

The Great battle - Mahabharata

Name – P. Hemaditya

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***Department - ECE, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,
Chennai Campus***

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Introduction:

The ***Mahabharata*** is an ancient Indian epic where the main story revolves around two branches of a family - the **Pandavas** and **Kauravas** -who, in the Kurukshetra **War, battle** for the throne of Hastinapura. Interwoven into this narrative are several smaller stories about people dead or living, and philosophical discourses. **Krishna**-Dwaipayana Vyasa, himself a character in the epic, composed it; as, according to tradition, he dictated the verses and **Ganesha** wrote them down. At 100,000 verses, it is the longest epic poem ever written, generally thought to have been composed in the 4th century BCE or earlier. The events in the epic play out in the Indian subcontinent and surrounding areas.

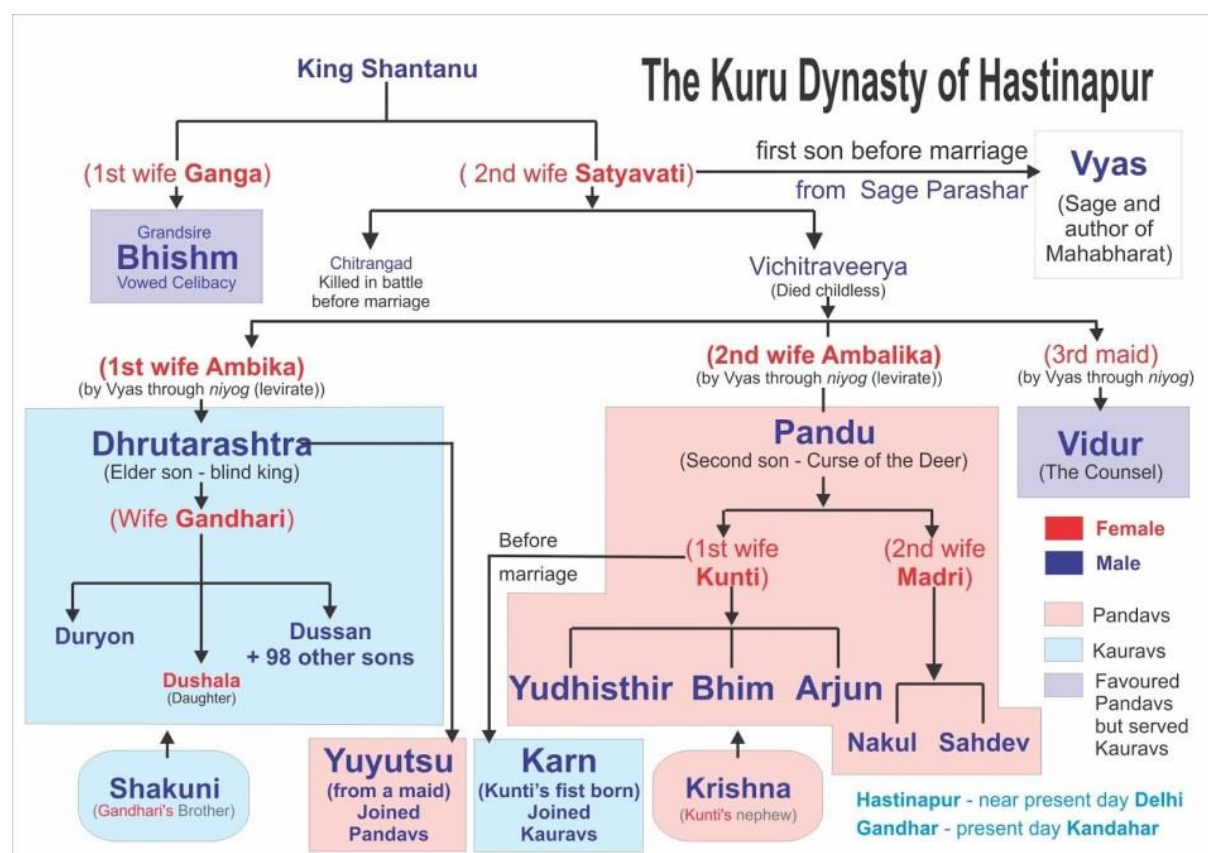
Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur, was married to **Ganga** (personification of the **Ganges**) with whom he had a son called Devavrat. Several years later, when Devavrat had grown up to be an accomplished prince, Shantanu fell in love with Satyawati. Her father refused to let her marry the king unless the king promised that Satyawati's son and descendants would inherit the throne. Unwilling to deny Devavrat his rights, Shantanu declined to do so but the prince, on coming to know of the matter, rode over to Satyawati's house, vowed to renounce the throne and to remain celibate throughout his life. The prince then took Satyawati home to the **palace** so that the king, his father, could marry her. On account of the terrible vow that he'd taken that day, Devavrat came to be known as Bheeshma. Shantanu was so pleased with his son that he granted to Devavrat the boon of choosing the time of his own **death**.

In time, Shantanu and Satyawati had two sons. Soon thereafter, Shantanu died. Satyawati's sons still being minors, the affairs of the kingdom were managed by Bheeshma and Satyawati. By the time these sons reached adulthood, the elder one had died in a skirmish with some gandharvas (heavenly beings) so the younger son, Vichitravirya, was enthroned. Bheeshma then abducted the three princesses of a neighbouring kingdom and brought them over to Hastinapur to be wedded to Vichitravirya. The eldest of these princesses declared that she was in love with someone else, so she was let go; the two other princesses were married to Vichitravirya who died soon afterwards, childless.

So that the family line did not die out, Satyawati summoned her son Vyasa to impregnate the two queens. Vyasa had been born to Satyawati of a great sage named Parashara before her marriage to Shantanu. According to the laws of the day, a child born to an unwed

mother was taken to be a step-child of the mother's husband; by that token, Vyasa could be considered Shantanu's son and could be used to perpetuate the Kuru clan that ruled Hastinapur. Thus, by the *Niyog* custom, the two queens each had a son of Vyasa: to the elder queen was born a blind son called Dhritarashtra, and to the younger was born an otherwise healthy but extremely pale son called Pandu. To a maid of these queens was born a son of Vyasa called Vidur. Bheeshm brought up these three boys with great care. Dhritarashtra grew up to be the strongest of all princes in the country, Pandu was extremely skilled in warfare and archery, and Vidur knew all the branches of learning, politics, and statesmanship.

With the boys grown, it was now time to fill up the empty throne of Hastinapur. Dhritarashtra, the eldest, was bypassed because the laws barred a disabled person from being king. Pandu, instead, was crowned. Bheeshm negotiated Dhritarashtra's marriage with Gandhari, and Pandu's with Kunti and Madri. Pandu expanded the kingdom by conquering the surrounding areas, and brought in considerable war booty. With things running smoothly in the country, and with its coffers full, Pandu asked his elder brother to look after the state affairs, and retired to the forests with his two wives for some time off.



A few years later, Kunti returned to Hastinapur. With her were five little boys, and the bodies of Pandu and Madri. The five boys were the sons of Pandu, born to his two wives through the *Niyog* custom from gods: the eldest YUDHISTIR was born of Dharma, the second BHEEM of Vayu, the third ARJUN of Indra, and the youngest - twins –NAKUL and SAHADEV of the Ashvins. In the meanwhile, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari too had had children of their own: 100 sons and one daughter. The Kuru elders performed the last rites for Pandu and Madri, and Kunti and the children were welcomed into the palace. All of the 105 princes were subsequently entrusted to the care of a teacher: Kripa at first and, additionally, Drona later. Drona's school at Hastinapur attracted several other boys; Karna, of the Suta clan was one such boy. It was here that hostilities quickly developed between the sons of Dhritarashtra (collectively called the Kauravas, patronymic of their ancestor Kuru) and the sons of Pandu (collectively called the Pandavas, patronymic of their father).

Pandavas and Kauravas:

Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava, tried - and failed - to poison Bheem, the second Pandava. Karna, because of his rivalry in archery with the third Pandava, Arjuna, allied himself with Duryodhan. In time, the princes learnt all they could from their teachers, and the Kuru elders decided to hold a public skills exhibition of the princes. It was during this exhibition that the citizens became plainly aware of the hostilities between the two branches of the royal family: Duryodhan and Bheem had a mace fight that had to be stopped before things turned ugly, Karna - uninvited as he was not a Kuru prince - challenged Arjuna, was insulted on account of his non-royal birth, and was crowned king of a vassal state on the spot by Duryodhan. It was also around this time that questions began to be raised about Dhritarashtra occupying the throne, since he was supposed to be holding it only in trust for Pandu, the crowned king. To keep peace in the realm, Dhritarashtra declared the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtir, as the crown prince and heir apparent.

Yudhishtir's being the crown prince and his rising popularity with the citizens was extremely distasteful to Duryodhan, who saw himself as the rightful heir since his father was the *de facto* king. He plotted to get rid of the Pandavas. This he did by getting his father to send the Pandavas and Kunti off to a nearby town on the pretext of a fair that was held there. The palace in which the Pandavas were to stay in that town was built by an agent of Duryodhan; the palace was made entirely of inflammable materials since the plan was to burn

down the palace - together with the Pandavas and Kunti - once they'd settled in. The Pandavas, however, were alerted to this fact by their other uncle, Vidur, and had a counter plan ready; they dug an escape tunnel underneath their chambers. One night, the Pandavas gave out a huge feast which all of the townsfolk came to. At that feast, a forest woman and her five sons found themselves so well-fed and well-drunk that they could no longer walk straight; they passed out on the floor of the hall. That very night, the Pandavas themselves set fire to the palace and escaped through the tunnel. When the flames had died down, the townsfolk discovered the bones of the forest woman and her boys, and mistook them for Kunti and the Pandavas. Duryodhan thought his plan had succeeded and that the world was free of the Pandavas. Like these many incidents led to the great battle of kurukshetra..

Kurukshetra war ground:

Present day located in the state of Haryana in India, Kuruskshetra is a famous pilgrimage site. ... The place is known for the **battle** between the Kauravas and Pandavas in the Hindu epic **Mahabharata**. It is the place where Krishna recited Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna.

Army involved:

Going by the numbers described in the epic, Mahabharata is one of the bloodiest wars that has ever happened during the history of mankind. 18 Akshauhini fought altogether and just 12 people survived the war. ie around 4 Million people are believed to be killed in the Mahabharata war. Considering that the total population of the world 5000 years back as per HYDE's estimate is ~45Millioin, the war is supposed to have consumed ~10% of Human population in 18 days, which is unbelievable humongous.

For a comparison around 14 million people were killed in World War 1 (over 4 years) and around 60 Million People were killed in World War 2 (over 6 years) which accounted to 1% and 3% of the total world population of that time.

Going by the numbers described in the epic, in 18 Akshouhinis, a total of 3,936,600 people, 393660 Elephants, 1180980 horses, and 393660 Chariots (each having 4-8 horses) took part in the war. This math is somehow hard to digest as the existence of 400,000 domesticated Elephants and >3 Million domesticated horses in the Indian Subcontinent 5000 years back is a highly debatable story. There is definitely a high likelihood of the numbers being exaggerated in the epic, but on the other hand, with the way the military structures and construction of an army is detailed in the epic, it's also hard to doubt the numbers described in the epic.

What is an Akshauhini?

An akshauhini, is a battallion consisting of **21,870** chariots; **21,870** elephants; **65,610** horses and **109,350** infantry as per the Mahabharata.

The ratio is 1 chariot : 1 elephant : 3 cavalry : 5 infantry soldiers. In each of these large number groups (65,610; 109,350 etc.), the digits add up to 18.

An Akshouhini is actually comosed of smaller military units call Anikinis, which is turn is divided into further smaller units. The systematic construction of an Akshouhini is decribed as follows:

One elephant (Gaja), one chariot (Ratha), three horses (Ashwa) and five foot soldiers (Padhata) form a Patti;

Three Pattis form a Sena-Mukha;

Three Sena-Mukhas make a Gulma;

Three Gulmas a Gana;

Three Ganas a Vahini;

Three Vahinis a Pruthana;

Three Pruthanas a Chamu;

Three Chamus a Anikini;

Ten Anikinis form an Akshauhini.

Thus an Akshauhini, by calculation, contains 21,870 elephants, 21,870 chariots, 65,610 Horses, and 109,350 foot soldiers.

Army of Kauravas:

Kuru Army of 11 Akshauhinis is formed by the kingdom of Hastinapura in alliance with races like the Samsaptakas, Trigartas, the Narayana army, the Sindhu army and Shalya of Madra.

Commanders in Chief: Bhishma (10 days), Drona (5 days), Karna (2 days), Shalya (1 day), Ashwatthama (after Duryodhana loses the mace match with Bhima).

Army of Pandavas

Pandava Army was a coalition of 7 Akshauhinis, primarily the Panchala and Matsya forces, the Rakshasa forces of Bhima's son, The Chedi and Magadha armies and Vrishni-Yadava heroes.

King/Prince/Commander	Kingdom	Size of the Army
Bhagadatta	Pragjyotisha	1 Akshauhini
Shalya	Madra	1 Akshauhini
Nila	Mahishmati	1 Akshauhini
Kritavarma	Yadavas (Krishna's Narayani sena)	1 Akshauhini
Jayadratha	Saindhava	1 Akshauhini
Sudakshina	Kambhoja	1 Akshauhini
Vinda and Anuvinda	Avanti	1 Akshauhini
Srutayudha	Kalinga	1 Akshauhini
Shakuni	Gandhara	1 Akshauhini
Susharma	Trigarta	1 Akshauhini
Duryodhana	Kurus and Allies	1 Akshauhini
		11 Akshauhinis

KAURAVAS ARMY

King/Prince/Commander	Kingdom	Size of the Army
Satyaki	Vrishini (Yadava clan)	1 Akshauhini
Kuntibhoja	Bhoja (Yadava clan)	1 Akshauhini
Dhrishaketu	Chedi	1 Akshauhini
Sahadeva (s/o Jarasandha)	Magadha	1 Akshauhini
Drupada	Panchala	1 Akshauhini
Virata	Matsya	1 Akshauhini
	Panda, Chola, Rakshasas and other allies	1 Akshauhini
		7 Akshauhinis

PANDAVAS ARMY

Rules of Engagement

The Mahabharata war is notable not only because of its magnitude but also for the unbelievable adherence to ethics and dignity displayed and followed during the initial phase of the war. The war indeed became a bloody madness from the thirteenth day, but still in relation to the way wars were fought in the western world (and in historic India) where doing anything to emerge victorious was the only principle, the soldiers who fought the Mahabharata war till the end of its course adhered to multiple rules despite such adherence taking away decisive advantages from their hand. Before the commencement of the war, the two supreme commanders met and framed "rules of ethical conduct", dharmayuddha, for the war. The rules included:

- Fighting must begin no earlier than sunrise and end exactly at sunset.
- No more than one warrior may attack a single warrior.
- Two warriors may "duel", or engage in prolonged personal combat, only if they carry the same weapons and they are on the same type of mount (on foot, on a horse, on an elephant, or in a chariot).
- A warrior needs to be challenged and warned before any duel.
- No warrior may kill or injure a warrior who has surrendered.
- One who surrenders becomes a prisoner of war and will then be subject to the protections of a prisoner of war.
- No warrior may kill or injure an unarmed warrior.
- No warrior may kill or injure an unconscious warrior.
- No warrior may kill or injure a person or animal not taking part in the war.
- No warrior may kill or injure a warrior whose back is turned away.
- No warrior may attack a woman.
- No warrior may strike an animal not considered a direct threat.
- The rules specific to each weapon must be followed. For example, it is prohibited to strike below the waist in mace warfare.
- Warriors may not engage in any unfair warfare.

Weapons Used:

During the Mahabharata period, every warrior had his personal weapons where were so dear to him and was always referred to with a name to allude personification to them. Some of these weapons were really so special in their making that they gave great advantage to the user. On the other hand some of them really needed a skilled warrior to handle them effectively. Many of these named weapons became renowned due to the wars that were won with them. Listed below are some of those famed weapons and the warriors who owned them.

Renowned Bows	Possessed by
Saranga	Krishna
Vijaya	Karna
Bow of Sage Angiras	Drona
Mahendra	Yudhistira
Vyavya	Bhima
Gandiva	Arjuna
Vaishnav	Nakula
Ashwini	Sahadeva
Raudra	Abhimanyu
Pulastya	Ghatotkacha
Raudra, Agneya, Kauverya, Yamya, Girisa	Upa Pandavas (Draupadi's Sons)
Raudra	Prativindhya
Agneya	Satanika
Kauverya	Sutasoma
Yamya	Srutasena / Srutavarma
Girisa	Srutakarma / Sruthakirthi

Conches	Possessed by
Panchajanya	Krishna
Anantavijaya	Yudhistira
Paundra	Bhima
Devadatta	Arjuna
Sughosa	Nakula
Manipuspaka	Sahadeva

Names of other weapons	Type of weapon	Possessed by
Kaumodaki	Mace	Krishna
Asi	Sword	Drona
Sudarshana	Chakra	Krishna
Nandaka	Sword	Krishna
Nistrimsha	Sword	Pradyumna
Balachita	Plough	Balarama
Saunanda	Cylindrical Rod	Balarama

Among all the bows, the Saranga, Vijaya and Gandiva were the most renowned primarily due to the warriors who wielded them. All of these in reality are very likely to be rigid and heavy composite bows made with horn for belly, wood or metal to give stiffness to the centre and sinew for back. They are described to have multiple strings that could help to launch multiple arrows simultaneously as well as provide backup option in case one of the strings is cut off during a combat. They probably had great tensile strength that allows the archer bend them more and provide enormous launch speed for the arrows which in turn enhances the shooting range and speed.

Vijaya as described in the Epic :

This bow was wielded by Karna. As per the epic, the bow was sure to give victory to the possessor. The bow is described to be created by Vishwakarma for Lord Shiva which was then given to Parshurama by Lord Shiva along with many other celestial weapons for killing the Kshatriyas. The bow was given to Karna by his teacher Parshurama. It is generally believed that the string of the bow was unbreakable and created thunderous sound and lightning, causing fear in the hearts of enemy, each time an arrow was released from it..

The celestial string of the bow could not be broken by any astra or any divine weapon. When arrows were released the twang of the bow was as loud as thunder, which caused great fear and despair on the enemy. It produced brilliant flashes like lightening that blinded the enemy. Not many warriors could withstand it's splendour in battle. The energy of the arrows was amplified by a thousand times as the bow was charged with many sacred mantras. No weapon, not even the Pashupatastra could harm the warrior who carried Vijaya in battle.

Gandiva as described in the Epic:

This one was possessed by Arjuna. As per the epic, tis bow was forged by Lord Brahma himself. The bow is desribed to be created from an heavenly tree called Gandi. The bow was so heavy that it could be wielded by only few people. The ownership of the bow passed on to various people. It came to Arjuna from Lord Agni when he wanted to devour the Khandava forest. The bow was known to create deep rumble and produce lightnings every time it was used creating trouble for enemies. It could fire hundreds of arrows at a time and at over great distances, making it one of the most formidable bows.

The bow was a double curve bow with great proportions and tremendous weight. It had 108 strings and one of them was celestial which could not be broken or cut. Whenever an arrow was fired the strings made loud thunderous sounds that filled the enemy with dread. The bow glowed bright during battle and was difficult to look at. It had the capability to enhance the strength of an arrow by many times. A skilled archer like Arjuna when equipt with a bow like Gandiva was almost invincible.

Food Arrangements:

The Kurukshetra war, between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, was the mother of all battles. Nobody could remain neutral. You had to be either on the Kaurava side or the Pandava side. All the kings – hundreds of them – aligned themselves on one side or the other. The king of Udupi however chose to remain neutral. He spoke to Krishna and said, ***‘Those who fight battles have to eat. I will be the caterer for this battle.’***

Krishna said, ‘Fine. Somebody has to cook and serve so you do it.’ They say over 500,000 soldiers had gathered for the battle. The battle lasted 18 days, and every day, thousands were dying. So the Udupi king had to cook that much less food, otherwise it would go waste. Somehow the catering had to be managed. If he kept cooking for 500,000 people it wouldn’t work. Or if he cooked for less, soldiers would go hungry.

The Udupi king managed it very well. The amazing thing was, every day, the food was exactly enough for all the soldiers and no food was wasted. After a few days, people were amazed, ‘How is he managing to cook the exact amount of food!’ No one could know how many people had died on any given day. By the time they could have taken account of these things, the next day morning would have dawned and again it was time to fight. There was no way the caterer could know how many thousands had died each day, but every day he cooked exactly the volume of food necessary for the rest of the armies. When someone asked him, ‘How do you manage this?’ the Udupi king replied, ‘Every night I go to Krishna’s tent.

Krishna likes to eat boiled groundnuts in the night so I peel them and keep them in a bowl. He eats just a few peanuts, and after he is done I count how many he has eaten. If it’s 10 peanuts, I know tomorrow 10,000 people will be dead. So the next day when I cook lunch, I cook for 10,000 people less. Every day I count these peanuts and cook accordingly, and it turns out right.’ Now you know why Krishna is so nonchalant during the whole Kurukshetra war.

Many of the Udupi people are caterers even today.

After Effects:

After Duryodhana's death and the night massacre, the women, who had stayed in the cities during the war, went to the battlefield to look for their men – their fathers, brothers, sons, grandsons, nephews, uncles, grandfathers, brothers-in-law. Each one of them prayed in her heart that her man would not be found wounded in the back, for that would mean that he had been killed as he was running away. They searched for their heroes in the day under the burning sun and through the night with the light of torches.

The air was filled with the sound of women weeping – they sobbed as they stumbled over bodies they recognised, or wailed because they could not find what was left of their men. They knelt in the mud and bloody gore, their tears falling like rain upon dead faces and broken bodies. Every now and then, a cry of joy would pierce the sadness when a woman found a husband or a brother who was still alive. The wounded were carried back to the city with light steps but the weight of the dead was heavy. Soon, the battlefield turned into a cremation ground as it was often easier to perform the last rites where the bodies lay. For some, there were no sons left to perform these rites and so the sons of other men stepped in to ensure the soul's safe journey to the next world.

Kurukshetra had turned from a field of glory into a field of the dead and dying. Yudhishtira took the Pandavas there to see what their victory had cost. He wanted them to realise that the kingdom they had coveted so much had brought death and destruction to hundreds and thousands of people, including their own subjects. Grimly, the brothers walked through the slush, taking in what they had unleashed, and their hearts grew heavy.

Inevitably, the moment of Bhishma's passing arrived and, on the day that the sun began its journey to the north, Bhishma died quietly on his bed of arrows, surrounded by the members of his family and watched by heavenly beings. Humans and gods both knew that another like Bhishma would not be born on earth again. After his death, Sanjaya and Vidura persuaded the grieving elders, Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, to leave the city which now held only memories and to live quietly together in the forest.

A grief-stricken Gandhari curses Krishna wishing for him and the whole Yadav clan a painful death just like her sons (Kauravas).

Pandavas rule Hastinapur for 36 long years. Meanwhile, Gandhari's curse to Lord Krishna starts taking shape. After the deadly war, Draupadi herself created a women council. That council was created to look after all the widows of the war. It supported them financially and looked after them, ensuring a respectable position in the palace.

After Pandavas left the kingdom of Hastinapur, Parikshit of the Kuru clan became the king of the empire. His sons became the successors and consolidated it afterwards.

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