

When Vichitravirya dies young without any heirs, Satyawati asks her first son Vyasa to father children with the widows. The eldest, Ambika, shuts her eyes when she sees him, and so her son Dhritarashtra is born blind. Ambalika turns pale and bloodless upon seeing him, and thus her son Pandu is born pale and unhealthy (the term Pandu may also mean 'jaundiced'[59]). Due to the physical challenges of the first two children, Satyawati asks Vyasa to try once again. However, Ambika and Ambalika send their maid instead, to Vyasa's room. Vyasa fathers a third son, Vidura, by the maid. He is born healthy and grows up to be one of the wisest figures in the Mahabharata. He serves as Prime Minister (Mahamantri or Mahatma) to King Pandu and King Dhritarashtra.

When the princes grow up, Dhritarashtra is about to be crowned king by Bhishma when Vidura intervenes and uses his knowledge of politics to assert that a blind person cannot be king. This is because a blind man cannot control and protect his subjects. The throne is then given to Pandu because of Dhritarashtra's blindness. Pandu marries twice, to Kunti and Madri. Dhritarashtra marries Gandhari, a princess from Gandhara, who blindfolds herself for the rest of her life so that she may feel the pain that her husband feels. Her brother Shakuni is enraged by this and vows to take revenge on the Kuru family. One day, when Pandu is relaxing in the forest, he hears the sound of a wild animal. He shoots an arrow in the direction of the sound. However, the arrow hits the sage Kindama, who was engaged in a sexual act in the guise of a deer. He curses Pandu that if he engages in a sexual act, he will die. Pandu then retires to the forest along with his two wives, and his brother Dhritarashtra rules thereafter, despite his blindness.

Pandu's older queen Kunti, however, had been given a boon by Sage Durvasa that she could invoke any god using a special mantra. Kunti uses this boon to ask Dharma the god of justice, Vayu the god of the wind, and Indra the lord of the heavens for sons. She gives birth to three sons, Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna, through these gods. Kunti shares her mantra with the younger queen Madri, who bears the twins Nakula and Sahadeva through the Ashvini twins. However, Pandu and Madri indulge in lovemaking, and Pandu dies. Madri commits suicide out of remorse. Kunti raises the five brothers, who are from then on usually referred to as the Pandava brothers.

Dhritarashtra has a hundred sons, and one daughter—Duhsala—through Gandhari,[60] all born after the birth of Yudhishtira. These are the Kaurava brothers, the eldest being Duryodhana, and the second Dushasana. Other Kaurava brothers were Vikarna and Sukarna. The rivalry and enmity between them and the Pandava brothers, from their youth and into manhood, leads to the Kurukshetra war. After the deaths of their mother (Madri) and father (Pandu), the Pandavas and their mother Kunti return to the palace of Hastinapur. Yudhishtira is made Crown Prince by Dhritarashtra, under considerable pressure from his courtiers. Dhritarashtra wanted his son Duryodhana to become king and lets his ambition get in the way of preserving justice.

Shakuni, Duryodhana, and Dushasana plot to get rid of the Pandavas. Shakuni calls the architect Purochana to build a palace out of flammable materials like lac and ghee. He then arranges for the Pandavas and the Queen Mother Kunti to stay there, intending to set it alight. However, the Pandavas are warned by their wise uncle, Vidura, who sends them a miner to dig a tunnel. They can escape to safety and go into hiding. During this time Bhima marries a demoness Hidimbi and has a son Ghatotkacha. Back in Hastinapur, the Pandavas and Kunti are presumed dead. Whilst they were in hiding the Pandavas learn of a swayamvara which is taking place for the hand of the Pāñcāla princess Draupadī. The Pandavas disguised as Brahmins come to witness the event.

Meanwhile, Krishna who has already befriended Draupadi, tells her to look out for Arjuna (though now believed to be dead). The task was to string a mighty steel bow and shoot a target on the ceiling, which was the eye of a moving artificial fish while looking at its reflection in oil below. In popular versions, after all the princes fail, many being unable to lift the bow, Karna proceeds to the attempt but is interrupted by Draupadi who refuses to marry a suta (this has been excised from the Critical Edition of Mahabharata[62][63] as later interpolation[64]). After this the swayamvara is opened to the Brahmins leading Arjuna to win the contest and marry Draupadi.

The Pandavas return home and inform their meditating mother that Arjuna has won a competition and to look at what they have brought back. Without looking, Kunti asks them to share whatever Arjuna has won amongst themselves, thinking it to be alms. Thus, Draupadi ends up being the wife of all five brothers

After the wedding, the Pandava brothers are invited back to Hastinapura. The Kuru family elders and relatives negotiate and broker a split of the kingdom, with the Pandavas obtaining and demanding only a wild forest inhabited by Takshaka, the king of snakes, and his family. Through hard work, the Pandavas build a new glorious capital for the territory at Indraprastha.

Shortly after this, Arjuna elopes with and then marries Krishna's sister, Subhadra. Yudhishtira wishes to establish his position as king; he seeks Krishna's advice.

Krishna advises him, and after due preparation and the elimination of some opposition, Yudhishtira carries out the rājasūya yagna ceremony; he is thus recognized as pre-eminent among kings.

The Pandavas have a new palace built for them, by Maya the Danava.[65] They invite their Kaurava cousins to Indraprastha. Duryodhana walks round the palace, and mistakes a glossy floor for water, and will not step in. After being told of his error, he then sees a pond and assumes it is not water and falls in. Bhima, Arjuna, the twins and the servants laugh at him.

In popular adaptations, this insult is wrongly attributed to Draupadi, even though in the Sanskrit epic, it was the Pandavas (except Yudhishtira) who had insulted Duryodhana. Enraged by the insult, and jealous at seeing the wealth of the Pandavas,

Duryodhana decides to host a dice-game on Shakuni's suggestion. This suggestion was accepted by Yudhishtira despite the rest of the Pandavas advising him not to play. Shakuni, Duryodhana's uncle, now arranges a dice game, playing against Yudhishtira with loaded dice. Shakuni's dice had magic as they were made from the bones of his siblings. In the dice game, Yudhishtira loses all his wealth, then his kingdom. Yudhishtira then gambles his brothers, himself, and finally his wife into servitude. The jubilant Kauravas insult the Pandavas in their helpless state and even try to disrobe Draupadi in front of the entire court, but Draupadi's disrobe is prevented by Krishna, who miraculously make her dress endless, therefore it couldn't be removed.

Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, and the other elders are aghast at the situation, but Duryodhana is adamant that there is no place for two crown princes in Hastinapura. Against his wishes Dhritarashtra orders for another dice game. The Pandavas are required to go into exile for 12 years, and in the 13th year, they must remain hidden. If they are discovered by the Kauravas in the 13th year of their exile, then they will be forced into exile for another 12 years. The two sides summon vast armies to their help and line up at Kurukshetra for a war. The kingdoms of Panchala, Dwaraka, Kasi, Kekaya, Magadha, Matsya, Chedi, Pandyas, Telinga, and the Yadus of Mathura and some other clans like the Parama Kambojas

were allied with the Pandavas. The allies of the Kauravas included the kings of Pragjyotisha, Anga, Kekaya, Sindhudesa (including Sindhus, Sauviras and Sivas), Mahishmati, Avanti in Madhyadesa, Madra, Gandhara, Bahlika people, Kambojas and many others. Before war was declared, Balarama had expressed his unhappiness at the developing conflict and leaves to go on pilgrimage; thus he does not take part in the battle itself. Krishna takes part in a non-combatant role, as charioteer (Sarathy) for Arjuna and offers Narayani Sena consisting of Abhira gopas to the Kauravas to fight on their side.[67][68]

Before the battle, Arjuna, noticing that the opposing army includes his cousins and relatives, including his grandfather Bhishma and his teacher Drona, has grave doubts about the fight. He falls into despair and refuses to fight. At this time, Krishna reminds him of his duty as a Kshatriya to fight for a righteous cause in the famous Bhagavad Gita section of the epic.

Though initially sticking to chivalrous notions of warfare, both sides soon adopt dishonorable tactics. At the end of the 18-day battle, only the Pandavas, Satyaki, Kripa, Ashwatthama, Kritavarma, Yuyutsu and Krishna survive. Yudhishtira becomes King of Hastinapur and Gandhari curses Krishna that the downfall of his clan is imminent. After "seeing" the carnage, Gandhari, who had lost all her sons, curses Krishna to be a witness to a similar annihilation of his family, for though divine and capable of stopping the war, he had not done so. Krishna accepts the curse, which bears fruit 36 years later.

The Pandavas, who had ruled their kingdom meanwhile, decide to renounce everything. Clad in skins and rags they retire to the Himalaya and climb towards heaven in their bodily form. A stray dog travels with them. One by one the brothers and Draupadi fall on their way. As each one stumbles, Yudhishtira gives the rest the reason for their fall (Draupadi was partial to Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva were vain and proud of their looks, and Bhima and Arjuna were proud of their strength and archery skills, respectively). Only the virtuous Yudhishtira, who had tried everything to prevent the carnage, and the dog remain. The dog reveals himself to be the god Yama (also known as Yama Dharmaraja) and then takes him to the underworld where he sees his siblings and wife. After explaining the nature of the test, Yama takes Yudhishtira back to heaven and explains that it was necessary to expose him to the underworld because (Rajyante narakam dhruvam) any ruler has to visit the underworld at least once. Yama then assures him that his siblings and wife would join him in heaven after they had been exposed to the underworld for measures of time according to their vices.

Arjuna's grandson Parikshit rules after them and dies bitten by a snake. His furious son, Janamejaya, decides to perform a snake sacrifice (sarpasattra) to destroy the snakes. It is at this sacrifice that the tale of his ancestors is narrated to him.