HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MAHABHARATA

Vyasa (?)

(c. 400 BCE)

Reading

Mahabharata, translated by John Smith, 2009

Overview

There is no the *Mahabharata*, rather we have a multitude of texts in all the major languages of India. Even the Sanskrit text ascribed to Vyasa, a legendary sage, comes in divergent recensions because it was compiled over a number of centuries, from about 400 BCE to 200 CE, by different scribes in different places. However, there is what scholars call the 'core story,' which is summarised here.

Cultural Significance

Similar to its sister epic (the *Ramayana*), the *Mahabharata* is of inestimable importance to Indian culture. The story is told in a wide variety of genres (from painted scrolls to television, from shadow puppetry to modern theatre) with different emphases and episodes that embroider the core events. The *Mahabharata* is often compared to the *Iliad* in terms of its importance, and that comparison holds true in that both texts are seminal literary expressions of war and fate, bravery and treachery in their respective societies. But one has to add that the *Mahabharata* has a place in Indian culture that exceeds any one text and is more like the *Iliad*, the Bible and Shakespeare all wrapped up in one. Because the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas is so deeply embedded in Indian life, it is often said that no one ever reads the *Mahabharata* for the first time. In other words, the incidents in the epic are so well known to children and adults, through comic books, television and the movies, that no one can read it without already knowing most of the story. Many people compare the *Mahabharata* to an encyclopaedia. The epic is not just a narrative; in the course of telling a story it contains information on every topic under the sun: cosmology, architecture, astrology, mythology, geography and history. And that is why the epic describes itself this way: 'If you can't find it in th e *Mahabharata*, then it doesn't exist.'

Story

When the story begins, the Kuru dynasty faces a crisis of succession. There are two competing brothers in the royal family based in the capital at Hastinapur, in the Gangetic plain of north India. The older brother, Dhrtarastra, who should succeed the king, is blind and thereby ineligible, and so his younger brother, Pandu, is crowned instead. Soon, however, Pandu gives up the throne (because of a curse) and retires to the Himalayas as an ascetic. This leaves Dhrtarastra to claim the throne. Pandu then dies, leaving five sons: Yudhisthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva. They are known as the Pandavas. Dhrtarastra also has sons, the eldest of whom is Duryodhana. He and his brothers are known as the Kauravas. These two sets of cousins (the Pandavas and the Kauravas) now struggle for control of the kingdom.

Following a number of events, including attempted poisonings and a famous archery competition, tension grows between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Then, in order to restore peace, Dhrtarastra decides that Yudhisthira should succeed him. When Yudhisthira is enthroned, Duryodhana is furious because he considers the son of a blind man ineligible to be a ruler. Duryodhana makes several attempts to kill or destroy Yudhisthira, after which the Pandavas decided to leave the country and wander as soldiers of fortune. While stopping at the court of a minor raja, Arjuna (one of the Pandavas) wins the hand of Draupadi, but, again to avoid strife among the brothers, she becomes the wife of them all. Next, the Pandavas meet Krishna, who becomes their great friend and ally.

Back in Hastinapur, Dhrtarastra is dying and decides to recall the wandering Pandavas, renounce the throne and divide the kingdom between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Happy with this settlement,

the Pandavas built their own capital, closer to Delhi. The Kauravas, however, led by Duryodhana, are incensed that they should have to share the territory with their rival cousins. Duryodhana then arranges a gambling match with Yudhisthira, in which he cleverly wins everything, including Yudhisthira's brothers and their common wife, Draupadi. Instead of going into slavery, the Pandavas agree to a period of thirteen years in exile, after which they will regain their half of the kingdom. The thirteen years come and go, but Duryodhana reneges on his promise, and the two sets of cousins prepare for war.

The two rival armies, immense in size and glorious in armour, assisted by elephants and chariots, gather on the battlefield. For eighteen days the battle rages, in the middle of which Krishna, charioteer for Arjuna, delivers a speech about the necessity of a warrior to kill, even his own cousins. (That scene later becomes the separate text of the *Bhagavad Gita*.) In the end, only the five Pandavas and Krishna are left alive. Yudhisthira is crowned king and rules peacefully for many years. In old age, he renounces the throne and, accompanied by his brothers, climbs into the Himalayas where he enters the City of the Gods.

Themes

Dharma The most prominent theme of the *Mahabharata* is *dharma*, which means 'right conduct.' It is not an absolute code of morality, however, because 'right conduct' is different for different castes in different situations. It is also often translated as 'duty' because it has a dimension of nobility and as 'righteousness' because it has a spiritual element. The legendary author of the epic says in his prologue that its purpose is 'to engrave *dharma* in the minds of men.' In other words, the *Mahabharata* is essentially an instruction manual, particularly for kings, princes and warriors. *Dharma* is complex because it sometimes means that the 'good guys,' the Pandavas, resort to lies and deceit (for instance, when Arjuna kills the unarmed Karna) and that the 'bad guys,' the Kauravas, perform noble deeds (for example, when Duryodhana fights fairly against a cheating Pandava cousin). Despite these qualifications, it is true that the Pandavas 'win' the battle and are rewarded for their (mostly) correct behaviour. In fact, the leader of the Pandavas, Yudhisthira, is seen as the embodiment of *dharma* and is later known as 'Dharma Raja.' In the more than one-thousand pages of the epic, there are many speeches devoted to explicating the complexities of 'right conduct', but the most important illustration of this concept is probably a seemingly trivial scene that occurs at the very end. With all his brothers having failed to make it to the top of the Himalayan mountain with him, Yudhisthira ends up standing at the entrance to the world of the gods, accompanied only by a dog. When he is told that the animal will not be admitted, Yudhisthira refuses to abandon his loyal companion. Then it is revealed that the dog is actually the god Dharma, who was testing Yudhisthira one last time. In this revealing incident, the right conduct is judged to be loyalty to a faithful animal. It is a fitting lesson for a text that purports to teach kings and soldiers about war since there can be no more important concept in battle than loyalty to one's comrades. *Dharma* means acting responsibly.

War The second overarching theme of the epic is the application of the teaching of *dharma* to the waging of war. Like the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata* does not flinch from describing war in all its bloody reality. But, again like its Greek counterpart, it maintains that true glory can only be obtained in battle. As one warrior says, 'Fame can be obtained by battle, and by no other means…The death that a warrior meets with at home is censurable…The man who casts away his body in battle obtains great glory.' To die in battle is glorious, but what about killing? Is it right to drive a sword through your cousin's chest? Can it be *dharma* to chop off his head? This is where the *Mahabharata* rises above a mere manual for warfare and enters the realm of Hindu philosophy. These questions are posed by Arjuna, the most glorious of all the fighters, just as the battle is about to commence. And he is given a sermon by Krishna, which essentially corrects his misguided understanding of what war is. You may think you are killing your cousins, Krishna tells him, but 'you' do not exist. There is only the eternal *atman* (or individual soul) and it neither slays nor is slain. Because it is never born it can never die.' It is pretty head stuff for a man about to charge into battle, but it is clever in providing the conscience-stricken Arjuna with an answer to his questions. You don't need to worry about who you kill, Krishna is saying, because 'you' don't kill 'them.' Individual selves like 'you' and 'them' don't really exist. Rather, Krishna continues, you should simply do your duty (*dharma*) as a warrior, just as a postman does his by delivering the post. And one more thing: don't get too attached to the results of your fighting, don't fight because you want to see a particular result. If you are attached to the 'fruits of your action,' your action is impure because it is tainted with desire. Better, therefore, to fight with a dispassionate mind, which is not craving for victory, but which follows *dharma* in a detached manner. Some commentators have called this message (which is the essence of the *Bhagavad Gita* section of

the epic) a Hindu defence of a 'just war.' War cannot be immoral if you fight without attachment to victory. In other words, war can be righteous if waged in a spirit of duty rather than a thirst for revenge.

Characters

Dhrtarastra Dhrtarastra is the king whose blindness should make him ineligible to be a ruler, but who sometimes sits on the throne because the warring sets of cousins cannot come to an agreement.

Yudhisthira Yudhisthira is the eldest son of Pandu and the leader of the Pandavas, one of the sets of rival cousins. He is a good and gentle leader and might be a hero, except that he sometimes lacks judgement.

Duryodhana Duryodhana is the leader of the Kauravas. Crafty, deceptive and proud, he plots and schemes to destroy his cousins. Despite these negative traits, however, he has a certain grandeur and a warrior's courage that almost passes as nobility

Arjuna Arjuna is one of the Pandavas. As a skilled archer and a reflective man, he is the closest we have to a hero in the story.

Draupadi Draupadi is the wife of the Pandavas.

Krishna Krishna is the friend of the Pandavas and also an avatar of the god Vishnu.

(Battle scene from the *Mahabharata*, Halebidu, 12c. CE)

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Yudhisthira (Righteous)

Character Yudhisthira is the oldest of the five Pandava brothers and is therefore their leader. He is portrayed as a man of wisdom rather than energy, and that is one reason why he falls short of being the overall hero of the epic (a label that fits his brother Arjuna). He has the qualities of leadership. He is distant, a little emotionally cold, and listens to his assistants. Patient and prudent, rather than courageous and bold, he is also steadfast (a quality from which his name derives). In addition, he is said to know many languages, which is another advantage for a ruler who must negotiate treaties and make foreign friends. Although he remains cool in battle, keeping his head while others panic, he does have flaws, one of which leads to near disaster for his brothers and his wife. Another shortcoming is a certain amount of pride, which at times leads him to make bad decisions. Yudhisthira is known as Dharma Raja, or 'King of Correct Conduct/Righteousness.' But perhaps he was too righteous: it is telling that his chariot was said never to touch the ground because of his purity. And, surely, hero of a war epic would have his 'feet on the ground.'

Activities As a young prince, Yudhisthira receives instruction in arts and sciences like his brothers, but he takes especial interest in philosophy, which he continues to study in later life. As a paragon of excellence and good manners, he spends time receiving guests, particularly sages, and giving them gifts. Yudhisthira also spends time conducting rituals that were meant to confer blessing on his army and kingdom. One such ritual took a full year to complete, and he was meticulous in every detail. He is often engaged in long theoretical discussions with visiting Brahmins, revelling in their hair-splitting distinctions about the nature of truth and reality. His other great pastime, unfortunately, is gambling.

Illustrative moments

Wise The most prominent aspect of Yudhisthira's character is his intelligence. As young princes, all the Pandavas are instructed in Hindu philosophy, as well the martial arts, but Yudhisthira outshines his brothers in his mastery of the many areas of knowledge covered by the ancient texts. The clearest illustration of his immense knowledge comes at a point in the epic when the Pandavas are in their first exile, wandering in a forest and become thirsty. One by one the brothers go to a lake, where a crane warns them not to drink if they do not answer its questions. Four brothers, a little disdainful of the bird, ignore its warning, drink and die. Then Yudhisthira comes on the scene and sees the dead bodies of his brothers. When the crane tells him exactly what he told the others, he begins to realise that the crane holds the key to the dead brothers and agrees to answer its questions. The crane then puts a series of 18 questions to him, which range from asking about the history of the Sun to the underlying nature of a Brahmin. A representative question is number 9: 'What enemy is invincible? What constitutes an incurable disease? What sort of man is noble and what sort is ignoble?' Without hesitation, Yudhisthira replies, 'Anger is the invincible enemy. Covetousness constitutes a disease that is incurable. He is noble who desires the well-being of all creatures, and he is ignoble who is without mercy.' Yudhisthira's answers demonstrate that he has the wisdom of sages, which makes him the perfect candidate for a king. In fact, the examination he undergoes is often repeated in later texts as a kind of interview for a would-be-ruler. This is one reason that he is called 'Yudhisthira' or 'he who is steady in war.'

Flawed Like all the major characters in the epic, however, the wise Yudhisthira has flaws—that is precisely what raises this otherwise ordinary story of Hindu gods, curses, vows and battles to the level of an epic. The most disastrous of his flaw is an addiction to gambling, plus pride, which results in the loss of his entire kingdom and family. The situation is that the Pandavas have just escaped from the plot to burn them to death in a palace. As a false gesture of commiseration, Duryodhana invites Yudhisthira to his palace for a friendly game of dice. At that moment, Yudhisthira senses something is wrong, but he loves to gamble and, equally important, he does want to be seen as a man who turned down such a kind and innocent invitation. Once the gambling begins, he wins a few times before losing everything. His initial losses are monetary, and the sums are paid over by his friends, but there is a one humiliating incident in which Yudhisthira gambles away his wife, Draupadi (not unlike the first scene in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridg*e). Duryodhana then claims Draupadi by ripping away her clothes and exposing her to the assembled men. It is a scene that always makes the reader or listener cringe, and is often the subject of paintings and plays. And worse it to follow. There is one final throw of the dice, which he loses and the price is that he must take his brothers and wife into exile. Contrite afterward, Yudhisthira at least judges himself accurately: 'It was my folly alone that has led to this disaster. I could have controlled my mind and

quit, but I became angry with Duryodhana and that anger drove off any patience. It was my mind that betrayed us, a mind influenced by vanity and anger.' His heartfelt admission and penetrating analysis of his flaw almost makes his suffering greater. It isn't that he is unaware of his shortcoming, but that he cannot control it.

Compassionate There are many sides to Yudhisthira's character that one could point to in concluding a description of him. He was a great warrior and a judicious king, for instance. But what also stands out is his compassion, not just for people but for animals. A moving illustration of that affinity comes at the very end of the very long story. The scene is that, having finally defeated his cousins and sat on the throne for many years, Yudhisthira renounces the throne and leads his brothers and his wife up to the peaks of the Himalayas, accompanied by a dog. They make the journey, hoping to join the gods ruled by Indra. On the long journey, however, all four brothers and the wife die. Yudhisthira now stands at the gate to heaven with only the dog beside him. Indra then asks him why each brother died and Yudhisthira gives him a reason, which functions as a character analysis (for example: 'Bhima was too boastful'). Satisfied with Yudhisthira's wisdom, Indra is about to admit him but says that the dog must remain behind. Yudhisthira is adamant that the dog must also join the gods in heaven. 'Impossible,' says Indra. 'The dog is old and thin. Besides, not everyone can attain heaven.' To which Yudhisthira says, 'Then I renounce heaven and will return to earth. The dog has been my faithful companion. It helped me whenever I was in trouble. It has none of the weaknesses of my brothers and wife. It is loyal, through and through.' Yudhisthira turns to leave, but Indra recalls him and lets him, and the dog, come through the gate. It is the right scene with which to end an epic about *dharma* (correct conduct), and it is the reason that Yudhisthira is later called Dharma Raja.

Duryodhana (Vengeful)

Character Duryodhana is a crafty, deceptive and proud man who plots and schemes to destroy his cousins, the Pandavas. Despite these negative traits, however, he has a certain grandeur and a warrior's courage that almost passes as nobility. The key to understanding his character is the long simmering resentment he feels against his cousins, whom he believes were wrongly granted the throne by their common grandfather. Having been denied what he thinks is his rightful status as king, Duryodhana is an angry and dangerous opponent. The sense of having been wronged eats away at him through the many years covered by the epic and leads him to acts of deceit and treachery. While he is clearly a villainous figure, he also has positive traits. He is courageous in battle and loyal to his comrades. Although not physically blind, like the grandfather, he is often said to suffer from a moral blindness. As a man plagued by a deep-seated sense of betrayal, a man determined to get revenge for an historic wrong, Duryodhana is something of a tragic hero.

Activities As with all his cousins, who were princes, Duryodhana receives instruction in the arts of war and statecraft. When a young boy, he takes a special interest in the mace, which he swings around with great gusto. Later, as a prince, he is very interested in the art of spying, as well, and spends time training spies to go to his rival cousins' palace in order to ferret out information.

Illustrative moments

Devious In his desperate struggle to gain control of the kingdom, Duryodhana does not hesitate to resort to deception. Perhaps the most infamous example of that deviousness occurs early on in the story. The aging king Drhtarasthra has decided that in order to halt the strife between cousins he will install Yudhisthira (leader of the five Pandava brothers) as the new king. Duryodhana, leader of the rival set of cousins (Kauravas), appears to accept this 'peace deal,' but he secretly lays a plan to murder his cousins. Duryodhana speaks to his infirm and gullible king, who agrees to send the Pandavas to a nearby town so that they can enjoy a religious festival being held there. 'I will even build a palace for them there,' Duryodhana explains, 'so that they can spend the festival days in comfort.' This gesture at reconciliation is greeted with joy. Except that Yudhisthira is suspicious. And his doubts prove sound when it turns out that Duryodhana has instructed the architect to construct a palace of wax, or lac, which is highly flammable. (As an aside: the English word 'lac' and 'lacquer' derive from the Sanskrit *laksha*, which refers to a tree resin used as the finish for wood products.) Then, when the Pandavas are sleeping peacefully inside the lac palace, the architect would set fire to the palace and the Pandavas would die. It would be an accident, a tragedy, but no one would be blamed. In the end, the devious murder plot is foiled and the Pandavas escape unhurt, but the plan created by Duryodhana has all the hallmarks of his deviousness.

Clever Even when he is not overtly devious, Duryodhana can achieve his ends by being clever. A perfect example occurs soon after the Pandavas escape from the burning palace. When Duryodhana learns of their escape, he publicly celebrates their 'good fortune' but privately curses his bad luck. Nursing his hurt pride, Duryodhana retires to his chamber and hatches another plan, one that illustrates his cleverness. Feigning commiseration at the destruction of their palace, he invites the Pandavas to come to his palace to 'throw the dice.' 'It will be a chance to forget your sorrows and relax,' he tells his hated cousins. 'Please come and play with us.' It is a crafty invitation because Duryodhana knows that Yudhisthira (leader of the Pandavas) has a weakness for gambling. And he knows that the Pandavas cannot be seen to reject such a harmless invitation to once again bury the hatchet. Duryodhana also says that, in order to remove any possible enmity from the proceedings, he himself will not play. Instead, his uncle, Sakuni, will play for him. Now, Sakuni is an experienced player, not to say a cheat. The gambling beings innocently enough, with a few wins on either side, for small stakes. But as the night wears on, Sakuni's skill triumphs again and again, stripping the hapless Yudhisthira of all his money. Yudhisthira could stop but, just as Duryodhana has calculated, his pride won't let him. By morning, Yudhisthira has lost his own freedom, and that of his brothers and even their common wife. Yudhisthira pleads for some modification of his losses, and Duryodhana proposes a final wager: whoever losses the last throw of the dice will go into voluntary exile for twelve years; and remain incognito during the thirteenth year. If, however, they are identified while in disguise, the cycle of 12+1 years in exile will be repeated. When the dice are thrown, Yudhisthira loses and he takes his brothers into exile.

Loyal For all his trickery and sinister traits, Duryodhana is one of the great warriors of the *Mahabharata*. As the leader of one side of the long battle, extending over 18 days, he shows courage and loyalty to his allies during the fight. There are many descriptions of his bravery in single-handedly defeating his enemies, who always appear to have the power of the gods behind them (since Krishna is a form of Vishnu). The most poignant demonstration of Duryodhana's loyalty comes on the penultimate day of the battle, when his great friend Karna is killed in a one-to-one combat with Arjuna. Duryodhana watches as Karna gains the upper hand, but then his chariot gets stuck in the mud (the result of a curse by Mother Earth) and Arjuna charges him. Karna then asks Arjuna to pause for a moment, as per the rules of warfare, while he gets down from his chariot to free the wheel from the mud. Duryodhana then cries out in horror as Arjuna continues his charge and cuts off Karna's head. At this death, Duryodhana is inconsolable. Although, during the previous days of battle, he remained stoic in the face of so many deaths of his comrades, this death moves Duryodhana to sob like a little baby. This is the turning point, after which Duryodhana renounces the battle, gives command of his army to another man and disappears into a lake. But he is then persuaded to fight to the very end, which comes the next day when he himself is slain. Duryodhana's reaction to Karna's death is described in great detail in the epic, stretching out over several pages. It might be seen as ironic that the man who was himself so deceitful would weep when his enemies use deceit to kill his best friend. But the lasting impression left by this scene is the depth of Duryodhana's friendship with his dead comrade.

Arjuna (Noble)

Character Arjuna is one of the five Pandava brothers. As a skilled archer, a man of reflection and a pious devotee, he is the closest we have to a hero in the story. He certainly has a noble and a martial ancestry: although he is the son of Pandu, his spiritual father is Indra, the king of the gods and the mightiest warrior among them. Arjuna is third in line for the throne, but everyone agrees that he would make a better king than his brothers. Arjuna, however, always defers to his older brother, Yudhisthira, whenever the question of succession to the throne is raised. Apart from this fraternal loyalty, which is a central theme in the epic, and in addition to his archery skills, Arjuna is a talented actor and singer, capabilities that he put to use during the thirteen year of the Pandavas' exile, during which they are to remain incognito. Throughout the epic, Arjuna is a trustworthy and intelligent figure, both in battle and during negotiations with the rival set of cousins. In the great battle itself, he distinguishes himself by first questioning the very goal of war, after which he is shown a cosmic manifestation of Vishnu, something that few men could comprehend. Vishnu has chosen to reveal himself to Arjuna because he knows that he has the depth of character capable of fully understanding what he sees.

Activities Like his brothers, and all princes of the day, Arjuna was taught a full spectrum of arts and sciences, from archery to statesmanship. He likes to practice his archery in the dark in order to perfect his aim. He also enjoys playing the role of a eneuch during the incognito year of the

Pandavas' exile. He also prepares for the coming battle with his cousins by going into the mountains and learning yoga from Shiva.

Illustrative moments

Skilled Arjuna is the most skilful warrior among the Pandavas. Yudhisthira is the wisest and Bhima is the strongest, but Arjuna is the one most accomplished in the martial arts. A famous display of his talents comes in an early chapter when, like an event out of a medieval European romance, he wins the hand of a princess at an archery competition. One day, when the Pandavas were wandering the countryside in exile, they hear of a ceremony (*swayamvaram)* at which a princess will choose a husband. The five brothers enter the great hall of a palace and sit down to enjoy the fun. The competition is somewhat unusual and very difficult. A fish is attached to a spinning contraption on top of a high pole. Below, at the base of the pole, is a shallow pool of water. The contestants have to use this water as a mirror with which to aim at the fish on top of the pole. The can't look up at the fish, only into the water and then shoot five arrows to try to bring down the spinning fish. One after the other, suitors attempt to bring down the fish. Some are not even able to lift the heavy bow let alone string it, while others shoot their arrows wildly. With the princess, Draupadi, watching on with anxiety, it seems that she will remain unmarried. Until Arjuna walks up the pole, looks down into the water and fires five arrows, each of which pierces the eye of the fish on top. The gasps and cheers from the onlookers distract our attention from the sweet smile that steals across Draupadi's face. Arjuna has shown extraordinary skill, and displayed it with such grace and humility, that this is justifiably one of most famous scenes in the entire epic.

Reflective Arjuna is a skilled archer and a valiant warrior, qualities that he demonstrates day after day in the long war that occupies most of the epic story. However, Arjuna is also a reflective person, capable of questioning even the morality of the war he is fighting. The situation is that, following all the trickery and betrayal of one side toward the other, war is inevitable. It is a grand setting, the battle field stretches out for miles, its edges lined with row after row of chariots, elephants, horsemen and soldiers on foot. They all await the conch shell that will sound the commencement of the great battle, which we know will result in the slaughter of thousands. The poet then zooms in on Arjuna, standing in his chariot and surveying the field before him. He sweeps his eyes from side and side, looking at his cousins, his great-uncles and his teachers. His resolution wavers and he says to Krishna, his charioteer, 'Take me back. I can't kill these people. There is no glory if we kill our own kinsmen in this battle. How can we want a kingdom and its pleasures, or even life itself, when those whom we love and respect are here in this field of battle about to give up their wealth and life? What happiness could we ever enjoy by killing our own kinsmen in battle?' Krishna then launches into a famous lecture (the text of the *Bhagavad Gita*) about how the soul (*atman*) is indestructible: 'it neither slays nor is slain.' In other words, you are mistaken and you must fight, anyway, because you are a warrior. But Arjuna is not convinced by Krishna's philosophical defence of warfare. 'My bow falls from my hand and I am no longer able to stand. My mind is whirling, my limbs are limp and my body trembles.' Of course, in the end, Arjuna does fight and fights with exceptional courage, but his moment of reflection, on the eve of battle, is the most famous and most often-quoted incident in the whole epic story.

Devoted After Krishna convinces Arjuna to fight the battle (as described above), Krishna reveals that he is Vishnu. In a spectacular display, Krishna-Vishnu show Arjuna his cosmic form that encompasses the earth and heavens. In fact, Arjuna has already been made a worshipper of Vishnu, in an earlier chapter of the epic. The story is that long before the war with his cousins, Arjuna travelled in south India and came to the place where, in the *Ramayana*, the monkeys had built a bridge to the island of Ceylon. Arjuna wonders aloud why Rama relied on monkeys when he, Rama, could have built a bridge of his own super-strong arrows. Overhearing this, a little monkey tells Arjuna that he shouldn't dismiss the monkeys lightly, that no bridge of arrows could have withstood the weight of the mighty monkeys. 'I am a puny little thing,' the monkey says, 'but even I could bring down any bridge of arrows.' Three times Arjuna builds a bridge of his own arrows and three times the little monkey breaks it. Then a young boy appears and says, 'I will judge this contest. Build another bride, and try again, monkey.' This time the bridge holds and the little boy reveals that he is Vishnu. Arjuna is embarrassed that he felt so proud of his own strength and so little of the monkey, who it turns out is Hanuman, the chief devotee of Rama. When Arjuna asks for the monkey's forgiveness, Hanuman says, 'Because you are genuinely remorseful for your unnecessary show of pride, I will protect you in battle.' From that moment onward, until the end of the epic, Arjuna worships Hanuman (and through him Rama). This is crucial because Hanuman appears on the banner that flies above

Arjuna’s chariot as he drives into battle on the final day. Arjuna is a great warrior, but even he requires assistance from the gods.