destructions.

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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have discussed the following: one, the motives behind *Duryodhana*’s appeal to call the *Pandavas* back for a second game of dice; two, *Dhrtarastra*’s weaknesses and his blind love for his son that makes him act impulsively; three, *Yudhishthira*’s state of mind in accepting the proposal of the king. We have also critically identified the difference between description and its interpretation, the way it was offered first by *Duryodhana* to *Dhrtarastra* and later by *Vidura* to *Dhrtarastra*. We have looked at the individual aspect that each *Pandava* carries with him/ her, while heading to the forest. The unit has highlighted the dramatic quality of this section of the epic that makes it cosmic in proportions.

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### **3.7 QUESTIONS**

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- 1) What is the significance of the Pandavas' gestures as they left for exile in to the forest?
- 2) Comment on the importance of the law and individual's free choice in the Mahabharata.

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### **3.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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#### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Refer to Section 3.2

#### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Refer to Sections 3.2 and 3.2.1
- 2) Refer to Section 3.3



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## UNIT 4 THE TEMPTATION OF *KARNA* FROM THE *UDYOG PARVA*

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Understanding the Character of *Karna*
- 4.3 The Predicament of *Karna* — Temptation
  - 43.1 Conversation with *Krsna*
  - 43.2 *Karna's* response to *Krsna*
  - 43.3 *Karna's* Dream
  - 43.4 *Kunti* and *Karna*
- 4.4 Class differences: the *Suta* and the *Kshatriya*
- 4.5 Strategy in War
- 4.6 A Series of Narratives
  - 46.1 The narratives of *Bhisma* and *Drona*
  - 46.2 The narratives of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.10 Glossary
- 4.11 Suggested Readings & References

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will acquaint you with the character of *Karna* and his specific predicament in the text when *Krsna* reveals to him the secret of his birth and parentage. *Karna* is *Pandu's* son—(*Kunti's* son to be precise), that she bears before she marries *Pandu*, a son from the Sun god as a result of a boon. *Krsna* makes a proposal to *Karna* that should he join the *Pandavas* in the war against the *Kauravas* he will bestow on him the title of King. Since he is the first born, he will be recognised by everyone as the rightful heir. This is exactly what *Karna* has been wishing for all his life—his claim as a *Ksatriya* and his rightful place in the power structure. With one stroke he would get both if he agrees to *Krsna*. It is this bind that *Karna* is caught in that gets revealed in this episode of Book 5 (55) of the *Mahabharata*. Would *Karna* agree? Would he be foolish if he didn't? What stops him from fulfilling his dreams? These and related questions will be explored in this unit. The objective of this unit is to help us unravel the psychological state of *Karna* and the social environment that he inhabits. It will also help us appreciate the motives that govern various characters in this section of the epic better.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Let us try to categorise the different events that take place in this chapter (55) of *Udyog Parva* (Book 5) of the *Mahabharata*. The play of narrative within narrative is also to be witnessed here. To begin with, *Dhrtarastra* asks *Sanjaya* to tell him what *Krsna* has told *Karna*. *Sanjaya* narrates the entire conversation

that takes place between *Krsna* and *Karna* where the former reveals the true *Kshatriya* identity of *Karna*. *Krsna* tries to persuade *Karna* to join the *Pandavas*, his brothers in the war against the *Kauravas*. He offers *Karna* the throne and the powers that come with the king with his five brothers standing in attendance. *Karna* refuses the tempting offer, his life's dream, claiming his loyalty to *Duryodhana*. He then narrates an ominous dream that portends the fall of *Duryodhana* and the rise of the *Pandavas*. He projects this war as a grand sacrifice where the unjust *Kauravas* are bound to be annihilated and he along with them. All this is narrated by *Sanjaya* to *Dhrtarastra* who is eager to know *Karna*'s stance. Remember, *Sanjaya* has the gift of sight, the power to see everything even where he is not present. He, therefore, becomes indispensable to the blind *Dhrtarastra* from this book onwards as the latter keeps urging *Sanjaya* to tell him about each event as it takes place.

Following the long conversation between *Krsna* and *Karna*, we move to the short *Vidura-Kunti* episode where the former expresses his grief over the imminent family war. To control the situation, *Kunti* goes to meet *Karna* on the bank of the river Ganges where the two have a candid conversation and she reveals the truth of his (*Karna*'s) birth. She, too, attempts to persuade *Karna* to join his brothers in war and this is coupled with the voice of the Sun-god who advises *Karna* to pay heed to his mother's offer. However, *Karna* is insistent. He offers *Kunti* some respite by promising to kill *Arjun* only in war and not touch *Kunti*'s other sons so that they would always remain five in number. With this, we move to the next episode in this section.

Here, *Krsna* returns to *Upaplavya*, the city where the *Pandavas* are camped, and holds counsel with *Yudhisthira*. On *Yudhisthira*'s request, *Krsna* tells him what he sees at the court of *Duryodhana*. First, he narrates the long speech of *Bhisma*, followed by *Drona*'s compelling argument about kingship and war. This is followed by the speeches of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*. All of them narrate the history of the clan only to bring it to bear upon *Duryodhana* that the Kingdom justly belongs to the *Pandavas* and that the war would bring disaster. *Krsna* narrates to *Yudhisthira* that *Duryodhana* remained adamant and hence he returned, finally suggesting that the war was inevitable and that preparations for it should begin. As *Krsna* claims—

*Now I see no other course open but the fourth—punishment. The kings are marching to Kurukshetra to their doom!* (113)

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## 4.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF *KARNA*

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Even since his first appearance on the scene, *Karna* has wished to prove his valour. To achieve this, he challenges *Arjun* and lets him know that he is equally brave and skillful as a warrior. He grapples with the question of his birth and origin. The awareness that he was born *Kshatriya* but denied the rights and privileges that came with it makes him bitter and angry—as *Karna* says “*born a Ksatriya I have yet not received the respect due a baron. What enemy could have done me greater harm than you (Kunti) have?*” That he may be the illegitimate child of a *Kshatriya* adds fuel to the fire; this makes him anxious about his parentage. He has never been claimed a son by any of the *Kshatriyas*, and this continues to haunt him. **Irawati Karve** has suggested that *Karna* “had acquired the skills of the *Kshatriyas* but he could not master their

value-frame”. The code of conduct followed by the *Kshatriya* is not ingrained in *Karna*. **Karve** has observed:

*To be rash was a Kshatriya characteristic but the unwritten rule that one must never be small-minded was broken often by Karna... (126)*

It is this that makes *Bhisma*, and then *Drona* comment that *Karna* falls short of being the ideal warrior for lack of sound judgment. From the beginning of the epic, *Karna* has been described as significant to *Duryodhana*’s plan of ousting and killing the *Pandavas*. *Ugrasravas* the poet, the actual narrator of the *Mahabharata* has this to say of their relationship—

*Duryodhana is a great tree, filled with resentment, Karna is the trunk (1.1.65)*

The two are portrayed as inseparable and yet, *Karna* in his words projects a sense of the right and wrong. He is aware of the wrong path he has chosen and continues to tread on it unlike *Duryodhana* who is blinded by power and full of conceit. Let’s look at the temptation of *Karna* next.

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### 4.3 THE PREDICAMENT OF *KARNA* - TEMPTATION

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In the narrative *Dhritarashtra* asks *Sanjaya* to narrate to him the conversation that takes place between *Krsna* and *Karna*, after *Krsna* asks the latter to mount the chariot. *Sanjaya* tells him that the words that *Krsna* spoke to mighty *Karna* are both pleasant and in conformity with the *Dharma*. And then he goes on to narrate the conversation between the two. *Krsna* praises *Karna* for being knowledgeable about the truth, the *dharma* and the sacred teachings of the *Vedas*. And then he reveals that *Karna* was born to *Kunti* before her marriage to *Pandu*, and thus according to *dharma*, he then is the son of *Pandu*.

After revealing the truth about his birth, *Krsna* then tries to tempt *Karna* with all kinds of favours and comforts and luxuries that he will enjoy if he so chooses to side with the *Pandavas*. *Krsna* tells him that if he comes with him, he will become the King, and that the *Pandavas* will recognise him as the eldest brother, for he was born even before *Yudhishtira*. *Krsna* then tells him that all those who have gathered to fight in favour of the *Pandavas*, including the *Pandavas* and their sons, will bow down to him, and also that he will be able to approach *Draupadi* with her own willingness.

*Krsna* tells *Karna* that the latter will have the assistance of the *Pandavas*, the five sons of *Kunti*, the *Panchalas*, and the *Chedis*, and *Krsna* himself will instate him as the king and ruler of the earth. He finally asks the mighty warrior to change sides so that he can enjoy the fruits of the kingdom along with his brothers, i.e. *Pandavas*. *Krsna* tells *Karna* that he needs to make a choice immediately as he must establish the blood line between him and his *Pandavas* brothers. In this manner *Krsna* keeps tempting *Karna*. We shall examine the conversation with *Krsna* in detail in the next section.

#### 4.3.1 Conversation with *Krsna*

Having asked *Karna* to mount his chariot, *Krsna* begins to unveil a seminal truth about the former’s life. He draws on the scriptures to suggest that a son born to a woman before marriage stands to claim his right as a legitimate son and “*You Karna were born that way; under law you are the son of Pandu.*

*Under the constraint of the book of law, come with me and you shall be king*". This is a moment of great testing for Karna. He has been waiting all his life to lay claim to his *Kshatriya* lineage. Now, when it is offered to him and along with the opportunity to be king, he has to make the tough choice. *Krsna* tempts him by presenting a visual picture of his would-be kingship—*"The five Pandavas shall clasp your feet as your brothers and so shall the five sons of Draupadi and the unvanquished son of Subhadra"* (92). *Krsna* is aware that nothing would please Karna better than to see the *Pandavas* at his feet and himself as the unchallenged king. *Krsna* further draws a picture of wealth and plenitude that would be on offer if Karna decides to join the *Pandavas*—*"Baronesses and daughters of kings shall bring golden, silver, and earthen vessels, herbs, all seeds, all gems, and shrubs for your imagination. And at the sixth turn you shall lie with Draupadi"*. This is meant to further lure Karna so he may lose his rigid stance and give in to the pleasures offered by *Krsna*. His unfulfilled desires are consciously stoked here. Despite his valour and strength Karna never received recognition from the *Brahmins* and was always looked down upon for belonging to the class of *Sutas*. *Krsna* plays upon this bitterness in Karna by suggesting that if he agreed,

*Today Brahmins representing all four Vedas shall consecrate you, assisted by the very priest of the Pandavas, while you are seated on the tiger skin* (93)

He also exploits Karna's hatred for *Arjun* as he appeases him by suggesting, *"Arjun shall drive the chariot drawn by his white horses"*. Karna's response to *Krsna* is very interesting as we shall see in the next section.

### 4.3.2 Karna's Response to Krsna

Instead, Karna shares his negative feelings with *Krsna* by claiming, *"Yes Krsna, under law I was born the son of Pandu. But Kunti cast me out as though I had been stillborn!"* The pain attached to being discarded at birth is palpable in Karna's speech. He recounts how *Adhiratha*, the *Suta*, carried him home with love to *Radha* and *"out of love for me the milk of Radha's breasts poured forth at once and she accepted my piss and shit, Madhava! How could a man like me deny her the ancestral offering?"* (93). It is this obligation that Karna finds difficult to turn away from. Also, it is meant to depict the contrast between *Kunti*, a mother who left him at the mercy of fate and another, *Radha*, who accepted him with love. The foster parents gave him a *Suta* identity when he had none and now when his *Kshatriya* identity has finally emerged, it would be an act of betrayal to forsake his *Suta* identity and accept the new one. As Karna says *"Adhiratha, the Suta, thinks of me as his son, and my love demands that I think of him as my father"*. Clearly Karna emphasises here his responsibility to think of *Adhiratha* as his father. His *Dharma* and his love both demand of him to accept his *Suta* identity. Karna also suggests that one cannot be uprooted from a social class and planted in another. His family life and bonds of love are within the social system he had inhabited. It is this that makes him say—

*He had my birth rites performed, Madhava, by the rules found in scriptures, out of love for his son, Janardana. He had the Brahmins name me Vasusena. And when I was old enough, he married me to wives, Kesava. I have sons and grandsons by them, Janardana, and my heart has bonds of love with them, Krsna.* (93)

*Karna* goes on to rationalise the other relationship he has built over the years with *Duryodhana* who, too, has showered him with favours and has found in him a friend. As *Karna* claims “*For thirteen years I have enjoyed unrivaled royal power in Dhrtarastra’s lineage by relying on Duryodhana*” and that “*Duryodhana has raised arms and prepared for war with the Pandavas, because he relies on me*”. It is this that makes *Karna* reject *Krsna*’s proposal. Interestingly, *Karna* refuses to accept *Krsna*’s enticing offer because of the debt he carries towards his foster parents and his friend /benefactor *Duryodhana*. He owes them this debt and it drives him to sacrifice himself at the altar of loyalty. As he states—“*Govinda, neither joy nor fear nor all the earth nor piles of gold can make me a traitor to my word*” (93). Nevertheless, *Karna* is aware of the impending doom of *Duryodhana* and is certain of his own downfall and death along with him. As he claims:

*The total destruction that looms for the earth is caused by Sakuni, me, Duhsasana, and Dhrtarastra’s son King Duryodhana. There is no doubt, Krsna, that a great battle impends between the Pandavas and Kurus, grisly and mired in blood. The kings and princes who follow Duryodhana’s orders will journey to Yama’s realm, burned by the fire of the weapons in the war.* (98)

In such a case, it appears strange that he doesn’t join the *Pandavas*. *Karna* sacrifices the promised life he has been dreaming of. Is it loyalty for *Duryodhana* alone or is it *Dharma*, the law that is stopping him from accepting *Krsna*’s offer? *Karna* also claims that accepting the offer would amount to cowardice. *Karna* is aware that the *Pandavas* have been in the right and are considerate of the law while the *Kauravas* have been on the side of *Adharma*. Why does he then follow ideas of loyalty with the unlawful lot? Could it be that *Karna* thinks himself to be irredeemable, suggesting that he has fallen to such an extent that he can’t retrieve himself? He, thus, enters the war to sacrifice himself and purge himself of the sins committed—he tells *Krsna* at the end of their rendezvous “*We shall meet again next (in heaven), prince sans blame*” signifying that in heaven he would be worthy of an alliance with *Krsna* while in the present situation he has committed many a wrong. *Krsna*’s words leave him more despondent and brooding and yet he continues to follow the path taken earlier. Can we say that if *Karna* agreed to join the *Pandavas*, he would have been instrumental in saving the *Kauravas* from the war? Without *Karna* on his side *Duryodhana* would feel too weak to put up a battle. Why else would *Krsna* call *Karna* to his chariot? *Krsna* called *Karna* and none else because he wished to avert the war. It was not love for *Karna* nor that he doubted the *Pandavas*’ victory in war. Can we then say that, it is *Karna*’s decision that leads them all to battle? Importantly, is *Karna* aware of the significant role he plays at this juncture in the text? Is he deliberately pushing for war—as if to meet death and to take the *Kauravas* to their rightful end, that is death? Is he following another kind of *Dharma* where the wrong must be punished, even when he is on the side of wrong and in rejecting *Krsna* he is actually following the right path? These questions come to mind as we see how *Karna* argues with *Krsna* about right and wrong—*Dharma* and *Adharma*. For instance, he says—

*Varsneya, the Dhrtarastra will hold a grand sacrifice of war. Of this sacrifice you shall be the witness, Janardana and you shall be the Adhvaryu priest at the ritual ... The insults I heaped on the Pandavas, to please Duryodhana, those I regret. When you see me cut down by the left-handed Archer, it will be the Re-piling of the fire of their sacrifice. When the Pandava drinks the blood of Duhsasana, bellowing his roar, it will be the Soma draught.*



*When the two Pancalyas fell Drona and Bhisma, that will be the conclusion of the sacrifice, Janardana. When the mighty Bhimsena kills Duryodhana, then the great sacrifice of the Dhartarastra will end (95-6).*

Karna's decision determines the further course of action in the text. On the surface it appears to be an individual's choice. However, this decision of the individual has far reaching consequences. Karna as you recall from your reading of the text, also has a dream that needs to be discussed next.

### 4.3.3 Karna's Dream

Speaking of Karna's dream you will note that it carries "portentous signs" that "foredoom great danger" for him and his allies. Karna narrates the picturesque dream he has to Krsna in which he says "I saw Yudhisthira and his brothers ascend to a thousand-pillared palace" wearing "white turbans and white robes" and "they all had beautiful stools". The grandeur of the palace here is heightened by the exaggeration that a dream easily facilitates. Also in the dream the Pandavas are wearing white robes and turbans that give them an ethereal quality. Still, white is also the colour of harmony, peace and justice signifying that a new order has been set up. Next, Karna says to Krsna,

*... In my vision I saw you drape the blood-fouled earth with entrails, Krsna Janardana. A boundless august Yudhisthira mounted a pile of bones and joyously ate rice mixed with ghee from a gold platter.*

In both scenes described here there is reference to violence and death. While Krsna is an active agent here, bringing justice by destroying the "fouled" earth; Yudhisthira on the other hand is seen climbing a "pile of bones" to enjoy abundant food. A new era is being ushered in, as Karna notes:

*I saw Yudhisthira swallow the earth which you had served him—clearly he shall enjoy the rule of the earth.*

Note that Karna seems to have already accepted defeat at this point, (even before entering the battlefield) in acknowledging the might of Krsna and the integrity of Yudhisthira. He goes on to narrate the dream further—

*Wolf-Belly of the terrible feats had climbed a steep mountain and with his club in hand the tiger-like man seemed to survey this earth—clearly he shall destroy us all in a great battle.*

Note that Karna is describing his dream but alongside is, also offering an interpretation of it. Bhima surveying the earth from atop a mountain suggests to Karna his invincibility. On his side, Karna is certain that Bhima will destroy all his opponents including him. He also talks of the triumph of law and justice when he claims—

*I know, Hrsikesa, that where there is Law there is triumph. Dhanamjaya carrying Gandiva had mounted a white elephant, together with you, Hrsikesa, blazing with sublime luster. All of you shall—about that I have no doubts—slaughter all the kings led by Duryodhana in battle, Krsna.*

Is it the law (Dharma) as Karna says that makes him certain of the "slaughter of all kings led by Duryodhana" or the might of the Pandava brothers and their allies or for that matter, is it the colossal figure of Krsna that daunts Karna making him believe the defeat of Duryodhana inevitable? Karna's dream gives us some clue. It appears that according to Karna the support of Krsna for the Pandavas is the decisive point in the battle. Interestingly, Krsna too thinks

that *Karna* is the vital support for *Duryodhana* and without his presence, *Duryodhana* would not enter the battlefield. *Karna* describes all the men he sees in his dream. While *Nakul*, *Sehdeva* and *Satyaki* are decked with pure bracelets, wearing white garlands and robes, *Dhrtarastra*'s army has red turbans except the three white turbaned men—*Aswathaman*, *Krpa* and *Krtavarman Satvata*. Finally, *Karna* ends his dream with the inexorable force of fortune, as he says—

*Mounted on a camel cart, O strong-armed Janardana, Bhisma and Drona accompanied by me and Dhartarastra traveled to the region ruled by Agastya, Lord Janardana: soon we shall reach the dwelling of Yama; I and the other kings and the circle of barons shall doubtless enter the fire of Gandiva.* (100)

The finality in *Karna*'s voice speaks of his belief that he would lose the war and his life. This further confirms that *Karna* willingly chooses death over life and kingdom. The dream in this sense is significant as it makes us privy to the working of the mind of *Karna*. This adds another dimension to his character which is to be understood in its complexity and subtlety. Besides *Krsna*, *Kunti* too tries to persuade *Karna* to switch sides and join his real brothers the *Pandavas*. Let's look at the exchange between *Kunti* and *Karna* next. It is interesting because *Kunti* reaches out to him as a mother, knowing that she had abandoned him at birth.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Why did *Krsna* tempt *Karna* to join the *Pandavas*? Was it for the well-being of *Karna* or the *Pandavas* or the entire social system of the time? Explain.

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#### 4.3.4 *Kunti* and *Karna*

As the narrative evolves, *Kunti* exhorts *Karna* to follow his *Dharma* and take up his *Kshatriya* identity. She tries to persuade him, reminding him of his duty as the first born *Pandu*. As **Kevin McGrath** notes in his essay

*Speaking of Truth—As usual in the Mahabharata, it is the royal women who are the ones to be cognizant in detail and eloquent in expression when matters of kingship arise. They function in the poem as a true mirror of princes.* (213)

**McGrath** further asserts:

*Women in epic Mahabharata more than male heroes speak what is considered to be social truth: what is right for ksatriyas and what constitutes good behaviour. They are satyavadini 'speakers of truth' or dharmacarini 'one whose conduct is dharmic'. Usually such speeches are made when crisis is occurring and right demeanour is in question: then, a woman will speak, clarifying the situation and exhorting a hero or king who is not acting correctly and without due regard to ksatriyas dharma.* (187)

Note how *Kunti* embarks upon her task by telling *Karna* what is right and wrong for him:

*He the God who makes light and spreads heat, he Virocana begot*

*you on me, Karna, to be the greatest swordsmen. The child of a god, with inborn earrings and armor, you were borne by me in my father's house, covered with glory, invincible son. It is not at all right for you, son, innocently to serve the Dhartarastras without knowing your real brothers.* (103)

Here, *Kunti* argues for the right path that *Karna* should take now that he is aware of his *Ksatriya* parentage and not follow the wrong “*innocently*”. *Karna*'s parentage has always been a burning issue in his life and now that it has come to light, he is unwilling to accept it. *Kunti* is both dramatic and eloquent in her persuasions and goes on to urge *Karna* to imagine what life would be if he joined his *Pandava* brothers. Much like *Krsna*, she paints the grand picture before *Karna*—

*Surrounded by your five brothers, you shall surely shine forth Karna, like Brahma surrounded by the Vedas and their Branches. Endowed with virtues, the eldest and the best among relations who are the best, your title will no longer be that of a son of Suta, you shall be a heroic Partha* (103)

Still, we may note that in the interaction between *Kunti* and *Karna*, *Kunti* describes her young days to *Karna* when she was both a woman and child suggesting that she was doubly gullible, innocent and curious as a young person and open to danger as a girl. She wished to try the strength and power of a boon she received from a saint and in doing so obtained *Karna* from the Sun-god.

Another interesting aspect of this section is the direct intervention of the gods. *Krsna* taken as god in human form is intervening to prevent war. Additionally, the sun-god talks directly to *Karna* corroborating *Kunti*'s tale and urging *Karna* to join the *Pandavas* and relinquish the side of *Duryodhana*. The gods thus, negotiate with humans and strive to change the course of events but in vain. *Karna* would not be moved to cowardice. Instead, he lets others know that he is bound by oath. In the next section we shall look at the class difference between the *Sutas* who were his foster parents and the *Kshatriyas* who were his real family.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Analyse the Character of *Kunti* as an independent assertive woman who was once a curious devoted girl too.

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## 4.4 CLASS DIFFERENCES: THE *SUTA* AND THE *KSHATRIYA*

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Even when it appears that *Karna* is fighting an individual battle, he is always reminded of the class he belongs to. Each time he is reminded of hierarchies that exist in society. At the time when he challenges *Arjuna* to a duel which is a desperate measure to display and prove his prowess, he is rebuffed by *Krpa* who asks him to hold a whip that is becoming of his caste and not a sword. *Karna* avows his fidelity to *Duryodhana*, and the latter rewards him by presenting him the kingdom of *Anga*. However, *Karna* is not presented with a marriage alliance with a *Kshatriya*. In fact, *Karna* claims that he and

his sons have married into the *Suta* class— “*I have offered much and often, but always with Sutas. I have performed domestic and marital rites, but always with Sutas.*” (93) Divisions of caste and class in the society of the time appear strict and fossilised and are not easy to break. At the time of the war, *Shalya* refuses to become a charioteer for *Karna* who is a *Suta*. These instances tell us about the strict boundaries of class and caste at the time. In this sense, *Karna* seems to be fighting for himself and his rights but at a deeper level he is fighting for the entire class that makes the art of war the exclusive rights of the upper class—the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas*. This strict categorisation denies rights to *Sutas* and the trader class. The case of *Eklavya* too comes to mind who, was physically wrenched away from the bow by extracting the sacrifice of his thumb. The inevitable war between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* is the main theme in this unit. It is but pertinent that we look at the strategy in war next.

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## 4.5 STRATEGY IN WAR

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Note that the larger question involved in this episode is that of war. The section begins with the blind *Dhrtarastra* immensely curious to know what transpires between *Krsna* and *Karna*. He urges Sanjaya to tell him what *Krsna* said to *Karna*. Note the urgency in his tone when he piles question upon question:

*What did that slayer of enemy heroes (Krsna) say to Radheya inside the chariot, what blandishments did Govinda offer the Suta's son? Relate to me what Krsna, with his voice roaring like a flood or a cloud, said to Karna, whether gently or sharply?* (92)

It is but obvious that, for the king, the implication would be far and deep. The choice *Karna* makes at this point would decisively change the power dynamics between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Thus, the King of the *Kauravas* would be apprehensive about *Krsna*'s smooth ways of appealing to the people. His interest in what *Krsna* tells *Karna* is politically important for it would determine the strength of the *Kauravas*.

*Krsna* doesn't tell the truth to *Karna* as an act of sheer good will. He wishes to turn the tide entirely in favour of the *Pandavas*. It may be said that *Krsna* knows the future and thus, wishes *Karna* to protect himself and attain his just position. However, *Krsna* in the text is known equally if not more for strategy than fair-play. In the given scenario he would do well to have a mighty warrior on the side of the *Pandavas*. *Karna* himself claims that it is only with his support that *Duryodhana* has ventured to go to war with the *Pandavas*. Another strategy adopted by *Krsna* is to intimidate the enemy so as to demoralise and weaken the enemy in mind by emphasising the powers of the *Pandavas*. He tells *Karna* –

*There is no shadow of doubt remaining that victory's sure of the Pandavas: the Pandava's banner of Triumph is out, the terrible king of the apes has been raised* (97)

and

*When you see the man of the white horses on the battlefield with Krsna driving his chariot, employing the missiles of Indra, Fire and Wind, and hear the whip-crack of Gandiva as of a thunderbolt, then there will be no more Krta Age, no more Treta, no more Dvarpara.*

*Krsna* goes on repeating the last phrase so that it appears as an echo and a reaffirmation of the proximity of doomsday. Strategy, however, is not limited

to the sphere of men. *Kunti* decides to meet *Karna* and soften him with her truth. *Karna* is well aware that it is self-interest that has made *Kunti* come to him. It is not the genuine love of a mother for her first born son. *Karna* retorts at her pleadings by claiming that:

*When there was time to act you did not show me your present compassion. And now you have laid orders on me, the son to whom you denied the sacraments. You have never acted in my interest like a mother, and now, here you are, enlightening me solely in your own interest.*  
(103)

*Kunti* like *Krsna* depicts a brilliant scene of kingship for *Karna* but he remains obdurate. However, she is able to extract a promise from *Karna* that includes the protection of her four sons except *Arjun*. The *Mahabharata* as we know is a long narrative with many little narratives in between. The entire narrative and sequence of events that leads to the war, the preparation for the war are all but narratives. Hence, a look at the series of narratives next.

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## 4.6 A SERIES OF NARRATIVES

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*Yudhishthira* asks an important question to *Krsna*:

*What did you tell the son of Dhrtarastra in the assembly hall, lotus-eyed one, when you had gone to the city of the Elephant? Please repeat it to me*

*Krsna* narrates the entire episode. Note that the narrative technique in the epic is based on “repetition”. Characters keep retelling events whether it is *Vaisampayana*, the overall narrator of the epic or *Sanjaya* for a brief period or in this case *Krsna*. Along with repetition, stories are provided within a story. For instance, *Krsna* narrates his story and repeats what he has said at the court of *Dhrtarastra* but also recounts the story told by *Bhisma* and by *Drona* of the clan—hence, story within a story. In *Krsna*’s narration we find separate narratives for *Bhisma*, *Drona* as also *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra* persuading *Duryodhana* to give up war and share the realm with his cousin brothers.

In this sense, if we trace the progression of the narrative we will find that *Sanjaya* becomes the first narrator in this section who tells *Dhrtarastra* what has ensued between *Krsna* and *Karna*. Then *Vaisampayana* assumes the role of narrator to describe the conversation between *Vidura* and *Kunti* followed by the scene between *Kunti* and *Karna*. *Vaisampayana* tells us next what *Krsna* and the *Pandavas* discuss. From this point on, *Krsna* assumes the role of narrator who tells *Yudhishthira* what has transpired at the court of the *Kauravas*. *Krsna* opens space for the narratives of *Bhisma*, and of *Drona* followed by those of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*. And the section ends with *Krsna*’s closing lines:

*They will not give you the kingdom without war, Pandava. Driven to destroy, they now face death.*  
(113)

This is the entire narrative sequence of this section which is both intertwined and complex.

#### 4.6.1 The Narratives of *Bhisma* and *Drona*

It becomes clear through the ancestral tales narrated by both *Bhisma* and *Drona* that Kingship is not the right of the first born but of a deserving person. These narratives of *Bhisma* and *Drona* are important for the reason that they recount the history of the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. They recount the past as it took place to provide the young King *Duryodhana* a clear understanding and perspective on issues of family and kinship. *Bhisma* speaks of his father King *Santanu*, and delineates the family tree. He speaks of the time when the kingdom was Kingless and *Bhisma* had to maintain his oath and yet protect the lineage of the family. All along the epic, one finds that *Bhisma*'s *raison d'etre* has been the furthering and sustaining of the *Kuru* dynasty and for this he is often seen to go to any limit. Each time the family rule is in jeopardy, *Bhisma* finds ways to overcome it. For this reason, he brings the hermit *Vyasa* (the author of the epic) to his brother's wives and "*propitiated the seer and solicited him for offspring and he bestowed his grace and begot three sons*". *Bhisma* continues his narrative, "*Being blind and thus lacking the faculty of sight, your father could not be King and Pandu great spirited and world renowned became King. He was the King and his sons are their father's heirs*". The story is meant to highlight the right of the *Pandu* brothers to the kingdom. However, it also charts the process of succession and problems of continuing the dominance of the family in a kingdom. *Bhisma* tries to convince *Duryodhana* because he wishes to protect the family line and believes that a war would destroy the lineage.

The narrative of *Drona* continues the saga where *Bhisma* leaves it. He speaks of *Pandu*'s law-spirited good judgement in having established the rule leaves the "lion throne" for the blind *Dhrtarastra* and the younger *Vidura* and goes to the forest himself. *Drona* questions *Duryodhana*'s actions juxtaposing them with those of his forefathers who share and sacrifice to maintain the unity of the family. He retorts: "*Why do you (Duryodhana) though born in the family, resolve to break up the family?*" Finally *Drona* asserts his affiliation before lords and kings by claiming "*Where Bhisma goes, goes Drona*". This also speaks of the loyalty *Drona* bears towards *Bhisma*, the man, and not the kingdom. His final words reinstate the basic motif of the epic—"Victory lies where law lies".

#### 4.6.2 The Narratives of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*

In the narrative, *Vidura* has been most vociferous in his critique of *Duryodhana*. Calling a spade a spade, *Vidura* blatantly describes the cruelty and arrogance of *Duryodhana*. Note how he speaks to *Bhisma*:

*Devavrata, listen to what I have to say. This dynasty of Kuru was lost and you rescued it—now you pay no heed to my complaints. Who is this defiler of his family, this Duryodhana, that you follow the judgement of this man who is possessed with greed, ignoble, ungrateful, his mind diseased with avarice, disobedient to the commandments of his father, who sees Law and Profit? The Kurus are doomed because of Duryodhana: act, great king, so that they need not perish. (109)*

*Vidura* speaks of the impending destruction of the *Kuru* clan and considers *Duryodhana* "diseased" in mind. *Vidura*'s speech instills fear in the heart of *Gandhari* who unequivocally chides her son—"how dare you aspire in your

folly to kingship, Duryodhana?” Gandhari, like Kunti makes an assertive statement about “The law” and its finality—“*The Realm of the Kurus is ruled by succession: that’s the family law come down to us*”, asserting that we must follow it. She is the upholder of the law as well as its custodian. Finally, Dhrtarastra speaks his mind. Krsna narrates what Dhrtarastra tells Duryodhana—he enlightens his son about the dynastic history of Soma Prajapati who was the founder of the Kuru dynasty. Dhrtarastra describes the story of Nahusa’s son Yayati who was “the sixth from Soma”. Yayati Nahusa had five sons, Yadu was the eldest and Puru was the youngest. Dhrtarastra narrates the story thus—

... befuddled by his pride in his strength” Yadu “grew mighty on four cornered earth and after subjugating the kings dwelled in the City of the Elephants.

He “did not abide by his father’s command” and as a result his father Yayati Nahusa in “fury cursed his son” and “cast him out of the kingdom” along with his other sons who followed him. He then “installed his youngest son Puru who took his orders obediently”. This story told by Dhrtarastra is meant to act as a check on Duryodhana who has been defiant and disobedient towards his elders. Dhrtarastra closes it with the statement:

Thus even an eldest son is not born to kingship, if he is prideful  
(112)

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Write a note on the narrative technique employed in this section of the Mahabharata.

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## 4.7 LET US SUM UP

The unit has taken up in detail each aspect of the section in the course to explore dimensions that may be less visible in the first reading. This section is primarily about Karna. At the same time though, it opens up several other layers of the text which include—caste/class hierarchies; gender stereotypes; loyalty and obligation; Dharma and Adharma; family dynasty and its struggle for dominion; bonds of love and kinship; destiny and predetermination among others. The text moves in several directions and takes into account the opinions of different characters, such as Krsna, Kunti, Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and Dhrtarastra and, indeed primarily of Karna. The vast scope of the narrative widens our understanding of the world of the text and it gets altered as new narratives emerge in the process of movement.

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## 4.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) Does Karna believe in the cause of Duryodhana? If not, then why does he continue his alliance with him? Elaborate.
- 2) What is Karna’s view of Krsna? Comment

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## 4.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Refer to Section 4.3, 4.3.1

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Refer to Section 4.3.4

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Refer to Section 4.6.1 & 4.6.2
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## 4.10 GLOSSARY

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*Dharma and Adharma* – (Sanskrit) the moral and the immoral; the pious and the profane; the lawful and unlawful.

*Raison d'être* – (French word) The most important reason for one's existence;

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