

THE CONTENTS OF THE MAHABHARATA

OCHS SUMMER SCHOOL, JUNE 2016

Anuradha Dooney

BOOK 1—THE ADI-PARVAN (225 CHAPTERS)

The *Adi* (Beginning) *Parvan* presents an introduction to the whole *Mahabharata* and sets the scene for the events to follow, introducing us to all of the major characters. It opens with a glorification of the religious significance of the *Mahabharata* before describing the circumstances of its first recitation by Vaishampayana, the disciple of Vyasa who is the author. We are then told of Vishnu's descent as Krishna in order to assist the gods in maintaining the order of creation, before the story proper begins with an account of King Samtanu's marriage to the goddess Ganga and the birth of their son Devavrata, later known as Bhishma. After Samtanu questions why Ganga has drowned all her sons bar one, she renounces him and returns to the heavens. Samtanu then marries the Satyavati, who has previously given birth to Vyasa as the son of the *rishi* Parashara. Only when Devavrata agrees to renounce his claim to the throne and remain celibate for life will Satyavati's father permit the marriage and because of this great vow Devavrata is henceforth known as Bhishma. He is blessed by his father to meet with death only when it is his desire to do so.

Samtanu and Satyavati have two sons, Vichitravirya and Chitrangada, both of whom die young without offspring. Satyavati then summons her other son Vyasa to beget children by their widowed queens, but because of their unwillingness to accept him, Dhritarashtra is born blind, Pandu is born very pale and Vidura is born as the son of a maid sent by the queen in her place. Although he is the eldest, Dhritarashtra cannot become king and so after Samtanu's death Pandu is crowned instead and by his prowess he establishes a great kingdom. Whilst hunting, however, he kills a *rishi* who has taken the form of a deer and is cursed to die if he ever indulges in a sexual act. Pandu then renounces his throne, but his first wife Kunti reveals that she has the power, granted by the *rishi* Durvasa, to summon any of the gods and to beget a son by them. On Pandu's urging, she begets Yudhishtira as the son of Dharma the god of justice, Bhima as the son of Vayu the wind god, and Arjuna as the son of Indra the lord of the gods. Pandu's other wife, Madri, makes use of Kunti's gift to give birth to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva as sons of the Asvins. Just after the birth of Yudhishtira, Gandhari the wife of Dhritarashtra gives birth to a hundred sons, the eldest of whom is Duryodhana. Some time later Pandu passes away due to the *rishi's* curse.

Returning to the city of Hastinapura the sons of Pandu receive military training alongside the sons of Dhritarashtra, firstly from Kripa and then from Dronacharya. This culminates in the display of military prowess in which Arjuna first encounters Karna and Bhima faces Duryodhana. As the rivalry between the two sets of brothers develops, the Pandavas are sent to live in a house of shellac, which is burned

down on Duryodhana's instruction. The Pandavas escape from the fire and then live in hiding, while the world thinks that they are dead. During this time Bhima kills the Rakshases Hidimba and Baka and Arjuna wins Draupadi as their joint wife at a competitive wedding ceremony. Thereby an alliance is forged with King Drupada, her father, who is the ruler of the Panchalas. When the Pandavas then return home the kingdom is divided between Yudhishtira and Duryodhana, with the Pandavas getting a deserted wilderness as their share. With Krishna's aid they develop this desolate region into a flourishing domain. Whilst travelling abroad Arjuna develops a relationship with his cousin Krishna, marries Krishna's sister Subhadra and assists Agni the fire god in the burning of the Khandava forest.

BOOK 2—THE SABHA-PARVAN (72 CHAPTERS)

As the title suggests the main action recounted in the *Sabha* (Assembly Hall) *Parvan* takes place in the assembly halls of the kings. It opens with Yudhishtira, now firmly established as the ruler of half the kingdom, wishing to regain his father's predominance over all the other kings of India. This can be achieved when he performs of *rajasuya yajña* (sacrifice). The main obstacle to this goal is Jarasandha, King of Magadha, but with Krishna's guidance Jarasandha is killed in single combat by Bhima.

The *rajasuya yajña* then goes ahead and at its completion Krishna is proclaimed as the leading guest amongst all the kings present. When Sisupala, the King of Chedi, challenges this and insults Krishna, he is killed by Krishna who is revealed as an avatar of Vishnu, the Supreme Deity. Duryodhana is also present, but becomes envious of the splendour of the Pandava domain and is mocked by Draupadi when he falls into a pool of water. This envy leads to the gambling match in which Yudhishtira is defeated by Duryodhana's uncle Shakuni and loses all their possessions including their kingdom and even Draupadi, who is viciously insulted before the assembly. These events lead to an undeviating sense of enmity between the two factions. As a result of their defeat the Pandavas are exiled in the wilderness for twelve years with a further year to be spent in hiding somewhere. If they are discovered in this final year they will have to repeat the full duration of their banishment.

BOOK 3—THE VANA- OR ARANAYAKA-PARVAN (299 CHAPTERS)

The lengthy *Aranyaka* (Forest) *Parvan* describes the sequence of extraordinary events that befall the Pandavas whilst they are enduring their years of exile in the forest. At the outset we find the pious Yudhishtira delighted by the peace and tranquillity forest life, but Bhima and Draupadi criticise him for his lack of warlike tendencies. They wish to return immediately and attack their enemies, but Yudhishtira insists that there can be no breach of faith—for that is *dharma*. Arjuna then departs for the world of the gods to acquire the celestial weapons they need for the inevitable conflict. He first encounters Shiva in the form of a hunter and after fighting with him receives his blessing and Shiva's *Pashupata* weapon.

Ascending to the realm of the gods Arjuna dwells with Indra, his true father, but is cursed by Urvashi to lose his manhood for one year. Meanwhile the four other Pandavas hear the story of Nala and Damayanti from the *rishi* Brihadasva and then travel with the *rishis* Pulastya and Lomasa to all the sacred *tirthas* in order to acquire the purity and strength of *dharma* that will assist them in their struggles. In the course of this journey numerous stories are told to them relating to the places and persons they visit. In the foothills of the Himalayas Bhima meets his half-brother Hanuman and fights with the servants of Kuvera in order to obtain celestial lotus flowers for Draupadi. Here also Arjuna descends from heaven and is reunited with his brothers. Yudhishtira frees his brothers from Nahusha in the form of a serpent by answering all his questions on *dharma*.

The Pandavas then meet with the *rishi* Markandeya who instructs them at length about the glories of Narayana who has descended as Krishna. Krishna himself comes to visit the Pandavas in the forest and at this time Draupadi instructs Satyabhama on the conduct of the perfect wife. Desiring to see the Pandavas in their state of disgrace and to mock them, Duryodhana comes with his supporters to the forest where his cousins are residing. However, they are defeated by the Gandharvas and Duryodhana is made prisoner. Arjuna then rescues Duryodhana who is humiliated by this act of grace and becomes even more inimical towards his rescuers. Draupadi is then kidnapped by King Jayadratha but is rescued by Bhima; Jayadratha is forgiven by Yudhishtira. Meeting again with Markandeya the Pandavas first hear from him the story of Rama and Sita and then about Savitri's saving her husband from the clutches of death. Finally the *Aranyaka Parvan* relates how Karna gave his celestial armour and earrings in charity to Indra and how Yudhishtira again saved his brothers by satisfying a Yaksha with a wonderful discourse on the subject of *dharma*.

BOOK 4—THE VIRATA-PARVAN (67 CHAPTERS)

The *Virata Parvan* tells of how the Pandavas passed the final year of their exile in disguise, living secretly in the realm of Virata, the King of the Matsyas. After the twelve years of exile in the forest are over, the Pandavas travel to the land of the Matsyas. They first hide their weapons in a tree and then take up employment in the service of King Virata. Yudhishtira becomes a Brahmin advisor to the king, Bhima becomes his chief cook, Arjuna (who has lost his manhood for a year due to Urvashi's curse) becomes a dancing instructor to the princess, Draupadi becomes a lady-in-waiting to the queen, Nakula takes charge of the king's horses and Sahadeva supervises his herds of cows.

The arrangement runs into trouble when Kichaka, the king's brother-in-law and the commander of his army, begins to harass Draupadi. Yudhishtira tells her to tolerate his advances, but Bhima takes assertive action and beats Kichaka to death. When Duryodhana and his allies come to hear about this they suspect that the Pandavas may be residing with King Virata and decide on a cattle raid against the Matsyas. They steal away Virata's cows but are defeated by Arjuna who has now resumed his true identity. Recognising Arjuna, the Kauravas (Duryodhana's

faction) claim that the terms of the agreement have been breached but Bhishma rules that a whole year has in fact passed and that the Pandavas have kept their side of the bargain intact.

BOOK 5—THE UDYOGA-PARVAN (197 CHAPTERS)

The *Udyoga* (preparations) *Parvan* tells of the negotiations and preparations that take place before battle is joined at Kurukshetra. After the thirteen years of exile are complete, Duryodhana still refuses to return the Pandavas' kingdom to them. Even when Yudhishtira asks for just five villages to rule, Duryodhana refuses. Then the Pandavas begin to call upon their friends and allies and to gather an army for war. Firstly, Salya, the King of the Madras and the grandfather of Nakula and Sahadeva, comes to join the Pandava host but he is welcomed and flattered by Duryodhana and as a result joins his faction. However, King Drupada of the Panchalas and King Virata of the Matsyas bring armies to support the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra sends his minister Sanjaya to urge the Pandavas to give up their preparations on the grounds that making war is always evil, but Yudhishtira rejects this disingenuous embassy.

Within the Pandava camp, however, there are significant debates over the nature of *dharma* and righteous action, with Yudhishtira speaking out against warfare and *kshatriya dharma*. In these debates he is opposed by his brothers, by Draupadi and by Krishna who has joined the Pandava side but only as a charioteer. He will not bear arms as he is related to both sides. After hearing the Pandavas' reply, Dhritarashtra then receives instruction on moral conduct from Vidura (the *Vidura-niti*) and on spiritual wisdom from the sage Sanat Sujata.

In the Kuru assembly, Bhishma, Kripa, Drona, Dhritarashtra and even Gandhari all urge Duryodhana to make peace but he will not listen to their advice even when it is revealed to him that Krishna is an *avatara* of Narayana. Sanjaya then instructs Dhritarashtra further about Krishna's divine nature. Meanwhile, the Pandavas decide to send Krishna as a peace emissary to the city of Hastinapura. Although he is graciously received, Duryodhana rejects his words and then attempts to make him a prisoner. This attempt is baffled by Krishna who displays his Vishva Rupa; all the gods and all the warriors are present within his own person. Krishna then reveals to Karna the secret of his birth as the first son of Kunti; he is hence a brother of the Pandavas. But even when Kunti herself begs him to do so, Karna will not give up his loyalty to Duryodhana. As the armies gather and move towards Kurukshetra it is clear that war cannot be avoided. Bhishma is an incomparable warrior but now we are told of his one weakness. He will not fight the Panchala prince Shikandhin, for he knows that in a previous birth he was the princess Amba who gave up her life when she was kidnapped by Bhishma as a wife for Vichitravirya.

BOOK 6—BHISHMA-PARVAN (117 CHAPTERS)

As the name suggests, this book of the *Mahabharata* gives an account of the first ten days of the battle when Bhishma commanded Duryodhana's army. We first

hear how Vyasa granted divine vision to Sanjaya so that he could relate to Dhritarashtra everything that takes place at Kurukshetra. This power is first used by Sanjaya to describe all the different regions of the world. As the fighting is about to commence we hear of Arjuna's unwillingness to fight with relatives and elders, which is followed by Krishna's revelation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Meanwhile Bhishma derides the prowess of the boastful Karna and the latter withdraws and says that he will not fight under the command of Bhishma. The battle then begins with extensive descriptions of the fighting and individual encounters between the great warriors of both sides. We hear that Arjuna is still fighting mildly and will not encounter Bhishma. On the first day the Kauravas prevail and Yudhishtira is dispirited but thereafter the Pandavas gain the upper hand and on each day drive back the Kaurava host. After the fifth day's fighting Duryodhana questions Bhishma as to why they are not victorious despite their mighty commanders and superior numbers. Bhishma then instructs Duryodhana about Krishna's divine nature and his identity as an *avatara* of Narayana.

Bhima kills several of Duryodhana's brothers, but Arjuna still will not fight against Bhishma to the full limit of his strength. On two occasions Krishna becomes so frustrated with Arjuna that he begins to attack Bhishma himself and has to be restrained by Arjuna in order to keep intact his vow not to fight. Bhishma finally decides to give up the fight; he gives permission for the Pandavas to kill him and tells them that Shikhandin should be stationed in front of Arjuna. Bhishma will not shoot arrows at Shikhandin and from this position Arjuna is able to pierce Bhishma with innumerable arrows until the latter falls to the ground. Lying mortally wounded on the field, Bhishma urges Duryodhana to make peace, but his words are ignored. He is also finally reconciled with Karna.

BOOK 7—THE DRONA-PARVAN (173 CHAPTERS)

The *Drona Parvan* gives an account of the events that take place in the five days of the battle during which Dronacharya commands Duryodhana's army. After the fall of Bhishma, Karna rejoins the Kaurava host and Drona is installed as their commander. Under Drona's grim leadership the fighting of the Kaurava army becomes more intense and the commander himself inflicts terrible casualties upon the Pandava host. Krishna and Arjuna travel by night to Mount Kailash where they receive the blessing of Shiva. Whilst Arjuna is fighting elsewhere, his son Abhimanyu penetrates to the heart of the Kaurava army but is surrounded and slain by six mighty warriors including Drona and Karna. The other Pandavas cannot help him because they are checked by Jayadratha. When Arjuna learns of his son's death he vows that he will either kill Jayadratha the next day or else enter a fire and kill himself. Learning of this from spies, the Kauravas position Jayadratha so that he is protected by the entire army, but with Krishna's aid Arjuna is still able to kill him at the very end of the day.

Enraged by this setback, Drona orders his forces to continue fighting all through the night and a terrible slaughter takes place in the confused battle that follows. Bhima had previously married a Rakshasa woman named Hidimba and begot-

ten a son named Ghatotkacha by her. Fighting on behalf of the Pandavas, Ghatotkacha appears to be virtually invincible. Eventually Karna kills Ghatotkacha with the weapon he received from Indra; but this invincible weapon can be used only once and Karna had been saving it for his fight with Arjuna. Seeing the destruction caused by Drona and realising that there is no one who can kill him in battle, Krishna suggests a strategy to remove him. If Drona learns that his son Ashvatthaman is dead he will put aside his weapons in a state of grief. Yudhishtira is known as a man of *dharma* who is always truthful and when he says that Ashvatthaman is dead, Drona believes the falsehood to be true. He puts aside his weapons and sits down on the battlefield to meditate. Taking this opportunity, Dhrishtadyumna the son of Drupada and brother of Draupadi, cuts off Drona's head. On learning what has happened, Ashvatthaman launches a destructive attack on the Pandava army. The *Drona Parvan* ends with a vision seen by Arjuna of the destructive form of Shiva that precedes him wherever he goes on the battlefield.

BOOK 8—THE KARNA-PARVAN (69 CHAPTERS)

The *Karna Parvan* recounts the events that take place over the two days during which Karna is the commander of Duryodhana's army. After the death of Drona, Karna is made general of the Kauravas and he takes a vow to kill Arjuna, his arch-rival. Somewhat against his will, King Salya of the Madras is persuaded to be Karna's charioteer and some harsh words are exchanged between them. Karna launches a destructive attack against the Pandava army but is unable to gain complete victory. Except for Arjuna, each of the Pandavas in turn is defeated by Karna but he does not kill them because of a promise he had made earlier to his mother Kunti. Whilst Arjuna is elsewhere, Karna afflicts Yudhishtira with many arrow wounds and forces him to flee from the field in a humiliating fashion. When Arjuna returns, insults and harsh words are exchanged with Yudhishtira and a quarrel ensues which is resolved by Krishna's discourse on *dharma*.

Arjuna then goes to confront Karna directly. The two great archers are evenly matched but Karna forgets the mantras he needs to fight effectively because of a curse from his guru, Parashurama. Due to another curse received by Karna, his chariot wheel becomes stuck in the ground and disabled. Karna begs Arjuna to follow *kshatriya* dharma and pause whilst he repairs his chariot, but Krishna reminds him of the absence of *dharma* when Karna and five others killed Abhimanyu. On Krishna's instruction Arjuna kills Karna whilst the latter is thus disadvantaged.

BOOK 9—THE SALYA-PARVAN (64 CHAPTERS)

The *Salya Parvan* describes events on the final day of the battle when Salya is the commander of the Kaurava army. After the death of Karna, Salya is installed as the new general and fights heroically against the Pandava captains. Yudhishtira then kills Salya and the remnants of the Kaurava host begin to flee from the field of battle. Sahadeva kills Shakuni and the last of Duryodhana's surviving brothers are

killed by Bhima. When his army is thus vanquished and put to flight, Duryodhana uses magical powers and seeks his own safety by hiding in the depths of a nearby lake. Taunted by the Pandava captains, Duryodhana emerges and agrees to fight with Bhima in single combat.

There is then a lengthy account of the tour of the holy *tirthas* along the Saraswati River made by Baladeva, Krishna's brother. He arrives at Kurukshetra just in time to witness Bhima's club fight with Duryodhana. They are evenly matched, but following the advice of Krishna and Arjuna, Bhima strikes down Duryodhana with a foul blow to the thighs. Baladeva's anger over this action is restrained Krishna. Only three of the Kaurava captains survive the battle—Kritavarman, Kripacharya and Ashvatthaman.

BOOK 10—THE SAUPTIKA-PARVAN (18 CHAPTERS)

The *Sauptika* (night time) *Parvan* records the events that take place during the night that follows the last day of the battle, when Ashvatthaman enters the Pandava encampment and massacres all the surviving warriors apart from Krishna and the five brothers. Having met with the dying Duryodhana and been encouraged by him to act, Kripa, Kritavarman and Ashvatthaman decide gain vengeance on their victorious adversaries. Accompanied by a manifestation of Shiva with his fearsome associates, Ashvatthaman enters the camp of the Pandava army and slaughters the warriors who are sleeping therein before they can awaken. This includes the five sons of Draupadi, one by each of the five Pandavas. When the Pandava brothers learn of this terrible event, Bhima and Arjuna set out in pursuit of Ashvatthaman who fires a mystic arrow to scorch the womb of Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu, and thereby destroy the embryo that is the last surviving heir of the Pandavas. Arjuna captures Ashvatthaman, but his life is spared because he is a Brahmin by birth and is the son of their teacher.

BOOK 11—THE STRI-PARVAN (27 CHAPTERS)

The *Stri* (Women's) *Parvan* describes the lamentations of wives and mothers as they gather on the battlefield to look upon the bodies of their loved ones. The *parvan* opens with words of wise instruction being given to Dhritarashtra by Vidura and Vyasa to comfort him in his grief. Dhritarashtra then goes to visit the battlefield with Gandhari; Krishna and the Pandavas meet them there. Gandhari then roams across the field accompanied by Krishna, pointing out to him the corpses of the great men who lie there. In a mood of anger she curses Krishna to the effect that his family will die at his own hand, for she believes that Krishna had the power to prevent the war but chose not to. All the women of the various royal families then grieve for those who have fallen and arrange for the funerals to be performed on the banks of the Ganga.

BOOK 12—THE SHANTI-PARVAN (353 CHAPTERS)

The extensive *Shanti* (peace) *Parvan* does not really take the story forward to any great extent. It is mainly devoted to the teachings delivered by Bhishma on his deathbed to Yudhishtira and the other Pandavas. Following on from the lamentations of the *Stri Parvan*, Yudhishtira condemns himself for his wickedness in waging war. He wants to renounce the kingdom they have won but is dissuaded from doing so by Krishna, Vyasa, his brothers and Draupadi. They then go to where the stricken Bhishma is still lying on the battlefield. Bhishma first glorifies Krishna and praises him as Narayana, the Supreme Deity. The first set of instructions follows on from Yudhishtira's questions as to how he should rule the kingdom. This passage is known as the *Raja-dharma-parvan* and indicates the ideal conduct of a righteous king. This is followed by a passage known as the *Apad-dharma-parvan* wherein Bhishma indicates that the rules of virtue may be broken in times of emergency. Yudhishtira is unhappy about this line of discourse and again criticises the *kshatriya dharma* for its wicked tendencies.

Yudhishtira then inquires from Bhishma about the means of gaining liberation from rebirth and is presented with the *Moksha-dharma-parvan*, a series of treatises spoken by Bhishma which deal with renunciation of the world, Samkhya philosophy, the practice of Yoga and devotion to Vishnu. He concludes with the *Narayaniya-parvan*, which praises Narayana as the Supreme Deity and emphasises the path of *bhakti*.

BOOK 13—THE ANUSHASANA-PARVAN (154 CHAPTERS)

In the *Anushasana* (instruction) *Parvan*, Bhishma continues to give religious instruction to Yudhishtira. There is little, if any, action taking place here and the entire book is given over to teachings on a wide variety of subjects. Before Bhishma resumes his discourse, Krishna describes his devotion to Shiva, gives an account of his initiation into Shiva *bhakti* and then reveals the *Shiva-sahasra-nama* prayer. Bhishma's opening topic is the role of destiny in our lives, the law of karma and the limits of free will, but he quickly moves on to speak on the subject of *Dharma-shastra*, frequently quoting from the *Manu Smriti*. He glorifies the Brahmins as the leaders and gods of humanity, he describes the duties of the four *varnas*, he discusses the role of women in society and outlines the laws of inheritance.

Bhishma then teaches Yudhishtira about the rituals for worshipping the gods and how the *shraddha* rites should be performed for departed ancestors. He also discusses charity, the worship of sacred images, the reasons for accepting a vegetarian diet, veneration of the cow and those persons from whom food may be freely accepted. From a Shaivite perspective he tells of Shiva's giving instruction to the Goddess Uma and then reveals the *Vishnu-sahasra-nama* prayer. The final instruction given here to Yudhishtira is that he must always respect the Brahmins and regard them as his superiors. Finally, Bhishma glorifies Krishna as the Supreme Deity, and then as the sun has now moved into the northern part of the sky, he gives up his life in the presence of Krishna.

BOOK 14—THE ASHVAMEDHIKA-PARVAN (96 CHAPTERS)

The *Ashvamedhika* (horse sacrifice) *Parvan* is concerned with the *yajña* Yudhishtira performs to atone for his sins, but in fact much of the book is devoted to teachings delivered by Krishna to Arjuna. At the beginning, Yudhishtira is still grieving and again condemns his own wickedness in causing the frightful carnage at Kurukshetra. He is then advised by Vyasa that a horse sacrifice can atone for any sins he may be guilty of. As they are preparing for the *yajña*, Arjuna asks Krishna to repeat the *Bhagavad Gita* to him as he has now forgotten its teachings. Krishna replies by giving a new set of teachings, beginning with a passage known as the *Anugita*. The ideas presented here are similar in many ways to the teachings presented by Bhishma in the *Moksha-dharma-parvan* of the *Shanti Parvan*.

As Krishna is returning to his home in Dwarka he encounters the *rishi* Uttanka who threatens to curse him for not stopping the war although he possessed the power to do so. Krishna advises that such a curse would be futile and then once more manifests the *vishva rupa* before the *rishi*'s eyes. In Hastinapura Yudhishtira prepares for the *Ashvamedha* ritual; when Krishna returns there he revives the stillborn son of Uttara and Abhimanyu who was scorched in the womb by the weapon of Ashvatthaman. This Pandava heir is named Parikshit. Arjuna re-establishes the dominion of Yudhishtira over all the kings of the land and then the *Ashvamedha* ritual is performed. At the end of the sacrifice, however, the god Dharma appears in the form of a golden mongoose and says that this ceremony was not equal in religious significance to an act of charity performed by a hungry Brahmin couple who gave away their food.

BOOK 15. THE ASHRAMAVASIKA-PARVAN (47 CHAPTERS)

The *Ashramavasika* (living in an ashram) *Parvan* tells of how the surviving elders of the family departed from Hastinapura to live a life of religious simplicity. At the beginning of the book, Yudhishtira again shows his generosity of spirit by providing Dhritarashtra with the means to perform *shraddha* rites for his dead sons, though Bhima argues against this and mocks the old king. After these rituals have been performed, Dhritarashtra, Vidura, Kunti and Gandhari secretly depart for the Himalayas to practise religious austerity. Later the Pandavas and their followers go to visit the elders in their ashram and meet with them again. By the grace of Vyasa, the slain warriors are able to descend from heaven and meet with comrades and adversaries still living; the old enmities are gone and they greet each other as friends. At the end of the book, we learn that Dhritarashtra, Vidura, Kunti and Gandhari have all perished in a forest fire that swept through the ashram.

BOOK 16—THE MAUSALA-PARVAN (9 CHAPTERS)

The *Mausala* (club fight) *Parvan* describes the destruction of Krishna's family and the death of Krishna and his departure from this world. When Krishna's sons play a trick on some *rishis* by dressing one of them as a pregnant woman, the *rishis*

curse the family to destroy itself. Some time later when they are drinking liquor a quarrel breaks out between them and they begin to fight. The fight continues until all of Krishna's clan is destroyed. A short time later Krishna is shot and killed by a hunter named Jara who mistakes him for a black deer. Krishna then returns to his original position, passing beyond the three worlds and entering the abode of Vishnu. Soon after the departure of Krishna, the sea breaks through the city walls and Dwarka is flooded. Arjuna comes to provide protection for the women of the city but in the absence of Krishna his might is spent and he is defeated by a mere band of robbers.

BOOK 17—THE MAHA-PRASTHANIKA-PARVAN (3 CHAPTERS)

In the *Maha-prasthanika* (great journey) *Parvan*, the Pandavas and Draupadi renounce their kingdom and set out for the Himalayas. As they walk along the path into the mountains they fall one by one as a result of a flaw in their character. Yudhishtira carries on alone, accompanied only by a dog that has joined them. Arriving at the summit, Yudhishtira is greeted by the charioteer of the gods who has come to take him to the celestial sphere. However, he refuses to go without the dog that has become dependent upon him; this is the final test of his unlimited virtue.

BOOK 18—THE SVARGAROHANIKA-PARVAN (5 CHAPTERS)

In the *Svargarohanika* (ascent to heaven) *Parvan* we are shown the main characters of the *Mahabharata* residing in heaven in the company of the gods. Yudhishtira first sees his brothers and Draupadi in hell and Duryodhana and his faction enjoying the delights of heaven. Due to his presence the others are released from hell, but still Yudhishtira will not accept that those who lived wickedly deserve a place amongst the gods just because they followed *kshatriya-dharma* and died bravely in battle. At the very end of the *Mahabharata* this tension over *dharma* is left without any conclusive resolution.

(From: Nick Sutton, *The Mahabharata and Ramayana*, Oxford Centre For Hindu Studies, 2008)